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Hannah Arendt, 1906–1975

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Abstract: This essay provides an overview of the life and theoretical concerns of Hannah Arendt. It traces the way her experience as a German Jew in the 1930s informed her analysis of totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and her idea of the "banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The essay takes issue with those of Arendt's critics who detect a lack of "love of the Jewish people" in her writing. It also traces the way Arendt's encounter with totalitarian evil led to a deeper questioning of the anti-democratic impulses in the Western tradition of political thought—a questioning that finds its fullest articulation in *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. Throughout, my concern is to highlight Arendt's contribution to thinking "the political" in a way friendly to the basic phenomenon of human plurality. I also highlight her recovery and extension of the main themes of the civic republican tradition.

In the 1970s and 1980s students of political theory invariably encountered the cliché that political theory and philosophy died sometime in the 1950s, only to be revived in 1971 by the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. One can be a great admirer of Rawls's work, as I am, and still be taken somewhat aback by the radical foreshortening of the history of political thought implied by this cliché. After all, the 1950s and early 1960s saw the publication of some of the most interesting—and enduring—works of political theory of the past half century or so.

A few landmarks will have to represent what was, in retrospect, a remarkably fertile period for political thought: Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History* (1953), Eric Voegelin's *Order and History* (1956–1957), Isaiah Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision* (1960), Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1963) and *Theory and Practice* (1966), C. B. Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962), and Michael Oakeshott's *Rationalism and Politics* (1962). To this list must be added Hannah Arendt's major theoretical works: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963) and *Between Past and Future* (1968).

Merely glancing through this (admittedly selective) list of titles reveals a shared concern with history, reason, and freedom amongst an ideologically and methodologically diverse group of theorists. Perhaps more striking—and perhaps the central reason why these works are consigned to oblivion by the cliché cited above—is that all these works took a self-consciously textual and historical approach to the practice of political theory. For academic practitioners of analytic political philosophy, the historical and/or interpretive idiom was reason enough to dismiss many if not all of the works

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I have mentioned. And, indeed, from the point of view of many practitioners of normative analytic theory, nothing much was going on in political philosophy prior to the publication of Rawls's masterwork.

Of course, the passage of time has enabled us—and Rawls himself, in the later stages of his career[1]—to historicize *A Theory of Justice*. The collapse of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the unfortunate enduring legacy of Reaganism has meant that the enormous energy and inventiveness Rawls devoted to justifying the liberal democratic welfare state currently has more influence in Europe than it does in America. Indeed, when the later Rawls dispensed with the "difference principle," it signaled something more than a mere theoretical adjustment or scaling back. It was nothing less than an acknowledgment that the political terrain had irrevocably changed. The postwar liberal-Keynesian consensus no longer exists, and any mainstream political concern with social justice (in America, at least) died a slow death in the 1980s. "Power of the market" rhetoric and thinking trickled down to middle- and lower-middle income citizens, the majority of whom now have a stake in the relentless pursuit of corporate profit and the expansion of "shareholder value."

It is not only the realignment of state and economy in what is usually termed a neo-liberal fashion that has cast Rawlsianism in a peculiar historical light. It is also the return of many of the political and social problems—both at home and abroad—that once seemed on the verge of being consigned to the ash heap of history. Cultural differences, religious differences, class differences; extraordinary gaps in wealth between developed and undeveloped countries; failed states and millions of "stateless persons"; proliferating wars and terrorism—all have combined to make a theory of justice focused on the welfare state look parochial, if not exactly quaint. Add to this list the decline of literacy, the decay of public-political space, and the absorption of political action and participation by fund-raising, marketing, and lobbying, and one has a lengthy catalogue of ills that clearly demand more capacious—and historically inflected—investigations into the nature, limits, and possibilities of politics.

I should state quite clearly that none of the pre-Rawlsian works I have cited do the work of, or could take the place of, *A Theory of Justice*. When it comes to the question of social justice in liberal democracies, no serious discussion can occur without reference to Rawls. Nevertheless, it is useful to be reminded that the question of social justice is only one of many confronting liberal democracies at the present time, even if one thinks—as I do—that it is a question that our politicians have, for the most part, shamefully ignored for the past thirty years. The useful reminder directs us to the multiple dimensions of the political world and to its historically shifting contours. Any of the works cited above can be read with profit when it comes to the question of

[1]See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

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this historical variability, and coming to grips with its peculiar characteristics in our age.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I think Hannah Arendt's work is the most suggestive in this regard—not because it contains answers to our most immediate problems, but because it continually exemplifies the most important virtue of the political theorist. This is the imaginative capacity (born of deep learning and great intellectual ambition and daring) to take a large step back from the unexamined presuppositions of our age. If for no other reason, Arendt's place in the canon of political theory is assured because none of the political thinkers of the past fifty to sixty years have so deeply and provocatively plumbed the question, "What is the political?" as she did.

