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Hannah Arendt, the Jews, and the Labor of Superfluity

DORIAN BELL

PERPLEXITY HAS OFTEN GREETED HANNAH ARENDT'S DECISION TO place an extended historical reflection on anti-Semitism at the beginning of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her doleful 1951 postmortem chronicling Europe's twentieth-century descent into the abyss. Seyla Benhabib proposes that to "appreciate the unity of the work as Arendt herself intended it to be read" (64), one must begin not with part 1 ("Antisemitism") but rather with the chapter in part 3 ("Totalitarianism") about the extermination and concentration camps. Another of Arendt's best commentators, Margaret Canovan, observes that Arendt's arrangement is "not a very helpful one" because, among other reasons, Arendt's discussion of anti-Semitism deploys key concepts like "imperialism" whose particular meanings to Arendt are only later defined. Canovan chalks up Arendt's organizational decision to "her own initial preoccupation" with anti-Semitism, as well as to "reasons of chronology" (28–29).

But what if the book's preliminary foray into the history and nature of anti-Semitism obeys a more necessary logic? The present essay offers that the historical examination of anti-Semitism with which Arendt begins *Origins* serves to defuse, or attempt to defuse, a tension immanent to her conception of the modern European state. This tension threatens to unsettle the deep, binary narrative that structures much of Arendt's analysis in *Origins*: the battle between the modern state and the various modes of rampant "superfluity" that overwhelmed it. Arendt locates the sources of superfluity elsewhere than in the state, diverting superfluity to the account of various phenomena, like capital and imperialism, that she understands to have infected the state from without. Yet, as I want to propose, Arendt's theoretical and historical frames also inadvertently sug-

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gest the state's inherent tendency to generate the dreaded superfluity from within. I will locate the aporetic kernel of this tendency in Arendt's later, idiosyncratic distinction between the categories of labor and work, which joins a fissure in her political thought already evident in *Origins*. The fissure snakes through the theme of superfluity that animates *Origins* and of which Arendt makes the Jewish experience a privileged signifier. This latter gesture continues to earn Arendt accusations of insensitivity toward the Jewish people. But it is better understood, I argue, as an anxious tactic on her part for exorcising a constitutive paradox from her notion of the state.

Charting this fault line in *Origins* begins with understanding how for Arendt the modern state, by effecting the political intercourse for which she valorizes it, expanded the man-made "world" that "relates and separates men at the same time" (*Human Condition* 52). In the state, the binding medium of relation and separation furnished the interstitial condition for a delicate political balance gathering singular citizens together without collapsing them into the undifferentiated masses of nation and society against which Arendt warns. She understands that balance to possess an ontology apart from the medium supporting it, insofar as the balance takes shape in the shifting, back-and-forth interactions among its participating elements. The medium, though, possesses an ontology as well. It is no mere vacuum. Historically speaking, it has needed constitution by something or someone—something or someone, moreover, irreducible to the state.

This partner to the state, Arendt submits, was the Jews. What Arendt calls the modern state's "claim to be above all classes" (*Origins* 17), by virtue of the local social isolation it entailed, made the state financially reliant on Jewish allies that—because of their own social isolation—could in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries align themselves with emerging states without betraying any class interests. One easily enough appreciates Arendt's point about the precariousness of that role. Functioning as an included exclusion in a system dependent on them only to the extent that they existed apart, the Jews were vulnerable, in Arendt's account, to outright exclusion once the state abandoned its class neutrality and made common cause with the bourgeoisie.

Hence, too, Arendt continues, were Jews among the first displaced by the new capitalist imperial order. I will refer to this posited imperial superfluity of the Jews as Arendt's "displacement thesis" to distinguish it from her more celebrated "boomerang thesis," so-called because Arendt suggests that a bureaucratically administered racism honed in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imperial periphery produced "boomerang effects" on the European continent (*Origins* 223)—including the Nazi disaster that forced her to leave Germany for France in 1933, then France for the United States in 1941 as she fled the horror that eventually claimed six million of her fellow Jews. Searching, as she wrote *Origins* in the late 1940s, to explain the totalitarian tragedy that had engulfed Europe, Arendt seized on, among other factors, the Scramble for Africa and the role she felt it had played in unleashing the hitherto latent potential for racism to destroy the European body politic.

