

## The International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method

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**Abstract.** This article examines the multiple ways in which Hannah Arendt's thought arose historically and in international context, but also how we might think about history and theory in new ways with Arendt. It is commonplace to situate Arendt's political and historical thought as a response to totalitarianism. However, far less attention has been paid to the significance of other specifically and irreducibly international experiences and events. Virtually all of her singular contributions to political and international thought were influenced by her lived experiences of and historical reflections on statelessness and exile, imperialism, transnational totalitarianism, world wars, the nuclear revolution, the founding of Israel, war crimes trials, and the war in Vietnam. Yet we currently lack a comprehensive reconstruction of the extent to which Arendt's thought was shaped by the fact of political multiplicity, that there are not one but many polities existing on earth and inhabiting the world. This neglect is surprising in light of the significant 'international turn' in the history of thought and intellectual history; the growing interest in Arendt's thought within international theory; and, above all, Arendt's own unwavering commitment to plurality not simply as a characteristic of individuals but as an essential and intrinsically valuable effect of distinct territorial entities. The article examines the historical and international context of Arendt's historical method, including her critique of process- and development-oriented histories that remain current in different social science fields, setting out and evaluating her alternative approach to historical writing.

[T]his system of relationships established by action, in which the past lives on in the form of a history that goes on speaking and being spoken about, can only exist within the world produced by man, nesting there in the stones until they too speak and in speaking bear witness, even if we must first dig them out of the earth.

- Hannah Arendt, 2005 [1955]: 161-162

Few twentieth century political thinkers exemplify more than German-American Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt the extent to which international encounters are productive of theorizing and how theory arises historically. Virtually all of Arendt's singular and enduring contributions to political and international thought were constituted

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in and through her lived experiences of and historical reflections on statelessness and exile, imperialism, transnational totalitarianism, world wars, the founding of Israel, war crimes trials, and the war in Vietnam. She insisted that political thought be grounded in historical knowledge. Otherwise, as she told students in 1955, ‘we don’t know what we do and what we are talking about’ (1955: 5). To be sure, Arendt most often described herself as a political theorist and she should not be read as a conventional historian of imperialism, totalitarianism, and revolution, though she wrote significant books on these subjects. Yet Arendt approached even the most philosophical of questions historically. Some of her earliest scholarly writing engaged with philosophies of history; she consistently sought to establish the historical grounds for her political theory; and she actively embraced and sought to theorize the role of historical experience on political and historical thought. She argued that thought and historical writing is not only bound *to* time, but also the character *of* the times governs the possibility of thinking the relationship of the past to the present in a fully historical and political manner. These seemingly simple avowals have profound implications for the task of considering the relation between history and theory, especially historical-theoretical sensibility and method. Given the enormity of Arendt’s contributions to twentieth century political thought, it is thus surprising that only recently have political theorists and historians of thought begun to place her historical writings at the centre of her work (Honohan, 1990; Owens, 2007; King and Stone, 2007; Hoffmann, 2010; Novák, 2010; Kang, 2013; Yaqoob, 2014a; Keedus, 2015).

It is commonplace to situate Hannah Arendt’s political and historical thought as a response to totalitarianism (Young-Bruehl, 2004 [1982]; Canovan, 1992, Villa, 1999;

Benhabib, 2000) and war (Owens, 2007). However, far less attention has been paid to the influence of other specifically and irreducibly *international* experiences and events on Arendt's life and work and, more specifically, her approach to historical epistemology. We currently lack a comprehensive reconstruction of the extent to which the context and content of Arendt's thought was shaped by the fact of political multiplicity, that there are not one but many polities existing on earth and inhabiting the world, to adapt Arendt's understanding of plurality (1958: 7). This neglect is also surprising in light of the significant 'international turn' in the history of thought and intellectual history (Sluga, 2015); the growing interest in Arendt's thought within international theory (Lang and Williams, 2005; Owens, 2007; Hayden, 2009); and, above all, Arendt's own unwavering commitment to political plurality not simply as a characteristic of individuals but as an essential and intrinsically valuable result of distinct territorial entities. As Arendt wrote in the 1961 preface to *Between Past and Future*, 'thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings' (1968a: 14). Given the considerable extent to which international encounters form the incidents of lived experience then serious thinking about Arendt's thought, and of course the international itself, must remain bound to them. Of course, 'thought itself is historic' (Arendt, 1994b [1954]: 431). But this history is not fully understood if we neglect its international conditions. Hence we need a fuller examination of the international origins of Arendt's historical method.

The first part of this essay places Arendt's earliest political activism and intellectual development in the context of Jewish statelessness in 1930s Europe. Arendt was involved in practical action and intellectual debates on the course of the Second

World War, the British Mandate in Palestine, the political organization of Jewish people, and the post-war reconstruction of Europe and its empires. These political and intellectual commitments shaped the content and structure of Arendt's most historical work, her monumental study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1966 [1951]). Arendt's decisive influence on the historiography of the period was her insistence that the roots of European fascism were not German, or even European. They were fundamentally imperial and international. Crucially, totalitarian domination represented a rupture in the continuity of historical time, incomprehensible to conventional historical and sociological approaches predicated upon this continuity. Accordingly, the second part analyses the highly unconventional historical approach that Arendt adopted in *Origins*, first published in 1951. Later, in an effort to develop a political response to the absolute novelty of the death factories, and by now a citizen of Cold War America, Arendt reflected on the character of historical thought in the more immediate context of another new reality that encompassed the whole of humanity and could destroy all life on earth. Hence the third part examines Arendt's still prescient critique of process- and development-oriented understandings of history in response to the invention of the atomic bomb. The final part examines Arendt's post-totalitarian alternatives to the grand sweeping historical sociological generalizations about global 'processes' and historical development still so current across several social science fields. This historical counterpart to Arendt's novel theory of politics centred on identifying the basic phenomenological conditions of historical experience since the possibility of politics itself, she argued, is bound to individual and collective experiences of time; understanding the fragmentary and discontinuous character of the remembered past; seeking to grasp phenomena and events

in their singularity and particularity; and identifying the new and unexpected, including through the exemplary lives of historical persons. Hannah Arendt points us toward a method for international history that is grounded in ‘lived incidents’ as guideposts for thinking, while accepting the fragmentary character of understanding given its rootedness in the plurality not only of persons but also polities.

