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Experiencing the International Space: Hannah Arendt on Reality, History and Plurality

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## Experiencing the International Space: Hannah Arendt on Reality, History and Plurality

Annalisa Furia

### Abstract:

This chapter seeks to reconstruct the main qualifying characteristics of the notion of international space Arendt derived from her intellectual analysis and existential experience, and that (implicitly and explicitly) informs her political theorizing. Without aiming at providing either an exhaustive review of the many international issues she addressed in her writings or a critical scrutiny of the consistency of her conceptualizations, this chapter argues that she delineates a notion of inter-national space that is neither the simple reflection of what exists, nor the simple product of an idea(I). Rather, it is conceived as a demanding dimension that can be safeguarded and kept alive by human action only if its constitutive relationships with *reality*, *history* and *plurality* are preserved. This is one of the most important contributions Arendt's thought offers to the contemporary debate on the theory and practice of the international.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt; Realism; Idealism; Cosmopolitanism; Historiography; Political Action; International Space (conceptualization of); Antisemitism; Plurality; Humanity

During Hannah Arendt's lifetime, the international was an important and complex subject for theoretical and public debate. While she never drew back from addressing even the most controversial international occurrences, many of her comments concerning international issues revolve around the attempt to understand historical events in their particularity, mainly by engaging with the actions of those involved in them, rather than the consistent confrontation with the consolidated traditions or schools of international theory<sup>1</sup>. In addition

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<sup>1</sup> On the ways in which Arendt's legacy has been claimed by various International Relations schools of thought, see, among the many, Patricia Owens, 'Hannah Arendt', in *Critical Theorists and International Relations* ed. Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-William (London: Routledge, 2009) and 'Walking Corpses: Arendt on the Limits and Possibilities of

to the difficulties of interpreting her unsystematic and sometimes contradictory work, when dealing with Arendt's conceptualisation of the international, one is also confronted with the fact that her engagement with the traditional international questions is generally scattered and irregular.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the international turn in the history of political thought there has been increased attention to Arendt's international reflections. Nevertheless, as Patricia Owens has observed, we still 'lack a comprehensive reconstruction of the extent to which the context and content of Arendt's thought was shaped by the fact of political multiplicity',<sup>3</sup> in other words, by the international itself.

Against this background, the chapter aims at reconstructing Arendt's conception of the international by adopting a twofold perspective. First, by considering it as an evolving, lived *experience*. For Arendt the international is, in the first instance, the empirical realm of facts and events to be fearlessly confronted in their singularity. It is the 'haphazard' realm of action and experience (not of theories or models) which must be investigated without reverting to comforting historical teleologies, deterministic laws, or causal explanations and in relation to which her political conceptualisations arise and are relentlessly checked. In a closely related sense, the international also constitutes the realm of Arendt's direct, personal experience of totalitarianism, wartime resistance, anti-Semitism and Jewish politics, exile, and statelessness – just to mention some of the events she witnessed and reflected upon.<sup>4</sup> Second, Arendt's experience of the international is investigated here not with the aim of providing either an exhaustive and detailed review of the themes she addressed or a critical scrutiny of the consistency of her conceptualisations, endeavours undertaken by others

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Cosmopolitan Politics', in *International Relations Theory and Philosophy: Interpretive Dialogues*, ed. Cerwyn Moore and Chris Farrands (London: Routledge, 2010). See also the special issue of the journal *International Politics* 45(4) 2008 and Shinkyu Lee, 'Hannah Arendt and International Relations', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 29 November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.665>.

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Lang and John Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations. Reading Across the Lines* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Owens, *Between war and politics: international relations and the thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and 'Walking Corpses'.

<sup>3</sup> Owens, 'The International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method', in *International Origins of Social and Political Theory*, ed. Tarak Barkawi and George Lawson (Political Power and Social Theory, Vol. 32, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 37-62 at 39.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, second edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Owens, 'Hannah Arendt' and 'International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method'.

elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> rather, this chapter seeks to reconstruct the notion of international space that she derives from her intellectual analysis and existential experience.

