

EDITORIAL

Even today, few thinkers arouse greater controversy than Hannah Arendt. Dismissed as a left-liberal by some, celebrated by others as the key thinker of politicality itself, what is clear to all sides is that Arendt's rich legacy is not one whose relevance or significance have been exhausted. In particular, as the guest editors of this issue point out, Arendt remains a uniquely significant thinker for any attempt to confront the politics of modernity. new formations is delighted to present an important collection of essays on and inspired by the work of this singular thinker.

HANNAH ARENDT 'AFTER MODERNITY'

*Devorah Baum, Stephen Bygrave
and Stephen Morton*

As one of the most incisive political philosophers of the post-war epoch, Hannah Arendt is well known for her critical reflections on anti-Semitism and the limitations of humanism; violence and revolutionary politics; morality and evil; judgement; and the aetiology of genocide and totalitarianism. Her reflections on the collapse of the public sphere and the loss of the shared human way of experiencing the world in the face of totalitarian state bureaucracies are no less valuable for confronting the destruction of the welfare state in contemporary western democracies today than they were for addressing the genealogy of totalitarianism in early twentieth-century Europe. What is more, Arendt's reflections on the nation state and human rights from the standpoint of the refugee, and her critique of the superfluity of human life associated with mass culture and society have proven to be very fertile ground for contemporary thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Paul Gilroy, Julia Kristeva, Jacqueline Rose and Edward Said (among others).

To take one example, Arendt's observation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the figure of the refugee is a subject who is deprived of the right to have rights, and as a consequence of the right to representation, has clear resonances in the contemporary geopolitical conjuncture. For Arendt, being deprived of the right to make public statements or hold opinions suggests that the stateless have no rhetorical space as legal subjects; they are, as Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb aptly puts it, 'statementless'.¹ And by denying the stateless rights that were deemed to be inalienable according to the language of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the state revealed that human rights for the stateless were in practice contingent upon the sovereignty of a given political community. Indeed, it is the failure of human rights discourse to protect the rights of the stateless that prompts Arendt to resort to the use of a performative contradiction in which she, as a member of the stateless population she describes, declares that the refugee is denied the right to have rights. In so doing, Arendt asserts the right to have rights (such as the right to make speech acts) in spite of the state's denial of such rights to the stateless. What is more, Arendt's suggestion in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the formation of the state of Israel created another population of Palestinian refugees at the very moment it attempted to find a political solution to the Jewish refugee crisis certainly exemplifies her scepticism about the political efficacy of the nation state to protect the rights of the human subject. It is significant indeed that Arendt's 'break with Zionism was due in large part to

1. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: anxiety and messianism in Hannah Arendt and W.H. Auden*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, p34.

the creation of a refugee population through the forced expulsion of the Arab population in Israel and the minority status of those Arabs who remained'.² With an uncanny prescience based on her own experience of statelessness as a German Jew who escaped from Nazi Germany, Arendt 'predicted nothing but violence for the inhabitants of the new state [of Israel], a violence perpetrated on the minority population in its midst'.³

One of the most influential thinkers to have provoked a renewed interest in Arendt's thought in recent years is the Italian legal philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In a short commentary on Hannah Arendt's chapter 'The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man' in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Agamben argues that 'the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come'.⁴ For Agamben, the figure of the refugee calls into question the universal claims of human rights declarations by 'breaking up' the assumption that the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen includes human subjects who are not citizens. The refugee highlights the fiction that national belonging is guaranteed by nativity or birth, and thereby 'throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty'.⁵ For Agamben as for Arendt, it is the Nazi Holocaust of the European Jews that clearly exemplifies the failure of universal human rights declarations to protect the rights of human populations. Yet Agamben's argument also has important implications for understanding the condition of the Palestinian refugee. For just as Arendt predicted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the formation of the state of Israel would create a new population of Palestinian refugees and a new regime of violent political sovereignty, so Agamben suggests that the 'four hundred and twenty-five Palestinians who were expelled by the state of Israel' in the early 1990s and 'dwell in a sort of no-man's-land between Lebanon and Israel' constitute what Hannah Arendt termed "'the avant-garde of their people'".⁶ Crucially for Agamben, Arendt's term 'does not necessarily or only mean' that these Palestinian refugees 'might form the original nucleus of a future national state'. For such a political solution 'would probably resolve the Palestinian problem just as inadequately as Israel has resolved the Jewish question'. Instead, Agamben argues that the 'no-man's-land' where the Palestinians have found refuge offers a means of altering the political territory in such a way that 'the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself [*sic*] is'.⁷

