Chapter Five

Hannah Arendt on Banality

Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem—A Report on the Banality of Evil* is the book that made her a popular subject of discussion since its appearance in 1963. The book is a report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. It contains, however, much more than a dry report. It tells the life story of Eichmann before, during, and after the war, as well as his role in the annihilation of the European Jewries; it portrays his negotiations with representatives of the Jewish communities in Europe and the Zionist emissaries; it describes the alleged collaboration of the Jewish functionaries with the Nazis, and it refers to the court, the judges, the public attending the trial, and the state of Israel. The book also criticizes the process, the kidnapping of Eichmann, the judges’ and the prosecution’s inability to grasp the philosophical meaning behind the Holocaust, and the state of Israel and its institutions. The book incited furor among many Jews in Israel and abroad, for it accuses the Jewish functionaries of being in collaboration with the Nazi, without which the annihilation of the European Jewry would be impossible, according to Arendt. Her provocative remarks on the state of Israel—she compares the rabbinic marital rules in Israel with the Nuremberg Laws (Arendt 1965: 5), and the deportation of Eichmann from Argentina resembles the deportation of the Jews from Europe (Ibid: 54)—also caused a negative reaction. As Deborah Lipstadt writes:

In her letters from the trial, she voiced a personal disdain for Israel that bordered on anti-Semitism and racism. In a letter to her husband, she complained that “honest and clean people were at a premium.” She described to her teacher and friend Karl Jaspers the “peies (side curl) and caftan Jews, who make life impossible for all reasonable people here.” She was full of praise for the judges, but even that contained a note of German Jewish disdain for Ostjuden, Eastern European Jews. The judges were “the best of Germany Jewry,” whereas Hausner was “a typical Galician Jew... one of those people who don’t know any language.” (Since he presented his case in multiple languages, she may have meant that his German was not up to her standard.) He spoke “without periods or

51 “There can be no doubt that without the cooperation of the victims, it would hardly have been possible for a few thousand people, most of whom, moreover, worked in offices, to liquidate many hundreds of thousands of other people.... Over the whole way to their deaths the Polish Jews got to see hardly more than a handful of Germans.” Thus R. Pendorf in the publication mentioned above. To an even greater extent this applies to those Jews who were transported to Poland to find their deaths there.” (Arendt 1965: 252)
commas ... like a diligent schoolboy who wants to show off everything he knows.... [He has a] ghetto mentality.” She had shown her contempt for East European émigrés and their concerns as early as 1944, when she denigrated the European émigré press in the United States for “worrying their heads off over the pettiest boundary disputes in a Europe thousands and thousands of miles away—such as whether Teschen belongs to Poland or Czechoslovakia, or Vilna to Lithuania instead of to Poland.” As Tony Judt observed, “No ‘Ost-Jud’ would have missed the significance of these disputes.”

However, it was Middle Eastern, often called Oriental, Jews who elicited her most acerbic comments. “The country’s interest in the trial has been artificially whetted. An oriental mob that would hang around any place where something is going on is hanging around in front of the courthouse.” (In another letter, she again used the term “oriental mob.” It was clearly not a slip.) She felt as if she were in “Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country.” She showed particular contempt for the Israeli police, many of whom were of Middle Eastern origin. “Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them. They would obey any order.” (Lipstadt 2011: 152–153)

The most outrageous, however, was her assessment that Eichmann was only a cog in the machine—that he was neither anti-Semitic nor sadistic, but rather a devout Zionist. He read “Theodor Herzl’s Der Judenstaat, the famous Zionist classic, which converted Eichmann promptly and forever to Zionism” (Arendt 1965: 40). His deeds were not motivated by evil intentions, and hence Arendt dubs the evilness of his deeds “banal.”

The disapproval and critique of Arendt are, however, surpassed and diminished by other declarations of admiration and support. Walter Laqueur describes it as the “Arendt Cult” (Laqueur 1998). Later studies showed that Arendt was wrong as far as her description of the events is concerned. A very recent book on Eichmann by Bettina Stangneth shows that he was by no means a desk murderer, as Arendt describes him (Stangneth 2011). Joachim Schwelien, who analyzes Eichmann’s jargon of violence, writes:

