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JEWISH WRITINGS

Hannah Arendt

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Jew as Pariah: The Case of Hannah Arendt\** (1906–1975)

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### I

All vaunted Jewish qualities—the “Jewish heart,” humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence—are pariah qualities. All Jewish shortcomings—tactlessness, political stupidity, inferiority complexes and money-grubbing—are characteristic of upstarts. There have always been Jews who did not think it worth while to change their humane attitude and their natural insight into reality for the narrowness of caste spirit or the essential unreality of financial transactions.<sup>1</sup>

Hannah Arendt’s life was played out during the “dark times” of the twentieth century. She was one of the most remarkable—as well as one of the last—offspring of a German-Jewish milieu which produced more than its share of great literary, scientific, and artistic figures. An outstanding political and cultural critic, her purpose as a thinker was to help us understand the meaning and direction of events in a world of deadly chaos.

Probably best known to the general public as the author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, over which a great storm erupted in the Jewish community and for which she was vehemently condemned in the Jewish press, Arendt’s

\*This essay appeared in a slightly different form in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1978).

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reputation as one of her generation's most gifted political thinkers rests on two other works: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*.

When Hannah Arendt died, she was out of favor with the Jewish community as a consequence of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: few of the eulogies which traditionally follow upon the death of such a prominent figure appeared in the Jewish press. Partly because she was subjected to a modern form of excommunication from the Jewish community and partly due to the power of her other writings, her Jewish writings were for the most part neglected and forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

This was most unfortunate, for it led to a less than complete understanding of both her political theory, for which she was renowned, and her view of modern Jewish history, for which she was castigated. In fact, there is an essential link between her conception of Jewish history and her political theory: her view of the modern Jewish condition serves as an introduction to her political theory, while her political theory illuminates her interpretation of Jewish history.

This collection not only serves to expand the public's knowledge of her work but, more importantly, when taken together these essays are of intrinsic importance because they present a coherent and powerful, albeit nonconformist, understanding of what it means to be a Jew in the modern world. Although many of the essays were written over fifty years ago, the issues they deal with continue to be of contemporary importance: the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis, the relationship of world Jewry to the State of Israel, the relationship of Israel to the Arabs both within the borders of the Jewish State and without, and the peculiar historical position of Jews within modern Western society.

Fundamentally these essays show that Hannah Arendt chose the role of a "conscious pariah." In Arendt's view, the status of pariah—the social outcast—characterizes the position of the Jews in Western Europe following the Enlightenment and emancipation because they were never truly accepted by European society. "During the 150 years when Jews truly lived amidst, and not just in the neighborhood of, Western European peoples, they always had to pay with political misery for social glory and with social insult for political success."<sup>3</sup> This outsider status gave rise to two particular types: the *conscious pariahs* who were aware of it, and the *parvenus*, who tried to succeed in the world of the gentiles but could never escape their Jewish roots. For Arendt, the conscious pariahs were

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those who really did most for the spiritual dignity of their people, who were great enough to transcend the bounds of nationality and to weave the strands of their Jewish genius into the general texture of European life . . . those bold spirits who tried to make of the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have been—an admission of Jews as *Jews* to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu.<sup>4</sup>

By affirming both their Jewish particularity and their right to a place in general European life, the conscious pariahs became marginal not only in relation to European society—as all Jews were—but to the Jewish community as well. They were neither parochially Jewish, like their Eastern European cousins, nor were they part of the wealthy Jewish upper class of bankers and merchants that controlled Jewish-gentile relations. According to Arendt, the conscious pariah is a hidden tradition: “hidden” because there are few links among the great but isolated individuals who have affirmed their pariah status—such as Heinrich Heine, Rahel Varnhagen, Bernard Lazare, Franz Kafka, and Walter Benjamin—nor ties between them and the rest of the Jewish community; a “tradition” because “for over a hundred years the same basic conditions have obtained and evoked the same basic reaction.”<sup>5</sup>

The parvenus—the upstarts who try to make it in non-Jewish society—are the products of the same historical circumstances and are thus the pariahs’ counterparts in Arendt’s typology. While the pariahs use their minds and hearts, voluntarily spurning society’s insidious gifts, the parvenus use their elbows to raise themselves above their fellow Jews into the “respectable” world of the gentiles. The parvenus are at best accepted only as “exceptions” to the stereotype of the uncouth, unworldly ghetto Jew—and those Jews who succeed with this ploy feel themselves superior to their fellow Jews. Those Jews who spurn social acceptance on the basis of this self-deceit have been few, but in exchange for their isolation from both Jewish and gentile society, these conscious pariahs gain the honesty that makes life worth living, a clear view of reality, and a place in both European and Jewish history.

Not only did Hannah Arendt formulate and celebrate the Jewish pariah as a human type, she epitomized it in her life and thought. As a conscious pariah

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who was committed to, yet critical of, both her Jewish and European inheritances, her intellectual project as a whole was founded in the problematic of Jewishness in the modern world. The transformation of Judaism into Jewishness in an increasingly secular world meant that, like Kafka, she had lost the Judaic heritage of her fathers without gaining a firmly rooted place in the European polity, which itself was in the process of collapse. As a pariah, her work is characterized by the dialectical tension between her Jewishness and modern Jewish experience, on the one side, and her European and generalized human experience in the modern age, on the other. The result was a unique outlook on both Jewish and European concerns in which the specifically Jewish and broadly European experiences constantly inform one another. Arendt's most lauded work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is clearly the product of a conscious pariah, without equal as an intricate and beautiful pattern into which both Jewish and European concerns and history are intentionally woven together.

Not standing exclusively inside or outside either her Jewish or European heritage, Hannah Arendt uses both as platforms from which to gain a critical insight into the other. On the one hand, she consciously stands outside the Jewish tradition, subjecting the experience of the Jews in the modern world to the criticism of a German philosopher rooted in the European classics. Distinguishing between Jewishness—an existential given that one cannot escape—and Judaism—a system of beliefs which one can adopt or reject—she adamantly accepts the one and rejects the other. In doing so, she became a rebel among her own people. On the other hand, Arendt uses her experience as a Jew and her perspective as a conscious pariah standing outside the mainstream of Western society to analyze and gain an understanding of that society. By claiming that “[i]t is no mere accident that the catastrophic defeats of the peoples of Europe began with the catastrophe of the Jewish people,”<sup>6</sup> Arendt places the modern Jewish experience at the center of her critique of modern society.

This Jewish-European dialectic in her work has been a perpetual source of misunderstanding on the part of critics concerned with both her Jewish and non-Jewish work, for she falls within no established historical or philosophical perspective. Much like Kafka, with whom Arendt has a feeling of particular closeness and to whom she expresses a particular debt, the Jewish element is crucial though not exclusive: her Jewishness is not her sole concern nor the

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sole determinant of her work, but our understanding of her work is both diminished and seriously distorted if we overlook it. Arendt's own understanding of her peculiar perspective is best expressed in her letter to Scholem:

What confuses you is that my arguments and my approach are different from what you are used to; in other words, the trouble is that I am independent. By this I mean, on the one hand, that I do not belong to any organisation and always speak only for myself, and on the other hand, that I have great confidence in Lessing's *selbstdenken* [thinking for oneself] for which, I think, no ideology, no public opinion, and no "convictions" can ever be a substitute. Whatever objections you may have to the results, you won't understand them unless you realize that they are really my own and nobody else's.<sup>7</sup>

## II

The enthusiastic Jewish intellectual dreaming of the paradise on earth, so certain of freedom from all national ties and prejudices, was in fact farther removed from political reality than his fathers, who had prayed for the coming of Messiah and the return of the people to Palestine.<sup>8</sup>

The twentieth century saw the most momentous changes in Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazis during World War II, and the founding of the Jewish State of Israel shortly thereafter, have radically changed the position of Jews in the world. The result has been a transformation of relations amongst Jews themselves and between them and the other peoples of the world. Though inextricably linked, the Holocaust and the Jewish State raise two different sets of questions. The Holocaust is the end of an era of Jewish existence and therefore raises questions about the past—how and why it happened. The Jewish State is the beginning of a new era and therefore raises questions about what it means to be a part of the Jewish people today and in

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the future. Of course, the answers to the second set of questions have been and must be influenced by the answers to the first, whether explicitly articulated in thought or implicitly contained in action. The task of trying to understand how and why the Holocaust happened and what has—or should be—changed as a result is the central task of Jewish thought in the post-Holocaust era.

