

Nihilism and the Crisis of Tradition: Arendt and Contemporary Radical Conservatism

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The present paper is a preliminary approach to the question of the applicability of Hannah Arendt's ideas on tradition and nihilism to the analysis of contemporary radical conservatism. For this purpose, I examine Arendt's essays of the 1940s and 1950s which shed light on the origins of the European conservatism crisis, and the difference between traditionalist and anti-traditionalist thinking. These arguments on the nihilistic aspects of radical conservatism, which legitimizes itself by appealing to a crisis of tradition, illustrate the shortcomings of Karl Mannheim's analysis of conservatism and traditionalism. In order to complement Arendt's rather fragmentary concept of conservatism, I use the definitions of adjectival and nominal conservatism to define the key differences between genuine conservatism and radical conservatism (pseudo-conservatism). Based on the analysis of the past, I address the question of why Arendt is important to the understanding of contemporary pseudo-conservatism, including its historical origins, self-description, and key instruments. Lastly, I explain why, together with Arendt, we should choose a broader perspective by focusing on analyzing the crisis of judgement in the public sphere and the resulting distortion of the ideas of tradition and dialogue, rather than simply describing contemporary radical conservatism as the spiritual successor to National Socialism.

Keywords: Arendt, Jaspers, conservatism, pseudo-conservatism, radicalism, nihilism, thinking, acting

The rise of right-wing, national-conservative movements and parties in Europe and across the world over the past decade has been accompanied by the new popularity of pseudo-conservative strategies. The idea of a political, economic, and social crisis pertaining to a certain cultural tradition is used as a pretext for unexpected, situational decisions. The rhetoric around preserving values has transformed into political revisionism and aggressive claims against both real and imaginary, internal and external opponents. Pseudo-conservatism feels perfectly at home under the conditions of the constant hastening of the social and political processes of decision-making, toying with incompatible arguments, and not shying away from direct confrontation or the risks associated with the alleged necessity of an immediate rescue of traditional values. My paper will examine some key aspects of this phenomenon, traditionally called radical conservatism (or ultraconservatism), from the perspective of Hannah Arendt's thought as a theoretical

basis and a major impulse for the analysis of pseudo-conservatism in comparison with 'classical' conservatism.

1

In order to analyze fake forms of conservatism, we have to examine their history and origins which go as far back as the 1920s. The period between the two World Wars saw major political, legal, and cultural crises. Included among these was the crisis of political and social (everyday) conservatism, which resulted in its gradual replacement, or substitution, by imitations that Adorno later called "pseudo-conservatism."¹ In Arendt's early essays (sadly undervalued by many scholars) and her major works on totalitarianism, thought, and action, we find important arguments that can shed light on the premises and major elements of this new phenomenon of pseudo-conservatism.

Starting from the mid-1940s, Hannah Arendt, along with her friend and mentor Karl Jaspers, took an active role in the discussions about Germany's future, its citizens' individual and collective responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime, and the crisis of values in the public sphere caused by the aggressive refutation and destruction of previous traditions. In his editorial preface to the first issue of the monthly journal *Die Wandlung*, which received praise from Arendt,² Jaspers describes the post-war intellectual crisis in Germany, marked by the loss of values and normative ties in the light of social atomization.³ He returns to the same topic in his highly debated speech *Our Future and Goethe (Unsere Zukunft und Goethe)* given in Frankfurt on August 28, 1947, upon receiving the Goethe prize. In his speech, Jaspers directly stresses the utopian character of the idea of a non-critical return to classical tradition and scrutinizes it from a modern point of view. His thoughts on the causes of the crisis of thought and the methods of overcoming it are consonant with the ideas Arendt first formulated in her essays of the 1940s (many of which were published in *Die Wandlung*⁴) and developed in her major works.

1. While Adorno sometimes used the notion of pseudo-conservatism in the sociological book *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950), there still has not been a study dedicated directly to this topic. My goal is to re-evaluate this notion from a contemporary perspective.

2. Cf. Arendt to Jaspers, 29.01.1946: "Die Wandlung, für die ich ihnen herzlichst danke und die hier von Hand zu Hand geht, obwohl ich sie eigentlich gar nicht aus der Hand geben wollte, ist ein schöner Anfang. Ihre Einleitung ist ganz herrlich . . ."

