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The Equivocations of Politics

On the Significance of Totalitarianism in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought

There is a great tendency to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalisations. In each one of us, there lurks such a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense.

Until now the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems only to have proved only that everything can be destroyed.

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of
Totalitarianism*, 439 and 459 respectively

Introduction

The concept of “totalitarianism” was developed by political philosophers to face up to a new and previously unthinkable social reality: the experience of Nazism and Stalinism in the middle years of the twentieth century. It was bowdlerised by those who locked it in the conceptual armoury of cold-war anti-communism, but in

its true form it expressed a brave, often marginalised, collective effort to avoid averting our eyes from horror.

Beneath its apparent self-identity the concept of totalitarianism was in fact used quite differently in different theoretical contexts. The conventional usage contrasts both types of totalitarianism with liberal democracy in order to reaffirm the institutions and practices of representative government. The more radical usage implies a confrontation with both liberal democracy and official “Marxism”, in order to question on the one hand why liberalism was unable to resist the rise of totalitarianism in the west and on the other why “Marxism” came to justify barbarism in the east or at least end up as what Claude Lefort called a “reformed totalitarianism”.¹ The first of these responses leaves liberal forms of representative government intact as the unfortunate victim of malevolent external forces; the second puts representative government (in both its parliamentary and Party-State modes) into question as a responsible and no longer innocent actor in the death of politics.

Where Hannah Arendt stood in relation to these two traditions of political thought has been a matter of some contention. While she was alive, her theory of totalitarianism was often treated (especially by Marxists) as if it were a conventional apology for American-style representative democracy², but this misreading of her work has now been overturned by a new generation of interpreters who have sought to uncover the radical character of her politics.³ There now seems to be general agreement that Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism had nothing to do with uncritical apologetics for liberal values or with the restoration of representative government. On the contrary, as far as Arendt was concerned, the experience of totalitarianism cast a dark shadow over all claims of liberal thought to innocence and challenged head-on the “hardened prejudice” which associates representative government with political freedom.

In the current literature, however, do we not find a certain one-sidedness, albeit one which perhaps reflects Arendt's own emphasis. She is generally acclaimed for her determination to "reclaim the practice of politics from representative, state-centered and state-centering institutions" (Honig 1993, 124-125); or as Dana Villa put it, "Arendt makes no attempt to escape 'the true predicaments of our time' by appealing to platitudes concerning reason, will and the institutions of representative democracy" (Villa 1996, 269). This inversion of the traditional reading of Arendt is well taken but it downplays the most original and distinctive aspect of Arendt's politics: that it combines the critique of representation with the critique of the critique of representation. It was the duality of Arendt's criticism that was crucial. In her use of the concept of totalitarianism, there was a double significance: Arendt was far from rationalising the liberal-democratic state but also far from rationalising the activist politics of resistance to which disillusionment gave rise.

The Equivocations of Liberalism

The recurrent theme of *Origins of Totalitarianism* was the legitimate disgust which every thinking being feels over the chasm between liberal concepts of peace, freedom, justice, human rights, etc. and the existence of world war and mass slaughter, colonial expansion and racial terror, class inequalities and impoverishment, ethnic nationalism and the stateless, etc. The failure of liberalism either to live up to its own ideals or to resist those who decried its ideals seemed to Arendt to be a clear and distinct lessons to be taken from this whole disaster. In *The Eggs Speak Up* (1951) Arendt expressed her conviction that liberalism had "demonstrated its inability to resist totalitarianism so often that its failure may already be counted among the historical

facts of our century” (EU, 282). We might look back on the heyday of the liberal tradition with a certain nostalgic affection, she added, but not pretend that “the past is alive in the sense that it is in our power to return to it” (EU, 282). She reminded those ex-communists who wanted to return after the war to the “democratic way of life” that it is “the same world against whose complacency, injustice and hypocrisy these same men once raised a radical protest, where the elements which eventually crystallised and have never ceased to crystallise into totalitarianism, are to be found” (EU, 281).