Eichmann does not suspect that exactly where he is—stubbornly or cannily-shrewdly, lying or covering and cloaking—trying to turn the truth of the events and of his deeds into its opposite, he actually lets the whole truth surface. Not that what he is saying is of importance for posterity, but how he says it, for as pure language mirrors truth in thought, in the jargon of violence, dark inhumanity is reflected relentlessly even where it is supposed to remain hidden. (Schwelien 1961: 6)

Lipstadt shows that Arendt’s use of Raoul Hilberg’s work verges on plagiarism. Hans Mommsen writes in the foreword to the German translation of Eichmann

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in Jerusalem that despite the mistakes and flaws in her analysis and reports, she manages to accurately fathom the essence of a totalitarian regime: terror, submissive bureaucracy, technocracy, and consolidation achieved by isolating a scapegoat (Mommsen 1986: 12). The question we should pose to Mommsen is, How could Arendt fathom the essence of totalitarianism if her historical investigation was indeed so flawed? To say general things about the nature of totalitarian regimes cannot tell us much about the distinctiveness of a given regime or its philosophy, and there was a huge difference between the four totalitarian powers that fought in World War II. Hence, Michael Burleigh writes: “Arendt also vehemently rejected notions of a separate German historical path to modernity, and favored a radical rupture with the course of European civilization, almost as if Hitler and Stalin were temporary visitors from Mars” (Berleigh 2000: 17).

Meticulous research, such as George Mosse’s The Crisis of German Ideology (1999), which leads us through the work and youth movement, the new paganism, and the development of a distinct intellectual background during the rise of the Third Reich, would not leave us with the impression of a leap or “rupture,” as Burleigh calls it. If one sees gradual development, as Mosse does, it also makes sense to talk about education as a means of changing detrimental dispositions. As Gottfried Benn provocatively puts it:

53 “Als Darstellung der blossen Abläufe, die zu Auschwitz führten, das die Gesamtheit der gegen Juden gerichteten Massnahmen des Völkermords symbolisiert, ist Hannah Arendts Interpretation lückenhaft, manchesmal nicht widerspruchsfrei und quellenkritisch nicht hinreichend abgesichert.” (Mommsen 1986: 11). See also Wolin (2001: 113): “As Michael Marrus has aptly observed, as the Eichmann polemic unfolded, ‘it became apparent how thin was the factual base on which [Arendt] had made her judgments.’ He concludes his assessment with the following sober caveat: ‘The Jewish negotiations with the Nazis... were, in retrospect, pathetic efforts to snatch Jews from the ovens of Auschwitz as the Third Reich was beginning its death agony. Yet it should be mentioned that, however pathetic, these efforts seemed sensible to some reasonable men caught in a desperate situation.’”

54 Benhabib compares Arendt’s historical attitude with Heidegger’s, Husserl’s, and Benjamin’s: “Let us recall that in treating tradition and the past, Arendt herself exercised two methodologies: the phenomenological methodology of Heidegger and Husserl, which sought to recover the ‘originary’ meaning of terms and conditions of phenomena; and a fragmentary methodology, inspired by Walter Benjamin, according to which one treats the past by acting either as a collector or as a pearl diver, digging down for those treasures that lie now disjoined and disconnected,” (Benhabib 2000: 172–17). Benhabib correctly sees Arendt’s fragmentary concept of history in its relation to Benjamin. She is, however, far from accurate in placing Husserl and Heidegger in this context: both Husserl and Heidegger were completely against method insofar as phenomenology is concerned. It is the lack of method that brings them in the end to mysticism. Furthermore, she does not see the similarity between Arendt and Heidegger in how history is seen by Heidegger, and sometimes by Arendt as well, as it is derived from the destiny of Being.
Wishes for Germany: new definitions for hero and honor. To wipe out any person who speaks in the course of the next hundred years of “Prussia” or “Reich.”... To educate children from age six to sixteen—following the decision of their parents—in Switzerland, England, France, America, and Denmark on account of the state. (Benn 1959: 388)

Arendt does not see this need; for her there is no continuity, as we shall presently show. Eichmann, according to Arendt, was by no means a Jew-hater, either before or after the war. Instead it happened to him to become a cog in the Nazi killing machine, and then it happened to him again to become a normal person. The banality of evil—the ability to kill innocent people with no bad motivations or criminal inclinations—is the outcome of a totalitarian regime, Arendt claims. But what caused people to become banal evildoers and then later to stop assuming this role? What impelled people to turn on this machine? Historical studies must talk about continuity and discontinuity of processes. Philosophy and religion can talk about leaps. Philosophy, however, must somehow refer to reality, especially a philosophy that is as intimately related to reality as Arendt’s. And yet, in dealing with Arendt, we are conducting philosophy by means of critical thinking rather than historical investigation, which has already demonstrated the flaws in Arendt’s writings.

