

# **Racism in the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and ‘the one Great Crime in which America was Never Involved’**

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**Abstract.** Hannah Arendt’s monumental study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, is a founding text in postcolonial studies, locating the seeds of European fascism in the racism of imperial expansion. However, Arendt also harboured deep racial prejudices, especially when writing about people of African descent, which affected core themes in her political thought. The existing secondary literature has diagnosed but not adequately explained Arendt’s failures in this regard. This article shows that Arendt’s anti-black racism is rooted in her consistent refusal to analyse the colonial and imperial origins of racial conflict in the United States given the unique role of the American republic in her vision for a new post-totalitarian politics. In making this argument, the article also contributes to the vexed question of how international theorists should approach important ‘canonical’ thinkers whose writings have been exposed as racist, including methodological strategies for approaching such a body of work, and engages in a form of self-critique for marginalising this problem in earlier writing on Arendt.

**Key words.** Racism, Theory Canon, Hannah Arendt

I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or under-privileged peoples for granted.

Hannah Arendt, ‘Reflections on Little Rock’, p.46

One of the most significant political thinkers of the twentieth-century, and arguably the only woman admitted to the male-dominated ‘canon’ of political thought, Hannah Arendt is slowly but surely gaining a similar stature in the academic study of world politics.<sup>1</sup> This entry into International Relations (IR) is belated to say the least. Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Jean-Paul Sartre were not the only intellectuals to conceive European fascism as a kind of European imperialism turned inwards. In a work of breathtaking ambition, Arendt’s first major book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, showed that the seeds of fascism were not German, but international. They were imperialism, racism, and anti-Semitism. She was the central theorist of the ‘boomerang effect’, the unintended

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<sup>1</sup>\* For comments on an earlier draft, I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers as well as Helen M. Kinsella, Melanie Richter-Montpetit, Richard H. King, Kamran Matin, and Lara Coleman. Beate Jahn, Sam Knafo, Justin Rosenberg, Ben Selwyn, and Benno Teschke also gave helpful framing advice at the ‘Abstracts discussion group’ hosted by the Centre for Advanced International Theory, Sussex University. An earlier version was presented at the *Millennium* Conference, ‘Racialized Realities in World Politics’, at the LSE in October 2016. The discussant, Chris Brown, also gave helpful feedback.

Anthony F. Lang, Jr. and John Williams (eds.) *Hannah Arendt and International Relations: Reading across the Lines* (London: Palgrave Press, 2005); Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Patrick Hayden, *Political Evil in a Global Age: Hannah Arendt and International Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009); Owens, ‘Hannah Arendt’, in Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams (eds.) *Critical Theorists and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.31-41; Kimberley Hutchings, ‘A Conversation with Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)’ in Richard Ned Lebow, Peer Schouten, and Hidemi Suganami (eds.) *The Return of the Theorists: Dialogues with Great Thinkers in International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp.245-253

consequences of imperial blowback, decades before Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> The scramble for Africa, she claimed, ‘became the most fertile soil for the flowering of what later was to become the Nazi elite. Here they had seen with their own eyes how peoples could be converted into races and how... one might put one’s own people into the position of the master race’.<sup>3</sup> *Origins* not only became a founding text in postcolonial studies, leading some to claim that it anticipates Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>4</sup> It was among the first to engage in a sustained historical and global analysis of racist ideology. Arendt placed race thinking and racism at the core of the destruction of the European system of states. ‘Race thinking, rather than class-thinking’, she insisted, ‘was the ever-present shadow accompanying the development of the comity of European nations, until it finally grew to be the powerful weapon for the destruction of those nations’.<sup>5</sup> In arguing that European and eventually worldwide federation was the antidote to the ‘walking corpse’ of the sovereign state Arendt also became a leading inspiration for theories of post-national politics. Her critique of Zionism as a potential vehicle for Jewish fascism, her prescient claim that founding a Jewish state in Palestine would repeat the suffering of the Jews, made her one of the earliest and still most influential ‘post-Zionists’.<sup>6</sup>

Hannah Arendt would thus seem to be a crucial, even irreplaceable, resource for analysing what she called ‘the nation-destroying and humanity-annihilating power of racism’ in world politics.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the opposite may be true. Arendt harboured her own deep racial prejudices, especially when writing about Africans and people of African descent. This problem was not just a personal racial prejudice, for example as expressed in private correspondence while covering the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, and was not limited to Africans. Surveying the courtroom in Israel, at the ‘top’, Arendt placed ‘the judges, the best of German Jewry. Below them, the prosecuting attorneys, Galicians, but still Europeans. Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic... they would obey any order. And outside the doors’, Arendt saw an ‘oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country’.<sup>8</sup> Racism was also not a minor issue in Arendt’s work, or something marginal to her substantive political theory. It affected core themes associated with what is most celebrated in her historical and theoretical work. The problem extends from her first book, in which she traded in horrific racial stereotypes about Africans, to her late public policy interventions, in which she disparaged African-Americans, all the way to her effort

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, [1976] 2003)

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (new edition with added prefaces) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, [1951] 1966), p.206. For an excellent account of the complicated mechanisms of the boomerang effect in *Origins* see Karuna Mantena, ‘Genealogies of Catastrophe: Arendt on the Logic and Legacy of Imperialism’ in Seyla Benhabib (ed.) *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.83-112. For the best historical application of the idea see Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.47; Pascal Grosse, ‘From Colonialism to National Socialism to Postcolonialism: Hannah Arendt’s “Origins of Totalitarianism”’, *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.9 (2006), pp.35-52

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.161

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman) (New York: Schocken, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.162

<sup>8</sup> Arendt in Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926-1969* (edited by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner) (trans. by Robert and Rita Kimber) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p.435

to theorise a new form of post-totalitarian politics, which relied on a distorted historical and political analysis of settler colonialism, slavery and racism in the United States.

Existing analyses of Arendt's racism fall into two broad camps. The first is highly critical, suggesting that these writings raise serious questions about the integrity of Arendt's work as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Another approach is more sympathetic and contextualist, imploring critics to keep Arendt's 'larger aims... in view'.<sup>10</sup> While some of Arendt's toughest detractors misrepresent the nuance and context of some of her claims they are broadly right in diagnosing the scale of the problem for Arendt's political thought. They should not be dismissed as presentist, self-righteous, or anachronistic, as if the problem can be reduced to Arendt not pursuing in her day the postcolonial agendas of our own.<sup>11</sup> As Anne Norton has put it, Arendt's writing on Africans and African-Americans 'represent so dramatic a departure from the scholarly and civil character of her work as a whole that one might read them as an aberration... That course might do justice to Arendt as a private woman, but it would continue the unjust effects of her public writings'.<sup>12</sup> Yet both Arendt's defenders and critics have largely failed to adequately explain, as oppose to diagnose and critique, this departure in her work, that is, to offer more than psychological reasons for why she never made amends for some of the most troubling aspects of her writing on Africans and African-Americans, but consistently reproduced them.

