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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Furia, A. (2021). Crisis and Vulnerability in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought: Political Action, Judgment and the Figure of the 'Conscious Pariah'.. Leiden; Boston : Brill [10.1163/9789004466876_017].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/837816> since: 2024-12-04

Published:

DOI: http://doi.org/10.1163/9789004466876_017

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Crisis and Vulnerability in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought: Political Action, Judgment and the Figure of the 'Conscious Pariah'

Annalisa Furia

Introduction

It is difficult to overstate the role that crisis, whether mentioned expressly or not, plays in Hannah Arendt's political theory. From her analysis of the totalitarian abyss and the status of violence in relation to power, to her reflections on the condition of statelessness, exile and the alienating dynamics of mass society, it seems fair to say that crisis in its multiple occurrences is the ever-changing yet constant worldly phenomenon through which she has fearlessly tried to sharpen in particular, but not only, her conception of political action.¹

Crisis was a first-hand experience for Arendt, as she had been confronted with the enduring condition of vulnerability throughout her life and had (too) often detected its signs in those around her.² While inextricable from lived

1 On the interactions between crisis and Arendt's treatment of violence and evil, as well as of civil disobedience and revolutionary changes, on the one hand, and of constitutional transformations, law and the institutionalisation of power, on the other, see e.g.: Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1972); Anthony F. Lang and John Williams (eds), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations. Reading Across the Lines* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary. Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Patricia Owens, 'The International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method', in Tarak Barkawi and George Lawson (eds), *International Origins of Social and Political Theory* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), pp. 37–62; Christian Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism. Law, Politics and the Order of Freedom* (Portland: Hart Publishing, 2015).

2 A touching example of her and other Jewish people's personal experience of crisis is provided in Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', in Marc Robinson (ed), *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), pp. 110–119. For the sake of this chapter, vulnerability, which is a notion currently hotly debated in many academic disciplines, is intended as the socially constructed condition of those individuals who, mainly due to their personal

experience, the phenomenology of crisis is however also a constitutive, living component of her peculiar epistemological approach, historical method and way of theorizing on political matters. In this sense, her intellectual reaction to crisis relies upon the attempt not to repel it, obliterate it or somehow resolve it, but rather to understand it as an irremediable occurrence of reality, to integrate its difficulties into both her conceptualisations and her method of theorising.³ As the first section will substantiate, her analysis of crisis mainly consists

in a radical critique of modernity that aspires to detecting and exposing its logic without continuing to fall prey to it.⁴ However, contrary to other scholars who had the same critical intent like Voegelin and Strauss, Arendt does not think that designing a new political philosophy could be a proper response to crisis because this would mean continuing to privilege thinking over acting, reinstating the philosophical hostility to phenomena that has led to the fatal totalitarian attempt to manipulate and even suppress reality. If Arendt's diagnosis of crisis may thus be close to that of other scholars of her time, and it was influenced in a definitive way by the experience of, and reflection on, totalitarian domination, total war and the Holocaust, her prognosis is original and peculiar.

As illustrated in the second and third section, she in fact boldly departs from the traditional concept of political action as being the actualisation of a doctrine or value, or consisting in a hierarchical, impersonal relationship, to identify the real opportunity for renewal offered by crisis in the recovery of a notion of an equal, spontaneous and boundless action, keeping to the particularities of reality and shaping history as continuously interrupted by unpredictable

characteristics and/or social positions, experience the crisis of a certain society more directly and intensely.

- 3 On Arendt's method, see among the many: Ernst Vollrath, 'Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking', *Social Research*, 44:1 (1977), pp. 160–182; Jerome Kohn, 'Introduction', in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), pp. vii–xxix; Nancy Fraser, 'Hannah Arendt in the 21st Century', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 3:3 (2004), pp. 253–261.
- 4 The position of Arendt with regard to modernity is widely disputed, also depending on the notion of modernity that is adopted. Seyla Benhabib argues for instance that Arendt is a 'reluctant modernist', for many authors her praise of the ancient agorà represents an indicator of her anti-modernism, while Dana Villa suggests that Arendt's concerns are similar to those of post-modern thinkers. In this regard, Galli convincingly argues that Arendt's position is difficult to categorise because it includes both pre-modern and post-modern elements. See Seyla Benhabib, 'The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt', *Hypatia*, 14:3 (1999), pp. 162–169; Dana Villa, 'Postmodernism and the Public Sphere', *The American Political Science Review*, 86:3 (1992), pp. 712–721; Carlo Galli, *Modernità. Categorie e profili critici* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1988), pp. 205–223.

human actions. For Arendt, political action remains forever relevant, even in extreme circumstances and for the most vulnerable, in which case judging, i.e., engaging in thinking and being concerned with the world is not only an inescapable responsibility, but also a form of political action.