Arendt's metonymic narrative of a European racism fastening sequentially on one victim after another dovetails with *Origins*'s dominant metaphor and conceit of superfluity. Arendt postulates a new category of superfluous man jarred loose by the nineteenth-century dislocations of capital and empire, a category as emergent in the superfluous European masses consigned to the imperial periphery as in the colonized masses relegated by racism to the margins of human endeavor. All this reaches its culminating expression in the absolute superfluity of concentration camp victims, rendered infinitely expendable because, as Arendt puts it, they have been banished "from the human

world altogether" (*Origins* 444). Surging forth from Europe, then gaining potency in Africa before returning to the continent with a vengeance, superfluity provides Arendt with a conceptual pivot around which to portray the Jews as the final and arguably most quintessential victims of empire.

But this lasting boomerang imagery has tended to obscure that, for Arendt, European Jews were not just the final repository of the superfluity set in motion by imperialism; they were also among the first. With the late-nineteenth-century rise of empire, Arendt argues, Europe's ascendant bourgeoisie saw its first opportunity to profit from state enterprise. The resultant flow of bourgeois capital into the imperial project dislodged the Jews from their traditional, privileged role as bankers to the state. Arendt's conclusion about the outcome is profound: Jewish wealth no longer explainable as the consequence of a tangible and potentially justifiable financial service rendered to nation-states, the Jew could now be portrayed more convincingly than ever as the social parasite par excellence. Arendt, in other words, credits the rise of empire with the late-nineteenth-century emergence of a modern anti-Semitism that, by categorizing the Jews en masse as socially superfluous, prefigured a twentieth-century totalitarian exterminationism radically intent on demonstrating the Jews' corresponding expendability.

What Arendt's displacement thesis elides, however, is that the Jews had already been primed for such a superfluity by the state. As capitalist Europe both produced and required, in empire, something in excess of itself, so the state produced and required the Jews as that which necessarily exceeded it. Put simply, the problem of superfluity was not limited to capitalist enterprise. It was also endemic to the state. The superfluity of the Jews, before Arendt identifies in it an early consequence of empire, is an unavowed superfluity always already essential to the precarious interstitial balance struck by even the comparatively benign preimperial state—a balance so precarious, in fact, that it represents no balance at all, given its innate and perpetual reliance on that which escapes it. Arendt's relative idealization of a postfeudal, class-neutral preimperial state represses this crucial detail. By blaming anti-Semitism on the superfluity to which empire relegated the Jews, the displacement thesis diverts attention from the state's own prior implication not only in Jewish superfluity but also in the production of superfluity itself.

Origins is structured to defuse this implication. Arendt begins with the Jews in part because, I would argue, they transport superfluity from state to empire. But what, exactly, makes this unavowed superfluity in the state troublesome enough for Arendt to repress and defer it? Here the categories later elaborated in Arendt's magnum opus *The Human Condition* prove illuminating. Let me call particular attention to two, labor and work, and to her unusual distinction between them. Arendt advances that labor, the province of the human being as *animal laborans*, is the toil necessary for the satisfaction of man's biological needs. Because it produces nothing more than life itself and, as Arendt maintains, "leaves nothing behind" (87), it imprisons *animal laborans* in nature's infinitely recurring cyclicality. Work, in contrast, opposes for Arendt a permanent domain of man-made artifice to the ephemerality of natural existence. Through work, *homo faber* builds a world of objects and institutions that gather and yet differentiate men in the way that "a table is located between those who sit around it" (52). This world building structures the public realm by facilitating what she terms an "in-between" where, in speech and action, men reveal themselves to one another as unique. In so doing, they enact the intangible, multiperspectival "web of human relationships" in which Arendt locates the only means for preserving individual life stories, and indeed human plurality itself, from the

undifferentiated oblivion of what the Greeks called *zōē*, or bare animal life (182–83).

Arendt critiques Marx for ignoring the difference between labor and work and for consequently not understanding that the society of laborers he foresaw dangerously replaced plural individuals with "worldless specimens of the species mankind" (118). Critics have in turn contested Arendt's distinction of labor from work and some of the conclusions to which it leads her. More than one commentator argues that Arendt misreads Marx by failing to account for, among other things, the similar distinction that Marx himself draws between alienated and unalienated labor.[1] Feminist political theorists have also expressed consternation that Arendt's definition of labor extends to private household tasks typically performed by women, like cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, which Arendt excludes ipso facto from the public realm of the world and political engagement. This has led to a number of thoughtful reflections on Arendt's implicit gendering of the divisions she advances—between private and public, labor and work, social and political—as well as on the permeability of these divisions themselves. So, for instance, does Seyla Benhabib compellingly maintain that raising children is a world-shaping activity without which no individuals could grow to occupy the public realm (137).[2]

Arendt, however, seems preoccupied with minimizing any overlap between biology and world. One such potential overlap exists in the fact that labor, and not just work, attends the endeavor of world building. Arendt allows for the importance of labor in staving off the encroachment by nature on the world of permanent objects and institutions:

> Equally bound up with the recurring cycles of natural movements, but not quite so urgently imposed upon man by "the condition of human life" itself, is the second task of laboring—its constant, unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice, threatening the durability of the world and its fitness for human use.