3. Jaspers, 1945: 5–6: "Wir haben fast alles verloren: Staat, Wirtschaft, die gesicherten Bedingungen unseres physischen Daseins, und schlimmer noch als das: die . . . uns alle verbindenden Normen, die moralische Würde, das einigende Selbstbewusstsein als Volk. . . . Haben wir wirklich alles verloren? Nein, wir Überlebenden sind noch da. . . . Vor dem Nichts rafften wir uns auf. Mir dürfen öffentlich miteinander reden. Sehen wir zu, was wir einander zu sagen haben. Wir sind innerlich und äußerlich verwandelt in zwölf Jahren. [Wir bitten] Deutsche, zu sprechen, ihre Gedanken mitzuteilen, Bilder zu gestalten, öffentlich fühlbar werden zu lassen, dass und wie sie leben. . . . So hoffen wir, auch in radikalen Auseinandersetzungen doch solidarisch miteinander zu reden. . . . Der Einzelne ist machtlos. Er bedarf des öffentlichen Geistes, der ihn trägt. . . . Wir wollen in öffentlicher Diskussion uns der Bindungen bewusst werden, aus denen wir leben. . . . Die Gegenwart und die Zukunft sind unsere Aufgabe. Alles Denken, das für sie wesentlich sein kann, soll in dieser Zeitschrift Raum finden, Politik, Wirtschaft, Technik, Recht, Wissenschaften, Kunst und Dichtung, Theologie und Philosophie."

4. More on Arendt's collaboration with the journal *Die Wandlung* see in Zhavoronkov 2018.

Sharing the overall diagnosis of the period, Jaspers and Arendt suggested several similar therapeutic instruments, such as the rehabilitation of dialogue in the public space. Still, Arendt's analysis of the past goes beyond the theoretical program of her mentor and friend. She uses Nietzsche's notion of nihilism (e.g., in Arendt 1946 and 1978) in her description of National Socialism's beginnings, shifting from the ethical to the political level while also presenting it in a much more one-sided manner while stressing the dangers and downplaying the creative aspects Nietzsche emphasized. In her essays and lectures, as well as in *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt constantly reminds her readers that nihilism destroys all of the connections between thinking and action, and in doing so, distorts the understanding of one's motivation and stimulates the will toward non-thinking and Nothing itself. While it is evident that Arendt's "nihilists" are primarily followers of the National Socialist ideology, her idea of nihilism is much broader. She points out that nihilism is used as the means to refuse thinking in general. Its key trait, which plays an important role in my analysis, is the negation of any kind of tradition in favor of the irresponsibility of choice.

In the German version of her essay "Imperialism: Road to Suicide" ("Über den Imperialismus," 1946), Arendt mentions three types of modern followers of nihilism. In the first group, there are those scientists who willingly or unconsciously "believe in Nothingness." Second are those people who believe they have experienced the Nothingness themselves. The third (and most important) type are those who undertake the impossible task of "producing the Nothingness" by "piling one destruction upon another" (Arendt, 1946: 662–663). The silent approval of the majority supports the destruction of existing traditions for the sake of Nothingness, recognizing it as a means of realizing their secret dreams or innermost experiences (Ibid.). For Arendt, National Socialism's instrumentalization of this form of nihilism was a logical consequence of the expansion of European imperialism starting from the second half of the 19th century, and represented a new alliance between capital and the mob. This mobilization of the mob, which is devoid of all principles, results in anti-Semitism since the Jews are now viewed as dangerous rivals to imperialist "big politics." On the academic level, this intellectual erosion manifests itself in the replacement of the notion of nation by the notion of race in both the natural and human sciences.⁵

Arendt's important achievement lies in the precise description of the radical contrast between the conservative facade of National Socialism and its evidently anti-conservative substance, which hides itself behind the mask of adherence to German traditions while incessantly destroying all the traditions standing in its way. This nihilistic thinking facilitates a non-critical adaptation of any other ideology, including the National Socialist ideology, or social order. Long before Theodor Adorno's influential essay "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" ("Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit," 1963), which takes on the topic of the dangerous legacy of National Socialist thought in Germany, Arendt registered the same problem, although from a slightly different point of view.

5. Thus, Arendt implicitly criticizes the logic of development and philosophical anthropology and the ideologization of Darwinism.

