

## **The Jewish Question, Secularization and the Nation-state crisis in Hannah Arendt: for a politics of plurality**

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### **Introduction**

In the present paper we intend to rethink the “Jewish question”, in the context of religion’s secularization and the modern nation-state crisis, in Hannah Arendt’s political thought, when “dark times” are intensified (to use a concept of the author herself). Within this context, Hannah Arendt goes through a “philosophical shock” when she comes across with Karl Jasper and Martin Heidegger’s philosophies; and a “reality shock”, stemming from the impact of Nazism’s rise to power. We hereby want to recapture these three core ideas from Arendt’s political theory, which structure her living thought and are intertwined in this paper. For she lives within the modern context of secularization which, as we will see later, throws us, on the one hand, in the depths of a politics devoid of absolute guarantors. She writes, on the other hand, in and over the decline of modern nation-states that expel and denationalize both foreign citizens and their own depending on the case. She also thinks as a Jew from birth who suffers persecutions and particularly theorizes on her Jew condition and the future of Judaism before and after the creation of no other than the State of Israel during the British mandate held in Palestine. As we will see during this paper, we can identify these three issues all together, for instance, in Zionism: modern secularization, decline of the nation-state and the “Jewish question”. And it is from these intertwined elements that we can draw a critical thinking for a politics of pluralism.

### **Secularization as context**

As any other contemporary thinker, Hanna Arendt’s writing context is the one of the secularization of religion and –according to herself– the nation-state crisis. Nonetheless, it is the stance in relation to this historical reality what changes depending on the case. In

Modern theory, we can find various viewpoints on the stance to take regarding secularization, and this standpoint also implies a particular perspective on progress, which, at the same time, will have an effect on the “Jewish Question” in a different way.

Secularization involves the downfall of sacred truths provided by the theological-political framework; and for that reason, along with modernity comes “nostalgia for the absolute”, in the words of George Steiner<sup>1</sup>, embodied in modern society’s totalitarian forms. Hannah Arendt states along the same line: “I am perfectly sure that this whole totalitarian catastrophe would not have taken place if people had continued to believe in God, or rather in hell –that is, if there were still ultimates. There were no ultimates”.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing this passage, in this respect, Claudia Hilb states that “the loss of ultimates, I dare to say, is the interstice through which the biggest harm of our century has been inserted”.<sup>3</sup> Totalitarianism is a potential scenario of this resurgence of the absolute within a context of dispersal, but not the only possible destiny of this modernity “out of joint”.

Hilb states in this line that “the fall of ultimates, distinctive of Modern era’s secularization, has not only opened the door for the advent of the worst evils, but has also provided, in Arendt’s eyes, the opportunity to, eventually, regain and rediscover the experience of the true political origin of political order, of the political foundation expressed in free action, that is to say, of a lost experience under the empire of tradition that put order’s legitimacy on a supernatural sphere. It is in this sense that the fall of the theological-political supremacy not only enables the rise of modern totalitarianism, but also, the possibility of reunion with the miraculous institution of politics in an autonomous way (but not for this self-sufficient). Arendt stands before this as a modern theorist, but also against the flow of a certain fairly secularized thinking, which lingers on the logics of the linear history inheritor of the theological-political. Both Marxism and liberalism insist on viewing history as a linear progress. Unlike Arendt’s view, Marxism and liberalism prioritize progress above all else.

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner George, *Nostalgia del absoluto*, trad. María Tabuyo and Agustín López, Siruela, Madrid, 2011, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt Hannah, “On Hannah Arendt”, in: Melvyn Hill (ed.), *The recovery of the public world*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1979, pp. 313-314. I owe this passage to Claudia Hilb’s text quoted below.

<sup>3</sup> Hilb Claudia, “Tres miradas sobre el abismo de la modernidad: Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Claude Lefort”, in: Gambarotta Emiliano, Borovinsky Tomas, Plot Martín (ed.). *Estética, política, dialéctica. El debate contemporáneo*, Prometeo, Buenos Aires, p. 8.