But despite conceding the close alignment of this "second task of laboring" with world building, Arendt is careful to reiterate the basic nonproductivity of the task, which, like all labor in her definition, leaves nothing behind:

> The protection and preservation of the world against natural processes are among the toils which need the monotonous performance of daily repeated chores. This laboring fight, as distinguished from the essentially peaceful fulfilment in which labor obeys the orders of immediate bodily needs, although it may be even less "productive" than man's direct metabolism with nature, has a much closer connection with the world, which it defends against nature. (100–01)

The feminist poet and thinker Adrienne Rich likens this repeated maintenance to the "million tiny stitches" of women's household toil and stresses its importance as "world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair" (205). Arendt, in contrast, hastens to emphasize the gulf separating the labor of maintenance and preservation from actual participation in the world. However Herculean that labor may seem, "the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds"; Arendt manifestly reserves heroism for the public action and speech that produce the "shining brightness we once called glory" (101, 180).

One detects a twinge of anxiety in the vigorousness with which Arendt polices the line between the world and the monotonous upkeep it demands. What accounts for this raising of the stakes, evident already in her tonal shift between a labor of self-sustenance that produces "peaceful fulfilment" and a labor of preservation that promises only an "unending

fight"? Is the basic struggle for sustenance really less violent than the labor of maintenance? One answer rests in the more obviously thankless, Sisyphean quality of the maintenance labor she describes: scrubbing floors bears none of the tangible fruit of labor in the fields. Another answer rests in the importance of the effort. Without it the world would crumble, an outcome in many ways worse for Arendt than death from lack of sustenance because man would regress back among the animals. But herein lies a complication. The further man rises in the public world above the cyclical transience of biological life, the more labor he creates for *ani* within the same natural cyclicality governing the maintenance now required. Silhouetted against the "shining brightness" of political action and speech it enables, the man-made world casts a nettlesome shadow indeed.

Arendt indirectly addresses this dilemma by clarifying that while public, political life and private, biological life should remain distinct, they are not mutually exclusive. In the Greek *pol* , she observes, a minority of citizens were freed by the labor of slaves to pursue the *bi* . Unencumbered by the private, day-to-day burden of physical sustenance, citizens could circulate in the public world of their fellow citizens, where they claimed their political equality in deeds and words. So radical a division of roles came at a tremendous price, however. Slaves found themselves condemned to the "shadowy kind of existence" reserved for those who, consumed wholly by the recurring toils of *ani* *l* , could not participate in the common sphere (50). Citizens, for their part, suffered alienation from the "vitality" achieved in labor and essential in its own way to the human experience; total freedom from necessity yielded a "lifeless life" too far removed from "real life" and its biological enjoyments (120). Arendt never offers what a more balanced combination of public and private lives might resemble, but it seems reasonable to infer that she envisions a civilization composed entirely of public equals in which labor is more evenly distributed. Everyone, ideally, would partake at least to some extent in the biological satisfactions of *ani* *l* and the fully realized humanity of public man. The unending maintenance labor generated by world building thus poses no insuperable contradiction, as long as it falls to emancipated men electing to maintain and preserve the common world whose liberating potential they simultaneously enjoy.

What Arendt does not account for is what I call the problem of beginnings, which relates to the conditions necessary for the emergence of a public realm. Modernity, with its emphasis on individual freedom and equality, had emancipated the laboring classes from slavery. In this fashion, mankind had moved closer to Arendt's ideal that no man exclusively inhabit either the private necessity of *zōē* or the public realm of *bios*. But civilization was also moving dangerously further, Arendt contends, from the classical distinction between the two. Consumer society had replaced the public realm with the mass organization of biological needs, ignoring the ancients' strict separation of household and civic enterprises by reducing public life to a sort of collective housekeeping (33). Still, modernity at least retained the potential for such a differentiation. The preimperial modern state rendered by Arendt in *Origins* evokes the classical separation by standing over and against disparate private economic interests to produce a common ground. In Arendt's telling, of course, the moment proved inherently fleeting. The rise of empire and capital aside, the modern conflation of state with nation quickly rendered the mode of this commonality, namely citizenship, an accident of national birth and belonging—an accident that clashed with Arendt's more active conception of an equality seized rather than given and that ominously excluded from the community of rights anyone unfortunate enough to lack citizenship.[3]

