Perspectives on Citizenship and Political Judgment in an Era of Democratic Anxiety

Jonathan Peter Schwartz
Independent Scholar

Books reviewed in this essay:


It is tempting to perceive the recent crisis in American politics as finally a crisis of political judgment. Presumably, some minimal consensus arising from shared political realities, acknowledged by all, should exist in a functional liberal democracy surrounding questions of individual rights, political equality, and democratic norms. Yet American political and informational polarization is now such that consensus on these questions is either non-existent or, at best, ambiguous. American democracy has produced a governing apparatus that is often indifferent, at times even hostile to its elemental liberal democratic commitments. Can this be comprehended as anything but a failure of its citizens’ political judgment? And at the dawn of a century where the massive growth in productivity and living standards that once underwrote the stability of capitalist political economies and liberal democratic institutions may soon be either unsustainable or in permanent stagnation, should it be suspected that we are merely witnessing the nascence of an incipient authoritarianism, and therefore that the judgment of everyday citizens will increasingly be essential to the future of liberal democracy? Two recent books offer valuable resources for theorizing citizens’ political judgment: Linda M. G. Zerilli’s *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*
Jonathan Peter Schwartz

and Rodolphe Gasché’s *Persuasion, Reflection, Judgment: Ancillae Vitae*. While each draws on an array of sources in exploring citizen judgment, Hannah Arendt’s work on the topic animates both. Along with other contemporary books affirmatively exploring it,1 there has been an outpouring of recent research engaging Arendtian judgment in fields as diverse as philosophy, political theory, psychology, sociology, legal theory, information technology, education studies, and empirical political science. With the publication of these two books—both the work of prominent scholars of continental and democratic political theory—it now seems fair to recognize the emergence in recent years of a second wave of scholarly interest in Arendt’s work on judgment. Where earlier work tended to view Arendt’s account of judgment as contestably flawed, this second wave centers on a new, positive consensus on its philosophical legitimacy and political value.

Rodolphe Gasché’s *Persuasion, Reflection, Judgment: Ancillae Vitae* concludes with a meticulous engagement with Arendt’s work on political judgment, an engagement which crowns the development of the book’s two prior themes: persuasion via Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and reflection as expressed in his account of Heideggerian thinking. As Gasché notes, these three themes are developed autonomously from each other, as three distinct essays containing three chapters apiece. The first essay explores Aristotelian practical reason in the context of political persuasion. It is dominated by a concern the author similarly finds to preoccupy his two other subjects: that is, the distinctive type of objectivity or validity that inheres uniquely to human affairs (a concern that we will also find dominating Zerilli’s work). The second essay, potentially the most controversial of the three, presents an unusually political and practical interpretation of Heideggerian reflection. Gasché then concludes in the third essay with a subtle and remarkably charitable interpretation of Arendt—who no doubt would have vigorously contested his own reading of Heidegger. Especially in its final chapter, this book represents an important new contribution to the emerging consensus on Arendtian judgment. Gasché is a master of textual analysis. His reading of the *Critique of Judgment* is subtle and profound, as is his skillful reconstruction of Arendt’s reception of it. In a thematic sense then, this final essay represents an ideal conclusion to Gasché’s forays into the faculties composing what Arendt, in a letter to Jaspers, called the *ancillae vitae*, the common life of man insofar as it is a “thinkingly (lived) life” (1–2).

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This book is unquestionably for those who prefer to think for themselves. Gasché presents the book’s three studies of the *ancillae vitae* with little comment concerning their broader meaning, other than a brief, tantalizingly suggestive introduction. “Persuasion, reflection, and judgment,” he writes, “are understood as fundamental aspects of a philosophy that is in the service of worldly life, a life, more precisely, in the world constituted by the in-between of human beings” (3). Yet such a philosophy is distinctive from the traditional metaphysical orientation of philosophy due to what Gasché conceives as its “extreme ontological fragility” (3). In emphasizing their ancillary character, Gasché foregrounds the fact that the public realm is not a necessary condition of human life and must therefore be sustained by these three political philosophical activities. Persuasion, reflection, and judgment are thus ancillary to human life because they are constitutive of it only insofar as it is a political form of life. Gasché has little else to say in the book about these insights. Though his goal was perhaps to leave these broader reflections in the hands of his readers, ultimately the book’s structure presents formidable obstacles to such a thoughtful engagement with the *ancillae vitae*. The three essays themselves are meticulously developed scholarship, and thus are perhaps best viewed as authoritative secondary literature. They do not offer the depth and broader political reflection the introduction seems to vouchsafe. The reader ultimately leaves *Ancillae Vitae* enlightened but also wishful that its author had followed a bit further what he perceives to be Heidegger’s path toward thinking, that is, the pursuit of a “kind of ‘theorizing’ required to rethink the political, especially if the political is to be the order of a world that takes shape only through and within political action” (7).

