

**ARENDR'S CRITIQUE of The NATION-STATE in *The ORIGINS of
TOTALITARIANISM***

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ÖZ

Hannah Arendt 20. yüzyıl siyasal düşünürlerinin en önemlilerinden biridir. Ünlü yapıtı *Totaliterliğin Kökenleri* (1951), Nazi ve Sovyet deneyimlerinde somutlaşan totaliterliğin Avrupa'da yükselisinin tarihsel ve toplumsal köklerini analiz etmektedir. Arendt'e göre totaliterliğin yükselisinde pek çok farklı faktörün yansira ulus-devletin doğası ve geçirdiği yapısal dönüşüm de etkili olmuştur. Bu makalede Arendt'in *Totaliterliğin Kökenleri* adlı yapıtında beliren ulus-devlet eleştirisi incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ulus - Devlet, Totaliterlik, Emperyalizm, Siyasal düşünce

ABSTRACT

Hannah Arendt is one of the most influential figures in 20th century political thought. Her famous work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), analysis historical and social elements of the rise of this phenomenon represented in Nazi and Soviet experiences in Europe. For Arendt, beside all the different factors created totalitarianism, nature of the nation-state and its structural transformation also have a role in it. In this article Arendt's critique of the nation-state alleged in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is discussed and interpreted.

Key Words: Nation-state, Totalitarianism, Imperialism, Political thought

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1. INTRODUCTION

The catastrophe that had been brought by World War I had caused a highly critical look at modernity and its achievements. The humanist advances many believed were going to develop within the light of modernity stumbled into chaos. This human made disaster unleashed a great suspicion against the claims of modernity. As the so-called perpetual development of humanity faced the totalitarian movements in Germany and Russia, and the culmination of another world war; it seemed a definite end of a dream.

In this atmosphere, Hannah Arendt's *'The Origins of Totalitarianism'* is a search to understand "the crystallised elements of the totalitarianism" which was published in 1951. Arendt tries to discover satisfactory answers to the question of "how the all this insanity happened at the cradle of the civilization". She traces out all the roads and paths that lead to totalitarianism and draws a detailed map. "She diagnosis totalitarianism as a new form of political rule in human history" (Benhabib, 1996).

According to Villa (2000), Arendt claims totalitarianism is a "climatic pathology". Understanding Nazi and Soviet totalitarisms is not possible with considering only interior conditions of these societies. These phenomena were the result of a series of "events and tendencies within modern European history and culture" after the French Revolution (Villa, 2000). To sum up, Arendt presents that the elements that gave rise to totalitarianism were imperialism, decline of the nation state, racism, "delegitimation of established political institutions" and superfluosness or statelessness of people (Canovan, 2000; Villa, 2000).

Her work is organized in three sections: Anti-Semitism, Imperialism, and Totalitarianism. At first sight, each part seems unrelated to each of the others. However, all the historical and political explanations converge upon one point, the reality of totalitarianism.

Throughout the book, a critique of the nation-state occupies a central role. Arendt repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the modern nation-state and she is concerned with the nature of it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In particular, the first two parts which determine the factors leading to totalitarianism concentrate on this pillar of modernity and its

elements. “For Arendt, a totalitarian regime is ultimate antithesis of the modern state” (Tsao, 2004: 107). The whole text can be read in terms of the nation-state’s relationship to the inner and outer factors. In this article, Arendt’s critique of the nation-state is discussed.

2. IMPERIALISM – NATION-STATE RELATIONSHIP

The relation of imperialism to the nation-state occupies an important position in Hannah Arendt’s theory of the origins of totalitarianism. According to Arendt, the great sin of the nation-state was to be contaminated by imperialism. There is a paradoxical relationship between imperialism and the nation-state.

European capitalism when having reached the limits of its growth, a series of economic crisis had emerged in the 1860’s and 70’s in the European economy. The accumulation of capital was under such a threat that it may have meant the end of the capitalist system. Imperialism emerged as a life preserver for the European bourgeoisie and the whole capitalist system. The main principle that was behind the idea of imperialism was to create new markets, and new supply and demand for the continuous development of the economic system. In other words, there was a desperate need to enlist the non-capitalist world to ensure the future of the capitalist one, like it or not.