Yet the state, as I have maintained, required no help in producing a difficulty of its own, and here it starts to become clearer why. Arendt offers that the state's elevation "above all classes" necessitated financial autonomy, an autonomy achieved in its partnership with the Jews. Political equality for citizens of the Greek *polis* had presupposed a freedom from necessity achieved by private mastery over slaves in the household. Thus, too, I would add, did the modern equality guaranteed by the state presuppose such a freedom—though not of citizens. Now it was the institution of publicness itself, rather than individual participants, that obtained the necessary autonomy. But a similarity persisted. That which had made citizenry in the *polis* possible—the all-consuming private labor of slaves—relegated the same laborers, by definition, to a "shadowy kind of existence" outside the public realm. Likewise did the Jews' pivotal contribution to the state constitute a special ostracism. To be sure, Jews were rewarded with citizenship. We have seen, though, that the condition of this inclusion in the public realm was their continued social exclusion, since the state courted the Jews precisely for their detachment from class society. Aligned as they were with the state, the Jews more resembled a structural feature of the common world than full-fledged participants inside it. If the state gathered and separated citizens "as a table is located between those who sit around it," so did, by extension, the Jews who made the state possible. Others might sit around the table, but the Jews *were* the table.

This, then, is Arendt's problem of beginnings, in which the disruption hinted by maintenance labor intensifies. Arendt obviously condemns slavery, and she bemoans the ironies of Jewish emancipation. Yet never does she offer conditions of emergence for a public realm that did not or would not create a caste of shadow men. Unjust as slavery was, slaves had made possible, made thinkable even, the *bios politikos* that Arendt celebrates; without them, one gets the impression from Arendt, man might never have made the Promethean leap from his enthrallment by the bare life of *zōē*. And these shadow men never seem entirely to go away. The more they are integrated into the world, in fact, the further they advance the shadow zone between world and *zōē* already evidenced in maintenance labor's constant fight to preserve the world from reclamation by nature. It is tolerable to Arendt that the world generate maintenance labor in continuous proportion to its existence, as long as the labor does not fall exclusively to a permanent underclass of *animal laborans* denied participation in the world. Even in the unjust conditions of the *polis*, the world as proud locus of the public, permanent realm remains separate from the world as the site—along its permanently fraying edges—of daily maintenance efforts where slaves toil in the murky zone between nature and man-made artifice. But what to make of Jewish service to modern states, wherein a key facet of the common world actually consisted of shadow men at once radically indissociable from that world and alienated from it? The binding medium that for Arendt relates and separates men furnishes the backdrop against which the "in-between" of the public realm can flourish. The medium does not, however, constitute that in-between, any more than the table constitutes the interaction of those seated around it. This is justifiable enough if one equates the binding medium with the inanimate objects, artworks, and institutions that Arendt envisions when she discusses the man-made world built by work. The problem arises when men become the medium.

The difficulty reappears in the European "comity of nations" dependent, for Arendt, on a neutral Jewish interstitiality grounding and facilitating exchanges among participating nation-states. She maintains that even after the importance of Jewish state finance waned at the national level, Jews retained their state relevance at the European level as a "non-

national" diplomatic element useful for negotiating treaties and disseminating news. Arendt credits these "good Europeans"—the expression is Nietzsche's—with having sustained a delicate European political order predicated on mutual national respect and common belonging. She understands that order to have dissolved, though, when the imperial directive of limitless expansion infected continental mentalities and undermined the very premise of European plurality (*Origins* 15, 21, 23). Yet the frailty of the order would seem to lie not just in its vulnerability to the imperial belligerence of individual members. It was a strange and tenuous thing, after all, for the comity of nations to depend on Jewish intermediaries existentially removed from the very in-between they facilitated.[4] Arendt writes unforgettably about the "worldlessness" of a persecuted people who, in their age-old quest for survival, had turned inward and become "unburdened by care for the world" (*Men* 13–14). But that worldlessness had made the world possible.

The resulting contradiction is plain to see. If in its supposed plurality the comity of nations guarded against the monolithic, biological existence that Arendt detested, it no less required a class of men engaged in just such a worldless existence. Arendt never takes up the paradox, though, because it indexes an aporia in her thought. She attributes to Marx a Hebraic fixation on labor's reproductive fertility—its potential for generating a surplus—that distracted him from the biological transience of this surplus and from the capacity of work to combat such ephemerality by building a lasting world (*Human Condition* 88, 106). And yet Arendt's countertheory reintroduces something of that Hebraic surfeit in the Jews whose biological, inward-oriented concern with survival and reproduction simultaneously enabled, coincided with, and exceeded the political world of the state. How to distinguish, in such an odd confluence, between *zōē* and *bios*, between the fruits of labor and the fruits of work?

