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Approximations to the Natures of Fascism
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Approximations Through Hannah Arendt to the Natures of Fascism

I. Introduction

Hannah Arendt's contributions to discussions of totalitarianism in general, and of fascism in particular, have been valued as much as criticized. While she attracted criticisms from her own field of political science, as well as from sharers of her Jewish identity (I would argue that Hannah Arendt's Jewishness constitutes an essential part of her persona in spite of its inherent contradictions), perhaps the criticisms most relevant to the subject of this paper have come from historians. In this context, I argue that Hannah Arendt, in spite of her claims to the historical accuracy and insights of her works, is a political scientist and philosopher, with her major contributions being in the field of theory. Moreover, this paper has the objective of assessing the value of these theoretical contributions through discussing two of Hannah Arendt's works, The Origins of Totalitarianism and Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil with regards to her own analysis and the understanding and criticism provided to her works by others. In the process, I will also refer to her book The Human Condition. My most general claim is that Hannah Arendt's oeuvre continues to provide important insights into the nature of totalitarian regimes—be it by her own works themselves or by the insights she has engendered in others.

II. The Origins of Totalitarianism Revisited.

In his article "Arendt and *The Origins of Totalitarianism: An Anglocentric View*," Bernard Crick states that historians and sociologists have been mistaken in their conception of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as an account of why totalitarian phenomena took place, "rather than a detailed speculation of how it could have happened at all."¹ Indeed, in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that the conditions that have rendered totalitarianism possible are the development of mass society, race-thinking, nationalism and imperialism. However, Villa argues that it is against Arendt's thought to infer from her writing that

elements that truly were crucial "conditions of possibility" for the advent of totalitarianism—racism, imperialism, the decline of the nation-state, anti-Semitism—caused it to occur as a kind of logical consequence.²

For Arendt, there existed no antecedent for totalitarianism, which surpassed our previous experiences of evil. She posited that totalitarianism "exploded our traditional categories of political thought [...] and the standards of our moral judgment [...]."³ Totalitarianism was indeed a "radical evil."

Mass society itself is the precondition of the "superfluosity" of human beings, and it is coupled by a distinct reduction in the sphere of politics. For Arendt, politics is the most human of all human activities, and has the specific objective of freedom. Totalitarianism, which represents a direct attack on human freedom, will thus seek to obliterate the political activity of the subject of mass society. Through attacking the

¹ Crick, 94.

² Villa, 125.

³ Quoted in Villa, 125.

"political" identity of individuals, the regime will also seek to destroy their "plurality."

As McGowan states:

The proliferation of identities through action is what Arendt calls "plurality," the many-sided diversity in which we find ourselves and that constitutes the "world" in which humans can experience freedom. Totalitarianism represents the attempt to obliterate plurality and freedom—and, hence, to obliterate the "world" of human action itself.⁴

Or as Villa asserts: "Only through the systematic elimination of legally and institutionally articulated spaces of freedom can a totalitarian regime destroy the capacity for action implicit in the simple fact of human plurality."⁵ Moreover, this negation of the human world, of the political life of the individual as well as his/her freedom, is most evident in the spatial context of the concentration camp. "[I]n the perfect totalitarian society, for which the camps provide the paradigm, terror binds individuals so tightly together that "all channels of communication" disappear, and neither spontaneity nor individuality has space for expression."⁶

One of Arendt's most important points in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is her attempt to assert that totalitarian movements did not constitute exceptions, but rather the political form that can be generalized for the 20th century, be it in Russia or Germany, Italy, Spain or the Balkans. As Crick argues, "no one other than Arendt has tried so hard to see the links between [totalitarian ideologies and Western democracies] and to set up a mirror by which European civilization can recognize its faults and perhaps seize a last chance to set its house in order [...]"⁷ However, Arendt was not the first to point out the

⁴ McGowan, 16.

⁵ Villa, 129.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷ Crick, 93.

commonality between Hitlerism and Stalinism. Yet she ignored or left aside previous insights about this point in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁸

Meanwhile, the "mass man," who would be the chief protagonist of the totalitarian regime was not any monstrous being of exception either. His essential characteristic is not brutality or backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships.⁹ In Arendt's thought, human beings find their meaningful existence and identity, as well as freedom through relating to other human beings. In the case of the lack of such relations, they are reduced to a mass existence. The typical attribute of such an existence is "the mass man's typical feeling of superfluosity."¹⁰ Meanwhile, the anger created by this feeling of superfluosity will constitute the untapped energy of the masses waiting to be exploited by totalitarian regimes. "Abstract notions as guides for life"¹¹ which replace the concrete relationships that exist between individuals "provide the catalyst[s] that transform "race-thinking" [...] into full-scale racism."¹²

Totalitarianism, for Arendt, constitutes an attempt to destroy the body politic at home (in contradistinction to her discussion of imperialism in the colonies). In this context, Arendt makes important references to her understanding of the political which will become much more explicit in later works such as *The Human Condition*. The political is the space of the multiplication of power, of the creation of diversity and plurality, as well as the achievement of meaningful identity, of "freedom." These are all aspects which the totalitarian regime has the objective of obliterating. Therefore,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 317.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹² McGowan, 17.

