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# Hannah Arendt Encounters Friedrich von Gentz: On Revolution, Preservation, and European Unity

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*This article contextualizes Hannah Arendt's complex and sometimes contradictory views on the Prussian statesman and balance-of-power theorist Friedrich von Gentz. A narration of Arendt's encounter with Gentz, to whom she devoted considerable space in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen and about whom she wrote two additional early essays, can illuminate the elusive contours of her international political thought as they developed from her early career to mature works like *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *On Revolution* (1963). I argue that a better grasp of Arendt's encounter with Gentz will shed light on the following: Arendt's complex relationship with conservatism, the early influences on her commitment to European unity and federation, and the early development of her conviction that the pathologies of the nation-state system require a revolutionary, cosmopolitan answer. Moreover, understanding this early encounter and its lasting traces will clarify why Gentz, who himself was active at the height of the "Age of Revolution," once again became an important interlocutor for Arendt as she explored the possibility of a new age of revolutions in *On Revolution*.*

This article embarks on what might seem an obscure task, which is to narrate Hannah Arendt's regard for Friedrich von Gentz, a figure whose actual work—for instance his best known *Fragments on the Balance of Power* (1806)—she does not seem to have read before writing extensively about him.<sup>1</sup> Yet supplied only with his correspondence and biographical information, the young Arendt developed a telling opinion of the Prussian statesman, featuring him prominently in three pieces: "Friedrich von Gentz: On the 100th Anniversary of His Death" (1932), *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of Jewess* (written in stages between 1928 and 1938), and a review of Paul Sweet's biography *Friedrich von Gentz: Defender of the Old Order* (1942).<sup>2</sup> Arendt did eventually read Gentz—he is cited in *On*

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt's early essays on Gentz draw on his letters with Rahel Varnhagen and Paul R. Sweet's 1941 biography *Friedrich von Gentz, Defender of the Old Order*. An annotated copy of the latter is housed in her library at Bard College, at <http://blogs.bard.edu/arendtcollection/sweet-paul-robinson-friedrich-von-gentz-defender-of-the-old-order>.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, "A Believer in European Unity. Book Review of *Friedrich von Gentz: Defender of the Old Order* by Paul R. Sweet," *Review of Politics* 4/2 (1942), 245–7; Arendt, "Friedrich von Gentz: On the 100th Anniversary of His Death, June 9, 1932," in Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb (Stanford, 2007; first published 1932), 31–7; Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*:

*Revolution* (1963) and *Between Past and Future* (1961)—but by this time her engagement with him is restricted to footnotes. What should we make of this?

Gentz is a minor enough figure in Arendt's *oeuvre* that their encounter has received very little attention, and no sustained analysis.<sup>3</sup> One reason for this is that her position on him is remarkably difficult to decipher, due in part to the dense language of the *Rahel* biography, once described by a reviewer as "a relentlessly abstract book—slow, cluttered, static, curiously oppressive; reading it feels like sitting in a hothouse with no watch."<sup>4</sup> As I discuss below, Arendt's descriptions of Gentz in that work are contradictory and disorienting. Nonetheless, there is an intention behind Arendt's obscurity about Gentz, and it can be illuminated if we properly contextualize her depiction of him within the development of her thought about European unity and international politics.

My object in what follows, then, is to illuminate some elusive contours of Arendt's international thought as they developed through her encounter with Gentz. A better grasp of this encounter will shed light on the following: Arendt's complex relationship with conservatism, the early influences on her commitment to European unity, and the development of her conviction that the pathologies of the nation-state system require a revolutionary, cosmopolitan answer. Moreover, understanding this encounter and its lasting traces will clarify why Gentz, who himself was active at the height of the "Age of Revolution," once again became an important interlocutor for Arendt as she explored the possibility of a new age of revolutions in *On Revolution*. *On Revolution* both mimics and departs from Gentz's 1800 work *The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution Compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution* (translated in 1801 by John Adams). Arendt shares Gentz's suspicion of the French, and agrees that the question of political unity beyond the nation is entangled in the revolutionary tradition, but she also rejects his attempt downplay and tame the revolutionary nature of the American founding. Thus *On Revolution* also contains traces of Arendt's embrace of Rahel Varnhagen, especially in her commitment to the revolutionary–cosmopolitan imagination. In the end, Arendt could be a student of conservatives like Gentz and revolutionaries at the same time because she was *sui generis*. She simply did not accept a dichotomy between *realpolitik* and emancipatory politics.

A renewed analysis of *On Revolution* in the context of Arendt's encounter with Gentz sheds light on the fact that this work should be read not only as a work on domestic revolutions, but also as a geopolitical treatise. While the earlier *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) has often been regarded as Arendt's main contribution to international political theory, it is in *On Revolution* that she definitively prescribes an alternative to the nation-state system, and it is in *On Revolution* that she muses about the decline of interstate war in an age of nuclear deterrence, a decline she

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*The Life of a Jewess. First Complete Edition*, ed. Liliane Weissberg, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore and London, 1997; first published 1959).

<sup>3</sup>See Marlis Gerhardt, "Einleitung: Rahel Levin, Friederike Robert, Madame Varnhagen," in Gerhardt, ed., *Rahel Varnhagen: Jeder Wunsch und Frivolität Genannt: Briefe und Tagebücher* (Darmstadt, 1983), 7–30, at 22–5; Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, 2000), 31; Etienne Tassin and Jerome Melancon, "... Sed Victa Catoni: The Defeated Cause of Revolutions," *Social Research* 74/4 (2007), 1109–26.

<sup>4</sup>Sybil Bedford, "Emancipation and Destiny," *The Reconstructionist*, 12 Dec. 1958, 22–6, at 23.

hopes will make room for the instantiation of a “new law on earth” in the form of non-sovereign, federated council democracies.<sup>5</sup>

To unravel this story, I take an approach, suggested by Richard Bernstein and Bryan Garsten, of following Arendt as she develops one of her “thought-trains.”<sup>6</sup> Because Arendt preferred a fragmentary approach to thinking, her stances can be elusive.<sup>7</sup> Taking this into account, I track Arendt as she thinks with and against Gentz, and as she refracts him through the lens of his friendship with Rahel Varnhagen. It is important to note that in untangling this thought-train, I take a naive approach to Arendt’s assessment of Gentz (and of Rahel Varnhagen, for that matter). By this I mean that I do not spend much time quibbling with Arendt’s (mis-/non-)reading of Gentz, since my aim is to understand how the encounter left indelible marks on her mature international thought. Nevertheless, I try to point out her misinterpretations where they are glaring, and I bring in Gentz’s own words where they help flesh out his political positions and character.<sup>8</sup>

Arendt’s later vision of non-sovereign international order incorporates key lessons she learned not only from Gentz and Rahel Varnhagen, but also from other figures in the German geopolitical tradition, including Carl Clausewitz (whose treatise *On War* she was reading in 1940 as she fled Europe), Carl Schmitt, and, later in exile, her friend Hans Morgenthau. Recent studies have turned to the international dimensions of Arendt’s thought, and in this context an investigation of her direct engagements with key geopolitical thinkers would be fruitful.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Arendt’s distinctive anti-sovereign approach to international politics deserves attention now more than ever because her object was to theorize democracy, human rights, and political unity beyond the bounds of the nation-state, a theme of perennial debate in contemporary politics.<sup>10</sup> As I will show,

<sup>5</sup>Arendt first calls for a “new law on earth” in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, 1976; first published 1951), ix.

<sup>6</sup>Bryan Garsten, “The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment,” *Social Research* 74/4 (2007), 1071–1108, at 1074; Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, 1996), 123.

<sup>7</sup>See Seyla Benhabib, “The Elusiveness of the Particular: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno,” in Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, 2018), 34–60.

<sup>8</sup>For a faithful reading of Gentz I rely on Jonathan Green’s nuanced reassessment of his thought in Jonathan Green, “*Fiat Justitia, Pereat Mundus*: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Gentz, and the Possibility of Prudential Enlightenment,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/1 (2017), 35–65.