### **I. ‘Thought itself is historic’**

Hannah Arendt’s position as a secular middle-class Jewess in interwar Germany - an *international* position ‘from the very beginning’ as modern anti-Semitism ‘functioned as an International’ (1994c [1945]: 141) - profoundly influenced her earliest political activity and writing. In 1929, before she became active against Nazism, Arendt began researching a biography of the writer and influential salon hostess, Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), based on Varnhagen’s papers collected at the Manuscript Division of the Prussian State Library. This was before the Gestapo arrested Arendt in 1933 and imprisoned her for also researching anti-Semitic propaganda. *Rahel Varnhagen*, first published almost three decades later, is not a straightforward historical biography, but an experimental attempt to ‘narrate the story of Rahel’s life as she herself might have told it’ (Arendt, 1974 [1957]: xv). The narrative centres on Varnhagen’s initial striving for acceptance in German gentile society through marriage, Christian conversion, and Enlightenment emancipation, but ultimately her eventual acceptance of her Jewish and pariah status. Except in its unconventionality and concern with the ‘Jewish Question’, this ‘life of a Jewish woman’ does not sit easily within the rest of Arendt’s *oeuvre*. And

yet, as others have suggested, to a great extent, the biography becomes semi-autobiography, as well as a prescient historical and political analysis of the seeds of the coming catastrophe faced by millions of European Jews (Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004).

Arendt was more politically active as a stateless and rightless Jew between 1933 and 1951 than at any other period of her life: arrested and imprisoned in Germany; escaping without papers to Geneva where she briefly worked as an administrator at the League of Nations; then to France where she worked to send children to Palestine; interred by the Vichy regime at the camp in Gurs; escaping before many of its inmates were sent to Auschwitz; and arriving in the United States (Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004: 106-7). The central purpose of Arendt's writing in these decisive years was to historicize anti-Semitism and politicize Jews. Assimilation had failed, but so too would any Zionist embrace of pseudo-biological essences, the notion of Jewish identity as emanating from 'an eternal organic body, the product of inevitable natural growth of inherent qualities' or any notion of an eternal anti-Semitism (2007a [1944], 367). To the extent that Jewish identity was to be political it had to be understood as worldly and historical. Yet, if attacked as Jews, Arendt insisted, they ought to embrace political and military resistance *as Jews*: 'you cannot say, "Excuse me, I am not a Jew; I am a human being". That is silly', she wrote. To defend oneself as anything else would have been 'nothing but a grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality' (Arendt, 1968b: 18). Arendt's intense support for the creation of a Jewish army, especially through 1942, went beyond chipping in to the military effort. She envisioned the organization and mobilization of units of armed Jewish men and women as a founding act of Jewish political organization. But, contra Clausewitz and the tradition of political realism, this participation in reciprocal

violence was not to be understood as the quintessence of politics itself, though exemplary political action could occur in wartime (Arendt, 1970a; Owens, 2007).

It is abundantly clear that several of Hannah Arendt's major contributions to political theory were shaped by her active involvement in the struggle over the new order in Palestine. One of the earliest and still most influential 'post-Zionists', she offered concrete proposals to undermine the establishment of a mono-ethnic/religious Jewish state to prevent Palestinians suffering a similar fate as European Jews. Exclusive national sovereignty in the State of Israel could only be a kind of Jewish pseudo-sovereignty (2007b [1948]: 401). 'A home that my neighbor does not recognize and respect is not a home... but an illusion - until it becomes a battlefield' (Arendt, 2007c [1945]: 235). Eventually, Arendt came to endorse a bi-national state since the vast majority of Arabs and Jews rejected multiethnic/religious federation. The influence of socialist Zionism on Arendt's writings on Israel/Palestine, and much of her mature political thought, is clear (Ashcroft, 2015). It has also been noted that 'Arendt's strategies of historical representation shared profound affinities with the urgent and engaged historical thinking of her German-Jewish contemporaries', including Walter Benjamin (Curthoys, 2010: 107). Less well known is how Arendt's signature contribution to international historiography in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was shaped by her involvement in pan-European debates on the future of postwar world order among wartime resistance movements.

Hannah Arendt vehemently opposed 'German' readings of totalitarianism, as the result of some deeply rooted authoritarianism within its history or character. First, she insisted that, to a great extent, Nazism arose 'from the vacuum resulting from an almost

simultaneous breakdown of *Europe's* social and political structures... The truth was that the class structure of European society could no longer function; it simply could no longer work either in its feudal form in the East or in its bourgeois form in the West' (1994 [1945]: 111, emphasis added). Second, the germ of fascism was *international*, not just European: its 'roots are strong and they are called - Anti-Semitism, Racism, Imperialism' (1994d [1945] 150). To center totalitarianism within German, or even European history, was not simply historically dubious. It legitimized the return to national sovereign states after German fascism was overcome. To prevent the reemergence of a new fascist *international* it was not enough to limit German sovereignty. Those elements of totalitarianism 'do not cease to exist', she wrote, 'with the defeat of one or all totalitarian governments' (1994a [1954]: 324). Citing what she claimed was the dominant view among the underground resisters - as distinct from the governments-in-exile - Arendt argued that European and eventually worldwide federation was the only real antidote to the 'walking corpse' of the sovereign state (1994c [1945]: 143). Hannah Arendt's *political* conviction regarding the necessity of federally organized commonwealths, rooted in international encounters and personal experiences, contributed directly to the central historical argument of her path-breaking transnational history of totalitarianism. As Selinger has recently made clear, Arendt saw 'the historiography of Nazism as profoundly connected with the future reconstruction of Europe' (2016: 2).