Lenin identified imperialism as the last stage of capitalism. It is an explanation from the economic perspective. However, as a political thinker, Hannah Arendt identifies imperialism as “the first stage in political rule of the bourgeoisie” (Arendt, 1979: 138). Benhabib (1996) clearly interprets Arendt’s point of view: “Polemicalizing against Lenin, she distinguishes between capitalism as an economic system, the bourgeoisie as a social class and the nation-state as a political formation”.

Although, true that the bourgeoisie had maintained many times intervened in the political sphere and gained privileges, there was a relative balance maintained between nation and state. In other words, the bourgeoisie had not held the control of the political body. Arendt points to imperialism as a turning point in European politics. Thus, in order to solve its economic problems, the nation-state sacrificed the basis of its political principles. The race for empire building among the nation-states of Europe inevitably caused unfavourable results

politically. The most important one was the opposed natures of the empire and the nation-state. The old empires' politics were primarily based on the integration under common law of the peoples living in the conquered areas. "The nation-state, however", was "based upon a homogenous population's active consent to its government" (Arendt, 1979: 125). So, the nation-state had to assimilate rather than to integrate, thus, turning the nation-state into a tyranny.

Expansion was the most basic and powerful operating principle of imperialism. "With the slogan 'expansion for expansion's sake' the bourgeoisie tried and partly succeeded in persuading their national governments to enter upon the path of world politics" (Arendt, 1979: 126).

The bourgeoisie brought its economic aims into the centre of the nation-state with the desirability of the economic growth. However, Arendt (1979: 126) emphasizes that,

in contrast to the economic structure, the political structure cannot be expanded indefinitely, because it is not based upon the productivity of man, which is, indeed, unlimited. Of all forms of government and organizations of people, the nation-state is least suited for unlimited growth because the genuine consent at its base cannot be stretched indefinitely, and is only rarely, and with difficulty, won from conquered peoples.

Arendt elaborates mainly two types of imperialist experience in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: The French and British. While the French practice is a reminder of the Roman model of empire building, the British practice is a reminder of the Greek colonisation.

Although the former looks the most loyal to the ideals of the nation-state, it was the most paradoxical and dramatic. French Governments saw the conquered lands a part of the homeland and the populations of these geographies were accepted as French citizens from a nationalistic point of view. However, "the inner contradiction between the nation's body politic and conquest as a political device has been obvious since the failure of the Napoleonic dream" (Arendt, 1979: 128). The body politic of the nation-state was not capable of empire building, and the governing methods of the French could not prevent the independence struggles of the native populations.

In British practice, which followed the Greek colonisation method, conquered territories and their native societies never were seen as part of Britain and British nationality. There were two explanations for this. First, distinguishing “lower” and “higher” breeds. Second, a kind of respect in not wishing to impose their rule on another country. British national institutions remained separate from the colonial administration. For these reasons, although it did export its law and political institutions, British colonial rule always worked as a shadow under the form of local authorities (1979: 126-128).

Instead of the old conquerors, the new imperialists were the exporters of the British money or the administrators of the local peoples. According to Arendt (1979: 130), if they “had changed from applying decrees to the making of laws, they might have become empire builders”.

In Arendt’s thought the rise of imperialism was another important aspect of the emergence of totalitarianism. Imperialism was also responsible for creating a powerful mob in the nation-states. When “superfluous” capital looked for new geographies and found them, it needed new labour power. A permanently unemployed and problematic group, the mob was the most suitable for that. As Arendt expressed it, “superfluous capital and superfluous working power, joined hands and left the country together” (1979: 150). This had also been seen as a perfect solution to one of the social problems of the nation-state which had been emerged during industrialisation, the existence of the mob.

Thus, two groups, which should be in antagonism, historically and politically, were in an alliance with the solution of imperialism. However, this was not a happy end. In contrast, it was probably the beginning of the end.

The first place to exploit was South Africa, because of the diamonds and gold mines. For Arendt, Boer colonisation of South Africa and the “scramble for Africa” (1979: 177) represents the collapse of Western moral standards.

The mob, which met the native people, became effective on the rise of the racist idea. They had the nation-state citizens’ rights and for that reason they were privileged in comparison to the native people who had no rights. “One of the functions that racism performed was to

cement the 'alliance between capital and mob' on which imperialism rested" (Canovan, 1992).

