

Introduction



This book is an attempt to historicize the so-called ‘Jewish writings’ of Hannah Arendt but it is also a reconstruction of an important tradition of Jewish thought and politics, one that is continually being renewed in the face of contemporary challenges. For some time I have felt that despite the veritable critical industry that has grown up around Arendt as a political theorist and philosopher, the specific intellectual and ethical background to her writings on Jewish issues has yet to be sufficiently illuminated. In *The Legacy of Liberal Judaism: Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt’s Hidden Conversation* I suggest that Arendt’s desire for a progressive or ‘worldly’ Judaism that eagerly participates in contemporary culture is informed by a vital legacy of liberal Jewish political advocacy, ethical idealism, and refractory historical consciousness. It was a legacy forged by luminaries of German Jewish letters such as Moses Mendelssohn, Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, Heinrich Heine, Hermann Cohen, and Ernst Cassirer.

By the rubric ‘liberal Judaism’ I have in mind a progressive conception of Jewish culture and history that arose after the German Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* in the late eighteenth century and maintained a powerful influence on German Jewry until the demise of that community beginning in 1933. I interpret liberal Judaism as an energetic worldview which seeks to accommodate the vitality and evolving nature of Jewish life in diaspora by emphasizing that in preserving the ethical kernel of genuine monotheism, Jews have an exemplary role to play in world history. Liberal Jewish thought emphasizes the importance of post-exilic Jewish history in shaping modern Jewish identity and points to the variety of religious, literary, and historical sources informing contemporary Judaism. Liberal Jewish intellectuals from Moses Mendelssohn onwards have taken particular pride in Jewish traditions of philosophical rationalism which articulate an ethical interpretation of Judaism. Maimonides stands at the pinnacle of this tradition because of his ethically motivated and idealistically inclined interpretation of the significance of Jewish monotheism and Jewish Law.

Liberal Judaism is also notable for its inclusive conception of Judaism and the keen interest it displays in ‘non-Jewish Jews’, those liminally situated and heterodox Jews who have been expelled from or have left the Jewish community such as, for example, Baruch Spinoza and Heinrich Heine. Interested

in the creative adaptability of Judaism under diasporic conditions, liberal Jewish thinkers extol the formative influence of non-Jewish cultural milieux such as Andalusian Spain or republican Holland in the seventeenth century on the flourishing of Jewish philosophy, literature, and biblical hermeneutics. Wary of ethnocentric and normative conceptions of Jewish belief and identity, liberal Jewish thought displays a constant willingness to incorporate the ideas of non-Jewish thinkers, such as the cosmopolitan philosophies of Lessing and Kant, into Jewish philosophy and theology. Liberal Judaism encourages an active and alert historical consciousness and a cautiously optimistic interpretation of the unfolding history of the Jewish people that is suspicious of the 'lachrymose' narrative of Jewish history as a story of perpetual suffering and martyrdom, a history that can only be redeemed by the ingathering of the Jewish people and the end of exile or *Galut*.

Liberal Jewish thought pays very close attention to the political affairs, social attitudes, and scholarly tendencies of the non-Jewish world and interprets Jewish advocacy as intervening in and attempting to progressively transform the host society's self-conception and formative historical narratives. From Moses Mendelssohn onwards, liberal Jewish intellectuals and political advocates assume that the fate of Jews and Judaism is closely tied to the broader achievement of social justice, and to the decoupling of state and nationality. As a reformist ethos, liberal Judaism promotes a secularized and pluralist conception of Jewish identity which is attentive to the polyglot nature of the diaspora. Impressed by the extraordinary intellectual and creative achievements of recent diaspora history, liberal Jewish thought is interested in the exemplary character, sensibility, and art of living of Jewish individuals throughout history. Liberal Jewish thinkers often suggest that the worldly Jewish characteristics they prize are more luminously disclosed through interaction with the non-Jewish world. Liberal Judaism urges an ethos of cosmopolitanism and humanism that is strongly opposed to Jewish nationalism and exclusivism. It regards Judaism as a religious and ethical impulse, a spiritual power or 'energy' that manifests itself immanently in world affairs while striving idealistically towards a redemptive or 'messianic' future that will unify humanity. Ecumenically inclined, the liberal Jewish thinkers I discuss have an abiding concern with the historical importance and ethical potential of cross-cultural friendship and sociability, inspired by the epochal friendship of Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, discussed in the first chapter. Many German Jews celebrated and commemorated their legendary friendship and intellectual collaboration as an exemplary instance of the fertile participation of Jews in modern culture as long as their difference and distinctiveness are fully acknowledged.

