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María Zambrano and Hannah Arendt: A philosophical symbiosis
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	Abstract	Resumen
Recepción: 22 de agosto de 2018 Aceptación: 22 de octubre de 2018 <i>Aurora</i> n.º 20, 2019, págs. 38-45	María Zambrano and Hannah Arendt were very nearly the same age and experienced similar historical and life circumstances—war and dictatorship in their countries of origin, exile, and a career in writing that included political writing. Zambrano considered the interior of the person in her study of democracy, while Arendt focused on exterior phenomena such as the masses in her consideration of totalitarianism.	María Zambrano y Hannah Arendt tenían casi la misma edad y experimentaron circunstancias históricas y vitales semejantes —guerra y dictadura en sus países de origen, y una carrera como escritoras que incluía la temática política en sus obras—. Zambrano se centró en el interior de la persona en su estudio sobre la democracia, mientras que Arendt se enfocó más en fenómenos exteriores como las masas en su estudio del totalitarismo.
	Keywords	Palabras clave
	María Zambrano, Hannah Arendt, exile, democracy, totalitarianism	María Zambrano, Hannah Arendt, exilio, democracia, totalitarismo

Julieta Lizaola has pointed out the coincidences in the lives of María Zambrano (1904-1991) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). As European contemporaries (Zambrano born in Spain in 1904; Arendt in Germany in 1906), they lived through similar circumstances—war in their early years, and exile from their native countries as a result of these wars (both lived in the Americas—Zambrano in Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico; Arendt in the United States). They both experienced dictatorial forms of government and a sense of exclusion—Zambrano as an exile; Arendt as an outcast. Lizaola concludes that:

Sin duda, el horizonte histórico que compartieron fue el que dirigió sus pensamientos a la reflexión cultural contemporánea y sus manifestaciones políticas. En las entrelíneas de sus obras palpita no solo la necesidad

de dar respuesta a nuevas formas de dominación política, sino fundamentalmente a buscar explicación al sufrimiento que los hombres infligen unos a otros.¹

[Surely the political horizon that they shared was what directed their thought toward contemporary cultural reflection and its political manifestations. The need to counter new forms of political domination and a search for an explanation for why humans inflict suffering on one another lie in the interstices of their works].

Although Lizaola also notes that the two authors took different paths toward these ends, I wish to add to her thoughtful remarks, especially to point out that Zambrano's way forward in her quest for answers to the troubling aspects of the politics of her times is fundamentally different from Arendt's. Zambrano begins with the interior of the person and moves outward to the historical circumstances; whereas Arendt begins with the exterior—the historical circumstances—and how these affect the individual. This is not a study of influences between Arendt and Zambrano; the simultaneity of their work and problems of language would make any influence of one on the other impossible.² It is as Jesús Moreno Sanz says, an “impretendida alianza”³ [an unintentional alliance]. My comparison of their positions, especially relating to democracy and totalitarianism, is useful primarily to shed light on the ideas of each thinker.

Another important parallel in the lives of Zambrano and Arendt is that each studied with major philosophers—Zambrano with José Ortega y Gasset and Xavier Zubiri, and Arendt with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. These relationships were highly influential in the women's formative years as thinkers, even though each forged her own unique path that diverged from those of her mentors. Interestingly, Arendt's development as a political thinker included some ideas that echo Ortega's notion of the mass man outlined in *La rebelión de las masas* [*The Revolt of the Masses*], although it is not at all certain that she was aware of Ortega's work (having studied at Marburg where Ortega also studied some years before, it is possible that they had similar sources). For example, Arendt notes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that “the [totalitarian] movements showed that the politically neutral and indifferent masses could easily be the majority in a democratically ruled country, that therefore a democracy could function according to rules which are actively recognized by only a minority.”⁴ Likewise, Zambrano mentions totalitarianism, which she calls *absolutismo*, especially in the latter sections of *Persona y democracia*. Importantly, both women were interested in Saint Augustine. Arendt wrote her doctoral dissertation on the concept of love in Augustine, while Zambrano offered an extensive commentary on Augustine in *La confesión: género literario* [*Two Confessions*] and other works.⁵

1. Lizaola, J., “María Zambrano y Hannah Arendt ante el totalitarismo”, in Pablo Armando González Ulloa Aguirre, Christian Eduardo and Díaz Sosa (eds.), *María Zambrano: Pensadora de nuestro tiempo*, Mexico, Universidad Autónoma de México, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Plaza y Valdés, 2009, 22.

