

8-2018

Hannah Arendt and Postwar Interpretations of National Socialism

Kacie Harris

Clemson University, kacieh@clemson.edu

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HANNAH ARENDT AND POSTWAR INTERPRETATIONS OF NATIONAL
SOCIALISM

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Kacie Harris
August 2018

Accepted by:
Dr. Michael Meng, Committee Chair
Dr. Steven Marks
Dr. Stephanie Barczewski

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about postwar interpretations of National Socialism. Its central aim is to contextualize Hannah Arendt as a major thinker and historian of Nazism. This thesis examines the *Sonderweg* or “special path” interpretation, as well as the critique of modernity, or what I refer to as the “dark modernity” thesis. It ultimately situates Arendt within the dark modernity thesis and notes her affinity to other scholarship within this interpretation of German history.

DEDICATION

To my mother

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Michael Meng, for his patience and guidance while I was working on this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Steven Marks for his honest criticism and encouragement during my time at Clemson. Many thanks are due to Dr. Stephanie Barczewski for her time and support while serving on my thesis committee. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Anderson, who, from the moment I stepped on campus, never stopped believing in me.

Finally, I am grateful for the support of my dear friends and family. This work would not have been possible without your constant love and encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

“The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.”¹

Hannah Arendt

This thesis is about different interpretations of National Socialism. My central aim is to contextualize Hannah Arendt as a thinker and historian of Nazism. Arendt is most widely known for her report on the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, a former S.S. Lieutenant-Colonel responsible for the deportation and death of millions of Jews. Originally published as a series of essays in *The New Yorker*, her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* remains one of the most controversial texts in the vast scholarship on Holocaust perpetrators.

When the essays were initially published, readers critiqued Arendt’s “banality of evil” thesis for several reasons. They were abhorred by the thought that evil, especially on such an unprecedented scale, could be considered “banal.” Critics also claimed that Arendt’s description of Eichmann as a “cog in the wheel” of a large bureaucratic machine excused him of his guilt. Readers were also critical of Arendt’s analysis of the role of the Jewish Councils in the death camps. Her contentious claim that Jewish leadership “cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis” alienated her from Jewish communities across the world.² Finally, people claimed that Arendt’s

¹ Hannah Arendt, “Nightmare and Flight,” in *Hannah Arendt: Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 134.

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 125.

interest in perpetrators and critique of the Jewish Councils demonstrated her lack of sympathy for the victims.

Arendt still faces much of the same criticism today. Some critiques are valid; the language Arendt used in her analysis of the Jewish leadership was too speculative. She claimed, for instance, that if the Jewish leadership resisted the Nazis “the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people.”³

Nevertheless, I believe that much of the controversy surrounding Arendt and her work stems largely from a misunderstanding of her and her intentions. It is this general misunderstanding of Arendt and her work that informs my thesis. Because of this misunderstanding, Arendt is generally left out of the discussion about modernity and its relationship to Nazism.⁴ But even some of the scholars who are sympathetic to Arendt do not put her in conversation with other major interpretations of Nazism.⁵ In this thesis, I consider Arendt and her work as engaging in a larger postwar debate between historians about how we understand Nazism.

This debate about Nazism is characterized by two distinct interpretations: the *Sonderweg* thesis and the critique of modernity, or what I call “the dark modernity” thesis. In the first chapter, I explore the *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history that

³ Ibid., 125.

⁴ The major historiographical essays that explore the critique of modernity and its relationship to Nazism do not mention Hannah Arendt. See Edward Ross Dickinson, “Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse about ‘Modernity’,” *Central European History* 37, no. 1 (2004), 1-48; and Mark Roseman, “National Socialism and Modernisation,” in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and contrasts*, ed. Richard Bessel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 197-229.

⁵ To my knowledge, major scholars such as Seyla Benhabib, Dana Villa, and Margaret Canovan do not discuss Arendt’s position in conjunction with other historians’ critiques of modernity and its relationship to Nazism.

was popular in the 1960s and '70s. The “special-path” thesis suggested that Germany lacked a strong liberal tradition and therefore never produced a liberal democratic revolution like the rest of the West. The lack of a liberal tradition in Germany resulted in a reversion to an authoritarian style government with the ascension of Adolf Hitler.

Within the *Sonderweg* interpretation historians explored various reasons as to why Germans did not embrace liberalism. Drawing on the scholarship of Ralf Dahrendorf, Leonard Krieger, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, and Hans Rosenberg, I organize the *Sonderweg* thesis into three different themes: the intellectual, socio-cultural, and political interpretations of German particularity. I ultimately argue that regardless of these distinctions, the *Sonderweg* thesis is political. It is political insofar as it advances a liberal conception of modernity, and in doing so assumes that as long as Germans embrace liberal democracy, the less likely they will revert to authoritarian style political systems in the future.

In chapter two, I begin to lay out Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of Nazism. Arendt’s own experience as a stateless Jew in interwar Europe undoubtedly informed her interests in Nazism and political theory later in life. While Hitler was campaigning for votes in the 1920s, Arendt was studying philosophy at the University of Marburg. She later earned her Ph.D. at the University of Heidelberg under the direction of Karl Jaspers, whom she remained close with her entire life.

When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Arendt was working for a Zionist organization. She claimed that during this time she “intended to emigrate” because she

believed that Jews could not stay in Germany.⁶ Her plans were delayed, however, when she was arrested by the Gestapo for her involvement with the Zionists. Fortunately, Arendt was released and fled to Paris, where she worked for *Jugend Aliyah*, “an organization that arranged passage for German Jewish young people to Palestine.”⁷ When the Nazis invaded France, Arendt was sent to an internment camp in the Third Republic as an enemy alien. She managed to escape to Portugal, where she then arranged to emigrate to New York.⁸ Once in New York, Arendt worked for a German newspaper called *Aufbau*. Shortly thereafter, Arendt was shocked by the reports of what was happening at Auschwitz in 1943. She claimed that she was of the opinion that “everything else could be forgiven... but not this.”⁹ Arendt therefore turned her attention to writing what became a crucial text in her interpretation of Nazism: *Origins of Totalitarianism*.¹⁰

In *Origins*, Arendt claimed that totalitarian regimes entirely dominated the individual, abolishing human freedom altogether. She applied this theory to both the victims and perpetrators. But if the perpetrators were totally dominated by the regime and stripped of their agency, how can we hold them responsible for their crimes? Arendt’s theory of “total domination” does not agree with her later analysis of Adolf Eichmann.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Zur Person: Hannah Arendt,” interview by Günter Gaus, Rundfunk Berlin – Brandenburg, October 28, 1964, Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg Interview-Archiv: https://www.rbb-online.de/zurperson/interview_archiv/arendt_hannah.html. “Ich hatte sowieso die Absicht zu emigrieren. Ich war sofort der Meinung: Juden können nicht bleiben.”

⁷ Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, “Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)” *Who’s Afraid of Social Democracy? A Blog by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20110120102031/http://elisabethyoung-bruehl.com/articles/hannah-arendt-articles/hannah-arendt-1906-1975/>, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Arendt, Interview. “Weil man die Vorstellung gehabt hat, alles andere hätte irgendwie noch einmal gutgemacht werden können... Dies nicht.”

¹⁰ Young-Bruehl, “Hannah Arendt,” 3.

Indeed, she understood Eichmann as a free agent who unthinkingly *chose* to submit to the authority of the Nazi regime. I therefore argue that *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published just over a decade after *Origins*, represents a shift in Arendt's understanding of Nazism.

In the third chapter, I explore what I call the "dark modernity" thesis. This interpretation of Nazism rejected the *Sonderweg* thesis insofar as it did not locate the origins of Nazism in German history but in western modernity. I explain how this argument developed within German historiography and place Arendt within this interpretation. I note her affinity to the arguments of Zygmunt Bauman and historian Detlev Peukert. Each of them understood the problem of Nazism to be the result of the desire for mastery and perfection that grew out of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment stressed that human beings could understand the world through science and mathematics. For Bauman, Peukert, and Arendt, this kind of thinking leads to the desire for perfection and truth which resulted in tyranny.

Arendt also critiqued the singular and purposive kind of thinking that stemmed from the Enlightenment. She believed that this type of thinking was manifest in modern ideologies and worldviews. She argued that when we adopt worldviews, we reduce the way in which we think about and understand the world. For example, capitalism makes us think about the world solely in terms of the accumulation of wealth. Thus, for Arendt, ideologies and worldviews dominate the way that we think. She believed that when we obey certain ideologies, we *voluntarily* occlude the possibility of challenging and undermining their authority. In doing so, we become dogmatic servants of various regimes of authority – we become like Eichmann. Thus the only way to avoid dogmatism

and servitude is through “thinking” - that is, reconsidering what we once thought was absolutely true. Finally, in the conclusion, I explore what is ultimately at stake in Arendt’s critique of modernity and its relationship to Nazism.

The central intervention I wish to make in this thesis is twofold. One, I would like to clarify Arendt’s intricate and complicated understanding of Nazism. In the process, I hope to address some of the controversy surrounding Arendt’s work and promote her as a serious and independent thinker of Nazism. Two, by putting Arendt in conversation with other interpretations and major thinkers of Nazism, I hope to encourage new ways of thinking about some of the fundamental problems of the twentieth century. However, I do not wish to promote Arendt’s interpretation of Nazism as final and correct – to do so would run contrary to her rejection of finality. Instead, I hope that her critique inspires us to reconsider our own convictions, as well as warn us about the possible dangers of dogmatism. Nazism is not just a phenomenon of the past – indeed, it is something that we must actively confront each day through an embrace of what Arendt called “thinking.”

CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE “SPECIAL PATH” THESIS

“History is possible only as a philosophy of history, a view that is not wholly without foundation.”¹¹ Theodor Adorno

Since 1945, historians have explored questions about the origins of National Socialism. Friedrich Meinecke was one of the first to analyze what he called “the German catastrophe.”¹² As early as 1946, he claimed that Nazism was an anomaly in German national development; “it marked a decisive break with the ‘healthy’ German past rather than being a product of it.”¹³ Meinecke’s position was later advanced by conservative historian Gerhard Ritter, who also suggested that Nazism represented something radically new, unrelated to German history.¹⁴ Both historians advanced an interpretation that attempted to salvage what they understood as an otherwise honorable national history. Their understanding of the Third Reich left historians with more questions than answers. The nationalist interpretation failed to offer a concrete explanation as to why Nazism was possible.

By the 1960s, scholars began to challenge the nationalist understanding of Nazism. Historians of the Bielefeld School instead claimed that the causes of Nazism

¹¹Theodor H. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden, MA: Polity, 2006), 10.

¹² See Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe*, trans. Sidney B. Fay (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), originally published as *Die deutsche Katastrophe* (Weisbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus Verlag, 1946).

¹³ Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 8.

¹⁴ Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 47. Kershaw also identified Gerhard Ritter as an advocate of this interpretation of Nazism. See Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 8.

could be located within German national history. Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, for example, argued that Germany followed its own “special path” of national development as compared to other nations in the West. In their view, the German path was distinct because Germany never experienced a liberal democratic revolution. The Germans’ failure to embrace liberalism resulted in a reversion to an authoritarian style regime with the rise of Adolf Hitler. This argument became known as the “special path” or “*Sonderweg*” thesis.

The fundamental assumption of the *Sonderweg* argument was that Imperial Germany was politically “backward” and anti-modern as compared to other nation-states in the West. Historians believed that if the middle class confronted the feudal elite and collectively stood up for its interests, social and political change would have followed. But the absence of a successful revolution instead preserved traditional social structures, thereby strengthening the power of the elite and preventing the establishment of liberal democratic institutions.

Some historians claim that the failed revolution of 1848 was the crucial opportunity for Germany to undermine its authoritarian political structure. After the French Revolution, liberal ideas began to spread throughout western Europe. These ideas crystallized into liberal movements in France, Italy, the Austrian Empire, and Germany. As the movements gained momentum, Western Europe experienced a series of economic crises including bad harvests, food shortages, overpopulation, and unemployment. The

political and economic tensions of the time erupted in 1848, igniting a series of revolutions across Europe.¹⁵

In Germany, the revolution was a chance to change the existing political order. The revolution was met with some success; the German states formed a national assembly and planned to unify Germany under a constitutional monarchy. The problem was that Prussia – the most powerful German state – rejected this reform. Prussia eventually agreed to the creation of a constitution, but with the stipulation that the monarch would retain most of his power. Conservatives who wanted to preserve the existing order embraced the new constitution. Those who opposed it were crushed by Prussian military forces.¹⁶ The revolution therefore failed to disrupt the current political order. Hence why A.J.P. Taylor claimed that in 1848 “German history reached its turning point and failed to turn.”¹⁷

With the failure of the revolution of 1848, the authoritarian structure of the German states prevailed. For reasons we will see, in the time both before and after German unification the liberal democratic tradition remained weak, unable to generate enough support for political transformation. The historians of the *Sonderweg* thesis therefore tried to prove that the German authoritarian tradition prevailed amid the weakness of the appeal of liberal democratic views. The *Sonderweg* argument therefore defended the doctrine of liberalism. These historians believed that if Germans established

¹⁵ Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions 1848-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History since 1815* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 71.

a stronger tradition of liberalism in the postwar period, the less likely they would revert to authoritarian rule in the future.