In this regard, the chapter argues that the figure of the ‘conscious pariah’, of the outcast of the Jewish tradition who appears in Arendt’s Jewish writings and who will be described in the last paragraph, can be seen as a symbol of both the existential, personal experience of crisis she lived and proudly accepted, and the external judging position, the methodological view she continuously tried to adopt when approaching the most consolidated notions of Western political thought and their crisis.

Crisis, Arendt tells us, signals a dissonance between reality and knowledge and challenges the ways in which we understand, signify and act upon this very same reality, in which we assign meaning to history and we structure our relationship with the past and the future,⁵ but it is no excuse – not even in political emergencies and when in the condition of a pariah –, for not acting, for not judging and taking our part of responsibility towards the world. Indeed, it is the moment in which the meaning and nature of political action is to be recovered anew and embraced.

Crisis and Crises: Tradition, Common Sense and Dark Times

Although Arendt does not clearly define crisis, the notion of crisis seems mainly to have two meanings in her writings: a general, broad meaning, dealt with here, and the contextual, particular meaning(s) periods of crisis reveal and illuminate in some parts of the world. To put it concisely, for Arendt there are both crisis and crises. In this sense, in *Between Past and Future*, and namely at the beginning of her analysis of the crisis in education affecting the United States of America from the late 1940s, Arendt talks of a general crisis that ‘has overtaken the modern world everywhere and in almost every sphere of life manifests itself differently in each country’.⁶

5 For an effective analysis of the theoretical function of the term crisis, that draws from Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history of crisis, and has been particularly useful for the investigation of Arendt’s use of this notion, see Janet Roitman, ‘Crisis’, <https://www.political-concepts.org/roitman-crisis/>, accessed on 13 April 2020.

6 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 173.

The general crisis Arendt is preoccupied with in this book is firstly the ‘crisis of tradition’,⁷ ‘the crisis in our attitude toward the realm of the past’,⁸ that is the result of a slow, long-standing, but not linear or predetermined process which started with the collapse of Ancient Rome, has progressed with modernity and has become ‘an accomplished fact’ with the unprecedented tragedy of totalitarian domination.⁹ The breakdown of tradition for Arendt constitutes the first sign of the meta-crisis, of the general, destabilizing crisis that affects modern society and whose main effect is what she terms as ‘wordlessness’,¹⁰ the peculiar form of loss of the world that comes from the shrinking of the public sphere of action and speech, from the disappearance of political action.¹¹

This general crisis thus represents for Arendt the background against which particular incidents emerge, but it also complicates their understanding and interpretation because it has left individuals without instructions on how to fill the gap between the past and the future, without the securely anchored standards and long-established categories tradition used to provide. In her view the notion and function of tradition is to be traced back to the Roman attitude ‘to consider the past qua past as a model, ancestors [...] as guiding examples’,¹² and to believe that the source of all greatness lies in the sacredness and unrepeatability of the foundation of Rome, of a unique beginning to be respected and continuously renewed in and throughout time.¹³ Together with authority and religion, tradition in fact formed the sacred trinity upon which the Romans erected the political realm, it exerted a binding force that had its roots in the past and tied every act back to the past, but was no less a living force present in the reality of Rome.

7 Ibid., p. 193.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 26.

10 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958; ii edn), pp. 54–58.

11 In this regard, Arendt seems to reiterate and reinterpret the shared assumptions on crisis that informed the German culture of her time. In this intellectual context, according to Sluga, the notion of crisis was ‘not an empirical idea waiting for confirmation but a regulative ideal, an a priori that structured the perception of the world for those who were in its grip. It determined their philosophical thinking as well as their political involvement’: Hans Sluga, *Heidegger’s Crisis. Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 67.

12 Arendt, *Between Past*, p. 193.

13 On the difference between beginnings and absolute beginnings in Arendt’s thought, as well as on the distance between Arendt’s and Schmitt’s conception of the political in this regard, see Kalyvas, *Democracy*, pp. 194–253.

In the modern world the role of tradition as providing qualified guidance, cohesion and stability over time has been increasingly disarticulated, it has relentlessly dried up until the final blow struck by the totalitarian catastrophe produced an irremediable, irreversible break in history, thus making it very difficult, especially but not only for common people, to establish and maintain a dialogue with the past.

Although the loss of tradition obviously does not mean the loss of the past, it however means that, as Tocqueville stated, ‘the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future’, that it has become extremely difficult to retain the ‘original spirit’ of traditional concepts – such as freedom, authority, justice, responsibility, virtue, power– that continue to exercise their influence over the minds but have lost their meaning.¹⁴

With the loss of tradition, humanity has thus lost the collective capability of making sense of the past, of questioning and preserving it and projecting its living force into the public sphere:

without tradition – which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is – there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, [...] neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it.¹⁵

[...]

