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HEIDEGGER’S SHADOW

Levinas, Arendt, and the Magician From Messkirch

Jonathan Judaken

We gave Heidegger the nickname “the little magician from Messkirch.” . . . His lecture technique consisted in building up an edifice of ideas, which he then proceeded to tear down, presenting the spellbound listeners with a riddle and then leaving them empty-handed.

Karl Löwith (2001: 34–35)

To treat Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt together on the topic of race is to tell a family story. All family histories, especially those about race, are about legacies and inheritance. Heidegger was not only Arendt’s and Levinas’s professor, but their key intellectual influence, impacting their lives as well as their philosophy. When Heidegger publically sided with Nazism, they were upended. This chapter considers how Levinas and Arendt both thought within but also sought to move beyond “Heidegger’s shadow”: his tutelage, his approach to the Western metaphysical and philosophical tradition, and his support of Nazism.

Heidegger’s “Hitlerism,” to use Levinas’s formulation, was undergirded by the legacy of the German völkisch tradition, which was framed by a specific ethnocentric and Eurocentric trajectory. Rejecting Heidegger’s völkisch thought and his ethnocentrism, Arendt and Levinas nonetheless shared his Eurocentrism. This caused them at times to get lost in his shadow, tripping like Dante in a dark wood, repeating racial stereotypes and typecast racial tropes. But Heidegger also opened a new path in philosophy that sought a destructuring (Destruktion) of Western metaphysics. This helped spur Levinas and Arendt to confront the heritage of Western race thinking. Levinas’s ethical project focused on the infinite responsibility for the Other, violated by the racism immanent in Western thought. Arendt historicized the stream of modern European ideas and institutions linking anti-Semitism, imperialism, totalitarianism, and genocide. This chapter traces the intellectual legacies of Heidegger, Levinas, and Arendt by mapping how scholars have addressed the debates about Hitlerism, race and racism, Jews and Judeophobia, the Holocaust and genocide, and the ethics and politics in their work.
Racing Heidegger’s Shadow

The shadow of Heidegger’s relationship to Nazism haunts the scholarship of his views on race. This is because in April of 1933, shortly after Hitler’s assumption of the chancellorship and amid the political restructuring of education, Heidegger maneuvered to obtain the post of rector of the University of Freiburg. He was elected to the position on April 21 and delivered his Rectoral Address on “The Self-Assertion of the German University” on April 27. It was replete with references to the *Führerprinzip* couched in some of his philosophical formulations (Heidegger 2003 [1933]: 2–11). In May 1933, Heidegger sent a telegram to Hitler expressing solidarity with the recent *Gleichschaltung* legislation that promised to align the university with the official policies of the Third Reich. This included enforcing the anti-Semitic laws that banned Jews from all government service, including university life. Known as the Baden Decree, it was implemented to purge the “Jewification of the Universities.” It meant that Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology and Heidegger’s benefactor, was now removed as professor emeritus, forbidden from even using the university library. He was one among 1,600 Jewish professors expunged. Commenting on this in a letter to Karl Jaspers, Arendt noted painfully, “I cannot but regard Heidegger as a potential murderer” (Arendt and Jaspers [1992]: 48). She and Levinas were at once “distracted, and philosophically instigated by Heidegger’s Nazi turn” (Moyn 1998: 23).

Heidegger’s Nazi turn, however, requires us to separate a set of overlapping themes: Heidegger’s views on race, his völkisch thought, and the relationship between his philosophy and National Socialism. The latter debate has become known as “the Heidegger Affair” and has gone through several waves. The issue was first deliberated in France in 1946 and 1947 in *Les Temps modernes*, and then in more scattered discussions from 1948 to 1987 (Kleinberg 2012: 386–413). It became a major affair in France in the immediate aftermath of the publication of Victor Farías’ dossier *Heidegger et le nazisme* in 1987. Farías’s text was responded to between October 1987 and May 1988 with the publication of a series of books on the topic by some of France’s most prominent philosophers: Jean-François Lyotard, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and in a flurry of subsequent radio and television programs and magazine and journal articles in France and internationally (Wolin 1988; Sheehan 1988; Rockmore 1995). More recently, Emmanuel Faye published the most extreme indictment yet of Heidegger, *L’introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie: Autour des séminaires inédits de 1933–1935* (Faye 2009). Faye insists that Heidegger’s Nazism infuses all of his philosophy and that there is consequently nothing redeemable in his thought. The latest cascade of considerations has resulted from the publication of Heidegger’s *Schwarze Hefte*, or “Black Notebooks,” his handwritten reflections penned in small black diaries (Trawny 2014; Wolin 2014; Gordon 2014; Faye 2014).

