

Interview with Celso Lafer

[Celso Lafer is Professor of Philosophy of Law at the University of São Paulo Brazil. He studied with Hannah Arendt during the 1960's at Cornell University, from where he received both Masters and later PhD degrees in Political Science. He has a Habilitation in Public International Law from the University of São Paulo. He worked for the administrations of Fernando Collor de Mello as Foreign Minister and for Fernando Henrique Cardoso as Foreign Minister and Commerce Minister. Since 2006 he is a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, occupying the chair that belonged to Miguel Reale. In 2006 he was also appointed to the "Countries and Cultures of the South" Chair by James H. Billington, at the Library of Congress. A recipient of many awards and honors, in 2002 he addressed the 57th session of the United Nations General Assembly. The following questions were submitted by Dr. Wolfgang Heuer of the Free University of Berlin, and Cláudia Perrone-Moisés, Professor of International and Comparative Law, University of São Paulo. Their help is gratefully acknowledged. The questions were supplied by Alexander R. Bazelon].

QUESTION: *"You studied with Hannah Arendt at Cornell University in the 1960's. How did you meet her"?*

CELSO LAFER: "In my first academic semester as a graduate student of Political Science at Cornell University, Hannah Arendt was a Visiting Professor in the Department of Government. I had previously read, in Brazil, her *Origins of Totalitarianism* and was deeply impressed by this remarkable book. So, I strove to become her student in the Graduate Course she offered in the fall of 1965. We were a class of around twenty students, meeting weekly in a very nice seminar room of the Olin Library".

QUESTION: *"What courses did you take from her"?*

CELSO LAFER: "The Course offered in the fall of 1965 was "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century". The Course aimed at the elaboration of an imaginary biography of someone who had been born in the last decade of the XIXth century, had lived through the major events of the XXth century, and whose life had been shaped by the turmoil of these events. The Course was a remarkable one and had a lasting impact on my view of things. I wrote an article on this Course, the first version of which was published in Spanish (*Revista de Occidente* n° 305, pp. 78-98, October 2006) and the second, enlarged and revised version, was published in Portuguese (USP-

Estudos Avançados, 21 (60), 2007, pp. 289-304). The article draws on my notes taken as her student and is also based on her own notes prepared for the Course, that are in her papers in the Library of Congress. The article relates, on the basis of her papers in the Library of Congress, this Course to a previous one offered in 1955 at the undergraduate level at the University of California and to a subsequent one, in 1968, at the graduate level given at the New School for Social Research. The article explores how these courses are relevant for the understanding of the importance, in Hannah Arendt's work, of experience, narrative, action, imagination, judgment, that are critical components of her originality as a major thinker of the XXth century. The article also points out how she was able to put together readings of political theory, history, biographies, novels, poetry, documents, and art to enable us to understand the major cultural events and socio-political experiences of the XXth century".

"I also attended most of her undergraduate course at Cornell in the Fall of 1965 - Lectures on Machiavelli to Marx that has not yet been published but is highly regarded, and justly so, by Arendt's scholars as an important expression of her reflections".

QUESTION: *"What was she like as a lecturer? What was your impression of her as a person? How did she affect you"?*

CELSO LAFER: "Hannah Arendt was an impressive lecturer both in terms of the extraordinary scope of her knowledge and the strength of her personality mingled with her unique capacity to perceive situations, things, personalities and to think with originality, to use her own words, "without banisters". She was, as a person, very attentive to her graduate students, interested in their concerns and intellectual endeavors and open to their points of view. She was, in the fall of 1965, paying great attention to what was happening in the US (the war in Vietnam) and in the world at large. I was very much drawn to her as a person and fascinated by her thought".

"After concluding my PhD and on my return to Brazil, it was clear to me that I should devote myself to the publication of her books in Brazil and to the intellectual reception of her thought. Her first book published in Brazil was *Between Past and Future* (Hannah Arendt, *Entre o Passado e o Futuro*, São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1972). This was her personal choice that she conveyed to me in a conversation we had. I wrote the introduction - entitled "On the Dignity of Politics" - and had the opportunity to

discuss points of this introduction with her by correspondence. Subsequently, during her lifetime and with her knowledge, I wrote the introduction to the first part of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Hannah Arendt, *Origens do Totalitarismo* vol. 1 - *Anti-semitismo Instrumento de Poder*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Documentário, 1975). My introduction dealt with her interpretation of anti-Semitism".

