

Book Review: Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging Tradition by Steve Buckler

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Hannah Arendt's work has been noted for its unorthodox and eclectic style, and in this book **Steve Buckler** aims to show that Arendt's unusual approach reflects a consistent and distinctive conception of, and way of doing, political theory. Through close readings of her most influential works and her less well known and posthumously published writing, Buckler argues that Arendt's work is an important and challenging alternative to the more orthodox methods characteristic of both analytic and post-analytic political theory. Reviewed by **Kye Barker**.



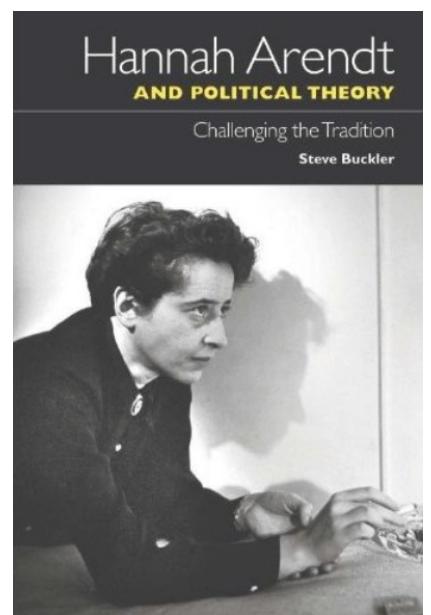
Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging Tradition. Steve Buckler. Edinburgh University Press. September 2012.

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The growing mountain of secondary literature on political theorist Hannah Arendt casts a long shadow over Steve Buckler's *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging Tradition*. In the nearly four decades since her death, Arendt's highly idiosyncratic and difficult books have inspired the work of countless scholars, and have now led to the development of a burgeoning area of study. Buckler's slim and highly ambitious volume sets itself two difficult tasks within the claustrophobia-inducing Arendt literature: to isolate a single synthetic method which is present throughout all of Arendt's work, and to present it as a viable method for interpreting the political phenomena of our time. This method is encapsulated in two elements which Buckler calls the epistemological and temporal mediations of Arendt's standpoint.

Buckler means by this that Arendt's method avoids both theoretically and historically crystallizing the subjects of her thought; her thinking structurally denies the possibility that there could be a final explanation of her subjects in either of these dimensions. To explore his thesis Buckler centers his book on the interpretation of three of Arendt's most important books: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *On Revolution*. This tactic is both Buckler's greatest strength and his greatest weakness. The strength comes as a by-product of the synoptic vision: his book gives an introduction to a good portion of Arendt's output. The weakness lies in the fact that he attempts to give a synoptic vision at all.

This synoptic vision is juxtaposed against the interpretation of Arendt's method as principally defined by the narrative form, which he finds to reductively miss the nuance of what he sees to be Arendt's method. The problem with Buckler's rejection of the narrative form is the total absence of any discussion of Arendt's description of storytelling in *The Human Condition*. It is difficult to overlook this omission, since it is here that Arendt describes the phenomenological structure of storytelling and its relevance for preserving actions and events. Indeed, although Buckler's take on *The Human Condition* focuses on the role that political action plays in it, action is only the focus of one chapter of Arendt's book, and at the beginning of that chapter are two epigrams: the topic of the first is the activity of storytelling, and the second is action. Although Arendt does not say in this chapter that *her* method is the form of storytelling, she does say that any time someone wants to describe an action or event, that person must put it in a story.



Buckler's stated objectives suggest that his book should be judged by the two following criteria: Did the book tell us something illuminating and persuasive about the political thought of Hannah Arendt, and does the book add something to contemporary political theory. The answer to the first question is yes. Buckler's use of the concept of 'mediation' is, in general, quite helpful in understanding Arendt's work. It adds depth to the plurality which Arendt insisted was at the center of all human interaction. Since this concept is quite simple and elegant, it is helpful for those encountering Arendt's writing for first time, and will suggest a slightly altered perspective for those more familiar with Arendt. The key strength of Buckler's book is not so much his argument on Arendt's method, but rather as an introduction to her political thought, and her theoretical innovations and distinctions.

The answer to the question of whether Buckler's book adds something to contemporary political theory is not as clear, since Buckler spends so little time considering contemporary political theory. To be fair, the flow of the book would have likely been derailed if much time had been devoted to this task. Yet, with so many prominent contemporary political theorists, who have already admitted and explained the way that their work has benefitted from the writing of Hannah Arendt and have not always described 'Arendtian political theory' as confined to the narrative form, the chances for this book providing a clear alternative to the standard interpretation of Arendt's political thought, and a viable alternative to the general trend of political theory, whatever that may be, seem rather murky.

Ultimately the book is structurally caught up in an insoluble irony: in arguing that Arendt's writing was *always* principally guided by an avoidance of closure, it subjects her work to a sort of theoretical closure through subjecting the whole of it to a transcendental interpretation. Thinking without the aid of tradition has neither guideposts nor method. The fact is that Arendt's work *is* irreducibly multifarious and multidimensional. She not only would endlessly enumerate categorical distinctions, but she would regularly slightly alter them, often without letting her readers know.

Near the end of her career, when Arendt actually mentioned the term "method," she said that it had been totally hidden from her in her investigation, and put the word in quotation marks to distance herself from such constraint. As Arendt playfully notes, a writer's method, criteria, or values really may only "seem to be quite manifest to reader and listener." The truth, ever changing, is that these three might belong more to the reader and listener, who will eventually tell their own stories, than to the writer or speaker. It is in this manner that Buckler has released his Hannah Arendt to join the rest of the Hannah Arendts mulling around in the growing secondary literature.

Kye Barker lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. In August 2012 he received an MA in the social sciences from the University of Chicago, and before that he earned a BA in history and political science from the University of Kansas. His research interests include the legacy of German émigré intellectuals in the mid-20th century, contemporary political theory, and aesthetics. Next year he will pursue a PhD in political theory. [Read more reviews by Kye.](#)

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