



Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion

Jeffrey C. Isaac

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The works of Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus--two of the most compelling political thinkers of the "resistance generation" that lived through World War II--can still provide penetrating insights for contemporary political reflection. Jeffrey C. Isaac offers new interpretations of these writers, viewing both as engaged intellectuals who grappled with the possibilities of political radicalism in a world in which liberalism and Marxism had revealed their inadequacy by being complicit in the rise of totalitarianism. According to Isaac, self-styled postmodern writers who proclaim the death of grandiose ideologies often fail to recognize that such thinkers as Camus and Arendt had already noted this. But unlike many postmodernists, these two sought to preserve what was worthy in modern humanism--the idea of a common human condition and a commitment to human rights and the dignity of individuals. Isaac shows that both writers advanced the idea of a democratic civil society made up of self-limiting groups. Although they criticized the typical institutions of mass democratic politics, they endorsed alternative forms of local and international organization that defy the principle of state sovereignty. Isaac also shows how Arendt's writings on the Middle East, and Camus's on Algeria, urged the creation of such institutions. The vision of a "rebellious politics" that Arendt and Camus shared is of great relevance to current debates in democratic theory and to the transformations taking place in Europe and the states of the former Soviet Union.

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