The essays in this volume, particularly when read together with Arendt's other works in which Jewish history is discussed—*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Rahel Varnhagen*, *Men in Dark Times*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—present Hannah Arendt's response to this challenge. Not only does she attempt to understand the sources of modern antisemitism by tracing the historical relationships of Jews and gentiles, but she also criticizes the modes of Jewish self-understanding and world-understanding that resulted in the Jewish responses of unbelief and passivity in the face of destruction.

Hannah Arendt's critical assessment of Jewish history is based on the fundamental political conviction that the world is what we make of it. There is no Hegelian "cunning of reason," but "rather does unreason begin to function automatically when reason has abdicated to it."<sup>9</sup> The Jews, by the very fact of their existence, are "one group of people among other groups, all of which are involved in the business of this world. And . . . [the Jews do] not simply cease to be coresponsible because . . . [they] became the victim of the world's injustice and cruelty."<sup>10</sup> Unlike both the "scapegoat" theory, which claims that the Jews were accidental victims, and the "eternal antisemitism" theory, which claims that the Jews are inevitable victims, Arendt tries to show that the catastrophic end to the history of the Jews in Europe was neither accidental nor inevitable. Rather, it was the result of the specific history of Jewish-gentile relationships. If the Jews were so politically blind that they did not understand the implications of their own actions and those of their opponents, it was the result of what Arendt considers the key feature of Jewish history in the modern period: the Jews' *worldlessness*.

Jewish history offers the extraordinary spectacle of a people, unique in this respect, which began its history with a well-defined concept of history and an almost conscious resolution to achieve a well-circumscribed plan on earth and then, without giving up this concept, avoided all political action for two thousand years. The result was that

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the political history of the Jewish people became even more dependent upon unforeseen, accidental factors than the history of other nations, so that the Jews stumbled from one role to the other and accepted responsibility for none.<sup>11</sup>

In Arendt's view, the continued existence of the Jewish people throughout the period of the Diaspora was until very recently much more the result of Jewish dissociation from the dominant Christian world than gentile dissociation from the Jews. It is only since the nineteenth century that anti-semitism has had a significant effect on Jewish preservation. Given the conditions of the Diaspora, this dissociation was the only possible method of self-preservation and, Arendt claims, survival has been the single aim of Jewish political thought and action since the Babylonian exile. This traditional solution to the problem of survival was to help prepare the basis for the later dissolution of the Jewish people; for, by making dissociation the basis for their survival, the Jews came to conceive of their existence as almost totally separate and independent from the rest of the world. Consequently, the Jews became ignorant of conditions in the real world and incapable of recognizing new opportunities and new threats to their survival as they arose.

Until the end of the Middle Ages, by Arendt's account, the Jews "had been able to conduct their communal affairs by means of a politics that existed in the realm of imagination alone—the memory of a far-off past and the hope of a far-off future."<sup>12</sup> This conceptual framework was destroyed by an event that ushered in the beginning of the modern age for the Jews: the failure of the mystical messianic movement centered around Sabbatai Zevi in 1666. The great historian of Shabbetai Tzevi is Gershom Scholem, and it is in "Jewish History, Revised," her review of Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, as well as "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After" that Hannah Arendt presents a unique political twist to the understanding of that event.

Shabbetai Tzevi's appearance on the scene was the culmination of a two-century period during which Jewish-gentile relations were at an all-time low and during which the mysticism of the Kabbalah had become popularized and extremely widespread. Because of their lack of involvement in and control over the political world in which they lived, the Jews were strongly attracted to mystical thought since "these speculations appeal to all who are actually excluded from action, prevented from altering a fate that appears to



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them unbearable and, feeling themselves helpless victims of incomprehensible forces, are naturally inclined to find some secret means for gaining power for participating in the ‘drama of the World.’”<sup>13</sup>

The messianic fervor which gripped the entire Jewish world had no basis in particular events occurring in the non-Jewish world, but was the result of the internal dynamics created by accepting mysticism as a substitute for political action; the Kabbalah saw the events leading to the messianic perfection of the world as a matter exclusively concerning God and His people Israel. When acted upon, the yearning for political reality that was confined within mystical categories could only shatter those categories because they offered no basis for evaluating political realities. Thus, when Zevi turned apostate in the face of the reality of the sultan’s power and the popular messianic hope for a physical return to Zion was dashed, the traditional Jewish religious framework for understanding the world was dealt a severe blow.

But, according to Arendt, this confrontation with reality did not engender a more “realistic” understanding among the Jews; understanding can exist only when there is a framework within which to place events. In her view, the Shabbetai Tzevi catastrophe destroyed the traditional framework without replacing it with another. The result was an unprecedented worldlessness:

In losing their faith in a divine beginning and ultimate culmination of history, the Jews lost their guide through the wilderness of bare facts; for when man is robbed of all means of interpreting events he is left with no sense whatsoever of reality. The present that confronted the Jews after the Shabbetai Tzevi debacle was the turmoil of a world whose course no longer made sense and in which, as a result, the Jews could no longer find a place.<sup>14</sup>

In Arendt’s view, the Shabbetai movement was “a great political movement” of “real popular action” which let loose onto the public scene what she sees as Jewish mysticism’s “exclusive concern with reality and action.”<sup>15</sup> The result, however, was a catastrophe “greater for the Jewish people than all other persecutions had been, if we are to measure it by the only available yardstick, its far-reaching influence upon the future of the people. From now on, the Jewish body politic was dead and the people retired from the public scene of history.”<sup>16</sup> The legacy of the period of Jewish estrangement from the non-Jewish world, played out in the subsequent history of Hasidism, the

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Reform movement, attempted assimilation, and revolutionary utopianism, was that the Jews were “even less ‘realistic’—that is, less capable than ever before of facing and understanding the real situation.”<sup>17</sup>

The “real situation” was that by the seventeenth century the Jews were becoming involved in the world as a whole and moving into positions of potential political power. According to Arendt’s analysis, presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the Jews, in the persons of the court Jews and the international bankers which followed them, were instrumental in the ascendance of the absolute monarchies and the subsequent development of the nation-state. Unlike the declining nobility and the privatistic bourgeoisie, “the Jews were the only part of the population willing to finance the state’s beginnings and to tie their destinies to its further development.”<sup>18</sup>

While being the state’s financiers had great potential for political power, as the antisemites were quick to understand, the worldless mentality of the Jews was such that “they never allied themselves with any specific government, but rather with governments, with authority as such.”<sup>19</sup> The wealthy Jews involved in “finance politics” were more concerned with continuing legal discrimination against the poor Jewish masses to preserve their privileged position of prestige and power within the Jewish community than in attaining power over the gentiles. As the practical rulers of the Jewish community, they were conscientious about their role as its protectors, but ignorant of their real potential among non-Jews. Their political concerns and perceptions never extended further than the pursuit of the only political goal the Jews ever had: survival. “The Jews, without knowledge of or interest in power, never thought of exercising more than mild pressure for minor purposes of self-defense.”<sup>20</sup>

The Jews didn’t realize that the modern state—a supposedly political entity ruling over class society—soon came into conflict with various classes which comprised that society. Their special services to and special protection from the political authorities prevented either the Jews’ submersion in the class system or their emergence as a separate class. They were thus the only distinctive social group that owed its continued existence to the government, unconditionally supported the state as such, and, like the state, stood apart from society and its class distinctions. The result, Arendt observes, was that “each class of society which came into a conflict with the state as such became antisemitic because the only social group which seemed to represent the state were the Jews.”<sup>21</sup>

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Precisely because they were neither part of class society nor the state's politically active governing clique, the Jews were oblivious to the increasing tension between state and society at the same time that they were driven toward the center of the conflict because they stood between the two as part of neither. Politically naïve enough to believe that their true lack of interest in power would be seen and accepted for what it was, they were taken completely by surprise when twentieth-century political antisemitism rose to power on the basis of charges of a Jewish world conspiracy. This political myopia reflects

the most serious paradox embodied in the curious political history of the Jews. Of all European peoples, the Jews had been the only one without a state of their own and had been, precisely for this reason, so eager and so suitable for alliances with governments and states as such, no matter what these governments or states might represent. On the other hand, the Jews had no political tradition or experience, and were as little aware of the tension between society and state as they were of the obvious risks and power-possibilities of their new role.<sup>22</sup>

Oblivious to the fact that they were instrumental in the development of the nation-state, the Jews were equally unconcerned with the maintenance of the nation-state system against the rise of the bourgeoisie's imperialist designs. Indeed, the Jews unwittingly helped the process along. Having "reached a saturation point in wealth and economic fortune . . . the sons of the well-to-do businessmen and, to a lesser extent, bankers, deserted their fathers' careers for the liberal professions or purely intellectual pursuits"<sup>23</sup> rather than fighting the growing influence of big business and industry that was causing a decay of their political position.

