

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

7. Arendt and the Civil Rights Movement



Rescheduled class: 5th November

Don't forget: next week our class takes place two hours earlier.

We'll meet at **1pm** (not 3.30)

Room tbc – I will email you over the week and put it up on the VLE



Agenda

- The Little Rock Nine
- Arendt's justification of segregation
- Arguments against Jewish assimilation
- Was Hannah Arendt a racist?
- Evaluation

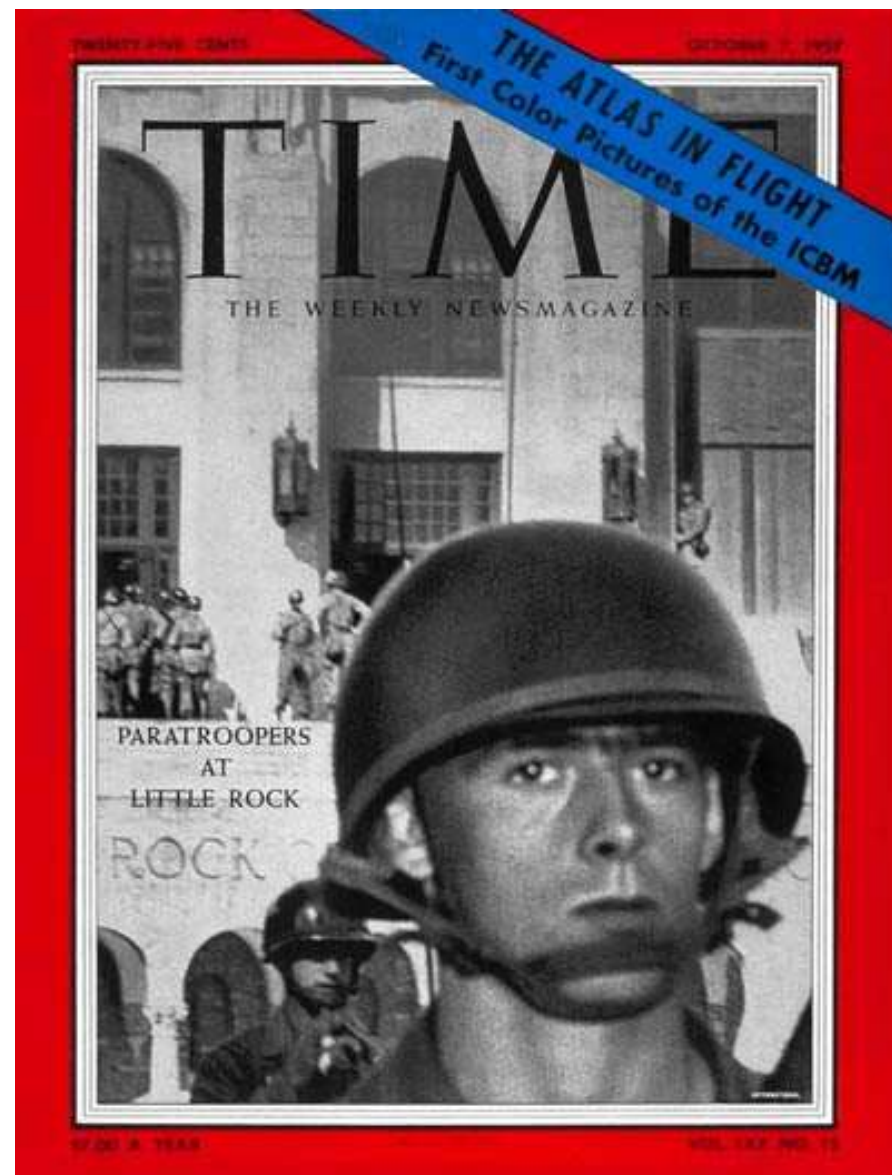
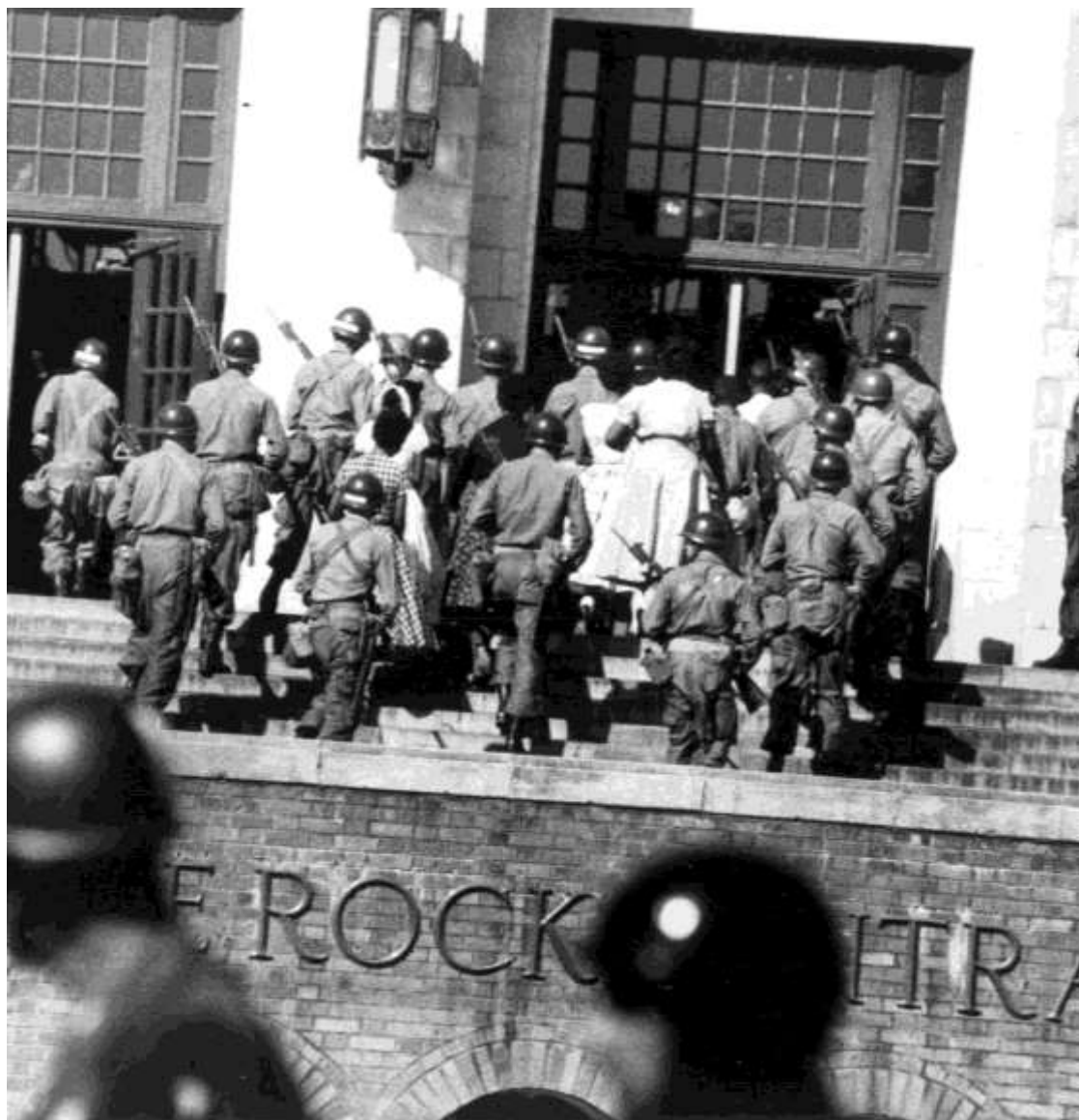