Both Arendt's and Adorno's analyses were placed in the broad contexts of the problem of nihilism and the non-critical foundations of action.

Arendt describes the role of nihilism in the political sphere, tracing its connection to nationalism and the idea of exclusivity for certain peoples or nations. In the course of her analysis on the details of the Dreyfus affair in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt reasonably notes that the atmosphere of nihilism makes traditional conceptions and institutions, including the system of law, appear obsolete and unnecessary. In the conflict between anti-Dreyfusards and Dreyfusards, both parties *de facto* chose nihilism, replacing the legal question of whether Dreyfus was innocent or guilty with the political question "Who will win?". Instead of careful justification independent of the political circumstances, these nihilistic arguments were based on a situational judgement.

Why does political nihilism need a conservative facade? To answer this question from an Arendtian perspective, we have to return to the beginnings of her idea on the banality of evil, traceable to her essays of the 1940s. We find many preliminary arguments concerning individual and collective responsibility, which will play a key role at a later point, e.g., in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.⁶ In her essay "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility" (1945), initially written for the Zionist journal "Jewish Frontier" and translated for the German publication in *Die Wandlung* under the title "Organisierte Schuld," Arendt criticizes the popular notion of collective guilt rooted in the attempts to present the Germans as "potential Nazis ever since Tacitus' times" (Arendt, 2005: 125). She states that "in trying to understand what the real motives were that caused people to act as cogs in the mass-murder machine," the aim of National Socialism, "we shall not be aided by speculations about German history and the so-called German national character" (Ibid.: 128), but rather understand the personality of those engaged in mass murder. Arendt illustrates her thesis by quoting a fragment from an interview between the journalist Raymond A. Davies and the paymaster of the death camp at Maidanek who was firmly convinced that he only carried out orders without actually murdering anyone (Ibid.: 127). Arendt sees the motives (in the German version, she uses Kant's notion of *Triebfeder*) that induce a man to transform himself into an element of the mass-murder machine in the character presented by the National Socialists, that is, not as something extraordinary, but as a norm. Under these circumstances, the transformation of a "responsible member of society" into a lifeless object occurs in an allegedly conservative, prosaic manner (Ibid.: 129).⁷

We can see that the concept of nihilism Arendt adopted from Nietzsche has been modified for her description of social-political consequences of the crisis of thought, and plays a key role in her analysis of tradition which remains relevant in a contemporary context. While examining the question of why social and political nihilism (the root of the current crisis) took the shape of traditionalism and conservatism under National Socialist use, Arendt takes note of the paradoxical nature of radical nihilism, since the

6. This topic plays a central role in Jaspers' philosophy of the same period, especially in his work *The Question of German Guilt* (Jaspers, 1946).

7. Arendt's thesis concerning the anticonservative character of totalitarian regimes can also be applied to Stalinism. Cf. Teichmann, 2016, case study of the political system in Soviet Middle Asia of the 1920s–1940s.

latter presents its latent endeavors to augment boundaries and exceptions as a consistent adherence to the everyday norm.

2

While Arendt's arguments remain highly relevant from a contemporary point of view, we must point out that her arguments do not have a systematic character since the notion of conservatism does not play a significant role in most of her works. An important exception is the essay "What is Authority" (1954) where she makes observations concerning the pessimistic aspects of conservative thinking. According to Arendt, "liberalism . . . measures a process of receding freedom, and conservatism measures a process of receding authority" (Arendt, 1968: 100). In her other essay of the same period, "The Crisis in Education" (1954), Arendt observes conservative thinking from a broader, ontological point of view, denying the possibility of preserving a perennial *status quo*. The cause, according to Arendt, lies in the world itself since it is doomed to gradual decline and destruction in the absence of active human involvement.

Since constant change is an integral part of human life, the critical question concerning conservatism as a way of thinking can be formulated as what can (or should) be preserved and for how long? Arendt does not explicitly ask this question, although we can deduce several answers from her discussion of other topics, most importantly, that of common sense and the shared world it creates. The concise character of Arendt's direct description of conservatism should thus hinder us from trying to reach a goal that was also her own, i.e., using Arendt's instruments to understand modern social and political phenomena. In order to deliver and expand her arguments, I will make a brief excursus into several conservatism studies, bridging the gap between her essays of the 1940s and 1950s and the present state of research, including the current debates on conservatism in the light of contemporary nationalist movements.