Consider, for example, why Arendt, the brilliant theorist of the boomerang effect, would insist that the United States had no history of imperialism relevant to race relations within the United States, that imperialism was the 'one great crime in which America was never involved'?<sup>13</sup> In the context of violent race struggles and the rise of Black Power,

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Shiraz Dossa, 'Human Status and Politics: Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol.13, no.2 (1980), pp.309-323; Anne Norton, 'Heart of Darkness: Africa and African Americans in the Writings of Hannah Arendt' in Bonnie Honig (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp.247-261; Robert Bernasconi, 'The Double Face of the Political and the Social: Hannah Arendt and America's Racial Division', *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol.26 (1996), pp.3-24; Gail Presby, 'Critique of Boers or Africans? Arendt's Treatment of South Africa in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.) *Postcolonial African Philosophy: a Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.162-180; Joy James, 'All Power to the People! Hannah Arendt's Theory of Communicative Power in a Racialized Democracy' in Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook (ed.) *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp.249-267; Robert H. King and Dan Stone (eds.) *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Jimmy Casas Klausen, 'Hannah Arendt's Antiprimitivism', *Political Theory*, Vol.38, no.3 (2010), pp.394-423; A. Dirk Moses, 'Das römische Gespräch' in a New Key: Hannah Arendt, Genocide, and the Defense of Republican Civilization', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (2013), pp.867-913; Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014). For a rare critique of Arendt in IR see the brief discussion in Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, 'Deferring difference: a postcolonial critique of the "race problem" in moral thought' in Sanjay Seth (ed.) *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), especially pp.14-17

<sup>10</sup> Roy T. Tsao, 'Arendt and the Modern State: Variations on Hegel in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*', *The Review of Politics*, Vol.66, no.1 (2004), p.122. See, for example, Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996); Richard H. King, 'Hannah Arendt: Race, History, and Humanism' in *Race, Culture and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp.96-120; Owens, *Between War and Politics*; Richard H. King, 'On Race and Culture: Hannah Arendt and Her Contemporaries' in Seyla Benhabib (ed.) *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.113-134; pp.287-296; Dana Villa, 'Arendt and totalitarianism: Contexts of interpretation', *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol.10, no.2 (2011), pp.287-296; Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)

<sup>11</sup> Villa, 'Arendt and totalitarianism', p. 296

<sup>12</sup> Norton, 'Heart of Darkness', p.248

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock', *Dissent*, Vol.6, no.1 (1959), p.46

why would she dismiss African-American students' calls for courses in African literature and Swahili and seek to deny the political reality of the Third World? Why would she hold theorists and practitioners of anticolonial violence to higher justificatory standards than those European Jews resisting Hitler? These questions touch on some of Arendt's most troubling interventions into the so-called 'Negro question'.<sup>14</sup> And yet, to date, commentators have largely ignored one of the most obvious explanations for these otherwise inexplicable claims: that in almost all of Arendt's writings on race struggles in America she sought to delink them from their global, transnational context, and failed. In contrast, this article demonstrates that Arendt *consistently* refused to extend her powerful boomerang thesis to contemporary racial conflict in the United States. It argues that this refusal was rooted in the unique role of the American republic in her vision for a new post-totalitarian politics, which necessitated excluding the United States from the kind of decentered, transnational analysis of racism found in *Origins*.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in her prominent role as a public intellectual Arendt sought to restrict the political and historical context of the 'Negro question' to the domestic politics of the United States out of fear of an open race war, as if to acknowledge its colonial and imperial origins would actually justify violence in America as a form of anti-colonial self-defence. In other words, the explanation for Arendt's race problem is connected to the core subject matter of IR.

In addition to showing the importance of an international frame for reading Arendt, the article also addresses some of the methodological issues at stake in decolonising the theory canon for a non-racist IR. Arendt is only one of many possible case studies of racism in twentieth-century political theory, but her thought is potentially one of the most immediately obvious to address. Max Weber quit the pan-German League for not being racist enough.<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt are well known for their fascism. Emmanuel Levinas was unable to recognise 'the face' of Palestinians, that is, to see the ethical demands they placed upon him as a Zionist; they remained a 'faceless horde'.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Weber and many of her contemporaries, Hannah Arendt was not consciously committed to white superiority, which makes her all the more interesting in a contemporary age of 'neo-racism'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the substantive questions that she addressed in her political thought, from student demands for university reform to the prospects for the American Republic, have enormous contemporary relevance, including efforts to decolonise syllabi in IR and responses to the election of Trump. Arendt is a highly original and powerful thinker. Indeed, a vital intellectual resource for contemporary post-Zionism is also at stake in our evaluation of Arendt. Writing for the *Jerusalem Post*, Seth J. Frantzman has recently seized on Arendt's racism problem to discredit the entirety of her work, suggesting she was a 'white supremacist' little better

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<sup>14</sup> Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*

<sup>15</sup> This is not a totally dissimilar logic to Robbie Shilliam's account of why Marx adopted a false unilinear theory of history; it was the basis on which he could theorise a socialist revolution in his 'backward' homeland of Germany. See Robbie Shilliam, 'Marx's Path to *Capital*: the International Dimension of an Intellectual Journey', *History of Political Thought*, Vol.27, no.2 (2006), pp.349-375. I am grateful to Kamran Matin for suggesting this parallel.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, The German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.102

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, 'Unable to Kill: Levinas contra Levinas' in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp.54-68

<sup>18</sup> Étienne Balibar, 'Is There a "Neo-Racism"?' in Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.) *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), pp.17-28

than the Nazis who arrested, interred and almost killed her in the 1930s.<sup>19</sup> Though easy to dismiss as politically motivated, such attacks are not without political consequence. Arendt's *Jewish Writings* remain prescient in the struggle against anti-Arab racism in Israel and elsewhere. As Moshe Zimmerman has put it, 'Arendt's writings about Zionism provide so-called post-Zionists with good arguments, or at least with a wonderful alibi'.<sup>20</sup>

There is now an excellent and growing body of work on racism in world politics, including in leading textbooks.<sup>21</sup> This article contributes to this literature by showing how, why and with what effect Hannah Arendt denied the settler colonial and imperial origins of race relations in the United States. It proceeds in two parts. The first examines Arendt's original boomerang thesis, key parts of which adopted, reproduced and even empathised with a number of the racial stereotypes found among European imperialists. Little in Arendt's work is more disturbing, or, as Kateb has written, 'Nowhere does she take more chances - is at greater risk - than in her discussion of antiblack racism in Africa'.<sup>22</sup> We see this in the manner of her distinctions between race thinking and racism and settler colonialism and the 'new imperialism' of late nineteenth-century as well as her contrast between cultured and natural peoples. Some of the racist and ethnocentric tropes of *Origins*, in which she denigrated Africans, find their way into her later political theory and public policy interventions, which are analysed in the second part of the essay. This section situates Arendt's 'American' writings on race within the global struggles that was so central to her own thinking on these questions, but that have been largely ignored in the secondary literature. What happens when our reading of Arendt's racism is placed within this frame? We find Arendt - unsuccessfully - placing a protective cordon around the American republic. The historical reality underpinning Arendt's boomerang thesis was, in the end, debilitating to her own claims about the possibilities of political freedom and republican government in the United States. The conclusion considers how to approach important 'canonical' political thinkers whose writings have been exposed as racist, including methodological strategies for approaching such a body of work, and engages in a form of self-critique for marginalising this problem in earlier writing on Arendt.

