

documents Interviewing

Preliminary Remarks

In October 1973, Hannah Arendt was interviewed by Roger Errera for the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (O.R.T.F.). Recorded over several days, the interviews were later worked into a 50-minute television feature directed by Jean-Claude Lubtchansky for the series "Un certain regard", first broadcast on July 6, 1974.

The transcripts of the recorded interviews (Errera's questions in French and

Hannah Arendt's answers in English) remained unpublished, except for a summary of Arendt's answers which appeared in *The New York Review of Books* (October 26, 1978, p. 18).

For the film, Arendt's answers were translated into French and dubbed, with Arendt's original voice in the back. By using this soundtrack and various transcripts and translations of the interviews, Ursula Ludz has reconstructed Arendt's original answers and completed a French-

English manuscript of the televised interview. This manuscript is published below for the first time.

We thank the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA, Bry sur Marne, France) for granting us the permission to print, and we are especially grateful to Dr. Errera for providing some background information in an introductory statement, which he wrote for this Newsletter.

Editors

Roger Errera

Interviewing Hannah Arendt

What follows is the text of my filmed interview with Hannah Arendt, which took place in New York in October 1973. Several circumstances made the film possible:

My own interest in H. Arendt's work, which, from 1965 on, led to several publications: reviewing (twice) the French translation of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*¹, Part 3 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*², and *On Revolution*³; editing a double-page of comments and reviews in *Le Monde*⁴; publishing (in the Diaspora series, which I edit) a French translation of *On Antisemitism*⁵ and, at the same publisher, a French translation of *Crises of the Republic*⁶. I also prepared a new French edition of *The Human Condition* with a preface by Paul Ricoeur⁷.

I had several meetings with H. Arendt, the first one at her place in New York during the winter of 1967⁸. Others followed: in Köln (1972) and near Ascona in Switzerland, when she stayed in Tegna.

Roger Errera is Member of the Conseil d'Etat, France's Supreme Court for administrative law; founder and director of the "Diaspora" series (Calmann-Lévy, Paris).

From 1972 to 1975, we exchanged a number of letters now deposited in the Library of Congress.

The initiative for the film came from a good friend, the late Pierre Schaeffer, then head of the Research Service of O.R.T.F. (French public radio and television). He asked me whether I would be interested. My answer was "yes", while Arendt's was, first, a categorical "no". She later accepted. The fact that we had met earlier no doubt helped.

In October 1973, we went to New York. I had spent the summer in Greece reading her books again and preparing the interview. I sent her a short list of topics, which was accepted. We agreed on the procedure: two hours of interviewing every day, over several days,

in a TV studio or her publisher's (i.e., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich's) office. She strongly refused to be filmed at home. I spoke in French, and she replied in English.

The moment was not exactly a calm one, politically speaking. In the Middle East, the October War had just taken place. In the US, the Watergate affair had begun. It would lead to the resignation of President Nixon in August 1974, under the threat of impeachment. If I remember well, we learnt, in the course of our talks, of the dismissal of Archibald Cox, then Special Prosecutor, and the resignation of Elliott Richardson, then Attorney General.

There is more than an echo of these

5 Hannah Arendt, *Sur l'antisémitisme* (Calmann-Lévy, 1973).

6 Hannah Arendt, *Du mensonge en politique. Réflexions sur les documents du Pentagon* (Calmann-Lévy, 1972).

7 Hannah Arendt, *Condition de l'homme moderne* (Calmann-Lévy, 1983).

8 The late Alain Clément, then *Le Monde's* correspondent in Washington, was instrumental in making this meeting possible.

1 "Eichmann: un procès inachevé", *Critique* (March 1965); "Une analyse du totalitarisme", *La quinzaine littéraire* (December 1-15, 1966).

2 "Peut-on comparer régime nazi et régime stalinien?", *Le Monde* (October 20, 1972).

3 "Révolution française et Révolution américaine", *La quinzaine littéraire* (April 15-30, 1967).

4 "Hannah Arendt, penseur du 'politique'", *Le Monde* (October 20, 1972).