In certain crystallized approaches, for instance, Liberalism and Marxism share the same viewpoint on the question of history as a progress to an inexorable political goal. In this sense, Hegel not only represents a paramount thinker of modern philosophy, but also an author that took this logic, with all that it entails, to paroxysm. Hegel, thinker of endings, would embody that modern philosophy taken to be “a secularized form of Christianity”<sup>4</sup> in the words of Leo Strauss.

Hegel is a thinker of endings who asserts that it is only at the end of the road that we can tell the truth. Where does this final analysis on history as progress comes from, this linear history aiming towards a definite goal? As Karl Löwith explained, such analysis of the Western universal history as philosophy of history is a “specifically biblical”<sup>5</sup> representation, as well as a theoretical justification of bourgeois’ rise to power in the 19th century, where history was heading towards “an ultimate end, and is conducted by the providence of a divine will”.<sup>6</sup> A divine will in secularization process, but characterized by its theological-political origin.

Upon the theological-political logic secularized in Marxism and Liberalism, Arendt sets up a thought of action and natality<sup>7</sup> against the automatism of modern society’s progress. For Arendt plurality is the condition of human action. There is a certain “realism” of the Ancients which contrasts the modern utopias that seek to create political regimes. As “everything generated is corruptible, this constitution will not last forever, but will be dissolved”,<sup>8</sup> for the Ancients there cannot be a definite perfect world, as liberals, Marxists and neo-conservatives do believe.<sup>9</sup> From the “Ancients perspective”, unlike modernists (Hegel), no political regime lasts forever. That is why the dispute between ancients and moderns –a theological-political and temporal one– is paramount for the understanding of how a dispute is carried out, where the Modern’s will of completion is at stake: this is a deeply rooted Judeo-Christian trait. In the end, as Strauss states: “The quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns seems to us to be more fundamental than either the quarrel

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<sup>4</sup> Strauss Leo, *On Tyranny*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000, p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Löwith Karl, *Historia del mundo y salvación*, trad. Norberto Espinoza, Editorial Katz, Buenos Aires, 2007, p.74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt Hannah, *The Human Condition*, The Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Platón, *República*, 546 a.

<sup>9</sup> Gray John, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, London, 2007, p. 107.

between Plato and Aristotle or that between Kant and Hegel.<sup>10</sup> That is why Arendt becomes crucial for contemporary thinking: she does not entirely fit in either side of the dispute, neither in favor of a modern secularized political messianism nor of a conservatism of the ancients.

In the face of these disputes between ancients and modernists, a middle-ground stand is taken by Arendt. Neither Marxist nor liberal, she criticizes progress at any cost without holding an anti-modernist position. She looks for inspiration in the origins of Greek politics, but does not share the same viewpoints, for instance, of Leo Strauss. She won't share either his perspective on Judaism, and will take a political stance which is far from the one taken by revolutionary thinker Jacob Taubes' (to mention two opposite cases). Despite being a modern and secular thinker, Arendt's source of inspiration was ancient (thus agreeing with Strauss): she knows that the price for having an eternally fair society is as high as impossible is to achieve such utopia.

### **Satethood Crisis**

The Enlightenment itself emancipates the Jews from the chains of the ghetto. For that same reason, Marcelo Raffin recalls that in an earlier text, Arendt points out that the modern version of the Jewish question came from a non-Jewish sphere: the European Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically or logically, this emancipation, however, resulted in Nazism. But the truth is that Arendt will survive extermination and persecution and will come to the cosmopolitan –though not free from ethnic problems– United States of America.

The fall of the great empires after the 1914 war, reconfigured, once again, the frontiers; and the appearance of new nation-states brought about a huge crisis and new challenges in places like Europe, Africa, the Middle and Far East. Thousands of refugees, displaced and stateless people woke up one day in a new country, in which they had now become a minority. We went from the archaic plurality of multinational empires to modern states,

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<sup>10</sup> Strauss Leo, *Estudios de filosofía política platónica*, trad. Amelia Aguado, Amorrortu, Buenos Aires, 2008, p. 238.

