

This article was downloaded by: [University College London]

On: 27 December 2012, At: 15:28

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

### From Rosa Luxemburg to Hannah Arendt: Socialism, Barbarism and the Extermination Camps

Philip Spencer<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Surrey KT1 2EE, UK E-mail:

Version of record first published: 20 Nov 2006.

To cite this article: Philip Spencer (2006): From Rosa Luxemburg to Hannah Arendt: Socialism, Barbarism and the Extermination Camps, *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, 11:5, 527-540

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10848770600842895>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## From Rosa Luxemburg to Hannah Arendt: Socialism, Barbarism and the Extermination Camps

~ PHILIP SPENCER ~

**ABSTRACT** *The relationship between Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt has occasionally been noted but rarely systematically discussed. In fact, there is a profound sense in which Arendt's continuing preoccupation with the significance of the extermination camps owes much to Luxemburg's earlier expressed concern that barbarism was a real possibility. Luxemburg first raised this in the context of the First World War, which she saw as a catastrophe marking a fundamental break with the past and opening the way to terrible new possibilities. The terms that Luxemburg used to describe this catastrophe apply better to subsequent events that Arendt was to analyse, particularly the extermination camps ("hell" on earth). In explaining how barbarism could occur, Arendt drew extensively on Luxemburg, emphasising the impact of world wars, imperialism and nationalism, though she was of course then to go further in analysing what barbarism meant when it took place.*

The discovery of the Nazi extermination camps came, as has often been noted, as an immense shock to many people at the time, perhaps not least to German-Jewish émigré intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> Even though they had witnessed Nazi anti-Semitism first hand, they were perhaps no more prepared than others for the enormity of Auschwitz. Recalling her first reactions, as the news began to filter out, Hannah Arendt openly admitted that "at first we didn't believe it—although my husband and I always said that we expected anything from that bunch. . . . But this was something entirely different. . . . Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can."<sup>2</sup>

Much of Arendt's subsequent work was to be devoted to grappling with the implications of this extreme violence, to attempting to understand what made it possible and what could be done to avoid its recurrence. At least two of her major works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, were devoted to this theme, but almost all of the rest of her work from this time on bears its imprint and might perhaps be best read in the context of what was for her a decisive break with the past.<sup>3</sup> Certainly Arendt herself insisted repeatedly that there was something new and unprecedented about what the Nazis had sought to do to the Jews.



Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Surrey KT1 2EE, UK. Email: p.spencer@kingston.ac.uk

But this insistence on novelty itself raises a question. What resources then did Arendt herself have to draw upon in thinking about the camps? If they were radically new, as she claimed, what could previous thinkers tell her or us about them? At times, Arendt implies that there is very little in any of the dominant intellectual or political traditions to draw upon here: “It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a radical evil . . . we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.”<sup>4</sup>

But did Arendt really have to work everything out for herself, to begin entirely anew? Were there no thinkers upon whom she could draw to orient her work, to point her in some of the directions she was to take? To the extent that the question of influences on Arendt has been discussed, it has tended to be at quite a general philosophical level, and focused largely on the somewhat contentious figure of Heidegger, with whom (as we now know) she had a close and entangled personal relationship.<sup>5</sup> But whatever Heidegger’s general influence on Arendt, it is difficult to see any obvious or credible way in which he could have been much of an inspiration to her in thinking directly about the extreme violence of Nazism, not least perhaps because of his own complicity with Nazism. On this issue, it would seem we need to look elsewhere and, it will be suggested here, in a rather different direction. For there was at least one perhaps surprising figure who can be seen to have had some influence on Arendt in this respect, in helping her to think both about the novelty and the barbaric nature of Nazi violence.

That figure was Rosa Luxemburg, the Jewish Marxist revolutionary, with whom Arendt also had some personal connections, if of a rather different kind, through both her mother and her second husband, Heinrich Blücher. The former was an ardent admirer of Luxemburg; the latter, through whom she said she learned to think politically, was directly involved in the Spartakist rising of 1919 in which Luxemburg lost her life.<sup>6</sup>

But these links were more than personal; they were also deeply political. Arendt and Luxemburg shared a set of profound political concerns, perhaps the most important and interesting of which had to do with the question of barbarism. This was a possibility overtly broached by Luxemburg, and in terms that, on closer inspection, point in an almost uncanny way to future developments—those that Arendt (unlike Luxemburg) was to witness. In trying to think through their significance, Arendt drew in various ways on Luxemburg—in formulating her own explanation of the emergence of a new, totalitarian kind of politics; in structuring her own account of what made Nazism possible; and in identifying the inner logic of the violence that the Nazis unleashed. That violence reached its apogee in the extermination camps, which might well be thought about as the institutionalised expression of the barbarism that was the object of Luxemburg’s deepest fears.