However much one may agree or disagree with Arendt's thinking, one must still be grateful for her strenuous effort to revive a question whose answer has, in the recent past, seemed either self-evident or irrelevant. To be sure, the answer Arendt gave to this question—the political as the speech and joint action of diverse equals in an institutionally articulated public space–has historical antecedents, most notably in the civic republican tradition. Arendt's version, however, is unique enough and—from the standpoint of civic republicanism—individualist or diversity-centered enough to warrant a biographical overview of the experiences that both led her to embrace this tradition and also to radically depart from it.

Arendt was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1906 and grew up in Königsberg, East Prussia. The only child of Paul and Martha Arendt, secular Jews of a broadly social democratic bent, Arendt displayed an intellectual precociousness, learning ancient Greek as a child and reading the works of Kant and Kierkegaard as an adolescent. Despite her father's early death and the not entirely happy remarriage of her mother, Arendt excelled at the Luiseschule (although she was expelled for insubordination at age 15, following a teacher's insulting remark).[2] There followed several semesters as a special student at the University of Berlin (1922–1923), where she studied classics and Christian theology, the latter with Romano Guardini. From there it was on to university study at Marburg, where—famously—she was the student (and lover) of Martin Heidegger during the period 1924–1926. She left Marburg for a semester of study with Edmund Husserl before moving to Heidelberg to write her doctoral dissertation, "Der Liebesbegriffe bei Augustin," with Karl Jaspers in 1927–1928.

As Arendt's biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has noted, Arendt's university studies coincided with what were, relatively speaking, the most stable years of the Weimar Republic (1924–1929).[3] She and other "resolute

[2]See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 33–34.

[3]Ibid., 42.

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starvlings" such as Hans Jonas (her friend from these years) were free to pursue their philosophical vocation without the question of politics—or, more to the point, anti-Semitism—subsuming everything. Her philosophical education at the hands of Heidegger and Jaspers—the two leading lights of the new and revolutionary *Existenzphilosophie*—had an enduring impact, even if it was not quite so "determining" as some of Arendt's detractors would like us to assume.[4]

Here it is important to note that Arendt always assumed she would study philosophy; she was not drawn to it because it had become suddenly fashionable.[5] Arendt's vocation as a political thinker, however, was hardly in the cards during her university days. As she later acknowledged, this vocation was in large part a function of events in Germany in 1933 and after. This was a period that—biographically speaking—saw her make a daring escape across the Czech border with her mother; emigrate to Paris; and—ultimately, via Marseilles and Lisbon—come to America in 1941 (she gained U.S. citizenship in 1951).

For Arendt, the implications of the Nazi ascendance in 1931–1932 and eventual coming to power in 1933 were all too clear. In later years, she could be quite cutting with respect to those who hoped that life—and especially Jewish life—would somehow continue in a normal fashion. She could be even more cutting about those Germans who, while hardly convinced by Nazi ideological claims, nevertheless "coordinated" with the regime (for reasons largely of self-interest) after 1933. Her sense of disillusionment with the academy and self-described intellectuals in the lead-up to the *Nazizeit* was severe. She never wanted to be associated with such people again.

The case of Heidegger was, for obvious reasons, more complicated. Like Jaspers, Arendt was painfully aware of both his human failings and his political idiocy, even going so far as to denounce his version of existential philosophy as a late excrescence of German romanticism in her essay "What is Existenz Philosophy?" (1947).[6] Later—in 1949, when she returned to Europe as the executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction—she personally reconciled with Heidegger, whom she recognized, as did Jaspers, as one of the great philosophical minds of the twentieth century.[7]

[4]See, for example, Richard Wolin's *Heidegger's Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[5]See Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Gunter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 9.

[6]Hannah Arendt, "What is Existenz Philosophy?" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, 163–87.

[7]The personal relationship between Arendt and Heidegger is well covered in Young-Bruehl's biography. As to the philosophical relationship, see my study,

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Arendt's clarity about the significance of the Nazi rise to power was, in no small part, due to discussions she had with the German Zionist leader Kurt Blumenfeld. As Young-Bruehl's biography makes clear—and as the subsequently published Arendt/Blumenfeld correspondence bears out[8]—Arendt's political education really began with her experience as a German Jew in the early 1930s, and through her contact with Blumenfeld. Although never a Zionist—she would, in later years, be quite critical of the tunnel vision of the movement[9]—she was anxious to act in some way against the enemies of her people, and to let the world know what was happening to Jews in Germany in the period 1930–1933.