In the following chapter I explore the *Sonderweg* thesis and its various dimensions. First, I identify the post-1945 origins of the special path thesis. I explain that the thesis is rooted in economic studies of the process of modernization. I then examine the *Sonderweg* argument in the work of a number of scholars including Leonard Krieger, Ralf Dahrendorf, Hans Ulrich-Wehler and Hans Rosenberg. Taken together, their work provides a thorough examination of the *Sonderweg* thesis from intellectual, socio-cultural, and political perspectives. Ultimately, I argue that the advocates of the special path thesis defended a liberal conception of modernity – that is, they understood modernity to be necessarily characterized by the advancement of individual rights and freedoms.¹⁸

The Emergence of the Negative Sonderweg Thesis¹⁹

¹⁸ This argument that the *Sonderweg* thesis advances a political agenda is not necessarily new. In a more recent article, James J. Sheehan argued that historians of post-war Germany viewed history as “an essential pedagogical instrument” when it came to questions concerning their country’s political future. The novelty of my piece consists in its holistic analysis of the origins and the various intellectual, social and political dimensions of the special path narrative. See, James J. Sheehan, “Paradigm Lost? The *Sonderweg* Revisited” in *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen Tendenzen und Theorien*, ed. Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 156.

¹⁹ I use the phrase “negative *Sonderweg*” here because research suggests that there was a notion of a positive *Sonderweg* prior to 1945. Jürgen Kocka argued that “in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many German historians were convinced of the existence of a positive ‘German way.’” They viewed the uniqueness of the German state as “an asset, not as a liability.” According to Kocka, these ideas were reinforced by scholars Otto Hintze and Ernst Troeltsch after the First World War. Historians Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer also argued that during WWI, German scholars spoke of a distinctive and superior German road to modernity. See Jürgen Kocka, “German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, no. 1 (1988): 3., and Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, 88-89.

According to historian Mark Roseman, “under the general heading of modernization theory the 1950s and ‘60s saw the emergence of a number of highly influential (and largely American) accounts of the development of modern societies.”²⁰ Modernization theory essentially described the process by which “the traditional became modern.”²¹ These scholars generally understood the “modern” to be characterized by the advancement of the individual, the creation of democratic institutions, and the formation of a capitalist economic system.²²

It was “against this background,” Roseman argued, that historians began to articulate Germany’s unique relationship to modernization. By the late nineteenth century, Germany was rapidly industrializing and well on its way to becoming a “modern” economic state. Its political system, however, “had failed to keep in step.”²³ The German Empire’s constitutional monarchy failed to grant its population basic political liberties that were characteristic of modern nations during this time. Thus, modernization theory – the normative model for how a nation-state became “modern” – formed the basis of what became the special path thesis in the field of German history.

But Germany’s unique relationship to the process of modernization was articulated much earlier than the 1950s and ‘60s. In 1915, American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen recognized that the German Empire, though economically thriving, had a distinct political structure compared to other European countries. He

²⁰ Mark Roseman, “National Socialism and Modernisation,” in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and contrasts*, ed. Richard Bessel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 198.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 199.

claimed that “the German system differs from that of other modern countries in being of a somewhat more coercive character, comprising a larger measure of authority and a smaller measure of popular self-direction.”²⁴ Nevertheless, Veblen admitted that this system worked for the Germans because it was efficient and received “the cordial approval of the subjects of the Empire.”²⁵ The authoritarian political structure granted Germans some degree of “freedom” while still operating within a tradition of “mitigated repression” and “bureaucratic guidance.”²⁶

Yet, in Veblen’s view, the effectiveness of the German political system and its approval from its subjects did not mean that the German Empire was “modern.” Germans had “not been in contact with the things of the modern world long enough or intimately enough to have fully assimilated the characteristically modern elements of the Western civilization.”²⁷ But Veblen claimed that even though the German Empire was not fully modern, it did not mean that it “may not, for the transient time being, be all the better off.”²⁸ Thus Veblen did not necessarily characterize the German Empire as something negative or inferior compared to fully modernized nation-states. Scholars generally did not express Germany’s partial modernization as overtly negative until they understood it as a crucial underpin of the rise of the Nazi regime.

Thomas Mann was perhaps the first to suggest that Nazism was a consequence of Germany’s failure to politically modernize – that is, its failure to become a true liberal

²⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), 230.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

democratic state. In a speech before the Library of Congress in 1945, Mann claimed that “Germany has never had a revolution and has never learned to combine the concept of the nation with the concept of liberty.”²⁹ Mann understood liberty as it was conceived in revolutionary France. In his view, the French Revolution generated support of egalitarian values. The fundamental belief that all people are equal and should be granted equal rights challenged rigid social hierarchies and promoted civic responsibility. The French political system therefore embraced a horizontal notion of liberty that was committed to the needs and interests of its subjects. For Mann, the French Revolution produced the most authentic form of nationhood; France became a nation-state committed to liberal values.³⁰

According to Mann, Germany’s failure to produce a successful revolution meant that Germans never embraced the same horizontal notion of liberty. Germans instead understood liberty vertically. Beginning with Martin Luther, Mann explained that Germans understood freedom as obedience to authority. In Luther’s terms, the only way to achieve salvation was to cultivate a one-on-one, individual relationship with God. Thus freedom in this sense always came from above. The German spiritual understanding of liberty translated into the political sphere. The state secularized this vertical notion of freedom so that individuals began to depend on the state for individual rights and liberties. Mann claimed that Luther was to blame “for the centuries-old, obsequious attitude of the Germans toward their princes and toward the power of the state.”³¹ The

²⁹ Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans* (Washington, DC, The Library of Congress, 1945), 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

German notion of liberty was responsible for the revolutionary failures of 1525, 1813, 1848, and ultimately 1918.³²

Already in 1945, Mann anticipated what became the *Sonderweg* thesis in full form in the 1960s and '70s. He was one of the first to suggest that Nazism was a result of Germany's anti-modern and backward political traditions. Germany failed to become politically modern because of its centuries old vertical conception of liberty. As we will see, the German understanding of liberty would eventually be at the center of Leonard Krieger's *The German Idea of Freedom* – a text that is an expression of the *Sonderweg* thesis from a similar intellectual perspective.

The Sonderweg: An Intellectual Analysis

Advocates of the *Sonderweg* thesis would agree that throughout the course of German history, the power of the authoritarian state prevented the installation of liberal democratic values. Where their interpretations differ, however, is in their explanations of how and why the authority of the state went unchallenged up until the First World War. The remainder of this chapter explores the differing intellectual, socio-cultural and political perspectives of what I find to be the most compelling work within the *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history. As the reader will see, each historian, regardless of his or her different explanations for the German special path, not only presupposed that liberal democracy is a necessary characteristic of the modern state, but that its weakness enabled the continued primacy of authoritarian rule.

³² Ibid., 12.

To begin, both Leonard Krieger and Ralf Dahrendorf in their respective works, *The German Idea of Freedom* and *Society and Democracy in Germany*, offered an intellectual interpretation of the *Sonderweg* thesis. They suggested that German ideas about freedom and certainty strengthened the power of the German state while at the same time restricting the possibility of liberal democratic reform. Because of the Germans' lack of enthusiasm for liberal democracy, Germany's authoritarian political structure prevailed.

Krieger argued that "the German idea of freedom" was responsible for the lack of a strong liberal tradition in Germany. The German understanding of freedom, according to Krieger, suggested the state was responsible for granting individual liberty. This vertical understanding of freedom was illiberal in the sense it did not advance individual rights and instead made individuals subordinate to the state. It was this idea of freedom, according to Krieger, that continually undermined the German ability to challenge the authoritarian structure of the state and establish a liberal democratic alternative.³³ He explained that beginning in the old regime up until German unification, Germans understood liberty to be a privilege that must be granted and acknowledged by the state.

³⁴ In the Holy Roman Empire, aristocratic liberty was collectively represented and acted

³³ This theory was later adopted by historians such as Georg Iggers in his book on the German understanding of history. Iggers argued that German historians in the nineteenth century thought that freedom could be achieved only through the framework of the state. German historians believed that the "synthesis of freedom and authority" through a constitutional monarchy secured individual liberty more than liberal democracy could. See Georg C. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 15.

³⁴ Krieger defines the old regime as a time period "from the Protestant Reformation to the French Revolution." Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition from the Reformation to 1871* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 9.

on by the prince. As the rulers of various principalities began to consolidate their power and transform into monarchical states, the power of the prince to expand or restrict his subjects' freedom increased. By the age of absolutism, German individual liberties were fully absorbed into the authority of the monarchy.³⁵

Soon the ideals of the French Revolution presented a threat to the authority of the German state. The influx of liberal ideas into German society prompted Germans to confront their previously held notions about liberty and the state. Krieger, however, argued that philosophers Immanuel Kant and G. W. Friedrich Hegel addressed the problem of liberty in ways that reaffirmed the standard German conception of freedom.³⁶ Kant was a "representative figure of German liberalism," who, according to Krieger, recognized the need for greater political freedom in German society.³⁷ But Kant reconciled the need for political freedom with his support of an absolute monarchy. Krieger claimed that Kant believed greater freedom could be achieved only through the existing political order, rather than through revolution. Kant's ideas, according to Krieger, supported the traditional claim that the state was the vehicle for the expansion of freedom.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 50- 71.

³⁶ It is important to note Krieger's reading of Kant and Hegel is problematic. In contrast to Krieger's views, Herbert Marcuse claimed that "the German idealists unanimously welcomed the revolution, calling it the dawn of a new era, and they all linked their basic philosophical principles to the ideals that it advanced." Hegel in particular viewed the French Revolution as an embrace of the concept of reason, which was significant in his dialectic. Indeed, his philosophy of the state depended on the rational realization that man was a communal being. He therefore viewed the French Revolution as an embrace of the ideal of a communal, egalitarian society. See Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), 3-29.

³⁷ Ibid., 86.

³⁸ Ibid., 105, 124.

In Krieger's view, Hegel more assertively affirmed the authoritarian structure of the state. Hegel, according to Krieger, believed that "the fulfilment of individual freedom, rights, [and] interests depended upon the individual's conscious adoption of the universal order manifested in the state."³⁹ Hegel advocated for the complete transcendence of the individual in order to form a more universal state that embodied the rights and freedoms of its subjects. Thus Hegel's ideas maintained the principle that freedom could only be an instrument of the state and thereby upheld the German authoritarian political structure.⁴⁰ Both Kant and Hegel's ideas, according to Krieger, represented the continued primacy of the state over individual liberties.

Even as the liberal movement gained momentum in the mid-nineteenth century, German liberals were divided over whether to reform the current political system or to radically break with it. Krieger argued that the divisions among liberals prevented any significant political change from taking place. When concessions were made, they were made within the existing political structure. In this sense, freedom always came from above instead of being generated from below, as in the British or French examples. The German idea of freedom, therefore, restricted the possibility of establishing liberal democracy in Germany. Germans valued the state as the embodiment of the individual, allowing authoritarian regimes to further consolidate their power over their subjects.

Similar to Krieger, Dahrendorf emphasized that throughout German history, Germans favored a strong state over their need for individual rights. Unlike Krieger,

³⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132-138.

Dahrendorf did not attribute the German support of the state to a particular notion of freedom. Instead, he argued that the support of the state came from the German desire for certainty and synthesis over conflicting political views. According to Dahrendorf, liberal democracy is necessarily characterized by conflict within the political sphere. “Conflict is liberty,” he claimed, “because by conflict alone the multitude and incompatibility of human interests and desires find adequate expression in a world of notorious uncertainty.”⁴¹ The expression of human needs and desires allowed for the possibility of opposing opinions. He believed that conflict as such had the power to generate social change. According to Dahrendorf, Germans did not see the importance of conflict and plurality. They instead wished to evade conflict and the uncertainty that it perpetuated. Germans desired stability and they believed they could find it within the state. The idea that the state could and should transcend the political realm of conflict restricted the possibility of liberal democratic reform.⁴²

Like Krieger, Dahrendorf turned to Hegel to support his claims. In his view, Hegel’s ideas demonstrated the German evasion of conflict and desire for synthesis. Hegel argued that man found his greatest expression as a human being not as an individual in society, but as a member of the state. Hegel developed this idea in his dichotomy between civil society and the state. Civil society, characterized by competing

⁴¹ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), 140. Originally published as *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1965).

⁴² Dahrendorf’s embrace of conflict and plurality is problematic. Conflict and disagreement is the result of the expression of human distinctiveness, which Dahrendorf clearly defended. But what he did not recognize is that the assertion of our individual views creates hierarchy and inequality, which then lead to selfish assertions of authority. In this sense, Dahrendorf’s call to embrace conflict and plurality does not reduce the problem of authority or tyranny but instead perpetuates these forms of violence and domination.

individual interests, classes, and parties, was ineffective in regulating the behavior of human beings. The state, however, could transcend the uncertainty and conflict in civil society and offer the human being access to truth and morality. As a member of the state, man could be “guided by the certainty of an authority that was no longer partisan itself.”⁴³ The state was superior to the individual, and thus, individual rights were not a priority.⁴⁴ Hegel’s ideas illustrated his own preference for the universal state over the particular individual. Dahrendorf believed that Hegel’s ideas had a tremendous amount of influence on German political thought.⁴⁵

Dahrendorf also suggested that German nationalism demonstrated the German desire for synthesis. In order to become a more unified and powerful state, thinkers such as Heinrich von Treitschke believed that the individual had to sacrifice himself for the good of the nation. Dahrendorf claimed that “time and time again the demands of the nation had to serve, in German history, to suspend civil society and with it the vital questions of men.”⁴⁶ The desire for unity and power distracted the Germans from internal civil liberties and occluded the possibility of individual progress.