2. I should also note that Jesús Moreno Sanz has treated Zambrano alongside Arendt (and Edith Stein and Simone Weill), especially finding affinities between Arendt's “corazón comprensivo” [understanding heart] and Zambrano's “razón poética” [poetic reason] (Moreno Sanz, J., *Edith Stein en compañía: Vidas filosóficas entrecruzadas de María Zambrano, Hannah Arendt y Simone Weil*, Madrid: Plaza y Valdés, 2014, 3).

3. Moreno Sanz, J., *El logos oscuro*, quoted in *ibid.*, 7, n. 11.

4. Arendt, H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973, 312.

5. See Ortega Muñoz, J. F., “Apéndice: Presencia de san Agustín en María Zambrano,” *Introducción al pensamiento de María Zambrano*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994, 255-267 for a comprehensive overview of Zambrano's writings that touch on Saint Augustine.

6. Abellán, J. L., *María Zambrano: Una pensadora de nuestro tiempo*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 2006, 59.
7. Costica Bradatan, “The Wisdom of Exile” in *The New York Times*, August 17, 2014, 12.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Guillén, C., “On the Literature of Exile and Counter Exile,” *Books Abroad* 50 (1976), 271.
11. Caballero Rodríguez, B., *A Life of Poetic Reason and Political Commitment*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2017, 65.

As noted above, both María Zambrano and Hannah Arendt experienced protracted exile from their native countries. José Luis Abellán divides exile experiences into three types—*destierro* [banishment; exile], in which the exiled person continues to maintain close ties with people in the home country while residing elsewhere; *transtierro* [transplanted; exiled], in which the exile puts down roots in another country, and “exilio propiamente dicho” [exile proper], in which the exile exists as though floating through geographical spaces with no specific ties to any of them. Abellán places Zambrano in the latter category,⁶ and although he does not address Hannah Arendt, surely he would have called her a *transterrada* for having established herself in her personal and professional life in the United States.

The differences in circumstances notwithstanding, the exile experience had an important influence on each woman’s life and work. As Costica Bradatan observes:

Each person who survives this uprooting [exile] and finds himself in exile experiences an existential earthquake of sorts: everything turns upside down, all certitudes are shattered. The world around you ceases to be that solid, reliable presence in which you used to feel comfortable, and turns into ruin—cold and foreign... [Bradatan concludes that] “you shall leave everything you love most: this is the arrow that the bow of exile shoots first” [as Dante wrote in “Paradiso”].⁷

However, Bradatan finds that such an “existential earthquake” also yields certain benefits, allowing the exiled person to see things in a different light that can be creative: “Yet exile, should you survive it, can be the greatest of philosophical gifts, a blessing in disguise. For when your old world goes down it takes with it all your assumptions, commonplaces, prejudices and preconceived ideas”.⁸ Thus, exile means a kind of freedom from old baggage; Bradatan concludes that “Exiles always travel light”.⁹ Claudio Guillén expressed a similar notion as “counter-exile”, which allows the author creative freedom and personal enrichment.¹⁰ Beatriz Caballero Rodríguez notes that the time Zambrano spent in Puerto Rico, and which produced *Isla de Puerto Rico. Nostalgia y esperanza de un mundo mejor*, was fundamental to Zambrano developing some of her political views:

Zambrano uses these pages to put forward some ideas that she would develop in future works: especially, the meaning of democracy, not just as a system of governance, but more essentially as a lifestyle on the one hand and the implications of the incomplete birth of human beings on the other.¹¹

It is hard to believe, as I have speculated elsewhere, that María Zambrano would have developed her philosophy of the soul so thoroughly had she remained in Spain under the watchful eye of her teacher José Ortega y Gasset. Ortega harshly critiqued her 1934arti-

cle “Hacia un saber sobre el alma” [Towards a knowledge of the soul], although he did publish it in his prestigious journal *Revista de Occidente* [Occidental journal]. One also has to wonder if Zambrano would have developed her theory of democracy and the person without the distance that exile created from the failed Spanish Republic and without her proximity to Inés María Mendoza in Puerto Rico and Rome. Correspondence uncovered by Madeline Cámara reveals that the dialogue between the Puerto Rican governor’s wife and Zambrano was instrumental to Zambrano’s completing of *Persona y democracia* [Person and democracy].¹²