<sup>9</sup>Of these encounters, the most attention has been paid to Arendt’s critical engagement with Schmitt, including Anna Jurkevics, “Hannah Arendt Reads Carl Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth*: A Dialogue on Law and Geopolitics from the Margins,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 16/3 (2017), 345–66; Hans Sluga, “The Pluralism of the Political: From Carl Schmitt to Hannah Arendt,” *Telos* 142 (2008), 91–109; and Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, 2009). On Arendt and Morgenthau see Douglas Klusmeyer, “Hannah Arendt’s Critical Realism: Power, Justice, and Responsibility,” in John Williams and Anthony F. Lang, eds., *Hannah Arendt and International Relations* (New York, 2005), 113–78; Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge, 2018), 147–91; Arendt’s geopolitical thought is also the topic of Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>E.g. Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford, 2006); James Bohman, *Democracy across Borders: From Demos to Demoi* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

Gentz was neither able to see beyond the nation-state system, nor committed to democracy. This apparent mismatch makes Arendt's ambiguous embrace of the man, and her willingness to draw lessons from him, all the more interesting.

### Encounters: Rahel Varnhagen, Friedrich von Gentz, Hannah Arendt

Rahel Varnhagen née Levin (1771–1833) hosted a prominent Enlightenment salon in the early nineteenth century in Prussia. Her gatherings in Berlin's Jägerstraße were visited by figures such as Schlegel, Schelling, the Humboldts, Schleiermacher, Tieck, and Brentano, and many other luminaries of the age. In 1801, Friedrich von Gentz (1764–1832) began frequenting the salon and made quick friends with Rahel. Gentz was a Prussian diplomatic aide and man of the world. He served as Metternich's secretary at the Congress of Vienna (1815), where he staunchly defended the old order against the onslaught of Napoleonic modernity. Gentz's aims often shifted to fit context, but he served the peace of Europe and so held one target constant: Napoleon. Many have noted the slipperiness of his character, but his pursuit of everything that opposed Napoleon was unquestionable, as British prime minister George Canning sums up nicely here: "I know he is very much distrusted by many people—and though I admit him to be ... somewhat profligate and a great spendthrift ... he is and has always been in good political principles ... and [he] has this certain recommendation and guarantee for his sincerity[:] that *he would infallibly be shot, if Bonaparte should catch him.*"<sup>11</sup> Though Gentz was Prussian, he was a man for hire, which was not unusual for the age. At various points he worked for Austria, Britain, and Russia, and spent time in England. Gentz was also an intellectual; he was a student of Kant, a translator of Burke, and an early theorist of the balance of power (*politisches Gleichgewicht*), which he understood as the lynchpin of European stability. His particular brand of conservatism eschewed nationalist awakenings as dangerous, pitting him against Prussian contemporaries such as his protégé Adam Müller.

Gentz was among Rahel Varnhagen's intimates and, as Arendt was quick to see when she acquired Rahel's correspondence, their letters are riveting. The friendship between the two seems to have been a case of "opposites attract." Where Rahel, a woman and a Jew, was barred access to worldly affairs, Gentz gained entrance. Rahel was a pariah despite her position in the salon; Gentz, on the other hand, moved through ranks and circles easily, perhaps too easily, so that he "was never able to rid himself of the reproach that he could be bought."<sup>12</sup> Their natures were also different. According to Arendt, Rahel was intellectually spontaneous, "anarchic," and original, while Gentz was receptive, sensual, vain, a collector of experiences.<sup>13</sup> Their relationship was intimate but never consummated, though not for lack of effort on Gentz's part.<sup>14</sup> It was an intimacy apparently unperturbed

<sup>11</sup>George Canning to Earl Bathurst (1809), cited by Travis Eakin, "Between the Old and the New: Friedrich Gentz, 1764–1832" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Missouri–Columbia, 2019), 252, emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup>Arendt, "Friedrich von Gentz," 32.

<sup>13</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 149.

<sup>14</sup>In their correspondence, Gentz repeatedly enjoins Rahel to consummate their union. See *ibid.*, 150.

by Gentz's anti-Semitism, and as Arendt describes it, Rahel's attitude towards him seems to have been forgiving.

Hannah Arendt (1906–75) first encountered the two friends in the 1920s when a childhood friend gave her a copy of Rahel's *Andenken* (1834), a collection of correspondences put together by her husband after her death.<sup>15</sup> The *Andenken* drew Arendt to the figure of Rahel, to whom she related, and whom she later called "my closest friend, though she has been dead for some one hundred years."<sup>16</sup> In 1928, the young Arendt began research on German Romanticism intended for a *Habilitationsschrift* (second dissertation). The work was cut short by the rise of Nazism, completed in exile in 1937–8, and finally published in 1959 as *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*.<sup>17</sup> Gentz figures prominently in the biography, as Arendt vividly captures his friendship with Rahel and displays a canny interest in the riddle of their affection.

Arendt's praise of Gentz—especially in her laudatory 1942 essay—strikes oddly given his anti-Semitism, his defense of autocracy, and his brazen social climbing, a quality which usually repulsed Arendt.<sup>18</sup> Why does she acknowledge these aspects of the man and yet not reject him? One possible explanation is that Arendt's affection for Gentz was derivative of Rahel's. Those who have read the *Rahel* biography will understand the emotional identification that underscores Arendt's study of her predecessor. However, her interest in Gentz also goes beyond her trust in Rahel.

Who was Gentz for Hannah Arendt? Arendt's stance is remarkably difficult to decipher. Her depiction of him in the *Rahel* biography is contradictory and dizzying. Over the course of a long passage introducing the man, she shifts back and forth wildly: "Gentz wanted to conserve everything that existed, but he was no conservative ... He defended reaction as a man of the Enlightenment ... But Gentz was by no means a liberal ... He was the last Romantic ... But Gentz was also no Romantic."<sup>19</sup> The reader has trouble finding her bearings, but this is Arendt's intent: she is performing the disorienting effect of Gentz's refusal to fix himself into the ideological camps of his age. For example, while he rejected the nationalist Romanticism of figures like Müller, Arendt sees his intense desire for experience (*Erlebnis*) as essentially Romantic.<sup>20</sup> Driven by his need for experience, Gentz sought to "know everything" about the world of affairs: "Gentz, like Schlegel and Humboldt, was in search of reality. He surrendered himself to pleasure, to the beautiful world, naïvely ... But ... he had succeeded in doing what remained impossible for either Friedrich Schlegel or, at bottom, Humboldt: intervening actively in the world of reality, and adjusting constantly to circumstances."<sup>21</sup> Thus Gentz's thirst

<sup>15</sup>Rahel Varnhagen, *Rahel: Ein Buch des Andenkens für ihre Freunde*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1834).

<sup>16</sup>Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven and London, 1982), 56.

<sup>17</sup>Liliane Weissberg, "Introduction: Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Writing of (Auto) Biography," in Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 3–70 at 5.

<sup>18</sup>For a scathing indictment of social climbing see an unpublished, untitled document written by Arendt, likely as a speech, in 1941–2, later titled "German Emigres," Library of Congress, Hannah Arendt papers, Speeches and Writings File, at <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/mharendtFolderP05.html>.

<sup>19</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 147.

<sup>20</sup>On experience (*Erlebnis*) as Romantic see Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1913; first published 1905).

<sup>21</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 146.

for experience drove him towards power, which for him had the deepest sense of reality. Arendt writes, “In the world he recognized only real power.”<sup>22</sup> In her analysis, Gentz’s desire for an insider’s view of “the world of reality” pulled him into the waves of political affairs, where, in his quest to “know everything,” he succumbed to a current that washed over his early principles and made him impossible to pin down.

Here it is important to note that Arendt does not have Gentz quite right. Jonathan Green has recently shown that Gentz’s transformation from early supporter of the French Revolution to archconservative is more subtle than is often acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Gentz did not abandon his principles, but developed a complex approach to “prudential Enlightenment” over the course of his career, coming to believe that the realities of statecraft must be brought together with moral principles in order to make the latter practicable. Gentz’s problem with the French Revolution was not its principles, “but that [the revolutionary founders] thought these rights sufficed—that they hoped to build a state with these mere rights when, in fact, it calls for different materials as well,” especially the “demands of prudence.”<sup>24</sup> But Arendt is no such subtle reader of Gentz, indeed may not have read him at all at the point when she writes this, and so this fact escapes her. What is interesting for my purposes is that Arendt’s obscure and contradictory depiction of Gentz is intentional. She *means* to forge Gentz into an unfixed point; it is, for her, the essence of his character.

