Walking Corpses

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Arendt on the limits and possibilities of cosmopolitan politics

[T]he 'national state', having lost its very foundations, leads the life of a walking corpse, whose spurious existence is artificially prolonged by repeated injections of imperialist expansion. (Arendt 1994: 143)

But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one's 'cosmopolitan existence.' When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen. (Arendt 1982: 75–76)

Introduction

Hannah Arendt's (1906–75) name has emerged at the forefront of contemporary writing on one of the newest – and oldest – questions in the history of political thought, the possibility of cosmopolitan political forms. This is not surprising since she was one of the leading thinkers among a postwar generation of Jewish intellectuals who developed the ideas and post-nationalist émigré sensibility that would deeply shape some important contemporary strands of modern cosmopolitan theory. The picture Arendt painted in her major and minor works of 'an undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together' (1966: 443) has been claimed by diverse and presumably competing approaches. The various cosmopolitan political forms and sensibilities allegedly found in her work include the 'anarchic' (Herzog 2004), 'pluralist' (Axtmann 2006), 'republican' (Rensmann 2007), 'rugged' (Fine 2000), 'Jewish' (Sznaider 2007), 'virtue' (Smith 2007), discourse ethical (Benhabib 2004; Benhabib *et al*. 2006) and 'agonistic' (Honig 2006).

Paradoxically, there are others, no less creative in their reading, who suggest a picture of Arendt's work that is far less productive, implying that she had little, if anything, to say to contemporary cosmopolitan concerns. We have been informed that Arendt was uninterested in institutions and laws more cosmopolitan in intent than traditional interstate law among states of sovereign equality and that she affirms 'the nation-state as a stable container of being and rights' (Burke 2008: 518). It appears to some that she was unable to theorise cosmopolitan 'rights' and this 'limits the conceptualisation of contemporary world politics' one may develop from her work (Beardsworth 2008a: 510). It even appears possible to derive a 'statist anti-cosmopolitanism' from her writing since it does not fit neatly into the received wisdom about humanitarian intervention (or the virtues of Jürgen Habermas) within certain schools of 'critical' international thought (Devetak 2007).

Apparently conflicting interpretations of Hannah Arendt are nothing new. But what explains this particular and most recent divergence regarding the treatment of Arendt and cosmopolitan political forms? The views of the second grouping can be quickly dispensed with since they are largely based on readings (sometimes misreadings) of

secondary sources, rather than what Arendt actually had to say on the relevant subjects. But the divergence cannot simply be down to the limitations of scholarship or that Arendt's writing defies easy categorisation. Another reason must be that she never clearly and systematically set out her thoughts in this area and when she did briefly address such issues it was not in her major works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. Arendt's most direct writing on a worldwide federated structure and related subjects is found in two biographical sketches of her teacher and mentor, Karl Jaspers, 'the only successor Kant has ever had' (1968a: 74), which appear in *Men in Dark Times*, remarks towards the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1968c) on the need for a permanent international criminal court, an interview where she sketched 'a new concept of the state' reprinted in*Crises of the Republic* (1969), the posthumously published *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1982) and a handful of short essays on European integration collected and posthumously published in *Essays in Understanding* (1994).

The fragmentary character of Arendt's writing on these themes (when combined with the more general idiosyncrasies of her political thought) has contributed much to the creative appropriations described above, a method of inspired (mis)reading of which she herself was not immune but that encourages some of her readers to find in her work what they have wanted to see. The fact is that Arendt rarely used the term 'cosmopolitan'. On the occasion that she did she spoke of 'cosmopolitan existence', not cosmopolitan*ism*. This matters because while she was clear on the political value of humanity as such, the practical rule of the idea should be understood only as a 'yardstick' to guide political thought and action. World citizenship should not be imagined, to borrow her words from a different context, as 'an achievable, producible end within the world' (2005: 3). As Arendt put it in her Kant lectures, 'one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen' (1982: 76). Nowhere is this sentiment contradicted in her major works of political theory. Undoubtedly, Arendt should remain as a central figure in the conversation about the theory and practice of post-national politics. But when taken as a whole, her writing suggests that the national state is not the only 'walking corpse' requiring 'injections of imperialist expansion' (1994: 143).

The goal of this short chapter is to briefly set out and analyse Hannah Arendt's writing on the limits and possibilities of cosmopolitan politics. Apparently incompatible readings of Arendt are above all a product of her own deep ambivalence towards all forms of political universalism and an abiding fear of the dangers of imperial expansion when the problem of political founding, its relativity and historical contingency, is circumvented, as it is in much contemporary cosmopolitan thought. In a preface to her first major book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argued that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities. (1966: ix)

In later work she began to articulate a vision for post-national politics and forms of political founding that are potentially worldwide in scope; namely a democratic–republican model of interlinked polities. It is not 'cosmopolitan nationalism' that best captures Arendt's position (c.f. Sznaider 2007), but cosmopolitan humanity in diversity. This cosmopolitan politics, if that is what we may call it, is anti-universalist and is without naivety regarding the propensity of all 'isms', including cosmopolitanism, to generate its own violence. She was well aware that the shrinkage of the globe had occurred to such an extent that 'each man is as much an inhabitant of the earth as he is an inhabitant of his country' (1958: 250). But Arendt also believed that the reality of this new order, the historical sociological conditions that make possible the resurgence of cosmopolitan political thought, 'is far from being the consolation or recompense for all past history as Kant hoped it to be' (1968a: 93).

