All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together. (Franz Fanon, *The Fact of Blackness*)

We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English or representatives of any country for that matter. We will always remain Jews, but we want to, too. (Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*)

At the time that Horkheimer and Adorno were rethinking their approach to modern antisemitism, Hannah Arendt was also embarking on her own sustained efforts to understand the phenomenon. Initially, she had shown little interest in the question of antisemitism, which she professed had previously ‘bored’ her, but with the rise of Hitler, antisemitism unsurprisingly became a key concern of hers both politically and intellectually. Arendt was active in Zionist movements, initially in Germany and then in France after she took refuge there in 1933. In the nation state that had proclaimed the Rights of Man and Citizen and accorded citizenship rights to Jews, she found herself extremely vulnerable as a stateless person. After the Nazis swept through France, Arendt was interned, escaped and made her way to the United States where, like Horkheimer and Adorno, she sought to come to terms with something which, in her mind, fundamentally altered the conditions not only of Jewish life but also of human existence.

**Modernity and antisemitism**

In an interview conducted in 1964, Arendt reflected on the impact that news of Auschwitz had on her in terms that echo Adorno and Horkheimer’s rethinking at the time.

What was decisive for me was not the year 1933 … What was decisive was the day we learned about Auschwitz … in 1943 … At first we didn’t believe
it … because militarily it was unnecessary and uncalled for. Before that, we said, well one has enemies. That is natural. Why shouldn’t people have enemies? But this was different. It was as if an abyss had opened up. We had the idea that amends could be made for everything else. Amends can be made for almost anything at some point in politics. But not for this. This ought never to have happened … Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves.4

Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt also argued that there is something about modern antisemitism that radically distinguishes it from earlier forms of anti-Judaic prejudice. Jews may always have had enemies but this was of a different order. She understood antisemitism as a modern phenomenon of ancient vintage. Its earlier elements did not necessarily disappear but they were rearticulated in the modern age:

It goes without saying that modern antisemitism is the heir to medieval antecedents and thus to the ancient hatred of Jews as well … there are scarcely any medieval accusations, from ritual murder to usury, that cannot be found verbatim in some modern piece of filthy literary trash.5

In emphasising the modernity of antisemitism, Arendt wanted to show that it is a phenomenon of shorter durée than anti-Judaism but of longer durée than those who position it always in the past. Antisemitism has deep roots in modern society even though modern society also has its own critical resources with which to combat it. While it is mistaken to naturalise antisemitism as a permanent property of relations between Jews and non-Jews, there are periods and places in which it appears obsolete, a zombie-concept in the language of cosmopolitanism, only to re-emerge in surprising new forms.6 Modern antisemitism has long historical antecedents, but what was more urgent than reviewing its pre-history was to think about why Jews were once again defined as a ‘question’ in modern times and how this was tied up with the concerns of those who put this ‘question’.7 The emphasis on the modernity of antisemitism is something most exponents of critical theory have in common but the specific aim of Arendt’s discussion was not to relegate antisemitism to the past, as may be the case if we see ourselves now living in a post-modern condition, but on the contrary to reveal the possibility of ongoing transmutations.8

As we have seen, Arendt held that although the Jewish question was posed in the Enlightenment in quite different ways and for quite different ends than it was by antisemites, in support of Jewish emancipation rather than against it, the Enlightenment provided ‘classic antisemitism its theoretical basis’.9 She argued that what distinguished modern secular antisemitism from medieval religious
hatred of Jews, was a legacy of Enlightenment: it was the abstraction of ‘the Jew’ as a principle of evil:

Modern antisemitism, which knows that Jews are not universally ‘noxious’, turns this abstraction on its head by overlooking the existence of ‘decent’ Jews with whom one may be personally acquainted (‘there are decent Jews everywhere’) in favour of the Jew, who has at last been discovered to be the evil principle of history … To transform the Jew from a living individual into a principle, into an agglomeration of characteristics that are universally ‘evil’ and, although observable in other people as well, are always called ‘Jewish’ (whereas any others have been ‘Judaized’), in short to transform the Jew into the Jew and then to conjure up all the things that are Jewish about him – all of these are tendencies found throughout modern antisemitism, which in its essence can be distinguished from the medieval hatred of Jews precisely because of its abstractness.10

Within the terms of the Jewish question ‘the Jew’ was defined as the other of the universal, whether the universal was equated with nations, states, the race, the international or indeed humanity. Arendt wrote in this vein:

Since the Jew no longer has an indisputable identity in Western European nations, one of the antisemite’s most urgent needs is to define him. Whether the Jews are a religion or a nation, a people or a race, a state or a tribe, depends on the specific opinion non-Jews – in whose midst Jews live – have about themselves, but it certainly has no connection whatever with any germinal knowledge about the Jews. As the peoples of Europe became nations, the Jews became a ‘nation within the nation’; as the Germans began to see in the state something more than their political representation, that is, as their fundamental ‘essence’, the Jews became a state within a state. As the word ‘international’ began to bounce around inside people’s heads, Jews came to represent the ‘international of gold’, and a bit later, by an ingenious combination of state and international, to advance – in the form of the ‘elders of Zion’ – to an international state. And … when the Germans transformed themselves at last into Aryans, we have been wandering through world history as Semites, just as it is to the arrogance of the Anglo-Saxon ‘white man’ over against colonial peoples that we owe the epithet ‘white nigger’.11

It was paradoxically the universalism of the modern age that set the terms for the rise of modern antisemitism.