Arendt's manner of evading the question explains some of the opprobrium attracted by her thinking about Jews. Likening historical Jewish "worldlessness" to a species of "barbarism,"[5] she sees prefigured in Jewish life the radical expulsion from the human world that European Jewry would experience in the camps. Along with her controversial remarks in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* about cooperation by the *Judenräte* ("Jewish councils") with the Nazis, this kind of analysis has evoked perennial accusations that Arendt meant to "blame the victim."[6] But my point is that her assignation of blame, such as it is, proves a red herring caused by the deferral for which the Jews simply provide Arendt with a vessel. By tracing a progression from traditional Jewish "worldlessness" to the superfluity into which the Jews were cast by empire and finally to the general superfluity of a totalitarianism that renders all men disposable, Arendt equates the devastations of modernity with the steady advance of a ravaging superfluity wrought by capital. As I have been arguing, however, the deeper problem of Jewish worldlessness for Arendt is not that Jews had turned away from, or been turned away by, the world. Rather, it is that they figured the paradoxical indispensability of worldlessness to the world, with all the implied category-collapsing consequences.

This worldlessness in the world, this excess haunting the system, is the superfluity reassigned by Arendt in *Origins* from the state to empire. The reassignment is accompanied and facilitated by the imperially induced Jewish superfluity that Arendt cites in explanation of modern anti-Semitism. Though Arendt would prefer to think of the specter of superfluity as a perversion introduced by capital and imperialism, it turns out to be endemic to world building. The lengths to which Arendt goes to contain that fact reflect the extent of the problem it poses for her political philosophy. I have tried to discuss one such tactic of hers: the deferral achieved in transforming, through the displacement thesis, the Jews

from a constitutive superfluity of the state into one of the many superfluities produced by capitalist imperialism. Beyond just conveniently funneling that superfluity away from the state, empire funnels it away from Europe altogether. Following Lenin, J. A. Hobson, and Rosa Luxemburg, Arendt understood empire in part as the radiation abroad of superfluous capital and labor (*Origins* 148n45). But it is important as well to appreciate the conceptual labor accomplished in *Origins* by superfluity itself. Indeed, one might locate in this conceptual labor an iteration of the vexed labor of maintenance, as Arendt's narrative ever keeps at bay an entropic disruption, superfluity, generated in inevitable proportion to the European state's world-building activity. The shadow Jews of the state become the shadow men of empire, a category that for Arendt includes all manner of so-called superfluous men—from European Jew to colonized African—and that leaves conveniently intact the exceptionalist political promise of a Europe in which, for all her postwar disillusionment, Arendt never quite stopped believing.

Notes

I would like to thank Maurice Samuels for his helpful feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

1. Bakan; Parekh. For more forgiving readings of Arendt's engagement with Marx, see Canovan 63–98 and Ring.

2. For other feminist readings of Arendt along these lines, see Dietz, "Feminist Receptions" and "Hannah Arendt"; Pitkin, "Conformism," "Justice," and *Attack* 145–76; and Rich 203–14.

3. Arendt identifies a "secret conflict between state and nation" inaugurated when modern nation-states like France grounded the legitimacy of human rights in the principle of national sovereignty. This subsumption of universal justice under particular belonging caused the "perversion of the state into an instrument of the nation" by making human rights conditional on citizenship (*Origins* 230–31); woe to anyone who, like European Jews in the twentieth century, is stateless.

4. European Jewish cohesion conversely depended, in Arendt's estimation, a bit too precariously on a comity of nations already eroding by the end of the nineteenth century. "This breakdown of European solidarity," she observes bitterly, "was at once reflected in the breakdown of Jewish solidarity all over Europe. When the persecution of German Jews began, Jews of other European countries discovered that German Jews constituted an exception whose fate could bear no resemblance to their own" (*Origins* 22). Rather than interrogating the inherent tenuousness of the arrangement, however, Arendt consistently finds reasons for its implosion elsewhere (imperialism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, etc.).

5. Arendt writes in *Men in Dark Times* that in the case of the Jews "we can speak of real worldlessness. And worldlessness, alas, is always a form of barbarism" (13).

6. I take the phrase from the title of an article by Bernard Wasserstein in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the most significant recent volley in the ongoing accusation that Arendt lacked "love of the Jewish people," as Gershom Scholem famously put it in a letter to Arendt following the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (241). For a measured account of the Eichmann controversy, see Young-Bruehl 347–78.

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