Hannah Arendt’s Jewish Cosmopolitanism Between the Universal and the Particular

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes the lofty term of cosmopolitanism from people’s historical experience. It attempts to find a bridge between theory and life. Many writers now maintain that cosmopolitanism is no longer a dream, but rather the substance of social reality – and that it is increasingly the nation-state and our particular identities that are figments of our imagination, clung to by our memories. The aim of this article is to concretize this argument and demonstrate how some of the Jewish intellectuals who emerged from World War II and the Holocaust argued passionately about the status of their Jewishness and how this related to abstract and universal ideals of modernity and human rights. The article focuses on Hannah Arendt’s responses to her critics instead of her vast theoretical work to illustrate this point. In responding to her critics, Arendt came closest to providing a formula for a concept of cosmopolitanism, which attempts to square the circle between the universal and the particular.

Key words

■ Hannah Arendt ■ cosmopolitanism ■ the Holocaust ■ particularism ■ universalism

There is a new cosmopolitanism in the air. The old concept has not simply been rediscovered but reinvented for the global age. Many writers now maintain that cosmopolitanism is no longer a dream, but rather the substance of social reality – and that it is increasingly the nation-state and our particular identities that are figments of our imagination, clung to by our memories. But this goes too far. If cultural and ethnic nations are really just illusions to be seen through, then the identities based on them are nothing more than mistakes and delusions. And if that is what we think, we have not produced a new concept at all. We have simply reproduced the troublesome universalism of old. Universalism obliges us to respect others as equals as a matter of principle, yet for that very reason it does not involve any requirement that would arouse curiosity or respect for what
makes others different. On the contrary, the particularity of others is sacrificed to an assumption of universal equality.

What I would call 'realistic cosmopolitanism' presupposes a universalistic minimum involving a number of substantive norms that must be upheld at all costs. We can speak of cosmopolitan common sense when we have good reasons to assume that the majority of human beings would be willing to defend these minimum norms (Beck and Sznaider, 2006: 19). However, the predicament faced by this universalistic account of cosmopolitanism is that it both carries a thick Eurocentric bias and operates with thin conceptions of identity. Its central shortcoming is to operate with an ahistorical notion of history that seeks to mould particular memories of the past into universal standards for the future. For this reason it presents nationalism as its main enemy and treats it only as something to be overcome (Calhoun, 2002). By contrast, I would argue that realistic cosmopolitanism also presupposes a particularistic minimum which does not simply negate the existence of a community of fate.

The respective balance of particularism and universal models can be located through the changing significance of Holocaust memories (Levy and Sznaider, 2005). The choice of how the Holocaust is remembered is not arbitrary, but serves as an exemplary case for the relation between universalism and particularism. In the past memories of the Holocaust have generally been organized around the dichotomy of universalism (the idea that it was an assault on humanity) and particularism (the recognition that it was primarily an attempt to exterminate European Jewry). The Holocaust is not one totalizing signifier containing the same meanings for everyone. Rather, its meanings evolve from the encounter of global interpretations and local sensibilities. Thus, the cosmopolitanization of Holocaust memories involves the formation of both nation-specific and nation-transcending commonalities. In this view, it is no longer the dichotomy but the mutual constitution of particular and universal conceptions that determines the ways in which the Holocaust is remembered. The cosmopolitanization of memory does not mean the end of national perspectives, so much as their transformation into more complex entities with different relations to the universal.

