Intertwined Lives and Themes among Jewish Exiles

Few if any images capture the poignancy of the twentieth century better than that of Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin playing chess during their French exile from 1933 to 1940. Benjamin and Arendt already knew each other from a distance in Berlin—she was married to his cousin Günther Anders (Stern)—but they grew closer during their time in Paris, and Arendt became part of a large circle of German émigrés alongside Benjamin in the cafes of the Latin Quarter. Arendt met her second husband, Heinrich Blücher, during evenings at Benjamin’s apartment, and an affectionate friendship developed between the three of them. Benjamin and Arendt taught Blücher to play chess. “Yesterday I played chess with Benji for the first time, in a long and interesting game,” Blücher wrote. Arendt responded playfully: “I am extremely proud you beat Benji. It reflects well on my teaching.”

As Arendt and Benjamin were playing chess, awaiting their fate as exiled Jewish intellectuals in Paris who were rendered stateless by Hitler’s Germany, a young socialist from Berlin by the name of Otto Albert Hirschmann (later to be known as Albert Hirschman), was shuttling across four countries: France, Italy, Great Britain, and Spain. From July to October 1936, he fought in the Spanish Civil War near Barcelona with the Italian and German émigré battalions of volunteers, loosely under the leadership of the leftist but anti-Stalinist Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM)).
France capitulated in the summer of 1940, Hirschman and his comrades convinced their commander to release them with fake military passes, and he made his way to the south of France. Soon he met a young Harvard-educated classicist, Varian Fry, who had come to Marseilles on behalf of the US Emergency Rescue Committee.

Fry and Hirschman spent the next five months preparing the departures of refugees whose names now read like a “Who’s Who” of intellectual Europe: Hannah Arendt, André Breton, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Siegfried Kracauer, Alma Maria Mahler Gropius Werfel, and others (but not, alas, Walter Benjamin, who would commit suicide in September 1940 in the coastal Spanish town of Port Bou while waiting for papers to travel to Portugal).

Meanwhile, in the northeastern city of Riga Latvia, subject over the years to German as well as Russian influences, a Jewish family of doctors by the name of “Shklar” and their two young daughters fled in 1939 via Sweden to Siberia, then to Japan and finally settled in Montréal, Canada. Judith Shklar, the older of these two girls, would eventually come to study political theory at Harvard with another émigré intellectual from Weimar, Germany, Carl J. Friedrich. She would meet Hannah Arendt for the first time in one of the symposia organized by Friedrich on totalitarianism.

Also born in Riga, Latvia, in 1909, was Isaiah Berlin, who moved with his family to Petrograd, Russia, at the age of six, where he witnessed the revolutions of 1915 and 1917. In 1921 his family came to England, and he was educated at St. Paul’s School in London, and at Corpus Christi College, obtaining a prestigious prize fellowship to All Soul’s College in Oxford in 1932 (where he was the first Jewish person admitted). Berlin, a prodigious commentator, would have much to say about many of the other émigrés whose paths took them across the ocean to the United States.

This book traces the intertwining of the lives and thought of these intellectuals and others as they confronted exile, migration, and, in some cases, statelessness. For Arendt and Shklar these questions were central and both wrote extensively about migration, exile, and citizenship. These themes are more attenuated and less central in the work of
Hirschman, although *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, while considered a contribution to the psychology of institutional behavior, is undoubtedly marked by Hirschman’s own experiences of loss of political voice and loyalty.

These thinkers faced migration, exile, and statelessness because of their Jewish origins, regardless of whether they themselves identified as Jewish, whether they were believers, or whether they were practicing Jews or not. The “Jewish question” is never absent from their writings, although, with the exception of Arendt and Berlin, few take a public position in relation to Jewish identity or the establishment of the state of Israel. Nonetheless, as Yuri Slezkine observes, “The Modern Age was Jewish not only because everyone was now a stranger but also because strangers were organized—or reassembled—into groups based on common dissent and destiny. . . . [T]otal strangers became kinsmen on the basis of common languages, origins, ancestors, and rituals duly standardized and disseminated for the purposes. The nation was family writ large . . . Or perhaps it was Christianity writ small . . . In other words, the Jews were doomed to a new exile as a result of Judaizing their Apollonian hosts.” 3 It is this condition of becoming a stranger in one’s own land because one did not belong to a national “family writ large” (or “Christianity writ small”), that all thinkers considered in this volume were cognizant of and that is reflected in myriad ways in their writings.

For German Jews, the experience of belonging and not belonging, of being rendered migrants and internal exiles in their own country, began in the mid-nineteenth century, with the granting of certain civil rights to Jews residing in German territories. This led to questions such as: What does it mean for the individual to be an equal citizen and to wish to retain one’s ethnic, cultural, and religious differences, or perhaps even to rid oneself of these differences altogether? What individual or collective forms would such expressions of difference take? The German-Jewish discussion carried on by these writers explored these paradoxes with honesty, ingenuity, and intensity. This is true not only for the towering figures of Hermann Cohen, Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Hans Kelsen, Walter Benjamin, Max
Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno but also for other lesser-known figures, such as Rabbi Leopold Lucas and the cultural critic Moritz Goldstein, whose writings I explore in the second chapter of this volume.

Two of the most famous contributions reflecting on dilemmas of Jewish otherness in a modernizing Germany were: “The Science of Judaism and the Roadmap to Its Future Development” (“Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Wege zu ihrer Förderung”), by Rabbi Leopold Lucas, based on a lecture he gave on December 27, 1905, at the Society for the Promotion of the Science of Judaism, and a 1912 article by Moritz Goldstein, “The German-Jewish Parnassus” (“Deutsch-Jüdischer Parnass”), published in the German-nationalist weekly, the Kunstwart (see chapter 2 below). These essays are separated only by six years, yet the pride and hopes expressed by Rabbi Lucas, proud of his Judaism and Germanness at once, stand in stark contrast to the anxiety, disillusionment, and irony voiced by Moritz Goldstein about being unable to reconcile these two aspects of his identity. Goldstein coins the term the “eternally half-other” to express the predicament of Jewish intellectuals who know that they can never really be a part of German culture, and yet, in his words, “administer” the works of art, music, and literature of a people that denies them the right to do so.

The theme of the “eternally half-other” is a leitmotif in these essays. Arendt and Benjamin were very much aware of Moritz Goldstein’s “The German-Jewish Parnassus,” and they defended this legacy of half-otherness in their work by contrast to the official Judaism of Rabbi Lucas.

Arendt’s writings on Judaism and, in particular, her critique of Zionism have found fresh and enthusiastic audiences in recent years, and most famously, Judith Butler in Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism. Chapter 5 explores the synthesis that Butler seeks to establish between Arendt’s views and Emmanuel Levinas’s ontology of cohabitation. I show that Butler fails to appreciate Arendt’s concepts of political action and plurality and seeks to derive an “ethic of cohabitation” from her work that is not to be found there. Butler’s overall attempt is to retrieve ethical insights and motifs from non-Zionist and in some cases anti-Zionist Jewishness, in order to create a space for Arab-Jewish
coexistence in Israel/Palestine—a political goal that I share, and that, interestingly enough, returns us to Moritz Goldstein's thesis of the Jew as the eternally half-other. What are the ethics and politics commensurate with such a project of fractured identity?

For Arendt, statelessness and totalitarianism were the principal evils of the last century, and both topics have hardly lost their relevance in our time. The fiftieth anniversary of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, first published in 1963, rekindled the so-called “Hannah Arendt Wars” among New York intellectuals. The publication of Bettina Stangneth’s monumental work, *Eichmann vor Jerusalem*, along with the appearance of Margarethe von Trotta’s acclaimed movie, *Hannah Arendt*, forced many to reconsider Arendt’s work. Some used Stangneth’s book to argue that Arendt was duped by Eichmann’s seeming lack of anti-Semitic sentiments and behavior in the trial and that she minimized his vicious and vindictive personality. Evil, they insisted, was not banal after all. Others repeated an objection, first made by Jewish historians, that Arendt’s treatment of the Jewish Councils (Judenräte) was historically inaccurate, cruel, and judgmental. Neither claim is supported by Stangneth’s book, which treats Arendt with great respect for what she was able to accomplish on the basis of the inadequate trial transcripts in her possession. (See chapter 4 below.)

Arendt not only experienced statelessness between 1933 and 1951 when she became an American citizen, but she also wrote theoretically about a condition that, until her famous discussion in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, had been, at the most, a topic for international lawyers and historians of the European interwar period. The phrase through which she tried to capture the vulnerability of the stateless—“the right to have rights”—has reverberated in the twenty-first century as well. As the world has experienced a refugee crisis of proportions unknown since World War II, the asylum-seeker, the refugee, and the stateless have become prisms through which to explore the hypocrisies of contemporary liberal democracies and of the postwar state system, which, on the one hand, affirms the universality of human rights—including the right to asylum—and, on the other hand, gives nations the sovereign privilege to control their borders and engage in
practices in defiance of their obligations under international law. Particularly irritating has been the transformation of “the right to have rights” into the right of “humanitarian intervention” through misguided administrative and political adventures. The protection of the right of the stateless has become a shield in order to hide the ideological pretensions of humanitarian reason, which reduces refugees to objects of pity and robs them of their political agency. These questions are discussed in chapter 6 in this volume.

