

Jewishness and the Problem of Nationalism:
A Genealogy of Arendt's Early Political Thought

I

Hannah Arendt is generally understood to have rejected direct involvement in politics, and refused to categorise her thinking in partisan terms. Yet this was not always the case. Arendt's early work from the 1930s and 1940s was predominantly concerned with contemporary Jewish politics, and her response to the events of this period form the most directly political engagement of Arendt's career. This article tracks the development of Arendt's thought over this timeframe, and how key aspects of her political thought developed through her understanding of the "Jewish nation." The evolution of this concept emerged through Arendt's increasingly critical position on mainstream Zionism, and her alternative: a binational Palestine, drawing on the unconventional Zionism of Bernard Lazare. This model, Arendt believed, if implemented correctly, could serve as a template for political organisation globally.

Arendt became interested in Jewish politics in the late 1920s. Despite writing extensively on this in the 1930s and 1940s, these writings attract less attention than her other work. Karuna Mantena writes, "*Origins* has come to hold a relatively subordinate place in the context of analyses and assessments of Arendt's political philosophy as a whole."¹ What is true of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt's first major work, published in 1951, is considerably more so of the work preceding it. Furthermore, consensus is lacking on where the Jewish writings should be located in her overall political theory. After *Origins* Jewish themes no longer form Arendt's central intellectual focus. This can be partly attributed to the changing political environment: the creation of Israel and her criticisms of that process. But while some claim a clear division exists between the substantive theory of the early and later

¹ Karuna Mantena, "Genealogies of Catastrophe," in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, 2010), 83-112, at 84.

work, as well as the subject matter, others argue there is consistency. Richard King represents a strong example of the former, arguing before the “sharp divide” Arendt saw politics as instrumental, unlike her later understanding of political action as an intrinsic good.² Gabriel Piterberg echoes this, claiming Arendt’s early writings, “form a virtually self-contained episode in her career.”³ Judith Butler believes Arendt’s politics fundamentally shifts between the early and later period, in terms of her understanding of “nation.”⁴ Sheldon Wolin argues the Jewish writings, unlike Arendt’s later work, lacked conceptual clarity, particularly in defining the category of Jewishness. She separated “‘Jewishness’ qua brute ontological datum and ‘Judaism’ qua religion,” he writes. “What it is that remains of ‘Jewishness’ when one has jettisoned ‘Judaism’ was a matter she never addressed.”⁵

However, others have emphasised the influence of Arendt’s Jewish writings on her later publications, often focusing on the connection between *Origins* and subsequent work. Margaret Canovan writes, “not only is *The Human Condition* itself much more closely related to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* than it appears to be, but virtually the entire agenda of Arendt’s political thought was set by her reflections on the political catastrophes of the twentieth century.”⁶ Bernard Crick goes further, describing Arendt’s later work as a “giant

² Richard H. King, “Endings and Beginnings: Politics in Arendt’s Early Thought,” *Political Theory*, 12/2 (1984), 235.

³ Gabriel Piterberg, “Zion’s Rebel Daughter,” *New Left Review*, 28 (November-December 2007), accessed December 6, 2013. <http://newleftreview.org/II/48/gabriel-piterberg-zion-s-rebel-daughter>

⁴ Judith Butler, “I Merely Belong to Them,” *London Review of Books*, 29/9 (May 10, 2007), accessed December 6, 2013. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n09/judith-butler/i-merely-belong-to-them>

⁵ Richard Wolin, “The Hannah Arendt Situation,” *New England Review*, 22/2 (2001), 102-3.

⁶ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, (Cambridge, 1992), 7.

footnote” to *Origins*.⁷ Seyla Benhabib has written extensively on the need to contextualise Arendt within her German-Jewish background, and claims *Origins* is the crowning political achievement of Arendt’s career.⁸ Similarly, Jerome Kohn argues parts of her work “cannot be fully grasped without recognising its poignancy as originating in Arendt’s experience as a Jew living in the twentieth century.”⁹ And Richard Bernstein notes that “a split between Arendt’s Jewish concerns and the rest of her work is untenable...her confrontation with the Jewish question...shaped many of the fundamental issues that preoccupied her throughout her life.”¹⁰ Yet he raises Wolin’s problem with Arendt’s category of “nation”, which, he argues, was never properly defined. “It seems as if Arendt simply takes the existence of the Jewish people as a historical fact...but this is to avoid the question of Jewish identity, not to answer it.”¹¹

This paper takes the position that there is a close intellectual connection between Arendt’s Jewish writings and her later theory, supporting those who have persuasively argued the relationship between *Origins* and later texts should be taken seriously, as should the formative experiences of Arendt’s earlier life. However, to fully understand this connection, it is necessary to also track Arendt’s thought prior to *Origins*, specifically her Zionism, more systematically than has been done before, to understand precisely the intellectual roots of her thought. Certainly, the European catastrophe was enormously important in shaping *Origins*,

⁷ Bernard Crick, “Arendt and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: An Anglocentric View,” in Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, (Berkeley, 2001), 93-104.

⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, (Oxford, 2003).

⁹ Jerome Kohn, “Preface,” in Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman, eds., *The Jewish Writings* (New York, 2007), ix-xxxi, at x.

¹⁰ Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, (Cambridge, 1996), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

as Benhabib and Canovan stress. But Arendt's response was conditioned by other influences, most importantly, I will argue, Arendt's complex relationship with Zionism. It is possible, via this engagement, to go beyond the mere influence of Jewish identity, and identify the development of a substantive part of Arendt's later thought. Specifically, the supposedly problematic notion of "Jewishness" takes on new clarity when understood in the context of Arendt's Zionism. A notion of "the people," differentiated from a "nation" emerges as an important conceptual development, in which a particular idea of politics inheres, influencing key components of Arendt's later political thought. This is conceptually close to what Canovan has previously written about, but I claim that by tracing its origins in Arendt's earliest writings and her engagement with Zionism (rather than *Origins*, as Canovan does) it is possible to see this idea both as a solution to the problem of distinguishing "Jewishness" within her Jewish writings, as well as understand the roots of this idea, and thus establish a connection between Arendt's earliest and latest work.¹²

Arendt's writings on Jewish politics ended abruptly after 1951, largely due to her disillusionment with the new state of Israel. But in the period immediately prior Arendt had been at her most politically active. Her lengthy correspondence in 1948 with Jewish leader Judah Magnes on the Israeli state, reveals the shape of Arendt's political theory in practice: federalism. Arendt is "one of the great outsiders of twentieth-century political thought," it has been claimed, remaining "aloof to all group sympathies or affiliations."¹³ But Arendt's support of a binational Israeli-Palestinian state adds another important dimension to her work, with Arendt expressing strong (although shifting) partisanship in terms of Zionist politics

¹² Canovan, "The People, the Masses, and the Mobilization of Power," *Social Research*, 69/2 (2002).

¹³ Canovan, *Reinterpretation*, 1; Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish experience* (Baltimore, 1990), ix.

over the 1930s and 1940s. The binational Palestinian state is a rare example of Arendt working towards a particular political actuality.

Thus her early work involved not just critique but a form of activism. The federal model she outlined flows from her positive conception of a people, contrasted against nationalistic notions. The model encompassed institutional structures ranging from the local to the national and regional levels. By 1948, this formed a political framework that Arendt did not see as exclusively Jewish, but applicable to all peoples. The idea of a people and its position within a federal structure thus offers an understanding of the political in Arendt's early work that not only illustrates her thought during this period, but is perhaps the most concrete political conceptualisation Arendt ever drew. This paper will trace her engagement with Zionism, to clarify both the source of her idea of "the Jewish people," and the connections that can be drawn between this and her later work, using the example of her 1963 text, *On Revolution*.

II

Before the rise of National Socialism, Arendt had taken little interest in politics, instead focusing on philosophy. Raised in a liberal, assimilated Jewish family, her Jewishness had been of relatively little consequence to her personal or intellectual life. She studied first at Marburg with Heidegger, already renowned as an extraordinary intellect even before his first publication.¹⁴ She then worked on her doctorate at Heidelberg with existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, with whom she developed a lifelong friendship. Eventually, rising antisemitism played a decisive influence, leading to Arendt fleeing Germany for France in

¹⁴ His first academic publication was his 1927 masterpiece, *Sein und Zeit*.