The great Jewish influx into the arts and sciences resulted in the development of a truly international society whose basis was the "radiant power of fame."<sup>24</sup> This phenomenon is extensively discussed in Arendt's essay, "Stefan Zweig: Jews in the World of Yesterday." For Arendt, this was yet another permutation of that quality of the Jewish condition that had made the Jews useful in the first place, their inter-European, nonnational character. The Jews entered into the cultural world and became the "outstanding reviewers, critics, collectors, and organizers of what was famous . . . the living tie binding famous individuals into a society of the renowned, an inter-

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national society by definition, for spiritual achievement transcends national boundaries.”<sup>25</sup>

Although assimilated Jews rarely recognized the fact, since within this international society their Jewish identity could effectively be lost, it was precisely those attributes—“kindness, freedom from prejudice, sensitiveness to injustice,”<sup>26</sup> “the ‘Jewish heart,’ humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence,”<sup>27</sup> and “fraternity”<sup>28</sup>—which were the privileges of the Jews as a pariah people that produced this particular kind of greatness. These gifts derived from “the great privilege of being unburdened by care for the world.”<sup>29</sup> It is a privilege dearly bought, however, for the price is “real worldlessness. And worldlessness, alas, is always a form of barbarism.”<sup>30</sup>

This barbarism was reflected in that Jewish unconcern with the political affairs of the world which developed to such an extent that the assimilated Jews “lost that measure of political responsibility which their origin implied and which the Jewish notables had still felt, albeit in the form of privilege and rulership.”<sup>31</sup> They forgot the fact that in every Jew “there still remained something of the old-time pariah, who has no country, for whom human rights do not exist, and whom society would gladly exclude from its privileges.”<sup>32</sup> Their activities brought them such social prominence that “Jews became the symbols of Society as such and the objects of hatred for all those whom society did not accept,”<sup>33</sup> while at the same time they lost interest in the “finance politics” that had brought them a modicum of protection from the state.

Arendt’s critique concludes that Jewish worldlessness, which had its source in the Jews’ attempt to preserve themselves by a radical and voluntary separation from the Christian world five hundred years earlier, culminated in the Jews’ being more exposed to attack than ever before. More aware of theatrical appearance than political reality, the Jews had a blind faith in the state that had protected them since the emancipation; they forgot that this protection had rested on their performance of unique and necessary functions. The lack of involvement in the political world which had led religious Jews to single out divine providence as the key factor determining the Jews’ political fate led secularized Jews to believe that Jewish history “takes place outside all usual historical laws.”<sup>34</sup> What had appeared as God’s unpredictable will—to which Jews responded with moralizing and penitential prayers—

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was now viewed as accidental and drew the similarly unpolitical response of Jewish apologetics. Thus, when the Dreyfus Affair demonstrated a very real threat to the Jews' existence and its slogan of "Death to the Jews" became the rallying cry around which Nazism later grew by leaps and bounds, the Jews, who had become "an object of universal hatred because of [their] useless wealth, and of contempt because of [their] lack of power,"<sup>35</sup> were the last to grasp the political significance of events.

In Hannah Arendt's gloomy picture of Jewish political history there is, however, one positive response to the unreality and worldlessness of the pariah status. This is Zionism, "the only political answer Jews have ever found to antisemitism and the only ideology in which they have ever taken seriously a hostility that would place them in the center of world events."<sup>36</sup>

### III

From the "disgrace" of being a Jew there is but one escape—to fight for the honor of the Jewish people as a whole.<sup>37</sup>

The Zionist movement was founded by Theodor Herzl in August 1897, when the first Zionist Congress met and created the World Zionist Organization. Herzl had been a typically assimilated Jew until his Vienna newspaper sent him to cover the Dreyfus case. The impact of this event transformed him into an ardent Jewish nationalist. Herzl saw "the Jewish problem" of the antisemites as the political threat that it was and proposed a radical solution—the creation of a Jewish state. As the essays from the 1940s in this collection show, Hannah Arendt's view of the Herzlian brand of political Zionism which shaped the movement's perspective and policies is laudatory of its strengths, yet sharply critical of its shortcomings and potential dangers.

According to Arendt's understanding, Herzl viewed antisemitism as a natural conflict which arose from the fact that the Jews were a national entity separate and different from the nations amongst whom they lived. Because it was natural and inevitable, "Antisemitism was an overwhelming force and the Jews would have either to make use of it or to be swallowed up by it."<sup>38</sup> Necessarily flowing from the Jews' Diaspora existence, antisemitism was the

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almost eternal “‘propelling force’ responsible for all Jewish suffering since the destruction of the Temple and it would continue to make the Jews suffer until they learned how to use it for their own advantage.”<sup>39</sup> Properly handled, it could lead the Jews to control over their destiny: Herzl believed that the antisemites were both rational and honest and that the Jewish problem was the most serious problem facing Europe. The “honest antisemites” would therefore help him implement his grand scheme to rid them of their Jews, gain Jewish independence, and solve the Jewish problem once and for all. Arendt commends Herzl, for his

mere will to action was something so startlingly new, so utterly revolutionary in Jewish life, that it spread with the speed of wildfire. Herzl’s lasting greatness lay in his very desire to do something about the Jewish question, his desire to act and to solve the problem in political terms.<sup>40</sup>

In Arendt’s interpretation, Herzl’s political Zionism was not the ideology of a mass revolutionary movement but was, rather, the creed of secularized Western European Jewish intellectuals. Zionism’s great asset was that it answered the need that had existed among the Jews since the Sabbatian catastrophe had shattered the traditional Jewish framework of understanding and started the Jews on their perilous journey towards worldlessness: it offered a path back to reality. While its doctrine of eternal antisemitism is similar to other nineteenth-century ideologies which attempted to explain reality in terms of irresistible “laws” and history in terms of “keys,” Zionism and the Zionist movement was unique, according to Arendt, because “the case of the Jews was and still remains different. What they needed was not only a guide to reality, but reality itself; not simply a key to history, but the experience itself of history.”<sup>41</sup>

The great achievement of Herzl’s Zionist theory is that it escapes the view which sees history as a totally fortuitous series of events understandable only in terms of providence and accident. Its great limitation is that Jewish history is reduced to mere surface manifestations of one unchanging law over which the Jews have no control and whose source is their mere existence as a nation. Thus, while Herzl and his followers were realistic enough to recognize the political actuality of antisemitism, the ideology of “natural” antisemitism meant that no political analysis of it was necessary. Their view, according to Arendt,

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presupposes the eternity of antisemitism in an eternal world of nations, and moreover, denies the Jewish part of responsibility for existing conditions. Thereby it not only cuts off Jewish history from European history and even from the rest of mankind; it ignores the role that European Jewry played in the construction and functioning of the national state; and thus it is reduced to the assumption, as arbitrary as it is absurd, that every gentile living with Jews must become a conscious or subconscious Jew-hater.<sup>42</sup>

Implicit in this notion of a natural and inevitable antisemitism was that political reality consisted of an unchanging and unchangeable structure whose main components were the Jews on one side and the nation-states on the other. For the political Zionists, “politics” therefore meant international relations, affairs of state. Herzl’s political action consisted of attempts at high-level diplomacy with the great powers, all of which came to nothing. Zionist political policy became one of unrealistic *Realpolitik*. Rather than organizing a powerful popular movement of world Jewry, relying on their own power to achieve their aims, and allying themselves with the oppressed peoples of the Near East, Arendt believes that the Zionist movement “sold out at the very first moment to the powers that be.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the ideology of eternal antisemitism led the Zionists into another typical response of the persecuted Diaspora Jew: rather than fighting antisemitism on its own ground, the Zionist solution was to escape.