The aim of this article is to concretize this argument and demonstrate how certain Jewish intellectuals after the Holocaust argued at once about the status of their Jewishness and how it related to the modern universalistic ideals centred on human rights (Rabinbach, 2004). One theme kept returning: the need to maintain the tension between the universal and the particular, not to 'resolve' it one way or the other. I argue that this was not merely an accident of intellectual history. The difficulties they went through – their inability to give up either their universalistic dreams or their national identity – were not merely an indecisiveness born of trauma and exile. These difficulties were not only matters of subjective concern but are directly relevant to cosmopolitan theory and praxis. Cosmopolitanism is not only a noble ideal but a challenge to people's lives – and this is true especially after a catastrophe. The soul of cosmopolitanism is that the universal and the particular must both be preserved without either being reduced to the other.
The reason this post-war generation of Jewish intellectuals were pioneers in developing the concept of modern cosmopolitanism was because of their situation. In the broad sense, of course, cosmopolitanism is as old as trade routes and empires and so too is the Jews’ connection with it (Slezkine, 2004). But the modern concept of cosmopolitanism with which we are concerned today did not begin to arise until after 1945 and one crucial factor that caused it to rise was the confrontation with the experience of the Holocaust. It is this that led to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and thence to the new universalistic common sense built on it (Levy and Sznaider, 2004). The very notion of these rights grew directly out of what was then considered its worst breach, namely, the crimes of the Nazis. Hence the Declaration says in its preamble: ‘whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind’. It was clear to the framers of the Declaration which ‘barbarous acts’ were meant. The confrontation with the Holocaust also started a broader process by which social and political theory based on national criteria came slowly to be de-legitimated in principle. While this is still more of a set of regulatory ideals than a reality, it still represents a historical change in regulatory ideals.

Of all the thinkers in this group, the clearest exemplar for our purposes is Hannah Arendt, one of the prominent political theorists of the 20th century. Though much of the literature on Arendt is concerned with her political theory, her Jewishness seems to be less explored and with it her re-affirmation of Jewish particularity (Arendt, 1978). *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, provoked an enormously heated debate among Jews who read it as a denial of Jewishness (Diner, 1997). However, shortly after the publication of book in 1964 she famously told the German journalist, Gunter Gaus, in an interview she gave in Germany that:

> if one is attacked as a Jew, one has to defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever. But: What can I specifically do as a Jew? (Arendt, 1994: 12)

There are many essays where Arendt discusses Jewish and Zionist issues (Arendt, 1978) and one of her first books (Arendt, 1957) was a biography of Rahel Varnhagen, a Jewish woman of the early 19th century, whose impossible attempt to escape her Jewishness was the subject of this study (Barnouw, 1990). Arendt, notwithstanding her worldly sympathies, seems to have taken exception to all escape from responsibility for one’s particular embedded situation.

*Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a book about the Holocaust, the human rights legacy of the Holocaust and the possibility of mass murder in modern times; but it was also a book about Jewish responsibility. The Eichmann trial was the first attempt to apply the doctrine of crimes against humanity outside the context of occupation authority and to make this idea the authority for action. The claim was being made by Israel, a nation-state, on behalf of the Jewish people, and in this sense it was as particular and non-universalistic as one can be. The trial brought these two seemingly incompatible opposites close together. On the one hand, it sought to establish the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the unique right
of the Jewish people to judge those who committed it; at the same time it convicted Eichmann of a charge – crimes against humanity – that by necessity had to be empty of all particular national content if it was to be legitimate at all. For this reason, perhaps, the court deemed it necessary to supplement it with the charge of ‘crimes against the Jewish people’, a charge that fits neither the old framework nor the new.

In the background was the debate over the legitimacy of Israel itself, which the trial sought to consolidate domestically and internationally, but whose right to Jewishness is undercut if the universalism at the basis of human rights laws is taken to its conclusion (Yablonka, 2004). So the Eichmann trial was a site of conflict and once Arendt wrote about the facts of the Holocaust and the moral lessons we should draw from it, it brought all the contradictions to the fore (Bilsky, 2004). Her attempt to work through these contradictions is of great interest to those of us who want to conceptualize cosmopolitanism. What crimes are we talking about?: crimes against humanity (Fine, 2000) or crimes against the Jewish people? Her narrative consists of both, a narrative in which universalistic and Jewish messages constantly reinforce one other.

