

»advanced« nations, into the advanced nations are coming war refugees and economic immigrants by the millions, completely changing the demography of EuroAmerica, creating conditions of »multiculturalism« that even a nation like America, founded by immigrants, has little capacity to celebrate. The current overseas imperialists, not aspiring to rule governmentally over the »natives,« who are anyway citizens of their own more or less stable new states, aspire instead to exploit their resources and cheap labor. But the result is that the cheap laborers, learning from the exploiters' tools – their TV's and phones and computers – that there is less starvation in the exploiters' countries, either aspire to go there or to become local agent exploiters of their own countryside. Now it is the post-colonial new states that have become state capitalist enterprises, massively corrupt.

Arendt had shown so clearly how late 19th century imperialism rebounded as the ruthless colonialists transmitted back to the state capitalist motherlands their ethic of ruthlessness, but we are only beginning to understand how exploitation can end up the norm everywhere, rendering all kinds of groups superfluous. Globalization certainly distributes some beneficial features of advanced technology, as it distributes education, including education in political processes; it brings people coming and going into touch with each other, promoting a sense of »humankind.« But it also entangles the entire earth with the mentality of »oh, these are superfluous people« and the imperialist techniques of ghettoization and massacre that Arendt portrayed so richly.

Steven E. Aschheim

The Book and Me

There is in the present assignment both an abiding danger and an unattainable challenge. On the one hand, the genre may appear hopelessly indulgent. It assumes a degree of self-importance that readers will find quite unwarranted: why should they be interested in »my history« with the book, when I first encountered it, what effect it had on me and so on? On the other hand, no matter how judiciously one may approach these autobiographical moments, like all acts of recollection, they conjure up a, not necessarily coherent, totality of implicated memories in which one's sensual, cognitive and emotional worlds are hopelessly intertwined. Only a Proustian talent and sensibility would be able to retrieve the ideational and physical fullness of these experiences. Clearly this is a task well beyond my powers. But I shall try here to, at least, ameliorate the problem by dint of an attempt at both an honest and critical retrieval that will, hopefully, compensate for the unavoidable self-indulgence (and cult-like atmosphere) entailed in such an exercise.

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When, in 1961, at the age of nineteen, I first came across *The Origins*, the effect was electric, intoxicating, almost magical. No book before that (nor, for that matter, many after) had affected me more powerfully. To be sure, as I grew older, my criteria of judgment became more sophisticated, my responses more measured. Yet, for reasons I hope to make clear, the magic has never entirely worn off. What – for a young, unformed, uninformed, and impressionable South African Jewish mind – constituted its special attraction? To the extent that I can faithfully recapture the experience, it was simultaneously tactile, nascently intellectual, and, to be completely candid, even faintly erotic. The eroticism was not related to the actual book and its contents but rather to the young woman who introduced me to it. One year ahead of me in

our university studies, she was temptingly remote, rather beautiful, and particularly brilliant. As she first showed me the book – it was at her house; unlike Proust, I forget whether it was upstairs or downstairs, and in which room – *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has since then carried with it a whiff of infatuation. Moreover, because, a year or two after that, this same person was swept into underground, highly dangerous anti-apartheid activities, by dint of association the book itself later took on added subliminal qualities of mystery and almost delicious subversion.

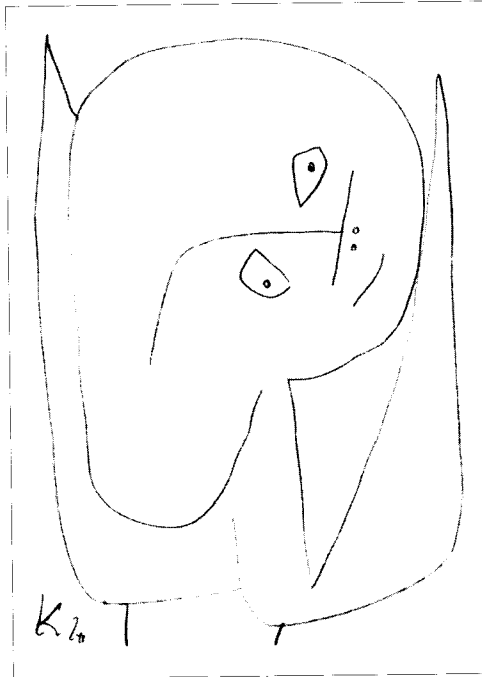
But, of course, exposure to the book went well beyond the person who first showed it to me. There was already something attractive about its feel and texture, the small, almost tiny, print (extending well over 500 pages), its very physicality. I still possess my first (and only) dog-eared, much-marked copy: the November 1963, eighth printing of the *Meridian paperback*, with its stark black background and striking red and white lettering, bought at *Vanguard booksellers*, which – slightly risqué (and liberal-left in inclination – was about the only establishment in Johannesburg likely to sell such a book. Embarrassingly, my copy still boasts the transparent (though now rather sweat-stained) plastic cover placed there – against my not very passionate protests – by a caring and diligent, if somewhat infantilising, German-Jewish mother who was not only loathe to accept that her son's childhood was over but also refused to recognise that the fussy obligation to cover high-school books did not apply to the liberation that came with study at Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand.

