

Jewish Peoplehood, “Jewish Politics,” and Political Responsibility: Arendt on Zionism and Partitions

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Bi-nationalism Reconsidered

The last years have seen a growing academic interest in the small group of Jewish intellectuals who, during the period of the British mandate introduced the idea of bi-nationalism into the discussion of Zionism and Palestine. In 1926 these intellectuals established a small organization called “Brit Shalom” (Covenant of Peace) that called for the establishment of a bi-national state in Palestine, based on equal rights and partnership of Jews and Arabs (a year earlier, most of them had been among the founders of the Hebrew University). After the dispersal of that organization in the early 1930s, there were other initiatives in the same direction. By the late 1930s and during the 1940s, the adherents of the bi-national idea became members in an organization called “Ichud”

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("Union"), which tried to advance a solution based on the rights of the Palestinians, and objected, finally, to the partition of Palestine. Among them were some of the most prominent Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century: Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, Hans Kohn, Hugo Bergmann, Ernst Simon, Yehouda Leib Magnes, and Hannah Arendt. In spite of their political marginality, these intellectuals, and the organizations in which they took active (and sometimes less active) part over the years, have attracted the attention of numerous scholars. By now, the general interest appears to have expanded even further, bringing about the publication of a large number of remarkable studies (Ratzabi, 2002; Schumski, 2010; Maor, 2010; Gordon, 2008; Weis, 2004; Heller, 2003).

It should be noted, however, that most of these studies refrain from dealing with the political ideas of this group. Instead, they concentrate on the historical and cultural background of the intellectuals involved, most of whom came from the German-Jewish milieu. Bi-national positions are correctly interpreted as a manifestation of the unique German-Jewish spirit of the early twentieth century, the result of central European experiences during the rise of nationalism and the formation of nation states (particularly in Czechoslovakia, where many originated). Accordingly, they consider their implications for thinking Jewish identity, but hardly (with the exception of Shumski) consider their implications for thinking the question of Palestine. Yet it does not seem to be a coincidence that this renewed academic curiosity is emerging at a time when the idea of one common state is being reintroduced into the larger discourse. Along with the question of Palestine, this idea is receiving attention from Arabs and Jews alike. The growing awareness that the peace process is unlikely to bring a genuine and just reconciliation, that it generates in fact more and more oppression and violence, has led many to rethink the logic of partition and the principle of separation that has long governed the search for alternatives. Given the renewed relevance of the idea of bi-nationalism, this essay will explore its conceptual development in the writing of Hannah Arendt. Crucially, I will argue that Arendt's political articulation of bi-nationalism also implies a rethinking of Jewish consciousness, and thereby suggests her awareness of the cultural dimension of politics in a way that has not been fully acknowledged.

It is not that the *Brit Shalom* intellectuals left us with any satisfactory or coherent political program. Their political writings contain many contradictions that cannot be easily solved. Indeed, more than a political organization, *Brit Shalom* functioned as a cultural association, dealing with cultural issues and initiatives that aimed at bringing a better understanding between Jews and Arabs. Nor is there any question that reality has dramatically changed since this political vision was first introduced. We should remember that in

1926, when *Brit Shalom* was established, the Jews were a minority of less than 20% of the entire population, half of them orthodox and non-Zionists. When the question was raised anew in the 1940s, and equal rights were being offered to the Arab majority, the number of Jews had increased to about a third of the population. From the Arab point of view, understandably, the bi-national vision, even if condemned by the Zionist establishment, was not significantly different from the hegemonic Zionist one, which insisted on a (projected) Jewish majority. One of the reasons to advance the bi-national agenda during the 1940s was in fact to allow Jewish immigration to continue.

It would however be mistaken to disregard the challenge, to ignore the critical insights on Zionist policy deployed in the writings of the *Brit Shalom* members. Their sensitivity to the colonial aspects of Zionism, in particular, should not be taken for granted. It found expression in the early writings of Hans Kohn (later a noted scholar of nationalism), and of Gershom Scholem (already an established historian of Jewish mysticism), as well as the philosopher Hugo Bergman. And while they all saw themselves as representatives of the true spirit of Zionism, Zionism responded by condemning them, thereby defining itself in opposition to them. “Bi-nationalism,” the idea of a partnership and equal sharing between Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine, thus provides an opportunity to examine and clarify many of the subversive elements associated with German-Jewish intellectuals, including their boundaries and limitations.

