

7. CONCLUSION

Arendt added a postscript to the revised and expanded edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which was published in 1965. Obviously, she wanted to comment on the controversy that had been raging ever since the appearance of the series of articles she wrote for the *New Yorker* and clarify what she intended to say in her book. In the context of this study, the postscript includes two important paragraphs that help shape the real and rarely understood context of Arendt's pamphlet. The first deals with Jewish cooperation:

In the debate [...] the most vocal participants were those who either identified the Jewish people with its leadership – in striking contrast to the clear distinction made in almost all the reports of survivors, which may be summed up in the words of a former inmate of Theresienstadt: 'The Jewish people as a whole behaved magnificently. Only the leadership failed' – or justified the Jewish functionaries by citing all the commendable services they had rendered before the war [...] as though there were no difference between helping Jews to emigrate and helping the Nazis to deport them. (Arendt 1963/1965, 284)

This quote shows that Arendt did not intend to criticise ordinary Jews, but instead focused her critique on the Jewish leadership. Nor did Arendt believe that it would have been possible to organise efficient and successful rescue operations during the war. What she does imply, rather, is that had the political judgement of Jewish leaders been sharper and more accurate, they would have seen the importance of escaping as soon as Hitler rose to power in 1933. In an interview given to Günter Gaus in 1964, after the appearance of the German translation of the Eichmann book, Arendt recalls her deep disappointment with the Germans – her own friends included – in the face of the rising Nazi power. Very few of them understood right away that the country was witnessing the appearance of a new type of evil government from which anything could be expected.

Arendt's point is that there would have been time to at least attempt to organise a mass escape between 1933 and 1938, but such an attempt was never made (see Arendt 1965).

As we have seen in this book, the American Jewish organisations did not waste time in organising a smear campaign against Arendt, mostly because of what she said about the actions of the Jewish leadership during the war. What is strange is that Arendt's readers never managed to read the book in its proper context. Although many of them had known Arendt for years, they ignored the fact that this was not the first time that she had criticised the Jewish leadership in general and Zionist leaders in particular. In fact, as I showed in Chapter One, she had been highly critical of Zionist politics and hierarchical Jewish community structures since the 1930s. Since this time, the core of her critique was the argument according to which Jewish political culture and thinking was to remain politically underdeveloped and ignorant as far as it was to rely on the principles of concessions and charity. For Arendt, this kind of politics was a clear sign of the political immaturity of Jewish political culture. In her view, the attempt to develop an independent Jewish political culture and community could not be based on these principles. I would suggest that instead of being outrageous or somehow out of place – as her critics claimed – Arendt's critique of the Jewish leadership was perfectly in line with her general understanding of Jewish and Zionist politics. It should not have come as any great surprise to Manhattan Jewish intellectuals.

Another important paragraph in the postscript deals with the politics of the past:

Manipulations of opinion, insofar as they are inspired by well-defined interests, have limited goals; their effect, however, if they happen to touch upon an issue of authentic concern, is no longer subject to their control and may easily produce consequences they never foresaw or intended. It now appeared that the era of the Hitler regime, with its gigantic, unprecedented crimes, constituted an 'unmastered past' not only for the German people or

for the Jews all over the world, but for the rest of the world, which had not forgotten this great catastrophe in the heart of Europe either, and had also been unable to come to terms with it. (Arendt 1963/1965, 283)

Although Arendt did not live to see the extent to which the field of Holocaust studies would expand after the 1970s and 1980s, this quote shows that she understood that there was a connection between the controversy over her book and the politics of history or politics of the past, although these terms were not in use in the 1960s. Here, she seems to suggest that not even the Jewish organisations themselves really understood the extent of the questions they touched upon by organising their campaign against her. They focused solely on their own immediate interests of concealing and hiding the embarrassing conduct of a number of European Jewish leaders during the war. According to Arendt, they were not really conscious of the fact that they were also politicking with the past.