On the responsibility of victims

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Arendt understood that the negative projections imposed on ‘the Jew’ had to do with the phantasies of those who made these projections rather than with the actual behaviour or characteristics of Jews themselves. This is not to say, however, that antisemitism in its own distorted
Hannah Arendt’s Jewish writings

and distorting ways did not have some connection with the realities of Jewish life. Arendt observed that nineteenth-century antisemitism – with its tales of conspiracy, money and parasitism and its references to ‘a secret world power which makes and unmakes governments’, a ‘secret force behind the throne’, a power that holds Europe ‘in its thrall’ – exploited transient and partial historical moments of Jewish history to convert them into the fictitious expression of a noxious Jewish essence. Some antisemitic stereotypes were constructed out of the history of ‘Court Jews’ who, with inter-European networks at their disposal, played a significant role in financing European monarchs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and who evolved into international banking houses when nineteenth-century European states extended this system of privileges to meet their own expanding financial needs. The history of every category of people contains ‘misdeeds’ among some of its members that serve as fuel for the racist imagination, though the racist imagination is not limited to any such real or imagined misdeeds, and this was true of the Jews as well. Arendt saw that when the system of state privileges broke down in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Jewish financiers lost their hegemonic role in state transactions and were replaced by national entrepreneurs attracted by the profits to be won through colonial conquest, antisemitism did not disappear but became more remote from social reality – the preserve of ‘charlatans and crackpots’ with their ‘weird admixture of half-truths and wild superstitions’.12 Arendt showed that after the First World War, antisemitism ‘emancipated itself from all specific Jewish deeds and misdeeds’ and became ‘severed from all actual experience concerning the Jewish people’.13 In genocidal antisemitism there arose an obverse relation between the actual situation of Jews, who were ‘cruelly powerless’, and the ‘fables of monstrous, diabolic and secret power’ constructed by Nazis.14 Arendt concluded that in all its forms, those that still had some connection with reality and those which lost all connection, ‘the foundations of antisemitism are found in developments that have very little to do with Jews’.15

It is worth stressing this point since Arendt has been read as attributing responsibility or at least co-responsibility to Jews for the rise of antisemitism.16 In The Origins of Totalitarianism she criticised theories of antisemitism that deny ‘all specific Jewish responsibility’ for its emergence and held that the origins of antisemitism ‘must be found in certain aspects of Jewish history and specifically Jewish functions during the last centuries’.17 Arendt’s emphasis on Jewish responsibility exposed her to the criticism that she focused on the transgressions of Jews – they ‘avoided all political action for two thousand years’;18 rich Jews involved themselves in ‘shady transactions’;19 Jewish finance manipulated ‘the business of the state’,20 etc. – and postulated an excessively ‘intimate relationship’ between antisemitic phantasies and the realities of Jewish life. She seemed to share an assumption, which as we have seen was common within the German left, that there was some truth to antisemitic images of Jews.21 She even seemed to rely at
times on antisemitic sources to illustrate what Jews were really like. Two cases in point were her citation of an opponent of Jewish emancipation, Heinrich Paulus (1761–1851), and of a National Socialist historian, Walter Frank (1905–1945), to back up claims that Jews were inclined toward ‘national isolation’ or that ‘rich Jews’ curried political favour with undemocratic states at the expense of the ‘Jewish masses’. What has most perturbed some critics is Arendt’s claim that these sources could be ‘consulted with profit’ to find out anything worthwhile about the realities of Jewish life.

Some recent readers of Arendt have written approvingly of her co-responsibility thesis in the following sense, that they hold the behaviour of the Jewish state or the ideology of Jewish nationalism or the worldwide machinations of Zionism responsible or partly responsible for outbreaks of antisemitism in the current period. In our view, however, we should no more accept the contention that there was a specific Jewish co-responsibility for the rise of antisemitism than we should accept the argument that black people are co-responsible for racism, women co-responsible for sexism, or Muslims co-responsible for Islamophobia. While Arendt wanted to restore some sense of Jewish agency, and not merely victimhood, in her analysis of antisemitism, this cannot justify the co-responsibility argument. To address Arendt’s contribution to our understanding of responsibility, we need to make a distinction she did not always observe: between how Jews have responded to antisemitism and their responsibility for antisemitism. In the use of language Arendt strayed over this line, but her considered judgment was summed up in the statement that to treat the behaviour of Jews as the source of antisemitism is ‘the malicious and stupid insight of antisemites, who think that this vile tenet can account for hecatombs of human sacrifice’. Arendt may not have been wholly consistent, but at the core of her argument lay a refusal on the one hand to blame the Jews for antisemitism and on the other to rationalise Jewish responses to antisemitism.

If the response of victims is consequential, if it affects outcomes, then it becomes a matter of concern how Jewish responses to antisemitism were forged and whether they closed off or opened up the potential for solidarity from other people. For it is in the nature of genocide that the targeted group alone rarely has the resources to defend itself against the power of perpetrators equipped with a monopoly of the means of coercion and backed by popular mobilisation. In the Holocaust Jews, largely defenceless, could not by themselves defeat the forces of antisemitism, and their search for solidarity puts an urgent slant on Arendt’s question of whether the ‘final solution’ was understood ‘only’ as a crime against the Jewish people, an extreme episode in ‘the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism’, or as a crime against humanity, an attack on human diversity as such. One of Arendt’s main concerns in her report on the Eichmann trial in 1963 was the prosecution’s failure to understand that in the ‘final solution’ humankind in its entirety was ‘grievously hurt and endangered’. It reinforced the
very problem that the category of ‘crimes against humanity’ was intended to address: the breaking up of the human race into a multitude of competing nations, each pursuing its own interests, each fighting its own battles, each uninterested in the fate of others. Arendt wanted to show that the universal and particular aspects of the genocide were inseparable, or as she put it, that the ‘final solution’ was a ‘crime against humanity … perpetrated on the body of the Jewish people’.27

The issue of responsibility Arendt raised was how victims responded to the dual aspect of the threat they faced – as Jews and as human beings. She maintained that the two types of political consciousness she addressed, assimilationism and Zionism, were both one-sided: assimilationism identifies with the ‘universal’ at the expense of the ‘particular’, which it treats as a defect, while Zionism identifies with the ‘particular’ at the expense of the ‘universal’, which it treats as an illusion and a trap. Arendt was critical of Jewish assimilationism for looking away from anti-Semitism altogether and of Zionism for confronting anti-Semitism exclusively from a national point of view. The alternative Arendt reached out for was that of a cosmopolitan form of solidarity that can reconcile the universal and the particular in the struggle against anti-Semitism, but this proved to be an elusive prize. She could not accept an abstract cosmopolitanism that deluded itself into thinking that it could rise above all particular concerns. Assimilationism, Zionism and cosmopolitanism all provided an occasion for anti-Semitic stereotypes denigrating respectively the ‘parvenu Jew’, the ‘Zionist Jew’ and the ‘rootless cosmopolitan Jew’. Arendt, however, did not explore these types of political consciousness through the suspicious eyes of the anti-Semite but through the experience of Jews confronted with the difficulties of finding a home in a world poisoned by anti-Semitism.