The rise of Hitler, in Dahrendorf’s view, was also evidence of the German desire for synthesis rather than conflict. He claimed that Germans in the interwar period were hesitant to adopt democratic pluralism, and thus found Hitler and the Nazi party

⁴³ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁴ Like Krieger, Dahrendorf misunderstood Hegel. Hegel’s overcoming of civil society does not mean he did not value the individual. He instead wished to *liberate* the individual from his or her own selfishness. For Hegel, selfishness perpetuated violence and struggle. He is therefore interested in human freedom, which he believed could be realized through the creation of an egalitarian, communal society. See Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*.

⁴⁵ Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany*, 188-203.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 199.

appealing. Hitler made Germans believe he was “allied with ‘providence’” and had the “certainty of the moral idea on his side.”⁴⁷ Hitler’s success based on his appeal to certainty demonstrated that Germans in Weimar Germany were uncomfortable with political conflict.

Even after the fall of the Third Reich when the Germans began to adopt liberal values, Dahrendorf believed that they still preferred certainty over political conflict. He claimed that when West Germans were asked whether they thought it was best to have multiple political parties or political unity, the majority of Germans wished to see the formation of unified coalitions. The creation of a coalition, according to Dahrendorf, suppressed plurality insofar as it symbolized an end to party conflict.⁴⁸

In the end, both Krieger and Dahrendorf demonstrated that German ideas – whether about freedom or synthesis – strengthened the authority of the German state. The potential for liberal democratic reform was weak in a society that emphasized the primacy of the rights of the state over individual liberties. In associating the strength of the authoritarian state with the failures and weakness of liberalism, Krieger and Dahrendorf presupposed the superiority of liberal-democracy.

The Sonderweg: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

⁴⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 194-5.

Like Krieger and Dahrendorf, Hans-Ulrich Wehler highlighted the German concept of the state as a reason for the lack of a liberal tradition in German history.⁴⁹ But Wehler also explored various political and socio-cultural realities of Imperial Germany that he believed affirmed the authority of the state and restricted the possibility for reform. The policies of Otto von Bismarck as well as socialization processes within the education system presented threats to the liberal movement in the German Empire. His conclusions about Bismarck's Germany have drawn considerable attention, but for the purpose of this chapter, I would like to focus on Wehler's social and cultural understanding of the German state through his discussion of the education system.⁵⁰

According to Wehler, education in Imperial Germany preserved existing social hierarchies. Students who belonged to higher social classes were given greater opportunities to further their education. The majority of students in Germany attended elementary school, but only a small fraction of those who attended elementary school would continue on to grammar school, and an even smaller percentage continued on to university. Since university admission was so competitive, Wehler argued that the educated class "continually reproduced itself" allowing the educated elite to control the upper levels of the German education system.⁵¹ After their schooling was complete, the

⁴⁹ Wehler also argued that the German ideology of the state during this time was in part derived from Hegel. See Hans Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1985), 100-101.

⁵⁰ Wehler referred to Bismarck as a "Bonapartist dictator." In short, he argued that Bismarck met some of the progressive demands of the bourgeoisie, but only to deter the threat of revolution. In doing so, he preserved the power of the ruling elite. Bismarck demonstrated that it was possible to modernize while at the same time defending traditional power structures (Ibid., 55-61). Since power relations "had not undergone any decisive alteration," Wehler referred to the German political system as a "semi-absolutist sham constitutionalism." Ibid., 55.

⁵¹ Ibid., 122.

privileged elite were often granted the highest administrative or judicial positions based on their affiliations.⁵²

German education perpetuated the rigid social structure in Imperial Germany, but more important for Wehler was the kind of education that students received. Beginning in elementary school, teachers reinforced patriotism and preached virtues such as “diligence, [the] fear of God, obedience and loyalty.”⁵³ The goal of public education under Wilhelm II was to purge any liberal or socialist ideas from the school systems and cultivate patriotism. When students reached the university level, Wehler explained that there was strong “pressure towards political conformity.”⁵⁴ Various disciplines promoted the idea of a strong state in order to justify the current political conditions. Universities aimed to strictly control opinions and thus became a breeding ground for political and social conservatives.⁵⁵

By the time students reached grammar school and university, they had the opportunity to join various organizations that promoted these same ideas. Organizations such as the *Wandervogel* supported “anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-urban and anti-industrial” values.⁵⁶ Its members rejected the modern world and wanted to return to a more natural way of life.⁵⁷ This movement, Wehler argued, emboldened the youth with a strong sense of nationalism as they fought in the battles of WWI. Other organizations

⁵² Ibid., 120-127.

⁵³ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 120-125.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁷ For more information on the German Youth Movement and its romantic/idealist ideology see George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1964), 171-189.

included student fraternities, in which middle class men were taught aristocratic norms and values. The feudalization of the bourgeoisie was one of the main functions of university fraternities. This socialization process was also carried out by the officer reserve organizations. In the elite's view, the more the middle class became acquainted with elite traditions and values, the less power they had to undermine the existing social and political structure.⁵⁸

But if so few Germans had access to higher education, then only a small percentage of Germans were actually subject to the socialization processes that Wehler described. The middle class and educated elite were taught to obey the state, but what about the rest of the German population? What prevented them from embracing liberal views? Wehler does not formally address this problem other than to suggest that Germans had a subservient mentality. Because of this mentality, Germans “passively accepted the actions and encroachments of the state.”⁵⁹ They were routinely inclined to conform instead of protest. According to Wehler, the many years that Germans were subject to princely rule shaped their servile mentality. This mentality, in addition to the socialization processes in the education system were some of the reasons why Germans failed to challenge the authority of the state and create a liberal democratic revolution.⁶⁰

Both the German subservient mentality and socialization process within the school system reinforced German loyalty to the monarchy and weakened the appeal of liberal ideas. The authority of the German state, according to Wehler, rested on the social

⁵⁸ Wehler, *The German Empire*, 125-127.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 129-130.

and cultural conditions which generated support for the monarchy outside of the political sphere. Here, too, we see that Wehler privileged liberal views and assumed that if the Germans had fully embraced liberalism, the authoritarian political structure could have been undermined.

The Sonderweg: A Political Analysis

Hans Rosenberg, in contrast to Krieger, Dahrendorf, and Wehler, analyzed Germany's lack of a liberal democratic revolution from a strictly political perspective. In his book *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660-1815*, Rosenberg attempted to understand how each of these institutions interacted with one another during old regime. He was particularly interested in the transformation of the bureaucracy into an absolutist institution. Rosenberg explained that by 1815, the Prussian political system was characterized by a period of "bureaucratic absolutism." During this time, the authority of the German state was no longer embodied in the monarchy but existed within the ranks of the civil service.

Rosenberg began his study at the time when Frederick William of Brandenburg, the Great Elector, began to consolidate his power over various Prussian estates. By bringing other estates under his control, Frederick William ushered in a period of centralized financial and military administration in Prussia. In this period of early Prussian absolutism, he created a class of civil servants that would be in charge of carrying out his wishes. Frederick William appointed men of various backgrounds, including judges, army officers, and university students to administrative positions. When

his grandson Frederick William I took over the throne, he increased the number of positions occupied by military officers. But it was also characteristic of Frederick William I to appoint non-noble commoners to administrative positions.⁶¹ The addition of commoners into state service “disturbed and confused the old social system, built on birth and privilege, on hierarchy and hereditary estate distinctions.”⁶²

The emergence of the new bureaucrat challenged the notion that only wealthy landholders were fit for service. Rosenberg argued that the nobles still had a significant advantage when it came to social advancement, but often times were “impeded or blocked by the successful competition of ‘immodest’ commoners.”⁶³ Tensions increased between the old aristocratic elite and the new bureaucrats. The competition for greater control and influence within the administrative realm reached new heights. Eventually the new bureaucracy began to absorb the old elite within their own ranks of royal service and tensions between the two dominant groups eased. The reorganization of the civil service, now fit to include members of the old official hierarchy, Rosenberg claimed, resulted in a check of the power of the absolute monarch.⁶⁴

The bureaucracy continued to expand throughout the course of the eighteenth century. The size of the bureaucracy alone made it difficult for the monarch to supervise and control their undertakings. Consequently, the bureaucracy “came to enjoy a high degree of hierarchical self-government.”⁶⁵ For instance, bureaucrats limited the power of

⁶¹ Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660-1815* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), 57-74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 109-136.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

the monarch by taking control of their own recruitment. Rosenberg also argued that the concept of *Bildung* was crucial in the emancipation of the bureaucracy from the absolutist control of the monarch. “The spread of *Bildung*,” he claimed, “powerfully reinforced the yearning for greater individual and corporate freedom in professional life; for more authority and responsibility.”⁶⁶ But with Frederick II in charge, Rosenberg argued that the bureaucratic detachment from the monarch was negative in nature; Frederick II still had the ultimate power. After Frederick’s death, however, the power of the bureaucracy increased.⁶⁷ The bureaucrats recognized their status as a superior ruling class and, according to Rosenberg, “was ready to assume political mastership.”⁶⁸

In the period that followed, the bureaucracy completely transformed from a political force under the control of the monarch to a mostly autonomous, absolutist institution. While the bureaucracy was ultimately subordinate to the Prussian King, legal sanctions and royal ordinances were signed by administrative ministers rather than the monarch. In addition, there were no constitutional checks on bureaucratic power. Thus, the monarch’s role was severely limited when he was banned from intervening with the operations of the administration.⁶⁹

The newfound authority of the bureaucracy faced opposition from both the monarch and the Junker elite. In order to solidify their power over the king, the bureaucracy allowed wealthy land owners to share in some of the governing. Just as dynastic absolutism was based on an agreement between the Hohenzollerns and the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 175-201.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 202-228.

landowning elite, bureaucratic absolutism functioned on an agreement between the civil administration and the squires.⁷⁰

Together the two ruling groups were able to curtail liberal and democratic movements up until 1848. Rosenberg claimed that in order to preserve their interests as elite groups, both the bureaucracy and the aristocrats “had a common interest in keeping the Prussian people almost free from acquiring political experience.”⁷¹ In their view, extending political representation to the lower classes, in their view, would have threatened the existence of the current political order. To preserve their own self-interest, the ruling Junkers and bureaucrats suppressed radical ideas that threatened their authority.⁷²

In his post-script, Rosenberg argued that it would be a mistake to look for the roots of totalitarianism in the peculiar traits of the Prussian government. He nevertheless confirmed the *Sonderweg* theory that German history unfolded in a way that diverged from the liberal democratic societies in the West. It would be impossible to understand Germany’s peculiar history, he claimed, “without the Prussian legacy.”⁷³ The characteristics of the Prussian elite in 1815 were still the characteristics of the ruling class in the Imperial period. Rosenberg pointed to “pride and vanity, the fear of losing superior status and resentment of the mounting power of the opposition” as factors that strengthened the authoritarian attitude of the ruling elite in the late nineteenth century.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid., 202-228.

⁷¹ Ibid., 227.

⁷² Ibid., 227.

⁷³ Ibid., 232.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 233.

It was this attitude, combined with the economic and parliamentary crises, that contributed to the rise of national socialism in later periods of German history.⁷⁵

Rosenberg's understanding of authority of the state hinged on the bureaucracy's transformation from a tool of an absolute monarch to a pseudo independent, absolutist, governing institution. He claimed that a manipulative group of elites who held tremendous political power affirmed the authority of the German state. But what Rosenberg failed to recognize is that a state run by an efficient bureaucracy was not something unique to Germany. Geoff Eley, for instance, argued that the presence of a productive and skilled bureaucracy is not "backward," but instead a mark of the modern state.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Rosenberg, like the rest of the advocates of the *Sonderweg* interpretation, attempted to prove that the presence of an all-powerful state hindered Germany's chances for a successful liberal democratic revolution.

Krieger, Dahrendorf, Wehler, and Rosenberg introduced various explanations as to why the liberal tradition remained weak and the authority of the German state went unchallenged. In their view, the German idea of freedom, the German desire for certainty, the educational system, and the legacy of the Prussian bureaucracy each affirmed the power of the German state, making it difficult for liberal ideas to generate support among

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁷⁶ Geoff Eley, "German History and the Contradictions of Modernity," in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany 1870-1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 93.

the German people. Consequently, they assumed that the embrace of liberal-democracy would have challenged and undermined the authoritarian tradition in German history.

