The burden of our time
Hannah Arendt and the critique of political modernity

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There is something profoundly disconcerting, and at the same time symptomatic, about how long it has taken, in the postwar period, for the historical meaning of genocide and its status within the political heritage of the West to have become an object of reflection. It has taken several decades to break the intellectual silence which surrounded the fact of the systematic and programmed extermination of the Jews and Gypsies and which, even in antifascist literature and critical analyses of the Second World War, tacitly gave it the status of a monstrous exception.¹ As Enzo Traverso reminds us, that Auschwitz has such importance in our representations of the history of that war is ‘a relatively recent phenomenon dating from the late 1960s’.² Only a handful of intellectuals, most of them survivors of the death camps or German refugees,³ had reflected on the ‘final solution’ or the conditions that made its conception and implementation possible, and until the 1960s their writings had little impact. It was as though the fault-line created by the enormity of the event had revealed the dark side of a tradition that thought could not look at directly without calling itself into question, or without questioning the certainties, presuppositions and hopes that had been its foundations for centuries.

The reception given to Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* is symptomatic of this reluctance, this inability to see: for several decades – a period which did, it is true, coincide with that of the Cold War – this pioneering work owed its success (but also the distrust and hostility it provoked) to an astonishingly reductive reading that took the analysis of totalitarianism to be an analysis of the Soviet or Stalinist experience alone, and thus repressed both the starting point and the hard kernel – the attempt to comprehend the crimes of the Nazis as an event that had spelled out ‘with unparalleled clarity the essential uncertainties of our time’.⁴

And yet, as early as 1951, Arendt had explicitly stated what was at stake in her work, notably in the preface to the 1951 English edition, which was entitled *The Burden of Our Time*. That title is, it seems to me, a much more accurate summary of the nature of her product. Because it represented such a radical break with the political and ethical traditions of the West, the genocide also revealed itself to be one of the possible outcomes of political modernity. Inconceivable as it may have been, and as difficult to understand as it may have been within the categories of thought and intellectual action, the break had to be thought through because it revealed something that opened up a terrible possibility for humanity: the possibility of the destruction of the human.

The genocide was not inevitable; it should never have taken place. But it did take place and nothing can change that event: ‘All efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.’⁵ Anticipating the reactions to this situation that were to dominate the immediate postwar period, Arendt saw the attempt to comprehend as the only way of consciously assuming the ‘burden which our century has placed on us’, and perhaps of realizing the slender hope that we can rid ourselves of it.

Now, Arendt’s approach means that comprehension and resistance are indissociably linked: ‘comprehension’ does not mean attenuating the monstrousness of the crime and nor does it mean submitting meekly to its weight. It is not a question of finding the germs of an inevitable development in a single cause, nor of drowning the irreducible singularity of the event by inserting it into a sequence of earlier historical experi-
In its tragic exceptionality, the historical past event opens on to a plural and inexhaustible posterity. It is not a matter of looking for the origin, but of looking for origins in the plural and, as Anne-Marie Roviello stresses, this reveals both the link between the event and its past, and the fact that the link can only be established a posteriori: ‘the event sheds light on its own past, and can be deduced only by its past.’

This approach, shared by other Jewish exiles who, like Adorno and Horkheimer, tried in this same period to think the catastrophe, implies the rejection of all the progressive and anti-progressive philosophies of history that threaten both comprehension of the past, and action in the present: ‘Progress and Doom are two sides of the same coin…. Both are articles of superstition, not of faith.’ Because they see what humanity has created as a product of historical necessity, ideologies of progress degenerate into a docile faith in the objective tendencies of history, whilst anti-progressive visions translate historical despair into a norm that has to be respected. If comprehension means ‘the attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be’, and if, as Adorno was already saying in the 1930s, ‘the interpretation of given reality and its abolition are closely connected to each other’, thought must abandon the idea, so imimical to politics, which holds that what men have failed to do has been ontologically denied them.