"political action is the absolute antithesis of totalitarian systems."¹³

We have already spoken about the shift from the concrete to the abstract in totalitarian regimes. According to Arendt, the abstract serves to "establish the fictitious world of the movement as a tangible working reality of everyday life."¹⁴ Indeed, Crick also asserts that Arendt's book is at its soundest in its understanding of ideology:

[Arendt] could deal with the seeming rationality of the irrational by invoking, in a special sense, the concept of ideology: how crazy ideas of the gutter or the library desk top could become state policy in both regimes and could animate mass movements.¹⁵

For Arendt, ideology, along with terror, constitutes the power of totalitarian regimes, making it all the more difficult to see or operate outside the system. This is a point which Arendt elaborates in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Political action and individuality are indeed the negation of the premises of totalitarian regimes. "Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions [...]."¹⁶ This becomes possible only in the spatial context of the camp where "everything is possible."¹⁷ The camp seeks to reduce individuals to reactions, in the same manner as Pavlov's dog. In the process, spontaneity as the clearest expression of humanity is the first to be lost. According to Arendt, "[t]he real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they

¹³ Crick, 190.

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 391.

¹⁵ Crick, 98.

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 408.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 407.

had died, because terror enforces oblivion."⁴⁸ The moment a person is taken away for the concentration camp, his whole human existence is effaced from the surface of the earth. In contradistinction to the horrors of the camp, murder seems most human: it leaves behind a body, as well as memories of the life and existence of the person, and people with a right to mourn him or her. Totalitarian regimes claim the existence of men not only when they are alive, but also in death.

Arendt underlines the horror of the concentration camp as a realm beyond human experience and understanding. The first essential step in the road to total domination and to the destruction of all human existence is the killing of the "juridical person" in man, while the next step is the murder of the "moral person" in him. "Through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible, the consciously organized complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made total."⁴⁹ Moreover, after the deaths of both the juridical and moral persons, the destruction of the individuality is almost always successful. As posited earlier, human existence is reduced to a set of reactions, which is indeed the objective of the concentration and extermination camps in totalitarian regimes.

However, against this fact, Arendt stubbornly argues for human agency and creativity. As McGowan asserts, "[s]he steadfastly poise[s] the totalitarian "fiction" against the "reality" of a common world forged through intersubjective interaction."⁵⁰ While ideology (the "abstract") plays an important role in the awful reality of this fiction, the major part is taken by terror itself. Moreover, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁵⁰ McGowan, 27.

perhaps most successful in its attempt of reconstructing the lived reality of this terror (in spite of the impossibility of bearing witness to the camp as Giorgio Agamben argues). According to Halberstam, "Arendt's phenomenological thesis is that the experience of terror describes the mood of totalitarianism. In other words, terror accounts for the way in which the totalitarian subject stands in the world"²¹ or "terror shapes the extreme self-world relationship of the subject under totalitarianism."²² Here, terror is not only a means but also an end in itself.

Crick affords a historian's criticism to Arendt's book. He asserts that "[s]he is, quite properly, writing history backward: she selects what is relevant to understanding the mentality of the Nazis and of the Communists under Stalin, and she is not writing a general account of nineteenth-century extreme political sects."²³ This is indeed true, as well as the claim that the book "leaps from history to sociology to philosophy."²⁴ Moreover, while Arendt's account of Germany is fully detailed and vivid, she remains rather vague on the case of Stalinist Russia. Yet, once its objective and limits are clearly defined,²⁵ her theoretical insights remain most valuable for understanding the case of German fascism as well as its counterparts in different corners of the world. This longing to "understand" totalitarian regimes in order to not repeat their "radical evil" is perhaps the greatest legacy of Arendt. Her take on the Eichmann trial in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* represents yet another manifestation of it, with once more numerous theoretical insights into the nature of totalitarian regimes as well as into the nature of evil.

²¹ Halberstam, 107.

²² *Ibid.*, 108.

²³ Crick, 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁵ Arendt's book, in spite of its claims to historical scholarship is a work of political science and philosophy, with its major contributions being in the field of theory.