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1966 [1951]) is 'one of the constitutive books of postcolonial studies', prefiguring claims by leading scholars of race and empire about the colonial origins of European fascism (DuBois, 2015 [1947]: 23; Grosse, 2006: 36). Central to this status is a series of historical distinctions Hannah Arendt drew between



Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism; race thinking and *racism*; and settler colonialism and the ‘new imperialism’ of the late-nineteenth-century. ‘In historical inquiries’, she wrote, ‘it is not important to arrive at ready-made definitions, but constantly to make distinctions, and these distinctions must follow the language we speak and the subject matter we deal with’ (1994h [1953]: 385). Ordinary Jew-hatred became radicalized and ideological as the institutions and economies of European states collapsed. Race thinking, which had always accompanied European expansion, was transformed into *racism* when race was propagated as ‘the new key to history’ (1966 [1951], 170). The governments established under settler colonialism and traditional empire building had no counterpart in the age of the ‘new imperialism’. Instead, the amalgamation of bureaucracy and racism served as a replacement for government, rationalizing the massacre and administration (or both - ‘administrative massacres’) of subject peoples. Arendt’s formative role in postcolonial scholarship is grounded on her claim that this substitution of a racial for political order was normalized and transported back to Europe. ‘African colonial possessions’, she wrote, ‘became the most fertile soil for the flowering of what later was to become the Nazi elite. Here they had seen with their own eyes how peoples could be converted into races and how... one might put one’s own people into the position of the master race’ (1966 [1951], 206). From ‘the wild murdering’ of Carl Peters in German Southeast Africa, to the ideology of ‘expansion for expansion’s sake’, ‘the stage seemed to be set’, she wrote, ‘for all possible horrors. Lying right under anybody’s nose were many of the elements which gathered together could create a totalitarian government on the basis of racism’ (1966 [1951], 221, 185).

Hannah Arendt’s version of the boomerang thesis, the unintended consequences

of imperial blowback, has been central to all subsequent historical studies of the links between Imperial Germany's conduct in Africa and Nazi conduct on the Eastern front (Arendt, 1966 [1951], xvii, 155, 206, 223; Hull, 2005; Zimmerer, 2004). However, in Arendt's own analysis, British, French and even German imperial practices played an *indirect* role in Europe's further descent into twentieth-century total war. In *Origins*, the most significant precursor to totalitarianism was not overseas imperialism, but the *continental* imperialisms of the pan-German and pan-Slav Leagues. These imperialist pan-movements were the real templates for totalitarian rule with their disdain for constitutional politics and existing institutions: mobs replaced classes and the party system, organized around the basis of class interests, was overwhelmed. The *immediate* predecessor of totalitarianism was continental imperialism. And yet several of the ideological rationalisations and forms of thought that accompanied overseas imperialism - obedience to the laws of nature or history, the role of impersonal and world historical 'processes' and necessities - were fundamental to totalitarianism.

The profound originality and relevance of Hannah Arendt's work in this context is not simply her decentered, international and transnational history of what she took to be the central phenomenon of the twentieth-century, nor is it that *Origins* was shaped by Arendt's international experiences and wartime political commitments, significant though they are. The political, historiographical and philosophical stakes are even higher. For while the discussion thus far has centered on Arendt's formative role as the 'godmother' of the boomerang thesis (Kühne, 2013: 341), more significant is her insistence on the *unprecedented* character of totalitarianism. Hannah Arendt is best read not simply as an historian of the imperial roots of totalitarianism, but also for how and why she violated

and reworked conventional historical narrative of cause and effect, that is, as a theorist of history. For Arendt, totalitarianism marked a fundamental rupture in the presumed continuity of history with enormous implications for the experience of historical time and the practice of historical writing. The event of totalitarian domination, she wrote, ‘marks the division between the modern age - rising with the natural sciences in the seventeenth-century, reaching its political climax in the revolutions of the eighteenth, and unfolding its general implications after the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth - and the world of the twentieth century, which came into existence through the chain of catastrophes touched off by the First World War’ (1968c: 26-27). This is not any vulgar notion of one century being somehow more important than another. Rather, as we now discuss, what led up to and happened in the Nazi death factories radically transformed the continuity of historical time and with it the conditions of historical thought. ‘We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface’ (Arendt, 1966 [1951], ix).

## **II. ‘Analysis in Terms of History’**

It is cliché to observe that Hannah Arendt’s writing does not correspond to any traditional school of thought or academic field. The distance between her work and conventional approaches to political science and historical method is well known (Vollrath, 1977; Luban, 1983). ‘One of the difficulties of the book’, Arendt later wrote about *Origins*, ‘is

that it does not belong to any school and hardly uses any of the officially recognized or officially controversial instruments' (1994e [1953]: 402). She not only 'saw herself at odds with the entire disciplinary matrix of her epoch' (Baehr, 2002: 804); she actively broke many of the rules of historical and political science. As Seyla Benhabib has observed, *Origins* 'is too systematically ambitious and overinterpreted to be a strictly historical account; it is too anecdotal, narrative, and ideographic to be considered social science, and although it has the vivacity and stylistic flair of a work of political journalism, it is too philosophical to be accessible to a broad public' (2000: 63). But this is not just a question of an iconoclast shunning orthodoxy. Arendt believed that conventional historical narrative and social science could not adequately comprehend the industrial production of corpses. The Nazi 'extermination camps... must cause social scientists and historical scholars to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behavior' (1994f [1950], 232). In turning away from conventional method, Arendt was illuminating and diagnosing the historical-philosophical significance of a phenomenon - the Nazi extermination camps - that made orthodox approaches seem obsolete. These 'laboratories in the experiment of total domination' (1994f [1950], 240) overturned the then dominant social science views about the motives for human conduct and what it means to think about continuity in historical time.