Because it is a matter of comprehending the meaning of what was, in fact, the radical negation of politics and the attempt to annihilate all the faculties of action and thought, Arendt’s appeal to thought is also a call to restore dignity to politics and to revive the sphere of politics as vita activa. Unlike the dominant doxa of the postwar years, Arendt does not see this task as a mere return to the liberal traditions of a modernity whose course has been interrupted by an archaic or premodern barbarity:

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 history will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition.

Trying to understand the elements that allowed the subterranean stream to ‘come to the surface’ inevitably means rethinking political modernity. It is this stance that explains her ‘stubborn refusal’ to reduce the genocide to ‘a German question’ and not, as some of Arendt’s critics have claimed, a desire to exonerate certain traditions (such as romanticism) within German culture. The ‘German specificity’ thesis was developed in the 1960s by a major philosophical and historiographical tendency. It stresses, of course, the archaic or anti-modern character of Nazi barbarism: conservative traditions, anti-liberal traditions in German culture, the long history of German anti-Semitism, resistance to modernization on the part of a German bourgeoisie which was unaware of where its true interests lay. The implicit or explicit assumptions behind these analyses, which posit the existence of a causal and automatic link between economic liberalism and political liberalism, or between capitalism and democracy, prevent us from understanding the undeniably modern elements that make Nazism different from earlier forms of barbarism: ‘Antisemitism (not merely the hatred of the Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship) – one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee.’ The abolition of limits, the hellish alliance between racist scientism and the efficiency of modern technology, and the image of hell that emerges from the industrial production of death, make for a specifically modern configuration. Whilst the long history of hatred of the Jews and of anti-Semitism might explain the choice of victim, it cannot, on the other hand, explain the nature of the crime.

Plurality and the pariah

It is this acute awareness of the radical novelty of the nature of the crime that gives Arendt’s analysis the dramatic tone that Gellner attributes to the influence of German romanticism. The terrifying meaning of the final solution was in fact grasped with an astonishing acuity by Arendt as early as 1946 in her interpretation of the notion of a ‘crime against humanity’ whose import cannot be reduced to relations between Jews and Germans. Politically speaking, the death factories were indeed crimes against humanity committed on the body of Jewish people. According to Arendt, the Jews are quite justified in accusing the Germans of having committed such a crime, provided that, when they do so, they speak in the name of all the peoples of the world. In its tragic exceptionality, the historical destiny of the Jews, and the Gypsies, is the paradigm for a specifically modern political experience: the attack on human diversity as such.
This crime concerns all peoples and all men because it was perpetrated against the human condition of *plurality*:

It was only when the Nazi regime declared that the Germany people wanted no Jews in Germany and that it wanted to wipe the entire Jewish people from the face of the earth, that this crime ‘against the status of being human’ came into being. But the ‘final solution’ has a further universal import: the complicity of a Europe and a world that remained passive.19

Before they started to use the gas chambers, the Nazis made a careful study of the question and concluded to their great satisfaction that no country was going to take responsibility for those people.20 As we now know, a great number of European countries with more ‘democratic’ traditions repressed this complicity with their complacent self-designation as victims of German Nazism. The ‘German specificity’ thesis denies us the means to think this undeniable fact and to resist its repression. What was shattered into pieces in Auschwitz was the very foundation of the universalist principles of political modernity: the common humanity, the common humanity of all men, and the very concept of *humanity*. That is why any attempt to re-establish human dignity presupposes that we reread that tradition against the grain.

A re-examination of the traditions and political dynamics of historical democracy from the point of view of its dissonances, discontinuities and contradictions results in an approach in which the singular becomes symptomatic; in which the exception, rather than proving the rule, sheds a new light on its antinomies. Within the framework of this innovative approach, the history of the Jews after the French Revolution can become a precious grid that allows us to read the modern political heritage, its potentialities and its dangers.