Hannah Arendt

events in the interview. During it, Hannah Arendt was extremely courteous and attentive, fully controlled, at times consulting a few notes (for quotations). It seems to me that she said exactly what she meant to say, correcting herself immediately whenever necessary. No anecdotes, no small talk. With a permanent grace she accepted what was for her neither a familiar nor a relaxing exercise.

Many themes were discussed by us: Europe and the U.S.; the pending constitutional crisis in Washington; the legacy of the sixties and early seventies in the American polity; the uniqueness of totalitarianism in the 20th century; Israel, the

Diaspora and the Jewish condition. We could have spent hours, even days on each of them. It was a rare privilege for me to see and listen to her thinking aloud.

One word on what can be seen in the film: mainly H. Arendt, of course, at half-distance or in close-up. I refused to be shown. As a "contrepoint" to the rather austere set-up, the film features a series of splendid views of Manhattan, the New York harbour, and the architecture of the city taken at dawn in a beautiful fall light by J.-C. Lubtchansky.

Several months following the interviewing and shooting in New York,

I worked with J.-C. Lubtchansky to assemble the parts of the film and make a whole out of them for the 50-minute program. The film was broadcast in the summer of 1974. It has been shown again recently.

One year later, I met H. Arendt again in New York in the fall of 1975, shortly before she died on December 4. After her death, I spent one night in Manhattan writing an article on her which appeared in *Le Monde* the next day – as a post-face to our interrupted dialogue.⁹

⁹ "Une éthique de la liberté", *Le Monde* (December 7-8, 1975).

Hannah Arendt | Roger Errera

The Interview *

A.: I may need a glass of water, if I could have that.

E.: Vous êtes arrivée dans ce pays [l'Amérique] en 1941. Vous venez d'Europe, et vous y vivez donc depuis 32 ans. Quand vous arrivez en Europe, quelle est votre impression dominante?

Ma impression dominante, well, mon impression dominante. Well. See, this is not a nation-state, America is not a nation-state and Europeans have a hell of a time to understand this simple fact which, after all, they could know theoretically; it is, this country is united neither by heritage, nor by memory, nor by soil, nor by language, nor by origin from the same ... There are no natives here. The natives were the Indians. Everything else are citizens and these citizens are united only by one thing and that's a lot: that is, you become a citizen in the United States by simple consent to the Constitution.

The constitution, that is a scrap of paper according to French as well as German common opinion, and you can change it. No, here it is a sacred document, it is the constant remembrance of one sacred act and that is the act of foundation. The act of foundation and the foundation is to make a union out of wholly disparate ethnic minorities and regions and still (a) have a union and (b) do not assimilate or level down these differences. And all this is very difficult to understand for a foreigner. That is what a foreigner never understand (we can say this is a government by law and not by men) to what extent that is true, and needs to be true for the well-being of the country, I almost said, the nation, but for the well-being of the country, for the United States of America, for the republic, really.

Durant les dix années qui viennent de sécouler l'Amérique a connu une vague de violence politique marquée par l'assassinat du Président [John F. Kennedy], de son frère [Robert Kennedy], par la guerre de Vietnam, par l'affaire de Watergate. Pourquoi l'Amérique peut-elle surmonter les crises qui en Europe auraient abouti un changement de régime, ou des troubles intérieurs très graves?

Let me try it a little different. I think the turning point in this whole business was indeed the assassination of the President. No matter how you explain it and no matter what you know or don't know about, it was quite clear that now really for the first time in a very long time in American history, a direct crime had interfered with the political process. And this somehow has changed the political process You know other assassinations followed, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King etc. Finally, the attentat [the assault on Wallace which also still belongs in the same direction].

And I think that Watergate has revealed perhaps one of the deepest constitutional crises this country has ever known. And if I say constitutional crisis, this is of course much more important than if I would say "une crise constitutionnelle" en France. For the Constitution . . . I don't know how many constitutions you had since the French Revolution. As far as I remember, at World War I you had fourteen. And how many you then got . . . I don't want [to tackle it], everyone of you can do it better than I. But anyhow, here there is ONE Constitution, and this Constitution has now lasted for not quite two hundred years. Here it's a different story. Here it's the whole fabric of government which actually is at stake.