## BARBARISM

The use of the term *barbarism* is not, of course, without its problems. It can be argued that it is inherently and heavily value-laden and that it has been repeatedly deployed for centuries to denigrate the culture of the “other,” whether in classical China or ancient

Greece or imperial Rome or more recently by Western colonial powers. It is also a term whose application has been particularly hotly disputed in relation to the Holocaust, where there has been a major debate about whether it can be understood in terms of a regression from or collapse of civilisation or whether, on the contrary, it revealed major problems with civilisation itself. Amongst those who have taken up sharply polarised positions on this issue have been some of the most influential of twentieth-century sociologists, Norbert Elias (a prominent proponent of the barbarism thesis) and Zygmunt Bauman (a trenchant critic of any such application).<sup>7</sup> It is a debate too with some political overtones, with some (particularly on the left) arguing that the term is inherently Eurocentric, inextricably bound up with Western efforts to justify the exploitation and even slaughter of those seen as inherently both inferior and dangerous others.<sup>8</sup>

This makes it perhaps the more striking that Luxemburg, a committed Marxist, did not hesitate to use this term, particularly as it cannot be easily argued that she, especially, was “soft” on Western imperialism, of which she was a relentless and consistent critic.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as we shall see, she came to use *barbarism* in this very context, in tracing the consequences of imperialism (amongst other things), not only for the fate of those it subjugated but for humanity as a whole. But she did so in a way that also pointed towards the Holocaust and in a form of argument that Arendt was then motivated to take further. Rather than being a term that should be so sedulously avoided, Luxemburg’s use of it is of some salience, both in helping us see how Arendt came to develop some of her most influential arguments and, perhaps more generally, in helping us understand some of the most central aspects of this catastrophic experience.

#### LUXEMBURG ON “SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM”

Luxemburg’s fears were articulated openly and eloquently in response to the onset of the First World War, a pivotal moment in her life and work. It was at this point, as Michael Lowy has argued, that her thought became “truly coherent” for the first time, as she broke irrevocably with the passive determinism of the Kautskyan centre with which she had long been uneasily allied in the Second International and in German Social Democracy.<sup>10</sup> Where Kautsky saw the war as a tragic but temporary aberration, from which humanity would soon recover, Luxemburg argued that it posed a critical threat and a stark choice. In the *Junius Brochure* in particular, written in 1915 after the first shock had worn off and as she came to terms with the full enormity of a prolonged world war, she laid out what was at stake in a passage that bears some close reading:

Friedrich Engels once said: “Capitalist society faces a dilemma, either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism.” What does a “reversion to barbarism” mean at the present stage of European civilisation? We have read and repeated these words thoughtlessly without a conception of their terrible import. At this moment one glance about us will show us what a reversion to barbarism in capitalist society means. *This world war* means a reversion to barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture, sporadically during a modern war, and forever, if the period of world wars that has just begun is allowed to take its damnable course to the last ultimate consequence. Thus we stand today, as Friedrich Engels prophesied more than a generation ago, before the awful proposition: the destruction of all culture and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery; or the

victory of socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism, against its methods, against war. This is the dilemma of world history, its inevitable choice, whose scales are trembling in the balance.<sup>11</sup>

There seems something almost uncannily prescient in this passage, which predicts not only more world wars but also some quite specific developments. These are both contained within and form the meaning of the term *barbarism*, which is by no means merely rhetorical. It has here five quite specific elements: the destruction of culture; depopulation; desolation; degeneration; the construction of a vast cemetery. Each of these can, with hindsight, be matched against subsequent developments.

There was, firstly, the onslaught on culture launched immediately the Nazis took power. There was, for instance, the famous burning of the books, the purging of museums and exhibitions, the expulsion of academics and teachers, the hunting down of intellectual dissent. If this was not an attack on culture *tout court* (though this too can be argued), it was certainly on any aspect of culture associated with the Jews, a sustained effort to attack the core elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West before, in and after the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

There was, secondly, a systematic policy of depopulation. Jewish communities were removed from places where they had lived for centuries, transported across Europe first into mass ghettos and then to the extermination camps. (Some recent theorists have indeed analysed the policy shift from ghettoisation to killing precisely in demographic terms, drawing on debates in the Nazi regime on supposedly optimal levels of population that should then be “supported” by the economy.)<sup>13</sup> The result was certainly a dramatic transformation of the demography of the region, with countries like Poland or Lithuania being radically ethnically homogenised as their large Jewish populations were largely eliminated.

The experience, thirdly, of those who faced the Nazi assault was literally a desolate one, certainly as the OED defines the term, “without means; destitute of inhabitants, uninhabited, deserted...laid waste...forlorn, disconsolate, wretched...abandoned.” Those who survived did so largely by scavenging underground in a fiercely hostile environment, hunted by Nazis and local anti-Semites alike. (This is not to minimise the extraordinary behaviour of those few who did offer assistance, only to indicate that this was a *relatively* limited experience.)