Heidegger’s relationship to Nazism is no less complicated than Nazi views on race. The problem with much of the literature on race and the Nazis of which the debates about Heidegger are a part is that often Hitler’s statements in *Mein Kampf* and elsewhere are taken as the template for this discussion. Hitler claimed that all of life was a struggle for existence governed by rigid biological laws, where victory depended upon racial purity, and the rootless Jew was the personification of evil. But following in the footsteps of the pioneering scholars of Nazi culture like Fritz Stern (1961) and George Mosse (1981 [1964]), intellectual historians including Anson Rabinbach and Sander
Gilman have noted the pliability and broad range of positions articulated in the name of race and the Volk by adherents to one version or another of Nazi ideas:

Nazi ideology had its roots in a broad array of völkisch, anti-Semitic, and pseudo-scientific ideas put forward during the nineteenth century, including social Darwinism, eugenics, pan-Germanism, Aryan mysticism, and extreme nationalism. But it never developed a consistent or officially prescribed doctrine. . . . Despite Hitler’s frequent claim that “National Socialism is a worldview,” even the leading ideologues of the movement—like Rosenberg, Krieck, Goebbels, and Hitler himself—showed little consensus about what this worldview encompassed. (2013: 107)

Race talk was consequently central to the Nazi message, but what anchored this message was variable, veering from biology to religion to more diffuse notions of spirit or cultural essence. There was a malleability and plasticity to notions of Volk and Rasse that were contested, sifted, reassessed, and rearticulated in the process of defining the national community (Volksgemeinschaft). Judeophobia functioned within this toxic mix as what Shulamit Volkov (1978) famously designated “a cultural code”: the conspiratorial anti-type to the Volk, embodying the rootless foreigner and the exploitative, materialist, and threatening shadow of modernity. What was key for the Nazis was that Volk and race were the terms in which the discussion of identities were deliberated because it was as such that the Nazi racial state extended its power. It was less important to the Nazis that a fixed definition of race coagulated.

Heidegger’s letters, diaries, speeches, essays, and lectures have to be understood in this broader frame, as well as within the philosophical debates of the era. Even before the Black Notebooks, we knew of Heidegger’s Judeophobia and his use of völkisch idioms. In 1929, for example, he had penned a letter to Victor Schwoerer, director of the Bureau of Universities of the Ministries of Public Education, in which he noted:

We are confronted by a crucial choice: Either to infuse, again, our German spiritual life with genuine indigenous forces and educators, or to leave it at the mercy, once and for all, of the Jewish contamination [Verjudung], both in a larger and a narrower sense. (2003: 1)

He concluded by saying how he took great pleasure “in seeing my work deeply rooted in our native soil” (Heidegger 2003 [1929]: 1). The example is pointed since Jewification (Verjudung) and rootedness were the two key antipodes of völkisch thought.

The Black Notebooks now show more clearly than ever that “during the 1930s and 1940s Heidegger was wholly obsessed with Bolshevism, National Socialism, and the ignoble actions of ‘World Jewry’ (Weltjudentum), as represented by Western powers such as England and the United States” (Wolin 2014: 40). They are replete with the stock and trade of anti-Semitic stereotypes. Heidegger notes, for instance:

Contemporary Jewry’s . . . increase in power finds its basis in the fact that western metaphysics—above all, in its modern incarnation—offers fertile ground for the dissemination of an empty rationality and calculability, which in this
way gains a foothold in “spirit,” without ever being able to grasp from within the hidden realms of decision.

(Wolin 2014: 42)

He jots elsewhere that “the tenacious aptitude for calculating and profiteering and intermingling, upon which the worldlessness of Jewry is founded” contributes to the hidden form that “machination” (Machenschaft) takes in modernity (Gordon 2014). As Adorno explained about how stereotypes work in *The Authoritarian Personality*, “Jewry” functions in the Black Notebooks as the personification of the targets of Heidegger’s thinking—Western metaphysics, calculative rationality, technology, and capitalist modernity—serving as the progenitors of those values in the nation-states that competed with Germany.