The Legacy of Liberal Judaism argues against the critical consensus that Hannah Arendt's Jewish politics and historical consciousness were forged as

a response to anti-Semitism and Nazism. I suggest that Arendt's stance – that the Jewish people should be at the vanguard of history in demonstrating the ethical nullity of the ethnic majority nation state – is distinctly redolent of a liberal Jewish articulation of Jews as vessels of ethical idealism and bearers of innovation and progress in a world blighted by parochialism and sectarianism. Arendt's sympathy for Jewish outsider figures, memorably epitomized in her praise for the rebellious figure of the Jewish 'pariah', resonates with the 'Prophetic' tradition of Judaism espoused *inter alia* by Abraham Geiger, Hermann Cohen, and Ernst Cassirer, which acknowledged the searing internal criticism of the Jewish Prophets as a crucial and exemplary chapter in the religious evolution of Judaism. Arendt's famous suggestion that the pariah, as a particular Jewish 'type', evokes a 'hidden tradition' of Jewish historical agency under diasporic conditions recalls liberal Jewish attempts to read Jewish history against the grain and to articulate the fecundity of Judaism's post-biblical history. I also suggest that when Arendt interpreted anti-Semitism historically as a contingent modern ideology that could be overcome, thus repudiating the fatalistic Zionist conception of an 'eternal anti-Semitism', a rationale for the inevitable failure of the Jewish diaspora, she was reprising liberal Jewish challenges to Zionism's lachrymose historical consciousness and primordial conception of Jewish identity, challenges that had previously been voiced by Abraham Geiger and Hermann Cohen among others. Arendt's Jewish thought reprises liberal Judaism in that it is focused on possibilities for secular Jewish agency under diasporic conditions and thus motivated by hope for the future rather than by a fatalistic and paradigmatically inclined interpretation of the cyclical and ever recurring historical suffering of the Jewish people.

All of this suggests that there are heuristic benefits in comparing Arendt to paragons of liberal Jewish thought such as Abraham Geiger, Hermann Cohen, and Ernst Cassirer, public intellectuals who articulated the vibrancy of Jewish diasporic life and expressed pride in the manifold contributions Jews have made to Western ethics and philosophy. Yet given the almost total absence of such a genealogical and comparative focus in Arendt studies to date, we need to explore why scholars of Arendt have been reluctant to locate the sources of her Jewish self-conception and ethical sensibility in post-Enlightenment liberal Judaism. It is a curious fact, and one in need of explanation, that Arendt has not been compared in any sustained fashion to prominent German Jewish philosophers such as Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and his great student, Ernst Cassirer (1872–1945), justly famous philosophers of whom she would surely have been aware as a young philosophically inclined German Jewish intellectual in the 1920s. The records of the Hannah Arendt collection at the Bard college library show, for example, that Arendt possessed a significant collection of Cassirer's works, some with marginalia and

underlining, Cohen's three-volume *Jüdische Schriften* (Jewish Writings), as well as the collected edition of Kant's writings published by Bruno Cassirer (1922–1923) that Cassirer edited with Hermann Cohen.¹

One of the obstacles to sourcing Arendt's ideas in nineteenth-century German Jewish liberal traditions has been a strong tendency in Arendt scholarship to take her at her word; that is, to judge Arendt as a quintessentially modern theorist who broke with the authority of tradition and invented a mode of philosophizing and judging 'without banisters', in other words, without meaningful precedents. Arendt's thought is often adjudged to be virtually *sui generis* because it is formed by, and an engaged reflection on, very recent experiences. These include Arendt's experiences of anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, her subsequent lengthy period as an endangered stateless refugee until her arrival in the United States in 1941, and later her reportage on the Eichmann trial for the *New Yorker* that (in)famously produced her controversial theory of the 'banality of evil'. Arendt studies have tended to agree with her self-perception as a theorist of modernity, and privilege her as one of the foremost participant-cum-theorists of the twentieth century. As we shall see, this presentism extends to discussions of Arendt's Jewish writings and activism, which are often interpreted as ascribable to her belated discovery of the 'Jewish question' under historical pressure and in scathing reaction to a baleful history of German Jewish assimilation.