Obviously, it was not just the book's sensual qualities but also its very name that possessed almost magical properties. For did not the title seemed to contain the key to an unprecedentedly bloody century? The invocation of the (to me entirely new)

concept »Totalitarianism« – we initiates began using the term with a wise, knowing look – conjured up a radical and novel world that was simultaneously sinister and fascinating. Coupled with the word »Origins« it promised to explain it all. At the time, of course, I did not know that Arendt had opposed this title. No historian, she had not attempted a conventional linear narrative or a causal historical explanation and must have been aware that her method, and the expectations generated by the title, would

raise the ire of various critics – which, of course, it did!

No book could, of course, possibly explain it all but, from my vantage point it seemed to come very close. Here was something that was exceedingly contemporary, burningly relevant, erudite yet never stiflingly academic. Of course, there was much, very much, that was unclear. At the time, I ascribed this to my untrained, juvenile mind (though, I must admit, after multiple forays and critical re-readings some of the same difficulties still apply.) Still, it was precisely Arendt's apparent



profundity, the dramatic, yet seemingly effortless, allusions to (what I regarded as) unheard of depths, the joining together of quite unexpected connections, that constituted the attraction. In a private letter Arendt told Mary McCarthy that she had written her Eichmann book »in a curious state of euphoria«. We do not know if *The Origins* was energised by a similar mood, although it certainly reads this way. For some, it is true, these very predilections were the source of doubts and unease. Early on, for instance, Raymond Aron observed of the book: »One sees the world as the totalitarians present it, and one risks feeling mysteriously attracted by the horror and the absurdity that is described. I am not sure that Mme. Arendt herself is not in some way fascinated by the monsters she takes from reality but which her logical imagination, in some

respects comparable to the imagination of the ideologues she denounces, brings to the point of perfection.«

But ultimately, of course the erotic, tactile and nominal magnetism of the book was subservient to what it treated – its subject matter. For no one before Arendt – and this, surely, must be considered her lasting achievement – had attempted to forge the theoretical and conceptual tools required to illuminate and explain the great cataclysms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The scope of the inquiry was vast taking in the formation of modern states and (in my edition) ending with the Hungarian Revolution; it ranged over all the evils of the late civilized world, from the depredations of Western imperialism (I was impressed to see South Africa so centrally represented, though its link to her major themes was never entirely clear to me), to the plight of post-World War One stateless refugees through Stalin's crimes. It may be true that to this day no definitive master-narrative of this woeful tale has emerged. Yet, uniquely at that time, she provided an account that seemed adequate to the enormity of the materials and problems at hand. Only later, did I discover that my hungry response was replicated amongst far more sophisticated people. Clearly, its appearance satisfied a number of real, even urgent, though often unarticulated and perhaps unconscious needs of a generation aware of recent hideous atrocities but at a loss to comprehensively account for them.

Yet, it should be quite clear, mine was also very much a »Jewish« reading and response (even though this may have been more of a subliminal than consciously self-defined process). Until then I had known about the Nazi destruction of European Jewry but in an intuitive, commemorative and thoroughly pre-cognitive way. Arendt's work was the first that seemed to take it on and to attack the issues with the appropriate earnestness of purpose and analysis (Raul Hilberg's monumental study, let us remember, appeared a full ten years after the publication of *The Origins*). Of course, this was a highly interested, selective reading. The term »Holocaust« actually never appears in the book (only many years later did it become common currency) and because it analysed events through the generalized prism of »totalitarianism«, it even precluded (outside the framework of some illustrative examples) any thoroughgoing analysis of the specificities of the »Final Solution«, of the war

against the Jews. Still, my filtered understanding was not as provincial as it may appear because, as I later learned, it was the Nazi death camps that, above all, affected Arendt and which indeed most guided her analyses in *The Origins*. »You see«, she wrote to Kurt Blumenfeld in 1947, »I cannot get over the extermination factories.« Others too read the book this way. As Alfred Kazin noted, »the life of the mind was of no use unless it addressed itself to the gas« and this Arendt patently seemed to do.