While his reign as a Nazi official ended when he resigned as rector in April 1934, Heidegger still continued to end classes by saluting Hitler, proclaimed “the inner truth and greatness of the movement” in 1935, and he remained in the Nazi party until 1945. But to understand what this meant to him in terms of Nazi racial politics, we can turn to his lectures to gain a clearer sense of his public position on *Rasse* and *Volk* in this period. Robert Bernasconi’s “Heidegger’s Alleged Challenge to the Nazi Concepts of Race” is a good guide because he provides an attentive reading of Heidegger’s shifting position alongside the work of other Nazi philosophers writing on the topic (Bernasconi 2000). In elucidating Heidegger’s position, Bernasconi also critiques past scholarship, including works by Julian Young, Pascal David, Berel Lang, and Tom Rockmore. He does so by focusing on the debate about the relevance of Heidegger’s lack of “biologism”: the fact that Heidegger did not subscribe to a biologically based understanding of race. This focus, Bernasconi shows, occludes a more finely grained understanding of Heidegger’s position on race, one attuned to how it reverberated in the lecture halls and in the philosophical debates of the Nazi period.

For Bernasconi, Julian Young’s book *Heidegger, Philosophy, Nazism* (1997) stands in a long line of Heidegger’s apologists who separate Heidegger’s politics and prejudices from his philosophy. Young’s defense of Heidegger’s racism maintains that because Heidegger was critical of biological racism, and since racism is always biological, Heidegger was no racist. To Young, “spiritual racism” is a self-contradiction. Young’s dualism thus pulls apart biology and spirit to serve his *apologia*; the racial and the spiritual are separated further in Pascal David’s defense of Heidegger where he “dissociates Heidegger’s conception of *Volk* from that of race by identifying it as spiritual” (Bernasconi 2000: 53).

Benasconi next considers Berel Lang and Tom Rockmore, who each agree that Heidegger may have critiqued biological racism, but that he still adhered to what Lang terms “metaphysical racism” (1996). Through a reading of Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche in the late 1930s, Bernasconi suggests three things. First, that Lang’s concept of “metaphysical racism” is derived from Nietzsche’s work. Second, “Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche are the main site of Heidegger’s public confrontation with the extreme forms of Nazi racial thought in the late 1930s” (2000: 57). In these lectures, Heidegger sought to go beyond the appropriations of Nietzsche by Social Darwinian and racist Nazi philosophers who used Nietzsche to justify racial hygiene and eugenics, most perniciously Alfred Baeumler. In doing so, Heidegger was critical of one important philosophical strand of Nazi racism. Third, Bernasconi reminds readers that for Heidegger, Nietzsche was the culmination of Western metaphysics. Bernasconi provocatively
suggests that race thinking likewise is an aspect of Western metaphysics, which remains a problem yet to be overcome, and that perhaps Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics can be bent in this direction.

Sonia Sikka's chapter “Heidegger and Race” in Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy (2003) adds a cautionary caveat to Bernasconi's arguments. Sikka concurs that Heidegger's views on race were not congruent with the picture we get of Hitler's biology in Mein Kampf or in the Social Darwinian philosophical racists like Baeumler. She discusses Heidegger's lectures on “Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language” in 1934, Heidegger's lectures on Holderlin in 1934–1935, and on Nietzsche in 1936. She confirms Bernasconi's (and Heidegger's own retrospective claims) that in these lectures one sees a progressive critique of National Socialist biological racism. This much of Heidegger's own story about his relationship to the Nazi movement holds up (Heidegger 2003 [1966]).

But contra Bernasconi, she maintains that Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche was congruent with some Nazi appropriations, since Heidegger had an essentialist conception of the German Volk, a claim that Bernasconi has responded to in his most recent take on these issues (Bernasconi 2010). Sikka details how Heidegger dovetails with certain strands of völkisch ideology: always insisting on the unity of the Volk and using the language of landscape, heritage and destiny as categorical for thinking about the historical/cultural formation of peoples, which Heidegger consistently thought of as unitary. Sikka thus neatly synthesizes Heidegger's views on race:

In sum, while Heidegger did not support, and indeed opposed, any biologically based concept of race, he held a strong view of the unity and identity of every particular Volk. This view included the idea that each people has a single, unique character and destiny and a set of obligations rooted in that character and destiny.