As we ourselves return to their ideas, we do so from a completely different situation. The state of Israel has long been established, and total Israeli hegemony is an indisputable reality. It is in this precise context, however, that the concept of bi-nationalism acquires a wider significance, both as a starting point for the analysis of the past, and as the fertile ground from which to generate an alternative approach to the present. The fundamental questions remain the same, and the vision of equality between Jews and Arabs in Palestine/Eretz Israel is as relevant and challenging as ever. A critical reading of the bi-national literature indicates the path to a process of decolonization—which in this context means an urgent rethinking of Israeli Jewish nationalism, with the understanding that it must include Palestinian nationalism. It is easy to understand the anxiety raised by such an idea of bi-nationalism, and we must take this anxiety seriously, but we should also remember that the root cause of this anxiety is found in the idea of equality.

It should be clarified that in this essay, I do not use the concept of bi-nationalism as referring to a solution of “one state” nor as a counter argument to the two-state solution, but rather as the framework of discussion and of responsibility. The concept helps resist the main principle that leads

the “peace process”, namely the concept of separation. Bi-nationalism leads to the basic understanding that the question of the rights of the Jews and the question of the rights of the Palestinians are the same. It thereby implies a Jewish identity based on the recognition of Palestinian rights, one that does not exclude the Palestinian but which begins to imagine these identities together.

Arendt: Anti-semitism, Zionism and the Jewish State

The publication of Hannah Arendt’s *Jewish Writings* (2007) reflects primarily the growing interest in Arendt’s entire writings, but it can also be considered within the frame of current political and historical discussions. Among many essays concerning the Jewish question, the volume includes Arendt’s engagement with Zionism, where, writing from a pro-Zionist point of view, she warned against Zionist policy and the demand to establish Palestine as a Jewish state. To determine the relevance of such essays is particularly demanding in the context of Arendt’s singular reflections on Judaism and the idea of a Jewish state. Arendt defined herself as a political thinker first of all, and it seems to me that the way to read her is therefore by inserting her observations into the wider, actual context of her writing (and ours), and to try to understand her position from this specific and concrete perspective.

Arendt’s writings on Zionism and the question of Palestine in that period were part of yet another broad project. It was then, while she was thinking about *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and over the course of writing that book, that Arendt developed her perceptions of Jewish nationalism, her support for a Jewish homeland, and her objection to a Jewish state. Her political writings and activism should thus be seen as an integral outcome of her thinking on the nation-state, imperialism and anti-Semitism: through them she was trying to translate and implement her general arguments into the concretely political, into the collective, political project of a people whose aim should not, she thought, be a nation-state. Such a state would suffer from severe contradictions with regard to what it should defend, contradictions that would ultimately lead to its collapse.

Zionism was not merely a case study, being neither an exemplary instance of a national project nor of colonial conflict. Rather it represented an articulation of all the major categories of modernity, and so provides key elements for establishing a different political understanding and analytical framework. Reading Arendt on Zionism today may shed light on her entire understanding of modernity, secularization, the nation-state and imperialism—and on ours. Her claim was, after all, that the actual policy of the Zionist movement demonstrated a failure on the part of its leadership to understand anti-Semitism as a historical phenomenon. She condemned the

Zionist demand to establish a Jewish nation-state as the adoption of the very principles that enabled the political rise and ultimate victory of anti-Semitism in the first place.

Arendt's critique was directed against the concrete Zionist policies that had been officially adopted during World War II, and which posited the establishment of Palestine as a "Jewish commonwealth" as the ultimate goal of Zionism and of the war itself. In a series of essays published in the 1940s, she came out against this new political line, viewing it as a shift toward a right-wing nationalistic attitude. Arguing this line that it ignored the rights and will of the Palestinians; Arendt ended up sharply rejecting the idea of a Jewish state. Arendt clearly warned that such a state would lead to the dispossession of the Palestinians, and would consequently also risk the very existence of the Jewish community.

Although she shared a similar background, Arendt was different from the other advocates of the bi-national idea: unlike them, she did not emigrate to Palestine, nor did she participate in the construction of the "national homeland." She consistently criticized and even condemned Zionist politics, but did so always from a standpoint of serious concern and deep empathy. Arendt basically identified with the vision of a "cultural center" that would reflect on Diaspora Jews, a vision that constituted the core of the Zionist perception of her Jerusalemite partners. She herself had no particular interest in the revival of Hebrew culture, yet, as the *Jewish Writings* document, her Zionism and her support of Jewish-Arab collaboration in Palestine were both integral parts of her thinking on the Jewish question. They both stemmed from her committed preoccupation with the idea of Jewish politics at the time. Arendt, who was not interested in "Jewish affairs" until the 1930s, joined Zionist activism after the rise of the Nazis in Germany and regarded Zionism as an effective and authentic way to struggle against anti-Semitism, as part of a broadly conceived "Jewish politics." It is her ambivalent attitude towards Zionism that makes her observations particularly meaningful. On the one hand, she supported Zionism as a movement that mobilized the Jews as a people, struggled against false assimilation, and generated a distinctive and genuine "Jewish politics." But on the other hand, she condemned Zionism for denying other possible Jewish activities, and particularly so when considering the movement's adoption of colonial methods, which she understood as its paradoxical embrace of the values of anti-Semitism.