In this article, I shall focus on Arendt’s responses to her critics to illustrate this point, for in my opinion it was in responding to her critics that she came close to conceptualizing the modern concept of cosmopolitanism. The most famous attacks on Arendt came not only from the cosmopolitan intellectuals that made up her New York circle, but rather from Zionist intellectuals who thought the lesson of the Holocaust was anything but universal. They thought it taught both that you had to make a choice, whether you were on the side of the Jews or you were not, and that this was not a choice for you to make because others made it for you. From this perspective it was a matter of facing the truth, the truth of your identity. Being true to who you are means being true to your people. It means loyalty and solidarity and denouncing particularism was a form of disloyalty bordering on treason. Zionists intellectuals read her book as saying that Auschwitz could have happened anywhere to anyone, as if she had no special connection to it and as if Jews had no special connection with it. All of this outraged them, for it seemed to make their particular suffering a matter of indifference. It was an argument about the ways Jews had to define themselves in relation to universal values (Fine, 2001; Suchoff, 1997).

The most forceful proponent of this point of view was Gershom Scholem, an old friend of Arendt’s and the leading scholar of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Scholem and Arendt had known each other for a long time, sharing at some points similar views about Jewish nationalism. Especially before the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, both tried to develop a ‘non-nationalist nationalism’ (Eddon, 2003), different from other nationalist movements while at the same time fulfilling a pragmatic obligation to the Jews. We can call this a ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’, to capture the paradox of embracing universalism and Jewish national independence at the same time. Arendt’s calls for Jewish political action, even forming a Jewish army, were based on the particularistic premise that only within the boundaries of a political community are
people free to raise their voice and be heard (Arendt, 1951). But hers was an appeal for a limited sovereignty.

The exchange between Scholem and Arendt not only stands in for Jewish fate after the Holocaust but points to recurrent theoretical dilemmas in current cosmopolitan theory. When Arendt published her report on Eichmann, this controversy reached its peak. In a famous and published exchange of letters in 1964, Scholem accused her of being heartless to her own people, of lacking sympathy and solidarity with the victims – without which no remedying of the world would ever be possible. As he put it:

In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as ‘Ahavat Israel’: ‘Love of the Jewish people.’ In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German Left, I find little trace of it. (Scholem and Arendt, 1964: 51)

When he referred to the German Left, Scholem may perhaps have been thinking of a famous quotation from Rosa Luxemburg, who was greatly admired by Arendt and who in 1917 had written to her friend Mathilde Wurm:

Why do you come with your particular Jewish sorrows? I feel equally close to the wretched victims of the rubber plantations in Putumayo, or to the Negroes in Africa with whose bodies the Europeans are playing catch-ball. I have not a separate corner in my heart for the ghetto: I feel at home in the entire world wherever there are cloud and birds and human tears. (Luxemburg, 1958: 13)

But that was 50 years ago, long before the Holocaust, back when Jews were still considered either citizens of European nation-states or tolerated subjects of European empires. Scholem did not think that after 1945 any Jew could take such blithe universalism seriously. As far as he was concerned, cosmopolitanism was just another name for a universalism that meant the obliteration of any concern with one’s roots. He maintained that one’s origins create an obligation of solidarity both in terms of aid and perspective. It was wrong to trample on the feelings of your own people; it was an offence against one’s own identity. He told Arendt that the ‘matter of the destruction of one-third of our people’ should require a more sensitive treatment from somebody he considered to be ‘a daughter of our people’.

