

# DEFENDING THE PLURAL: HANNAH ARENDT AND GENOCIDE STUDIES

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**Abstract** *This essay examines the reasons for the revival of interest in Hannah Arendt's work in the new field of genocide studies. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt puts forward the 'boomerang thesis', suggesting that the roots of European totalitarianism, especially Nazism, lay in overseas colonialism. This claim, which is only now, over fifty years later, being empirically tested, accords with the view of some scholars of genocide that genocide and colonialism are inherently linked. German Southwest Africa (Namibia), where the Herero and Nama War (1904-08) ended in the first genocide of the twentieth century, is often cited as the best proof of Arendt's thesis. Yet Arendt herself argued that there were unbridgeable breaks between the nineteenth-century, including the history of imperialism, and twentieth-century totalitarianism, and also believed that the Holocaust could not meaningfully be compared with pre-modern or colonial cases of genocide. What then accounts for Arendt's renewed popularity? Apart from being one of the few thinkers to acknowledge that genocide had occurred in colonial contexts, genocide scholars find that the philosophical underpinning of Arendt's work accords with their own. Like Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term 'genocide', Arendt saw that, at bottom, her thought was concerned with defending the plurality of the human species.*

**Keywords** Genocide studies, colonialism, imperialism, totalitarianism, fascism, antisemitism, Holocaust

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## INTRODUCTION

In the burgeoning world of 'Arendt scholarship', perhaps the most noteworthy development - and certainly one of the more contentious - is the identification of Hannah Arendt as an intellectual forebear for the emerging field of 'genocide studies'. Discussions of many aspects of Arendt's thought - secularization, cliché and terror, liberalism, republicanism, rights discourse and international relations, and so on - continue apace, as they have long done. But with genocide studies, Arendt is fast being canonised, in a way that would have amazed her, as one of the 'founding fathers' of the field.<sup>1</sup> Yet ironically, in claiming Arendt for their intellectual heritage, genocide scholars may be misreading her. In this essay, I examine the way in which Arendt's ideas have been taken up by genocide scholars, furnishing them with an intellectual lineage. My concern is less with the content of Arendt's ideas than with their adoption and adaptation in the context of genocide studies.

In a recent article, Dirk Moses argues that scholars who invoke Arendt's so-called 'boomerang thesis' to justify their argument that the violence of European overseas colonialism formed the basis of fascism in Europe have misunderstood her position:

Far from proposing a 'boomerang' thesis about the corrosive effect of colonialism in Africa on the German and European metropole, Arendt was advancing an alternative continuity

argument in service of a broader agenda about the *discontinuity* between what she called 'the Western tradition' and totalitarian crimes. The relevance of her invocation of British colonialism in Africa was not to demonstrate their infection of Germany, let alone Russia. It was to redeem British rule, which she admired. The German colonialism and imperialism relevant to Nazism and the Holocaust was not to be found in Africa, as commonly supposed, but in the Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism of Central Europe. 'Continental imperialism', as she called Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism, fed into totalitarianism and its unique crimes, while any abuses of 'Western imperialism' were rationally limited.<sup>2</sup>

In Moses's reading, Arendt's aim in limiting the connections between European atrocities overseas and Nazi genocide in Europe was to assert the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Or, we might add, to defend the Western tradition, which Arendt wanted to quarantine from contamination with her comment that Nazism came 'from the gutter'. These are extremely thought-provoking claims. Not only do they suggest that genocide scholars are misreading Arendt, a problem to which I will return, but they also imply that genocide studies, a field that - one hopes - is founded on solidarity with the oppressed, actually panders to western stereotypes about 'exotic' peoples and morbid fantasies about unrestrained violence. Let us not forget that Edward Said lumped Arendt together with Joseph Conrad, Graham Green and V.S. Naipaul as a purveyor of just such stereotypes, one 'whose speciality is to deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgment or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences'.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the truth about Arendt's intentions, it remains the case that her imprimatur is regularly invoked in order to make a connection between imperialism and fascism, colonialism and genocide. Just as Marx turned Hegel on his head to argue that material conditions generated ideas rather than vice versa, so historians have rendered topsy-turvy Arendt's description of the discontinuities between western overseas expansionism and continental imperialism within Europe. What matters is that Arendt placed these two apparently discrete trends of world history together; it is the juxtaposition which fuels the historical imagination, not Arendt's attempt to delimit its relevance. In what follows, I show how Arendt is often the inspiration for many scholars in genocide studies, whether they cite her or not. I then test the 'genocide studies Arendt' against Arendt's own claims, and ask what it is about Arendt's thought that many scholars find so congenial. I will argue that although there is a clear mismatch between Arendt's own statements about colonialism, totalitarianism and Nazism, and those that underpin contemporary genocide studies, there are nevertheless good reasons why Arendt can provide intellectual sustenance and a sense of participation in a politically engaged project by investigating genocide. In particular, building on the work of Dirk Moses, Jürgen Zimmerer and others on the links between colonialism and genocide, I suggest that attending to the often-overlooked 'Continental Imperialism' section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (henceforth *OT*) will help in explaining Arendt's appeal to scholars of genocide. But beyond merely invoking Arendt as a precursor or inspiration, I suggest too that approaching Arendt in the context of postcolonial studies can be a productive way of understanding Arendt and the reasons why her ideas have been taken up in recent scholarship; Arendt, whilst hardly in the tradition of postcolonial theory, straddles a fascinating and ambivalent line between racist disdain for native peoples and criticism of their treatment at the hands of European colonialists. This complex