- ‘They moved closer and closer. ... Somebody started yelling. ... I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the crowd—someone who maybe could help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.’
– Elizabeth Eckford
- ‘Finally, I should like to remind the reader that I am writing as an outsider. ... Since what I wrote may shock good people and be misused by bad ones, I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or under-privileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise.’
- Hannah Arendt, “Preliminary Remarks” in *Reflections on Little Rock*



The Little Rock Nine

- In 1957, Nine African-American students enrol into Little Rock Central High School, a racially segregated school
- Three years earlier, the Supreme Court had ordered the 'separate but equal' segregation of schools unconstitutional
- Following racist protests, they are barred from entering by the National Guard, under orders by the Governor of Arkansas
- President Eisenhower intervenes, and the Nine are able to attend school. They return under protection of the 101st Airborne, but are subject to often violent bullying thereafter...



“Reflections on Little Rock” (1959)

- In response, Arendt writes in *defence* of school segregation...
- Her controversial article is rejected by *Commentary*, but published by *Dissent* in early 1959
- While she personally objected to discrimination, it was a private or social matter, and should not be abolished by political means
- Parents had a right to choose that no government should overrule
- Her argument rests on philosophical distinctions between the political, the social and the private...

- The right to marry whoever one wishes is an elementary human right compared to which "the right to attend an integrated school, the right to sit where one pleases on a bus, the right to go into any hotel or recreation area or place of amusement, regardless of one's skin or color or race" are minor indeed.' (236)
- 'In any event, discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right. The question is not how to abolish discrimination, but how to keep it confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent its trespassing on the political and the personal sphere, where it is destructive.' (238)

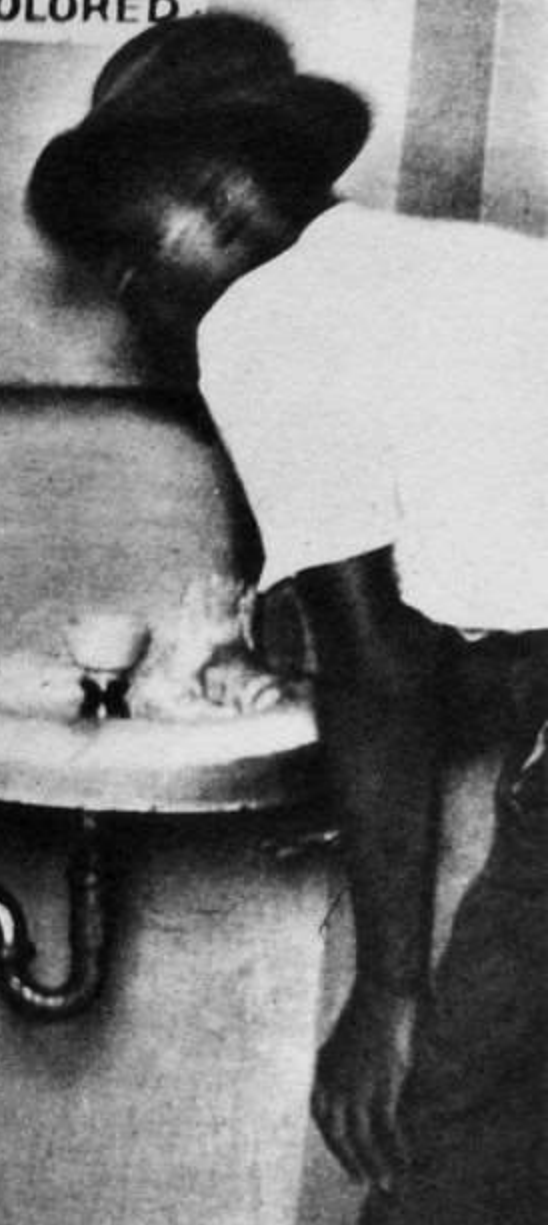
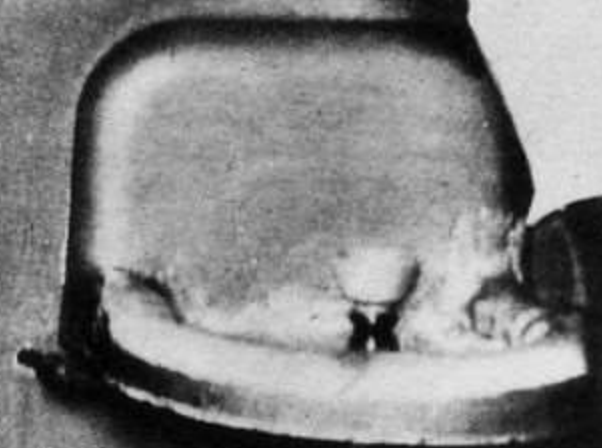
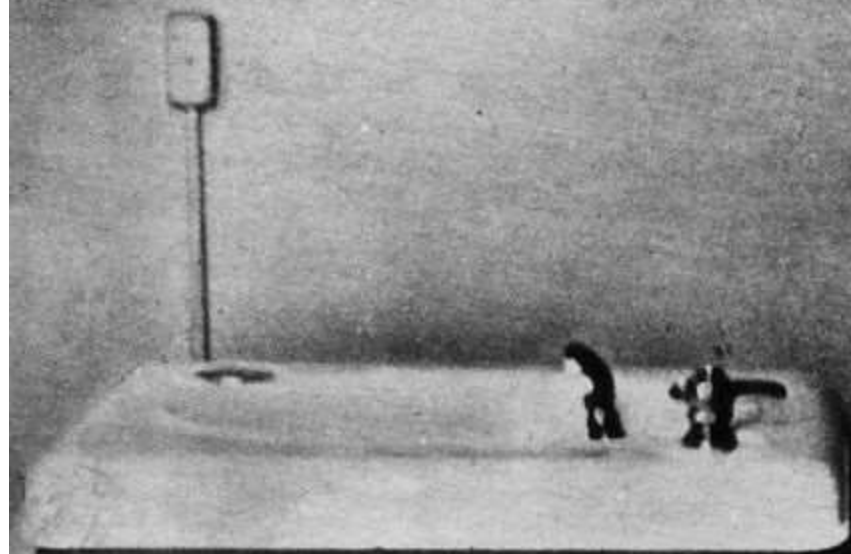