The building up of Palestine is indeed a great accomplishment and could be made an important and even decisive argument for Jewish claims in Palestine. . . . But the upbuilding of Palestine has little to do with answering the antisemites; at most it has “answered” the secret self-hatred and lack of self-confidence on the part of those Jews who have themselves consciously or unconsciously succumbed to some parts of antisemitic propaganda.<sup>44</sup>

Another consequence of Herzl’s static view of reality was a blind hatred of all revolutionary movements and his patronizing attitude toward the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe. The only political Zionist who ever proposed that the Zionist movement “organize the Jewish people in order to negotiate on the basis of a great revolutionary movement”<sup>45</sup>—what it should have

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been, according to Arendt—was Bernard Lazare, the French-Jewish author and lawyer who was the first to publicize the innocence of the accused Captain Dreyfus.

Remembering that Arendt is first and foremost a political thinker,<sup>46</sup> and that her aim is to present a political interpretation of Jewish history, it is understandable that Bernard Lazare stands out as a figure of singular importance and greatness in Arendt's account of Jewish history and Zionism. According to Arendt, Lazare was the first to translate the Jews' social status as a pariah people into terms of political significance by making it a tool for political analysis and the basis for political action.

Living in the France of the Dreyfus affair, Lazare could appreciate at first hand the pariah quality of Jewish existence. But he knew where the solution lay: in contrast to his unemancipated brethren who accept their pariah status automatically and unconsciously, the emancipated Jew must awake to an awareness of his position and, conscious of it, become a rebel against it—the champion of an oppressed people. His fight for freedom is part and parcel of that which all the downtrodden of Europe must wage to achieve national and social liberation.<sup>47</sup>

Having become a conscious pariah as a result of the Dreyfus Affair, to whom “history is no longer a closed book . . . and politics is no longer the privilege of gentiles,”<sup>48</sup> Lazare perforce became a Zionist.

Lazare belonged to the official Zionist movement only briefly, however. Having attended the Second Zionist Congress in 1898, where he was immediately elected to the Actions Committee, Lazare resigned from the committee and separated himself from the Zionist Organization in 1899 because the committee was acting like “a sort of autocratic government [that] seeks to direct the Jewish masses as though they were ignorant children.”<sup>49</sup> Lazare wanted to promote a revolution within Jewish life, to criticize the role Jewish finance played in internal affairs and the effects it had on the relation of the Jews to non-Jews. But, Arendt claims, there was no possibility for such radical views within “Herzl's essentially reactionary movement.”<sup>50</sup>

Herzl's solution of the Jewish problem was, in the final analysis, escape or deliverance in a homeland. In the light of the Dreyfus case the whole of the gentile world seemed to him hostile; there were only Jews and



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antisemites. . . . To Lazare, on the other hand, the territorial question was secondary—a mere outcome of the primary demand that “the Jews should be emancipated as a people and in the form of a nation.” What he sought was not an escape from antisemitism but a mobilization of the people against its foes.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of the perspective Arendt displays through the essays in this collection, the importance of Lazare as a model of what it means to be a political pariah is hard to overestimate. It is significant to note that Hannah Arendt edited the first collection of his essays that appeared in English, *Job's Dungheap* (1948), writing a short biography for that volume. Not only is his work the source from which Arendt derives many of her insights into both modern Jewish history and Zionism (it is from Lazare that Arendt borrows the terms “pariah” and “parvenu”), but his experience as an outspoken Jew cast out from the Jewish community because of his criticism closely parallels the experience of Arendt herself. Interestingly, in the 1940s, when Arendt wrote about Lazare’s exclusion from Jewish circles due to his views on how the Dreyfus case should have been handled, she could not have anticipated what was to cause her a similar experience of modern excommunication: the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Although in the first case it was the Jews who were on trial and in the second it was antisemitism, both Lazare and Arendt based their criticism of the trials’ conduct on the grounds that justice for the defendant must be the aim of legal proceedings, not political demagoguery and showmanship.

According to Arendt, the lesson of Lazare’s experience as a Jewish political thinker and actor is that “[a]s soon as the pariah enters the arena of politics, and translates his status into political terms, he becomes perforce a rebel.”<sup>52</sup> The social pariahs of the nineteenth century, such as Heine and Varnhagen, drew comfort from the world of dreams and fantasy, secure in the knowledge that as compared to nature, human concerns are pure vanity. In the twentieth century, however, Arendt believes that such a retreat is no longer possible: the pariah must become political. Thus, the first consequence of becoming conscious of one’s pariah status is the demand that the Jewish people “come to grips with the world of men and women.”<sup>53</sup> The duty of the conscious pariah is to waken one’s fellow Jews to a similar consciousness so as to rebel against it. “[Lazare] saw that what was necessary was

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to rouse the Jewish pariah to fight against the Jewish *parvenu*. There was no other way to save him from the latter's own fate—inevitable destruction."<sup>54</sup> This call to action was founded on the conviction that

[h]owever much the Jewish pariah might be, from the historical viewpoint, the product of an unjust dispensation . . . politically speaking, every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented. From such shame there was no escape, either in art or in nature. For insofar as man is more than a mere creature of nature, more than a mere product of divine creativity, insofar will he be called to account for the things which men do to men in the world which they themselves condition.<sup>55</sup>

This responsibility for the human world, whether one is a victim or a victimizer, is at the core of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, and it is the basis for her politically radical, self-critical analysis of the modern Jewish experience that leads to a Zionist conclusion. But Arendt's Zionism is not in the mainstream Herzlian tradition; it is, rather, in the dissident mold of Bernard Lazare, who wanted to be a revolutionary among his own people, not among others. It is well to keep this point in mind as we turn to Arendt's critical assessment of the founding of the Jewish State of Israel.

## IV

The real goal of the Jews in Palestine is the building up of a Jewish homeland. This goal must never be sacrificed to the pseudo-sovereignty of a Jewish state.<sup>56</sup>

Hannah Arendt's essays on Zionism and the Jewish State were written prior to 1950, the most crucial period in the history of the Zionist movement. Her views were shared by only a very small minority of Zionists, most of whom were organized in the *Ihud*, the latest in a long line of small organizations of Palestinian Jews whose purposes were to promote Jewish-Arab understanding and cooperation. Never very large or effectual, the *Ihud* and its advocacy

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of a binational solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict was well known because it contained a large number of outstanding intellectual, cultural, and philanthropic leaders such as Rabbi Judah Magnes (president of the Hebrew University), Henrietta Szold (the organizer of Youth Aliyah and founder of Hadassah), and Martin Buber.

In the mid-1940s, however, the *Ihud's* advocacy of binationalism was out of step with the mainstream of the Zionist movement. While for many years the Zionist majority was in favor of coexistence with the Arabs in a binational Palestine, by the end of World War II, in reaction to the genocide of European Jewry, the Zionist maximum—the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state—had become the Zionist minimum. This shift in the Zionist position is the crux of Arendt's criticism of official Zionist policy throughout this period, for she maintained—in 1945, when the Zionist movement demanded a Jewish state in all of Palestine, again in 1948, when they had accepted the principle of partition, and once again, in 1950, after Israel had been established by force of arms—that the creation of a Jewish state was out of touch with the realities of the situation in the Near East and the world at large.<sup>57</sup>

Arendt's criticism of Zionist politics is founded on a deep concern with the fate of the Jewish people following the Holocaust. The realization that millions of Jews had gone to their deaths without resistance resulted in a revolutionary change in Jewish consciousness. "Gone, probably forever, is that chief concern of the Jewish people for centuries: survival at any price. Instead, we find something essentially new among Jews, the desire for dignity at any price."<sup>58</sup> According to Arendt, this shift had the potential to become the basis for "an essentially sane Jewish political movement,"<sup>59</sup> for it indicated a desire to deal with reality and live freely in the world. The problem was that in their desire to overcome the centuries-long experience of worldlessness, the Jews grasped onto the unrealistic ideological framework of Herzlian Zionism and its doctrine of eternal antisemitism. The result was the famous "Masada complex" in which this newfound desire for dignity was transformed into a potentially suicidal attitude. The danger to the Jewish homeland, as Arendt saw it, was that "[t]here is nothing in Herzlian Zionism that could act as a check on this; on the contrary, the utopian and ideological elements with which he injected the new Jewish will to political action are only too likely to lead the Jews out of reality once more—and out of the sphere of political action."<sup>60</sup>

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It was this dangerous course Arendt had in mind when she wrote that “at this moment and under present circumstances a Jewish state can only be erected at the price of the Jewish homeland.”<sup>61</sup> Since the “Jewish homeland” has been virtually synonymous with the “Jewish state” since Israel’s independence in 1948, it may be difficult to understand Arendt’s distinction. In order to do so, we must piece together Arendt’s own particular brand of Zionism.

