

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ARENDT'S AND MARX'S CONCEPTIONS OF
HISTORY**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to bring out the similarities and differences between Arendt's and Marx's conceptions of history and to state the position of Arendt as to whether she is a Marxist or non-Marxist. In the words of Philip Hansen "Arendt sees Marx as the last great thinker in the western traditional political thought." Also, Young-Bruehl talking about the relationship between Arendt and Marx writes: "Towering over the work of Arendt is the figure of Karl Max" Young-Bruehl, 278). From the foregoing one might be tempted to conclude that Arendt was a Marxist. But, can this be true? In attempt to answer this question birthed this paper. The work uses the proper method of philosophical analysis which includes; the use of the method of exposition, the analysis of terms and concepts where necessary and general evaluation of arguments. The paper uncovered that though, Marx's and Arendt's conceptions of history shares a lot of common grounds in relation to methodology and focus but concluded that Arendt had a conservative conception of history while Marx believes in the dynamics of inevitable change in historical development of the society.

Keywords: Arendt, Marx, History, Hermeneutics, Conservative.

Background To The Study

In the "poetics" Aristotle argued that poetry is superior to history, because poetry speaks of what must or should be true (certainty). This reflects early axial focus (good/bad, right/wrong) over metaphysical focus for what "is." Accordingly, classical historians felt a duty to ennoble the world. In keeping with philosophy of history, it is clear that their philosophy of value imposed upon their process of writing history (philosophy influenced the method and hence product).

Herodotus, considered by some as the first systematic historian, and later Plutarch freely invented speeches for their historical figures and choose their historical subjects with an eye toward morally improving the reader. History for them was supposed to teach one good example to follow. The assumption that history "should teach good examples", influenced how history was written. Event of the past are just as likely to show bad examples that are not to be followed, but these historians would either not record them or re-interpret them to support their assumptions - history's purpose.

From the classical period to the Renaissance, historians alternated between focusing on subjects designed to improve mankind and on a devotion to fact. History was composed mainly of hagiographies of monarchs or epic poetry describing heroic gesture such as the song of Roland about the Battle of Rondeaux pass during Charlemagne's first campaign to conquer the Iberian

In the 14th century, Ibn Khaldun, who is considered one of the fathers of philosophy of history, discussed his philosophy of history society in detail in his *Muquddimah*. His work was culmination of earlier works by Muslims thinkers in the spheres of ethics, political sciences, and historiography, such as those of “al-Farabi Ibn Miskawayi, al Dawwani, and Nasir al-Din al-Tui”(Mowlana;2001).

By the 18th century, historians had turned towards a more positivist approach focusing on fact as much as possible, still, with an eye on telling histories that could instruct and improve. Starting with Fustel de Coullanges and Theodor Mommsen, historical studies began to progress towards a more modern scientific form. In the Victorian era, the debate in historiography thus, was so much whether history was interested to improve the reader, but what causes turned history and how historical change could be understood. Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit* was a classical work of this era.

In the twentieth century, philosophy of history took a new dimension known as hermeneutics (Arendt:2017). This approach focuses on the meaning of the actions and intentions of the historical individuals rather than historical wholes. The method of understanding makes a methodology of this approach; It invites the thinker to engage in an active construction of meanings and intentions of the actors from their point of view (Arendt:2017). This line of interpretation of human history found expression in the philosophical writings of Ricoeur and Foucault. This tradition approaches the philosophy of history from the perspective of meaning and language. It argues that historical knowledge depends upon interpretation of meaningful human actions and practices. Historians should probe historical events and actions in order to discover the interconnections of meaning and symbolic interaction that human actions have created.

There was an important new turn in the mid-twentieth century, as philosophers attempted to make sense of modern historical developments including war, ethnic and national hatred, and holocaust. Narratives of progress were no longer compelling, following the terrible events of the first half of the twentieth century. The focus of this approach might be labelled history as “remembrance”(Arendt :2017). Contributors to this stand of thought emerged from twentieth century European Philosophy, including Existentialism and Marxism, and were influenced by the search for meaning in the Holocaust. Paul Ricoeur, Domini La Capra and Michael Kammen are figures to mention here.