Over to you – the three spheres

- In groups, let's explore what Arendt is actually arguing for
- 1. What are the characteristics of the private, the social and the public spheres? (237-8, 241-2) How convincing do you find this distinction?
- 2. How does Arendt use the language of equality to argue for social discrimination (238)? Is there any way this argument might be rehabilitated?

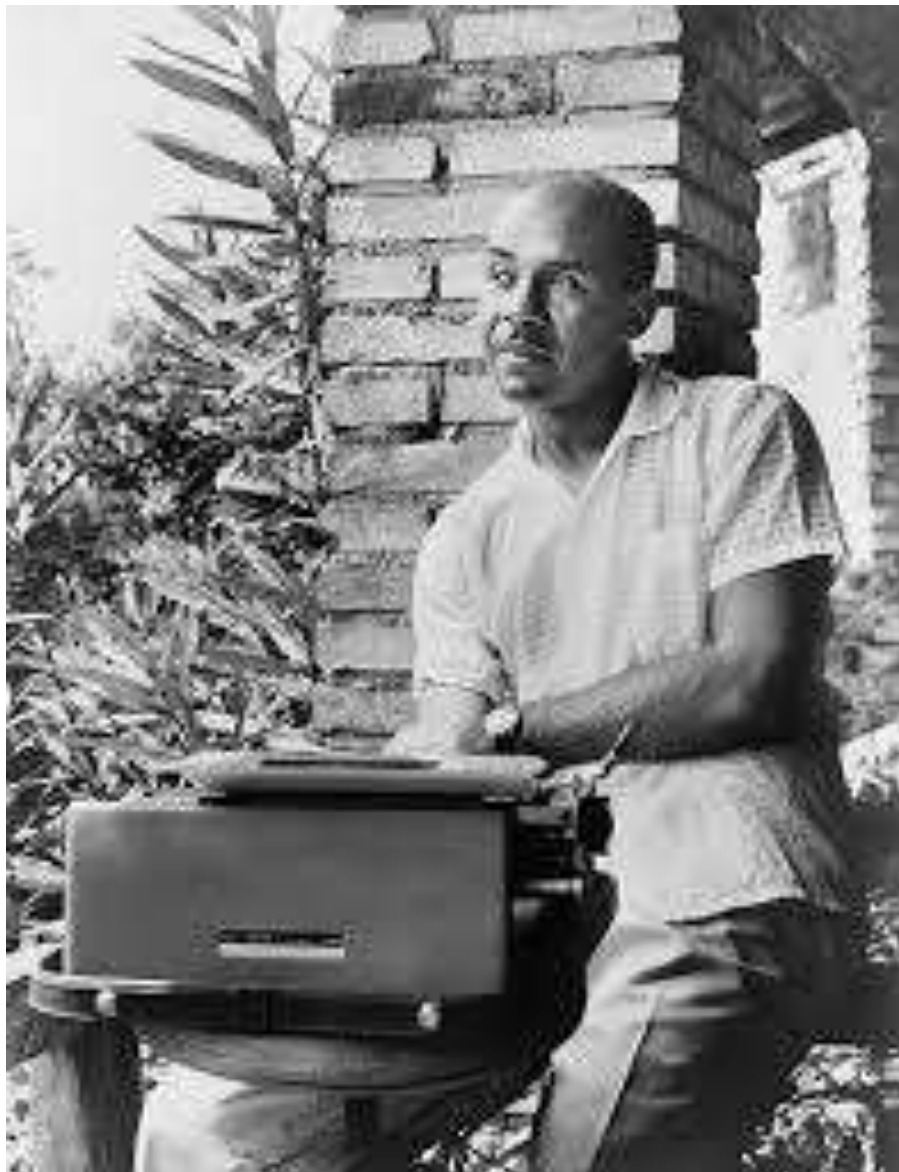
WHITE

COLORED



Political, Social and Private

- The political is governed by the principle of equality
- The social by the principle of discrimination, and
- The private by the principle of exclusivity
- While some overlap, education in her view falls solely under the social (despite its obvious political nature and effects)
- Discrimination and exclusivity are also considered positively – our right to decide who wish to associate with
- These distinctions return in Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958)



005820

July 29, 1965

Dear Mr. Ellison:

While reading Robert Penn Warren's The
Speeches for the Negro I came across the very
interesting interview with you and also read
your remarks on my old reflections on Little
Rock. You are entirely right: it is precisely
this "ideal of sacrifice" which I didn't under-
stand; and since my starting point was a
consideration of the situation of Negro kids
in forcibly integrated schools, this failure
to understand caused me indeed to go into an
entirely wrong direction. I received, of course,
a great many criticisms about this article from
the side of my "liberal" friends or rather non-
friends which, I must confess, didn't bother me.
But I knew that I was somehow wrong and thought
that I hadn't grasped the element of stark violence,
of elementary, bodily fear in the situation. But
your remarks seem to me so entirely right, that
I now see that I simply didn't understand the
complexities in the situation.

With kind regards,

Sincerely yours,

Reaction to “Little Rock”

- Criticism appears in *Dissent*, dismissed characteristically offhand
- Some criticised Arendt’s implied blame of black parents for using or not defending their children for social advancement
- Others found the semantic focus, line and aloof tone offensive
- Ralph Ellison wrote to Arendt, imploring her to consider
