

16. Europe and its Refugees: Arendt on the Politicization of Minorities

In January 1940, a few months before her internment in France, Hannah Arendt wrote in a very distinct and programmatic letter to her friend Erich Cohn-Bendit: “All politics dealing with minorities, and not just with the Jews, have foundered on the existent and abiding fact of state sovereignty.” Because

... as early as the Russian mass emigrations – at the latest by 1923–24, ... we can observe the emergence of a new class of people in Europe, the *stateless*. If one regards the European history as the development of the European nation-state, or as the development of European peoples into nation-states, then these people, the stateless, are the most important product of recent history. Since 1920, almost all European states have sheltered great masses of people who have no right of residence or consular protection of any sort – modern pariahs. ...

The inability to absorb these masses of people clearly demonstrates that the fact of assimilation has lost its crucial significance. There is no longer any such thing as assimilation in Europe – nation-states have grown too developed and too old. There is no longer any assimilation for Jews either. The chance of assimilation during the nineteenth century ... was based in a reorganization of peoples that arose out of the French Revolution, and in their development as nations. This process has now come to an end. No one else can be included. In fact, we now have the process in reverse: the addition of great masses of people and their degradation to pariahs.

Although they are Europeans, these pariahs are isolated from all specifically national interest. They are the first to have an interest in pan-European politics ...¹

Under these conditions, Arendt wrote, minority rights are completely inadequate, and can only mean cultural autonomy. “Culture without politics – that is, without history and a national context – becomes vapid folkloristics and *Volk*-barbarism.”²

1 Hannah Arendt: *The Minority Question*, in: *The Jewish Writings*, New York: Schocken 2007, p. 127f.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 128f.

Hannah Arendt's letter culminates in a plea for a new European federal system: "I do not think it is utopian to hope for the possibility of a commonwealth of European nations with a parliament of its own",³ where the Jewish people would also be recognized and represented as a European nation.

This letter could be described as Arendt's political manifesto and is reflected in the rest of her work. In Part Two of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she presents a more detailed analysis of what she calls the decline of the nation state and the end of the rights of man, and the emergence of the nation of minorities and the stateless people. Her letter already contains the idea of a federation as an alternative to the sovereign nation state, an idea she was encouraged in by her encounter with the United States, which was to become her second country of exile. The letter also includes a move towards political action. Minorities and the stateless, those deprived of their rights, the insecure and the faceless, all victims stepping out of the darkness of lawlessness and facelessness into the light of politics: as pariahs they become actors. During the 1930s, Hannah Arendt finished her book on Rahel Varnhagen's failed attempts at assimilation, describing the latter's conscious rejection of assimilation and her decision to live the life of a pariah. In 1943, she also published a moving article in the *Menorah Journal* entitled "We Refugees", in which she pleaded that refugees demonstrate political self-confidence as pariahs. A year later "The Hidden Tradition" appeared, promoting the pariah rebellion as the sole chance of survival.

These texts undoubtedly refer to the specific situation after the First World War, which saw the emergence of vast numbers of stateless people and refugees following the dissolution of the Russian, Austrian and Ottoman Empires. It was at this time that totalitarian movements, particularly Germany's, began to look for a 'final solution' to their insecure existence. Although the situation in Europe is now different – after all we have the federal Europe so favoured by Arendt and, like her, are aware of the importance of the right to have rights – the threat to free societies arising from unsolved problems and their aggravation still prevails today. I will first address these dangers and then discuss the significance of Arendt's shift in perspective from victim to acting pariah. Arendt discusses both topics politically, making it politicization of minorities in a twofold sense.

I.

The dangers emanating from unsolved political problems affected first and foremost the stateless and the refugees themselves. Following her analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt was able to analyse a fatal process in retrospect, which she summarized in a seminar on statelessness in Berkeley in 1955 as follows:

3 Ibid., p. 130.

When the number of refugees and stateless people swelled, the European politicians first tried to do justice to their ambiguous status by issuing refugee passports, the so-called Nansen passports, supervised by the League of Nations. When it turned out that the refugees were not temporary but permanent, this passport lost its validity. The politicians now chose to ignore the problem by cancelling the distinction between refugees and stateless people and discontinuing refugee aid of any kind. As a consequence the now exclusively stateless people were declared “undesirable”.⁴