We are in danger of forgetting, and such an oblivion [...] would mean that [...] we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.¹⁶

Arendt approximates the idea of crisis in at least two other ways that are the expression of the same, profound concern for the risk of worldlessness, of the inclination to migrate from the world to the realm of introspection and private interests that crisis brings with it.

In the first instance, she uses the expression ‘dark times’ not to specifically identify the events of crisis that took place in the twentieth century or in other historical moments, but rather the *modality* in which they appeared in the

14 Arendt, *Between Past*, pp. 7, 15. For Arendt, the three constituting elements of the trinity – tradition, authority and religion – stand and fall together, so the crisis of tradition implies the crisis of institutional religion and the loss of authority. *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

public realm and yet remained opaque and hidden because they were ‘covered up [...] by the highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives’.¹⁷

In relation to this, the crucial political problem for Arendt lies in the fact that in those moments, which are no rarity in history, reality is so disfigured by what Heidegger called the ‘power of mere talk’, of the ‘incomprehensible triviality’ that arises out of the public realm and obscures everything, that people are very likely to lose commitment to the public realm, that is, to shift from the world as the ‘in-between’ that lies between people to an interior realm, to the world of thinking and feeling in which the reality of the world loses any appeal or relevance.¹⁸

Very close to this facet of crisis is the other, quite elusive and dispersed way in which Arendt substantiates this notion as the progressive erosion of what, following Kant, she names ‘common sense’:

Whenever in political questions human sound reason fails or gives up the attempt to supply answers we are faced by a crisis; for this kind of reason is really that common sense by virtue of which we and our five individual senses are fitted into a single world common to us all and by the aid of which we move about in it. The disappearance of common sense in the present day is the surest sign of the present-day crisis. In every crisis a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed.¹⁹

Common sense is for Arendt ‘the political sense par excellence’ as it assumes a common world and allows the experience of the complexities of reality as a whole.²⁰ More specifically, common sense for Arendt is a specifically human sense, a ‘community sense’, the sense of being in a community that allows us to share and communicate our opinions.²¹

The cognitive and guiding role that is played by this sense in fact includes a crucial dimension that is important to highlight here and that explains the closeness between common sense and the faculty of judgment.

In addition to being an efficient instrument to manage what is new and unexpected (similarly to prejudices), common sense in fact also suggestively

17 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc 1968), p. viii.

18 *Ibid.*, p. ix, pp. 4, 19.

19 Arendt, *Between Past*, p. 178.

20 Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), p. 318.

21 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1978), p. 269.

implies the sense, a sort of reassuring sensation, that other people would relate to the reality of the world in a similar way, that ‘my impressions are in principle communicable and will at least potentially be ratified’ by others, and it is for this reason that the loss of common sense for Arendt matters not only in epistemic terms, but more crucially in political terms.²²

Being a prerequisite of understanding – meaning not only having correct information or scientific knowledge but the activity by which ‘we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality’ – the disruption of common sense entails, in the first place, the growing incapacity of taking cognizance of factual phenomena, of the reality of the world.²³ In this regard, Arendt highlights that whereas the crisis of common sense reached its decisive manifestation under totalitarianism, its destruction was already under way as a result of the atomisation of individuals, of their ‘loss of social status’ and ‘communal relationships’.²⁴ Common sense had in fact already started to lose its validity and to be replaced ever more with stringent logicity for quite a long time when the perverse totalitarian combination of logicity and ideological reasoning made it possible to transform a mere abstraction, an idea into a premise from which the explanations of facts were to be consistently deduced, thereby definitively obscuring and annihilating reality.²⁵

The problem with this process is in fact, as Arendt further explains, that whereas common sense presupposes and depends on the existence of a common world and other people, logical reasoning does not need them because it ‘can claim a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other people’.²⁶ The generalisations and categorisations central to the logical operations of objective theory in fact do not need to remain connected to the world to function and to be persuasive, and in this sense not only are they irremediably unable to allow any sort of understanding of factual, phenomenal reality, but they also make it impossible to make distinctions between events, detect newness and attribute meaning to facts. In addition to these very troubling effects, for Arendt, the loss of common sense produces yet another consequence that is charged with political

22 Jakob Norberg, ‘Arendt in Crisis: Political Thought in Between Past and Future’, *College Literature*, 38:1 (2011), pp. 131–149, p. 136. On the ways in which Arendt connects common sense to understanding and knowledge, see Arendt, *Essays*, p. 311.

23 Arendt, *Essays*, p. 308. See Vollrath, ‘Hannah Arendt’, pp. 173–177.

24 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973; vi edn), p. 352.