<sup>11</sup> Raffin Marcelo, "Hannah Arendt, la condición judía y la asunción del mundo", in: Sucasas Alberto and Taub Emmanuel, *Pensamiento judío contemporáneo*, Prometeo, Buenos Aires, 2015, p. 343.

free from imperial ties, but potentially dangerous for the “new minorities”. All of this, naturally, without neither omitting nor idealizing those feudal empires which, in many cases, continued to persecute and harass their respective minorities. But this new scenario that surfaces after the empires’ fall is a double-edged scenario (later, we will see Arendt’s fundamental implication on this problem when addressing the Palestinian conflict). Stateless people and refugees at risk are seen across the globe. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, within the previously mentioned context, even prior to WWII, different mechanisms of population and people denationalization were spread. The word in Italy in the 1920s was “Unworthy citizens of citizenship”, with echoes of Nazi “Lives unworthy of life”.

In 1943, Arendt had already mentioned in a Classic text that refugees of a country represent the *avant-garde* of their people.<sup>12</sup> Despite all provocation, the importance of this idea lies in the fact that the refugee embodies the nation-state crisis, brings up the need to rethink the boundaries of human rights and represents the “general corrosion of traditional political categories”.<sup>13</sup>

The problem of universality in human rights –revolutionary France was the great promoter– is brought about by this crisis, which triggers the unsettling relation between State and nation-state’s own origin (let’s not forget the importance of Arendt’s concept of ‘natality’). As Agamben stated, reviewing Arendt once more, “Nation-state means: a state that makes nativity or birth, the foundation of its own sovereignty”.<sup>14</sup> France will be, in turn, Arendt’s nation-state model and for her, who was used to seeing history from Germany, the fall of France was considered a major tragedy, because she knew what this fall entailed (all of this took place before the discovery of the cosmopolitan American democracy).

France was *la nation par excellence* and Arendt reclaimed an idea of non-ethnic civic nation, and vindicated the *jus soli* against the *jus sanguinis*. While the former donates citizenship through territory, the latter does so through a combination of *ethos* and *demos*.

Giorgio Agamben recovers Hannah Arendt’s developments for a demanding present, because the theoretical-political sphere in question –as mentioned by Seyla Benhabib–

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<sup>12</sup> Arendt Hannah, “We refugees”, *The Jewish Writings*, Schocken, New York, 2007, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> Agamben Giorgio, *Mezzi senza fine*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2005, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

(both the Italian philosopher and the thinker from Istanbul write their works rethinking Arendt regarding the underlying Yugoslavian conflict), was more than explicit by remarking that “the phenomenon of political evil and the lack of membership of a State will continue to be the most discouraging problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.<sup>15</sup>

The nation-state crisis is reflected upon Arendt’s criticism to it. According to her, concepts such as equality, freedom and civil independence, in favor of others as people and territory, should have never been left aside by the nation-state.<sup>16</sup> Stateless peoples are subject to an apolitical life; their potential to exist politically is taken away from them. And when the nation-states become purely administrative and economic, when the core of statehood is the people-territory relationship, it is only natural that minorities outside this relationship are at risk. In the long run, the whole population might be out, due to the depoliticization involved in the administration of the future nation-state and the anti-political nature of Totalitarianism.

The nation-state went from trying to be a guarantor and instrument of the law and guarantees in defense of men, to being an instrument of discretion and massive denationalization. The Jewish people experience was extremely paradigmatic because –not in solitude– Jews went through this process in the heart of Europe one end to the other: from the Enlightenment emancipation to modern Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination.