Arendt observes that “Palestine and the building of a Jewish homeland constitute today the great hope and the great pride of Jews all over the world.”<sup>62</sup> This deceptively simple sentence contains the essence of her conception of the Jewish homeland as a place that is a *center* and a place that is *built*. Arendt’s Zionism is in many ways similar to the “cultural” Zionism of Bialik and Ahad Haam, but she arrives at it for reasons that in her view are highly political. The establishment of a Jewish cultural center in Palestine is a conscious act of creation on the part of the Jewish people; it is a positive response to the crises that have racked Jewish life since the time of Shabbetai Tzevi, for it is an attempt by the Jews to create a political realm, take control over their lives, and reenter history after the Diaspora with its accompanying worldlessness and powerlessness. The building of the Jewish homeland is a profoundly political act, for it means not only the fabrication of a “world” within which a truly human life can be lived but the fabrication of a specifically Jewish world. This cultural specificity is of great importance, “[f]or only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men.”<sup>63</sup>

Many people have recognized that the *Yishuv* (the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine)—and, later, the State of Israel—was a highly artificial creation. This is usually understood to be a criticism of the Jewish homeland, for the whole point of the homeland in Herzl’s ideology is to “normalize” and make “natural” the Jews’ “unnatural” Diaspora existence. For Arendt, however, “precisely this artificiality gave the Jewish achievements in Palestine their human significance.”<sup>64</sup> The greatness of the *Yishuv* was that it was the conscious product of the concerted will of the Jewish people and *not* the predestined product of any natural forces to which the Jewish people were subject. “The challenges were all there, but none of the responses was ‘natural.’”<sup>65</sup> The economic development of the *Yishuv* bore little resemblance to the traditional colonial enterprise. Rather than the usual “original accumulation” in which native riches are exploited with the help and at the expense of

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native labor in order to enrich the colonial power, the riches of the *Yishuv* “are exclusively the product of Jewish labor.”<sup>66</sup> The revival of the Hebrew language, the erection of the Hebrew University, the new modes of human organization and cooperation found in the *kibbutzim*, and the establishment of great health centers “can certainly not be explained by utilitarian reasons.”<sup>67</sup>

Unlike those Zionists who considered the establishment of a state to be not only the goal but the ultimate sign of success of the Jewish people’s effort to reestablish themselves in their ancient home, Arendt considers the *Yishuv* to already embody the aims of Zionism as she sees them. For Arendt, the Jewish homeland is a political space, a human world created by conscious human effort where a Jewish culture can come into being; this the *Yishuv* achieved, without political sovereignty and without being a majority in Palestine. Precisely because a Jewish community had been built where people could appear to each other, where there was an audience for works of literature and art, Jewish cultural genius no longer needed to either abandon its Jewish roots, in favor of “universal” European culture or else be relegated to the category of folklore. It was this political and cultural space of the “Jewish homeland” that Arendt felt was being sacrificed on the altar of the “Jewish state” by the unrealistic political demands of the Zionist movement.

In Arendt’s opinion, the demand for a Jewish state simply ignored the fact that the majority of Palestine’s population was Arab, and that Palestine itself was surrounded by millions of Arabs in the neighboring countries. The Zionist demand for a state left the Palestinian Arabs with only two choices: emigration or acceptance of their eventual minority status, both of which were unacceptable to a people striving for their independence. The inalterable fact of the Near East was that the Arabs were the Jews’ neighbors. In order to preserve the Jewish homeland in Palestine once the British pulled out, the Jews had the choice of either working out an agreement with the Arabs or seeking the protection of one of the great imperial powers. By choosing the latter, the concept of a Jewish state would become farcical and even self-defeating insofar as that state would be a bastion of imperial interests in an area striving to liberate itself from colonialism. On the other hand, Arendt recognized that Arab policies were equally blind in not recognizing the needs and concrete achievements of the Zionists in Palestine.

The unrealistic approach to the Palestinian situation on the part of both

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the Jews and Arabs, Arendt observed, was the result of the British Mandate under which the British mediated between and separated the two communities from each other. This allowed Jews and Arabs to develop without any political regard or responsibility for each other and made it seem to each of them that the main political issue was how to deal with and ultimately get rid of the British, ignoring the permanent reality of the other's existence. The real issues at the heart of the conflict were "Jewish determination to keep and possibly extend national sovereignty without consideration for Arab interests, and Arab determination to expel the Jewish 'invaders' from Palestine without consideration for Jewish achievements there."<sup>68</sup> The Jewish and Arab claims were perfectly incompatible and mutually irrefutable, for both were the result of nationalistic policies reached within "the closed framework of one's own people and history."<sup>69</sup>

Arendt believed that cooperation between Jews and Arabs in the Near East could, by developing the area, be the basis for true sovereignty and independence. But the only way for this to occur was if both sides gave up their nationalistic and chauvinistic perspectives and claims. "Good relationships between Jews and Arabs will depend upon a changed attitude toward each other, upon a change in the atmosphere in Palestine and the Near East, not necessarily upon a formula."<sup>70</sup> Prophetically, she warned that "if this 'independent and sovereign' behavior . . . goes on unabated, then all independence and sovereignty will be lost."<sup>71</sup>

The inevitable war that would result from the spurious sovereignty upon which the Zionist movement had set its sights would almost certainly destroy those aspects of the Jewish homeland that in Arendt's view had made it "the great hope and the great pride of Jews all over the world." Prior to the *Yishuv's* success during the War of Liberation (1948–49), the very survival of Israel was highly questionable. Like most Jewish observers then (and now), Arendt's prime concern was with the consequence for the Jewish people of a second catastrophe so soon after Hitler.

What would happen to Jews, individually and collectively, if this hope and this pride were to be extinguished in another catastrophe is almost beyond imagining. But it is certain that this would become the central fact of Jewish history and it is possible that it might become the beginning of

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the self-dissolution of the Jewish people. There is no Jew in the world whose whole outlook on life and the world would not be radically changed by such a tragedy.<sup>72</sup>

Today we know that such a tragedy did not occur; but unlike most observers of that period, Arendt asserted that “even if the Jews were to win the war, its end would find the unique possibilities and the unique achievements of Zionism in Palestine destroyed.”<sup>73</sup> Without a peace agreement with the Arabs—and the Arabs were not prepared to accept a sovereign Jewish state in their midst—the internal nature of the *Yishuv* would be radically transformed. The result of an uneasy armistice with its neighbors, Arendt predicted, would be that concerns of military self-defense would come to dominate all other public interest and activities. “The growth of a Jewish culture would cease to be the concern of the whole people; social experiments would have to be discarded as impractical luxuries; political thought would center around military strategy; economic development would be determined exclusively by the needs of war.”<sup>74</sup> With the constant threat from abroad, the country would have to be perpetually prepared for instantaneous mobilization; in order to sustain such a spirit of sacrifice, nationalism and chauvinism would quickly seep into the political and cultural atmosphere. Under these circumstances, a military dictatorship could easily result.

