

The Communal Machinery of Evil: Reflections on Hannah Arendt

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Abstract: The fifty-year anniversary of the trial and execution of Adolph Eichmann saw the release of the Margarethe von Trotta film *Hannah Arendt*. This article considers the film's achievements in the context of Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, and especially her "lesson" that political evil consists not only in some demonic instinct or motive, but in a monstrous lack of imagination, a condition of radical philosophical thoughtlessness. The film is principally a character study of a political philosopher with strong convictions and an abiding concern for what Arendt saw as the unfortunate truth about Eichmann. Largely occluded are the enduring political themes with which Arendt's many books in political theory dealt – themes including power, conformity, and community. Yet, the film anticipates important moral and political questions of lasting relevance. There remains much to be learned about thoughtlessness in nations where power is broadly shared by the people. Concerns over evil's precise nature aside, the question of conformity in democracies remains important to consider as nationalist, ethnic, and sectarian sentiments arise anew in Russia, the Middle East, as well as the United States.

Keywords: BANALITY OF EVIL, COMMUNITY, CONFORMITY, DEMOCRACY, EICHMANN, HANNAH ARENDT, NATIONALISM, POWER

[Eichmann] wanted to go along with the rest. He wanted to say "we," and going-along-with-the-rest and wanting-to-say-we like this were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible. The Hitlers, after all, really aren't the ones who are typical in this kind of situation – they'd be powerless without the support of others.ⁱ

What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?

- Hannah Arendt ⁱⁱ

The film *Hannah Arendt*, which opened in theaters in the United States in 2013, is principally devoted to the controversy surrounding what has been called "the banality of evil" thesis in Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.ⁱⁱⁱ As is well known, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a biographical and historical work presented as journalism, but its chief purpose was to place in theoretical context the responsibility of a high-ranking Nazi official for directing

Hitler's Final Solution. Arendt's book was about much more than the prosecution of Eichmann by an Israeli court in the early 1960s. Among Arendt's key achievements, and the reason the book remains important fifty years after it was published, is that this theoretical context facilitates interrogations of power and responsibility, morality and ethics, as well as judgment and the law as each of these political notions bear on the Holocaust, its immediate aftermath, and well beyond. *Hannah Arendt*, directed by German filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta, evidently had similar aspirations in spite of the fact that it is mainly a character study. It gives primacy far and away to Arendt's fierce intellectual independence over and above the sinister mechanisms of the unthinking, conforming masses that so preoccupied the philosopher throughout her career.

Often in spite of itself, *Hannah Arendt* raises many interesting and important questions. These include: who was Adolph Eichmann?; what did he represent morally, ethically, and politically, and to whom?; and, what is the meaning of evil in a political sense – that is, as an exercise, at least in part, in community building? The film is somewhat torn, it must be said, between, on the one hand, a controversy sparked by Arendt's thesis that the evil Eichmann represented was somehow banal, a claim which to many implied everyday and unoriginal. In the book, the profile Arendt provided was psychological as well as a political – she sought to explain a very minor talent with major power operating at the center of a regime that rewarded unthinking conformity and undying loyalty. The film deals with these themes, with varying degrees of success. On the other hand, the film appears committed to raising key theoretical questions, including: what is the meaning of ethical and political responsibility as these complex theoretical concepts are revealed by the practices of both mid- and high-level officials in the attempted extermination of European Jews and numerous other “others”? In contrast, Arendt's book discussed at some length Eichmann's life as a young man, his role as head of logistics in the machinery of the Final Solution, as well as his fifteen years following the War and his eventual capture by agents of the Mossad in Argentina in 1960. Arendt was not a legal theorist, and so it is understandable that while she was present in the pressroom for much of the Eichmann trial, relatively little reporting for *The New Yorker* concerned the prosecution's case and the various twists and turns of the courtroom proceedings. The film devoted even less time to the many jurisprudential questions the case posed for the young Jewish state.

In her book Arendt frequently made note of her exasperation with the prosecution team, and on many occasions she reported a feeling of utter incomprehension and astonishment as she listened to Eichmann's statements and testimony throughout the proceedings. She leaves the reader with the impression that over the course of the trial's many weeks, a great share of the court's time was taken up with relatively small details of Eichmann's past, details which were all the smaller against the backdrop of the awful magnitude of the crimes. The prosecution's often fruitless efforts with such minor details such as whether Eichmann had actually killed a Jewish person himself, clearly outraged Arendt, and any reader of the book shares