While conservatism is a political theory, in the broader sense it is also a social attitude with potential political consequences (cf. Oakeshott, 1991). The analysis of the conservative model of action goes back to Karl Mannheim's 1925 habilitation thesis (1st ed. 1984).⁸ Assuming that conservatism emerged during the French Revolution (although this thesis is insufficiently backed by arguments), Mannheim introduces a key opposition between fully reactive traditionalism, which lacks a long-term, historical fundament, and the more flexible conservatism based around a certain set of principles. While traditionalism opposes changes, conservatism may adopt or even favor them — given that they do not contradict its own principles of action. Arendt's ideas can be used to refine Mannheim's theory since they demonstrate the limits of conservatism, something Mannheim did not take into account. In the light of Arendt's arguments, the National Socialist ideology does not look like a kind of reactive traditionalism (as Mannheim suggests), but rather as a

8. Interestingly, Arendt has written an essay on Mannheim's sociology "Philosophie und Soziologie: Anlässlich Karl Mannheims 'Ideologie und Utopie'" (Arendt, 1930), although she has never referenced his studies on conservatism, neither in that essay nor in her other works.

false form of conservatism that negates traditions and takes any possible shape due to the absence of long-term principles. To describe this form, which has only a superficial similarity to conservatism but has an essentially anti-conservative and anti-traditional character, I use the notion of pseudo-conservatism as invented by Adorno.

To give my line of argument a more concrete shape, I will make use of the parallel, analytical tradition of conservative studies, particularly debates on the question of what can be considered a “genuinely” conservative action.⁹ Some scholars like Beckstein (Beckstein, 2005), have fairly criticized the distinction between adjectival and nominal conservatism, i.e., the idea of action that seeks to avoid possible risks and the idea of protecting the *status quo*, because of the uncertainty about the limits of the *status quo* and crucial inconsistencies in the model of action, whose sole goal is to preemptively eliminate any risks.¹⁰ Although these critical remarks are largely justified, it is still evident that a conservative model of action, e.g., as a business model, aims to preserve a long-term (although not perennial¹¹) *status quo* while minimizing (but not fully eliminating) all possible risks. As Oakeshott reasonably remarks in his brilliant essay *On Being Conservative* (1956), most people are conservative by nature, not trusting anything new, and evading risks.

To prevent misunderstandings, I must note that I do not seek to define conservatism in comparison with liberalism, and will not even offer a separate detailed description of conservatism, including its main deficits; thus, I will not participate in the complex discussion between the main authors of conservative tradition in political theory.¹² Since I am examining conservatism in a broad sense, I will only mention some basic characteristics that help us to understand its specific features and limitations. In the light of these characteristics, we can clearly see the paradoxical nature of the appeals to tradition and conservative thinking from the standpoint of political nihilism, as described by Arendt in her works on totalitarianism, the banality of evil, and thinking. Taking into account that political nihilism negates any kind of tradition while also appealing to a broad, largely (but not exclusively) conservative audience, we can regard it as one of the pillars of pseudo-conservatism. In the terminological triad of traditionalism, conservatism and pseudo-conservatism, conservatism occupies a place in the center, that is, between innovation-friendly traditionalism and pseudo-conservatism (or ‘radical conservatism’) which is willing to undertake significant risks without regard to pragmatic considerations as it strives to undermine the *status quo*.

(1) While some pseudo-conservatism traits may look similar to those of conservatism, there are, in my opinion, at least five key differences we must consider when dealing with specific cases:

9. See especially Huntington (1957), Oakeshott (1991) and Brennan and Hamlin (2004).

10. If we consider that conservatism’s purpose is to find a temporary balance, rather than avoid risks, the main issue will be analyzing how and why a new paradigm of action replaces an older one. Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, Arendt is unconcerned with this kind of question.

11. Cf. Arendt’s remarks in “The Crisis in Education” (Arendt, 1968).

12. For this discussion, see Buchanan (2005), Hayek (2011) and many others.

(2) Unlike conservatism, pseudo-conservatism does not operate with the current *status quo* but with a former one or with a fully fictive construct that presents itself as historical reality. It also regularly undermines the present *status quo* (producing the ‘nothingness’, to use Arendt’s language).

