Nazism, Culture and The Origins of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and the Discourse of Evil

Author(s): Steven E. Aschheim

Source: *New German Critique*, Winter, 1997, No. 70, Special Issue on Germans and Jews (Winter, 1997), pp. 117-139

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/488501

Nazism, Culture and The Origins of Totalitarianism: *Hannah Arendt and the Discourse of Evil*

Steven E. Aschheim

The intense intellectual and emotional impact exerted by Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* upon a whole generation of readers during the 1950s and through the 1960s has been well documented and is in no need of rehearsal here.[1] Any rereading of the work, any appreciation of its cultural significance and the role it has played, will have to seek the reasons for this. Its appearance satisfied a number of real, indeed urgent, through often unarticulated, perhaps even unconscious, needs. It would be wise to recall that in 1951 (and for at least a decade after that[2]), there were painfully few serious attempts to forge the theoretical, historical, and conceptual tools necessary to illuminate and

1. Indeed, there is a compulsion to reminisce about it in almost confessional terms. For instance, Michael Marrus reports how taken aback he was when a reviewer of his first book, *The Politics of Assimilation,* rebuked him for taking Hannah Arendt seriously ("a bad sign"): "I first read *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1963 and I recall packing a heavily underlined copy among the few possessions I took with me to graduate school in the summer of that year. And so the put-down . . . did not sting at the time. But I remember being puzzled at the very nature of the accusation. Could there be people who did not take Hannah Arendt seriously, I wondered?" See Marrus, "Hannah Arendt and the Dreyfus Affair," *New German Critique* 66 (Fall 1995): 147. Even readers more critical than Marrus write similarly of the power exerted by the book. Abbot Gleason, who has just written a kind of retrospective balance-sheet of the notion of totalitarianism, reports that upon first reading the *Origins* in 1958, "I was disturbed and enthralled by its vision and rhetoric" (although he adds that even then "its post-war atmosphere of Armageddon seemed anachronistic.") See Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford UP) 5.

2. Raul Hilberg's pathbreaking *The Destruction of the European Jews* only appeared in 1961. See Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961).

explain the great cataclysms of the twentieth century. To this day it is difficult to find satisfactory accounts, able to integrate coherently and persuasively these events into the flow of this century's history. In its sweep, tone, and content, Arendt seemed, at last, to provide an account adequate to the enormity of the materials and problems at hand.[3] As Alfred Kazin recalls: "Hannah Arendt became vital to my life . . . it was for the direction of her thinking that I loved her, for the personal insistencies she gained from her comprehension of the European catastrophe."[4]

At the time, most readings of Arendt were relatively naive, innocent of the personal and philosophical baggage, the political and existential predilections that shaped and guided her analyses.[5] Yet, even then, it was obvious that neither in method nor aim was this a conventional work of history. Even if one did not possess the term, it was clear that this was a highly sophisticated cultural criticism [*Kulturkritik*] animated by the attempt to comprehend, and in some way overcome, "the burden of our times" (the title of the more appropriately named British edition).

The work was not only a guide to the Jewish perplexed. Dwight MacDonald, for instance, hailed the book as the greatest advance in social thought since Marx;[6] and early in her friendship with Arendt, Mary McCarthy proclaimed that she had been reading *Origins* "and the marvel of its construction," "in the bathtub, riding in the car, waiting in line in the grocery store. It seems to me a truly extraordinary piece of work, an advance in human thought of, at the very least, a decade . . ."[7] The work evoked such a response because in an overarching way the "meaning" — and perhaps the still remaining, if fragile, promise — of the century seemed somehow to be laid bare. As one perceptive critic had it, the book was itself "a myth useful to the very time it analyzes."[8]

Arendt was not interested in the ordinary writing of history. As Judith Shklar noted, "[t]he representation of the past through the chronological arrangement of all the available evidence struck her as trivial. She had

3. I owe this formulation to Melvin Richter in conversation (6 Nov. 1995).

4. Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Knopf, 1978) 299.

5. A good introduction to this and Arendt's context can be found in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982).

6. See Dwight MacDonald's review in *New Leader*, 15 Aug. 1951.

7. Mary McCarthy, letter to Hannah Arendt, 26 April 1951, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, ed. and intro. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995) 1-2. Hereafter referred to as *Between Friends* in the notes.

8. Philllip Rieff, "The Theology of Politics: Reflections on Totalitarianism as the Burden of Our Time," *Journal of Religion* 32.2 (Apr. 1952): 119.

no interest in explaining how something came to be, step by step."[9] Rather, Arendt pursued a kind of didacticism,[10] a Heideggerian concern, as Michael Marrus puts it, "to present events as mere surface phenomena, reflecting deeper, subterranean currents of meaning."[11] It is this overall meaning-endowing propensity that partly accounts for Arendt's current almost auratic status — Martin Jay, by no means a slavish follower, recently characterized her as a "charismatic legitimater"[12] — and the subsequent attempt by various camps to appropriate her thought.[13]

General though her appeal was, it was particularly powerful for many of her Jewish readers. Her capacity to remove the Jewish experience from parochial settings, to lift it from a "ghettoized" frame and integrate it into the marrow of world (or what was virtually synonymous, European or Western) history, indeed, to make the former virtually constitutive of the latter, provided a kind of dignity and importance to an existence that had come perilously close to extinction. The emphasis on situating the Jews at the storm center of events, combined with the desire to grasp antisemitism at its deadliest level, made *Origins* particularly beguiling and attractive.[14] Irving Howe

9. Judith N. Shklar, "Hannah Arendt as Pariah," *Partisan Review* 50 (1983): 69.

10. Arendt's "views on writing history, despite an enduring insistence on understanding how fact differs from opinion, showed traces of Heidegger, Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin's challenge to the claims of historical objectivity and the static character of historical fact. She stuck to her didactic story telling." See Leon Botstein, "The Jew as Pariah: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy," *Dialectical Anthropology* 8 (1983): 57.

11. Marrus 160.

12. See Martin Jay, "Name-Dropping or Dropping Names? Modes of Legitimation in the Humanities," *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 168.

13. For a "left" view see Phillip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1993). See too *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995).