in her moral anguish over the law's tedium. Thus, Arendt the philosopher was understandably restive much of the time she was present at the trial. But she was compelled to report on a number of extra-legal matters that drew on her education and talents in political philosophy and, perhaps most important of all, as a theorist of power. Arendt was dispatched to Jerusalem to report on the political meaning of an historic war criminal and Israel's first major war crimes trial. Eichmann's complicity in the crimes and his willingness to take responsibility for his actions were not the most pressing issues for Arendt (though they were certainly pressing for many observers). Rather, what was vitally at stake for Arendt was the nature of the evil that Eichmann represented, how that evil came to exist, how it must be conceived in relation to the laws of Israel, and what might be characterized as the political conscience of a would-be free-thinking, politically conscious being that she devoted her life to studying, certainly most memorably in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*.^{iv} In the face of the law, Arendt surely felt, any attempt to represent the nature of Eichmann's complicity in the crimes utterly failed. Arendt was stirred, then, to consider his person and his actions on an entirely different plane of examination, namely a philosophical one.

Hannah Arendt may enjoy some limited success at this level, but it provides scarcely more than an occasional glance at the great philosophical and political questions posed by Eichmann. The film is not an especially adept presentation of the central moral and political problems surrounding the case. It is an anxious film that betrays the anxiety von Trotta must have felt about the difficulty of presenting a philosophical subject in an intellectually solicitous way. Few of the actors, including Barbara Sukowa who portrayed Arendt, as well as Janet McTeer, Axel Milberg, and Klaus Pohl, stand out for their performances. Aside from some skillful discussion brought forth in scenes where a number of Arendt's friends are presented in agitated conversation, *Hannah Arendt* never quite succeeds in provoking the audience to consider the moral and political dimensions of the case of Eichmann in a fresh and philosophically illuminating light. It is difficult to recall a rough recent cinematic equivalent, but many viewers probably remembered Abby Mann and Stanley Kramer's 1961 film *Judgment at Nuremberg*. With its star-studded cast, including Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, and Maximilian Schell, *Judgment at Nuremberg* was nearly four hours long. *Hannah Arendt* was a mere 112 minutes. The film compresses too many plot lines, and it generally feels hurried and anxious.

It can probably be said that most of those who turned out to see *Hannah Arendt* (including those who will view it in the next several years) knew a great many details of the Eichmann trial, and even a good bit about the personal and political tremors caused by Arendt's controversial thesis. Arendt's claim that the evil that Eichmann represented was banal has, over the last fifty years, generated by far the most discussion about her "report." In a Postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt said explicitly that her book was not meant as a "theoretical treatise on the nature of evil"

for when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing* . . . He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is “banal” and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace . . . That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.^v

Admittedly, such nuanced though arguably crucial distinctions are difficult to present in a compelling cinematic drama. But the audience learns rather little from the film that is new or especially provoking beyond the fact that Arendt was a person of conviction and that she paid a high personal price for her views. Mark Lilla’s review of the film in the *New York Review of Books*, while sympathetic at times to the intentions of the filmmakers, was an understandably harsh indictment of the film’s precarious achievements (Lilla calls the film a “stilted, and very German, morality play”).^{vi} This is unfortunate because such a narrow treatment of Arendt’s views about who Eichmann was and what he represented crowds out a more sustained consideration of some enduring qualities of Arendt’s thinking about political evil’s essential or “natural” qualities, an analysis of how such hatred came about in the times and places that it did, as well as the moral and political limits faced by a state in bringing about justice for crimes unknown hitherto.^{vii} Even further afield, but no less important, would be an engagement that took up matters of where Arendt’s analysis of the figure of Eichmann stands in relation to her large body of writing in political theory and philosophy.

Such matters are very difficult to examine in a cinematic drama, to be sure. Lilla, in his review, made mention of the problem of depicting or characterizing moral and political issues through cinema, as well as some rather clumsy – in Lilla’s words “tasteless” – decisions that were made by the filmmakers.^{viii} Close readers of Arendt probably felt some (however slight) violation with just this kind of cinematic expose. When one devotes years to reading a thinker like Arendt, one develops a level of devotional familiarity that brings with it quite intense feelings of emotional intimacy. This is true even, and perhaps most especially, if the thinker is no longer

alive. And given the depth of feeling Arendt's many readers have had toward her harsh views concerning Jewish leaders' complicity with the Nazis, not to mention her position on Zionism, the film was bound to disappoint on many different levels.

All of this said, it should also be acknowledged that the film is still relatively recent, and it may stand the test of time as a quite fair treatment of a courageous political thinker, someone who stood for important political principles. But what does it mean to raise these issues cinematically today? Beyond the merely ceremonial fifty-year anniversary of Eichmann's trial and execution in 2012, what are Arendt's most enduring contributions to our understanding of the causes of the Holocaust and of the jurisprudential actions taken by the state of Israel in the case of Eichmann and other Nazi war criminals? The trial of Adolph Eichmann lives on as a touchstone for thinking about questions of power, responsibility, political evil, and the limits of the law. It matters profoundly how such a touchstone is used, how it continues to inform thinking about such questions in our own time. There remains much to be learned not only about Hitler's Final Solution, but also about the role of thinking as opposed to nonthinking in nations where power is broadly shared by the people. The question of conformity in democracies is one of the most difficult to address, but it remains critically important as nationalist, ethnic, and sectarian sentiments reemerge in Russia and its former satellites, in any number of countries in the Middle East, in the United States, and elsewhere.

