

1. HANNAH ARENDT AND ZIONISM

In sharp contrast to their eastern comrades, these western Zionists were no revolutionaries at all; they neither criticized nor rebelled against the social and political conditions of their time; on the contrary, they wanted only to establish the same set of conditions for their own people. Herzl dreamt of a kind of huge transfer-enterprise by which 'the people without a country' was to be transported into 'the country without a people'; but the people themselves were to him poor, uneducated and irresponsible masses (an 'ignorant child' as Bernard Lazare put it in his critique of Herzl), which had to be led and governed from above. Of a real popular movement Herzl spoke but once – when he wanted to frighten the Rothschilds and other philanthropists into supporting them. (Arendt 1945a, 357)

As odd as it may sound today, not only for Theodor Herzl but for most Zionists, the area of "Eretz-Israel" was, indeed, a country without a people, an open and empty space waiting for the Jews to return from diaspora. In Herzlian terms, however, the question was not about the old religious tradition according to which only the remnant will return, the remnant being the elite of the Jewish people upon whom Jewish survival exclusively depended. It was, rather, about finding a refuge from the eternal antisemitism that was intended to lead to the persecution of the Jews for as long as they lived dispersed all over the world. Herzl, in fact, even considered the possibility of establishing a Jewish state somewhere other than Palestine. For him, Argentina or Uganda would have also been acceptable, although it turned out that neither place appealed to the majority of Jews (Herzl 1896; Herzl 1922/1956).

When Hannah Arendt wrote the above quoted words in 1945, "the remigration" of the Jews to Palestine had already been in full progress for quite a while. Its main impetus had been neither the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland nor the Messianic dream of a return to the Holy Land, but rather the cruel reality of the

destruction of Jews that was taking place in Europe. In Arendt's view, however, standing by and watching the events taking place on the world political stage was not sufficient in order to understand Jewish politics in Palestine and "the genesis" of the new national Jewish state. It was also necessary to become acquainted with Jewish tradition and the history of the Zionist movement.

Scholars are not in agreement in their assessments of whether Arendt really ever was a Zionist or not. I think it is possible to argue that she was inspired by Zionism at least for a certain period in her own way. Nevertheless, it is also possible to add that she was never a faithful member of any Zionist branch. She did not enthusiastically celebrate the redemptive notion of the return to the Promised Land as the natural and historically justified right of the Jewish people. For her, Zionism was a form of political self-defence for the Jews and was to be judged and justified as such. As to her personal engagement with Judaism, she was far from a traditionalist. For her, having been born a Jewess was merely one of the basic facts of her life and as such simultaneously self-evident and inescapable, something that shaped and conditioned her life in the contingency of the human world (Arendt 1965, 6; cf. Young-Bruehl 1982, 102–110).

Although it has frequently been pointed out that Arendt never received a thorough religious education but was raised instead in the spirit of German romanticism and its ideas of *Bildung*, it is important to remember that this did not mean that her parents necessarily wanted to conceal the fact that they were Jews. Rather, in the secularised and revolutionary atmosphere of the beginning of the 20th century, the notion of being Jews did not seem to be among the most important and binding facts of life for Bundists like Arendt's parents. They – especially Arendt's mother Martha – were looking forward to the start of a socialist revolution that would resolve the Jewish question by abandoning any kind of national discrimination. A seed of militant political consciousness was, however, sowed into little Hannah's heart by her mother. This

seed was Martha Arendt's conviction that if one was attacked as a Jew, one had to defend oneself as a Jew. Without exaggeration, one can argue that this simple notion of the duty to defend oneself would later constitute the core of Arendt's understanding of Zionist politics as a form of pariah politics stemming from the political need for self-defence and the desire to share a political community with other people in freedom and equality (Arendt 1965, 7–8).

Despite Martha Arendt's passionate attitude towards revolutionary politics – she was a great admirer of Rosa Luxemburg and succeeded in passing down this admiration and respect to her daughter (see Young-Bruehl 1982, 239; Arendt 1968c) – Hannah Arendt's youth was characterised by an apolitical immersion into Greek and German philosophy. It was only when she first met Kurt Blumenfeld, the executive secretary and chief spokesman of the Zionist Organisation of Germany, at the end of 1920s that she began to approach the situation of the Jews in a political context. Rather than considering Zionism a systematic doctrine, Blumenfeld maintained that it was a matter of personal revelation. This did not, however, lead him to see it as a mystical movement, but rather to emphasise its entirely secular and political nature. He was particularly interested in finding an approach to Zionism that would attract his own kind of emancipated and assimilated middle-class Jews. And he did just that in the notion of post-assimilatory Zionism, which was based on the harsh critique of “philanthropic Zionism”. He believed that Western European Zionism could not be limited to the return to Palestine through the aid and financing of the great philanthropists without making any changes to the Jewish conception of justice by means of charity and without introducing the conception of authentic political freedom (Young-Bruehl 1982, 70–73; cf. Blumenfeld 1962).

These were, as we have seen in retrospect, the years during which the political antisemitism that began to take shape during the last decade of the 19th century began to intensify in earnest. Blumenfeld

succeeded in convincing Arendt of both the importance and the threat of the emerging national socialist movement to the point that she decided it was time to take action when the Nazis seized power in 1933. The Zionists seemed to be the only ones who were actively interested in the political fate of the Jews, and Arendt mobilised herself to collect proof of antisemitism for the Zionists. This did not last long, however, as Arendt was soon arrested and forced to leave the country upon her release.

