


BOOK REVIEW

Zionism and the experience of the Shoah between Arendt and Berlin

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One of the most important arguments in Kei Hiruta's *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* is that the theoretical confrontation of Arendt and Berlin was heightened through their respective engagements with Zionism. Hiruta aptly and excitingly suggests that these two thinkers' stances on the Zionist movement had a complex and substantial influence on their political theories. Hiruta's claim is that the differing positions on real-world politics of Arendt and Berlin partly arose from their opposition over Zionism. By comparatively analysing the two thinkers' works, Hiruta shows that these post-Shoah Jewish political theorists never came to form a monolithic opinion thereon; rather there was a plurality of conflicting viewpoints.

In this review, the focus is specifically on Chapter 2 of this book, titled 'A real *Bête Noire*' (Hiruta, 2021: 9–47). The merit of this chapter lies in having established that there are several bases and causes of the theoretical differences between Arendt and Berlin, to be analysed in the succeeding chapters.

1. Arendt, Berlin, and Zionism

I focus on three interrelated points: the disagreement between Arendt and Berlin over Zionism, that over theory, and their differing positions on real-world politics (the Shoah). Hiruta's book argues that these three have an organic relationship with each other. I begin with the two thinkers' divergent stances on Zionism.

Modern Zionism as a political movement is roughly divided into two types: labour, and Revisionist Zionism. The former is referred to as 'the official Zionism' in this book, comprising a dominant strand in the Zionist movement at the time. Theodor Hetzel, Chaim Weitzmann, and David Ben-Gurion, the last of whom later assumed the role of the first Prime Minister of Israel, had belonged to this group. The latter, which we might call the 'unofficial' part of the movement, tended towards chauvinism, and took more aggressive stance than the labour group on the issue of settlement. For example, it is said that this group played a central part in the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948, one of the infamous ethnic cleansings carried out by Israel.

Berlin's position on Zionism can be placed squarely in the labour group. In contrast, it is difficult to categorize Arendt's one. She criticized both groups, particularly regarding their common espousal of the establishment of a sovereign state (cf. Arendt, 2007: 178). Moreover, her position on the 'Jewish army' further complicates our understanding of where she stands in the spectrum of Zionist thought. Hiruta notes the fact that Arendt supported the foundation of a 'Jewish army' in the 1940s. By this support, Berlin judged Arendt to belong to the Revisionist group, taking her, in Hiruta's words, to be a 'fanatical' Zionist (Hiruta, 2021: 19). For her part Arendt agreed with the formation of a 'Jewish army,' but on the other hand, criticized the establishment of Israel and opted for coexistence between the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. As such, Arendt's stance struck Berlin as something incongruous.

Hiruta gives a concise account of why Arendt believed it necessary to limit the violence of the 'Jewish army.' Here I would like to add to Hiruta's account of this issue. Arendt's image of the

'Jewish army' is different from Berlin's. Arendt conceived of a 'Jewish army' to liberate the Jews from Nazi concentration camps, not to attack the Palestinians in Palestine. At the same time, she supported the idea of a federated state in Palestine as a substitute for the Jewish state. In her view, federal initiatives in the Middle East were initially conceived in the hope of limiting or overcoming Jewish violence in Palestine (Futai, 2022). With the Shoah and the subsequent foundation of Israel, the number of Jewish settlers in Palestine surged. Then the greatest common concern for the Zionists was how state-building would be accomplished. In other words, it was about the Jewish people gaining their own sovereignty. The 'Jewish army' in Zionism at the time also meant the defense of those Jewish refugees who fled to Palestine. Arendt's concept of the 'Jewish army' is still often misunderstood as being aimed at defending Jews from Palestinians in Palestine. In reality, however, the 'Jewish army' to which Arendt referred was intended to liberate Jews from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany and did not include the defense of Jews in Palestine.

Generally, military, sovereignty, and nationalism are closely intertwined elements. However, Arendt strongly feared that the Jewish people, who were refugees due to the sovereignty of the nation-state, would create new refugees by establishing a new nation-state. She was also worried that violence by Jewish people would be directed towards the Palestinian people. Arendt supported Zionism in terms of Jewish national self-determination, but believed that the violence of the 'Jewish army' needed to be clearly limited so as not to be associated with sovereignty.

The most important finding to emerge from Hiruta's analytical work is the originality of Arendt's position on national liberation. Several studies have previously compared Arendt with the German Jewish Zionists – for example, Kurt Blumenfeld, Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and so on – in order to clarify Arendt's Zionism (cf. Barnouw, 1990; Aschheim, 2001), but none, thus far with Berlin.

Many people, including Berlin, believed that the national liberation movement would be achieved by the foundation of a sovereign state, and thus that Zionism must be part and parcel with establishing sovereignty. They believed that antisemitism cannot be eradicated without the acquisition of an independent state.

For Berlin, says Hiruta, Zionism was a matter of Jewish identity (Hiruta, 2021: 20). The Jewish identity mentioned here is chiefly a matter of belonging and nationality (citizenship). Berlin thought that the foundation of Israel was required if the Jews were to attain an identity capable of resisting discrimination. On the contrary, for Arendt, national identity did not necessitate sovereignty. She drew a line between national identity and sovereignty, in other words, between belonging and nationality. For her, the achievement of the sovereign state meant a repetition of 'the aporia of human rights'.

