

# Back to Arendt

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Introduction to Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees* (1943) for *Kritika & Kontext*

When the historico-philosophical *Stimmung* becomes ominous, there is a Central European tradition of responding with “Zurück zu Kant!” This is an entirely reasonable impulse. There is little that can root us more unambiguously than Kant’s categorical imperative: always treat a person as an end, never a means. Now as ever, moral grounding in the present moment calls for “Back to Kant!” *Understanding* in the present moment calls for “Back to Arendt!”

After the November 2016 presidential elections in the United States, I revised my teaching plans for the following semesters: all of my students would read Hannah Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism. The youngest were eighteen years old; they had been in their last year of high school in November 2016. They understood that something was very wrong, but—to use Kantian language—they did not yet have the concepts to process their intuitions. Arendt was a challenge for them, but they read earnestly and asked good questions. Midway through the seminar, we reached chapter 10. There Arendt writes of the mob, whose attitudes and convictions “were actually the attitudes and convictions of the bourgeoisie cleansed of hypocrisy.” The mob, she writes, emerged on the historical stage to lead the previously disenfranchised and politically indifferent masses. In an at once amusing and deadly serious passage, Arendt describes a performance of Bertolt Brecht’s Dreigroschenoper in Weimar Germany:

The play presented gangsters as respectable businessmen and respectable businessmen as gangsters. The irony was somewhat lost when respectable businessmen in the audience considered this a deep insight into the ways of the world and when the mob welcomed it as an artistic sanction of gangsterism. The theme song in the play, *Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral*, was greeted with frantic applause by exactly everybody, though for different reasons. The mob applauded because it took the statement literally; the bourgeoisie applauded because it had been fooled by its own hypocrisy for so long that it had grown tired of the tension and found deep wisdom in the expression of the banality by which it lived; the elite applauded because the unveiling of hypocrisy was such superior and wonderful fun.



Tretie bombardovanie hlavného mesta Bratislavy angloamerickými letcami, 14. 10. 1944

"Oh my God, Professor Shore," one of my students suddenly said, "she's talking about us!"

"How did she know?" asked another.

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How did she know?

"*Alles Denken ist Nachdenken*," Arendt explained in a 1964 interview with Günter Gaus. She considered experience the precondition for any thought process. Chapter 9 of *Origins of Totalitarianism*—which immediately precedes the chapter about the allure of the mob—is devoted to statelessness. It is, in effect, the *Nachdenken* of her experience described in *We Refugees*, which was written in real time, during the war.

*We Refugees* has often been read in the context of Arendt and the Jewish question: that is, in the context of the debate over Eichmann in Jerusalem and "the banality of evil," Arendt's indictment of the *Judenrat*, her exchange with Gershom Scholem about "love for the Jewish people," her unsparing examination of just how much Theodor Herzl had in common with the antisemites. *We Refugees*, very personal and written in the first-person plural, is invoked in response to the question: Was Arendt a self-hating Jew?

No. She was neither self-hating nor self-disavowing. About her own milieu Arendt was, rather, mercilessly self-reflective: "With us from Germany the word 'assimilation' received a 'deep' philosophical meaning. You can hardly realize how serious we were about it." She was not sympathetic to a denial of Jewishness—which she more than once described as insane: "Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our insane desire to be changed, not to be Jews," Arendt writes in *We Refugees*. "We are fascinated by every new nationality"—she continues, with her inimitable mixture of sobriety and sarcasm—"in the same way as a woman of tidy size is delighted with every new dress which promises to give her the desired waistline."

*We Refugees* reveals, though, something far more urgent than Arendt's attitude towards her own Jewishness. For Arendt, Jews are like all other refugees—only more so. "Apparently nobody wants to know," she writes, "that contemporary history has created a new kind of human being—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends." The category of "the refugee," the phenomenon of mass statelessness, was for Arendt an epistemologically privileged point of in-

sight into the calamities of her own time. Philosophically, the homelessness of the refugee illuminated the alienation that had been men's (and women's) fate ever since Kant, in accepting the unreachability of the *Ding-an-sich*, had shattered "the ancient tie between Being and thought that had always guaranteed man his home in the world," as she writes in *What is Existential Philosophy?* Politically, the fate of the refugee illuminated the fragility of liberalism and—still more radically—the factual non-existence of the "Rights of Man" as such.

This fragility is what Arendt elaborates in "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," chapter 9 of *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Her point of departure there is not the Second, but rather the First World War, which "sufficiently shattered the façade of Europe's political system to lay bare its hidden frame. Such visible exposures were the sufferings of more and more groups of people to whom suddenly the rules of the world around them had ceased to apply." Among the unintended consequences of the fall of empires, the redrawing of borders, and the creation at Versailles of new states according to the national principle was mass statelessness. The asylum process broke down: asylum laws had been designed for exceptional individuals, not for huge masses of *Heimatlosen*. The number of persons existing outside of the law grew staggeringly. Unprotected by the laws of any state, they were ruled over by the police. In effect, the phenomenon of statelessness laid bare the extent to which the notion of "human rights" was devoid of content. In practice, there existed only the rights of the citizen. As it turned out, "[t]he world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human." Allegedly sacred, inalienable human rights revealed themselves to be dependent upon their guarantee by sovereign states. In the absence of a state to guarantee them, human rights became meaningless.

For Arendt, statelessness was a necessary condition for the possibility of the Holocaust. She observes that "a condition of complete rightlessness was created before the right to live was challenged." It is not a banal observation. She makes the point still more vividly: "The official SS newspaper, the *Schwarze Korps*, stated explicitly in 1938 that if the world was not yet convinced that the Jews were the scum of the earth, it soon would be when unidentifiable beggars, without nationality, without money, and without passports crossed their frontiers." And so it happened. Stefan Zweig, another refugee from Arendt's world, noticed this as well. "Always I had to think of what an exiled Russian had said to me years ago," Zweig writes in *Die Welt von Gestern*: "Formerly man had only a body and a soul. Now he needs a passport as well, for without it he will not be treated like a human being."

Here again, Jews—Zweig among them—are like everyone else only more so: they are the particular instance through which the universal essence is revealed. This universal essence—the essence of the pathology Arendt experienced—speaks all too uncannily to our own time: “[R]emember,” she writes,

that being a Jew does not give any legal status in this world. If we should start telling the truth that we are nothing but Jews, it would mean that we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings. I can hardly imagine an attitude more dangerous, since we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while.



Jozef Cincík: Momentky z príchodu ukrajinských emigrantov na Slovensko, 6. - 12. 8. 1944