During the controversy concerning Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* a little-known lecturer in the government department at Harvard University, Judith Nisse Shklar, published *Legalism. An Essay on Law, Morals and Politics* in 1964. What Shklar called her “bare bones liberalism” (*Legalism*, 5) carried the indelible marks of disbelief in the face of a world gone insane (see chapter 7 below). Yet what is distinctive about her voice as an émigré political theorist, and what sets her apart from Leo Strauss and Arendt (both approximately a generation older) is the lack of pathos with which she registered the destruction of her familial world and the end of her childhood. With the memory of the Nuremberg trials and the McCarthy hearings in the United States still very much alive, in *Legalism* she positioned herself against too much self-congratulation on the part of liberal democracies.

Like Albert Hirschman, Shklar had a skeptical view of human psychology, an emphasis on the passions, and a distrust of too much social engineering in political life. With her work we can retrieve a tradition within liberalism, in part Kantian in inspiration, but opposed to Kant in that it replaces the supreme moral law with the injunction against cruelty. If the Kantian moral law is the manifestation of our dignity, both because we can cognize it and because we can act in accordance with it, Shklar emphasizes that it is cruelty that destroys our dignity by subjecting us to arbitrary force as well as coercion.

Hirschman, by contrast, was more hopeful about political transformation and he was a Communist internationalist first and later, a socialist militant. Although raised in a German-Jewish bourgeois family in Berlin, early on he came under the influence of the French and British Enlightenments. He shared Shklar’s admiration for Montaigne, and is
reported to have carried an edition of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* with him on his journeys through Europe. He had no particular inclinations toward German philosophy, though as a young political economist, he had studied both Hegel and Marx quite well. His life and work, as well as his times, are explored in chapter 8.

The final essay of this collection is devoted to Isaiah Berlin. Celebrated as a sage in recent years, Berlin made a systematic contribution to political thought by drawing a distinction between “pluralism” and “relativism.” The plurality of incommensurable goods, be it in politics, morals, aesthetics, was a central tenet of Berlin’s thinking. Yet equally crucial was his claim that incommensurability did not mean that “anything goes,” because he believed that there were standards of judgment and conduct that ought to guide individuals and collectivities.

I explore this thesis through the prism of Max Weber’s theory of the fragmentation and differentiation of value in modernity. I argue that Berlin is a Weberian, but one whose views are modulated by the experiences and expectations of living in a liberal civil society such as the British one to which he emigrated. I then discuss “the burdens of judgment” in John Rawls’s work as one of the most sophisticated treatments of the question of value pluralism.

What is the relationship between the burdens of judgment and the answer to Carl Schmitt’s decisionism? Carl Schmitt’s challenge haunted Arendt no less than it did Leo Strauss, Berlin no less than Shklar. While Strauss showed that natural law thinking could not be so easily dismissed, Shklar turned to the rule of law and a robust conception of legality as the structures that would hold liberal societies together. Arendt, by contrast, argued that liberalism needed to be anchored in a civic-republican tradition that emphasized political participation and revived a sense for the res publica. In stressing the need for developing societies to make their own decisions and be rid of the grandiose “development projects” imposed upon them by experts, Hirschman also emphasized the virtues of self-governance and economic republicanism in overcoming poverty and dysfunctionality. The following chapters are dedicated to analyzing the answers provided by these thinkers to these puzzles—answers that are often arresting in their depth as well as brilliance.
Although Hannah Arendt is at the center of much of the following discussion, my goal is to situate her political thinking in a broader context of exchange both with her contemporaries such as Scholem, Strauss, Levinas, and Berlin, as well as to probe the limits of her political theory as revealed by contemporary reinterpretations. Hirschman’s turn to the developing world in Asia, Africa, and Latin America is a sharp reminder of the Eurocentrism of Arendt’s thought, while her reflections on law and revolution, as Shklar shows us, brilliant as they may be, are often capricious in interpretation and scholarship. My purpose is to situate her thinking as well as that of other émigré intellectuals in what Martin Jay once called “force-fields,” which do not have a center but are rather a domain in which elements attract and repulse one another. It is through the attraction to as well as repulsion from one another of the many thinkers considered in this book that I have approached the force-field formed by these émigré intellectuals.