Agamben's reading of Arendt clearly demonstrates that Arendt's thought has much to offer our understanding of the complex and contradictory processes that underpin the contemporary condition of global modernity. Yet it is important to emphasise that such a view of Hannah Arendt was far from assured, as some commentators have noted. In the years following her death, Arendt was largely viewed as a figure very much of her own time. As Richard King and Dan Stone explain, Arendt was regarded as a 'normative theorist of politics, action, and participatory freedom, of the public-private

2. Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and human rights: the predicament of common responsibility*, Bloomington, Ind., Indiana University Press, 2006, p139.

3. *Ibid.*, p140.

4. Giorgio Agamben, 'We Refugees', Michael Roche (trans), <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-we-refugees.html> [accessed 8th April 2009].

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Richard H. King and Dan Stone, 'Introduction', *Hannah Arendt and the uses of history: imperialism, nation, race, and genocide*, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2007, p5.

9. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, px.

10. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (mis)use of a notion*, London, Verso, 2000, p2.

11. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, pxlvi.

12. *Ibid.*, p29.

13. *Ibid.*, pp29-30.

14. Hannah Arendt, 'The Jews and Society', pp54-88, in *Anti-Semitism, Part One of The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Washington, Harvart Books, 1979, p56.

15. Judith Butler, 'I merely belong to them', pp26-28, *London Review of Books*, 29, 9, May 2007, p28.

16. Žižek, *Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p3.

[...] question, and of the problem of political judgment'.⁸ The 'standard' view of Arendt that prevailed during this period, argues Seyla Benhabib, was of a 'political philosopher of nostalgia, an anti-modernist for whom the Greek "polis" remained the quintessential political experience'.⁹ In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek describes a shift in the reception of Arendt's thought in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001): 'Until two decades ago, Leftist radicals dismissed [Arendt] as the perpetrator of the notion of "totalitarianism", the key weapon of the West in the Cold War ideological struggle: if, at a Cultural Studies symposium in the 1970s, one was asked innocently, "Is your line of argumentation not similar to that of Arendt?", this was a sure sign that one was in deep trouble'.¹⁰ Benhabib (among others) offers a more nuanced reading of Arendt that challenges the 'standard' reading which both she and Žižek outline. For Benhabib, it was Arendt's critical engagement with Heidegger and Marx that offered crucial insights into the political implications of uprootedness, statelessness, and homelessness - conditions associated with modernity which also enabled the rise of totalitarianism.¹¹ Crucially, Benhabib suggests that Arendt's thought offers an alternative genealogy of modernity that complicates the prevailing identification of modernity with the 'spread of commodity exchange relations and the growth of a capitalist economy'.¹² For Arendt, Benhabib suggests, modernity also brings with it 'new forms of social interaction' and identity politics that underpin modern forms of totalitarianism and racism.¹³ Arendt's reflections on 'The Jews and Society' in part one of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for example, noted that it had 'been one of the most unfortunate facts in the history of the Jewish people that only its enemies, and almost never its friends, understood that the Jewish question was a political one'.¹⁴ Recognising this 'unfortunate fact', however, did not become the basis of her own identity politics. Rather, Arendt's efforts to locate the 'promise of politics' required rethinking what might be signified, in political terms, by belonging. As Judith Butler discusses in a review of Arendt's *Jewish Writings*, 'belonging' for Arendt is a matter less of sentimentality than of irreducible facticity, which should never be disavowed, but which cannot presume to structure the polis: 'A polity requires the capacity to live with others precisely when there is no obvious mode of belonging'.¹⁵