And this constitutional crisis consists, and it is the first time in the United States, in a head-on clash conflict between the legislative and the executive. Now there the Constitution itself is somehow at fault, and I would like to talk about that a moment. The Founding Fathers never believed that tyranny could arise out of the executive office, because they did not see this office in any different light but as the execution of what the legislation had decreed – in various forms; I leave it at that. We know today that the greatest danger of tyranny is of course the executive. But what did the Founding Fathers, if we take the spirit of the Constitution, what did they think? They thought they were freed primarily of majority rule and therefore it is a great mistake if you believe that what we have here is democracy, a mistake in which many Americans share. What we have here is republican rule, and the Founding Fathers were most concerned about preserving the rights of the minorities because they believed that in a healthy body politic there must be a plurality of opinions. What the French call: "l'union sacrée" is precisely what one should not have because this would already be a kind of tyranny or the consequence of a tyranny, and the tyranny could very well be . . . The tyrant could very well be a majority. Hence, the whole government is construed in such a way that there is always [the victory of the majority, that the majority has won]. But there is always the opposition and the opposition is necessary because the opposition represents legitimate opinions of either one minority or of minorities.

And national security is a new word in the American vocabulary, and this, I think, you should know. National security is really, if I may already interpret a bit, it is the translation of "raison d'état". And "raison d'état", this whole notion of reason of state, never played any role in this country. This is a new import. And national security now covers everything, and it covers, as you may know from the interrogation of Mr. Ehrlichman¹, it covers all kinds of crimes. For instance, the President has a perfect right, He can do no wrong, that is he is like a monarch in a republic. He's above the law, and his justification is always that whatever he does, he does for the sake of national security.

¹ John D. Ehrlichman, President Nixon's adviser on domestic affairs, left office on April 30, 1973. Later he had to testify before the Senate Watergate Committee (Ervin Committee). Arendt alludes to his testimony before the Committee.

En quoi, selon vous, ces implications modernes de la raison d'état, ce que vous appelez l'intrusion de la criminalité dans le domaine politique est-elle propre à notre temps? Est-ce que ceci est propre à notre époque?

This is *propre à notre époque*, this ... I really think so. Just as the stateless business is *propre à notre époque*, and repeats itself again and again under different aspects and in different [countries] and in different colors. But if we come to these general questions, what is also *propre à notre époque* is the massive intrusion of criminality into political processes. And by this I mean something which by far transcends those crimes always justified, rightly or wrongly, by *raison d'état*, because these are always the exceptions from the rule, whereas here we are confronted suddenly with a style of politics which by itself is criminal.

Here it's by no means exception to the rule. It is not so that they say, because we are in such a special emergency we have to bug everybody all and sundry, including the President himself. But they think that bugging belongs to the normal political process. And the same is, they don't say we will once burgle, break in the office of the psychiatrist and never again, by no means. But they say this is absolutely legitimate to break in

So this whole business of national security comes of course from the reason-of-state business. The national-security business is a direct European import. Of course the Germans, and the French, and the Italians recognize it as entirely justified because they have always lived under this. But this was precisely the European heritage which the American Revolution intended to break.

Dans votre essai consacré aux Documents du Pentagone² vous décrivez la psychologie de ceux que vous appelez les spécialistes de la solution des problèmes, qui étaient à l'époque les conseillers du gouvernement américain, et vous dites: Les spécialistes de la solution des problèmes ont été définis comme des hommes très sûrs d'eux-mêmes et qui semblent rarement douter de leur aptitude à s'imposer. Ils ne se contentaient pas de faire preuve d'intelligence, mais se targuaient en même temps de leur «rationalisme», de leur «amour de la théorie», de l'univers purement intellectuel, leur faisant rejeter tout sentimentalisme à un point assez effrayant ...

May I interrupt you here. I think that's enough. I have a very good example, precisely from these Pentagon Papers, with this scientific mentality which finally overwhelms all other insights. You know about the "domino theory", which was the official theory throughout the Cold War from 1950 till about 1969, shortly after the Pentagon Papers. The fact is that very few of the very sophisticated intellectuals who wrote the Pentagon Papers believed in this theory. – There are only, I think, two or three guys, pretty high up in the administration but not exactly very intelligent ones: Mr. Rostow and, I don't know, the ... General Taylor, and ... not the most intelligent boy, who really believed it. – That is, they didn't believe in it, but in everything which they did they took this assumption and this not because they were liars, or because they wanted to please their superiors – these people really were all right in this respect – but because this gave them a framework within which they could work, and they took this framework even though they knew – and though every intelligence report and though every factual analysis proved to them every morning – that these assumptions were simply factually wrong. They took it because they didn't have any other framework.

² Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers", *The New York Review of Books* (November 18, 1971), pp. 30-39; for the French edition, cf. note 6 to "Interviewing Hannah Arendt"; German edition: "Die Lüge in der Politik: Überlegungen zu den Pentagon-Papieren", *Die neue Rundschau* (v. 83, no. 2 [1972]), pp. 185-213.

Notre siècle me semble dominé par une persistance de mode de penser fondée sur le déterminisme historique.

Yes, and I think this has very good reasons, this belief in this historical necessity. The trouble with this whole business – and it is really an open question – is the following: We don't know the future, everybody acts into the future [which] nobody can at all know. Nobody knows what he is doing, because the future is being done. Action is a WE and not an I. Only where I am the only one, if I were the only one, could I foretell what's going to happen from what I am doing. Now this looks as though what actually happens is entirely contingent, and contingency is indeed one of the biggest factors in all history. Nobody knows what is going to happen simply because so much depends on an enormous amount of variables, as they say, that is, in other words, on the simple hazard. On the other hand, if you look back on history retrospectively, then you can, even though all this was contingent – you can tell a story that makes sense. How is that possible? That is a real problem of every philosophy of history: How is it possible that in retrospect it always looks as though it couldn't have happened otherwise? All the variables have disappeared, and reality is of such an overwhelming impact upon us that we cannot be bothered with actually an infinite variety of, perhaps, possibilities.

Mais si nos contemporains conservent leur attachement à des modes de pensée déterministes, malgré le démenti de l'histoire, serait-ce d'après vous parce qu'ils ont peur de la liberté?

Ja. Sure. And rightly so. Only they don't say it. If they would, one could immediately start a debate. If they only would say it. They are afraid, they are afraid to be afraid. That is one of the main personal motivations. They are afraid of freedom.

Est-ce que vous imaginez en Europe un ministre, voyant sa politique sur le point d'échouer, commander à un équipe d'experts extérieurs à l'administration une étude dont le but serait de savoir comment ...

It was not extérieur de l'administration. They were taken from everywhere and also from ...

C'est cela, mais également avec des personnes extérieures à l'administration. Est-ce que donc vous imaginez un ministre européen dans la même situation commander une telle étude pour savoir comment cela est arrivé?

Of course not.

Pourquoi?

Because of reason of state, you know. He would have felt that ... He would have stopped it immediately and The McNamara attitude – and you know also what I quoted there as a motto, what McNamara said: It's not a very nice view what we are doing there, what the hell is going on here?³ – this is an American attitude. This shows you that things were still all right, even if they went wrong, but they were still all right because there was still McNamara who wanted to learn from it.

Pensez-vous qu' actuellement les dirigeants américains placés devant d'autres situations aient encore l'envie de savoir ...

No. I don't think that a single one is left. I don't know. No. No. No, I take that back. But I don't believe that ... I think that McNamara was on Nixon's list of enemies, if I am not mistaken. I saw it today in the *New York Times*. I think that is true. And this shows you already that this whole attitude went out of American politics, that

³ The quote by Robert S. McNamara which Arendt took as her motto for "Lying in Politics" reads as follows: "The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring a thousand non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

is on the highest level. This is no longer they [???]. They believed, you see, these people believed already in image-making, but still with a vengeance, that is: Why didn't we succeed with image-making? And one can say that it was only images, you know. But now they want everybody to believe their image, and nobody should look beyond it, and that is of course an altogether different political will.

Après ce que le sénateur Fulbright appelle l'arrogance du pouvoir, après ce que l'on pourrait nommer l'arrogance du savoir, un troisième stade qui serait l'arrogance tout court?

Yes, I don't know whether it's *l'arrogance tout court*. It is really the will to dominate, for heaven's sake. And up to now it hasn't succeeded because up to now, I still sit with you at this table and talk pretty freely. So they haven't yet dominated me; and somehow I am not afraid. Maybe I am mistaken, but I feel perfectly free in this country. So they haven't succeeded. Somebody, I think [Hans] Morgenthau, called this whole Nixon enterprise the "abortive revolution". Now, we don't yet know whether it is abortive, it was a little early when he said that, but one thing one can say: successful it wasn't either.

Mais ce qui menace à cette époque c'est l'idée que les buts de la politique sont illimités?

Le libéralisme tout de même repose, je crois, sur l'idée que la politique a des objectifs limités. Est-ce que à notre époque l'arrivée au pouvoir d'hommes, de mouvements qui s'assignent des objectifs illimités n'est pas la plus grande menace?

I hope I don't shock you if I tell you that I'm not at all sure that I'm a liberal. You know, not at all. And I really don't have any [creed] in this sense. I have no [exact] political philosophy which I could summon up with one "ism".

Certainement, mais c'est tout de même à l'intérieur des fondements de la pensée libérale, avec les emprunts à l'antiquité, que se situe votre réflexion philosophique.

Is Montesquieu a liberal? Would you say that all the people whom I take into account as worth a little – I mean "moi je me sers où je peux". And I take whatever I can and whatever suits me. That is, I do no longer believe that we ... I think one of the great advantages of our time is really, you know, what René Char has said: "Notre héritage n'est garanti par aucun testament."⁴

... n'est précédé par aucun testament ...

... n'est précédé par aucun testament. This means, we are entirely free to help ourselves wherever we can from the experiences and the thoughts of our past.

Mais est-ce que cette liberté extrême ne risque pas d'effrayer beaucoup de nos contemporains qui préféreraient trouver toute faite une théorie, une idéologie et être en mesure de l'appliquer?

Aucun doute. Aucun doute.

Cette liberté que vous définissez, cela risque d'être la liberté de quelques uns, de ceux qui auront la force d'inventer de nouveaux modes de pensée?

Non. Non. It rests only on, well ... on the conviction that actually every human being as a thinking being can reflect as well as I do and can therefore judge for himself, if he wants to. How I can arouse this wish in him, this I don't know. That is, I am not a ... The only thing that can help us, I think, is really to réfléchir. And to think always means to think critically. And to think critically is always to be [hostile]. Every thought actually undermines whatever there is of rigid rules, general convictions etc. Everything which happens in thinking is subject to a critical examination of whatever there is. That is, there are no dangerous thoughts for the simple reason that thinking itself is such a dangerous enterprise. So how I can convince ... I think, non-thinking is even more dangerous. I don't deny that

⁴ René Char: "Notre héritage n'est précédé par aucun testament". The aphorism is taken from René Char, *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, no. 62 see R. Char, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 190; cf. Hannah Arendt in her "Preface" to *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking), 1968.

thinking is dangerous, but I would say not-thinking, *pas réfléchir c'est plus dangereux encore*.

Revenons à ce mot de René Char: «Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament.»

Quel est d'après vous l'héritage du vingtième siècle?

We are still there, you know, you are young, I am old, but we both are still there, and are still there to leave them something.

Que laisserons-nous au vingt-et-unième siècle? Les trois quarts du siècle son déjà écoulés ...

I, I've no idea. I'm pretty sure that modern art which is now rather at a deep point ... But after such an enormous creativity as we had during the first forty years especially in France of course, this is only natural. A certain exhaustion then sets in. No, this we will leave. This whole era, this whole twentieth century will probably be one of the great centuries in history, but not in politics.

Et l'Amérique?

No. No, no, no ...

Pourquoi?

You know, this country ... You need a certain amount of tradition.

Il n'y a pas de tradition artistique américaine?

No, no, not a great one. A great one in poetry, a great one in novels, in writing, etc. But the only thing that you could really mention is this, the architecture. The stone buildings are like tents of nomads who have been frozen into stone.

Vous avez traité, à plusieurs reprises, dans votre oeuvre de l'histoire moderne des Juifs et de l'antisémitisme, et vous dites à la fin de l'un de vos ouvrages que la naissance du mouvement sioniste à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle a été la seule réponse politique que les Juifs aient jamais trouvée à l'antisémitisme.⁵ En quoi l'existence d'Israel a changé le contexte politique et psychologique dans lequel vivent les Juifs dans le monde?

Oh, I think it has changed everything. The Jewish people today are really united behind Israel.⁶ They feel that they have a state, a political representation in the same way as the Irish, the English, the French, etc. They have not only a homeland but they have a nation-state and their whole attitude towards the Arabs depends of course to a large extent on these identifications which the Jews coming from Central Europe made almost instinctively and without reflection, namely that the state must necessarily be a nation-state.

Now this, that is the whole relationship between the Diaspora and Israel, or what formerly was Palestine, has changed because Israel is no longer just a refuge for those underdogs in Poland, where a Zionist was a guy who tried to get money from rich Jews for the poor Jews in Poland. But it is today really the Jewish representative of the Jewish people all over the world. Whether we like that or not is another question, but ... This doesn't mean that this Diaspora Judaism has always to be of the same opinion as the government in Israel. It's not a question of the government, it's a question of the state and so long as the state exists, this is of course what represents us in the eyes of the world.

Un auteur français, Georges Friedmann a écrit, il y a une dizaine d'années, un livre intitulé: *Fin du peuple juif?*⁷, où il concluait que à l'avenir il y aurait d'un côté un nouvel Etat, la nation israélienne, et de l'autre côté, dans les pays de la Diaspora, des Juifs qui s'assimileraient et perdraient peu à peu leurs caractéristiques propres.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces (San Diego etc.: A Harvest / HBJ Book, 1979), p. 120.

⁷ Georges Friedmann, *Fin du peuple juif?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

⁶ This and the following statements have to be read against the background of the events of the day. On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria had attacked Israel, unleashing the October [Yom-Kippur] War.

Cette hypothèse sounds very plausible, and I think it's quite wrong. You see, in antiquity, while the Jewish state still existed, there was already a great Jewish Diaspora. Through the centuries, where there were many different forms of government and forms of state, the Jews, the only ancient people that actually survived these thousands of years, were never assimilated ... If Jews could have been assimilated, they would have been assimilated long ago. There was a chance during the Spanish period, there was a chance during the Roman period, there was of course a chance in the 18th and 19th centuries. Look, a people, a collective, doesn't commit suicide. Mr. Friedmann is wrong, because he doesn't understand that the feeling of intellectuals, who can indeed change nationalities and can absorb another culture etc., does not correspond to the feeling of the people as a whole, and especially not of a people that has been actually constituted by those laws which we all know.

Que signifie pour les Juifs l'assimilation dans la société américaine?

Well, in the sense in which we spoke of assimilated Jewry by which we meant assimilation to the surrounding culture, it doesn't exist. Would you kindly tell me to what the Jews should assimilate here? To the English? To the Irish? To the Germans? To the French? To the ... you know, whoever came here ...

Lorsque l'on dit que les Juifs américains sont très américanisés, non seulement américains mais américanisés, à quoi fait-on allusion?

One means the way of life, and all these Jews are very good American citizens ... It signifies their public life, not their private life, not their social life. And their social and their private life is of course today more Jewish than it ever was before. The younger generation in great numbers learn Hebrew, even if they are from parents who don't know any Hebrew any longer, etc. But the main thing is really Israel, the main thing is: Are you for or against Israel?

Take for example the German Jews of my generation who came to this country. They became in no time very nationalistic Jews, much more nationalistic than I ever was, even though I was a Zionist and they were not. I never said I'm a German, I always said I'm a Jew. But they now assimilate. To what? To the Jewish community; since they were used to assimilation. They assimilated to the Jewish community of America and that means that they then of course, with the fervor of new converts, became extra-special nationalistic and pro-Israel.

A travers l'histoire ce qui a assuré la survie du peuple juif, cela a été essentiellement un lien de nature religieuse. Nous sommes à une époque où l'ensemble des religions connaissent une crise, et où le lien religieux tente à s'affaiblir. Dans ces conditions qu'est-ce qui à l'époque contemporaine fait l'unité du peuple juif à travers le monde?

I think you are slightly wrong with this thesis. When you say religion, you think of course of the Christian religion which is a creed and a faith. This is not at all true for the Jewish religion. This is really a national religion where nation and religion coincide. You know that Jews for instance don't recognize baptism and for them it is though it hadn't happened. That is a Jew never ceases to be a Jew according to Jewish law. So long as somebody is born by a Jewish mother – *la recherche de la paternité est interdite* – he is a Jew, that is the notion of what religion is is altogether different. It's much more a way of life, as we would say, than it is a religion in this particular, specific sense of the Christian religion. I remember, for instance, I had a Jewish instruction, religious instruction, and when I was about fourteen years old, of course I wanted to rebel and do something terrible to our teacher and I got up and said "I don't believe in God". Whereupon he said: "Who asked you?"

Votre premier livre, publié en 1951, a pour titre «Les Origines du totalitarisme». Dans ce livre, vous avez voulu non seulement décrire un phénomène, mais aussi l'expliquer. D'où cette question: Qu'est-ce pour vous que le totalitarisme?

Interviewing Hannah Arendt

Oui, enfin ... Let me start with making certain distinctions upon which other people ... They are not agreed upon. First of all a totalitarian dictatorship is neither a simple dictatorship nor a simple tyranny. One of the main characteristics ... When I analyzed a totalitarian government, I tried to analyze it as a new form of government that wasn't known before, and therefore I tried to enumerate its main characteristics. Among these, I would just like to remind you of one characteristic which is entirely absent from all tyrannies today, and that is the role of the innocent, the innocent victim. Under Stalin you didn't have to do anything in order to be deported or in order to be killed. You were given the role according to the dynamism of history and you had to play this role no matter what you did. With respect to this, no government before has killed people for saying yes. Usually a government kills people or tyrants kill people for saying no. Now, I was reminded by a friend that something very similar has been said by some Chinese many centuries ago, namely that men who have the impertinence to approve are no better than the disobedients who oppose. And this of course is the quintessential sign of totalitarianism, in that there is a total domination of men by men.

Now, in this sense there is no totalitarianism today, even in Russia which has one of the worst tyrannies which we ever knew. Even in Russia you have got to do something in order to be sent away into exile, or forced labor camp, or into a psychiatric ward of a hospital.

Now let's for a moment see what tyranny is, because after all totalitarianism the majority of European governments were already under dictatorships. Dictatorships, if we take them in the original sense usually during a war or civil war or such. But, anyhow, the dictatorship is limited in time and tyranny is not, and these are things really important enough to pay attention to.

[French translation of the last paragraph: *Considérons pendant un instant ce qu'est la tyrannie, parce que, après tout, tous les régimes totalitaires sont nés dans un climat dans lequel la majorité des gouvernements européens étaient déjà soumis à une dictature. La dictature, si nous la considérons dans le sens original du concept et du mot, n'est pas une tyrannie, c'est une suspension temporaire des lois en cas d'urgence, généralement pendant une guerre ou une guerre civile. Mais de toute façon la dictature est limitée dans le temps et la tyrannie ne l'est pas.*]

He ... When I wrote my *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, I hadn't read this [i.e., a line by Brecht quoted by Errera: "Der Schoß ist fruchtbar noch, aus dem das kroch ..."⁸], I didn't know it. But one of my main intentions was to destroy the legend of the greatness of evil, of the demonic force, to take away from people the admiration they have for the great evildoers like Richard III or ... etc. Now I found in Brecht the following remark: The great political criminals must be exposed and exposed especially to laughter. They are not *great* political criminals, but people who permitted great political crimes, which is something entirely different. The failure of his enterprises does not indicate that Hitler was an idiot. Now, that Hitler was an idiot was of course a prejudice of all, of the whole opposition to Hitler prior to his seizure of power, and therefore a great many books tried then to justify him and to make him a great man. So he [Brecht] says: The failure ... That he failed did not indicate that Hitler was an idiot and the extent of his enterprises does not make him a great man. That is neither the one nor the other; that is, this whole category