Defining the stateless as ‘refugees’ was invested with the hope that the right to asylum would come into effect, and that charity organizations would look after the refugees. According to Arendt, however, the right to asylum lost its validity for two reasons: first of all there were too many refugees and secondly, they could not be recognized as refugees because they were not persecuted. The charitable solution did not work either because it had no judicial significance, “Charity is no right, charity should only come after justice is done. ... To throw them into the lap of charity organizations meant practically: They are completely rightless: No right to live in the sense (of) no business to be on the earth.” Arendt emphasized that there was no ill will involved. The politicians looked for solutions within the framework of national sovereignty: naturalization, repatriation or expulsion. However, even within this framework they were unable to act, since mass naturalization would obviously have put excessive demands on the institutions – Arendt quotes the example of 45,000 Armenians in Greece in 1936 – and repatriation was impossible because the countries of origin usually refused to take back the refugees. Finally, expulsion was also out of the question because the stateless could not simply be deported. Internment camps were erected as a result, or worse, concentration camps.

What characterizes stateless people? They differ from criminals in terms of national law and from enemies in war time in terms of international law. What happens to criminals results from a deliberate act and is not at all outside the law. On the contrary, they can rely on the law. All police action towards them is bound by law and even their punishment is a right that is in accordance with the law. As Arendt states, imprisonment and food are not given out of charity but is a right. With stateless people it is the other way round. They are outside the law. Not their activities but their mere existence provokes state action.

The main problem for the countries that host stateless people consists in “the spread of lawlessness”, that is, in unlawful action towards those living under lawless conditions. The fact that the police and not the law is responsible for them alters the

4 Hannah Arendt: Statelessness, Berkeley 1955, unpublished, in: *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress*, Washington DC., [https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105601307/](https://www.loc.gov/item/mss1105601307) (2023.7.3)

character of the police. By overstepping the limits of an executor of laws and becoming legislator and executor at the same time, the police “rules over people, acquires subjects, becomes a state within the state, a kind of Kingdom”. By finally erecting concentration camps the police even acquires a form of territory.

At this point at the latest the issue of human rights becomes critical, that is, when nationality and civil rights no longer protect people against state and police whims. But there was no international institution to limit national sovereignty. Lawlessness, arbitrariness and finally extermination were at the end of a creeping decline that began with political helplessness in a system of nation-state sovereignty. Arendt drew the conclusion from this experience that a reversed human right was required: everyone should be protected from birth by inalienable rights, “an internationally guaranteed right to citizenship”. Without this, “more and more people will no longer be human with regard to their legal status, will no longer have a place within humanity”.

Therefore the system of nation states turned out to be incapable of solving the fate of minorities, refugees, and stateless people in a humane manner. The European dimension of streams of refugees required a European answer. Arendt gave an answer: a European political answer in the shape of a federation, which would make it possible to offer other nations without a fixed territory a place in the community of nations. National Socialism had a different answer, namely the folkish Europeanizing of nations and subordination to the Third Reich. Arendt pleaded for the dissolution of the unity of nation, territory and state, on which the modern nation states were based, in favour of a state in the sense of a political space with political citizenship. According to Arendt there was always an inherent danger in the nation state of the nation overtaking the state – as *volonté générale*, as democratic populism or as a folkish, today ethnic movement.

II.

Before coming to the changed situation today – the globalizing of refugees and the question of a European response – I would like to examine the second aspect mentioned above, i.e. the politicization of the refugees, not only of their status but of their thoughts and actions. Ten years after her escape from Germany and two years after she fled from France, Arendt described the behaviour of the refugees around her in an extremely bitter and ironic tone in her essay “We Refugees”. Ironic because Arendt describes almost as a caricature the eager efforts of the refugees to assimilate, to become indistinguishable, to forget the past and solve everything individually. Her irony lets them speak for themselves: “We did our best to prove to other people that we were just ordinary immigrants. We declared that we had departed of our own free will to countries of our choice, and we denied that our situation had

anything to do with 'so-called Jewish problems'.⁵ At the same time the tone is bitter because Arendt herself belongs to the We, to these refugees, which is why she criticizes their attitude so vehemently. She knew that together with their flight into exile they had lost their identity and that no disguise could help, but only a political reaction.