The majority were killed, either by deliberate starvation, or in mass shootings, or in the extermination camps, or finally, when these had to be abandoned as the war was being lost, in death marches. The extraordinary collapse of morality involved in this sustained project of annihilation remains a profoundly baffling and disturbing phenomenon, to which perhaps even the term “degeneration” cannot do full justice. It was not after all a momentary phenomenon but, as Berel Lang and Saul Friedlander in particular have argued, a consciously chosen inversion of values, a deliberate embrace of what was known to be fundamentally wrong, if not of evil itself.<sup>14</sup>

The bodies of those murdered would certainly have made for a vast cemetery (for millions, after all) had the Nazis permitted even that. But their project was so radical that it sought to eliminate almost all trace of its victims, not only systematically turning corpses into ashes, but even trying to burn those previously buried in unmarked mass graves in an effort to cover up the crime.

None of this is to suggest that Luxemburg was some kind of clairvoyant, but the categories she uses are not random or accidental. These were latent possibilities, whose roots lay in her view in certain dynamics operating beneath the surface. These had to do, respectively, with the consequences of world war for the international working class; with the imperialism which was its fundamental cause; and with the nationalism that enabled it both to occur in the first place and to continue relentlessly to the bitter end.

The First World War was for Luxemburg both a moral and political catastrophe, not only for its unprecedented scale of violence, the extraordinary and pointless killing of millions on all sides, but also because it destroyed so much of the European proletariat. As she noted bitterly, “nine-tenths of these millions came from the ranks of the working class . . . the best, the most intelligent, the most thoroughly schooled forces of international socialism.” These formed what she called “the vanguard of the whole world proletariat,” the agency to which she had looked to create a better world, a more just (in her case, socialist) society.

It had also been the force to which she had looked to put an end to the imperialism that was, in her eyes, the root cause of the war itself. The war had not come out of nowhere; it was not the accidental result of miscalculations by governments, acting foolishly and against their own interests. Capitalist states had always competed ruthlessly with each other, roaming the world in search of resources and markets to offset or delay an inevitable and terminal crisis. They were now attacking each other directly, letting destructiveness entirely loose in Europe, in the heart of global capitalism itself. The violence that had been practised on the Herreros, in Putamayo, in China, in Persia and in Tripoli, was now turned back in on itself, on a scale that was even more radically dangerous, threatening the future of humanity. “Imperialism brings catastrophe as a mode of existence back from the periphery of capitalist development to its point of departure.”<sup>15</sup> It now put “the civilisation of mankind itself in question.”<sup>16</sup>

Why though had the European working class failed in what Luxemburg regarded as its historic duty “to call capitalism to account for centuries of crime”? A major part of the answer lay, in her eyes, in nationalism, an alternative, antithetical ideology to socialism, which had succeeded in breaking the horizontal ties of international, class solidarity and in mobilising workers of different nations to kill each other. For decades Luxemburg had urged socialists to confront the danger and illusions of nationalism, arguing that the idea of the nation as a homogeneous socio-political entity was a central “category of bourgeois ideology,” with particularly fatal consequences in the epoch of imperialism. She had argued even with others on the radical left (such as Lenin) against what she saw as the illusion (particularly in this period) of the slogan of the right of nations to self-determination, pointing out that the nationalist project, the attempt to create a state for each supposed nation, could only lead to more oppression, to the denial by each successive group of the rights of others (the Poles for instance by the Russians, the Ruthenians by the Poles, the Jews by all).<sup>17</sup>

### THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM

Each of these themes—world war, imperialism, nationalism—was to be picked up by Arendt. They are all central, in particular, to the argument developed in *The Origins of*

*Totalitarianism*, which is in important respects structured along Luxemburgist lines, and where she first attempts to think in a sustained way about barbarism.

Although *The Origins* begins with a long discussion of anti-Semitism, the explanation of its salience and distinctiveness in the modern world depends largely on the context of imperialism, which Arendt claimed had transformed the position of the Jews. It might then have made more sense to have begun with a discussion of imperialism; indeed, according to Canovan, this is how the work was originally conceived.<sup>18</sup> Be that as it may, what is clear is that Arendt's explication of the logic of imperialism is largely derived from Luxemburg, whose account she believes is more comprehensive and consistent than that of other Marxists, particularly in its insistence that the expansion of capitalism depended from the beginning on the exploitation of non-capitalist markets, resources and labour.<sup>19</sup> It was, from the outset, a restless and inherently expansionist system. At its heart lay a drive for accumulation which is simultaneously economic and political.<sup>20</sup>

Arendt's primary concern is with the political aspects of this dynamic, an effort to draw out the implications of what she calls "Rosa Luxemburg's brilliant insight into the political structure of imperialism" (*Origins*, 148, n. 45). And she traces these in a way that, as Robert Fine has argued, essentially parallels the direction of Luxemburg's argument. In her work, "the imperialist principle of politics mirrored the bourgeois principle of economics: unlimited accumulation of power mirrored the unlimited accumulation of capital."<sup>21</sup> Arendt points in particular to the way in which imperialism, both abroad and at home, cannot tolerate any limits or restrictions. Lawlessness and violence are endemic and consciously pursued to a radically new extent. As she argues, "the new feature of this imperialist political philosophy is not the predominant place it gave violence, nor the discovery that power is one of the basic political realities. . . . But neither had ever before been the conscious aim of the body politic."