## I. 'Some Specimen of an Animal Species'

Hannah Arendt grounded her history of totalitarianism in racial imperialism, securing her formative role in postcolonial scholarship. 'Lying right under anybody's nose', in the European empires, 'were many of the elements which gathered together could create a

<sup>19</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, 'Hannah Arendt, white supremacist', *The Jerusalem Post*, May 6, 2016. Available at <<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Hannah-Arendt-white-supremacist-456007>> (accessed September 29, 2016)

<sup>20</sup> Moshe Zimmerman, 'Hannah Arendt, the Early "Post-Zionist"' in Steven Aschheim (ed.) *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p.181. Also see Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). This is despite the fact that Arendt was an early supporter of Zionism on the troubling grounds that the Jews had better cultivated the land. See Shmuel Lederman, 'Making the Desert Bloom: Hannah Arendt and Zionist Discourse', *The European Legacy*, Vol.21, no.4 (2016), pp.393-407 and Moses, 'Das römische Gespräch', pp.894-899

<sup>21</sup> Alex Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam (eds.) *Confronting the Global Colour Line: Race and Racism in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Robbie Shilliam, 'Race in World Politics' in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (eds.) *The Globalization of World Politics: an Introduction to International Relations* (seventh edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.285-300

<sup>22</sup> George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NY: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), p.61

totalitarian government on the basis of racism'.<sup>23</sup> Yet more significant for us is Arendt's insistence on totalitarianism's *unprecedented* character, that there was something discontinuous between imperialism and Nazism. Her analysis of the horrible originality of totalitarianism marks her distance from postcolonial scholars who vehemently reject - as racist - the notion that Nazi crimes were different. As W.E.B. DuBois famously wrote, 'there was no Nazi atrocity - concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood - which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, for Arendt, there was a chasm between the concentration camps used for population control in imperial wars, in which many tens of thousands of civilians died, and the Nazi gas chambers, the central institution of totalitarianism. It was not a question of numbers, or even their European victims, but the *anti-utilitarian* character of the extermination camps fundamentally set them apart. Unlike all previous forms of domination, including chattel slavery, 'the gas chambers did not benefit anybody'.<sup>25</sup> Totalitarianism was a rupture in human history.

Whether or not one agrees with DuBois, it is certain that Arendt's response to totalitarianism led her to produce one of the most original and significant bodies of twentieth-century political thought. Unfortunately, the particular way she sought to establish totalitarianism's novelty relied on a series of evocative but deeply problematic historical distinctions. The most important for our purpose is that between race thinking and *racism* and settler colonialism and the 'new imperialism' of the late-nineteenth-century.<sup>26</sup> For Arendt, the formal governments of settler colonialism and traditional empire had no counterpart in the age of the 'new imperialism'. There was a shift from limited and predictable goals to the limitless pursuit of power. Similarly, Arendt argued that the 'race thinking' of the eighteenth-century used to justify civilisational hierarchies and discrimination was different from the more virulent ideology of racism, which she again claimed was a product of the nineteenth-century. Race thinking had permitted some form of co-existence between groups. Indeed, Arendt argued that earlier colonial settlers were never 'seriously concerned with discrimination against other peoples as lower races'.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, racism was an explicit ideological system to justify the radicalisation of imperial expansion. Racial hierarchy became the 'new key to history', a universal law to validate equally novel forms of global domination.<sup>28</sup> Just as Arendt insisted that anti-Semitism was not the modern manifestation of some timeless hatred of the Jews, she claimed that there was no 'immanent logic' to racism; 'even slavery', she insisted, 'though actually established on a strict racial basis, did not make the slave-holding peoples race-conscious before the nineteenth-century'.<sup>29</sup> Anti-Semitism, racism, and the

<sup>23</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.221, 185

<sup>24</sup> W. E. Burghardt DuBois, *The World and Africa: an Inquiry into the part which Africa has played in world history* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, [1946] 2015), p.23.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps [1950]' in *Essays in Understanding* (edited by Jerome Kohn) (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), p.236

<sup>26</sup> Arendt also distinguished between ordinary Jew-hatred and the ideology of anti-Semitism. See Arendt, *Origins*, chapter one.

<sup>27</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.182

<sup>28</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.170

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.177



new imperialism were historical phenomenon that crystalised to become the unprecedented phenomenon of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

If, as Arendt claimed, totalitarianism was a fundamental break, then conventional historical narrative based on the causal sequence of long-term developmental processes was inadequate. Arendt was especially scathing of all forms of process-thinking and developmental histories, taking Hegel's *Philosophy of History* as exemplary.<sup>30</sup> There is some irony then for while Arendt rejected developmental philosophies of history she was unable to move beyond Hegel's associated hierarchy of civilisations. Specifically, she adopted the distinction, also prevalent in German anthropology, between *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*, cultured and natural peoples, those with history and those without.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, Arendt perpetuated some of the worst Eurocentric and racist assumptions of the philosophical tradition she sought to overturn. As Klausen has brilliantly shown, Arendt's antiprimitivism 'converges with and disjoins from racial discourses'.<sup>32</sup> This problem extends from her analysis of imperialism and the deprivation of statelessness through to her celebrated political theory. Arendt's brilliant and prescient claim about the deprivations of statelessness and the significance of a public political world depended on 'a narrowly ethnocentric premise' about what counts as a fully human status.<sup>33</sup> In effect, as argued later, Arendt would need to actively deny the continuing relevance of her boomerang thesis to sustain some of the core features of her vision for a new post-totalitarian politics.

Consider chapter seven of *Imperialism, 'Race and Bureaucracy'*, which contains the section, 'The Phantom World of the Dark Continent'.<sup>34</sup> Arendt's purpose here is to understand the mindset of those who massacre entire populations without believing they had done anything wrong. The conscious aims of the Nazis most direct European forerunners, the Pan-German and Pan-Slav movements, were first laid bare in Africa. They 'can be watched like a laboratory test in the Boers' early and sad attempt' to transform a 'people into a horde'.<sup>35</sup> These Dutch settlers thought they were a chosen people. To Arendt, they were 'the only European group that ever, though in complete isolation, had to live in a world of black savages'.<sup>36</sup> Their racism, Arendt claimed, was 'the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilized man could understand and whose humanity so frightened and humiliated the immigrants that they no longer cared to belong to the same human species'.<sup>37</sup> In a kind of nineteenth-century environmental and demographic determinism, Arendt depicted the Boers - and her own - sense of the 'overwhelming monstrosity of Africa', the 'merciless sun' and 'entirely hostile nature', the 'great horror' of a place 'populated and overpopulated by savages' as 'incomprehensible as the inmates of a madhouse'.<sup>38</sup> All this gave 'Boer racism, unlike the

<sup>30</sup> On Arendt's approach to history, its international origins and potential relevance to international thought, see Owens, 'The International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method', *Political Power and Social Theory*, forthcoming, 2017

<sup>31</sup> King, 'Hannah Arendt', pp.116-117; Presby, 'Critique of Boers or Africans?' p.175