1933, following her brief imprisonment by the Nazis.¹⁵ Amidst this changing environment, two particular events influenced Arendt's thought on Jewish politics: her discovery of Bernard Lazare's writings; and her friendship with the head of the German Zionist Organization, Kurt Blumenfeld. Lazare's socialist, collectivist Zionism contrasted with the dominant Zionism of Arendt's Germany (represented by Blumenfeld), heavily influenced by Zionist "founding father" Theodor Herzl, who emphasised the reconstruction of the Jewish homeland in Palestine. Lazare expressed more revolutionary ideals, espousing, through his Zionism, a break with the notion of sovereignty Herzl saw as foundational. Lazare, Arendt later wrote, was the last representative of Zionism who "trusted the Jewish people for the necessary political strength of will to achieve freedom, instead of being transported to freedom."¹⁶ This portrait of Lazare, whilst idealised, nevertheless illustrates her preference for Lazare's form of Zionism, interpreted as a philosophy rejecting traditional rule-based politics, and in which leadership was replaced by the constituent power of the people. Yet she supported Blumenfeld, despite the German Zionist Organization's very different understanding of Zionism. Arendt's interest in Zionism, while profoundly important to her, was thus never simple, and she maintained a critical distance.

However, Arendt believed Zionism had powerful and compelling aspects, and this sympathy emerged in her biography of the Jewess Rahel Varnhagen, the Jewish eighteenth century Berlin salonnière. Varnhagen's letters document her lifelong struggle with her Jewishness: outwardly, in the social sphere, and inwardly, through her personal identity. While Arendt never sought to assimilate as Varnhagen did, she clearly identified with her and the turbulent socio-political status of Jews in Varnhagen's world. Largely written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, *Rahel Varnhagen* is a response to the contemporary political crisis: a

¹⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (London, 2004), 105-106.

¹⁶ Arendt, "Zionism Reconsidered," in *Jewish Writings*, 343-74, at 363-4.

meditation on what it means to be Jewish in modernity, and a condemnation of Jewish assimilation.

Jewishness cannot be an objective characteristic, Arendt argues, defining it as “not an objectification of Jewish existence...but the historical conditions of a life which can, I think, mean something.”¹⁷ The idea one ought to understand a people through their historical conditions, rather than inwardly shared characteristics, is central to Arendt’s method of understanding Jewish political identity. “The history of any given personality is far older than the individual as a product of nature,” Arendt claims, “begins long before the individual’s life, and can foster or destroy the elements of nature in his heritage.”¹⁸ For Arendt, individuals are born into a story predating them, are bound to a common past, but in a way that the individual may freely continue that story through their actions.

Yet Varnhagen’s Enlightenment world inverted the relationship between history and individual, Arendt believed. Universal reason, not historical contingency, was understood as the essence of the individual, *and* of community. So Enlightenment ideas accelerated social atomisation, already initiated by secularisation, and thus the breakdown of Jewish identity.¹⁹ Superficially, it seemed Jews would benefit from Enlightenment tolerance, Arendt wrote. This was not the case. Enlightenment thought preached equality for individuals, not peoples. Only assimilated Jews could be equals; equality entailed the rejection of Jewish identity. In Arendt’s terms, this places Jews in an impossible position. “The possibilities of being different from what one is are infinite. Once one has negated oneself, however, there are no longer any particular choices. There is only one aim: always, at any given moment, to be

¹⁷ Arendt, “Letter to Karl Jaspers, 24 March 1930,” in Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969* (London, 1992), 11.

¹⁸ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York, 1974), 4.

¹⁹ Arendt, “The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question,” in *Jewish Writings*, 3-18, at 14-15.

different from what one is...to become anything else, so long as it is not oneself.”²⁰ And, she points out, assimilated Jews could not escape prejudice. Even having cast off their Jewishness, they were seen to belong to an alien people. Unopposed, antisemitic narratives became increasingly accepted even *amongst* assimilated Jews. “The individual who has been liberated by reason is always running head-on into a world...where past in the shape of ‘prejudices’ has a great deal of power; he is forced to learn that past reality is also a reality,” Arendt wrote.²¹ The combination of antisemitism, the rejection of cultural-historical difference by assimilated Jews in favour of universal rationality, and the principle of self-negation, was toxic. Assimilated Jews were doubly undermined, by rootlessness within, and prejudice without. Because Varnhagen rejected her past by assimilating, Arendt wrote, she “was completely at the mercy of the destructive elements.”²²

III

Over the 1930s, the ideas in *Rahel* became increasingly politicised as Arendt highlighted the centrality of the political sphere for resolving the Jews’ problems. Failed assimilation and the impending disaster of extreme nationalism led Arendt to seek an alternative concept of the political. In Paris, surrounded by other Jewish refugees at work (Arendt worked for Jewish refugee agency Youth Aliyah) and at home, Jewish issues dominated Arendt’s thought. Two unpublished essays from the late 1930s applied some of the ideas from *Rahel* to the contemporary crisis. In the context of widespread nationalist prejudice against minorities, assimilationism was a blindness of the Jews towards extreme danger, Arendt believed. “The

²⁰ Arendt, *Rahel*, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 113.

refusal to analyze or deal with or indeed to confront antisemitism was tantamount to a political refusal to offer any defense whatever,” she wrote. “But there is no question that in politics knowing your enemy is at least as important as knowing yourself.”²³ Yet, she argues, the Jews failed to grasp that any political solution *must* consider the position of the Jewish nation within the wider world. Assimilation had come up against its own negation in National Socialism: the idea of Jewishness as natural substance. Attacked as Jews, Arendt argued, Jews must battle their enemies as Jews. Jewish politics must look inward *and* outward, reaffirming national identity whilst understanding their position in the world. The breakdown of assimilation offered the potential – and necessity – for Jews to affirm their political identity. Yet this potential, Arendt wrote, while “granted by the grace of the Nazis, first had to be confirmed and constituted by ourselves.”²⁴

In *Antisemitism*, her first substantial essay on Zionism, Arendt assesses the potential of Zionism in this task. As the only extant political answer to Jewish persecution she supports Zionism, but is critical of it as a movement. Zionism is “the legitimate heir to assimilation,”²⁵ but its focus on Palestine, not the diaspora, means fails to deal with the imminent threat to Jewish existence. While correctly rejecting assimilation, Zionism erred in adopting certain nationalist assumptions, inspired, Arendt believed, by Herzl, for whom, “the ultimate goal of Jewish politics is the normalisation of the conditions for the Jewish substance.”²⁶ This was fundamentally dangerous. “For Zionism – as for nationalist historiography – status as a ‘nation of foreigners’ is just as undifferentiated as 100 percent correspondence is for the assimilationists...Zionism...soars to heights of counter-assertions that are just as purely

²³ Arendt, “The Jewish Question,” in *Jewish Writings*, 42-5, at 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43-4.

²⁵ Arendt, “Antisemitism,” in *Jewish Writings*, 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

dogmatic.”²⁷ In claiming “Jewish substance,” and, implicitly, the natural superiority of the Jewish nation, Zionist ideology rejects the only possible basis of Jewishness, that found in a shared past. Instead, the principle of foreignness becomes the organising factor: “a blindness for any differentiation between friend and foe.”²⁸ Zionism, like other nationalist-tinged ideologies, replaces history with the negative principle of enmity. Herzl’s “victorious trend” of Zionism, as Arendt called it, thus had serious deficiencies.²⁹

Throughout the 1930s, Arendt developed two interconnected critiques of assimilation and nationalistic Zionism. In doing so, she developed her concept of a people. Against assimilationists, she argued a people must share an identity based upon understanding their shared history. In short, as Canovan argues Arendt suggests in *Origins*, the difference between a people and a non-people, is that the former must share a self-created, public “world.”³⁰ Yet they must also claim equality; demand to be treated with equal dignity to other peoples *and* do likewise. Both aspects stand against nationalist ideas of the “natural” nation and international hierarchisation. Arendt depicts a people as a weak constellation premised upon inner recognition of unity, and mutual recognition by other peoples. It rests upon historical contingency and so appears fragile and uncontrollable. However, one thing offered Arendt hope. Extreme antisemitism, and the impossibility of assimilation, meant “the history of the Jewish people is again becoming unified.”³¹ The idea of a Jewish people, rejected by Enlightenment ideology, was thrust back into politics. Arendt saw an opportunity for world Jewry to re-emerge as a people.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁹ Arendt, “Peace or Armistice in the Near East,” in *Jewish Writings*, 423-50, at 442.