It was during her exile in Paris that she really began to throw herself into the Zionist cause in a concrete way. She earned her living by working in the Youth Aliyah of the Jewish Agency, which was engaged in emigrating Jewish children to Palestine. Simultaneously, she embarked on her study of the history of Zionism and lectured about it in the meetings of the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO). It was around this time that she began to delve into the writings of Bernard Lazare. It is likely that Blumenfeld had already introduced her to Lazare's writings in Germany, but she was only able to study them systematically once she was living in Paris, where she found all the original works. It was in Lazare's writings that Arendt re-encountered the notion of the duty to defend oneself as a Jew (Young-Bruehl 1982, 121–122; cf. Parvikko 1996, 114–156). Bernard Lazare was a contemporary of Theodor Herzl, and a significant number of his ideas concerning the Jews and their political fate and future were born out of his critique of Herzlian politics. This is why it is important to briefly examine the cornerstones of Herzlian Zionism prior to turning to Bernard Lazare's highly original critique of it.

1.1. THE CORNERSTONES OF HERZLIAN ZIONISM

In textbook history, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) remains the founding father of the Zionist movement. This is, however, not an entirely accurate assessment. It would be more accurate to say that it

was he who both organised the Western branch of the very divided Jewish national movement into the World Zionist Organization and secularised the ancient Jewish dream of a return to Palestine into a national vision in his book *Der Judenstaat* (1896). In addition, however, it is also accurate to say that the Zionist movement is a movement that was born simultaneously in two areas and in two separate branches.

On the one hand, there was the Eastern social revolutionary branch, which spoke emphatically in favour of emigration to Palestine in order to establish a Jewish homeland that would be based on freedom and justice. Out of these social ideals grew the *chalutz* and *kibbutz* movements, which aimed at the creation of a new type of Jew by combining hard work and contempt for material wealth and bourgeois life (see e.g. Sachar 1976/1996; Sokolow 1919; Vital 1975). In Arendt's view, the problem with this social revolutionary branch of Zionism was its entirely unpolitical nature. Once settled in Palestine, its members formed their own small circles, to the point of being completely unaware of the general destiny of their people. They remained outside the sphere of any appreciable political influence, gladly leaving politics to the politicians. They even tended to view the events of 1933 as a God-sent opportunity for the wave of immigration to Palestine they had only dreamt of until then (Arendt 1945a, 349–350). In other words, instead of making itself the political vanguard of the Jewish people as a whole, the Palestine Jewry developed a spirit of self-centredness which was veiled by its readiness to welcome refugees who would help it become a stronger factor in Palestine (Arendt 1945a, 361).

On the other hand, there was the Western branch of “political Zionism,” which grew out of an extremely strong wave of political antisemitism. The novelty of this new type of political antisemitism was that it was far more organised in terms of its leadership and programme than the traditional religious hatred of the Jews, which never aimed at the complete annihilation of the entire Jewish

population. In addition, it was based on a strongly racist and nationalist ideology that considered the Jews to be inferior human beings who had to be destroyed one way or another. Political Zionism did not, however, remain a mere counter attack against antisemitism. Drawing on socialist and nationalist ideas, it developed its own Jewish nationalistic ideals and goals. Thus, paradoxically enough, an organised Zionist movement as the first political response of the Jews to their plight of oppression and discrimination would probably never have been born in the form in which it was without the emergence of European nationalism, which contained a strongly anti-Jewish element in its belief that every people on earth had its own proper geographical location and should not live anywhere else. In other words, it follows from the nationalistic principle that every people has a proper place on earth and that no dispersed European Jew lived in the right place. From the antisemitic viewpoint, it was essential to force the Jews leave Europe – regardless of where they went and how – whereas from the Zionist viewpoint, it was essential to remigrate to the correct place, which was Palestine (cf. Sachar 1976/1996; Vital 1975).

For Theodor Herzl, the immediate impetus to be awakened “to acknowledge the new situation” was the Dreyfus affair, which drew his attention to the persecution of the Jews.² It was in this context that he adopted the specific understanding of the nature of antisemitism that would shape his own branch of Zionism. This understanding stemmed from the adoption of a nationalistic worldview. Herzl shared with the antisemites the conviction that

2. Herzl was an Austro-Hungarian journalist who worked as a correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse* in Paris during the Dreyfus trial. The general assumption is that it was precisely this event that turned his attention to the plight of the European Jews. His early work did not focus on Jews but rather on politics and literature in general terms. His early works include *Das Palais-Bourbon* (Leipzig: Duncker u. Humblot, 1895), which is a piece on parliamentary journalism.

all peoples should inhabit their proper place on earth, and that as long as this correct order was not realised conflicts between different peoples and nations were unavoidable. From all this, Herzl concluded that antisemitism was “eternal,” i.e. would never end and could not be fought against on European soil. The only lasting solution was to escape Europe. Religiously, Herzl was far from being an orthodox Jew and was not anticipating the coming of Messianic times and redemption. This is what first led him to conclude that it would be possible to establish a Jewish state somewhere other than in Palestine. However, he soon realised that most Jews, no matter how secularised they were, supported the traditional pattern of a return to Palestine (see Herzl 1896).