Arendt’s determination to confront the “burden of events” in the twentieth century was at once a confrontation with liberalism’s claim to innocence: not to “explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalisations” and not to allow ourselves to be “wheedled with the voice of common sense” (OT, 440). Thus the contradictions of representative government appeared among the elements which crystallised into totalitarianism. Behind all the conventional political parties, she argued in *Origins*, lay “slumbering majorities” who were invisible as long as focus was placed on the parties themselves but emerged as “one great unorganised, structureless mass of furious individuals” as soon as the party system went into crisis (OT, 315). One of the reasons why totalitarian movements were the beneficiaries of the crisis of parliamentary democracy, she suggests, is that the ground was prepared for them by a representative system of government which left most people atomised, malleable, at best politically indifferent and at worst brimming with resentment at the invisibility of their sufferings.

What we call democracy, Arendt wrote ten years later in *On Revolution*, is “a form of government where the few rule, supposedly in the interest of the many” and where “public happiness and public freedom...become the privilege of the few” (OR, 269). Political parties, she argued,

serve primarily as instruments through which “the power of the people is curtailed and controlled”, their programmes are “ready-made formulas which demand not action but execution” (OR, 264), they turn political life into a specialist vocation and reserve for representatives alone the opportunity to engage in those activities of “‘expressing, discussing and deciding’ which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom” (OR, 235). Arendt shared Jefferson’s foreboding that representative democracy formally gives “the people” power but without giving them “the opportunity of being republicans and of acting as citizens” (OR, 253). Normally this division between representatives and the represented may not be a matter of concern except for those committed to a principle of participation; in “dark times”, she suggests, it may become the source of great danger.

Arendt’s critique of representative government was, however, more nuanced than it first appears. She distinguished, for example, between the relative stability of the British two-party system, which gave it some protection from anti-democratic forces, and the hidden authoritarianism of Continental multi-party systems which made them so vulnerable to totalitarian movements. The difference between them, as she saw it, was that in the multi-party systems the state stood above the disparate parties and claimed to represent the nation as a whole, while the two-party system unified state and party in the sense that the ruling party was both representative and governmental. Since multi-party government was formed via party alliances, no one party could take responsibility for government and the parties never transcended particular interests to become parties of government managing the public affairs of the people as a whole. Public affairs were then monopolised by state executives beyond the reach of the parties and the citizens they were meant to represent. At least in its Continental form, she concluded,

representative government was among the origins of totalitarianism.

This contrast between the “Continental” and the “Anglo-American” was later developed in Arendt’s comparison of the American and French revolutionary traditions. She acknowledged one achievement of the American revolution that was lacking in the French: its formation of a lasting constitutional and institutional framework to guarantee the rights and property of individuals and a government based on the consent of the people. However, she also saw in the American tradition a source of the same political indifference, atomisation and conformity which she had discerned in *Origins*. While for example she recognised that the Bill of Rights offers a crucial defence of the private realm against public power, she argued that in a bourgeois society, where the principal source of corruption derives from the colonisation of the public realm by private interests, it is the public realm which is in most need of protection. To remedy this lack, a different kind of solution was required: an institutional and constitutional framework designed to guarantee public life as well as private rights. The decision to place all guarantees on the side of private right and the failure to consolidate institutions of popular participation deprived public life of its space and right to be.

At no time did Arendt equate the liberal state (even in its most authoritarian variants) with totalitarian regimes; such an elision could not have been further from her mind. Thus she took great pains to specify the temporal and geographic boundaries of totalitarianism, Russia from 1929 to 1953, Germany from 1933 to 1945, and not to stretch the concept beyond its proper usage. She characterised the difference between totalitarian regimes and even the most authoritarian bourgeois states not as one of degree but quality. At the same time, however, she traced the origins of totalitarianism deep within the

antinomies of the modern state and “normal” political life. If we are to keep both sides of her approach in view, we should say that her use of the term “totalitarianism” was a long way both from its use in conventional political theory and its use in a vulgarised “postmodernism” which draws too straight a line between modernity and the Holocaust.