"Zionism Reconsidered"

In the first paragraph of her famous essay "Zionism Reconsidered" published in 1944, Arendt described the implications of two current resolutions that expressed the new political approach. One was the 1942 "Biltmore

Program,” which asked for the establishment of “a free Jewish commonwealth in Palestine” after the war. This program was further sharpened and given a more extreme formulation by the American Jewish Conference in their 1944 “Atlantic City resolution” (later confirmed by the World Zionist Organization), that raised the demand for a “free and democratic Jewish commonwealth . . . which shall embrace the whole of Palestine, undivided and undiminished” (Arendt, 2007, 343). Analyzing these declarations, Arendt claimed:

The Atlantic City resolution goes even a step further than the Biltmore Program in which the Jewish minority had granted minority rights to the Arab majority. This time the Arabs were simply not mentioned in the resolution, which obviously leaves them the choice between voluntary emigration or second-class citizenship [I]t seems to admit that only opportunist reasons had previously prevented the Zionist movement from stating its final aims. These aims now appear to be completely identical with those of the extremists as far as the future political constitution of Palestine is concerned. It is a deadly blow to those Jewish parties in Palestine itself that have tirelessly preached the necessity of an understanding between the Arab and the Jewish peoples. On the other hand it will considerably strengthen the majority under the leadership of Ben Gurion, which, through the pressure of many injustices in Palestine and the terrible catastrophes in Europe, have turned more than ever nationalistic. (Arendt 2007, 343)

In other words, a Jewish state, a “free Jewish commonwealth” as understood by the Zionist leadership, left no room for Arab existence, and particularly so when accompanied by a growing discussion of the transfer of Arabs from Palestine. Arendt objected on similar grounds to the 1947 UN partition resolution and voiced a prescient warning against its consequences. She argued against British and Zionist policies of division between the peoples, and predicted that such division would inevitably lead to the dispossession of the Arabs. She described the process that would bring about the expulsion of the Palestinians and the systematic violation of their rights, as well as the subsequent onset of a war which would threaten the very existence of the Jewish community. Parallel to her writing, Arendt collaborated with Judah Leib Magnes, the first president and chancellor of the Hebrew University and the most enthusiastic adherent of bi-nationalism (Heller, 2003); she assisted his otherwise unsuccessful efforts to prevent the acceptance of the partition plan and to suggest alternative proposals based on agreements with Arab representatives. In March 1948, with the prospect of war becoming evident, Arendt and Magnes both supported the short-lived American initiative to nominate an international trusteeship that would rule until a settlement could be achieved to ensure the rights of the population. Even after the war

she continued for a while to advance the idea of a regional federation in which the Jewish entity would be included.

One can feel the urgency and the growing sense of the coming catastrophe that motivated her writings and activities in 1947-48, a sense most obviously expressed in the title of her main article on the issue, "To Save the Jewish Homeland." There, Arendt warned against the blindness of the Jewish leadership, who had surrendered to colonial interests. From her own position as a stateless person, she was able to demonstrate the exclusive role and responsibility of nation-states, as mechanisms of exclusion that create refugees. Considered from this angle, the rights and perspective of the Palestinians became an integral part of the discussion of Jewish rights and self-definition as well as of the vision of Jewish political emancipation. From Arendt's perspective, any other option amounted to a denial of the principles Zionism should uphold in the name of the Jewish people.

Arendt Reconsidered (1)

There is no doubt that many of the insights and critical observations deployed in these essays by Arendt should be regarded as obsolete. They were introduced in a concrete political context that has since drastically changed. The essays were written when the Jews were a minority, and when a sort of bi-national state did in fact exist: the British colonial administration, although in a process of decline, was to a certain extent such a state. The establishment of the state of Israel, on the other hand, and the temporary partition of Palestine that followed the 1948 war, seemed to bring the idea of bi-nationalism to an end. Arendt still hoped for a change in attitude after the end of the war, but like most of the other advocates of the idea, she later abandoned this option, never to return to it. The reason for this, it may be suggested, is that, at least for the time being, her pessimistic predictions on the chance of the Jewish homeland to survive had been proven wrong. For all practical purposes, the motivations for her political activity had disappeared.