By the alliance with the bourgeoisie, the mob became powerful and, when they went back to Europe, they even prepared the end of the sovereignty of the bourgeoisie. The mob had not been tied by any class relationship. For that reason they refused all the classes easily. Under unbalanced, politically and economically depressive conditions of the post-war Europe, they came to power in Germany. The German bourgeoisie were not as stable as British or French bourgeoisie, because they had reached their full power just at the second part of the 19th century, and they eagerly called the mob to duty to rescue them in the crisis conditions. However, the mob (Nazis) expressed that they were the first anti-bourgeois power (Arendt, 1979: 152-156).

Although the social and political base of European nation-states is the class system, a totalitarian regime, indeed, by the leadership of the mob, aims at a classless society. "The totalitarian movements aimed at and succeeded in organizing masses, not classes, like the old interest parties of the continental nation-states" (Arendt, 1979: 308). Breakdown of the class system meant the breakdown of the political system that depends on the parties, because each party represents a different class or interest group.

The bourgeoisie was successful in destroying the nation-state, but the mob by taking over control, showed that they were able to liquidate the bourgeoisie and the other classes.

Finally, under total domination, there is no room left for "capacity of motion" that is the prerequisite of all kinds of freedom. There is no space left for "speech" and "action". Once the totalitarian movements came to power, "totally innocent populations" targeted (Villa, 2000).

3. THE NATION-STATE AFTER THE WORLD WAR I

Arendt elaborates in her work that the modern nation-state paved the road for the totalitarian movements. Although this judgment looks speculative at first sight, it is very important to bear in mind that Arendt does not find the nation-state directly responsible for totalitarianism. She points that when some handicaps of the nation-state met the other factors,

totalitarian movements found a suitable base in the middle of Europe. A useful starting point for this discussion is the question of ‘How did this happen’?

According to Arendt (1979: 269-270), Balance of Europe’s nation-state system was undermined by the pan-movements and rising imperialism. Neither imperialism nor pan-movements were coming from the nation-state’s institutions and tradition. Disintegration of these factors began with the end of World War I. The peace treaties which were creating minorities and the revolutions that caused a refugee movement had an important effect.

At the end of the First World War, the last three old empires collapsed: Austria-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman. As opposed to the Western nation-states these empires had multinational structures. From the ruins of the empires two victim groups emerged: The stateless and the minorities. This was a turning point in world history and created lots of problems to solve for the 20th century. The European nation-state system could not solve or absorb these problems because the nature of the nation-state was not fully capable to do that. Therefore, the modern nation-state became ineffective in the struggle with the problems of the new unstable situation in the world.

Through the Peace Treaties at the end of the war, new nation-states were shaped by the victorious countries. However, there was a mathematical question, because there were many ethnic groups without a political entity in Eastern Europe. Victorious states preferred not to create a state for every nation because of their concerns about status quo. In other words, only a few nations were awarded with the rights of self-determination and sovereignty. There remained two choices for the rest of this European population: immigration or to live as minorities in their homeland without equal rights.

In the former case, millions of people left their home and emigrated to Central and Western Europe. Arendt (1979: 269) says that because of this situation “a completely new element of disintegration was introduced” in post-war Europe. Western nation-states could not find a place for these stateless people, because the nation-state standing on the nationalist base, gave rights only to its own citizens. According to this assumption, every nation has its own state, legacy and political system, whether democratic or not, and the citizens of a specific country are covered by its rights and obligations and the nation-state provides protection for its citizens inside or outside its own borders. However, stateless people had an

ambiguous situation in the legal system of the nation-state. They had no official representative, which supported and protected their rights.

According to Arendt, this situation was worse than a position of a criminal, because the criminal has recognition and a legal situation in front of the law. However, a stateless has nothing. The stateless represents no country or power, but only humanity. He/she does not belong to a political entity but only to the human species. This position of the stateless people reminds Arendt of the colonial population of the overseas countries under European rule.

Especially during the Imperialist period of the 19th century, when Europeans of the nation-states met the different ethnic groups, e.g. African tribes, that was assumed to have no significant civilizations and political entity, they treated them in a different way. These people never could have citizenship rights under the colonial rules, because of power distance and cultural differences. They represented the barbarianism. This unequal status of the colonial people had no strong effect on Europe, because there was also a geographical distance. However, the situation that emerged at the end of the World War I carried the colonial people status into the middle of the Europe. The colonial people status was given to the stateless and minorities although they had similar cultures with the other Europeans.