III. Judging Arendt on the Eichmann Trial

In 1960, the Israeli secret service kidnapped the ex-SS officer Adolf Eichmann, who had been responsible for the deportations and evacuations of Jews in several Eastern European countries under Nazi rule. He was caught in Argentina and was later brought back to Israel for trial. It was Hannah Arendt who covered the whole process for the *New Yorker*, and her five-part report was published in 1963 as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.²⁶

For Arendt, Eichmann was not the criminal architect of the Final Solution that he was asserted to be. Rather, he was extraordinary in his ordinariness: he was just a functionary who did his job and who got so involved in it that he actually gave it little thought. He was the ultimate representative of the mass man who had lost all human agency and political ability, and what struck Arendt the most was his sheer "thoughtlessness."

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been father 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.²⁷

This was the first point in which Arendt contradicted public opinion made prevalent in the trial and it was in this context that she spoke about the "banality of evil."

The second point at which she fundamentally differed from most observers was in her perception and depiction of the Jewish people. She wrote about the way in which the

²⁶ M. Gosses, 9.

²⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287.

Nazis had made use of local Jewish leaders and Jewish councils in organizing deportation, and she pointed out to the guilt remaining within those who were lumped together in the position of the innocent.

According to Cohen,

In raising this claim, Arendt remained true to the interpretation of anti-Semitism she presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. There, she argued that events relating to Jews, including those in which they were the victims, cannot be comprehended without considering the ways in which Jews themselves contributed to that outcome.²⁸

It sounded as if Arendt were accusing the Jews of collaboration with the Nazis in the context of the Holocaust. In fact, while she was fighting for an honest collective memory to be made possible for the Jews, she was also making an argument of the nature of the totalitarian regimes that create a daily reality without any real alternatives for the active assertion of human agency. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Eichmann and the Nazis were studied as human beings who performed mass murder. Their Jewish victims were also presented as human beings, not saints, and they figured in history not simply as passive entities, but as characters who affected their own fate.²⁹ Through her take on the trial, Arendt was actually according more agency to the Jews.

Moreover, the complexity and perplexity of totalitarian regimes manifested themselves at another point:

According to almost every conventional was of determining morality, Eichmann acted morally. Within Nazi Germany, where the courts had declared that "the Führer's words had the force of law," the conscientious Eichmann was not acting on "criminal" or "unlawful" orders when he furthered the murder of the Jews. Hence, there was no competing standard of morality that he might have pondered to determine whether his actions had been fit to be seen.³⁰

²⁸ Cohen, 254.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

³⁰ McGowan, 103.

In a sense, Eichmann's crime was that he had done his job well. The problem was not with him, but with the well-functioning totalitarian movement. The predicament of our time is perhaps "the discovery that people take their moral bearings so completely and so docilely from the world that surrounds them that the unthinkable can be transformed into the taken-for-granted almost overnight."⁴⁸ The camp is not the only sphere where "everything is possible." The whole society is prone to be the laboratory where totalitarian regimes test this maxim.

In the Eichmann case, Arendt wished that the court had passed judgment through solely considering Eichmann's deeds without referring to what he stood for in the context of the Holocaust. Yet, in this she was not apologetic for Eichmann, in spite of the fact that she posited him as "understandable" in a totalitarian context. For her, the fact still remained that he had supported and carried out a policy of mass murder. Arendt's main criticism of the prosecution was that it "refused to identify Eichmann's crime as a "crime against humanity"—or more specifically as it related to Eichmann, "crimes against mankind committed on the body of the Jewish people."⁴⁹ She was against anti-Semitism's being at the core of the proceedings, and while she insisted on the "personal" nature on Eichmann's crimes in the context where they were posited as representative of the mass of crimes against the Jewish people, she insisted on their importance in the context of humanity. Therefore, she directed her attention to totalitarianism itself and its impacts on its perpetrators and victims, and saw the trial as a turning point in her aim of making

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁹ *Marrus*, 208.

humanity not repeat its mistake. Arendt took issue with the prosecution at the point where it failed to point out the universal and historical significance of what had occurred.

Moreover, Arendt had long argued that "criminal responsibility was widely diffused throughout the Third Reich."³³ The guilt not only belonged to Eichmann nor to the SS officials tried at Nuremberg. It lay with totalitarian society. However, this certainly did not mean that Arendt wanted to posit the German people as possessing a collective guilt while the Jews were innocent. Instead, it meant that guilt was diffused at all levels of the totalitarian system—in those acting as well as in those within the body of the acted upon, who still unconsciously acted. As Mommsen asserts, "[t]he dehumanization not only of the perpetrators, but of the victims, too, appeared to Arendt one of the most terrifying experiences of totalitarian rule."³⁴ Moreover, in this context, we can also, along with Mommsen (231) see an element of self-criticism in Arendt in regards to her Jewishness.