<sup>32</sup> Klausen, 'Hannah Arendt's Antiprimitivism', p.395

<sup>33</sup> Dossa, 'Human Status', p.320.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, pp.186-197

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.196

<sup>36</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.191

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.124

<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.124, 190, 194

other brands, a touch of authenticity'.<sup>39</sup> Arendt quotes extensively from Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* to substantiate her claims about what happened to European identity in the encounter with the extreme other. Fear and repugnance, when refracted through new ideologies of race, almost inevitably led them to 'Exterminate the brutes!'<sup>40</sup> Arendt was seeking to show the effects of the Boers inability to accord equal worth to those they viewed as 'alien'. Foreshadowing what would become of European Jews such a figure 'is a frightening symbol of the fact of difference as such... and indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to destroy'.<sup>41</sup>

Hannah Arendt was not seeking to justify extermination or massacres, but in her effort to 'understand the experiential basis' of the Boers' moral failings she came too close to apologetics.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, she suggested that Boer racism was different, even justifiable, because of the character of the peoples it was directed against. 'African savages... had frightened Europeans out of their wits'.<sup>43</sup> Like Hegel and Marx, it was self-evident to Arendt that 'tribal' Africans were more primitive than Europeans; 'as far as we know, [they] had never found by themselves any adequate expression of human reason or human passion in either cultural deeds or popular customs, and which had developed human institutions only to a very low level'.<sup>44</sup> Aware of the obvious implications, Arendt distanced the issue from 'race' to implicate the capacity to rise above 'nature'. 'What made them different from other human beings', she wrote, 'was not at all the color of their skin but... that they treated nature like their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality'.<sup>45</sup> Arendt's principle agenda was not to denigrate 'tribal' Africans as such, but to show that because they 'were, as it were, "natural" human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, ...when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder'.<sup>46</sup> Arendt was trying to suggest that any mutual recognition of rights depends on human artifice; that there was no such thing as 'natural' rights. But she could only do so on a racist premise. We know Arendt shared the Boers view that there was a 'touch of inhumanity among human beings who apparently were as much a part of nature as wild animals' since it accords with what we know is her own well developed view of what it is to be fully human.<sup>47</sup>

One of the most fundamental of Hannah Arendt's ideas, underlying almost all her contributions to political theory, is the distinction between nature and culture, between what is given and what is fabricated by humans through work. Her philosophical anthropology, most fully explicated in *The Human Condition*, was based on the premise that all humans have particular capacities to engage in labour, work, and political

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.196

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.124

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.301

<sup>42</sup> Disch, *Hannah Arendt*, p.132; Arendt, *Origins*, p.192

<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.206,

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.177

<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.192

<sup>46</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.192

<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.194



action.<sup>48</sup> But only under certain conditions are humans able to move beyond laboring to fully realise each of these capacities. Hence some people are more or less ‘cultured’, more or less free, and thus more or less fully human. It was Arendt’s personal experience of and writing on statelessness that led her to claim that political freedom was wholly dependent on the ability to forge a public realm grounded on the appropriate distinction between nature and political artifice, between human life and the political world; the ‘abstract nakedness of being nothing but human’ was politically irrelevant, even dangerous. Similarly, when racism triumphed, she claimed, all ‘deeds are... explained as “necessary” consequences of some “Negro” qualities; he has become some specimen of an animal species, called man’.<sup>49</sup> There was no in-born human dignity to protect this ‘animal species’ separate from the concrete laws and institutions that upheld political rights. Human status was a function of politics. The problem is that Arendt made this argument through maligning cultures and peoples that she deemed unworldly and thus primitive. Her denigration of ‘tribal Africans’ did not occur through a crude evolutionism. All humans had particular capacities to engage in labour, work, and political action. But, for Arendt, the Boers degraded themselves by failing to properly cultivate a fully human world. They regressed from their full humanity. The implication is that ‘natives’, in not fully realising their capacity to create an enduring world, were never fully human.<sup>50</sup>

In indicting the Boers Arendt dehumanised Africans for she claimed that the Boers, but not Africans, should have known better. Thus we find Arendt’s most scathing condemnation of the Boers is for being ‘lazy and unproductive’, for degrading themselves by falling to the level of Africans, living off their slaves as Africans had lived off nature. In her words,

They treated the natives as raw material and lived on them as one might live on the fruits of wild trees... to vegetate on essentially the same level as the black tribes had vegetated for thousands of years... When the Boers, in their fright and misery, decided to use these savages as though they were just another form of animal life, they embarked upon a process which could only end with their own degradation into a white race living beside and together with black races from whom in the end they would differ only in the color of their skin.<sup>51</sup>

The Boers had betrayed the putatively human need, exemplified by cultured Europeans, to transform nature into culture, the earth into a world, and were thus ‘the first European group to become completely alienated from the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself’.<sup>52</sup> Arendt did not consider the possibility that those Africans of whom she wrote, but about which she knew almost nothing, possessed their own form of political activity and world making that was not ‘a world of folly’, that they did *not* live ‘on an unprepared and unchanged nature’<sup>53</sup> or ‘without the future of a

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<sup>48</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958)

<sup>49</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, pp.301-2, 300

<sup>50</sup> For an excellent discussion see Klausen, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Antiprimitivism’, p. 405 and King, ‘Hannah Arendt’, p.116

<sup>51</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.194

<sup>52</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.194

<sup>53</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.194

purpose and the past of an accomplishment'.<sup>54</sup> She was not interested in whether indigenous African peoples engaged in their own world making, practicing forms of art, craft, and political co-existence 'prior to their reduction to mere labor by a system of exploitation'.<sup>55</sup>

Some scholars have defended Arendt by insisting that she was conveying the Boers' view of Africans, not her own. It is therefore beside the point that 'Arendt gave voice to the Boer', but 'left the African silent'.<sup>56</sup> This is not entirely persuasive, 'the moral, as well as the political, significance' of Arendt's broader agenda notwithstanding.<sup>57</sup> She was obviously doing more than describing the Boers view of Africa and the 'native life' of Africans.<sup>58</sup> She rationalised and even sympathised with racist tropes. Consider her comment on the 'boomerang effect' on Chinese and Indian laborers imported to southern Africa; 'for the first time, people were treated in almost the same way as those African savages... The difference was only that there could be no excuse and no humanly comprehensible reason for treating Indians and Chinese as though they were not human beings. In a certain sense *it is only here that the real crime began*, because here everyone ought to have known what they were doing'.<sup>59</sup> The issue is not whose voice is privileged - the Boers or the Africans - but what Arendt revealed of herself when representing both. Arendt clearly moved from including the Boers 'within the grasp of the empathetic imagination'<sup>60</sup> to sharing some of their views and adding insults of her own. The *Heart of Darkness*, Arendt's primary source in 'The Phantom World of the Dark Continent', is obviously deeply racist. Yet, as Moruzzi writes, in *Origins* too, 'black bodies are constructed in the narrative as so unnervingly other and abject that an encounter with them, at the margins of empire, can draw white/Western civilization right over the edge and into the dark abyss'.<sup>61</sup>

If the effect of Arendt's writings on Africans were restricted to a few passages in *Origins*, written in the 1940s, then they might be cordoned off and explained by their context. As Richard H. King writes, Arendt 'may have transferred her anger, shame, and contempt for what happened to the Jews to contempt for what happened to the Africans'.<sup>62</sup> But long after Arendt became a citizen of the United States in 1951 she persisted in misrepresenting African history and people of African descent. There is an additional, though largely neglected source of Hannah Arendt's failure in this regard. The highly distinctive place of the United States in her project for a new post-totalitarian politics necessitated excluding her new home from the transnational relations, both colonial and imperial, that she had so effectively analysed in her first book. This was the only basis on which Arendt could plausibly make her claims about the reality of public political freedom in the American republic, that the American Revolution had 'endowed

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<sup>54</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.190, 191

<sup>55</sup> Presby, 'Critique of Boers', p.172

<sup>56</sup> Norton, 'Heart of Darkness', p.254, 258.

