



Hannah Arendt' Reflections on the Origins of the Modern Anti-Semitism and the Establishment of a Jewish State

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الورقة أولاً إلى تسليط الضوء على تحليل حنه أرندت لتصادم معاداة السامية في الفترة الحديثة. فهي تفترض في كتابها العمدة أصول التوتاليتارية (الصادر في عام 1951) أن تفسير بروز معاداة السامية الحديثة بصعود الدول القومية في أوروبا ما هي إلا فكرة مضللة ومجرد تفسير جاهز. على العكس من ذلك فهي تربط الظاهرة باختيار النظام الأوروبي للدول القومية. كما تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى اكتشاف موقف حنه أرندت من إقامة دولة يهودية في فلسطين، واقتراحاتها المتعلقة بتأسيس وطن يهودي، ثم علاقتها بالصهيونية.

الكلمات الدالة: معاداة السامية؛ الدولة القومية؛ الصهيونية؛ انصهار؛ النظام الفيدرالي.

Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the growth of the modern anti-Semitism. She assumes in her monumental masterpiece, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (published in 1951) that the identification of the modern anti-Semitism with the rise of the nation-states in Europe is a misleading thought and a mere ready-made explanation. For her, the modern anti-Semitism grew as the European system of nation-states crashed. On the other hand, Arendt, through almost all her writings, has seemed supporting the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine, for that, this paper aims as well to discover Arendt's position towards founding a Jewish homeland, her proposals concerning that issue and her relationship with Zionism.

Keywords: anti-Semitism, national state, Zionism, assimilation, federal system.

Résumé

Cet article vise premièrement à démontrer l'analyse d'Hannah Arendt de l'ascension de l'antisémitisme moderne. Dans son livre, intitulé *Les Origines du totalitarisme* (1951), elle présume que la liaison entre l'antisémitisme moderne est la montée de l'État-nation en Europe n'est qu'une idée trompeuse et une interprétation erronée. Au contraire, pour elle, le phénomène de l'antisémitisme dans l'Europe moderne est lié à l'effondrement du système européen d'État-nation. D'autre part, Arendt, à travers presque tous ses écrits, semble en faveur de la création d'un État juif en Palestine. Pour cela, cet article a également pour but de découvrir la position d'Arendt et ses propositions concernant l'établissement d'une patrie juive, ainsi que sa relation avec le sionisme.

Mots-clés: antisémitisme; état-nation; sionisme; assimilation; système fédéral.

Introduction

The origin of modern Antisemitism* according to the German-born Jewish political theorist, Hannah Arendt (1906-75), is exclusively political; the decline of the nation-state or nationalism was the major reason of the strong and violent eruption of Jew-hatred in Germany and other parts of Europe during the 1870s. This does not refer to the religious anti-Semitism which has existed all over history, but "rather, she wants to underscore what she takes to be a new and distinctively nineteenth century phenomenon" (Bernstein, 1996, p.48).

She clearly stated her statement by saying that the "modern anti-Semitism grew in proportion as traditional nationalism

*Arendt has used the word antisemitism instead of anti-Semitism, which is a misnomer because, as she points out in the second footnote to *Antisemitism*: "At the turn of the nineteenth century "Semitic" and "Indo-Germanic," as used by Schlegel and Eichhorn, were purely linguistic terms. They were first used as anthropological and ethnic terms by Christian Lassen in his *Indische Alttertumskunde* [Ancient India] (1847)" and only in the last third of the nineteenth century was the ideological 'catchword antisemitic' coined and applied 'to Jews in general'.



declined, and reached its climax at the exact moment when the European system of nation-states and its precarious balance of power crashed" (Arendt, 1951, p.3).

Unsurprisingly, this point of view has been challenged by many thinkers, and it still provokes a considerable and heated controversy over her Jewishness. To fully understand her view, we need to follow the thread' fascinating analysis she gave in her outset chapter devoted to anti-Semitism.