In one of the most recent volumes dedicated to Arendt's ethics and politics, *Thinking in Dark Times* (2010), Jerome Kohn contends that Arendt not only wrote on Jews and Jewish affairs over four decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s, but that her 'political thought in general is anchored in her experience as a Jew . . . her Jewish experience is literally the foundation of her thought'.² Kohn reads Arendt's 'Jewish experience' as negatively forged by her reaction against the 'assimilation of Jews into German society'. That assimilation and the 'lack of responsible political action' by German Jews are the 'kernels' that engendered Arendt's well known distinction between social and political life, marking 'the beginning of her career as a conscious pariah among her own people'.³ Another prominent interpreter of Arendt's Jewish thought, Ron Feldman, argues in the same volume that Arendt's Jewishness was adamantly secular and political, thus in elective affinity to the Zionist response to Jewish modernity. As for so many German Jews, 'its significance was thrust upon her by the rise of Nazism'.⁴ Despite Arendt's critique of Theodor Herzl's Zionist philosophy, her 'personal transformation into a Zionist bears many similarities to that of political Zionism's founder'. For both Arendt and Herzl, Feldman suggests, their 'German cultural education was more significant than their Jewish education', nor did either take any particular interest in 'Judaism'. After becoming politicized in the face of growing anti-Semitism, neither Arendt nor Herzl displayed any real personal interest in Jewish religion,

philosophy, or literature, but were instead 'focused on political and historical issues'.⁵

I would dispute Kohn and Feldman's presentist assumption that Arendt's political theory and Jewish commitments can be experientially derived from her belated awakening to contemporary circumstances, rather than from an interpretation of Jewish identity, philosophy, and history with profound moorings in German Jewish letters.⁶ If we accept, as the scholarship does, that Arendt was strongly influenced by what she took to be the critical realism of the German Zionist movement, led by her friend Kurt Blumenfeld, a movement which, given its hopes for a Jewish cultural renaissance, can hardly be reduced to an epiphenomenon of anti-Semitism, it follows that the non-Zionist aspects of her thinking, particularly apparent from the 1940s, may have been influenced by other Jewish philosophical and ethical traditions intrinsic to her German Jewish background.

Where Feldman and Kohn argue, conventionally, for an interpretation of Arendt's Jewishness as a belated conversion to political Zionism after she became alert to the threat of anti-Semitism in Germany, recent scholarship interested in Arendt as a 'post-Zionist' *avant la lettre* has also contributed to the tendency to derive Arendt's Jewish worldview from her contemporaneous experience and political engagements. Moshe Zimmerman, for example, in seeking to explain Arendt's growing concern during the 1940s at the prospect of a sovereign Jewish state with a Palestinian Arab minority, suggests that the 'European experience taught Hannah Arendt to doubt minority agreements of any kind in the search for a solution to the Middle Eastern problem'.⁷ While this statement and others quoted above are largely correct, they typify an approach that rarely asks after the possible 'Jewish sources' of Arendt's critique of the ethnocentric nation state. Such an approach, while interested in Arendt's non-Zionism or idiosyncratic cultural Zionism, fails to recognize how closely Arendt's desire to defend the wide spectrum of contemporary Jewish life against Zionism's often aggressive critique of the alienated condition of the diaspora echoes Hermann Cohen's defence of diasporic Judaism in his 1916 debate with the cultural Zionist Martin Buber, discussed in Chapter 4. In his introduction to the volume *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Steven Aschheim quotes Arendt as reminding her friend Karl Jaspers that 'the state of Israel . . . in no way arose exclusively from . . . necessity'.⁸ Perhaps Arendt was also obliquely referring to her own heterodox position on Jewish issues, indicating that her ideas were by no means simply a response to being, in her words 'hit over the head by History', or motivated by the perception that the 'modern European Jewish project of assimilation was a complete disaster'.⁹ After all, both liberal Judaism and Zionism are different responses to anti-Semitism and cannot simply be derived from experience or personal predilection. Ideas, particularly ones that attempt to express or enact political emotions, rarely can.