But the Palestinian question will also influence Arendt’s thinking before and after 1948, before and after the horrific European experience and the nation-state crisis. In the eyes of Arendt, the European collapse serves as a true lesson to consider the world in general and the Middle-East in particular. If Arendt describes the consequences of the nation-state decline and its consequences on men’s lives in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*<sup>17</sup>, she also expands the potential consequences of this logic when writing –even before publishing this book– about the repositioning of Zionist Revisionism, believing there might be an Israeli solution involving Arab expulsion. In the long run, there is war, Arendt says.

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<sup>15</sup>Arendt Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, New York, 2003 p. 134. Also see Benhabib Seyla, *Los derechos de los otros*, trad. Gabriel Zadunaisky, Gedisa, Madrid, 2005, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Sánchez Madrid Nuria, “Crisis del Estado-nación y dialéctica de los derechos humanos en Hannah Arendt. El totalitarismo como colapso de las formas políticas”, ISEGORÍA. Revista de Filosofía Moral y Política N 49, 2013, p. 496.

<sup>17</sup>Arendt Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

## **“The Jewish Question” and the debate around the State of Israel**

Hannah Arendt's relation to her Jewish identity went through various stages along her life, and was marked by the crucial historical experiences she lived.<sup>18</sup> Her book on Rahel Varnhagen narrates “the failed Jewish assimilation to a surrounding that excludes them as Jews”.<sup>19</sup> And that would be Arendt's own story in Germany. At the beginning, Arendt kept her distance, and was even hostile for the hesitant nature of Varnhagen's relation to her Judaism and integration, and for wanting to give up on her Jewish condition. However, Arendt stands on her side when she recognizes herself in Varnhagen as a pariah, who decides to be Jewish due to people's rejection. That is how Arendt comes to terms with her Jewishness as a political question: because “if you are attacked as a Jew, then you should defend yourself as one.”

Then we should wonder where Judaism stands regarding politics and what political implication does the “Jewish question” have. As noted below, Arendt's position on the “Jewish question” is neither unique nor the most representative (it may be unfair to say that somebody else is). For instance, we have Jacob Taubes with his revolutionary approach, then Leo Strauss' “conservative” perspective and, naturally, Gershom Scholem's approach (just to mention a scholar related to them and with Hannah Arendt); all of them, interesting standpoints to contrast the theoretical-political one in question. These are essential but not exhaustive approaches to analyze the Jewish question, secularization and the State of Israel.

Regarding the theological-political grounds of exile and its relation to redemption, let us recall Jacob Taubes' words on the Jewish exile and its consequences: “Exile is the wilderness state of the nations, in which Israel wanders till the end of its days. In fact, exile repeats the wilderness state because life in exile is only possible through the hope of redemption”, and then Taubes added, “in exile, the invisible God of the wilderness becomes the God of the world who directs world history”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Young-Bruehl Elisabeth, *Hannah Arendt. For love of the World*, Yale University Press, Yale, 2004, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup>Brunkhorst Hauke, *El legado de Hannah Arendt*, trad. Manuel Abella and José Luis López de Lizaga, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2006. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Taubes Jacob, *Escatología occidental*, trad. Carola Pivetta, Miño y Dávila, Buenos Aires, 2010, p. 21.

Taubes will also state that “The historical place of revolutionary apocalypticism is Israel”<sup>21</sup>, which sparks a debate on what we talk about when ‘revolutionary’ comes to mind; it can be regarded as the break with a present marked by suffering and injustice (comprehensive justice is only attainable in the end, after the break, maybe when the law is established). For that reason, Taubes will later affirm that “we do what is right if we are aware of the Christian basis where our burgoise society lies”<sup>22</sup>. The revolutionary paradigm is another key difference between Taubes and Arendt. On the one hand, through an eschatological politics of religious messianic nature, Taubes proposes to dethrone the existing order all at once; on the other hand, Arendt presents herself as an admirer of the American Revolution<sup>23</sup> and a critic of violence.<sup>24</sup>