Žižek, for his part, has suggested that the relatively recent 'elevation of Arendt is perhaps the clearest sign of the political defeat of the Left - of how the Left has accepted the basic coordinates of liberal democracy ('democracy' versus 'totalitarianism', etc.), and is now trying to define its (op)position within this space'.¹⁶ Such a critique might appear to suggest that Arendt's thought is of little use to address the depredations of neoliberal globalisation, contemporary forms of ethnic violence, the privatisation of the public sphere, and the securitisation of the state. And yet, there are ways in which Arendt's thought has been rehabilitated by the left in the service of a critique of the contemporary neoliberal state and its totalitarian tendencies. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, have suggested in a recently

co-authored book that Arendt's reflections on the limitations and possibilities of human rights as a meaningful political discourse might provide us with the conceptual tools through which to understand the political structures underpinning contemporary formations of modernity. For Butler, what is particularly interesting about Arendt's critique of human rights is that she 'effectively redeclares the rights of man and tries to animate a discourse that she thinks will be politically efficacious'.¹⁷ For Spivak, however, there is an important distinction to be made between the disintegration of the nation state that started at the precise moment 'when the right to national self-determination was recognized for all of Europe, and the supremacy of the will of the nation over all legal and abstract institutions - which is the state - was universally accepted',¹⁸ and the 'decline of the nation state that we are witnessing in globalization'. This latter decline is in part 'a result of the economic and political restructuring of the state in global capital'.¹⁹ Yet what Arendt also allows us to grasp, Spivak suggests, is that the faulty form of the nation state was the condition of possibility for the emergence of the neoliberal state in the late twentieth century.

It is one of the more curious aspects of Arendt's critical reception that she has been equally revered and reviled by thinkers working at both ends of the political spectrum, as well as finding herself heterogeneously identified as a 'Hebrew', 'Greek', 'Roman', 'Kantian', 'Heideggerian', 'Ancient', 'Modern', etc. (Indeed, until fairly recently, one striking and perhaps surprising exception to the list of political and philosophical usages to which she has regularly been subject has been 'Feminism', which exclusion, as Julia Kristeva reflects in her representation of Arendt's 'female genius', may in part be explained by Arendt's own distinct ambivalence towards gendered interpretations of her work.²⁰) Ironically, then, a thinker invested in the quintessentially Kantian project of taxonomy has herself proved intractable to classification, and a thinker whose reputation has rested primarily on her diagnosis and critique of modernity's new political realities, has proven just as prescient when remarking what, within modernity, isn't new (in *On Revolution*, for example, she observes that Marx's outlook was 'firmly rooted in the institutions and theories of the ancients'²¹). These contradictions, along with Arendt's recalcitrance regarding partisan attachments of all shades, have led thinkers seeking to comprehend the political realities of our own day to detect sources of interest and inspiration in her work despite - or even *because* - of the fact that, as Butler comments, 'the matter of her political affiliation' is not 'easy to settle'.²² In this sense it may be tempting to compare the legacy of Arendt to that of her contemporary and friend Walter Benjamin, of whom she once observed, 'The trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*'.²³

This special issue will reassess the critical reception of Hannah Arendt in the period 'after Modernity'. In different ways, each of the essays that form this special issue seek to assess the ways in which Arendt's writings offer concepts

17. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who sings the nation-state?: language, politics, belonging*, London, Seagull Books, 2007, p47.

18. *Ibid.*, p75.

19. *Ibid.*, p76.

20. Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, Ross Guberman (trans), New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p25.

21. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1985, p63.