However, if many of Arendt's ideas about Jews and Judaism are attributable to the influence of the liberal Jewish ethos, with its proud defence of the creative individuality of Jewish individuals, this genealogy has been occluded by the commonplace that Arendt's Jewish commitments represent a sharp reaction to her German Jewish heritage.

Arendt as a German Jew

The persistent failure of Arendt studies to analyse her affiliations with liberal German Jewish thought – an affinity that would illuminate her heterodox approach to Jewish history, politics, and culture – is attributable, I argue, to the assumption that much of the German Jewish response to modernity can be safely dismissed as 'assimilationist'. As we have seen, there is a marked tendency in Arendt scholarship to interpret her politicized and performative conception of Jewish identity as a vigorous rejection of the assimilationist posture of her bourgeois German Jewish forebears. Analysing the famous disagreement between Arendt and Gershom Scholem, David Suchoff, for example, points to their dispute over Jewish identity as a kind of family quarrel. He argues that since both Arendt and Scholem sought to highlight the 'scandalous Jewish particularity signified to the German cultural tradition', their work has a deeper affinity as a 'Jewish critique of German culture'.¹⁰ Where Arendt faulted German Jews as careerist 'parvenus', Scholem bitterly attacked them for a self-deceptive belief in universalism that hid the particularities of the Jewish situation in Europe.¹¹ Steven Aschheim agrees with Suchoff's assessment, arguing that both Arendt and Scholem 'exemplified the radical revolt against German Jewish bourgeois modes of assimilation'.¹²

Underlying many of the assessments of Arendt's Judaism is the tacit consensus that, in the words of Anson Rabinbach, Arendt articulates a 'new Jewish *ethos*' which above all 'refused to accept . . . the optimism of the generation of German Jews nurtured on the concept of *Bildung* as the German Jewish mystique'.¹³ The 'modern Jewish type', Rabinbach argues, 'emerges as the negative image of the assimilated German Jew'.¹⁴ Significantly, Rabinbach establishes Hermann Cohen's 'unproblematic interpretation of Judaism as "the religion of reason"' as the generational foil of this 'new' Jewish sensibility. Cohen, according to Rabinbach, epitomizes the 'rationalism of Wilhelminian Jewish intellectuals', displaying a lamentably naive faith in a symbiosis of German and Jewish identities 'which only in retrospect appears to us as a fatal blindness'.¹⁵ Rabinbach's jaundiced generational thesis is clearly influenced by the great social historian George Mosse's famous critique of the German Jewish embrace of *Bildung* or autonomous self-formation through acculturation, in which the German Jewish acquisition of classical learning, aesthetic

sensitivity, and norms of social respectability were considered 'entry tickets to German society', signifying 'membership in the bourgeoisie'.¹⁶ That the German Jewish strategy of embourgeoisement proved a lamentable failure in protecting Jews from anti-Semitism has become a commonplace of German Jewish historiography.¹⁷ As Dirk Moses has recently argued, however, in a revisionist critique of some of the guiding assumptions of German Jewish studies, the tendency to 'posit Germans and Jews as ontologically distinct categories' leads to a 'zero-sum game of interaction in which a cultural adaptation, layered or co-mingled identity is coded as a loss or gain for a minority or majority', subtending an interpretation of Jewish emancipation in Germany as amounting to assimilation and the decline of 'Jewish strength and vitality'.¹⁸ This zero-sum game is clearly evidenced in the broad assumption that Arendt's Jewish identity was a revolt against her 'German cultural education' and Enlightenment background, yet is nevertheless ironic given Arendt's complaint against the Zionist division of Jews and non-Jews into two warring 'natural substances'.¹⁹

This brings us to the continuing elision of Ernst Cassirer from Arendt studies. It is regrettable that in his recent intellectual biography of Ernst Cassirer, Edward Skidelsky recapitulates the thesis of a potent Jewish generational divide separating the dated German Jewish rationalist from the vigorous 'new Jew'. In *Ernst Cassirer: the Last Philosopher of Culture* (2008), Skidelsky sheds doubt as to whether a classic product of the cultured, rationalist German Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* like Ernst Cassirer can still speak to modern audiences. He laments, while also affirming as necessary, that we moderns remain, in Richard Wolin's terms, 'Heidegger's children'. Denying that Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms possesses a coherent ethics and politics, Skidelsky suggests that 'Cassirer, for all his decency – indeed precisely *because* of his decency – did not see what Heidegger and many others saw so clearly: that the secular idols of humanity and progress were dead.'²⁰