On assimilationist responses to anti-Semitism

Arendt observed that a great temptation facing Jews who sought absorption into national societies brimming with anti-Jewish prejudice was to regard everything particular about themselves as Jews as ‘an impediment to … their becoming full human beings’.28 In her study of Rahel Varnhagen (written in the 1930s and first published in 1958) Arendt put the issue thus: ‘In a society on the whole hostile to the Jews – and that situation obtained in all countries in which Jews lived, down to the twentieth century – it is possible to assimilate only by assimilating to anti-Semitism also’.29 In The Origins of Totalitarianism (first published in 1951 and mainly written in the 1940s) Arendt maintained that ‘all advocates of emancipation called for assimilation as either a preliminary condition to Jewish emancipation or its automatic consequence’. She commented, albeit with more passion than empirical evidence, that the vast majority of Jews in Germany and Austria became indifferent to or complicit with the upsurge of anti-Semitism that accompanied their emancipation.
Faced with the growth of modern political antisemitism – and more broadly of a sense of the inherent difference of ‘the Jews’ as an alien category of people – the tried-and-tested assimilationist response seemed to Arendt self-defeating. It called for the redoubling of efforts to assimilate into increasingly antisemitic societies through ‘slavish’ expressions of exaggerated patriotism, gratitude and trust in ‘whatever government happened to be in power’ without noticing how untrustworthy this made Jews appear in the eyes of every successive government.30

Arendt argued that assimilationists could never get to grips with the modernity of antisemitism. They presented it as an outmoded prejudice inexorably coming to an end in the modern era, and simply closed their eyes to the evolution of new forms of antisemitism.31 In spite of Sisyphean efforts to integrate into antisemitic societies, assimilationists were ‘never able to explain how things could ever have turned out so badly’.32 They reduced the otherness of Jews to a ‘harmless difference of religion’ and, in a manner reminiscent of von Dohm, attributed all further differences to old political conditions, which had ‘corrupted the Jews by treating them badly’.33 The poverty of assimilationism for Arendt lay in its reluctance to think about antisemitism at all. As she put it: ‘one of the hallmarks of the Jewish world’s response to the Jewish question is a total lack of interest in dealing with antisemitism’.34

Arendt explained the predominance of assimilationism in terms of the changing character of Jewish society. As antisemitic movements evolved in Europe, modern conditions were also gnawing away at the cohesion of Jewish communities, traditionally constructed around religious values and the protective role of Jewish notables. The result was that attacks on Jews from without met with loss of solidarity from within; not least, the exaggerated patriotism of assimilationist Jews was aligned to disdainful hostility to Ostjuden, Jewish migrants from the East. Some Jews imagined that political antisemitism might be not so bad since it at least kept the Jewish people intact just as Christian hostility to Jews once had. Some looked for local protection in the time-honoured but no longer effective ways of appealing to ‘connections’ wealthy Jews had with those in power. Some denied there was any significant antisemitism in society, declaring, for example, that Dreyfus just happened to be a Jew and that his persecution had nothing to do with his Jewishness. Assimilated Jews became less interested in Judaism than in their natural-born Jewishness, that is, the sense of Jewish origins without religious or ethical connotation which Marcel Proust called ‘dejudaized Judaism’.35 One of the threads of Arendt’s argument was that the construction of ‘Jewishness’ among assimilated Jews dovetailed with antisemitic ways of thinking, inasmuch as Judaism no longer served as a faith that could be renounced but Jewishness served as the unchangeable core of one’s being. While Jews were able to escape from Judaism, there was no escape from Jewishness.
A ferociously anti-bourgeois conviction drove Arendt’s critique of assimilationism. She echoed the words of the French socialist Bernard Lazare (1865–1903), that assimilationism was a ‘spurious doctrine’ that would have Jews ‘abandon all their characteristics, individual and moral alike’ and enter into a ‘double slavery … not only the wealthy of my people, who exploit and sell me, but also the rich and poor of other peoples who oppress and torture me in the name of my rich’.36 Arendt commented that Jews who profited from this ‘double slavery’ were destined to ‘pay the price of the whole wretched system’ and be abandoned by those who used them as ‘lackeys and henchmen’. She paid homage to the ‘pariah politics’ of ‘those bold spirits who tried to make of the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have been – an admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu’.37 Arendt contrasted assimilationism to the ‘bold spirit’ of the pariah:38 the ‘conscious pariah’, as Bernard Lazare put it, who proclaimed it ‘the duty of every human being to resist oppression’ of all human beings, as well as less overtly political types like Heinrich Heine’s ‘schlemiel’, Charlie Chaplin’s ‘suspect’ or Franz Kafka’s ‘man of good will’. What they had in common was ‘practical experience of just how ambiguous is the freedom which emancipation has ensured … how treacherous the promise of equality which assimilation has held out’.39 None, according to Arendt, was fooled by the illusion that ‘by achieving emancipation the Jewish people had achieved a genuine freedom’. It was an illusion that ignored ‘the condition which had characterised emancipation everywhere in Europe … that the Jew might only become a man when he ceased to be a Jew’.40

Now, Arendt’s account of assimilationism has rightly been criticised for constructing a pejorative view of assimilated German Jews.41 There is now a substantial literature describing the various creative paths of assimilation taken by Jews in Germany and elsewhere, which reveals a more complex picture of assimilated Jews than Arendt provided.42 Not all were as complacent or as passive as she seems to suggest. Some did not conform to existing society, or rebelled against it in the name of its unachieved ideals. Some were politically engaged as liberals and socialists. Some did not place much value on their Jewish identity and saw themselves only as good liberals or good socialists. Some created new hybrid identities out of the encounter between Germans and Jews. And some, including Arendt herself, refused to discard their particularity as Jews in order to be accepted as universal human beings.