This was to have disastrous consequences. "For power left to itself can achieve nothing but more power, and violence administered for power's (and not for law's) sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate. . . . Its logical consequence is the destruction of all living communities, those of the conquered peoples as well as of the people at home" (137).

Nowhere was this more evident than in the carnage of world war which, like Luxemburg, Arendt saw as a decisive turning-point. "The days before and after the First World War are separated not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and after an explosion" (267). The war was fought on a wholly new scale, for global, unlimited ends. It mobilised huge numbers, harnessed immense resources, and set off an unstoppable "chain reaction." Its impact was felt everywhere: on the economy, where it produced mass unemployment and inflation; on society, where it led to the breakdown of classes; on culture, where it led to a wave of "death ideologies"; and on politics, where it destroyed the nation-state.

As the great powers carved up the world between them, the notion of national sovereignty became a "mockery" (as Luxemburg had long insisted). But imperialism also revealed that there was no longer anything progressive about the nation-state or the ideology (nationalism) that underpinned it, if indeed there ever had been (again as Luxemburg had argued).<sup>22</sup> In fact, there had always been, in Arendt's view, a basic contradiction, one which "came to light at the very birth of the modern nation-state,

when the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty. The same essential rights were at once claimed as the inalienable heritage of all human beings *and* as the specific heritage of specific nations... the practical outcome of this contradiction was that from then on human rights were protected and enforced only as national rights” (230). This basic “perversion” was to have deadly consequences for minorities inside nation-states who were anathematised and expelled, particularly during and after the First World War. Larger and larger numbers of people became stateless, refugees who (like Arendt herself) were deprived not only of the most basic rights but even of the right to have rights at all. Outside the law, stripped of the protection of governments, they now belonged to no community at all; they were deprived not only of a home but also of any political status. This was the most fundamental loss, since it deprived people of what makes them most fully human. “Man, as it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity” (297).

Minorities had to be expelled because nationalism, which had been given a “new lease of life” by imperialism and linked ever more tightly to racism and tribalism, could not tolerate loyalties that cut across, transcended or challenged the primacy of the nation-state conceived in such terms.<sup>23</sup> The Jews in particular were placed in an extremely dangerous position as a “non-national element in a world of growing or existing nations” (*Origins*, 22). But the only way to challenge the new and virulent anti-Semitism would have been through a thoroughgoing (one might say, Luxemburgist) internationalism. This the left largely failed to develop, confining itself to a vague inter-European solidarity and an inconsistent opposition to imperialism. Arendt was sharply critical of this approach, which she described as generally lacking in political seriousness.<sup>24</sup> In sharp contrast, the Nazis were able to use nationalism to great effect, in a systematic assault on all that was progressive within the Weimar Republic, starting with the class-based associations of the left.

The attack on the left is often underplayed in readings of Arendt’s work, probably because of the view, widely held at one time, that she was profoundly hostile to Marxism, even that Marx was her “main opponent.”<sup>25</sup> More recent research has effectively challenged this view, showing Arendt to have an altogether more ambivalent attitude to Marx,<sup>26</sup> and one which indeed involved some serious misreadings on her part,<sup>27</sup> and some unnecessary misunderstandings.<sup>28</sup> Arendt herself clearly stated that she did not think that Marxism was a cause of totalitarianism. At worst, Marx’s efforts may “have foreshadowed and can certainly help illuminate it, but they did not cause it in any way.” To argue otherwise would be “even more dangerous than it is unjust.”<sup>29</sup>

In fact there are important respects in which her analysis of the rise of Nazism is, in places, quite close to a Marxist approach. She repeatedly emphasises the significance of the attack on class made by the alliance between criminals and the mob, describing the latter in almost classically Marxist terms as the “refuse but also the by-product of bourgeois society, directly produced by it and therefore never quite separable from it” (*Origins*, 155). It is nihilistic, anti-intellectual, anti-Semitic, ready and willing to be led by a new criminal “elite which shared the features of earlier mob leaders: failure in professional and social life, perversion and disaster in private life” (327). This is uncannily close to Marx’s classic definition of the *lumpenproletariat* and particularly to

Trotsky's analysis of how bourgeois society threw up in Nazism its undigested barbarism, how its leaders emerged from the gutter of society.<sup>30</sup>

The destruction of class solidarity was indeed, in Arendt's view, an extremely important precondition for the emergence of mass society. Deprived of the solidarity (however limited) provided by class organisation, human beings were left isolated and highly vulnerable. "In this atmosphere of the breakdown of class society the psychology of the European mass man developed . . . self-centred . . . expendable . . . the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomised society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had only been held in check through membership in a class" (315, 317).

### THE POLITICS OF TOTALITARIANISM

Arendt's argument, however, goes deeper than this. The destruction of the class-based organisations of the left opened the way to a new form of politics. The totalitarian state (if indeed it was a state at all)<sup>31</sup> was a dictatorship of a qualitatively new kind. It ruled not so much through fear as through terror. (In a regime based on fear, survival is possible through complete obedience, but no amount of obedience could save the Jews.)<sup>32</sup> It claimed total power over all areas of social life (the private as well as the public), seeking to reshape (or rather degrade) human nature itself. The now atomised masses were in thrall to (or enthralled by) leaders to whom they abdicated all responsibility, all their creativity, all their capacity to innovate, to engage in spontaneous political action. Mixing "gullibility and cynicism" in equal measure, they were prepared to believe whatever these leaders told them, regardless of the contradictions this might involve with what had been said yesterday or might be said tomorrow. They were prepared to do whatever they were told, to obey any order, no matter that it violated the most elementary moral principles.

This was a form of politics almost entirely at variance with her own understanding of politics as a quintessentially human activity. For Arendt, after all, the polity is the "place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective" (*Origins*, 296). It is where we engage in an open dialogue with others about fundamental questions and purposes, in which we demonstrate our capacity to think for ourselves, to reason with each other. It is an inherently creative process; there are no pre-given answers to these fundamental questions. It requires our active participation—not to engage in politics is to abandon our responsibilities, both to ourselves and to others.

Much of this echoes some of Luxemburg's central concerns. Socialism after all is, for Luxemburg, a matter of collective self-emancipation. It requires full participation; it demands extensive freedom. It will not be self-emancipation ("the liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself"),<sup>33</sup> unless there is full participation ("the mass of the people must take part in it") by self-determining individuals, each with their own ideas. "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently,"<sup>34</sup> a phrase Arendt more or less repeats herself ("freedom always implies freedom of dissent").<sup>35</sup> Different opinions are needed because the attempt to build a new society will throw up issues to which there are no pre-given answers and which require a creative, imaginative response. "Socialism by its very nature cannot be decreed. . . . New territory. A thousand problems. Only experience is capable

of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescent life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to life creative force itself, itself corrects all mistaken attempts."<sup>36</sup>

But this is more than a theoretical convergence. There have been a number of episodes when this kind of politics has come to life, moments of revolution upon which both Arendt and Luxemburg fix as evidence that an authentic politics is not merely an abstract ideal but a real possibility.<sup>37</sup> In such revolutions, they both argue, large numbers of people participate spontaneously in the political process, without direction, taking responsibility for their own actions individually and collectively, often creating new forms of democratic association in the process (the Paris Commune, soviets in Russia in 1905, workers' and soldiers' councils in Germany in 1918, citizens' councils in Hungary in 1956).<sup>38</sup> As Arendt noted (in terms that clearly echo Luxemburg), "each time they appeared, they sprang up as the spontaneous organs of the people, not only outside of all revolutionary parties but entirely unexpected by them and their leaders."<sup>39</sup>

Of course it can be argued that this enthusiasm for revolutions, which she shares with Luxemburg, and more generally this common approach to politics, is naïvely utopian, that it is an essentially romantic view, marred by a fatal lack of realism.<sup>40</sup> One could, however, argue the opposite, that it is imbued with a profound sense of what could go wrong, that it is in an important sense actually a response to impending or actual catastrophe. Luxemburg after all poses socialism as the direct alternative to barbarism. Arendt's interest in revolutions comes, as Lefort has argued, from "inverting the image of totalitarianism and this leads her to look, not for a model of politics . . . but for a reference to politics in certain privileged moments when its features are most clearly discernible."<sup>41</sup> Many of Arendt's most profound arguments are developed as a response to the fundamental ethical and political issues thrown up in our "dark times" (the title of the set of essays which includes the one piece she devoted to Luxemburg).<sup>42</sup>

The full extent of this catastrophe of course only became apparent in the extermination camps. These were no accident, not some arbitrary excess, a product of contingency or circumstance, but "the true central institution of totalitarian organisational power," which revealed the fundamental logic of the system, its inherent, cumulative and radical destructiveness.<sup>43</sup> The camps were sealed off from the rest of society, "laboratories" where the experiment of radical dehumanisation could be carried out without restraint or hindrance. Here the "power accumulating machine" could be most fully developed. "The society of the dying established in the camps is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely" (*Origins*, 456).

For the commandants and the guards, "everything is possible." They could engage in a project of radical degradation, stripping other human beings of all that is truly human systematically and comprehensively. This was done, as Arendt showed in three sequential stages: through the destruction first of the juridical, then of the moral, and finally of the individual personality (455).