ambivalence in her thinking provides a productive jumping-off point for many contemporary discussions. Genocide studies' appropriation of her ideas, seems, in other words, to be one of the best examples of 'the prescience of Hannah Arendt'.

## GENOCIDE STUDIES AND THE 'BOOMERANG THESIS'

Genocide studies reflects the wider reception of Arendt, which splits markedly between those who find her ideas insightful and productive, and those who instinctively recoil from them. In the first camp we find, among others, Benjamin Madley, Enzo Traverso, Sven Lindqvist and, most significantly, Jürgen Zimmerer. Until recently, bringing Arendt and the notion of genocide together was a comparative rarity, with a major exception being Stephen Whitfield's 1980 book, *Into the Dark*, which discusses Lemkin's theory and applies it to the definition of totalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> Now it has become common to refer to Arendt, even if only in passing, as the source of the notion that imperialism and Nazism were linked, a linkage that recent work is determined to defend empirically.

Enzo Traverso's *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (2003, French 2002) is a book whose debt to Arendt is signalled in the title. Arguing for lifting the veil of obscurity from the relationship between 'classic imperialism' and National Socialism, Traverso directly appeals to *OT* as the book in which Arendt established 'European imperialism as an essential stage in the genesis of Nazism'.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, *Lebensraum* was not a Nazi invention, but 'simply the German version of a commonplace of European culture at the time of imperialism', and the Nuremberg Laws were so shocking to Europeans because they were directed against other Europeans, whereas 'the entire club of colonial powers had already envisaged such laws as normal and natural measures to be taken with regard to the non-European world'.<sup>6</sup> Traverso's conclusion is that 'Deportation, dehumanization, and racial extermination as undertaken by Hitler's Germany are in line with earlier ideas that were firmly anchored in the history of Western imperialism'.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin Madley begins his article, 'From Africa to Auschwitz' with Arendt, citing *OT* as the basis of the argument that 'European imperialism played a crucial role in the development of totalitarianism and associated genocides'. He sees his own research as providing empirical backing for Arendt's (in his opinion, untested) assertion.<sup>8</sup> Madley also cites Jürgen Zimmerer's argument that 'the murder of the Jews, which was distinguished by the notion of eradicating a world-wide conspiracy, would probably not have been thinkable and possible if the idea that ethnicities can simply be wiped out had not already existed and had not already been put into action'.<sup>9</sup> Zimmerer too refers to Arendt as the inspiration for the idea 'that imperialism was the precursor to National Socialism', an idea that, Zimmerer argues, she did not pursue and is only now, in the early twenty-first century, being seriously investigated.<sup>10</sup> Zimmerer, indeed, is the most important historian arguing for a link between German Southwest Africa and Nazi genocide, in the sense that he has advanced the most conceptually-sophisticated and empirically-detailed work. The critique of the 'Zimmerer thesis' is just as likely to be a rejection of Arendt.

For example, strong criticism of the use of Arendt's thesis comes from Ulrike Kistner, who argues that genocide scholars have misunderstood Arendt's carefully drawn distinction 'between race-thinking and racism, continental and overseas imperialism'. Kistner, like Moses, points out Arendt's emphasis on the break brought about by Nazism; for her, however, this discontinuity invalidates the attempt to link 'colonial racism, anti-semitism and genocide'.<sup>11</sup> This sort of

literalism is perhaps a valid reading of Arendt, but fails to recognise the 'elective affinity' between Arendt's ideas and genocide scholars that would permit reading her against herself, as I will discuss later.