At stake in this view of German history is a liberal understanding of modernity that associates the “modern” with liberal democratic political structures. These historians ultimately used their platform to advance their own beliefs about the primacy of the individual and individual rights. They argued that the “modern” was something to strive for because as history demonstrated, its incompleteness – as in the case of Germany – could result in catastrophe. But, as we will see, the liberal notion of modernity would soon be challenged with a wave of scholarship in the 1980s. These historians would suggest that modernity is not necessarily characterized by liberal democracy. A state could be considered modern and have modern features without being liberal democratic. These scholars instead argued that the origins of Nazism are located in western modernity.

CHAPTER TWO

HANNAH ARENDT'S INTERPRETATION OF NAZISM

Considered to be one of the greatest political thinkers of her time, Hannah Arendt is known for her complex and often controversial explanations of the twentieth century's most imminent questions: why do people commit evil acts and how do we understand totalitarianism? Arendt confronted these issues most famously in her texts *Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Taken together, these texts do not represent one single view or understanding of Nazism. Instead, Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published over a decade later, marks a shift in her interpretation of Nazism.

In *Origins*, Arendt explored the conditions that enabled the rise of modern dictators such as Adolf Hitler. She identified widespread anti-Semitism, the desire for world domination, and isolated masses as key conditions in which modern totalitarian regimes emerged. Once in power, Arendt argued that totalitarian regimes represented a novel form of government. She distinguished totalitarianism from other forms of governing such as despotism, tyranny, dictatorship and authoritarianism. Unlike these forms of government, totalitarianism “does not curtail liberties or abolish essential freedom.”⁷⁷ It instead disposes of human freedom altogether. The totalitarian domination

⁷⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 466. Arendt reiterates this fundamental distinction between totalitarianism and other forms of government in a later essay, nearly a decade before the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: There are “differences in principle between the restriction of freedom in authoritarian regimes, the abolition of political freedom in tyrannies and dictatorships, and the total elimination of spontaneity itself, that is, of the most general and most elementary manifestation of human freedom, at which only totalitarian regimes aim by means of their

of the individual was most clearly seen in the dehumanization of prisoners in Nazi concentration and death camps. But even the perpetrators, she suggested, were “thrown into the movement” and unable to think or challenge the Nazi worldview. Totalitarian regimes altogether destroyed man’s capacity to think and made human beings superfluous.

Years later, Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a controversial text based on her observations of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in the early 1960s. Originally published as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*, Arendt’s conclusions about the Eichmann trial received significant criticism. Scholars believe she portrayed Eichmann as a dominated individual, and thus, argue that Arendt excused him from his murderous actions.

This critique can be found in an especially clear manner in the work of historians Bettina Stangneth and Richard Wolin. In her book *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, Stangneth sought to undermine Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann as a banal, obsequious bureaucrat. She relied on new evidence to suggest that Eichmann was indeed an anti-Semitic ideologue who fooled many, including Arendt, with his defense that he had only followed orders. Stangneth was generally critical of the secondary literature that “parroted” the view that Eichmann was “just a small cog in Adolf Hitler’s extermination machine.”⁷⁸ In a book review, Wolin praised Stangneth’s conclusions. He claimed, “one of the outstanding merits of Stangneth’s comprehensive account is that she shows that Eichmann was anything but a faceless cog in the

various methods of conditioning.” Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 96. See also Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 45.

⁷⁸ See Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, trans. Ruth Martin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), xv-xxv.

machine.”⁷⁹ The problem with Arendt’s analysis, Wolin argued, was that she created a narrative that managed “to downplay the executioners’ criminal liability.”⁸⁰

Eichmann’s defense certainly adopted this narrative; he was not responsible for the death of millions of Jews — so he claimed — but rather it was the system in which he was a cog that was responsible. He claimed that if he had not done it, somebody else would have. But upon closer reading, it is clear that Arendt’s understanding of Eichmann is misunderstood by Stangneth and Wolin. Indeed, Arendt affirmed Eichmann’s guilt based on the fact that he *voluntarily* surrendered his ability to think – that is his ability to form judgments – and submitted to an authority in order to advance his career. Consequently, Eichmann and his actions were complicit in a regime that carried out mass murder. She did not view Eichmann as a puppet with conditioned reflexes. He was not a totally dominated individual that was helplessly thrown into the Nazi movement. He instead was a self-interested individual who was in total command of himself. Thus, Arendt’s portrayal of Eichmann does not fit the picture of totalitarian domination that she introduced years earlier. Eichmann was someone capable of resisting, but instead chose to submit to an authority that carried out crimes against humanity.⁸¹

I am not the only one to critique the view that Arendt portrayed Eichmann as a dominated individual and thus, deprived him of his agency and responsibility. Many scholars claim that Arendt did not merely view Eichmann as a dominated cog, but as a free, responsible agent. Dana Villa, for instance, claimed that Arendt did not view

⁷⁹ Richard Wolin, “The Banality of Evil: The Demise of a Legend,” *Jewish Review of Books* (2014), 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

Eichmann as an automaton, but one among criminals that “willingly participate in crimes legalized by the state.” Similarly, in an edited volume of essays on Arendt, Richard Bernstein emphasized her rejection of the cog theory and assertion of his responsibility.⁸² The originality of my position is that it considers Arendt’s understanding of Eichmann as a free individual with regard to her theory of total domination that she introduced in *Origins*.

In the following chapter, I aim to offer a more complete picture of Arendt’s understanding of Nazism as it evolved over the course of several decades. I first analyze Arendt’s theory of total domination as described in *Origins*. I then compare this understanding of Nazism to the one Arendt introduces in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Based on these two texts, as well as a number of additional essays, I argue that Arendt’s portrayal of Eichmann represents a significant shift in her understanding of Nazism. Finally, I address the significance of Arendt’s conclusions about Nazism and how they prompt us to reconsider how we understand freedom and evil.

Total Domination

According to Arendt, totalitarianism “becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition; it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way.”⁸³ To eliminate opposition from their societies, totalitarian regimes combined ideology with

⁸² See Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 51; Richard Bernstein, “Are Arendt’s Reflections Still Relevant,” in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 302.

⁸³ Arendt, *Origins*, 464.

terror. Their ideology was based on their narrative of history, and terror, Arendt argued, was the essence of the regime.

Nazi ideology was based on what Arendt called the laws of nature or history. The regime's adherence to these laws is one way it was distinguished from despotism, tyranny and dictatorship, and authoritarianism. The regime was neither lawless, nor was it arbitrary. It instead claimed to obey strictly the laws of nature and history. Based on these laws, the Nazis argued that the Aryan race was superior, destined to outlive all other races. Arendt claimed that totalitarian law "promises to release the fulfillment of law from all action and will of man; and it promises justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of the law."⁸⁴ Totalitarian regimes molded man into an "active unfailing carrier of a law to which human beings otherwise would only passively and reluctantly be subjected."⁸⁵

Through the use of terror, Hitler and the Nazis transformed their ideology into an alternate reality. Terror was physical force that the regime used to actualize its ideology. They believed it was their duty to "provide the forces of nature or history with an incomparable instrument to accelerate their movement."⁸⁶ Essentially, this meant that Germans could kill off races they deemed as "unfit to live," instead of "waiting for the slower and less efficient processes of nature or history themselves."⁸⁷ Since the laws of nature determined the extinction of these races anyway, the Nazis claimed it was logical to set these forces in motion.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 462.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 463.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 466.

Based on the laws of history, human behavior in Nazi society was guided by what nature itself had already decided; people were designated either perpetrators or victims.⁸⁸ Whatever happened, happened according to the logic of the laws of nature. Thus, every act was carried out in the name of the law and of the acceleration of the movement; “every single act is the execution of a death sentence which Nature or History has already pronounced.”⁸⁹ In this way, the laws of totalitarian society entirely dominated the way the individual thought. There was an explanation for everything that occurred, whether it took place in the past, present, or future. According to Arendt, Nazi ideology caused Germans to surrender their freedom of thought “for the strait jacket of logic with which man can force himself.”⁹⁰

The total domination of the individual, Arendt claimed, was most clearly observed in the death camps. The purpose of the Nazi camps was “not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing.”⁹¹ Robbing the individual of his or her spontaneity – that is, according to Arendt, one’s capacity to start something new – was a necessary prerequisite for total domination.⁹² Spontaneity was the enemy of total control because it was incalculable. As such, spontaneity had the capacity to undermine and resist the power of the regime. Thus,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 468.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 467.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 470.

⁹¹ Ibid., 438.

⁹² Ibid., 455.

Arendt claimed that “total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity.”⁹³

In order to transform men in the camps into mere puppets, the regime followed a three-step process. First, it stripped the individual of his/her civil rights. The regime outlawed innocent people from the state. In relinquishing the individual’s political rights, one can arbitrarily arrest somebody without his or her consent. Scholar Dana Villa clarified Arendt’s point best: once “the juridical person has been effaced... the continued ‘total disenfranchisement of man’ becomes possible.”⁹⁴ The second step in this process was to kill the moral person in man. The Nazis took away the prisoners’ ability to choose between good and evil and instead forced them to decide “between murder and murder.” It became impossible to do good. Prisoners were confronted with the difficult decision of either sending their friends or complete strangers to their deaths. The triumph of totalitarian terror, Arendt explained, occurred when “the consciously organized complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total.”⁹⁵ The regime essentially forced populations to participate in their own destruction.

The final step in stripping the human being of all spontaneity was to destroy his individual identity. The destruction of the individual’s identity was made possible by assuming total control over human beings’ deaths. Death itself belongs to the individual. For instance, nobody can experience my death but myself, and therefore my death is

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁹⁴ Villa, *Politics*, 25.

⁹⁵ Arendt, *Origins*, 452.

certainly my own. Yet Arendt claimed that the Nazis “took away the individual’s own death, proving henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one.”⁹⁶ The Nazis reified death by completely isolating the individual from his or her death. From the moment that they arrived in the camp, the prisoners’ manner and time of death was already determined. The camp system essentially made the process of dying permanent.

The destruction of the individual’s rights, moral agency, and identity were essential steps in destroying freedom and entirely dominating human beings. This process robbed men of their spontaneity and turned them into marionettes with conditioned reflexes. The process was successful; Arendt claimed that prisoners marched to their own death without protest or resistance. Humans were completely mastered, living in a rigid state of submission. For Arendt, the horror of the camps was a kind of radical evil, unprecedented in human history. She emphasized that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of totalitarian government was that it proved “everything is possible.” Man’s power was greater than anyone had ever dared to imagine.

The total control over the individual in the camps, as well as the one-dimensional thinking the regime enforced, formed the basis of what Arendt understood as a totally dominated society. But her theory of total domination is problematic for several reasons. In this interpretation of Nazism, human agency is ultimately at stake. In order for an entire society to be under total control of the regime, the regime must “eliminate precisely the capacity of man to act.”⁹⁷ This then raises the question that if the individual

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 467.

is incapable of acting independently, can the individual be held responsible for his or her actions while totally under the control of the regime? If total domination denies human agency, the human being has no choice but to become a part of the system. How, then, can we hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions?

These questions and concerns are appropriate in the context of Arendt's analysis of total domination. Scholars, however, tend to place Arendt's analysis of Eichmann into this framework of total domination, and thus misinterpret her as excusing Eichmann of his role in the death of millions of Jews.⁹⁸ In this case, not only do scholars misunderstand Arendt's banality of evil thesis, but they do not acknowledge the important revision she makes to her understanding of Nazism. Eichmann was not a dominated individual, but someone who actively chose to support the Nazi regime. Arendt affirmed Eichmann's free agency and thus affirmed his guilt and responsibility.

Who was Adolf Eichmann?

Eichmann was in exile in Argentina for a decade before being captured and arrested by Israeli intelligence. Subsequently, Arendt was sent by *The New Yorker* to report on his trial in 1961. During the trial, she was perplexed by the fact that Eichmann appeared "terrifyingly normal."⁹⁹ Eichmann did not represent the monstrous and demonic

⁹⁸ There are a number of scholars who defend Arendt against these critiques. See for instance: Villa, *Politics*; Richard Bernstein, "Are Arendt's Reflections Still Relevant?"; Seyla Benhabib, "Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 65-85; and Susan Neiman "Banality Reconsidered," in *Politics in Dark Times*.

⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 276.

Nazi one might imagine. His ordinary demeanor led Arendt to the conclusion that wickedness was not a prerequisite for evil-doing. She argued that “he did not enter the party out of conviction, nor was he ever convinced by it.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, the ideology itself did not dominate the way Eichmann thought about the world. However, he did rigidly obey a set of rules that resulted in mass murder. The question then becomes why? Was he forced to obey? Did Eichmann have a choice? Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann’s life both before and during his time in the S.S. confirms her belief in his free agency.

Arendt described the young Eichmann as a mediocre student who dropped out of school to start working for his father’s electrical business. For this reason, his family and peers considered him a failure. After working for his father for a number of years, Eichmann began a job in sales for the Austrian Elektrobau Company. Arendt claimed that Eichmann at this time was “twenty-two years old and without any prospects for a career; the only thing he had learned, perhaps, was how to sell.”¹⁰¹ Just two years later, Eichmann left his job with the electric company and became a vacuum salesman. Thus, until 1932, Eichmann led an ordinary life.¹⁰²

By 1932, Eichmann was unsatisfied with his job in vacuum sales. For whatever reason, he no longer enjoyed his work. Later that year, Eichmann joined the N.S.D.A.P. just before losing his job with the Vacuum Oil Company. His failed attempt in sales led him to turn to the Nazi party for a career. Eichmann moved to Germany and decided to enlist as an S.S. soldier. Arendt described his motivation for the career change:

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰² Ibid., 27-33.