Drawing from Galli's reflections on the category of *space* as a crucial component of political theories, this chapter investigates the ways in which a certain spatial representation of the international (implicitly and explicitly) emerges from Arendt's experience of reality, namely from her reaction to the concrete articulations of space that were established by power politics, and forms part of her peculiar way of theorizing about politics.<sup>6</sup> In order to organize the diverse sources and inputs that converge in Arendt's conceptualization of the international as a *political* space, my analysis focuses on three intersecting and privileged conceptual axes: namely, *reality*, *history*, and *plurality*. Those three axes seem in fact the most appropriate to highlight the profound and defining impact the experience of, and reflection on, totalitarianism, total war, and the Holocaust, together

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Jeffrey Isaac, 'A New Guarantee on Earth: Hannah Arendt on Human Dignity and the Politics of Human Rights', *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 1 (1996): 61- 73; Lang and Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations*; Owens, *Between War and Politics*; Owens, 'The Ethic of Reality in Hannah Arendt', in *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme*, ed. Duncan Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Owens, 'The Return of Realism? War and Changing Concepts of the Political', in *The Changing Character of War*, ed. Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 484-502; Owens, 'The International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method'; Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the politics of the extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Patrick Hayden, *Political Evil in a Global Age: Hannah Arendt and International Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009); Seyla Benhabib (ed.) with the assistance of Roy T. Tsao and Peter Verovek, *Politics in dark times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Bhikhu Parekh, 'Hannah Arendt and Global Justice', *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 9 (2013): 771–780; Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in An Age of Rights. Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lee, 'Hannah Arendt and International Relations'.

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Galli, *Spazi politici. L'età moderna e l'età globale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010). In another sense, the investigation of the role of space in political theories can focus on 'the use of spatial metaphors to make sense of an abstract concept' (Andre Skupin and Sara Fabrikant, 'Spatialization', in *The Handbook of Geographic Information Science*, ed. John P. Wilson and A. Stewart Fotheringham (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 61). For a broader analysis of Arendt's spatial thinking and 'spatial ontologies', see Bernard Debarbieux, 'Hannah Arendt's spatial thinking: an introduction', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 351-367.

with other events like the explosion of the atomic bomb, had on Arendt's representation of political space(s).

For Arendt totalitarianism was an outrageous and unprecedented phenomenon in many respects among which she stigmatized the 'disdain of the whole texture of reality'.<sup>7</sup> Totalitarianism was for her 'the most radical denial of freedom',<sup>8</sup> the most ferocious obliteration of 'the spatial and temporal requirements of freedom',<sup>9</sup> of politics as something that arises when citizens speak and act together in a public space limited and secured by law. Through the combination of ideology and terror totalitarianism methodically destroyed public and private spaces, attempting to produce a 'new man' by dehumanizing and destroying individual men, and exploiting the senses of loneliness, uprootedness, and superfluosness that had affected them since the Industrial Revolution.<sup>10</sup> With its attempt to establish a global rule, 'a new and universally valid law on earth',<sup>11</sup> it also radically altered the international space by abolishing the distinction between domestic and foreign politics, as well as between civil and foreign war. It annihilated the world as the space in-between individuals and peoples by 'simply and mercilessly press[ing] men, such as they [were], against each other so that the very space of free action—and this is the reality of freedom—disappear[ed]'.<sup>12</sup>

In this light, this chapter argues that Arendt's delineation of a notion of international space is neither the simple reflection of what exists, nor the simple product of an idea(l). Instead, drawing from the tragic experience of totalitarianism she conceived it as a demanding dimension that can be comprehended, safeguarded and kept alive by human action only if its constitutive relationship with reality, history and plurality are preserved. For Arendt, the existence of such a qualified, distinct space, together with that of an equally qualified and distinct domestic space, is in fact the preliminary condition for preserving human dignity.

## **Which Space? Reality, Earth and the Common World**

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New Edition with added Prefaces, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), viii.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 328.

<sup>9</sup> Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 253.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*; Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 333.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 343.