14. For a good exposition of the place of antisemitism in her overall scheme, see Ben Halpern, "The Context of Hannah Arendt's Concept of Totalitarianism," *Totalitarian Democracy and After* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984) 386-98. Arendt's totalitarianism was a product of the nation-states and essentially international. As Halpern puts it: "For it was the Protocols of the Elders of Zion that became the model the fascists followed; taking the extraterritorial survival of the Jewish people as their example, the fascists developed an essentially anti-national, global conspiracy of their own, with antisemitism as its essential base." Both Jaspers and Arendt were very critical of Halpern. See, for example, Arendt, letter to Karl Jaspers, 19 Nov. 1948, *Correspondence 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) 121-23; see also Jaspers, letter to Arendt, 7 Jan. 1951, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 162. Halpern was aware of this hostility and prefaced his article by stressing that he would "perform the task with all the empathy she deserves." See Halpern 387.

relates how, after reading Arendt, his generation "could no longer escape the conviction that, blessing or curse, Jewishness was an integral part of our life."[15]

To be sure, naive readers may have been a little puzzled, if not disconcerted, by her insistence on the absolute centrality of the Jews in the creation and maintenance of the modern state and economy, their instinctive alliances with ruling elites and concomitant deep alienation from "society" and the implication — as yet not explicitly spelled out — that the Jews bore some responsibility for their predicament, that indeed their actions and roles were not disconnected from the emergence of modern antisemitism.[16] It was, of course, only later in 1963, when *Eichmann In Jerusalem* appeared, that this thesis was radicalized, and the Jewish leadership indicted as an indispensable, complicit factor in the extermination of the Jews. Only then was the outraged attention of critics — in search of the genealogy of these views — drawn to this submerged theme in *The Origins*. Indeed, within the context of the ideological war triggered by the Eichmann book, Arendt's most virulent opponents went so far as to claim that her views echoed those aired in *Mein Kampf*, that her portrait of the determinative centrality of the Jew within the State simply repeated the Nazi view.[17]

The debate has not ceased since then (and I thus shall not belabor it here).[18] Personalized accusations as to her "self-hate" apart, her opponents dismiss the analysis as essentially an exercise in blaming the victim. Leon Wieseltier has most recently stated this view, arguing that

---

15. Irving Howe, *Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1970) 244-45.

16. Arendt's portrait in *Origins* not only reflected her overall existentialist posture that all historical actors exercised certain historical choices for which they were responsible (at least in the pre-totalitarian phase), but also a defiantly anti-apologetic form of Jewish history inspired partly by her "post-assimilationist" mentor Kurt Blumenfeld.

17. See Yerahmiel Cohen, "On the Question of the Responsibility of the Jews for Their Extermination by the Nazis as Expressed in the Writings of Bruno Bettelheim, Raul Hilberg, and Hannah Arendt, and the Debate Surrounding Them," M. A. diss., Hebrew University, 1972, 45 ff. Cohen's dissertation was supervised by the leading modern Jewish historian at that time, Samuel Ettinger. Since then, Cohen has clearly moderated his views (see the footnote beneath) but, based on various conversations, it would not be wrong to say that some of Israel's leading historians and political scientists hold this view to this day.

18. Indeed, Richard I. Cohen, the author of the views quoted in the above footnote, has now (in much cooler fashion) comprehensively surveyed attitudes in this respect. See Cohen, "Breaking the Code: Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann In Jerusalem* and the Public Polemic — Myth, Memory, and Historical Imagination," *Michael* 13 (1993): 29-85.

the sources of antisemitism are

> to be found in certain aspects of German history, and French history, and Russian history. Not in Jewish money but in German industry . . . not in Jewish achievement, but in the pitiful inability of certain political cultures to tolerate it; not in the Jewish insistence upon difference, but in the non Jewish insistence upon sameness. Study the goyim, in short, not the Jews. . . . There is something morally quite simple about totalitarianism . . . the victims were, in these systems of slavery and murder, simply powerless.[19]

Whatever the merits or demerits of the debate, in the early years, few pointed out the rather delicious irony that Arendt's critique of Jewish elites and leadership was a direct expression of her post-assimilationist Weimar Zionism, and of a consistently espoused, anti-apologetic viewpoint already present in 1929 as she undertook her work on Rahel Varnhagen.[20]

As with her analysis of antisemitism so too with the rest of the book. Only much later retrospective interpretations have been able to demonstrate that the concepts employed to understand totalitarianism were informed by Arendt's broader ideational arsenal and a unique (and for some, rather bizarre) political worldview.[21] Such readings — specifically the argument that in Arendt's overall scheme of things, totalitarianism is conceived as the ultimate form of false, world-less politics, that is, the antithesis to her positive worldly ontology of freedom, plurality, action, and the public realm — became possible only with the later, full *oeuvre* in sight.

---

19. Leon Wieseltier, "Understanding Anti-Semitism: Hannah Arendt on the Origins of Prejudice," *The New Republic* 7 Oct. 1981: 32.

20. This was published for the first time much later in 1957 and in English. For the latest revised edition see Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). Many years later Blumenfeld, her Zionist mentor from Weimar days onward, reformulated his position to Arendt thus: "Genuine relationships between Jews and non Jews will first occur when the Jew too will not be embarrassed to express his opinions about other Jews . . ." See Kurt Blumenfeld, letter to Arendt, 25 July 1969, Letter 104 of "*. . . in keinem Besitz verwurzelt*": *Die Korrespondenz*, eds. Ingeborg Nordman und Iris Pilling (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995) 237-38. Hereafter referred to as "*keinem Besitz*" in the notes.

21. As one commentator put it, *The Origins* "is best read as an ontologically informed account of a distinctive and frightening political reality which threatens in a powerful and unprecedented way our human status as political beings." See Hansen, *Hannah Arendt* 133.