Having reviewed the forgoing literature, it becomes obvious that the concern of the Ancient philosophical historians was that of promoting morality. While during the renaissance the concern was to devotion to fact, while the 18th century philosophical historians have a positivist concern to facts. And in the twentieth century the concern of philosophical historians was on history as remembrance. Hence, the need to compare and contrast Arendt's conception of history from that of Marx cannot be overemphasized. This is owing to the fact that, there have been a controversy as to whether Arendt was a Marxist or non-Marxist. This is because of her enigmatic way of thoughts and writings. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy Arendt, is a “heterodox” thinker with complicated argumentation (2015). The same encyclopedia described her as, “a most challenging figure for any one wishing to understand the body of her work in political philosophy” (2015). Owing to the complex nature of Arendt's historical, political, and philosophical thoughts, it becomes rather difficult to hold her as a Marxist or non-Marxist.

Marx's Conception Of History

Karl Marx was born in Trier in Germany in 1818. He obtained higher education in the University of Bonn and Berlin. As a student, he was influenced by the teaching of G. W. F. Hegel. He joined the young Hegelians of the Doctors' club in Berlin, where he came under the influence of the leftist radicalization in atheism, and republicanism, preferring communism to Monarchianism. He was also largely influenced by Feuerbachian atheism humanism. He was also influenced by the ancient materialist such as Democritus and Epicurus.

Marx's Hegellian Heritage

Marx was greatly influenced by Hegel's works especially *The philosophy of History*. Marx accepted Hegel's dialectic but rejected his metaphysical idealism and gave the dialectics a materialist interpretation. Hegel was an idealist while Marx was a materialist. Marx contrasting his dialectic with that of Hegel writes:

“My dialectic method is not different from the Hegelian; but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain... is the demiurgeous of the real world and the real world is the only external phenomenon of 'the idea' with one on the contrary, the idea is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought.... with him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell (Marx :1961).

Historical Materialism

Marx holds a materialist conception of history. Historical materialism therefore, is the special application, which Marx gives to Hegel's idea of philosophy of history (Idike:2002). Marx, Engels and their followers believed that the highest determinant of human history is the sum of the relations of economic production. That is, the economic structure of society is the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which corresponds to definite forms of social consciousness (Marx:1977). The moving force in history therefore is economic production. According to Engels, historical materialism is:

The view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggle of these classes against one another (Engels:1892).

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to note that production has a dual significance. Marx distinguishes two aspect of the mode of production that:

The relation of man to Nature is determine by his force of production and that men out only act on nature in order to produce but also on one another co-operating mutually in the exchange of activities that involved that relations of production(Nwoko:2006).

For, example, if the ownership of means of production is private, relations would be those

of dominations, exploitation and subordination between workers and entrepreneurs, and if ownership is communal, the relationship would be that of co-operation and mutual assistance.

Human historical development is hinged on these two aspects of the relationship in economic production (the productive forces and the relations of production). As such, Marx classified the historical development of human social activities (societies) into five stages: Primitive or ancient society, society of slavery, feudal society, bourgeois society, and socialist society (Marx:1992).

Arendtian Conception Of History

A Brief Biography Of Hannah Arendt

The political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1906, the only child of secular Jews. She studied classic, Christian theology and philosophy. She was tutored by Martin Heidegger and Karl Jesper but was more influenced by Heidegger's *phenomenology*. Works written by her include, *The origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition* *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. And *Thinking and Moral Considerations*. She died on December 4, 1975, having only just stated work on the third and final volume of *Judging*.

Arendtian Dualistic Perspective On History

What is the meaning and significance of a genuine history? The foregoing question was what informed or triggered Arendt's outlook on history.

In *The Concept of History*. Arendt identifies two distinct notions of history that have played a central role in western culture: Ancient and Modern. The ancient notion of history was developed in the context of Greek experience and was intimately associated with the polis (public realm). While the modern notion dates from the beginning of the modern scientific revolution, roughly the late middle-ages, although its full impacts was not felt until the seventeenth century (Arendt:1993). For Arendt, it is the modern notion which has been powerfully at the centre of the kind of historical consciousness which has proved so baleful for a genuine politics, and it thus provides the primary focus of her account.