The exemplary character of the fate of the Jewish people within modernity culminates in Arendt’s elaboration of the figure of the *pariah*. Unlike Max Weber, who made the pariah the ideal type of the diasporic fate of the Jewish people in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Arendt stresses the modernity of the pariah, of that figure who initially emerges from a tension specific to the system of universalist legitimation21 introduced by the French Revolution: the tension between the universalist principle of *one general law for all*, which founded the nation-state and emancipation, and the real discrimination encountered by Jews in European nation-states. The Western genealogy of the term ‘pariah’ and the history of its introduction into European political vocabulary show that she is right: they coincide with the history of the political system of universalist legitimation, and illustrate its ironies and paradoxes.22

Not the least of these ironies is that the term itself, which comes from the hierarchical Indian caste system and which had been familiar from the sixteenth century onwards, becomes politically pertinent only at the moment when the principle of *one general law for all* had discredited the logic of caste and privilege. From the end of the eighteenth century, the metaphor of the pariah, which had been disseminated by the literature of the Enlightenment (Montesquieu, Diderot, Raynal, Sieyès, Grégoire), connoted a critique of absolutism and arbitrary power and, at the same time, astonishment, perplexity or even resignation at how difficult it was to include certain categories of individuals (servants, blacks, Jews and women) within the principle of citizenship that was beginning to emerge. When slavery was re-established by Napoleon, the pariah metaphor became part of the vocabulary of abolitionism.23 Madame de Stael, Flora Tristan and the women of 1848 made it a metaphor for the social, political and ethical subjugation of women and, at the same time, a figure of critical subjectivity, a positive collective identity. Stressing the political dimension of the pariah fate reserved for Jews, Bernard Lazare, writing at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, celebrates in his *Le Fumier de Job* (‘Job’s Dungheap’) the conscious *pariah* who, as he becomes aware of his condition, becomes a champion of an oppressed people.

The existence of a close link between the development of the notion of the pariah and the universalism of the Declaration of the Rights of Man is hinted at by the privileged place the notion occupies in the literary and political public sphere in France, as opposed to countries like England and Germany, where its use remained marginal. Its almost total absence, for example, in English political vocabulary, despite abundant information about the Untouchables of India, may be explained by the existence of a very different system of political legitimation, which, as Arendt demonstrates in her remarkable analysis of Burke’s polemic against the French Revolution, was closer to the notion of the ‘rights of freeborn Englishmen’ – rights *inherited from* ancestors – than to the universalist framework of the rights of man. The gap between political principles and political practices was more *visible*, and the antinomies of the new political system were more illuminating in France, perhaps because the Declaration of Human rights made universalism the explicit basis of political legitimation in that country.24
Because it was located within that gap, the pariah metaphor openly exploded the growing tension between the emancipatory promises of revolutionary universalism and the perverse effects of the historical process of emancipation which, as Bernard Lazare wrote at the end of the nineteenth century, had demolished the ‘material barriers’ around the ghetto only to replace them with the invisible wall ‘built between the Jew and those he lived amongst.’

Influenced by Lazare, Arendt elaborated a double-edged genealogy of the Jew as pariah. The history of the Jews since the French Revolution revealed a failure to base the human community on a truly human conception of humanity, or on respect for the human race’s constitutive diversity and plurality; but it also revealed the hidden tradition of those who refused to see emancipation as a licence to imitate non-Jews or to play the parvenu. Instead, they tried to make emancipation ‘what it should have been’, namely the admission of the Jew to the ranks of humanity as Jew. When it proclaimed that membership of the human race was a sufficient condition for an equal right to happiness, the 1789 Declaration of Universal Rights seemed to suggest, contrary to the postulates of classical political philosophy, that the realization of the human community was possible despite the differences between human beings, and that the singular man could be thought of ‘as a plural internal to the universal “men”’. Wrested from the beyond to which the teachings of the Church had consigned it, the abstract concept of man supplied a single criterion for a comparison of the various social positions which, in the name of humanity in general, could claim to have an equality of rights. It thus supplied the precondition for the assertion of differences, and powerful grounds for the particular’s emancipatory claim to be part of the universal.

Emancipation, however, although born of demands for a new body politic that could function only in conditions of political and legal equality, was not the result of a general law confirming the validity of universal rights for all Jewish populations. What we now call the emancipation of the Jews was, rather, a sequence of ‘decrees’, ‘rulings’ and particular ‘decisions’, most of which renewed the letters patent which, since the time of Henri II, had granted certain Jewish communities certain privileges and then gradually extended them to all Jews. Arendt demonstrates the political repercussions of the major paradox of establishing equality in the form of privileges, and its lasting effects on the development of modern anti-Semitism.