³⁰ Canovan, “The People,” 414.

³¹ Arendt, “Antisemitism,” 61.

IV

In 1941, Arendt fled occupied France for America. There, she took up the question of the future of the Jewish people with zeal. Arendt was soon invited to write for German-Jewish newspaper *Aufbau*, an influential émigré publication which proved an ideal forum for Arendt. Although a German language paper, *Aufbau* aimed to help émigrés to “Americanise”: integrate into the society of the United States. In 1941, against the background of American unease with the sudden influx of German immigrants – albeit persecuted Germans – the paper’s key message was to encourage its readers to visibly support the war effort.³² Readers were encouraged to donate money, goods and time, whilst *Aufbau* itself made a particular point of its patriotism through its articles. In the early 1940s, *Aufbau*’s editorial policy on Zionism and Palestine was unsettled, mirroring Arendt’s ambiguous attitude. This would change markedly by 1945, as political momentum moved in favour of Zionism in America and Europe, and Arendt became increasingly critical of the movement.

Arendt wrote for *Aufbau* from 1941 to 1945, often writing on the idea that marks out this period of her work: her support for the creation of a Jewish army to fight in the war. The proposal was spearheaded in America by Irgun, the Revisionist Zionist party ideologically influenced by militant nationalist Ze’ev Jabotinsky, and in Britain by the moderate Chaim Weizmann, President of the World Zionist Organization. But Arendt was in unlikely company. She considered Irgun to be little more than a terrorist organisation, and Weizmann’s programme, whilst less repellent to Arendt, was considered to be contrary to the dignity of what should be a self-determining people, relying heavily on the British for

³² “Aufbau,” *Transatlantic Perspectives*, accessed May 5, 2014.

<http://www.transatlanticperspectives.org/entry.php?rec=90>

support. Ultimately, little would come out of these calls for a Jewish army – only in 1945 was a Jewish Brigade, formed of Palestinian Jews, established within the British Army, a “token success” making little impact.³³

Arendt’s support of the Jewish Army embodies a movement in her work towards a more practical engagement with politics. However her conceptual division between the nationalised “nation” and a “people” remained at the heart of her argument for the Jewish army, which was concerned with how to reconstitute Jewish identity against antisemitism. Over this period, Arendt repeatedly refers to the need to revitalise the “Jewish nation,” but this in no way implied the acceptance of nationalism.³⁴ The fact was, she argued, “you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as.”³⁵ Arendt’s argument does not rely upon intrinsic national substance but is concerned with the essential interdependency of peoples. The Jewish army is primarily a method of developing a robust Jewish self-understanding of their existence as a people – Arendt’s alternative to both nation-building through nationalist narratives, and assimilationist apathy; her attempt to find a different path for Jewish politics.

We can do battle against antisemitism only if we battle Hitler with weapons in our hands. But this battle must in turn be waged on the basis of certain theoretical insights whose consequences we wish to make a reality. The first of these insights is that we enter this war as a European people, who have contributed as much to the glory and

³³ “Britain Creating a Jewish Brigade,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1944, 12.

³⁴ Arendt, “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening,” in *Jewish Writings*, 134-85, at 137.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

misery of Europe ...we must do battle with all those in our own ranks who claim that we are and always have been nothing but the victims and targets of history.³⁶

Furthermore, the breakdown of Western politics, Arendt argues, created conditions where the renewal of Jewish nationality might be realised through a newly shared political position. In the political void, the “no longer and not yet,” was the opportunity not only for Jews to reconstitute themselves upon firm ground, but for all peoples.³⁷ “The chances are now very great for a new orientation of Jewish national politics,” she wrote. “We can expect more from this solidarity [with other European peoples] than from any protections granted us in the past.”³⁸ Jews were the first victims of modernity, but not its last, as expanding nationalisms meant, Arendt wrote, that where once the Jewish people alone were seen to be outsiders, or “pariahs,” now “all European nations have become pariah peoples, all are forced to take up the battle anew for freedom and equality. For the first time our fate has turned out to be no special fate.”³⁹ That the Jewish people are no longer alone in their persecution, represents a radical change in the political sphere, and new possibilities for mutual recognition and shared action. By claiming that Jews have been brought together with other peoples through similar struggles, Arendt’s political theory, which previously applied solely to the Jewish people, becomes applicable to all peoples. Thus Arendt’s Jewish political thought transforms into political thought as such, forming the basis from which aspects of her later political thought developed.

³⁶ Ibid., 143.

³⁷ Arendt, “No Longer and Not Yet,” in Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding* (New York, 1994), 158-62, at 158.

³⁸ Arendt, “A Way Towards the Reconciliation of Peoples,” in *Jewish Writings*, 258-63, at 261.

³⁹ Arendt, “The Jewish War,” 141.

However, the broadening out of Arendt's political theory does not mean her interest in Jewish politics was diminished. Arendt was at her most actively Zionist in this period, amidst the turmoil of war, and in response to what she sees as the urgent need for the Jewish community to unite against oppression. "We have only one truly political organization," she argues, "the Zionist organization."⁴⁰ Yet even now, she is critical of its direction, whilst recognising it as the only practical basis for a Jewish movement. Her notion of the Jewish army is itself a critique of Zionism. "Zionist propaganda must finally put itself on solid footing instead of standing on ground our enemies prepare for us,"⁴¹ she claims. This solid footing is not in Palestine, but in "the determination of its people to be free."⁴² Zionism is hindered by its failure to include the whole Jewish people. "Until a real popular movement arises out of our various committees and political bodies, we do not stand a chance."⁴³ Zionism undermines itself, Arendt believes, by making nationalist assumptions, adopted in extreme form by Irgun. Their argument for the Jewish army was based on fascist, nationalist principles, Arendt argues, and she declares herself opposed to their growing influence on Zionist doctrine. However, she believes their views are not without ideological precedent in Zionism.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Zionism possessed remarkable diversity, incorporating religious, political (often secular), and cultural strands; expressed divergent opinions on Palestine; and covered various positions from left to right. As a secular Jew, Arendt remained distant from the religious elements of Zionism. She also rejected those elements she deemed "nationalistic," predominantly those now falling under the classification

⁴⁰ Arendt, "The Jewish War," 143-144.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 181.

of political Zionism – for Arendt, an ironic label, for it was precisely these who sought to avoid politics, she thought, rather than engaging with the political reality of one’s enemies.⁴⁴ The growing dominance of this group, including Leon Pinsker and Herzl among others, eventually resulted in the diminishment of Zionism’s ideological breadth. But it is Herzl who is singled out by Arendt as the key influence.

Herzl, a Hungarian-born Jewish journalist, was the first populariser of Zionism on a large scale, as a feasible political aim. This was achieved through his writing – notably his 1896 *Der Judenstaat* – and political activism, founding and heading the first Zionist group with serious political ambitions: the World Zionist Organisation. Through this, Herzl built Zionism from a small and fragmented movement into a global political force united behind clear aims. Central to Herzl’s philosophy was the principle that Jews were a nation like any other, and therefore needed a homeland to escape European antisemitism. While Herzl concluded that should be Palestine, his political ideology was secular, not religious. He believed Palestine should be restored to the Jews because of the historical link, that is, the sense of connection Jewish people felt towards the region. Herzl combined the principles of the nation-state with a secularised Jewish history, to produce, in essence, Zionism as it became widely understood.

Lazare was a French contemporary of Herzl, also a journalist, who became interested in Zionism, and the problem of antisemitism, through his involvement with the Dreyfus Affair (he was asked to defend Dreyfus). Lazare initially befriended Herzl, but the two soon fell out over the substantial differences in their respective Zionist projects. While Herzl sought a Jewish nation and territory modelled upon Western nations, Lazare, Arendt wrote, sought “not an escape from antisemitism but a mobilization of the people against its foes.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Arendt, “Antisemitism,” 57.

⁴⁵ Arendt, “Herzl and Lazare,” in *Jewish Writings*, 338-42, at 339.