(3) In pseudo-conservatism, risks are not limited by authoritative restrictions but, rather, welcomed as a ‘necessary evil’ used to achieve a grand goal.

(4) Pseudo-conservative actions and reasoning are mostly situational since pseudo-conservatism does not *de facto* appeal to any existing (or living) long-term tradition.

(5) Conservatism has to be flexible in the long term, eventually recognizing important changes in the *status quo*.¹³ Pseudo-conservatism, on the other hand, is much more reactive. For instance, it seeks to revive isolated elements of past traditions¹⁴ and/or give them new meaning.

While conservative action takes place when the rules are made clear to all involved parties, it can be and often is the other way around in the pseudo-conservative model.¹⁵ The latter can easily offer an explanation *ad hoc* or *a posteriori* while the real reasons may remain concealed or even not properly considered.

3

To illustrate our point, we also have to consider several key arguments from radical conservatism studies. It would be trite to say that contemporary radical conservatism (e.g., “the New Right”) in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere can hardly be identified with the “classical” conservatism briefly described above. These new patterns of action may appear to be essentially conservative, although much more radicalized and, in many cases, polarized than in the past. Indeed, some radical conservatives care about preserving certain cultural, moral, and economic traditions (or at least do so superficially). Moreover, not all radical conservatism, with its many shapes, local genealogies and goals, can be labeled as pseudo-conservatism. This notion, however, still applies to many cases when conservatism is used to mask a wholly different idea of action and the reasoning behind it. I will list some of the most important ‘smaller’ traits that do not conform with the basic prin-

13. As Hayek notes in his classical critical essay, conservatism is only opposed to *drastic* changes (cf. Hayek, 2011 [1960]: 519).

14. See, for instance, von Beyme, 2013. While I do agree with Drolet and Williams (Drolet, Williams, 2018) that we have to take a serious theoretical approach to contemporary radical conservatism “as a theoretical perspective” (p. 285) despite its obvious inconsistencies, I think the authors seriously underestimate this pseudoconservative trait in the New Right while also neglecting the differences between, for instance, the ‘Nouvelle Droite’ ideology and modern pseudo-conservatism, with its imperialist slogans and tendencies (a good example would be the ideology of territorial revisionism in Hungary under Victor Orbán).

15. This trait can be deduced from two common arguments presented in several key studies on conservatism (such as those of Hayek and Buchanan, which are in turn quoted by many others): (1) that conservatism does not offer alternative models of action, lacking creativity in this regard, and; (2) that conservatism presupposes a certain order to things, which is based on the idea of a stable social hierarchy of power (e.g. in the form of elitism), as opposed to liberal egalitarianism. Thus, a conservative action can only choose from a range of already existing sets of principles that are based on a hierarchic worldview.

principles of conservatism. These traits, pointed out in recent studies on radical conservatism, can be derived from the ones described above.

Pseudo-conservatism is nurtured by a disappointment with the current *status quo*, including hierarchical relations (be it on the national or international level).¹⁶ This disappointment, while not being in any way exclusive to pseudo-conservatism, urges pseudo-conservatism proponents to choose restoration over preservation, as they do not see the possibility of improving existing relations through traditional means (e.g., in the case of the many British citizens who have voted in favor of Brexit, which was actively supported by the UKIP). The everlasting conservative debate on how far a conservative restoration can reach without causing harm to existing traditions is resolved by pseudo-conservatism in the most radical of all possible ways — by thinking outside of the historical, cultural, social, and economic relations of the present.

In contrast to contemporary mainstream conservatism, pseudo-conservatism does not need a flexible, pragmatically-oriented basis of argumentation (as, for instance, in mainstream German politics during Angela Merkel's era). Instead of choosing between several possibilities with the help of our faculty of judgement (in the Kantian and Arndtian sense), it strives to equalize real and fake facts as well as sound and baseless arguments while promoting its own theoretically and practically inconsistent strategy as a unique remedy against the current crisis of tradition.¹⁷ Its almost religious devotion¹⁸ to ideals of restoring a former glory induces it not only to deny rationalist liberalism but also, in many cases, to negate reason, even though reason, as a practical instrument, is equally necessary to both liberal and conservative strategies. This kind of worldview explains the fact that pseudo-conservatism is notoriously aggressive towards alternative opinions.