It is, however, imperative to recognize that Arendt's ideas became "unrealistic" only when "reality" proved her right. It revealed that her observations and predictions had been fundamentally correct and precise. This is to say that Arendt became irrelevant at the very moment when what she foresaw came to actuality. Thus, her critique of Zionist policy was impressively accurate when it came to the implication of Zionist policy and to the partition plan. The establishment of the state of Israel as a Jewish state *did* cause the destruction of the Arab entity. It did lead to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. It also led to the confiscation of most Arab lands, which were henceforth declared to be Jewish national property. Finally, and as she also predicted, the definition of Israel as a Jewish state turned its Arab

citizens (those who were not expelled from its territory in 1948) into second-class citizens. That is why any assertion today that the bi-national arrangement was not realistic can mean only one thing: the incontrovertible admission that Arendt was absolutely correct and that ethnic cleansing stands at the foundation of the partition plan; that in order to establish a Jewish state and to ensure Jewish hegemony and a Jewish majority, expulsion and exclusion were inevitable. The state of Israel indeed left “no choice between [non]-voluntary emigration or second-class citizenship,” but both choices were implemented through the division of the Palestinian people between two different kinds of refugees: second-class Arab citizens in the State of Israel and, since 1967, stateless Palestinians under Israeli occupation, to whom Israel now proposes second-class citizenship of a limited and divided Palestinian “nation-state.”

One could still argue, of course, that even if Arendt was right, her predictions no longer have any meaning. The reality “on the ground” has been dramatically altered, and the state of Israel can only be seen as a *fait accompli*. This is not untrue, and it is in fact the perspective from which we should read this historical rendering of her work. Arendt herself also failed to predict the mass immigration to Israel in the years following its independence—of people who were often themselves refugees, but who were not allowed to experience their own status as refugees in Israel, who were rather forced to suppress their memories and culture. And Arendt was certainly wrong in her assumption, shared by Magnes, that the Jewish community would remain relatively small and would not grow to more than a million.

But such historical hindsight does not reduce the relevance of Arendt’s prescient vision and analysis, and this on several levels. First, the past and its perception still determine the present discourse and remain a fundamental aspect of the construction of reality. Arendt’s predictions undermine one of the main arguments used by Israel to refute any discussion of the Palestinian right of return, namely the argument that the mass expulsion came as a result of a Palestinian refusal to partition, that Palestinians are accordingly to be blamed for their tragedy. Arendt foresaw the evacuation. She described how it would occur as a result of the UN resolution, not because of its rejection by the Palestinians. Writing during the war, she observed that the evacuation of Palestinians from Haifa and Tiberias “could not have been carried out without careful preparation, and it is hardly likely that they are spontaneous” (Arendt 2007, 397). Writing *before the events* she showed that the program of transfer was inherent to the resolution’s logic, at least in the way Zionist leaders perceived it. She came to this conclusion out of a penetrating reading of the Zionist documents, as well as the growing rhetoric of transfer in the Zionist press of the time. Arendt was utterly precise in her analysis, and she

made manifest all the contradictions associated with the partition plan and its implementation. She demonstrated that it was not the refusal of the Palestinians but the forced implementation of partition that determined the evacuation of the Palestinian population. Her analysis of Zionist declarations, Zionist policies, and the Zionist discourse of mass transfer brought her to understand all this. She reminds us, therefore, that the partition plan was also the partition of the Palestinian people, half of whom were supposed to remain as citizens of the Jewish state according to the original program. We should note that Arendt herself did not use the term bi-nationalism and even pronounced against it in arguments to which we will return. She preferred a wider federative solution. But for the moment, following her observations, we should notice again that bi-nationalism is not to be seen as a political solution but rather as the frame of political responsibility and thinking.

In the name of responsibility—a key concept in Arendt’s writings—the return to reality and to historical context is therefore of crucial importance. There is no question that we should consider historical reality. But it is equally important to properly apprehend the boundaries of responsibility, a responsibility that includes *both* Jews and Arabs. It is crucial as well to understand that the refugees are very much a part of this context, and should be integral part of the discussion of the rights of the Jews. Arendt foresaw the plight of Palestinian refugees when she herself was stateless, when she herself documented that experience in “We Refugees,” an article that would later become the cornerstone for her discussion of the human condition. The question of the refugees is not an easy question, but there is ample evidence that its total suppression or its spurious solution are equally dangerous.