Certainly, the Heideggerian influence and turn of thought were hardly perceived at the time (indeed, the debate as to the extent of Arendt's debt to her teacher and the harmful or beneficial effects is only now really unfolding).[22]

At any rate, upon its appearance (and ever since then) it was apparent both to its admirers and to its (many) detractors that in aim, scope, construction, and conception, *The Origins* was a quite extraordinary (and at the same time a very curious, even eccentric) book. It bears constant renewed scavengings and reveals a mind capable of flashes of brilliance and original insight. To be sure, there has never been unanimity and some views have been archly, even contemptuously, critical.[23] Still, I believe, Phillip Rieff's 1951 assessment reflected a more general view: applying Burckhardt's maxim on Machiavelli to *The Origins* — "Even if every line were demonstrated to be false, the whole would still present an indispensable truth" — Rieff declared that if the work "should, in some important parts, be an error, it is, by its sweep and passion a creative error. . . . It will make public opinion as much as it tries to understand it."[24] Arendt's galvanizing intellectual energy, her knack for perceiving unexpected relationships and making (almost recklessly) large generalizations in novel, indeed subversive, ways rendered her always an exciting, almost "shocking" thinker, capable, on later reflection perhaps, of widely missing the mark but also of rare illumination. Even her sternest critics granted this.

---

22. Relatively early on (1978), Martin Jay suggested that Arendt's views were stamped by a Heideggerian existentialism and Weimerian "decisionism" that produced a politics devoid of any substantial norms. See Jay, "The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt," *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration From Germany to America*, ed. Martin Jay (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 237-56. For a recent depiction of Arendt as a postmodern political theorist who reworked the Heideggerian (and Nietzschean) predicament and the collapse of metaphysics but avoided their pernicious political conclusions, see Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996).

23. It should be obvious that this was not a consensual view. Apart from the fury and pain Arendt evoked with her *Eichmann* book, many other fine minds were far from persuaded as to the quality of hers. Isaiah Berlin is an extreme example of this: "I do not greatly respect the lady's ideas . . . I think she produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It is all a stream of metaphysical free association." See Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Scribner's, 1991) 82.

24. See Rieff, "The Theology of Politics" 119.

Her still revelatory comments[25] on the structure of assimilation and the "psychologized" nature of modern Jewish identity, her instructive analysis of the general disenfranchisement of minorities and its potentially genocidal implications attendant upon what she called forced "statelessness, the newest mass phenomenon in history,"[26] and her shrewd (and still pertinent) identification of human with civic or political status and the almost poetic concluding pages on human plurality and the recuperative powers of natality and beginnings can still be read with profit.[27] Above all, Arendt's phenomenological exposition of the transgressive impulse behind the camps — "the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified" — retains its evocative power.[28] Despite the admonitions by one irritated scholar that while useful in familiar situations and when applied to established concepts, the phenomenological method has no value when extended "to a new phenomenon and a new idea such as totalitarianism. . . . It then has a kind of inherent and inescapable arbitrariness: whatever you put into the bag, you can also pull out,"[29] Arendt (no postmodernist believer in non-representability, yet aware of the difficulties) nevertheless attempts to confront her subject directly, seeking to somehow imaginatively enter the abyss and render it comprehensible.

At the same time the glaring inadequacies and weaknesses — both of the parts and of the book as a whole — by now have become crystal-clear. Criticisms of the work abound and it is not my task here to con-

---

25. "The behavior patterns of assimilated Jews, determined by this continuous concentrated effort to distinguish themselves, created a Jewish type that is recognizable everywhere. Instead of being defined by nationality or religion, Jews were being transformed into a social group whose members shared certain psychological attributes and reactions, the sum total of which was supposed to constitute 'Jewishness.' In other words, Judaism became a psychological quality and the Jewish question became an involved personal problem for every individual Jew." See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, second enlarged edition (Cleveland: Meridian, 1958) 66. See also chapter three, "The Jews and Society." Hereafter referred to as *Origins* in the notes.

26. Arendt, *Origins* 277. In this ninth chapter, entitled "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," Arendt is especially illuminating on the latter and hopelessly confusing (and perhaps confused) on the former.

27. Arendt, *Origins* 479.

28. Arendt, *Origins* 437.

29. Ernest Gellner, "From Königsberg to Manhattan (Or Hannah, Rahel, Martin and Elfriede or Thy Neighbour's Gemeinschaft)," *Culture, Identity, and Politics*, ed. Ernest Gellner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 89-90. Hereafter referred to as "From Königsberg" in the notes.

sider the obvious problems inherent in the very notion of totalitarianism[30] (not to mention Arendt's own view, about which one critic caustically and presciently noted, "the totalitarian essence did not arise mysteriously, fully armed out of the mind of History or of the mind of Stalin. Certain circumstances favored its emergence, and others will foster its disappearance."[31]) I have already mentioned some of the objections to her treatment of antisemitism. Let me just touch on a few other basic issues.

In the first place, Arendt's conception of totalitarianism as both the cause and the result of the political dynamics of uprooting, atomization, and loneliness, rests upon a clearly flawed, and by now almost universally rejected socio-psychological model of mass society derived from conservative European social theory.[32] While most historians object to the ahistorical deficiencies of this model — and given Arendt's hostility to social science her reliance on it is somewhat curious — it may be worth pointing out parenthetically, that other commentators, like Lyotard, find her account disappointing precisely *because*, as he puts it, her "description is essentially an external one, from a historico-political point of view."[33] Indeed, he argues that Arendt subverted her own deepest

---

30. On the concept of totalitarianism in general and Arendt's in particular, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995). For general treatments of *The Origins* (fair but also critical) see Sephen Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980) and Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). For a defense of the work in the light of such criticisms, see Bernard Crick, "On Rereading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," *Social Research* 44.1 (Spring 1977): 106-26. For one important and perhaps surprising rejection (given the fact that his name was intimately associated with Arendt over the *Eichmann In Jerusalem* controversy), see Raul Hilberg, *Unerbetene Erinnerung: Der Weg eines Holocaust-Forschers* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1994) 128.

31. Raymond Aron, "The Essence of Totalitarianism According to Hannah Arendt," *Partisan Review* 60 (1993): 366-75. Originally published in the French journal *Critique* in 1954.

32. For a still interesting review of these theories and their problems (as well as their ideological biases), see Leon Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961). A recent attempt to argue that Arendt's use of the mass society hypothesis was not conservative can be found in Hansen, *Hannah Arendt*.