Lazare thus fits within a tradition generally known as cultural Zionism, including thinkers such as Martin Buber and Ahad Ha'am. Indeed, Arendt praised both Ha'am and Buber, calling Buber "German Judaism's incontestable guide...[who] has always known how to infuse Zionism with a distinctive spirit."⁴⁶ Ha'am, she wrote, had done the same for Eastern Jews.⁴⁷ But while Ha'am and Buber focused on Jewish spirit, Lazare took a more political approach. The importance of Lazare to Arendt is evident in her appraisal of his thought, as well as the extent of her work on him (she mentions him frequently, and in 1948 edited his previously unpublished manuscript, *Job's Dungheap*.) Accordingly, Arendt drew extensively on his work.

Herzl and Lazare shared a secular approach to Zionism, and the belief that the Jewish community and self-consciousness needed restoration. But Lazare rejected Herzl's promotion of national Jewish politics, instead arguing that the demoralisation of the Jewish people was the primary obstacle to overcome.⁴⁸ For Arendt too, there were numerous problems with Herzl. She criticised the importance Herzl placed upon the possession of sovereign territory, and rejected his belief that Jews could escape from antisemitism in this way. Such an escape, Arendt believed, had never been possible, let alone in a globalised world. Yet, she wrote, this was what modern Zionism, because of Herzl, preached. And Arendt rejects the foundation of Herzl's philosophy: the nation state. The notion, she believed, not only fostered exclusion and violence, but was outdated, a remnant of the past that could not – and should not – persist.

Yet while Arendt praised Lazare by contrast, she did not wholly adopt his philosophy. Lazare, although not an orthodox Marxist, adhered to socialist notions of the progress of mankind through revolution, and therefore believed antisemitism would "ultimately

⁴⁶ Arendt, "Martin Buber: A Guide for Youth," in *Jewish Writings*, 31-33, at 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁸ Arendt, "Zionism Reconsidered," 340.

perish...because antisemitism is one of the last, though most long lived, manifestations of that old spirit of reaction and narrow conservatism, which is vainly attempting to arrest the onward movement of the Revolution.”⁴⁹ Arendt, living in different times, could not agree. However, there are remarkable similarities in their analyses of antisemitism and the position of Jews in modernity, particularly in Lazare’s 1894 *Antisemitism: Its History and Causes*, which Arendt had read. Lazare writes, “the day when the Jew was first admitted to civil rights, the Christian state was in danger...the antisemites who say that the Jews have destroyed the idea of State could more justly say that the entrance of the Jew into society marked the destruction of the State, meaning by State, the Christian State.”⁵⁰ Arendt’s claim, in *Origins*, that enhanced Jewish civil rights resulted in social persecution, echoes this. Likewise, Lazare’s history of a divided people, the wealthy financiers and the impoverished masses, is central to Arendt’s narrative of Jewish history in *Origins* and more broadly. While for Lazare, this maps onto a capitalist/proletariat structure absent in Arendt’s work, the substance is nonetheless the same.

It is in the notion of a Jewish people where the closest parallels exist between Arendt and Lazare’s thought. Arendt’s rejection of nationalistic determinism is evident in Lazare, who writes:

There are no races, but there are peoples and nations. What is improperly called a race is not an ethnologic unit, but is an historic, intellectual and moral unit. The Jews are not an ethnos, but they are a nationality, they are diversified types, it is true, but what

⁴⁹ Bernard Lazare, *Antisemitism: Its History and Causes* (1894), accessed 20 March 2015.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lazare-bernard/1894/antisemitism/ch15.htm>

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lazare-bernard/1894/antisemitism/ch13.htm>

nation is not diversified? What makes a people is not unity of origin, but unity of sentiments, ideas, ethics.⁵¹

Like Arendt, Lazare rejects assimilation, writing: “What shocks me on the part of anti-Semites is not hearing them say: “You are a Nation,” nor hearing them affirm that we are a state within the state. I find that there are not enough states within the state, or, to be more precise, in modern states there are not enough autonomous and free groupings with ties among themselves.”⁵² Lazare insisted the Jewish nation did not rely upon religion, race or language. What mattered, rather, was the shared consciousness of Jewish tradition and community.

To be a Jew, or indeed a member of any people, was to be balanced between unity and difference. Hence for Lazare, like Arendt, the primary need for Jews was not territory, it was the restoration of a sense of public selfhood. Thus, Arendt writes, “Herzl’s solution of the Jewish problem was, in the final analysis, escape or deliverance in a homeland... To Lazare, on the other hand, the territorial question was secondary – a mere outcome of the primary demand that ‘the Jews should be emancipated as a people and in the form of a nation.’”⁵³ The Jewish army was seen by Arendt as a catalyst for the Jewish people to rediscover itself, thereby forming a new political entity based upon a shared public identity – but only if it fought not only its enemies, but the whole ideology of antisemitism and its progenitor, nationalism. To the degree that Zionism embodied nationalism, Arendt rejected it. What she valued was the alternative, anti-nationalist Zionism Lazare offered.

⁵¹ Ibid., <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lazare-bernard/1894/antisemitism/ch10.htm>

⁵² Lazare, *Jewish Nationalism* (1898), accessed March 20, 2015.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lazare-bernard/1898/jewish-nationalism.htm>

⁵³ Arendt, “Herzl and Lazare,” 339.

V

If nationalism was to be overcome, however, it must be replaced by an alternative system. A Jewish army might generate solidarity, but was not an enduring solution. That, she believed, in accordance with the mutual recognition central to her political understanding, could only emerge through federation. “Palestine can be saved as the national homeland of Jews,” she argues, “only if (like other small countries and nationalities), it is integrated into a federation.” Federation offers “the greatest chance of solving national conflicts and can thus be the basis for a political life that offers peoples the possibility of reorganizing themselves politically.”⁵⁴ One might speculate American federalism influenced Arendt’s thinking, given her later fascination with American politics.⁵⁵ But there are again parallels with Lazare’s thought, specifically his internationalism. “I find that in order to establish internationalism,” he writes, “it is necessary in the first place for human groups to conquer their autonomy. They must be able to freely express themselves; they must be conscious of who they are.”⁵⁶ But as well as conquering their autonomy, they also need to consider their position within the community of nations. Lazare complains of the historical “exclusiveness” of the Jewish people, their self-imposed segregation. He rejects the “egoism of nations” in favour of an internationalism, “abolishing the current economic-political constitution of nations... Suppressing frontiers does not mean making an amalgamation of all the inhabitants of the globe. Is not one of the familiar concepts of internationalist socialism, and even of

⁵⁴ Arendt, “Between Silence and Speechlessness,” in *Jewish Writings*, 186-98, at 195.

⁵⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 1965).

⁵⁶ Lazare, *Jewish Nationalism*.

revolutionary anarchism, the federative concept, the concept of a fragmented humanity composed of a multitude of cellular organisms?”⁵⁷

From Arendt’s global perspective on Jewish politics the creation of a new Jewish state hardly seemed an adequate solution. For Arendt, the diaspora mattered, and Zionism made the crucial error of ignoring it. The Jewish problem demanded more than a national solution – federalism was that solution. However, federalism for Arendt, like the problems it was intended to resolve, was by now about more than Jewish politics. The need to think about politics in terms of the cooperation and quasi-integration of different peoples, rather than in terms of sovereign exclusivity, clearly emerged from her engagement with Jewish politics, but for Arendt, increasing globalisation and a corresponding breakdown of sovereignty as an efficient political principle, meant federalisation was now seen as the future for all Western peoples. Arendt’s interest in politics had been provoked by the Jewish situation, but by the mid-1940s, Arendt was thinking about politics in broader terms. The Jewish crisis was still central, but now it was seen as the archetypal crisis of politics as a Western phenomenon.

VI

The clearest formation of Arendt’s federalism appears in her 1948 correspondence with Judah Leon Magnes, Jewish-American rabbi and political leader, and champion of Jewish-Arab federation. Yet in 1943, Arendt criticised Magnes’ binationalism. The problem, she argued, is Magnes thinks national conflicts may be resolved through the guarantee of minority rights, yet minority rights are an offshoot of nationalism, attributing unequal political status to peoples.⁵⁸ As such, Magnes’ concept, “kills the idea that federation is – in contrast to a nation

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 194.

– made up of different peoples with equal rights.”⁵⁹ While she considered Zionism to be flawed, Arendt believed that it alone possessed a concept of the Jews as a distinctly *political* people. In fact, Arendt argues: “The Magnes proposal if realized would make out of Palestine one of our worst Galuth countries.”⁶⁰ Yet shortly after, Arendt wholly reversed her judgment, becoming one of Magnes’ most devoted allies.