While Gasché’s *Ancillae Vitae* is notable for its meticulous, if also circumscribed scholarship, Linda Zerilli’s *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* is distinguished by its theoretical ambition. The book pursues an expansive engagement with contemporary scholarship, through which Zerilli rigorously and logically carves out a new, distinctive space for Arendtian judgment in the broader discourses of political theory. Though any work of sufficiently magisterial scope will yield much to contest, this should not distract from the book’s monumental contribution to Arendt scholarship. Scholars have commented on Arendt’s account of political judgment for nearly four decades, yet none previous to Zerilli has approached the comprehensiveness with which she situates it in respect to the contemporary philosophical and political milieu.

The book opens with an extended tour de force chapter of introduction. Zerilli begins by pointing out that the unique challenge posed by modern democracy is fundamentally a problem of judgment. In her words: “In light of the widespread value pluralism of multicultural democracies, we, democratic citizens, find ourselves increasingly called upon to make judgments about practices not always our own” (1). While this problem has motivated
political theory for decades, Zerilli suggests that Arendtian judgment offers a unique solution to the perplexities that have confronted democratic politics. It may not be necessary to instruct democratic citizens in how to think correctly about politics, simply because each already possesses a faculty, judgment, that is already itself political by nature (31). What is required instead is simply to cultivate this capacity to judge in the context of the political sphere itself, and to reject the modern loss of confidence in the possibility of judging in a political world characterized by value pluralism. Here Zerilli perhaps most powerfully echoes Arendt. “There exists in our society,” Arendt once wrote, “a widespread fear of judging that has nothing whatever to do with the biblical ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’ . . . For behind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence the doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done.”

Chapter 1 goes on to outline an expansive and erudite defense of Arendt’s view that political judgment involves a distinctive type of “objectivity”—in Arendt’s words, “impartiality”—one that cannot be reduced to the traditional epistemologically informed formulations of the concept (29). Zerilli explores a wide swath of “noncognitivist” philosophies of value, including among numerous others Stanley Cavell, John McDowell, A. J. Ayer, J. L. Mackie, Jürgen Habermas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Through these engagements Zerilli seeks to defend the notion that objective judgment is relevant not only to epistemologically related pursuits but also to any sphere of human life, whether it be in art, morality, politics, or science—though such objectivity will have a different character and possess a different force depending on the context to which it is applied. She suggests it has been the failure to recognize that there are many forms of objectivity that has led to the modern loss of confidence in the capacity to judge politically (36–38).

It would be impossible to do justice in this space to the breadth of scholarship Zerilli engages in the ensuing chapters. Here I will discuss only a few highlights. The introductory chapter is followed by a three chapter arch exploring key aspects of interpreting Arendtian judgment: a carefully researched discussion of the philosophical discourse over aesthetics into which Arendt inserted herself when she sought to apply the third Critique to politics (chapter 2); an engagement with historicism via a surprisingly fresh encounter between Arendt and Leo Strauss (chapter 3); and a provocative defense and appropriation of Arendt’s much debated and perhaps more timely than ever before “Truth and Politics” essay (chapter 4). Each of

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these are significant contributions to understanding the scope of Arendtian judgment. Nevertheless, it is also here we most often find Zerilli arguably reading her own political and philosophical views into Arendt’s, and thus where the limits of her perspective on Arendtian judgment most often assert themselves. I will return to discuss the consequences of these limitations later. The proceeding chapters go on to flesh out the implications of this work in numerous hotly debated areas of political theory scholarship. Particularly of note are the two chapters directly following the early interpretative arch engaging Rawlsian political liberalism (chapter 5) and feminism and the question of universalism (chapter 6). These chapters are in many ways the climax of the book, exemplifying the potential contributions of Arendtian judgment to democratic theory. They hardly exhaust the wealth of contributions that follow, however. Indeed, the book’s most compelling essay may well be chapter 9’s constructive critique of the recent turn toward affect in social and democratic theory, an outlook which often seems overly bleak in its assessment of human political sentiment, and at times given over to disturbingly Maoist revolutionary solutions that would seek to politically enforce revisions of the deep affective psychology of individuals. In her words, “[B]ecause it then fully severs the link between affect and judgment, save as a fundamentally unknowable relation of priming, affect theory leaves us stranded when it comes to judging politically understood as entailing the revision of irrational beliefs” (261). Here Zerilli deftly shows how Arendtian judgment offers affect theory a path out of what may well be a theoretical cul-de-sac.