The double register

The manifestations of this paradox are not confined to the emancipation of the Jews. ‘Continuity with feudal freedoms’ was also the argument that was officially put forward in favour of granting free ‘people of colour’ citizens’ rights. The decree of 15 May 1791, which represented the first attempt at emancipation, simply explicitly renewed the provisions of the Code Noir, and ratified both the rights of mulattoes and the continuation of slavery. And although the one thing that our collective memory retains of the session is Robespierre’s celebrated ‘may the colonies perish, rather than a principle’, it was quickly forgotten that the ‘principle’ concerned particular freedoms, or in other words the privileges granted to the slaves who had been set free by Louis XV, rather than the Freedom and Equality introduced by the Revolution as universal rights.

The adoption of a double register of the extension of privileges and the universality of rights, particular freedoms and Freedom as such, meant different criteria for citizenship for different people. Whereas the exclusion (in 1791) of ‘passive’ citizens could be debated within the framework of the fundamental unity of all human beings, regarded as individuals, that framework was not enough to justify the general exclusion of ‘mulattoes’, Jews and women. For these latter it was membership of a group, as conferred by birth, that was now invoked to determine the possibility of and the preconditions for the granting of citizenship, regardless of individual talents or wealth. It was in order to stress this logic, which was not consistent with universalist principles, that Pierre Guyomar – one of the few revolutionaries to be in favour of the equality of the sexes – described himself to the Convention as a defender, not of the political rights of women, but of ‘the political equality of all individuals’. The double register introduced into the heart of the new political legitimation a basic contradiction that had a brilliant future before it: a universalist system that bases the rights of individuals on the unity of the human race coexisted alongside a tacit and informal system that based the rights (and duties) of certain groups, constructed as homogeneous categories, on a hierarchical evaluation of the ‘differences’ between them.

Once they had lost their theological foundations, which had been crumbling for a long time, hierarchy and domination had to be justified in the name of scientific truth. Scientific truth became the incontrovertible domain of political legitimation. If man was part of a universe governed by ‘natural laws’ that he had to imitate and to which he had to conform, the
sole criterion of justice was, as Diderot had asserted, an accurate understanding of the natural facts, and an accurate understanding of existing relations between men. Once those facts had been established, they could not be the object of any critique or moral evaluation. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, nature – defined in terms of infallible bodily manifestations such as breasts, muscles, genitalia, facial traits and skin colour, and subsequently anthropometric dimensions – became a powerful argument in favour of exclusion. The naturalization of inequalities resulted in an insidious combination of old and new modes of legitimation and domination. It made difference and equality antinomic, and established a contradictory and complementary relationship between rights and individuals; the individual could be seen both as an atom who was abstractly similar to and comparable with all other individuals (in the eyes of the general law to which the individual was subject) and as indivisible from the group, or even species, that had given birth to him. The individual was therefore not comparable with others (in terms of his right to elaborate the general law).

Promoted by the hegemony of nineteenth-century scientism and positivism, the determinism of a natural and historical patrimony reformulated the aristocratic notion of heritage in terms that were compatible with universalism. Nature, the study of which promised to reveal the station to which everyone was destined on this earth, replaced the distributive justice of the beyond, whilst the philosophy of history strove to reformulate the archaic vision of a theodicy by re-establishing a finality internal to the movement of history within which every ‘race’, species and people was called upon to play a specific role. It is true that these doctrines are not the automatic or inevitable product of science and that they emerge as political weapons which serve the purposes of domination; that racist theories in particular are often, but not always, the product of conservative or counter-revolutionary thinking; but their ideological hegemony left a lasting mark on the mental structures of political modernity. The fascination, which transcended political divisions, of the Aryan/Jew, male/female hierarchies of
being based upon both *the general law and privilege*, allows the particular to be disguised as the universal, and the interests of the few as the interests of all. This configuration establishes a new correlation between different forms of domination and different origins, making it possible to evaluate certain social groups (Jews, blacks, Gypsies and women) on the basis of their birth, and then to construct them as *separate* homogeneous categories.