The contention authorizing Hannah Arendt's sweeping conclusion was her claim that totalitarian domination was qualitatively different from all the tyrannies and dictatorships that had come before. In her words,

It is far from unprecedented to wage an aggressive war; massacres of enemy population or even of what one assumes to be hostile people look like an everyday

affair in the bloody record of history; extermination of natives in the process of colonization and the establishment of new settlements has happened in America, Australia, and Africa; slavery is one of the oldest institutions of mankind and forced-labor gangs, employed by the state for the performance of public works, were one of the mainstays of the Roman Empire. Even the claim to world rule, well known from the history of political dreams, is no monopoly of totalitarian governments. All these aspects of totalitarian rule, hideous and criminal as they are, have one thing in common which separates them from the phenomenon with which we are dealing: in distinction from the concentration camps, they have a definite purpose and they benefit the rulers... The motives are clear and the means to achieve the goal are utilitarian in the accepted sense of the term (1994/1950: 233-234).

It was the *anti-utilitarian* character of the Nazi extermination camps - the central institutions of totalitarianism - that fundamentally set them apart from the concentration and labour camps of imperial rule and 'explode this whole framework of reference' (Arendt, 1994f [1950], 234). Even from the Nazis' own perspective, the vast majority of camp inmates were completely innocent and unthreatening to the regime. The SS men in charge 'were completely normal', Arendt claimed; none of those overseeing a system of permanent torture were especially 'sadistic or cruel' (1994f [1950], 239). Above all, the German state's war effort was never allowed to interfere with efficient camp administration. The Nazi 'gas chambers did not benefit anybody' (1994f [1950], 236). Yet they trumped military exigency *even* in the context of total war and in the face of absolute defeat. For Arendt, these facts demonstrated the incommensurability between the concentration camps of imperial rule and the Nazi death chambers. The latter did not 'merely' exterminate and degrade particular humans for instrumental ends, though this did indeed occur; they sought to transform human beings as such into mere things (1966 [1951], 438). The differences between totalitarian domination and what had come before were so great as to destroy the standards and categories of existing social and historical

thought.

To Arendt, conventional historical narrative relied on historical analogies and causal sequence, thus portraying totalitarianism as the culmination of long-term developmental historical processes. Similarly, the social science of her day largely relied on simplistic ideal-types, utilitarian motives, and/or functionalism. The ‘modern historical and social sciences’, she thus claimed, were beset by a ‘kind of confusion - where everything distinct disappears and everything that is new and shocking is (not explained but) explained away either through drawing some analogies or reducing it to a previously known chain of causes and influences’ (1994e [1953], 407). For example, she criticized leading sociologists, such as Jules Monnerot, for reducing totalitarian ideology to a form of political or secular religion (Arendt, 1994h [1953]). Such forms of conventional historical and social science could adequately comprehend the absolute novelty of totalitarianism. They could not fathom the unprecedented nature of the camps, specifically the attempt to make humans superfluous as human beings, the absolute terror of never-ending experiments in total domination. Arendt located the problem in the hegemony of process-thinking and developmental histories, both of which she argued defined the modern concept of history itself. Before analyzing Arendt’s critique of these modes of thought ‘virtually unknown prior to the modern age’ (1958: 116) first consider the alternative historical method she adopted in *Origins*. Why spend sixty percent of the book addressing the historical phenomena of racism, anti-Semitism and imperialism if totalitarianism was not the product of or continuous with them? What purpose did that serve? If totalitarianism was not something that could be understood through the setting out a chain of causes in which totalitarianism was the logical outcome, then how should

its history be written?

Part of the difficulty of interpretation is that *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a title chosen by its American publisher, is not a study of ‘origins’ in this sense, of analyzing racism, anti-Semitism and imperialism as causal factors in totalitarianism.<sup>1</sup> Anti-Semitism, Arendt explained, could only be said to have ‘prepared the ground’; it was not the first or earliest manifestation of totalitarian solutions to the Jewish Question somehow already present, for example, at the Dreyfus Affair (1994f [1950], 235; 1966 [1951], ch.4). This is not possible, she wrote, ‘because this essence...[of totalitarianism] did not exist before it had come into being’ (1994e [1953], 405). Instead racism, anti-Semitism and imperialism were examined as the main ‘*elements*’ that ‘crystallized’ in a particular historical moment to become the phenomenon of totalitarianism itself. ‘I therefore talk only of “elements”’, Arendt belatedly explained, ‘which eventually crystallized into totalitarianism, some of which are traceable to the eighteenth-century, some perhaps even further back... Under no circumstances would I call any of them totalitarian’ (1994e [1953], 405-406). Only once racism, imperialism, and anti-Semitism crystallized was it possible, in *retrospect*, to see them as origins of something - totalitarianism - that ‘illuminates its own past’ (Arendt, 1994a [1954], 319). Thus, Arendt analysed these phenomena ‘in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary. That is, I did not write a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history’ (1994e [1953], 403). To illustrate, Book II of *Origins* - with chapters titled ‘The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie’, ‘Race Thinking Before Racism’, ‘Race and Bureaucracy’, ‘Continental Imperialism: the Pan-Movements’, and ‘The

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<sup>1</sup> The original title first published in Britain by Secker and Warburg in 1951 was *The Burden of Our Time*. The front cover announces the book as, ‘An historical study of the world-wide crisis of our time, with its evil concept - the deliberate dehumanization of humanity’.

Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man' - is clearly not a history of imperialism *per se*. Rather it examined the 'element of expansion insofar as [it was] clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself' (1994e [1953], 403).