The position of the minorities was not much different than that of the stateless. These people suddenly lost their rights with the collapse of the Austria-Hungarian and Russian Empires and became second-class citizens under the new nation-state authorities. The minority treaties of the post war condition emphasized that “only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions” (1979: 275). Therefore, the minorities, without any rights that were brought by the modern nation-state, were left to the mercy of the great powers. “Representatives of the great nations knew only too well that minorities, within nation-states must sooner or later be either assimilated or liquidated” (1979: 273). So, the minorities were denationalised by the victorious governments in their countries.

Hannah Arendt describes a transformation of the nation-state, which was completed through the affect of the rise of the stateless people in Europe. She calls it “the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation” (1979: 275). In other words, with this transformation national interest gained priority over law, “nation had

conquered the state” (1979: 275). Arendt demonstrates that it was not a problem that emerges with the totalitarian movements of the 20th century. It was a destination of the modern nation-state, and the nation-state had already travelled a lot on this way. This crisis was not an unpredictable occurrence as the structure of the nation-state had had appropriate conditions since the beginning (1979: 275). It came from the stress between the national interests and legal institutions. At the establishment of the nation-state, against arbitrary administration and despotism, the principle of the priority of law had been set. In time, with the development of the bourgeoisie, this balance had changed to the interest of the nation. When the balance was broken, Europe had faced a huge group of stateless people and minorities as a result of the World War.

Arendt also enumerates two implications of statelessness that damages the nation-state: First, *rights of man* were being abolished in the sphere of international relations. Second, realization of the impossibility either “to get rid of refugees” or transform them into nationals of the country of refuge (1979: 268-301).

Although the Rights of Man never had become a law in Europe, it was providing protection at an institutional level. Of the latter implication, it was accepted that the problem could be solved through *repatriation* or *naturalization*.

The new stateless had no loyalty to the government and the state, and their relations with their territory was not strong. These kinds of characteristics, which belonged to Eastern societies had come into the centre of the European nation-state. Therefore, Hannah Arendt indicates that these created a fear among the European governments, what can be called the fear of modernity. Actually, the suspicion against the stateless and minorities was not a new thing. During the previous centuries in Europe, relationships of the Jews with the nation-states had not created a trust among the governments. The Jews had never determined themselves with a state and did not gain or desire a nation specification. Moreover, their class identity was also ambiguous. They were not representative of any specific class. However, class and nationality were inevitable components of the nation-state. One of the most typical situations which create an untrustworthy relationship between governments and Jewish community was hidden in the Jewish bankers’ attitudes: After every revolutionary change during the modern European history, Jewish bankers had been switching their loyalty quickly from one

government to the new one. "It took the French Rothschilds in 1848 hardly twenty-four hours to transfer their services from the government of Louis Philippe to the new short-lived French Republic and again to Napoleon III" (1979: 23-24).

The nation-state system could not be a solution to the new problem of the era. The stateless and minorities were seen as problems by the old nation-states of Europe. The repatriation and naturalization did not work.

Governments had begun to send back the refugees legally or illegally across the border. This endless human traffic, obviously, could not have been a solution. Arendt emphasizes that all the international congress's main concern about the stateless were focused on the question of "how these people can be made deportable" (1979: 284). And Arendt, bitterly points out that the practical solution which was founded by Hitler "to make stateless deportable through camps" was not an invention of Nazis. "Indeed, as early as the thirties this was the only 'country' the world had to offer the stateless" (1979: 284).

The naturalisation formula also did not work because the naturalisation system of the nation-state was strict in its legislation. The people had to be born in the territories of these countries to be qualified for citizenship. Governments even tried to find administrative solutions for naturalisation, but the mass immigrations made naturalisation impossible. For that reason it was cancelled and this caused the mass denaturalisation (1979: 285).

Jews were at the centre of this problem. Arendt (1979: 289-290) criticises that all the states in Europe acted as if statelessness was only a Jewish question and they reduced the problem into the Jewishness. This made Jews an open target. With the help of the rising anti-Semitism that emerged in Germany after the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon, the Germans reduced Jews to a nonrecognised minority. When they were exiled, and finally when they were gathered in the concentration and extermination camps, it was an important lesson for the rest of Europe on how to *liquidate* minorities and the stateless. And from a humanistic point of view Arendt transcends the Jewish question and mentions that the solution for it after World War II, rescued Jews from statelessness but, turned thousands of Palestinian Arabs into a stateless and minority people. Thus, actually, the method that had been used and failed at the end of the First World War was used again. It was, establishing new states "in the image of the nation state" (1979: 290).