In line with all the above mentioned, Leo Strauss will reclaim the relation among modern conservatism, ancient liberalism and Judaism in the face of the advance of the universal State, proclaimed by his friend/opponent Alexandre Kojève,<sup>25</sup> who levels and equals it all. Hannah Arendt took Kojève’s courses in Paris and was also drawn to dive into the dispute about universal or World State. The World State is considered unachievable for Strauss, facing the impossibility of satisfying every man’s wishes and suppressing politics; according to Arendt, this Marxist utopian notion (as well as liberal) of a world with no State and politics is more of a nightmare than a dream.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, when tackling the Jewish problem, Arendt becomes interested in the question of modern liberalism. Strauss, despite the distance, wonders about the problems that Arendt rethinks, “Is liberalism, necessarily, friendly for Jews and Judaism?” And further on: “Can the liberal state claim to have solved the Jewish problem? Can any state claim to have solved it?”<sup>27</sup> The background here and one of the main texts on this topic in this same book constitutes Spinoza’s field: the first Jewish thinker who stopped being one without converting to another religion.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Taubes Jacob, *Del culto a la cultura*, trad. Silvia Villegas, Katz, Buenos Aires, 2007, p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Arendt Hannah, *On Revolution*, Penguin, New York, 2006, p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Arendt Hannah, *On Violence*, Harcourt, Orlando, 1970.

<sup>25</sup> Kojève Alexandre, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Gallimard, Paris, 2005. And see Kojève Alexandre, “Tyranny and Wisdom”, in: Strauss Leo, *On Tyranny*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt Hannah, *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken, New York, 2005, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> Strauss Leo, *Liberalismo antiguo y moderno*, trad. Leonel Livchits, Katz, Buenos Aires, 2007, p. 12.



Spinoza is a modern liberal thinker who contributed to weakening the Leviathan State, from Carl Schmitt's viewpoint,<sup>28</sup> paralyzing Europe and emancipating Jews all at once.

But Strauss wonders about the scope of the Spinozian work of refuting religious orthodox and he comes up with a negative answer, orthodoxy is not at all rejected, and even though modern liberalism stands as the political solution (modern) to all human problems, it is considered a blasphemy to find a human solution to a Jewish problem.

On the question of a Jewish State, in 1965 Strauss writes, "the Jewish state will be an empty shell without a Jewish culture which has its roots in the Jewish heritage".<sup>29</sup> Strauss will therefore remark that, even though the foundation of the State of Israel is the greatest event since the beginning of the exile [*Galut*], this event does not imply the end of the exile. There is only one way to give it an end: through the Divine Providence.

Furthermore, there is Gershom Scholem's angle, friend of Arendt's, but who also engaged with her in a heated argument on *Affaire Eichmann*.<sup>30</sup> Within this context, it is important to mention that Scholem and Strauss kept their friendship until the end, whilst with Taubes, he had at first a master-disciple relationship that ended up in enmity. But this animosity with Taubes proves to be essential to grasp part of Scholem's idea on mysticism and politics, and to consider his view on the State of Israel and even his quarrel with Arendt. In his critical article on Scholem, Taubes will write about a "neutralized Messianism", stating that Scholem is not willing to accept the true price of Messianism.<sup>31</sup>

As pointed out by Scholem in an important debate held in 1929, "I absolutely deny that Zionism is a messianic movement and that it has the right (if it is not mere empty phrases) to employ religious terminology for its own political goals. The redemption of the Jewish people, which as a Zionist I desire, is in no way identical with the religious redemption I hope for in the future. As a Zionist, I am not willing to meet interrogative or nostalgic politics that comply with a non-political and unmistakably religious sphere, the Apocalypse of the end of times." And adds that, "the Zionist ideal is one thing and the messianic ideal another, and the two do not meet except in the pompous phraseology of mass rallies which often infuse our youth with a spirit of new Sabbatianism, which must inevitably fail. The

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<sup>28</sup>Schmitt Carl, *El Leviathan en la teoría del Estado de Thomas Hobbes*, trad. Francisco Javier Conde, Comares, Granada, 2004, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup>Strauss Leo, *Liberalismo antiguo y moderno*, *op. cit.* 329.