The persistence of the principles proposed by Arendt is visible in the continuing condemnation of the idea of bi-nationalism as being anti-Zionist. It was so labeled when it was first introduced, when the Jews were a minority, and it is still seen as a threat, the very mention of which must be suppressed. Not surprisingly, the current “peace discourse” in Israel follows quite precisely the very principles Arendt criticized long ago. The concept of separation, for instance, is at the core of the Israeli perception of “peace” and makes its limits manifest. Peace here does not mean the fulfillment of Palestinian rights, or a vision of equal co-existence. It is rather an expression of the will to separation. From the Israeli point of view, in other words, the reigning vision of peace is explicitly articulated as the desire to get rid of the Palestinians in order to maintain a homogeneous Jewish state, and to restore Israel’s self-image as an innocent, Western community, an image, incidentally, that has surely been damaged during decades of direct occupation and resistance.

"Jewish Politics"

What makes Arendt's criticism significant is the fact that it articulated the logical conclusion to her perception of what collective and distinctive "Jewish politics" should be. Arendt's own critique did not come out of an anti-national or anti-Zionist position but rather from a deep belief that the Jews could be emancipated only as a people. She did not write from a universalist point of view, in other words, but from a Jewish point of view—one can even say, from a national Jewish point of view. When she blamed Ben-Gurion (and later Scholem) for being too nationalistic, Arendt meant no more, but also no less, than their support of the nation-state, not the very identification of Jews as a people (she would prefer the term "peoplehood" and regularly used the term "brethren"). On the contrary, during the war she repeatedly called for a distinctive Jewish politics and for the political mobilization of the Jews as a people. It is because Arendt believed in the capacity for political action on the part of the Jewish people that she also objected to the idea of the state, and could warn against its consequences. She famously recalled that "when one is attacked *as a Jew* one must respond not as a German or a Frenchman or a world citizen, not as an upholder of the rights of Man, but *as a Jew*." (2000, 12). At that time, the only possibility of fighting Nazi policy was to bring "a political organization of the Jewish people." This is why she devoted herself to the task of advancing the establishment of a separate "Jewish army," in which Jews would fight among other nations, but in separate units. A military framework was supposed to establish the Jews as a European people, but a people that would subvert the very system of the nation-states, a non-territorial people within Europe and a part of the federation of free people, whose very freedom is distinguished from sovereignty (1970, 5-6). Accordingly, Arendt expressed her admiration for the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt, describing their actions as being "for the Honor and glory of the Jewish People," words not so different from those of the Zionist vocabulary of heroism (2007, 199).

It becomes clear why Zionism should be a part of that Jewish framework: not as the only and ultimate purpose of Jewish politics, but as one vector among a much wider range of Jewish organizations and Jewish struggles. Arendt could thus praise Zionism for taking action, and for generating political mobilization, as well as for its resistance to assimilation, but on the very same grounds she also attacked Zionism for betraying its duty by subordinating the interests of the Jews to the history of Palestine: "for the sake of Palestine it has abandoned Jewish politics on a global scale" (2007, 57). In other words, she did not blame Zionism for being nationalistic, but rather for preventing a united, albeit diverse, Jewish politics. On the one hand, then, she favored Zionism as a movement that mobilized the Jews as a people, strug-

gled against false assimilation and generated a distinctive and genuine Jewish politics. But on the other, she condemned Zionism for denying other possible Jewish activities, and particularly for its adoption of colonial methods as well as its embrace of the basic values of anti-Semitism.

This judgment was based on her 1932 critical account of “the Enlightenment and the Jews” (Arendt, 2007, 3-18), one of her most brilliant and ground-breaking articles, which was later elaborated upon in different ways. There, she became one of the first to consider the process of emancipation as, in truth, a process of exclusion that developed in several stages. “The conditions that characterized emancipation everywhere in Europe,” she wrote, were “that the Jew might only become a man when he ceased to be a Jew” (283). The modern Jewish question engaged the Enlightenment as the very source and origin of modern anti-Semitism. In the first stage of this process, the Jews were forced to integrate into society by abandoning their Jewish identity, and upon this very ground, after being assimilated as individuals, and following a desperate effort to abandon all aspects of their tradition, they were finally excluded and persecuted. That is why a true emancipation of the Jews must be political, and as a people. Along the same lines, Arendt also condemned the reform movement, who unsuccessfully tried to

dissolve the Jewish people into a “Mosaic confession,” but destroyed the meaning of the legends of its foundation. . . . This “Reform” which ruthlessly and nonchalantly removed all national, all political meaning from the tradition, did not reform the tradition—it has in fact proved to be its most powerful preserver—it merely robbed it of its living meaning. (Arendt 2007, 149-50)