Undoubtedly, the extermination of the Jews and their persecution by the Nazi regime was something premeditated and well planned, but why the Jews? Even though the Aryan ideology discriminated all the Semite people –Arabs and others- and classified them as representing the lower stages of humanity' race, it targeted the Jews more than any other communities, so why the Jews? This is the crucial query that anguished and preoccupied Hannah Arendt.

1. The rejection of three fallacious explanations of anti-Semitism

For the aim of searching a plausible answer, she, first of all, refuted the different social, psychological, religious and economic reasons for anti-Semitism and qualified them as hurriedly and dangerously contrived. Besides, she identified three fallacies, knitted about Jews' resentment that should be discarded.

1.1- The first fallacy

It is the scapegoat theory, which regards the Jews as completely innocent victims, defenseless, and chosen arbitrarily so they could be blamed of being the hidden sources of all evil and sins. What seems logically irrational and untenable in this thesis is that the Jews, among other groups, were all involved in the making of the events, with different degrees and different circumstances. But, why did they constitute the well suited group to perform that role? Certainly, they were purposefully singled out to endorse the 'world's injustice and cruelty'.



For that reason, according to Arendt, this theory is inconsistent and it just gained credibility greater than it ever had before because of the intensity of the terror policy deployed by the Nazis. Moreover, the scapegoat theory is motivated by escapism. In fact, it discharges the victim of responsibility; and nothing is more forcefully conspicuous "than the utter innocence of the individual caught in the horror machine and his utter inability to change his fate" (p.7).

1.2- The second fallacy

It is the theory of 'eternal anti-Semitism', in which the Jew-hatred and murdering are considered as a normal conduct and a natural reaction. What makes this doctrine extremely dangerous, on the one hand, is the fact that it views anti-Semitism as a matter of fact that is beyond any need of explanation, then, all possible horrors might be justified. On the other hand, now and again, it leads "to the neglect or exactly to the avoidance of the discussion of the real problem, which is the Jews specific share of responsibility" (p.8) Furthermore, it is worthy to note that being a subject of an eternal and a continuous hate sounds irrational unless there is an inner recognition of being culpable and deserving an everlasting punishment.

Both fallacious narratives failed to tackle the Jewish question because they are based upon the idea of the victimization of the Jews, and overlooked the Jewish history with all its ups and downs. They both preclude any revision of political, social, economic, cultural conditions that, undeniably, could have contributed to the rise of Jews' persecution, because this kind of sketch would incriminate the Jews themselves.

1.3-The third fallacy

It is based "on the consoling idea that anti-Semitism, after all, might be an excellent means for keeping the people together"(p.9). At first glance it seems odd, but a deep view tells that the Jews, at least a large number of them, were not comfortable with the idea of being assimilated into the



European societies. Because, assimilation bears the threat of dissolution into other cultures, slow disappearance of Jewish values, loss of identity and Jewish self, for that reason, and very paradoxically and desperately as well, anti-Semitism was considered as a guarantee of Jewish people' survival and continuity. But with the rise of totalitarianism, "anti-Semitism, far from being a mysterious guarantee of the survival of the Jewish people, has been clearly revealed as a threat of its extermination"(p. 8).

2- Arendt's historical and critical approach to anti-Semitism

For Arendt, the growth of anti-Semitic movements is coincidentally related to the downfall of the European nation-state. It must be searched within "the more general framework of the development of the nation-state, and at the same time its source must be found in certain aspects of Jewish history and specifically Jewish functions during the last centuries"(p.9). For that purpose, her distinctive approach is based on a critical questioning and exploration of Jews' history to figure out the "spirit of the time". She has carefully examined the bond between Jews and the state for the sake of founding the elementary indications to the increasing enmity between certain groups of society and the Jews.

