The importance of the issue of human rights has increased greatly in international relations since the end of the Cold War, and refugees have often been at the center of debate, concern, and action. The response to perceived refugee crises is indicative of important elements of these wider debates about human rights and their place in an international system that remains based around the sovereign state. Indeed, in places such as Bosnia and Kosovo the creation of large numbers of refugees through the forced expulsion of populations has proved a catalyst for and focus of diplomatic and military action by coalitions of states. However, while willing to express their condemnation for policies that create refugees, the political debate in many states, including those Western states ostensibly most closely linked to the ideal of human rights, has highlighted contradictions, conflicts, and tensions.

Hannah Arendt’s writings on refugees and statelessness have often been neglected by Arendt scholars and are largely unknown to the world of contemporary literature on refugees. As with most subjects that she addressed, her main value and usefulness as a theorist lies in her ability to expose with adeptness and clarity the contradictions and tensions within and among the principles and practices of Western modernity. She was less focused on proposing solutions. Instead, she tended to issue warnings against neglect and to encourage vigilance of protective political institutions. Such vigilance was a key characteristic of the active citizenship that Arendt so admired. Today, when the
question of refugees and asylum are hot topics on all Western political agendas, political analysts are expected to come up with precise solutions. However, despite Arendt’s failure to do so, her work is still relevant in helping us to understand the experience of the refugees and the challenges they pose to modern democratic states. As a former refugee herself, Arendt was able to evoke with painful clarity a picture of the peculiar existential and physical sufferings of the refugee. As a political theorist, her analysis exposes the contradictions and tensions within the liberal democratic project that are thrown into stark relief by the existence of refugees.

For Arendt, refugees were the “most symptomatic group in contemporary politics.” While totalitarian regimes have done the most to produce the uprootedness and misery of the refugee, in Arendt’s opinion, the existence of refugees also exposes several conflicts and contradictions of the European liberal democratic nation-state. The primary conflict is between the liberal democratic commitment to universal individual rights, on the one hand, and the claim of the liberal democratic state to national sovereignty, on the other. National sovereignty has negative consequences for the rights of man, and, for a number of reasons, the situation of refugees is symbolic of these consequences. Thus, Arendt’s work on refugees and statelessness identifies both philosophical and practical problems that lie at the heart of liberal democratic theory and practice. It is through the experience of those who lack rights, whose social and legal status is marginal or nonexistent, that we can see the contradictions and failures of current thought and practice.

We can begin with some definitions. For Arendt, a refugee is someone who has been expelled from his country and who has thereby been deprived of citizen’s rights. While most clear-cut in the case of those ordered from their state by their government, it is also necessary to include those who have been “constructively expelled” by the pursuit of policies or the creation of a political climate that makes it impossible to enjoy the normal rights of citizenship and that engenders a fear of persecution. For Arendt, there was no useful distinction between refugees and stateless persons because, while refugees may not be de jure stateless, they were de facto stateless.

Arendt also points to two defining and conflicting features of the rights of man. First, they were established during the American and French Revolutions, which means that, while an idea of natural universal rights is much older, they were only practically realized in the context of two struggles that were national in character. Second, and in spite of this, they were declared and are still seen as natural,