Arendt does not make a systematic study of the affinities that the new political system established between groups. In her study of Rahel Varnhagen, for example, it is Varnhagen’s Jewishness rather than her situation as woman that puts her in the particular position of being midway ‘between pariah and parvenu’. And even though certain of her later writings (particular the portrait of Rosa Luxemburg) do establish a closer link between Jewishness and femininity, the pariah status of women is not conceptualized as a social and political condition of modern times. Whilst she does not herself apply the notion of a pariah status to ‘men of colour’, her analysis of their historical fate in the age of imperialism does, on the other hand, make a major contribution to our understanding of the political and social dynamic that makes the pariah a central figure of modernity. That dynamic finds its expression in the development of racism in Europe, but also in the disastrous and lasting repercussions of the ‘primal crime’ that excluded Indians and Blacks from the founding contract of the American *res publica.*

When the ‘founding fathers’ based universal rights both on a human agreement which had of course a relative validity, and on an absolute truth so self-evident as to do away with the need to reach any agreement, they no doubt wanted to give those rights an authority no less imperative than despotic power, and no less absolute than mathematical axioms. Grotius had already invoked this type of authority to criticize the divine right of monarchy by asserting that not even God could prevent two and two from making four. But if, as Arendt underlines, the irresistible power of the self-evident was sufficiently irrefutable to defeat the absolutism of divine right, it has proved notoriously powerless in the face of domination’s new foundations. What is worse still, it rapidly revealed its hidden affinities with scientific absolutism and the despotism of nature. The false logic that confused the nature of mathematical laws with that of the laws of the community, and claimed that the former could in some way inspire the latter, made it possible to reassert in much more powerful terms the classic argument that *natural rights* are restricted by *natural law*.

By ridding the promise of a self-instituting community, or a community based on self-definition and the interaction of a plurality of human wills, of its utopian implications, the strength of the ‘self-evident’ rendered superfluous the possibility that was also granted to all to display their singularity to others and to act with others in a shared world. It established a pre-political hierarchy that existed prior to human action and made it possible to create whole categories of individuals: ‘Privileges in some cases, injustices in most, blessings and doom are meted out to them, according to accident and without any relation whatsoever to what they do, did, or may do.’ Such individuals are evaluated on the basis of what is strictly within them, on the basis of what is inaccessible to the strictly human action whereby we both endlessly reinvent ourselves and invent a common world.

In a political community in which, as Zalkind Hourwitz ironically puts it, one must ‘have a white foreskin’ in order to be a citizen and a law-maker, the pariah does not need to *act* in order to reveal who he is. All his acts will be interpreted as ‘necessary’ consequences that are bound up with the ‘qualities’ or ‘functions’ of the group or species of which he is the general image. He or she, As Simmel remarks, ‘The most general of her qualities, the fact that she was a woman and as such served the function proper to her sex, caused her to be classed with all other women under one general concept.’ Denied all individuality, and without any acts that can individualize or particularize him, the pariah does not have to speak to express his subjectivity or his specific difference. When he acquires the right to participate in the invention of a common world, he loses his right to his own reality, which becomes invisible, unsayable and non-communicable.

‘Freedom to communicate thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman’, wrote Olympe de Gouges in 1791. ‘Any woman citizen can therefore say freely that I am the mother of a child who belongs to you without any barbarous prejudice having the strength to conceal the truth.’ The *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen,* like the attempts to promote the adoption of a ‘special clause’ confirming that the rights of man also applied to Jews, the paradoxical irruption of the particular into the generality and impersonality of the Declaration of 1789, anticipate the argument that because *man in general* does not exist anywhere, the universality of rights can be realized only through the meanings given them by the public speech [prise de parole] through which citizens reveal their humanity by revealing the
They are simply asserting themselves as active political subjects. By interrupting into the public space, and literally ‘seizing the word’ [prendant la parole], they have broken out of the homogeneity in which the collective imaginary wrapped them; they have revealed to the eyes of public opinion the diversity of the collective histories and fates that led them to seek refuge in a country that is supposed to be a land of asylum, but also the individual multiplicity of their status, needs and aspirations. Whereas we expected to see clandestine street-sweepers hugging the walls, we discovered men and women who worked as computer scientists or teachers of German rubbing shoulders with domestic servants and construction workers. We discovered men and women who had been living and working in France for a long time, but who had been put (and are being put) outside the law by unjust and xenophobic legislation. Where we once saw, or thought we saw, closed and irreducible ethnic communities, we are seeing the presence of a political collective constituted in and through the intentional and concerted actions of the multitude.

