

Hannah Arendt

(14 October 1906, Königsberg, Germany – 4 December 1975, NYC, United States)



Hannah Arendt about Politics (*Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*. Piper Verlag, 1993, München. *¿Qué es la política?* Ediciones Paidós, 1997, Barcelona):

“Politik beruht auf der Tatsache der Pluralität der Menschen.” “La política se basa en el hecho de la pluralidad de los hombres.”

“Politik handelt von dem Zusammen-und Miteinander-Sein der *Verschiedenen*.” “La política trata del estar juntos y los unos con los otros de los *diversos*.”

“Wo das Sprechen aufhört, hört Politik auf.” “Donde acaba el habla acaba la política.”

Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees*, *Menorah Journal*, nº 31, January 1943:

“In the first place, we don’t like to be called *refugees*. We ourselves call each other *newcomers* or *immigrants*. Our newspapers are papers for *Americans of German language*; and as far as I know, there is not and never was any club founded by Hitler-persecuted people whose name indicated that its members were refugees.

A refugee used to be a person driven to seek refuge because of some act committed or some political opinion held. Well, it is true we had had to seek refuge; but we committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical opinion. With us the meaning of the term *refugee* has changed. Now refugees are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive to a new country without means and have to be helped by Refugees Committees.

Before this war broke out we were even more sensitive about being called refugees. We did our best to prove to other people that we were just ordinary immigrants. We declared that we had departed of our own free will to countries of our choice and, we denied that our

situation had anything to do with *so called Jewish problems*. Yes, we were *immigrants* or *newcomers* who had left our country because, one fine day, it no longer suited us to stay, or for purely economic reasons. We wanted to rebuild our lives, that was all. In order to rebuild one's life one has to be strong and an optimist. So we are very optimistic.

(...) The story of our struggle has finally become known. We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expressions of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives.

Nevertheless, as soon as we were saved, and most of us had to be saved several times, we started our new lives and tried to follow as possibly all the good advices our saviors passed on to us. We were told to forget; and we forgot quicker as anybody ever could imagine. In a friendly way we were reminded that the new country would become a new home; and after four weeks in France or six weeks in America, we pretended to be Frenchmen or Americans. The more optimistic among us would even add that their whole former life had been passed in a kind of unconscious exile and only their new country now taught them what a home really looks like. It is true we sometimes raise objections when we are told to forget about our former work; and our former ideals are usually hard to throw over if our social standard is at stake. With the language, however, we no find difficulties: after a single year optimists are convinced they speak English as well as their mother tongue; and after two years they swear very solemnly that they speak English better than any other language; their German is a language they hardly remember.

In order to forget more efficiently we rather avoid any allusion to concentration or internment camps we experienced in nearly all European countries, it might be interpreted as pessimism or lack of confidence in the new homeland. Besides, how often have we been told that nobody likes to listen to all that; hell is no longer a religious belief or a fantasy, but something as real as houses and stones and trees. Apparently, nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings, the kind that has put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.

Even among ourselves we don't speak about this past. Instead, we have found our own way of mastering an uncertain future. Since everybody plans and wishes and hopes, so do we. Apart from these general human attitudes, however, we try to clear up the future more scientifically. (...) Therefore, we leave the earth with all its uncertainties behind and we cast our eyes up to the sky. The stars tell us, rather than the newspaper, when Hitler will be defeated and when we shall become American citizens. We think the stars more reliable advisers than all our friends, we learn from the stars when should we have lunch with our benefactors and on what day we have the best chances to filling out one of these countless questionnaires which accompany our present lives."

You can read the whole article on:

http://www-leland.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah_arendt_we_refugees.pdf