

The Banality of Ideology

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Abstract: For many thinkers, Hannah Arendt seems to exemplify the ultimate horizon for a contemporary leftist critique. Nonetheless, the recent film depiction of her is subject to an ideological incorporation with the function of reinforcing the (neo-)liberal ideologeme of the ultimate subject (the individual) by presenting its empty universalization as the immunization against any substantial evil. This fundamentally contradicts even Arendt's own achievements and the implicit radicality of her analysis on the banality of evil. The systemic origin of evil that Arendt indicated in her work on Eichmann can be revealed with Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis on anti-Semitism. Combined with an Althusserian position of a critique of ideology one can identify the systemic production of empty subjectivity that is at the heart of capitalism's ideological reproduction and simultaneously the condition for a fascist (and totalized) system to emerge. In order not to fall back behind this essential insight, one must confront today's ideological constellation with its own contradictions and, in respect to Hannah Arendt, unmask the ideological reduction of her to a similar empty subject that she was criticizing in her own analysis.

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Hannah Arendt seems to be *en vogue* again, not only in academic circles. But there is also a disturbing feature about the way we provide ourselves with a narrative about her. Most strikingly, it is Margarethe von Trotta's film *Hannah Arendt* (2013) that without any doubt provides us with an overall positive picture of a relentless thinker and tough woman, emancipated from her male colleagues, self-determined and always smoking. Arendt's struggle, her doubts and convictions are compressed into a "feel good" depiction of one of the most popular contemporary political thinkers to be found in the western hemisphere. Furthermore, Hannah Arendt seems to be even more popular today the more controversial she was in her own time. At first glance, the message here is the urgency of having a strong commitment to one's own conviction, against all resistance. But curiously, the way Arendt's particular commitment is presented to us leaves us with no idea about

what she is actually committed to. It rather universalizes commitment as such by separating it from any particular content. In fact, Arendt's depicted conviction appears as a purely negative one, and it seems as if it would tell us that what counts is not the specific idea one is bound to but the very fact that one has an opinion. In that way, Arendt is chosen to exemplify the ultimate horizon for a leftist (but liberal) critique nowadays and in the zenith of our post-ideological times, she becomes the perfect ideological figure to remind us that the individual and its intrinsic perspective is still the highest good. And it is no coincidence that Arendt herself is presented to us as the bearer of certain qualities that are not qualified at all. The depiction of Hannah Arendt thus describes a mere tautology. And just as Roland Barthes remarked, tautologies are always the results of an aggressive act of disappropriation of meaning. They are as evil as they are banal.

Paradoxically, exactly this reduction of a concrete and qualitative commitment to the equivalence of commitment as such—which is simply reification of commitment—subverts the very logic of it and additionally deflects the message which is originally expressed in Arendt's work on Eichmann. In at least that sense, we should be more than skeptical with the ideological tale that we tell ourselves about Hannah Arendt today. That is to say that we should resist the seduction to blindly celebrate Arendt as an iconographic figure of a leftist critique and to remind us of the intrinsic radicality of her analysis on Eichmann's trial. One way to express this skepticism against an ideological narrative of the ultimate subject called Arendt is to confront it with her own achievements, comprised here primarily in the concept of the *banality of evil*. Ultimately, this leads to a critique of ideology that Arendt already anticipated and that got lost in the ideological shades of today's neoliberal capitalism. Just as Arendt characterized the consequences of Eichmann's trial as a plea for reason, we should similarly follow her in terms of not falling back into ideological delusion.

What is so Banal about Evil?

Too often, Arendt's terminology of the banality of evil invites severe misunderstanding when read as a sort of moral critique that is supposed to remind us that everyone has a dark side and that we are all likely to become subjected to that evil. Evil here appears as a positive and substantial entity, although it might cause a lot of trouble to define it, at least it must be something. Precisely in that sense, the witnesses of the trial expected Eichmann to provide them with an answer to finally get the clue of how the overwhelming and unimaginable horror of the Holocaust could be explained. One wanted to trace back that underlying evil that this particular agent had fallen prey to. Eichmann was supposed to be the expression of evil incarnate as such and the desire therefore was to simply convince oneself what