In Arendt’s view, one of the decisive mistakes made by Herzl and most other “political” Zionists was their failure to fully comprehend the political nature of the new antisemitism. Instead of searching for an authentically political solution to the plight of the Jews by organising themselves to fight back, their political ignorance led the Zionist leaders to dream of salvation through an escape to Palestine. More precisely, since antisemitism was taken to be a natural corollary of nationalism, it could not be fomented against a world-Jewry that was established as a nation. Palestine was considered to be the only place where Jews could escape the hatred of their people. By the same token, the Jews did not really comprehend how dangerous a movement the new antisemitism actually was, but instead sincerely believed that the antisemites would turn out to be their best friends in their shared desire to purify European soil of the Jews. In Arendt’s view, at the core of this hope and conception was the belief that it does not pay for enslaved peoples to fight back and that one must dodge and escape in order to survive persecution (Arendt 1945a, 360–361; cf. Herzl 1896).

For Arendt, another decisive mistake made by the political Zionists was their inherent elitism. They never even dreamt of mobilising a social revolutionary mass movement of the people

simply because they despised poor masses, regardless of whether they were Jewish or gentile. Thus the Herzlian dream of a Jewish state in Palestine did not contain the idea of a new, more democratic political order but was based instead on the idea of transferring the European political structure to Palestine. Instead of mobilising and organising the Jewish masses into a group that could and would fight against gentile oppressors and the Jewish bourgeoisie, Herzl preferred high diplomacy. He negotiated with the Sultan of Turkey and high-ranking British officials, believing that a piece of Palestinian land could be bought with Jewish money (see Herzl 1922/1956).

In sum, Arendt identifies a highly isolationist and essentially German-inspired version of nationalism as lying at the very core of the Zionist misconceptions. According to this version, a nation is an eternal body and the product of the inevitable natural growth of inherent qualities. It does not explain peoples in terms of political organisations, but rather in terms of organic superhuman personalities. In this conception, the French notion of the sovereignty of the people is perverted into nationalist claims of autarkical existence (Arendt 1945a, 366–367).

1.2. THE LAZAREAN-ARENDRIAN CRITIQUE OF THE UNWORLDLY HIERARCHIES OF JEWISH TRADITION

Bernard Lazare (1865–1903) belonged to those Jews who never dreamt of an escape to Palestine, opting instead to search for a solution to the Jewish question on European soil. Similarly to Herzl, he viewed the Dreyfus affair as a concrete event by means of which it was possible to consider and discuss the situation of the Jews. During the first Zionist Congress in 1897, Lazare was too busy with the affair to attend, spending most of his time attempting to help the Dreyfus family. At the second congress the following year, he was hailed as a hero of the Zionist movement for his role

in the affair. It soon became clear, however, that he was not willing to accept the cornerstones of Herzlian Zionism, as he preferred a more mass-based and democratically inspired version of it that was in keeping with the European context. From this perspective, he identified a major problem of the Jewish condition as based on the very structure of the community. In his view, the external discrimination of the Jews by gentiles was only one side of the coin. On the reverse side, there was the self-prolonged condition of exclusion based on self-chosen isolation and the profoundly hierarchical structure within the Jewish community (Lazare 1901, 135; cf. Arendt 1944a; 1948a).

In other words, the situation of the Jews was characterised by a kind of dualistic exclusion. On the one hand, wherever they went, the Jews were excluded from the society and polity of their host peoples. On the other hand, the exclusion of the Jews was also sustained by their own people. The desire to stand apart from their host peoples mainly stemmed from an ancient Jewish tradition according to which the diaspora was only a provisional period to be followed by a return to the Promised Land. In this situation of double exclusion, the Jews failed to develop any political thinking and tradition of their own, which in turn led to a lack of political ability and judgement. Within the framework of diaspora history, the Jews conceived of themselves as sufferers of history. This conception left no room for the notion of the Jewish people as an active political agent that should unite its forces to fight against oppression and for shared political goals (see Arendt 1948b).

This structure of the traditional Jewish community stemmed, of course, from religious tradition, which did not distinguish between religious and secular leadership. According to tradition, the rabbinical leadership was unquestionable and perpetual. However, over the course of history, another strong Jewish factor emerged alongside this one, namely the role of Jewish money in the European economy. Many Jewish bankers and businessmen were not only successful

in economic terms but also became indispensable to the entire European economy. Although these businessmen did not always remain faithful to the religious tradition, there were many among them who upheld the ancient duty to help their poor brethren. And so the Jewish tradition of philanthropy developed (in detail, see Arendt 1951/1979).

In Lazare's view, the problem of this fairly systematically developed philanthropic practice was that it did not aim at abolishing social disparity and inequality. In other words, it accepted poverty as an inevitable and perpetual fact to be alleviated by the generosity and magnanimity of the plutocracy. What this kind of practice produced was endless and hierarchical chains of gratitude. Instead of finding the charity structures unfair and socially and politically deformed, the average Jew learnt to feel grateful to his or her benefactors. On the basis of his criticism of the hierarchical nature of Jewish power and charity structures, Lazare developed a distinction between the parvenu and the conscious pariah as alternative responses to the peculiar situation of the double slavery of ordinary Jews. The strategy of the parvenu was based on the acceptance of the prevailing situation. In the eyes of the parvenu, the only possible way to avoid the curse of poverty and ignorance was to search for a purely individual solution to it by climbing up the social ladder and becoming assimilated into gentile culture and society. The price to be paid for assimilation was the denial of one's own religious, cultural and social roots, as the gentile society was prepared to include only those who accepted and adopted its habits and beliefs (Lazare 1901, 134; 1928, 41–44; cf. Arendt 1944a).