2.1- the political exclusion of the Jews

In the 19th century, the European countries were at the verge of a menacing crisis, caused by the accumulation of capital, the only way for them to maintain the speedy wheel of capitalist development spinning, was to find new markets, precisely at this moment, "Imperialism emerged as a life preserver for the European bourgeoisie and the whole capitalist system" (ÇagriInceoglu, 2012, p.3). In such a vulnerable climate of venture, the Jews were the only group ready to grant credits, raise large amounts of financial support in order to participate in the development of state business and more than that, to become allies of the European colonialist expansion policy in Africa and Asia.



As remuneration, the Jews acquired a prominent position and were even treated as a separate-privileged group. That apparently explains how they “received their citizenship from governments which in the process of centuries had made nationality a prerequisite for citizenship and homogeneity of population the outstanding characteristic of the body politic” (Arendt, 1951, p.9). Yet, does that specific treatment mean that the national states secured the equality of conditions for the Jews? Or was it a meager formal citizenship?

Even though the Jews were among the inhabitants of European countries and active members in their societies, as it was mentioned, they were not considered as full citizens and they were allowed no access to political action as they initiate none by themselves, although they could have benefited from their close ties with the European nobility.

Actually the emancipation' process of the Jews has unfolded a contradiction; the nation-state granted them privileges without granting them political equality, it did not consider them as full citizens, who can have rights and opportunities, on the contrary the national state did not treat their peoples at the same foot, Arendt has described that by saying that “the very fact of being born a Jew would either mean that one was over privileged under special protection of the government or underprivileged, lacking certain rights and opportunities which were withheld from the Jews in order to prevent their assimilation” (Arendt). It was exactly that political vacuum which incited the Jews to make a tremendous financial success as businessmen, money lenders, bankers. Apparently, all that worked against their political inclusion.

In fact, there was proportionality between the services rendered and the privileges granted, as Arendt has noted that, “this state' strategy coincided with Jewish interest in self-preservation and group survival; their special protection from the state (...) and their special services to the governments



prevented their submersion in the class system as well as their own establishment as a class" (Arendt).

2.2- wealth without power as the cause of Jews' resentment

By the end of the First World War, the system of nation-states, as a political corpus of citizens sharing a common interest, began to decline, and an imperialistic business mind started to flourish with the economic and political triumph of the bourgeoisie at the expense of other social strata. Within the split of the society into two social classes; the rich capitalists, who owned the means of production, and the workers, who were alienated from the fruits of their work and even from themselves as rational and innovative human beings, "the non-national, inter-European Jewish element became an object of universal hatred because of its useless wealth and of contempt because of its lack of power"(p.15).

According to Arendt, as long as the Jews possessed power emanated from the key positions they held in the governments, they gained respect. But, once they lost their power and prestige, they lost with them all respect. Fortune is intolerable without power, she wrote "neither oppression nor exploitation as such is ever the main cause for resentment; wealth without visible function is much more intolerable because nobody can understand why it should be tolerated" (Arendt) When they were holders of power, they aligned with the governments and exploited people who respected them out of fear, but later, after they had lost their functions in the government and left with their wealth alone, they became isolated and aloof from the society. Precisely, at that stage, the hidden anti-Semitic reactions found their way to the surface, because, as Arendt argues "What makes men obey or tolerate real power and, on the other hand, hate people who have wealth without power, is the rational instinct that power has a certain function and is of some general use." (Arendt).

Although their economic effectiveness was exhausted, the Jews succeeded in maintaining their important role as middlemen in



times of national conflicts and wars. Yet, on the other hand, they made a disastrous blameworthy mistake as they failed to build a political experience of their own, and had not 'political ambitions for their own' and ignored their economic role with all its entailed power-possibilities. For Arendt, there is "no doubts that the Jews should have sought political equality and bore social discrimination" (Betz, 1992, p.406).

She was contemptuous of both the rich Jews who sought just their social success, with a little care of their poor fellows, Ostjuden, the Pariah; who had escaped pogroms, and of another category of Jews gentile, the Parvenu; wealthy, 'charming', 'brilliant', 'intellectual', 'amusing' who positively integrated the high class, but "the price of this assimilation was to renounce one's Jewishness or to wear it openly as a badge of one's attractive freakishness"(Betz).