<sup>57</sup> Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, pp.85-85

<sup>58</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.194; C.f. Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, p.85.

<sup>59</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.206, emphasis added; also see Dossa, 'Human Status', p.319

<sup>60</sup> Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, p.63.

<sup>61</sup> Norma Claire Moruzzi, *Speaking through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.97.

<sup>62</sup> King, 'Hannah Arendt', p.118

the affairs of men with some measure of dignity and greatness'.<sup>63</sup> Benjamin R. Barber has noted that Arendt 'seemed to forgive nothing associated with Europe's recent past while exonerating America of just about everything others might regard as dark in its history'. But this is not only the 'intellectual schizophrenia typical of reflective refugees'.<sup>64</sup> Arendt's deeply problematic comments about African-Americans often appear alongside equally dubious attempts to sever the historical and political link between racism in America and the forms of imperial racism analysed in *Origins*. This move, part gift to her adopted homeland, meant that she was unable to extend her unmatched analysis of the right-less condition of the stateless to those African-Americans who were effectively stateless within the United States.

## II. The Missing Boomerang: 'the one great crime in which America was never involved'

For many of Arendt's critics the clearest evidence of a Eurocentric double standard in her writing is found in the eloquent praise she offered in the 1940s for Jewish uprisings against the Nazis as well as her support for the creation of a Jewish army as an act of Jewish political founding, which she did not equate with Zionism.<sup>65</sup> In 1968, in contrast, Arendt claimed that 'Negro violence' in America is only 'political to the small extent that it is hoped to dramatize justified grievances, to serve as an unhappy substitute for organized power'.<sup>66</sup> Serequeberhan has thus claimed that 'what she recognises in the European she fails to see in the non-European'.<sup>67</sup> Katherine Gines goes further, suggesting that Arendt condemned anticolonial violence.<sup>68</sup> Such claims are based on Arendt's lengthy critique of the justification for violence in the writings of Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. In her 1970 essay, 'On Violence', Arendt objected to the claim that anticolonial violence might contribute to a new more humanistic order of global freedom led by the Third World, of the formerly oppressed 'starting a new history of Man'.<sup>69</sup> She criticised Fanon's claim that such violence could be an expression of life and creativity, a 'creative madness'.<sup>70</sup> But there is no principled opposition to anticolonial violence in this essay, or anywhere else in Arendt's work. Violence to force the end of imperial rule could be justified, but only on instrumental grounds, as a means to an end, while always recognising that the most likely outcome was more violence. Arendt certainly mischaracterised Fanon and Sartre in 'On Violence'.<sup>71</sup> But whatever one makes of

<sup>63</sup> Arendt, 'What is Authority' in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p.140

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, 'Hannah Arendt between Europe and America: Optimism in Dark Times' in Seyla Benhabib (ed.) *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.261. For her own analysis of this condition, written in 1943, see Arendt, 'We Refugees', *Jewish Writings*, pp.264-274

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, 'For the Honor and Glory of the Jewish People', *Jewish Writings*, pp.199-201

<sup>66</sup> Arendt, 'Is America By Nature A Violent Society?' *New York Times Magazine*, 28 April 1968, p.24

<sup>67</sup> Tsenay Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.77

<sup>68</sup> Gines, *Hannah Arendt*, p.93

<sup>69</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.315

<sup>70</sup> Fanon, *Wretched*, p.95; Gines, *Hannah Arendt*, pp.99-100

<sup>71</sup> Arendt offered a highly selective and simplistic reading of Sartre that amounts to 'willful distortion... She selected bits and pieces from *Reason and Violence* that fit her critique, but she is not fair or true to the analysis presented' in that or other works. Gines, *Hannah Arendt*, p.107.

Arendt's distorted reading of these thinkers she is clearly *not* condemning anticolonial violence as such, but the form of its justification within a particular tradition of thought.<sup>72</sup> On this issue at least, we should not assimilate Arendt's critique of Fanon to what is most troubling in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The more revealing problem in 'On Violence' is Arendt's dismissal of the Third World as the political organisation of newly decolonised states and as an object of transnational solidarity among students in the West. 'To think...' she wrote, 'that there is such a thing as a "Unity of the Third World", to which one could address the new slogan in the era of decolonization "Natives of all underdeveloped countries unite!" (Sartre) is to repeat Marx's worst illusions on a greatly enlarged scale and with considerably less justification. The Third World is not a reality but an ideology'.<sup>73</sup> Later pressed in an interview to justify this statement Arendt made no differentiation between Sartre's riff on Marx and world historical reality, what her interviewer referred to as 'simply the existence of the third world, the reality of the third world... Possibly there's a misunderstanding here'.<sup>74</sup> 'Not a bit of it', Arendt replied.<sup>75</sup> Instead, she restated her assertion that the Third World was 'an illusion. Africa, Asia, South America - those are realities... Try telling a Chinese sometime that he belongs to exactly the same world as an African Bantu tribesman and, believe me, you'll get the surprise of your life'.<sup>76</sup> Giving agency only to Europeans, Arendt suggested that the Third World concept originated in the imperialist 'distinction between colonial countries and colonizing powers. For the imperialists, Egypt was, naturally, like India: they both fell under the heading of "subject races". This imperialist leveling out of all differences is copied by the New Left, only with the labels reversed'.<sup>77</sup>

One of Arendt's central ideas, developed in *The Human Condition*, was that universal experience is not a substitute for particularity and plurality. As argued elsewhere, Arendt was committed to political plurality not simply as a characteristic of individuals but as an essential intrinsically valuable result of distinct territorial entities.<sup>78</sup> Yet in the context in which she was making her statements about the Third World Arendt was unable to fathom how a leveling out of *some* differences among states could draw attention to a common condition of global hierarchy and subordination.<sup>79</sup> In the context of the *global* Cold War many Chinese leaders did, indeed, seek alliances with African anti-apartheid and liberation movements. In fact, in the early 1970s, Mao introduced his 'three worlds theory' of international politics, situating China within the 'Third World'.<sup>80</sup> Mao's vision was certainly 'ideological'. But regional differences and histories notwithstanding,

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Owens, 'Violence and Power, Politics and War', *Between War and Politics*, pp.20-22

<sup>73</sup> Arendt, 'On Violence', p.123

<sup>74</sup> Adelbert Reif, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p.209

<sup>75</sup> Arendt, 'Thoughts', p.209

<sup>76</sup> Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in *Crises of the Republic*, p.209-210

<sup>77</sup> Arendt, 'Thoughts', p.210

<sup>78</sup> Owens, 'The International Origins of Hannah Arendt's Historical Method'

<sup>79</sup> I'm grateful to Helen M. Kinsella for pointing to the significance of Arendt here only thinking of one part of her philosophy.