‘people who must live in a society without recognition, real status, but who are involved in the ideals of that society and who are trying to make their way, trying to determine their true position and their rightful position within it’ (Ellison).



Was race a blindspot?

- ‘for the color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nations – that is, the one great crime in which America was never involved’.
- ‘Like other race questions, it has a special attraction for the mob and is particularly well fitted to serve as the point around which a mob ideology and a mob organization can crystallize’
- ‘But the principle of equality, even in its American form, is not omnipotent; it cannot equalize natural, physical characteristics. This limit is reached only when inequalities of economic and educational condition have been ironed out’

‘When reading “Reflections on Little Rock,” I am shocked, not by Arendt’s prioritization of the marriage issue, but rather by her casual relegation of racial discrimination in public education, housing, and employment to social issues. My shock is exacerbated by her suggestion that Black parents who allowed their children to integrate schools were merely seeking upward social mobility. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, I am initially impressed at the connections Arendt makes between racism, imperialism, and totalitarianism, only to become outraged at her condescending and stereotypical characterizations of people of African descent. The frustration continues with her very generous recounting of the conditions under which American slavery is preserved with the founding of freedom in *On Revolution*, and then her less open-minded reading of Black student protesters and of Frantz Fanon in *On Violence*.’

- Kathryn T. Gines



The charges

- Blindspots on US imperialism, slavery and pro-segregation on “Little Rock”
- Arendt’s rhetoric in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* about the ‘dark continent’ and its ‘world of black savages’.
- *On Violence*’s attacks on black power and students
- Passing remarks of a racist character, e.g. a letter to Jaspers during the Eichmann trial:
- ‘The judges, the best of German Jewry. Below them, the prosecuting attorneys, Galicians, but still Europeans. Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic... they would obey any order. And outside the doors’, Arendt saw an ‘oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country’



Origins of Totalitarianism – Boer mentality?