3.The birth of Zionism

The long period of Jewish political passivity and inaction came to an end, and what Arendt had long aspired and claims was at last accomplished by the birth of Zionism. In fact "the Jewish discovery of Zionism was a stroke of genius because it was a political response to the enduring traumas and homelessness"(Dossa, 1986, p.4). It came up with a new alternative to the issue of anti-Semitism, which consisted in the evacuation of Jews from Europe to the so-called Promised Land, in Palestine. For that, it is worthy to question about Arendt's relationship with the Zionist organization.

3.1 Arendt's critique of Zionism

The young Hannah Arendt was an effective activist member of Zionism in Europe. She herself worked, with Youth Aliyah, a Zionist group, which illegally transported the European Jewish children from Paris to Palestine. Additionally:

Following her arrival in New York in 1941, Arendt was intensely engaged in Zionist politics for nearly ten years. Throughout this period she was constantly critical of Zionist tactics and aims, yet she never



disclaimed Zionism... Until her death in 1975, Arendt remained a Zionist albeit a tormented Zionist (Dossa).

Undeniably, Arendt has accused Zionism of representing a 'sectarian ideology and shortsighted realism', but she was thoroughly committed to its primordial political aims. Moreover, she has vigorously aimed to reform it -before she became completely desperate of such a task by the end of 60s. For instance, in 'The Crisis of Zionism', she says that, though it spoke on the behalf of the Jewish people and for the Jewish people, it was relatively concerned with the masses; "it has never been a true popular movement" (Arendt, 1951, p.180), it acted merely relying on the great support of the rich and influential Jews, like the Rothschilds.

Thus, unlike almost all political movements, which were born from the womb of the people' turmoil, will and determination, Zionism, as a political body, emerged from the plutocrat Jewish strata. Furthermore, this fact indicates the lack of democracy within the Jews themselves. "The Zionists after all had things to do: colonize, bring people to their country, and raise money, and so forth; whereas the Jewish minorities were thought of as something inert and lacking all initiative, as if created by God merely so that they could be protected from pogroms"(Arendt, 1940, p.125).

Besides, she blamed the Zionists of their somehow naïve trust of the British, she wrote "they were all still very much alive when the British White Paper blocked immigration and the purchase of land, thereby silently abolishing the Balfour Declaration at the very time of greatest Jewish need"(Arendt, 1951, p.180). For her, granting Palestine land is not a guarantee at all. On the contrary, it was a compulsory evacuation from Europe and a failure in Jewish resistance to anti-Semitism. She said the:

Zionist politicians have the great advantage of having climbed down off the tightrope on which Jewish politicians have done their balancing act high above the ground. But the shock was probably too great;



for instead of landing on earth, where normal mortals are usually found, they are sunk up to their necks in the soil of Palestine, which unfortunately badly limits their field of vision (Arendt).

3.2- Arendt's proposal of a federate Arab-Jewish state

In her deep unspoken thoughts, Arendt seems not fully convinced about Palestine, she wanted the Jews, as 'European people', to stay in Europe instead of leaving to a remote and risky land surrounded by the Arabs, whose' "hostility toward a Jewish national homeland is the strongest link binding them" (p.192). Furthermore, the Balfour Declaration would be a better means to serve imperial-colonial interests.

Hence, to broaden their vision, the Jews, according to Arendt, have to reestablish their politics, and to unite "sooner or later on the basis of a few fundamental demands" (p.183):

Firstly, Instead of saying the Jews obtained the land of Palestine because of the remote past bestow, or they had bought it with their money," they will declare instead that the right of the Jewish people in Palestine is the same right every human being has to the fruits of his work; that the Arabs had 1,500 years to turn a stony desert into fertile land, whereas the Jews have not had even forty, and that the difference is quite remarkable" (Arendt). The land should be given to those who work hard and better, it is indeed, a distorted way to legitimate the occupation of lands and a return backwards to the lawless stage of humanity.