<sup>80</sup> Chen Jian, 'China and the Bandung Conference: Changing Perceptions and Representations' in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (ed.) *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2008), pp.132-159

ordinary Chinese and African people *were* participants in the ‘same world’ of superpower hostility and neocolonial struggle. The Third World Project began as early as 1928 when anticolonial leaders met in Brussels to form the League Against Imperialism and was revived in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 against violent and non-violent subversion.<sup>81</sup> Arendt erased the *multi*-national history of the Third World by reducing it to a kind of African interest group, as if the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 never existed. ‘The only ones who have an obvious political interest in saying that there is a third world’, she claimed, ‘are, of course, those who stand on the lowest step - that is, the Negroes in Africa. In their case it’s easy to understand; *all the rest* is empty talk’.<sup>82</sup>

Arendt offered no contemporary evidence for her dismissal of the Third World because her main interest was not postcolonial leaders attempting to transform the global political and economic architecture. Her real target was the ‘empty talk’ of Western intellectuals and students who evoked the Third World cause, claimed solidarity with it, and thereby, in Arendt’s view, justified violence inside the United States. Her tone is mocking and racially charged. Student interest in Mao, Castro, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh were like ‘pseudo-religious incantations for saviors from another world; they would also call for Tito if only Yugoslavia were farther away and less approachable’.<sup>83</sup> Things become more sinister when she turns to the movement for Black Power; ‘its ideological commitment to the nonexistent “Unity of the Third World” is not sheer romantic nonsense. They have an obvious interest in a black-white dichotomy; this too is of course mere escapism - an escape into a dream world in which Negroes would constitute an overwhelming majority of the world’s population’.<sup>84</sup> Rather than seek to understand why anti-racist activists might situate themselves within wider anticolonial and -neocolonial struggles, that is, in the context of global white supremacy, Arendt reduced black solidarity to a crass demographic calculation.<sup>85</sup> She presented black students as more violent than whites, with the backing of the wider ‘black community’. ‘Serious violence’, she claimed, ‘entered the scene only with the appearance of the Black Power movement on American campuses. Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualification, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representatives of the black community’.<sup>86</sup> These black students then made ‘nonsensical and obviously damaging demands’ such as instruction in the ‘nonexistent subjects’ of African literature, ‘soul courses’, and Swahili, ‘a nineteenth-century kind of no-language’.<sup>87</sup> The ‘white rebels’, in contrast, put forth ‘disinterested and usually highly moral claims’, such as support for ‘nonviolent “participatory democracy”’.<sup>88</sup>

How and why is Hannah Arendt in the position of denying the reality of the Third World, of dismissing black student demands, and claiming that Swahili is a ‘no-language’? What is at stake, for Arendt, in claiming that African literature is a ‘non-

<sup>81</sup> Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: a People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008)

<sup>82</sup> Arendt, ‘Thoughts’, p.209-210, emphasis added

<sup>83</sup> Arendt, ‘On Violence’, p.123, fn37

<sup>84</sup> Arendt, ‘On Violence’, pp.123-124, fn37

<sup>85</sup> Nico Slate (ed.), *Black Power Beyond Borders: the Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement* (London: Palgrave, 2012)

<sup>86</sup> Arendt, ‘On Violence’, p.120

<sup>87</sup> Arendt, ‘On Violence’, p.192, 176-177. For a reading more sympathetic to Arendt see Elizabeth Young-Buehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1982] 2004), pp.415-419

<sup>88</sup> Arendt, ‘On Violence’, p.121.

existent subject'? My argument is that 'On Violence' should be read, in part, as Arendt's futile effort to deny that her own boomerang thesis applied in the New World to maintain an idealised version of the American republic, a form of American exceptionalism. At stake in Arendt's attack on Fanon and Sartre, Black Power, African literature, and black students is more than a defense of a particular theory of violence and Eurocentric curriculum. Arendt believed that there was inevitability to the violence of interracial struggle. Echoing her account of the Boers massacres of tribal Africans, she wrote, 'Racism, white or black, is fraught with violence by definition because it objects to natural organic facts - a white or black skin - which no persuasion or power could change; all one can do, when the chips are down, is to exterminate their bearers... Violence in interracial struggle is always murderous, but it is not "irrational"; it is the logical and rational consequence of racism'.<sup>89</sup> Arendt is surely right that racism is inevitably violent. It is violence. But she refused to place African-American struggles in a colonial frame, and thus had to somehow radically dissociate black struggles in the United States from their violent origins and the political implications of these origins. Hence, pace Arendt's critics, she engaged in this denial *precisely because* there is a justification for anticolonial violence. Arendt's difficulty is what this might mean for the United States. Arendt's problem becomes clearer when 'On Violence' is read alongside her earlier essay 'Reflections on Little Rock', written in 1957, published in 1959, and second only to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the scandal caused.<sup>90</sup>

The immediate context of this essay was the front-page image of a black girl, Elizabeth Eckford, attempting to enter the newly desegregated Little Rock Central High School, flanked by armed National Guards escorting her through the baying white mob of protesters. 'What would I do if I were a Negro mother?' Arendt asked. She responded that 'under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted'.<sup>91</sup> African-American parents failed to protect the dignity of their children by sending them into a hostile environment for the sake of bettering their social condition. Civil rights leaders should turn their attention to anti-miscegenation laws where the more fundamental right to marry was at stake. Education was a private right of parents; even racists had the right to educate their children as they wished. Drawing on Jewish experience in Europe rather than the history of American racism, Arendt inevitably failed to translate the essentially historical and power-laced distinctions between social, political, public and private into normative categories applied to public education. In the voluminous critiques of Arendt's essay it is not often noted that 'Reflections on Little Rock' began with some reflections on international affairs.

Arendt opened her essay by lamenting how 'unfortunate' and 'unjust' it is that 'the events at Little Rock' have damaged the United States in the court of world opinion and 'become a major stumbling block to American foreign policy'.<sup>92</sup> The root of the

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<sup>89</sup> Arendt, 'On Violence', p.173

<sup>90</sup> Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock', pp. 45-56. There is an extremely large literature on the scandal of Arendt's response to the events in Little Rock. For a summary, including discussion of Arendt's correspondence with Ralph Ellison, see Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, pp.313-318.