There is also need to consider another weakness of the nation-state, which was discussed by Hannah Arendt. It was also related to the problems so far mentioned and also had an impact on the rise of the totalitarianism. Arendt expresses it as “the end of the rights of man” (1979: 293-294).

It would perhaps be useful to identify the main reasons for the loss of the rights of man. The Declaration of the Rights of Man had provided new rights that had been dependent on the constitution and rational laws rather than the ancien régime’s traditional law system. However, the rights of man had removed the protection of the people by the social, spiritual and religious forces; because of the secular and emancipated nature of its conception. With the power gain of the modern state day by day, through the 19th century; another idea was developed, which believed that the rights of man should protect the individuals’ rights against the arbitrariness in the society (1979: 291). Thus, under the new conditions of the social insecurity of the modern age, the rights of man easily turned into the “rights of nation-state’s citizens”. “The fundamental human rights are therefore, the right to have rights, which means the right to belong to a political community” (1979: 293).

As a consequence of the loss of the universal human rights, Arendt indicates that stateless people lost first, their homes, and second, government protection under the conditions of post-war. In the former case, there was left no place on earth to come and go freely and simply as a member of the human species, because of the boundaries, territories, rules and belongings. In the latter case, people lost their legal status in their own and the other countries. When Jews were sent to the extermination camps, no country claimed that its law secures them (1979: 296).

4. CONCLUSION

Consequently, in Hannah Arendt’s thought, imperialism and the other weaknesses of the nation-state, which so far have been mentioned here, paved the way for totalitarianism. According to Canovan’s (1992) interpretation of Arendt, “the nation state is understood as an essentially humanist institution, a civilised structure providing a legal order and guaranteeing rights”. However, it is very important to bear in mind that, as Arendt emphasizes again and again in ‘*The Origins of Totalitarianism*’ -and specifically in the chapter, which is on ‘*the end*

of rights of man' - the nation-state's principles do not cover all of humanity. Furthermore, she thinks that human rights mean the rights of citizens, and there is no territory in the world where people move freely. Thus, the human being has become passport-ridden.

These are some of Hannah Arendt's critiques of the nation-state. She obviously does not find the nation-state fully humanistic and thinks universal equality is still a distant phenomenon. However, she admits, beside all its disadvantages, the nation-state is an important stage in the development of political idea as against arbitrariness and the cruelty of the old authorities.

On the one hand, Hannah Arendt's thought can easily be seen as anti-modernist. On the other hand, it can be seen as modernist by different interpreters. It depends on which point of view is chosen by the reader. This situation does not come from a contradiction in the presentation of her thought. In contrast, it proves the durability of Arendt's thought rather than its weakness. She demonstrates the pros and cons of the nation-state. She evaluates the nation-state as a political body from an analytical point of view. Arendt is not bounded by this or that mainstream idea in her evaluation. She makes a conversation with herself. Her work is a synthesis of philosophy and political analysis. Thus, she meets an important requirement of philosophical discussion.

In her work, Arendt shows objectively the different aspects of the nation-state, its strengths and weaknesses and what its role is in 20th century totalitarianism phenomenon. "Modernity for Hannah Arendt, was not a seamless historical development but a process rich in contradictions" (Benhabib, 1996).

On balance it would be said that Hannah Arendt cannot be described as an anti-modernist. However, she criticises modernity through its two of the most important pillars: The nation and the state. It is worth remembering that she emphasizes many times in '*The Origins of Totalitarianism*', modernity's nation-state never aimed or included characteristics of totalitarian movements. With Benhabib's (1996) words, Hannah Arendt did not subscribe to the slippery slope argument that totalitarian domination was either an inevitable or even an inescapable result of Western culture, reason or modernity. However, the problem emerged, because of the

changing conditions of the world and the insufficiency of the nation-state's ability to cope with the new problems of the new condition. The failure of the modern state when mixed with the other factors, totalitarianism came to power not inevitably but easily.

Whole 20th century history and the 21st century so far has proved that Arendt's analysis on the problematic of the nation-state phenomenon is still respectable. The nation-state primarily based upon a homogeneous population. Due to complex demographic maps of the Eastern Europe, Middle-East, Caucasia, Africa, etc., the nation-state principle could not have been adapted successfully in these areas. In the light of Arendt's claims the problems that the humanity has been encountered for nearly a hundred years in international arena will seem to be existed for a long time.

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