Extermination came at the end of this process. "It happens to human beings who for all practical purposes are already dead."<sup>44</sup> They had already disappeared from the sight of other human beings, from the (selective) awareness of the rest of the world. Now all traces that they had ever existed were to be eliminated.

## THE EXTERMINATION CAMPS AS BARBARISM

A watershed, Arendt believed, had been crossed here. Something had happened which was “unprecedented”;<sup>45</sup> an “abyss . . . has opened up before us.”<sup>46</sup>

What the Nazis had done with the camps was to create “Hell [sic] on earth,” a term that Arendt used not “allegorically but literally.”<sup>47</sup> It was Hell, not Purgatory, because there was (at least in principle) some possible exit from the latter, some way back to society, however damaged or traumatised the victims might be by the process and experience. (This was a significant difference between the Nazi and Soviet camps.)<sup>48</sup> It was Hell because the camps fundamentally inverted the most basic rules of morality and of reason. In the camps, the “basic commandments of Western morality were reversed.”<sup>49</sup> The commandment “thou shalt not kill” was turned into its opposite: killing itself became a duty. As Arendt pointed out, Himmler (“the member of the Nazi hierarchy most gifted at solving problems of conscience”) actually described the extermination of the Jews as “something historic, grandiose, unique,” as “a page of glory in our history,” an extraordinary reversal of meanings.<sup>50</sup> In Arendt’s eyes, this signalled the appearance in the modern world of “an absolute evil,” which she first described as radical (in *Origins*) and later as banal (in *Eichmann*). There is some debate about whether the later term represents a change of mind, whether there is a contradiction between the two terms, or whether they are complementary.<sup>51</sup> What is perhaps more important is that Arendt continued unapologetically and unequivocally to use the term.

This evil is absolute “because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives” (*Origins*, ix). What she meant was that there was no apparent, utilitarian rationale for the extermination camps (456). “The incredibility of the horrors is closely bound up with their economic uselessness . . . carried to the point of non-utility” (445). The extermination of the Jews was not a means to another end but an end in itself.

But the inversion went further than this. In a quite condensed passage, Arendt identified four specific features of the extermination camp system which, it may be argued, constituted an experiment in barbarism. “The world of dying, in which men are taught they are superfluous through a way of life in which punishment is meted out without any connection with crime, in which exploitation is practiced without profit, and where work is performed without product, is a place where senselessness is daily produced anew” (457).

This passage marks, in this context, a point both of convergence and separation. There are elements identified here which describe a society in terms which Luxemburg, as a Marxist, might readily have understood as barbarism. The extermination camps were “factories of annihilation” (459) whose primary output was death. What came out of them was (literally) nothing, the end of life itself. The camps thus effectively constituted (to use Marxist terminology) a novel mode of production; one which threw history into reverse. The “forces of production” were not deployed either for use or for exchange, a radical regression in relation to either feudalism or capitalism. The “social relations” that obtained in the extermination camps were characterised by total domination, a radical regression even compared to slavery.

But there are also elements here that cannot be easily contemplated within a Marxist framework. Those targeted for destruction in the camps were more than exploited.

Even those kept (briefly) alive were worked to death in a way that was economically irrational; most were gassed immediately. They had become superfluous to a radically new extent. They were more than stateless; they had lost not only the right to have rights but the right to live as human beings at all. This was a world that no longer had any sense; it was, in Arendt's words, "utter lunacy" (453).

There are, clearly, a number of serious difficulties in thinking further within a Marxist framework about a society that is regressive in such fundamental respects but is also peculiarly modern, "a hell... established by the most modern methods of destruction," as Arendt described it, like a medieval hell but without "what made the traditional conceptions of hell tolerable to man" (446–47).<sup>52</sup> What, for instance, are its internal contradictions and how would (indeed how can) history then move forward? It might, to put it in Luxemburgist terms, no longer be a question of socialism *or* barbarism, but of socialism *after* barbarism. The prospects for socialism now, however, might be remote; the removal of barbarism might have to come from forces other than socialist ones, from outside, rather than inside, such a society.

Of course Marxism is, as Arendt herself openly acknowledged, by no means the only mode of thought which faces this challenge. As she pointed out, the extermination camps had "exploded our traditional categories of political thought and the standards of our moral judgement in every area,"<sup>53</sup> just as they had "exploded the limits of the law... we are simply not equipped to deal with a guilt that goes beyond crime."<sup>54</sup>

Arendt's self-imposed task then was to work out the implications of the actual advent of barbarism. A full consideration of the ways in which she tried to rise to this challenge is beyond the scope of this paper. It raises a whole raft of questions about, amongst other things, human nature, about responsibility, about judgement, about thinking itself—issues which in many ways set the agenda for much of her later work.

What has been argued here is rather that she arrived at this point in some ways because of the influence exercised on her by Luxemburg. This was in part to do with a shared political orientation and set of concerns; it was in part a consequent sensitivity to darker possibilities. These were anticipated, with what seems remarkable prescience, by Luxemburg but then realised in a particular form in the extermination camps. These constituted the almost exact reverse of Luxemburg's and Arendt's shared notion of an authentic, properly human politics. In thinking about what the camps meant for humanity, Arendt was to go far beyond Luxemburg. But there is an important and enduring sense in which Luxemburg pointed the way, posing a problem that Arendt would then seek to work out for herself.

## NOTES

1. The reaction of some of these intellectuals is analysed by Anson Rabinbach in "The Abyss that Opened Up Before Us': Thinking about Auschwitz and Modernity," in *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the 20th Century*, ed. Moishe Postone and A. Eric Santner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The quotation is from Arendt.
2. Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Gunter Gaus," cited in Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment? Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 84.
3. Mary Dietz has argued persuasively that even *The Human Condition*, Arendt's most general work of political theory, needs to be understood (not only because it was written between the

- other two works) as “a profound response to the trauma inflicted upon humanity by the Nazi regime.” Mary Dietz, “Arendt and the Holocaust,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90.
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1967), 459; subsequent references are cited in the text.
  5. The emotional aspects are discussed, somewhat sensationally, in Elzbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995). The philosophical connections are explored rather more systematically by Dana Villa in *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
  6. See, respectively, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); and “Letter from Arendt to Karl Jaspers, 1946,” cited in Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 10.
  7. Elias argued that Nazism was an extreme product of a decivilising process, a “black ideology full of ideas more appropriate to a pre-industrial age than an industrial world.” Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Oxford: Polity, 1996), 380. Bauman explicitly attacked Elias on this issue for painting a profoundly inaccurate picture of civilisation, at once complacent and self-satisfied. What he calls “the morally elevating story of humanity emerging from pre-social barbarity” is, in his view, a myth which obscures the vital ways in which central features of this same civilisation contributed to the Holocaust. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), 12.
  8. This is argued for instance by Mark Salter in *Barbarians and Civilisation in International Relations* (Sterling, VA: Pluto, 2002). Perhaps symptomatically, Salter focuses exclusively on the history of the West, ignores the Chinese precedent, and traces the term only back as far as the Greeks.
  9. A number of biographers have insisted on the centrality of her analysis of imperialism to the rest of her politics. See, for instance, Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1982), 32; and J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 161.
  10. Michael Lowy, “Rosa Luxemburg’s Conception of ‘Socialism or Barbarism,’” in *On Changing the World: Essays in Political Philosophy from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 96. Norman Geras has contested this interpretation, arguing that Luxemburg never succumbed to any such determinism. Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 29.
  11. “The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in German Social Democracy,” in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 269.
  12. The Nazis did of course lay claim to what they called authentic German culture, although its products were entirely mediocre and superficial, what Herman Glaser calls “culture as façade” in *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).
  13. See, for instance, Götz Aly, *Final Solution: Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews* (London: Arnold, 1999).
  14. See the discussions by both of the extraordinary speech made by Himmler to SS officers in Poznan in 1943, in which he openly and proudly acknowledged the nature of the crime being committed: “the hard decision had to be made that this people should be caused to disappear from the earth.” He took full responsibility for it: “we have taken the responsibility for it on ourselves—the responsibility for an act not just an idea.” Indeed, he made a virtue out of it, entirely subverting every moral code known to humanity: it was “a glorious page in our history,” even if it could never be written. Saul Friedlander, “The ‘Final Solution’: On the Unease in Historical Interpretation,” in *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Berel Lang, “The Knowledge of Evil and Good,” in *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003). Arendt significantly also focused on this speech (see note 49).
  15. Cited from the *Anti-Critique*, by Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, 34.
  16. Cited from the *Anti-Critique*, by Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg*, 34.