Arendt may have been correct in this assessment in the sense that the general consciousness of the importance and frequency of the politics of history was not very high in the 1960s. The importance and prevalence of this mode of politicking was not yet commonly recognised and understood. In retrospect, it is easy to see that the Arendt controversy was a clear case of the politics of history and politics of memory. Both significant and powerful American Jewish organisations and the Israeli government – particularly Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, as we saw in Chapter Two – attempted to control people's knowledge and judgements of Jewish wartime politics and their conceptions and the political significance of the Holocaust. It is also easy to see in retrospect that these attempts failed miserably. Both the Eichmann trial and the Arendt controversy surrounding it had quite the opposite effect than the Jewish establishment had hoped: an entire new field of research was born that focused its attention on the Holocaust and the role of various actors in it. Peter Novick's argument is related to precisely this line of thought. He has pointed out that the Eichmann trial

and the Arendt controversy broke 15 years of near silence on the Holocaust in American public discourse. As part of this process, there emerged in American culture a distinct thing called the “Holocaust”,²² that is to say, an event in its own right, not simply a subdivision of general Nazi barbarism. He also points to the shift in focus from the Nazi perpetrators to the Jewish victims discussed in Chapter Six (Novick 1999, 144).

As I illustrated in Chapter Six, the recent renewed interest in reinterpreting the Eichmann trial deals extensively with the role of the victims. In this respect, the trial has been seen as a decisive turning point in the manners of approaching and studying the Holocaust. The Eichmann trial has been praised as having been an impetus for and starting point in viewing the victims of the Holocaust independently of the general context of the Second World War and giving voice to the survivors. Arendt has been criticised for failing to understand this important aspect of the trial. She was, indeed, very critical of Gideon Hausner’s decision to turn the trial into a public performance of the survivors and their experiences and memories instead of focusing on the accused and his crimes. In Arendt’s view, the courtroom was not the proper place for this kind of performance precisely because it drew attention away from the crimes of the accused and towards the suffering of the victims.

In addition, there were other aspects of the organisation of the trial that made it extremely imbalanced as a court process. Arendt argued that instead of being the most suitable country for a trial against the implementers of the Final Solution, as the Israelis

22. The term Holocaust itself has remained controversial. A number of scholars have criticised it for containing misleading connotations and suggested alternative terms, such as “Shoah” and the “genocide of the Jews”. I have used it in this study because, despite its controversial character, it remains the most widely used term for the destruction of the European Jews. It has been applicable in the context of this study because it refers only to the Jews, excluding other groups of people annihilated by the Nazis.

maintained, it turned out that “Israel was the only country in the world where defence witnesses could not be heard, and where certain witnesses for the prosecution [...] could not be cross-examined” (Arendt 1963/1965, 221). This was because the state of Israel was not willing to guarantee the immunity of potential defence witnesses who were former Nazis. Arendt also highlighted the fact that the prosecution selected its 100 witnesses from hundreds and hundreds of applicants and remarked that it would have been wiser to seek out those who had not volunteered to testify (Arendt 1963/1965, 223).

Nevertheless, the main problem with the survivor-witnesses was that there was no guarantee that their stories were reliable. Arendt pointed out that a number of witnesses were unable to distinguish between their own experiences and the memories and stories they had heard or imagined after the war. Even worse, in Arendt’s view, was “the predilection of the prosecution for witnesses of some prominence, many of whom had published books about their experiences, and who now told what they had previously written, or what they had told and retold many times” (Arendt 1963/1965, 224). Finally, half of the witnesses were not even actually Eichmann’s victims, as they came from Poland and Lithuania, where Eichmann’s competence and authority had been almost nil (Arendt 1963/1965, 225).