(2003: 87–88)

Sikka concludes that there is nothing intrinsically racist about Heidegger's völkisch thought: he didn't ever place groups into a hierarchy and argue that some were superior, only that some had a unique mission and that the Germanic mission was tied to its language and its role within the history of Europe, which linked the Germans and Greeks. She maintains this view was Eurocentric and it could feed cultural racism, but it need not.

While this is true, reinserted into its political context, it did. Steven Ashheim (1992) indicates this in his masterly reception history The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990. Ashheim maintains that when Karl Löwith first penned “The Political Implications of Heidegger’s Existentialism,” which is what sparked the whole Heidegger Affair in its first incarnation in 1946, he indicated what intellectual historians like Ashheim have repeatedly insisted upon: “the perception of decline and impending European catastrophe . . . was not an idiosyncratic Heideggerian whim, but part and parcel of the post-1914 radical-right stock-in-trade, integral to the conservative revolutionary mentalité” (Ashheim 1992: 264). Understanding Heidegger's views on race entails situating Heidegger within this mentalité of which he was a part, and retracing how it played out in the Nazi era. It is as such that we can understand his political choices, but also central aspects of his Technikkritik (his critique of modern technology),
his criticism of calculative rationality, and his condemnation of capitalist modernity. Völkisch thought had long identified these traits with Jewish attributes. This völkisch tradition could abjure biologism all it wanted, but within the Nazi state its cultural racism was one strand that legitimated Nazi state policy on the Jewish question.

**Levinas After Heidegger’s Hitlerism**

As Jewish students of Heidegger, Levinas’s and Arendt’s views on race are usefully understood as studies in the “anxiety of influence.” As Richard Wolin maintains in *Heidegger's Children*, his “children sought to philosophize with Heidegger against Heidegger, thereby hoping to save what could be saved, all the while trying to cast off their mentor’s long and powerful shadow” (2001: 7–8). The literature on Levinas bears out this burden. Now entering its third generation, the first commentators were elucidators, translating and trying to understand Levinas’s notoriously difficult formulations (Drabinski 2011: xiv–xv). Levinas worked within the phenomenological tradition set by Husserl and Heidegger to establish the key axioms of his own philosophy, which from his earliest postwar writings to his final work concern the question of alterity (Otherness): existence as confronting the alterity of Being as horror; time as alterity; God as alterity; and most centrally the other person as irremediably Other (*autrui*), but whose existence demands hyperbolic responsibility, which is constitutive of the Self.

A second generation of scholars, animated by the early analysis of Levinas’s work by Derrida, concentrated on the questions of the alterity of language, and the gender of Levinas’s Other. They also sought to understand Levinas’s relationship to Heidegger’s thought, as well as Levinas’s Jewish writings in relation to his phenomenological work (Morgan 2007). The present generation of scholars has drawn attention to this relationship from a new angle, by explicitly considering Levinas’s views on race. Bernasconi (2005) first teased out the problem in another seminal article titled “Who Is My Neighbor? Who Is the Other? Questioning ‘the Generosity of Western Thought.’”

Originally published in 1992, this was a groundbreaking analysis of Levinas’s views on race, since Bernasconi framed the issue in terms of the relationship between ethnics and ethics in Levinas’s thought. To appreciate the stakes of this discussion it is useful to revisit the text where Levinas marks his break with Heidegger: “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” (1990b [1934]). While Heidegger’s name is unmentioned in the original, it is clearly signaled in Levinas’s “Prefatory Note” that accompanied the English translation in 1990:

> The source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding . . . [but rather by] the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. This possibility is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being . . . to use the Heideggerian expression.

(1990b: 63)

In “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Levinas subverts Heidegger’s own effort to exit from Western metaphysics via ontology. He insists instead upon an ethical impulse at the foundation of “Western civilization”—an impulse that he identifies with
Judaism—and that the philosophy of Hitlerism sought forcibly to eliminate. For Levi- 
inas, Hitlerism was a product of an autoimmune deficiency syndrome within “Western 
civilization,” that needed to (re)connect to ethics as its first principle.

