

## Editors' Introduction

The collection of essays contained within this special issue of *SPECTRA: the ASPECT Journal*, dealing with a range of issues surrounding Hannah Arendt's private life and public thoughts, are overall concerned with the question of how we should *think* our way through the contemporary world. It is an urgent concern. Mark Lilla, for example, in a recent piece in the *New Republic*, describes an unsettling picture of the challenges we face. The twenty-five years since the end of the Cold War has not brought about the much-heralded end of history or even an end to ideology. Instead, what has come to an abrupt end are the very real struggles over political, economic, and cultural *ideas* and *thought* that defined much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, not only among the EuroAmerican intellectual elite, but one that many "ordinary" people actively took part in around the world. New possible forms of society, order, community, and culture were continually developed, refuted, and redeveloped in a visceral manner that today's students of politics and culture can hardly envision. By contrast, Lilla marks the era since the collapse of the Wall in terms of a narrowing of, in effect, the ways in which we imagine new orders and relationships. Contesting the political today overwhelmingly involves a constant rehashing of a handful of tired and often oppressive models. As he puts it, "we all sense that ominous changes are taking place in our societies, and in other societies whose destinies will very much shape our own. Yet we lack adequate concepts or even a vocabulary for describing the world we find ourselves in."<sup>1</sup>

Could the general anxiety felt in regards to these ill-defined "ominous changes" explain the recent resurgence of interest into the work and life of Arendt? While marked all-too-often as a "liberal," her call to think "without banisters" (echoing Nietzsche) and the intricate and novel map of her thought process that is always in plain sight in her writings, ultimately make it difficult to neatly categorize Arendt as a thinker. Could it be that her appeal is drawn from the ways in which her approaches to political and social phenomena jolt us out of our well-worn tracks?

The initial provocation for this special issue of *Spectra* was Margarethe von Trotta's 2012 film, *Hannah Arendt* which coincided with the fifty year anniversary of *Eichmann in Jerusalem's* publication. The movie is novel for two reasons. First is the fact that philosophers and political theorists are rarely the focus of artistic works. The second is that we are offered a glimpse of Arendt as both a thinker and a woman, a human being. Contrary to the common call that scholars be evaluated only in terms of the work they produce, von Trotta insists on an Arendt whose thinking, writings, personal relationships, and solitude must all be considered in concert with one another.

The collection of essays contained within this special issue of *Spectra* approach both the Arendt offered in the film and the Arendt of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. A common theme throughout is the contention regarding her concept of the "banality of evil," harkening back to the difficulty in definitively pinning her down as a particular thinker and human being. We are especially excited that this issue

contains a number of pieces from scholars outside Virginia Tech, which we believe speaks to the overall growing interest in Arendt's work and life.

In her piece, "The Danger of Following Rules: Reflections on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," Laura Zanotti argues that the concept of banality of evil offers a framework through which universal claims on ethics and norms, especially in terms of global governance matters, can be effectively challenged.

Richard Curtis analyzes one of Banksy's most famous works in the essay entitled "The Artist, the Philosopher, and the Nazi: One Possible Meaning Behind the Mischievous Banality of the Banality of Evil," which Curtis considers an indictment of the way contemporary American culture is unable to confront, let alone conceive of, the evil that Nazism unleashed into the world.

Allison Cardon's essay, "Winning and War Crimes: What *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Means for *The Act of Killing*," cautions those who make various "evil" acts and their perpetrators across time and space essentially equivalent. Doing so, she argues, reduces our ability to recognize and distinguish between the various forms the political and the legitimate can take.

Laura Mascaro contends with the very complicated ways that silences, forgetting, and oral testimony affect national truth and reconciliation projects in the piece "The Potential of Testimony in Transitional Justice: What Truth Can It Bring to Light?" In other words, how do investigators and citizens come to terms with the multiplicity of voices and truths that arise in such contexts?

In "Toward Forgiveness: Arendt's Banality of Evil," Lucy Britt argues that the banality of evil framework allows for a route to not only understanding how seemingly ordinary people can commit horrific atrocities, but also in allowing individuals to forgive the perpetrators, specifically in Rwanda and South Africa.

Max Stephenson reflects on how a general lack of empathy can pervade and distort political and social landscapes, whether in Nazi Germany or in the contemporary American context in the piece "When Empathy Withers."

In the piece entitled "A Lesson Still Unlearned: Arendt and Radical Evil," Marc Lucht argues that Arendt's conception of evil highlights the ways in which both humans and animals have increasingly been categorized as superfluous beings.

Deirdre Mahony discusses the primary errors about Arendt's thinking in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that continue to be perpetuated to this day in "Misconceptions Regarding Arendt on Eichmann."

Matthew Boedy puts Arendt and Walter Benjamin in conversation with each other in "Eichmann's Thoughtlessness and Language" to see whether evil can, and indeed should, ever be totally comprehended and the strong connections between

manifested evil and thoughtlessness.

Holly Jordan's review of *Hannah Arendt*, "Hannah Arendt: Why Now", concerns several issues, focusing specifically on how Arendt as a human being with a past and prejudices that strongly mold her thinking is presented.

Alex Struwe contends in "The Banality of Ideology" that the Arendt portrayed in the film is nothing more than an empty signifier, absent any real political or social convictions and so directly contrasts the actual radical nature of much of the real Arendt's thinking, including the banality of evil concept.

Amy Shuster offers an insightful critique of von Trotta's film in "Hannah Arendt Without Politics." While a beautiful work of art, Shuster argues the movie nevertheless obscures important dimensions of Arendt as a thinker and as a political agent.

In "The Communal Machinery of Evil: Reflections on *Hannah Arendt*," Scott Nelson focuses on Arendt's highlighting of the relationship between individual thoughtlessness and the commission of evil acts. However, he insists that the thoughtlessness exhibited by whole communities, especially those living within highly precarious situations, has not received the coterminous attention it deserves.

We strongly encourage our readers who are particularly moved by a piece or theme to submit responses for inclusion in a future issue. We encourage a broad range of conventional and creative contribution in a variety of formats, including articles, book reviews, essays, interviews and other works in addition to original multimedia pieces, including podcasts, digital videos, internet-hosted texts, artwork, comics, and photography.

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<sup>1</sup> Lilla, Mark. "The Truth About Our Libertarian Age." *The New Republic*. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118043/our-libertarian-age-dogma-democracy-dogma-decline> June 17, 2014.