Lazare believed that the only possible alternative to this false and dishonest strategy of assimilation was the rebellion of the conscious pariah. First and foremost, the conscious pariah rejected the strategy of assimilation, considering it a politically false solution to the plight of the Jews. Assimilation created a self-deceptive belief that the misery of the Jews could be overcome by abandoning one's

personal background and ignoring the fact that assimilation was entirely based upon the benevolence of the gentiles: once this benevolence dried up, discrimination reappeared. In this context, rebellion against gentiles alone was not enough, as parvenuism was also upheld by the philanthropic social practice of the Jews. Lazare saw the conscious pariah as a figure who was not content with merely attacking the gentile society, but who also wanted to fight against the hierarchical power structures within Jewish communities (Lazare 1898, 10; Arendt 1944a).³

This Lazarean-Arendtian critique did not, of course, mean that the Jews were not organised at all. Arendt argues that the Jews were not entirely without a polity of their own, but that the problem, rather, was that this polity was politically ignorant and ineffective by nature. The extreme political events of the 20th century have shown that its structures have included a frightening degree of backwardness. According to Arendt, the Jewish quasi-polity of this century was comprised of three elements that constituted the world-Jewry as a single community that belonged together. Firstly, there was the “tribal element,” or the family, which bound the Jews together into living communities and hereditary lines. Secondly, there were business connections that bound families together across international borders. And thirdly, there was charity, a remnant of the once autonomous Jewish communities: “Whereas family and business connections sufficed to keep the Jewry of each country a closely knit social body, Jewish charity had come very near to organize world-Jewry into a curious sort of body politic.” (Arendt 1945a, 356)

Politically speaking, there were two essential problems in this kind of organisation. Most importantly, it was profoundly hierarchical and determined a person’s status either as benefactor or a receiver.

3. I have analysed in detail Arendt’s conception of Jewish pariahdom in Parvikko 1996.

As Arendt put it, “in this great and truly international organization one had to be either on the receiving or on the giving end in order to be accounted for as a Jew.” (Arendt 1945a, 356) By the same token, it constituted immense hierarchies of gratitude in which the benefactors bought the fidelity of the poor masses with their money. Secondly, together with traditional religious hierarchies, the hierarchical structure of charity replaced the egalitarian political structure in which the members of Jewish communities could have gathered to decide about communal matters in terms of justice and freedom. As far as I can see, this second characteristic of the Jewish quasi-polity is even more important than Arendt seems to realise. It highlights the specific Jewish understanding of justice as a hierarchical and thus non-egalitarian relationship between people. It reveals that in the Jewish tradition, justice is not an impartial and neutral political relationship for which one need not be grateful, but, rather, requires gratitude and recompensation. It was precisely this hierarchical power structure of the traditional Jewish community that Bernard Lazare fiercely criticised in his writings at the end of the 19th century, which later illuminated Arendt’s approach to Jewish politics.

In Arendt’s view, the hierarchical structure of the Jewish quasi-polity also strengthened and perpetuated the tradition of keeping aloof from gentiles. In this sense, the Jewish people maintained the ancient attitude of dividing mankind between themselves and “foreigners,” the Jews and the *Goyim*, as the Greeks had divided the world between themselves and the *barbaroi*. Because of this attitude, the Jews, Zionists included, were willing to accept a highly apolitical and ahistorical explanation of the hostility against them as fortifying “the dangerous, time-honoured, deep-seated distrust of the Jews for Gentiles” (Arendt 1945a, 359). In terms of European political history, this attitude led to irresponsibility: it ignored the role played by the European Jewry in the construction and functioning of the national state (for more on this role, see Arendt 1951/1979).

In addition to the hierarchical charity structures of the Jewish plutocracy, there was, of course, the traditional religious structure, which determined the status of an individual within the family and the community. Whereas the economic plutocracy was reluctant to devote itself to a political revolution because of its economic interests in the existing economic order, the religious plutocracy had no need to devote itself to earthly matters prior to the arrival of the Messiah. In Arendt's analysis, both economic and religious plutocracy were characterised by equally unworldly attitudes, which rendered the Jewish tradition entirely unpolitical and "other-worldly". Within the confines of its profound otherworldliness, the Jewry had learnt over time to cope with the gentiles up to a certain point. This point was the survival of the traditional political order and structure in Europe. The traditional Jewish survival strategies did not, however, provide any tools whatsoever with which to cope with unprecedented and extreme political situations, such as the rise of Nazi totalitarianism (Arendt 1948a, 303–311).

1.3. THE CRISIS OF ZIONISM

When Germany occupied France in 1940, Arendt had no choice but to continue her escape to America. Unlike in Paris, where she was unable to get any of her work published, once she settled in New York and joined the local German Jewish intellectual community, she began to contribute to Jewish politics in earnest by publishing articles on Jewish history, the contemporary situation of European Jews and Zionism. These articles clearly indicate that, although Arendt was not a militant Zionist engaged in concrete politicking in Zionist organisations, she was committed to Jewish politics and the fate of European Jews, both intellectually and practically, in her own way. And her way was to observe and analyse Zionist politics from a critical distance. She never became a *homo politicus à la* Blumenfeld, devoted whole-heartedly to a single cause, but preferred instead

to remain a kind of “Socrates” of sorts, evaluating the events and phenomena of the human world from the sidelines.

During the war, Arendt published a large number of her critiques of Jewish and Zionist politics in the columns she wrote for the German Jewish weekly, *Aufbau-Reconstruction*. Arendt scholars have tended to ignore these columns, maintaining that in them, Arendt did little more than reiterate her call for the establishment of a Jewish army. It is rarely pointed out that it was precisely in these columns that she began to develop and mould her systematic critique of Zionist politics.⁴ It is for precisely this reason that a few of these columns deserve closer attention in the context of the present study.