Secondly, "support all efforts for a federated Europe, because within such a union of nationalities the Jewish question is solvable and guarantees can be given to Palestine as an area for Jewish settlement" (p.184). A federation drawn upon the United States of America' model that is what Arendt dreamt of and admired. Or at least, a Commonwealth of European nations, maintained strategically by economic and political interests, and the Jews will constitute a nation belonging to this entity



and will be represented in a European parliament, as she stated clearly that a commonwealth of European nations is not a utopian idea, rather it is a possible hope, and "Within such a commonwealth we could be recognized as a nation and be represented in a European parliament" (Arendt, 1940, p.130).

Nevertheless, it does not mean that she was against the occupation of Palestine, the point is that she was skeptical about the choice, for her, Palestine is and will always be a source of increasing turmoil and tumult, it is certainly a "problematic territory". She said:

Perhaps as a member of a European commonwealth and as part of a European state, the Jewish people can also look for a region to settle or actually hold on to Palestine. Any area of settlement outside such a commonwealth and lacking its guarantees can be only a chimera or end in deportation to forced labor (p.133).

Thirdly, the recognition of Jewish nationality, under which all Europe' Jews will benefit from an identical political status. Besides, she wants anti-Semitism punishable under the law as a crime against society (Arendt, 1951, p.185). However, that does not mean that Arendt abandoned the idea of Palestine as Jews homeland; on the contrary, and as mentioned previously, she bluntly said that "Palestine can be saved as the national homeland of Jews only if (like other small countries and nationalities) it is integrated into a federation" (p.195). However, not an Arab federation affiliated with an Anglo-American union, as Judah L. Magnes (1877-1948) declaration proposal of a binational state to be included in an Arab federation, and for the Arab federation to be connected with a kind of Anglo-American alliance. For there is a hitch in his utopian proposal, as she qualified it:

It would leave the Jews in the position of a permanent minority within a larger Arab empire that would exist under the weaker or stronger protectorate of a third party, either under the aegis of the British Empire or the United States or under protection shared by both



powers. In which case, we definitely cannot exclude the possibility that after the war, Palestine might become the worst Diaspora problem of all, instead of being a place for Jewish national emancipation to develop (p.194).

She has rather showed a strong preference for 'local councils', within this political organization the two communities; the Arabs and the Jews, will elect their respective representatives in order to create a federated Arab-Jewish state.

3.3 Arendt's claim of a Jewish army

In her article, 'Can the Jewish-Arab Question Be Solved?' she tackled another issue related to the creation of a proper Jewish army. For that, she plainly blames the Zionist leadership for its giving up on a claim for a Jewish army, which "would offer a certain guarantee for a Jewish future in Palestine" (Arendt, 1943, p.193), and enforce the Jewish position instead of being regarded as 'unequantité négligeable'.

Furthermore, through her article entitled "The Jewish Army-The Beginning of Jewish Politics?", published in 1941, she definitely endorsed the idea of a Jewish army, and we can notice her firm conviction of the plausibility of this claim, in her saying that "a Jewish army is not utopian if the Jews of all countries demand it and are prepared to volunteer for it" (Arendt, 1941, p.137) for the resistance against anti-Semitism necessitates the contribution in the war with the aim of defeating the Nazis. She even went further to qualify the inability to raise a Jewish army as a big failure in the Zionist politics. Most evidently, the idea of founding a Jewish army, fighting under the Jewish flag, for the Jews' own freedom', had not received major support because such a claim was inconsistent with the general political tendency of the Jewish leaders, who sought the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state as a priority. Beyond that, it seems odd in terms of political philosophy, as Walter laqueur has commented:



Arendt despised Ben Gurion who had not studied political philosophy but instinctively understood that the beginning of 'Jewish politics' was not an army but a state. In any case, how could an army exist free-floating in mid-air without the support of a state? Such lack of a sense of reality was not a sudden aberration;

it was typical for her political judgment (Laqueur, 1998,p. 489).