22. Butler, 'I merely belong to them', op. cit., p26.

23. Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction', pp7-55, Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, St Ives, Fontana, 1992, p9.

and vocabularies for thinking through and beyond the condition of modernity as it relates to ethics and aesthetics, as well as history and politics. For Patricia Owens in 'The Supreme Social Concept: the Un-Worldliness of Modern Security', Arendt's amorphous and eccentric category of the 'social' offers a means of understanding the modern discourse of 'security'. The discourse of 'security', Owens suggests, is the most powerful discourse of the modern age since it has largely set the parameters of modern thinking about politics and war. However, contra Schmitt and his followers within international political and legal thought, this is not because 'security' is the political discourse par excellence, allowing the sovereign to decide the law and exceptions to the law. Instead, Owens argues that modern 'security' is an exemplary instance of the modern rise of the social, as understood by Hannah Arendt. Modern discourses and practices of 'security' have provided the justification and mechanism for the expansion of what Arendt described as the 'life process' of 'society' and the liberal view that 'life is the highest good'. In Owens' account, Arendt's unwieldy and strange concept of 'the social' is eccentric, but defensible, both in terms of its origins in her unique form of philosophical anthropology (through which she distinguished 'life' and 'world') and her socio-historical analysis of the modern state, capitalism, and imperialism. In making this argument, Owens suggests that Arendt's controversial and often misunderstood writing on 'the social' offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding the un-worldliness of global 'security' governance today.

Another dimension of Arendt's contribution to our understanding of modernity resides in her critique of colonialism and in her suggestion in *Origins of Totalitarianism* that the rise of fascism in Europe can be traced to the colonial bureaucracies of German South West Africa. Indeed, Richard H. King in 'Three Faces of Revolution: James, Fanon and Arendt' acknowledges that Hannah Arendt's exploration of the relationship between European imperialism and the rise of fascism, especially Nazism, offers fresh ways to study the rise of modern totalitarian regimes. To be sure, Paul Gilroy, among others, has underscored Arendt's importance for understanding contemporary race thinking around the globe, while African Studies specialists still see Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* as one of the founding texts of their discipline. For King, however, this reading of Arendt also overlooks the important contribution that Arendt's *On Revolution* has made to our understanding of third world national liberation movements in the twentieth century. Situating Arendt's study in relation to CLR James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938; 1963) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), King traces a lacuna in Arendt's account of revolutionary politics, and suggests that Arendt was tone-deaf to the Haitian Revolution because she was predisposed to fear revolutions whose main goal was the alleviation of poverty and clearly disliked Fanon's emphasis upon the reconstruction of self aimed for through revolutionary violence. And yet, as King goes on to suggest, in the post-colonial era, Arendt's focus on the importance of a 'constitution of

liberty', implying for her a politics of democratic participation in the context of stable institutions, remains a worthy, if more limited, goal of post-colonial regimes.

On a different, but related topic, Dan Stone, in 'Defending the Plural: Hannah Arendt and Genocide Studies' assesses the reasons for the revival of interest in Hannah Arendt's work in the new field of genocide studies. Stone begins by considering the reception of Arendt's 'boomerang thesis' (first presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) - a thesis which suggested that the roots of European totalitarianism, especially Nazism, lay in overseas colonialism; he proceeds to note how this thesis accords with the view of some scholars of genocide that genocide and colonialism are inherently linked. And yet, as Stone goes on to explain through a carefully historicised reading, Arendt herself argued that there were unbridgeable breaks between the nineteenth century, including the history of imperialism, and twentieth-century totalitarianism, and also believed that the Holocaust could not meaningfully be compared with pre-modern or colonial cases of genocide. In Stone's argument, what accounts for Arendt's renewed popularity is partly her claim that genocide had occurred in colonial contexts - a claim that reinforces contemporary empirical historical research in genocide studies - but also the appeal of her position as a political philosopher who defended the plurality of the human species.