monstrous character was necessary to carry out such atrocities. Just like Arendt remarked, it was not only the individual to appear before the court, rather “it was history that [...] stood in the center of the trial.”ⁱⁱ The fundamental misinterpretation here lies in an implicit insisting on *evil* as something substantive, a positive entity that can be clearly identified and therefore avoided. The expectation was that there must have been something like a positive ideology, a system of meaning, and again a commitment that was ascribed to Eichmann and that must be evil through and through. In a nutshell, one wanted to see the monster. Although Arendt’s concern with Eichmann’s trial originally seemed to be driven by the same aspiration, her observation of Eichmann soon led her to the quite different insight that “everybody could see that this man was not a ‘monster’, but it was indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Essentially, it was this clear moral distinction between good and evil that Eichmann challenged in his mere existence. In his view, he did not do anything wrong, especially not in moral terms. Therefore he, throughout the whole trial, pleaded not guilty in the sense of the indictment. As Arendt comments:

“The Indictment implied not only that he had acted on purpose, which he did not deny, but out of base motives and in full knowledge of the criminal nature of his deeds. [...] and as for his conscience he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to.”^{iv}

Eichmann himself seemed to be unable to even understand those accusations, because his sole motivation was a “professional” one. Within a certain systemic order, he occupied a function that he idealized with the help of a variety of empty stock-phrases and clichés. As a specialist for certain tasks that simply had to be done, “he and the world he lived in had once been in perfect harmony.”^v The integrity of his reality and the officially distributed lie of the fascist system was of course an ideological effect, but it is only one aspect of it. There obviously were several ideological tricks in order to make the whole machinery run smoothly: the transformation of the crimes into medical matters (killing by gas causes less suffering etc.), the use of “language rules” as the systematic substitution of facts by lies, or Himmler’s strategy to turn every guise of moral doubts against the self (“What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties.”^{vi}) And it was Eichmann who perfectly internalized these lies so that “this outrageous cliché was no longer issued from above, it was a self-fabricated stock-phrase.”^{vii} Without

any doubt, these are evidences of a reproduction of an *evil* ideology. But besides this analysis of the concrete ideological foundation of Eichmann's subject, Arendt became more and more aware of an even more fundamental ideological dimension that pointed her to the banality of not only this specific evil but to evil as such.

It became incidental that those ideological clichés and common places that Eichmann learned by heart definitely were functional in respect to his own subjectivity as an integral part of the system, but they also turned out to be interchangeable. Indeed, he never seemed to have any positive commitment to the ideologemes of the Party, quite the contrary, Eichmann always pretended to have no personal reservations against Jewish people, nor did he prefer those violent solutions that the Party imposed. What supposedly influenced him so deeply was not the particularity of the ideological narrative, but those matters that referred to his professional career that became the only source of a meaningful existence for him. Eichmann kept a certain distance to the fanatic ideologues and their explanations, it must have appeared to him as a sort of necessary evil for the functioning of the system as such that in turn allowed him to be part of it. Therefore, his personal approach or opinion did not matter at all. In his view, the very interference of any of his individual feelings would have been a disruption of the efficient operation of the system. And in turn, this would have been a violation of his very own code of idealism that instructed his commitment to the system as such. As Arendt highlights, one of the most important driving forces for Eichmann's identification with his office was this idealism and "an 'idealist' was a man who *lived* for his idea [...] and who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially, everybody."^{viii} In some sense, this was the real horror that Eichmann exemplified. He was obviously not the conscious embodiment of the devil that everyone wanted him to be; quite the contrary, he seemed to be free from any substantive commitment what made him as empty as it could be. This presented Arendt with the essential ideological paradox here: being fully committed to a universal idea without being bound to any particularity at all. The true origin of the evil that Arendt wanted to explain was not the specific ideology anymore—although it is definitely evil—but the ideological functioning as such. It was not Eichmann's subjective conviction, his anti-Semitic fanaticism, his hatred and so on that made him follow the leader, it was the very way his subjectivity was shaped in general. And this origin of evil is the point where it becomes banal.

Eichmann, the Depleted Subject

As Althusser famously remarks, ideology is not simply a false representation

of the world, but it is the imaginary substitution of an undistorted relation between the individual and its material conditions of existence.^{ix} The separation between the individual and its world is therefore the very source of ideology, in the sense that it steadily induces an imaginary bridging of that gap. As such, ideology is more an unconsciousness of a false world than simply a false consciousness. This brings Althusser to draw the consequence that the subject and ideology are inseparably interlinked and that “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects.”^x According to that, it is ideology that interpolates individuals as subjects in the first place. That means two things: on the one hand, the individual is equipped with certain subjective qualities according to the specific interpellation. On the other hand, and on a more fundamental level, the subject comes into existence only through the existence of ideology. Just as the ideological interpellation brings subjects to the fore according to its own image, subjectivity as such is a reflection of its systemic origin. So, when ideology stems from alienation—the separation of human beings from their essence in the reification of social relationships into objective relations—it produces alienated subjects.