Arendt also felt that as a consequence of statehood the great achievements of the labor movement—particularly the *kibbutzim*—and of the cultural Zionists—particularly the Hebrew University—“would be the first victims of a long period of military insecurity and nationalistic aggressiveness.”<sup>75</sup> They would become increasingly isolated as their “anti-nationalist” and “anti-chauvinist” Zionism did not fit the need for a statist ideology. But these would only be the first victims, “[f]or without the cultural and social *hinterland* of Jerusalem and the collective settlements, Tel Aviv could become a Levantine city overnight. Chauvinism . . . could use the religious concept of the chosen people and allow its meaning to degenerate into hopeless vulgarity.”<sup>76</sup>

With its wars and *raison d'état*, Arendt asserted that statehood would make the Jewish homeland's relationship with the Diaspora problematic. While the cultural center of world Jewry would become a modern-day Sparta, its large expenditures on national defense would lead Israel to exces-

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sive financial dependence upon American Jewry. The consequences of this were potentially disastrous:

Charity money can be mobilized in great quantities only in emergencies, such as the recent catastrophe in Europe or in the Arab-Jewish war; if the Israeli government cannot win its economic independence from such money it will soon find itself in the unenviable position of being forced to create emergencies, that is, forced into a policy of aggressiveness and expansion.<sup>77</sup>

As Arendt warned, Herzl's Jewish state did not solve "the Jewish problem"; the tragic result has been that antisemitism has been transformed into anti-Zionism. With sovereignty, the pariah people has not ceased to be a pariah—it has created a pariah state. As a small state located in a key area of superpower rivalry, Israel's destiny is almost as subject to uncontrollable and unforeseen accidental circumstances as the Jews' fate in the Diaspora. Arendt contends that the often-expressed Israeli belief that they can stand up against the whole world, if necessary, is just as politically unrealistic as the Diasporic unconcern with politics. She feared that it might lead to an equally tragic end.

## V

For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.<sup>78</sup>

In a complex and largely implicit manner, Hannah Arendt placed the Jews and "the Jewish condition" at the center of her critique of the modern age. By doing so she took one of Karl Marx's ideas and transformed it into part of her own system of thought. In the process she came up with both her own insights and a critique of Marx. A number of aspects of her political theory were arrived at in this fashion, but this case is special. The discovery was not of just one particular quality of modern society but concerns the central



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category of Arendt's and Marx's respective critiques of the modern age. As Arendt puts it, "(w)orld alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age."<sup>79</sup>

It was Marx, in his essay "On the Jewish Question," who first put forward the thesis that the Jews, rather than being a backward people who had to be "civilized," were actually at the forefront of contemporary developments and embodied the true spirit of the modern age. According to Marx, the reason why "the Jewish question"—whether the Jews were fit for entrance into civil society—was being considered was not that the Jews had become similar to the Christians, but that society was becoming "Jewish":

The Jew has emancipated himself in a Jewish manner, not only by acquiring the power of money, but also because *money* has become, through him and also apart from him, a world power, while the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian nations. The Jews have emancipated themselves in so far as the Christians have become Jews.<sup>80</sup>

It is among the Jews that Marx first discovers money as the "universal *antisocial* element of the *present time*" which is "the *supreme practical* expression of human self-estrangement" that causes "civil society [to] separate itself completely from the life of the state, [to] sever all the species-bonds of man, [and to] dissolve the human world into a world of atomistic, antagonistic individuals."<sup>81</sup> Marx later elaborates the antisocial element inherent in money as such into the social relationship defined by "commodity fetishism" and simultaneously shifts his focus from the Jews to the bourgeoisie. This is no accident, for the Jews were—at most—protocapitalists. As merchants, financiers, and moneylenders, more than any other group they had lived apart from the land and within the money economy during the medieval and early modern periods. It is thus among the Jews, according to Marx, that the real nature of capitalism—the alienation that results from the commodity fetishism inherent in money relations between people—first develops and reveals its inhumanity.

The Jews' social and economic existence within the moneyed sector of the economy in precapitalist society thus foreshadowed the direction in which modern society was moving. With the emergence of industrial capitalism—in Marx's view, the true basis of the modern social structure—Jewish mer-

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chant and finance capital became simply a parasitical sector of the capitalist class which received a portion of the surplus value expropriated from the laborer by the industrial bourgeoisie. Thus, while Marx first discovered what he considered to be the “secret” of capitalism by a consideration of the Jews and contended that historically it first developed among the Jews, he believed that the Jews did not have a unique place in the materialist dialectic of capitalist production which ground all people into either capitalists or workers. For Marx, the Jews had become unimportant in society and quickly ceased to figure in his analysis.

Avoiding Marx’s misrepresentation of Judaism and his anti-Jewish rhetoric, more subtle and consistent in her analysis of Jews and “the Jewish question,” Arendt never makes the facile assertion that modern society is becoming Jewish. Still, the Jews are at the center of her analysis. For Hannah Arendt, history is not made up of the mass of normal, everyday events. Rather, it is made up of the exceptional person and action that reveals the meaning of an historical period.<sup>82</sup> In the modern age, the experience of the Jews is the exception that illuminates the whole modern period, both in terms of the antisemitism that affected them from without and the worldless “Jewish condition” that affected them from within. Thus, while concurring with Marx’s analysis that it is among the Jews that the characteristic phenomena of the modern age first appears, she also believes that, as the modern age develops, the dangerous effects of worldlessness are most clearly displayed in the history of the Jews. The very reason why Marx loses interest in the Jews—their marginal and unimportant status in terms of economic life—is precisely the reason why they are significant for Arendt. It is their very superfluosity, their separation from both state and society, that explains why “[i]t is no mere accident that the catastrophic defeats of the peoples of Europe began with the catastrophe of the Jewish people.”<sup>83</sup>

In *The Human Condition*—which hardly refers to the Jews or Judaism—Arendt states that

property, as distinguished from wealth and appropriation, indicates the privately owned share of a common world and therefore is the most elementary political condition for man’s worldliness. By the same token, expropriation and world alienation coincide, and the modern age . . . began by alienating certain strata of the population from the world.<sup>84</sup>

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In context it is clear that she is referring to the uprooting of peasants, but it is equally clear that among the Jews this lack of a “privately owned share of a common world” has been a condition of existence since the beginning of the Diaspora. The rootlessness of “the wandering Jew” antedates the rootlessness of the modern age, and more than any other factor was responsible for the worldless, unrealistic, and unpolitical perceptions Jews had of the world.

Until the Shabbetai Tzevi episode this worldlessness was kept within certain bounds. Although separated from the world around them, Arendt asserts that the Jews maintained an internal community whose cohesiveness and distinctiveness was expressed in the concept of exile, a fundamentally political notion which over the centuries had taken on religious form and become one of the central ideas of Judaism. Echoing Marx’s analysis, the Jews lived within the market sector of the economy, a realm characterized by “the essential unreality of financial transactions.”<sup>85</sup> But it wasn’t the spread of the Jewish “god” of money that defined the modern age, as Marx would have it. Rather, the modern age was characterized by the cause which underlay the Jews’ reliance on money wealth: the lack of any physical place to which people were rooted and from which they could orient themselves to the world, grasp reality, and experience history. The unique worldless situation of the Jews increasingly became the generalized condition of humankind. And, as the world within which they existed as a pariah people started to disintegrate, the Jews were at the forefront of the process because they had, as it were, a head start.

The atomization of communities into lonely individuals was a process most clearly visible among the assimilating Jews. On the one hand, assimilation spelled the end of the Jewish community. On the other hand, Jews were accepted into the ranks of high society only as exceptions. Thus, in order to become part of society, they had to escape from the Jewish community and become free-floating individuals. The road to assimilation by conforming to the standards laid down by high society was a precursor of the phenomenon of “conformism inherent in society.”<sup>86</sup> What was demanded of the Jews was that they behave in an exceptional and peculiar but nevertheless recognizable—and hence stereotypic—“Jewish” way. The result of the ambiguous situation where they were supposed to both be—and not be—Jewish was that introspection characteristic of the “so-called complex psychology of the average Jew.”<sup>87</sup>

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In Arendt's analysis, the psychological conflict that derived from their unresolved social dilemma was that "Jews felt simultaneously the pariah's regret at not having become a parvenu and the parvenu's bad conscience at having betrayed his people and exchanged equal rights for personal privileges."<sup>88</sup> The result was that

[i]nstead of being defined by nationality or religion, Jews were being transformed into a social group whose members shared certain psychological attributes and reactions, the sum total of which was supposed to constitute "Jewishness." In other words, Judaism became a psychological quality, and the Jewish question became an involved personal problem for every individual Jew.<sup>89</sup>