Arendt's conception of banality remains important to consider in all societies where the mechanisms of conformity are so widespread, if attenuated, in the politics of the everyday.^{ix} Of course, political theorists have considered for many years Arendt's choice of terms for characterizing something so complex as political evil. In her biography of the philosopher, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl noted that the idea of banality was initially suggested to Arendt by her husband Heinrich Blücher. Arendt, Young-Bruehl notes, reportedly told Karl Jaspers "that her husband had often considered the possibility that evil was 'a superficial phenomenon.'" Blücher was a long-time reader of Bertolt Brecht, and apparently, years after the Eichmann trial, Blücher shared with Arendt some notes Brecht had written at the time he was writing his play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.^x Arendt, following Blücher, saw more than a kernel of wisdom in Brecht's adroit handling of themes of dramatic political aberration which he examined through humor and a presentation of the patently absurd. "The great political criminals," Brecht wrote in his notes,

must be exposed and exposed especially to laughter. They are not great political criminals, but people who permitted great political crimes, which is something entirely different. The failure of his enterprises does not indicate that Hitler was an idiot and the extent of his enterprises does not make him a great man. If the ruling classes permit a small crook to become a great crook, he is not entitled to a privileged position in our view of history. That is, the fact that he becomes a great crook, and that what he does has great consequences does not add to this stature . . .

One may say that tragedy deals with the sufferings of mankind in a less serious way than comedy.”^{xi}

The recent publication in English of an interview Arendt gave in 1964 goes still further toward clarifying what she intended by using the term banality in the context of Eichmann’s great crimes. Asked to address “misunderstandings” associated with the banality of evil idea, Arendt said:

Now, one misunderstanding is this: people thought that what is banal is also commonplace . . . That wasn’t what I meant. I didn’t in the least mean that there’s an Eichmann in all of us, each of us has an Eichmann in him and the Devil knows what else. Far from it! I can perfectly well imagine talking to somebody, and they say to me something that I’ve never heard before, so it’s not in the least commonplace. And I say, “That’s really banal.” Or I say, “That’s not much good.” That’s the sense in which I meant it.

Now, banality was a phenomenon that really couldn’t be overlooked. The phenomenon expressed itself in those frankly incredible clichés and turns of phrases that we heard over and over again [during the Eichmann trial].^{xii}

Arendt goes on to stress that Eichmann’s actions were not “demonic,” and neither were they ideological. Instead, they were “outrageously stupid.” “There’s nothing deep about it – nothing demonic! There’s simply the reluctance ever to imagine what the other person is experiencing, right?”^{xiii}

Of course, stupidity alone cannot come close to capturing the stakes for Arendt in her depiction of Eichmann in the book. It was the political dimension of that illogical stupidity – the inability of a person to think from another’s point of view and to find significance, and even compassion, toward another – that mattered above and beyond almost everything else. But what may have mattered even more was the power that coursed through and underneath the entire political culture of Nazi Germany, a power that fostered unyielding conformism, an unquestioning, even desiring, following-along, and a learned, practiced hatred of the Jewish “other.” How, in a political culture, does stupidity acquire such appalling, intoxicating power? This was arguably the question that proved most arresting for Arendt.

Perhaps Arendt’s argument would have been better served had she more explicitly acknowledged that what she saw and heard of Eichmann in Jerusalem was the Eichmann who was confronted with, and who was asked to account for his actions in light of, the laws of the state of Israel.^{xiv} True, she did quite extensive research on Eichmann’s life, considering in particular the memoir he wrote while in Argentina, and especially an interview he gave to a Dutch Nazi sympathizer before he was captured. But all of this is most appropriately understood in the light of Arendt’s work as a political theorist, and in particular her accounts of spontaneous thinking,

labor, and action in *The Human Condition*. There is, first of all, Eichmann himself – the man and his terrible deeds, as well as his accounts during the trial of their supposed meaning (to his mind almost nil, apparently). Then there is what Eichmann represented, and still represents, politically to those trying to explain how such a political abyss could come about. It may be that Arendt’s conception of power – the ability to act in concert with others – is a major part of the problem of accounting for the political nature of the evil Eichmann represented. Without a diabolical motive, Arendt seemed to be saying, evil was a rather unexceptional political force, and one difficult to recognize as such. Still another dimension of the problem of assessing who Eichmann was and what he represented is an analysis that would account for the personal and cultural anxieties, traumas, and anguish people feel about themselves and what they have been told to value and esteem, sometimes at virtually any cost, as the essential, unquestionable identitarian quality of their nation, race, ethnicity, or sect. There is much about people’s experiences that comes before power aggregates, before it is transformed into collective action. Yet, such traumatic experiences are hardly ever outside of the networks of power relations. That is one reason Michel Foucault defined power as the general (that is, generally accepted and widespread) economy of force relations that both constitute and effect power in late-modern societies.^{xv}