<sup>30</sup>Arendt Hannah, *The Jewish Writings*, *op. cit.*, pp. 465-511.

<sup>31</sup>Taubes, Jacob, *Del culto a la cultura*. *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Zionist movement has nothing in common with Sabbatianism, and the attempts to instill such spirit has already caused serious misfortunes”.<sup>32</sup>

As specified by Emmanuel Taub, “ It is Scholem’s desire –regardless of this being true or a mere historical-political configuration through his investigations– to emphasize the political-national and ethical-universal division of Messianism, as well as the distinction between politics and religion, but directly removing the primary characteristic of the messianic ideal from the symbolic map”.<sup>33</sup> And goes on saying, “we could state that, in accordance with Scholem’s logics, it is impossible to build a long-term historical project on the foundations of the messianic ideal, because Messianism, in its own essence, will destroy it [...] So as to preserve the constitution of the modern state, Scholem needs to neutralize Messianism, if not, this would be impossible.”<sup>34</sup>

We hereby find various common concepts among Strauss, Taubes and Scholem which are differently approached by Arendt. While Strauss and Scholem seem to agree on separating Messianism from Zionism, Taubes, by asserting the theological aspect of politics, seeks to unblock what he calls “neutralization of Messianism” by “dethroning the existing order”. Arendt, though open for dialogue, will have a different perspective of the debate.

Throughout her path on the “Jewish question” and the State of Israel, a secular and critical position was held by Arendt, differing from her contemporaries mentioned before. Regarding this theological-political view (Taubes), “Messianic-neutralized” view (Scholem) and conservative esoteric view (Strauss), Arendt urges us to consider a different view of the Jewish question in modern times. And even when she goes through various stages in relation to her Judaism, she does not relate to these opposing views. However, it is paradoxically the work of Scholem –an eminent scholar on Kabbalah and Hebrew mysticisms– that could serve us, in a way, as a hint to one of Arendt’s analysis of Zionism and the emergence of the State of Israel.

As Emmanuel Taub recalls once again, “Sabbatianism was the greatest messianic movement with most followers in Judaism after the Temple’s destruction, exile and the Bar

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<sup>32</sup> Scholem Gershom, *Hay un misterio en el mundo*, trad. Manuel Abella, Trotta, Madrid, 2006, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> Taub Emmanuel, “Historia y neutralización: el mesianismo judío de Gershom Scholem”, *Eadem Utraque Europa*, N 14, Jun 2013, p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

Kokhba revolt”.<sup>35</sup> Regarding Sabbatai Zevi, Scholem says, “A people which had suffered from all the tribulations which exile and persecution could bring, and which at the same time had developed an extremely sensitive consciousness of life actually lived between the poles of exile and redemption, needed little to take the final step to Messianism. The appearance of Sabbatai Zevi and Nathan of Gaza precipitated this step by liberating the latent energies and potentialities which had gradually accumulated during the generations immediately preceding them. The eruption of the volcano, when it came, was terrific”.<sup>36</sup>

But what is it that Arendt finds relevant in this medieval Jewish Messianism? According to Arendt, action is one of politics’ key. And during the two hundred years of Diaspora, there were only two attempts to change this situation through action; the first being Sabbatianism, the second one, Zionism. Therefore, the “Zevi event” constitutes a key chapter to think about the connection among secularization, Judaism and the future emergence of the State of Israel. Arendt says that “until Sabbatai Zevi's time [Jews] had been able to conduct their communal matters through an imaginary politics: the memory of a remote past and the hope for a remote future”.<sup>37</sup>

Along these lines, the “Zevi event” catastrophically ended with the Jewish Middle Ages and defined the basic attitudes and convictions of the Jewish people for the following two centuries. According to Arendt, however, Jewish began to “judge secular events by secular criterion and make secular decisions in secular terms”<sup>38</sup> as a consequence of the calamitous way in which the mystical-political movement ended.