For me the book was powerfully »Jewish« in yet another way. It consisted in Arendt's capacity to remove the Jewish experience from parochial settings, to lift it from insulated frameworks and integrate it into the marrow of world history. Indeed, she rendered the former virtually constitutive of the latter! Reading it thus provided a kind of dignity and importance to an existence that had come perilously close to extinction. The emphasis on situating the Jews at the storm center of history itself, combined with the desire to grasp anti-Semitism at its deadliest level, made *The Origins* particularly relevant and beguiling for me and – as it turned out, when I investigated this many years later – for a whole generation of like-minded readers. Irving Howe recalls that after reading the book one »could no longer escape the conviction that, blessing or curse, Jewishness was an integral part of our life.« True, there were various critics of *The Origins* who – long before the appearance of the highly controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – regarded her linkage of anti-semitism to the acts of the Jews themselves as problematic if not downright distasteful, and her analysis of the centrality of Jews in emerging modern State economies and their alliance with ruling elites as itself uncomfortably antisemitic. (Years later, of course, accusations as to Arendt's »Jewish self-hate« were to greatly increase).

At the time, however, I was less sensitive to these kinds of issues. I found then (and still do), that her analyses of the socio-psychological dynamics and distortions of assimilation and Jewish secular intellectual creativity to be marvellously insightful, crucially revelatory, indeed, of my own existential predicaments. Already in the early 1960's I intuited, but was hardly able to articulate the conviction, that Arendt was not only the keenest analyst of this historical crisis but herself a central product and expression of it. Her achievements and biases, her creativity and inner tensions were part of the extraordinary history of post-emancipation German

Jewish intellectuals and their wider engagement with the imperatives of German, indeed modern, culture and its later great breakdown.

I must conclude with an admonitory confession. Cults – intellectual as much as political and religious ones – disturb me. The present-day adulation of Hannah Arendt is coming precariously close to such a sorry condition and the Newsletter (of which, indeed, I am a corresponding editor), it must be said, is playing a central contributory role. Why, then, have I seemingly added fuel to the fire? Why, even though I have tried to bring a critical perspective to bear, play into the phenomenon? The answer lies not only in the requirements demanded by autobiographical veracity but in the fact that – despite its many, obvious shortcomings, its blatant historical blunders and eccentric, sometimes inco-

herent, connections – *The Origins* (despite, or perhaps because of, its idiosyncratic nature) is indeed an extraordinary work. It has achieved a kind of canonic status. This has been granted as much by its detractors as by its admirers. As classics are wont to do, it seems to withstand constant renewed scavengings and, somehow, reveals previously unnoticed flashes of brilliance and new insights. So often off the mark, it nevertheless possesses the power still to yield moments of rare illumination that light up our own condition as much as it does the past.

Vlasta Jalušič

Totalitarianism: redundancy of the people and domination of the social

My personal interest in Hannah Arendt's thought was raised by a »casual acquaintance« with her work in the second half of eighties. Almost accidentally, while working on a topic »Women and Revolution«, I bought her book *On Revolution*. Reading it through, especially the part on the meaning of revolution and the chapter on the »social question«, I discovered, utterly astounded, not only from the mainstream so radically different thinking about violence, revolution, and politics, but also an author who confirmed my doubt in the concepts of »social emancipation« that have been predominant within the socialist surrounding and that especially applied to the question of emancipation of women.

I have begun reading her *Origins of Totalitarianism* the first time when Milosevic was just gaining his support by mobilizing a mass ethno-nationalist movement and when amongst many intellectuals in former Yugoslavia there was a widespread opinion that »politics« and politicians were the main culprit for the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation and, later on, for the horror and misery of war and

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ethnic cleansing. However, the events were proving that, without a mass movement and mobilization, such phenomenon as Milosevic would have been impossible. Still more, the development has shown that the approach, how Milosevic has paved his way to power through implementing ethno-nationalist propaganda, has been very close to the Arendtian observation about totalitarian propaganda, when