<sup>91</sup> Arendt, 'A reply to critics', *Dissent*, Vol.6, no.2 (1959), p.179

<sup>92</sup> Arendt, 'Reflections', p.46. Arendt does not provide evidence in her essay but see Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); also see Brenda Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC:

injustice was that ‘the country’s attitude to its Negro population is rooted in American tradition *and nothing else*... The fact that this [color] question has also become a major issue in world affairs is sheer coincidence as far as American history and politics are concerned; for the color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nations - that is, *the one great crime in which America was never involved*’.<sup>93</sup> Yet from the arrival of the first Europeans, and the expansion of the continental empire and overseas annexations, the United States was a fundamentally colonial and imperial republic, both of which were grounded in racism.<sup>94</sup> Even her more sympathetic readers have criticised Arendt’s ‘historically inaccurate’ and ‘untenable generalizations’ in ‘Reflections on Little Rock’,<sup>95</sup> placing them in the usual context of her overriding experience of how anti-Semitism worked in Europe and her failure to see black-white relations in the United States as any different from other race relations. Arendt was also ‘protective of her new country and homeland’, Benhabib writes, ‘although never becoming an apologist for it’.<sup>96</sup> But Arendt would never need to apologise for something - American imperialism - that she denied had ever happened. We need more than Jewish context to account for Arendt’s refusal to reckon with the United States colonial and imperial past - and present - and insistence that the ‘color question... is soluble only within the political and historical framework of the Republic’.<sup>97</sup>

Why would Arendt begin her essay on school desegregation by denying a link between the ‘color problem’ in the United States and racial conflicts in the rest of the world, so flagrantly misrepresenting US imperialism, literally denying its existence? It is difficult to understand Arendt’s agenda except as an effort to quarantine the American republic from the transnational aspect of what W. E. B. DuBois famously called the ‘color-line, - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea’.<sup>98</sup> As the political activist Stokely Carmichael put it in a 1967 address to the Organization of Latin American Solidarity,

The struggle we are engaged in is international... This is even more apparent when we look at ourselves not as African-Americans of the United States, but as African-Americans of the Americas... Our people are a colony within the United States; you are colonies outside the United States. It is more than a figure of

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University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

<sup>93</sup> Arendt, ‘Reflections’, p.46, emphasis added

<sup>94</sup> The erasure of empire and race from the post-World War II field of International Relations see Vitalis, *White World Order*. On empire and race in American history see Merze Tate and Fidele Foy, ‘Slavery and Racism in South Pacific Annexations’, *Journal of Negro History*, Vol.50, no.1 (1965), pp.1-21; Gerald Horne, *White Pacific: US Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (Honolulu, Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007). On this question Hans Morgenthau may have been influenced Arendt, his close friend.

<sup>95</sup> Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, pp.148-149

<sup>96</sup> Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, p.154

<sup>97</sup> Arendt, ‘Reflections’, p.46. Arendt had in mind something like a constitutional amendment ‘addressed specifically to the Negro people of America’ ‘to welcome’ them ‘explicitly into the otherwise tacit *consensus universalis* of the nation’. Arendt, ‘Civil Disobedience’, p.91

<sup>98</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1944 [1903]), p.9. Thus Arendt was unable to assimilate the powerful tradition of black internationalism, of which women were often leading figures, and a tradition that has also largely been excluded from the history of international thought. Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011)



speech to say that the black communities in America are the victims of white imperialism and colonial exploitation.<sup>99</sup>

Arendt never mentioned Stokely Carmichael by name, but 'On Violence' is her effort to withhold the political grounds for African-American solidarity with the *justifiably violent* struggles for the dignity and freedom of non-white peoples around the world. Hence, it is not quite right, as Joy James has written, that 'Arendt ignored the promise and pitfalls of radical antiracist organizations such as the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords, the Brown Berets, and the Independentistas'.<sup>100</sup> Arendt's dismissal of black students and praise for whites was not because she was a leading proponent of non-violent civil disobedience, as if African-Americans were not pioneers of such activity. Rather she was deeply troubled by a notion of a continuum between colonial violence abroad and colonial violence 'at home', when this 'home' was her own and so much of her post-totalitarian political theory was invested in its civic republican form of government.<sup>101</sup>

Arendt's denial of American imperialism and disavowal of the Third World was of a par with her lack of understanding of structural racism in the American republic and ideological racism in the transatlantic slave trade, which she had already failed to adequately address in both *Origins* and *On Revolution*. To support her distinction between race thinking and racism as an ideology Arendt had downplayed the ideological racism of slavery, which in the American context was present much earlier than the nineteenth-century, as well as the racial dimensions of earlier settler colonialisms.<sup>102</sup> Arendt was clear that slavery was the 'primordial crime upon which the fabric of American society rested'.<sup>103</sup> She acknowledged that 'the extermination of native peoples went hand in hand with the colonization of the Americas, Australia and Africa'.<sup>104</sup> But she also claimed that North America and Canada were 'almost empty and had no serious population problem'. Echoing the Africa of *Origins*, these were places 'without a culture and a history of their own'.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps this is why she never condemned settler colonialism with the same vehemence with which she rebuked 'unlimited' imperial expansion. In Arendt's eyes, neither the annihilation of Native Americans nor the institution of chattel slavery was enough to discredit her fabled version of the American Revolution.<sup>106</sup> She claimed that in the eighteenth-century American slaveholders viewed

<sup>99</sup> Stokely Carmichael, 'Black Power and the Third World', Address to the Organization of Latin American Solidarity, Havana Cuba, August 1967. Available at <<http://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/Black%20Liberation%20Disk/Black%20Power!/SugahData/Books/Carmichael.S.pdf>> (last accessed October 10, 2016)

<sup>100</sup> James, 'All Power to the People!' p.258

<sup>101</sup> See, in particular, Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, [1963] 1970) and Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*

<sup>102</sup> As Gines points out, slaveholders 'had to be aware of some concept of race, or at least the values of "Black" (or mulatto or Indian) versus "white" skin, which determined which race would consist of the slaveholders and free, and which would consist of the slaves and the unfree'. Moreover, under settler colonialism, 'the genocide, oppression, and aggression characteristic of this era operated along lines of categories that we now classify as racial'. Gines, *Hannah Arendt*, p.65, 79. Also see King, *Arendt and America*, p.153

<sup>103</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p.66

<sup>104</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.440

<sup>105</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.182, 186

<sup>106</sup> Moses argues that this failure is partly a product of the influence of Roman history and categories on Arendt's writing, and which were central to her reading of the American Revolution as a 'renewal' of the Roman tradition of political founding. The effect, he suggests, 'was to tolerate, even justify, the violent excesses' of both Roman and American expansion. Moses, 'Das römische Gespräch', p.878. For a different reading of Arendt's interest in Roman

slavery as only a temporary institution and that the Founders knew that slavery and ‘the foundation of freedom’ were incompatible.<sup>107</sup> But she did not analyse the contradiction in any depth, nor did she extend her condemnation of European imperialists to the American founders. Instead, she suggested that slavery was not as bad as statelessness, for at least slave labour ‘was needed, used, and exploited, and this kept them within the pale of humanity. To be a slave was after all to have a distinctive character, a place in society - more than the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human’.<sup>108</sup> Yet slaves were not conceived as ‘fully human’; they were property. Arendt did not accuse the American revolutionaries of the same hypocrisy as the interwar statesmen and humanitarians who insisted that the millions of stateless really were in possession of ‘in-born’ and ‘inalienable’ rights.<sup>109</sup> Instead, she praised the Founders for not falling under the sway of the Social Question - poverty and the ‘degrading misery... of slavery and Negro labor’<sup>110</sup> - to focus on founding institutions for political freedom. Slavery was a price worth paying to found an enduring republican government for some: the American slaveholders.