Anti-Semitism was a powerful weapon, Arendt says, and Jews had to take that weapon and use it in their favor. That is how Zionism was created. It is necessary to go back to the topic of “the fall of sacred truths” we mentioned at the beginning of the article. In this case, this decline implies that Jews had to take action in the secularization era.

But being plunged into reality is not the same as being realistic. And so that is what Arendt criticizes in relation to the European Jews’ situation before and after the *Shoá*, in general, and the Middle East in particular. Arendt mentions that “the process of

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Scholem Gershom, *Las grandes tendencias de la mística judía*, trad. Beatriz Oberländer, Siruela, Madrid, 2000, p. 313.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt Hannah, “The Jewish State”, *The Jewish Writings, op. cit.*, p. 377.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 378.

secularization made Jews even less ‘realistic’ –that is less capable than even before of facing and understanding the real situation”.<sup>39</sup> There is a lingering interest here that we will be found throughout her work, as it is the case of the “ability to judge”.<sup>40</sup>

In Arendt’s view, Zionism is the “ism” the Jews found in the era of secularization, another “ism” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but one that, for obvious reasons, will be decisive for the Jewish history. In the Jewish case, this search for a new guidance for history translates into an entrance to history in a strongly anti-Semite context, which springs from Zionism. It is after the rise of Zionism that Jews can become a nation among nations and have their own state. It went from messianic hope to secular faith in a modern state as any other.

She has always highlighted the underlying problem of nationalism in any case, and the Jewish was no exception. Therefore, it sounded prophetic when, by 1948, she was already stating that “and even if Jews were to win the war, its end would find the unique possibilities and the unique of Zionist in Palestine. The land that would come into being would be something quite other than the dream of world Jewry, Zionist and non-Zionist. The ‘victorious’ Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities”.<sup>41</sup>

For Arendt, there was a bitter-sweet nature in the emergence of the State of Israel, which was shown in her critical thinking. She saw how paradoxical the situation was: in a sense, defeat meant completing what Nazism had started (the extermination), but winning, meant living surrounded by hostile enemies. What is more, she thought –history would prove her right later– that the military triumph was no guarantee of political coexistence in the region.

Arendt pointed out<sup>42</sup> that Hertzl thought in terms of German nationalism, while Lazare did so from his French heritage together with the French revolutionary ideals (let us recall that in the ‘40s and ‘50s Arendt has not yet entirely “discovered” the American Revolution). We should not forget that for this dilemma Arendt was drawn to Lazare’s portrait of the “conscious pariahs” where she seems to want to enlist.<sup>43</sup> Within this

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Arendt Hannah, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, The Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt Hannah, “To Save the Jewish Homeland”, *The Jewish Writings, op. cit.*, p. 396.

<sup>42</sup> Arendt Hannah, “Herzl and Lazare”, *The Jewish Writings, op. cit.*, p. 338

<sup>43</sup> Arendt Hannah, “*The Jew as a Pariah*”, *The Jewish Writings, op. cit.*, p. 283.

framework, Zionism fuels on anti-Semitism, but embarks on the difficult enterprise of creating a state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in times of nation-state crisis. And that is actually the cross the grand State of Israel has to carry.

Arendt knew it was not wise to repeat the European mistakes in the Middle East, and for that reason she built up her hopes on a federation for the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> In light of the small states proliferation, Arendt suggested a federation of states, for the fall of the Ottoman Empire and decolonization resulted in balkanization. She suggested a federation which boosted economic growth and political coexistence in the region, to avoid war among the multiple nation-states. In return for peace and cooperation, the State of Israel could donate its economic achievements to the region. Another option would be to deny the politics of plurality through nationalisms which, in a non-factual way, fueled the war on behalf of a miracle that would at once wipe out its respective otherness. As Arendt puts it, “but it would be a tragedy if, once this home or this state [the State of Israel] has been established, its people continued to depend upon ‘miracles’ and were unable to accommodate themselves to objective necessities, even if these are of a long-term nature”.<sup>45</sup> As we mentioned before, and Arendt stated in a previous text, secularization is no guarantee of realism. Thus the importance of Arendt’s critical thinking in pursuit of a politics of plurality.