Other scholars have criticised the 'boomerang thesis' without explicitly addressing Arendt, for example, Matthew Fitzpatrick, Edward Ross Dickinson, and Birthe Kundrus. Fitzpatrick thinks that the continuity thesis runs up against its limits when one sees the contrast between colonial and Nazi biological racism (again, this could be an Arendtian argument).<sup>12</sup> Kundrus too thinks that the superficial similarities between the ban on 'mixed marriages' in the colonies and the Nuremberg Laws are over-exaggerated by Zimmerer, when in fact it does not suffice to reduce the Wilhelmine Empire to a proto-fascist prelude.<sup>13</sup> Dickinson does not dismiss the 'continuity argument', but expresses surprise that Zimmerer chooses not to focus on German colonialism in Poland, which was centuries old and to which Nazi notions of a land-based empire are more clearly bound than to Southwest Africa.<sup>14</sup> His sole reference to Arendt in this important article is in a footnote where he refers to *OT* as the 'locus classicus for the opposition between nation and empire'.<sup>15</sup>

To some extent their fear is that the connection leads to a new *Sonderweg* thesis, this time in terms of German colonial history leading to Nazism. The strongest criticisms of Zimmerer's work comes from an article which, at least in its English version, is entitled 'Hannah Arendt's Ghosts'. In that piece, Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski argue that Zimmerer places undue emphasis on the Arendtian imperialism-Nazism connection, with the result that the argument strains under the weight of ahistorical juxtapositions, and that more obvious, well-established sources of Nazism, such as World War I and the chaos that followed it, are overlooked.<sup>16</sup> Gerwarth and Malinowski do not pick up Arendt's insistence that totalitarianism was not simply the continuation of imperialism by other means; they thus also overlook the fact that Zimmerer also does not subscribe to such a simple position. Like Arendt, he wants to bring imperialism into the discussion of the origins of Nazism and the Holocaust, but by no means ascribes primacy to it, and certainly does not exclude other sources, such as World War I (itself, of course, an imperial war, so that it is not clear how one can so easily distinguish between 'European' and 'imperial' sources here - precisely what Arendt was getting at with her notion of 'elements' that 'crystallized' together).<sup>17</sup>

Much recent research in genocide studies, then, takes its cue from the Arendt-inspired suggestion of continuities between imperialism and totalitarianism. Somewhat ironically, those who argue against the suggestion might be closer to Arendt's thinking than they suppose. Whatever the truth of that claim, it is certainly the case that *OT* has been the inspiration for many scholars who have sought to find empirical evidence that Nazism's history begins in the European overseas colonies.<sup>18</sup>

## READING ARENDT

Let us test these debates against what Arendt actually wrote, particularly in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in order to see whether she places more emphasis on distinctions or continuities between imperialism and totalitarianism. This is worth doing because recent analyses of Arendt have tended to pay close heed to the chapters ('Race-Thinking before Racism' and 'Race and Bureaucracy') that highlight those links, and overlook the following chapter, 'Continental

Imperialism: the Pan-Movements' which emphasizes the novelty of what took place in Europe in the twentieth century. The first section of Arendt's book, *Antisemitism*, is often forgotten altogether, even though in Arendt's argument, antisemitism provides the 'glue' that connects nationalism with the pan-movements and totalitarianism.

It is clear that, in her discussion of the origins of Nazism, Arendt's emphasis was primarily on the pan-movements, the breakdown of the nation-state and the rise of 'the mob'.<sup>19</sup> Compare Arendt's analysis of the alliance of the 'much-too-rich' and the 'much-too-poor' in British imperialism with her analysis of what the pan-movements effected in Europe:

The so-called hypocrisy of British politics was the result of the good sense of English statesmen who drew a sharp line between colonial methods and normal domestic policies, thereby avoiding with considerable success the feared boomerang effect of imperialism upon the homeland. In other countries, particularly in Germany and Austria, the alliance took effect at home in the form of pan-movements, and to a lesser extent in France, in a so-called colonial policy. The aim of these 'movements' was, so to speak, to imperialize the whole nation (and not only the 'superfluous' part of it), to combine domestic and foreign policy in such a way as to organize the nation for the looting of foreign territories and the permanent degradation of alien peoples.<sup>20</sup>

'Continental imperialism', Arendt famously wrote at the start of her chapter on the pan-movements, 'truly begins at home', as the central and eastern European nations, which had been prevented from acquiring overseas colonial territories, decided that they had to expand in order to compete with the maritime great powers, and that they therefore had to do so in Europe.<sup>21</sup> The pan-movements mark the key mediating factor between overseas colonialism (especially as carried out by the British) and totalitarianism in twentieth-century Europe. There is no direct line running 'from Africa to Auschwitz' but, as Arendt very precisely explained to Eric Voegelin, a set of 'elements' which 'crystallized' into totalitarianism.<sup>22</sup> These elements suggest important precedents in the shape of imperial bureaucracy, nationalism, the rise of the 'mob' and the stateless person, and race-thinking ('before Nazism, in the course of its totalitarian policy, attempted to change man into a beast, there were numerous efforts to develop him on a strictly hereditary basis into a god'<sup>23</sup>). But Nazism was not merely a radicalization of these pre-existing phenomena; it was, rather, a synthesis of them that permitted the formation of something altogether new, not as an 'idea', as Arendt wrote in 'Understanding and Politics', but precisely in its actions: 'Elements by themselves never cause anything. They become origins of events if and when they suddenly crystallize into fixed and definite forms'.<sup>24</sup> The pan-movements are the key to understanding this somewhat cloudy process.

