

Günter Gaus, “Conversation with Hannah Arendt,” from the Series *Zur Person* (1964)

Abstract

Günter Gaus (1929–2004) conducted a series of interviews with prominent political and cultural figures for the German television stations ZDF and SFW between 1963 and 1973. After withdrawing from the series to serve as the permanent representative of the Federal Republic of Germany to the GDR, he resumed his interviews in 1984, albeit in a changed media environment. In this selection from his 1964 interview with the political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), the two discuss Arendt’s experience as a woman in the “man’s world” of philosophy, the difference between philosophy and political theory, her writing process, her university studies at Marburg, Heidelberg, and Freiburg, and her notions of the public realm and communication. (A link to the television interview can be found below under “Further Reading.”) The interview was conducted shortly after the publication of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

Source

Excerpts from the Interview

Gaus: Hannah Arendt, you’re the first woman to be profiled in this series. The first woman, although you have what is commonly thought of as quite a masculine occupation: you are a philosopher. Allow me to move from these opening remarks to my first question: despite the recognition and respect afforded to you, do you perceive your role in the circle of philosophers as an anomaly—or in asking this, are we touching upon an emancipation problem that never existed for you?

Arendt: Yes, I’m afraid I must already protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession—if one can still call it that—is political theory. I do not feel at all like a philosopher. Nor do I believe that I have been accepted into the circle of philosophers, as you kindly suggest. But if we turn to the other question that you raise in your opening remarks: you say this is commonly considered a masculine occupation. But it need not remain a masculine occupation! It could well be that a woman will also be a philosopher one day....

Gaus: In my opinion, you are one....

Arendt: Yes, well, I can’t help that. But I can also express my own opinion, and my opinion is that I am not a philosopher. In my opinion, I said goodbye to philosophy for good. I studied philosophy, as you know, but this does not mean that I stayed with it.

Gaus: But I would very much like to learn from you more precisely—and I am glad that we have come to this point—where you see the difference, exactly, between your work as a professor of political theory and political philosophy. When I think of a number of your works, for instance, *Vita activa* [*The Human Condition*], then I would like to categorize you as a philosopher, as long as you don’t define more precisely the difference as you see it.

Arendt: Look, the difference lies in the subject itself. The expression “political philosophy,” which I avoid—this expression is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things, in an academic or a non-academic setting, I always mention that there is a tension between philosophy and politics, specifically, between the human being as a philosophizing entity and the human being as an acting entity, which does not exist with natural

philosophy, for instance. The philosopher regards nature the same way as all other human beings. When he thinks about nature, he speaks in the name of all humanity. But his relationship to politics is not neutral. It has not been since Plato!

Gaus: I understand what you mean.

Arendt: And there is a kind of animosity toward politics among most philosophers, with very few exceptions—Kant is one exception—which is very important for this whole complex, because it isn't a personal story. It is about the essence of the subject itself.

Gaus: You want no part of this animosity toward politics because you believe it would burden your work?

Arendt: I want no part of this animosity. In other words, I want to see politics with eyes that are unclouded by philosophy, so to speak.

Gaus: I understand. To return to the emancipation question: has this been a problem for you?

Arendt: Yes, of course, there is always this problem *per se*. I've always been rather old-fashioned. I was always of the opinion that there are certain occupations that aren't becoming for women, that don't suit them, if I can put it that way. It doesn't look good when a woman gives orders. She should attempt not to enter such positions if she is concerned with preserving her feminine qualities. I don't know whether I am right about this or not. I myself have followed this, more or less unconsciously—or let's say more or less consciously. The problem itself played no role for me personally. I simply did what I wanted to do. I never thought to myself that men normally do this and now a woman is doing it, or anything like that. It really never affected me personally.

Gaus: I understand. Significant parts of your work—we will go into the details shortly—aim to recognize the conditions under which political action and behavior unfold. Do you want to achieve broad impact with these works, or do you believe that such influence is no longer possible in these times—or is this type of broad impact not your main objective?

