

Thinking in Dark Times
Roger Berkowitz

Forthcoming in:

Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics
ed. by Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz, & Thomas Keenan
Fordham University Press 2009.

In Bertold Brecht's poem "To Posterity," the poet laments:

Truly, I live in dark times!
An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead
Points to insensitivity. He who laughs
Has not yet received
The terrible news.

What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!
And he who walks quietly across the street,
Passes out of the reach of his friends
Who are in danger?¹

Brecht's poem inspires the title of one of Hannah Arendt's lesser read books, *Men in Dark Times*. For Arendt, dark times are not limited to the tragedies of the 20th century; they are not even a rarity in the history of the world. Darkness, as she would have us understand it, does not name the genocides, purges, and hunger of a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden. As Arendt observes, the tragedies to which Brecht's poem refers were not shrouded in secrecy and mystery, yet they were darkened by the "highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns."² Similarly today, the various outrages--environmental, economic, and governmental--that confront

us daily are hidden in plain sight. Darkness, for Arendt, names the all-too-public invisibility of inconvenient facts, and not simply the horror of the facts themselves.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt responds to what she, borrowing from Martin Heidegger, calls the light of the public that obscures everything. The black light of the public realm is, of course, the chatter and talk that drown the reality of life in “incomprehensible triviality.” It is the vapid clichés that mar speech on TV news channels and by the water cooler. For Arendt, as for Heidegger, “everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of “mere talk” that irresistibly arises out of the public realm.”³ And yet, Arendt, unlike Heidegger, resists the philosophical withdrawal from the public world into a realm of philosophical contemplation.

Instead of world-weary withdrawal, Arendt writes with the conviction that “we have the right to expect some illumination.” The darkness of the public spotlight is, she insists, not inevitable. On the contrary, it is possible and even necessary that darkness cede to light.

In seeking light in the public realm, Arendt shuns the embrace of rationality, democracy, and universal values that are the source of the optimism driving much of political thinking in modern times. Al Gore, for example, has recently argued that the crisis facing the nation and the world have been allowed to flourish because reason is under attack. In his book *The Assault on Reason*, Gore argues that a “faith in the power of reason--the belief that free citizens can govern themselves wisely and fairly by resorting to logical debate on the basis of the best evidence available, instead of raw power--was and remains the central premise of American democracy.” That faith is, he writes, under assault. He blames TV, advertising, and the corporatization of press--all of which have

undermined what Gore, citing Jürgen Habermas, calls “the structure of the public forum.”⁴ In the face of the dangers posed by dictators and environmental disaster, Gore embraces Habermas’ claim that reasoned deliberation can yield rational and thus decent decisions.⁵ For Gore, as for Habermas, dark times demand the light of reason.

The faith in reason that animates both Gore and Habermas is seductive. It speaks to the pride of man: that we, as rational beings, can come together and dispassionately and rationally move ourselves--fitfully at times--towards a better world. Our faith speaks to our scientific age, in which we believe that we can understand and improve both the natural and the political worlds. And our conviction reflects the fundamental claim of enlightenment, that our reason will set us free.

For Arendt, however, to reassert our rationalist tradition in the face of its rampant violation is to ignore the facts of our times. If the last 100 years have taught us anything, it is that “the subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition.”⁶ It is questionable whether any universal affirmation of the values of human reason and human dignity can offer a meaningful bulwark against the temptations of evil-doing. The pressing need for rationally decipherable human values--let no one deny the need is pressing--does not, alas, render those values actual. Mature thought requires, Arendt implores us repeatedly, that we trade the fantasies of wish fulfillment for the honest work of thoughtful comprehension.

To comprehend the failure of rationality as guarantor of a peaceful and prosperous life is not merely to recognize the limits of reason’s universal knowability. Beyond the charge of relativism, Arendt insists that we face squarely the possibility that the claims of rationality itself offer no protection against the very horrors that Gore and Habermas

enlist it to oppose. On the contrary, all too often the arguments in favor of genocide, torture, and terror are made in the voice of reason. Arendt reveals how the totalitarian and dictatorial regimes of the 20th century counted upon and received popular support. Today, suicide bombers rationalize their use of terror as the most efficient way to address their political claims even as democratic governments rationalize their use of torture in their elusive pursuit of security. Indeed, the normalization of terror and torture shows how ordinary men can reason themselves into justifying what ought to be unthinkable. Reason, Arendt warns, risks fitting “man into the iron band of terror.”⁷ Reason, she insists, reasons, it does not think.