Arendt’s critics have understood these remarks as being proof of her contempt for the victims and her corresponding sympathy for Eichmann. In my view, her critics simply failed to see that Arendt clearly had nothing at all against the victims as such. Her critique was focused on the prosecution’s strategy, which was based on a theatrical revival of the experience of the Holocaust instead of on Eichmann’s actual crimes. In general terms, she maintained that telling the story of the Holocaust was of utmost importance, but added that it should have been told somewhere other than the courtroom. In addition, conversely to the supporters of the singularity thesis, she did believe it was possible to tell the story of the Holocaust:

The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story [...] Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that 'it could happen' in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. (Arendt 1963/1965, 232–233)

In Arendt's understanding, experience is always personal and something that cannot be shared with anybody, no matter how extreme the experience in question happens to be. Nevertheless, experiences can be transformed into stories that can be told and retold to other people and future generations (cf. Arendt 1968b). In addition to the above suggested understanding of the Arendt controversy as a clear case of the politics of history, I argue that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* contains a powerful plea to remember the Holocaust and tell its story to future generations. I would like to suggest that Arendt's book may be understood as an anticipated commentary on and critique of both the thesis of the singularity of the Holocaust and the priority of the victim's viewpoint in Holocaust studies. In order to understand Arendt's anticipated critique of "victimology", it should be approached from the context of Jewish history, which is precisely the context in which Arendt's critique was carried out. Arendt had been criticising the Jewish historiography of upholding an image of Jews as the innocent and helpless victims of eternal and perpetual antisemitism since the 1940s. In a sense, she tended to identify the "politics of victims" with the "history of losers" in a very specific way. In her view, the Jewish self-image of eternal victimhood had managed to sustain an apolitical if not openly antipolitical mentality and culture that conditioned the Jews to yield to discrimination without protest. In this context, victimology is not a recent invention born after the Eichmann trial but one of the most important longstanding patterns of self-understanding among persecuted people.

In another sense, the contemporary victimology of the Jews and other groups of victims of political persecution may be understood

as a kind of travesty of the history of losers. It tends to culminate in a bitter competition between different groups of victims for recognition and compensation of suffering and losses. It is no longer sufficient to give a voice to the losers in order to enrich our understanding of the past; nowadays every single group of victims wants to be exalted as the most important group of sufferers in history (cf. Barnouw 2005).

Novick (1999) has pointed to the fact that the contemporary emphasis on survivors displaces our attention from the original context of atrocities by raising the survivors to the position of post-apocalyptic heroes who miraculously managed to endure hellish existence. In Arendtian terms, this displacement of attention might be understood as an expression of a frustrated desire for defining a “who” which appeared for the first time after the Great War:

The monuments to the ‘Unknown Soldier’ after World War I bear testimony to the then still existing need for glorification, for finding a “who”, an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed. The frustration of this wish and the unwillingness to resign oneself to the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually nobody inspired the erection of the monuments to the ‘unknown’, to all those whom the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity. (Arendt 1958, 181)

Unlike the monuments to the Unknown Soldier, contemporary monuments attempt to name the “who” and thus restore the human dignity of the victims. However, the erection of monuments creates at least two problems. First, a monument may lead to a new period of silence. It may mark the end of the discussion and debate surrounding the events and people for whom it is erected. Remembering and judging is replaced by the formal and ritualistic celebration of anniversaries. Second, as we have actually seen throughout the world, the erection of monuments may lead to the constant need to erect a new monument for a new group of victims that had previously been ignored (cf. Koselleck, Narr & Palonen 2000).

After the war, Arendt was one of the first critics of what was later referred to as the “silence” over Auschwitz in the postwar period. During the 1950s, she wrote a number of reports from Germany based on her own impressions of her first visits to Europe after the collapse of the Nazi Reich. In them, Arendt not only criticised the widespread and widely accepted notion of the “collective guilt” of the German people but also pointed to the pervasive unwillingness to take personal and political responsibility for what had happened. In fact, Arendt’s postwar accounts of Germany suggest that it is a misconception that there existed a collective “silence” about what had happened at Auschwitz. People did talk, books were written, and research was done, although apparently in a different manner and tone than the present day approaches to the Nazi period. Consequently, Arendt’s account suggest that it would be extremely important and interesting to begin to reread and reinterpret the “postwar silence” politically, without the preconceptions of repression and the unwillingness to talk.²³