25 See Arendt, *Essays*, p. 317.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 318.

significance: whereas the loss of prejudice liberates us from stereotyped and rigid categories, the loss of common sense ‘makes us utterly lonely, for it is the loss of a sense of sharing the world with others’;²⁷ it entails the end of the idea that the world is our common reality because we can make sense of it through political action, through our words and deeds, through the speech and actions we make in public and that reveal our identity to others.²⁸

A crucial sign of crisis, together with the loss of tradition and the ever-impending darkening of times described above, the loss of common sense thus implies the most serious of political risks for Arendt, that is, being deprived of the conditions for any future understanding and (inter)action, and thus for political action, to arise and blossom; the risk of the ‘gradual destruction of a common world’.²⁹

(Re)discovering Political Action

In Koselleck’s masterly conceptual history of crisis, and namely in his reconstruction of the complex and decisive semantic shift that this notion underwent in the eighteenth century, the modern experience and signification of crisis, as well as its constitutive links with the role of critique, is the result of the dualistic relationship between politics and morality that emerged at that time and that allowed a specific temporalisation of history through the elaboration of a philosophy of history.³⁰ To put it very simply, it resulted from the critique of politics and history performed, in the secret, private domain, by the enclaves of intellectuals that were excluded by, and staked against, the absolutist state and that eventually developed into centres of elaboration of a secularised moral authority, of a severe moral critique of political societies.³¹ The main point for Koselleck is that the political nature and impact of this (pretended) moral critique was denied and covered over by the elaboration of a philosophy of history, by the perpetual invocation of a future, utopian world to be realised, in the name of which absolutism was morally condemned, and

27 Norberg, ‘Arendt in Crisis’, p. 136.

28 On political action as disclosing the identity of actors, see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 175–181.

29 Norberg, ‘Arendt in Crisis’, p. 136.

30 See Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988); Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Crisis’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67:2 (2006), pp. 357–400 (transl. Michaela W. Richter); Roitman, ‘Crisis’.

31 See Gourevitch’s preface to Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, p. viii.

the (political) conditions for (a perpetual) crisis, for the French Revolution, for terror and dictatorship, were reinforced and justified.³²

Confronted with a disaster in which high moral standards and principles had proved to be utterly weak and far too easy to replace and defraud, Arendt argues in a similar vein that continuing to juxtapose thinking and acting, that is, theory and reality, does not represent an adequate answer to the crisis unleashed by totalitarianism but rather ‘lead[s] to ruin’ and ‘increase[s] that estrangement from the world by which we are already threatened on all sides’. ‘A crisis becomes a disaster’, Arendt affirms, ‘only when we respond to it with pre-formed judgments [...]. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides’.³³ In this sense, for Arendt the answer to crisis cannot thus be provided by the reiteration of the same, crystallised attitudes nor by a desperate attempt to make sense of it by elaborating the most consistent philosophical theory, renewed historical narrative, refined ideology or sophisticated moral system: for her, as for Koselleck, the rule of utopia, in its multiple, old and new, forms, has already proved to be a dreadful dead end.

Against any attempt, like those of Voegelin and Strauss, aimed at redressing crisis by re-establishing a relationship between reality and transcendence (philosophy), Arendt’s reply is realistic and practical, though her realism is profoundly different from any sort of Realpolitik, instrumental logic, empiricism or appeased form of conciliation with reality.³⁴ Her unorthodox answer is, in fact, that crisis offers the opportunity to recover the irreducibility of reality and thus the proper nature and meaning of praxis, of political action.

By stripping individuals of their ready moral standards and internalised orthodoxies, crisis creates the opportunity ‘to explore and inquire into whatever has been laid bare of the essence of the matter’ directly, without the rigidities and constraints set by tradition and by being free to (re)discover the treasures that were lost in this very same tradition. Sweeping away all the given answers, Arendt states, crisis ‘forces us back to the questions themselves’.³⁵ It is a moment in which we are confronted anew with ‘the elementary problems of human living-together’,³⁶ in which the need for political action to be

32 Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, pp. 174–186; Roitman, ‘Crisis’.

33 Arendt, *Between Past*, pp. 194–195, pp. 174–175.

34 On Arendt’s peculiar form of realism, see Patricia Owens, ‘The Ethic of Reality in Hannah Arendt’, in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 105–121.