If reason risks descending into the justifications and rationalizations that spread darkness in our times, Arendt argues that the only reliable source of light in dark times is found in the activity of thinking. From the beginning to the end of her writing life, Arendt situates herself as a thinker even as she warns against the dangers of reason. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her grand inquiry into the roots of totalitarianism in rootlessness, loneliness, and thoughtlessness, Arendt frames her inquiry as an effort of comprehension, by which she means “the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality--whatever it may be.” In *The Human Condition*, she explains her project as a “matter of thought” that opposes the thoughtlessness that “seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time.” And in her engagement with what she saw as the thoughtlessness behind Adolf Eichmann’s evil deeds, she asks: “Could the activity of thinking as such be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it?”⁸ Thinking, Arendt suggests, is the

only reliable safety net against the increasingly totalitarian or even bureaucratic temptations to evil that threaten the modern world.

By thinking Arendt means something quite specific, namely the silent dialogue with oneself that Socrates describes in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Only one who speaks with oneself will worry that in acting unethically he or she will have to live with a criminal. It is Socrates' habit of thinking with his other self, his *daimon*, that Arendt argues stands behind Socrates' moral claim that "it would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I direct were out of tune and loud with discord, and that most men should not agree with me and contradict me, rather than that I, being one, should be out of tune with *myself* and contradict *myself*."⁹ Arendt repeatedly returns to this line of Socrates and highlights his claim that an individual person, though one, can be out of tune with himself or herself. "If I disagree with other people," Arendt writes, "I can walk away." I cannot, however, walk away from myself unless I cease the internal dialogue of myself with myself. Because the activity of thinking means that I must live with myself--with my other self--thinking is the one activity that can stop men and women from doing great wrongs. For who, she asks, is willing to live their lives in such close confines with a criminal?

The political implications of thinking are brought front and center in Arendt's discussion of the argument from the lesser evil as it arose in response to the actions of German citizens and even Jews during the Nazi era. In her coverage of the trial of Adolf Eichmann for *The New Yorker* and later in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt reported on a disturbing fact that struck her, and many others, at the trial. Eichmann, she noted, was decidedly average. The evil of his deeds was indisputable; yet, notwithstanding what he had done, Eichmann's motivations seemed grounded in typical

bourgeois drives. Eichmann was ambitious. He sought recognition that came from success. And he wanted to excel at his profession. These banal motivations could, under the Nazi system of rule, lead him to participate in some of the most wrongful deeds in the history of man. How could such a simple man do such extraordinary evil?

Confronted with the normalcy of one responsible for such evil, Arendt drew parallels with others who participated in the Nazi government but escaped judgment for their complicity with the Nazi regime. While not at all equating members of the *Judenräte* (the Jewish Councils that worked with the Nazis to administer life in and deportation from the Jewish Ghettoes) with Eichmann's orchestration of the machinery of death, she nevertheless condemned those Jewish leaders for participating in the selection of who should die and who should live. And while not in the least obscuring the difference between Eichmann's role in genocide and the everyday role of those German bureaucrats who accommodated without supporting the Nazis--many of whom easily made the transition from Hitler's to Adenauer's civil service--Arendt also condemned normal, average, everyday Germans who chose to work within the Nazi government. What unites the German civil servants and the Jewish leaders in Arendt's telling is their willingness to justify morally suspect actions in the name of doing an unethical job as ethically as possible. They claimed, in other words, that their cooperation was a lesser evil that helped to prevent an even greater evil. This, she argued, was the very same argument Eichmann employed.