Gil Rubin’s recent article discusses this remarkable change of opinion.⁶¹ Rubin positions Arendt within the context of broader debates occurring globally on federalism, including the possibility of European, as well as Arab, federation. He argues in the early 1940s Arendt positioned herself against Magnes because she supported a specific notion of multi-ethnic federal structures, as opposed to those maintaining the damaging “minority-majority” distinction.⁶² He claims that her later adoption of Magnes’ binationalism represents a shift in her political thinking, brought about by the changing political context. Clearly, the political context is important. Yet Arendt’s position on Magnes’ federalism also, crucially, results from her shifting opinion of the Zionist movement, rather than a substantive change in her underlying beliefs.

By 1944, the basis of Arendt’s theoretical framework for understanding modern European politics had been formed, arising from her dual critique of assimilation and nationalism. Total insularity and total immersion into another culture were the two reasons for the failure of Jewish politics, and the former, as nationalism, was the great problem of

⁵⁹ Arendt, “The Crisis of Zionism,” in *Jewish Writings*, 329-37, at 336.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 336; the Galuth refers to the ancient persecution of the Jews.

⁶¹ Gil Rubin, “From Federalism to Binationalism: Hannah Arendt’s Shifting Zionism,” *Contemporary European History* (forthcoming).

⁶² *Ibid.*

European politics. Arendt's politics required both shared internal recognition, and an external, international dimension of recognition.

During 1944 Arendt's opinion of Zionism deteriorated dramatically. *Aufbau*, along with the American establishment in general, became increasingly supportive of the creation of a Jewish state, in the wake of the Holocaust, and the urgent question of what to do with Europe's displaced people. But Arendt, in provocative contrast to the tide of opinion, now deplored Zionism as "nothing other than the uncritical acceptance of German-inspired nationalism," from a time "when nobody could imagine any other solution of minority or nationality problems than the autonomous national state with a homogenous population."⁶³

What had brought about this decisive shift? The conceptual underpinnings were laid over twenty years, in Arendt's criticism of Zionist nationalism and support of federalisation. But in 1944, a substantial movement in Zionist policy forced Arendt to choose between her political allegiances or her political theory. That year, at the American Zionist Organization's Atlantic City meeting, the Revisionists Arendt so despised dominated conference proceedings. This was not unexpected, previous conferences had seen their nationalist agenda for Israel move into the mainstream, notably at the 1942 Biltmore Conference, which had prompted Magnes' split with the Zionist Organization. But 1944 saw Irgun's position gain massive support in response to an increasing awareness of the situation of European Jews. Their uncompromising demands for the creation of an Israel encompassing the full extent of its ancient territories were thus adopted by the influential American Zionist Organization.

Zionism, Arendt now asserts, "started half a century ago with ideals so lofty that it overlooked the particular realities of the Near East and the general wickedness of the world."⁶⁴ As a result, it "has ended – as do most such movements – with the unequivocal

⁶³ Arendt, "Crisis of Zionism," 336-337, 335-6

⁶⁴ Arendt, "Zionism Reconsidered," 351.

support not only of nationalist but of chauvinist claims – not against the foes of the Jewish people but against its possible friends and present neighbours.”⁶⁵ The Atlantic City Resolution saw Zionism shift away from the social-revolutionary, popular ideals Arendt admired, towards the nationalist, militarist tendencies she had consistently abhorred. With this, the seriousness of the conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews crystallized in Arendt’s thought as the Arab position in relation to the proposed Zionist state took on a worryingly familiar aspect. Arendt believed that Arab Palestinians were, like the Jews, a people – and shortly would be a stateless people, if the Zionist programme succeeded. Arendt could not accept this, ethically or pragmatically. Most likely, she believed, Arabs would fight back, placing Israel in a precarious position within an already hostile region. “A Jewish national home that is not recognized and respected by its neighbouring people is no home but an illusion – until it becomes a battlefield.”⁶⁶ So she turned from mainstream Zionism, whose errors she now saw as insurmountable, towards the binational politics of Magnes and his party, Ihud: “Unity.”

VII

Magnes, although born in America in 1877, was educated in part in Germany, where he discovered Zionism. Upon his return to America Magnes pursued his political aims, helping found the American Jewish Committee in 1906, and fundraising for Jews in Palestine. In 1922, Magnes became one of the few American Jews to move to Mandate Palestine, and became involved with the Brit Shalom pacifist movement, proclaiming his support for a

⁶⁵ Ibid., 351.

⁶⁶ Arendt, “The Political Organization of the Jewish People,” in *Jewish Writings*, 199-240, at 235.

binational solution in Palestine, with Jewish-Arab equality.⁶⁷ In 1942, following his split with the Zionist Organization, he founded Ihud, a party promoting the principles of binationalism in Palestine – a deeply unpopular idea amongst both peoples of the region – and rejecting both a partitioned *or* wholly Jewish state.

In 1948, in the wake of the UN decision that Israel should become an independent state, Arendt and Magnes began to correspond frequently on the question of Israel. This exchange represents Arendt's most complete political programme to this date, in which her political theory is given particular form as a solution to the problems of the Arab-Jewish conflict. Through their correspondence Arendt advises Magnes, offering suggestions on Ihud policy, helps to promote Ihud through her writing, and makes connections with her own circle. Largely, Ihud's policy corresponds to Arendt's own politics, both sharing a belief in a binational Palestinian solution. Underlying this is a rejection of nationalism as a political principle, and, in particular, a rejection of the Zionist movement towards Israeli nationalism, such as the right wing ideology of Menachem Begin, incorporating "ultranationalism, religious mysticism and racial superiority."⁶⁸ Instead, Arab Palestinians must be recognised as an equal people, and this recognition institutionalised within the Jewish-Palestinian constitutional structure. This was essential, Arendt believed, if Israel had any realistic chance of survival. "The idea of Arab-Jewish cooperation, though never realized on any scale and today seemingly further off than ever, is not an idealistic daydream, but a sober statement of the fact that without it the whole Jewish venture in Palestine is doomed."⁶⁹ The precise form was described in Ihud's 1948 proposal to the UN, recommending equal representation of

⁶⁷ Arendt did not engage with Brit Shalom in the 1920s, and only mentions it in the 1940s, when she sees it as a predecessor to Ihud.

⁶⁸ Arendt, "New Palestine Party," in *Jewish Writings*, 417-422, at 418.

⁶⁹ Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland," in *Jewish Writings*, 388-401, at 396.

Arabs and Jews in shared Palestinian political institutions.⁷⁰ This ought *not* to be a majoritarian democracy but, instead, represent the political equality of peoples. Majoritarian democracy, Ihud claims, has never functioned in a state with multiple peoples.

Palestinian binationalism springs from Arendt's critique of assimilationist and nationalist politics, and her commitment to the formal political equality of peoples as a basis for the equality of individuals. Compared to partition, she argues, it is "much more realistic ... [because] it avoids the troublesome majority-minority constellation, which is insoluble by definition."⁷¹ It is the nationalist logic of the separation of peoples in a partitioned state that she opposes, an ideology doomed to produce conflict through the assumption of inequality. Arendt also believes the organisational structure of a binational state would prove more amenable to conflict resolution. An internally federated structure would rest upon Jewish-Arab community councils, she claims, "which would mean that the Jewish-Arab conflict would be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighbourliness."⁷² Her model here is the kibbutz, which she semi-mythologised as "the most magnificent part of the Jewish homeland."⁷³ Arendt had worked for Jewish agency Youth Aliyah in 1930s Paris, an organisation that trained young Jewish refugees for life in the kibbutzim, and arranged their migration to Palestine. As part of this work, Arendt visited Palestine, and apparently became captivated with the kibbutzim as an expression of genuine community. This idea would stay with her, feeding an ideal of what Palestine could be

⁷⁰ Judah Leon Magnes, *Palestine – Divided or United? The Case for a Bi-national Palestine before the United Nations* (Westport, CT, 1983).

⁷¹ Arendt, "Jewish Homeland," 400.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 400.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 395.