In 1942, the participants of the annual congress of the American Zionist Organization were to define which issues they thought should be emphasised in Jewish politics. Arendt was deeply disappointed with the resolutions made during the congress and saw them as a sign of crisis within the Zionist movement and politics. Instead of formulating explicit political claims about the situation at hand, they focused on dreaming about the postwar situation and formulating the Jewish position in future peace negotiations (Arendt 1942a).

In 1942, there was no indication at all that the Jews would have been included as a party to these peace negotiations if they took no steps to ensure their own participation. In Arendt’s view, the reason for the spinelessness and weakness of Zionist politics was all too clear. It stemmed from the unwillingness and incapability to acknowledge the priority of a single programmatic goal in times of war. The Zionists’ main goal should have been the acknowledgement of their right to join the war as a political community or body.

4. Nevertheless, it may be that Arendt’s early writings may gain more interest among scholars in future as a large number of her Jewish writings are finally being republished in a volume edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Felman. See Arendt 2007.

This principle should have been manifested in practice by the establishment of a Jewish army. It is important to point out that for Arendt, this principle had nothing at all to do with the right to fight against the Nazis, as participation in the war as such did not presuppose a separate army. Single Jews could and certainly did join other national armies (Arendt 1942a).

For Arendt, the grounds for establishing a Jewish army were political rather than military. She identified two reasons why a Jewish army should be created, one being tactical and the other based on principle. The tactical reason stemmed from the need to be able to anticipate the postwar situation and ensure the participation of the Jews in peace negotiations. In order to be able to sit at the table as equal partners, the Jews had to be recognised as an independent party that had waged its own war against Hitler. This would only have been possible by establishing a national Jewish army that would have declared war upon Germany (Arendt 1942a).

The second reason, based on principle, was related to Arendt's conception of politics. According to her, a political community is born by gathering together to begin something new that is related to the common world between people. In this action, freedom becomes actualised as the most important and characteristically political relationship between people. Founding and establishing an enduring political community requires the continuous creation of free relationships. However, in a politically extreme situation such as war, freedom cannot be actualised as an internal fight for power shares within the community, but is actualised instead by the act of fighting against a common enemy. Thus, for Arendt, a Jewish army was not only a military necessity but also a means of self-defence and the realisation of the principle of equal participation and the relationship of freedom in the extreme situation of war and under the threat of mass destruction.

Arendt argued that the first step towards a lasting solution to the situation facing the Jews was to recognise the crisis of traditional

Herzlian Zionism. In her view, there were two standpoints that needed revision. Firstly, the Zionists should have revised their view of who had the right to govern Palestine. After 1500 years of Arab settlement in the area, the Jews could no longer appeal to their natural and historical right to occupy the land. A credible political right to occupy a certain geographic region could only be acquired by cultivating it, by concretely working for the establishment of a cultural and political regime. More precisely, the labour of the land alone was not enough. It was also necessary to establish a tangible common world that people would share with each other. The Jews had only been working towards this end for 40 years (Arendt 1942a; 1942c).

Secondly, the Zionists should have revised their relationship with and policy towards Britain. The Balfour Declaration and the mandate system on which it was based were no longer relevant political alternatives.⁵ It no longer made sense to believe, in Herzlian terms, that a Jewish state could have been established as the result of high-level diplomatic negotiations and the mere purchase of a large enough piece of land in Palestine (Arendt 1942a).

According to Arendt, these two elements of the crisis of Zionism revealed a fundamental failure of the movement. It had never developed into a mass movement of the Jewish people. The Zionist leaders had been acting for their people but not been empowered

5. Here, Arendt had in mind the first Balfour Declaration of 1917, which was an official letter written by Arthur Balfour, the UK's Foreign Secretary, to Lord Rothschild, who was seen as the representative of the Jewish people. The letter stated that the British government viewed with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. The second Balfour Declaration of 1926 recognised the self-governing Dominions of the British Empire as fully autonomous states. The British Mandate for Palestine (1920–1948) was a League of Nations Mandate created after the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire was split by the Treaty of Sèvres. The objective of the mandate system was to administer the area of Palestine until it was able to stand alone.

by them. The European Zionist movement had never succeeded in resolving the fundamental contradiction between the revolutionary Jewish mass movement and traditional Jewish plutocracy. It had refused to face the fact that the interests of these two elements were not identical, choosing instead to camouflage the political conflict between them into a national ideological conflict as to whether the Jews constituted a people or not (Arendt 1942b).

Arendt had hoped for much more from the American Zionists, as they had learnt how to engage in politics in a country with a long democratic tradition. This tradition provided them with valuable insights into the revision of Zionist politics. In Arendt's view, the American Zionists had two main tasks. On the one hand, because of their experience with democratic politics, it was their task to democratise the Zionist movement by turning it into a mass movement. On the other hand, they needed to clarify the significance of Palestine in relation to their own political existence. In the American context, it was obvious that the Herzlian dream of the establishment of a Jewish state would not be a solution for all the Jews of the world. Most American Jews did not want to emigrate anywhere. They did not think in terms of the Herzlian conception of antisemitism, according to which antisemitism would plague the Jews for as long as they were dispersed among other peoples in the world. The American tradition of democracy had taught them something about sharing the world with other people: the national basis was not the only possible solution for the peaceful political organisation of people (Arendt 1942b).