33. See Jean-François Lyotard, "The Survivor," *Toward the Post-Modern*, ed. Jean-François Lyotard, trans. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P International, 1993) 156-58. The burden of the essay is to argue that given the ongoing psychological anxieties that produce and sustain totalitarianism, the totalitarian threat remains a reality within advanced contemporary industrial society. There is something absurdly inappropriate in the badly translated text: "The historical names for this Mr. Nice Guy totalitarianism are no longer Stalingrad or Normandy (much less Auschwitz) but Wall Street's Dow Average and the Tokyo Nikko Index." See Lyotard 159.

insight into the matter — "The *need* for terror is born out of the fear that with the birth of each human being a new beginning might raise and make heard its voice in the world" — when she failed to elaborate upon it. Arendt's recognition of the resistant function of the onion-like organizational structure of totalitarianism to "the shock by which it is threatened by the factuality of the real world" was a genuine psychological insight. For Lyotard it is here that Arendt indeed locates "the origin of totalitarianism" — as a psycho-ontological rather than a historical reality — but only fleetingly, only soon to abandon it.

But beyond this, not even the most sympathetic reader will be able to grasp clearly the way in which the book's three parts cohere. Karl Jaspers tried, not altogether persuasively, to explain it thus:

> Hannah never claimed that English imperialism produced Hitler and Stalin, nor did she claim that there was any intellectual identity anywhere among them. But the analogies in the phenomena, which ultimately made the whole disaster possible, would still be there even if there were no causal relationships at all.[34]

Arendt herself subsequently wrote that the book "does not really deal with the 'origins' of totalitarianism — as its title unfortunately claims — but gives a historical account of the elements [into] which [it] crystallized";[35] yet even the most kindly disposed have noted how frequently there is a reliance on flashing paradox where "factual evidence is slight or balky."[36] There is no point rehearsing the critiques in detail but, consonant with her view of mass society, the rise of totalitarianism is linked to a very unclear account of the decline and collapse of the nation-state and the class system. Even if one accepts the dubious premise that such a decay took place, it is not at all apparent why particular societies (rather than others) ended up as totalitarian. Moreover, as Margaret Canovan has noted Arendt "writes about the downfall of the nation-state in terms that might give one the impression that Europe had consisted of such states until the coming of imperialism. When one considers, however, that most of Europe, and particularly the German and Austro-Hungarian parts of it, with which she is most concerned, had belonged to states that could not possibly be thought of as national,

34. Jaspers, letter to Arendt, 12 Jan. 1952, Letter 14, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 174.

35. Arendt, "A Reply." *Review of Politics* (Jan. 1953): 78

36. McCarthy, letter to Arendt, 26 Apr. 1953, *Between Friends* 2.

it is difficult to tell what she is talking about."[37]

These are all, however, familiar criticisms. I must therefore return to the main theme of this paper and argue that it is Nazism and Auschwitz — far more that the Soviet experience — that animates *The Origins*.[38] It is this great transgressive moment in European history (and the prior creation of a genocidal mentality) that obsesses Arendt and drives her analysis.[39] "You see," she confided to her friend Kurt Blumenfeld in July 1947, "I cannot get over the extermination factories."[40] Upon learning of Auschwitz in 1943 she later reported:

> It was really as if an abyss had opened. . . . This ought not to have happened. And I don't mean just the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on. . . . Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can.[41]

This concern similarly explains the special attraction of *The Origins*. As one contemporary noted, "the life of the mind was of no use unless it addressed itself to the gas" and it was precisely this that Arendt did.[42]

What, in the light of this question, does *The Origins* propose? Most striking perhaps is what it does not say, what it rejects by loud omission. There is not a hint of the German *Sonderweg* here, no consideration of the role and weight of the peculiarities of German political and social development. It is not continuity but rather radical and nihilistic rupture that is indicted. "The real trouble," she wrote already in 1945, "lies not in the German national character but, rather in the disintegration of this character."[43] Moreover, in a sharp departure from the conventional wisdom (of say Thomas Mann, Georg Lukács, and T. W.

37. Canovan 42.

38. As Walter Laqueur has noted, Arendt does not deal with Communism "except in passing"; much is said of Dreyfus and Rhodes and hardly anything of Lenin. See Laqueur, "Postfascism, Postcommunism," *Partisan Review* 3 (1995): 389.

39. The work was begun already in 1946, impelled "by her increasing realization of the scale of the death camps and the radicality of Nazi intentions." See Gleason 108. Even before that, in 1945, Arendt published relevant reflections upon Nazi mass murder. See Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York, 1994) 121-32. Hereafter referred to as *Essays in Understanding* in the notes.

40. See Arendt, letter to Kurt Blumenfeld, 19 July 1947, *"keinem Besitz"* 43.

41. Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation With Günter Gaus," *Essays in Understanding* 14.

42. Kazin 298.

43. Arendt, "Approaches to the 'German Problem'," *Essays in Understanding* 111. First published in *Partisan Review* 13.1 (Winter 1945).

Adorno and Max Horkheimer), Arendt explicitly, even extremely, exculpated "culture" from the catastrophe.[44] Very early on, she dismissed any notion of the complicity not only of German — but also European — culture and tradition in what had transpired. "Nazism," she insisted,

> owes nothing to any part of the Western tradition, be it German or not, Catholic or Protestant, Christian, Greek, or Roman. Whether we like Thomas Aquinas or Machiavelli or Luther or Kant or Hegel or Nietzsche — the list may be prolonged indefinitely as even a cursory glance at the literature of the 'German problem' will reveal — they have not the least responsibility for what is happening in the extermination camps. Ideologically speaking, Nazism begins with no traditional basis at all . . . only the experts with their fondness for the spoken or written word and incomprehension of political realities have taken these utterances of the Nazis at face value and interpreted them as the consequence of certain German or European traditions. On the contrary, Nazism is actually the breakdown of all German and European traditions, the good as well as the bad.[45]

She later explained: "one compelling reason why I took such trouble to isolate the elements of totalitarian governments was to show that the Western tradition from Plato up to and including Nietzsche is above any such suspicion."[46]

It was partly this consideration that induced her to locate the alternative "disintegrative" model in mass society. The roots of barbarism lay exclusively in the processes of uprooting and atomization, spearheaded by an imperialist bourgeois politics and economics of expansion for its own sake, rendering not only the nation-state, but also culture and tradition, superfluous. Indeed, Arendt regards the totalitarian loss of limits — where "everything becomes possible" — as a bourgeois invention. It is surplus capital that produces the precondition for genocide: surplus people. *The Origins*, thus, idiosyncratically fuses the conservative theory of mass society with an exceedingly radical (and insufficiently remarked) Marxist analysis of imperialism.[47] It elaborates what Young-Bruehl has

44. I treat these different conceptions in the first chapter of *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (New York: New York UP, 1995). Herafter referred to in the notes as *Culture and Catastrophe*.