In this book, I have made two major arguments. First, over the course of the past two or three decades, Arendt’s report of the Eichmann trial has been relocated from its original context as the political judgement of a politically extreme and unprecedented event to that of the dispute over the singularity of the Holocaust. While Arendt’s thesis of the unprecedentedness of Nazi totalitarianism and the uniqueness of the Holocaust come very close to the singularity thesis, it is decisively different from the latter because she never understood uniqueness in absolute terms. Rather, she approached it as an aspect of the contingency of human action. Given the contingent character of human action and its outcomes, the events and phenomena of the human world should be assessed and judged in terms of their

23. For recent attempts to reread the Holocaust and the “postwar silence” politically, see e.g. Moeller 2005; Kansteiner 2006; Pearce 2008; Traverso 2008.

uniqueness without confusing this uniqueness with absoluteness, which tends to mystify and depoliticise the events under scrutiny.

Second, because of the displacement of the context in which the Eichmann report is read, its “original” message has once again been ignored. It was intended to be a political judgement of a concrete empirical phenomenon and ought to be read as such. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* should be read as one of the very first attempts to read the Holocaust politically, and this is, in my view, one of the reasons why it is still the subject of such a vast number of suspicious misreadings.

Reading the Holocaust politically would require two crucial conditions. In the context of Arendt’s book, it would require that the ironies put forth by Arendt and discussed here in Chapter Five be taken seriously, as they often mark the points at which the political aspects of the Holocaust emerge. In more general terms, it would mean that scholars should stop viewing the Jews as pure and innocent victims of supra-human and absolute evil forces who were in no way responsible for their own historical and political fate. Instead, they, just as any other people on earth, ought to be seen as active contributors to their own fate and history.

The primary guiding principle of any political reading of unique phenomena should be the acknowledgement of the relative singularity of any empirical event – for the simple reason that they occur only once. Phenomena often tend to be incomprehensible at the outset, and they tend not to adhere to any pre-established patterns of thought. It is precisely for this reason that political reading and interpretation is necessary. In a political reading, a phenomenon may indeed turn out to be completely new and thus require new criteria of judgement.

The ongoing disputes over the Holocaust – with all its instrumentalisations, mythologisations, and sacralisations – suggest that it might be possible to understand it as being a phenomenon of long duration in Koselleckian terms. A number of scholars have spoken about a past that never passes. This is another way of saying that certain events may continue to exist in new forms and after being

displaced from their original contexts for decades or even centuries. In this context, we may ask whether we can truly say that we currently live in a “post-totalitarian” world or a “post-Holocaust” era. What if the Nazi Reich and the Holocaust did not mark the end of an era but the beginning of an era characterised by constant displacement and transference of dehumanisation to new areas and spheres of life? Or what if it was not even a beginning but merely an extreme period of systematic political annihilation and dehumanisation?

Of course, placing the Holocaust in the broader context of political annihilation and destruction destroys its absolute singularity. If we are interested in its political aspect, we cannot approach it from outside its historical and political context. I emphasise this because it seems to me that one of the most important characteristics of the recent readings of the Holocaust has been the strong tendency to take the Holocaust out of its original context and deal with it in immanent and absolute terms without paying any attention to its historical and political conditions.

The question remains: Why has *Eichmann in Jerusalem* become so important? Why is it not simply approached as one of several reports written about the trial? I have argued throughout this book that the importance of Arendt’s report is the result of the displacement of the discussion surrounding it from its original context and its integration into the disputes over the Holocaust and its singularity. It has become a kind of buffer text that authors use for their own purposes. I would also like to suggest that the conceptual displacement of Arendt’s book is a conscious political move made by those who promote certain kinds of interpretations of the singularity of the Holocaust and Israeli politics. Thus, the use of Arendt’s book as a means of politicking continues to this day. I might even go so far as to suggest that the Arendt controversy has become a kind of intellectual event of long duration in Koselleckian terms. Simultaneously, the ongoing debate over the book and its meaning suggests that it has

not lost its actuality. It continues to raise a number of questions and themes that remain controversial in the context of Holocaust studies, political studies of the Nazi Reich, and political theory.