In his article "Malicious Clerks: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil," Lozowick returns to historical documents in order to prove that Arendt was wrong in her assessment of the nature of Eichmann's guilt. He asserts that Arendt's claim to the "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann needs to be read in the context of Arendt's argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that "[t]he higher one climbs and the closer to power, the farther one is from reality and from contact with the non-totalitarian society and world."³⁵ In looking for a group of bureaucrats appropriate for proving the factuality of this assertion, the author was led to study Eichmann and his staff. His conclusion is that there

³³ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁴ Mommsen, 226.

³⁵ Lozowick, 215.

was no banality in Eichmann or his accomplices.

Eichmann and many of his closest colleagues were affiliated with nationalistic, anti-Semitic organizations before they joined the party or the SS, and earlier than 1932, so that opportunism was not their main motive.²⁶

Moreover, in the context of a series of reports written by Eichmann and his colleagues in the SD about the Jews of the Third Reich, he concludes:

Reading these reports, one finds many of the standard canards of Nazi anti-Semitism, except that the formulations are more sophisticated than usual. If he and his colleagues were earnestly writing and talking this way at the time merely out of opportunism, they certainly managed to hide the fact well. These were the very indoctrinators themselves.²⁷

Lozowick's historical data is much more extensive, but these points are enough to posit his argument against Arendt's contention about the banality of Eichmann's deeds.

However, this argument is flawed at the point that it considers Arendt's argument about the "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann to be set solely in the context of his opportunism. I do not believe that it rightly responds to Arendt's main idea about the power of totalitarian ideologies, rendering "thoughtless" their perpetrators as well as victims.

However, Arendt herself revised her opinion on ideology and asserted that once extermination was well under way, ideology lost its importance and "annihilation became a more or less self-sustaining process."²⁸ For the same reason, she argued that the slaughter would not end with the Jews but that the regime would turn to other groups as well. This was indeed demonstrated in the Nazi policies of euthanasia. Moreover, insisting on the Holocaust as the crime against humanity par excellence, "she stressed that the transpersonal element of the Holocaust, which she interpreted as the self-destruction

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁸ *Marxism*, 229.

of humanity never would have come to its end with the liquidation of the Jews, but would have involved other groups, as well [...].³⁹

We can once more relate Arendt's discussions of the Holocaust in the context of the Eichmann trial to her strong belief in the political and her understanding of totalitarianism as its negation.

As the worst culmination of terror and devastation, the Holocaust revealed that the nature of totalitarian rule consisted in the destruction of politics as such because it destroyed in the long run any possibility of political communication and meaningful political action.⁴⁰

Therefore, totalitarian rule also destroyed all confidence in the body politic. As linked to this, Arendt stresses the unrelatedness of the Holocaust to specific political and economic interests. This is demonstrated in the policy of annihilation and the institution of the camp that ran counter to any concrete interests.

IV. Conclusion

No matter what its flaws and inadequacies are, Arendt's analysis of totalitarian movements in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* have many insights to offer. In *Origins*, she discusses in length the nature of totalitarian regimes, from the factors that led to their advent to the sort of ideology and terror they created. Moreover, she posits totalitarianism in the context of her general theory about human individuality, freedom and the meaning of the political on which she elaborated in later works such as *The Human Condition*. Arendt takes her assessment of totalitarian ideology that she elaborates on in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, on to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

where she applies it both to the person of Eichmann as banal perpetrator, as well as to the body of the Jews as responsible victims. In the process, she proves the importance of the role that she had accorded to ideology in her theorization in The Origins of Totalitarianism.

All the insights to the nature of totalitarian regimes notwithstanding, Arendt's most important contribution through these two works is perhaps the theoretical understanding she gives of the nature of evil in modern society and the necessity for the political, that is for individual choice and freedom of action. While Eichmann in Jerusalem is a convincing reminder of the banality of evil existent in totalitarian ideology, both the latter and Origins testify to the power of ideology as such.

If along with Arendt we posit that memory and understanding serve as our sole protection against the repetition of the Holocaust, not forgetting Arendt's insights and following her lead in seeking to understand the nature of evil and of ideology may have a similar function. The evil inherent in the Holocaust indeed is "radical," but at the same time it is "banal," and ideology has the power of dragging us all along with it, of rendering "thoughtless" the most thoughtful in our midst.

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