When Blumenfeld suggested that Arendt could help Jews in Germany by collecting examples of anti-Semitic propaganda in the Prussian State Library and elsewhere, she jumped at the chance. As someone who was not part of the Zionist organization, Arendt, it was thought, could undertake this dangerous work with minimal risk to the group or its members. It was, indeed, a very dicey business, and Arendt was arrested by the German police for her activities. It was only due to the kindness and credulity of the official in charge of her case, to whom she lied about everything, that she managed to be released from custody. It was that moment in 1933 that she seized to escape from Germany, crossing the Czech border at night with her mother. Thus began Arendt's life as a "stateless person," a condition that would last for eighteen years.

There can be little doubt that both her Jewishness and her statelessness had a profound impact on Arendt's subsequent political thinking. While a fierce opponent of all forms of tribal nationalism (and no friend of what we today call identity politics), Arendt was under no illusions that, as she put it, "when one is attacked as a Jew one must defend oneself as a Jew."[10] Her repudiation of the fiction of assimilation—the central point she shared with the

Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[8]Hannah Arendt and Kurt Blumenfeld, *In keinem Besitz verwurzelt* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1995).

[9]See, for example, Arendt's comments in the previously unpublished ms. "Anti-Semitism" (most likely composed in the late thirties) in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ronald H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 50ff. Of course, once the war began, Arendt was quite clear that the Zionist Organization was the only true Jewish political organization and—as such—a key vehicle for active resistance to the Hitler regime. See her piece "*Centrum Censeo . . .* " from *Aufbau* (December 26, 1941), in *The Jewish Writings*, 142–44.

[10]This is the animating theme of the majority of the columns she wrote for *Aufbau*, with their insistent call for the creation of a Jewish army to take part in the fight against Hitler. See Hannah Arendt, "The Jewish Army—The Beginning of a Jewish Politics," in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 136–39.

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Zionists—took on theoretical flesh when (in part 1 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) she focused on the failure of European Jews to organize themselves as a political people. This she preferred, as opposed to a vulnerable minority dependent upon state protection and the influence of a small set of Jewish plutocratic elites.

This particular strain in Arendt's writing has led some of her later critics—most notably Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*—to charge her with "blaming the victim." The recent publication of Arendt's collected *Jewish Writings* should lay this particular canard—and the willful misreading on which it is based—to rest. The *Jewish Writings* amply demonstrate Arendt's fierce identification with her own people, and they underline the passionate intensity with which she preached political organization and self-reliance as the sine qua non of Jewish survival.[11]

The experience of statelessness—which included incarceration in a French concentration camp at Gurs for being an "enemy alien" in 1940[12]—had a similarly profound effect. It led Arendt to be deeply skeptical about moral-philanthropic declarations of universal "human rights" and human dignity. In the interwar period, such declarations proved entirely ineffectual. In response, Arendt focused on what she famously called (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) the "right to have rights": the right of every human being to be a member of some organized political community, to be a citizen with legal rights.[13]

The intensity of Arendt's focus on this basic right becomes more understandable when we remember that totalitarian and proto-totalitarian states abused the principle of sovereignty in order to denationalize entire populations, creating a refugee population in the millions (if not tens of millions) during the interwar period. No one wanted these "stateless" people—not their central and eastern European nation-states of origin, nor the Western parliamentary democracies to which they fled. In this regard, it is important to remember that concentration and internment camps were not a Nazi invention, but rather a pan-European phenomenon during the interwar years. Millions of Russian, Hungarian, Jewish, and other refugees appeared on the doorstep of various European nation-states, only to be treated as superfluous people—as people without a national home and who were (as a result) effectively right-less.

Arendt's own experience of statelessness—not to mention the narrowness of her escape from Germany in 1933 and from Europe in 1941—led to a lifelong insistence on two basic principles. First, there was the overarching need to guarantee that a "nation"—an ethnic majority population—could never

[11]See Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 134–243.

[12]Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 153–55.

[13]Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1973), 296–97. Hereafter cited as OT.

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again be in a position where it could so easily overwhelm that state (the constitutional edifice of laws and institutions that protected citizens' rights). This is what happened between the wars, thanks in part to the rise of pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism. Second, there was the need to restrict radically both the idea and practice of national sovereignty, most obviously through some type of federal apparatus (such as a European federation). Only by being guaranteed the "right to have rights"—only, that is, by being guaranteed membership in a legally and constitutionally organized political entity—could the dignity of man be given concrete recognition and the "rights of Man" have a more than hortatory status.

These characteristically Arendtian views were to emerge later, during the writing of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the mid- to late-forties. As a refugee in Paris in the thirties, she was able to find employment with the Baroness Rothschild and worked extensively with Youth Aliyah. The latter was a Jewish social service organization that trained, fed, and clothed Jewish refugee youth, all in preparation for eventual settlement in Palestine.