"After she passed away I pursued my efforts in drawing attention to her work in Brazil. I wrote an essay on what I considered some of the recurring concerns of her thought and how they fitted into a broad and instigating framework. I also wrote a review-essay of the posthumous *The Life of the Mind*, when it was published, relating her philosophical reflections on thinking and willing and the fragments of judging to her political reflections".

"In 1979 my book *Hannah Arendt, Pensamento, Persuasão e Poder* ["*Hannah Arendt, Thought, Power, and Persuasion*"] (Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1979) was published. The book was a collection with appropriate revisions, of my above mentioned essays and an Introduction. In that occasion the only book devoted to Hannah Arendt was the pioneering one published by Margaret Canovan in 1974".

"I subsequently wrote the introductions of the Brazilian editions of *The Human Condition* (*A Condição Humana*, Rio de Janeiro, Forense Universitária, 1981), of *Man in Dark times* (*Homens em Tempos Sombrios*, São Paulo, Cia. das Letras, 1987) and of *On Violence* (*Sobre a Violência*, Rio de Janeiro, Relume-Dumará, 1994)".

QUESTION: *"The 1960's were a very important time for Arendt intellectually. Can you talk a bit about how Hannah Arendt's thinking influenced the development of your own ideas, and in particular what lessons you have taken away from the study of her works"?*

CELSO LAFER: "My most ambitious attempt to think with "fermenta cognitionis" provided by Hannah Arendt was my book devoted to the reconstruction of human rights, in the light of the gap between past and future and of the theme of the "right to have rights". My book was published in 1988 (*A Reconstrução dos Direitos Humanos - Um diálogo com o pensamento de Hannah Arendt* , ["*The Reconstruction of Human Rights, a dialogue with the thought of Hannah Arendt*"], São Paulo, Cia. das Letras, 1988) of which there is a Spanish translation (Mexico, Fondo de Cultura, 1994). A summary of the main points of the book is available in French ("La Reconstruction

des Droits de l'homme: la contribution de Hannah Arendt, in Hannah Arendt, les sans-État et le droit d'avoir des droits, vol. 1, organized and edited by M.C. Caloz-Tschopp, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998, pp. 102-114).”

QUESTION: *"Looking forward, as you reflect on your career as a law professor, diplomat, and teacher, and in particular on your involvement with the ideas and personality of Hannah Arendt over the past half century, are there a set of lessons and ideas you believe are particularly relevant to the problems we face in the twenty first century"?*

CELSO LAFER: "Hannah Arendt's lessons have followed me in my intellectual endeavors and in my academic and public life. I am probably one of her few students that latter on had a "vita activa" that included Cabinet positions in Brazil. In an essay included in the second enlarged edition of my first book (Hannah Arendt, Pensamento, Persuasão e Poder, 2ª edição, revista e ampliada, São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 2003) I attempted to discuss my experience with the concepts and ideas of Hannah Arendt in my political and diplomatic life. Among them the epistemological importance of experience, action, "the right to have rights", the meaning of authority, the problem of evil, her concept of power and violence, the impact of modern science and technology for the human artifact and judgment as a specific faculty of the Mind, distinct from Thinking and Willing. Judgment, as elaborated by Hannah Arendt in her posthumously published lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy, for me was crucial in helping me deal with political judgment and diplomatic judgment".

"I also wrote on the 'why' of how she became a major intellectual reference, as time went by, in Brazil and in many parts of the World. The thrust of my argument regarding the intellectual reception of her thought is that Hannah Arendt has been recognized as a classic in the three dimensions that one can say, according to Norberto Bobbio, that an author is a classic: (i) She is an authentic and major analyst of her time - the XXth century; (ii) Her work, as a result of its scope and novelty, has stimulated and continues to stimulate different and pluralistic interpretations of her intellectual endeavors, (iii) She has provided us with concepts and insights that remain relevant for our understanding of the world we live in".

[Celso Lafer, São Paulo Brazil, February 14, 2011]