The Equivocations of Radicalism

It is in the context that we can begin to understand Arendt’s analysis of “European nihilism” not as a pathological state of mind of a few destructive individuals but rather as a valid philosophical expression of the “dark times” which followed the First World War. The problem, as Arendt saw it, was previewed in Nietzsche’s analysis in *Will to Power* where he defined nihilism thus:

What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer.⁴

Nietzsche sought to capture the *fin-de-siècle* mood of irredeemable decline when the values and beliefs that had been taken as the highest manifestation of the spirit of the West had lost their efficacy and validity. He believed that this loss of values, born out of the falseness of liberalism, bred a destructive and spiritless radicalism, full of “hostility to culture” and images of destruction.⁵ This sense of “coming barbarism” which Nietzsche experienced at the turn of the century, was perceived in even stronger form for Arendt in the inter-war period.

Arendt shared the sense of revulsion felt by all those who confronted the gulf between liberal values and the experience of mass slaughter, poverty and racism, and never ceased to declare how well founded it was.

Simply to brand as outbursts of nihilism this violent dissatisfaction with the prewar age...is to overlook how justified disgust can be in a society wholly permeated with the ideological outlook and moral standards of the bourgeoisie. (OT, 328)

Nihilism was the spectre haunting Europe, not because it was pathological but on the contrary because it was grounded. However, Arendt also shared Nietzsche's concerns over the kind of radicalism which was being generated out of disillusionment. What was called the "front generation", she wrote, were completely absorbed by their desire to see the ruin of this whole world of fake security, fake culture and fake life. This desire was so great that it outweighed in impact and articulateness all earlier attempts at a "transformation of values" such as Nietzsche had attempted... Destruction without mitigation, chaos and ruin as such assumed the dignity of supreme values. (OT, 328).

What Arendt perceived was the destructive nihilism which could declare with one of Nazism's sympathisers: "When I hear the word culture, I draw my revolver". Its source was disgust with all existing standards, with every power that be; its hope was that everything they knew, the whole culture and texture of life, might go down in "storms of steel" (Jünger). For this "front generation", Arendt argued, war was the truth of the existing world-order and the father of the new. In the words of Thomas Mann, war was the means of "chastisement" and "purification" in a corrupt age, the "great equaliser" in a class-ridden society, the arena of "selflessness" which obliterated bourgeois egoism and satisfied Bakunin's plea "I do not want to be I, I want to be we". It was the site of Nechaev's "doomed man", the anti-bourgeois with "no personal interest, no affairs, no sentiments, attachments, property, not even a name of his own". War was the ground for the philosophy of action

whose principle was that “you are what you have done” and whose existential dream was of escape from society into the world of doing something, heroic or criminal, which was undetermined. (OT, 326-331)

While Arendt wanted to affirm how “justified disgust can be in a society wholly permeated with the ideological outlook and moral standards of the bourgeoisie” (OT, 328), she was also repelled by the “anti-humanist, anti-liberal, anti-individualist and anti-cultural instincts” of an “elite” which elevated violence, power and cruelty as the supreme capacities of humankind.

Since the bourgeoisie claimed to be the guardian of Western traditions and confounded all moral issues by parading publicly virtues which it not only did not possess in private and business life, but actually held in contempt, it seemed revolutionary to admit cruelty, disregard of human values, and general amorality, because this at least destroyed the duplicity upon which the existing society seemed to rest. (OT, 334)

In the twilight of double moral standards, she argued, it seemed radical to flaunt extreme attitudes: “to wear publicly the mask of cruelty if everybody...pretended to be gentle”. She cited the case of Céline’s *Bagatelles pour un Massacre* in which he proposed the massacre of all Jews, and the welcome which André Gide gave to it, not of course because he wanted to kill the Jews...but because he rejoiced in the blunt admission of such a desire and in the fascinating contradiction between Céline’s bluntness and the hypocritical politeness which surrounded the Jewish question in all respectable quarters. (OT, 335)

The desire to unmask hypocrisy, Arendt commented, might have been a rebellion against the double standards of the bourgeoisie, but it was also welcome to those bourgeois tired of the tension between words and deeds and ready to remove their masks in favour of a naked brutality.