I will be engaging with Skidelsky's critique of Cassirer as an apolitical Wilhelminian German Jew in Chapter 5, but I mention his reprise of the generational argument to illustrate how contemporary scholarship has worked very effectively to categorize Arendt, but not overlapping contemporaries such as Ernst Cassirer and the later Hermann Cohen, as a vigorous participant in the 'Jewish Renaissance'. This was a movement of German and central European Jews after the First World War which critiqued the assimilationism and embourgeoisement of their parents' generation and sought to prioritize their Jewish identity, often by looking to the example of East European Jewry and the revivalist 'Hebrew humanism' of cultural Zionists such as Martin Buber. Many scholars hold that there is a distinct generational and attitudinal divide between, on the one hand, Weimar era thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, Franz Rosenzweig, and Walter Benjamin

who articulate different forms of Jewish modernity and, on the other, those German Jews, like Cassirer, whom they characterize as bourgeois, rationalist, and ultimately deluded by their faith in the salutary power of German culture. Wilhelmine era Jews are held to have naively underestimated the threat of anti-Semitism, and are condemned as part of a liberal Jewish community that transformed Judaism into a voluntaristic confessional faith rather than an encompassing cultural and spiritual identity. The interpretation of Arendt as a quintessentially modern and secular thinker who rejected the thin universalism of the Enlightenment, thus a student ('child') of Heidegger, has also contributed to the perception that she represents a completely different era from the now passé neo-Kantian idealism of thinkers like Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer.

In *The Legacy of Liberal Judaism: Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt's Hidden Conversation* I attempt to break down this highly influential generational thesis which has tended to discourage genealogical investigations of Arendt's relationship to liberal and progressive strands of German Jewish thought or to resemblances between Arendt's activity as a Jewish public intellectual and earlier eras of German Jewish advocacy. We can see the efficacy of the putative generational divide between the radical 'new Jew' and the bourgeois and quietist German Jew when we consider that there are few if any comparisons of the philosophy and Jewish writings of Arendt and Ernst Cassirer. This is peculiar when we remember that Cassirer was a leading interpreter of Kant who anticipated Arendt in taking great interest in Kant's Enlightenment context, including his enthusiasm for the French Revolution, his cosmopolitan political theory and philosophy of history, and his humanist desire to engage a broader public. As Arendt would in the 1950s, as early as the 1920s Cassirer extolled the epochal significance of Lessing's dynamic conception of reason and enthused over Lessing as one of the great representatives of the 'religious Enlightenment'. Like Arendt, Cassirer was critical of a particularist conception of Judaism focused on territorial sovereignty and the priority of Jewish survival. Responding to the injunction of his friend and mentor Hermann Cohen, Cassirer theorized an ethically inspired 'Prophetic Judaism' that promotes diaspora Judaism's ongoing world-historical task to articulate the ethical principles of monotheism and its correlative conception of a unified humanity.

While commentators seem to remember well Arendt's caustic – one might say parricidal – critique of German Jewish responses to the post-emancipation era, a critique that is certainly comparable to Gershom Scholem's in its intensity, they tend to pay far less attention to the thematic significance of Arendt's post-war writings, which provide abundant evidence of a reconciliation with many aspects of liberal German Jewish thought. I have in mind Arendt's increasing sympathy for the German *Aufklärung*, evoked by her mature

enthusiasm for Lessing and Kant, her growing interest in the redemptive political potential of friendships between Germans and Jews, and her evocation of the exemplary qualities of rebellious Jewish character types in recent Jewish history. I think too of Arendt's sympathetic focus on those diasporic Jewish 'worlds', such as the Polish-Jewish milieu of Rosa Luxemburg, that have nourished political agency and relational sensibilities; of great significance in this regard is Arendt's mature 'Prophetic' willingness to be an outsider to or rebel within the Jewish community.