(despite the fact that these Jewish communities neither integrated nor sought to integrate with local Arab populations).⁷⁴

The second aspect of this proposal was federation between a binational Palestine and its neighbours. “A federated state, finally, could be the natural stepping-stone for any later, greater federated structure in the Near East and the Mediterranean area,”⁷⁵ Arendt wrote. More immediately, informal cooperation – inspired by friendly federation within Palestine – could provide essential regional stability. “For good relationships with the Arab states, an Arab ‘minority’ can as well be an asset as it could become a liability,” Arendt wrote. “It would be an asset if complete equality were granted, including complete equality of the Arab language with the Hebrew language and if the very term ‘minority’ were carefully avoided.”⁷⁶ This corresponds to Arendt’s belief that the age of the nation-state as the dominant political actor was ending, not only here, but across the Western world. The Zionists, she asserts, made the mistake of asking for a state, “only when the whole concept of national sovereignty had become a mockery.”⁷⁷

Thus, the earlier “federalist” and later “binationalist” positions that Rubin identifies, are not substantially different. In both her earlier critical position on Magnes, and her later endorsement of his binationalism, Arendt rejects any form of political organisation that perpetuates the “majority-minority” problem. Therefore, in both, she argues any Palestinian-

⁷⁴ However, later Arendt recognised the decline of the kibbutz ideal in Israel, e.g. Moshe Zimmermann, “Hannah Arendt: The Early ‘Post-Zionist,’” in Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley, 2001), 181-93, at 193.

⁷⁵ Arendt, “Jewish Homeland,” 400.

⁷⁶ Arendt, “Letter to Judah Magnes, 28 August 1948,” Correspondence - General, 1938-1976 – Magnes, Judah Leon – 1948, Sept.-Oct., 0047, The Hannah Arendt Papers, The New School, New York.

⁷⁷ Arendt, “The Jewish State: Fifty Years After, Where Have Herzl’s Politics Led?” in *Jewish Writings*, 375-87, at 384.

Israeli organisational form should be part of a wider political federation of peoples. In her later correspondence, she is simply more practically-minded, as one would expect in the circumstances of direct political engagement. Arendt sets out, through her correspondence, the steps to a federal structure, believing Palestinian-Israeli binationalism could form the first step to regional federation. One further point here is the extreme demographic flux over this period. In 1948, Jews were outnumbered by Arabs in Palestine by two to one, but with rapid Jewish emigration to Palestine this looked as if it would equalise or even create a Jewish majority.⁷⁸ Part of Magnes' proposal was the stabilisation of the Jewish-Arab population in Palestine, thus, in Arendt's terms, avoiding the majority-minority problem within Palestine. The insurmountable Jewish-Arab demographic imbalance in the wider region, could from here be resolved, Arendt evidently hoped, through the creation of broader federations.

What is particularly important is that it was the Atlantic City Conference of 1944, rather than the Biltmore Conference of 1942, that Arendt marks out as *the* decisive move in Zionism towards irredeemable nationalism. It was thus not until 1944 that Arendt broke with Zionism, two years after Magnes' rejection of the movement. From 1942 to 1944, Arendt is writing as a critical, but ultimately loyal, supporter of the Zionist movement, after that, she is not. The style of her earlier criticisms of Magnes are telling, for example, she blames Magnes (in large part) for a "crisis of Zionism," by undermining the only possible movement that could unify the Jews as a people.⁷⁹ After 1944, her opinion of Zionism was shattered, as what she believed to be a fundamentally unpolitical ideology became dominant, which was both chillingly nationalistic and prejudiced against the Arabs. Her position became that of a

⁷⁸ Sami Hadawi, ed., *Village Statistics 1945: A Classification of Land and Area Ownership in Palestine*, (Beirut, 1970), 13.

⁷⁹ Arendt, "Crisis of Zionism," 329-337.

Zionist outsider, and thus she finds an ally in Magnes, another outsider, and “the leader of the only group that is still willing to pursue an understanding with the Arabs.”⁸⁰

This whole approach looks impossibly idealistic in retrospect – as indeed, it did then. Hostility between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East had been growing since the 1920s, due to growing violent nationalism on both sides, making Arab-Jewish cooperation unlikely. Even Arendt only believed her suggestions had an outside chance of implementation. However, she was certain the alternative would be disastrous for at least one of the two Palestinian peoples. Only “the political implementation and guarantee of permanent cooperation, and not national sovereignty, offers a solution in which the true national interests of both peoples might be safeguarded,” she wrote.⁸¹

While Arendt’s solution may have looked implausible, her analysis was prescient. She recognised the intensity of the Jewish-Arab conflict, and its roots in the developing national identities of both peoples. Generally, the dominant Zionist narratives of the time failed to recognise Arab national identities, an omission which in retrospect appears striking. Arendt also saw that the threat posed by the wider Arab region to Israel, if constituted as a militant nation-state (and thus a potential threat) could only be countered by a quasi-imperial benefactor, a major power who would throw its military weight behind the young state.

Arendt had not only abandoned mainstream Zionism by this point, but in response to the post-war Jewish political context, rather than calling upon Jews to fight, believed it imperative they negotiate for peace. The creation of Israel had resulted in the recognition of the Jewish people as an independent nation, while the Holocaust had shocked Jews out of their complacency towards antisemitism, leading to a revival of Jewish self-identification. Yet Arendt also saw danger in the changing character of the Jewish people, particularly those

⁸⁰ Arendt, “Letter to Karl Jaspers, 28 May 1948,” in *Correspondence*, 111.

⁸¹ Arendt, “Political Organization,” 209.

in Palestine. Their new found political confidence had turned them from assimilationists into nationalists, with all the problems that posed.

The result [of the war] has been an amazing and rapid change in what we call national character. After two thousand years of “Galuth mentality,” the Jewish people have suddenly ceased to believe in survival as an ultimate good in itself and have gone over in a few years to the opposite extreme. Now Jews believe in fighting at any price and feel that “going down” is a very sensible method of politics.⁸²

With these changes, the political innovation of the Kibbutzim movement, had been overwhelmed by the success of national parties in Israel, and the “growth of totalitarian methods...silently tolerated and secretly applauded.”⁸³ Arendt was not alone in this harsh criticism, and with other prominent Jewish immigrants, including Einstein and Sydney Hook, wrote a letter to the New York Times in 1948 criticising the “reign of terror” of Irgun and the Stern Gang, two of the most extreme Revisionist groups in Israel.⁸⁴

Arendt considered herself to be dealing with a very different problem now: not the question of how Jews reify their identity without the nation state, but how Jews can maintain their political identity in a national context while rejecting nationalist ideology. She still, however, employed the concepts developed over the previous two decades. Her critique of nationalism as an assumption of “natural substance” and inequality was transferred from a critique of German political culture to a critique of the Israeli position towards their neighbours. Their attitude, Arendt argues, is one of “plain racist chauvinism,” whose division

⁸² Arendt, “Jewish Homeland,” 391.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁸⁴ Arendt et al., “New Palestine Party,” in *Jewish Writings*, 417-419.

of Jews from other peoples, who are therefore classed as enemies “does not differ from other master-race theories.”⁸⁵ Hence, she concludes, “any interpretation of politics oriented to such ‘principles’ is hopelessly out of touch with the realities of this world. Nevertheless it is a fact that such attitudes tacitly or explicitly permeate the general atmosphere of Jewry; and therefore Jewish leaders can threaten mass suicide to the applause of their audience.”⁸⁶

The Origins of Totalitarianism marks the end of Arendt’s Jewish focus. Published in 1951, the book brought together her thought on Jewish politics and nationalism with Western politics more broadly, to seek out the causes of totalitarianism. But Arendt had become deeply disillusioned by the events surrounding Israel’s birth and firmly opposed to what she considered its doomed political system. With the death of Magnes in late 1948, her last hopes for Israel died. “The fact is,” she wrote, “nobody in the Jewish people could succeed Magnes. This is the measure of his greatness; it is, by the same token, the measure of our failure.”⁸⁷ But this is not a rejection of Israel itself, nor Zionism in a broad sense. Arendt’s refusal to write on Jewish politics was motivated by the opposite emotion. She remained involved in Jewish committees, donated to Jewish charitable organisations, and regularly visited Israel. She often discussed Israel privately. Why the public silence? In one letter, from 1953, she explains. “The whole business is absolutely nauseating. I decided that I do not want to have anything to do with Jewish politics any longer – not even in the way of protesting. All

