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### Hannah Arendt and her Socrates: Heinrich Bluecher

In the discussion of the work of Hannah Arendt and the intellectual bridge she established between European philosophy and the republican tradition in the United States, not much attention is paid to the role of her husband Heinrich Bluecher. Yet Bluecher, who taught here at Bard College from 1952 to 1967, and who is buried here together with Hannah Arendt, was her most important discussion partner. He contributed to many of the key ideas in her work, and he helped to establish the foundations of many of her political writings. Bluecher was the embodiment of the non-conformist, and he set himself up with Arendt in a no-man's-land between the past and the future.

"My lectures on existence are over now, and it was the biggest course I've done so far; my first attempt to outline absolutely free and independent human thought - it really scared them," writes Heinrich Bluecher in 1952 to Hannah Arendt about his philosophy course at the New School for Social Research in New York. "Nietzsche was lucky that he did not have to see his audience. I have shown them free man in all his metaphysical reality of being, and they were taken aback as if it were the *Übermensch*. They clearly showed that they would much rather be the last human rather than this Free Man. They expected that when I spoke of overcoming the nihilistic situation from within themselves this would involve a return to comfortable liberalism. What they want is the inner comfort or consolation that can be offered by the Jehovah of the Talmud or by his Son, and at the same time the external comfort promised by Karl Marx. I want to take both away from them. You should have heard them wailing - despite all their admiration for my 'brilliance'."

Bluecher is popular and his classes are always full. In his lectures he speaks freely, without reading from notes, but he is always well-prepared, and always provocative. "My Introduction to Philosophy is going to be a real shocker," he announces. Neither Jesus nor Marx, neither metaphysics nor liberalism - instead of that thinking without a safety rail, like Arendt. That is fascinating, but also confusing.

Bluecher was born in Berlin in 1899, and only had basic schooling, but now he was teaching at the famous New School. In the First World War he had joined the Spartakists, and he later became a member of the German Communist Party. After leaving Nazi Germany, he remained a communist in exile in Paris until the Moscow show trials of the mid 1930s. This auto-didact, philosopher, theorist of art and politics, with no formal qualifications, taught at the New School in the early 1950s and became a professor at Bard College. And yet he never published a single essay, let alone any books. All that ever appeared in print was the outline of an introductory course for college students and a review of two art publications. His strength was rhetorical, and this was supported by his thirst for knowledge, his curiosity and his enjoyment of discussions. Writing of any kind, on the other hand, was agony for him. He felt he had a "terrible lack of writing talent", and in the end he gave up trying. "When I was born the good fairy said 'The boy shall have the power of judgement ....', but then the wicked fairy interrupted her and added ' .. and nothing else'. And that's the way things have stayed."

Bluecher came from a working-class background. He never knew his father, who had been killed in a factory accident, and his mother was very unstable. Because of the shortage of teachers during the First World War, Bluecher had the opportunity to attend a teacher training college. He was drafted into the army in 1917 and suffered from gas poisoning, and only returned to the college after a lengthy stay in a military hospital. By this time he was more interested in the Spartakists, and he left college, no longer interested in the "ivory-tower learning". He joined the Communist Party of Rosa Luxemburg and Paul Levi, a fact he wisely forgot to mention to the American immigration authorities in 1941.

In Berlin he earned money working in journalism, and in his spare time he visited university courses on politics and attended the lectures on military history given by Hans Dellbrück. He got to know Robert Gilbert, a popular song writer in Germany at the time, and worked on lyrics with him for films like *The Sailor's Life* and *Bombs over Monte Carlo*. He also developed an interest in modern art and was a member of the circle around the expressionist painter Max Holz. A first marriage soon ended in divorce, and he then

married the Lithuanian Natasha Jefroikyn, although this was mainly so that she could obtain German nationality.

In the Communist Party (KPD) he belonged to a minority who defended the *soviets* or workers councils against increasing centralisation and the growing influence of Stalin, and in 1928 he helped to found the opposition KPD(O). In 1934 he fled via Prague to Paris, where he met Hannah Arendt in 1936 at a lecture. They were married in 1940.

In Paris, he was deeply shocked by the news of the capture and torture of his communist friends: Karl. O., who had to "lie in an oil-bath because he had injuries all over his body", the kid from the Charlottenburg district "who was literally trampled to death by 10 thugs", and another from Moabit who had his rib-cage smashed with iron bars. And at the same time other exiles were bringing news of the show trials in Moscow, feeding his doubts about the communist ideology. He did not just turn his back on it, but tried to argue with other communists, to no avail. "Our kind looks for the dialectics in the things themselves, and is denounced as an intellectual, while the scholastic heroes with their cardboard swords praise themselves as masters of *realpolitik*. Everything is turning over and over in these times of chronic failures," he wrote to Arendt in November 1936. And he also mentioned that the Stalinists had accused him of being "completely Jewish".