The Jews thus constituted the first large-scale example of what happens when political issues are dealt with on an individual, private level rather than a collective, public level. Thinking they were free from the given reality of their Jewish roots, Jews like Rahel Varnhagen tried to overcome their Jewishness by believing that "[e]verything depends on self-thinking."<sup>90</sup> Arendt, speaking from Rahel's point of view, comments that "[s]elf-thinking brings liberation from objects and their reality, creates a sphere of pure ideas and a world which is accessible to any rational being without benefit of knowledge or experience."<sup>91</sup> The result of this alienation from the real world was the breakup of the Jewish community into isolated, lonely individuals. "The terrible and bloody annihilation of individual Jews was preceded by the bloodless destruction of the Jewish people."<sup>92</sup>

For Arendt, the destruction of the Jewish community was only a predecessor to the destruction of communities throughout Europe. The subsequent result was the rise of ideologically based mass movements and the destruction of the nation-state. Despite its many problems and internal contradictions, Arendt does think that for a time prior to the economically inspired imperialism of the nineteenth century, the nation-state had provided a truly political form of human organization. The legal emancipation of the Jews was but one of its logical results. The destruction of the political organization of people in the nation-state and the class society upon which it rested was the first accomplishment of the Nazi movement's rise to power. By Arendt's account, class society was absorbed by mass society. The citizen, already turned into the bourgeois, now became the philistine: "the bourgeois

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isolated from his own class, the atomized individual who is produced by the breakdown of the bourgeois class itself.”<sup>93</sup>

Citizenship, the foundation of politics, was now selectively denied to minorities—particularly Jews—on the basis of race. Stateless Jews, rightless people “thrown back into a peculiar state of nature,”<sup>94</sup> were among the first to discover that without the rights of the citizen there was no such thing as “the rights of man.” The Jews, both pariahs and parvenus, found that once they became “outlaws” literally anything could be done with them, “that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man.”<sup>95</sup> Expelled from their homes and deprived of even the legal status of the criminal, nobody knew who they were or cared what happened to them. For the stateless, accident reigned supreme. They had absolutely no place on earth to go but internment and concentration camps. Statelessness was the ultimate manifestation of worldlessness, whose logical end is elimination from this world.

Precisely because of their worldless condition, the Jews became the first inhabitants of the laboratory of the concentration camp “in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified.”<sup>96</sup> It is here that worldlessness and atomization reach their ultimate form and people are reduced to nothing but their biological nature. Both individuality and community are systematically destroyed. The individuals shipped to the concentration camp are more effectively separated from the world of the living than if they were killed, for their very existence and memory are blotted out. World-alienation, a phenomenon which had made its earliest appearance in the modern age among the Jews, reached its climax with their destruction.

## VI

Rahel had remained a Jewish woman and pariah.  
Only because she clung to both identities did she  
find a place in the history of European humanity.<sup>97</sup>

We are now in a position to briefly consider the bitter controversy which followed the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. What aroused her critics’

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ire more than anything else was her assertion that “[w]herever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis.”<sup>98</sup> Gershom Scholem’s reaction in his letter to Arendt was typical: “What perversity! We are asked, it appears, to confess that the Jews too had their ‘share’ in these acts of genocide.”<sup>99</sup>

This criticism totally misses what Hannah Arendt is trying to show about the implications of total worldlessness, for which the “banality of evil” is a corollary. The horror is both that while Eichmann “*never realized what he was doing*,”<sup>100</sup> “the members of the Jewish Councils as a rule were *not* traitors or Gestapo agents, and *still* they became the tools of the Nazis.”<sup>101</sup> It was no accident that the Jews were the first victims, and the utmost importance of considering the particularities of modern Jewish history is perhaps most succinctly summed up by Arendt in one of the most important passages in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*:

It was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth that the new crime, the crime against humanity—in the sense of a crime “against the human status,” or against the very nature of mankind—appeared. . . . The supreme crime it [the Israeli court trying Eichmann] was confronted with, the physical extermination of the Jewish people, was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people, and . . . only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism.<sup>102</sup>

For Hannah Arendt the destruction of the Jews is insolubly embedded in European history as a whole. It is only by recognizing the fact that the Jews *were* singled out by the Nazis that the crime against humanity appears, and it is precisely because of this particularity that the experience of the Jews *as* Jews is important for all humankind. It is no accident that the Jews were the first victims of the death factories which constitute the basis of totalitarianism; but they were just that, the *first* victims. Because it is exceptional, the Jews’ fate sheds light on the history and experience of all people in the modern age.

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As a conscious pariah, Arendt concerns herself with the Jews because she is both a Jew and a European, and she addresses herself to both the world as a whole and the Jews in particular. To the world she is saying that the Jews' condition is connected to everyone's condition, that what happened to the Jews is not an isolated instance but may happen to anybody because the crime itself is not uniquely Jewish, but was only perpetrated upon them. The lack of a political orientation to the world is what links the fate of the Jews to that of modern society as a whole.

Her experience as a Jewish refugee provided Hannah Arendt with the fundamental experience from which she derived worldliness as her standard of political judgment. Part of her impulse to search for paradigms of political thought and action in the experience of ancient Greece is that she wants to teach a sense of politics to a world in danger of doing what the Jews unwittingly did to themselves as well as what the Nazis did to the Jews. Arendt's great fear is that the condition of worldlessness which has characterized the Jews more than any other people in the modern age may become the generalized condition of our day.

To the Jews, Arendt is saying that part of the reason for the terrible end to their history in Europe is that they did not have a realistic political understanding of the world in which they lived. While Eichmann "*never realized what he was doing,*" the Jews never realized what was happening. In response to the Eichmann controversy, she reminds us that "[n]o State of Israel would ever have come into being if the Jewish people had not created and maintained its own specific in-between space throughout the long centuries of dispersion, that is, prior to the seizure of its old territory."<sup>103</sup> Her aim is to awaken Jews to the fact that whether or not they have been aware of it, they have been able to survive precisely because they have constituted a political community. To survive, they must break with the past in which accident reigned supreme and take conscious control of their destiny. The Zionist movement, and the *kibbutzim* in particular, are important phenomena not only for the Jews but for humankind as a whole because they demonstrate that *even* the Jews can establish a world through the power of collective action and that the so-called natural processes of society produce inevitable results only when human beings desert the realm of politics.

## VII

Arendt's solution to her own "Jewish problem" was not to repudiate her Jewishness nor blindly affirm it, but to adopt the stance of a conscious pariah—an outsider among non-Jews, and a rebel among her own people. It was because of this marginal position that she was able to gain critical insights into both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. There are, of course, problems with both her version of modern Jewish history and her critique of modern society.<sup>104</sup> But, as is the case with truly original thinkers, the encounter with these problems is a valuable process for the reader.

The essays in this volume reveal the central importance of Arendt's experience as a Jew on both her life and work. The rising of Nazism pushed her from being a student of philosophy into political awareness and activism; her political education was as a Jew, and specifically as a Zionist. "I realized what I then expressed time and again in the sentence: If one is attacked as Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever. But: What can I specifically do as Jew? Second, it was now my clear intention to work with an organization. For the first time. To work with the Zionists. They were the only ones who were ready. It would have been pointless to join those who had assimilated."<sup>105</sup>

Arendt believed that the Jewish experience can only be understood by consideration of the complete context within which the Jews lived as a distinctive minority. Her focus was on the *interactions* between Jews and non-Jews. Issues concerning Jews were relevant beyond the borders of the Jewish community, and vice versa.

In the Jewish community Arendt's views—or, what have come to be seen as Arendt's views—continue to be subject of controversy;<sup>106</sup> no doubt this collection will add new fuel to that fire. Argument and criticism are intrinsic aspects of Jewish culture; criticism in itself is not self-hatred. Arendt may disapprove of the powers that be and specific policies they are practicing, but she was committed to the idea that there *is* a Jewish people and that Jews could and should participate *as Jews* in the politics of the Jewish community, and through it, in world politics. Her criticism of Zionist policies and leadership came from the perspective of someone whose allegiance was to the



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Jewish people, of which the Zionist movement was only a part. In her words, “there can be no patriotism without permanent opposition.”

Beyond the particular positions Arendt advocates, her stance is of lasting significance: she assumes the existence of a Jewish polity, one which is sufficiently strong, proud, and secure that all Jews have an inherent right to engage in vigorous political debate. One need not agree with all of Arendt’s views to find this attitude to be a continuing model for Jewish political speech and advocacy.