María Zambrano’s approach to dissecting democracy centers on her distinction between the *individuo* [individual; I] and the *persona* [person], a distinction that allows Zambrano to make certain points about totalitarianism that Arendt, lacking such a differentiation, does not. Lizaola conflates *individuo* and *persona* in Zambrano’s philosophy, claiming that her goal is to “esbozar de qué manera la negación del individuo, de la persona, se alzó como justificación política para su aniquilación”¹³ [outline how negating the individual, the person, was raised as a political justification for its annihilation]. However, it is important to remember that Zambrano theorized that “Cada hombre está formado por un yo y una persona”¹⁴ [Each human being is formed of an I and a person]. For Zambrano the person includes the I and transcends it. The I is a sort of an immobile guardian that watches over or pays attention while the person is the mask by means of which we enter into relations with others (both human and divine). The authentic person has a moral stance with regard to society. In describing the person, Zambrano has recourse to the notion of alienation, which is so important to existentialism. She distinguishes between an authentic self—*persona*—and a *personaje* [personage or fictitious character]:

La cuestión es que frente a cualquier sujeto de la acción habría que preguntarse, ¿quién es? ¿es una persona real, con su sustancia propia, o es solamente el personaje inventado, máscara de un delirio? Si es este último estamos tratando entonces con alguien que es otro; otro no ya para mí, o para los demás, sino otro *para sí mismo*. Su verdadera persona está sojuzgada, yace víctima del personaje que lo sustituye.¹⁵

[The question is that when confronted with any subject of an action we must ask, who is it? Is it a real person, with his/her own substance, or is it only an invented personage, the mask of a delirium? If it is the latter then we are dealing with someone that is the other: not other for me or for everyone else, but other to him or herself. His or her true persona is subjugated, is the victim of the personage that substitutes for it.]

Zambrano represents this situation of the authentic self—the person—as a struggle: “Lo normal es padecerlo [la semienajenación] mas de un modo en el que la persona verdadera va ganando terreno al personaje... Pues en ser persona hay algo absoluto, es algo absoluto”¹⁶ [The normal thing is to put up with the

12. Cámara, M., “Estancias y ensueños de María Zambrano en Puerto Rico en diálogo con Inés María Mendoza” in *Antígona* 3, 2009, 69-79. Cámara demonstrates how conversations that Zambrano and Mendoza had in Rome in 1955 assisted Zambrano in completing her book *Persona y democracia*: “Por este sendero de como se inserta la persona en la Historia se encuentran ambas intelectuales hispanas en el tema de la democracia y esta vez sí de modo real y de muy relevantes consecuencias públicas y privadas... Ese tipo de conversación que solo puede darse entre dos mujeres, donde todo se mezcla: familia, nación, penas, esperanzas; y cuyas coordenadas vitales son las más adecuadas, creo, para repensar la democracia” (73, 75) [By this means of how the person inserts him or herself into history both Hispanic intellectuals find themselves confronted with the theme of democracy and now in a very real way with very relevant public and private consequences... This kind of conversation that can only occur between two women in which everything is mixed in: family, nation, disappointments, hopes and, I believe, whose vital coordinates are the most apt for rethinking democracy].

13. Lizaola, J., *Op. cit.*, 22.

14. Zambrano, M., *Persona y democracia: La historia sacrificial*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 1988, 79.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 81.

17. In the term “absolute person” Zambrano seems to be echoing Max Scheler’s notion of the absolute person. As I have noted elsewhere, Zambrano and her friend Rosa Chacel were greatly influenced by their youthful readings in Scheler (see my “Self-Consciousness in Rosa Chacel and María Zambrano”, in *Bucknell Review*, 39, 1995, 52-70).

18. Revilla, C., “María Zambrano ante la crisis de la modernidad”, in Pablo Armando González Ulloa Aguirre, Christian Eduardo and Díaz Sosa (eds.), *María Zambrano: Pensadora de nuestro tiempo*, México, Universidad Autónoma de México, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Plaza y Valdés, 2009, 140.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 155.