- ‘the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilized man could understand and whose humanity so frightened and humiliated the immigrants that they no longer cared to belong to the same human species’.
- The ‘overwhelming monstrosity of Africa’, the ‘merciless sun’ and ‘entirely hostile nature’, the ‘great horror’ of a place ‘populated and overpopulated by savages’ as ‘incomprehensible as the inmates of a madhouse’
- ‘as far as we know, [they] had never found by themselves any adequate expression of human reason or human passion in either cultural deeds or popular customs, and which had developed human institutions only to a very low level’
- ‘were, as it were, “natural” human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, ...when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder’.



On Violence (1970)

- 'They have an obvious interest in a black-white dichotomy; this too is of course mere escapism – an escape into a dream world in which Negroes would constitute an overwhelming majority of the world's population'
- 'Serious violence ... entered the scene only with the appearance of the Black Power movement on American campuses. Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualification, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representatives of the black community'.
- These black students then made 'nonsensical and obviously damaging demands' such as instruction in the 'nonexistent subjects' of African literature, 'soul courses', and Swahili, 'a nineteenth-century kind of no-language'.



In defence

- Context...
- Preoccupation with philosophical arguments...
- Positions on Zionism and Jewish assimilation?

Over to you

In groups, let's look over Gines' remark about Arendt's resistance to assimilation. Then, focus on a question:

1. What reasons did Arendt have for criticising Jewish assimilation? (7-9) How was it related to the Enlightenment?
2. How do we evaluate Arendt's inconsistencies on black rights (compared to Jewish resistance)? Can we accuse Arendt of racism?

HANNAH
ARENDT
RAHEL
VARNHAGEN
Lebensgeschichte einer
deutschen Jüdin aus der
Romantik



SERIE PIPER



*My Pledge
For Youth Aliyah*

I MAKE MY PLEDGE FOR \$ _____
to Hadassah for Youth Aliyah
happy in the knowledge that
it will help rehabilitate
in Palestine another Jewish
refugee child victim of Hitler.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

TELEPHONE NO. _____

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The “Negro Problem” vs the “Jewish Problem”

- Arendt dismissed Jewish assimilation in the 19th century, and elsewhere called for a Jewish army over WW2
- ‘One truth that is unfamiliar to the Jewish people ... is that *you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as*’ (1941)
- *Rahel Vernhagen* criticised Jewish parvenus and celebrated the pariah, while the *Origins of Totalitarianism* locates Anti-Semitism in 19thc Jewish assimilation
- If Arendt argued for self-defence and political organisation for Jews, why not for the organised civil rights movement?

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November 21, 1962

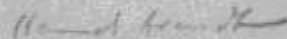
Dear Mr. Baldwin:

Your article in the New Yorker is a political event of a very high order, I think; it certainly is an event in my understanding of what is involved in the Negro question. And since this is a question which concerns us all, I feel I am entitled to raise objections.

What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy. All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.

In sincere admiration,

cordially (that is, in case you remember
that we know each other slightly) yours,



Hannah Arendt



Arendt to James Baldwin, 1962

- In response to Baldwin's "A Letter from a Region of my Mind" in the *New Yorker*, 'a political event of a very high order'
- 'What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy.' (Arendt)
- But Baldwin addressed not love, but religion, disillusionment, and 'the specificity of being Black in the American context' (Gines), and of racism being not a black problem, but a white one
- All things Arendt seemingly ignores, or cannot see...

“Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945)

‘the idea of humanity and of the Judeo-Christian faith in the unitary origin of the human race’, she noted, had created a moral burden that many simply did not care to shoulder.

Some have rejected these ideas and ‘become more susceptible to the doctrine of race, which denies the very possibility of common humanity.’

‘To follow a non-imperialistic policy and to maintain a non-racist faith becomes daily more difficult because it becomes daily clearer how great a burden mankind is for man.’

Next week... Arendt's *On Revolution*

- We'll turn to one of Arendt's major works, *On Revolution* (1963), which we'll cover over two sessions
- Please read Chapter 1: "The Meaning of Revolution"
- What makes for a successful revolution? What is the relationship between violence and power, or liberation and freedom?
- And why does Arendt believe that the American Revolution (and not the French) serves as an exemplar?
- Email if any queries: dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk