The Concept of Pariah in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought

Tuija Parvikko: The Responsibility of the Pariah. University of Jyväskylä: SoPhi, 1996.

Tuija Parvikko's study makes an important contribution to understanding Arendt's political philosophy by elucidating the intellectual history of a concept – pariah – that is pivotal to Arendt's work. Although many scholars have noted the importance to Arendt of pariah figures such as Heinrich Heine, Charlie Chaplin, and the protagonists of Kafka's novels, Parvikko is the first to do a "conceptual archeology" of the term (17). Her book traces its lineage from Weber, to Lazare, to Arendt, and then uses this conceptual history to shed new light on Arendt's position in the Eichmann controversy. Parvikko contends that "without knowing Lazare's notion of the partial responsibility of the pariah for her own acts and deeds it is hard to view Arendt's interpretation of the role of the Jewish Councils in the Eichmann book in an accurate light" (17). Specifically, Parvikko seeks to refute the charge that Arendt, by her criticisms of the Jewish Councils, effec-

tively held the victims responsible for the crimes of the victimizers. She claims that this accusation unravels when it is situated in the context of Arendt's distinction - inherited from Lazare – between political responsibility and the responsibility of the pariah.

Parvikko begins her conceptual archeology with Weber, who appropriated the term "pariah" from its context in the Indian caste system to describe the privileged position of Jews in Europe. In the Indian context, "pariah" is a static designation, denoting the outcast status of ethnically subordinated groups. Weber first used the term to characterize the situation of Jews in 1915; in so doing, however, he transformed it. As a description of the outcast condition of the Jewish people, "pariah" carries with it a redemptive conception of history by virtue of the belief in the Jews' "providential mission and...specific honour before God" (39-40). Jewish pariah status is allied with an eschatological vision of history that justifies a withdrawal from, and abdication of responsibility for, worldly politics. Parvikko argues that Weber gives Arendt one way to think about the political vulnerability of pariah peoples: Weber uses the term "pariah" to designate the belief in exceptionalism that is manifest in the peculiar apolitical insularity and other-worldliness of diasporic Jewish enclave communities.

The core of the book and its most original contribution to Arendt scholarship is the chapter on Bernard Lazare. Parvikko's is the only sustained look at the intellectual influence of Lazare on Arendt, a relationship that is difficult to trace because even though Lazare's work was a central influence on her conceptualization of the political significance of Jewish identity, "Arendt never wrote an entire article not to mention a book-length study on Lazare" (115). Moreover, Parvikko argues that the Arendt-Lazare connection is of interest not simply to scholars who are concerned with Arendt's writings on Jewish identity but is

critical to understanding her conception of action more generally. Parvikko argues that the pariah is a "counterpart to the citizen-actor of the political realm" (213). Whereas the citizen undertakes politics in "'normal' circumstances where actors have access to the public space of politics," Arendt uses the pariah to theorize action in "extreme situations" (213). Parvikko contends that "without knowing her notion of pariahdom and its role in her political theory it easily begins to seem as if political initiative is something reserved for fully authorized citizen-actors, ignoring the existence of those who do not have access to the public sphere of politics" (214).

Parvikko argues that it is from Lazare that Arendt takes her notion of the partial responsibility of the pariah. Lazare, a French Jew born into an assimilated middle-class family, was a journalist and intellectual of the late nineteenth century who became committed to Zionism as a result of the Dreyfus Affair. Lazare's was an unusual Zionism, rooted in the figure of the conscious pariah who does not "seek to rebuild a Jewish state in Palestine and conquer Jerusalem, but demands the right to dignity as a human being" by making a political space for the Jewish people on European soil (139). Parvikko notes that Lazare's work engages Arendt for its rejection of the nineteenth-century view of Jews as "history-sufferers instead of history-makers" (131). She learned from Lazare to distinguish between the passivity of the parvenu and the active resistance of the conscious pariah and to hold that "every pariah who refuses to be a rebel is partly responsible for her own situation and therefore for the blot on mankind which it represents" (135).

In sum, Arendt follows Lazare in a characteristically unconventional turn, setting aside the more familiar question of what communities owe to their outcasts (e.g. the poor, the homeless, the uninsured, etc...), to consider the duties that even outcasts have to the world.