To be sure, the content of this identity remained obscure. Arendt was well aware of the situation from which she was writing and advancing Jewish politics. She herself was an obvious product of this failed process of assimilation. Unlike other Jewish intellectuals she did not express any desire or interest to return to this tradition, and believed instead that the exact content of this “Jewishness” would be revealed through the historical process. She may have identified with Herder when she described his position that the history of the Jews “arises out of the Law of Moses and cannot be separated from it,” but she still searched for an alternative. As Judith Butler has shown, Arendt tried to distinguish the secular from the assimilated Jew, to advance an alternative secular notion, one that is not based on the denial of identities (Butler 2007). There is no question that Arendt searched for a secular model (Moyn 2008), yet this ultimately unsuccessful search was based on a scathing critique of the foundation of European secularism that tends to homogenize all religious and cultural identities. In a famous letter to Gershom Scholem during the controversy over her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, she reported on

a conversation with Golda Meir, who told her that, “You will understand that, as a socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people.” Arendt reports that

I found this a shocking statement and, being too shocked, I did not reply at the time. But I could have answered: The greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love toward Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believe only in itself? (Arendt 2007, 467)

But in spite of her awareness of the implication of secularization, when she declares that “one can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack,” the nature of this identity remains ambiguous. She thus tried to establish a space between assimilation and orthodoxy, to establish a notion of “peoplehood” that would work with and against nationalism as a repository of state ideology and chauvinistic sentiments. Arendt’s *Jewish Writings* constitute an early, critical account of the very process of secularization as reflected in the rise of the system of nation-states, and particularly what she observed of the collapse of the imperial system.

It is important to note at this point that the term “Jew” for Arendt refers first of all to the ethnic group under attack, to that which forces one to “fight as a Jew.” It also signals a specific political organization, one relevant first of all for the Jews themselves—particularly when they are victimized as Jews: they should fight as Jews, with their brethren Jews. But “Jew” is also an open identity that can include non-Jews who share the values carried by the term, or as suggested by Gil Anidjar, everyone should fight as Jews when they are attacked (2008, 23–25). It is obviously a European identity, a way of distinguishing the Jews while re-integrating them as a European nation. Besides her own commitments as a Jew, she still saw the Jewish struggle as the model for general revolutionary politics. Jerome Kohn is thus correct when he links her views on the role of the Jewish people to her later reflections on “the revolutionary tradition and its lost treasure” (Arendt 1963). Recall that Arendt’s perception of the revolution was that it sought to found a new state, a new kind of state, and that is precisely what she saw as the goal of the Jewish people. Reading *The Jewish Writings* alongside her other texts, it becomes clear that the politics of the Jewish people should be revolutionary in the precise sense that it should redeem a new political form, based on the distinction between the people and the state (Kohn, 2007: xxiv)

She presented her solution in the form or figure of the modern, “conscious” Pariah, in the Jew who resists and struggles against the system in which he lives. Thus, whereas Orthodox Jews (whom she calls “the unemancipated brethren”) “accept their pariah status automatically and unconsciously,” she proposed that “the emancipated Jew must awake to an aware-

ness of his position and, conscious of it, become a rebel against it—the champion of an oppressed people. His fight for freedom is part and parcel of that which all the downtrodden of Europe must wage to achieve: national and social liberation” (Arendt 2006, 283). Unlike the passivity of the “parvenu,” the unconscious emancipated Jew who lost his entire memory without being able to recognize the danger, the Pariah Jew preserves the notion of rebellion, demonstrates her commitment to a resistance whose origins are definitely in religion—in the observance of the Law—while now appearing as emancipated from it. She is a member of the society where she lives, but permanently resists its values. Jewish peoplehood is constituted as a resistance to European-Christian universalism (albeit in its secular form), and simultaneously as an alternative universal attitude, one that emerges out of resistance but which should preserve the identities attacked in the name of “universalism.” In spite of Arendt’s attempt to escape exceptionality, then, the Jew remains an exception.

Interestingly, Arendt’s standpoint in that matter is quite similar to Gershom Scholem’s, the “old friend” who became her sharp rival. Like him, she searched for a Jewish existence between orthodoxy (that as such, remained closed upon itself) and assimilation. Like Scholem, she searched for a distinctive Jewish politics. Her Pariah is obviously drawn from the figures of Jewish heretics such as were described by Scholem in his essays on Sabbatian subversive individuals since the seventeenth century. Arendt herself made this link in her review of Scholem’s seminal book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the only text where she deals with concrete and specific content from within the Jewish tradition. Almost twenty years earlier, Scholem had elaborated his own critical argument, one uncannily similar to Arendt’s. As one of the founders of Brit Shalom and responsible for some of its most important essays, Scholem wrote, in a 1931 response to those who denounced Brit Shalom,