This hands-on period of Arendt's life—mirrored after the war by her work for Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, in which capacity she helped to save over 1.5 million pieces of Judaica from a war-ravaged Europe—is frequently overlooked by American and Israeli Jews who were angered by *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).[14] However praiseworthy (from a liberal point of view) her response to Gershom Scholem's charge that she lacked "Ahabeth Israel" may be,[15] there can be no doubt that Arendt was deeply committed to the Jewish people—to their survival, their political education and organization, and to their future.

Arendt—along with her mother and her second husband, the German leftist and autodidact Heinrich Blücher—arrived in New York in 1941. She went to work as a columnist for the German language Jewish newspaper *Aufbau*. Her columns for the paper—under the heading "This Means You!"—manifest a passionate yet futile call for the creation of a "Jewish Army" to take the field with the Allies in the war against Hitler. The basic thought—undone by hard political realities, such as British Imperial interests—was that political voice, power, and freedom would come to the Jewish people only if they showed themselves willing to fight under their own flag, against a common enemy. Reading these columns—collected in *The Jewish Writings*—one is struck by both their passionate intensity and their utterly atheoretical character. For obvious reasons, in the early 1940s Arendt was still far from linking her earlier philosophical vocation to the consideration of politics. The question of "what is to be done?" trumped the thinking of politics as such.

[14]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

[15]Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 466–67.

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Things began to change when—in 1943—Arendt and her husband received confirmation of the darkest rumors from Europe concerning the fate of the Jews. Initially incredulous at reports of systematic extermination (Blücher tried to reassure her by insisting that the Nazis would never depart so radically from strategic and tactical imperatives, especially since they were now in a defensive posture), Arendt spent the next seven years engaged in an intensive effort to comprehend the fact of Auschwitz. Or, to put it more precisely, she began her "interminable dialogue" with the essence of totalitarianism, attempting to comprehend the set of political, cultural, and social factors that made concentration and exterminations camps possible in the heart of civilized Europe. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is the fruit of that effort. It is no exaggeration to state that everything Arendt says in that book is determined by the shock of the extermination and concentration camps and their "industrial production of corpses."[16]

Famously, Arendt viewed the concentration and extermination camps as "the central institutions of totalitarian government." She made this observation not in order to underline the brutality of totalitarian rule. Rather, she made it because she wanted to direct her readers' attention to the utter novelty of totalitarian terror and totalitarian "politics." The totalitarians did not use terror in a strictly strategic or tactical fashion, in order to contain or break resistance. Such an instrumental use of terror has been characteristic of tyrannical and authoritarian regimes from ancient times to our own. Rather, the totalitarians used terror "systematically," after their political opponents had been eliminated. Their goal was to realize the ideological supersense of their respective movements, a goal that required changing human nature "itself."

In Arendt's view, totalitarianism installed a new and radical form of total domination, one that eliminated the space between men and women, binding them together in an "iron band" of terror. The idea was to create "one man of gigantic dimensions" in place of plural individuals.[17] Deprived of any public or social space for free movement or discourse, stripped of the capacity for spontaneity through ideological conditioning and the ubiquitous threat and practice of terror, human beings would be reduced to subhuman "bundles of reflexes," much like Pavlov's dogs. Such creatures would be incapable of resistance. More to the point, they would no longer be a source of unpredictability and (thus) interference to the ostensibly "natural" forces determining—in a supposedly objective, scientific fashion—the destiny of the human species. For the Nazis, the terroristic immobilization of human beings would speed up the process of natural racial selection, culminating in the predestined hegemony of the Aryan

[16]See Dana Villa, "Genealogies of Total Domination: Arendt, Adorno, and Auschwitz," *New German Critique* 100 (Winter, 2007): 1–44.

[17]Arendt, "Ideology and Terror," in OT, 466.

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race; for the Bolsheviks, it would accelerate the process of selection implicit in the idea of class struggle, bringing about the inevitable victory of the proletariat and the oblivion of historically doomed classes.

This, then, is the vision of totalitarianism that Arendt elicited from the camps. She saw the latter not as antistrategic excrescences, but as crucial laboratories of total terror. It was in the camps that the most advanced experiments in changing human nature—in reducing unpredictable human beings to mere bundles of reflexes—were being carried out.[18] The dream of the totalitarians was to create an utterly determined and determinable world, one in which the laws of racial or historical selection would sweep through the passive, immobilized medium of human raw material. In this way, the ideologically specified end of history (understood as the process of class struggle) or nature (understood as the process of racial selection) would be reached more quickly.