The original 'post-national political form'

Hannah Arendt's historical and conceptual writing speaks directly to one of the central and still unresolved problems facing those wishing to theorise postnational political forms: whether cosmopolitanism is too tainted by its association with European imperialism and Euro-centric political categories to offer much that is useful and responsible under current global political conditions. 'Europe, as Kant foresaw, has prescribed its laws to all other continents' (Arendt 1968a: 82). Arendt's analysis of nineteenth century imperial expansion, her response to one of its products, European totalitarianism, and her claim that Cold War ideological and military expansions were clearly also imperial in character all suggest a lack of naivety when it comes to the political reality of this legacy. As*The Origins of Totalitarianism* powerfully showed, the transcendence of national state structures can easily degenerate into

ideological and imperial political forms unless initiated by simultaneous acts of political foundation, properly understood.

During the nineteenth century, imperial regimes were imposed on populations 'without the foundation of a body politic' (Arendt 1966: 135). The stabilising forces of laws and territorial boundaries were swept away; no authentic political action was possible, only ideological expansion and the all-powerful stream of exploitative economic processes. By the early twentieth century, the ideological claims of Europe's pan-nationalisms (especially the pan-German and pan-Slav movements) emerged as similarly hostile to existing political structures and borders, a dangerous form of identity politics without limits. Gravely flawed, but nonetheless relatively stable civic–political boundaries and associations disappeared across Europe in the name of expansion and ethnic and racial self-assertion. One of the most important insights of *Origins* was her linking of the racist ideologies and experiments in race politics in both overseas Empire and 'continental imperialism' in Europe. Later, writing on post-1945 European politics, Arendt (1994) also foresaw the dangers in the emergence of a homogeneous pan-European identity as the ideological and imperial justification for economic and then political integration. In each of these historical cases, Arendt pitted imperial expansion against the authentic foundation of a body politic.

And yet just as Europe's political innovation of the nation state had been planted in the 'four corners of the earth' it had become obsolete. Nationalism may have been useful in the specific context of the nineteenth century but in the twentieth century, Arendt argued, it 'could no longer either guarantee the true sovereignty of the people within [the nation-state] or establish a just relationship among different peoples beyond the national borders' (1978: 141). At the same time, the political existence of 'mankind', Arendt argued, was primarily a product not of the 'dreams of the humanists', but of two technical developments – the existence of the atom bomb, which threatened all life on earth, and the revolution in communications (1968a: 87). In other words, the 'means of communication and violence' are at the root of any cosmopolitan existence. Arendt did not abandon politics to the nation state. But, what if anything, might limit the imperial character of post-national political forms?

The central political issue, for Arendt, was one of appropriate foundation, that is, 'the setting of a new beginning' and of 'lawgiving' (1970: 31). One could read Arendt's entire theory of politics as an effort to work out the possibility of non-violent, non-imperial, non-ideological political founding. She attempted to theorise the originative act of a new political power and to institutionally extend it, to develop a framework that allowed newness and stability. Within such a framework, a form of non-imperial post-national politics was possible that may even be worldwide in scope. Arendt once described the political realm as 'the inherently anarchic conglomeration of human beings in the conditions of life on earth' (1968a: 149). To retain its essentially anarchic character, its non-imperial and non-ideological potential, the political realm required constant founding and refounding. Arendt's sense of our cosmopolitan existence involves a certain way of 'being in the world' that enables both movement in anarchy and the stability of worldliness, motion and a system of laws. She correlated legal and political forms and identities with different modes of territorial movements, which Herzog wonderfully describes as Arendt's anarchic cosmopolitanism (2004: 20). To understand how this might be so, it is necessary to account for Arendt's distinctive understanding of political action, new beginnings, laws and territorial boundaries. Taken together they make it possible to conceive a non-imperial but nonetheless worldwide federated structure.

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This article is extracted from:

'**On philosophical traditions and hermeneutic global politics**'
Edited by Cerwyn Moore and Chris Farrands

The academic study of international relations – International Relations (IR) – captures a drama of debate, a vital conversation, as Professor C.A.W. Manning (1962) described it, perhaps with the most important consequences if those involved misunderstand each other. Sixty years after he wrote these ideas, when much of the theory that has been discussed in the field in the meantime has been forgotten, that idea that knowledge can be produced by a conversation remains alive and kicking. The context has changed, and Manning would not recognise some of the arguments. The conversation is at least as much between individuals and social groups as between states. But as one of the originators of the academic study of IR, who insisted first of all on the importance of a philosophical understanding of the subject, Manning would certainly recognise the importance of the motives behind this collection of essays.

The rationale for this book derives first of all from a desire to integrate the diverse set of ideas that are broadly concerned with dialogue, with dialogic understanding, with 'interpretive' theory and methods in the discipline of academic IR. It aims at the same time to explore the richness of continental philosophy as a tradition of understanding that can help scholars in IR make sense of the drama unfolding before them. Many contemporary discussions in IR neglect that tradition; others may take it in a rather simpler or more formulaic way than it deserves. Recent attempts have been made to highlight the trans-disciplinary nature of the discipline of International Relations in many studies (including many discussed in this volume), drawing extensively on social studies, literature, aesthetics and gender studies as well as on philosophy. But one unfortunate by-product of this synthesising exercise has perhaps been the fragmentation and reintegration of 'post' theories (i.e. postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-development theory, post-feminism and so on), creating a discipline by proxy, a kind of new icon that in turn demands deconstruction. It is also significant that the discipline has gone through a number of 'great debates' and, whilst these have provided important contributions for the study of war and peace, the further transformation of the international system in the last twenty years has once again led to the need for adaptations in IR, both as a practical endeavour and as a critically thought through body of theoretical debate. This book is a timely re-evaluation of important elements in 'post' thinking as well as an exploration of how fruitful specific engagements with philosophy can be for IR.