Walter Benjamin is a friend of Bluecher and Arendt, and in 1938 they have an argument about Brecht's 'Reader for city dwellers'. Afterwards Benjamin reflects in his diary that Bluecher recognises in Brecht's poems an approach, "in which the worst elements of the communist party communicate with the most unscrupulous of the National Socialists."

Bluecher narrowly avoided arrest in Marseilles, and when he arrived in the USA with Arendt in 1941 they began to work actively against Hitler. As a research assistant for the National Committee for National Morale, Bluecher argued for the entry of the USA into the war. He gave instruction to American officers on the structure of the German and French armies and later gave history lessons for German prisoners of war.

When the war ended, Bluecher was disoriented. He was a revolutionary without a cause: a speaker without an audience, an activist without a goal, a thinker who was not able to write. According to Arendt's biographer Young-Bruehl, if he had been able to write as well as he could speak then he might well have become a great novelist. Like Brecht, he belonged to the "lost generation" born at the turn of the century, which Arendt writes about in her Brecht portrait. The generation is characterised by the "ability not to feel sorry for themselves, and never to complain", by a "marked tendency to anonymity" and closely linked with this a "strong aversion against all forms of conceit and boasting". Bluecher lives a quiet life, although he enjoys discussing in company, and he does not like to travel.

In 1948 Bluecher resolved to make a new start with his thinking. He wrote: "I have drawn aside the dream sky and the false sky, and now it ought to be possible to see the clear sky of pure earthly possibilities, free from distortions. Well tough luck. Again and again, the clouds of left-over concepts kept floating past. And then came the brainstorm. In two days and a night without a break I saw the new conceptual whole, the unity of my intentions. And now I finally believe that I have found dry land. I know the continent that I am discovering. Now I want to land on it. Kant was a servant, Nietzsche a master, Marx a despot and Kierkegaard a slave. And now I am a 'prospective citizen'."

He is concerned with the recognition of the break in Western thought, to which philosophy and politics must react in a positive way. He writes: "Philosophy will be ended when it finally says the truth about the truth and gives up its illusion, and forgoes the further production of dreams." A clear distinction must be drawn between philosophy and science, and the creative potential must be mobilised in all fields. Modern art is to be seen as a guarantor against tyrannical thought, and in politics the main thing was to use the confrontation between republic and Cossacks (Napoleon) to develop a republican way of thinking and acting which combines the American tradition of establishing free communities with the European experience with workers councils and spontaneous action.

At first he was unsuccessful. His political efforts to draw up a programme for a league of international law failed to interest any political groups. "Apart from that I have lost time

with continually looking for jobs," he wrote to Arendt in 1950, while she was on her first visit back to Germany. "Nothing is working out, despite a lot of interviews. You know, I think that I am an extremely suspicious character for all these people. The most moderate things I can say still shock them, the more careful and subdued I am, the more arrogant they find me. They are all so clever and respectable and look down on me, even though they are afraid.. I feel like I have got the plague. They have a guilty conscience and I seem to make it worse just by being there."

But completely by chance he soon had the opportunity to give a series of lectures on the philosophy of art in a club in Greenwich Village. He went to listen to a talk about Malraux, but the speaker did not come. So they asked him if he could give an impromptu talk. He agreed, and made a very good job of it. Not longer afterwards he began to give lectures at the New School, and in 1952 he was asked by Bard College whether he could draw up a new, general introductory course and train the college teachers to give it. "The president is looking for a Socratic Man and believes he has found one in me," he wrote. The president was right.

Bluecher developed an open course which defended the world of human life against its scientific instrumentalisation. He did not teach as a scientist, but rather, as he said in a lecture in the Common Course, "as a simple citizen, who, like Socrates, is convinced that the key task for people is to establish relationships between each other" - more important than the relationships to gods or to nature. This cannot be taught theoretically, but can only be learnt practically, in a process that can never be fully completed. The search for truth, justice and liberty is endless, but it is necessary and never pointless. The goals will also lie outside the people, but "suddenly, in some inexplicable way, there will be more justice in the world (and there can never be too much justice in the world), some liberty (and there can never be enough liberty in the world), a little more truth (and there can never be enough truth in the world). For Socrates, there were three closely linked areas that cannot be investigated scientifically - the relationship to oneself, to loved ones, and to mankind as such, which is the most difficult of all. If these relationships are realised in the spirit of the above-mentioned principles, then the relationships in human existence will improve." Therefore attention should be paid to those qualities "which are needed for the

key human activities: Philosophy - or the relationships of a person to themselves, erotics - or the relationships of people to each other, and politics - or the relationships of people to Mankind as a whole." And none of these without the others.