⁸⁵ Arendt, “Jewish Homeland,” 393.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁸⁷ Arendt, “Letter to William Zukerman, 11 November 1952,” Correspondence – Publishers - Jewish Newsletter - 1950-1961, 0004d, The Hannah Arendt Papers, The New School, New York.

that seem to me to involve is that one is willing and prepared to fight it out in public. And this is what I am not prepared to do.”⁸⁸

She was not prepared to fight it out in public because she continued to support Israel, even while she rejected its leadership and the nationalist principles she believed Israel had embraced, in contrast to the cosmopolitan, plural and federal principles of her own Zionist ideal. Israel had become political fact, and could not be reversed without terrible consequences. Arendt may have rejected Herzl’s Israel, but once realised, she refused to turn on it. Yet she saw no way out of the deepening political antagonisms that cleaved the region; she no longer believed peace was possible. In another letter she wrote: “There are a few things one could do, and even these have no great chance of success. Among them are equal rights for all Arabs in Israel...and the restitution of land without conditions. But nothing of this will happen...The whole people has become fanatical.”⁸⁹

Despite Arendt’s refusal to write on Jewish politics – with the important exception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a decade later, which she claimed was merely a trial report of brute facts – her occasional comments on her earlier work show she continued to identify with the arguments offered in her Jewish writings. In 1961 she responded to a request for a sequel to her 1945 article *Zionism Reconsidered*, by simply replying that she still adhered to the ideas within that article, and so had nothing to add.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Arendt, “Letter to William Zukerman, 1 November 1953,” Correspondence – Publishers – Jewish Newsletter 1950-1961, 0009d, The Hannah Arendt Papers, The New School, New York.

⁸⁹ Arendt, “Letter to Mr Mirelman, 24 December 1956,” Correspondence – General – McQ-Mit miscellaneous, 0068, The Hannah Arendt Papers, The New School, New York.

⁹⁰ Arendt, “Letter to Leonard Sussman, 7 August 1961,” Correspondence – Organizations – American Council for Judaism - 1958-1967, 0008d, The Hannah Arendt Papers, The New School, New York.

VIII

Arendt's early writings consistently reject assimilationism and nationalism, focusing increasingly on the latter as political conditions and Zionist political ideology evolved over time. Her development of a positive, non-nationalist concept of a nation emerged from this dual critique, and although initially closely connected to Jewish politics, in particular the now largely lost Zionist tradition of Lazare, Arendt came to apply its principles to politics more widely. The criticism of inconsistency in Arendt's early work can be explained with reference to the historical and political context, while the clarity of this vision in Arendt's correspondence with Magnes, opposes claims of political incoherency in her pre-*Origins* work. Arendt's ideal, a binational Palestine within a regional federation, portrays the potential for the realisation of this concept.

To recapitulate, a people, in Arendt's terms, must seek to avoid the twin evils of assimilation and nationalism, and strike a balance between inner and outer, change and tradition. Dogmatic ideology, whether the belief that there is no difference between peoples, or the belief that all peoples are essentially different, rejects the reality of human difference and changeability. Arendt's rejection of assimilation began with her assessment in *Rahel*, that while assimilation requires the rejection of a common past, individuals depend on this for the interconnected purposes of individual identity as well as group identity. In a world formed of different political communities, the undermining of their shared world was disastrous for Jews for psychological, social, and political reasons. Meanwhile, growing nationalism fostered by individualisation, together with the growth of powerful state systems, resulted in the negation of assimilation: the ideology of natural differences between peoples. This, equally at odds with the reality of a globalising world, would bring disaster to all peoples, a process Arendt set out in *Origins*. Western nationalisms of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century, breeding contempt for foreign peoples by brutal imperial colonisation, fostered the acceptance of brute force as politics, and also engendered race-thinking, preparing the ground for the breakdown of traditional politics, and thus totalitarianism. Such ideologies were applied domestically, first to “alien” peoples (i.e. Jews), but ultimately, Arendt argued, this mode of thinking about politics would lead to the repression of all peoples, if unopposed.

In Arendt’s alternative conception of a nation, a shared past is the beginning of identity for individuals within that tradition, and from this, the loose, changing basis of national identity. The global interconnectedness of those traditions constrains political possibilities, but is not definitive. Instead, peoples are defined through the actions of people within that tradition, as well as the interaction and opposition of people and peoples from different traditions. Leaving room for individual and national difference, Arendt’s definition of a people is, crucially, based upon the assumption of group *and* individual differences. There is no definitive centre, rather, it is suggestive of the “web of interactions” Arendt later defined as the political. Importantly, free action is prized above perfectibility or universalisation, leaving individual action as the true constituent power.

Arendt’s binational, federated Israel-Palestine plan maps onto this theoretical structure, bringing two separate communities into a relationship of mutual interest, while maintaining their distinguishing features and independence. Spanning out, this binational system underpins a wider regional federation. The rejection of sovereignty and clear territorial lines – the basis of the modern state – could form, Arendt believed, a political structure on which to build peace, by recognising and institutionalising difference on a basis of equality. A pluralistic structure, recognising the constitutive power of the people’s action springing from a basis of traditional values, as well as the necessity of integration with the outside world, mirrored her understanding of a people. That Arendt believed there was a

chance of this happening displays the belief she had in the capacity of men to live together cooperatively and share a world, and the power of institutional structure in bringing this about. So she placed her faith in a new constitutional form which she believed could embody Israeli political reality in a peaceful manner, in a world where she believed the nation state had little prospect of long-term success.

While central aspects of Arendt's early thought certainly developed from her Zionist engagement, there are of course other important early influences. Whilst too numerous to fully reconstruct here, certain of these should be noted. Her two teachers, Heidegger and Jaspers, were formative in crucial respects, not least in Arendt's adoption of their phenomenological methodology. From Heidegger, Canovan argues, Arendt learnt "not so much a doctrine as the activity of thinking itself."⁹¹ From Jaspers, however, Arendt drew key elements of her theory relating to the importance of communication and community in establishing identity, a theme also evident through *Rahel* and Arendt's idea of a people. But where Jaspers, before the war, was more interested in describing *Existenz* from the perspective of the self, Arendt's work, after *Rahel*, was always concerned with human pluralities – with politics. As Young-Bruehl points out, Jaspers also had aspects to his early thought that Arendt was unwilling to accept. "Jaspers was challenged by Hannah Arendt's refusal to accept what he called in Weberian language 'the German essence.'"⁹² Jaspers was important to Arendt's philosophical development, and his influence continued to play a role through Arendt's political work, but her interest in politics came about through her engagement with Jewish issues.

Arendt's husband Heinrich Blucher, however, is another early political influence. Blucher had been involved in the Spartacist uprising in Berlin in 1919, and remained

⁹¹ Canovan, *Reinterpretation*, 6

⁹² Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 70.

committed to left-wing revolutionary ideology for some time after he met Arendt. From Blucher, one might imagine some of the more “revolutionary” aspects of Arendt’s thought were inspired, as well as her more internationalist approach. However, Arendt never adopted Blucher’s particular political sympathies, and since Blucher’s political thought was not written down in any systematised manner it is extremely difficult to map the precise nature of his influence on her thought. Contrasted with Arendt’s extensive commentary on Zionism of various types, Blucher’s influence must of necessity remain relatively obscure.

William Selinger and Gil Rubin also show in recent articles that Arendt’s federalism was part of a broader conversation occurring in the 1940s.⁹³ Selinger and Rubin depict a lively federal debate in the international arena, and Rubin interestingly observes that this debate influenced the Zionist movement itself, as well as Arendt, although the disparity between them shows the lack of consensus around federalist ideas.