If we are to recover the force of Arendt’s argument, we have more work to do. We need to make a distinction Arendt generally did not observe: that between assimilation and assimilationism. Arendt tended to use these concepts interchangeably but it makes little sense to treat Arendt as hostile to assimilation as such. She was, after all, a thoroughly assimilated German–Jewish intellectual. Her critique is undoubtedly reductive when aimed at assimilation as such, but
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it makes good sense when aimed at assimilationism, that is to say, a response to antisemitism that turns assimilation into the raison d’être of one’s being in the world. While assimilation refers to processes of adjustment to prevailing social norms, which can take all manner of more or less creative forms, assimilationism prizes assimilation over all other values. Arendt is not to be blamed for facing up to the contradictions of assimilationism, that is to say, of a subjectivity that does everything it can to refute the existence of antisemitism, to put acceptance in society before solidarity with fellow Jews, and to represent oneself as an ‘exception’ to the Jewish norm. Assimilationism was a form of life of assimilated Jewish metropolitan intellectuals willing to come to terms with an ever more antisemitic society.43

On Zionist responses to antisemitism

The main political alternative to assimilationism Arendt addressed, and with which she had a deeply troubled relation, was that of Jewish nationalism and especially Zionism. Arendt was critical of Zionism but she worked with it and saw it as a radical response to the failure of assimilationists to face up to the attacks mounted by antisemites. In her 1964 interview with Gunther Gaus, she recollected her feeling that ‘there was no alternative’ and that ‘it would have been pointless to work with the assimilated’.44 In 1938 she wrote that she valued nationalist histories written from a Zionist perspective more than ‘apologetic’ histories written from an assimilationist perspective, since Zionists at least attempted to ‘defend the honour of the Jewish people’ and ‘unify a scattered nation’.45 She saw it as the strength of Zionism to recognise the existence of modern European antisemitism in a way that assimilationists were never able to do; but its weakness as she saw it was to naturalise antisemitism – to conceive the history of the Jews as one ‘monotonous chronicle of persecution and misfortune’, to put the notion of ‘an eternal struggle of substances foreign to one another’ before any social or historical relations, to treat hatred of Jews as a ‘generalised fixation’ that erased any distinction between friends and foes, to treat antisemitism as a relation between non-Jews and Jews that could be escaped but not changed.46 Arendt saw Zionism as a response to persecution based on the credo that ‘You can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as. A person attacked as a Jew cannot defend himself as an Englishman or a Frenchman. The world would only conclude that he is simply not defending himself’.47 Nonetheless she did not simply endorse this form of response. Zionism, like other nationalisms, offered a limited form of solidarity.

Arendt’s analysis of Zionism was tied to the experience of other post-imperial nationalist movements, which accompanied the break-up of the multi-national empires (Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Prussian) that had dominated Europe and Asia until the First World War. They all based themselves on the
conviction that ‘emancipation could be attained only with national self-determination’ and aimed to secure their ‘own’ nation states, at a time when there was a widespread consensus across the political spectrum that nations had a right to self-determination. Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, and Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, were opposed in almost every other respect, but converged over the existence of this right. Arendt did not disagree but she drew attention to the reshaping of the political landscape on which this right was premised. While in its republican form the state had defined the nation in terms of common citizenship in a bounded political community, post-imperial nationalist movements reversed this relation. It was now the nation that defined the state and established internal divisions between those deemed to belong to the nation and those deemed to fall outside. Arendt wrote of the construction in newly independent states of a fourfold hierarchy: state-peoples who had a recognised claim to their own state; peoples said to be formally equal but unequal in fact; minorities sometimes legally recognised in international treaties; and stateless persons deprived of work, home, country and, as she famously put it, of the very ‘right to have rights’. The danger Arendt discerned in Zionism was that the same kind of exclusionary nationalism which spread over the European continent in the interwar years was again rising to the surface in the Middle East. In an essay on *The Crisis of Zionism* (1943), she argued that ‘the foundations of Zionism were laid during a time when nobody could imagine any other solution to minority or nationality problems than the autonomous national state with a homogeneous population’. At the same time, and this was a crucial qualification, she warned against allowing a selective distrust of nationalism to be turned into a pretext for abandoning the project for a Jewish homeland. She looked for other solutions, including the idea of a federal state based on equal rights for all peoples following a model she saw *in nuce* in the United States, Soviet Union and Europe, but she never doubted the need to provide a safe place for those facing annihilation.

In *Zionism Reconsidered* (1944), Arendt argued that Zionism was the child not only of romantic nationalism but also of socialism. She expressed her admiration of left Zionists in Hashomer Hatzair and Poale Zion for the social experiments they carried out but criticised their indifference to Arab–Jewish co-operation, failure to support Jews and Arabs who looked to co-operation, and acceptance of terror against Arab populations. Arendt was worried by a tendency toward ‘revisionist attitudes’ in mainstream Zionism, that is, the tendency to accept antisemitism as a ‘fact’ of the non-Jewish world, to adopt an intransigent stance on the Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine, and to prioritise alliances with imperial powers against relations with their neighbours. She admired the militancy of Zionism but not the ‘self-centredness’ that had little interest in fighting alongside other revolutionary forces in Europe. Whenever the Zionist movement in Palestine faced a choice between asking for ‘protection from an
outside power against their neighbours’ and coming to ‘a working agreement with their neighbours’, Arendt saw it as inclined to choose the former: ‘only folly could dictate a policy which trusts a distant imperial power for protection, while alienating the good will of neighbours’. The point for Arendt was that this type of ‘revisionism’ did nothing to combat the antisemitism that existed among Arabs as well as Europeans.