Levinas maintains that Hitlerism sought to snuff out this Jewish impulse by radicaliz-
ing the materialism of the Enlightenment. National Socialism picked up on an insight 
of Socialism, which was an extension of Enlightenment principles, but located it within 
the Nazi vision of völkisch nationalism. The body was now firmly fixed in nature, and 
seen to determine psychological life, our temperament, our activities, and our feelings 
of identity. Spiritual strivings were themselves located in the body, the blood, heredity. 
Race determined nature, which defined destiny. As such, Levinas concluded “Relec-
tions on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” by stating, “It is not a particular dogma concern-
ing democracy, parliamentary government, dictatorial regime, or religious politics that 
is in question. It is the very humanity of man” (1990b: 71). Unfurling the full signifi-
cance of this last line would preoccupy the rest of his life. But as early as 1934, he main-
tained that Hitlerism revealed a problem constitutive of “Western civilization,” whose 
currents were either congruous with National Socialism or constitutionally immune to 
adequately confronting its racism.

Bernasconi’s article probes whether the Other in Levinas’s thought is a figure for 
pure transcendence or whether Levinas’s concept cross-circuited with figures of Jews 
and Judaism, as well as his understanding of anti-Semitism, which he universalizes, 
as he does in “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” Another good example of 
this universalization is his dedication to Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence (1981 
[1974]): “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated 
by the National Socialists,” wrote Levinas, “and of the millions on millions of all con-
fessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same antisem-
itism.” Considering a number of texts that stretch from 1934 to 1974, Bernasconi 
interrogated Levinas’s views on race by considering whether he reiterated the abstract 
humanism and claims to colorblindness that legitimated the French Third Republic’s 
defense of colonial expansion. He also considers the tensions between Levinas’s critique 
of Western philosophy in works like Totality and Infinity and Otherwise Than Being with 
Levinas’s simultaneous celebration of Western culture in some of his other writing. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas argued that Western philosophy has a long history of total-
zizing thought, subsuming difference within a totalitarian and imperial gaze. But in a set 
of short articles and interviews, like “Meaning and Sense” (1964) among many others, 
Levinas celebrated Western culture’s ability to understand other cultures better than 
they could understand themselves. This point has become a key bone of contention 
among scholars.

A decade after Bernasconi’s article, in a section of his Levinas and the Political titled 
“Threatening Others,” Howard Caygill laid out some of the key signposts for Levinas’s 
slips on racial Others that portended a clear problem in his views on race and their links 
to “Western civilization.” These stopping points have now become the key focus of 
cholars rethinking Levinas’s work from a decolonial or postcolonial perspective (Cay-
gill 2002). In a cluster of statements, Levinas set in opposition “Afro-Asiatic Civiliza-
and the Sino-Soviet Quarrel” (1960) his “ugliest and most disturbing published work.” 
It was written in the context of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. In it, Levinas urges 
that “Russia” (not the Soviet Union, which was the state involved at the time) should
ally with Europe, and defend itself against Asia. In a line that damns the text, Levinas writes “The yellow peril! It is not racial, but spiritual. Not about inferior values but about a radical strangeness, strange to all the density of its past, where no voice with a familiar inflection comes through: a lunar, a Martian past” (1994: 108). Asia is here consigned to an orientalist alterity.

The statement was not a one-off. In “Jewish Thought Today,” an essay from 1961 included in Difficult Freedom, a collection of his Jewish writings, he stipulates as one of the three factors shaping Jewish philosophy, “the rise of countless masses of Asiatic and underdeveloped peoples. . . peoples and civilizations who no longer refer to our holy history, for whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob no longer mean anything” (Levinas 1990a: 165). In “Beyond Dialogue” from 1967, Levinas called for Judeo-Christian solidarity in the face of the “innumerable masses advancing out of Asia. In the eyes of these crowds who do not take holy history as their frame of reference, are we Jews and Christians anything but sects quarrelling over the meaning of a few obscure texts” (Levinas 1999: 83). Strung together this mesh of statements evinces a nasty tendency to reiterate the formulas of Eurocentrism and orientalism, statements that are echoed in interviews.

The work of John Drabinski and Nelson Maldonado-Torres are indicative of the new current of scholarship on Levinas probing the tension between his critique of Western thought and his Eurocentrism. In a historiographic article, “Levinas’s Hegemonic Identity Politics, Radical Philosophy, and the Unfinished Project of Decolonization” (2008) Maldonado-Torres rips into the Levinas cognoscente. He targets scholars who refuse to slam Levinas’s Judeocentrism, his Zionism, and his Eurocentricism, which he treats as congruent.