The striking thing about Arendt's analysis of the camps in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is its breathtaking dystopianism. Not only does she argue that the camps were the central—indeed, defining—institution of totalitarian rule. She also argues that they were, in principle and (to a degree) in practice, successful in their project of changing human nature. This is perhaps the most shocking claim in the entirety of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, one that goes against many religious and metaphysical ideas about human nature.[19] However, anyone who has read either Primo Levi's descriptions of the all-but-dead *Müsselmanner* in Auschwitz, or David Rousset's descriptions in *Les jours de notre mort*, will have to acknowledge at least a portion of this success. Drawing on eyewitness accounts like Levi's and Rousset's, Arendt's theoretical point is that there is nothing in us, no untouchable spiritual or metaphysical core, that can prevent human beings from being literally dehumanized, turned into mere examples of the animal species mankind.[20]

The Origins of Totalitarianism not only put totalitarianism on the map as a theoretical concept, it made Arendt world-famous. It also created the unfortunate but still lingering image of her as first and foremost a Cold Warrior. This is an image which has greatly impeded her reception in the generally Marxist intellectual cultures of postwar France and Italy, where her work has gained a sympathetic hearing only recently. On the plus side, the early recognition of *Origins* as a masterpiece of theory and analysis, combined with its virtual best-seller status, enabled Arendt to devote the rest of her life to thinking, writing, and part-time teaching. A series of visiting professorships at Princeton, Berkeley, and—perhaps most famously—the University of

[18]Ibid., 455, 458–59.

[19]See, for example, the exchange between Arendt and Voegelin on "The Origins of Totalitarianism" in *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 1 (January 1953), 68–85.

[20]Ibid., 441. See my essay "Terror and Radical Evil" in Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1–32.

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Chicago (1964–1967) were the more-or-less direct result of the enormous success of the totalitarianism book.

Given the current academic professionalization of the life of the mind, it is striking to recall that Arendt was offered a full-time professorship—in the graduate faculty at the New School—relatively late in life (1967). However ambivalent she might have been about the academy, her return to university life (even if only as a visitor) enabled Arendt to deepen her understanding of the nature and limits of Western political thought. For while totalitarianism was—on one level—a repudiation of everything the Western tradition of political and philosophical thought stood for, it was—on another level—the exaggerated and pathological manifestation of some of this tradition's most deeply rooted prejudices.

Foremost among these prejudices was the oblivion or effacement of the basic political phenomenon of human plurality. For Arendt, human plurality—the "fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world"—was the fundamental constitutive condition of politics and political relations. And politics, for Arendt, was not a relation of rule or domination, the activity of administration or the state's tending of the economic life process of society. Rather—and this is something her encounter with the pure anti-politics of totalitarianism made clear to her—it was the activity of debate, deliberation, and decision exercised by plural and diverse civic equals in a legally and institutionally articulated public space.

It is, of course, relatively easy to comprehend the totalitarian negation of human plurality. It is somewhat more difficult to grasp the ways in which the Western tradition of political philosophy, from its beginning in Plato to its end in the thought of Karl Marx, consistently undermined or bracketed human plurality (and diverse, talkative civic equality) through a series of misleading metaphors. From the Platonic analogy between the structure of the soul and that of the just polity, to Aristotle's insistence on natural relations of hierarchy, to Hobbes's and Rousseau's doctrines of a unitary sovereign will (whether monarchical or popular), to, finally, the Marxian idea of a society without class divisions, one which has overcome politics—again and again, the tradition effaces the sine qua non of authentic politics: the discursive relations of plural equals.

It was the depth of this antipolitical prejudice against plurality that Arendt discovered as she began research on her follow-up to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. A study of the proto-totalitarian elements in the thought of Karl Marx—funded by an award from the Guggenheim foundation in 1952—was to have shored up what Arendt (and many of her critics) considered the weaker side of *Origins*, namely, its analysis of Soviet Communism. Her engagement with Marx's thought led her—I almost want to say "inevitably"—back to a depth reading of the tradition, the better to understand the roots of an idea of political community from which plurality, in all its richness, has been expunged. The ultimate fruit of that labor was *The Human Condition* (1958), a book that in many respects is Arendt's theoretical *summa*. Most often cited for its distinctions between labor, work, and action (on the one hand) and its emphasis on the public realm (on

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the other), the book contained a penetrating and never-equaled critique of the tradition—a critique that, as I have already suggested, reached back to Plato and Aristotle and forward to liberalism, Marxism, and our increasingly technological society, one from which genuine politics is rapidly disappearing.