21. For Arendt there are only two totalitarian regimes in modern times — those of Hitler and Stalin. For a state to be totalitarian in her definition, it must break up all allegiances (between family, friends, members of organizations), except to the state. It does this by creating a climate of fear in which anyone can be a spy for the state and can accuse anyone else—even family members—of being enemies of the state. In this situation, the best way to avoid being accused of being an enemy of the state is to accuse others of this crime.

22. Arendt, H., *Op. cit.*, 312.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Caballero, *Op. cit.*, 88.

semi-alienation in a way that the true person gains ground over the personage... There is something absolute in being a person; being a person is absolute].¹⁷ Carmen Revilla points out that it is precisely in *Persona y democracia* that Zambrano develops “la distinción entre persona y yo”¹⁸ [the distinction between person and I]. Where Zambrano and Arendt meet is on the question of absolutism. As Carmen Revilla points out:

Según Zambrano, la tragedia de la historia en Occidente es la violencia del absolutismo, el querer algo absolutamente, aunque sea hacer su propia historia, o vivir la propia vida: es un proceso sin objetivos, solamente se quiere, ‘querer por querer’, sin más justificación que el querer, es la violencia más peligrosa.¹⁹

[According to Zambrano, the tragedy of Western history is the violence of absolutism, wanting something absolutely, even though it means making one’s own history or living one’s own life, it is a process without objectives, one just wants, “desiring just to desire”, without any justification other than desiring, is the most dangerous violence].

On the issue of absolutism Zambrano’s distinction between person and individual is particularly useful. As Carmen Revilla points out, “El absolutismo está en contra de la persona, quiere absolutamente ‘ser’ y lo que provoca es violencia y destrucción”²⁰ [Absolutism is against the person; it wants “to be” absolutely and what it provokes is violence and destruction].

Being separated from her homeland, rather than turning Hannah Arendt inward as it did María Zambrano, caused her to cast her critical eye upon society. Chapter 10 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, titled “A Classless Society”, is particularly illustrative. Arendt begins the chapter by considering the masses. Unlike Zambrano, whose political models (doubtless Franco, although Arendt would not have called his regime totalitarian)²¹ remain in the abstract, Arendt names names—Stalin, Lenin, Hitler. Arendt points out that politically neutral and indifferent masses could be in the majority in democratically ruled countries, and thus a democracy “could function according to rules which are actively recognized by only a minority”.²² Arendt additionally notes that totalitarian movements, unlike democratic forms of government, do not believe that the politically indifferent masses need to be taken into account, “that they were truly neutral and constituted no more than the inarticulate backward setting for the political life of the nation”.²³ As Beatriz Caballero Rodríguez aptly notes, Zambrano also warns against the mass mentality:

Echoing one of her recurrent preoccupations during the late 1930s, Zambrano reminds the reader that one of the dangers people face is that of becoming a mass. For her, this happens as a result of demagoguery, which alienates people from reality, thus altering their sense of responsibility, consciousness and time.²⁴

Additionally, Arendt points out that:

Democratic freedoms may be based on the equality of all citizens before the law; yet they acquire their meaning and function organically only where the citizens belong to and are represented by groups or form a social and political hierarchy.²⁵

Like Zambrano, Arendt critiques individualism. While Zambrano pits personhood against individualism, Arendt asserts that individualism characterized the bourgeoisie's and the mob's attitude toward life, allowing the totalitarian movements to "rightly claim that they were the first truly antibourgeois parties".²⁶ The remainder of Arendt's chapter on "A Classless Society" is a summation of the horrors of the Stalinist regime that systematically eradicated those pertaining to the peasant and other classes in the 1930s. Once she had developed her ideas on the individual and the person in the early chapters of *Persona y democracia*, Zambrano also dealt with society, especially social class and the masses in the later chapters. For example, she notes that being a person is prior to belonging to a social class.²⁷ This situation makes insertion in a social class less onerous: "si el ser persona es lo que verdaderamente cuenta no sería tan nefasto el que hubiese diferentes clases, pues por encima de su diversidad, y aun en ella, sería visible la unidad del ser persona, de vivir personalmente"²⁸ [if being a person is what truly matters it wouldn't be so terrible to have different classes, since in addition to their diversity and even within it, the unity of being a person, to live personally, would be visible].