Interestingly, in the same passage, after she performs the chaos of a man driven by desire for experience rather than inner principle, Arendt nevertheless comes to a definitive conclusion, one which reveals what she admired about Gentz. He may have been a “moving target,”<sup>25</sup> but Gentz did have a point of orientation within the chaos of real power: his commitment to the “magnificent old world,” i.e. Europe.<sup>26</sup> She concludes, “He was interested as little in one principle as the other; at most he was concerned with the ‘great old world’ whose decline he had been forced to watch, and could not endure.”<sup>27</sup> This magnificent old world is none other than the precariously balanced family of European states, which Gentz saw threatened by Napoleon. In this, his one commitment, Arendt finds in Gentz something more than a man seduced by worldly affairs; she finds a defender of European unity.

### **Gentz the conservative: defender of Europe, preserver of the magnificent old world**

Already in the early 1930s, before the events of 1933 that forced Arendt’s escape into exile, Arendt is pleased by Gentz’s commitment to European unity. In her 1932 commemorative essay, which precedes the completion of the *Rahel* biography,

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Green, “*Fiat Justitia, Pereat Mundus.*”

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 41, citing Friedrich von Gentz, *Betrachtungen über die französische Revolution nach dem Englischen des Herrn Burke*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1793), 89–90, 95.

<sup>25</sup>Eakin, “Between the Old and the New,” 254.

<sup>26</sup>Arendt, “Friedrich von Gentz,” 33.

<sup>27</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 147. The translation of *große alte Welt* differs across translations.



she marks Gentz out for his devotion to Europe: “He ... devoted his efforts entirely to the ‘magnificent old world’ whose decline he was witnessing. This ‘magnificent old world’ was Europe.”<sup>28</sup> In 1932, Arendt understands herself to be witnessing a new and terrifying episode of European decline.<sup>29</sup> In the preface to the *Rahel* biography, which she was writing at the time, she explains, “The present biography was written with an awareness of the doom of German Judaism.”<sup>30</sup> A decade later, Europe is at war. By that time, she responds to the 1942 publication of a biography of Gentz by remarking that it “is of a strange and exciting timeliness, since, again, the question of European unity presents one of the most important political tasks.”<sup>31</sup>

Arendt’s language of timeliness suggests that she believed that Gentz’s lessons could be of use in her own time. Before I draw out these lessons, however, it is important to distinguish Gentz’s and Arendt’s conceptions of Europe. Not only did they live in different times, but they sympathized with different ideals. Where Gentz labored to preserve European stability and unity through balance among already powerful players, Arendt is committed to European ideals of revolutionary cosmopolitanism and antifascist resistance. Her heroes are not heads of state but individuals like Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg, and René Char (I will have more to say on this below).

Differences aside, they share a number of commitments. One of the positions that sparks Arendt’s attention is Gentz’s abhorrence of national awakenings. When Napoleon swept through German lands in 1806, rousing widespread “national feeling,” Gentz was wary of proposals for national German unification.<sup>32</sup> This stance intensified after he played a key role in restoring the pre-Napoleonic order at the 1815 Congress of Vienna. At the height of his power, Gentz helped craft policies such as the reactionary Carlsbad Decrees (1819), which censored nationalist revolutionary groups, such as the student-led *Burschenschaften*, of which Gentz wrote, “Thus it is revolutionary in the most extreme and dangerous sense of this term. For think what one may, theoretically or historically, of the present organization of the German states, the unification toward which these true and consummate Jacobins have been striving for six years cannot be achieved without the most violent revolutions, without the overthrow of Europe.”<sup>33</sup> Gentz’s position made him highly unpopular among his intellectual contemporaries, and permanently marked him as a conservative henchman to Metternich, with whom he wrote the decrees. While Arendt has nothing nice to say about Restoration-era conservatism, she nevertheless admires Gentz’s refusal of national political projects: “At

<sup>28</sup>Arendt, “Friedrich von Gentz,” 33.

<sup>29</sup>Arendt came to the belief that the Nazis would seize power before the *Machtergreifung* (1933). By 1932, she was already of the opinion that the “way to power had really been opened in 1929, when he [Hitler] received support from the financier Alfred Hugenberg.” Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 98.

<sup>30</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 82.

<sup>31</sup>Arendt, “A Believer in European Unity,” 247.

<sup>32</sup>Eakin, “Between the Old and the New,” 137–52. Gentz’s position was ambiguous at first. He shared with the nationalists a sense of pride about Prussian culture, but did not support political unification.

<sup>33</sup>Friedrich von Gentz, *Staatsschriften und Briefe: Auswahl in zwei Bänden*, vol. 2 (Mannheim, 1838–9), 53. Cited by Eakin, “Between the Old and the New,” 214–15. See also Jonathan Green, “Edmund Burke’s German Readers at the End of Enlightenment” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2018), 162.

a time of growing nationalism, the cause which Gentz served was highly unpopular. All his life he was advancing the idea of Europe—the Europe he had still known in the 18th century and which was seriously threatened by the Napoleonic wars and the ruthless nationalism they had created.”<sup>34</sup> Gentz’s concern was ever with the precarious balance of power among European states, a balance that not merely pitted power against power, but was a precondition of peace and friendly relations, later referred to by Arendt as the “comity of nations.” Arendt agrees with Gentz’s assessment. She writes that the “growing nationalism of the 19th century” did nothing less than “destroy the unity of Europe.”<sup>35</sup>

Arendt displays a fascination with the fact that Gentz, who had Romantic sensibilities and ran in Romantic circles, never embraced nationalism. Even in the circles of power at the Congress of Vienna where national interests were at play, Gentz remained nationally disinterested: “While Metternich stood for Austrian interests, Talleyrand for French, Castlereagh and Canning for English ones, the Prussian Gentz labored to defend the interest of Europe.”<sup>36</sup> Later in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt describes these realpolitik nationalists—she almost always chooses a Frenchman as their representative (Talleyrand or the later Clemenceau) because she associates France with the national principle—as fundamentally mistaken about their own objectives. If their aim was to bolster the power of their respective nation-states, they failed to see how nationalism undermined the stability of Europe as a whole. Not only that, but they failed to see how the nation would eventually cannibalize the achievements of the modern liberal state, e.g. rule of law, enforceable rights and legal equality, and constitutionalism.<sup>37</sup> In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt explains, “the state inherited as its supreme function the protection of all inhabitants in its territory no matter what their nationality, and was supposed to act as a supreme legal institution. The tragedy of the nation-state was that the people’s rising national consciousness interfered with these functions.”<sup>38</sup> While it is too much to say that Gentz alone brought Arendt to this position, there is nevertheless an identifiable Gentzian language—the language of “national consciousness” and suspicion of national emancipations—that remains in Arendt’s mature works as a reminder of her early encounter with his thought.

In the end, Arendt’s critique of nationalism is more complex than Gentz’s. In *Origins*, Arendt discusses nationalism in the context of the “nation-state system,” whose crises, contradictions, and fragilities would become exposed in the disasters of the twentieth century. She distinguishes the “national principle” from race imperialism and totalitarianism and argues that the latter two emerged from the failures of the nation-state.<sup>39</sup> Arendt agrees with Gentz’s assessment of nationalism

<sup>34</sup>Arendt, “A Believer in European Unity,” 246.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 247.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>While Arendt is critical of both nationalism and sovereignty, she also praises the legal structures of the modern state. For a detailed account of Arendt on the state see Christian Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism: Law, Politics and the Order of Freedom* (Oxford, 2015).

<sup>38</sup>Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 230

<sup>39</sup>Arendt features the notion of “the national principle” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Later she refers to it as the “nation-state principle,” in Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 2006; first published 1963), 157.



as *destructive* in the early nineteenth century, but as she extends this analysis through time, she sees how this same force would later become *impotent* in the face of its own failures, opening the door for far more pernicious political movements in the twentieth century.