Her politics came to be about transcending particular identities, a politics prompted by her experiences of exile in New York. ... This war more than anything the emotional center of Hannah Arendt's politics: the exile obliged to transcend dreams of home, *Gemeinschaft*, or religious destiny. The problem of politics was how people who could count on nothing, who could not *inherit*, might therefore invent the conditions of their own and their common lives. No identity can be recovered; therefore, turn outward.⁶

These refugees, Arendt writes, have lost their language and thus the naturalness of their reactions, the simplicity of their gestures, the unaffected expression of their feelings. They left their relatives in Polish ghettos and their best friends were killed in concentration camps – which was nothing more than a rupture in the continuity of their private lives. They followed the instruction to forget everything more rapidly than could ever have been imagined. In order to forget more efficiently they avoid any allusion to concentration camps or internment. “But sometimes I imagine that at least nightly we think of our dead or we remember the poems we once loved (...) In daylight, of course, we become only ‘technically’ enemy aliens”⁷. Neither do they talk to other refugees about their experiences or their suffering. And when the present can no longer overshadow the past or optimism the suffering, they commit suicide without even leaving a note.

And as if this were not enough they feel humiliated if they are saved and degraded when they are helped. They “fight like madmen for private existences with individual destinies”. And to give their new insecure existence some form of stability they refer to the marvellous existence they once had and lost.

The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles. ... During seven years we played the ridiculous game of trying to be Frenchmen – at least, prospective citizens; but at the beginning of the war we were interned as *boches* all the same. In the

5 Hannah Arendt: We Refugees, in: *The Jewish Writings*, op. cit., p. 264,

6 Richard Sennett: *The Conscience of the Eye. The Design and Social Life of Cities*, New York-London 1990, p. 133f.

7 Hannah Arendt: We Refugees, op. cit., p. 266.

meantime, however, most of us had indeed become such loyal Frenchmen that we could not even criticize a French governmental order ...⁸

There is general confusion, as Arendt calls it, about these Ulysses-like wanderers who have no idea who they are because they have developed the perfect obsession of disclaiming any kind of identity. But what are they to do? Should they recall their Jewishness and proclaim it in public? That would mean exposing themselves

... to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings. I can hardly imagine an attitude more dangerous, since we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while; since society has discovered discrimination as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed; since passports or birth certificates, and sometimes even income tax receipts, are no longer formal papers but matters of social distinction.⁹

Fleeing the danger of this bare life into the costume of another culture, into a mere facade and facelessness, leads to mental suffering that can end in suicide. There is, however, an alternative: the pariah who does not hide and who does not expose himself helplessly to merely being human, but who is “conscious” and acts consciously. He belongs in Arendt’s words to the “hidden tradition” behind the visible tradition of the parvenus, along with Heine, Rahel Varnhagen, Bernard Lazare, and Franz Kafka. Not that they are more protected by their consciousness. On the contrary. “... it is equally true that the very few among us who have tried to get along without all these tricks and jokes of adjustment and assimilation have paid a much higher price than they could afford: they jeopardized the few chances even outlaws are given in a topsy-turvy world.”¹⁰

But this consciousness, which requires so much courage as soon as it becomes practical, is the precondition for refugees to become actors instead of passive victims. It is not primarily about political goals and programmes but about an attitude and strength that expresses itself in human qualities. “Conscious pariahs” distinguish themselves by “the ‘Jewish heart’, humanity, humor and disinterested intelligence”, while upstarts and parvenus are characterized by “tactlessness, political stupidity, inferiority complexes and money-grubbing”¹¹.

Arendt’s high esteem for these pariahs is evident in the unusual obituary she wrote in 1954 for her friend Waldemar Gurian. A Russian Jew originally from St. Petersburg, Gurian was a Catholic convert and highly respected as a leading academic

8 Ibid., p. 270.

9 Ibid., p. 273.

10 Ibid., p. 273f.

11 Ibid., p. 274.

figure in political Catholicism and on totalitarianism. He was an important representative of Jewish emigration in the USA, worked as a political scientist and author, and became dean of the university of Notre Dame. Arendt's obituary was published in *The Review of Politics*, which Waldemar Gurian had previously edited. It testifies to her interest in the *who* of the man rather than the *what* of his scientific qualities.

The same portrait is read here and in chapter 6 from different perspectives: once as the description of a man of integrity, outward-looking, who can be imagined as a public-spirited citizen on whose presence the prosperity of a republican society depends, and here as a pariah and member of an ethnic minority who turns down the supposedly attractive career as a parvenu and decides to fight for equality.

On the one hand, we read Gurian as the Who, the One who reveals himself in action, which is possible for all people and means freedom and worldliness. The other time we read Gurian as acting in an oppressed and threatened minority, in which rebellious action brings freedom and worldliness to the minority.