The argument of the lesser evil is endemic to our society. It is typically the case that both sides in a given political or ethical argument invoke reasoning of the lesser evil to buttress their position. In Israel today, for example, supporters of humanitarian aid for

the Palestinians argue that giving food and medicine to the Palestinians and thereby normalizing and even supporting the blockade of Gaza is the lesser evil when compared to the starvation and deaths that would otherwise occur. Opponents of the humanitarian mission argue, with the same logic, that allowing some to die is a lesser evil than supporting and thus legitimating an inhumane blockade. Similarly, arguments in the United States over the Iraq war and the war on terrorism most often revolve around the question of the lesser evil, torture in the name of safety or potential deaths in the name of freedom and civil liberties.

In pointing out the pervasiveness of the argument of the lesser evil, Arendt argues that it is itself rooted in a deeper phenomenon, namely the “widespread fear of judging” that has nothing to do with the biblical “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”¹⁰ She connects the increasingly common recourse to the argument of the lesser evil with the even more pervasive unwillingness to judge in general.

This fear of judging is wide-ranging in society. We see it in social issues like euthanasia, where what was once considered deeply wrong is now often justified as a lesser evil to the pain of a slow death.¹¹ We see the fear of judging in the law where the embrace of mandatory sentences reflect the view that the loss of individualized judgment and individualized punishment are lesser evils than the risk of shorter sentences by lenient judges. And those of us in the academic world are witness to the fear of judging in the rampant inflation of grades, a reflection of the increasing unwillingness of professors to honestly evaluate student work.

To Arendt, both the fear of judging and the embrace of the argument of the lesser evil that accompanies it stem from the same two causes. First, the fear of judging is

rooted in the rise of social science and determinism, practices that reduce human freedom to the conformity of norms, statistics, and probabilities. The more that social events and even personal actions are seen to be calculable, predictable, and manipulable through sociological norms and rules that are discoverable by sociologists, economists, and political scientists, the less responsible people are for their actions. If what we do, what we read, and what we buy can be plotted on a bell curve, we trade the rarity of action for the normalcy of behavior. And the diminished responsibility of persons leads to an unwillingness to judge those who are not responsible for what they do.¹²

The second, and less often acknowledged, ground of the fear of judgment is the modern belief in equality. Judgment, Arendt writes, presupposes self-confidence and pride: “what former times called the dignity or the honor of man.”¹³ Only one who believes oneself right can judge another; thus, judgment presupposes a certain authority and superiority. The judge must have a feeling of distinction, what Nietzsche calls a “pathos of difference,” in order to arrogate to himself or herself the right to judge. There is, Arendt recognizes, a necessary arrogance to judging that is increasingly absent in our age in which pride is either absent or at least tempered by a mock-modesty that denies oneself the right to judge.

The problem of judgment is widespread. Take, for example, the outcry over President Bush’s description of Saddam Hussein as a bad man. Immediately the intelligentsia condemned the simplicity of Bush’s worldview that would dare to divide the world into good and evil. Such a black and white approach, critics held, misses the nuances and shades of grey in moral judgment. While Saddam killed many people, he also held Iraq together and raised the standard of living. To judge him a mass murderer is

thought to be a vulgar judgment lacking in sophistication. There is, of course, much to criticize in the President's decision to label Saddam evil. One could wonder at his selective vision. And one can certainly reject his conclusion that the United States is justified in invading any country led by an evil leader. To judge the war morally wrong, or to judge it as an unnecessary risk, reflects a sound mind. To condemn the characterization of an autocratic and cynical despot who gasses his own citizens as evil is something else. The unwillingness to make such stark judgments of guilt is indicative of a "deep-seated fear [...] of passing judgment, of naming names, and of fixing blame."¹⁴

In raising the question of personal responsibility under a dictatorship, Arendt suggests that first and foremost, one must be able and willing to judge. When asked or ordered to participate in an evil government, the citizen must make a judgment, one that does not depend on a rational or intellectual calculation of the lesser or greater evil. Those who judged the Nazi regime wrong belonged to no particular class and shared no common educational background. The non-participants were not the intellectuals or the most respected members of the community. Those who resisted and those who simply withdrew into private life did not rationally consider the question of whether it was good to murder Jews. Instead, those who judged that to coordinate their actions with the regime was not a lesser evil but evil plain and simple were the ones who "never doubted that crimes remained crimes even if legalized by the government." Faced with laws and commands that rationalized actions they held to be wrong, these individuals said no; their no was based neither on a universal rationality nor social norms. They simply said "This I can't do."¹⁵