Selinger identifies an “internationalist” trend in *Origins*, and offers a compelling depiction of how contemporary European debates on federalism influenced Arendt’s work.⁹⁴ But there is no real conflict between the European and Jewish influences on Arendt’s work – the two facets of Arendt’s background are both foundational to her thought. Yet while Arendt’s European-Jewish heritage cannot be divided, it was her concern with specifically Jewish politics which first brought her into contact with politics and maintained her interest for many years. Her experience of the German intellectual community’s mute acceptance (or support, in Heidegger’s case) of Hitler led her, she later explained, to leave Germany “dominated by the idea...: Never again! I shall never again get involved in any kind of

⁹³ Rubin, “Federalism to Binationalism”; William Selinger, “The Politics of Arendtian Historiography: European Federation and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,” *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

intellectual business. I want nothing to do with that lot.”⁹⁵ Yet Arendt’s involvement with Youth Aliyah in Paris, her work for *Aufbau* in New York, and perhaps most profoundly, her friendship with Magnes inspired her with some hope. “Politics in our century is almost a business of despair,” Arendt wrote to Magnes. “I have always been tempted to run away from it. I wanted you to know that your example prevented me from despairing and will prevent me for many years to come.”⁹⁶ Nor should it be forgotten how long Arendt spent working on Zionism and Jewish politics. For half her adult life (by 1951, Arendt was 45), it was her dominant intellectual preoccupation. And although Arendt’s early written output is less voluminous, it should not be taken any less seriously than her later work.

IX

I will conclude by outlining how these early Jewish concepts influenced the development of her later thought, using Arendt’s 1963 *On Revolution*, to outline the connections between her concept of a Jewish people, and her later, more universalised idea of a political people. This is prefaced with the observation that there are important differences between Arendt’s pre- and post-*Origins* writings: themes and questions absent from one or the other, and the evolution of ideas in the later writings which are undeveloped earlier on. Aside from the shift from Jewish to “Western” politics already discussed, I will here note two ideas of particular importance to *On Revolution*, and her later work more broadly (but not the earlier): her republicanism and her notion of “the social.” A sympathy with republicanism can be discerned in *Origins*, when Arendt writes that the only counter to the Dreyfus Affair was

⁹⁵ Arendt, ““What Remains? The Language Remains,”” in *Essays in Understanding*, 12.

⁹⁶ Arendt, “Letter to Judah Magnes, 3 October 1948,” Correspondence – General – Magnes, Judah Leon – 1948, Sept.-Oct., 0030d, The Hannah Arendt Papers, The New School, New York.

“that Republican view of communal life which asserts that...by infringing on the rights of one you infringe on the rights of all.”⁹⁷ Yet not until the 1950s would she begin to explicitly develop these ideas, influenced by her long-standing interest in Roman political thought. In *On Revolution* she outlines her idea of republicanism through a comparison between early American republicanism, which she favours, and the corrupted republicanism of the French Revolution. Also central to *On Revolution*, the complex idea of “the social” is absent from Arendt’s Jewish writings. In *Rahel* and *Origins* the term is used in a largely conventional manner, substantially different to the idea detailed in *The Human Condition*. There “the social” was portrayed as a specifically modern problem, whereby the traditionally separate public and private spheres are confused with one another, leading to the breakdown of the boundary and thus the sphere of the public-political itself.

But ideas from Arendt’s early work do prepare the groundwork for these concepts, and moreover, several central concepts drawn from her understanding of “the people” can be seen in *On Revolution*. Arendt compares two communities: the American people and the French “multitudes.” Early Americans, she wrote, developed an understanding of politics, and a mode of political practice, sharply contrasting with European sovereign systems. They understood the nature of politics as power, she argued, the idea that the active involvement of citizens was essential; that the free and equal engagement of citizens in a public sphere *created* politics. This was institutionalised in township councils, where citizens engaged in the public sphere through agonistic discourse and the resultant emergence of shared meaning and action. This understanding of political power as constituted in the space between citizens, combined with the idea of authority in the constitutional foundation, was fundamental to the success of the Revolution, Arendt writes.

⁹⁷ Arendt, *Origins*, 106

The word “people” retained for [the American founders] the meaning of manyness, of the endless variety of a multitude whose majesty resided in its very plurality...they knew that the public realm in a republic was constituted by an exchange of opinion between equals, and that this realm would simply disappear at the very moment an exchange became superfluous because all equals happened to be of the same opinion.⁹⁸

For Arendt, America represents a model of what politics should be. By contrast, the political practice that emerged from the French Revolution resulted in violent chaos, and represents not simply political failure, but an example of an anti-political system. The French, Arendt writes, while motivated by the same desire for liberation as the Americans, failed to grasp the essence of politics as power. The “social question” of poverty meant biological need dominated - the people’s hunger dictated their demands – and the fragile but politically essential public space of discourse, was eroded, and thus, politics itself. The French “multitude” was connected only in its overwhelming poverty, and the notion of the general will became the means by which the people were understood to be involved in politics. When the multitude were believed to be one unified mind, no discourse could be possible, and instead ideological aspirations of natural progress and the stripping away of political artifice and hypocrisy, through liberation from the *ancient regime*, came to be seen as paramount. Fundamentally destructive of politics, this ideology also proved to be fundamentally destructive of men, through the violence it demanded in order to shape the world according to its own dictates.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 93

While this story is conceptually mapped onto Arendt's tripartite division of the *vita activa* from *The Human Condition*, there are multiple aspects here, specifically pertaining to the division of the American people and the French multitude, which mirror the distinction between the Jewish people and the Jewish nation. For Arendt, writing in the 1940s, the constituent power of the Jewish people must be the people themselves, not an elite Jewish leadership. While this idea is common to French and American revolutionary thinking, Arendt's appeal in her binational plan, to localised, council or kibbutz-style communal action involving large numbers of citizens, evokes a notion of constituent power which is in concept and practice close to the American system, and in opposition to the French appeal to an ideological abstraction of the people through the general will, and the practice of representative leadership. The notion of "action" in Arendt's later work, may therefore be found in embryonic form within Arendt's Jewish writings, themselves influenced by Jaspers' *existenzphilosophie*, and an emphasis on the potential for individual spontaneity and creativity.

The distinction between both the French and American communities, and the Jewish people and Jewish nation, can be summarised in terms of plurality. Political action, as Arendt describes it, can only be enacted in a condition of plurality: whereby individuals are recognised as both politically equal *and* distinct. This enables genuine discourse to take place, and thus is a condition of politics itself. Nationalism rejects equality, while assimilationism rejects difference. Yet if both Jews and Arabs would accept a political system which recognised both peoples as equal, but different – the binational system – Israel had a future, she believed. One important difference is that Arendt's argument for binationalism demands plurality on the level of peoples, not individuals, while the American example demanded individual plurality, at least for the minority eligible for citizenship. Yet the principle, I argue, is the same, and this similarity is visible in Arendt's Palestinian

constitutional settlement based upon councils. As Bernstein writes, Arendt's emphasis on the need for an Arab population in Palestine involves "a contest of a plurality of perspectives that are publicly displayed and tested in public spaces."⁹⁹ Plurality involves a notion of anti-foundationalism which is as important to Arendt's early writings, in her rejection of nationalism or ideological thinking, as her later thought, where it is a constant. In both cases, the rejection of objective truth or absolutes in politics should be connected to the need for plurality in politics, on a conceptual, individual, and national level. The biological determinacy Arendt rejects in terms of nationalism, emerges in her later rejection of sovereignty as rule.

The last connection I will make relates to the interaction between individual freedom and the political that features heavily in *On Revolution* and Arendt's work generally. For Arendt, the Jew lost something of her personhood when she rejected her Jewishness in order to assimilate. The problem was that Jews were simply not accepted as "ordinary" by those they tried to assimilate with. It is not enough to demand to become a member of a particular people if you are not accepted as equal. Such an individual is literally without a people – having rejected one tradition, and been rejected by another. She is missing something which, as Arendt depicts in *Rahel*, is of the utmost importance to one's sense of self. Although it is not made explicit in *Rahel*, I suggest that what is missing is the freedom to take part in political practice, that is, the possibility of engaging in genuinely free discourse with others in a community, thereby fully disclosing one's identity and enacting one's agency. Underlying both the "joy" of political action that Arendt writes about in *On Revolution*, and the despair of the assimilated "parvenu" she writes about in her Jewish writings, is the idea that

⁹⁹ Bernstein, "Hannah Arendt's Zionism?" in Steven Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, 194-202, at 201.

individual agency is inherently connected to political community, and recognition of and by a community.

The notion of “the people,” therefore, as distinct from “the nation,” and developed through a lengthy engagement with Zionism and Jewish politics, contains in essence several of the most important ideas which Arendt later develops, including the notions of action and plurality; the connection between individual agency and identity and group identity; and an appeal to anti-foundationalism. As such, Arendt’s Jewish writings may profitably be drawn upon for a deeper understanding of her concept of the political and its origins.