In short, Arendt saw this new outbreak of “European nihilism” as a shallow radicalism. It channelled contempt for political parties into a doctrine of “movements” that suppressed all forms of representation except that of the totalitarian movement itself. It exposed the double standards endemic in the separation of *citoyen* and bourgeois only to attack the very separation of public and private life in the name of the “wholeness of man”. It revealed the false trust on which representative institutions are based only to promote a philosophy of universal distrust. It turned the untruths of the bourgeois system of rule into a repudiation of the very distinction between truth and falsehood. It exposed the hypocrisy of bourgeois society only to espouse a violent cult of “unmasking” as its solution. Its contempt for facts as such, she wrote, preceded the determinate lies of totalitarian movements, its cult of unmasking preceded the reign of terror. Concerning this wave of European nihilism, Arendt’s view might be summed up in the proposition that its insight into the poverty of modern politics everywhere yielded false conclusions.

To be sure, Arendt’s critique of the “front generation” did not lead her to embrace hollow notions concerning the guilt of nihilism “as if Nietzsche had submitted meekly to the nihilistic trends of his time, or, on the contrary, was to blame for the rise of Nazism” (EU, 431). Her argument refused to embrace these palliatives. Disillusionment with democracy certainly impelled many intellectuals, some of whom were influenced by Nietzsche and Marx – into either the Nazi or Stalinist movements and doubtless played a part in their rise to power. But totalitarianism was basically an anti-intellectual movement which sometimes devoured its former intellectuals, sometimes expelled them, sometimes marginalised them, but always ignored their ideas. What was far more important than the destructive radicalism of nihilistic ideas was the destructive nihilism of society itself.

When Arendt excavated the political ground on which the devaluation of all values flourished, what she found above all was imperialism. For the first time in human history, she argued, imperialism freed power from all restraint and expansion for expansion's sake became the credo of the age. The unlimited accumulation of power became the political corollary of the unlimited accumulation of capital.

Expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism, it is an entirely new concept in the long history of political thought and action. The reason for this surprising originality is simply that this concept is not really political at all, but has its origin in the realm of business speculation. (OT, 125)

It was here, in the political rule of the bourgeoisie, that Arendt discerned the "will to power" first emancipated from all moral or political constraint. Here Arendt discovered the foundations of a power which "left to itself can achieve nothing but more power" and a violence which "administered for power's sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate" (OT, 137). To be sure, liberal institutions and practices of the nation-state at home, as well as nationalist movements in the colonies, provided obstacles to the growth of imperial violence, as a result of which "the conscience of the nation, represented by Parliament and a free press...was resented by colonial administrators in all European countries" (OT, 133); but this resistance was either eroded from within by the racialising of the nation or swept aside from without. No wonder liberalism entered into disrepute. No wonder too, Arendt added, that European nihilism found an open door in the corridors of power and a ready audience among the new rulers.

Two Sides of the Same Medal

The two-sidedness of Arendt's polemic was already prefigured in the Preface of *Origins*. Here she rebelled against a liberal spirit which could do no more than hope for "an eventual restoration of the old world order...to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion" (OT, viii - ix). But she also rebelled against that kind of radicalism which, though justifiably repelled by the gulf between liberal values and the experience of cruelty and suffering, could only find expression in a politics of destruction. As Arendt put it, "Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal" (OT, vii). The onus on political philosophy, as she saw it, was to protest both against the tyranny of conventional values which had lost their credibility in the face of totalitarianism, and against the tyranny of a world devoid of values where the only gods that rule are egoism and violence. She experienced contemporary political philosophy as caught between "pious banalities which have lost their meaning and in which nobody believes any longer, and the vulgar banality of *homo homini lupus* which as a guide to human action is utterly meaningless" (OT, 459).

This predicament was not treated by Arendt as an *aporia*, as if there were no way out, but as a *diaporia*, the "difficult way" was to take her on a long and complicated journey in search of a political spirit whose *raison d'être* is freedom rather than violence. The primacy of experience over theory was her compass. What was important to her was that we face up to the "burden of events, neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise" (OT, xiv). The "event" of totalitarianism interrupted and disturbed all our standards of ethical and political judgement. Arendt could not fall

back on the apparently safe ground of liberalism because she saw liberalism's core concepts, those of humanity, progress, reason, duty, representation, etc. – as all implicated in totalitarian justifications.