Maldonado-Torres nonetheless draws on Levinas’s critique of European hegemonic thought as imperial and totalizing: “Levinas articulates his critique,” he writes, “in terms of the primacy of being, power, the ego, conflict, self-preservation, and war, all of which can be useful in understanding colonization” (Maldonado-Torres 2012: 86–87). This is a point he enlarges in Against War (2008). But he is critical of Levinas, insisting that his Eurocentrism does not permit “the geography of reason” to shift into alignment with the global South, something made possible by thinkers like Enrique Dussel and Frantz Fanon, whom he triangulates with Levinas to forge his argument in Against War.

In Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other, John Drabinski elaborates the point. Drabinski argues that Levinas’s radical responsibility to the Other as the core of his work is “critical for thinking in a postcolonial context.” However, he also argues that Levinas’s philosophy must be “uncoupled” from his “problematic conception of Europe.” For Drabinski, it is “Levinas’s concern with the meaning and future of Judaism” that “seals his work, especially with its Europeaness, in the particularity of a geography of ideas” (Drabinski 2011: x–xii). Like Maldonado-Torres, he maintains that links between Judeocentrism, Eurocentrism, and Zionism delimit Levinas’s thought.

Oona Eisenstadt and Santiago Slabodsky push back on Maldonado-Torres and Drabinski and their new trinity. They insist that Levinas’s reflections on Judaism can be and were marshaled as part of a decolonial critique. In his “Emmanuel Levinas’s Geopolitics: Overlooked Conversations Between Rabbinical and Third World Decolonials,” Slabodsky concurs that Levinas’s “pre-1970s writing does not appear to qualify Levinas as anything other than a partisan of Eurocentrism.” But Slabodsky maintains that beginning in the mid-1970s, there is “strong textual evidence of Levinas’s growing openness to decolonial thinking” (2010: 148), a point he elaborates in Decolonial
Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking (2014). Eisenstadt also asents with the critiques of Levinas’s Eurocentrism, but nuances them by showing that “it might help to remember that the reason Levinas admires Europe is because he sees its culture as the one most open to self-criticism.” European philosophy not only rationalized racism, she explains, but also spoke to Europe’s “historical failings,” serving as its “bad conscience.” Or as Levinas puts it, some European thought pits “Europe against Europe” (Eisenstadt 2012: 45–46). Eisenstadt demonstrates how Levinas, too, can be used to think against himself in this way. She concludes that Levinas’s Eurocentrism “is at odds with a better Levinas . . . the potentially anti-Eurocentric openness to alterity that we find as the main thrust of his thinking” (Eisenstadt 2012: 51).

The core of Levinas’s philosophy was the project to deconstruct Western metaphysics and with it the reduction of the human Other in race thinking. What Eisenstadt claims about Levinas’s Eurocentrism can be repeated mutatis mutandis about his Zionism. Levinas’s Jewish writings particularize and ethnicize what he elsewhere articulates in phenomenological and ontological categories. Jews and anti-Semitism were his “optic” through which he viewed more universally the problem of alterity. In each case, the face of the Other who demands a response and thus calls us to our responsibility stands as a critique of the efforts in the West to petrify or assimilate or eviscerate alterity, including in Levinas’s own thought, where one finds those “threatening Others” who he identified as opposing a Judeo-Christian, Western heritage, itself somewhat reified.

Race Thinking and Racism in Arendt

Levinas and Arendt were twin critics of the stream of Western history that resulted in totalitarianism, racism, empire, anti-Semitism, and genocide. Robert Eaglestone makes this case in a short article subtitled “Arendt and Levinas After Heidegger”: “Arendt’s and Levinas’s work complement each other; while Arendt’s work ‘looks out,’ as it were, to the effects of the subterranean stream, Levinas’s ‘looks in’ to explain and critique its internal dynamic” (Eaglestone 2007: 206). Despite the differences of emphasis—Arendt’s focus on politics, Levinas’s emphasis on ethics; their competing interpretations of Heidegger; and their different views on Israel—Eaglestone usefully maintains that each sought to “reframe” the Heideggerian legacy that led to Heidegger’s Nazism, Judeophobia, and völkisch ethno-nationalism. What Eaglestone does not explore is that like Levinas, Arendt also tripped over tropes that shadow Heidegger’s Eurocentrism.