17. For a clear exposition of Luxemburg's argument, see A. Shelton, "Rosa Luxemburg and the National Question," *East European Quarterly* 21.3 (1987).
18. Canovan, *A Reinterpretation*, 19.
19. See her observations on Hilferding and Lenin in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 148. Arendt's preference for and reliance upon Luxemburg's analysis of imperialism rather than that of other Marxists is discussed in Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: Sage, 1996), 78–79. See also Phillip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 134.
20. See Bernard J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the 'Final Solution'* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).
21. Robert Fine, *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2001), 116.
22. Joan Cocks has argued more generally that Arendt's approach to nationalism was strongly influenced by Luxemburg. Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 58.
23. Arendt implies in places that there are two different kinds of nationalism, one "Western," the other "tribal." The example she gives of the former, however, is always French, perhaps a rather unrepresentative kind. See R. Beiner, "Arendt and Nationalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Villa.
24. Arendt's criticisms of the left's inadequate internationalism are quite Luxemburgist, seeing it as too confined to an inter-European solidarity, restricting opposition to imperialism, and generally lacking political seriousness. See, *Origins*, 40–41.
25. Sheldon Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political," in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (New York: SUNY, 1994), 292.
26. As Canovan has noted, "her investigation of Marxism turned out to lead in so many directions and to raise so many complex issues that her original companion piece to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was never accomplished" (*A Reinterpretation*, 64). Canovan has elsewhere insisted on the conservative dimension to Arendt's thought. See Margaret Canovan, "Hannah Arendt as a Conservative Thinker," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). Hansen (*Hannah Arendt*) takes a very different line, stressing the links between Arendt and the left.
27. Wal Suchting argues that "her interpretation of Marx is completely erroneous," in "Marx and Hannah Arendt's Human Condition," *Ethics* 73.1 (1962): 47.
28. Particularly in thinking about his critiques of alienation and reification which can be taken as the opposite of what Arendt suggests, as credible attempts to rethink a proper, human relationship between them of a kind that she herself elsewhere advocated. See Jennifer Ring, "On Needing Both Marx and Arendt: Alienation and the Flight from Inwardness," *Political Theory* 17.3 (1989). Bikhu Parekh goes as far as to argue that Arendt's own critique of modern society is "Marxist in inspiration" in crucial ways. Bikhu Parekh, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of Marx," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 90.
29. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 26–27.
30. See, in particular, "What Is National Socialism?" where Trotsky talks of the ways in which "Fascism has opened up the depths of society for politics . . . capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism." In Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle against Fascism in Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 413.
31. Arendt's emphasis on movement and restlessness suggests that the concept of a totalitarian state is something of a contradiction in terms. As Canovan points out, "any ordinary state, however authoritarian it may be, is at least a *structure* with a definite shape and definite limits. Totalitarianism, by contrast, is not so much a structure as a movement in perpetual motion" (*A Reinterpretation*, 58).
32. This point is well made by Dana Villa, "Totalitarianism, Modernity and the Tradition," in *Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven Aschheim (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 126–27.

33. Rosa Luxemburg, "What Does the Spartakusbund Want?" in *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings*, ed. R. Looker (London: Cape, 1972), 278.
34. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Waters, 391.
35. Hannah Arendt, "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," in *Crises of the Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 181.
36. Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," 391.
37. Luxemburg defines revolution as a process in which "civic virtues...[are] acquired only through their own activity" ("What Does the Spartakusbund Want?" 277–28). Arendt describes revolution as "the foundation of freedom," as the "moment in which a new public space for freedom is constituted and organised" [*On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 249, 29].
38. There is a good discussion of Luxemburg's republicanism in Martine Leibovici, "Révolution et Démocratie: Rosa Luxemburg," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 41 (1991). On Arendt, see J. F. Sutton, "Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy," in *Critical Essays*, ed. Hinchman and Hinchman.
39. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 249. Significantly, despite her ambivalent attitude towards Marxism, she openly acknowledged the role of the European working class in these developments. See *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 215–16.
40. Walter Laqueur criticises them together in much these terms in "The Arendt Cult: Hannah Arendt as Political Commentator," in *Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Aschheim, 57.
41. Cited in Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 100. Bernstein has himself also argued elsewhere that Arendt's enthusiasm for revolutions was for the way in which they helped us remember "what is essentially a permanent human possibility" ("Judging: The Actor and the Spectator," in *The Realm of Humanitas: Responses to the Writings of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Reuben Garner (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 231.
42. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968). As Bat Ami Bar-On has noted, Arendt's essay on Luxemburg was "clearly written with an eye on Germany's Nazi past." Bat-Ami Bar-On, "Women in Dark Times: Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt and Me," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. May and Kohn, 289.
43. Arendt, *Origins*, 439.
44. Hannah Arendt, "Social Science and the Concentration Camps," in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 236.
45. Hannah Arendt, "Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Kohn, 405.
46. "Letter to Jaspers, 1946," cited in Steven Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 200), 61.
47. Arendt, "Reply to Voegelin," 404.
48. On mortality rates in the Gulag, which were noticeably less deadly than the Nazi ones, see, for instance, Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 2004). Overy points to significant similarities (in the victims' loss of identity, in the camp geography, in many of the rituals, in the culture of deliberate cruelty). But he also shows that there were marked differences. The camps had different purposes, were developed differently, and had different structures. His conclusion is emphatic: "camp does not equal camp" (595).
49. Cited in Sandra Hinchman, "Common Sense and Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt," *Polity* 17.2 (1984): 318.
50. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking, 1965), 105.
51. These different interpretations are discussed at length in Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*.
52. She refers here to the Last Judgement, "the idea of an absolute standard of justice combined with the infinite possibility of grace," entirely missing from the extermination camps.
53. Arendt, "Reply to Voegelin," 405.
54. "Letter to Jaspers, 1946," cited in Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer*, 61.