Compared to conservatism, pseudo-conservatism has much more creativity in its treatment of facts and arguments as it works not only with the present *status quo* but also with a multitude of dead traditions having the most national or even international history at its disposal. The necessity of finding a suitable explanation *post factum* induces pseudo-conservatism to broaden its scope by referring to the most convenient historical examples, be it the 1950s or the second half of the 1980s as the supposed “golden era” of American economics or, for instance, some unknown point in history after World War II, when European countries were absolutely free of immigrants.¹⁹ These (imaginary or real) examples have little to do with the current situation but serve the hidden practical

16. See, for instance, Coles, 2017: 52–62 (on the American far right) and 62–76 (on far-right movements in Europe after the 1990s).

17. Aside from many newspaper articles, there are several recent studies, such as: Vorländer, Herold, Schaller, 2018 (on PEGIDA and the German New Right) and Shanahan, 2018 (on Donald Trump's politics), which have already touched on that topic.

18. For more on the connection between the Radical Right and religion, see Minkenberg 2018. See also Toplin 2006 (although I would not go as far as to label radical conservatism as fundamentalism).

19. Cf. Viktor Orbán's repeated claim that Hungary has to remain free of immigrants, which is connected to the idea of preserving national independency against the new “invasion” of Europe. Similar rhetoric about invasion is used by the German AfD to support their anti-immigrant policy.

interests of their proponents.²⁰ This gap between contemporary reality and the historical (or imaginary) past is a serious threat to the basic conservative goal of supporting established institutions.

Lastly, the situational character of pseudo-conservatism legitimizes its aim of maximizing the number of exceptions in decision-making instead of keeping them at a necessary minimum, as would be the case in 'traditional' conservatism and, with some reservations, in contemporary conservatism as well. The key trait of contemporary pseudo-conservatism is its spontaneity, which can easily appeal to the broader public as 'fascinating' in comparison to the 'boring' predictability of conservative action.²¹ Increasing social acceleration,²² which significantly shortens the gap between thought and action in the social sphere, raises the pressure to constantly re-synchronize the pace of decision-making with that of social developments. This shortage of resources presents a serious problem for any kind of conservative strategy. The fact that pseudo-conservatism proves to be more efficient in this regard is as alarming as it is understandable.

4

Considering the boundaries of my theoretical approach (and of this paper), I am setting aside the more practical question of the self-definition of contemporary conservatism as a potential golden mean between traditionalism and pseudo-conservatism. In limiting the analysis to a description of pseudo-conservative strategies of action, I will instead answer a question that connects observations of Arendt's ideas of tradition and nihilism with the studies on conservatism and the so-called radical conservatism: "How can we use Arendt's arguments in the critical observation of pseudo-conservatism as a social and political phenomenon?" I will briefly show how the main aspects, or layers, of contemporary pseudo-conservatism can be better understood with the help of Arendt's toolkit.

Several aspects that I will mention, such as Arendt's notion of factual truth, which is popularly used today to contrast with the notion of "post-truth," are already the focus of Arendt studies in recent years (or even the last decades, e.g., the opposition of thinking and non-thinking). However, they are viewed from other perspectives since the topic of conservatism still plays a marginal role compared to the idea of revolution²³, the role of morals in politics, or Arendt's notion of the banality of evil. Thus, my own reflections present an attempt to view some traditional questions and topics from a new angle.

20. See, for instance, George Lakoff's brilliant analysis of Donald Trump's language, which includes appeals to a "past ideal state" (Lakoff, 2016).

21. This has many effects, including the rise in popularity of radical conservative parties and personalities in the media. The high media coverage of radical conservatism has a major influence on the political and social climate, which many scholars still underestimate. More on this see in Ellinas, 2018.

22. The most important studies on contemporary social implications of acceleration are those of Hartmut Rosa (esp. 2005 and 2010). On the relation between time and politics, see also Paul Virilio's classical study (1977).