Eaglestone’s essay was part of a collection edited by Richard H. King and Dan Stone, Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race and Genocide, which serves as an excellent starting point for understanding the developments in scholarship on Arendt’s contributions and limitations for the critical philosophy of race. Indeed King and Stone’s “Introduction” takes readers through the historiography. Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism was a touchstone text when it appeared in 1951. Her masterpiece is a genealogy of totalitarianism divided into three parts, “Antisemitism,” “Imperialism,” and “Totalitarianism.” The three parts are roughly chronological but overlap. Anti-Semitism was the dark side of the Enlightenment; Germanic pan-movements—the apex of ethno-nationalism—and European imperial expansion reach across the nineteenth century; and totalitarian movements belong to the twentieth century. She traces the increasing ferocity in the totalitarian features that reached their apogee in the death camps and the gulag archipelago. Her work examines the
connections between anti-Jewish and colonial racism that produced the ideology and
terror apparatus of totalitarian regimes. If Origins defined her early career, by the time of
her death in 1975, however, Arendt was read more as a “normative theorist of politics,
action, and participatory freedom, of the public-private (in Arendt’s terms the political-
social) question, and of the problem of political judgment” raised by her books The
Human Condition (1958) and On Revolution (1963) rather than by the issues considered
in The Origins of Totalitarianism.

But starting with Ron H. Feldman’s 1978 collection of Arendt’s Jewish essays,
The Jew as Pariah, and followed by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl’s magisterial biography,
Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World (1982), a new generation of scholars came to
appreciate the depth and breadth of Arendt’s engagement with Jewish history, Zion-
ism, the State of Israel, and anti-Semitism, and to debate Arendt’s understanding of
these issues (Feldman 1978; Arendt 2007; Young-Bruehl 1982). The same period
gave rise to Shiraz Dossa’s breakthrough 1980 essay, “Human Status and Politics:
Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust,” which akin to the scholarship on Levinas raised
the “ethnocentric strain” in Arendt’s thought by considering how she parroted prim-
itivism in her depictions of colonized sub-Saharan Africans in The Origins of Totali-
tarianism (Dossa 1980). One instance of this was Arendt’s reading of Joseph Conrad’s
Heart of Darkness, a work charged most famously by Chinua Achebe as racist, as the
“most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa” (Arendt 1973: 185).
George Kateb’s brief account “On Racism in Africa” in his Hannah Arendt quickly
quashed Dossa’s insight by insisting that Arendt did not share European colonial and
racial attitudes; she merely sought to describe the effects of their racism. Kateb (1983:
61–63) thereby inaugurated what has emerged as an ongoing problem in treatments
of Arendt’s writing: how to pull apart her descriptions of others’ work from her own
perspective.

The 1990s saw a deepening rift around these interpretative issues. Anne Norton
(1995) pointed not only to Arendt’s attitudes toward Africans, but toward African
American activists in Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock,” as further evidence of her
deprecation of blacks. Agreeing with Dossa and Norton was Hannah Pitkin who stated
that Arendt “simply shares the European prejudice against so-called primitive culture
as somehow less cultured or more natural—in a pejorative sense—than the European”
(1993: 293). Seyla Benhabib’s response was similar to Kateb’s earlier, indicating that
these positions were reductive of Arendt’s views (1999: 83).

The rise of postcolonial theory and the critical philosophy of race opened the flood-
gates of critique. Kathryn Gines’s book Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question is the
most developed account among those critical of Arendt’s racial politics. Gines develops
four key arguments: that (1) Arendt sees the “Negro question as a Negro problem rather
than a white problem”; (2) “Arendt’s analysis of the Jewish question has implications
for her analysis of the Negro question, but Arendt does not readily connect the two”;
(3) Arendt does not recognize that “anti-Black racism (like Jew hatred) is a political
phenomenon”; and (4) “Arendt’s representational thinking and judgment are flawed
and further inhibit her understanding of the Negro question” (2014: 2–3). The argu-
ments made by scholars like Gines also have their respondents, however, with Arendt’s
“Reflections on Little Rock” as the crucial contested text in the scholarly melee (Klau-
sen 2010; Cole 2011; Locke 2013).
In “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt decried the politicization of schools as the front line of the civil rights struggle on the basis of a set of categorical distinctions central to her theorizing of Republican models of political participation: the private, the social, and the political. If politics demands equality as its sine qua non, within the social realm discrimination is permitted and it often takes priority over equality, she maintained. Arendt decried the public legislation of social discrimination that was the foundation of Jim Crow segregation. But she insisted that children should not bear the burden of correcting the “original crime in America’s history,” and maintained that forced integration of schools was wrong. She also defended states’ rights as an important principle since it is core to the checks and balances of American Republicanism. In her letter responding to the critics of her article (Arendt 1959), she speaks to American Negro parents in a superior tone that anticipated the row caused by her haughtiness in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the text that remains a lightning rod in critiques of Arendt’s views on Jews.