35 Arendt, *Between Past*, p. 174.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

(re)discovered and, as Norberg highlights, for politics ‘to come to its own’ is, at the same time, vital and made extremely difficult by crisis itself.³⁷

As is known, for Arendt political action does not denote a predictable, hierarchical and impersonal action responding to a means-end logic, nor the mere application of ideas, theories, models aimed at suppressing the contingency of reality. This is actually what in her view has made an authentic consideration of human affairs impossible in Western political philosophy and has produced the crisis of the modern world and the tragedy of totalitarianism. Rather, for her, political action – which is the only form of activity that is proper to human beings and the highest realisation of their potentialities – is to be recovered in its meaning of a spontaneous, boundless, and undetermined action, keeping to the particularities of reality, the unpredictability and frailty of human affairs, and whose sense and dangers are contained in this very same unpredictability and frailty.³⁸

Bound up with the facts of natality and plurality, being the consequence and public, narrative actualisation of those two facts – of the capacity to initiate something new, inherent in birth, and of expressing difference in speech, intrinsic to plurality –, political action consists of spontaneous ‘miraculous’ moments of rupture and ‘new beginning’; it is the realisation of freedom as ‘the capacity to begin’ and it thus contributes to shaping the world and history as the realm of contingency, unexpected and unique events rather than of necessity.³⁹ In Arendt’s view, action in fact does not have any prefixed end but is an end in itself, and it is from political action, that is, whenever and wherever people act together, in concert and publicly, that power – which contra the tradition of Western political thought is not to be equated with sovereignty, violence or a relation of hierarchy – springs up and the public sphere is shaped, kept alive and secured.⁴⁰

What happens then when the irreversible interruption of the continuity of history and the destruction of plurality are willfully pursued and realised? Which form of political action is possible when individuals seem to no longer have anything in common – neither the world, nor the categories and

37 Norberg, ‘Arendt in Crisis’, p. 144.

38 See Kohn, ‘Introduction’, pp. viii-xxvi; Margaret Canovan, ‘Introduction’, in Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. vii-xx.

39 Arendt, *Between Past*, pp. 169–170.

40 This explains why Arendt praises every instance of spontaneous public action she encounters in her life and study – from the ancient *polis* and the modern revolutions, to the 1871 Commune of Paris, the Russian soviets and the workers’ councils of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution – and relentlessly stigmatises the dynamics that facilitate world alienation and the contraction of the public realm.

convictions to which they used to fall back on, to understand and navigate through reality? When public and private spaces are methodically destroyed? Judgment is the puzzling and controversial answer Arendt offers, an answer whose content, evolution and function in her political thought is still widely debated and studied. Whereas her conceptualisation of judgment, which is unfinished being only partially elaborated, acquires divergent inclinations over time and problematically stands at the crossroads between the role of the actor and that of the spectator, between ‘vita activa’ and ‘vita contemplativa’ and their complex relationships with history and morality, this work is aimed at highlighting the close link – which is also inscribed in the etymology of the word crisis that comes from the Greek *krinein*, ‘to separate’, ‘to decide’, and ‘to judge’ – that Arendt establishes between judgement and crisis.⁴¹

Arendt focuses her attention on the connection between the two, and more precisely on a possible extension to politics of Kant’s aesthetic judgment and reflections on taste, in her investigation of totalitarianism. In particular, she attempted to understand what allowed some (very few) individuals to be able to discriminate between right and wrong in such a moment of ultimate dissolution of the established norms and standards, while the majority of the others, like the Nazi lieutenant colonel Adolf Eichmann, proved to be dramatically unable even to think.

Following Kant’s reflections, Arendt is thus interested in judgment intended as ‘the faculty of thinking the particular’⁴² without resorting to any general standard or rule. In this light, judgment is not a routinised operation whereby a particular is subsumed under an accepted rule, but rather a reflective operation that starts from the particular, from the original and contextual character

41 It is not possible here to provide a comprehensive account and analysis of Arendt’s concept of judgement, as well as of the diverging interpretations provided by scholars, on which see at least Tuija Parvikko, *The Responsibility of the Pariah. The Impact of Bernard Lazare on Arendt’s Conception of Political Action and Judgment in Extreme Situations* (Jyväskylä: SoPhi, 1996); Tuija Parvikko, ‘Committed to Think, Judge and Act. Hannah Arendt’s Idealtypical Approach to Human Faculties’, in Joke J. Hermsen and Dana Villa (eds), *The Judge and the Spectator. Hannah Arendt’s Political Philosophy* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), pp. 111–133; Simona Forti, ‘Judging Between Politics and History’, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 2 (1998), pp. 15–36; David L. Marshall, ‘The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Judgment’, *Political Theory*, 38:3 (2010), pp. 367–393; M. Passerin d’Entreves, ‘Hannah Arendt’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>, accessed on 13 April 2020.

