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Authenticity of the signatures guaranteed by Martin Palous,  
Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic\*  
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## »The Origins of Totalitarianism« – debate

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

# ***It Will Always Be The Pioneering Work***

**I often take up my copy of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to read one or more of its sections, like revisiting a museum where there is a giant mural of the early Twentieth Century that you can never finish taking in. A Guernica. The same naive question rises up in me each time: How did one person write this? It is richer on most of its topics than shelves of other books.**

But I have also had three sustained encounters with it. The first, when I was twenty-five, was in a *New School* class that Hannah Arendt, my teacher, told me to go take with the words »it will be very practical for you.« Her old friend Hans Morgenthau had come to teach for a semester, and she viewed him as a practical man – that is, a man of praxis, a man of action. The action for which we all considered him a hero was that he had been the one member of President Lyndon Johnson's administration – on the National Security Council – to resign in protest over the Vietnam War.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, a psychoanalyst practicing in Philadelphia, is the author of *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World* (1982) and also of, among other books, *Anna Freud: A Biography* (1988), *Creative Characters* (1990), *The Anatomy of prejudices* (1996) and *Subject to Biography: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Writing Women's Lives* (1999), an essay collection that includes two essays about Hannah Arendt. See also her contribution in Newsletter No. 1: *Return to Germany*.

The man of action's syllabus for a course on Twentieth Century Politics was made up of works that he used like optical instruments. If you look at the world through this book, what do you see? Most were books no politician or political scientist in America read (although they were revered in Europe), like Karl Jaspers' *The Atombomb* and the *Future of Mankind* and *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time*. Morgenthau and Arendt shared a disdain – it was almost contempt – for the way politics was studied in America, and he offered the whole list and her book particularly as models for how political theory should be written. »You can fight over

many things with her, but she was the first to understand fascism,« he said in his heavy accent, »and then professors came along years later to elaborate where she pioneered. She was a historian very close up, like Thucydides.« By »understand« Morgenthau meant she had drawn up a field manual so that no one reading it would ever again be unable to identify a regime as fascist. As he read Arendt's book with us, Morgenthau had one question on his mind: Was America becoming fascist in a way that her analysis could illuminate? His answer was that he saw many ingredients of fascism or protototalitarianism, much danger.

I experienced *The Origins of Totalitarianism* completely differently nearly ten years later, in the late 1970's, when the war in Vietnam was over, the fear of American fascism had receded, and the Student Movement had slowed to stasis. Hannah Arendt had died, and Hans Morgenthau was frail, failing (he died in 1980). Her book was then a classic, a monument, seldom used, and I, Hannah Arendt's biographer, was studying it as the *fons et origo* for the questions she would ask herself in all the rest of her books. Mine was the daunting task then to draw from the correspondences and manuscripts in her voluminous literary estate a history of how her book had been conceived and – over the course of the years from 1944 to 1951 – produced, to show Hannah Arendt's »close up« historical and theoretical mind at work. I think I was able to present clearly, sometimes vividly, the passionate drive to understand that had moved Hannah Arendt when the full extent of the events we now call The Holocaust became known and she began writing the book. I sowed how she imagined the book as a weapon in a life or death struggle against totalitarianism as it had been in Nazi Germany and as it was still then in the Soviet Union. Her own – »Never Again!« But I didn't feel that I could, in the same biographical pages, demonstrate the usefulness of the book or show the reasons why Morgenthau, for example, would have found it so important for thinking about America.

In the early 1990's, I took up the book again and wrote a summary of Arendt's ideas about anti-Semitism into my book *The Anatomy of Prejudices* (1996). This was a demonstration of her book's usefulness: it could be put into the service of an effort to map a field that did not exist when she wrote or when I wrote: comparative study of prejudices and their forms. I modeled my work on the

comparative study of political forms that I had learned from her and from Morgenthau, although I brought psychoanalytic ideas to my project that I doubt either one of them would have been receptive to.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* will never cease to be a useful book, a relevant book. It will always be the pioneering work of history and political theory in reference to fascism and totalitarianism, even though later authors have been very critical of it. And it should be in the minds of anyone who wants to use the word »totalitarianism« accurately, or, for that matter, to use the word »genocide« accurately (as those now debating how to apply the UN's genocide definition to war crimes in the Balkans are trying to do).