Parallel to the most recent work on Levinas, a slate of scholars inspired by postcolonial theory have moved beyond the dichotomies among the Arendt connoisseurs to deploy her work as a site for connecting the histories of anti-Semitism, racism, colonialism, Nazism, and genocide. These scholars include Paul Gilroy, Aamer Mufti, Mark Mazower, Richard King, Maxim Silverman, Griselda Pollock, Sarah Casteel, Marc Caplan, Anna Guttman, and Isabelle Hesse. To get a sense of this literature, I will just reference the work of Michael Rothberg and Bryan Cheyette. Both Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) and Cheyette’s *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (2013) ask us to reconsider the links of both anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism with empire and to reexamine the connections between instances of oppression and calls for liberation.

*Multidirectional Memory* makes the case for a “‘decolonized’ Holocaust memory” that is capable of addressing the “shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, [and] cultural destruction” (Rothberg 2009: 23). Rothberg’s reading of Arendt acknowledges what critical philosophers of race have said about her work on Africans and Americans of African descent. He bears in mind how she recapitulates the primitivism that Conrad applied to Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. But in addressing this, Rothberg brings Arendt into dialogue with Aime Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, ultimately reassessing the limits in Césaire’s account of the genocide of European Jewry in an Arendtian vein. Cheyette, like Rothberg, valorizes the risk of Arendt’s “metaphorical thinking” that finds “similarities in dissimilarities” (2013: 6).

Both are cognizant of the blindnesses and insights of Arendt’s thought. For Cheyette, the pariah/parvenu distinction that she develops in her writing on Jews, “confines the Jewish diaspora to good/bad Jews, which is merely a continuation of prewar racial discourse. Equally problematically, Arendt applies the pariah/parvenu distinction to the civil rights campaign to desegregate schools in the American South” in “Reflections on Little Rock.” She thereby displaces “her experience of the failed social assimilation of European Jewry onto the black/white ‘racial divisions’ in the United States” (Cheyette 2013: 13–14). But if these are the hazards of Arendt’s metaphorical thinking, the advantage of her thought is its experiment in comprehending the connections between Judeophobia, Negrophobia, colonialism, “racial imperialism,” genocide, and totalitarianism.
Ultimately, the critical philosophy of race must interrogate the intersections within Western civilization that link together the cultural histories of anti-Semitism and other forms of racism. Levinas and Arendt each took us down this path, following a trail indicated by Heidegger in his effort to reevaluate Western metaphysics. Levinas and Arendt each sought to move beyond Heidegger’s shadow by reconsidering the dead ends of his intellectual legacy. While all three left us at a crossroads along the way, failing to interrogate persisting racial tropes in their own work, they also each offered methodological and conceptual resources that remain invaluable for undoing racism. Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Western metaphysics opened the tradition of deconstructive critique, which in the critical philosophy of race has targeted “metaphysical racism” and the semiotics of racial stereotyping. Levinas sought to step beyond Heidegger’s shadow by radicalizing the immanent critique of Western thought and culture, often from the vantage of Jews as Europe’s primary internal Other. His insistence on “ethics as first philosophy” perpetually demands our responsibility to respond to all Others in their fragility and vulnerability as the basis of every philosophy worthy of the name, since the discipline claims the love of wisdom and justice but can only fulfill its mission if it embraces the wisdom of love. And Arendt’s historical genealogy of the effects of Western civilization on the cultures it sought to colonize, to appropriate, expropriate, enslave, and exploit helps to connect critical approaches often treated disparately, showing how racial logics join Judeophobia and Negrophobia with other forms of racism and subjugation. These connections are key if we are ever to correct the harms of racial injustice.

References