Furthermore, it is certainly the case that Moses is right to highlight Arendt's emphasis on the break brought about by Nazism and the Holocaust. In her influential review of Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* (1946), she spoke of 'the empty space between the no longer and the not yet', an abyss which had become almost unbridgeable since 'the death factories erected in the heart of Europe definitely cut the already outworn thread with which we still might have been tied to a historical entity of more than two thousand years'.<sup>25</sup> Some years later, in 'Tradition and the Modern Age', Arendt reaffirmed this position, arguing that 'totalitarian domination' had 'broken the continuity of Occidental history. The break in our tradition is now an accomplished

fact'.<sup>26</sup> Thus, as Dana Villa explains, what Arendt does in part 3 of *OT* is to tell 'the story of how endlessly dynamic, ideologically driven "movements" hollow out and make superfluous whatever "inert" institutional and legal structures they inherit from the "old-style" state.' Nazism is the heir to the nineteenth century's dark side, but it is also a radical break with what has gone before: 'Totalitarianism in power is not what Ernst Cassirer thought it was - namely, a horrible instantiation of the "myth of the state". Rather, in Arendt's view, it was the dissolution of every stable, artificial political structure that had humanized life in the West for two centuries'.<sup>27</sup>

Given her emphasis on the pan-movements, what then is the purpose in *OT* of the whole section on imperialism? Actually, whilst the argument that Arendt stresses Nazism's break with the past more than its continuities is correct, Arendt's text is full of paradoxes and self-contradictions.<sup>28</sup> Writing of 'an almost complete break in the flow of Western history' on the one hand, she then later affirms on the other hand that colonialism was the seedbed of fascism, even going so far at one point as to say that 'African colonial possessions became the most fertile soil for the flowering of what later was to become the Nazi elite'.<sup>29</sup> 'The most fertile soil ...' is hardly unambiguous, and Caroline Elkins, for one, notes the significance of Arendt's claims for inspiring 'important analyses of the relationship between racial ideologies, bureaucratic forms, and violence, and their circulation between metropole and empire during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, Arendt wants to have her cake and eat it. She argues for continuities *and* breaks. Imperialism provided fertile soil for the flowering of Nazism, *and* Nazism had nothing to do with the nineteenth-century experience of overseas colonialism and its concomitant, race thinking. This is not quite as sophistic as it at first appears, after all, one cannot have a break without a notion of continuity, and the concept of historicity implies both breaks and continuities. It seems quite plausible to argue that Nazism was related to earlier moments of European history but that in the process of becoming (or crystallizing into) Nazism, it radicalised these existing traditions with the results we know all too well. As Arendt wrote in her notebooks, as a borderline phenomenon of politics, the aetiology of totalitarian radical evil cannot neatly be read off previous history. 'Hence the un-chronological nature of Origins'.<sup>31</sup> This is the nub of the continuity debate in German colonial history: no one totally excludes Southwest Africa from consideration, just as no one would see World War I as irrelevant when searching for the roots of Nazism. The question is the relative weight to be ascribed to each factor. In Arendt's text, this matter is ambiguous, to say the least. However, she never argued that German Southwest Africa was a totalitarian state. Her point is that in explaining Nazism, one tributary (among many) flowed from the colonies into Europe, where it was transformed. Perhaps 'only' the fact that Arendt was not a Hegelian prevented her from talking of an *Aufhebung* that brought it all together, and using instead the language of 'elements' 'crystallizing'. Hegel's term, though it is neater, obscures the very process of synthesis it assumes magically to occur; Arendt's language, though messier, captures something of the complexity of the world and is thus - for a historian, at any rate - more convincing.

Yet, when Arendt did refer explicitly to genocide, it was hardly in a way that would please students of that subject today. The 'moral point of this matter', she wrote of the Holocaust, 'is never reached by calling what happened by the name of "genocide" or by counting the many millions of victims: exterminations of whole peoples had happened before in antiquity, as well as in modern colonization'.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the logic of her discussion in 'Imperialism' seems to be

that, as Michael Rothberg puts it, she ‘inadvertently reproduces the racial logic under analysis’. By talking of the Africans as ‘natural men’ who ‘shock’ the Europeans who encounter them, the logic of Arendt’s argument, when she then turns to Nazism, ‘is that the Nazis turn their victims (and even their own adherents) into the de-individualized humans that the Africans already are’. In other words, ‘her attempt to explain how that encounter produces the salience of race and the force of racism ends up requiring that racial difference pre-exist the encounter’.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, merely Arendt’s frank admission that genocide had happened in ‘modern colonization’ set her apart from most scholars - the concept of ‘colonial genocide’ and its occurrence, in say, colonial North America or Australia, is still hotly debated - and provides the basis for *historical* inquiries into cases of genocide, albeit with different *moral* judgements about the comparative framework.