I think that the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which deals with the transition from totalitarian movements to full-blown totalitarianism, total terror, and genocide (a transition that did not take place in Italy, although the word »totalitario« was born there), is probably the best known among political theorists. But it seems to me that in our present world situation the second part, on imperialism, is of great interest. This part is full of passages in which Hannah Arendt's acquaintance with history outside of Europe is obviously limited, but it is, nonetheless, also full of food for thought about the phenomenon we now call (vaguely) »globalization.«

The differences between the end of the 19th century overseas and continental imperialisms of the European nation-states and of America and the imperialisms of the end of the 20th century and now are crucial to understanding »globalization,« in both its potential benefits for the planetary tribe and its potential dangers. Let me give just one indication.

Arendt was so perceptive in her focus on the crucial role played by movements of population in the imperialism that followed the Industrial Revolution, which was spurred by mergers of governments and capitalists (state capitalism) for big state-run projects like the building of the Panama Canal or the Suez Canal. Europe's »surplus populations« were shipped off to dark continents, providing the first key lesson in what being a »superfluous person« can mean, for they were superfluous and they treated the people they colonized as superfluous. Now, while middle managers and technicians are being exported to the Third World from the

»advanced« nations, into the advanced nations are coming war refugees and economic immigrants by the millions, completely changing the demography of EuroAmerica, creating conditions of »multiculturalism« that even a nation like America, founded by immigrants, has little capacity to celebrate. The current overseas imperialists, not aspiring to rule governmentally over the »natives,« who are anyway citizens of their own more or less stable new states, aspire instead to exploit their resources and cheap labor. But the result is that the cheap laborers, learning from the exploiters' tools – their TV's and phones and computers – that there is less starvation in the exploiters' countries, either aspire to go there or to become local agent exploiters of their own countryside. Now it is the post-colonial new states that have become state capitalist enterprises, massively corrupt.

Arendt had shown so clearly how late 19th century imperialism rebounded as the ruthless colonialists transmitted back to the state capitalist motherlands their ethic of ruthlessness, but we are only beginning to understand how exploitation can end up the norm everywhere, rendering all kinds of groups superfluous. Globalization certainly distributes some beneficial features of advanced technology, as it distributes education, including education in political processes; it brings people coming and going into touch with each other, promoting a sense of »humankind.« But it also entangles the entire earth with the mentality of »oh, these are superfluous people« and the imperialist techniques of ghettoization and massacre that Arendt portrayed so richly.

Steven E. Aschheim

## The Book and Me

**There is in the present** assignment both an abiding danger and an unattainable challenge. On the one hand, the genre may appear hopelessly indulgent. It assumes a degree of self-importance that readers will find quite unwarranted: why should they be interested in »my history« with the book, when I first encountered it, what effect it had on me and so on? On the other hand, no matter how judiciously one may approach these autobiographical moments, like all acts of recollection, they conjure up a, not necessarily coherent, totality of implicated memories in which one's sensual, cognitive and emotional worlds are hopelessly intertwined. Only a Proustian talent and sensibility would be able to retrieve the ideational and physical fullness of these experiences. Clearly this is a task well beyond my powers. But I shall try here to, at least, ameliorate the problem by dint of an attempt at both an honest and critical retrieval that will, hopefully, compensate for the unavoidable self-indulgence (and cult-like atmosphere) entailed in such an exercise.

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When, in 1961, at the age of nineteen, I first came across *The Origins*, the effect was electric, intoxicating, almost magical. No book before that (nor, for that matter, many after) had affected me more powerfully. To be sure, as I grew older, my criteria of judgment became more sophisticated, my responses more measured. Yet, for reasons I hope to make clear, the magic has never entirely worn off. What – for a young, unformed, uninformed, and impressionable South African Jewish mind – constituted its special attraction? To the extent that I can faithfully recapture the experience, it was simultaneously tactile, nascently intellectual, and, to be completely candid, even faintly erotic. The eroticism was not related to the actual book and its contents but rather to the young woman who introduced me to it. One year ahead of me in