As previously noted, though her book has tremendous value for Arendt scholars, there are a number of problems with Zerilli’s interpretation of Arendt. One such problem involves her reading of a much debated text in the literature on Arendtian judgment, “Truth and Politics.” There Arendt sharply distinguishes between the validity of truth claims, which have a compelling effect on the mind, and the free, persuasive mode of validity characteristic of judgments. In her treatment of this essay, Zerilli offers a subtle, wide-ranging discussion of the issues raised by Arendt’s comments of truth and politics. However, Zerilli’s approach may mislead scholars who do not specialize in Arendt into failing to appreciate the rigorous distinction Arendt drew between truth and judgment. The chapter’s major flaw centers on the greater care that should have been paid to the Arendt’s overall outlook on truth and political judgment, and to the intellectual development of her thoughts on these matters. What is particularly apt to mislead will be Zerilli’s discussions of two early manuscripts, “Philosophy and Politics” and “Introduction into Politics”—the former written around 1954, and the latter written in 1956–1957. The problem with employing these texts is

that Arendt’s thought journal indicates that she discovered her theory of judgment while reading the third *Critique* sometime around August 1957.\(^5\) Thus, both of these texts were almost certainly written before she had fully developed her account of judgment, and quite likely before she had even discovered it. In these earlier essays—particularly in “Philosophy and Politics”—we find Arendt engaging Socratic and hermeneutic notions of dialectical truth in which the distinctive validities of truth and judgment are much less clearly distinguished. I have argued elsewhere that Arendt was likely motivated to develop her theory of judgment as an alternative to the notion of dialectical truth, which she believed had been used to legitimize ideological political philosophies and even totalitarianism.\(^6\) Needless to say, Arendt would have strongly objected to Zerilli’s portrayal of her thoughts on truth here, since it may mislead many readers into thinking Arendt more sympathetic to dialectical truth than she in fact was.

A second worry involves what seems to me is the overly bourgeois version of Arendt’s ideas Zerilli presents. Zerilli tends systematically to downplay Arendt’s overriding objective—evidenced throughout her thought—of reminding us that humans beings are the sole agents of history and politics, a fact whose gravity carries heavy burdens of responsible political participation. Such a bourgeois interpretation risks domesticating the radical force of Arendt’s critique of modern politics, a critique that is both distinctively unique, and therefore worthy of scholarly attention, yet also increasingly timely. This rendering of Arendt often occurs via omission rather than commission. For example, Zerilli’s discussion of historicity in her chapter on Strauss does not appreciate the fact that Arendt’s critique of historicity was motivated by her objections to how dialectical truth claims were used to ground ideologies and philosophies of history that removed political agency from human beings, and instead placed responsibility for political change solely in the hands of vast social trends. Similarly, her treatment of Arendt’s application of the third *Critique* to politics in chapter 2 does not engage Arendt’s key arguments in her 1970 “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” where Arendt insists that Kant’s mistake was to fail to appreciate the role of human agency in history and politics. Had he done so, he would have recognized that it is not the second half of the third *Critique* on teleological judgment that is applicable to politics, but rather the first half devoted to aesthetic judgment. Both omissions, I would argue, open

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\(^6\)On this point, see the second part of chapter 4 and chapter 5 of my book *Arendt’s Judgment*. 
the door to a more bourgeois treatment of Arendtian judgment, where political judgment can be exercised without common purposes or a robust commitment among citizens to participation in the public realm. This reading is then cashed out in later discussions of Zerilli’s ongoing commitment to agonistic democracy and in her concept of democratic world-building. Very often, agonistic democracy tends to presupposes liberal and privatized modes of political agency. Because it emphasizes the establishing of recognition of identity differences as the center of political agency, agonistic democracy in practice must focus on the integration of marginalized identities into the bourgeois economy and society. Similarly, Zerilli’s account of democratic world-building heavily emphasizes the disclosure of world that emerges from the exchange of views among citizens but does not reckon enough with the concrete work of political participation and engagement that such world-building must inevitably involve.

These objections should not distract from the extraordinary overall importance of *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. Zerilli’s book is likely to be a touchstone for years to come, not just for Arendt scholars but for political theory in general. As with Rodolphe Gasché’s *Persuasion, Reflection, Judgment: Ancillae Vitae*, it is a rich book that deserves and rewards careful reading. We may hope that both of these fine contributions to political theory will continue to draw attention among scholars to the extraordinary spirit of Arendt’s politics and to her crucial insights into the nature and possibility of political judgment among democratic citizens.