In light of its phenomenally verifiable content, its historical essence, Hannah Arendt claimed totalitarianism was not an event that could be assimilated into the movement of historical processes, as suggested by conventional historical and social science (c.f. Aron, 1969 [1965]). Her retrospective narrative involved analyzing those aspects of the complex history of imperialism, racism, and anti-Semitism that combined to become something unprecedented, suggesting their altogether different historical significance from what could have appeared at the time of their emergence. She sought to show how totalitarianism could not be deduced from or caused by its main 'elements'; was in no sense the *logical* outcome of what came before; and was not the *inevitable* product of modernity, as if foreordained in the teleological progression of Western history (c.f. Adorno and Horkheimer (1979 [1944])). This is what Arendt meant when she called totalitarianism 'an almost complete break in the continuous flow of Western history' (1966 [1951], 124). Thus for historical, philosophical, and political reasons, Arendt was deeply reluctant to conceive the central event of the twentieth-century as an exemplary instance of some longer-term developmental processes or the manifestation of underlying social structures, which is the default position for process-thinking and developmental histories. As historian Richard H. King has pointed out, the use of the language of 'crystallization' to encapsulate the historical coming together of the elements of totalitarianism 'was shrewdly chosen, since the process of crystallization can hardly be



perceived as taking place *over* time, as opposed to happening, in the shortest historical duration, *within* a moment of time' (2007: 253). The language and underlying method that Hannah Arendt developed through the 1940s was her alternative to a chronological historical narrative or process- and development-oriented understandings of totalitarianism. In other words, Arendt's critique and the alternative she would develop in later writing was first and foremost grounded in her own historical and international experiences with and politically charged reflections on totalitarianism.

### **III. 'The key words of modern historiography'**

By the 1950s, and now a citizen of the United States, Hannah Arendt believed that the invention of the atomic bomb had joined totalitarianism as the two most 'fundamental experiences of our age' (2005: 109; King, 2015). Now moving from the scene of total war in Europe to Cold War America, Arendt's reflections on historical method were still shaped by distinctly international, and now increasingly global, affairs. 'The horror that swept over mankind when it learned about the first atomic bomb', she wrote, 'was the horror of an energy that came from the universe and is supernatural in the truest sense of the word' (2005: 158). Any new political reality of 'mankind' after the Holocaust was thus not the product of the 'dreams of the humanists', the dangerous fantasy of a world state that was more likely to bring forth a murderous tyranny than world peace (1968h: 81). It was occasioned by two facts that emerged from the recent experience of global war, the revolution in communications and the existence of the atom bomb (1968h: 87). These technological developments, but especially the nuclear revolution, were at the root

of any meaningful existence of ‘mankind’ and, for Arendt, were the influential backdrop for what she saw as an urgent attempt to theorize history and politics anew for a post-totalitarian but now nuclear age.

Based on her readings in the history of science, including works by Copernicus and Galileo, Arendt claimed that the rise of modern science and its commitment to uncovering the laws of scientific and natural processes had a profound effect on philosophies of history (1968d, 57; Yaqoob, 2014b). The crucial correspondence between natural science and the ‘modern concept of history’ that emerged with the early modern scientific revolution was their dual emphasis on *development* and *processes*. In Arendt’s words,

Historically, political theorists from the seventeenth century onward were confronted with a hitherto unheard-of process of growing wealth, growing property, growing acquisition. In the attempt to account for this steady growth, their attention was naturally drawn to the phenomenon of a progressing process itself... From its beginning, this process... was understood as a natural process... in the image of the life process itself (Arendt, 1958: 105; also Hyvönen, 2016)

Historical imaginaries dominated by processes not only appeared to be in accord with the laws of science, and the evolution of human life itself, but also compatible with new methods of administering life and prosecuting wars. Capitalist expansion seemed to mirror the natural processes of life in ‘ever-recurring cycles’ (Arendt, 1958: 134; Owens, 2015: Ch.3). With the testing of hydrogen bombs and the spread of thermonuclear weapons it was as though ‘automatic processes’ leading to a nuclear holocaust would ‘proceed unchecked’ (2005: 107). The ‘chain reaction of the atom bomb...’ Arendt wrote, ‘can easily become the symbol for a conspiracy between man and the elementary forces of nature, which... may one day take their revenge and destroy all life on the surface of the earth’ (1994 [1954]: 419). On the face of it, capitalism, imperialism, totalitarianism,

and nuclear competition all seemed to demonstrate the fundamentally *process*-character of human history. In the modern age, it appeared only a short step for humans to consider themselves ‘part and parcel of the two superhuman, all-encompassing processes of nature and history’ (1958: 307).

Arendt illustrated the flaws of process-oriented historical explanation with Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of history, in which the appearance of events and phenomena primarily served to illustrate a deeper, though hidden, structural cause, development process or law. In Arendt’s words,

Since Hegel watched Napoleon ride into Jena and saw in him not the emperor of France nor the conqueror of Prussia, not the son and not the destroyer or overcomer of the French Revolution, that is, nothing that Napoleon actually was at this moment, but rather ‘world spirit on horseback’ - since that time historians and historiography have believed that they are finished with the investigation and depiction of an event only when they have discovered that which is functionally exponential in it, namely that which itself is hidden imperceptibly behind the visible and the experiential (Arendt quoted in Hoffmann, 2010: 226).

With the arresting image of Napoleon as ‘world spirit on horseback’, time was conceived as a constant flow; historical events and specific individuals were largely meaningful to the extent that they reflected a deeper direction, ultimate end and reason in history. Though Marx more promisingly sought to ground world historical processes in the actions of the laboring classes he too subsumed the past into a grand teleological narrative of large-scale developmental processes of production. Arendt’s critique of historical materialism did not extend to Marxist analyses of capitalism or imperialism. Probably influenced by her husband Heinrich Blücher, a member of Rosa Luxembour’s Spartacus League, Arendt’s analysis of imperial motives centred on outlets for surplus capital and the bourgeois search for profits. Further, in 1949, she complained to her

mentor Karl Jaspers that in Cold War America ‘every little idiot thinks he has the right and duty to look down on Marx now’ (Arendt to Jaspers, 1992: 137). The problem was that as a grand philosophy of history, Marxism retained a teleological commitment to the direction of history, to historical laws of movement and nature. Real historical persons, phenomena, and events ‘become almost accidental by-products’ or functions of historical processes (Arendt, 1968d: 57).