Arendt wrote brilliantly about the deprivations of statelessness and the political problems of minorities in interwar Europe. But she was unable to extend her analysis to those who experienced themselves as stateless and rightless within an imperial nation-state purportedly founded on rights but built on settler colonialism and slave labour.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, while Arendt marginalised the constitutive role of slavery and praised the American Revolution she did not mention its role in the revolution in France and completely ignored the one prominent revolution that was led by slaves, in Haiti.<sup>112</sup> Slave revolts, slave revolutions, did not fit into Arendt’s model of revolutionary founding. As Sibylle Fischer has put it, ‘Slaves vanish... in the abyss between the social and the political. Revolutionary antislavery is a contradiction in terms. Haiti becomes unthinkable’.<sup>113</sup> It is also unthinkable because Arendt needed to deny the boomerang effect from operating in the New World.<sup>114</sup> The problem is not fully captured in Dana

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law and expansion see Owens, *Between War and Politics*, ch.5; Owens, ‘The International Origins of Hannah Arendt’s Historical Method’

<sup>107</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p.66. Arendt, *Origins*, p.177. Norton is unfair when she says, for Arendt, African Americans ‘had a physical presence in the American past, but they do not share in the history of the “European-determined world of the United States” (OT 191). Arendt’s denial of an African American presence in history entails the denial of an American past in Africa’. Norton, ‘Heart of Darkness’, p.254. But Norton omits the part of Arendt’s sentence that does this: ‘shiploads of Negroes were imported as slaves into the Europe-determined world of the United States’. Arendt, *Origins*, p.191.

<sup>108</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p.297.

<sup>109</sup> Bernasconi, ‘Double Face’, p.14. Arendt, ‘The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man’, *Origins*, chapter nine

<sup>110</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p.65

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, the powerful writings of Claudia Jones, writing in the same period as Arendt, who argued that African Americans in the Deep South of the United States constituted an oppressed nation entitled to self-determination. See her essays collected in Carole Boyce Davis (eds.) *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment* (Banbury: Ayebia, 2011)

<sup>112</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, *Slavery and the French revolutionists (1788-1805)* (trans., foreword and introductory essay by Frances Richardson Keller) (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1988)

<sup>113</sup> Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p.9; c.f. C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, which was first published in 1938, and thus available to Arendt.

<sup>114</sup> While not explicitly extending Arendt’s boomerang thesis, the kind of analysis of the American founding Arendt refused is suggested in Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

Villa's description of Arendt's postcolonial critics, that she simply 'didn't go far enough and she wasn't inclusive enough in her indictment of European modernity'.<sup>115</sup> It is that even when applied to the political context in which it was written, Arendt's political theory does not offer the theoretical resources to analyse racial violence and resistance to racial oppression. She celebrated violent and nonviolent resistance. Yet she did not consider violence by black activists in the United States as a form of legitimate self-defence and hence could not theorise such struggles within a colonial and imperial nation-state, again despite her analysis of these state forms in *Origins*. This is why Arendt insisted that the 'Negro question' could only be 'addressed within the political and historical framework' of the republic. But the claim rested on a distorted historical and political analysis of race and violence in America, an effective disavowal of deep *transnational* structures of white supremacy that must be addressed within a political and historical framework beyond her beloved American republic.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that Hannah Arendt's political analysis of race in America foundered, in no small measure, on her effort to deny its irreducibly colonial and imperial context. Arendt was unable to assimilate the violent imperial origins of racial hierarchies into her idealisation of the American republic. The 'Negro question' had to be contained inside US domestic politics, severed from its colonial and imperial origins, to avoid an open race war and to validate her faith in America's republican institutions. The consequences have been a deep chasm between her still prescient insights on the conditions of statelessness and the extremely limited resources in her political theory for analysing and resisting white supremacy. It is no surprise then that the racism in Arendt's thought has been all but ignored in the generally laudatory readings of her work within IR, including by the present author.<sup>116</sup> Hence, the critique of Arendt offered in this article is also a self-critique. In previous work, I largely bracketed what I knew to be Arendt's racist assertions about Africans in *Origins* and African-Americans in 'On Violence' and proceeded to draw on her work to analyse what I believed to be different, unrelated phenomena. I now see that Arendt's Euro-centrism was not just analytical but also celebratory, and that this has seeped into my own work.<sup>117</sup> For example, I paid insufficient attention to the antiprimitivist underpinnings of Arendt's distinction between life and world when discussing contemporary refugees and human security.<sup>118</sup> The problem with such a distinction may go beyond Arendt's denigration of those she deemed unworldly; it might be racist and colonial to the core.<sup>119</sup> In writing on Anglo-American counterinsurgency, I emphasised European imperialism to the neglect of settler

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<sup>115</sup> Villa, 'Arendt and totalitarianism', p.296

<sup>116</sup> The exception is Grovogui, 'Deferring difference'.

<sup>117</sup> C.f. Owens, *Between War and Politics*, p.54. Ira Katznelson, [\*Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust\*](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p.70.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Owens, 'Reclaiming "Bare Life"? Against Agamben on Refugees', *International Relations*, Vol.23, no.4, pp.567-82 and Owens, 'Human Security and the Rise of the Social', *Review of International Studies*, Vol.38, no.3, pp.547-567.

<sup>119</sup> Julia Suarez Krabbe, *Race, Rights and Rebels: Alternatives to Human Rights and Development from the Global South* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015). I'm grateful to Lara Coleman for this point.

colonialism and its racisms, which is far more significant for understanding the relationship between war-making and state-making in the United States.<sup>120</sup>

Hannah Arendt, like many in IR, was unable to fully escape the discourse of European superiority in which she was trained and acculturated. Hence we should be wary of condemning the woman herself. There is no 'interpretative "high road"' from which to read Arendt.<sup>121</sup> But her thought, and our own, must also be held to account in the effort to decolonise the theory canon for IR. It would be easy to write her work off, for much of what she wrote was unclear, contradictory, and even worse, it was misogynistic, racist, Orientalist, elitist, and unnecessarily antagonistic toward Marx. But there are no un-problematic thinkers. Franz Fanon held deeply sexist and homophobic views, yet he remains indispensable to critical studies of race and hence non-racist international theory.<sup>122</sup> Arendt held deeply problematic views about people of African descent that go to the core of, and even call into question, much that has been valued and celebrated in her work. The question is how many of her signature contributions to political thought rest on racist and ethnocentric premises, and whether anything is left of the work if these premises can be severed and fully reworked.<sup>123</sup> There is no easy way to find out except through such a reworking and there is no one-size-fits-all checklist that can be applied across canonical thinkers. But to refuse the work may be to miss what Arendt got right, to miss certain things that nobody else but she had fathomed. It would also forego certain insights that Arendt too was unable to imagine, but nonetheless might inspire in others.

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<sup>120</sup> Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). I am extremely grateful to Jairus Grove for pointing this out.

<sup>121</sup> Villa, 'Arendt and totalitarianism', p.296

<sup>122</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Franz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997)

<sup>123</sup> Feminists have already undertaken such a project in relation to Arendt's troubling approach to gender. See Bonnie Honig (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995)