Hannah Arendt was sent by the New Yorker to cover the Eichmann trial. Her reports were later released in a volume named Eichmann in Jerusalem—A Report on the Banality of Evil. The keyword “evil” in the title is conspicuous in relation to a report from a court, and not only because it is bombastic. Courts investigate criminal motivation, while evil is rather a subject of theology or philosophy. Arendt says that the case which the court in Jerusalem had to deal with was unprecedented in the course of human history. She defines her role by examining to what extent the court succeeded in adequately dealing with this case. Yet allusion to theology is unusual. The peculiarity of the case required peculiar attention. Hence, Arendt was outraged by the prosecutor Hausner’s opening address:

For it was history that ... stood in the center of the trial. “It is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history.” This was the tone set by Mr. Hausner, who began his opening address ... with Pharaoh in Egypt and Haman’s decree “to destroy, to slay, and to cause them to perish.” ...

55 “And the question of individual guilt or innocence, the act of meting out justice to both the defendant and the victim, are the only things at stake in a criminal court. The Eichmann trial was no exception, even though the court here was confronted with a crime it could not find in the law books and with a criminal whose like was unknown in any court, at least prior to the Nuremberg Trials. The present report deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice.” (Arendt 1965: 298)
It was bad history and cheap rhetoric; worse, it was clearly at cross-purposes with putting Eichmann on trial, suggesting that perhaps he was only an *innocent executor* of some *mysteriously* foreordained destiny or ... even of anti-Semitism, which perhaps was necessary to blaze the trail of “the-bloodstained road traveled by this people” to fulfill its destiny. (Arendt 1965: 19)

Hausner’s address may sound too theatrical and not entirely relevant. Yet, if we overlook this aspect of his speech, we see him point at the relation between Eichmann and the long-practiced anti-Semitism that inspired the Nazis. As the books by Claudia Koonz and Daniel Goldhagen show, the Nazi conscience was conditioned by norms and customs whose shaping can be explained by this long history. For example:

The recollections of a former Hitler youth member, Alfons Heck, illustrate how such knowledge formed moral thinking. In 1940, when Alfons watched the Gestapo take away his best friend, Heinz, and all Jews in his village, he did not say to himself, “How terrible they are arresting Jews.” Having absorbed knowledge about the “Jewish menace,” he said, “What a misfortune Heinz is Jewish.” As an adult he recalled, “I accepted deportation as just.” (Koonz 2003: 5)

Yet, this by no means suggests that Eichmann can be reduced to the executor of a historical plan to annihilate the Jews. But this is what Arendt sees in Hausner’s address. And if it were true, she claims, Eichmann would be discharged from any responsibility (Arendt 1965: 297–298). Arendt, however, sees in the Holocaust something *completely new* that cannot be considered the outcome of traditional anti-Semitism. Arendt tries to bind her theory of innovation to the Nuremberg trial that the Allies conducted against the Nazis. She writes:

However, it was by no means this sort of well-known offense that had prompted the Allies to declare, in the words of Churchill, that “punishment of war criminals [was] one of the principal war aims” but, on the contrary, reports of unheard-of atrocities, the blotting out of whole peoples, the “clearance” of whole regions of their native population, that is, not only crimes that “no conception of military necessity could sustain” but crimes that were in fact independent of the war and that announced a *policy of systematic murder to be continued in time of peace*. (Ibid: 257, emphasis added)

This appears overstated, because if we accept the assumption that the Jews were at no point part of the War, then the distinction between war and peace is irrelevant here. If, however, we assume that the Jews were part of the War, then again this assessment turns out to be meaningless. The Nazis were in a war with world Jewry that justified their annihilation. This assumption is also supported subsequently, for example, by the historian Ernst Nolte⁵⁶ and the psychologist Peter

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⁵⁶ See in Santner (1990: 78).
Robert Hofstätter (1963), who claim that the annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis followed Chaim Weizmann’s declaration of war against Germany.