Hannah Arendt did not deny the existence of structures or processes. Rather, she argued, that historical events were not the mere exterior manifestation of seemingly more fundamental forces. Particular events and specific persons possess an intelligibility and significance on their own; they do not lack meaning outside the ‘context’ of the overarching process, whether natural or man-made, of which modern philosophies of history imagine them to be a part. As already suggested in Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism, transforming a particular phenomenon into a mere example or indicator of deeper processes obscures the meaning and novelty of historical events. This may be legitimate for scientists examining the recurrence of natural processes. ‘Newness’, in contrast, ‘is the realm of the historian, who - unlike the natural scientist, who is concerned with ever-recurring happenings - deals with events which always occur only once’ (1994a [1954], 318). Not only did modern, process-oriented philosophies of history explain events away as the completion of natural processes or anonymous structures where ‘single events and deeds and sufferings have no more meaning here than hammer and nails have with respect to the finished table’ (Arendt, 1968d: 80). They attempted to overcome the essential frailty, unpredictability, and even futility of political action with the durability of something that is *made* (Arendt, 1958). This was to equate political

action with shaping the human condition toward a preconceived end as a carpenter shapes a piece of wood, that is, through violence. Arendt's response to the essential frailty of human affairs was not to assimilate politics into the naturalness of life or the instrumentality and violence of fabrication, both of which defined modern philosophies of history and were so appealing to imperial and totalitarian movements. Rather it was to retrieve a form of historical writing that coincided precisely with the frailty, but also new beginnings, inherent in political action.

#### **IV. History for a 'Being whose Essence is Beginning'**

Once again irreducibly international experiences influenced Arendt's alternative approach to historical-political work. Walter Benjamin's influential essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', written in early 1940, was among the manuscripts Benjamin entrusted to Arendt and her husband the last time they saw each other before seeking to escape to the United States, from France via Spain and Portugal. Soon after Benjamin took his own life on being told by Spanish authorities that he would be transported back to Vichy France as the border to Portugal from where he wished to sail to the United States was closed. Arendt's biographer recounts how Arendt, Blücher, and other refugees read aloud to each other some of Benjamin's writings, which would later be celebrated as among the most significant in the philosophy of history (Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004: 162). Fragments of at least three of Benjamin's 'Theses' would have immediately stood out to Arendt: 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history... The true picture of the past flits by', Benjamin says. 'The past can be seized only as an image

which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never again seen.... To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’ (1969 [1940]: 254-255). Hannah Arendt’s understanding of fragmentary history as well as her refusal to conceive the past in terms of necessity and progress is deeply indebted to Benjamin. She would later edit and introduce to English-readers a volume of his work, titled *Illuminations*, including the ‘Theses’. We can interpret much of Arendt’s later post-war writings as the distinctly *political* historical and theoretical rendering of Benjamin’s claims.

One of the reasons for the widespread appeal of developmental philosophies of history, Arendt insisted, is that the tradition of Western political thought since Plato failed to properly understand its central object. ‘Each time the modern age had reason to hope for a new political philosophy’, Arendt observed, ‘it received a philosophy of history instead’ (1958: 298, n62). Any genuinely new political theory required a new philosophy of history, a phenomenology-based analysis of the ‘anthropological conditions of historical experience’ (Hoffmann, 2010: 227). We have already seen the influence of a particular form of phenomenology on Arendt’s historical writing on totalitarianism. Rejecting all forms of metaphysics, the history of ideas, or abstract analysis of concepts, Arendt’s mode of phenomenological analysis was centered on the inherent meaningfulness of the *lived-experience* of events, prioritizing the factual, inter-subjective, and experiential character of political being-in-the-world.<sup>2</sup> The interpretive

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<sup>2</sup> On the influence of Heidegger on Arendt, but also the significant distance between them, see Villa who brilliantly reads ‘Arendt as appropriating Heidegger in a highly agonistic manner; as twisting, displacing, and reinterpreting his thought in ways designed to illuminate a range of exceedingly *un*-Heideggerian issues... Indeed, no small part of Arendt’s originality resides in her ability to see the political implications of a body of work in a way that goes against the grain of authorial intent’ (1996: 13).

task was one of understanding phenomena and events in their particularity, ‘separating the phenomenally verifiable content of an event from its genesis’ and making distinctions, which is not the same as offering up ‘definitions’ (1994g [1948], 166). Arendt most clearly explicated this phenomenology in *The Human Condition* (1958) in which she distinguished between three basic human activities, labour, work, and action. It is worth pausing to note how Arendt’s famous distinctions are fundamentally temporal (Ricoeur, 1990).

The endless and repetitive activity of attending to biological life needs through *labour*, Arendt argued, was essentially futile. Though necessary for the survival of the species, the cycle of life on earth produces nothing of permanence. However, the human activity of *work* builds an artificial human-made world on the earth and is thus able to ‘bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time’ (Arendt, 1958: 8). The built-environment - works of art, monuments, laws and institutions - form this more durable world. Finally, there is *action*, the ever-present human capacity to begin something new with plural others, creating a “‘web of human relationships’ in-between people (1958: 183). Though ‘spun of the most ephemeral stuff, of fleeting words and quickly forgotten deeds’ (2005: 161), action is able to disrupt the continuity of natural processes and undo human-made structures. Yet while action is defined by its frailty and evanescence, since it ‘goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter..., in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, [action] creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history’ (1958: 7, 8-9). What Arendt took to be the most political of all human activities, the capacity for action, is defined in terms of *interrupting* natural and historical

processes, while also creating the possibility of political memory where ‘the past lives on in a form of history that goes on speaking and being spoken about’ (2005: 161). The temporal dimensions of the activities of labour, work, and action underpin individual and collective experiences of time; they are the human conditions of historical experience.