Arendt argued that what came in to being in Palestine was a world of mutual denunciation: ‘Jewish determination to keep and possibly extend national sovereignty without consideration for Arab interests, and Arab determination to expel the Jewish “invaders” from Palestine without consideration for Jewish achievements there’. The result was that a small national conflict in the Middle East, which bore a disturbing resemblance to that of small nations in Europe in the interwar period, was magnified and distorted in terms of ‘sinister behind-the-scenes conspiracy’. Arabs saw themselves confronted by the forces of imperialism, Jews saw themselves confronted by two thousand years of antisemitic history; both treated their opponents not as a ‘concrete human being’ but as a kind of ‘ghost’ or ‘phantom’. Arendt saw it as a basic task of critical thought to exorcise these phantoms and foster a changed attitude among both Jews and Arabs: ‘recognition of the existence of the state of Israel on one side and of the existence of an Arab population in Palestine and the Near East on the other’.

To make sense of Arendt’s critical stance, we need again to make a distinction she did not always observe: between the project of building a homeland in which Jews could find refuge, and that of constructing an exclusionary nation state. Arendt’s appraisal of Zionism was founded on a distinction between the right of national self-determination and the political reversions and ideological mystifications generated by exclusive nationalism. Recognition of the right of peoples to collective self-determination at local, national and transnational levels is not at all the same thing as an ideology that turns the nation into the supreme source of political sovereignty. Her search was for new forms of territorial entity.

**Equivocations of cosmopolitanism**

So far we find in Arendt’s Jewish writings a twofold critique: on one side, the critique of an assimilationism whose wilful blindness in the face of the gathering menace set the scene for its failure; on the other, the critique of a Zionism rendered normatively suspect by its naturalistic understanding of antisemitism. To do justice to Arendt’s Jewish writings, we should keep both sides in mind. We should also keep in mind that Arendt adopted a developmental approach to her analysis of Jewish consciousness in the face of modern antisemitism. She saw Zionism, for all its fault-lines, as an advance over assimilationism – as a response
to antisemitism that was more political, more radical and more attractive to the Jewish masses than the assimilationism it opposed.

The Eichmann trial of 1960–1961 brought Arendt’s critical relation to assimilationism and Zionism to the forefront of political debate. Arendt travelled to Jerusalem to attend some of the trial and published her ‘report’ at first in the New Yorker and then as the monograph *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The accused, Adolf Eichmann, had been in charge of the Nazi transportation of Jews to the death and labour camps. He escaped prosecution after the war, joined other Nazi escapees in Argentina, was seized by the Israeli secret services and put on trial in Israel. His trial provided a major opportunity, perhaps the first, to address the phenomenon of genocidal antisemitism in a public forum.58 The trial also provided an occasion for Arendt to concretise her critique of Zionism and develop her own cosmopolitan leanings. Her assessment of the trial was equivocal. On the one hand, she had no problem with the abduction of Eichmann from Argentina, a country where there was little chance of extradition; no problem with an Israeli court prosecuting Eichmann for crimes committed almost entirely against Jews; no problem with the guilty verdict or the death penalty imposed on Eichmann. To the criticism that the trial ought to have been the work of an international criminal court, she defended the right of Israel to hold the trial and pointed out that in any event, there was no international criminal court. To the criticism that the trial might appear as a form of vengeance, she argued that it depended on how the trial was conducted.

On the other hand, Arendt criticised the prosecution, and in particular the prosecutor Gideon Hausner, for losing sight of the universalistic promise contained in the notion of ‘crimes against humanity’: she heard the voice of Jewish chauvinism in his privileging the new offence of ‘crimes against the Jewish people’ over that of ‘crimes against humanity’, in his failure to understand that humankind in its entirety had been ‘grievously hurt and endangered’ by the attack on Jews, in his appeals to Old Testament conceptions of vengeance over secular legality, and most controversially in his refusal to face up to the complicity of some members of the Jewish councils (Judenräte and Jüdischen Ältestenräte) in the execution of the ‘final solution’ – and that not all Jews were victims or heroes.59

For Arendt the ‘final solution’ – the terms *Shoah* and *Holocaust* were not yet used in this context – was not only to be understood in the context of the long history of antisemitism but also as an attack on the very idea of ‘humanity’.60 More than fifteen years earlier, in response to the Nuremberg trials, she had sought to expand the idea of guilt beyond national identity markers. She maintained in a cosmopolitan spirit that what was done to Jews raised questions not only of German guilt but also ‘of what man is capable’. In an essay of ‘universal responsibility’ she wrote:
For many years now we have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed of being German, I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human ... For the idea of humanity ... has the very serious consequence that ... men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that all nations share the onus of evil committed by all others ... In political terms, the idea of humanity, excluding no people and assigning a monopoly of guilt to no one, is the only guarantee that one ‘superior race’ after another may not feel obligated to ... exterminate ‘inferior races unworthy of survival’ ... It becomes daily clearer how great a burden mankind is for man. Perhaps those Jews, to whose forefathers we owe the first conception of the idea of humanity, knew something about that burden when each year they used to say ‘Our Father and King, we have sinned before you’, taking not only the sins of their own community but all human offences upon themselves. Those who today are ready to follow this road in a modern version do not content themselves with the hypocritical confession ‘God be thanked, I am not like that’ ... Rather in fear and trembling have they finally realized of what man is capable – and this is indeed the precondition of modern political thinking ... only upon them, who are filled with a genuine fear of the inescapable guilt of the human race, can there be any reliance when it comes to fighting fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against the incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about.61