The tragic experience of this century necessarily casts a sinister light on the status that political modernity has reserved for its pariahs over the last two hundred years. Yet whilst it is important to resist the temptation to establish a posteriori a relationship of unavoidable continuity between the antinomies of emancipation and the unprecedented crimes of this century, it is just as important to think about the terrible failure of the rights of man. The history of modern pariahs provides the genealogy of that failure. The events of recent years bear witness to the fact that there is nothing reassuring about history’s constant production of the new and the unknown.

In proclaiming rights that belonged to anyone with a human face, the Declaration of the Rights of Man seemed to suggest that democracy or the regime of the multiple – which had until then been no more than a theoretical possibility for secular political community – could be achieved. It made it possible to discredit the absolutist postulate that saw the coercive unification of the multitude as the only way of living together. Now, whilst the political systems that were born of the French Revolution and, more generally, of the ‘natural rights’ revolutions did assert individual freedom, they did not guarantee its precondition – the institutional recognition of plurality. By reasserting the absolutist postulate of the homogeneity of the body politic, and by making the exercise of human rights dependent upon territoriality and nationality, the democratic state constructed human plurality and diversity as antinomic with freedom and equality, and restricted political vocabulary to a single voice. If, as Marx claimed, the ancien régime is the hidden defect of the modern state, nowhere is that defect more tragically obvious than in real democracy’s inability to tear itself away from the majestic model of the One, its repeated failure to defend human plurality.

In 1951, Hannah Arendt formulated the task bequeathed us by this century as the creation of ‘a new political principle … a new law on earth whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted and controlled by newly defined territorial entities’. It need scarcely be added that the task has yet to be completed – or that the difficulties involved are still the burden of our time.

**Translated by David Macey**

**Notes**

3. Most were German Jews who, like Hannah Arendt, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, G. Anders and Herbert Marcuse, emigrated, or German émigrés like Thomas Mann. Others stayed in Europe: Karl Jaspers remained in Germany, Vladimir Jankelevitch in France. Others, like Dwight MacDonald in the United States, were citizens of those countries that took in the immigrants. For a typology of intellectual reactions to the Shoah, see Traverso,
5. Ibid., p. ix.
9. Ibid.
14. For a pertinent historical critique of this hypothesis, see Geoff Eley, ‘À la Recherche de la révolution allemande’, Science(s) politique(s) 4, 1993.
24. This may explain the disconcerting fact that, when Arendt analyses ideologies and racist thinking in general, she privileges doctrines and practices developed in France at the expense of the German and English historical experiences in this domain, even though they are rich.
26. Ibid.
27. See Arendt, The Jew as a Pariah, p. 68.
29. Translator’s note: this was the legislation drafted by Colbert and adopted in 1685; it restricted the powers of colonists in the French West Indies by guaranteeing slaves minimal standards of working conditions and nutrition.
30. The legitimacy of making rights dependent on property qualifications was already justified by the Declaration of 1789, which recognized distinctions based upon individual capacities, talents or virtues. Despite his civil incapacity, the Poor Man could hope to enrich himself through labour and thus be in a position to make the contribution required for citizenship.
32. Denis Diderot, Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, ou sur l’inconvénient d’attacher des idées morales à certains actions physiques qui n’en comportent pas, Paris, 1772.
41. Olympe de Gouges, Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne, 1791.
42. See Adresse présentée à l’Assemblée Nationale, le 26 août par les Juifs résidants à Paris.
44. Translator’s note: legislation adopted in June 1993 created a new class of semi-clandestine immigrants who, although they had lived and worked in France, did not have the right papers to establish a right to be resident there.