The consolation of “humanity” which Kant had offered for the death and suffering which befall individuals, that violence and barbarity play their part in the Progress of Humankind toward mastery of its own destiny, this sign of the “unsocial sociability of man” could no longer be upheld. Totalitarianism turned the liberal faith in progress into a vision of a new world order and of a “new man” emerging out of storms of destruction. For Arendt, however, it was no more possible to “write off the death camps as work-related accidents in the victorious advancement of civilisation” as it was for Adorno.⁶ The victims of the Gulag and the Holocaust could no longer be chalked up to progress.⁷ The wounds inflicted on individuals in the death camps of totalitarianism could no longer be compensated by any grand narrative. In answer to the question Valéry posed after the First War, “Knowledge and Duty, are you then suspect?”, totalitarianism had given an affirmative answer.⁸ The extermination of Jews in this “unworld” was conceived as the triumph of duty over instinct, moral commitment over both hate and pity, the “laws” of life and history over feeling and mere sentiment. Its execution was conceived in the manner of a scientific experiment, complete with white coats and racial theoreticians, resulting in a seemingly methodical, industrialised system of murder. In this context, terror is not that of the pogrom but rather, as Arendt put it, “the realisation of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action” (OT, 465). The movement, its Leader and the secret police(s) represented themselves as the law of life or history incarnate.

For Arendt anti-totalitarian politics had to go beyond conventional forms of anti-Stalinism or anti-Nazism if it was to face up to and resist those ideas which had crossed the boundaries between normal politics and totalitarianism: the idea of Man rather than people in their “infinite plurality”, the idea of Progress rather than the spontaneity and actions of individuals, the idea of the People rather than debate, disagreement and the exchange of opinions, the idea of Reason rather than the reasoning of thoughtful persons, these were the “elements of totalitarian thinking which exist today in all free societies” (EU, 309). In totalitarianism the dominance of abstractions over flesh and blood individuals, a dominance which Hegel and Marx had already perceived in embryo in the formation of the modern state – turned into a monster far worse than Arendt’s forebears could imagine. The phenomenon they all confronted, however, was the same: the rule of abstractions over real human beings in the modern age.

In the face of the “disaster” Arendt was clearly no more content than Hegel or Marx with a “cold despair” which recognises that in the actual world things are bad or at best indifferent, but that nothing better can be expected here.⁹ “Keep your mind in hell, and despair not” would have been a more fitting epitaph for her engagement with totalitarian politics.¹⁰ But what does it mean in this context “not to despair” when opposition was as implicated as that which it opposed.

The Originality of Totalitarianism

For Arendt politics now meant facing up to the “horrible originality” of totalitarianism: that it broke the “thread of tradition” and the possibility of renewing it. This was not because “some new idea came into the world, but because its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions;

they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and standards for moral judgement" (EU, 309-310). In *Tradition and the Modern Age* she embraced the same theme when she quoted Tocqueville, "the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future". What was in evidence in the totalitarian event was not the "result" of the rationalisation of society or the "product" of modernity, an end which can only be read backwards, but "the beginning of something new whose outcome is unpredictable" (EU, 429). It does not mean that "elements of the past have received their final, definite form, but that something inescapably new was born" (EU, 326). In this sense totalitarianism belongs to the future insofar as its emergence can "never be deduced from its own elements but is caused by some factor which lies in the realm of human freedom" (EU, 326).¹¹ What was needed was to grasp the specificity of the new, not to dissolve it into its elements. Between the analytic question, what are the elements which crystallised into totalitarianism, and the synthetic, why did these elements crystallise in this particular form, there is always a space where human potentiality and freedom meet. Totalitarianism is more than its origins. What is important is what differentiates it.

In power, Arendt suggests, totalitarianism had little in common with the architectonic of the modern state whose rationality and contradictions Hegel had first diagnosed in the *Philosophy of Right* and Weber had defended in the face of its impending collapse. The totalitarian multiplicity of administrative organisations had little in common with the rule-bound hierarchies of a singular bureaucratic apparatus:

Knowledge of whom to obey and a comparatively permanent settlement of hierarchy would introduce an element of stability which is essentially absent from totalitarian rule (OT, 401).