45. Arendt, "Approaches to the 'German Problem'" 108-09.

46. Arendt, letter to Jaspers, 4 March 1951, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 166.

47. For an interpretation placing Arendt squarely on the left (perhaps even more radically than Marx) and defending her reading of mass society as proceeding from a radical rather than conservative viewpoint, see Hansen, *Hannah Arendt*. Arendt's quasi-Marxist analysis may have been influenced by her husband, Heinrich Bluecher.

called a "frontal assault" on the European, nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, conceived as the agent, rather than the victim, of unprecedented breakdown and nihilistic expansion.[48] This is a far cry from the 1960s scholarship of other German-Jewish refugees such as George Mosse and Fritz Stern who firmly located Nazism within an ongoing anti-liberal, anti-bourgeois, German cultural tradition.[49]

Ernest Gellner has commented that given Arendt's background and education, she was perfectly placed to provide a much-needed historical account of the German — especially the cultural — roots of the catastrophe and that her adamant refusal to do so must be regarded as both strange and significant. Her picture of a mass society controlled by terror, he correctly notes, obscures the fact "that Hitler's New Order was indeed an Order, which as long as it was victorious, was acceptable to many, without the sanction of terror, and which could be justified in terms of themes that had long been present," that were a recognizable part of the normative (rather than subterranean) historical European inheritance.[50] This "strange refusal," so to speak, to confront and to indict culture, Gellner claims, arises from the fact that Arendt was raised in and remained wedded to some of the intellectual traditions taken up by Nazism — such as romanticism — and thus sought to give such traditions a clean bill of health. Her "depiction of totalitarianism, the over-dramatic presentation, he argues, "is itself very much in the romantic tradition even if here, ironically, it is used to exculpate romanticism and philosophy from having fathered the allegedly alien evil."[51]

While Gellner's comments need careful unpacking,[52] his critique, at least, has the merit of not stooping as low as some recent highly personalized attacks on Arendt linking her exculpation of mind and culture from Nazism with her renewed 1950 defense of her ex-lover Martin

---

48. Young-Bruehl 200. Hansen argues that Arendt does not indict modernity as such but rather its specifically bourgeois component as the culprit in the rise of totalitarianism. See Hansen, *Hannah Arendt* 133.

49. See George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964); as well as Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1961).

50. Gellner, "From Königsberg" 89.

51. Gellner, "From Königsberg" 85.

52. One should note that shortly before his death, Gellner sought to resuscitate the usefulness of the concept of totalitarianism. See Gellner, "Coming to Terms," *The New Republic* 4 Dec. 1995: 42-45.

Heidegger who in her mind is held to be "the embodiment" of such a culture.[53] This is both a chronological and conceptual distortion. Arendt's refusal to indict culture and the specificities of German life in the catastrophe may be idiosyncratic, even dubious, history; but as we have already shown, it far predated her purported 1950 Heideggerian turn. And as I hope this paper will make clear, reducing the complexity of Arendt's engagement with the Nazi experience to her amorous rationalizations is cheap at best.

The refusal to engage culture is indeed problematic but Gellner is wrong to claim that through distancing it from the catastrophe Arendt sought to represent totalitarianism as so novel and alien that it was "not really after all very much concerned with us."[54] He mistakenly conflates novelty with alienness. There is no doubt that Arendt believed that she was dealing with radically unprecedented phenomena and was groping for the intellectual equipment and conceptual vocabulary adequate to the task. To be sure, she was doing this to some extent with the inherited and problematic tools of romanticism and existentialism; but she rejected the *Sonderweg* approach in part *because* she was impelled by the conviction that the issues raised transcended "Germans" and "Jews" and far from being alien were a matter of urgent universal concern.[55] Indeed, already in 1945 she declared in a statement programmatic of what she defined as her future task: "The reality is that 'the Nazis are men like ourselves'; the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what man is capable of."[56]

It may very well be that the dismissal of peculiarly German factors, the continuity of its political and social history, was too extreme, perhaps even misguided.[57] But while conventional historical explanations may be able to account for novel occurrences, they may also require, and this Arendt strongly believed, entirely new, alternative ways of

53. This debate has been fueled by the appearance of Elzbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995). For a controversial argument representing Arendt's view of Nazism as "*kulturlos*" as a function of her attempt to rehabilitate Heidegger, see Richard Wolin, "Hannah and the Magician: An Affair To Remember," *The New Republic* 9 Oct. 1995: 27-37.

54. Gellner, "From Königsberg" 86.

55. Arendt, letter to Blumenfeld, 19 July 1947, *"Keinem Besitz"* 43.

56. Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," *Essays in Understanding* 134.

57. In an unpublished letter for instance, Arendt wrote that Raul Hilber's work on the destruction of European Jewry was almost "perfect" except for the "foolish" first chapter (that sought to locate Nazi antisemitism within the continuity of German — and Western — history). See Hilberg, *Unerbetene Erinnerung*135.

thinking (even if some, like that of mass society, turned out to be markedly inadequate and flawed). Hannah, Alfred Kazin writes, saw totalitarianism "[b]iblically as a great fall." The break with tradition was her very *definition* of totalitarianism, and rightly or wrongly, she regarded it as her task radically, and thus controversially, to think through this novum, this "law unto itself."[58] There was nothing, contra Gellner, suspicious or covert about this. Arendt explicitly critiqued interpretations of Nazism that tended to rely on past experiences or that employed older interpretational systems which, in her view, were rather tortuously transposed onto to what she regarded as a quite different, novel sort of phenomenon.[59] She consciously sought to repair this predicament of *Begriffslosigkeit*, the lack of relevant master-models, and to provide the missing ethical and cognitive equipment she deemed necessary for the task.

Gellner, moreover, picks up on what many other commentators have observed: her propensity for "operatic, metaphysical" description and overblown analysis. There is very little in Arendt about the humdrum, every day world of politics; the quotidian workings of representative liberal democracy hardly excited her interest.[60] The Arendtian world revolves around ultimate existentialist moments — the totalitatarian abyss or the ecstasy of the revolutionary moment (or of *disinterested* and high-minded decision-making in the polis). Very early on, friends and critics alike were aware of this "ecstatic" predisposition. In 1954 Raymond Aron shrewdly observed of the book that

> one sees the world as the totalitarians present it, and one risks feeling mysteriously attracted by the horror and the absurdity that is described. I am not sure that Mme. Arendt herself is not in some way fascinated by the monsters she takes from reality but which her logical

58. Kazin, *New York Jew* 307.

59. Thus, Arendt remarked of Hermann Broch (whom she deeply admired) that his categories and values, and especially his emphasis on death, were characteristic of the generation of World War I. He "remained limited to this . . . horizon of experience; and it is decisive that this horizon was broken through by the generation for whom not war but totalitarian forms of rule were the basic, the crucial experience. For we know today that killing is far from the worst that man can inflict on man and that on the other hand death is by no means what man most fears." See Arendt, "Hermann Broch: 1886-1951," *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1968) 126-27.

60. See the insightful comments by George Kateb, "The Questionable Influence of Arendt (and Strauss)," *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political* Thought after World War II, ed. P. G. Kielmansegg (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995).

> imagination, in some respects comparable to the imagination of the ideologues she denounces, brings to the point of perfection.[61]

Aron did not mention the word but it was this predilection for a kind of "demonic" discourse that her — always sympathetic — friend Karl Jaspers detected as early as August 1946 when she wrote to him that one could not think through the Nazi experience within familiar categories of crime, guilt and responsibility as Jaspers's *The Question of German Guilt* [*Die Schuldfrage*] had sought to do.[62] "The Nazi crimes," she wrote

> explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness . . . this guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems. . . . We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue. This is the abyss that opened before us as early as 1933 (much earlier, actually, with the onset of imperialistic politics) . . .[63]

Jaspers retorted: "You say that what the Nazis did cannot be comprehended as 'crime' — I'm not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of 'greatness' — of satanic greatness — which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the 'demonic' element in Hitler and so forth." "It seems to me," he wrote (anticipating a theme Arendt would pick up 17 years later),

> that we have to see things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of myth and legend with horror, and everything unspecific is just such a hint. . . . The way you express it, you've almost taken the path of poetry. And a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material — his instinctive aesthetic sense would lead to falsification of it — and that's why he couldn't attempt it. There is no idea and no essence here. Nazi crime is properly a subject for psychology and sociology, for psychopathology and jurisprudence only.[64]

---

61. Raymond Aron, "The Essence of Totalitarianism According to Hannah Arendt." The review is a masterly "common-sense" critique.

62. See Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton, (1947; New York: Capricorn, 1961).

63. Arendt, letter to Jaspers, 17 Aug. 1946, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 54.

64. Jaspers, letter to Arendt, 19 Oct. 1946, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 62.

Arendt was aware of this issue even before Jaspers raised it. In 1945 she had already noted that such demonization was a "flight from reality . . . evading the responsibility of man for his deeds."[65] This, to be sure, is an ongoing problem. Finding a mode of representation adequate to the transgressive nature of the phenomenon which, at the same time, does not fall into mystification — is endemic to the material and perhaps unresolvable.[66] To Jaspers she confessed the dilemma and admitted that she was groping for the correct formulation:

> I realize completely that in the way I've expressed this up to now I come dangerously close to that 'satanic greatness' that I, like you, totally reject. But still, there is a difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people who without considering the economic usefulness of their actions at all (the deportations were very damaging to the war effort) built factories to produce corpses. One thing is certain: we have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible, and to the extent that I can't avoid such formulations, I haven't understood what actually went on. Perhaps what is behind it is only that individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of the human being.[67]

This kind of thinking was crucial to the Arendtian project which we must now try to locate within its larger cultural and historical context. To be sure, Arendt wrote in an age before the term "Holocaust" had become common currency. The term does not appear in the book. Moreover, viewing matters through the generalized prism of "totalitarianism" precluded any thorough-going analysis of the specificities of the war against the Jews (this, albeit in explosive and controversial fashion, Arendt was to do twelve years later in *Eichmann In Jerusalem*). Nevertheless, she both fitted into, and played a crucial role in the creation and formulation of an on-going (and increasingly contested) post-Second World War "discourse of evil" in which Nazism and Auschwitz have become symbolic code-words, emblematic of our culture's conceptions

65. Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," *Essays in Understanding* 133-35. This review of Denis de Rougemont's *The Devil's Share* was originally published in *Partisan Review* Exx/2 (1945).

66. The "metaphysical" temptation is great indeed, perhaps a given, in this kind of extreme situation. Sidney Hook, for instance, was acutely aware of the problem from early on and sought a different, far more concrete mode of analysis. See Hook, "Hitlerism: A Non-Metaphysical View," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7.2 (Apr. 1944).

67. Arendt, letter to Jaspers, 17 Dec. 1946, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 62.

of absolute inhumanity.[68] She did this, above all, through her organizing idea of "radical evil" that expressed and animated her notion of novelty. "The problem of evil," she already insisted in a 1945 piece, "will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe — as death became the fundamental problem after the last war."[69] Positing matters in this way, to be sure, entailed patently extra-historical, perhaps even quasi-theological formulations. Arendt admitted the vagueness of the term but insisted upon its necessity in coming to terms with what had transpired. "Evil," she wrote in a letter to Jaspers,

> has proved to be more radical than expected. In objective terms, modern crimes are not provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things humans can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable, sinful motives. What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with . . . making human beings as human beings superfluous. . . . This happens as soon as all unpredictability — which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity — is eliminated.