Whether it is still possible for an entire movement to change its ways and attempt to join up with the powers that will determine the shape of the coming generation, I do not know. But I do know that, except for this attempt, it has no other way. Zionism must return to the sources it betrayed in the hour of its victory. Better that the movement again becomes small but confident in its ways and pregnant with possibility than that it remains in its state of disintegration and falsehood and die with the reactionary forces that it followed as a result of the original sin: false victory. And if we do not win once again, and the fire of revolution consume us, at least we will be among those standing on the right side of the barricades. (Scholem [1931] 1987)

Arendt followed the same direction in her articles. But when she did so most explicitly, during the 1940s, Scholem himself had already changed his mind. Scholem's bi-national approach preserved an obvious notion of a forthcoming catastrophe, of an apocalyptic war between the "awakening East" and the declining colonial power. Yet, the catastrophe occurred elsewhere, and Scholem's views on Zionism dramatically shifted. Unlike some of the other adherents of bi-nationalism, Scholem withdrew from any political involvement and no longer participated in initiatives in pursuit of his earlier program. By the 1940s, Scholem had already rejected its very principles, and had come to support the exclusive idea of the Jewish state. The same circumstances that mark (or caused) the shift in Scholem's political sensitivity, namely, the Nazi victory, are what led Hannah Arendt to dedicate her intellectual and political commitment to Jewish politics. Ironically, Scholem then criticized her for her lack of empathy (Scholem 199, nos. 129—131, 302–314). Her reconsideration of Zionism in the 1940s thus advanced the same values and was grounded in the same intellectual context of his early writings, and relied on his monumental survey of Jewish Mysticism. But it was directed against the political-historical construction that was shaped and designed in those years by, among others, Scholem himself. Instead, she preferred the attitude of Bernard Lazare. Unlike Herzl, "whose solution of the Jewish problem was, in the final analysis, escape or deliverance in a homeland" for Lazare, "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.'" As Arendt observes, this was "not an escape from anti-Semitism but a mobilization of the people against its foes" (2007, 339).

Arendt Reconsidered (2)

As I have already pointed out, Arendt certainly did not offer a complete or coherent political attitude, nor did she provide a satisfactory alternative to the predicament that still plagues us. The question of Zionism may reveal both the extent of her remarkable awareness and the limitation of her thought. But we should remember that Arendt raised the very questions to which we still have no better answers, but which seem more crucial than ever. That is why they can guide us toward a better understanding of her own position.

With regard to Palestine, Arendt believed that the only viable alternative to a Jewish state would have to take the form of a federation. This idea remains one of the serious options today as well. We can still say that "Federative arrangements hold out good chances for the future because they promise the greater chance for success in solving national conflicts and can thus be the basis for a political life that offers peoples the possibility of reorganizing themselves politically" (2007, 195). In her writings, Arendt briefly

mentioned several guidelines to that effect. She assumed, for instance, that such a federation would be under the protection of a superpower, and raised the idea of a “British Commonwealth of Nations—in contradistinction to the British Empire” (196). The preferable solution for her was a Mediterranean federation because “in a model of this sort the Arabs would be strongly represented and yet not in a position to dominate all others” (197).

The federation was an alternative *both* to the Zionist state *and* to the bi-national option. In spite of her identification with Magnes, Arendt argued that “Dr. Magnes’s bi-national state would leave the Jews in the position of a permanent minority within a larger Arab empire that would exist under the weaker or stronger protectorate of a third party, either under the aegis of the British Empire or the United States or under protection shared by both powers.” She saw as preferable an arrangement in which “Arabs will be brought into unity with European Peoples. (2007, 195). In spite of her sharp critique of European modernity, however, she remained within the boundaries of Europe.

Despite Arendt’s critique of bi-nationalism within a concrete historical situation, I think that taking her seriously means to emphasize the importance of the concept as developed from her own approach. Already in 1945, Arendt claimed that “A home that my neighbor does not recognize and respect is not a home. A Jewish national home that is not recognized and respected by its neighboring people is no home but an illusion—until it becomes a battlefield.” She condemned Zionist leadership for its refusal to deal with any Arab proposal, arguing that “Jewish rights to Palestine, earned and founded on Jewish labor, are being recognized by the only partner who actually counts when it comes to recognition” (2007, 236). In that sense bi-nationalism is the principle that includes the rights of both, that take into consideration the right of the Palestinians while we discuss the rights of the Jews and vice versa: in other words, bi-nationalism is the principle that deals with the rights of the Jews together with those of their “neighbors,” whose recognition remains in the long run the precondition of the existence of the Jewish-Israeli entity.