But the American Zionists, too, had their own weak point, namely the influence of philanthropic elements in the Jewish community. Instead of thinking in democratic and horizontal terms, American Jews had also learnt to think in hierarchical terms typical of traditional philanthropic practice. The American Zionists were not overly eager to attack and revolt against the traditional plutocratic power structures of their own community, but preferred instead to

conceal their internal conflicts by making politically indefinite and ineffective compromises (Arendt 1942b).

1.3.1. The Ironies of Zionist Politics

It is important to remember that in addition to the numerous aspects of substantial criticism of Zionism which are in Arendt's early columns, another characteristic of her political criticism begins to take shape here, too. This characteristic is her style of writing, which caused much of the debate over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The book was said to be full of overstatements and poorly formed ironies which blurred the distinctions between Nazi criminals and their victims. It is true that Arendt clearly favoured an emphatically ironic style when writing the Eichmann book, although I think it is important to note that this stylistic choice was not limited to the context of the Eichmann report. On the contrary, the columns she wrote for *Aufbau* show that it was already part of her early stylistic repertoire. I will give three examples.

The first example concerns Nahum Goldmann's (the then President of both the World Jewish Congress and the World Zionist Organization) speech at the American Zionist Conference, in which he suggested that the plight of European Jews would best be resolved through the mass transportation of European Jews to Palestine after the war. Arendt treats this claim as a kind of return to the Herzlian conception of the solution of the Jewish question. She observed that it was no coincidence that another leading American Zionist and member of the congress, Stephen S. Wise, reacted to Goldmann's speech by pointing out a resemblance between the words "transportation" and "deportation" (Arendt 1942a). The irony lies, of course, in the parallel between the national-socialist goal of making Europe *Judenrein* by deporting the Jews out of Europe and the Zionist goal of transporting the Jews to Palestine. It is a well known fact – and one of which Arendt was perfectly aware – that

there were many Zionist leaders in Europe who sincerely believed that these two goals could have been intertwined in such a way that both the Nazis and the Zionists would have been at least somewhat satisfied with the outcome. Aside from the irony of the situation, which only really becomes clear when viewed in retrospect, as we know the outcome of the Nazi Jewish policy, the main point Arendt aimed at making with this ironic observation was her argument that Herzlian politics from above had become entirely obsolete. Instead of playing diplomatic games with large European powers, those who wanted to support the Jewish fight for freedom should have joined their ranks.

The second irony is related to philanthropic politics. Arendt argued that the Jews would not be able to shed their own mistrust of the Palestinian experiment as long as it was presented to them in first class hotels by elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen as an expanded shelter for homeless people. Here, the irony lies in the fact that nobody knew how many homeless people in need of a roof there would actually be after the war (Arendt 1942b). Arendt hints at the possibility that traditional Jewish philanthropy might die a “natural” death through the execution of the Nazi Jewish policy.

Thirdly, she observed that if the circumstances were not so sad and serious, there could hardly be a more absurd spectacle than that of the Jews’ continuous belief that the postwar solution of the Jewish question could be based on the status quo, as if the bestial version of Hitler’s antisemitism could be modified into a milder form, such as that represented by some members of the Polish government in exile, and the problem of Arabic antisemitism could be resolved within the traditional colonial structure (Arendt 1942c). The irony lies in the fact that the Jewish mandate in Palestine would be guaranteed by states that no longer existed and applied to a dead people. Even in its milder form, the status quo would mean that the world would be divided into countries that wanted the Jews to leave and countries to which they were not allowed entry (Arendt 1942c).

These three examples illustrate that playing with ironies was indeed a very early aspect of Arendt's textual strategy. As I pointed out in the introduction, her aim was to push certain characteristics of a phenomenon to the extreme in order to illuminate her own point as clearly as possible. Often this endeavour led her to identify parallels between the actions of the Jews and their enemies. This may well be one of the reasons why her Eichmann book caused such a furious controversy, as most people tend to refuse to face extreme ironies and are unable to see anything amusing in them. More often than not they are received as intentional offences committed against innocent victims.

1.4. ARENDT'S CRITIQUE OF THE JEWISH STATE

For Arendt, the emergence and later collapse of Nazi totalitarianism was the same as the final collapse of the European national state system, which in practice had been an imperialistic and colonial enterprise of certain great European powers rather than the happy coexistence of nations that were politically organised on a national basis. The outcome of the First World War, including the enormous problems related to minorities and stateless people, had already shown that in reality Europe was a multiethnic continent in which the Jews were not the only people who lived dispersed amongst other peoples (Arendt 1944b; 1945b). The mythical and power political nature of European nationalism was only emphasised by the fact that the great European powers had never been satisfied with any "natural" borders between nations, but had instead always greedily attempted to conquer new lands regardless of who "originally" lived there. This greediness culminated in the imperialistic era, during which the European powers were able to enjoy and exploit the new riches they found on new continents. The First World War was a kind of "swan song" of this deeply rooted desire to control as large a portion of the world as possible while simultaneously abiding by

the terms of the established international political order, in which the European colonial countries had a clear-cut hegemony over the entire globe (Arendt 1945a; 1945b).

Arendt firmly believed that the postwar political organisation in Europe could no longer be based on national states, but should instead be established on a federal basis. The emergence of Nazism had shown only too concretely that the ideological basis of the national state system was politically dangerous with its intrinsic racism and national chauvinism; when Hitler made his first territorial claims, the leaders of other European countries could only nod their heads in agreement that he was, after all, only demanding the return of that which rightfully belonged to the German people. After the war, Arendt, together with Karl Jaspers (see Jaspers 1967), advocated the creation of a European Federation. She did not see the suitability of the federal principle as limited to Europe, but rather conceived of it as a general model for the postwar and postcolonial political organisation of all human communities. As a great admirer of the political system of the United States, she believed that the American Constitution would provide both Europe and the Near East with a concrete model upon which to base their own constitution.