Arendt had argued in 1945 for a universal conception of ‘humanity’: that human beings must assume responsibility for all the crimes committed by human beings and that a monopoly of guilt should be assigned to no one nation. She saw the idea of ‘universal responsibility’ as all that was left of the once noble idea of international solidarity. Now in the early 1960s she again picked up this cosmopolitan thread. What was most dramatically on display in the figure of Eichmann was the incapacity to imagine sharing a common world with Jews or see the world from their point of view. This was at once an attack both on Jews and on the idea of humanity itself.

the fate of the Jews has become today the symbol of what appears to be the rule of the devil on earth ... it is in the very nature of things human that every act that has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as potentiality ... if genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth – least of all, of course, the Jewish people, in Israel or elsewhere – can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence.62

The trial of Eichmann re-raised the question of what it is to be human, for the project in which he participated was in effect an attempt to eradicate the very idea of the human status.63 In Mein Kampf Hitler denounced universalism as a mode of Jewish domination designed to weaken the racial struggle. For Hitler it did not matter if universalism took the form of Christianity, liberalism, socialism or cosmopolitanism, for in all its guises it was the invention of the Jews
in their ceaseless endeavour to seize power and profit. The genocide of Jews was not just one for Jews to respond to but for everyone who wished to defend the idea of humanity against its assailants.

If we are right in saying that the main thread of Arendt’s argument was a cosmopolitan thread, the fury with which her report on the trial was met within the Jewish political and intellectual community indicates how little it was understood. Her cosmopolitan leanings, defence of universalism and critique of Jewish chauvinism gave rise to the impression among some of her readers that she lacked human compassion and, more specifically, that she lacked compassion for the Jewish people. Gershom Scholem wrote to Arendt after the publication of her work objecting to the ‘sneering’ tone she used in speaking of her fellow Jews, focusing exclusively on ‘the weakness of the Jewish stance in the world’ and writing in a ‘heartless … and malicious tone’ on matters that touched ‘the very quick of our life’. Scholem accused Arendt of lacking love for the Jewish people, Ahabath Israel in Hebrew, which he described as typical of ‘so many intellectuals who came from the German left’. In response, Arendt re-affirmed her cosmopolitan leanings in a clever and honest way by attributing to Scholem’s reprimand a quite different meaning:

You are quite right – I am not moved by any ‘love’ of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class, or anything of that sort. I indeed ‘love’ only my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this ‘love of the Jews’ would appear to me, since I am Jewish myself, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person … The greatness of this people [the Jews] was once that it believed in God … And now this people believes only in itself? What good can come out of that? – Well, in this sense I do not ‘love’ the Jews nor do I ‘believe’ in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.

A cosmopolitan ethos infused Arendt’s response to Scholem’s condemnation. It looked on love for any nation with suspicion and love for one’s own nation with special suspicion. Love is a personal and not a political matter; one has love for individuals and not for collectivities. The additional comment, that no good could come from a people who once believed in God now believing only in itself, echoed an observation she had made many years earlier in The Origins of Totalitarianism, that Judaism once meant ‘the sharing of specific memories and specific hopes’ but that in a secular age it tended to relapse into a ‘simple fact of birth’. In this context Arendt maintained that ‘love for the Jewish people’ could become a ‘very real chauvinism … a perverted nationalism in which (in the words of Chesterton) “the individual is himself the thing to be worshipped”’. 

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Arendt’s argument can best be understood if we distinguish between nationalism, i.e. making an ‘ism’ of the nation, and a simple sense of national belonging. In this case, her critique of Jewish nationalism was not at all incompatible with a strong sense of the rights of Jews, including the right of self-determination. She added a rider to the cosmopolitan tenor of her argument by acknowledging that ‘wrong done by my own people naturally grieves me more than the wrong done by other peoples’. She maintained that she had always taken as given her mother’s injunction that the wrongs done to her own people imposed on her, as a Jew, a particular responsibility to ‘strike back’. Arendt’s twofold stance contrasts both with those who attend only to the wrongs done by Jewish people and with those who attend only to the wrongs done to Jewish people. It gave genuine substance to her cosmopolitan ethos.

Our cosmopolitan existence

In her phenomenology of Jewish political consciousness, Arendt was critical of abstract forms of cosmopolitanism. She held that abstract cosmopolitanism could become merely a way of ‘evading reality’, the reality of who you are. She wrote of the ‘pathos’ of Jewish revolutionaries who preferred to ‘play the revolutionary in the society of others but not in their own’, and of Jewish intellectuals who imagined they could exist as ‘pure human beings outside the range of peoples and nations’. Regarding the phantasy that ‘once the Jew was emancipated he would become more human, more free, and less prejudiced than other men’, she described it as a ‘gross expectation’ lacking in elementary understanding. In its abstract form of expression she likened cosmopolitanism to an international passport that gives you entry to every country in the world except your own. For Arendt, cosmopolitanism was not to be conceived as a synthesis finally resolving the contradictions present in assimilationism and Zionism, but rather as itself a site of contradiction. In a Europe beset by genocidal antisemitism, the peril Arendt articulated was that cosmopolitanism could function as a facile denial of reality erasing the specificity of Jewish experience. In her reply to Scholem, Arendt justifiably wrote that the ‘Jewish problem … has never been my problem’. She was right about herself and alert to the danger of dressing up the ‘Jewish problem’ in a modern cosmopolitan garb.