Arendt replied a month later. She wrote: ‘I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change to disclaim facts of this kind’ (Scholem and Arendt, 1964: 53). For Arendt, her Jewishness was a given, a ‘physei’ rather than a ‘nomos’ as she put it (Scholem and Arendt, 1964: 54). But when it came to Scholem’s charge that she lacked love of the Jewish people, she seemed to agree. It was not just love of the Jewish people she lacked. She didn’t love any people. As she put it:

you are right – I am not moved by any ‘love’ of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life loved any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love ‘only’ my friends and the only love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. (Scholem and Arendt, 1964: 54)
Arendt said Jewishness was a key feature of her identity. After all, her most important book on political theory dealt with the horrors of totalitarianism and of what was later to be called the Holocaust (Arendt, 1951). However, against the background of her life, the idea that only friends were a subject of love was implausible. She wasn’t exactly a cultivator of her garden. Politics was her life and she was passionately involved with Israel. As she once said, the fate of that country affected her more personally than the fact of any other country in the world (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 455). Even when she was furious at Israel, she cared about it. It was this disjunction between deeply held convictions that led to the constant argument and agonizing that were the mark of this generation. They argued all the time, they wrote all the time, and then periodically the argument would resurface with all its little emendations and improvements (Baehr, 2004; Rabinbach, 2004; Vromen, 2004). On the other hand, Arendt was no stranger to the political concept of love. Besides her dissertation, where she analysed the Augustinian notion of love, her rejection of love and other emotions in the public sphere were extremely important to her. Thus, in one of her most philosophical books *The Human Condition* (1958), where she deals with the most universal of human issues like ‘worldliness’, ‘human action’ and ‘forgiveness’, she rejects ‘love’ as a political principle: ‘love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason, rather than its rarity that is not only a-political, but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces (1958: 242). She wants political relations (like forgiveness) to be based on mutual respect. However, in the same place, she talks about ‘radical evil’ (1958: 241) which needs to be exempted from political processes like forgiveness.

With the publication of the German translation of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a year later, in 1964, many German intellectuals also construed Arendt’s cosmopolitanism as synonymous with universalism, but universalism had as much appeal for the Germans as it outraged the Jews and for precisely the same reasons: it de-emphasized the particularity of victims and perpetrators. It changed the categories into impersonal ones. It implied retrospectively that it all could have happened to anyone. It made the Holocaust simply one instance of a larger class of mass murders, rather than a unique evil event perpetrated by uniquely evil people. Arendt was intellectually drafted as one of the mothers of this functional approach to the study of the Holocaust, which de-emphasizes agency (and therefore guilt) and concentrates on rational bureaucracy or modernity (Bauman, 1989). This was an important moment in the history of Holocaust studies, a now burgeoning field that is still marked by this fundamental divide.

An important argument in this respect was with a young intellectual named Hans Magnus Enzensberger who was later to become a central figure in the German New Left and the German cultural scene. In the same year the translation of Eichmann appeared in German, Enzensberger published a collection of essays called *Politics and Crime*, one of which built its argument using Arendt’s book as a foundation. It was called ‘Reflections before a Glass Cage’, and it made what he thought was the obvious extension of Arendt’s argument: that all genocides are the same and we have the same obligation to stop them. They are all
Holocausts and he in particular drew people's attention to the prospect of a nuclear Holocaust that was very much preying on people's minds. It was not only that the two phrases used the same word; it was that the same mechanism seemed to be at work that Arendt had described in her book. In Enzensberger's interpretation, evil wasn't banal; it was banalized. The Holocaust and the rise of the Nazis had generally been explained in terms of Germany's exceptional national development, but what Enzensberger represents is a 'cosmopolitanism wrongly understood': he took the Holocaust out of the framework of the German nation and reset it into the context of modernity. Germany ceased to be the exception to the standard path of European national development and became instead the exemplification of a common modernity. World War II was not a disaster caused or suffered by Germany alone. It was a disaster suffered by all of Europe and one which was prepared by all of Europe beforehand. Germany was simply its epicentre. As for the 'After period', it was also not simply the aftermath for Germany but a new phase for all of Europe. It was the beginning of the European Union, which marked a new phase in modernity, a cosmopolitan rather than nation-state modernity.