The complexity of her theory notwithstanding, Arendt agrees with Gentz that a Europe of nation-states cannot be a stable, cooperative Europe, and therefore unity is the foremost geopolitical task for the continent. In *Origins*, Arendt mirrors Gentz's commitment to diplomatic unity in her repeated references to "comity" among European nations.<sup>40</sup> "Comity of nations" is a legal term that refers to the friendly diplomatic preconditions of peaceful international coordination, and Arendt's use of the term signals her agreement with Gentz's conclusion that it is a *sine qua non* of peace. As I explore below, she ultimately deems comity of nations within a Westphalian system to be too fragile to address the crises of her age, a conclusion which leads her to explore federations. Interestingly, Gentz was also drawn to federations. When Arendt reviews his biography in 1942, she is thus delighted to learn that "the forces Gentz thought fit to counterbalance [ruthless nationalism] were, at first, the English policy of 'balance of power' and, later, the Austrian federate monarchy which was based on a principle opposed to the national one and whose interests, for several reasons coincided with the general interest of Europe."<sup>41</sup> Thus political unity, and unity of Europe in particular, whether through comity or federation or both, is perhaps the single most important thread in Arendt's Gentzian thought-train.

Due to her early and abiding concern with the issue of European cooperation, Arendt does not, therefore, cast off Gentz's preoccupation with stability as mere conservatism. And this even though Gentz was an ardent supporter of Metternich's policy of "calm at any price."<sup>42</sup> Arendt herself did not support calm at any price—she sympathized with revolutionaries and resistance fighters, and she believed that Europe's problems required a revolutionary answer—yet she finds something redeeming in Gentz's position. The redeeming element is a political attitude that can be confused with conservatism, but is not the same for Arendt: a commitment to world preservation. A commitment to world preservation is, in turn, borne of love of the world (*amor mundi*). In Arendt's eyes, Gentz did not support the status quo *for the sake of* existing power, but to hold back the destruction of Europe. Arendt steadfastly insists that this attitude should not be confused with genuine conservatism: "he did not advocate [conservatism] for its own sake, but used it only as a means of maintaining a 'balance.'"<sup>43</sup>

Gentz provides for Arendt an example of how power politics and balance-of-power theory can be harnessed for the sake of the world. The distinction between power for power's sake and power for the sake of the world is important for Arendt. It resurfaces in her critique of imperialism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she traces imperialism's inner principle of "expansion for

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 15, 147, 161, 184, 267, 278, 391, 414.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, "A Believer in European Unity," 246. Arendt's gloss on Gentz here is somewhat superficial. Gentz did not change his mind about balance of power, but came to believe that federation and balance of power can and should work in tandem. On this point I am indebted to Christopher Meckstroth.

<sup>42</sup> Arendt, "Friedrich von Gentz," 32.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

expansion's sake" to pathological forms of Hobbesian politics in which power is glorified.<sup>44</sup> In that work, Arendt praises the principled power politics advocated by twentieth-century defenders of the state (e.g. Clemenceau) while exposing the scandal of "completely unprincipled power politics" employed by racist-imperialists and totalitarians.<sup>45</sup> Her embrace of Gentz's instinct for world preservation can help us make sense of why Arendt, who was a cosmopolitan by nature and who supported principle-driven politics, never rejects theories of the balance of power and *realpolitik* out of hand. For example, she briefly supported Nelson Rockefeller's Republican candidacy in the 1960 presidential election because of his support of federation in Latin America, which he defended on *realpolitik* grounds.<sup>46</sup> It also explains her later sympathy for theorists of power like Hans Morgenthau, whom she held in high intellectual esteem. Arendt could be sympathetic to theories of *realpolitik* because she never drew an opposition between political principles (e.g. equality, human rights, freedom) and power. She, like Gentz, did not think within the bounds of a strict Kantian opposition between Enlightenment principles and the realities of power.<sup>47</sup>

While Arendt agrees with Gentz about the dangers of the national principle and the importance of European unity, and respects his world-preserving attitude, she nevertheless departs from his worldview, which she deems naive. There was never any hope for the magnificent old world. It was an unjust order that had to crumble, and its replacement—the nation-state system—was equally flawed. Gentz had enough foresight to know that the magnificent old world was a lost cause, but he could not see beyond it. In the 1932 essay, Arendt describes him as a man both desperate to be part of the world, to "know everything," and yet paralyzed as he watched his world disappear. He could not fight for a new order, an alternative to the new "national feeling," and so had necessarily to cling to the old order. But in this, he clung to a failing project and was thrust back on his judgment as a spectator of looming disaster. Without a new project to fight for, with only regret and no vision, Gentz became "indifferent."<sup>48</sup> Thus Arendt ends the 1932 essay by invoking Gentz's motto, that favorite phrase which she later appropriates for different purposes: *victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Cato* (The victorious cause pleases the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato).<sup>49</sup>

For Arendt, Gentz's judgment was inadequate because, unlike his friend Rahel Varnhagen, he was not an original thinker, and his vantage point from within

<sup>44</sup>Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 123–57.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>46</sup>Young-Bruhl, *Hannah Arendt*, 388.

<sup>47</sup>On this opposition see Green, "Fiat Justitia, Pereat Mundus." Arendt later exhibits knowledge of Gentz's debate with Kant regarding morality and politics. In "The Concept of History," which was first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1957, she cites Gentz's critique of Kant (Friedrich von Gentz, "Nachtrag zu dem Raisonement des Herrn Prof. Kant über das Verhältnis zwischen Theorie und Praxis," *Berliner Monatsschrift*, Dec. 1793), and refers to Gentz as "the first to see Kant as a theorist of the French Revolution." Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, 1993; first published 1961), 82 n. 34.

<sup>48</sup>Arendt, "Friedrich von Gentz," 36.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 37. Arendt learned the phrase from Gentz's correspondence with Rahel. The phrase was to become an epigraph for the last, unfinished section of *The Life of the Mind* (1978), "Judgment," which was found in Arendt's typewriter at the time of her death in 1975.

worldly affairs positioned him badly to critique existing power. He could not imagine how things *might otherwise be*. Therefore, however instructive Arendt finds Gentz, he is not able to offer alternatives to the nation-state system, alternatives she eventually hashes out in *On Revolution*. However, already at the time of her early encounter with Gentz, there is another figure who helps Arendt begin to think through the alternative. Rahel Varnhagen, the first exemplary revolutionary in Arendt's *oeuvre*, thoroughly understood Gentz, even loved him, but could not agree with him about the "magnificent old world," which to her was nothing other than a "rotten old order."<sup>50</sup>

### The allure of reality

To understand Rahel Varnhagen's early influence on Arendt, we first have to pinpoint the difference between Rahel and Gentz. How did Rahel come to insights from her excluded position that Gentz could not muster from his vast political experience? The key lies in their differing relationships with "the world of reality."

To begin with, it will help to review Arendt's philosophy of reality, which she begins formulating in the *Rahel* biography, and which comes to fruition in *The Human Condition* (1958). In the latter work, Arendt writes, "for us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality ... The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves."<sup>51</sup> Reality, then, arises between and among humans. It depends on a plurality of individuals, who can confirm the reality of the world by confirming that they are seeing and hearing the same things from different perspectives.

Politically speaking, reality depends on a public realm in which things can appear, so that we can see and hear the same things together.<sup>52</sup> The worldly interests which gather us together in the public realm are things which quite literally lie between us, *inter-est*. Because the public realm is in between us, Arendt likens it to a table which "relates and separates men at the same time ... gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak."<sup>53</sup> The open negotiation of our interests in the public realm, founded on our access to a common reality, is a condition of political freedom for Arendt. Individuals barred from the shared reality of the public realm are subject to "worldlessness."

Rahel's political exclusion as a woman and a Jew meant that she suffered worldlessness and that she therefore had a difficult relationship with reality. Gentz, on the other hand, sought out reality with passion and success. *Nevertheless*, Arendt argues that Gentz's service of reality was pathological. He did not merely seek reality, he drowned in it. To describe the pathology, Arendt compares Gentz to the spirit of Friedrich Schlegel's controversial and disliked novel *Lucinde*, a work that embodies the Romantic quest for *Erlebnis* (experience): "Gentz gave himself to the world

<sup>50</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 231. Later exemplary revolutionaries in Arendt's *oeuvre* include Rosa Luxemburg, World War II resistance fighters (e.g. René Char), the Hungarian revolutionaries of 1956, and the American founders.