42 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, p. 271.

of phenomena, to judge their uniqueness as well as their universal import and meaning, their 'exemplary validity'.⁴³

In Arendt's view, the power of this form of judgment stems from what Kant called 'enlarged mentality',⁴⁴ that is, the capability of comparing a subjective standpoint with possible judgments of other judging individuals, using imagination and representation to evoke events and to make others present. Enlarged thought, however, does not mean empathy, or simple acceptance of the difference between individual standpoints, but is the result of abstracting from the limitations of one's subjective condition, needs and self-interest, so that judgment can reach a validity that is 'neither objective and universal, nor subjective', but rather inter-subjective; a validity that the more positions I take into consideration, the more 'representative' and impartial it becomes. Judgment, Arendt continues, is thus integrally connected with plurality; not with the existence of a man as an intelligible being but of 'men in the plural, as living in a community'.⁴⁵

The comparison of my judgment with the possible judgments of others and its communicability are made possible by common sense, which, as we have seen, is the sense that allows me to be in 'anticipated communication with others' who are absent but with whom I know I can come to a potential agreement.⁴⁶ Drawing not from speculative thought but from common sense, judgment does not transcend the public realm, but it is entirely concerned with it. It is 'disinterested' because it concerns the factual reality of the world and its appearances, not the private or moral life of individuals.⁴⁷

Whereas at one stage Arendt seems to consider judgement as a faculty that enables the political actor to decide what to do in practice (like the Greek *phronesis*), in her last writings judging seems no longer to be configured as a modality that connects thinking and acting but rather, as we will see in the next paragraph, as the privilege of the impartial spectator, the historian or the poet, who appeals to judgement to retrospectively cull meaning from the past in order to hand it down, through narration, to the future generations. While this contradiction has been (and still is) extensively debated in literature, it is the peculiar

43 Ibid., p. 272. On the notion of exemplary validity, which Arendt extends also to the actions of individuals and historical figures, as well as to past events, see Passerin d'Entreves, 'Hannah Arendt'.

44 Kant quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), p. 140.

45 Ibid., pp. 141–142. On the validity of judgement, which is linked to the crucial difference between opinion and truth, see Passerin d'Entreves, 'Hannah Arendt'.

46 Arendt, *Between Past*, p. 220.

47 Ibid., p. 222.

function, simultaneously political, ethical and historical, judgement plays in moment of political emergencies that is to be emphasised here,⁴⁸ as this long and crucial passage of Arendt's *Life of the Mind* shows:

When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. The purging element in thinking, Socrates' midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them – values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions – is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules. The faculty of judging particulars (as Kant discovered it), the ability to say, 'this is wrong', 'this is beautiful', etc., is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles [...] judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated in a way similar to the way consciousness and conscience are interconnected. If thinking [...] results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world [...]. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, [...]. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.⁴⁹

Especially in times of emergency, thinking ceases to be a marginal activity, Arendt states in the long quotation above, because it prepares the ground for judgement as an autonomous activity, as an activity not supported by any sort of 'banister',⁵⁰ be it a universal rule, a shared norm or a consolidated concept. It is particularly when 'the chips are down', she continues, that judging, that

48 See Forti, 'Judging', p. 31. On the different phases and possible interpretations of Arendt's theory of judgement see Forti, 'Judging', pp. 15–35; Passerin d'Entreves, 'Hannah Arendt'. Drawing from Kant's idea of united mankind, Arendt seems to reconcile the roles of actor and spectator in *Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, p. 271.

49 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 192–193 (emphasis added).

50 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975* (Schocken Books: New York, 2018; ed. Jerome Kohn).

is, engaging in thinking and being concerned with reality, becomes not only an inescapable responsibility, but also ‘immediately action’,⁵¹ even though, we may hope, not the only possible form of political action.

Redeeming Meaning and Dignity from the Past: History as Storytelling

The peculiar nature of judgment as ‘the place of resistance with respect [...] [to] the existent’⁵² becomes more manifest if we now address the ways in which Arendt, especially in her last writings, deals with the relationship between judgment and history.

Contrasting the transformation of history into a philosophy of history, as well as any deterministic or monist reading and construction of it, Arendt affirms that judgment – in line with the old Greek meaning of history as *historein* (inquiry, knowledge from inquiry, or judge) – is what will make it possible for us to ‘reclaim our human dignity’, to win it back from the ‘pseudo- divinity named History of the modern age’.⁵³

For Arendt, the modern conception of history is in fact another result of the Western attitude that privileges theory over praxis, or necessity over contingency, in the attempt to escape from the frustrations and fragility of human action and by construing historical events as forming a process, as the derivative and predictable stages of a teleological development. By conceiving history as something that has a beginning and a determinate end, as well as intelligible content, laws and means, modern historiography has in fact managed to reconcile rationality and reality but at the price of depriving the particular, the realm of ‘single events and deeds and suffering’, of any independent meaning and relevance. Quite ironically, having affirmed that ‘meaning is contained in the process as a whole’, modern historiography, for Arendt, has produced the loss of history, the loss of relevance of both factual reality and human actions, of the uniqueness and particularity of past actions and events.⁵⁴

As we have seen, with the fatal break in tradition produced by totalitarianism, individuals have irremediably lost their consolidated categories of thought and evaluation and are thus left with what ‘is still the past, but a fragmented

51 Forti, ‘Judging’, p. 34; see Parvikko, *Responsibility*, pp. 207–228.

52 Forti, ‘Judging’, p. 34.

53 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 216.

