Introduction

"I don't like him," wrote Hannah Arendt in response to Karl Jaspers's inquiry about Leo Strauss.[1] "I have not seen H. Arendt's articles of Political Philosophy," Strauss in turn tellingly evaded answering Karl Löwith's question as to whether Arendt was "worth reading."[2] It is still widely believed that if these two influential and controversial German-Jewish political thinkers shared anything at all it was little else than a strong mutual personal and professional dislike. Moreover, while their ideas have gained increasing influence in the post-Rawlsian and post-Habermasian debates on ethics and politics, the schools of thought that claim their legacies – the Straussians and Arendtians – occupy opposite ends of the philosophical and political spectrums. The outcome of this has been that they have come to be perceived as each other's antipodes, Strauss being usually read as a conservative reviver of the idea of natural right and a defender of a philosophical way of life and Arendt coming forward as a post-metaphysical advocate of politics.

In what follows, I want to challenge this simplified opposition between the two thinkers by presenting a distinctly historical layer to the interpretative debates. I will argue, first, that regardless of how greatly Arendt's and Strauss's works continue to inspire us today, their own pursuits can only be grasped as involvement with the problems of their time. In particular, I will seek to reconstruct the formation of Arendt's and Strauss's ideas in the light of the intellectual controversies of interwar and mid-century decades. However, the purpose of such an investigation is not simply historical since it also tries to explain the radical character of their critiques of current idioms of politically orientated discourse and their lifelong effort to challenge and modify the

[1] Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers (1992): *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926–1969* (henceforth: *HAKJ*), L. Kohler and H. Saner (eds.), New York, letter from Jaspers to Arendt, May 4, 1954, and Arendt's reply, July 24, 1954, 244.

[2] Leo Strauss (2001): *Gesammelte Schriften* (henceforth *GS*) *III*, H. Meier (ed.), Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, letter from Löwith to Strauss, March 27, 1962, 688, and from Strauss to Löwith, April 2, 1962, 689.

reflective approach to political experience. Second, the book emphasizes hitherto unexplored conjunctions between Arendt and Strauss. It argues that they shared a fundamental interrogative horizon – comprising questions about the possibility of an ethically engaged political philosophy after two world wars and the European genocides, the political fate of Jewry, the implications of modern conceptions of freedom, and the relation between *theoria* and *praxis*. But, more surprisingly, their answers often displayed striking parallels. It is only on the basis of a reconstruction of Arendt's and Strauss's common intellectual horizons and topography of the concrete debates guiding their work – or so I argue – that we can unravel the similarities as well as the genuine antagonisms between the two thinkers. No less importantly, I believe that it is precisely because Arendt's and Strauss's current influences stand so far apart that exploring encounters between them will also allow us to reassess their respective philosophical and political legacies.

Of course it makes little sense to undertake a detailed comparative study of the two authors – despite Arendt and Strauss's prominence in twentieth-century intellectual history – just for comparison's sake. After all, they shared an intellectual background and political experience with numerous other German-Jewish émigré scholars of the same generation. Even the facts that Arendt's and Strauss's paths crossed several times, or that they often had the same philosophical sources, were both engaged in Zionism for a while and later retreated from it, and that they both later positioned themselves in conspicuous opposition against the American mainstreams of political science, only indicate that studying them together could potentially illuminate some aspects of the history of twentieth-century political thought. The main reason for such a conjoint study is, I believe, a different one. In contrast to the prevalent American perception of World War II and the Holocaust as largely a sinister deviation from the modern political project, Arendt and Strauss – like many other émigré scholars – considered it an integral part, or even a culmination, of political modernity's having forced its unsettled undercurrents to the surface. Yet, unlike other "critics of modernity," they made the question of politics – rather than religion, technology, ethics, or culture – the central crux by which to grapple with the predicaments of their time. Both of them denied the possibility of a purely "technical" solution to the problem of politics; they also raised significant doubts concerning the immediate efficacy of philosophical ideas within politics and society at large and, indeed, questioned the desirability of such interaction. It is Arendt's and Strauss's reflections on politics and their shared insistence on the urgent

need to thoroughly revise contemporary approaches to the problem of politics that stand at the centre of my study.

The first part of the book delineates the intellectual contexts of Arendt's and Strauss's youth in Weimar Germany. While recent research has illuminated the context of Arendt's and Strauss's thinking, I want to go beyond investigating the standard references to Weimar philosophical and political thought and explore their work within the wider framework of cross-disciplinary debates. I trace the genesis of their ideas to debates on the political future of European Jewry, the role of scientific knowledge in politics, and the possibility of ethics in the world after the Great War, as well as to controversies occasioned by the demise of historicism and the hermeneutic revolutions defining the scholarly scene of the time. I argue, first, that, the new currents in interwar thought decisively shaped Arendt's and Strauss's reflections on the significance of their Jewishness and on the political situation of German Jewry. Second, I maintain that many key aspects of their later, more generally articulated, critiques of political modernity can be unearthed in their early formulations of the Jewish predicament. Third, by reconstructing the conceptual topography of their early writings, I want to unravel not just how the debates shaped their individual sensibilities but also how Strauss and Arendt attempted to rethink and challenge the conventions of their time. In short, I seek to answer the questions of how they arrived at their political critiques, what the underlying contemporary problems and questions were, and how these changed. What were the provocations driving their critiques, and what were they aiming at?

In the second part of the book, more explicitly comparative and thematic in its focus, I argue that in their American work, Arendt and Strauss continued to converse with, as well as attempted to break free from, the intellectual traditions of their youth. Once Strauss and Arendt entered the American academic context, their work doubtless had new intents and engaged with new problems. Yet, it is striking how, alongside many other European émigrés, Strauss and Arendt brought into the postwar American debates the political predicaments and philosophical discontents that had informed some of the Weimar controversies. They often continued to operate within discursive frameworks unfamiliar to their American colleagues, and their argumentation raised issues largely regarded as unproblematic or irrelevant in this new academic context.

For instance, postwar American political science, increasingly quantitative and analytical in its focus, deemed historical approaches at best irrelevant to scientific purposes – and at worst obstructive. By contrast, Arendt and

Strauss unremittingly appealed to the past – to its experiences, thought, and language – and did so in order to contest the contemporary progressivist outlook in its entirety, including its relation to history. Furthermore, one of the main aims of contemporary social sciences was to devise new methods that would allow not only the causal explanation of social phenomena but also their prediction and, ultimately, control. Arendt and Strauss, to the contrary, insisted that the specifically modern dream of submitting the realm of praxis to scientific guidance underlies the ideological turn in politics. This constituted for them a paradigmatic shift wherein all practical limitations are reconceived as theoretical challenges and action has become an application of theory.

It was from a similar perspective that Arendt and Strauss presented their critical narratives of liberalism. They made no secret of the fact that they were "not liberals."[3] Yet it has remained unclear when and where their accounts of modern political thought in the broader sense entailed a critique of liberalism in a more specific sense. As a result, their readers have deemed their interrogations of political modernity too general for a constructive critique of liberalism. In my comparison, I argue that in contrast to other contemporary critics, who highlighted the economic, moral, or social ramifications of liberal modernity, Arendt and Strauss contested what they believed was the misconstruction of the problem of politics in liberalism. For them, liberalism attempts to constantly elude the political and yet at the same time to rescue it by appealing to elements that, according to its own categories, should not belong to the political sphere. This inner dialectic accounts for both the potential weaknesses of liberalism and its tendency to misrepresent political phenomena.

One of the major difficulties throughout the writing of this study has been the fact that despite their opposition to the scholarly mainstreams of their time, Arendt and Strauss rarely mentioned – or even less, discussed – each other's work. Still, Arendt was somewhat more disposed to acknowledge Strauss's contribution to contemporary scholarship than the other way around. She considered him a "truly gifted intellect," even if "a convinced orthodox atheist," which she thought was "odd." Strauss, she believed, was giving students a genuine taste for reading, "regardless of what one might think of him otherwise," and it was precisely because of that, or so she claimed, she did "systematic propaganda for him with the

[3] Hannah Arendt (1994): "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954* (henceforth: *EU*), ed. J. Kohn, New York: Hartcourt, 405. Cf. Leo Strauss (1959): "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy," *Review of Metaphysics* 12, No. 3, 392ff.

students." She added that if some students later start believing that "everything comes from Aristotle, is also not a disaster that the world would not be able to survive. Most men have considerably more absurd opinions."[4]

Arendt also seems to have appreciated Strauss's written work, even if there are no references to it in her own writings. Her library, as well as the reading lists of her courses – today more accessible than ever to researchers and wider readership – contained several of his books, including his interpretations of Spinoza, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, and *Natural Right and History*. She did not merely own these books, but had also read them with considerable attention, or at the very least with numerous marginalia. Arendt seems to have found Strauss's book on Hobbes particularly insightful, and she used it as the only secondary source in her notes for a course on the Malmesbury philosopher. In notes for another political philosophy seminar, Arendt praised Strauss's "esoteric" readings of Plato, even if she characterized these as "Aristotelian" and Strauss himself as a "traditionalist."[5]

Despite the fact that Strauss's archive has also recently been opened up for researchers, I have not yet found similar references to Arendt's work in Strauss's unpublished writings. Yet Strauss's students similarly charged Arendt with traditionalism. For today's reader it seems somewhat ironic – considering their own teacher's affection for the "ancients" – that these young men reproached Arendt for her "nostalgic longing" for the Greek world. Although she was not explicitly named, it is very likely that the authors had Arendt in mind when they spoke of thinkers who "succumb to [a] kind of nostalgic longing for the *polis* and the *vita activa*, public space, " or "sense of community." Unlike some "radical modern thinkers" – and here Arendt continued to be an unmistakable target – their Strauss knew better than to "speak contemptuously of 'bourgeois' individualism or to

[4] Hannah Arendt and Kurt Blumenfeld (1995): "*. . .in keinem Besitz verwurzelt*." *Die Korrespondenz*, I. Normann and I. Pilling (eds.), Hamburg, letters from Arendt to Blumenfeld, April 26, 1956, 141, and July 31, 1956, 150.

[5] Arendt characterized Strauss as a "traditionalist" in her seminar notes for "Political Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy" (1969), Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress (henceforth: HAPLC), Subject File 1949–1975, 1/2, Courses, 6. Cf. notes for the second meeting of the seminar called "Political Philosophy or Philosophy and Politics," (1960), HAPLC, Subject File 1949–1975, No. 024805. Arendt appreciated Strauss's interpretations, and included his books on Spinoza, Machiavelli, and Hobbes on her seminar reading lists that usually comprised 5–15 titles. See seminar notes for (1) History of Political Theory, University of California, spring 1955, introduction and seminar on Hobbes; (2) From Machiavelli to Marx, Cornell University, fall 1965; (3) Machiavelli, Wesleyan University, Middletown, 1961; (4) Philosophy and Politics, New School, Spring 1969, HAPLC, Subject File: 1949–1975, Courses.

spurn with ingratitude the unprecedented humanity, compassion, social welfare, and protection for diversity brought by the modern commercial republic."[6] This assertion is at the very least perplexing: if there was one thing on which Arendt's and Strauss's views coincided, then it was precisely in their judgment of the "modern commercial republic."

This emphasized withholding of mutual recognition could hardly have been a mere professional matter. After all, both Arendt and Strauss had agreeable relations with a number of other contemporaries who were sometimes at the opposite end of the political and intellectual spectrum. Also, unlike in the case of their adversaries, they remained silent on the subject of each other. This determined silence between the protagonists admittedly does not allow for a meaningful reconstruction of a dialogue, explicit or implicit, between the two thinkers. Instead, I will trace the (dis) junctions between them, whether expressive of shared problems or viewpoints, or on the contrary, of disparities. As I explained above, I will do so against the background of the influences, engagements, and conflicts with the powerful intellectual presences in their youth, as well as the conversations that constituted the shared contexts of their early thought. They name some of these, while others they omit. The latter is the case also with today's commentaries on Arendt and Strauss: these bring to light some of the experiences and intellectual encounters of Arendt's and Strauss's youth, while others – not less important, as I will argue – have been cast aside. Thus, instead of carving out a comprehensive picture of their intellectual trajectories – much of which would duplicate the existing literature – I will focus on the episodes that have been omitted, yet that in particular serve as traces for the equally unduly neglected connections between the two thinkers.

Similarly, I have tried to use as extensively as possible their lesser-known and less frequently cited writings, in particular their earliest published work, unpublished articles, research proposals, speeches, lecture notes, and correspondence. I have focused mainly – with few borderline exceptions – on their work up to the mid-1950s, which was the time by which they were becoming recognized political thinkers in the United States. It was also the time by which Strauss had published *Natural Right and History* and Arendt had presented the main ideas of *The Human Condition*, their major political-philosophical opuses. It was mostly later

[6] Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle (1986): "Epilogue" to the 3rd edition of *History of Political Philosophy*, L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (eds.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 928.

that they became more engaged both in American political and academic debates, the implications of which I believe deserve a separate study. The main reason for building my investigation on Arendt's and Strauss's less cited and or even unpublished writings is of course that these are, I believe, highly illuminating sources for understanding the concerns in the contexts of which their thinking evolved. In these articles, speeches, or even just notes, they were sometimes more explicit about the contemporary debates to which they were responding, about their own hesitations, about their aims. The second reason for my emphasis on these sources is that almost every year more materials from Arendt's and Strauss's archives are becoming accessible to a wider audience, and are now even partly published online.[7] This book is an attempt to integrate a fragment of these sources into debates over their political-philosophical legacies, and as such I hope it will also encourage other readers to do so.

In the first decades that Arendt's and Strauss's ideas became increasingly inspirational for late twentieth-century political philosophy, most readings tended to be overwhelmingly ahistorical, if not outright anachronistic. The relevance of Arendt's theory of politics has been explored in many branches of late twentieth-century political philosophy, among others by "communitarians," "pluralists," and proponents of "deliberative democracy."[8] The interpretation of Strauss's philosophical legacy has largely been dominated by his students, the "Straussians," on the one hand, and their critics, on the other hand. These often highly political controversies tend to spill much ink over such questions as "whose side is Strauss on": the side of the philosopher or the citizen? Liberal, moral absolutism, or rather political nihilism? Was he a friend or a foe of democracy? Can he be considered the intellectual father of neoconservatism?[9]

[7] Many of Arendt's papers, notes, letters, etc. in HAPLC are fully or partly published online. The catalogue for her library, which can be consulted on site at Bard College, is online, too. The Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago has an ongoing project of making recordings and transcripts of Strauss's lectures available online.

[8] The list comprising all notable interpretations of Arendt would be very long. Some of the most authoritative readings of Arendt include Seyla Benhabib (1996): *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications; Margaret Canovan (1992): *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Andreas Kalyvas (2008): *Democracy and the Politics of Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[9] The most notable recent examples here, written in Strauss's defence, are Steven Smith (2006): *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy and Judaism*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, esp. ch. "Strauss's Platonic Liberalism"; and Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert (2008): *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press. For an opposing reading, see John McCormick (2011): "Post-Enlightenment Sources of Political

Attempts to instrumentalize Arendt and Strauss in current debates are still present in today's scholarship, yet these have recently been complemented by numerous historicizing or at least historically more sensitive accounts. A breakthrough study was Dana Villa's *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (1996), a detailed examination of how Arendt's central political concepts were indebted to Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) phenomenological-philosophical categories. Villa does not assert that Arendt simply adopted Heidegger's ideas, yet he rightly argues that her key arguments can only be grasped with a view to their Heideggerian roots. It was only recently that Richard Velkeley, in his *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting*, filled a disturbing gap in the otherwise abundant Strauss scholarship. He offers an impressively knowledgeable, comprehensive, and meticulous clarification of Strauss's relationship to Heidegger, focusing on Heidegger's critique of tradition and Strauss's aim to rediscover, on the basis of this critique, a radically questioning political philosophy.

I have learned a great deal from both of these interpretations, but I will not myself engage in length in an inquiry of Heidegger's philosophy as an enduring framework for both Arendt's and Strauss's political-philosophical projects. Of course, Heidegger cannot be absent from this book, but in exploring the ways that Arendt and Strauss thought with or against him I felt I had little new to say (this little I have still said, however). At the same time, while Heidegger cannot be overlooked, I want to emphasize above all that he was not the only figure of influence during the years of Arendt's and Strauss's intellectual coming of age, but that they grew into independent thinkers in the midst of and while participating in a multiplicity of debates and sea changes.

Lately there has developed considerable agreement among Arendt's and Strauss's historically minded readers that the German political experience and philosophical tradition remained constant reference points for them. Still, there is considerable disagreement about which of these were the most relevant "contexts." For instance, scholarship representative of the recent upsurge of interest in the young Strauss – the best examples being David Janssens's? *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Work* (2008) and Daniel Tanguay's *Leo Strauss: Intellectual Biography* (2007) – has reconstructed a dialogue between Strauss and the great tradition, rather than his contemporaries. In this

Authority: Biblical Atheism, Political Theology and the Strauss-Schmitt Exchange," *History of European Ideas* 37 (2), 175–80.

sense, Strauss's early thought is presented as a solitary dialogue – even if provoked by the political predicaments of the time – culminating in his adoption of Platonism or Nietzscheanism. A notable exception is Michael Zank's editorial comments on a collection of Strauss's early essays that discuss in detail Strauss's participation in the Zionist movement in the 1920s. Arendt's early work by contrast is often read as an attempt to come to terms with her eventful personal life, for instance, in the light of her love affair with Heidegger or her experiences as a young Jewish female in increasingly anti-Semitic Germany.[10] Another notable direction in the interpretative scholarship, offering an abundance of insightful discussions, is to trace the philosophical roots of Arendt's and Strauss's work back to one or two figures of influence.[11]

There are also a few attempts to take a broader discursive-contextual approach to Arendt's and Strauss's political thought. A recent book by Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (2008), comes closest to my own perspective both methodologically and substantially. It follows Weimar debates about the fate of the divine across disciplines, and their impact on the thought of three German-Jewish intellectuals, Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, and Gerschom Scholem. Similarly, I have been methodologically inspired by Steven Aschheim's research on German-Jewish intellectual history that inquires into its radically critical stance at all ends of the political spectrum. Aschheim's studies go beyond the usual focus on either individuals or institutions, and instead focus on the concerns and broader discourses that they shared. Further examples of a similar approach to intellectual history are David Myers's *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (2004), with a chapter on Strauss, and Anette Vowinckel's *Geschichtsbegriff und historisches Denken bei Hannah Arendt* (2004). Intellectual contexts play a lesser role in Leora Batnitzky's nonetheless impressive comparison, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (2006). In this context, it bears noting that an earlier attempt to juxtapose the protagonists of my own

[10] The two most informative examples here are the widely cited Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1984): *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Julia Kristeva (2001): *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press; and Antonia Grunenberg (2006): *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. Geschichte einer Liebe*, Munich: Piper Verlag. For a recent biography of Strauss, see Eugene Sheppard (2006): *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of the Political Philosopher*, Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.

[11] Again, this would be a long list. The young Arendt's work is, as a rule, traced back to her two philosophical mentors, Heidegger and/or Jaspers, among others by Young-Bruehl and Grunenberg. In Strauss's case, for studies of influence, see for instance, Nasser Benhegar (2003): *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics*, Chicago: Chicago University Press; and Heinrich Meier (1995): *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. The Hidden Dialogue*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

study, *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigrés and American Political Thought* (1995) is a collection of mostly contextualizing papers, none of which, however, discusses both thinkers.[12]

These numerous interpretations have explored the ways in which Arendt's and Strauss's works were shaped by their experience of the crisis and collapse of the Weimar Republic, the onslaught of totalitarianism, and World War II in sufficient detail. Therefore I will refer to the direct implications of the political-historical contexts only occasionally, while mostly tracing the conversations about it. In this sense, the book is above all a study of scholars trying to make sense of politics as well as of their own enterprise in the political context, occasionally pursuing an ideal of theoretical intervention – or, on the contrary, refuting it. As the reader will also notice, I will not be viewing these concerns and controversies as emerging immediately from external social factors. Although such explorations may at times open important perspectives, the belief that texts and other forms of discourses are best understood as functions of the sociopolitical environment has its limitations. Most importantly, such an approach proceeds from the problematic presumption that there is a unidirectional link between the extralinguistic reality as the more "real" reality and the linguistic-argumentative spaces created and constantly contested by the agents.[13] To look at intellectual spaces as the mere outcome or reaction to experience means ignoring the reciprocity of the relation; that is, the fact that the "more real reality" is to a significant extent shaped and reshaped by our ideas, understanding, and talking about it. My approach, by contrast, follows the methodological line in which language is understood both as emerging from life as well as giving it orientation.[14]

[12] There are, however, a number of comparative essays, including Dana Villa's (2001) study of the problem of politics and philosophy in both authors; see the chapter, "Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: Citizenship versus Philosophy," in *Socratic Citizenship*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ronald Beiner (1990): "Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: The Uncommenced Dialogue," *Political Theory* 18, No. 2, May, 238–254; Harald Bluhm (1999): "Variationen des Höhlengleichnisses: Kritik und Restitution politischer Philosophie bei Hannah Arendt und Leo Strauss," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 47; Horst Mewes (1992): "Modern Individualism: Reflections on Oakeshott, Arendt and Strauss," *Political Science Reviewer* 21, Spring, 116–147.

[13] Cf. J. G. A Pocock (1973): *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History*, New York: Atheneum, 29–38.

[14] My understanding of discourse and a discursive approach to intellectual history largely draws upon perspectives explored in James Tully, "The Pen Is a Mighty Sword," and in the chapters by Quentin Skinner in Tully (ed.) (1988): *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, Princeton University Press. In the field of history of twentieth-century political science, I have benefited most from the methodological reflections in R. Adcock, M. Bevir, and S. Stimson (2007): *Modern Political Science. Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880*, Princeton University Press, esp. the introduction and ch. "The Remaking of Political Theory" by the editors.