## THE ARENDTIAN MOMENT

Why then do genocide scholars invoke Arendt? The answer is partly to do with the ‘rediscovery’ of Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term ‘genocide’ in his *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), a book which has become something of an *Urtext* for genocide studies. In that book, Lemkin argued that genocide was intrinsically colonial, for: ‘Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.’ He also noted that genocide ‘does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation’; rather, genocide signifies ‘a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating those groups themselves’. Hence, genocide ‘is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group’.<sup>34</sup>

Although she did not refer to Lemkin, Arendt’s definition of genocide as ‘an attack upon human diversity as such’ or on ‘human status’, and her resistance to ‘all totalizing definitions’ and ‘all homogenizing politics’, is strikingly similar to Lemkin’s claim that ‘the “human cosmos” was violated by the destruction of its constituent nations’.<sup>35</sup> Even if Arendt thought that this definition applied to the Holocaust alone, that does not prevent scholars today from seeing its relevance to cases of genocide in the European overseas colonies, or, for that matter, in cases of subaltern genocide such as the Great Rebellion of Peru and Upper Peru (Bolivia) in 1780-82 or Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1802-04.<sup>36</sup> Where the first generation of genocide scholars (the self-named ‘pioneers of genocide studies’) saw genocide exclusively as a state-administered crime of mass killing, thus largely excluding colonial genocides from their purview, a new generation of more historically-conscious scholars have turned to Lemkin’s definition. Doing so means being more attuned to the linkages between colonialism and genocide (is genocide inherently colonial? Is colonialism inherently genocidal?), and stressing ‘relations of genocide’ and the unfolding of genocidal processes, or genocide as a historical process that occurs over time. It means moving away from approaches suitable for the courtroom - focusing on the UNGC’s prioritisation of intent - and taking a more historical view, which can explain why certain situations evolve into genocidal episodes and, importantly, why some violent ones do not.<sup>37</sup>

How else can genocide studies profit from Arendt’s interpretations? Her stress on the ‘loss of ground’ experienced under totalitarianism, the breaking of the bonds of human solidarity that

characterises the experience of those living under totalitarianism, clearly expresses the sense of abandonment and isolation felt by those subjected to genocidal policies.<sup>38</sup> Arendt writes that 'totalitarian domination ... bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man'. She goes on:

Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicity, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluosity which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time.<sup>39</sup>

Arendt was not writing about genocide, nor is loneliness, even in Arendt's sense, an adequate concept for thinking about the victims of genocide; but it is clear how effective her statement is as a description of those abandoned to trucidation by a state or other authority that denies its victims human status. 'L'Affaire d'un seul est l'affaire de tous' ('The affair of a single person is the affair of all'), she wrote to Jaspers in 1946, citing (as she often cited) Clemenceau's words in the Dreyfus affair, his championing of what she called in *OT* 'the stern Jacobin concept of the nation based upon human rights - that republican view of communal life which asserts that (in the words of Clemenceau) by infringing on the rights of one you infringe on the rights of all'.<sup>40</sup> These are words that surely underpin genocide studies not just as an academic discipline but as an engagement with the ills of the world.

Finally, although Arendt condemned Nazism as coming 'from the gutter', her attempt to stress its novelty and thus to find a way of rescuing the western tradition was not simply a result of myopia. She clearly condemned western traditions of thought and politics for their pusillanimous response to the totalitarian challenge (even if she would not tolerate the notion of totalitarianism as a product of those traditions) and, as Richard King notes, 'she stressed the deep inadequacy of the Enlightenment notion of natural rights to provide any guarantee for minorities and stateless peoples'.<sup>41</sup> Besides, 'the gutter' is also part of the western tradition. She placed the force of her analysis on Europe not as a way of celebrating an untainted tradition but in order to demand that Europe set its house in order, arguments that she had been making since her dissertation on Augustine: 'It was, for instance, the presence of the very elements of Nazism that made the Nazis' victory in Europe not only possible but also so shamefully easy'.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, where the 'pioneers of genocide studies' stressed a concept of genocide that equates it with mass killing carried out by the state, usually a totalitarian state,<sup>43</sup> so more recent studies suggest that genocide is not simply a tool of evil madmen 'over there', but is deeply embedded in western history.<sup>44</sup> Arendt, then, is not just the thinker who questions the west's relationship to genocide, but she also foreshadows many 'post-Holocaust' debates about representation: 'For those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment'.<sup>45</sup>

Fundamental to recent genocide studies is a rejection of the emotionally (rather than scholarly)-driven notion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The contexts of these debates about Holocaust uniqueness are implicit in the debate over Arendt, even though, paradoxically, those who invoke Arendt are contradicting her position on that issue. Genocide scholars find Arendt



good to work with, for all the reasons just mentioned, even though she herself held that the Holocaust stood apart from the major trends of world history before the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Arendt, despite herself, is shanghaied and credited with providing an intellectual justification for rejecting - or better, ignoring altogether as unscholarly - the uniqueness issue, and for paving the way for the study of comparative genocide carried out in a properly historical way, i.e., that highlights differences as well as similarities and builds general theories without diminishing the specificities of any given case.