This, Arendt added, was a function of the delusion of omnipotence that differed from the Nietzschean will to power that "wants simply to become more powerful and so remains within the comparative, which still respects the limits of human existence and does not push on to the madness of the superlative."[70]

She put it thus in *The Origins*:

> Until now the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed. Yet, in their effort

68. "My mother," writes Andrew Delbanco, "told me with tears in her eyes that Joseph Goebbels had been the devil incarnate — Mephistopheles she called him." In his recent book *The Death of Satan*, Delbanco writes that America is a culture that has lost a necessary sense of evil, incapable of constructing an acceptable symbolic language for describing what nevertheless remains an ongoing experience. See Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How American Have Lost Their Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1995) especially 5 and 224.

69. Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight" 134.

70. Arendt, letter to Jaspers, 4 March 1951, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 166. If the camps resemble "nothing so much as medieval pictures of Hell," it did not reproduce "what made the traditional conceptions of Hell tolerable to man: the Last Judgment, the idea of an absolute standard of justice combined with the infinite possibility of grace." See Arendt *Origins* 447.

> to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer "human" in the eyes of their executioners, so this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.
>
> It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a "radical evil." And this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a "perverted ill will" that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all the standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous.[71]

We must touch now on some of the problematics of this general discourse and Arendt's particular role within it. I have elsewhere recently noted that under the very many (relatively immediate) postwar attempts to comprehend the experience and atrocities of National Socialism, there lay a common denominator. Whether one approached it as in some way an outgrowth of, or standing in dialectical relation to, "history" and "culture," or, like Arendt, denied any such normative connections, all these theories were occasioned by essentially the same sense of outrage, the shock that such events could issue from within a modern, civilized society, and in particular be perpetrated by (what many of these theoreticians had taken to be) *the* most Enlightened *Kulturnation*.[72] The enduring fascination with (and the deep need to account for)

---

71. Arendt, *Origins* 459. In addition, she writes that "[i]t is the appearance of some radical evil, previously unknown to us, that puts an end to the notion of developments and transformations of qualities. Here, there are neither political nor historical nor simply moral standards but at the most, the realization that something seems to be involved in modern politics that actually should never have been involved in politics as we used to understand it, namely all-or-nothing — all, and that is an undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together, or nothing . . . inexorable doom for human beings." See Arendt, *Origins* 443.

72. See Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe* chap. 1.

National Socialism and the atrocities it committed — the rich multiplicity of ruminations it has produced and its cumulative imprint on political and intellectual discourse (as well as the accompanying, increasingly ubiquitous attempts to elide or neutralize and displace its significance and impact) — resides in this, rather ethnocentric, sense of scandal and riddle, the abiding astonishment that a modern allegedly cultured society could thus deport itself. Arendt's importance and enduring attraction lies in helping to create this paradigm.[73]

It is a paradigm that has never been problem-free nor has it gone unchallenged. Arendt herself presciently anticipated some of its problems. She understood, for instance, that the uniqueness of the atrocities could potentially create a self-righteous cult of victimization (bringing in its turn the absurd current competition in comparative victimization as the site of group-identity confrontation). She noted, already in August 1946, that:

> Human beings simply can't be as innocent as they all were in the face of the gas chambers (the most repulsive usurer was as innocent as the newborn child because no crime deserves such a punishment). We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue . . . we Jews are burdened by million of innocents, by reason of which every Jew alive today can see himself as innocence personified.[74]

To her readers then this must have appeared as strange, at best.

But beyond this, we must at least raise the delicate problem of Eurocentricism. If the abiding scandal resides in the fact that it is advanced European, especially German, civilization[75] that perpetrated these atrocities,

---

73. As Greil Marcus puts it, Arendt "does not explain it, because that is not what one does with an abyss; instead . . . she locates it. Without in any way removing Nazism from history," she demonstrates its radically transgressive, novel nature, the ways in which it "altered the limits of action." See Marcus, "Götterdämmerung After Twenty-One Years" (1976) but republished as still valid and relevant in his recent *The Dustbin of History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 61-62.

74. Arendt, letter to Jaspers, 17 Aug. 1946, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 54.

75. George Steiner, for instance, is quite candid about this. "The atrocities," he writes, "did not spring up in the Gobi desert or the rain forests of the Amazon." See Steiner, "Preface," *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1977) viiiix. "My own consciousness is possessed by the eruption of barbarism in Europe," he writes. Yet this simultaneously indicates his Eurocentrism as well as its saving critical capacity: "I do not claim for this hideousness any singular privilege; but this is the crisis of rational, humane expectation which has shaped my own life and with which I am most directly concerned" (viii).

the very shock implies both a certain superiority as well as a — much-needed — self-critical posture. By extension, if and when atrocities occur in places removed from the European center — such as Rwanda (or, a little more threateningly, in "half-Asian" Slavic places like Yugoslavia?) — one is (tragically) less likely to be appalled, less able to connect empathically. Of late, critics have increasingly drawn our attention to, and questioned this Eurocentric bias, both as it affects the "discourse of evil" in general,[76] and the work of Arendt in particular.[77]

In the second book of *The Origins*, Arendt directly treats the genocidal imperialist past in Africa and the inhuman treatment and massacres of its native population (as the prelude to later events, the site where the genocidal mind set is born). She certainly does not elide these happenings but the critics correctly point out that the same sense of shock, outrage, and scandal is missing, the analysis of a different order. This is, in part, because, as Arendt herself correctly and repeatedly pointed out, the factory-like method of Nazi exterminations, the systematic gassings, in fact went beyond anything previously known. Still, within its own terms her framework of analysis is not altogether innocent. She emphasizes the "ahistoricity," the "naturalness" of African life:

> What made them different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skin but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world. . . . They were, as it were, "natural" human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder. . . . Moreover, the senseless massacre of native tribes on the Dark Continent was quite in keeping with the traditions of these tribes themselves.[78]

To argue, as some of her critics have done, that Arendt was racist is, I think, quite absurd given her fundamental belief in plurality — in

---

76. See Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe* especially 9. I have also just come across Scott L. Montgomery's provocative but insightful article, "What Kind of Memory? Reflections on Images of the Holocaust," *Contention* 5.1 (Fall 1995): 79-103.