From a humdrum life without significance and consequence the wind had blown him into History, as he understood it, namely, into a Movement that always kept moving and in which somebody like him – already a failure in the eyes of his social class, of his family, and hence in his own eyes as well—could start from scratch and make a career.¹⁰³

Up to that point Eichmann's life had been characterized by disappointment and failure. As Arendt implied in the quote above, Eichmann viewed a new career in the S.S. as an opportunity to redeem his unsuccessful past. Evidently, after months of training, Eichmann realized that being a soldier would not bring him the satisfaction he desired. After hearing that the Security Service of the Reichsführer had positions available, Eichmann took advantage of the opportunity and successfully applied for the job.¹⁰⁴

Much to Eichmann's disappointment, however, his new job in the S.S. was not what he expected. Arendt argued that his disappointment “consisted chiefly in that he had to start all over again, that he was back at the bottom.”¹⁰⁵ He was initially a file person for the information department, which he found boring. But contrary to his past experience, Eichmann worked his way through the ranks of the S.S. By 1938, just three years after accepting an internship with the department of Jewish affairs, Eichmann was in charge of the “forced emigration” of German Jewry.¹⁰⁶ By 1941, he was promoted four times, ultimately achieving the title of lieutenant colonel. Arendt wrote, “and there, to his great

¹⁰³ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 33-35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 43.

grief, he ‘got stuck’; as he saw it, there was no higher grade obtainable in the section in which he worked.”¹⁰⁷ At this point in his career, he was considered the “expert” on Jewish evacuation.¹⁰⁸

When put on the stand during his trial in 1961, Eichmann made himself out to be a clown, using various clichés and stock phrases that shielded him from the reality of his own actions. The judges characterized his defense as “empty talk.” Arendt supported their claim: “no communication was possible with him.”¹⁰⁹ He had an unreliable memory, and when he did remember any specific details about his time in the S.S, his memories were of the turning points in his career. Thus, in her final impression, Arendt understood Eichmann to be an ambitious careerist. Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann is not one of an individual who was totally dominated or forced into obedience. Instead, he was entirely in command of himself when he submitted to the authority of Nazism. The basis of his obedience was his interest in career advancement; an interest he pursued at the expense of millions of lives.

The most compelling evidence of Arendt’s affirmation of Eichmann’s agency and guilt, at least in this text, appears in the epilogue. Arendt reimagined the judges’ final address to Eichmann. She responded to Eichmann’s claim that anybody could have taken his place, and that potentially all Germans are guilty: “guilt and innocence before the law are of an objective nature, and even if eighty million Germans had done as you did, this would not have been an excuse for you.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 35, 43, 65.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 278.

Arendt makes this claim again in an essay on personal responsibility in dictatorships: “in a courtroom there is no system on trial, no History, or historical trend, no ism, anti-Semitism for instance, but a person, and if the defendant happens to be a functionary, he stands accused precisely because even a functionary is still a human being, and it is in this capacity that he stands trial.”¹¹¹ In this quote, Arendt clearly repudiates the defense’s cog theory, as well as the claim that she excused Eichmann from his responsibility. For Arendt, the cog-theory is inadmissible in court. It did not matter that Eichmann claimed to have no ill intentions. It did not matter that if he had not done it, someone else would have. The cog in the wheel defense does not absolve the individual from his actions; the fact remains that he “carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder.”¹¹² Even if the theory was valid in court, it does not explain why Eichmann became a cog in the first place. Arendt claimed that the moment an individual enters the court room the question is not “how did this system function,” but “why did the defendant become a functionary in this organization?”¹¹³ This implies that she believed there is always a possibility to resist.

At the end of her imagined address to Eichmann, Arendt asserted that “in politics obedience and support are the same.”¹¹⁴ This point is worth exploring further. In a subsequent essay, she argued that no man can accomplish anything without the support of others. Essentially those who obey him “actually support him and his enterprise” since

¹¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 30.

¹¹² Arendt, *Eichmann*, 279.

¹¹³ Arendt, *Responsibility*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 279.

“without such ‘obedience’ he would be helpless.¹¹⁵ To put it more clearly, a leader cannot lead without the consent of others. Arendt claimed that since a revolution against a government represents the withdrawal of public consent, obedience must be characterized as consent and support. In fact, she argued we should trade the term “obedience” for “support” in political thought. Instead of asking, “why did you obey?” the question should always be “why did you support?”¹¹⁶

Arendt’s identification of obedience with support is crucial. According to philosopher Alexandre Kojève, to obey means to hold back *voluntarily* the possibility of opposing any kind of authority. When I submit to someone else’s rule, I am thereby relinquishing my ability to resist. My act of obedience is therefore free in the sense that there is always the possibility of opposing it, and I myself have chosen to resist that possibility.¹¹⁷ Put in these terms, obedience is free consent by definition, otherwise one would be forced to obey by compulsion of some kind.

Let us briefly return to Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann. Aside from his fervent careerism, Arendt characterized him by his genuine inability to think. She assumed that if he had only thought about what he was doing, he would have realized that his actions were wrong. In her later work, Arendt attempted to demonstrate that the activity of thinking could prevent men from committing evil acts.¹¹⁸ Arendt used Kant’s distinction

¹¹⁵ Arendt, *Responsibility*, 47.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹⁷ Alexandre Kojève, *The Notion of Authority*, trans. Hager Weslati (New York: Verso, 2014), 8.

¹¹⁸ In a book on evil, Susan Neiman claimed that Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann’s evil as banal meant that “the sources of evil are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp.” If evil is comprehensible, and if evil “can result from causes that small, there may be hope for overcoming them.” Indeed, Arendt believed that evil like Eichmann’s could be prevented through thinking. Susan Neiman, *Evil*

between *Vernunft* (reason) and *Verstand* (intellect) to illustrate thinking's ability to prevent evil. According to Arendt, Kant described intellect as the faculty of the mind that concerns itself with knowledge. Reason, however, corresponds to humans' need to think. Knowledge presupposes one has learned everything there is to learn on a given topic, but thinking is never final. Arendt explained that thinking "leaves nothing so tangible behind, nor can it be stilled by allegedly definite insights of 'wise men.'" ¹¹⁹ In this sense, thinking is completely free and limitless. It produces no doctrine or creed.

Thinking instead has the ability to destroy all doctrine. Arendt claimed that people who do not think "hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society." ¹²⁰ Thinking, however, had the capacity to destroy those rules. To use Arendt's terms, thinking "unfreezes" doctrine that is "frozen" into our minds. In other words, when I stop and think, I challenge my previously held judgments and in the end become perplexed, unsure of what I initially thought was beyond doubt. Hence Arendt's claim that thinking is a "dangerous and resultless enterprise." ¹²¹ It is a danger to any doctrine and does not put forward a new one.

When Eichmann decided to obey the Nazi regime, he voluntarily surrendered his ability to think and resist, and instead adhered to a doctrine without ever pausing to reflect and question it. In this sense, Eichmann had the opportunity to resist, but freely denied that opportunity. Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann proves that the Nazi regime did

in *Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 302-303.

¹¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture" *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971), 422.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 436.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 434.

not totally dominate the individual. If this were the case, the human being would have no agency. He or she would be incapable of resisting and therefore Arendt's entire concept of thinking would collapse. Eichmann was not deprived of his agency, but freely chose to become a functionary in a regime that committed mass murder.

On Freedom and Evil

Arendt's conclusions about Eichmann challenge the way that people traditionally understand evil in the West. Because of the tremendous influence of Christianity, evil is typically understood as demonic and extraordinary. Arendt instead argued that the evil doer is not necessarily monstrous or demonic. But she did not mean that the action itself is not monstrous. Nevertheless, scholars like Wolin claimed that her characterization of Eichmann as banal marginalized the Holocaust, making the genocide of 6 million Jews itself "banal."¹²² Arendt instead made it clear that she was interested in "the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer."¹²³ In her analysis of Eichmann, Arendt demonstrated that depravity or wickedness is not a necessary condition for evil-doing. In the Nazi regime the unthinking banal bureaucrat was just as capable of carrying out mass-murder as the wicked, convicted anti-Semite.

Arendt also challenged the Christian notion of original sin. Within the Christian tradition, Saint Augustine was one of the first thinkers to raise questions about the nature

¹²² Wolin, "The Banality of Evil," 1.

¹²³ Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 417.

and origins of evil. Evil was a problem for Christians because it casted doubt on the omnipotent and omniscient nature of God. In other words, evil posed the question: if God is good and all knowing, then why does evil exist in the world? In his famous text, *On the Free Choice of Will*, Augustine claimed evil came from human freedom.¹²⁴ He had to claim that humans were responsible for evil, otherwise one could trace the existence of evil back to God. In his view, evil was the consequence of humans freely disobeying God's will. In the Christian tradition, evil was therefore associated with disobedience.

In locating the origins of evil in humans' free will, Augustine encountered another fundamental problem. If evil were merely a consequence of human action, then evil is historical.

And if we believe that evil is historical, then we assume it can be remedied. We assume that we can create a world without the problem of evil; we can achieve peace on earth. If this were the case, the entire concept of Heaven, where humans achieve salvation, would collapse. There would be no need for God. Thus, even though Augustine associated evil with free will, he needed to affirm that sin or evil doing was somehow permanent. He therefore developed the concept of original sin. According to Augustine, the moment that Adam disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, humans *became* naturally evil. His concept of original sin affirmed the permanence of evil in the world. We can only achieve peace and salvation in Heaven. With his concept of original sin, Augustine limited human freedom; humans can never overcome their sinful nature.

¹²⁴ See Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1933).

The conception that evil is something fixed and permanent dominated the way humans thought about evil in the West. Major thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes claimed that in the state of nature humans are naturally violent and evil, concerned only with self-preservation. For Hobbes, the best way to moderate the problem of evil was to form societies and create laws that protect us from our evil nature.¹²⁵

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the first major thinkers to challenge Augustine's notion of original sin. In response to Hobbes, Rousseau imagined the state of nature as completely free in the sense that it was free from social inequality which for Rousseau, leads to violence and evil. The moment that the human declared "this is mine" was an assertion of ownership that distinguished one human from another. This assertion of distinctiveness is what created inequality and suffering in the world. His conclusions about evil were profound. He affirmed Augustine's initial equation of evil with human freedom.¹²⁶ In doing so, Rousseau assumed that evil was historical and therefore that it could be remedied.

Like Rousseau, Arendt's conclusions about Nazism rejected the concept of original sin and instead claimed that evil came from human freedom. Instead of assuming that the human being is naturally sinful, she claimed that the human being was free. Arendt demonstrated through Eichmann that in freely obeying various regimes of authority we can perpetuate evil. The horrors of Nazism were committed by people who

¹²⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Classics, 1982).

¹²⁶ See Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Second Discourse," in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 131-188.

freely chose to commit them. In this sense, Arendt was optimistic about the possibility of eliminating evil and human suffering in this world.

Arendt also rejected the Christian notion that evil comes from disobedience. In the case of Eichmann, Arendt demonstrated that evil does not always come from disobedience, but rather obedience. In a society where the laws were so easily inverted from “thou shall not kill,” to “thou shalt kill,” obedience became dangerous.¹²⁷ Eichmann was evil because he obeyed Hitler’s orders.

Arendt’s conclusions about Nazism demonstrate that our traditional conception of evil fails us when we try to understand the evil of Nazism. Her banality of evil thesis challenged the idea that the evil doer is wicked and demonic. Moreover, she proved that evil does not always come from the instances when we disobey authority, but often in the instances when we obey it. Ultimately, Arendt’s understanding of evil assumes that we can reduce the problem of evil in this world; indeed, Arendt believed that we could minimize the problem of evil through thinking.¹²⁸

In this chapter, I have brought attention to what I see as a significant shift in Arendt’s understanding of Nazism. With her initial publication of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt introduced an interpretation of Nazism that suggested the regime totally dominated every individual in its sphere of governing. This view of Nazism was

¹²⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 150.

¹²⁸ It is important to note that Arendt’s project about thinking is problematic. She assumes that thinking helps us to distinguish right from wrong. Yet throughout her work, she develops no ground or foundation for morality itself.

problematic because it stripped the individual of his or her agency and therefore made it difficult to assign responsibility for crimes against humanity. Years later, after the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt began to rethink and reshape her initial conclusions.

Consequently, the interpretation of Nazism that she introduced in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* returned agency back to the individual, thereby affirming individual culpability.

In her final analysis of Nazism, Arendt repudiated the traditional narrative that evil was radical and demonic. Instead, she proved that even the most banal bureaucrat could transform into a mass murderer. In the case of Adolf Eichmann, it required voluntary, unyielding obedience to a strict doctrine or worldview, even if he was not convinced by it himself. In this sense, Arendt believed that evil was a choice that could be moderated through thinking. In the next chapter I explore where Arendt locates the problem of Nazism historically and attempt to situate her interpretation within a broader critique of modernity in German historiography.