The political significance of Arendt's humanism is also the subject of Ned Curthoys' essay 'A Question of Character', which explores the ethical importance of 'character' or 'personality' in Hannah Arendt's political philosophy. In a compelling and nuanced analysis, Curthoys suggests that what Arendt means by 'character' or 'personality' is bound up with her commitment to thinking and judgment as quintessentially worldly human activities. Arendt's interest in the 'representative significance' of personality, and the disastrous ethical consequences of not having one, Curthoys claims, reflects her post-war commitment to thinking history and politics from the cosmopolitan standpoint of a 'citizen of the world'. Curthoys further suggests that Arendt refrains from facile, self-exculpatory rationalisations of the causes and significance of the Holocaust, instead submitting that capitulation to fascism is a constant possibility for the great majority of us who do not have a distinctive character which animates and unifies our comportment toward the world.

In this context also Simon Swift returns, in 'Arendt's Tactlessness', to the controversy surrounding Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial. In an highly original essay that takes into account the often neglected question of Arendt's style, Swift analyses Arendt's representation of the fascist's weakness in character in relation to the literature and theory of affects. Swift argues that Arendt's study of Eichmann springs out of a critique of bourgeois emotionalism made manifest in Eichmann's failure to recognise his own feelings. Swift further delineates an Arendtian ethics that stands

opposed to those sentimental responses to injustice that work to disable meaningful political action. Arendt's thinking here, Swift suggests, has stylistic implications which appear in what often seems like tactlessness on her part, as well as political ramifications insofar as the denial of feeling may be a way of making contact possible. His article contextualises the issue of Arendt's tactlessness in relation to the treatment of tact in the German philosophical tradition, and connects this to issues surrounding Arendt's curious reflections on the political and ethical significance of disgust and intimacy.

Also interested in Arendt's affective lexicon is Rei Terada's article, 'The Life Process and Forgettable Living', which investigates Arendt's emphatically low estimation of household and society in *The Human Condition*. In a subtle, complex and thought-provoking discussion, Terada observes how Arendt's critique is ambiguously grounded in her objections to expropriation of labour, on one hand - an expropriation that she associates with the 'life process' - and to what she perceives as the 'futility of mortal life' on the other. Terada's essay interrogates Arendt's disgust and argues that it should be viewed in its specific post-war context, having emerged during a time when the 'bare life' signified by survival had a particular political valence. Terada also compares *The Human Condition* to related thoughts about bare life, subjectivity, labour, work and meaninglessness in Marx, Agamben and Adorno. Terada's historical contextualisation of Arendt's reflections on the life process has major implications for how we read and understand both Arendt and those indebted to her. In the case of Arendt and Agamben, Terada carefully reconciles some of the complex imbrications between two figures whose work is often conflated without sufficient attention paid to the contradictions between and within their writings. Finally, in a positive if challenging contestation to the thinkers with whom she engages, Terada's essay argues for a toleration of the very meaninglessness in whose shadow Arendt had feared oblivion.

Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb also responds to a certain melancholic strain within *The Human Condition* in 'Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Ruin'. In this essay, which concentrates primarily on Arendt's reflections on literature (and especially her thoughts on Franz Kafka), Gottlieb seeks to account for the sources and consequences of Arendt's conception of ruin as the 'natural' and 'normal' character of human affairs. Beginning with an analysis of Heidegger's use of the term 'ruination' in his early Marburg lectures, the essay shows how Arendt absorbs Heidegger's insight while completely altering its critical function. Gottlieb suggests that, as a German Jew, Arendt was acutely aware of the temptations and dangers of the cult of *Bildung* (culture, self-development), whose contradictions she exposes in her early account of Rahel Varnhagen's attempts at improving her socio-political status by such means. For Arendt, argues Gottlieb, following Kafka, any process that operates on its own, including *Bildung*, tends toward ruin, and she understood her own work as an uncovering of the counter-movement to ruination in the form of action. The essay concludes by showing the degree to which Arendt's

reflections on ruination also inform her reading of the Eichmann trial, and reveals, remarkably, how her critical engagement with Kafka may have paved the way for her most famous 'report'.

Hannah Arendt 'After Modernity' is thus an interdisciplinary collection of original, thought-provoking and challenging essays, which seek to reassess the influence and impact of a fascinating and important figure who, as now appears, was both a unique witness to those modern events whose unfolding she lived through, and a prophet of our own times.