It is hard to overstate the influence of *The Human Condition*, even though some (e.g., Isaiah Berlin) have tried to dismiss it.[21] More or less single-handedly, the book rescued the ideas of the public realm and a noninstrumental form of praxis from oblivion. It is impossible to conceive the early- and middle-period work of Jürgen Habermas, or Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision*, or even J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*, without it. In broader and less academic terms, the book's "retrieval" of political action as a form of joint action or "acting together" had a significant impact on both the American civil rights and antiwar movements. And, more recently, through the work of Jonathan Schell and others, the book's themes of earth- and world-alienation have influenced not only the antinuclear movement, but environmental activism as well.[22]

Yet despite its influence, *The Human Condition* remains, fifty years after its publication, an untimely book. It was untimely in the late fifties and early sixties insofar as it questioned the impulses driving an increasingly scientific and technological civilization. It is untimely now because its central notions of an institutionally articulated public space and a civic form of plurality sit uneasily with our current fixation on interest- and/or identity-group politics. Finally, it is untimely insofar as it suggests—in a manner parallel to but radically different from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*—that the concrete reality of freedom is to be found in action with others in the public realm, and not in the spheres of consumer choice, self-fashioning, intimate relations, or withdrawal from the world.

Arendt's idea of public freedom has, of course, a long and distinguished pedigree in Western political thought, going back to the Greek polis and to the republican city-states of Renaissance Italy. She illuminated this pedigree in her next major theoretical work, *On Revolution* (1963). If, as is generally acknowledged, *The Human Condition* is Arendt's most "Heideggerian" book, *On Revolution* is her most unabashedly republican. In it she comes to terms not only with a tradition of political discourse stretching back to

[21]See Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Scribner's, 1991). Berlin's lack of regard for Arendt might, at first glance, appear to be a function of an analytic philosopher's disdain for a more "continental," dense, and occasionally aphoristic form of writing. In fact, as Jeremy Waldron has recently pointed out, Berlin's own prose is hardly the most disciplined or "rigorous," at least from an analytic point of view. The real source of Berlin's dismissal was, unsurprisingly, political. Berlin was an intimate of many establishment figures in Israeli politics and the Zionist movement, and had little regard for those—like Arendt—who were critical of either. Academic vanity also played a role.

[22]See Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Picador, 1982).

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Montesquieu, Harrington, Machiavelli, Cicero, and (ultimately) Aristotle; she also comes to terms with the two main competing interpretations of the modern revolutionary tradition, namely, Marxism and liberalism.[23]

Using a broadly comparative method (one focusing on the French and American Revolutions), Arendt argued that the pathos of the modern revolutionary tradition derives from its most basic and defining act: the founding of a new space of public freedom, a founding that occurs through the creation of a new (constitutional and republican) form of government. However, Arendt claims, the central importance of political foundation—of starting a new "story" through the creation of a new "space of freedom"—has been covered over by the Jacobin-Marxist obsession with the question of poverty (the "Social Question"), and by the liberal reduction of constitutional government to the essential purpose of protecting civil rights and individual freedoms. Breathing new life into what many had considered a moribund theoretical tradition, *On Revolution* paved the way for a civic republican renewal in Anglo-American thought. This renewal is manifest in works as diverse as Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* and Michael Sandel's *Democracy and Its Discontents*, and in Bernard Bailyn's and Gordon Woods's influential reinterpretations of the history of the American Revolution.

When it appeared in 1963, *On Revolution* was completely overshadowed by another book Arendt published that year: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This work—which grew out of her trial reportage for *The New Yorker* in 1961—has been the single most enduring source of antipathy toward Arendt, in both academic and nonacademic circles. In order to understand this antipathy, one has to go back to the campaign by a variety of Jewish organizations in the United States to prevent the book's publication.[24] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, it was claimed, exonerated the "monster" and blamed the victims. That this is nothing short of a libel is clear to anyone who has actually read the book. However, the possibility of deciding for oneself was precisely what the campaign sought to eliminate.

What Arendt did do—in eight pages in the middle of a 300-page book—was to bring up the topic of the *Judenräte*, their relations with the Nazis, and their activities during the Holocaust. Needless to say, Arendt does not blame the members of the "Jewish Councils"—which the Nazis set up to administer the ghettos they created in Poland and elsewhere—for the extermination of European Jewry. The Nazis and their various European allies and fellow travelers did that. And Eichmann—as Arendt repeatedly

[23]See Albrecht Wellmer's important essay "Hannah Arendt on Revolution" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[24]See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's detailed account in *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 347–62.

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emphasizes in the book that supposedly "exonerates" him—zealously and efficiently carried out his duties as "transport czar" for the Final Solution.[25]

What some of the elites who made up the *Judenräte* did, in Arendt's opinion, was to betray their people through administrative fulfillment of many Nazi requests—drawing up lists of property holdings slated for confiscation, as well as lists of members of the community suitable for shipment to the East and so-called special treatment. Hyperbolically, Arendt claimed that without this administrative complicity in organizational matters, fewer than half of the six million European Jews eventually slaughtered would have met their fate. Of course, there is no way of knowing how many Jews might have been saved had a consistent policy of noncompliance been in place. Suffice it to say that figures like Chaim Rumkowski—the self-styled "King of the Jews" in Lodz, Poland—remain problematic even for scholars like Isaiah Trunk, whose massive work *Judenrat* was written precisely in order to dispute Arendt's charge of (limited) elite complicity.[26]

The "Eichmann Controversy"—which lasted for years in the sixties—took a tremendous toll on Arendt. As she insisted time and again in her own defense, in the Eichmann book she was a trial reporter and nothing more. And indeed, her portrait of Eichmann—as an "ordinary" man in the worst sense of the word—was confirmed by many who had attended the trial. They, like Arendt, expected to see a devil—or at least an ideological fanatic and Jew-hater—in the dock. Instead they encountered an ordinary and none-too-bright mid-level bureaucrat, one given to self-pity and officialese.