CHAPTER THREE

HANNAH ARENDT AND THE CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

*“The challenge of Nazism shows that the evolution of modernity is not a one-way trip to freedom. The struggle for freedom must always be resumed afresh, both in enquiry and in action.”*¹²⁹ Detlev Peukert

The central question of this chapter is: where might Arendt’s understanding of Nazism situate her within German historiography? Arendt did not support the *Sonderweg* thesis. She never considered Nazism to be the result of the lack of a strong liberal tradition in German history.¹³⁰ Indeed, she claimed that “the posing of the ‘German problem’ by spreading the notion that the source of international conflict lies in the iniquities of Germany (or Japan) has the effect of masking the actual political issues.”¹³¹ For Arendt, the *Sonderweg* thesis was political propaganda; it was used to shape “public opinion for certain political steps.”¹³² In locating the origins of Nazism in German national history, the advocates of the *Sonderweg* thesis encouraged the belief that “the

¹²⁹ Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, And Racism in Everyday Life*, trans. Richard Deveson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 249.

¹³⁰ In an article about Arendt’s *Origins*, Steven Aschheim also made this claim: “There is no hint of the German *Sonderweg* here, no consideration of the role and weight of the peculiarities of German political and social development.” Steven E. Aschheim, “Nazism, Culture and The Origins of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and the Discourse of Evil,” *New German Critique*, no. 70 (1997): 126. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is only one instance that I am aware of where Arendt supported claims about German particularity its relationship to Nazism. In an interview with Joachim Fest, she claimed that her analysis of Eichmann captured something that was uniquely German: “I am not of the opinion that the German people are especially brutal. I absolutely do not believe in a [German] national character... what I consider to be specifically German is the insane idealization of obedience.” Hannah Arendt and Joachim Fest, *Eichmann war von empörender Dummheit. Gespräche und Briefe* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2011), 45, my translation.

¹³¹ Hannah Arendt, “Approaches to the ‘German Problem’” in *Essays in Understanding: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 107.

¹³² *Ibid.*

crushing of Germany is synonymous with the eradication of fascism.”¹³³ The assumption of the special path thesis was that if Germans work to establish a stronger tradition of liberalism in post-war Germany, the less likely Germans would support future authoritarians. In this sense, the *Sonderweg* thesis prevented people from recognizing that the problem of Nazism was not exclusive to the German nation-state. In Arendt’s view, the origins of Nazism are indeed more pervasive. Nazism and the horrors that accompanied it were a negative consequence of European modernity.¹³⁴

In this essay, I situate Arendt within what I call the “dark modernity” interpretation of Nazism. This interpretation of German history challenged the *Sonderweg* narrative and in various ways demonstrated that Nazism was an outgrowth of the pathologies of western modernity. In order to explain how she fits into this interpretation of German history, I first explore the evolution of the critique of modernity and its relationship to Nazism within German historiography. I begin by explaining how historians David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley undermined the *Sonderweg* thesis,

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ The claim that Arendt located the problem of Nazism in western modernity is supported by a number of scholars who have written on Arendt. George Kateb explained Arendt’s critique of modernity most clearly: Nazism and Stalinism “are not, in Arendt’s rendering, typical of our period; they need not have happened. Rather, they could have happened only in the modern age; they show what only modern Europe was capable of. She does not pretend to know whether anything comparable will happen again.” George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 149. See also: Aschheim, “Nazism”; Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). It is important to note here that scholar Seyla Benhabib adopted a more nuanced approach, arguing that Arendt was a “reluctant modern.” In Benhabib’s view, Arendt saw a link between Nazism and specific characteristics of the modern age. Nevertheless, Benhabib argued that this did not make her a nostalgic antimodernist, but rather someone who exposed the contradictions and tensions of modernity without rendering it hopeless. See Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). This scholarship on Arendt attempts to situate her within philosophical critiques of modernity but does not necessarily situate her within the debate in German historiography. My aim, therefore, is to put Arendt in conversation with these critiques of modernity and its role in German history.

prompting historians to explore origins of Nazism in European modernity. I then compare the work of some of the key scholars of the dark modernity narrative, including Geoff Eley, Zygmunt Bauman, and Detlev Peukert. They each understood Nazism to be a negative outgrowth of modernity but traced its origins to different characteristics of the modern age. I then address some of the more recent literature on the dark modernity thesis and how it suggests that future historians should approach the critique of modernity. Finally, I offer my interpretation of Arendt's understanding of the relationship between modernity and Nazism. I note her affinity to both Baumann and Peukert, who believe the modern desire for mastery can lead to tyranny. I also explain how she believed that in the modern era, humans adopt and adhere to dogmatic worldviews that dominate the way that we understand the world. Worldviews are therefore a form of authority that make human beings "thoughtless"; they diminish our ability to challenge and undermine their authority.

The "Dark Modernity" Thesis in the Historiography of Nazism

The *Sonderweg* narrative dominated German historiography until it was challenged by two British scholars, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley. In their collaborative work, *The Peculiarities of German History*, Blackbourn and Eley critiqued the notion of a unique German path to modernity. In their view, one of the fundamental problems of the *Sonderweg* thesis was that it assumed that Imperial Germany was

politically “backward” because did not represent the interests of the middle class.¹³⁵ Historians like Wehler assumed that because Germany was not liberal democratic, the bourgeoisie was unable to assert itself politically, and instead solidified the power of the ruling elites. In his later work, Eley claimed that an authoritarian state – in this case the *Kaiserreich* – “might also articulate the interests of the bourgeoisie and might even provide a framework for the latter’s social and political hegemony.”¹³⁶ In other words, Eley believed that a state did not have to be liberal democratic in order to represent the interests of the middle class. He argued that the *Kaiserreich*’s municipal governments, social administration, male suffrage, and political mobilization proved that it was less “backward” and more “modern” than the advocates of the *Sonderweg* implied.¹³⁷

For Eley, the *Kaiserreich* “showed itself adaptable to the tasks that a ‘modern’ state is called upon to perform.”¹³⁸ If the German state indeed could be considered “modern”, what broad connections could be made between modernity and the rise of Nazism? Eley explored these questions in an essay entitled “What Produces Fascism: Pre-Industrial Traditions or A Crisis of the Capitalist State?” As indicated by the title, Eley argued that the crisis of a modern capitalist state enabled the rise of Nazism. To argue that Nazism was an outgrowth of Germany’s preindustrial traditions would echo the claims of the supporters of the German *Sonderweg*.¹³⁹ Eley instead argued that

¹³⁵ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in the Nineteenth-Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 144.

¹³⁶ Geoff Eley, “German History and the Contradictions of Modernity,” in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany 1870-1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 90.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³⁹ The argument that the persistence of pre-industrial and pre-capitalist traditions “favoured the rise of right-wing extremism” is strongly supported and advanced by Jürgen Kocka, who Eley is responding to in

Germany experienced an accelerated capitalist transformation – a transformation at a pace that “outstripped the adaptive capabilities of the existing political institutions.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, the speed at which Germany transformed into a modern capitalist society had significant consequences when it came to the Germans’ confidence in the existing political institutions.

Beginning in the 1890s, Eley argued that the educated citizenry was frustrated with the German state’s inability to account for the economic interests of the industrial, agrarian, and bureaucratic social classes. As a result, a radical nationalist movement emerged that challenged the “largely liberal and parliamentary” structure of the state.¹⁴¹ The movement argued for unity among the classes. It also supported political reorientation based on the consent of all classes in order to regain the confidence in the German state. This “right wing populism”, as Eley termed it, attracted the support of the emerging bourgeois class because it embodied its own cultural aspirations. Eley used the rise of right-wing populism to suggest that radical nationalist ideology appealed to people regardless of their social stature. He therefore undermined the classic *Sonderweg* claim that Nazism owed its rise to the traditional, anti-modern elite who felt threatened by an increasingly industrial society. Indeed, he argued that amidst the overwhelming economic and political crises of the Weimar Republic, the Nazis generated support from all social classes. Thus Eley sought to demonstrate that the victory of Fascism came at a time when

this essay. See Geoff Eley, “What Produces Fascism: Pre-Industrial Traditions or a Crisis of the Capitalist State?” in *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past*, ed. Geoff Eley (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, Inc., 1986), 257.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 265.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

an illegitimate state failed to manage the economy and create social unity in a dynamic capitalist society.

To put it more simply, Eley believed that the origins of Nazism could be located in Weimar's political crisis that was born out of its modern capitalist state. Eley's interpretation is a standard Marxist critique of modernity. Whereas Eley traced the problems of modernity and Nazism to capitalism, other critics of modernity believed that the problem of Nazism was closely connected to the Enlightenment rationalism and the desire to master nature.

In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Baumann explored the issues of modernity, Nazism, and the Enlightenment. In the preface, Bauman emphasized that Nazism and the Holocaust were "born out of and executed in our modern rational society."¹⁴² He critiqued the *Sonderweg* thesis, claiming that we must recognize the problem of Nazism as a larger problem of society, civilization, and culture. In his view, the danger in emphasizing the Germanness of the crime, is that it exculpated everyone else. "The more 'they' [the Germans] are to blame," Bauman claimed, "the more the rest of 'us' are safe, and the less we have to defend this safety."¹⁴³ His aim in this text, therefore, was to situate the problem of Nazism not as an anomaly in the otherwise 'normal' paths to modernity, but as "another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), x.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

Baumann believed that the Holocaust embodied the Enlightenment project which suggested humans can eliminate suffering and master nature. The Nazis' vision of a perfect world was a world without Jews. They believed that if they eliminated their enemies, they would eliminate German suffering and create what they understood as a perfect society. Nazism therefore demonstrated the potential danger of the belief in human perfectibility and the horrifying means that people could use to create the "perfect" world. Moreover, Nazism also revealed the capacity of modern technology and industry to conduct mass murder. According to Bauman, genocide was a "technological achievement of an industrial society."¹⁴⁵ For Baumann, the Nazi use of technology was another expression of their desire to eliminate German suffering and master nature.

More important for Bauman was the role that modern bureaucratic society had in organizing and orchestrating mass murder. He claimed that mass murder "depended on the availability of well-developed and firmly entrenched skills and habits of meticulous and precise division of labour, of maintaining a smooth flow of command and information, or of impersonal, well-synchronized co-ordination of autonomous yet complimentary actions."¹⁴⁶ Bureaucratic rationality, therefore, was a necessary condition in the efficient implementation of mass murder. Without Eichmann's precision and detailed coordination of the deportation of European Jews, would the Holocaust have been possible? For Bauman, even the idea of a final solution was the product of bureaucratic rationalism; "*the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the*

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

task of Entfremung was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means-ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application."¹⁴⁷

Bauman therefore demonstrated that the Holocaust was not a product of German irrationalism or anti-modernism but was a "legitimate resident in the house of modernity."¹⁴⁸ Critics of Bauman argued that his analysis ignored the motivations for genocide. Bureaucratic rationality, in their view, did not explain why Jews were specifically targeted. They claimed he did not address the role that anti-Semitism played in the Holocaust.¹⁴⁹ This critique of Bauman's work, however, fails to recognize the chapters in the text where Bauman addressed the problem of anti-Semitism. Baumann affirmed the role that anti-Semitism played in the Holocaust, but argued "that it cannot by itself account for the Holocaust's uniqueness."¹⁵⁰ For Baumann, bureaucratic rationality radicalized anti-Semitism and other forms of racism. It introduced a new "modern" form of racism insofar that its purpose was to eliminate that race.

Baumann explored the modern features of the Nazi regime including the desire to master nature, the use of technology and bureaucratic rationalism. He proved that the Nazis were modern in a way that few historians had addressed and traced the problem of Nazism back to the Enlightenment. Like Bauman, Detlev Peukert explored the inevitably "modern" aspects of the Nazi regime. In his text *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, Peukert identified a fundamental problem with the *Sonderweg*

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 17. Bauman's italics.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴⁹ A.D. Moses, "Modernity and the Holocaust," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 43 (1997): 441-45.

¹⁵⁰ Bauman, *Modernity*, 104.

thesis. The special path thesis, in his view, was based on a modernization theory that defined German history against an “idealized notion of ‘western’ social evolution.”¹⁵¹ He therefore questioned the value of modernization theory in explaining the origins of Nazism. Peukert instead argued that historians needed to operate under a “more empirical, descriptive concept of ‘modernity’ and ‘modernization.’”¹⁵²

Peukert defined modernity in economic, social, cultural, and intellectual terms. Economically modernity meant industrial production, technology, bureaucratic administration and a “small, but productive agricultural sector.”¹⁵³ Socially, modernity was characterized by the control of wages and division of labor. Culturally, modernity was the creative arts’ break with “traditional aesthetic principles and practices.”¹⁵⁴ In an intellectual sense, Peukert identified modernity with western rationality, whether in science, technology, or social planning.¹⁵⁵ If modernity is defined by these terms, Peukert claimed that the process of modernization was a “complex interwoven set of historical changes” that gave rise to these features of modern society.¹⁵⁶ According to Peukert, “the crucial factor governing a society’s stability and survival” is “the way in which that society deals with these broadly inevitable tensions.”¹⁵⁷ Peukert used these definitions to evaluate how German society responded to the abrupt set of changes and the tensions that these institutions created.