In both, we find a high degree of integrity and humanity. This double role means that the rebellious pariah brings humanity to the majority society, or at least offers it. Arendt's plea for a federal Europe is the institutional side of humanity, in which the distinction between majority and minority becomes superfluous. The two figures of the pariah melt into one of the conscious citizen.

Arendt admired Gurian's ability for friendship, declaring that he had come as a stranger but: "He had achieved what we all must: he had his home in this world and he had made himself at home on the earth through friendship".¹²

She praised his "faithfulness to his friends, to everybody he had ever known, to everything he had ever liked, became so much the dominant note on which his life was tuned that one is tempted to say that the crime most alien to him was the crime of oblivion, perhaps one of the cardinal crimes in human relationships".¹³

She commended his humanity that consisted of more than pure friendliness and kindness.

(W)e are inclined to identify ourselves with what we make and do, and frequently forget that it remains the greatest prerogative of every man to be essentially and forever more than anything he can produce or achieve, not only to remain, after each work and achievement, the not yet exhausted, sheer inexhaustible source of further achievements, but to be in his very essence beyond all of them, untouchable and unlimited by them.¹⁴

12 Hannah Arendt: Waldemar Gurian, in: *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1968, p. 262.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

He is one of the rare people Arendt knew who “remained completely free of middle-class concepts of achievement” and had “thus a picture of mankind”.¹⁵

And finally, Arendt paid tribute to his ability to judge independently, and an unerring sense for quality and relevance, which may sound like nothing

And yet, in the not frequent cases where men have possessed it and have chosen not to exchange it for more easily recognizable and acceptable values, it infallibly has led them far – far beyond conventions and established standards of society – and carried them directly into the dangers of a life that is no longer protected by the walls of objects and the supports of objective evaluations.¹⁶

Hence Gurian was at the same time both a non-conformist and a realist. “His whole spiritual existence was built on the decision never to conform and never to escape, which is only another way of saying that it was built on courage.”¹⁷

He was delighted when he could break down these barriers of so-called civilized society, because he saw in them barriers between human souls. At the source of this delight were innocence and courage, innocence all the more captivating as it occurred in a man who was so extremely well versed in the ways of the world, and who therefore needed all the courage he could muster to keep his original innocence alive and intact. He was a very courageous man.¹⁸

They are not the only ones who are politically active, of course; but Arendt rejects the nationalism of the various Zionist organizations. She admired the “conscious pariahs”, not because they were morally more sound but because they represented what Arendt would later call worldliness and interest in a common world, and because they focused on the creation of power and the opening of a political space and not the use of tacit violence and the definition of politics as a means of fabrication. Therefore, Arendt can argue that “refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples – if they keep their identity.”¹⁹

III.

Let us take another look at the participant scenarios presented by Arendt and consider the significance of her descriptions and analyses for today. First of all, there

15 Hannah Arendt / Kurt Blumenfeld “... *in keinem Besitz verwurzelt*”. Briefwechsel, Hamburg: Rotbuch 1995, p. 52.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 257f.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 261/262.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 258/259.

19 Hannah Arendt: *We Refugees*, op. cit., p. 274.

are the politicians of more or less democratic states, who, caught up in the categories of the nation state, were unable to help the refugees and thus contributed to the erosion of these states. This issue is not merely a problem for the refugees themselves but also for those who deal with it. Today Arendt's European federation is reality, but now the refugees come from countries outside Europe. It is now no longer an inner-European but a global phenomenon. As a result of this confrontation between inside and outside, between inclusion and exclusion, the European federation is transformed into a nation state. The number of migrants is growing steadily; turning them away from Europe has already been declared a priority and a permanent task of European *realpolitik*. Similar to Arendt's time, today the European Union and the UN are eager to reduce the number of approved refugees because they do not consider themselves responsible. Almost as in battle, migrants are beaten back at the trenches of the European stronghold. Europe is planning internment camps in North Africa, not unlike how Australia interns migrants on islands off the coast. Regardless of whether camps are being constructed within or outside of Europe or whether the police is on the verge of becoming a state within the state, the world-making idea of a federation is clearly drowning in world-excluding, nation-state, administrative thinking. Politics as administration represents both a pre- and post-totalitarian threat to freedom. Saskia Sassen describes these dangers similarly to Arendt:

These developments raise two issues. One concerns the old trade-off between policies that criminalize what may not intrinsically be a criminal act in the name of controlling a somewhat untenable situation; this in turn raises the incentives for genuinely criminal actors to promote the forbidden activity. A familiar instance of this trade-off concerns the marihuana control policy.