Very few individuals have successfully balanced the reality of being both a Jew and a European, making of the emancipation what it should have been—the emancipation of Jews as Jews. Hannah Arendt provides a striking example of the potential fruitfulness of this combination. The threads of both heritages are woven together in such a way that to overlook or deny the influence of one or the other is to rip apart the very fabric of her life and thought. It is because she remained both a Jew and a European that she gained a place in history, and it is as both a Jew and a European that her life and work should be understood.

The Jewish experience of danger, trauma, and hope in the dark times of the twentieth century was one which Hannah Arendt shared. Very early in her life she took to heart the experience and final words of Rahel Varnhagen:

The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wish to have missed.<sup>107</sup>

## Notes

1. “We Refugees,” see p. 274.
2. The Spring 1977 issue of *Social Research* was devoted exclusively to Hannah Arendt, but not one of the eminent authors who contributed articles so much as mentioned her Jewish writings.
3. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), p. 76.
4. “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” see p. 275.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
6. “The Moral of History,” see p. 314.
7. “The Eichmann Controversy,” p. 470.
8. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 99.
9. “The Moral of History,” see p. 314.

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10. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 14.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
12. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see pp. 377–78.
13. "Jewish History, Revised," see p. 304.
14. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see p. 378.
15. "Jewish History, Revised," see p. 311. Those familiar with Hannah Arendt's other work will notice the affinity between this account and her discussion of the breakdown of tradition in the modern age presented in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), particularly the essays "Tradition and the Modern Age" and "What is Authority?"
16. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
17. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see p. 378.
18. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 29.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
24. "Portrait of a Period," see p. 325.
25. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 72.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
27. "We Refugees," see p. 274.
28. "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing," *Men in Dark Times* (London: Cape, 1970), p. 13.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
31. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 110.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 309n.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
37. "Portrait of a Period," see p. 328.
38. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see p. 377.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
42. "Zionism Reconsidered," see p. 358.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
44. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see p. 383.
45. "Zionism Reconsidered," see p. 363.
46. It should be remembered that "politics" and "political thought" have special meanings and uncommon implications for Hannah Arendt. These are implicit throughout her work, but are particularly spelled out in *Between Past and Future* and *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
47. "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," see p. 283.
48. "We Refugees," see p. 274.
49. Bernard Lazare, *Job's Dungheap* (New York, Schocken Books, 1948), p. 10.
50. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see p. 381.

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51. "Herzl and Lazare," see p. 339.
52. "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," see p. 284.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., pp. 284–85.
56. "To Save the Jewish Homeland," p. 401.
57. Foreshadowing the controversy over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the continued advocacy of binationalism by Arendt and the *Ihud* was strongly condemned by the mainstream Zionist establishment:

"Any program which denies these fundamental principles [the Biltmore Program, which called for the creation of a sovereign Jewish Commonwealth], such as advanced by the *Ihud* or any other group, is unacceptable to the Zionist Organization of America and Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America." (Esco Foundation for Palestine, Inc., *Palestine: A Study of Jewish, Arab, and British Policies*, 2 vols., New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1947, p. 1087.)
- Arendt responded to this criticism in "About 'Collaboration,'" see p. 414.
58. "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After," see p. 386.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., pp. 386–87. For Arendt there is an important distinction between ideology and politics: "an ideology differs from a single [political] opinion in that it claims to possess either the key to history, or the solution for all the 'riddles of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 211.) Ideology, with its certainty, is the pattern of thought characteristic of totalitarianism, while "common sense," with its element of doubt and opinion, characterizes a truly free political realm.
61. "To Save the Jewish Homeland," see p. 397.
62. Ibid., p. 394.
63. "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," see p. 297. The relationship between "fabrication" and "the world" is an important but complex one in Arendt's political theory. The interested reader should look at *The Human Condition*, especially the chapters on "Work" and "Action."
64. "Peace or Armistice in the Near East?," see p. 435.
65. Ibid., p. 436. The contrast between nature and its necessity on the one hand, and artifice and its freedom on the other, is treated in depth in *The Human Condition*.
66. Ibid., p. 435.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., p. 427.
69. Ibid., p. 430. The fundamental importance for politics of representative thinking, the ability to see things from another person's point of view, is discussed by Arendt in "Truth and Politics" in *Between Past and Future*.
70. Ibid., p. 427.
71. Ibid.
72. "To Save the Jewish Homeland," see pp. 394–95.
73. Ibid., p. 396.
74. Ibid.
75. "Peace or Armistice in the Near East?," see p. 450.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., pp. 449–50.
78. "We Refugees," see p. 274.
79. *The Human Condition*, p. 254. Other examples of Arendt's changing the focus of Marx's analysis are:

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(1) Marx believed that the establishment of the nation-state system was a result of the rise of the bourgeoisie, with imperialism the logical outcome of the expansion of capital. While Arendt agrees that imperialism was the result of the growth of capital and the bourgeoisie's involvement in politics, she asserts that the bourgeoisie's entrance into politics occurred only in the mid-nineteenth century and caused the imperialism which destroyed the nation-state.

(2) Arendt generally follows Marx's analysis in her discussion of the separation of people from the land and the development of modern society as a society of laborers "free" from the old "bonds" to land and community. For Marx the characteristic product of bourgeois society is the proletariat, and it is this class of wage laborers upon whom the capitalist mode of production is based that is the vanguard which is to make history. In contrast, Arendt thinks that the important result of laboring society is the creation of what Marx called the *lumpenproletariat*, which she expands to include the *déclassé* elements of all the classes that came to form the mob, for it was the mob that prepared the way for the mass movements and totalitarianism.

I think, in fact, that Arendt's view of the importance of political action and her notion of both action and freedom, the *raison d'être* of politics, are actually much closer to those of Marx than she thought. But this all depends upon which of the many interpretations of Marx one believes is accurate.

80. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), p. 47.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 47–50 *passim*.

82. Arendt's philosophy of history, including her critique of Marxist historiography, is most fully developed in her essay "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern" in *Between Past and Future*.

83. "The Moral of History," see p. 314.

Arendt's attitude toward history has a certain affinity to that of her friend Walter Benjamin as expressed in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which he bequeathed to Arendt's guardianship shortly before his death in 1940. "*Thinking* involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it *crystallizes* into a monad" (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], pp. 262–63, emphasis added). By comparison, Arendt's overall intellectual project is perhaps most succinctly put in *The Human Condition* (p. 5), where she claims that her purpose "is nothing more than to *think* what we are doing" (emphasis added). This being the case, it is particularly revealing that in her reply to a critique of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she states:

I did not write a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history. . . . The book, therefore, does not really deal with the "origins" of totalitarianism—as its title unfortunately claims—but gives a historical account of the elements which *crystallized* into totalitarianism. ("A Reply to Eric Voegelin," in H. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. J. Kohn [New York: Schocken Books, 2005], p. 403, emphasis added.)

84. *The Human Condition*, p. 253.

85. "We Refugees," see p. 274.

86. *The Human Condition*, p. 41.

87. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 89.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, p. 88

90. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) p. 9.

91. *Ibid.* I believe that it is from this experience of the assimilating Jews, in particular Rahel Varnhagen and Franz Kafka, that Arendt gained an insight into the phenomenon that she was later to describe as "the subjectivism of modern philosophy" which removed "the Archimedean point" out of the world

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and into the mind of the human being. See especially the chapter titled “The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age” in *The Human Condition*.

92. see p. 315.

93. “The Moral of History,” *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 448.

94. Ibid, p. 381.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid, p. 565.

97. *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 227.

98. H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, Penguin Books, 2005), p. 125.

99. Gershom Scholem, “Exchange,” *The Jew as Pariah*, p. 243.

100. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 287.

101. “‘The Formidable Dr. Robinson’: A Reply,” see p. 497.

102. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 268–69.

103. Ibid., p. 263.

104. For example, Arendt rarely discusses Eastern European Jewish history and ignores the attempts by Zionist and non-Zionist socialists to organize the Jews into “a great revolutionary movement.” In her political theory she aestheticizes and sanitizes politics to such an extent that one often wonders what the exact content of “political action” really is. In a similar vein, her critique of Marx is not always based on a fair representation of his views. And, of course, the accuracy of the historical facts upon which she bases her interpretations of history has been widely questioned, most notably in the case of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

105. *Essays in Understanding*, p. 11–12.

106. See, for example Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), the papers delivered at a 1997 conference of the same name.

107. *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 3.