Arendt’s response to the abstraction of cosmopolitanism was similar to Marx’s response to the abstraction of humanism: for Marx, it was not to reject humanism but to construct a ‘real humanism’, as he put it; for Arendt, it was not to reject cosmopolitanism but to construct what we might call a ‘real cosmopolitanism’, which resisted turning the cosmopolitan ethos into an other-worldly ideal. Our ‘cosmopolitan existence’, she wrote in her Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, does not lie in dissociating ourselves from our particular identities and
background but in nurturing the capacity to share a common world with others, to place oneself in the shoes of others, to see the world from the viewpoint of others. She wrote as follows:

One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis*. But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one’s ‘cosmopolitan existence’. When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearing from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and therefore also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.75

‘Common sense’ refers to the experience of sharing of a common world with others; it requires the imagination to see the world from the standpoint of others. World citizenship and world spectatorship require what she called the ‘enlarged mentality’ capable of breaking free from the fetters of self-absorption. While they recognise the boundaries of one’s communal grouping, they also push beyond these boundaries to behold the world through the eyes of the generalised other. It is a carefully crafted and balanced passage. Recognition of one’s particular being as a member of this or that community is set against abstract cosmopolitanism; recognition of one’s universal existence as a member of a world community is set against the allures of nationalism; recognition that judgment should be based on the *idea* of being a world citizen is set against the illusion that the world is actually cosmopolitan.

Arendt’s idea of our ‘cosmopolitan existence’ incited the fury of some who were intent on defending Jewish chauvinism, and won the esteem of others who have used her work to legitimate antizionism. What both sets of commentators miss is Arendt’s sense of the sheer modernity of the Jewish question and the oppressive weight of its legacy, which declares that Jews have to cease to be Jews in order to realise their humanity. The cosmopolitan existence to which Arendt referred is a struggle not only to overcome the prejudices of the so-called Jewish question, but also to recognise the inner strength of the three moments in the development of modern Jewish consciousness: the ‘assimilated’ moment of living one’s life as a Jew in the diaspora, the ‘Zionist’ moment of living one’s life as a citizen of Israel, and the ‘cosmopolitan’ moment of putting ourselves in the place of others, not least those for whose human suffering we bear some responsibility. There is no contradiction between these forms of life once we emancipate them from their respective ‘isms’ and cease to entrench them as hostile ways of being. What we wish to uncover in Arendt’s Jewish writings is, we might say, a moderation wrought out of a deep and bold sense of rebellion against every absolute – be it old-fashioned assimilationism, a nationalistic Zionism, or even a cosmopolitan sense of moral superiority over those who identify with the Jewish nation.
For us this is the hallmark of Arendt’s own striving for common sense and enlarged mentality. It was haunted by recognition of the human condition of Jews after the Holocaust, which the return of the Jewish question was again threatening from within and without.

Notes

5 Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 65.
6 Regarding the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, Arendt wrote: ‘In fin-de-siècle society it was the antisemitism of the Dreyfus affair which opened society’s doors to Jews … When the traitor was discovered to be the rather stupid victim of an ordinary frame-up … social interest in Jews subsided as quickly as did political antisemitism. Jews were again looked upon as ordinary mortals … When antisemitic legislation (later) forced society to oust the Jews … “admirers” of Jews finally became their murderers … It may be doubted that they were prominent among those who ran the death factories, although the percentage of the so-called educated classes among the actual killers is amazing. But it does explain the incredible disloyalty of precisely those strata of society that had known Jews most intimately’. Arendt, *Origins*, 86–87.
7 In *Anti-Judaism*, David Nirenberg situates antisemitism as a definite stage in the history of anti-Judaic thinking. He writes that it is ‘a word that captures only a small portion, historically and conceptually’ of what his book is about. Nirenberg also emphasises its lack of explanatory power: ‘How and why do ideas about Jews and Judaism become convincing explanations for the state of the world? She [Arendt] rightly stressed the failure of “Antisemitism” as a sufficient explanation. The term anti-Semite effectively labels its targets as enemies of Jews and Judaism, but it does not do much to explain the nature of or reason for that enmity’. See Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 461–465.
8 Zygmunt Bauman offers one of the finest examples of sociological understanding of the modernity of antisemitism, but it is one that ultimately represents antisemitism as belonging to a now superseded age, the age of the first modernity as seen from the point of view of postmodernity. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991) and *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).
9 Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 64.
10 Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 64.
11 Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 69.
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12 Arendt, Origins, 53.
13 Arendt, Origins, 241, 229.
14 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 75.
16 Arendt, Origins, 8–9.
17 Arendt, Origins, 8.
18 Arendt, Origins, 98.
19 Arendt, Origins, 99.
21 Arendt, Origins, 33.
22 Arendt, Origins, xiv.
23 We shall address in a further chapter ‘anti-Zionist’ conceptions of the co-responsibility of Jews for antisemitism, which are wrongly associated with Arendt.
24 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 48.
26 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 9.
27 Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, 269.
29 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 53.
30 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 48.
31 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 51.
32 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 52.
33 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 42.
34 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 80.
35 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 284.
36 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 275.
37 For a survey of ‘pariah types’, explaining why Lazare was Arendt’s ideal type, see Tuija Parvikko, The Responsibility of the Pariah: The Impact of Bernard Lazare on Arendt’s Conception of Political Action and Judgement in Extreme Situations (Finland: SoPhi Academic Press, 2000).
38 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 276.
39 Arendt, Jewish Writings, 283.
40 Staudenmaier, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Analysis of Antisemitism’.
41 See, for example, Shulamit Volkov, Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials in Emancipation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Steven E. Aschheim, Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times (Bloomington: Indiana
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University Press 2001); George Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1985). It should be noted that the total of conversions in Vienna between 1868 and 1903 was about 9000 Jews, less than 10% of the whole. Even this was proportionately higher than that for Berlin. See Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, trans. Rosemary Morris (New York: Continuum, 1993), 187–204.

According to Le Rider, the journalist and writer Karl Kraus attacked assimilationism from the other side: ‘why attack the antisemites when it was Jewish and liberal corruption in finance and the press that was causing all the trouble?’, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*, 252.

Arendt, ‘What Remains?’


Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 75.

Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 137.