To the question posed by Judge Landau to Eichmann as to whether he had a conscience, Arendt replies:

Yes, he had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around. (Arendt 1965: 95)

According to Arendt, Eichmann’s conscience functioned normally and then suddenly failed. Eichmann was not alone, but rather one of millions. Arendt says:

Conscience as such had apparently got lost in Germany, and this to a point where people hardly remembered it and had ceased to realize that the surprising “new set of German values” was not shared by the outside world. (Ibid: 103)

Arendt does not discuss factors that may condition conscience, such as differences between races. In the Western part of the world, a normal man would have a bad conscience if he accidentally ran down a child on the street but hardly any remorse if he ran down only a cat or dog, or if he supported euthanasia. This is also true as far as human races are concerned. Rudolf Höss felt pity for the gentlemen who needed to carry out the dirty job of annihilating the Jews, but not for the murdered ones. Arendt must back away from this possibility in order to defend her theory that Eichmann could do what he did only as a small cog in the huge totalitarian machine. Eichmann, according to Arendt, adopted Kant’s moral categorical imperative, although he replaced his own will with the will of the Führer:

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57 See the discussion in Finkielkraut (1999: 5).
Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land—or, in Hans Frank’s formulation of “the categorical imperative in the Third Reich” which Eichmann might have known: “Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it” (Ibid: 136).

But as Marie Syrkin shows, Arendt not only evades but also distorts historical facts in order to defend her theory on the totalitarian machine with the little cogs obeying orders.

When German defeat became imminent, Eichmann received orders to stop the deportation of Hungarian Jews to the death camps. Instead of obeying, he speeded up the transports. Hilberg, Miss Arendt’s chief source, writes of this passage, “Eichmann could not rest until all the Hungarian Jews were in their graves.” Miss Arendt has no difficulty in explaining Eichmann’s enthusiasm: “For the uncomfortable truth of the matter is that not Eichmann’s fanaticism but his very conscience had prompted him to adopt his uncompromising attitude during the last year of the war.” Suddenly everyman, the conscientious cog, appears to have become a zealot: yet Miss Arendt views the uncontested evidence of his enterprise as further proof of his supine loyalty to Hitler; the Führer’s words are law and superseded all written instructions by others, be it Horthy or Himmler.

Dr. Robinson has pointed out the astonishing negligence with which Miss Arendt has examined the relevant documents in order to reach this conclusion. In a communication (quoted also by Hilberg) from Ribbentrop to Veesenmayer, the Nazi plenipotentiary in Hungary, the German Foreign Minister warns: “The Führer expects that the measures against the Budapest Jews will now be taken without any further delay by the Hungarian government, with those exceptions which were allowed to the Hungarian government by the German government.”...The exceptions involved permission for about 7000 Jewish families to leave Hungary, apparently via Rumania (Trial Doc. T1214-par. 5.) In a telegraphic report that Veesenmayer sent to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin (T1215-par. 2), Eichmann is shown as questioning Hitler’s concession and appealing to Himmler to get a new decision from the Führer. Now, of this damaging report Miss Arendt writes: “When Himmler’s order to stop the evacuation of Hungarian Jews arrived in Budapest, Eichmann threatened, according to a telegram that Veesenmayer sent to Himmler, “to seek a new decision from the Führer.” But notice that Miss Arendt has here switched the roles of Hitler and Himmler. The document leaves no doubt that it is Hitler, not Himmler, who had given the order to stop the deportation. Consequently, Miss Arendt’s elaborate structure (for Eichmann, the little bureaucrat, Hitler’s word is sacred) crashes. The evidence shows Eichmann as seeking to contravene Hitler himself. (Syrkin 1963: 347–348)

Arendt does not refer to these factors and does not hesitate to distort historical facts in order to maintain her theoretical structure. According to Arendt, Eichmann could do what he did only as a small cog in the big totalitarian machine, which released him from a bad conscience. But what incited this machine to start working? And what brought it to a halt? Can the claim that people lost their consciences and then retrieved them be entirely convincing? Or rather, were
their consciences so conditioned that it enabled them to turn on, and then off, the annihilation machine?

Arendt’s motivation, however, seems to be philosophical, not historical. She wants first of all to undermine Hausner’s picture, in which Eichmann embodies the τέλος or the acme of a long history of Jew-hatred and killing. It is necessary to do that, according to Arendt, because we can meaningfully put on trial only free agents. Hence, in her description, all of a sudden, Eichmann, along with the German people, lost his conscience and became a mass killer. In the same way, he also probably retrieved his conscience and became a normal person. Arendt refers to leaps in another context as well, as she is asked by Günter Gaus how she felt as she returned to Germany after the war:

Whatever took place in 1933 with respect to what took place later was insignificant....