When the sole and ultimate ground and guarantee of one's belonging-to is through sovereignty, the consequence is sometimes discrimination against minorities. Even now, Israel as a Jewish national state accelerates the exclusion of the Palestinians. In Arendt's understanding, the sovereign state did not only mean, one nation inhabiting one territory to attain its own nationality; it also meant the creation of stateless persons and refugees. What was important to Arendt was the limitation of violence. The violence caused by Zionism and that caused by sovereignty must be limited. In this way a politics with several peoples, which for Arendt was freedom, would become possible. This is where the gap between Arendt's and Berlin's thinking on Zionism and political ideology becomes apparent.

Hiruta shows that these differences over Zionism have correlates in their respective theories of 'freedom'. Berlin was a Zionist and supported Jewish nationalism from a liberal standpoint. This corresponds to his concept of 'negative freedom'. By contrast, Arendt criticized the notion of sovereignty within Zionism. For Arendt, freedom did not entail a unity, like sovereignty, but consisted of the power of a plurality of people. This is why she opposed the construction of a sovereign state of the Jewish people in favour of a federal state with Palestinian Arabs.

Chapters 3–6 of Hiruta's book explicate these theoretical differences. Hiruta palpably traces the development of their respective theories as illuminated through their differing positions on Zionism. Finally, Hiruta concludes that these differences between Arendt and Berlin originated in their divergent positions on real-world politics.

Hiruta recognizes that the two differed in real-life, social situation vis-à-vis the Shoah. At the time, Berlin was a diplomat and an assimilated UK citizen; in stark contrast, Arendt was one of the refugees who experienced the Gurs camp. Berlin worked as a British national with a Jewish identity, but Arendt did not have any legal rights or association with a nation-state. She was a stateless person for about 18 years until she acquired American citizenship in 1950. For example, in the essay ‘We Refugees’ written in 1943, she expressed her true feelings as a person who was never permitted legal or social status and discriminated against as an enemy alien in exile (Arendt, 2007: 264–74). One enjoyed the full range of legal guarantees provided by a nation-state; the other, none.

These real-life differences influenced their divergent opinions on Zionism and the Eichmann trial. Hiruta’s argument in the final chapter is as follows. The work of both Arendt and Berlin is not limited to the field of philosophy. For they were both witnesses to a time with a common experience, the Shoah. Against the backdrop of this singular situation, Arendt chose to fight as a social worker and a journalist despite being a refugee; whereas, Berlin confronted the issue as a national civil servant and a diplomatic journalist. Their thoughts shared a point of experience in common, but their opinions would clash.

I agree with this argument of Hiruta’s. This is because, in the case of Arendt, there are many similarities between her claims about Zionism and her political theories in *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*, which advocated federalism and coexistence with plural others. It can be said that actual political experience underlies theory. Some researchers have claimed that Arendt’s arguments on Zionism are fleeting, and do not have organic links to her theories. However, the situation during the war undoubtedly influenced the thinking of both. Hiruta’s book excitingly and elegantly demonstrates how an event or movement embedded in concrete reality relates simultaneously to theory as general argument. In the process, he has also shone a light on Arendt’s early works, the still untapped potential.

2. Possibility examining the text from a commitment to real-world politics

The disagreement over Zionism between Arendt and Berlin is deeply connected with their theoretical disagreements, engendering the different ways in which they came to relate to their post-Shoah ‘Jewishness’.

Hiruta points out that his approach, which goes about establishing correspondences between an author’s general theory and her real-world political positions, are risky. At the end of the final chapter, Hiruta makes an interesting suggestion. I quote: ‘there are many intellectual virtues that Arendt and Berlin shared and yet are not to be found in much academic work today’. Of particular note is our protagonists’ shared determination to face up squarely to the most urgent challenges of their times and to think them through, unhindered by intellectual cowardice and its twin, ‘disciplinary boundaries’ (Hiruta, 2021: 202–3).

In both thinkers’ cases, proximity to the ‘real world’ was a double-edged sword: what gave their works immediacy, urgency, integrity and authority also made them vulnerable to distortion, prejudice, and rash judgment. This is a variation of the general problem that is endemic in non-idealized modes of political theorizing: if one builds one’s theory ‘from below,’ beginning with a close examination of some concrete problem at hand rather than with an abstract model, then the resulting theory is likely to be too influenced by that problem, which may be more significant than other problems in the long run. (Hiruta, 2021: 204)

Even if such a method is a ‘double-edged sword’, it is meaningful to employ it in studying their ‘political’ thought, insofar as it is political. Recently there have been quite a few studies re-examining Arendt’s racism and Eurocentrism (cf. Butler, 2013; Gines, 2014). Arendt’s personal political opinions are here provocatively linked to perceived inadequacies in the theory. Arendt’s ideas should become more accessible to others through a more critical reading of her texts from the perspective of

real-world politics. Furthermore, I believe that this approach will provide much-needed illumination for the new generation who have not lived through the war. Hiruta's approach will enable the text to be read not only as the voice of a thinker but also as that of a witness, and will enrich the history of thought.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

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