In this regard, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* deflated the narrative that the lead prosecutor, Israeli Attorney General Gideon Hausner, struggled so mightily to put in place. Hausner framed Eichmann as the architect of the Final Solution. This he most clearly was not, as both the trial and subsequent scholarship has demonstrated. The fact that Eichmann was not the mastermind he was presented as did not stop Arendt from insisting that he did, in fact, deserve the death penalty for the crimes against humanity he had committed. She was quite clear about that. As to the tangled question of whether Arendt and others were deceived by Eichmann's nonideological self-presentation . . . well, for that to be cleared up, Yad Vashem—the Israeli Holocaust Museum and Archive—will have to publish the 3,000-page transcript of Eichmann's interrogation (which Arendt read in preparation for her book). Then and only then will scholars be in a position to assess the extent of his anti-Semitism and its role as a motive for his activities.

Of course, it is entirely possible that Arendt got Eichmann's specific motivation—or, more precisely, his lack of a motive—wrong. Nevertheless, the concept that occurred to her when she was confronted by Eichmann in

[25]See my essay "Conscience, the Banality of Evil, and the Idea of a Representative Perpetrator" in Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 33–61.

[26]See Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

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the flesh—the "banality of evil"—remains crucial for understanding how it is that thousands of normal people, neither fanatical nor hate-filled, are able to make themselves available for what the political theorist George Kateb has called "evil as policy."[27]

Events like the genocide in Rwanda or 9/11 dispose us to a traditional or theological view, one which views hatred, fanaticism, and/or sheer wickedness as defining characteristics of most if not all evil in the world. Nevertheless, the fact remains that tens of millions of victims were sent to their graves in the twentieth century, more often than not by men and women who lacked ideological fervor, racial hatred, or even what Kant would call an "evil will." This is not to say that fanatics, sadists, and racists were not involved in these massacres. However, state terror—evil as policy—does not depend on such individuals, who always constitute a relative minority in the actual apparatuses of death. Such massive undertakings as the rationalized extermination of European Jewry, or the creation of the Soviet Gulag, could never have been carried out were it not for the involvement of thousands of ordinary men and women. All state-initiated terror requires people who obey the laws, follow orders, and do their jobs—no matter how merciless the job in question might be.

The Eichmann controversy generated Arendt's most enduring and vociferous critics. More than a few of these would later seize upon the revelation of Arendt's youthful relationship with the "Nazi" Heidegger in order to question both her moral bearings and her intellectual integrity. This revelation was made—in detail—in Young-Bruehl's 1982 biography (some seven years after Arendt's death at age 69). However, it was only with the publication of Elzbieta Ettinger's psychologizing *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* in 1995 that the "Hannah Arendt scandal" occurred. To be sure, Ettinger had no particular axe to grind, and clearly identified with Arendt at some level. Somehow, she gained permission to view the Arendt/Heidegger correspondence, which had previously been off limits to scholars (it was finally published—in German—in 1998 and in English translation in 2003).[28] On the basis of this perusal, Ettinger was able to claim that Arendt not only forgave and reconciled with Heidegger after the war, but that their liaison had been recommenced.

The notion of "sleeping with the enemy" was too much for many, even though we have no confirmation that a romantic relationship was restarted. More to the point—and something those who blame Arendt for her personal connection to Heidegger tend to forget—Heidegger was obviously not a Nazi in 1924–1926. His public role in the regime—as Rektor of Freiburg—lasted

[27]See George Kateb, "On Political Evil," in Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 199–221.

[28]Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Letters: 1925–1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz, translated by Andrew Shields (New York: Harcourt, 2003).