Totalitarian appeals to the laws of life and history had nothing in common with any system of formal legality:

Positive laws are primarily designed to function as stabilising factors for the ever changing movements of men. In the interpretation of totalitarianism, all laws have become laws of movement (OT, 463).

Totalitarian appeals to scientific justification depended on pseudo-sciences (like eugenics) and vulgarised versions of “Marxism” and “Darwinism” which had little in common with the original articles. Its mode of representation, through the movement and the Leader, had nothing in common with the party system of liberal democracy:

The Leader represents the movement in a way totally different from all ordinary party leaders; he claims personal responsibility for every action, deed or misdeed, committed by any member or functionary in his official capacity (OT, 374).

And finally its employment of terror and “power-ideology” was devoid of any of the rational calculations which govern the exercise of violence even in the most authoritarian of states:

Totalitarian terror is no longer a means to an end; it is the very essence of such a government (EU, 305).

Arendt referred to the “so-called totalitarian state” precisely because it was no longer a state in the proper sense of the term that governed society; totalitarianism was the self-propelling and self-destructive triumph of movement over structure, not the realisation of the “totalising” universalism of political modernity. It is one thing to trace the elements of totalitarianism in a preceding liberal order, another to tar the liberal values of reason, science, bureaucracy, law,

progress etc. with the over-stretched brush of total domination.

The “lesson” Arendt took from the experience of totalitarianism contained both these elements: on the one hand, intensify our sense of “the gap between past and future”; on the other, neither forget nor reject traditional concepts and theories but “distil from them anew their original spirit”. It was a difficult tension. Arendt’s description of Benjamin’s “poetic” thinking, that it works with “thought fragments” it can wrest from the past, applies very much to her own.

What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallisation...some things survive in new crystallised forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements.¹²

In this sense, at least, traditional concepts and theories are not “dead”, but precisely what things from the past have survived in “new crystallised forms” remains to be answered.

One answer we find in Arendt, and is developed by many of her contemporary commentators, points to performative notions of action. This direction was spelt out in an early article on the experience of totalitarianism which I mentioned above: *The Eggs Speak Up* (1951). Here Arendt took up arms against the hoary old chestnut beloved of official Communists, “You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs”. Speaking up for the eggs, she argued that a simplistic proverb like this only has appeal because it expresses in a vulgar form “some quintessence of Western political thought”. What was this quintessence? Arendt’s answer was that it derived from the element of destruction inherent in all technical activity, like “you can’t make a table without killing a tree”, but an element of destruction that becomes all the more pronounced when applied to political activity. Its application to politics, she

insisted, was not a monopoly of totalitarian thinking; totalitarianism only drew the final consequences from the realm of modern politics. The difficulty facing us as political actors, she suggests, is no longer to think of ourselves “in this tradition of human handiwork” (EU, 283) as *homo faber* or even less as *homo laborans*, but as actors enjoying the “miraculous” human capacity to create something new.

In this regard, Arendt’s “anti-totalitarian” politics was designed to break from the notion of “making men good”. This is why she criticised both Aristotle and Rousseau for continuing to conceive man as *homo faber* in spite of all their gestures toward action, participation and performance.¹³ But Arendt herself (from her discussion of ancient notions of political freedom to the modern revolutionary tradition) constantly encountered the same problem. When she wrote of the “crystallisation of elements” or in a more active mode of the “distillation of spirit”, it is the indeterminacy of origins and outcomes in the first case and the skill of the worker constructing her handiwork in the second that is expressed in these metaphors. The link between labour, work and action, if you wish, between politics and production, is not easily severed. The production of a society in which totalitarian movements have no place and in which, as Alain Finkielkraut put it, individuals become the “guardians” rather than the “means” of humanity, remained within her compass.