In a very interesting aperçu that questions the notion of Arendt's Jewishness as a purely secular phenomenon divorced from historical Judaism, the late Elisabeth Young-Bruehl recently affirmed the influence of the Prophetic tradition of Judaism on Arendt's historical consciousness. She maintains that it was 'Arendt's Jewish identity – not just the identity she asserted in defending herself as a Jew when attacked as one, but more deeply her connection to the Axial Age prophetic tradition – that made her the cosmopolitan she was'. Young-Bruehl suggests that in the anti-Semitism section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and throughout her writings on 'the Jewish question', Arendt invokes the 'cosmopolitan tradition that was established for the Jews by their Axial Age prophets' as an antidote to 'tribalist Jewish thinking, parochial and governed by mythic notions about the Jews as a chosen people . . . transcendentally oriented rather than in and of this world and its interrelated peoples'.²¹ Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb has also recently renewed interest in a post-secular Arendt by arguing suggestively that 'Arendt's use of messianic language [Gottlieb refers to Arendt's analysis of the 'fact of human natality' in *The Human Condition* as that 'miracle' which expresses 'faith in and hope for the world'] and redemptive motifs has a long and distinguished tradition in German Jewish scholarship', articulated in Arendt's work as the 'weak [because non-sovereign] redemptive power of action'.²²

Young-Bruehl and Gottlieb's 'post-secularist' approach to the sources of Arendt's Jewish thought is immensely valuable, particularly as both stress that Arendt draws on a tradition of German Jewish religious thought which is emphatically non-eschatological in that it expresses hope for, rather than flight from, the world. Following Young-Bruehl, *The Legacy of Liberal Judaism: Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt's Hidden Conversation* explores the continuity and expressive power of the ideals of Prophetic Judaism, an influential German Jewish discourse throughout the nineteenth century, which arguably culminated in Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism* (1919) and was a source of inspiration for Ernst Cassirer's philosophical anthropology.

Prophetic Judaism, I argue, was less a purely religious teaching than a way of modelling Jewish cultural identity in the present: defending, for example, the role of the creative outsider and internal critic of the Jewish community,

and establishing the historical importance of a visionary and reformist stream of Jewish philosophical and literary creativity. Rather than illuminating Arendt's Jewish writings against an antithetical German Jewish background, I point to the fecundity and adaptability of liberal Jewish thought, which, like Arendt's Lessing in *Men in Dark Times*, defends Judaism's 'position in the world' while never losing sight of the richness of its historical sources. The reconstruction of liberal Jewish thought I undertake here suggests, as does Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, that Arendt's willingness to relationally perform her Jewishness in response to an oppressive environment, and her espousal of a refractory, cosmopolitan historical consciousness that challenges official histories, situate her as a proponent of the Prophetic tradition of Jewish ethics. Arendt's relationship to Prophetic Judaism can only be illuminated, however, by acknowledging her contribution to a tradition of liberal Jewish thought stretching back some two and half centuries. Methodologically, such an investigation cannot remain content with rehearsing Arendt's explicit distaste, predicated on a distorted and jaundiced interpretation, for German Jewish forebears such as Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher and political advocate. Despite her antipathy to Mendelssohn's alleged quietism and ahistorical emphasis on individual *Bildung*, Arendt's celebration of a Jewish sensibility synonymous with a humane sympathy for outsiders and heretics, her belief that overarching historical philosophies diminish the intellectual independence of the individual, her sympathy for the dialogical philosophizing of Socrates, and her vigorous defence of Judaism's contribution to human progress, can all be traced back to Mendelssohn, her putative nemesis.

In Chapter 1 I resituate the oft maligned Moses Mendelssohn as a 'world thinker', a cosmopolitan liberal thinker and public-intellectual who established a number of influential strategies for combating anti-Jewish sentiment and Christian hubris. These discursive stratagems included alerting Christians to the greater tolerance of the Muslim world towards Jews and providing a 'counter-historical' critique of Christianity as historically persecutory and theologically dogmatic. In Chapter 2 I discuss the famous *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement that arose in the second decade of the nineteenth century. I argue that scholars and writers working under its aegis, such as Leopold Zunz, Heinrich Heine, and Heinrich Graetz, were, in the words of Ismar Schorsch, 'confrontational' in their emancipative politics and 'counter-historical' methodologies, their challenge to the normative conceptions and collective memory of the Christian majority.²³ Chapter 3 explores the efflorescence of Jewish historical consciousness in the passionate and polemical writings of Abraham Geiger, the great theorist of Reform and Liberal Judaism. I discuss Geiger's attempts to reinvigorate Jewish history and identity by evoking Judaism's interpretive creativity and 'Prophetic' orientation to the future as key elements of Judaism's congenial relationship to 'new cultures'.