54 Arendt, *Between Past*, pp. 80, 87.

past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation'.⁵⁵ In this situation, each generation, each human being, must find a way to think about and remember the past because without this process of reflection there are no stories, nor history, to be told.

It is in this context that judging, with all the specific characteristics Arendt assigns to it, becomes the faculty that makes it possible to find a way out of this conundrum and to cull meaning from the past, to bear witness to the events of the world by deciding, independently and impartially, that is, without resorting to authoritative and generalizing standards, what is worthy of being remembered and preserved in its particularity from disappearing in time.

Re-establishing a link with the past for Arendt thus requires us, first of all, to recognise that making history does not mean tracking down the causes of an event – a manipulative and falsifying operation. Rather, it means selecting particular stories and events in order to recover their meaning, which for her can be done only when the event is narrated as part of a story because it is this narration that illuminates the past and allows our reconciliation with reality not through empathy, complacency or passivity but through our active confrontation with its factual nature.

In this perspective, historiography is the art of the storyteller who 'reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, [...] [who] brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are'.⁵⁶ No longer distracted and constrained by tradition, a storyteller, like Arendt was, cannot save the past as a whole but is like a pearl diver 'who dive[s] deep and excavate[s] the original meaning of the phenomena which lay covered by sedimented layers of historical interpretation', and who tries to identify newness and uniqueness by searching for pearls that can 'unsettle the present', for the lost treasures, forgotten meanings and origins that can still illuminate the present, that can be reappropriated, remembered and transformed into examples, a source of guidance for the future, and it is in the historian's search for newness, particularity

55 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 212. On the alteration of the relationship between present, past and future produced by the modern notion of progress, see *ibid.*, p. 214. On the similarities and differences between Arendt's and Koselleck's conception of this relationship, see José D'Assunção Barros, 'Rupturas entre o presente e o passado. Leituras sobre as concepções de tempo de Koselleck e Hannah Arendt', *Revista Páginas de Filosofia*, 2:2 (2010), pp. 65–88.

56 Arendt, *Men*, p. 105. See Arendt, *Essays*, pp. 318–319; Vollrath, 'Hannah Arendt', pp. 180–181; Seyla Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative', *Social Research*, 57:1 (1990), pp. 167–196, pp. 186–190; Owens, 'International Origins', pp. 50–55.

and individuality that in her view resides the other side of political action as the human capacity to begin something new.⁵⁷

In the first sense, the recovery of the lost nature of political action as a spontaneous and undetermined action further proves that history cannot be told as a continuous and teleological flow because it is through individuals' action and speech that 'condition for remembrance, that is, for history' is created,⁵⁸ and that it lies in the realm of contingency, of unexpected and unique events rather than of necessity:

History, in contradistinction to nature, is full of events; here the miracle of accident and infinite improbability occurs so frequently that it seems strange to speak of miracles at all. But the reason for this frequency is merely that historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative, by the initiative man is insofar as he is an acting being. Hence it is not in the least superstitious, it is even a counsel of realism, to look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable, to be prepared for and to expect 'miracles' in the political realm.⁵⁹

In the second and interconnected sense, by judging and selecting events, by denying history its 'right to being the ultimate judge' in the Hegelian sense, historians as storytellers can further claim back human dignity and capacity for action, so that, as is also seen in the figure of the 'conscious pariah', history can ultimately become the history also of the 'defeated' cause, and no longer only of the victorious.⁶⁰

Seeing Like a Pariah

The figure of the conscious pariah, just like Arendt's thought in general, has seen a steady resurgence of interest and investigation for quite some time now. In addition to epitomizing her peculiar historical and theoretical method, the figure of the 'conscious pariah' is identified here, on the one hand, as the figure of those individuals who embody, experience and give testimony to, the crisis of a certain society through their vulnerability, in their flesh, making

57 Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt', p. 189. On the particular that can become an example that, in turn, will help us to judge reality in its particularity, see Arendt, *Responsibility*, pp. 143–146.

58 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 9.

59 Arendt, *Between Past*, p. 170.

60 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 216.

visible the need for new answers and for (re)thinking the conditions of human co-habitation. On the other, it is argued that this figure is also particularly apt for capturing the political relevance of judgment in extreme circumstances and for affirming that nothing, not even the condition of exclusion she embodies, can exempt from the responsibility of practicing it, as Arendt tried to demonstrate by being a proud pariah herself, not only with respect to the broader society but also Jewish people, and by reconstructing and recounting the stories of many pariahs in her writings (Rahel Varnhagen, Sholom Aleichem, Heinrich Heine, Bernard Lazare, Franz Kafka, Charlie Chaplin), investigating their deeds and suffering.⁶¹

In Arendt's view, the status of the pariah characterises the condition of the Jews in Western Europe even after their emancipation because, even though they lived amidst European peoples, they continued to be excluded and discriminated, not truly accepted as Jews, thus remaining in an outsider condition that has historically given rise to two different attitudes: that of the conscious pariah, who is aware of her condition and nevertheless reaffirms, in various ways, her right to be included and recognised as a Jew, that is, for her unique-ness and particularity, and that of the 'parvenu' who unsuccessfully tries to be assimilated and to succeed in the world of the gentiles, and yet who cannot escape her (Jewish) identity.