<sup>51</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998; first published 1958), 50.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

immediately and directly, and it consumed him ... This total passivity is why he could be called ‘the spirit of *Lucinde* incarnate.’”<sup>54</sup> A firm grip on reality is, for Arendt, a *sine qua non* of both good judgment and political freedom, but this requires that we have our grip on reality and not the other way around.

The problem was that Gentz “threw in his lot with reality” without maintaining a critical distance from the affairs he wanted to “know everything” about, and this was a perilous move.<sup>55</sup> Without proper distance, reality consumes the individual, destroying the worldly in-between necessary for good judgment. To judge the world well, we have to step back and see it, in all its errors and perplexities. This viewpoint was, for much of his life, unavailable to Gentz. In the end, he did pull back far enough to see the totality of the magnificent old world as it descended, but by then he was “indifferent.” He could not answer it.

### Resisting reality: Rahel Varnhagen and the revolutionary impulse

Distance from the world was not a problem for Rahel Varnhagen. She was in no danger of being consumed by the reality available to people in the know. Arendt writes, “to yield without reserve to reality did not lie within her power; the world would not accept her.”<sup>56</sup> It is true that she had friendships with many luminaries of her time, but these friendships should not be confused with worldly acceptance. While the German salons offered some respite from the rigid social hierarchies of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Prussia, they were a very fragile precursor to what Jürgen Habermas has described as “the public sphere.”<sup>57</sup> The salons were a site of escape from societal roles, but did not erase them.<sup>58</sup> Outside the walls of Rahel’s *Dachstube* (attic apartment) in the Jägerstraße, she faced bitter exclusion. Moreover, when in 1806 the wave of post-Napoleonic “ruthless nationalism” roused anti-Semitic sentiments in all ranks of society, Rahel was forced to disband her salon. Rahel, who, Arendt tells us, had neither the beauty nor the wealth to aid assimilation in dark times, remained a pariah, both socially and politically. She was thrust back on her Jewishness, which she bore as a mark of shame. She called it her “disgrace.”<sup>59</sup>

Rahel openly acknowledged the tragedy of her situation. However, in Arendt’s eyes, Rahel’s “disgrace” also bred capacities within her. Because she was excluded from the world and suffered its injustices, she could see its errors and develop a feeling of resistance. Moreover, since she could not immerse herself in the world, she labored intellectually to create a reality of her own. Rahel’s unique character traits—her intellectual spontaneity, her creativity, her eccentricity—were in part, according to Arendt, a response to her pariahdom. Gentz recognized her productivity in this titillating passage from their correspondence:

<sup>54</sup>Arendt, “Friedrich von Gentz,” 35.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>56</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 148.

<sup>57</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

<sup>58</sup>Gerhardt, “Einleitung,” 15.

<sup>59</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 254.

Do you know, my love, why our relationship is so grand and so perfect? ... You are an *infinitely productive*, I am an *infinitely receptive* being; you are a great *man*; I am the first of all the women who have ever lived. I know this: that had I been physically a woman, I should have brought the globe to my feet.<sup>60</sup>

Given that the two were never lovers, the statement is striking. Interestingly, Gentz understood himself to lack the productive (masculine) quality required to be a man of action, to change the world. He was immersed in the world, but he could not remake it. Rahel, on the other hand, had a world-making quality. For Arendt, Rahel's productive nature gave her capacity to resist reality. Her *will* to resist reality, which is something more, was borne of the feeling of injustice which pariahdom bestowed on her. This combined capacity and will to resist the injustices of the world comprise the beginnings of what we might call a *revolutionary impulse*.

Therefore, what Rahel had, which Gentz lacked, was a revolutionary impulse, the result of a productive nature in discord with the world:

The difference between Rahel and Gentz would always be that she could not reconcile herself to the existing orders ... she could not be "in the know"; all she could possess of the world was the sun that shone equally upon all, the beautiful things which existed for all; so that when she became involved in society she had to be revolutionary, or as Gentz called it, "anarchic."<sup>61</sup>

Importantly, Rahel's exclusion from the world drew her attention to those things universally accorded to all humans regardless of political status: a sun that equally shines on all, things that are beautiful to all. Arendt depicts Rahel as irresistibly drawn to the notion of universality. Therefore, as Rahel despaired over her exclusion from the world, she became acquainted with the universal aspirations of equality that may have remained hidden to her had she been able to immerse herself in the virtues and pleasantries of Gentz's magnificent old world.

According to Arendt, Rahel's stance on pariahdom changed at the end of her life. She stopped yearning for assimilation and discovered the advantages of perspective accorded to the "conscious pariah," the pariah who embraces Jewishness and refuses the indignities of assimilation.<sup>62</sup> Arendt, for whom this embrace of pariahdom is an apotheosis, thus begins the biography with these words from Rahel's deathbed: "The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wish to have missed."<sup>63</sup> Rahel's realization, which came quite late,

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 150, original emphasis. This passage is also discussed in Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 31; and Gerhardt, "Einleitung," 22–5.

<sup>61</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 149.

<sup>62</sup>Other conscious pariahs identified by Arendt include Franz Kafka and Heinrich Heine. She borrowed the phrase from the French journalist Bernard Lazare. Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York, 2007; first published 1944), 275–97.

<sup>63</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 85. Note that Arendt edits down Rahel's deathbed confession, which also expresses Rahel's gratitude for having found Christ.

was that in order to be *for humanity* she must consciously admit the injustice of her exclusion from it, and to do this she had to affirm what had been her “disgrace”: the inescapable fact of her Jewishness. Arendt writes,

Rahel, for all her singularity, for all her isolation, put up a resistance ... she resisted accepting a society and a view of the world whose foundations would inevitably always remain hostile to her—not to her personally, but to her as a Jew. For that society had never of its own accord granted her—as a Jew—the most elementary, most important and minimum concession: equal human rights.<sup>64</sup>

This principle of equal human rights that Rahel discovered, and that Arendt discovered through her, gave her resistance to reality a revolutionary, cosmopolitan aim. In the later years of her life, Rahel settled into her critical perspective. She became a Saint-Simonist. She befriended Heinrich Heine. Her letters became politically engaged. Arendt notes one in which she writes, “One thing is certain: Europe no longer desires to conquer pieces of ground, but something more serious: pieces of *equality*.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, Rahel decided that the world had to change to realize the promises of the Enlightenment.

Writing through Rahel, Arendt is developing her own views on the Jewish Question. In this context, the last two chapters of the biography, which were written in exile years after the rest of the manuscript, are the most fascinating.<sup>66</sup> In them, Arendt imposes a heavy interpretive framework on Rahel; her voice intertwines with Rahel’s and the two become indistinguishable at points. In particular, Arendt imputes to Rahel the following judgment, which resurfaces in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: that the fate of Europe was inextricably linked to its pariah people, the Jews. Arendt writes, “the fate of the Jews was not so accidental and out of the way ... on the contrary it precisely limned the state of society, outlined the ugly reality of the gaps in the social structure.”<sup>67</sup> The inability of states to incorporate Jews *as Jews* revealed a fundamental flaw, namely “gaps” of membership, in the structure of the nation-state system. Arendt tells us that Rahel saw this, and realized that the system suffered an illness. She writes that Rahel “realized that the ‘diseased matter’ which had to ‘get out of us’ was not contained in the Jews alone; that the pox only broke out on the Jews, infecting them by contagion.”<sup>68</sup> Thus Rahel was not only a revolutionary because she embraced the idea of equal human rights, but because she realized that the change required to realize equality would have to be systemic; that is, it would require a revolution in the nation-state regime. This idea, which becomes an abiding theme of Arendt’s international thought, was surely not as much Rahel’s as it was Arendt’s.

In summary, Rahel, over the course of coming to terms with her “infamous birth,” found that the only dignified stance towards the world would have to be

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 209.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>66</sup>The main part of the manuscript was finished in 1933; the last two chapters were completed in 1937–8.