Like many proponents of the new cosmopolitan perspective, Enzensberger conceived of modernity as falling into two phases: first, a nation-centred stage that began with the Westphalian Order (Fine, 2003), and, second, a cosmopolitan stage, the arcs of which begin at different times after 1945. Once one accepts this rough division of modernity into nation-state-centred phase and non-nation-state-centred phase, it seems to go without saying that the exemplars of the first stage must be the countries that are the most nationalist. Once the nation-state has been identified as the central defining feature of ‘First Modernity’ (Beck, 2005), it simply does not compute that the most nationalist country on the historical stage – the most ethnically defined, the most willing to sacrifice for national greatness – should be an ‘exception’. It must be the rule because it defines the rule. For Enzensberger, this was the soul of Arendt’s book. For him, Arendt had made Eichmann the paradigm of how instrumental-bureaucratic rationality could make us numb to millions of dead by reducing them to numbers and sanitized clichés, like ‘collateral damage’. And for him, this was the exactly what made Eichmann the same as the authors of the nuclear Holocaust that was now looming over them. He compared Eichmann to Hermann Kahn, who had written two books entitled On Thermonuclear War (1961) and Thinking the Unthinkable (1962). The latter title almost makes his entire argument: here was a man who was saying we should think the unthinkable. It was our moral duty. Rationality demanded it. And by making it thinkable, he was making it doable. The assumption up until then was the nuclear weapons were too horrible ever to be used. Kahn was trying to convince the establishment that wasn’t true: that 30 million or 60 million dead wouldn’t be the end of the world.

Enzensberger’s arguments were a major intellectual attempt to equate the Holocaust to the mass murders threatened by the Cold War. The debate over whether the Holocaust should be considered unique or an exemplar of all other genocides rages to this day. Now Arendt's response to this was very interesting.
She was asked to review the book by the German journal *Merkur* and she refused. When they asked her why, the result was an exchange of letters between her and Enzensberger which *Merkur* published the following year (Arendt and Enzensberger, 1965). Arendt attacked Enzensberger seemingly for some of the same things she had been attacked for, namely that by describing everything in abstract, functionalist terms he was talking away the guilt. And she said that it was especially wrong for him to talk like this, because he was a German.

Enzensberger replied that this was an entirely illegitimate form of argument. It went beyond *ad hominem* to *ad nationem*, and thus violated every canon of universal reason. Enzensberger wanted to be considered a person, not a representative of an ethnic collective (Arendt and Enzensberger, 1965: 383). And he stuck by his original assertion: we should be against every Holocaust no matter who commits them: ‘And the worst is that these deeds were committed at all and not that they were committed by Germans’ (Arendt and Enzensberger, 1965: 383). Surely she could not disagree?

And it is true, she did not disagree but it was not the main point for her. What she said in her reply was: you misunderstood my book. It is not the meaning of the Holocaust in my book. It is not the meaning of the Holocaust for me. And most of all, it shouldn’t be the meaning of the Holocaust for you, a German. She insisted: ‘It did happen in Germany and nowhere else, and has turned into an event of German history’ (Arendt and Enzensberger, 1965: 384). She continued disagreeing with him about the comparisons he drew between Auschwitz and war-related deaths as in Dresden and Hiroshima. For her, Auschwitz had nothing to do with war. Its aim was to exterminate the Jewish people (Arendt and Enzensberger, 1965: 385). Why shouldn’t a German understand the Holocaust without reference to its particularity? *Because morality is based on particularity.* It is based on being able to look ourselves in the mirror and say that we have fulfilled the moral obligations that make us who we are. And that includes above all the special responsibilities we have to particular others who have been attached to us by accidents of history and birth. To sweep this aside is to forget who you are and to free yourself from all personal responsibility. This is the crux of Arendt’s argument.