Arendt: You know, this is another big question. If I were speaking totally honestly, then I would have to say that when I'm working, I'm not interested in the effect.

Gaus: And when the work is finished?

Arendt: Then I am finished with it. What is really essential is how it seems to me. I want to say all of this with the caveat that nobody knows himself, no one should tell his own fortune, that one really shouldn't do what I'm doing with you right now. Given all of that, then I would like to say that what is important to me is that I must understand. This understanding for me also entails writing. Writing is part of the process of understanding.

Gaus: When you write, this serves your own further knowledge?

Arendt: Yes, because now certain things have been recorded. Let's say that I had a very good memory so that I could actually retain everything that I thought: I very much doubt, since I know how lazy I am, that I would ever have written anything down. What is important to me is the process of thinking itself. When I have that, I am personally totally satisfied. And then, if I succeed in expressing it adequately in writing, then I am satisfied again.— Now, you asked about the effect of my work. This—if I may speak ironically—is a masculine question. Men always want to be tremendously influential; but I see it from outside, so to speak. Do I see myself as influential?

No, I want to understand. And if other people understand in the same sense as I have understood, this gives me satisfaction, a sense of being at home.

[...]

Gaus: You studied in Marburg, Heidelberg, and Freiburg with Professors Heidegger, Bultmann, and Jaspers, with a primary concentration in philosophy and secondary concentrations in theology and Greek. Why did you decide to study these subjects?

Arendt: You know, I have often thought about this. I can only say, philosophy was a certainty. Since I was fourteen years old.

Gaus: Why?

Arendt: Well, I read Kant. Then you can ask, "Why did you read Kant?" Somehow the question was, either I can study philosophy or kill myself. But not because I didn't love life! No! As I said before: there was this need to understand.

Gaus: Yes.

Arendt: This need to understand was with me from a very early age. You know, I had all the books with me at home; one could get them from the library.

Gaus: Besides Kant, are there reading experiences that you particularly remember?

Arendt: Yes. First, Jaspers's *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* [*Psychology of Worldviews*], which I believe was published in 1920. I was fourteen. After that I read Kierkegaard, and so it was connected....

Gaus: Did theology come in at this point?

Arendt: Yes. It was connected so that for me, the two of them belonged together. My main concern was then, how can you do this if you are Jew? And how does it work? I had no idea, you know. I had a lot of anxiety about this, which then resolved itself. Greek is another matter. I always loved Greek poetry. And literature played a major role in my life. So, I added Greek because it was the most convenient. I read Greek in any case.

Gaus: Respect

Arendt: No, that's too much.

Gaus: Your intellectual gift, Frau Arendt, was proven so early—were you at times set apart by it, as a schoolgirl and a university student, perhaps in a painful way, from the usual social behavior in your environment?

Arendt: That would have been the case if I had been aware of it. I thought everyone was like that.

Gaus: When did you realize this wasn't true?

Arendt: Rather late. I don't want to say it. It's embarrassing. I was incredibly naïve. This was partly because of how I was brought up. It was never talked about. Grades were never talked about. It was considered improper. Any ambition was considered improper at home. In any case I was not really aware of it. Or rather, I was aware of it sometimes in that I felt strange around other people.

Gaus: You felt strange, and you believed it was because of you?

Arendt: Yes, totally. But this has nothing to do with being gifted. I never connected it with being gifted.

[...]

Gaus: Frau Arendt, do you feel so committed to insights that you have gained through political-philosophical speculation or sociological analysis that for you the publication of these insights becomes a duty? Or would you say there are reasons that would justify remaining silent about something that you have come to recognize is true?

Arendt: You know, this is a very difficult problem. This is fundamentally the one question that interested me in the whole controversy about the Eichmann book. Of course, it was never raised except when I raised it. I raised it quite often in lectures. It is the one serious question. Everything else is pure propagandistic twaddle. So, *fiat veritas, pereat mundus* [let truth be told, though the world may perish]? No, the Eichmann book did not *de facto* touch on such things. The book did not actually jeopardize anyone's legitimate interests. This was only what was thought.