<sup>67</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 257.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 258.



a revolutionary one.<sup>69</sup> Gentz was right. Rahel *was* anarchic. Arendt therefore ends the biography with a description of Rahel passing the torch to Heinrich Heine at the end of her life. She tells us that among all her friends and lovers, only the equally anarchic Heine was able to “save the image of her soul.”<sup>70</sup> Heine could carry Rahel’s revolutionary mantle into the future because he promised “to be enthusiastic for the cause of the Jews and their attainment of equality before the law. In bad times, which are inevitable, the Germanic rabble will hear my voice ring resoundingly in German beer halls and palaces.”<sup>71</sup>

### 1940–62: in search of “a new law on earth”

So far we know that by the time she finishes drafting the *Rahel* biography in 1938, Arendt believes that the nation-state system is fundamentally flawed and that a proper appraisal of it requires a critical and revolutionary stance, embodied in Rahel’s emancipatory impulse. Arendt’s own emancipatory impulse takes on Rahel’s cosmopolitan principle: equal human rights. We also know from her interest in Gentz that she is developing the idea that a revolutionary approach to equal human rights must be deployed for the sake of the world, and for the preservation of Europe as a whole, which will require a balance of power through political unity. She has also taken on Gentz’s position that national emancipation will obstruct this goal because it undermines unity.

After the 1942 essay, Arendt goes silent on Gentz for many years. He reappears in the footnotes of *Between Past and Future* (1961) and *On Revolution* (1963). By this time, Arendt has finally read his actual works, including *The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution, Compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution* (1800, translated into English in 1801 by John Quincy Adams).<sup>72</sup> *On Revolution* mimics the premise of Gentz’s piece, and so it is sensible that Arendt returns to him for guidance as she writes it. Judith Shklar takes note of the similarity between the two works in a particularly savage review from 1983, where she writes, “the only really interesting thing about this embarrassing book [*On Revolution*] is that it’s a new version of Friedrich Gentz’s comparison of the two revolutions.”<sup>73</sup>

On its face, a comparison of revolutions may appear unrelated to Arendt’s international thought. However, I would like to contend that Arendt’s return to Gentz and the Age of Revolutions is intricately tied to the same concerns—European preservation and unity—that sparked her earlier interest in the man. Arendt returns to the Age of Revolutions—the age in which Gentz “knew everything” and everyone, the time when he moved through the circles of power and labored in the interest of Europe—in order to seek political alternatives to the failures of her own time. *On*

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 254.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>As discussed in note 47 above, she also read Gentz’s essay on Kant, which is referenced in *Between Past and Future*.

<sup>73</sup>Judith Shklar, “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” *Partisan Review* 50/1 (1983), 64–77, at 74. Cited in Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, 2018), 235 n. 48.

*Revolution* is not only an appraisal of domestic revolutions, but also a search for possibilities and forgotten solutions to the problem of political unity that could be useful in a *new* age of revolutions. Arendt's focus on non-sovereign federalism in this later work, I will argue, ought to be read as the answer to her own earlier demand in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that Europe (and not only Europe) must be unified under a "new law on earth" in order to be preserved.<sup>74</sup>

To tether this thought-train through time, I need to explain how Arendt's nascent revolutionary cosmopolitanism from the *Rahel* era (1930s) takes a federative turn in the 1940s–1960s.<sup>75</sup> This requires that we understand how Arendt schematizes international regimes. Arendt features three international regimes in her works: the nation-state system, totalitarianism, and her own alternative, which I will call cosmopolitan federalism. To understand where her thoughts about cosmopolitan federalism come from, we have to understand how the first two are related.

In 1946, Arendt wrote a letter to her editor, Mary Underwood, explaining her intent behind *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In it, she describes totalitarianism "as a horrific, misbegotten 'solution' to the age's problems—problems that remained very real and thoroughly unsolved."<sup>76</sup> Arendt understood totalitarianism as a solution to a set of problems of the age. Which problems? Arendt names the following: (1) "the Jewish Question," (2) "the unsolved problem of a new organization of peoples," (3) "the unsolved problem of a new concept of mankind," and (4) "the unsolved problem of [economically] organizing a constantly shrinking world."<sup>77</sup> In *Origins*, Arendt poses these problems as "perplexities" of the nation-state system; they are crises that arise *but cannot be resolved* within the framework of the Westphalian system.

The German totalitarians provided convincing, albeit horrifying, solutions to all of these problems, and this was part of their appeal. Their answers were: (1) anti-Semitism (answer to the Jewish Question), (2) the destruction of the nation-state in favor of the imperial totalitarian state (answer to the question of political organization), (3) racism (answer to the question of how to conceive of mankind), and (4) expansion for expansion's sake (i.e. imperialism, which answers the question of resource distribution in a shrinking world). Thus totalitarianism was, according to Arendt, a geopolitical alternative to the nation-state system that solved its problems. It "was based on a wide-spread, frequently conscious, conviction that it provided the answers to these problems and [would] be able to master the tasks of our time."<sup>78</sup>

According to Arendt, the advocates of the nation-state system—defenders of sovereign states such as Clemenceau, and bourgeois idealists who sought wealth abroad while retaining a commitment to liberal rights at home—failed to provide a convincing set of solutions to these problems. They sank into the perplexities

<sup>74</sup>Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ix.

<sup>75</sup>On Arendt's turn to federations I rely on William Selinger, "The Politics of Arendtian Historiography: European Federation and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," *Modern Intellectual History* 13/2 (2016), 417–46.

<sup>76</sup>Jonathan Schell, "Introduction," in *On Revolution by Hannah Arendt*, ed. Jonathan Schell (New York: Penguin, 2006), xviii.

<sup>77</sup>Memo to Mary Underwood of Houghton Mifflin, 24 Sept. 1946, Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress. Cited by Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 202; Schell, "Introduction," xviii–xix.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

of the fragile system that housed the nation-states they championed. Most prominently, their system promised equality before the law, but could not deliver it because equality depended on impossible national homogeneity. Nor could they respond to economic crises that overran borders. She explains that early twentieth-century nationalists “had lost touch with reality and did not realize that trade and economics had already involved every nation in world politics. The national principle was leading into provincial ignorance and the battle fought by sanity was lost.”<sup>79</sup> Like Gentz before them, who was thrust into impotent spectatorship as he watched the old order descend, so the nationalists of the twentieth century, men like Clemenceau—who, by the way, were far saner than racist imperial totalitarians arising in their midst—were forced to watch Europe break on the shoals of a set of realities with which it could not reckon.

In sum, the adherents of the flawed nation-state system lacked convincing answers and a way forward. The totalitarians had answers, and proposed a geopolitical system to supersede the nation-state, but it resulted in a “descent into hell.”<sup>80</sup> But which regime, which “new law on earth ... rooted and controlled by newly defined territorial entities,” could deliver freedom?<sup>81</sup> This is Arendt’s question. With it, she is approaching the terrain that Carl Schmitt is handling in the same period in *Nomos of the Earth* (1950), though she opposes his proposals entirely.<sup>82</sup>

For Arendt, the regime that can deliver freedom is federation. Her concern is, as ever, with preservation through unity, but she knows that the Westphalian “comity of nations” is too fragile to deliver it, and it is for this reason that federationist thinking sparks her interest when she encounters it in the 1940s. In that decade, federations become a focal point for Arendt’s emancipatory impulse. Her many proposals for federative solutions to international politics—in Europe, in Palestine, in Latin America, in the United States—are attempts to think through the contours of a geopolitical order which could answer the still-unanswered questions of the nation-state system.

Will Selinger traces Arendt’s support for federation as early as 1940. He cites a letter from that year in which she writes, “Our [the Jews’] only chance—indeed the only chance of all small peoples—lies in a new European federal system.”<sup>83</sup> Throughout the 1940s, she advocates the position that Europe’s hope lies in federation. In “Approaches to the German Problem” (1945), she lauds World War II resistance fighters for their claim that “the German problem” could not be solved by extinguishing Germany, but only by liberating it from its current regime through European unification and a post-national federation.<sup>84</sup> In other works, she argues that the road to peace and freedom in Palestine will require a federation comprising

<sup>79</sup>Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 124.