This is an essential clue to grasp the paradox of Eichmann’s subjectivity and to explain the distance between his commonly assumed positive ideological interpellation and his empty subjectivity that is only committed to the functioning of the system. Eichmann was, as Arendt remarks, the ideal subject for this empty lies that ideologically backed up the system’s operation.^{xi} As it turned out for her, this was not the case because of his own affinity towards anti-Semitic propaganda, but it was an essential feature of his subjectivity as such, as this fully alienated and depleted subject. The incapacity to realize the slightest hint of reality that would have made it possible for Eichmann to challenge the official lies ultimately stems from a totalized alienation that is realized in a totalized system of Totalitarianism. The function of ideology within that system is not essentially bound to a particular narrative, either. Generally, since it is ideology’s primary aim to conceal the constitutive distortion on which the system (of alienation) is built, its concrete content is thus a more or less subordinated feature that is functional in respect to the sustaining of the system by any means.

In that way, Eichmann showed us the underlying and meaningless dynamic of self-reproduction at the heart of the system by fully incorporating this emptiness in his subjectivity. It is this emptiness that made him, in the Lacanian sense, a true encounter with the *Real* for Arendt, by exhibiting that he was only committed to the system as such, no particular expression, no ideological narrative but the purity of evil, the mere dynamic of its self-

sustainment. And this is precisely the *banality* of evil: its non-substantiality. While Eichmann was unconditionally obligated to his career, the only meaningful reference point possible for him that provided him with “utter ignorance for everything that was not directly, technically and bureaucratically, connected with his job.”^{xii} This focus on the functional reproduction made it possible for him to ignore any aspect of reality. This proto-ideological distortion mirrors in his own memory of what actually happened and it “was certainly not controlled by chronological order [...but] was like a storehouse, filled with human-interest stories of the worst type”^{xiii}. This arbitrary assemblage of lies and clichés is not only ideological in the sense that it is not true, but it indicates the substitution of reality by an imaginary that is empty at its core.

Anti-Semitism, Ideology as such

Is this to say that anti-Semitism as the fascist ideology is in any way arbitrarily employed? Not at all. We have to differentiate between the systemic functioning of ideology in general and the specific case of the German anti-Semitism. This case is so special that the horror of the Holocaust would not have been possible with simply another ideology. Is it therefore just a question of intensity? Not quite. Horkheimer and Adorno, who were perfectly aware of the systemic origin of ideology in general and anti-Semitism in particular, point us to the crux of anti-Semitism as the “release valve” with which “rage is vented on those who are both conspicuous and unprotected [...] depending on the constellation, the victims are interchangeable.”^{xiv} Again, we find the feature of ideology to externalize an internal (systemic) contradiction. What is so crucial about the phenomenon of anti-Semitism is not that it is simply a particular ideology but ideology in its purest form. And as such, it is the direct pendant to a totalized system, or to be more precise, these two aspects are of mutual dependence. That is why “anti-Semitism and totality have always been profoundly connected.”^{xv} Adorno and Horkheimer express this connection clearly, when they point to the systemic production of empty subjectivity that is in turn the condition for ideological interpellation. Thus, “anti-Semitic behavior is unleashed in situations in which blinded people, deprived of subjectivity, are let loose as subjects.”^{xvi}

According to them, the totalized alienation in a totalized system necessarily creates hatred against every form that resists such mimicry because these confrontations are the only moment that the alienated subject experiences its own deflection and needs to channel this unbearable contradiction onto an external object. This whole process is based on a prior disorder that is the

separation between world and individual into object and subject. The consequence is that “between the actual object and the indubitable sense datum, between inner and outer, yawns an abyss which the subject must bridge at its own peril.”^{xvii} And the impossible self-identity must conceal itself behind an ideological consciousness that steadily holds up the imaginary of exactly that self-identity. The subject that can solely focus on itself lost every concrete quality because it lost its relation to the world that would provide it with meaning. Thus, “it projects the world out of the bottomless origin of its own self, it exhausts itself in monotonous repetition.”^{xviii} just as the system that brought it into being. The consequence that Adorno and Horkheimer draw from this constellation is the state of paranoia. In a similar way, Guattari and Deleuze argued that capitalism ultimately causes schizophrenia. And the obsessively projecting subject is doomed to project its own inner contradiction which origin it fails to recognize. The fully alienated and reified world becomes a projection screen for this delusion and the projection turns into the impulse of castration in which “the objects of the fixation are replaceable like father figures in childhood.”^{xix}