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nine months, even though he retained his Nazi party membership until 1945. Of course, his politics throughout the period were hypernationalist, xenophobic, and antimodernist to the core. However, the idea that his call for a return to a pre-Socratic "first beginning" somehow provided the Nazis with important ideological fodder is, of course, absurd. After 1933, he withdrew from any public involvement with a movement that had let him know—early and clearly—that his thinking did not sufficiently toe the party line.[29]

Needless to say, individual readers are entirely within their rights if they choose to blame Arendt for reestablishing contact with Heidegger in 1949, or for accepting (more than a little naively) his version of events and his personal motivations during the Nazi years.[30] What cannot be done—at least legitimately—is to reduce the complicated structure of Arendt's political thought to the wooly-headed musings of a left Heideggerian disciple. True, like Heidegger, Arendt worried a lot about the political implications of modern science and technology. And also like Heidegger, she forcefully focused attention on the "initiatory" dimensions of political action, its character as a "radical beginning." The fact remains, however, that she was a firm believer in constitutionalism, federalism, equal civil and political rights, and an inclusive public sphere. She was also a staunch opponent of all forms of tribal nationalism and of the general political legacy of German Romanticism (a legacy she viewed Heidegger as fatally imbibing). These points are lost on Arendt's contemporary academic critics, who—on the basis of the Eichmann book and the liaison with Heidegger—portray Arendt as confused, irrationalist, and (as the old saying goes) "bad for the Jews."

All of this, however, is to jump ahead to recent polemics. In the late sixties and early seventies, Arendt was one of America's most recognizable, forceful, and—the Eichmann book notwithstanding—respected public intellectuals. The essays contained in the collection *Crises of the Republic* (1972) attest to her fierce commitment to the American ideal and to her intense worries about the country's future. Unlike elitist critics of American democracy (to which she is sometimes falsely compared), Arendt urged greater governmental transparency and broader public attention and political participation. The revival of citizenship and the "preservation and augmentation" of the public space of freedom opened by the Constitution were her persistent themes. Her

[29]For a record of Heidegger's political activities during the Nazi period, see Hugo Otto, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. Allan Blunden (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For a balanced view of the nature and background of his political thought (such as it was), see Otto Pöggeler's essay "Heidegger's Political Self-Understanding" in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 198–244.

[30]See Hannah Arendt, "Martin Heidegger at 80," in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy,* ed. Michael Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

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opposition to elite critics who think that we somehow suffer from too much democracy is readily apparent.

At the time of her death—from a heart attack while entertaining friends in her New York apartment—Arendt was working on the third part of *The Life of the Mind*. The first two volumes—on thinking and willing, respectively—were finished, albeit in rough form. The third, on judging, was scarcely begun.

As many a commentator has noted, Arendt's death robbed us of what would have been a highly original analysis of a faculty too often identified with the mechanical activity of subsuming a particular thing, event, or person under a predetermined concept or universal. Like Hans-Georg Gadamer—but working out of a Kantian rather than an Aristotelian tradition—Arendt thought particulars and universals actually "co-determined" one another, and that the faculty of judgment was most its own not when reading events, people, things back into familiar categories, but rather when it spontaneously did justice to their novelty and unprecedented quality through the creation of a new concept.[31] As she herself states in the introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, the "banality of evil" was just such an instance of judgment's reflective exercise, its ascent from a concrete particular—Eichmann—to a new and spontaneously generated concept. The "banality of evil" captured a new but increasingly widespread phenomenon characteristic of twentieth-century life: political evil on a massive scale, committed without the presence of wickedness or, indeed, any particular motive on the part of the perpetrators.[32]

In the years immediately preceding her death, Arendt won many awards, including the Danish Sonning prize for Contributions to European Civilization. She was invited to give the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University in 1973 and 1974, suffering a first serious heart attack at the beginning of the second series. Her status as an intellectual celebrity, well-established at the time of her death, has in recent years given way to a widespread recognition of the canonical status of her work. It can truthfully be said that she is the first woman to gain admission to the Western canon of political thought. There are, of course, those who would argue with this assessment, preferring to see her as an exemplar of the "lack of rigor" analytic philosophers associate with so-called Continental figures. Thus, despite the fact that her work is discussed, written on, and taught in virtually all fields in the humanities today, she remains a fugitive presence in all but a few American philosophy departments.

[31]For an extended comparison of Gadamer and Arendt, as well as a nuanced appreciation of Arendt's debt to Kant's third Critique, see Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[32]Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I, *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 3–4.

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The verdict of some analytic philosophers notwithstanding, interest in Arendt is currently at an all-time high. As her centenary in 2006 demonstrated—with conferences and celebrations in France, Italy, Germany, Brazil, Turkey, Israel, Sweden, Japan, America and elsewhere—the extent of her influence is now worldwide. Of course, no one can say whether her reputation will wax or wane in the decades to come. What one can say is that she was the single figure in a luminous gallery of émigré intellectuals who made the public realm and the political significance of human plurality her enduring theme. Transcending the context of totalitarian horror that gave birth to it, Arendt's political theory reminds citizens of the contemporary world that the meaning of politics is not power, wealth, or virtue. As she puts it simply in the unfinished Introduction into Politics, "the meaning of politics is freedom."[33]

[33]Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 108.

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