The students like Bluecher's lectures, which are concise, polemical and free from jargon. Many of the topics turn up again in Arendt's writings. They found each other when escaping from dictatorship and anti-semitism, and they stayed together with their sceptical approach to supposedly obvious truths, stimulating each other with their differences in background, education and experience. "It is so rare for people to be able to give each other mutual assistance, but it really seems to me that in our case each of us would have found it hard to make it through without the other," wrote Arendt after the war to her friend Blumenfeld.

Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, the criticism of Marxism, the fascination with workers' councils and spontaneous actions, as well as the sympathy for Rosa Luxemburg would all be hard to envisage without the intensive discussions with Bluecher. The concept of the banality of evil was his idea. He had no problem with accepting that Eichmann had as little depth as Hitler had greatness, whereas it took Arendt a long time to warm to the idea. Arendt's criticism of the philosophical tradition encouraged Bluecher to adopt a Socratic approach, while Bluecher's criticism of the authoritarian forms of politics encouraged Arendt to produce a new definition of political action. This mutual opening of philosophy and politics, of thought and action, sets the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* in a new relationship to each other, personified by these two people. Now it was possible "to intervene on the side of the inseparability of the liberty made actual in deeds and the truth made actual in thoughts," as Bluecher wrote to Jaspers. Germans lacked a free philosophy, and indeed a natural feeling for liberty, he complained, and as much as he appreciated Jaspers for his interest in politics and liberty, Bluecher regretted that Jasper's *On the question of guilt* was so apolitical. And he remained sceptical about Heidegger for the same reason; this "pocketbook German" should think about the good European for a change.

These exchanges between Bluecher and Arendt were of course anything but calm and academic. They both liked to have a good argument, between themselves or with others. As Bluecher became more and more critical of Stalinist policies while in exile in Paris, he argued his corner vehemently, and was not afraid to be branded a renegade: "I had a real set-to with Brandler. It was refreshing to lock horns with a man who had some arguments." - "I was only arguing," reported Arendt at the same time from a family reunion, "so as not to get out of practice." The writer Randall Jarrell, who knew them well, portrays them in his novel 'Pictures from an Institution' (1954) as the Rosenbaums, a couple who have heated arguments about Goethe and Hölderlin. Their friend, the journalist Dwight Macdonald admired Heinrich Bluecher, and the same could be said of Arendt, for "the ability to argue passionately for something and not to worry about whether he had backed the wrong horse - or what it could cost."

Many years later, Karl Jaspers wrote to Arendt: "It seems to me that just as there would not have been Plato's thought without Socrates, so your thought would not have developed as it has without Heinrich." And he admired the untroubled way that Bluecher was able to express things accurately and concisely. When Arendt was fifty in 1956, Bluecher wrote how good it had been to be together with her for so much of that first half century, "And I am all in favour of more. How good it can be alone and really One, when it is possible to be so together with you and really Two - there are not only dead circles but also living spirals. Like the ancient Chinese productive circles of the life forces yin and yang."

Bluecher is a steadying influence in the marriage, he gives Arendt a feeling of personal and intellectual security. His self-confidence expresses itself in his sarcastic humour. In exile in Paris, his disguise was that of a distinguished tourist with umbrella, which he enjoyed so much that Arendt gave him the nickname 'Monsieur'. And in later official documents he entered his occupation as 'wirepuller'. When he was in hospital because of an aneurysm, Arendt tried to get him to realise just how serious his situation was, and explained that the rate of mortality was 50 per cent - but his response was: "Don't get so upset, you are forgetting the other 50 per cent".

A "true, hopeless anarchist", who guides his arguments to their target almost unintentionally, like a Zen archer - this is how he was described by Dwight Macdonald. Self-effacing, and always preferring to remain in the background, even his own birthdays surprised him. In Arendt's obituary for Waldemar Gurian, the Rector of the Notre Dame University, and her descriptions of Eric Hoffer, the philosophising dock-worker in San Francisco, or of Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches, there are always flashes of a characteristic of Bluecher. They all come together with Arendt to form a group of people, "who can leave the troubles of the time behind them" (Bluecher) and who are therefore able to see these so clearly. Heinrich Bluecher's correspondence with Arendt preserves something of his vitality.

In 1968 the college awarded him an honorary doctorate. In 1970 he suffered a fatal heart attack, aged 69. Arendt died only 5 years later at the age of 70.