Following on the logic of uniqueness, the debate also turns on an understanding of the world seen through the lenses of postcolonial studies. The Arendtian moment in genocide studies is a postcolonial moment, insofar as it argues that genocide is part of the history of the West, especially in the West's dealings with its colonial subjects. Again, Arendt must be turning in her grave. Although in passing she let slip that colonial practices were 'criminal', they did not, in her view, compare with the genocide committed in 'civilized' Europe. Even though Arendt 'subordinates events and actions overseas, namely in sub-Saharan Africa, to an interpretative framework which is interested only in National Socialism', her unique contribution was that 'on the one hand she embedded National Socialism in a more global perspective of world politics, and on the other hand placed colonialism directly into a transnational account of European history'.<sup>47</sup>

Arendt's popularity, then, derives not just from the fact that she advocated the boomerang thesis. As several scholars have shown, Rosa Luxemburg is the likely source of this idea, and it has been stated far more forcefully by postcolonial theorists from Césaire and Fanon to Vinay Lal and Paul Gilroy.<sup>48</sup> Nor is it only that Arendt can be appealed to by European historians whose research only tangentially concerns the extra-European world, because it provides a kind of legitimacy for studying Europe. One does not need an excuse for doing so, in any case - it is as valid an area of study as any other - but *OT* somehow accords with the postcolonial critique whilst simultaneously justifying a Europe-focused, if not Eurocentric perspective.

Rather, Arendt's ideas, whether they are 'wrong' or not - and they clearly remain highly contentious (and we have not even touched on the Eichmann debate) - are extremely stimulating.<sup>49</sup> She remains the only thinker of note really to take up the idea that colonialism and fascism are linked (anti-colonial writers such as Du Bois, Césaire and Fanon all made the connection but took it for granted rather than seeing it as the problem they needed to investigate<sup>50</sup>). Even if she developed this link primarily to disavow it and to stress instead the discontinuity between colonial and intra-European violence, *OT* is the starting point for anyone interested in large conceptual questions about what the main sources of Nazism (and, to a lesser extent, communism) were. It is, furthermore, the most moving demonstration of the philosophy that underpins genocide studies and motivates its adherents: the belief in human plurality and the value of all human beings. Arendt's causal pluralism goes hand in hand with her defence of human plurality. A concept of historicity that thinks in terms of continuities and breaks, tradition and its rejection, and their coming together in a way that unexpectedly 'crystallizes' a multiplicity of trends, also works to allow Arendt to defend a notion of 'the human' that is at once essentialist and polyvalent, anthropologically fixed in certain key respects but able to embrace diversity in others. Not everyone would go along with Arendt in her claim that critical thought can resist evil; but most would agree that the desirability of *thinking what we are doing*, as she put it, lies in the demand to defend the human, to 'regain what former times called the dignity or the honour of man: not perhaps of mankind but of the status of being human'.<sup>51</sup>