23. There are currently no monographic studies and only one dissertation on this topic: Wolcott, 2010.

To understand pseudo-conservatism, we have to understand its structure and limits, historical origins, the forms of its current manifestation, and its (often non-exclusive) instruments. Respectively, there are four main areas of analysis that can be considered from the standpoint of Arendtian studies:

(1) First of all, we must re-evaluate the limits of conservatism since we are not placing it opposite to liberalism (as is the case in most studies) but to pseudo-conservatism. For this purpose, we have to follow Arendt in maintaining our critical distance from the well-established views defining the everyday use of some key terms. In other words, we are to question the notion of conservatism just like Arendt questions the notions of tradition in her early essays, and revolution, in her works on this topic from the 1960s. We must ask ourselves if we really can or should regard a movement or strategy of action as conservative simply because it is called so by the actors themselves. In many cases, it will very probably prove to be a disguise that conceals the nihilism of thought Arendt described in her essays of the 1940s and several of her major works after 1951.

While Arendt's analysis of the perverse nature of the National Socialist idea of tradition is in no way exclusive, she was one of the first thinkers to describe the social and political results of these nihilistic transformations with such insight and in such detail. However, there is another theoretical aspect which should be considered as well. Contrary to some scholars such as Irwing Horowitz (2012), I do not regard Arendt as a purely liberal or conservative thinker (even less so as a radical-conservative philosopher), although there are parallels between Arendt's thought and that of conservative authors like Roger Scruton. It would be much more plausible to say that Arendt takes on the role of external observer judging some key pros and cons of conservatism and liberalism, as we see in her essay "What is Authority?" (1954). This neutral stance allows us to see the limitations of each model of thought, thus being perfectly suitable to compare these models to one another and to other forms such as pseudo-conservatism.

(2) On the diachronic level, we have to look into the historical roots of pseudo-conservatism which flourished in totalitarian regimes, thus sharing some of its key features and premises (for instance, the use of rhetorical strategies for creating confusion) with those pointed out by Arendt. A good example would be her observations on the political role of nationalistic nihilism in Germany and France before and between the World Wars together with her analysis of the transformation of the traditional nihilistic principle of "everything is permitted" into the much more destructive non-utilitarian, practical principle of "everything is possible," which transcends the realm of self-interest (Arendt, 1979: 440–441).²⁴ Unfortunately, in this context, Arendt pays little to no attention to the contribution of the thinkers of the so-called Conservative Revolution to the development of radical conservatism in Europe,²⁵ although she herself speaks of a "conservative

24. On the three different stages of nihilism according Arendt, see Schwartz, 2016: 148–149.

25. There are several studies that regard the Conservative Revolution as one of the initial stages in the development of radical conservatism, e.g., Dahl, 1999. On the parallels between the ideas of Conservative Revolution and the contemporary radical conservatism of the New Right in Germany, see Pfahl-Traughber, 1999. The same continuity is postulated in more recent studies, placing the New Right in the "gray zone" between ultraconservatism and conservatism (cf. Keßler, 2018).

revolution” — not in regard to 1920s Germany, but to the revolution in America (Arendt 1990, 44–45). Instead, she sees the experience of World War I as an important element contributing to the radicalization of the mob (Arendt, 1979: 330–331).

Despite the obvious importance of Arendt’s observations concerning totalitarianism’s genesis, it would be rather counterproductive to regard pseudo-conservatism as a “totalitarian” element of modern societies, since the notion of totalitarianism is defined by a set number of criteria (e.g., a well-defined and detailed ideology or the existence of a single governing party). These criteria mostly do not fit into the analysis of contemporary tendencies and narrow the scope from the social level as a whole to the political perspective. Considering that pseudo-conservatism has meanwhile adapted itself to other types of societies, especially during the new wave of nationalist movements in the EU as well as in the USA, Turkey, and Russia, we have to take an alternative approach. Together with Arendt, we should ask ourselves about the reasons for the current popularity and adaptability of pseudo-conservatism as a model of thought and practical action strategy. Referring to Arendt’s studies of totalitarianism, e.g., to her notions of the mob and political nihilism, we need also look for her underlying observations on the causes behind the absence of thought and on the relations between thinking and acting, which define most of her works after *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

(3) Pseudo-conservatism, which has spread rapidly in recent years, opposes traditional models of politics. Its appeal to the emotions, particularly those associated with patriotism, rather than facts, and long-term considerations is consonant with the current tendencies of post-truth politics. From Arendt’s perspective, this phenomenon can be viewed as a symptom of its abandonment of the idea of federalism (which she explicitly supports) in favor of a new nationalism. On the other hand, it also presents a dangerous example of the retrospective justification of actions that have already been taken, as was the case during the French Revolution, Arendt’s key example in *On Revolution*.²⁶

Arendt’s approach and terminological apparatus may also be applied to the analysis of minor pseudo-conservative phenomena, an example being “fake news.” Arendt’s notion of factual truth, already used to describe the social role of “fake news” (cf. Hendricks, Vestergaard, 2017), plays an important part. In pseudo-conservative models of action, the plurality of opinions Arendt advocates is replaced by the absence of alternatives that is justified by references to the crisis situation and the necessity for immediate action without preliminary discussion.