Some time ago George Kateb argued that Arendt did not endeavor to “trace [Eichmann’s] incapacity for thinking to some further source. She neither psychologizes the incapacity nor offers a broadly sociological explanation of it.”^{xvi} Instead, Kateb wrote, Arendt considered deliberate action and responsibility in the context of the uniquely philosophical capacities of the person. Her objective was to elaborate a dimension of thinking that could properly be called philosophical. Whatever political evil’s nature is, it is not philosophical. Thinking of the philosophical variety involves an exalted, almost sacred capacity for moral, ethical and political judgment, something for which Arendt leaves the impression most people are not well suited.^{xvii} Why this is the case is surely something that merits ceaseless examination.

What we are left with, then, and what the film *Hannah Arendt* can at best only beckon toward, are a host of political questions and injunctions that grow out of the experiences of individuals acting in concert with others in the great machineries of power of late-modern societies. Arendt issued one such injunction directly just a couple of years before she was presented with the person of Eichmann himself: “to think what we are doing.”^{xviii} Over the last fifty years, it is the philosophical and political status of “thinking” – or theoretical reflection, or simply *theory* – which has received the most sustained attention from political and social theorists concerned with the unique and certainly lasting qualities of Arendt’s political thought. Regrettably, the political quality of “we” in Arendt’s simple but arresting statement – the role of conformity and even community in political thinking – has received considerably less.

Acknowledgements:

Sincere thanks to Bradley S. Klein and to my colleague Patricia M. Nickel for their incisive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Notes

i Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann was Outrageously Stupid," in *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013), 43.

ii Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 441. The author was directed to this quote by Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 47.

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

iv Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

v Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287-288, italics in the original. It is worth nothing that Isaiah Berlin strenuously objected to this characterization of Eichmann, most especially Arendt's claim that he did not "realize what he was doing." See Isaiah Berlin, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, edited by Ramin Jahanbegloo (Halban Publishers, 2007), 84-85.

vi There are a few relevant articles and letters-to-the-editor that appeared in the *Review*. See Mark Lilla, "Arendt and Eichmann: The New Truth," *New York Review of Books* (21 November 2013), and Mark Lilla, "The Defense of Jewish Collaborator" (5 December 2013). See also the exchange between Lilla and Roger Berkowitz, "Arendt and Eichmann," *New York Review of Books* (19 December 2013). The quote is taken from page 8 of the *New York Review of Books* on-line printed copy of "Arendt and Eichmann."

vii See Arendt's discussion of retroactive versus adequate laws in relation to the crime of genocide in the Epilogue of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, especially pages 254-255.

viii *Ibid.*, 7.

ix See, for example, Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), as well as the many writings of Benedict Anderson on the subject of nationalism.

x Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 330-331.

xi Bertolt Brecht, "Zu Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui," in *Stuecke*, Vol. IX. The quote is taken from Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 331; the citation of Brecht's quote is taken from Arendt's chapter on Brecht in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968), 247. To this author's mind, considering a condition of political radicality strategically can be productive for

political thinking. A loose parallel can be found in Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010) where the author argues that a political response to rage can be made strategically articulate and effective not by visiting radical violence upon another people, as the U.S. did after 9.11, but through a "carefully crafted 'fuck you.'" (p. 182).

xii Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann was Outrageously Stupid," in *Hannah Arendt: The Last The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 47.

xiii Ibid., 48. On the question of ideology, see page 44.

xiv This point can surely be debated. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is in large part the work of the journalist Arendt. In the book's Epilogue and Postscript she does deal with the tensions between the work of reporting and theoretical analysis.

xv See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), especially pp. 92-102; and 137-159. Arendt theorized several aspects of power in *The Human Condition* (200-205). The quote that many readers have fastened onto is this: "power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (200). The idea that power ever vanishes seems to contradict Arendt's suggestion (on the same page) that power "is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measureable, and reliable entity like force or strength" (200).

xvi George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1984), 72.

xvii This approximates Sheldon Wolin's claim in his essay "Hannah Arendt and the Ordinance of Time," *Social Research*, 44, No. 1 (1977), pp. 91-105.

xviii Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.