What is needed in dark times, Arendt shows us, are people who think. Instead of reason, Arendt teaches the supreme importance of thinking-- the habit of erecting obstacles to oversimplifications, compromises, and conventions. “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in,” Arendt wrote, “those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.”¹⁶ The thinker is the one who stands as a beacon not to some particular ideology or policy, but to following one’s conscience.

* * *

This book originates in an unusual conference that was held to celebrate Arendt’s 100th birthday at Bard College. For the conference, “Thinking in Dark Times: The Legacy of Hannah Arendt,” we invited a wide-range of public intellectuals, artists, journalists, and academics from across the disciplines to address the relevance of Arendt’s thinking. The speakers were given particular questions to respond to, questions like: “Is Totalitarianism a present danger?”; “What is the activity of democratic citizenship?”; and “What does it mean to think about politics?” In addition, we asked the participants to limit their remarks to 10 minutes. The effort was to encourage talks that avoid the regalia of disciplinary posturing and specialized jargons and move straight to the provocative questions at the very heart of Arendt’s project.

Looking over the transcripts after the conference, we quickly recognized that the talks not only spoke in a provocative and incisive way. They also revealed the passionate and

engaged embrace of political and ethical thinking that is too frequently lost amongst the layers of interpretation and scholarship that deadens much writing about Arendt. We therefore asked the participants to expand and polish their essays for publication. At the same time, we asked that they make an effort to preserve the style and form of the original oral presentations. The essays that follow are the result. They are as a whole shorter than typical academic essays, and they have fewer footnotes and scholarly trappings. Instead, they present efforts to think with and, at times, against Arendt in her call for thinking.

The book, like the conference that inspired it, is very much rooted in Bard College. Bard has long and meaningful association with Hannah Arendt. Her husband, Heinrich Blücher, taught at Bard for 17 years and was instrumental in designing Bard's common course core curriculum. Arendt herself was a professor and friend of Bard's current president Leon Botstein. Blücher and Arendt both are buried on the Bard campus, a short walk from Arendt's personal library that is currently housed at Bard's Stevenson Library. In addition, the College now hosts the Hannah Arendt Center for Ethical and Political Thinking. To give a feel for Arendt's intellectual life and to offer to others a glimpse into world of her personal library, we include in this volume a wide range of images taken from the books and manuscripts of the Hannah Arendt Library.

Thomas Keenan, Jenny Lyn Bader, and Wyatt Mason all read and offered generous and helpful comments to earlier versions of this essay.

¹ Bertold Brecht, "An die Nachgeborenen." Translated by Scott Horton.
<http://www.harpers.org/archive/2008/01/hbc-90002129>

² Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), viii.

³ *Men in Dark Times*, ix.

⁴ Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (Penguin Press, 2007), 2, 26.

⁵ Nazism taught Habermas that when we abandon universal values, there is a grave danger that the horrors of the 20th century will reappear. “We have to stand by our traditions,” he writes. Jürgen Habermas, “On the Public Use of History.” See generally the excellent account of Habermas’s work by Tracy B. Strong and Frank Andreas Sposito, “Habermas’ Significant Other,” in *The Defense of Modernity. The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*. ed. Stephen K. White (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harvest Books; New Edition , March 21, 1973).

⁷ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475.

⁸ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958) 5. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (Harvest/HBJ Book, 1981) I, 5.

⁹ *Gorgias* 482bc, cited in “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken, 2005) 90.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 19.

¹¹ See Shai Joshua Lavi’s excellent book, *The Modern Art of Dying* (Princeton, 2005).

¹² “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 19. See also, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 42-43.

¹³ “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 48.

¹⁴ “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 21.

¹⁵ “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 78.

¹⁶ *The Life of the Mind*, I, 192.