Chapter 4 queries an influential critique of Hermann Cohen as advocating a ‘Protestantized Judaism’ that naively stresses the compatibility of Judaism and *Deutschtum*. I suggest that Cohen’s invocation of Germany’s ‘better self’, that is, its fostering of the individual conscience, was a counter-historical stratagem cautioning against the rise of Romantic irrationalism in Germany. Influenced by Abraham Geiger, Cohen celebrated the diversity of Jewish diasporic history, particularly its ‘golden age’ in Andalusian Spain. In Chapter 5 I argue for Cassirer as a ‘Jewish’ thinker in the liberal Jewish tradition, suggesting, through a reading of Toni Cassirer’s memoir of her life with Ernst Cassirer, that Cassirer was not naïve or delusional but an engaged advocate of the German Jewish community who did his utmost to warn Germany of the looming catastrophe. I suggest that Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms was informed by his liberal Jewish ethics and specifically his Prophetic monotheism. Cassirer’s emphasis on the mediated and symbolic dimension of human perception and expression, in which human beings transcend their immediate environment and biological facticity, is closely cathected to his frequent invocations of the Jewish Prophets. In Cassirer’s reading, the monotheism of the Jewish Prophets represents the overcoming of the ancestral cosmologies and object fetishism of myth in the vision of a ‘new heaven and a new earth’, an ethical and religious interpretation of life. Cassirer’s evocation of Prophetic ethics throughout his writing works in tandem with the liberal Jewish argument that Judaism is the most demythified monotheistic religion and that its ideal tendency, still historically evolving, is to overcome its own residual mythic elements, including biblical literalism and ethnocentrism, through semiotic reflexivity and the ethical interpretation of Jewish sources.

In Chapter 6 I turn to Cassirer’s liberal Jewish enthusiasm for the European Enlightenment and the German *Aufklärung* in particular. Cassirer was an active contributor to the important 200th anniversary commemoration of the birth of Mendelssohn in 1929, and he used that occasion to speak to Jewish and non-Jewish German audiences about Mendelssohn’s formative contribution to Germany’s intellectual heritage, and the profound significance of the Mendelssohn/Lessing friendship. From 1928 onwards, Cassirer invoked the Enlightenment as a challenge to German nationalist exceptionalism, evoking its sociably engaged conception of critique as a valuable antidote to the philosophical fatalism of Heidegger and Spengler and to the ‘co-ordination’ of many German academics with the Nazi worldview.

In Chapter 7 I grapple with the complex issue of Arendt’s relationship to liberal Jewish thought. I point to a peripeteia or ‘turn’ in Arendt’s thinking in the late 1930s, in which she moves from a harsh critique of the baleful effect of the Enlightenment on Jewish solidarity and political agency, towards a growing appreciation of the Enlightenment’s emphasis on independent thought as a valuable ethical alternative to the historical meta-narratives of

Hegel and Marx. In a near-complete reversal of her earlier critique of the Enlightenment, Arendt drew on Lessing and Kant's ethic of *Selbsdenken* (thinking for oneself) and more obliquely upon Mendelssohn's ethos of *Bildung* in order to articulate a robustly relational and humanist conception of Jewish ethics that memorably clashed with the ethnocentrism of Gershom Scholem.

In Chapter 8 I discuss Arendt's post-war interest in questions of moral 'character' and 'personality'. Analysing Arendt's discursive conception of character as emerging from the inner dialogue of consciousness/conscience, I argue that Arendt's idealization of the relational energies of a particular Jewish 'type' – the Jewish pariah – resonates with liberal Jewish sympathies for the Jewish outsider who maintained their Jewish distinctiveness while energetically contributing to world literature and world culture. In the postscript I gesture tentatively towards the legacy of liberal Jewish thought in contemporary Jewish theories of diaspora and post-Zionist historiography and Jewish cultural studies, and I suggest ways in which reconstructing liberal Judaism can help us to think about some of the preoccupations and 'counter-historical' tendencies of recent Jewish scholarship.