¹⁵¹ Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 81.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

In the German case, modernization arrived in “a sudden and uncompromising manner,” which was exacerbated by economic and political crises related to WWI.¹⁵⁸ According to Peukert, Weimar experienced rapid advancement in science and technology, as well as in the humanities. These advancements were accompanied by the “culmination of a process of rationalization and efficiency, not only in technology and the economy, but in the social structure and in people’s daily lives.”¹⁵⁹ Thus Weimar bore the stamp of “modern” like other societies during this time. But Peukert argued that Weimar was ill-prepared to accommodate the sudden and abrupt social changes taking place in German society. In the face of economic collapse, the Weimar Republic had “little or no growth in wealth to distribute,” and failed to maintain control over wages and benefits. Consequently, Weimar saw an increase in social fragmentation and polarization within society. Weimar’s inability to accommodate social change was met with “a deep-seated sense of unease and disorientation, an awareness that the conditions underlying everyday life and experience were in flux.”¹⁶⁰ For Peukert, the Weimar Republic was a “unique conjunction” of the processes of modernization and severe economic and political crises. Weimar caved to these pressures, ultimately generating public support for an authoritarian regime. People no longer had faith in liberal democracy.

Nazism appealed to the people because it challenged the contradictions of modernity. It offered “a conclusive new answer to the challenges and discomforts of the age.”¹⁶¹ The victory of Nazism in 1933, Peukert argued, demonstrated that modern

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 281.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 277.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 275.

¹⁶¹ Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 245.

institutions and the process by which they came into existence were indeed fragile. Weimar demonstrated how easily the processes of modernization could lead to catastrophe.

The Nazi response to Weimar's crisis of classical modernity was to reform society through a radical racial policy. For Peukert, the Nazis did not solely represent an anti-modern movement that promised to restore the old social order of German society. Even though their rhetoric was anti-modern, the Nazis used modern means to carry out their utopian vision. According to Peukert, they "envisaged a society with modern technologies and institutions but owing nothing to the ideals of equal rights, emancipation, self-determination and common humanity."¹⁶² Nevertheless, Peukert believed the Nazi vision of an ideal society embodied the rhetoric of bureaucratic rationalism and mastery. Here Peukert and Bauman's analyses overlap. Peukert argued that the "scientific final solutions of social problems" were taken to "the ultimate logical extreme, encompassing the entire population in a bureaucratic racial-biological design and eradication of all sources of nonconformity and restriction."¹⁶³ In other words, the systematic operation of Nazi racial policy was a product of bureaucratic rationalism because it used logical and scientific means to efficiently accomplish its goal. Like Baumann, he viewed the Nazi racial policy as an expression of the modern, rational attempt to master nature.

¹⁶² Ibid., 248.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

In addition to modern racial policy, the regime also made use of modern technology in order to wage war. Peukert argued that during the Weimar period the Nazis represented a revolution against the tensions of modernity, but soon realized they needed to adopt the trends of modernity (specifically bureaucratic rationalism and technology) to achieve their utopian vision. Thus, in Peukert's view, Nazism "demonstrated with heightened clarity and murderous consistency, the pathologies and seismic fractures of the modern civilizing process."¹⁶⁴

Eley, Bauman, and Peukert analyzed modernity and the origins of Nazism during the 1980s. Their somewhat dated analysis prompts the question: where do historians stand on the dark modernity thesis today? Recent literature on the "dark modernity" interpretation explored the implications of Bauman and Peukert's analysis of Nazi racial politics. In an article on biopolitics, fascism, and democracy, Edward Ross Dickinson situated Nazi racial policy in a larger framework of biopolitics.¹⁶⁵ He affirmed that biopolitics was a characteristic of modernity insofar that it takes a scientific and rational approach to social problems. In this sense, he recognized the reprehensible aspects of biopolitics: "it coerces, cajoles, massages, and incentivizes its citizens into behaving in certain ways."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Dickinson defined biopolitics "as an extensive complex of ideas, practices, and institutions focused on the care, regulation, disciplining, improvement, and shaping of individual bodies and the collective 'body' of national populations." It included but was not limited to medical practices, such as therapy or hygiene, social welfare programs that included social insurance and tax policies, and racial science, which included eugenics. See Dickinson, "Biopolitics," 3.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 35.

But his fundamental concern with the literature on the subject is that it fails to recognize the discontinuities between the traditional practice of biopolitics in the Weimar welfare-state and the Nazis' radical racial policy. He claimed that "the Nazi variant of biopolitical modernity was in fact quite idiosyncratic."¹⁶⁷ The immediacy and force at which the Nazis approached racial politics, for Dickinson, was extraordinary. Nazi racial policy therefore represented a shift from the strategies and principles of biopolitics in the Weimar era. Dickinson believed that Peukert and Bauman's analysis of the pathology of racial science was too narrow-minded; it neglected the "ways in which biopolitics has made life tangibly better."¹⁶⁸ Indeed, Dickinson believed that biopolitics could create more opportunity for people and empower them. He recognized that biopolitics could be practiced in different ways in different modern societies. Thus he argued for the need to insert the positive attributes of biopolitics back into our discourse about modernity. The dark modernity thesis, in his view, was too pessimistic. He instead introduced a view of modernity that suggests there are "multiple modernities" with "radically differing potentials."¹⁶⁹ But Dickinson's claim that we need to recognize modernity for both its positive and negative potential misses the central point of the dark modernity thesis – which is to identify modernity's shortcomings.

Arendt's Critique of Modernity

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 36.

In a number of her major works – *The Life of the Mind*, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* – Hannah Arendt explored the relationship between modernity and Nazism. She understood Nazism to be a problem of modernity for two main reasons. One, like Baumann and Peukert, she believed that technological drive to master or overcome nature leads to tyranny. Two, she believed that the Enlightenment encouraged a kind of singular and purposive thinking that is manifest in modern ideologies and worldviews. These worldviews promote one way of understanding the world. In doing so, they attempt to dominate the way that people think and therefore leads to dogmatism and servitude.

Like Baumann and Peukert, Arendt understood modern technology as an attempt to overcome and master nature. In her text *The Human Condition*, Arendt claimed that technology such as the telescope or airplane helped us to “shrink the world” and in doing so alienated us from it. What she meant is that technology allowed us to gain more knowledge and understanding of the world that was at one time difficult for us to comprehend. Our increased knowledge of the world enables us to take “full possession” of our dwelling place; the world transformed into something that humans attempt to perfect and master. For Arendt, the desire for perfection and mastery makes us concerned exclusively with ourselves. She thought by attempting to master nature and become perfect, humans tried to eliminate their sufferings and overcome temporality. Thus our desire to dominate and master the world alienates us from our own worldliness – that is, the very fact that we are suffering, temporal beings.¹⁷⁰ Similar to Baumann and Peukert,

¹⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 248-261.

Arendt believed that this desire for perfection -- for “final solutions” -- leads to tyranny. Indeed, they each traced the origins of Nazism back to the Enlightenment and the desire to master nature through the use of technology.

Arendt also believed that the Enlightenment promoted a singular understanding of the world which she believed leads to dogmatism and a failure to think. She claimed that “with the rise of the modern age, thinking became chiefly the handmaiden of science, of organized knowledge.”¹⁷¹ This statement essentially meant that in the modern era, our foundations for knowledge changed. Humans no longer believed that their knowledge of the world came from God. Indeed, the sentiment that “God is dead” suggested that we no longer grounded our understanding of the world in metaphysics. Instead humans came to believe that the world could be explained through reason. For Arendt, thinking solely through reason was reductive. It limited our understanding of the world insofar as it suggested that science and reason were the sole foundation for true and complete knowledge. It discouraged any other kinds of thinking, and in doing so, dominated the way human beings thought about the world.

The calculative, purposive thinking that grew out of the Enlightenment and scientific revolution was manifest in various ideologies and worldviews of the modern era. Ideologies and worldviews promoted a singular understanding of the world in the same way that the Enlightenment encouraged humans to think solely in terms of reason. In this sense, Arendt characterized modern, dogmatic worldviews as forms of authority that dominate the way people think. Arendt’s interest in forms of authority became the

¹⁷¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 7.

basis for her text *Origins of Totalitarianism*. The title of the German edition more precisely captures what Arendt tried to accomplish in her text. The German title is: *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, which can be translated as “elements and origins of total authority.” Arendt therefore was not exclusively interested in the origins of totalitarianism, as the English title indicates. Rather, she was interested in the history of anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism, and how they evolved into authorities that dominated the way people thought about the world.

Anti-Semitism, for instance, promoted the view that all problems of society could be traced back to Jews. There is a long history of both political and social discrimination against Jews. But Arendt revealed that Jews faced a new and unprecedented kind of anti-Semitism in the modern era. In the Christian era Jewishness was understood as a crime that could be redeemed through conversion. Jewishness in the modern era, however, was seen as a vice from which “there was no escape”; Jewishness was permanent.¹⁷² In the modern era, Arendt demonstrated that Jews also became the targets of conspiracy theories such as the Dreyfus Affair. Consequently, the public increasingly began to blame Jews for everything that they disliked about society. Arendt claimed that “if they [the mob] hated society they could point to the way in which the Jews were tolerated within it; and if they hated the government they could point to the way in which the Jews had been protected by or were identifiable with state.”¹⁷³ Thus anti-Semitism in the modern era

¹⁷² Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), 87.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 108.

transformed into a form of authority that understood the world solely in terms of its hatred of Jews.

Arendt also understood imperialism as a form of authority. Imperialism encouraged people to think in terms of self-preservation. In this section of *Origins*, Arendt used Hobbes to highlight the ideology of imperialism. Hobbes believed that man was driven by his material interests, most notably by the desire for wealth and power. Arendt argued that the individual desire to accumulate power and wealth generated a worldview that culminated in imperialism and empire building.¹⁷⁴ Imperialism, pursued by the capitalist bourgeoisie, was therefore a singular, authoritative worldview because it forced its believers to think of the world solely in terms of wealth and power.

In the final section of the text, Arendt described totalitarian ideology as a form of authority that sought to totally dominate the way people thought.¹⁷⁵ Let us take a closer look at her analysis of the Nazi worldview.¹⁷⁶ Arendt argued that the Nazis understood the world in terms of race. They claimed that the laws of history and nature demonstrated that the Aryan race was superior, destined to outlive all other races. The Nazis therefore believed that it was their duty to “provide the forces of nature or history with an

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹⁷⁵ It is important to note that throughout *Origins*, Arendt distinguished totalitarianism from other forms of authoritarianism based on its ability to achieve total domination. In my chapter on Arendt’s understanding of Nazism, I demonstrated that Arendt’s conception of totalitarianism in this text is flawed. Based on Arendt’s discussion of Eichmann, I argued that totalitarianism can never be “total” in the sense that it cannot rob the individual of his or her agency. It cannot eliminate the individual’s ability to choose whether or not to obey a given authority. Thus I do not see the issue with situating totalitarianism within her broader understanding of authority. Indeed, totalitarian regimes were forms of authoritarianism based on their commitment to dominating the very way that people think.

¹⁷⁶ I have chosen to look at Arendt’s analysis of totalitarian domination exclusively through Nazism rather than through Stalinism. I omit her explanation of Stalinism here because I find that her argument about the dominating worldview of totalitarianism is most clearly demonstrated through her analysis of Hitler. Also, given the purpose of this essay, a closer examination of her analysis of Nazism seems more appropriate.

incomparable instrument to accelerate their movement.”¹⁷⁷ Essentially, this meant that Germans could kill off races deemed as “unfit to live,” instead of “waiting for the slower and less efficient processes of nature or history themselves.”¹⁷⁸ Since the laws of nature determined the extinction of these races anyway, the Nazis claimed it was logical to set these forces in motion. The main target of their racial policy was the Jews.

While campaigning for votes throughout the 1920s, Hitler claimed that Jews were responsible for German misfortunes. Moreover, he argued that the Jews were conspiring for world domination and that the Germans needed to fight them and emerge as the rulers of the world. In this way, the Nazis’ racial ideology dominated the way people thought about world. It made people believe that Aryans would one day rule the world and that in order to achieve world domination, they must rid the world of enemy races.