### **Arendt’s legacy: critical thinking in dark times**

Hannah Arendt is a fundamental philosopher of modern society, embodying a permanently evolving critical thinking. This uneasy theorist prioritized thinking at any cost. For her, politics is based on the fact of human plurality<sup>46</sup> and her condition as a Jew refugee pariah is paramount for the understanding of how important plurality and freedom are for her in such a relentless world. We are immersed in this modern vacancy and it is completely up to us how to handle our potential.

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<sup>44</sup> Arendt Hannah, “Peace or Armistice in the Near East”, *The Jewish Writings, op. cit.*, p. 447.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 449.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt Hannah, *The Promise of Politics, op. cit.*, p. 93.

As the historian Tony Judt said, “in various essays and later in *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*, she argues that evil comes from a simple inability to think”.<sup>47</sup> In the context of dehumanization, that implies the victory of the Government under modern states, society’s complicity to any kind of excluding experience is also explained by the non-critical acceptance of a standardized logic in the political, cultural and social spheres. One of the traits of non-critical societies is the uncritical acceptance of exclusion as an inexorable fatality. Arendt has always tried not to be subjected to general opinion without questioning it.

Modernity itself, through criticism, allows us to take distance and put thinking in the service of life. In this sense, Arendt reminds us the power of free action when acting politically, regarding the life-saving power of thought. According to Arendt, politics involve the construction of factitiousness. She states that, “our political life dwells on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals [...] We are not born equal; we become equals as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights”.<sup>48</sup>

In Arendt, to rethink a politics of plurality involves rethinking her view on the Jewish Question and vice versa. Arendt’s writing goes against the flow, she does not concur with any mainstream ideology of her time. Neither liberal nor Marxist, critical of both Capitalism and Soviet communism, Judaism advocate, and critical, only when required of the State of Israel; Arendt is a philosopher of urgent times: her thought becomes a toolbox in times of uncertainty. As stated in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Anti-Semitism (not merely the hatred of Jews) and imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship) one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by

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<sup>47</sup> Judt Tony, *Reappraisals*, Penguin, New York, 2009, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> Arendt Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

newly defined territorial entities”.<sup>49</sup> A New Nomos of the Earth for a plural and collective life in a secular time.

Arendt can only be understood within the context she wrote in. And we cannot take the risk of falling into purist contextualism nor into the biographical side of the history of ideas. Because Arendt was a political thinker who wanted to think about what was going on “between men”, hence the importance of her existential course for putting ideas together. Her approach entails an opening to the world, love for the world. In this respect, her ideas cannot be detached from the Modern state crisis that ended up expelling her from Europe and forcing her to feel as a pariah, as well as her migrant Jewish condition in the cosmopolitan United States in an era of nuclear war.

It is worth mentioning Arendt’s fresh thinking, within all boundaries, for the contemporary scene. There is a variety of people who, still today, in a world ravaged by religious, ethnical and national wars, resort to her work, accounting for this contemporaneity: from Seyla Benhabib to Judith Butler, from Giorgio Agamben to Gayatri Spivak, from Andrew Arato to Tony Judt.

For that reason, Giorgio Agamben, admirer of Arendt’s thinking, will say that “the refugee is perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day. At least until the process of the dissolution of the nation-state and its sovereignty has come to an end, the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come,”<sup>50</sup> in a hopeful remark by the Italian philosopher. In this respect, in the depths of secularized modernity, Arendt proposes acceptance to social contingency, ability to political action and the power of words. All of these against the ghost of State restitution, in the forms of modern Totalitarianism. She writes in times of bursting crisis, she writes against all nostalgia of the theological-political ultimates. Arendt enlightens our path in times of darkness; a star in the firmament of Modernity’s desert.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

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