## Notes

1. I will not say 'discipline', for genocide studies draws on many traditional disciplines and has no agreed methodological or conceptual basis.
2. A. Dirk Moses, 'Hannah Arendt, Imperialisms, and the Holocaust' in *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama (eds), New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.
3. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1993, pxix; see also George Steinmetz, 'Decolonizing German Theory: An Introduction', *Postcolonial Studies*, 9, 1 (2006): 3-13, esp. 7-8.
4. Stephen J. Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1980, pp39-40.
5. Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, New York, The New Press, 2003, pp48, 50.
6. *Ibid.*, pp51, 53-54.
7. *Ibid.*, p73. See also Marc Ferro (ed), *Le livre noir du colonialisme*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2003, for a similar argument.
8. Benjamin Madley, 'From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe', *European History Quarterly*, 35, 3 (2005): 429-464.
9. Jürgen Zimmerer, 'Colonialism and the Holocaust: Towards an Archaeology of Genocide' in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, A. Dirk Moses (ed) New York, Berghahn Books, 2004, p68.
10. Zimmerer, 'Colonialism and the Holocaust', p50. See also Pascal Grosse, 'What Does German Colonialism Have to Do with National Socialism?' in *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz and Lora Wildenthal (eds), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2005, pp115-134; David Furber, 'Near as Far in the Colonies: The Nazi Occupation of Poland', *The International History Review*, 26, 3 (2004): 541-579; Marcia Klotz, 'Global Visions: From the Colonial to the National Socialist World', *The European Studies Journal*, 16, 2 (1999): 37-68.
11. Ulrike Kistner, 'Lineages of Racism in Genocidal Contexts: Lessons from Hannah Arendt in Contemporary African Genocide Scholarship', *Development Dialogue*, 50 (2008): 169. Cf. Giuseppe Finaldi, 'European Empire and the Making of the Modern World: Recent Books and Old Arguments', *Contemporary European History*, 14, 2 (2005): 247: 'seeing colonialism as a precursor of Nazism (or even Stalin's Russia) may have made sense to a Jewish-German historian writing in the 1950s but from 2004 it seems patently absurd.'
12. Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, 'The Pre-History of the Holocaust? The *Sonderweg* and *Historikerstreit* Debates and the Abject Colonial Past', *Central European History*, 41, 3 (2008): 477-503.
13. Birthe Kundrus, 'Kontinuitäten, Parallelen, Rezeptionen: Überlegungen zur "Kolonialisierung" des Nationalsozialismus', *Werkstattsgeschichte*, 15 (2006): 45-62; 'From the Herero to the Holocaust? Some Remarks on the Current Debate', *Afrika Spectrum*, 40, 2 (2005): 299-308; 'Blind Spots: Empire, Colony, and Ethnic Identities in Modern German History' in *Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography*, Karen Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert (eds), New York, Berghahn Books, 2007, pp86-106; 'Von Windhoek nach Nürnberg? Koloniale "Mischehenverbote" und die nationalsozialistische Rassengesetzgebung' in *Phantasiereiche: Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, Kundrus (ed), Frankfurt/M, Campus Verlag, 2003, pp110-131.
14. Edward Ross Dickinson, 'The German Empire - an Empire?', *History Workshop Journal*, 66 (2008): 129-162.
15. *Ibid.*, p160, n84.
16. Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, 'Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz', *Central European History*, 42, 2 (2009): 279-300.
17. For Zimmerer's responses to his critics, see 'The First Genocide of the Twentieth Century: The German War of Destruction in South-West Africa (1904-1908) and the Global History of Genocide' in *Lessons and Legacies, vol. VIII: From Generation to Generation*, Doris L. Bergen (ed), Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2008, pp34-63; 'Nationalsozialismus postkolonial: Plädoyer zur Globalisierung der deutschen Gewaltgeschichte', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 57, 6 (2009), pp529-548. See also his essays in *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust*, Münster, Lit Verlag, 2009. Arendt herself writes (*OT*, p267): 'Before totalitarian politics consciously attacked and partially destroyed the very structure of European civilization, the explosion of 1914 and its severe consequences of instability had sufficiently shattered the façade of Europe's political system to lay bare its hidden frame'.
18. For a much fuller discussion of these debates, contextualised in relation to developments in Holocaust historiography and genocide studies, see Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, ch5.
19. Peter Baehr, 'The "Masses" in Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism', *The Good Society*, 16, 2 (2007): 12-18.