But how is that people came to recognize and obey these singular, authoritative worldviews? In *Origins*, Arendt claimed that isolated masses of modern European society found meaning in these movements. She argued that the masses were politically indifferent people “whom all other parties had given up as too apathetic or too stupid for their attention.”¹⁷⁹ The isolated individual was loyal to these movements because they gave him or her a sense of belonging in a world where they had little to no other social ties.¹⁸⁰

Another reason that people came to recognize and obey worldviews is because these views grounded their legitimacy in their possession of the truth. Indeed, according

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 267.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 466.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 311.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 323.

to Arendt's definition of authority, the source of its legitimacy transcends the contested realm of politics.¹⁸¹ If the authoritarian grounded his or her legitimacy in the political sphere, his or her authority is more likely to be contested or disproven. For example, Hitler's story of Jewish conspiracy transcended the political sphere because it was beyond verifiable experience. He therefore promoted his ideology as absolute truth. According to Arendt, Nazi ideology was "no longer an objective issue about which people may have opinions," but was "as real and untouchable an element in their lives as the rules of arithmetic."¹⁸²

But as we have seen with Arendt's portrait of Eichmann, people obey certain regimes of authority without necessarily believing in the ideology itself. In Eichmann's case, he recognized Hitler's authority because of his interest in self-advancement. Indeed, Eichmann viewed Nazism as an opportunity to redeem his unsuccessful past and work his way up the ranks of a powerful bureaucratic order. Arendt therefore introduced multiple reasons why people obey authority. To generate the support of the isolated masses, authoritarian movements gave them a sense of belonging. People also supported regimes of authority based on that authority's appeal to external truth. In other words, they were

¹⁸¹ Arendt defined authority as a source that demands obedience without the use of violence or persuasion. The authoritarian derives his or her legitimacy from this source in order to assert their power over others. If the authoritarian has to rely on physical force or persuasion to get another to obey, his or her authority is no longer recognized. Arendt's definition of authority is similar to that of Alexandre Kojève, who also argued that authority was based on the ability to command obedience without the use of physical force. Kojève more clearly elaborates on the concept of recognition here: "For to get oneself 'recognized' by someone without inspiring fear (in the final analysis, fear of violent death) or love in him, is to enjoy *authority* in his eyes. To acquire authority in someone's eyes, is to get him to recognize that authority." Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); and Alexandre Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny: Reexamining the Debate Between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève*, ed. Timothy W Burns and Bryan-Paul Frost (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 305.

¹⁸² Arendt, *Origins*, 363.

convinced by its understanding of the world. Others recognize authorities because of their own selfish interests in a particular movement, as demonstrated in the case of Adolf Eichmann.

Whatever the basis of one's obedience, Arendt demonstrated through Eichmann that recognition of authority is always a choice. Nevertheless, she believed that once people recognized a given authority, that authority attempted to entirely dominate the way people thought about and understood the world. Indeed, the success of authoritarian regimes or worldviews depended on their ability to restrict the possibility of challenging that worldview. Modern authorities made people adopt and adhere to its ideology without ever considering the potential consequences of that view. Hence why Arendt characterized Eichmann as "thoughtless" in the sense that he unthinkingly adhered to strict set of principles which resulted in mass murder. In Arendt's view, the triumph of Nazism was therefore a consequence of a singular type of thinking, or what she understood as the absence of thought, which emerged out of the Enlightenment. Nazism was a form of domination that was made possible in the modern era.

To reiterate, authoritarian regimes and worldviews restricted one's ability to challenge their authority and turned humans into "thoughtless" beings. However, Arendt believed that there is always a possibility to undermine authority through thinking. Thinking in this sense, should not to be confused with Arendt's analysis of the singular kind of thinking of the modern era. Whereas the calculative thinking of the Enlightenment leads to various forms of domination, "thinking" for Arendt was a way to free ourselves from the control of these singular worldviews. Arendt's project of thinking

enables us to challenge dogmatic doctrines and therefore reevaluate what we initially thought was absolutely true. Indeed, thinking is emancipatory for Arendt because it frees us from the bonds of dogmatism that in the case of Nazi Germany, proved to be dangerous.

Arendt's argument that modern authorities and worldviews were forms of domination raises the following question: if worldviews have the capacity to become dogmatic and dominate the way that we think, how might we make judgments and form opinions about the world without lending ourselves to dogmatism and servitude? Arendt's discussion of Socrates offered one possible answer. Socrates, according to Arendt, was able to think without becoming a philosopher – that is, he did not produce a doctrine, nor did he impose his view or opinions on others. Instead, when Socrates engaged with the citizens of the polis, he taught them how to think. Arendt used three similes to describe Socrates: he was a gadfly, an electric ray, and a midwife. He was a gadfly because he aroused the citizens of the polis to thinking. He encouraged them to examine their opinions. At the same time, Socrates was an electric ray. By encouraging the citizens to think, Socrates paralyzed them. According to Arendt, “the paralysis of thought is two-fold.”¹⁸³ One, it made someone stop whatever it was they were doing to think. Two, thinking had “a paralyzing effect when you come out of it, no longer sure of what had seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971), 434.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Finally, Socrates functioned as a midwife. While encouraging citizens to think and purging them of their judgments, Socrates also helped the citizens realize that there was an element of truth in their opinions. According to Arendt, Socrates understood that reality appeared differently to different people, and that reality could be expressed in a variety of ways. If each person shared in the belief that there was an element of truth in others' interpretations, we would no longer seek to dominate others. That is to say, thinking and dialogue would unite people based on their common understanding that no one opinion was more correct or truthful than the other. Those engaged in the conversation would then recognize that they had no right to assert their viewpoint over someone else. The result of this type of dialogue was that each person walked away transformed by the conversation. It produced no result other than to equalize both of its participants. Socratic dialogue thus has the potential to create communities that celebrate and support a plurality of opinions. This imagined community creates the foundation for a world without the problem of domination.¹⁸⁵

For Arendt, the modern desire for mastery and dogmatic thinking are fundamental problems of modernity that she believed lead to various forms of tyranny. Like Baumann and Peukert, she argued that our desire for perfection was a problem because it alienates us from our worldliness and encourages us to pursue final answers and solutions. In addition, she argued that modern ideologies and worldviews promoted one understanding

¹⁸⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 81-82.

of the world. In doing so, these ideologies became forms of authority that dominated the way we think. For Arendt, Nazism was just one example of an authority that dominated human beings. As a form of authoritarianism, Nazism generated support in various ways, one being its claim that it possessed the truth. Once people recognized Nazism as a legitimate form of authority, the Nazis attempted to occlude any form of opposition. It therefore turned humans into unthinking beings who strictly adhered to Nazi ideology. Consequently, the regime was able to execute mass murder to the degree at which the world had never witnessed before. For these reasons, Arendt can be situated within the “dark modernity” interpretation of Nazism.

CONCLUSION

MODERNITY AND THE HUMAN BEING

In the previous chapter, I revealed the affinity between Bauman, Peukert, and Arendt's understanding of Nazism as a consequence of western modernity. They each identified the origins of Nazism within the pursuit of mastery and perfection stemming from the Enlightenment. This kind of thinking suggested that humans could master nature and, in their view, Nazism was a consequence of the desire for human perfectibility. The Nazi vision of German sovereignty and the elimination of German suffering motivated them to pursue final solutions. In my conclusion, I would like to address what is at stake in this understanding of German history, especially for Arendt. In her view, modernity threatens what it is to be human.

Arendt understood the human being in terms of its worldly activity. For Arendt, our *vita activa*, or "active life" is comprised of three activities: labor, work, and action. Labor is essentially what humans do in order to stay alive. It is a necessary activity insofar as its aim is to continue the process of life. In contrast to labor, work is that which produces "objects for use."¹⁸⁶ Action, for Arendt, is the activity between men – that is, the way human beings interact, communicate, and distinguish themselves from one another.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 136.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

These three activities, according to Arendt, “are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality.”¹⁸⁸ In other words, each of these activities is bound to the fact that humans are born, they live, and they die. Labor is concerned with the sustainability of life. Work is connected to death because it produces objects that outlive the human being. Action, however, is primarily connected with birth. Arendt claimed that the moment someone is born, they “possess the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”¹⁸⁹

Of the three activities, action is of fundamental importance. For Arendt, action is what makes us plural beings; it affirms our uniqueness. In acting, we reveal information about who we are, including our “qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings.”¹⁹⁰ Arendt claimed that through acting humans reveal “their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”¹⁹¹ If action is what distinguishes us from others, then to be human means that we are our own creative beings. We are never “the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”¹⁹² Any action is an expression of our distinctiveness and therefore an expression of our humanness. Without action, Arendt believed we would cease to be human: “a life without speech and without action, on the other hand... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 179.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 8.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 176.

Arendt associated action with natality because with every new birth, the human's capacity for action is renewed. Arendt hinted at the importance of natality in *Origins* as well. She described beginning as that which is the "supreme capacity of man."¹⁹⁴ For Arendt, it is beginning — or the renewed capacity to act — which has the capability to undermine all tyranny. We are born free with the ability to creatively define and express ourselves in contradistinction to others.¹⁹⁵

For most of human history, according to Arendt, action was the chief activity of the *vita activa* – it occupied the highest position in the hierarchy of action, labor and work. Nevertheless, the human capacity for action was indeed fragile. Arendt claimed that "the conviction that the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance and actualization is by no means a matter of course."¹⁹⁶ Human uniqueness is not certain and therefore could be challenged or undermined. Indeed, Arendt claimed that throughout western history, humans challenged the importance of action within the public realm. They have searched for alternatives to action "in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents."¹⁹⁷ She explained that the creation of monarchies and other forms of one-man rule were ways to combat the problem of plurality. One-man rule limited human activity in

¹⁹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1968), 478-9.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 208.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220. Here Arendt hints at the potential danger in human plurality. The problem with affirming human pluralism is that it has the potential to perpetuate violence and struggle. In affirming human distinctiveness (or particularity), one individual or a group of individuals can assert their distinctiveness over the other. For Carl Schmitt, a Nazi political theorist, particularism is a necessary condition for the perpetuation of what he calls the "friend/enemy distinction." Indeed, Schmitt believed that Germans needed to violently engage with the other in order to assert German dominance. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

the public realm because it suggested that only the ruler needed to concern himself with politics.

But these traditional attempts to limit human action were ultimately unsuccessful. Arendt claimed that the downfall of one-man rule is that it worked too well. Banning citizens entirely from the public sphere motivated rebellion and therefore led “to an inevitable loss of power.”¹⁹⁸ In other words, banning humans from acting in the public sphere inspired individuals to reassert their role in political affairs. Nevertheless, she demonstrated that people have challenged what it is to be human in earlier periods of history.

In addition to monarchies and other forms of one-man rule, Arendt identified man’s desire to make products as the fundamental threat to the primacy of action. *Homo faber* – or the identification of the human as a creator – is not concerned with action, but instead values things based on utility. But the creator is not interested in the use of tools “in order to build a world, but in order to ease the labors of its own life process.”¹⁹⁹ The creator makes products in order to sustain his or her own life. As such, *homo faber* concerns itself with the activity of labor and not of work. The human as creator dismisses action as mere “idlebusybodiness and idle talk” and judges social activities solely “in terms of their usefulness to supposedly higher ends.”²⁰⁰ The creator always values making over acting. For Arendt, *homo faber’s* desire “to make the world more useful and more beautiful” alienates the human being from who he or she truly is – a unique and

¹⁹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

creative being.²⁰¹ But for much of human history, labor was unsuccessful in replacing action as the highest and most important activity in the hierarchy of the *vita activa*.

In the modern age, however, the hierarchy of the *vita activa* was reversed. Labor, or man as a creator replaced action in the hierarchy of human activity. But why? Arendt argued that with the rise of modern science came the conviction that “one cannot know truth as something given and disclosed,” but that “man can at least know what he makes himself.”²⁰² This attitude, according to Arendt, became the dominate attitude of the modern age. Making things ourselves became the only way to achieve absolute knowledge. She explained that the modern belief that man can only fully know what he himself produces elevated the human being as a creator – or as one who makes things for the sustainability of life. Labor became a necessity for knowledge. Consequently, the chief activity of the human being was no longer interaction with others, but in producing things. Since production for the *homo faber* is intrinsically linked to self-preservation, the exclusive role of the modern human was to be violent towards nature “in order to build a more permanent life for himself.”²⁰³

The problem for Arendt, therefore, was that the human capacity to act in the modern age was “confined to one single deed.”²⁰⁴ In other words, action became defined solely in terms of making. Because action is confined to producing things solely for our own self-preservation, human beings runs the risk of becoming entirely the same. Arendt believed that if we all think and act in the same way, we become totally reified beings

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 282.

²⁰³ Ibid., 304.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 237.

without any mark of distinction. If we lose our distinctiveness, human plurality itself is threatened. The modern era therefore alienates us from who we truly are because it destroys our individuality. We cease to be creative beings who reveal our distinctiveness when we engage with others. Instead, the modern human acts only in ways that will prevent suffering. For Arendt, the danger of modernity is that it makes us all the same. We lose our individual identities and instead become passive beings that think and act one-dimensionally. Indeed, Arendt claimed that “it is quite conceivable that the modern age...may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity that history has ever known.”²⁰⁵

At stake for Arendt in her interpretation of German history, therefore, is our humanity. With the onset of the modern era, we run the risk of losing our particularity and distinctiveness. Perhaps this is what Arendt was hinting at in her discussion of Adolf Eichmann. As I explained in chapter two, Arendt did not understand Eichmann as a totally dominated individual incapable of resisting. But he was someone without any kind of distinctiveness or creativity. He was the epitome of the modern human being insofar as he was only concerned with producing things that helped him preserve and advance his own self-interest. He helped craft and execute the final solution which for him was the only way to assert himself in the world. The *fundamental* danger of modernity, therefore, is not necessarily that by adopting dogmatic worldviews we can perpetuate evil, but that we cease to be humans at all.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 322.

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