For Arendt, the problem never was the Jewish presence in the Near East as such. In her view, the voluntary immigration of the Jews to Palestine and their concrete way of living there had already historically justified it by the 1930s. The problem was the mode and conditions of the Jewish presence. As we have already seen, she never accepted the Herzlian notion of a country without a people, but instead tirelessly reiterated that the Arabs had an equal right to form a political presence in the region. From this viewpoint, she found the idea of a Jewish national state very problematic and dangerous in political terms. Even more importantly, she found the entire notion of a national state politically anachronistic.

It is within this framework that she spoke about the need to establish a Jewish “homeland” in Palestine. The choice of the term

homeland already reveals that what she had in mind was neither a Jewish nor any other national state but rather an organisational mode which would include all those who lived in the area. Bearing in mind the colonial history of the Arab countries, she believed that the establishment of a national state system was not a feasible solution for them either. Arab-Jewish cooperation would be needed in order to establish a federated state, which would be a stepping stone for the establishment of a later and greater federated structure in the Near East and the Mediterranean area and which would eliminate the Jewish fear of being outnumbered by Arabs (Arendt 1948a, 191; 1950, 218). This federated structure, for its own part, could serve as a model for all formerly and presently oppressed people in their efforts to find a way to live their own political existence while avoiding developing nationalist superiority complexes (Arendt 1948a, 186).

For Arendt, federal did not mean binational. Although in practice she supported Judah Magnes'⁶ efforts to speak in favour of a binational state of Jews and Arabs, to which the Jews had historical rights and the Arabs a natural right (Arendt 1950, 211), the guiding principle behind her thinking was the dream of a world in which a person could freely choose to which polity she or he wanted to belong:

What I would like to see and what cannot be achieved today would be such a change in circumstances that everyone could freely choose where he would like to exercise his political rights and responsibilities and in which cultural tradition he feels most comfortable. So that there will finally be an end to genealogical investigations both here and in Europe. (Arendt 1985/1992, 91)

6. Judah Magnes was one of the founders of the American Jewish Committee and later the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His views as a Reform rabbi were not in the mainstream. Since the First World War to the day of his death in October 1948, he was the premiere spokesman for Arab-Jewish understanding in Palestine. He advocated a binational state in which equal rights would be enjoyed by all. He advanced this view in the groups Brit Shalom and Ihud.

As this quote shows, Arendt was not overly optimistic about the possibility of doing away with the national state structure in the political organisation of people, although in 1948 she still hoped that the “balkanisation” of the entire Near East region could be avoided by moving towards federal structures. By balkanisation she was referring to the possibility that the Near East would become transformed into a battlefield of the conflicting interests of the great powers to the detriment of all authentic national interests (Arendt 1950, 217). At the same time, she feared that if the extreme elements of Zionism were allowed to determine the course of development in Palestine, the result would be the enforcement of aggressive national chauvinism:

Chauvinism of the Balkan type could use the religious concept of the chosen people and allow its meaning to degenerate into hopeless vulgarity. The birth of a nation in the midst of our century may be a great event; it certainly is a dangerous event. National sovereignty which so long had been the very symbol of free national development has become the greatest danger to national survival for small nations. (Arendt 1950, 222)

As we know in retrospect, Arendt anticipated the coming problems. She correctly feared that the birth of Jewish state could and would lead to extreme national chauvinism by Jewish people against the Palestinian people and their right to live in the area and share it freely and equally with the other people living there.

1.4.1. The Artificial Community in the Shadow of Natural Justification

What makes Arendt’s arguments relevant even today is that she does not approach the political situation in the Near East from the viewpoint of the immediate interests of the Jews, which could easily lead to the unfounded justification of Jewish terrorism as the only effective means of reaching the goal of the establishment of a national state. Nor does she approach it from the viewpoint of the Holocaust,

from which the foundation of a Jewish state would appear as the least that could be done to compensate for such cruel destruction. Rather, she approaches it in broader political terms by asking: What kinds of polities should be established following the collapse of the national state system, and what kinds of political principles should guide the foundation of these polities? In this context, she shows how extreme nationalism, together with some other self-centred political interests, may lead astray even the justified struggle of a persecuted people to establish a polity of their own, causing them to adopt a policy which comes paradoxically and frighteningly close to the policies of its worst enemies, as has happened in the case of Israel.

As a new polity, Arendt conceives of Israel as being a unique case, arguing that what happened in Palestine was extraordinarily different from anything that had happened in the past (Arendt 1950, 205). She identifies four specific factors that define its extraordinary status. Firstly, the building of a Jewish national home was not a colonial enterprise in which Europeans came to exploit foreign riches with the help of and at the expense of native labour. Secondly, the exploitation characteristic of the “original accumulation” of imperialist enterprises was completely absent. The American and European capital that flooded the country came in the form of charitable contributions, which the recipients could use as they pleased. Thirdly, charitable funds were used to build an economy with a distinctly socialist physiognomy. And fourthly, collective rural settlements in Palestine were not inspired by any kind of utilitarian reasoning. (Arendt 1950, 205–206)