This unconventional move is at the root of what Parvikko claims sparked so much controversy over Eichmann in Jerusalem. She argues that a Lazarean concern with the question of pariah responsibility "directed Arendt's attention to the role of the Jewish Councils as well as to the banality of evil in Eichmann's case" (159). Parvikko wisely avoids recapitulating the controversy over Eichmann; instead, she uses it to elucidate the conception of "political responsibility" that Arendt's less generous critics interpreted as Jewish self-hatred. Parvikko argues that to appreciate the subtlety of this judgment, it is necessary to place it in the context of the Lazarean framework that constitutes one of its "hidden 'subtexts'" (157).

Arendt's position rests on a distinction between political responsibility and pariah responsibility that, as Parvikko demonstrates, Arendt drew from Lazare but failed to elucidate in the Eichmann study. Political responsibility is a form of "collective responsibility" that is shared by every member of a political community regardless whether they are decision-makers or citizens (193). For Adolf Eichmann, serving under a criminal regime, "assuming political responsibility in traditional terms inevitably means participating in crimes" (197). Pariah responsibility differs from this criminal responsibility for the obvious reason that pariah peoples, by definition, do not partake in political responsibility. As Parvikko notes, "nobody is responsible for a community to which she does not belong" (199). Instead, "in the Lazarean-Arendtian framework the responsibility of the pariah includes evaluation of the deeds of her fellow pariahs" (199). In criticizing the role that the Jewish Councils played in expediting the "final solution", Parvikko argues that Arendt was both exercising this responsibility as, herself, a pariah and holding the Jewish leadership to a standard of responsibility appropriate to them as pariahs. To anyone who read Arendt's trial report with its Lazarean subtext in view, the

differences between her evaluations of Eichmann and the Councils would have been clear: Whereas Arendt held Eichmann politically responsible, accusing him of the crime of genocide, she charged the Jewish leadership not with a crime but with the pariah responsibility to rebel against a criminal regime.

Parvikko's book offers new insights into Arendt's understanding of political action by putting the pariah, who is typically read as a marginal figure, at the center of her study. As such, she reminds us that Arendt is not only a theorist of citizenship but also a theorist (in the words of Parvikko's title) "political action and judgement in extreme situations". Parvikko also makes an original and important contribution to understanding Arendt's intellectual lineage by charting the influence of Lazare. On this second point, however, it may be that Parvikko works too hard to make both Lazare and Arendt likeable to her readers.

For example, Parvikko makes an interesting choice in handling Lazare's early writings on Jewish politics, which some interpreters have read to be antisemitic. In these works, Lazare makes a critique of race-based notions of Jewish solidarity that Arendt echoes in her own post-War criticisms of Israeli nationalism. Parvikko quotes Lazare denouncing the notion of ethnic Jewish solidarity as follows: "What are they to me, an Israelite of France, the Russian money-lenders, the Galician inn-keepers and pawn-brokers, the polish horse-traders, the peddlers of Prague and the money-changers of Frankfurt...the Christians of Crete have as great a right to move me, and many others who are pariahs on this globe, without being Israelites" (125). Although Parvikko fully acknowledges what she calls Lazare's "Sephardic arrogance" toward eastern Jews, she insists that the import of this passage is to show the "first germs of Lazare's later distinction into conscious pariahs and parvenus" (126). It is difficult to read this litany of stereotypes without wondering whether Lazare

regarded himself, and French Jews generally, as what Arendt termed "exception Jews." There is an eerie echo of Lazare's categories in a letter of Arendt's, written from Israel to Karl Jaspers on April 13, 1961, the eve of the Eichmann trial:

> My first impression: On top, the judges, the best of German Jewry. Below them, the prosecuting attorneys, Galicians, but still Europeans. Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew and looks Arabic... And outside the doors, the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country. In addition, and very visible in Jersualem, the peies and caftan Jews, who make life impossible for all the reasonable people here. (*Arendt–Jaspers Correspondence*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, 435).

This passage suggests that in addition to the lineage that Parvikko traces, there might be other, less politically acceptable, facets of Lazare's legacy to Arendt. Exploring them as well would introduce into Parvikko's fine study an additional critical perspective on Arendt and on the Eichmann controversy.

Tuija Parvikko's book should be read by any scholar who wants to understand the full range of intellectual influences on Hannah Arendt, not just those who can be found in the traditional canon of political theory. Parvikko demonstrates beautifully how Bernard Lazare influenced Arendt's political thinking. She also offers us an Arendt who theorizes the possibility of agency on the part of political outcasts, a possibility that grows ever more important with the proliferation of refugees around the globe.

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