Anti-Semitism is on the one hand this specific projection of the depleted subject as the release valve of its inner contradiction, on the other hand it is the operation of ideology in general. It supplements the reflection of the individual on itself and the world with a stereotypical imaginary to let loose of the necessity to be confronted with its inherent abyss. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it briefly: “Experience is replaced by cliché.”^{xx} It thus resembles a ticket mentality in which the conscious perception of the world is reified itself and appears as a commodity that can be simply consumed. The important conclusion that brings us back to the systemic origin of evil, to its banality of originating from the empty core of the system, is that “it is not only the anti-Semitic ticket which is anti-Semitic, but the ticket mentality itself.”^{xxi} In precisely that sense, the evil, Arendt is talking about, is a *radical evil* that lies at the root of the system.

Against a Non-symptomatic Reading of Hannah Arendt

There are two problems with Hannah Arendt at this point. Firstly, it is Arendt’s own consequences that she draws from her insights. Although Margarethe von Trotta wants to make us believe that Arendt radically fought against the public opinion and nearly every of her contemporaries, she originally stayed within a liberal framework of critique that necessarily reaffirms those origins of evil that she wants to extinguish. It simply neglects the dialectic of its systemic origin. This is in fact an ideological fallacy. The shortcomings of Arendt’s critique may be ascribed to the specific, to speak in Althusserian

terms, theoretical conjuncture of her times. The direct answer to fascism was the liberation represented by liberalism. But the more difficult problem arises if we, as readers of Arendt, fail to address this constellation and fall back behind her own radicality. Instead, the task may be to provide a symptomatic reading of Arendt that uncovers the blind spots in her own analysis, that what is said without being explicated. This would be the necessary step out of the vicious circle of ideology's reproduction in which the portrait of Arendt seems to be entangled.

That is to say that once we develop the radical consequences from the banality of evil, we must broach the issue of ideology in general to deal with the second problem of Arendt's own integration into the ideological framework of (neo-)liberal capitalism. Arendt remarked that Eichmann, in his empty subjectivity, lost the qualification of a human being and its ability to think and judge. If this is the problem, it is not enough to simply universalize this quality as the cornerstone of an anti-fascist approach. As von Trotta's depiction exemplifies, you can easily have the ultimate individual and its extraordinary ability for commitment that is still as alienated as it can be. The message that whatever opinion you have, the main point is that you have one, can be easily translated into the ideological codex of whatever your imaginary relationship to your conditions of existence is, the main point is that you have an *imaginary* one (because this is what ensures the reproduction of the system). Again, the reification of conviction reaffirms the empty subjectivity induced by a system that is fully dependent on the separation of the individual from its meaningful world. It would be cynical, if not stupid, to draw the consequence from here that capitalism and fascism would be equal phenomena. But to take the critique of fascism serious, implies to realize that when fascism rests on ideology, it is capitalism that provides the very possibility for ideology to appear in a totalized form. Not to reflect on this relation is to blind out the radical dimension of evil, its banality. Although Arendt implicitly recognized this connection, none of these insights are included in the recent depiction of her. This deflection of a radical critique of the systemic origin of evil should not be confused as a coincidence but instead a symptom of ideology.

Notes

i Cf. Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies* (New York et al.: Noonday Press, 1991).

ii Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 19.

iii Ibid., p. 54.

iv Ibid., p. 25.

v Ibid., p. 52.

vi Ibid., p. 106.

vii Ibid., p. 53.

viii Ibid., p. 42.

ix Althusser, Louis. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes towards an Investigation)*. In: Ibid. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), p. 109.

x Ibid., p. 115.

xi Cf. Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 86.

xii Ibid., p. 54.

xiii Ibid., p. 81.

xiv Horkheimer, Max / Adorno, Theodor W. *Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment*. In: Ibid.: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 140.

xv Ibid., p. 140 f.

xvi Ibid., p. 140.

xvii Ibid., p. 155.

xviii Ibid., p. 156.

xix Ibid., p. 159.

xx Ibid., p. 166.

xxi Ibid., p. 172.