Arendt is not so concerned with history as a technical discipline or with the status of historical explanation, but rather the significance of historical consciousness for the quality of public life (politics). In her view, this consciousness shapes a way of thinking about the world that is dangerously inappropriate for a true public action (politics).

Arendt in her essay titled: "The Concept of History" examines the meaning of a genuine history and its significance. For Arendt; a genuine history is one that is objective in outlook and possesses an element of remembrance (audience) which helps to capture the original events as they are. In her views, it is only the ancient notion of history that has the aforementioned features of a genuine history.

According to Hansen, "The objectivity Arendt defends is not that of the modern natural science with their epistemological commitment to mathematical formulation, deductive and nomological laws. It is rather sensuous objectivity which has the subjective as one of its elements (Arendt: 1993). Consequently, she sees modern historical consciousness as process consciousness, that we see ourselves as radically determine and thus unfree (Arendt:1959). Hence, her negative conception of modern history. So, for Arendt the modern notion of history is deficient because it lacks the kind of sensuous objectivity mentioned earlier.

In talking about the significance of genuine history, Arendt argued that a genuine history is sure to guarantee the permanent status of the polis (public sphere). She rates politics as the highest of all human endeavour because it is in the politics that human freedom is sure, and the realm of politics is the public sphere (polis). For her, what makes human being unique as humans is their capacity to exercise their individual freedom, and she associated freedom with action (speech) which can only be manifested in polis (public sphere). And the permanent guarantee for the existence of the polis as earlier stated is the presence of a genuine history. For her, it was only the Greek polis that has survived all these while until the advent of historical consciousness as process consciousness.

Modern history for her, somehow combines action and fabrication “Thinking in terms of processes, on the one hand, and the conviction, on the other that I know only what I myself have made.” Hence, the dilemmas of modern historical consciousness and experience, which reflects the ability of people at one and the same time to create norms, practices and institutions, what Arendt calls additions to the human artifice (Arendt:1959). While seeing them as gaining meaning from a nature-like process over which they exercise no control. Thus, the problem of meaning in human existence. For Hansen, this is Arendt's Ontology of History (Hansen.1993).

A Comparative Analysis Of Arendt's And Marx's Conceptions Of History

Areas Of Convergence

- ✓ Both were concerned with the causes of modern human misery, utilizing a theory of alienation as an explanation.
- ✓ Both Arendt and Marx used the method of hermeneutics in their historical presentation.
- ✓ They saw the importance of history as a necessary tool for understanding the present.
- ✓ They hold an ontological outlook on history.
- ✓ They saw the importance of the individual (historical actors) in the making and shaping of history.
- ✓ Both Arendt and Marx recognized the creative capacities of men in historical development.
- ✓ They recognized the role of labour in human historical development.
- ✓ They both saw forms of Alienation in relation to labour in historical development and productivity.

Areas Of Divergence

- ✓ Arendt holds an existentialist conception of history while Marx holds a materialist conception of history.
- ✓ Arendt was concerned with the (qualitative status) content of history while Marx was concerned with history as a process in the development of human society.
- ✓ She upholds objectivity in history while Marx believes in the dialectic of change.
- ✓ She holds a conservative conception of history while Marx's conceptions of history is

linear progressive.

- ✓ Arendt relegated the importance of human labour to the background while Marx upholds significance of human labour in historical development.
- ✓ Marx was concerned about the alienation of man from his labour while Arendt was concerned with social alienation from human existence.

Concluding Remark

In conclusion, having x-rayed the similarities and differences between Arendt's and Marx's conception of history it certainly became obvious that Hannah Arendt was no Marxist. Reason being that, she was basically ontological in her outlook on history while, Marx's outlook on history was basically materialistic. In support of my claim, Martin, Hill who is one of the outstanding translators of Arendt's works writes; "Arendt was certainly no Marxist and had little sympathy for Marxism in any of its form. 'Orthodox or 'Critical', Soviet' or Western. (1999:64).

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