Gaus: However, the question of what is legitimate you have to leave open to debate.

Arendt: Yes. You're right. What is legitimate is again open to debate. And I truly understand the word "legitimate" differently than the Jewish organizations. Yes, that's right. But we also agree there are real interests—ones which I also acknowledge—at stake.

Gaus: Is it permissible then to remain silent about something you have come to recognize as true?

Arendt: Should I have done that? Yes, I should have written it ... Look, someone asked me: if you had been able to predict this and that, wouldn't you have written the Eichmann book differently? I answered: no. I was faced with the alternatives of writing or not writing. Of course, it is possible to keep one's mouth shut.

Gaus: Yes.

Arendt: One doesn't always have to talk. But now there is the following: we come now to the question of what in the eighteenth century were called "factual truths." This is not a matter of opinion. The guardians of factual truths at universities have always been the historical disciplines.

Gaus: They have not always been the best.

Arendt: No. They capitulate. They take orders from the state. Someone told me that a historian said about some particular book on the causes of the First World War: this book is not going to spoil my memories of that uplifting time! So this is a man who doesn't know who he is. But this is not interesting. *De facto* he is a guardian of historical truth, factual truth. And we know how important these guardians are, for example, from Bolshevik history, where history is rewritten every five years, and the facts, such as that Trotsky existed, remain unknown. Do we want to go there? Do the governments have an interest in going there?

[...]

Gaus: Frau Arendt, Karl Jaspers, your former teacher, can be thought of as fundamentally connected to you and you to him as a type of dialogue partner in that perpetual dialogue between friends that you already mentioned. What do you see as Jaspers's strongest influence on you?

Arendt: Look, wherever Jaspers goes and speaks (I hope he is listening to this broadcast), there is illumination. He has an unreserved, trusting, unconditional way of speaking that is unlike any other person. This impressed me even when I was very young. In addition, he has a conception of freedom, coupled with reason, which was totally foreign to me when I came to Heidelberg. I knew nothing about it although I had read Kant. I saw this reason, so to speak, *in praxi*. And if I may say so—I grew up without a father—I was raised by him. I do not want to make him responsible for me, for God's sake, but as far as any person succeeded at teaching me to be reasonable, this person is Karl Jaspers. And this dialogue is, of course, quite different today. That was really my most powerful postwar experience. That such a conversation was still possible! That one could speak this way!

Gaus: Allow me one final question. In a celebratory speech on Jaspers you said, "Humanity is never achieved in solitude and never by giving one's work over to the public. It can only be achieved by the person who throws his life and self into 'the venture into the realm.'" This "venture into the public realm" itself is a quotation from Jaspers—what is it for Hannah Arendt?

Arendt: The venture into the public realm seems clear to me. One exposes oneself in the light of publicity as a person. If I am of the opinion that one must not appear and act self-consciously in public, then I also know that in every action the person is expressed in a way that is unlike anything else the person does. Whereby speaking is also a form of action. This is one venture. The second is: we start something, we weave our thread into a network of relationships. We never know what will come out of it. It is imperative to say, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is the case for all action. Simply, quite concretely, because it is not possible to know it. It is a venture. And I would say that this venture is only possible through trust in other people—through a difficult to grasp but fundamental trust in the humanity of all people. Without this it is impossible.

Source: Günter Gaus in Conversation with Hannah Arendt, 28. October 1964. Available online at: RBB Fernsehen, *Zur Person*, Interview Archive, https://www.rbb-online.de/zurperson/interview_archiv/arendt_hannah.html

Recommended Citation: Günter Gaus, "Conversation with Hannah Arendt," from the Series *Zur Person* (1964), published in: *German History Intersections*, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-105>> [December 04, 2023].