Arendt *Origins*, 301–302. Arendt was preoccupied by the emergence of a stateless class of human beings, numbered in millions, expelled from their homes, turned into refugees, confronted by police blocking access into other countries, and their predicament ascribed to their own natural deficiencies. This transformation of the European landscape profoundly affected Jewish minorities, many of whom were driven westward as stateless refugees. Often this meant that Jews were persecuted by local nationalists before being hunted down by Nazis. It was, in part, because Arendt was exercised by the plight of Jews in Europe, that she supported attempts to build a Jewish democratic state in Palestine. On the role of nationalists in murdering Jews, see Snyder, *Black Earth* and Aristotle Kallis, *Genocide and Fascism: The Eliminationist Drive in Fascist Europe* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2009).


Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 430.

Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 428.

In recent discussions of Arendt’s Jewish writings, some contemporary radical readers of her work misconstrue Arendt’s critique of Zionism as a forerunner of the contemporary ‘antizionism’ of which they are advocates. In our judgment they underplay the significance of Arendt’s critique of assimilationism and her support for the establishment of Israel. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press 2005).

The category of ‘crimes against humanity’ was conceived in 1945 to enable prosecution of the kind of crimes Eichmann was accused of but was marginalised in practice
in the Nuremberg Trials. See Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The Genocide Convention of 1948 was formulated in part as a response to the Holocaust, but the history of genocidal antisemitism did not figure prominently in discussions of the Convention or in the final text. Arendt’s determination to write about the Eichmann trial was triggered by the fact that the prosecution of a key architect and administrator of the ‘final solution’ directly raised the human meaning of genocidal antisemitism.

At one point Arendt wrote rather hyperbolically of David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, that he was trying to turn the prosecution into a ‘show trial’. However, the term ‘show trial’ conjures up a different phenomenon – the charging of people with crimes they did not commit, and murdering them in order to terrorise others. Neither applies to the Eichmann trial. It also seems to be the case that she exaggerated the effect that Ben-Gurion had on the construction of the prosecution and on its reception in Israel. See Hanna Yablonka, *The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).

Arendt emphasised that the category ‘crimes against humanity’ was not just a juridical name, but an accurate way of capturing the radical project of eradicating the idea of humanity. The relation of the concept to actuality is discussed in her correspondence with Jaspers around both the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials and in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. See, for example, 268–269. See Robert Fine, ‘Crimes Against Humanity: Hannah Arendt and the Nuremberg Debates’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3 (3), 2000: 293–311.


Arendt also raised the importance of introducing a third element into cosmopolitan ways of thinking: not only universalism and particularism but also uniqueness, singularity, a deeper sense of plurality than is possible through the idea of common humanity or that of particular identity.

For Hitler’s representation of universalism as a ‘Jewish idea’ that had to be destroyed see Snyder, *Black Earth*, 5–6; and ‘Hitler’s World’, *New York Review of Books*, 63 (14), 24 September to 7 October 2015: 6–10.


Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 467.

Malachi Haim Hacohen writes that the philosopher Karl Popper ‘spoke little of the Jewish predicament’ but ‘rejected all nationalism, German and Jewish alike. The Open Society offered a radical cosmopolitan alternative to Central European nationalism’. He spoke of Jews as exemplary cosmopolitans as well as citizens in their respective countries. He deconstructed the nation state but ‘never extended this mode...
of questioning to the old Austro-Hungarian Empire … The gap between cosmopolitan dream and ethnonational realities came back to haunt Popper with a vengeance’. Franz Kafka commented perceptively in this vein in a letter to Brod, 1921: ‘Most [Jewish writers] who began writing in German wanted to distance themselves from Jewishness … but their hind legs were still stuck to their father’s Jewishness and their forelegs found no new ground’. See Malachi Haim Hacohen, ‘Popper’s Cosmopolitanism’ in Steven Beller, *Rethinking Vienna 1900* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2001), 171–194.

Arendt comments critically on Stephan Zweig’s aloofness from his Jewishness and on his inability to reconcile himself to the fact that ‘the famous Stephan Zweig had become the Jew Zweig’. See Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 59. Zweig was often asked to lend his voice to anti-Nazi and Jewish causes, but by his own admission he was anything but outspoken. Arendt argued that Zweig clung to the hope that, if he didn’t draw attention to himself, his work could somehow continue unimpeded. Klaus Mann was no less disparaging of Zweig’s decision to remain ‘objective’, ‘understanding’, and ‘just’ toward the deadly enemy.

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1. Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 282. Arendt lauded the Soviet Union as a country in which the rights of Jews were guaranteed by constitutional law and the penal code. She was wholly mistaken. Her central point, however, stands – that it is not a moral or political failure to struggle against antisemitism as one form of the universal struggle against oppression and exploitation.

2. Cited in Jacques Le Rider, ‘The Assimilated Jews of Vienna’ in Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*, 200. Le Rider points out that the Jewish writer, Stefan Zweig, was misled by his own ‘almost unreasoning cosmopolitanism’. After hailing Emile Verhaeren as a ‘pan-European’, he was ‘shattered to discover in 1914 that his Belgian idol was an anti-German patriot, capable … of violently antisemitic pronouncements’ (200–201).

3. The erasure of any sign of Jews in favour of generic constructs like ‘victims of Nazism’ or ‘anti-fascists’ was common practice in official Communist memorials to the camps and has provided the template in which the mention of Jewish victims has been described as privileging the particularistic concerns of Jews. For a journalistic discussion see, for example, James Kirchick, ‘The Holocaust without Jews’, *Tablet*, 3 May 2016, www.tabletmag(2,4),(998,993)


6. In *The Rebel* Albert Camus wrote in praise of rebellious moderation against absolutism: ‘Moderation is not the opposite of rebellion. Rebellion in itself is moderation, and it demands, defends and recreates it throughout history … Moderation, born of rebellion, can only live by rebellion’. See Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 301. We find something in Arendt’s phenomenology of Jewish responsiveness to antisemitism that has close parallels with Camus’ identity of rebellion and moderation.