Hence the first historical counterpart to Hannah Arendt’s political theory is the historian’s obligation to identify the new, to engage in a form of historical writing that illuminates precisely because it refuses to place everything that happens in some broader ‘trend’ of which the event is a mere example. Thus the rejection of the modern concept of history is closely related to Arendt’s account of political beginning and the human capacity for the new. In a manner not dissimilar to Reinhart Koselleck’s understanding of newness as defining of human history, Arendt turned philosophy’s obsession with death on its head to argue that humans ‘are not born in order to die but in order to begin’ (1958: 246; 1994a [1954], 321; Kang, 2013). A decade later she observed again that ‘historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative, by the *initium* man is insofar as he is acting being’ (1968e: 170). This is why Arendt so often wrote about ‘historical persons’ (1958: 184) and engaged in a kind of historical ‘teaching by example’ (1968i: 247). This is evident not only in the eleven biographical essays collected in *Men in Dark Times*, which include Rosa Luxembour, Walter Benjamin, and Karl Jaspers, but also exemplary figures such as Socrates, Robespierre, Rahel Varnhagen, T. E. Lawrence, Benjamin Disraeli, and of course Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi fugitive captured in Argentina by Israeli agents and put on trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Arendt attended the major international event of the trial and her reports for *The New Yorker* were republished as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).



Violating almost all conventions of Holocaust representation and tone, she recounted that Jewish Councils had cooperated with Nazis; criticized Israel for turning the event into a pedagogical occasion such that ‘history... stood at the center of the trial’ (1963: 19); presented Eichmann himself as a nobody, a laughable clown, not the extreme monster many had wanted him to be, that should still hang for his crimes; and intervened in debates on international criminal law, especially crimes against humanity.

More generally, Arendt’s historiographical method of using the lives of real people to illuminate particular historical moments was rooted in her political commitment to retain human dignity and capacity for action, judgement, and thought in the face of arguments for historical and/or natural necessities and laws, as Eichmann had pleaded when seeking to justify his utter failure to think for himself. For Arendt, histories were started by real persons precisely because humans are a being whose ‘essence is beginning’ (1994a: 321). As she wrote in *Men in Dark Times* of people other than Eichmann, the illumination of the past ‘may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth’ (1968g, ix). While Arendt was interested in the history of thought, and contributed enormously to it, she insisted that ideologies and intellectual developments were not central forces in history. ‘I proceed from facts and events instead of intellectual affinities and influence’ (1994e [1953], 405). We might also add that she proceeded from real persons. To account for these historical persons and their ideas is obviously not to suggest that individuals shape the direction of history as they wish; nor does she seek to rigidly separate the meaning of their actions and ideas from the present.

Events transcend the original intentions of historical actors; they could not have been expected and they could not have been made; ‘whenever something new occurs’, Arendt wrote, ‘it bursts into the context of predictable processes as something unexpected, unpredictable, and ultimately causally inexplicable’ (2005: 111-112). In relating the lives and actions of historical persons and stories of moments of political freedom - political revolutions, wartime resistance, anti-war activism, and civil disobedience - Arendt was breaking the hold of history as continuity, process and progress. She was also seeking to bring these persons and moments into the present to illuminate something about the contemporary world. Almost all of these stories and moments were essentially international or related to international affairs. Perhaps this makes sense of Arendt’s otherwise strange claim that ‘Only in foreign affairs, because the relationships between nations still harbor hostilities and sympathies which cannot be reduced to economic factors, seem to be left as a purely political domain’ (1968e: 155).

Not processes but (international) events themselves become the proper subject matter of historical writing, and these events are no less significant, no less meaningful, when they are removed from the need to situate them in engulfing processes of historical movement or ‘development’: ‘each event in human history’, Arendt claimed, ‘reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected *new* with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance’ (1994a [1954], 320). Thus, after the rupture in historical time represented by totalitarian domination, Arendt sought to reclaim moments of human freedom, but also the singularity and fragmentary character

of the remembered past. Hence, to conceive grounding for politics after totalitarianism and in the face of the threat of nuclear annihilation, Red Scares, the conformism in mass society, and the dangers to republican government posed by the Vietnam War, it is no surprise that Arendt turned to the question of revolution. In the early 1960s, she was drawn to write *On Revolution* because revolutions ‘are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning’ (1970b [1963]), 13). It is also unsurprising that the central purpose of the book, as she saw it, was not to provide the most accurate account of the origins and motives of the French and American Revolutions, far from it. Rather the book was a ‘political fable’, a celebration of the participatory council system and, through the 1960s, was often required reading among American Students for a Democratic Society and German Socialist Students League (Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004: 403-404). No matter that Arendt conceived the French and American cases as failed revolutions; her purpose was to theorize the capacity for new beginnings and political re-founding in her own time and in light of the historical and moral significance of totalitarianism and the challenges posed to revolution by both neo-colonialism and the nuclear age.