Notes

- 1 See 'The Hannah Arendt Collection' [online], 2009. Stevenson Library, Bard College. Available at <http://www.bard.edu/arendtcollection/>, accessed 4 May 2011.
- 2 J. Kohn. 2010. 'Hannah Arendt's Jewish Experience: Thinking, Acting, Judging', in R. Berkowitz, J. Katz, and T. Keenan (eds), *Thinking in Dark Times, Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 187–188.
- 3 Kohn, 'Hannah Arendt's Jewish Experience', 184. Kohn's analysis of the German Jewish matrix determining Arendt's separation of 'social' and 'political' questions and values is probably indebted to Dagmar Barnouw's seminal study of the relationship between Arendt's Jewish identity and her political thought, D. Barnouw. 1990. *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press. Barnouw argues there that Arendt's critique of Jewish assimilation leading to 'parvenuism' acknowledged the 'co-responsibility of Jews because, like most Germans, herself included, they had been excellent Germans and mediocre citizens'. Kohn, 'Hannah Arendt's Jewish Experience', 83.
- 4 R.H. Feldman. 2010. 'The Pariah as Rebel, Hannah Arendt's Jewish Writings', in R. Berkowitz, J. Katz, and T. Keenan (eds), *Thinking in Dark Times, Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 198.
- 5 Feldman, 'The Pariah as Rebel, Hannah Arendt's Jewish Writings', 199. Natan Sznajder's recent and suggestive analysis of Arendt's 'rooted cosmopolitanism' nevertheless rehearses the accepted wisdom that Arendt's principal interlocutor in the formation of her Jewish identity was Zionism: 'For Arendt, being a Jew was first of all a political stance, one that she developed while still in Germany through her

- intellectual connections with Zionism'. See N. Sznajder. 2011. *Jewish Memory and the Cosmopolitan Order*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 18.
- 6 Richard J. Bernstein's influential book *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* has helped to catalyse the notion that Arendt's Jewish identity, because secular and a single generation removed from the assimilationist 'liberal Jewish community', was thin and deracinated: 'It was not any religious, spiritual, or even deeply emotional experiences that attracted [Arendt] to Zionism . . . It was politics – the need for a Jewish politics – that led her to Zionism'. See R.J. Bernstein. 1996. *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 102.
 - 7 M. Zimmerman. 2001. 'Hannah Arendt, the Early "Post-Zionist"', in S.E. Aschheim (ed.), *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 186.
 - 8 S. Aschheim. 2001. 'Introduction', in S.E. Aschheim (ed.), *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 14.
 - 9 Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 103.
 - 10 D. Suchoff. 1997. 'Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, and the Scandal of Jewish Particularity', *The Germanic Review* 72(1), 59.
 - 11 Suchoff, 'Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt', 70.
 - 12 Aschheim, 'Introduction', 10.
 - 13 A. Rabinbach. 1985. 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism', *New German Critique* 34, 78.
 - 14 Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 79–80.
 - 15 Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse', 78–79.
 - 16 G.L. Mosse. 1985. 'Jewish Emancipation, Between *Bildung* and Respectability', in J. Reinharz and W. Schatzberg (eds), *The Jewish Response to German Culture*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2.
 - 17 Paul Mendes-Flohr, a prominent theorist of the German Jewish legacy, argues that 'The very *Bildung* that promised to integrate the Jews into the common fabric of humanity left them in the end virtually isolated within a German society overtaken by nationalism and its invidious myths and symbols'. See P. Mendes-Flohr. 1999. *German Jews: a Dual Identity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 41.
 - 18 A.D. Moses. 2009. 'The Contradictory Legacies of German-Jewry', *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 54, 37.
 - 19 H. Arendt. 2007. *The Jewish Writings*, J. Kohn and R.H. Feldman (eds), New York: Schocken Books, 50.
 - 20 E. Skidelsky. 2008. *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 8.
 - 21 E. Young-Bruehl. 2010. 'Hannah Arendt's Jewish Identity', in R. Berkowitz, J. Katz, and T. Keenan (eds), *Thinking in Dark Times, Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 208.
 - 22 S. Young-ah Gottlieb. 2003. *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W.H. Auden*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 22–23.
 - 23 See I. Schorsch. 1994. *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*, Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press.