⁸ Engl.: The womb from which this wormed its way is fertile till today. This quote is from Brecht's "Epilog" to *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*, cf. Brecht, *Werke* (Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe), v. 7, p. 112. In the following, Arendt refers to Brecht's "Bemerkungen" to the same play, *Werke*, v. 24, pp. 315-319.

of greatness has no application. If the ruling classes, says he, permit a small crook to become a great crook, he is not entitled to a privileged position in our view of history. That is, the fact that he becomes a great crook and that what he does has great consequences does not add to his [stature]. And generally speaking, he then says in these rather abrupt remarks: One may say that tragedy deals with the sufferings of mankind in a less serious way than comedy.

This, of course, is a shocking statement. I think that at the same time it is entirely true. What is really necessary is, if you want to keep your integrity under these circumstances, then you can do it only if you remember your old way of looking at such things and say: No matter what he does or does not do, and if he killed ten million people, he is still a clown.

Lorsque vous avez publié votre livre sur le procès Eichmann, cet ouvrage a provoqué des réactions très violentes. Pourquoi ces réactions?

Well, as I said before, this controversy was partly caused by the fact that I attacked the bureaucracy, and if you attack a bureaucracy, you have got to be prepared that this bureaucracy will defend itself, will attack you, will try to make you impossible and everything which goes with it. That is more or less a dirty political business. Now, with this I really had no real quarrel. But there was ... But suppose they had not done it, suppose they had not organized this campaign, then still the opposition to this book would have been strong because the Jewish people was offended, and now I mean people whom I [fairly] respect and [therefore] I can understand it. They were offended chiefly by that what Brecht said, by laughter. My laughter was at that time kind of innocent and kind of not reflecting on my laughter. What I saw was a clown.

So, Eichmann, for instance, was bothered never by anything which he had done to the Jews – in general. But he was bothered by one little incident ... He had slapped the face of the then President of the Jewish community in Vienna during an interrogation. God knows worse things were happening to many people than to be slapped in the face. But this he has never condoned himself for having done and he thought that was very wrong, indeed. He had lost his cool, so to speak.

Pourquoi pensez-vous que nous voyons en effet apparaître toute une littérature qui, s'agissant notamment du nazisme, décrit de façon souvent romancée ses chefs, leurs forfaits, et essaye de les humaniser, somme toute, et ainsi indirectement de les justifier? Pensez-vous que de telles publications aient une raison purement commerciale où pensez-vous qu'elles aient une signification profonde?

I think it has a signification, at least it shows that what once was can happen again; and this indeed, I believe, is entirely true. You see, tyranny has been discovered very early and very early really as an enemy. Still it has never in any way prevented any tyrant from becoming a tyrant. It has not prevented Nero, and it has not prevented Caligula. And Nero and Caligula have not prevented a more closer example of what the massive intrusion of criminality can mean for the political process.



Note on the Interview

This transcript of those parts of the recorded interview that went into the film presents a reconstructed version of Arendt's answers in English. It is based on what I heard when listening to the soundtrack of the film and consulting the existing French-English transcripts and/or a manuscript version provided by M. Errera. Three dots (...) indicate pauses

and/or unconnected words, nine dots (.....) mark those words and/or passages which I could not understand because of the dubbing voice and was unable to supplement on the basis of the existing written material. My own additions and guesses are put in square brackets. Some time ago, I translated this text into German and published it in my edition: Hannah Arendt, *Ich will verstehen: Selbstaus-*

künfte zu Leben und Werk mit einer vollständigen Bibliographie (München: Serie Piper 2238, 1996, pp. 114-131). – The reader should be aware of the fact that the above text is an abbreviated, but otherwise unedited transcript of what Hannah Arendt actually said when she was interviewed by Roger Errera in 1973.

Ursula Ludz