The need to preserve a relation to the past, to preserve the past itself, was fundamental to humanizing the post-totalitarian world, but this past was necessarily discontinuous. Hence, for Arendt, historical narrative becomes fragmentary history. ‘What you then are left with’, she wrote in her last book, *The Life of the Mind*, ‘is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation’ (1978 [LM, Vol.1], 212). In previous writing Arendt had illuminated this approach through the conceptual metaphor of the pearl diver who ‘descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the

bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the corals in the depths, and carry them to the surface' (1968f; 205). 'What guides this thinking', she observed, quoting Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 'is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depths of the sea... some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living' (1968f: 205-6). The meaning, as distinct from the cause, of an historical event becomes clear once it has been related as part of a story, and this storytelling also shapes history. This emphasis on narrative history does not contradict Arendt's critique of history as continuous and teleological. Rather to make the past comprehensible in his fashion can be to emphasize disjuncture and contingency. For Arendt, it was the poets and historians, not the social scientists, who were responsible for conveying actions deserving of remembrance, actions that become the subject of poetry and history such that they potentially become immortal, that is, inspire and live on in the public, political world. 'No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story' (1968b: 22). Hans J. Morgenthau went so far as to compare Arendt's historical writing to the storytelling of Thucydides (Young-Bruehl, 2006: 34). In fact, Arendt had identified a form of writing in Thucydides, and also Homer and Herodotus, in which the meaning of political events is revealed in the reflections of the political actors and the opinion of the judging spectators, the historians.

In posthumously published writings on the political consequences of possible

nuclear annihilation, Hannah Arendt turned to ‘the ur-example’ of annihilatory war, the legendary Trojan War recounted in Homer’s *The Illiad* (2005: 163). How might wars of annihilation be transformed into ‘political wars’, that is, come to an end through an ‘alliance and a treaty... according to which yesterday’s enemies became tomorrow’s allies’ (2005: 176-178)? To consider this urgent question, relevant not only to nuclear confrontation but Israel/Palestine, Arendt told a story in which wars ‘did not end in yet another annihilation of the vanquished, but an alliance and a treaty... inventing a new outcome for war’s conflagration’ (2005: 176). The ancient Romans, who traced their origins to defeat in the Trojan War, were able to build an empire among the formerly vanquished, establishing new relationships with former foes. To be sure, the turn away from wars of annihilation was not for the sake of ethics, but ‘for the sake of expanding Rome’ (2005: 185-187). Pointing to Rome’s peace treaties and alliances was no naïve liberal internationalism, nor any attempt to historically ‘contextualise’ the conditions for averting annihilatory war. Arendt was clear that, for the vanquished, defeat ‘was synonymous with plunder, murder, and theft’ (2005: 189). Rather Arendt’s reading of Homer for the nuclear age was allegorical and in line with her better known writing on the ancient Greek *polis*, that is, as a monumental form of historical consciousness.<sup>3</sup> This particular response to the dangers posed by nuclear annihilation was an exemplary exercise in pearl diving, of Benjamin’s call ‘to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’ (1969 [1940]: 255). Arendt was carrying to the surface a vision of a different kind of politics - and foreign policy - that was itself a ‘response to an experience of annihilation’ (Shell, 2010: 257).

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Richard King for suggesting this formulation.

## Conclusion

Hannah Arendt is an historical figure of significance in her own right (Krieger, 1976), the subject of films, documentaries, plays, art exhibitions, and an endless stream of articles and books, almost all commenting on her originality and distance from conventional approaches to historical and social science. This article has examined the neglected international origins and context of Arendt's work, specifically her approach to historical method, a method that crystallized through her political activism and experiences in the 1930s through to her response to the horrors of a different (nuclear) war of annihilation in the 1950s and '60s. If Hannah Arendt is *the* 'political theorist of the post-totalitarian moment', then we cannot fully appreciate her influence and significance without understanding the deeply generative impact of the international on her thought (Benhabib, 1999). Arendt insisted that the event of totalitarianism fundamentally transformed the conditions of historical and political thought and she directly confronted the consequences of its rupture in the continuity of historical time. Her response to totalitarianism, the danger of nuclear annihilation, and the precariousness of revolutions in a neo-colonial age was to innovate forms of historical writing that was compatible with, a counterpart to, human plurality and freedom, and the frailty of, but new beginning intrinsic to, political action. Indeed, the importance of international events and contexts on Arendt's thought corresponds to, and may be partially responsible for, the enormous value she placed on plurality as one of the conditions of human existence. This concept is not limited to Arendt's better-known and celebrated writing on the plurality of persons as the basic condition of politics; that 'we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that

nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (1958: 8). Arendt's relational and plural understanding of the individual subject is also found in her writing on the value of *international* plurality as the equal plurality of distinct peoples.

To inhabit the world, Hannah Arendt insisted, is also necessarily a form of cohabitation. The fact that there are multiple and plural territorially defined human-made (not naturally-defined) entities on the earth gives meaning to the *inter*-national, from the Latin 'between' and 'among', as that which 'relates and separates... at the same time'. Different polities exist in their unique distinctness, by definition, between and among plural others. They are not simply multiple, 'endlessly reproducible repetitions' of themselves (Arendt, 1958: 8, 52). The intrinsic value of a plurality of territorially defined entities clarifies Arendt's rejection of *supranational* solutions to the ever-present danger of totalitarianism, the possibility of atomic war, and the existence of stateless and rightless persons (1972: 230-231). There was - and should be - 'an undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together' within a worldwide federated structure (1966 [1951]: 443; 1968h: 93). Indeed, there were epistemological as well as political and ethical grounds for valuing international plurality and why wars of annihilation, *defined* by their destruction of plurality, were impermissible. Historical representation itself had to be answerable to the human condition of the plurality of peoples. The historical counterpart to Arendt's ontological basis for political action is that 'there is nothing in... the historical-political world that has assumed full reality... until... all its sides' have been 'revealed' (2005: 175). Plurality and reality are inextricably linked; the latter requires the former, is 'guaranteed for each by the presence of all' (1958: 244). Despite its particular and partial origins in Arendt's own lived experiences, such an historical epistemology is

eminently compatible with emerging postcolonial forms of writing international history and theory: skeptical of grand-sweeping generalizations about global processes and developments; wary of easy anachronisms; and more attentive to the lived experiences of a plurality of historical persons and peoples. International history is necessarily fragmentary history.

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