20. *OT*, p155.
21. *OT*, pp222-223.
22. 'A Reply to Eric Voegelin' in *Essays in Understanding*, p403.
23. *OT*, p179.
24. Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', p325, n12. See also Whitfield, *Into the Dark*, p260; Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, op. cit., pp150-151. Karuna Mantena puts it very neatly: 'When totalitarianism is figured as the historical fruition of a certain set of ideas and concepts, the historical and political conditions of its emergence cannot be adequately accounted for'. See 'Genealogies of Catastrophe: Arendt on the Logic and Legacy of Imperialism' in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, Seyla Benhabib (ed), New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p108.
25. Arendt, 'No Longer and Not Yet' in *Essays in Understanding*, op. cit., pp159-60.
26. Arendt, 'Tradition and the Modern Age' in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Penguin, 1993, p26.
27. Dana Villa, 'Genealogies of Total Domination: Arendt, Adorno, and Auschwitz', *New German Critique*, 100 (2007): 43, referring to Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1946. On Cassirer and Arendt, see Ned Curthoys, 'Ernst Cassirer, Hannah Arendt and the Twentieth-Century Revival of Philosophical Anthropology', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 13, 1-2 (2011), special issue on genocide and philosophy, Dan Stone (ed).
28. Margaret Canovan, 'The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought', *Political Theory*, 6, 1 (1978): 5-26.
29. *OT*, pp123 and 206. See the discussion in King and Stone, 'Introduction' in *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide*, Richard H. King and Dan Stone (eds), New York, Berghahn Books, 2007.
30. Caroline Elkins, 'The Re-assertion of the British Empire in Southeast Asia', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 39, 3 (2009): 375.
31. Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950-1973*, Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (eds), Munich, Piper, 2003, I, p68 (April 1951). ['Totalitarismus als Grenzphänomen der Politik (das radikal Böse) kann nicht einfach in die Geschichte verweisen, wo man seine Ätiologie fein säuberlich studieren könnte. Daher das Unchronologische der Origins.']
32. Arendt, 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship' in *Responsibility and Judgment*, Jerome Kohn (ed), New York, Schocken Books, 2003, p42. See my discussion in 'The Holocaust and Its Historiography' in *The Historiography of Genocide*, Dan Stone (ed), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp373-399.
33. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, pp63, 61. For Rothberg, this problem invalidates Arendt's notion of 'the human' tout court, but it is not clear why Arendt's reproduction of racist logic should mean that a minimal definition of 'human status' cannot be found that avoids the same problem.
34. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, p79. See Anson Rabinbach, 'The Challenge of the Unprecedented: Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide', *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook*, 4 (2005): 397-420; Dan Stone, 'Raphael Lemkin on the Holocaust', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 7, 4 (2005): 539-50; A. Dirk Moses, 'The Holocaust and Genocide' in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, Dan Stone (ed), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp533-55; Moses, 'Colonialism' in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.
35. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London, Penguin, 1977), pp268-9; Steven E. Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001, pp62, 67. See also A. Dirk Moses, 'Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide' in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp19-41; Seyla Benhabib, 'International Law and Human Plurality in the Shadow of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin', *Constellations*, 16, 2 (2009), pp331-350; Michael Mack's comments on Arendt, philosophy and plurality in 'The Holocaust and Hannah Arendt's Philosophical Critique of Philosophy: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*', *New German Critique*, 106 (2009): 35-60; Gabriel Motzkin, 'Hannah Arendt: Von ethnischer Minderheit zu universeller Humanität' in *Hannah Arendt Revisited: 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' und die Folgen*, Gary Smith (ed) Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, 2000, pp177-201; Jerome Kohn, 'Evil and Plurality: Hannah Arendt's Way to *The Life of the Mind*, I' in *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later*, Larry May and Jerome Kohn (eds), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996, pp147-178.
36. Nicholas A. Robins and Adam Jones (eds), *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009.
37. For more detail, see Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust*, ch5; Moses, 'The Holocaust and Genocide'; Moses, 'Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the "Racial Century": Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36, 2 (2002): 7-36; Scott Straus, 'Second-Generation Comparative Research on Genocide', *World Politics*, 59, 3 (2007): 476-501.

38. Anne-Marie Roviello, 'The Hidden Violence of Totalitarianism: The Loss of the Groundwork of the World', *Social Research*, 74, 3 (2007): 923-930.
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40. *OT*, p106; Arendt to Jaspers, 17 August 1946 in *Arendt/Jaspers Correspondence*, p54. See Michael R. Marrus, 'Hannah Arendt and the Dreyfus Affair', *New German Critique*, 66 (1995): 157-8.
41. Richard H. King, 'Hannah Arendt: The Public and the Private' in *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939-1945: Continuity or Contingency?*, Jonathan Frankel (ed) New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p276.
42. Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', p324, n4. See also Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, p70; Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott, 'Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later: A German Jewess in the Age of Totalitarianism', *New German Critique*, 86 (2002): 29-30.
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44. Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 2 vols., London, I. B. Tauris, 2005; Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009; Cathie Carmichael, *Genocide before the Holocaust*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009.
45. 'Understanding and Politics', op. cit., p318.
46. See Peter Baehr, 'Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Critique of Sociology', *American Sociological Review*, 67, 6 (2002): 804-831 for a discussion of this issue.
47. Pascal Grosse, 'From Colonialism to National Socialism to Postcolonialism: Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism', *Postcolonial Studies*, 9, 1 (2006): 48.
48. Philip Spencer, 'From Rosa Luxemburg to Hannah Arendt: Socialism, Barbarism and the Extermination Camps', *The European Legacy*, 11, 5 (2006): 527-540; A. Dirk Moses, 'Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History' in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, Moses (ed), New York, Berghahn Books, 2008, p34.
49. See, for example, Kathryn T. Gines, 'Race Thinking and Racism in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' in *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History*, King and Stone (eds), pp38-53, for the argument (p50) that 'Arendt's association of racism with imperialism ignores the problems of racism that were already a part of race-thinking during the colonial era, including the creation of racial hierarchies in relationship to the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting establishment of racial systems of slavery.'
50. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, op. cit.
51. 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship', p48; cf. my 'The Holocaust and "the Human"' in *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History*, King and Stone (eds), pp232-249. But bear in mind too Arendt's comments (*OT*, pp. 299-300) that 'The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human' and the need for people to cling to their national identity in preference to becoming 'savages'.

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