Hannah Arendt likewise addresses individualism, which she attributes to the breakdown of the class system. For her individualism is a bourgeois phenomenon, which generated a competitive and acquisitive society that "produced apathy and even hostility toward public life".²⁹ Arendt blames these bourgeois individualistic attitudes for the rise of dictatorial regimes:

These bourgeois attitudes are very useful for those forms of dictatorship in which a 'strong man' takes upon himself the troublesome responsibility for the conduct of public affairs; they are the positive hindrance to totalitarian movements which can tolerate bourgeois individualism no more than any other kind of individualism.³⁰

Zambrano has a similar view of individualism, which she believes creates a society of individuals, an aggregation, "como si el individuo hubiera existido siempre"³¹ [as if the individual had always existed]. However, Zambrano's concept of the individual is more subtle and complete than Arendt's thanks to her comparison of the individual and the person, which she considers to be the individual endowed with consciousness, "que se sabe a sí mismo y que se entiende a sí mismo como valor supremo, como última finalidad terrestre..."³² [that knows him/herself and understands him/herself as a supreme

25. Arendt, H., *Ibid.*

26. Arendt, *Ibid.*, 314.

27. Zambrano, M., *Persona y democracia*, 135.

28. *Ibid.*, 136.

29. Arendt, H., 313.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Zambrano, M., *Persona y democracia*, 102.

32. *Ibid.*, 103.

33. Arendt, H., *Op. cit.*, 314.
 34. Arendt, H., *Op. cit.*, 329.
 35. Zambrano, M., *Op. cit.*, 109.

value, as the ultimate terrestrial goal]. Arendt seems to employ the term “individual” in a similar way to Zambrano’s notion of “person”—that is, a fully functioning human being that includes a rich interior life and full participation in public life, although Arendt focuses on the public rather than the private sphere.

However, on the whole, Zambrano focuses on the nature of personhood in democratic forms of government, while Arendt concentrates on the features of society that allow totalitarianism to flourish. Her main tenant is that in order for totalitarianism to succeed a country must have a sufficiently large mass population. Arendt distinguishes between the “mob” and the “mass”. “The masses”, she writes, “do not inherit, as the mob does—albeit in a perverted form—the standards and attitudes of the dominating class, but reflect and somehow pervert the standards and attitudes toward public affairs of all classes”.³³ Arendt points out that the success of totalitarian governments can be attributed to two causes that countermand aspects of democracy: 1) that everyone was politically active in some way, and 2) that parliamentary majorities corresponded to the reality of the country. Arendt astutely sees little difference between the totalitarianism of Nazism or Bolshevism in their intent and tactics with regard to the masses.

While Zambrano and Arendt approach the nature of the governments of their time from different perspectives—Zambrano from the interior of the person; Arendt from a social perspective—the two come together in aligning political dynamics with social class. Arendt understands the success of totalitarianism in terms of the melting of social classes into the masses:

This generation [that of the First World War] remembered the war as the great prelude to the breakdown of classes and their transformation into masses. War with its constant murderous arbitrariness, became the symbol for death, the “great equalizer” and therefore the true father of a new world order. The passion for equality and justice, the longing to transcend narrow and meaningless class lines, to abandon stupid privileges and prejudices, seemed to find in war a way out of the old condescending attitudes of pity for the oppressed and disinherited. In times of growing misery and individual helplessness, it seems as difficult to resist pity when it grows into an all-devouring passion as it is not to resent its very boundlessness, which seems to kill human dignity with a more deadly certainty than misery itself.³⁴

If Arendt approached totalitarianism from the exterior social conditions that made it possible, Zambrano conceived its opposite—democracy—from the interior or personal: “La primera revolución democrática conocida sería aquella en virtud de la cual cada hombre tiene su alma —la suya propia, aquí sobre la tierra— cumplida en Egipto por Osiris”³⁵ [The first known democratic revolution would be that by which each person has his/her soul—his/her own soul here on Earth—fulfilled in Egypt by Osiris]. The logical conclusion

is that the eradication of Zambrano's "person" leads to the creation of Arendt's masses which provide the fodder for totalitarianism.

Read together, the two thinkers provide a complete philosophical map for understanding the dynamics of democracy and totalitarianism. Reading Zambrano and Arendt in the context of the direction some Western democracies have taken in the last several years, makes it clear that their political ideas and analyses, while formulated in different times and circumstances, are very relevant today.