One of the reasons why Arendt's account has not lost its actuality is the fact that she was able to foresee a number of unanticipated consequences of the Eichmann trial. First, as I pointed out earlier, Arendt foresaw the emergence of the field of victim studies, warning that it would encounter a number of politically problematic aspects. The most serious problem related to victim studies is the aforementioned tendency to immanently and exclusively focus on the Holocaust from the viewpoint of its Jewish victims. This myopic and exclusive approach tends to ignore the political reading of the Third Reich. Serious scholarly studies are replaced with all kinds of melancholic memory stories that are often assumed to somehow be more truthful accounts of the period than the historical and political analyses of it.

Second, Arendt foresaw that becoming conscious of the Holocaust might lead to its use as a means of politicking. We have seen that the antisemitism of the 1930s and 1940s has developed into what might be described as fanatic filosemitism in the late 20th and early 21st century. It has become virtually impossible for a gentile to criticise anything Jewish or anything related to Israel without being labelled an antisemite. The functionaries of Jewish organisations, communities and the state of Israel work vehemently to control of what is said about Jews throughout the world. Another expression of the use of the Holocaust as a means of politicking is the astonishing compensation claims for damages for pain and suffering made by third and fourth generation heirs to the victims of the Holocaust. In addition, an astonishing cult of apologies has been born in terms of which the present governments are put under an obligation to apologise atrocities carried out centuries ago. Especially the Germans live under a constant pressure to repeat their apologies of having carried out the Holocaust everywhere.

Third, and perhaps most explicitly, Arendt warned us about the limitations of the judicial process when dealing with Nazi crimes, which were irreconcilable by nature. She also warned that intertwining the judicial and political aspects of these crimes would only lead to new problems. This “warning” implies that Arendt foresaw the appearance of the tendency to deal with political problems in juridical terms. This practice is particularly widespread in the United States, but it is also spreading elsewhere.

In my view, the contemporary discussion surrounding Arendt’s book reflects the attempt by the defenders of the thesis of the singularity of the Holocaust to monopolise the correct interpretations of it and dictate its limits. Arendt’s book is used as a buffer text because it provides the defenders of the singularity thesis with a way to repeat their accusations regarding the dangers of the supposed historical relativism of Arendt’s stance.

The price of the displacement of the dispute over Arendt’s book is that its original “message” is at risk of disappearing once again. Only a handful of scholars have read the book as it was meant to be read, i.e. as a concrete political judgement and thesis of the complete collapse of political judgement in the face of the phenomenon of Nazi totalitarianism. In my view, Arendt’s harsh judgements about the conduct of the Jewish leadership and lack of Jewish resistance, as well as her portrait of the Nazi criminal, become comprehensible only when examined in the context of this original message. She suggests that, in order to understand how it was possible that Nazism could emerge in Europe, it is necessary to take into account the conceptual weakness and obsolescence of the tradition of European political thought. This tradition did not offer tools with which to approach and analyse extreme political phenomena such as Nazism, as such tools did not exist. In other words, conceptually speaking, Nazism was not conceivable in the context of the European tradition of political thought.

From this it followed that the European political elite – the Jewish leaders included – did not really understand the nature of

the enemy with which they were confronted. It is only rarely understood or admitted that Arendt's critique of the Jewish leadership included, both implicitly and explicitly, a general critique of the entire European political leadership, which suffered, in her view, from a total breakdown in political judgement.

Arendt has been hailed as one of the most important modern political thinkers in Germany. As proof of this, there is now a street that bears her name in Berlin, just beside Peter Eisman's heavily debated Memorial to Murdered Jews of Europe. Nevertheless, Jaspers' prediction at the height of the Arendt controversy that the time would come when the Jews would erect a monument to her in Israel and proudly claim her as their own has not come to fruition. Perhaps it is for the best. In my view, Arendt's writings are best understood as attempts to write against the general political and theoretical currents of her time. As an independent theoretician and political "judge", she does not belong to any place, time, or group of people. The endeavour to read the Holocaust and the rest of the Nazi era politically has been largely unsuccessful thus far, and it sets a demanding challenge for political theorists of the 21st century.