<sup>80</sup>Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 88. Bernstein’s analysis of Arendt’s schematic of regimes influences my analysis in this section.

<sup>81</sup>Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ix.

<sup>82</sup>Jurkevics, “Hannah Arendt Reads Carl Schmitt’s *the Nomos of the Earth*.”

<sup>83</sup>Hannah Arendt, “The Minority Question: Copied from a Letter to Erich Cohn-Bendit, Summer 1940,” in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 125–33, at 129. See Selinger, “The Politics of Arendtian Historiography,” 422.

<sup>84</sup>Hannah Arendt, “Approaches to the German Problem,” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, 1994; first published 1945), 106–20.

local democracies, and that a national Jewish state is a mistake.<sup>85</sup> The national principle, she decides, can have no place in Palestine without dire consequences. Indeed, this is the issue that brings about her break with Zionism.

Though Arendt eventually becomes exasperated with Palestinian politics, she never abandons hope that revolutionary political movements can ground new orders of freedom beyond the nation-state. The 1956 Hungarian revolution is a turning point for Arendt, both because it stirs her revolutionary instincts, and also because the spontaneous emergence of democratic councils provides her a new institutional form to theorize alongside federations. Jonathan Schell explains, "The fact was that the revolution gave her a first moment of relief from the crushing weight of the totalitarian phenomenon and stirred the most far-reaching hopes in her heart."<sup>86</sup> Having seen freedom spontaneously arise in the midst of totalitarianism, Arendt sets out to articulate an alternative order of freedom. Indeed, Arendt's 1958 essay on the Hungarian revolution is among the early draft materials for *On Revolution*.<sup>87</sup> In the next section, I turn to that work, and trace how Arendt fleshes out the alternative geopolitics she has been musing about since her first encounters with Gentz and Rahel Varnhagen.

### Arendt's answer: revolutionary federations

Whereas the Arendt of 1942 is deeply concerned with the stability and comity of nations in Europe, the Arendt of 1963 has turned her focus to the possibility of revolutions and a new geopolitical order. In this later period, she never abandons key elements of Gentzian thinking, in particular the priority of unity and rejection of national interest. Indeed, her rejection of the nation only intensifies in this period, culminating in her rejection of national sovereignty as a form of tyranny.

To see how Arendt's encounter with Gentz influenced *On Revolution*, we have to understand what makes this work a geopolitical treatise. Take, for example, the introductory chapter, which is based on an earlier essay, "The Cold War and the West," written for the *Partisan Review* in 1962. In the earlier version, Arendt asserts that the international system "based on national sovereignty" is one in which interstate war is the primary mode of violence. She points us to the classic treatise on violence among nation-states, Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* (1832), and asks, what if war as the last resort of politics becomes impossible under conditions of nuclear deterrence? In the second version of the essay, the introduction to *On Revolution*, Arendt takes the possible disappearance of interstate war as the source of a new possibility: the rebirth of the revolutionary tradition, a tradition primarily concerned with the question of bringing freedom into the world. Interstate war within the nation-state system is not, according to Arendt, a matter of freedom.

At first glance, it is perplexing that Arendt introduces her revival of the revolutionary tradition with a discussion of interstate war. However, within the context of

<sup>85</sup>Hannah Arendt, "Can the Jewish-Arab Question Be Solved?", in Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 186–98.

<sup>86</sup>Schell, "Introduction," xix.

<sup>87</sup>Hannah Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," *Journal of Politics* 20/1 (1958), 5–43. The essay was also published as an epilogue to the 1958 (second) edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It was taken out of later editions.

the schematic of regimes discussed in the last section, the continuity becomes clear. Whereas Clausewitz's treatise was for the age of the nation-state, hers is intended for a geopolitical future in which new political forms, like council democracy and non-sovereign federations, might arise. Indeed, it is possible that Arendt named her book *On Revolution* in reference Clausewitz's title *On War* to signal a paradigm shift.<sup>88</sup> Arendt, who was reading *On War* during her last weeks in France in 1940 before escaping to the United States, thus comes full circle decades later to rewrite his classic work.<sup>89</sup>

Arendt is also rewriting Gentz's *Origin and Principles of the American Revolution, Compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution*. Her preoccupation with the Age of Revolutions is one of the threads that connects her early and later interest in Gentz. He is, for Arendt, the man of the revolutionary period who best understood the priority of European unity, though his mechanisms for attaining this unity (balance and comity) were inadequate. Gentz also helps Arendt riddle out a tricky position, which is pro-revolution, but which rejects the two most prominent philosophies of revolution: republican sovereigntism, championed by Rousseau, and national emancipation, championed by Fichte and Müller.

Arendt, like Gentz, favors the American Revolution over the French. Like Gentz, she lauds the American revolutionaries for their commitments to constitutionalism and rule of law. Gentz repeatedly emphasizes that the American Revolution, unlike the French, never approached "the precipice of lawlessness."<sup>90</sup> Arendt emphasizes the same:

The direction of the American Revolution remained committed to the foundation of freedom and the establishment of lasting institutions, and to those who acted in this direction nothing was permitted that would have been outside the range of civil law. The direction of the French Revolution was deflected almost from its beginning from this course of foundation ... The lawlessness of the "all is permitted" sprang here still from the sentiments of the heart whose very boundlessness helped in the unleashing of a stream of boundless violence.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup>Note that Arendt excised explicit references to Clausewitz in the *On Revolution* introduction that had been present in the earlier version.

<sup>89</sup>Arendt returns to Clausewitz in the 1950s–1960s by way of Lenin, whom she reads in the context of her renewed interest in Rosa Luxemburg. In a footnote to the essay on Rosa Luxemburg in *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt writes, "Lenin read Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* (1832) during the First World War ... Lenin was under the influence of Clausewitz when he began to consider the possibility that war, the collapse of the European system of nation states, might replace the economic collapse of the capitalist economy as predicted by Marx." Hannah Arendt, "Rosa Luxemburg: 1871–1919," in Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, 1968), 33–56, at 53. Perhaps Arendt picked up Clausewitz in 1940 for the same reason that Lenin had during the previous world war, to understand the crisis that had led to systemic collapse. And doesn't Arendt agree with Lenin's assessment in some sense? She agrees that the structural contradictions of the system (albeit of the nation-state system, not capitalism per se) were released into crisis by the world wars, causing the nation-state system to collapse.

<sup>90</sup>Friedrich von Gentz, *The Origins and Principles of the American Revolution Compared with the Origins and Principles of the French Revolution*, trans. John Quincy Adams (Philadelphia: Asbury Dickens, 1800), 53.

<sup>91</sup>Arendt, *On Revolution*, 82.

Furthermore, they are both highly suspicious of Rousseau and admire Burke.<sup>92</sup> Gentz brought Burke to German-speaking audiences with his 1794 translation of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). One might think that this convergence solidifies Arendt's conservatism (and Gentz's, for that matter), but that would be a hasty judgment. To begin with, it is questionable how conservative Gentz's own reading of Burke was. According to Green, Gentz's translation of *Reflections* was heavy-handed and imposed his approach to "prudential Enlightenment" on the text.<sup>93</sup> The result is that Burke is less critical of Enlightenment principles in German than he is in English. Though Arendt herself reads Burke in English, she also resists his conservatism. In *On Revolution*, she claims that Burke's critique of the Rights of Man was not "reactionary,"<sup>94</sup> echoing her earlier assertion that Gentz was "no conservative."<sup>95</sup> Arendt's interest in Burke stems from her agreement with his argument—against Rousseau—that human rights do not arise in nature, but are an artifice, i.e. the product of politics, and so have to be constituted.<sup>96</sup> Where Arendt departs from Burke is in her argument that rights can be established not only through tradition, as Burke claims, but through revolutionary founding. Gentz, on the other hand, was opposed to revolt in principle, and it drives him to great lengths to prove that the American Revolution was carried out on lawful grounds. He writes, "Never, in the whole course of the American revolution, were the rights of man appealed to for the destruction of the rights of a citizen; never was the sovereignty of the people used as a pretext to undermine the respect due to the laws."<sup>97</sup>

Arendt's aim in *On Revolution* also departs from Gentz's text. While the Age of Revolutions brings them together, Arendt never sides with the status quo and does not share Gentz's commitment to the magnificent old world. Gentz weathered the Age of Revolutions, but unlike Arendt (and Rahel), he did not have a revolutionary instinct. There are two elements of Arendt's study on revolutions that I would like to highlight in this context: first, her pointed critique of sovereignty; and second, her tentative glances towards council democracy. These innovations are not ones Gentz would have agreed with, but they help Arendt envision how his ideal of unity beyond the nation might be attained.