77. See, for instance, Shiraz Dossa, "Human Status and Politics: Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 13.2 (June 1980): 309-23; and Anne Norton, "Heart of Darkness: Africa and African Americans in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* 247-61.

78. Arendt, *Origins* 192.

the "undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together";[79] but it is true that, as Anne Norton has pointed out, the African viewpoint, unlike that of the Boers, is not even considered. They are not given a voice.[80] Another critic, Shiraz Dossa, has put it even more extremely: with Arendt, he writes, the enormity of totalitarian atrocities and the Holocaust consists in "the murder of eminently 'civilized' victims by equally 'civilized' killers." For her, "the issue becomes a profoundly moral one in this context when 'unnatural' human beings are both reduced to and murdered as pathetically 'natural' beings, as if they knew neither a history, a tradition, nor a past of human achievement. For the European Jews, unlike the African, were unmistakably human." Only with their transformation from political beings to "natural creatures" bereft of rights and legal claims could they be, literally, expelled from humanity.[81]

This perception of Nazism as a kind of absolute "bogeyman" (the phrase is Greil Marcus's), the most radical embodiment of evil — "the single commonality onto which one could project fantasies of hatred without the slightest feeling of guilt"[82] — may act as a kind of psychological safety valve, as a belief that such evil has now been wiped out. It may also function as a form of political justification for inaction concerning present injustices that can in no way be compared to the ultimate case. In the words of Scott Montgomery here is a

> closed system that does not aid us in posing new question, continually offers a revue of shallow finalities and, still worse, promotes voyeurism. . . . Transformed from historical truth into icons both of the machine and of modern malevolence, the Nazis have been given a disturbing purity, a kind of sacred uniqueness, even a mystifying grandeur of depravity that finally gives back to them certain qualities of myth they sought for themselves.

Could it be, he asks

> that recent atrocities in various parts of the world have not seemed to demand immediate attention intervention because . . . these events do not appear to sufficiently obey the requirements of a "true Holocaust"? . . . Is it perhaps conceivable that our political leaders would

79. Arendt, *Origins* 443.
80. See Norton, "Heart of Darkness" especially 252-54.
81. Dossa, "Human Status and Politics" 319-20.
82. Marcus, "Götterdämmerung" 53.

> feel a greater . . . urgency to deal with genocidal acts . . . if these acts closely simulated those of fascism, mimicking more precisely the monstrousness of the Hitlerian regime?[83]

At the same time, the opposite case also holds — that the constant invocation of Auschwitz as a model, a metaphor, an analogy produces a reflexive sort of moral deadening and rhetorical numbing. As Montgomery argues, the enthronement of Nazis as ultimate demons, "the horror at Auschwitz [as] supreme by virtue of being fully modern, occurring in the very center of Europe" makes other horrors in Africa, Asia, and South America, "no matter how brutal or planned, somehow qualify as more primitive. . . . In a strange twist of logic, the Holocaust is made to seem more sophisticated, more advanced than any other incident of its kind. The terrible irony here is that Nazism finally becomes, at this elevated symbolic height, a perverted reflection of Eurocentrism."[84]

These are problems and dangers that inhere in any discourse that insistently, indeed obsessively, presses the case for its "uniqueness."[85] It is a code word that invariably contains an extra-historical agenda. At the very least, it raises the delicate problem of balancing historically meaningful distinctions between atrocities with the commonalities of experience that allow for some kind of common ground and solidarity.[86] This vulgar exercise in comparative victimization, however, works both ways. As Alain Finkielkraut has pointed out the opposite bias can be cynically and obscenely manipulated.[87] Thus the defense at Klaus Barbie's trial contended that the genocide of the Jews "offended only the consciousness of white people." As merely a moment in the history of the oppressors,

> there was no reason for humanity (and those in charge of its progress) to mourn its victims. And since the Third World is the herald of progress, those perceived as its enemies are the logical successors of

---

83. Montgomery 79-80, 88, 98-99.

84. Montgomery 100-01.

85. His heated denials notwithstanding, this, I would argue, is the effect created by Steven Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context: The Holocaust and Mass Death Before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

86. See the insightful review of Katz's book by David Biale, *Tikkun* (Jan./Feb. 1995).

87. Alain Finkielkraut, *Remembering in Vain: The Klaus Barbie Trial and Crimes against Humanity*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus with Sima Godfrey, intro. Alice Y. Kaplan (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

> Nazism: the Americans in Vietnam, the French in Algeria, the Israelis in the West Bank.

The Holocaust, Jewish pain, thus becomes a means by which to obscure and obstruct world memory of the great colonial and other slaughters.[88]

It is inevitable that, once mobilized and unleashed, Holocaust rhetoric (that most immediately accessible emotional shorthand) and the incessant appeal to the Shoah as the most resonantly evocative, but variously interpretable, absolute metaphor, would entail engagement in political and cultural conflicts and be brandished as a weapon in ongoing political divides. The imperative to invoke the analogies (or lack of them) and draw the appropriate — always problematic and ideologically loaded — "lessons" became irresistible.

How, within this larger picture, may Arendt be located and assessed? Despite all its drawbacks, it was necessary (indeed, it was quite unavoidable) to formulate a discourse that sought to capture something that *was*, after all, without precedent and that required modes of conceptualization adequate to it. If the rhetoric was overblown and excessive, the material was beyond the conventional pale of historical representation. The proper mode in which to render it remains to this day a heatedly contested matter.[89] In a secular society self-consciously lacking the tools to do so, she sought to provide a rational vocabulary and explanation of this evil (in its radical or "banal" guise). In many ways this was not successful, but who can deny the validity and fascination of her search?

---

88. "Nothing inherent makes a discussion of colonialism cancel out a discussion of the Shoah; nothing inherent makes a discussion of the Shoah cancel out a discussion of the Third World. The political rift between two world perspectives is both tragic and emblematic of our times." See Kaplan, "Introduction," *Remembering in Vain* xxi.

89. For a rounded discussion of this problem, see *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).