Arendt’s difficulty takes us back to *Origins*. The significance of totalitarianism in her analysis lay not in its reduction of politics to the technology of fabrication, but rather in the fact that “the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed” (OT, 459). Totalitarianism was not about making but destroying, not about power but violence. Its highest achievement was the death camp, but it does not take much to kill people, far less than to build something,

anything, that is new. People are relatively easy to kill, witness the lack of relics in the death camps of Sobibor, Belzec, Chelmo... Auschwitz itself was hardly the “final consequence” either of the politicisation of modern technology or of the technologisation of modern politics. In *Modernity and the Holocaust* Zygmunt Bauman used the metaphor of the gardener removing weeds to describe the genocide, but whatever plans the Nazis had to transform the landscape of the east into a German “garden”, these were all abandoned as the “law of killing” substituted for their failure. The totalitarian project of making something new was in fact contradicted by increasingly frenzied efforts only to destroy, to kill, to create the simulacrum of power where real power was absent.

The difficulty Arendt had in “facing up to and resisting the burden” of these events is that, as a particular political form, “anti-totalitarianism” is inclined to mimic aspects of that which it most opposes: the broken promises of a “new beginning”, the devaluation of political liberalism, hatred of bureaucracy, the self-aggrandising myth of “total domination”, the sacralisation of “radical evil”, not least the subordination of work and labour to a certain kind of political “action”. There is perhaps no sense of doing without the concepts of totalitarianism in order to destroy totalitarianism. To quote Derrida out of context, “we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest”.¹⁴ Arendt’s strength, as I see it, lay in the constant battles she fought to free herself from this mimetic relation: not so much to offer a solution in the form of a “purified” theory of action, but a relentless questioning and radical equivocation.

Notes

- ¹ See Claude Lefort, "Le concept de totalitarisme", paper presented at the Social Theory Centre, University of Warwick, 1997.
- ² See for example Eric Hobsbawm, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution", in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*, New York, Pantheon, 1973, 201-208.
- ³ See for example, Benhabib, Seyla *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Sage London 1996; Bernstein, Richard, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, Polity, Cambridge, 1996; Canovan, Margaret, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, CUP, Cambridge, 1994; Hansen, Phillip, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship*, Polity, Cambridge, 1993; Hinchman, Lewis and Sandra, *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, SUNY, Albany 1994; Honig, Bonnie, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993; Villa, Dana, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996.
- ⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage Press, 1969, 9.
- ⁵ In a passage from *Untimely Meditations* Nietzsche captured the experience of "devaluation" thus:

Now how does the philosopher see the culture of our time? Naturally quite differently than those philosophy professors who are satisfied with their state. When he thinks of the universal haste and the increasing speed with which things are falling, of the cessation of all contemplativeness and simplicity, it almost seems to him as if he were seeing the symptoms of a total extermination and uprooting of culture. The waters of religion are ebbing and they are leaving behind swamps or ponds; the nations are again separating from one another in the most hostile manner and they are trying to rip each other to shreds. The sciences, without any measure and pursued in the blindest spirit of *laissez faire*, are breaking apart and dissolving everything which is firmly believed; the edified classes and states are being swept along by a money economy which is enormously contemptible. Never was the world more a world, never was it poorer in love and good. The educated

classes are no longer lighthouses or sanctuaries in the midst of all this turbulent secularisation; they themselves become more turbulent by the day, more thoughtless and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism. (Nietzsche 1983, 148-9).

⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, 1974.

⁷ It is this intuition that makes the viewer so uncomfortable with the final, triumphant scene of *Schindler's List*.

⁸ This was quoted in Alain Finkielkraut, *Remembering in Vain: The Klaus Barbie Trial and Crimes Against Humanity*, Columbia University Press 1992, 29. From Paul Valéry, "La Crise de l'esprit", in *Variété* 1, Gallimard, 1978, 15.

⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Preface.

¹⁰ Quoted by Gillian Rose in *Love's Work*, Chatto and Windus, 1995, from Staretz Silouan.

¹¹ See by contrast Zygmunt Bauman's misreading of Arendt in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991. He writes of the Holocaust as "a rare test of the hidden possibilities of modern society", that it "arose out of a genuinely rational concern and was generated by bureaucracy true to its form", was "witness to the advance of civilisation", was based on the "applied technology of the mass production line", was "the product of modernity", etc.

¹² Arendt, "Introduction" to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Schocken, New York 1968, 39.

¹³ Aristotle wrote: "the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions". *Ethics*, 1099b, 30.

¹⁴ J. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in *Writing and Difference*, 280.

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