For Arendt, a value-free description of the Holocaust is wrong in itself because the Ought is immanent in the Is. The Jews were outraged at the way she looked at facts objectively and tampered with sacred taboos, but what she was trying to make clear was that there is a big difference between that and being value neutral. For Arendt, there is no value-free description; there is only the running away from who you are. And when we look back at the rest of her book, this is the key. For her, you can deduce the Ought from the Is. Everything that happens in the world has a moral significance. This idea of an intimate connection between morality and identity is Arendt’s answer to what it means to maintain a tension between the universal and the particular. She is not saying all morality is based on identity. She is saying that identity is an essential part because it is the part which makes us who we are and gives us our moral motivation, because it is the basis of our passions and our self.
This for me is the meaning of cosmopolitanism beyond universalism. Universal maxims, like ‘we should help the poor’ or ‘we should save the innocent’, because they contain no personal element, are merely pious maxims that no one acts on – until they are mixed with the passion of identity, the feeling that you just can’t look yourself in the face if you allow this to happen without doing something.

So Arendt’s response to Scholem and Enzensberger is that they misunderstand her universalism because both are unable to go beyond conceiving of the relation of universal and particular as an either–or. For her, they are a both–and. Scholem decries her for being a universalist and betraying her duty to people, to her personal collective identity. And she replies: No. Not everything is particular. The truth is not particular. To Scholem she says, in essence, identity is not everything. And to Enzensberger she says, identity is not nothing. Your identity and my identity matter. And the fact that we are individuals does not sever us from our collectivities. Individuals do not come out of the void, they are produced socially, and they remain rooted in the emotions and ways of thought of the collectivities that produce them. Even if they reject them, they reject the terms that have been inculcated in their sense of self and which an outsider wouldn’t feel at all. To Scholem she says: not all morality is particular. We owe a duty to humankind. And to Enzensberger she says: not all morality is universal. If all we use is reason, then we could end up equally with Kantian moral imperatives – or with bureaucratic memos justifying torture and nuclear war. The ultimate basis of our convictions is our identity: what we can’t imagine ourselves doing; what people are we vitally attached to. That for me is the starting point of modern cosmopolitanism. It is about rooted cosmopolitanism, by which I mean universal values that descend from the level of abstract philosophy and are emotionally engaging that in people’s everyday lives. It is by becoming embedded in people’s personal identities that cosmopolitan philosophy becomes a political force. It is by embodying philosophy in rituals that such identities are created, reinforced, and integrated into communities. And this, I believe, is what Arendt was trying to do in her twofold exchanges over the Eichmann work.

Squaring the circle between the universal and the particular is no easy task and Arendt by no means finished it. What she showed is that it also requires squaring the circle between thought and feeling, morality and identity, the Ought and the Is. It is not an easy path, but it is the way not to get stuck in a universalism where identity does not matter – and cosmopolitanism doesn’t exist.

Notes

1 For a discussion of Arendt’s critical cosmopolitanism in connection to the Nuremberg Trials and in dialogue with Karl Jaspers. see Fine (2000).
2 The secondary literature on Arendt’s Eichmann book has reached such huge proportions that it does not make sense to even start listing all the entries in it.
3 On Arendt’s stance towards Zionism, see her essays in Arendt (1978), especially ‘Zionism Reconsidered’ (1978: 131–63), written in 1945 and extremely critical of
Jewish ethno-nationalism. Scholem reacted to this article as well, where he defended his Jewish particularism (Aschheim, 2004: 922).

4 After her arrival in New York, Arendt published between 1941 and 1945 a column ‘This Means You’ in the German Jewish American publication Der Aufbau. There she appealed directly to her fellow Jews and demanded Jewish political action such as the constitution of a Jewish army to fight against the Nazis. Her ‘Aufbau’ essays are collected in Arendt (1994).

5 Arendt began to direct research work for the ‘Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction’ in 1944. The task of this commission was to see how European Jewry’s spiritual treasures (i.e. books) could be recovered and given new homes. Between 1948 and 1952, Arendt served as executive director of ‘Jewish Cultural Reconstruction.’ In this capacity, she travelled many times to Germany to try to recover Jewish cultural property. This was the same period she worked on The Origins of Totalitarianism (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 187–8).

References


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