Likewise, "the fact that these people lack the proper documents for entry is easily represented in policy and media circles as exempting us from any responsibility as societies for these deaths".²⁰

Arendt describes refugees who not only fled from persecutors and adverse conditions, but also from themselves. The same is happening today to African migrants, who are sometimes on the move for years from south West Africa to the Spanish border, from one country to the next, caught and sent back time and again, betrayed, blackmailed and robbed by facilitators and policemen. These are the redundants of chaotic societies such as that of Nigeria or the failed states of Liberia or Ivory Coast. They begin their odyssey as bare human beings in the hope of surviving it. Their destination, Europe, is the utopia that will rid them of an unneeded and unseen existence.

20 Saskia Sassen: Is this the way to go? Handling immigration in a global era, in: *Stanford Agora: An Online Journal of Legal Perspectives*, Vol. 4, 2003, p.1f.

Finally, there is Arendt's avant-garde, which consists of individual pariahs who are not organized. The German journalist Klaus Brinkbäumer, who accompanied refugees on their journey through Africa, writes that the refugees are "electrical engineers, doctors, and teachers, educated, witty, unemployed and poor, that's why they try their luck. Those who leave are rarely old – it is the young, the strong, the creative, the courageous who leave."²¹ Arendt did not explain the notion of avant-garde in greater detail. Authors like Brinkbäumer generally emphasize that refugees constitute the more flexible and more educated parts of the population. Arendt, on the other hand, speaks of refugees who "keep their identity". Undoubtedly, the notion of avant-garde is drawn from the vocabulary of her husband, Heinrich Blücher. Both substituted the ideological avant-garde with the avant-garde of the independent pariahs, those who think for themselves. The humanity Arendt describes in Waldemar Gurian is not pure enthusiasm but existential in the sense of worldliness, of being related to this world. For Arendt this sense of avant-garde is indispensable to refugees if they are to take their affairs into their own hands. In other words, she indicates that what is required is not refugee policies but political action by the refugees, and that politics should be a matter for the citizens themselves.

Two political concepts are in direct confrontation here. On the one hand, the assumed *realpolitik* of administrative refugee management that is crippling Europe with its anti-policy and its thinking in categories of camps, borders and governmentality. This concept (developed by Foucault) recognizes politics merely as a planning process and migrants as anonymous figures. It involves the mistake of defining politics as a planning unit, with logical arguments and bureaucratic enforcement, where policies is implemented by the few and suffered by the many. Here, we are confronted with what Arendt considers to be a fundamental obstacle to our understanding of politics since the Antiquity, i.e. the problem of domination, of politics as the domination of the few over the many, even in democracy.

On the other hand, there is Arendt's concept of the politics of subjects who make the opening of political space possible by their action. It is these subjects rather than professional politicians who are inclined to bring about new action. When Arendt speaks of the miracle and spontaneity of action, she does not do so from the romantic perspective of councils and Greek polis but from her experience of the potential in those who act or are able to act. It implies the view that the rationality of political planning is always limited, that spontaneous action not only occurs again and again but that politics is merely part of this action, of surprises and events. This sheds new light on the significance of the demonstrations by illegal immigrants in the USA in 2006, and on NGOs and migration organizations.

21 Klaus Brinkbäumer *Der Traum vom Leben. Eine afrikanische Odyssee*, Frankfurt/M. S. Fischer Verlag 2006, p. 171.

So, Arendt's perspective looks at both sides, at Europe and at migrants. Politicization consists in the search for a common judicial frame and for those who can act together in our world as conscious pariahs and as citizens. It is the perspective of the "in-between" that constitutes the common world. And if this common world does not exist, then Arendt's perspective is one of resistance and change, of a new or re-founding of the common world.

The "in-between" forms a bridge, a political concept of cosmopolitanism, as Ian Buruma wrote.²² Instead of the weak concept of tolerance and the liberal concept of negative freedom we should look for those who, like Arendt, belong to this sort of avant-garde that bridges the abyss between nations.

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22 Ian Buruma *Gezelligheid genügt nicht. Wie der Multikulturalismus zu retten ist*, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, No. 259, /November 2006, p. 35.