The conscious pariahs were those who did the most for their people's dignity because, contrary to the 'parvenus' who were social climbers denying their historical identity and wanting to be assimilated at any price, they never denied nor traded their identity for a simulacrum of acceptance and recognition. They actually tried to preserve, defend and affirm their identity in its particularity in as many ways as they could afford, in a context of exclusion.⁶²

In this context, the figure of the conscious pariah is thus the figure of a person who is aware of her condition as an outsider, of the ways in which history and politics have shaped and continue to shape her existence, and who accepts her condition of vulnerability, 'rather than denying it, retreating from it, trying to hide who they are', but does not submit to it.⁶³

61 See Ron H. Feldman, 'Introduction: The Jew as Pariah: The Case of Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)', in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. xliii.

62 See Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, pp. 275–297; Feldman, 'Introduction', pp. xlii–xliii; Jennifer Ring, 'The Pariah as Hero: Hannah Arendt's Political Actor', *Political Theory*, 19:3 (1991), pp. 433–452, pp. 441–444. On the historical sources of Arendt's conception of pariahdom, see Parvikko, *Responsibility*, pp. 13–60.

63 Ring, 'The Pariah', p. 443.

Due to her specific position, by being, at the same time, inside and outside the world of human affairs, she is in fact in the best position to judge history and politics independently, because resorting to the dominant ideologies, moral standards or given answers would mean resorting to the very same logic and means that produced her exclusion. When she accepts being conscious, she cannot but judge reality for what it is – and not for what it should be, is supposed to be or she would like it to be – because she experiences its harsh reality in everyday life. But whereas she is irremediably doomed to bear the burden of reality, she also gets something very precious in exchange: she understands the logic that produces this burden. Even though she knows that her condition is not of her own making, when the pariah recognises her condition, she, in her rejection of any form of resignation or self-pity, in fact recognises that she has at least a partial responsibility for it, depending on whether she decides to capitulate or consent to it or to resist it (at least, but if possible, not only) by judging it.⁶⁴ As Arendt affirms with regard to refugees who, like the conscious pariahs of the Jewish tradition, accept their condition and do not deny their identity, they obtain ‘one priceless advantage’ in exchange:

history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of gentiles. They know that the outlawing of the Jewish people in Europe has been followed closely by the outlawing of most European nations. Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples – if they keep their identity.⁶⁵

The same privilege is assigned, as Arendt’s experience and reflection regarding crisis suggest, to those who dare to look at reality from the standpoint of a pariah, to judge it “from outside” instead of holding fast to consolidated categories, meanings and hierarchies, instead of resorting to the opinions and narratives of the majority.

64 See Parvikko, *Responsibility*, pp. 206–220. On the ways in which the complex and articulated role of the pariah connects with Arendt’s analysis of both the role of the Jewish councils under totalitarian domination, the condition of refugees and stateless individuals and the predicament of individuals in mass society see: Ring, ‘The Pariah’, pp. 443–450; Parvikko, *Responsibility*, pp. 209–213. In the pariahs’ stories Arendt narrates, the conscious pariahs are often those who decided to act in unconventional, eccentric ways (poetry, humour, art), and to become rebels in as many ways as they could.

65 Arendt, ‘We Refugees’, p. 119.

Conclusion

While political action and judgment are the twofold, and not so uncommon, answers Arendt provides to crisis, the peculiar characteristics Arendt assigns to them – from the essence of political action as being an equal and spontaneous action keeping to the particularities of reality, to the relevance and responsibility of judging especially in political emergencies, and to their connections with history as continuously interrupted by unpredictable human actions and with historiography as storytelling – cannot be grasped in their dense originality without comprehending them as the result of Arendt's attempt to understand reality in its contingent, unpredictable and undetermined nature, and thus to understand crisis as an inescapable manifestation of such a reality; of her attempt not to circumvent the manifold dangers and potential of crisis but instead to integrate them into her conceptualisations and method, as fiercely as she personally confronted it during her life as a pariah, contesting any pre-tense, assertion or form of necessity and escape from reality, and stating that accepting the inescapable contingency of human condition, accepting our responsibility to act and to judge, is 'the price we pay for being free'⁶⁶ and for saving our dignity.

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