We may have a better grasp now of the reasons why the concept of bi-nationalism is crucial in order to follow Arendt’s analysis of the concrete reality she witnessed and apprehended. Regardless of the distance she herself took from the term, Arendt’s own approach emphasizes the need to deal with bi-nationalism, as the perspective that includes both the Jew and the Arab—who is oppressed as an Arab, and should fight, therefore, as an Arab. In that sense, bi-nationalism leads to the basic understanding that the question of the rights of the Jews and the question of the rights of the Palestinians are the

same. It is impossible to distinguish the history of Zionist settlement from the history of Palestine and the Palestinians—and particularly the recognition that the establishment of the State of Israel is the Palestinian *Nakbah*—the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Such a vision is one of partnership rather than of separation.

As such bi-nationalism is a crucial concept for a process of decolonization, and it is towards such a process that Arendt and the other contributors to the idea may direct us now. Bi-nationalism indeed preserves the different national identities that exist, but works against attempts at separation. As division perpetuates the colonial state, the bi-national perspective includes both the colonizer and the colonized and works towards an equal relationship, a process of de-colonization that includes them both.

From the Jewish point of view, the question is how we can define a Jewish collective identity based on the recognition of the Palestinians and their rights. The need for such a thinking is critical in the state of crisis in which we live. It means the need to recognize Palestinian nationalism (as a set of rights) as a precondition for the recognition of Jewish-Israeli nationalism.

Arendt herself remained within the boundaries of “Western civilization” and its orientalist perspective. This aspect is demonstrated in a striking passage from a letter to Jaspers, where Arendt reflects on the Eichmann court:

My first impression. On top, the judges, the best of German Jewry. Below them the persecuting attorneys, Galicians, but still Europeans. Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them. They would follow any order. And outside the doors, the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country. In addition, and very visible in Jerusalem, the *peies* [sidelocked] and caftan Jews, who make life impossible for all the reasonable people here. (qtd. in Aschheim 2001, 7)

Although written in a private letter, these astonishing remarks cannot be ignored, particularly as remnants of them can be found in the text of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and in other writings. We may call it the banality of racism. The thinker who contributed so much to the understanding of racism does not miss any attribute of racism here. Oriental Jews turn without any hesitation into Nazis who “will obey all orders,” and Orthodox Jews make the life of “reasonable people” unbearable. It is an amazing paradigmatic expression of the anxiety from anything considered as Oriental, and points to the link between Orientalism and anti-Semitism.

My purpose here is not to condemn Arendt but to address her failures, since it is from the identities she despises that we can continue thinking with her. We should read Arendt against herself, in order to insert meaning into her own insights. The better awareness does not put me (or us) in a different

position: we may have a better awareness, but our answers to the crisis of Zionism are not necessarily less obscure. The passage quoted above contradicts anything she wrote about the Pariah. According to this paragraph, in order to be a (European) Pariah, the Jew must stop being a Jew, stop being Oriental (as he was defined in modern European consciousness). Arendt, who claimed that the Jew should fight *as a Jew* and who objected to assimilation, obviously remains within the European-Christian domain. She participated in the process of distinguishing the Jew from the Arab as a way of integrating the Jew and assimilating her into the West. Following Gil Anidjar, it is an excellent example of the attempt to separate the Jew from the Arab and consequently from herself: an attempt to sharply distinguish the “Jew” as a European from the Oriental, to which pole Orthodox Jews are here assigned (2003).

But at the same time Arendt marks the figures through which any attempt at decolonizing the Jews should start: by integrating the perspectives of the Jew and the Arab. It is not only that the bi-national approach is at least “half Asiatic,” but that the very figure of the Pariah should be seen as at least “half Asiatic.” Otherwise, according to Arendt, he will not be able to struggle. To struggle as a Jew means to struggle as an Oriental, and so to subvert Orientalist dichotomies. Arendt’s unconscious racism clarifies a major cultural element that we should resist if we want her observations to become meaningful: the division of Jews and Arabs.

It seems that Arendt could envision such a prospect, but had no way of escaping the boundaries of the Eurocentrism that determined the limits of her own thought. The place of the Oriental Jew, the Arab-Jew, is the place from which an alternative Jewish politics can emerge. Decolonizing the Jews means confronting what has come to stand as the current Jewish identity, as was insightfully described by Arendt more than sixty years ago, with the elements on whose suppression it was founded: of the Arabs and of the Jews. It seems that in Israel/Palestine a genuine process of decolonization must include both Jews and Palestinians, the colonizer and the colonized, and that both should work towards a mutual recognition based on equality and justice. Arendt provides us with the outline of such a process.

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Fonte: College Literature, v. 38, n. 1, p. 57-74, 2011. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>. Acesso em: 17 fev. 2011.