(4) Lastly, Arendt’s ideas are indispensable for understanding the key instruments pseudo-conservatism uses to popularize itself. One of these instruments is the undermining of public dialogue where all sides can be heard. Against the background of Arendt’s notion of acting in concert (used in its aesthetic sense), the pseudo-conservative strategy of action looks not like a traditional musical piece which can be divided into individual elements, but rather like a loud din of individual voices blending into an undecipherable, chaotic mess. Instead of a Socratic exchange of ideas which serves as a classical

26. Although Arendt does not directly mention the problem of retrospective justification, historical examples from *On Revolution* can be used to further develop her analysis in this area.

example for Arendt's notion of dialogue²⁷, we have an exchange of emotions where each side is desperately trying to silence the other, thus negating the need for many opinions. Pseudo-conservatism distorts the idea of dialogue and urges other parties representing alternative opinions to use the same emotional tactics to further confuse them and the wider audience.²⁸

Social media play an important part in this strategy. They can be instrumentalized both in a positive sense by promoting the plurality and accessibility of differing opinions as well as in the opposite manner as the means of limiting the opinion plurality via such phenomena as the echo-chamber or the spiral of silence. Arendt's language, i.e., her notions of opinion, dialogue, and acting in concert, can be used to describe the influence these phenomena exert on collective action in the public sphere.

Pseudo-conservatism is a symptom of a crisis of judgement in the public sphere. Rather than simply representing the return of nationalism, it mirrors the problems of political decision-making under the increasing pressure of time. From a broader perspective, it represents a shift in everyday thought, and is maybe even a defensive psychological mechanism that helps us avoid the tiresome and time-consuming necessity of making a difficult choice between multiple alternatives. By advocating the plurality of opinions and the idea of thinking as a dialogue, Arendt indirectly outlines a pattern of critical analysis for pseudo-conservatism. All that remains is to undertake a more complex and detailed approach connecting the context of Arendt's studies with that of modern sociology and political theory.

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27. More on this see in Zhavoronkov, 2017.

28. One can compare this situation to the one Arendt described about the Dreyfus affair in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

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Нигилизм и кризис традиции: Арендт и современный радикальный консерватизм

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Настоящая статья представляет собой первую попытку ответа на вопрос о возможности применения идеи традиции и нигилизма у Ханны Арендт к анализу современного радикального консерватизма. С этой целью автор обращается к эссе Арендт 1940-х и 1950-х годов, проливающих свет на истоки современного европейского кризиса консерватизма и на различия между традиционалистским и антитрадиционалистским мышлением. Предложенные Арендт аргументы, касающиеся нигилистических аспектов радикального консерватизма, легитимирующего себя отсылками к кризису традиции, помогают выявить недостатки анализа консерватизма и традиционализма у Карла Мангейма. Дополняя фрагментарную арендтовскую концепцию консерватизма, автор использует понятия адъективного и номинального консерватизма для определения ключевых различий между подлинным и ложным, радикальным консерватизмом (псевдоконсерватизмом). Исходя из результатов анализа прошлого, предлагается ответ на вопрос о том, почему работы Арендт важны для понимания современного псевдоконсерватизма, в т.ч. его исторических истоков, самоописания и основных инструментов. В завершение автор поясняет, почему исследователи, вместе с Арендт, должны выбрать более широкую перспективу анализа современного кризиса суждения в публичной сфере и проистекающего из него процесса искажения идей традиции и диалога — вместо того, чтобы ограничиться упрощенным определением нового радикального консерватизма как духовного наследника национал-социализма.

Ключевые слова: Ханна Арендт, Карл Ясперс, консерватизм, псевдоконсерватизм, радикализм, нигилизм, мышление, действие