In 'Zionism Reconsidered' (1944), she significantly strengthened her critique of Zionism. She rebutted the resolution adopted by the Zionist movement at the annual conference held in Atlantic City in October 1944, which claimed with unequivocal bluntness a "free and democratic Jewish commonwealth ... [which] shall embrace the whole of Palestine, undivided and undiminished" (Arendt, 1944, p.343).

It was a turning point in the Zionist politics to claim the whole of Palestine, and to expel the Arabs to the neighbouring countries. Such a resolution was a considerable blow to Arendt; she asserted that embracing such an extremist polity will cut the way to all compromises between the Jews and the Arabs, and will inevitably engender disastrous and insoluble conflicts in the region. The truth of the matter is that the Jews with the help of the great powers, European and American, turned the balance of power to their interest; they chased away the Palestinians from their properties, stole their lands and made of them a minority.

Conclusion

Thus, this paper can be concluded by the following remarks:

- a. Undoubtedly, Arendt' approach to the question of anti-Semitism was severely criticized by the fanatic Jewish politicians and thinkers, for two reasons. First, she concomitantly and repeatedly accentuated the Jewish co-responsibility for the emergence of anti-Semitism. Second, she was accused of imprudently relying on anti-Semitic resources. Besides, her position towards an establishment of



- a Jewish state may furnish other reasons as well to the rebuke she was subjected to.
- b. Arendt belonged to the context of totalitarian regimes, Nazism and fascism, and we cannot uproot her thoughts from that specific frame. Her belief in Zionism can be understood in that way as well. She has thought that it was the solution to the anti-Semitic policy in Europe. As she stated in her article 'The Crisis of Zionism', Zionism is undergoing a serious crisis and needs to be reformed, for that Herzl's idea "according to which anti-Semitism is an unavoidable evil that can be healed by the evacuation of the Jews" (Arendt, 1951, p.181), necessities a revision and the Jewish right to Palestine requires reformulation. In fact, in many occasions, she has mentioned the Balfour Declaration, but she has never questioned the accuracy of the presumably Jewish right to Palestine, at the contrary she has taken it for granted.
- c. As an engaged philosopher, what is mostly distinctive about Arendt is that she pointed the finger towards Jews themselves, blaming their passivity and lack of spirit of venture and risk, which explains their failure to take part in political action or to constitute their proper body politics. As it is mentioned above, she has constantly emphasized on the importance of political action as a means people should have to shape their own history and to accomplish their own freedom, for freedom is not a gift given to people, but rather an aim for which struggle and strife are highly needed.
- d. She, as well, pointed out the Zionist' policy of terror and she qualified it as "a disastrous mistake". This does not mean that she was concerned with the Arabs of Palestine, "the issue was not that the Zionists were immoral or unjust to the Palestinian Arabs, but that the Zionist tactics were undermining, indeed destroying, the achievements and the security of the Jewish community" (Dossa, 9).



- e. She has not endorsed the partition proposal as means of solving the Arab-Jewish conflict, because "The partition of so small a country could at best mean the petrification of the conflict, which would result in arrested development for both peoples; at worst it would signify a temporary stage during which both parties would prepare for further war" (Arendt, 1944, p.340). Instead of that, she has thought that the both sides should cooperate and find a better compromise under the alternative of a federated state, composed of Jewish-Arab community councils.

In fact Arendt has believed in the establishment of Jewish homeland, and she has mostly endeavored for that aim, as a woman she was in search for a home that could put an end to the Diaspora, if not within Europe -as she does not like the idea of giving up the European character of the Jews- it will be in Palestine, provided that an federative agreement between the two sides could be attained. Such reasoning was viewed by her critics and the cunning and sly politicians as a sign of unrealism and narrow-mindedness.

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