All four of these factors are clearly intertwined with one another and thus make the Palestinian experiment unique in its extraordinary artificiality. Arendt points out that it is precisely this artificiality which should be understood in a new light. Unlike both the Zionists and anti-Zionists, who believed that the artificial character of the enterprise was to be reproached rather than praised and who tried to explain the building of a Jewish national home in terms of its

being an historically necessary answer to eternal antisemitism, Arendt thought that the artificial character of the country should be greeted in terms of its human and, as such, political value and significance. More precisely, none of the responses of immigrants to the challenges they had to face in Palestine were “natural”. There was nothing inevitable or necessary in them at all, as they were entirely human, i.e. political. Thus, the biggest mistake made by the Zionists was their attempt to naturalise something that was entirely unnatural and their refusal to acknowledge the political uniqueness of their own enterprise in its artificiality.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that all Zionists made bad politicians. They were often quite skilful and clever in the art of political bargaining and tactics. The point, rather, is that their tendency to unquestionably accept the supremacy of the established great powers hindered the development of their political imagination and judgement, thus preventing them from foreseeing the possible changes in the political scene in Europe and the Near East. In other words, Zionist politicians were most skilful in quasi-diplomatic negotiations, in which the negotiating parties were given and “recognised” each other as such. It could be argued that their sense of *Realpolitik* overshadowed and restricted their capacity to play with the contingency of the situation. They concentrated on figuring out what seemed to be the most realistic, and thus the most attainable alternative in a given situation without realising that this realism did not necessarily help them to identify all the possible alternatives in unprecedented and extreme situations.

Yet another mistake was their poor choice of rhetoric. They did not understand that it made no sense to try to convince gentiles to acknowledge that Palestine had “originally” belonged to the Jews and that as such they had a religious-historical right to inhabit it. It would have made more sense to try to convince as many quarters as possible to see the novelty of the Jewish enterprise, to win the support of gentiles by showing the genesis of a new polity in practice –

a new polity which based its political justification entirely on concrete action in Palestine. Thus, Arendt observed, neither the Jewish workers “nor their leaders realized articulately the chief features of the new experiment. The Zionist leadership could go on for decades talking about the natural coincidence between Jewish interests and British imperialism, showing how little they understood themselves.” (Arendt 1950, 207–208)

What was lost by this political blindness of both Zionist leaders and Jewish workers and farmers was the seed of the new political body that the Jews managed to erect under the watchful eye of the British trustee. In Arendt’s view, this unofficial Jewish government was neither the Jewish Agency, the recognised political body of world Zionism, nor the Vaad Leumi, the official representative of the Palestinian Jewry, but rather the Histadruth, i.e. the Palestinian trade unions (Arendt 1950, 207). This argument may come as somewhat of a surprise to Arendt scholars, many of whom have come to believe that Arendt’s thinking is so entirely political that there is no room in it for trade unionism. Arendt’s purpose is not, however, to praise trade unions as such. Rather she saw the Histadruth as a new and characteristically Jewish political element within the Palestinian reality of the 1940s. Unlike the Jewish Agency and Vaad Leumi, which attempted to negotiate with the great powers in the context of the established political order, the Histadruth concentrated on establishing concrete structures of the Jewish public realm in Palestine. Instead of limiting itself to acting according to the lines dictated by the British trustee, it acted and established something new despite the limiting pressures of *Realpolitik*. It moved into all those areas which are usually regulated by municipal or national government. According to Arendt, this explains the miraculous fact that a mere proclamation of Jewish self-government eventually sufficed to bring a state machine into being (Arendt 1950, 207).

In sum, Arendt stresses the uniqueness of Israel as a new political experiment by illustrating that it came surprisingly close to her

dream of the existence of freely chosen polities. She stresses that there was nothing at all natural in the genesis of Israel, but that its political uniqueness lay rather in its total artificiality (Arendt 1950, 220). In Arendt's view, as a unique political artefact, the future of Israel depended on the political choice between a national state structure and a federation. The choice of a national state would lead to the political ossification and militarisation of the entire people in self-defence against its hostile neighbours, accompanied by an increase in national-chauvinist claims aimed at conquering more *Lebensraum*. A federation, on the other hand, would mean the consolidation and appreciation of the artificial political nature of the Israeli polity.

In this chapter I have dealt with Arendt's early writings on Jewish politics and Zionism in order to show that her critique of wartime Jewish and Zionist politics in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was very much based on these early reflections and critiques. On the basis of the reading I have carried out in this chapter, it is possible to single out a few ideas or guiding principles that would shape virtually all of her later reflections on Jewish politics. First and foremost, there was the notion of the duty to defend oneself as a Jew, which she originally inherited from her mother and which was later politicised by her reading of Lazare's work. Second, there was the critique of the Herzlian type of nationalistic Zionism, which Arendt wanted to see replaced by a new type of democratic and federalist thinking. Third, there was the critique of the traditional plutocratic Jewish political tradition, which lacked democratic (not to mention parliamentary) structures and institutions and was based instead on the hierarchical status structures of Jewish communities. Instead of creating equalitarian political structures and procedures, Jewish community politics was based on the traditional religious structure of the *Judenräte*, the assemblies of Rabbis. Fourth, there was the critique of the Jewish wartime policy in Europe, Palestine and

America. While Arendt criticised the Jewish Agency for its highly restrictive and selective rescue policy in Europe, she maintained that the American Zionists did not want to commit themselves in any way with determining the fate of European Jews. And finally, there was the element of irony, which constituted the basis for the development of the sharp textual and rhetorical strategy that Arendt had already adopted in her early writings, well before the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In the subsequent chapters I will show that Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial becomes intelligible only in the context of these guiding principles: it is possible to understand that what is really at stake in her trial report is the critique of European political tradition. In her understanding, Jewish politics should be approached as both a part of this tradition and one of its anomalies.