In Arendt's early works, she takes aim at the national principle, and those familiar with the chapters on the French Revolution in *On Revolution* know that this line of critique does not abate. However, with her focus now turned to the American project, she extends her analysis into a pointed critique of sovereignty. The genius of the American founding, according to Arendt, was its rejection of sovereignty. She writes, "in this respect, the great and, in the long run, perhaps the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolition of sovereignty

<sup>92</sup>On Gentz and Rousseau see Paul Friedrich Reiff, "Friedrich Gentz: An Opponent of the French Revolution and Napoleon" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Illinois, 1912).

<sup>93</sup>Jonathan Green, "Friedrich Gentz's Translation of Burke's *Reflections*," *Historical Journal* 57/3 (2014), 639–59.

<sup>94</sup>Arendt, *On Revolution*, 98–9.

<sup>95</sup>Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 147. I will leave aside the question whether Arendt was correct, but suffice it to say she imposed her own heavy interpretive lens on both.

<sup>96</sup>See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 299.

<sup>97</sup>Gentz, *The Origins and Principles*, 56.



within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same.”<sup>98</sup> According to Arendt, the Americans accomplished the abolition of sovereignty via three mechanisms: federalism, separation of powers, and dispersed local democratic fora. Arendt is comfortable with the idea of a republic made up of a chaotic tangle of overlapping and diffused sources of democratic power. It is debatable whether Arendt is correct about the American project, but for our purposes here what is important is that she believes that the Americans, by banishing the sovereign, had invented and constituted an alternative to the nation-state.

The American federal republic is not the only non-sovereign political form Arendt looks to for inspiration. She is also interested in Thomas Jefferson’s never-adopted proposal for a ward system and generational constitutional conventions. She relates these proposals to the emergence of councils in times of revolution. Council democracy plays a central role in Arendt’s answer to the perplexities of the nation-state. Arendt’s biographer Elizabeth Young-Bruehl writes, “On the ground she prepared in her first book [*Origins*], Hannah Arendt later built the intellectual foundations for an answer. She based this answer on the council system.”<sup>99</sup> Councils capture Arendt’s preference for direct democracy and horizontal organization of power.<sup>100</sup> In *On Revolution*, Arendt describes the possibility of aggregating councils into a non-sovereign federative regime through a process of diplomatic, legal combination (via *lex*).

The last chapter of *On Revolution*, “The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure,” is thus Arendt’s most direct proposal of an alternative to the nation-state system. In that chapter, she suggests an order of federal republics, federations, and confederations based on the legal combination of local council democracies, which are themselves based on direct participation and delegation rather than parties.<sup>101</sup> In this proposal, sovereignty and the nation are nowhere to be found. It is a vision she had more or less already suggested in the 1940s for the Middle East, and which she lauded World War II resistance fighters for suggesting for postwar Europe. It is also a starkly cosmopolitan vision, though it diverges from top-down, legalistic approaches to global unity. Arendt was skeptical of such approaches, agreeing with Kant that a world-state would be despotic.<sup>102</sup> Finally, Arendt’s cosmopolitan federalism steadfastly insists on the right to “equal human rights,” which her dear friend Rahel Varnhagen had discovered centuries earlier. The last chapter of *On*

<sup>98</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 144.

<sup>99</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 201.

<sup>100</sup> The importance of horizontal power within and across council democracies has been identified by Peter Verovšek as an important component of Arendt’s cosmopolitanism in Peter J. Verovšek, “Integration after Totalitarianism: Arendt and Habermas on the Postwar Imperatives of Memory,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 16/1 (2018), 2–24.

<sup>101</sup> Verovšek’s essay, in focusing on the horizontal aspects of Arendt’s cosmopolitan vision, does not adequately treat her suggestion of the federative combination of councils, which she saw as the work of diplomacy. Still, he is correct that Arendt’s approach to cosmopolitanism is strictly bottom-up and grassroots.

<sup>102</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 298. Arendt was searching for an institutional basis for “the right to have rights,” but she did not trust international human rights conventions to guarantee that right. See also Seyla Benhabib, “International Law and Human Plurality in the Shadow of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin,” in Benhabib, *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Turbulent Times* (Cambridge, 2011), 41–56.

*Revolution* is thus Arendt's most sustained meditation on what it would mean to found international political unity on the basis of a new law of the earth, a new *nomos* of the earth. In this sense, it is the final chapter in her encounter with Friedrich Gentz, indeed it is also the moment she overcomes him, and so it is fitting that this work returns to mirror one of his best-known.

## Conclusion

What is the significance of the thought-train that weaves in and out of Arendt's encounter with Gentz, and why should we study the geopolitical influences on her thought? First of all, the method of following Arendt's thought trains is effective if our goal is to figure out why Arendt is an idiosyncratic thinker, why she does not fit into the ideological categories of the Cold War, and why her relation to conservatism remains confusing despite many attempts to riddle it out.<sup>103</sup> On the last point, Arendt's position on Gentz reveals that she was a thinker who was not opposed to conservative stances that invoked power *for the sake of the world*. However, as we saw through her identification with Rahel, she did not side with the status quo. Like Rahel, Arendt was of an essentially revolutionary disposition. These two conflicting interests—the revolutionary implementation of cosmopolitan principles, and a commitment to world preservation—exist in a tense equilibrium in Arendt's thought and make her difficult to categorize. In the end, Arendt could be a student of Gentz and Rahel at the same time because her thought is *sui generis*. She simply does not accept a dichotomy between realpolitik and emancipatory politics. My hope is that this study has helped to illuminate for the reader why Arendt comes out with this oft-quoted response to Morgenthau's query whether she is a liberal or a conservative:

I really don't know and I've never known. And I suppose I never had any such position. You know the left think I am conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am maverick or God knows what. And I must say I couldn't care less. I don't think that the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing.<sup>104</sup>

Arendt's political thought is uncategorizable, but she does not contradict herself. Her approach to world preservation and political unity beyond the nation-state, developed over long years of experience and intellectual encounters, allows her to maintain her revolutionary instinct alongside her respect for figures like Gentz and Burke.

The depiction of Arendt's intellectual development in this article illuminates her distinct, and often fragmented, approach to international political thought. Telling the story of Arendt as an international thinker through her encounters—and there

<sup>103</sup>On Arendt's idiosyncrasies see Jeffrey Isaac, "Hannah Arendt as Dissenting Intellectual," in Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca, 1998), 59–73. On Arendt and the Cold War see Patchen Markell, "Politics and the Case of Poetry: Arendt on Brecht," *Modern Intellectual History* 15/2 (2018), 503–33.

<sup>104</sup>Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York, 1979), 334. Interestingly, Arendt is clear about one ideological position. Later in the exchange she comes back to it: "I never was a liberal ... I never believed in liberalism."

are many more stories to tell in this fashion, e.g. her encounters with Clausewitz, Lenin and Luxemburg, Schmitt, and Morgenthau—can help us gather the fragments into a narrative which makes sense of what she was after. My claim in this paper has been that she worked consistently over time towards a normative vision of non-sovereign international order, which she posed as an alternative to the nation-state system. Encounters with figures like Gentz were highly influential in the development of this vision. Cosmopolitan federalism embraces decentralized and democratic politics housed within federative legal structures. It is a program that flatly rejects liberal progress narratives, rejects hierarchical political organization and nationalism, banishes sovereignty, and champions principles that respond to the fragility and urgency of human rights. From this perspective, Arendt's international thought does not culminate in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, but in *On Revolution*.

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