[With such feelings] I came [to Germany]. And today, as everything, let us simply say, has embarked on a stable track, the distances have become bigger than they were before, as they were then in that shock. (Gaus 1964)

Also Eichmann had a sudden transformation, according to Arendt:

I heard from an acquaintance who had just returned from a trip to Germany that a certain feeling of guilt had seized some sections of German youth... and the fact of this guilt complex was for me as much of a landmark as, let us say, the landing of the first man-bearing rocket on the moon. It became an essential point of my inner life, around which many thoughts crystallized. This was why I did not escape... when I knew the search commando was closing in on me.... After these conversations about the guilt feeling among young people in Germany, which made such a deep impression on me, I felt I no longer had the right to disappear. (Arendt 1965: 242)

Sudden transformation sounds odd in a historical study. It also cannot serve as a way of portraying Eichmann as a free agent, for a member of an anti-Semitic society is also a free agent to the extent that he can choose to kill or not kill Jews. Instead, he ceases to be a free agent when he is suddenly transformed into a cog in a killing machine, as in Arendt’s description, and then transformed back into normality; 59 it happens to him to become a mass murderer and then again

59 See Wolin (2001: 98): “In the writing of history we seek to ‘understand.’ She [Arendt] thus characterized anti-Semitism and imperialism as ‘elements’ that, at a certain point, ultimately ‘crystallized’ in modern totalitarian practice. Yet what it was that catalyzed this mysterious process of ‘crystallization’ remained murky in her account.” As George Kateb accurately points out, writing on Arendt’s concept of “Freedom,” Arendt’s notion of a principle “comes to one from outside and inspires ‘from without.’” Quoted in Kalyvas (2004: 325). De Vila claims that Arendt’s alternative to authoritarian submission to the metaphysical first principle of action is
become a normal man. An alternative example is Voegelin (1999), who calls on the Germans to come to terms with the present instead of the past; “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (“coming to terms with the past”) is a term used in Germany to deal with their Nazi past as if, according to Voegelin, it did not continue into the present, as if there were no continuity between what happened before the war and what happened after it, or as if the Nazi past were not a chapter in German history. Arendt, however, must introduce rupture and discontinuity in her theory in order to maintain its well-roundedness and to present the Holocaust as something completely new. The Holocaust, according to Arendt, was not a cumulative outcome of a long history of Jew-hatred, but rather something completely unanticipated.

It was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have the Jews in Germany but wish to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth that the new crime, namely the crime against humanity—in the sense of crime “against the human status,” or against the very nature of mankind—appeared. Expulsion and genocide, though both are international offenses, must remain distinct; the former is an offense against fellow-nations, whereas the latter is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the “human status” without which, the very words “mankind” and “humanity” would be devoid of meaning. (Arendt 1965: 267–268)

It was completely new in the sense that, for the first time in human history, an attempt had been made to eradicate an entire race from the earth. It means that the Jewish genocide was not a crime committed against the Jewish people, but rather against humanity as such (Ibid: 255). Eichmann is then, according to Arendt, hostis humani generis and not hostis Judaeorum (Ibid: 260).

Arendt’s use of the term “crime against humanity” deviates from its use when it was devised in the Nuremberg Trials. Crimes against humanity, according to her, are committed against the “human status.” This was something completely novel, Arendt argues, and hence we should not conceive the annihilation of European Jewry as part of a long history of Jew-hatred and killing. Arendt writes:

It was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people, and that only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism. (Ibid: 269)

action out of nothingness or abyss. This is indeed Heideggerian teaching, and Arendt herself uses it to excuse Heidegger’s support of German Nazism, as we have seen. Villa, however, does not examine the alternative to submission to metaphysical principle; that is, submission to an authoritarian system as one can no longer rely on himself and his will and on moral principles. (Villa 1996: 117)
Now, this claim reflects not historical truth, but Arendt’s philosophical scheme. Because we cannot separate the Holocaust from anti-Semitism—the Final Solution invented to solve the Jewish Problem—likewise we cannot claim, as Arendt does, that the Germans and the Jews are inessential to this story. It was the Jewish Problem that called up the Final Solution and the introduction of a more efficient means to carry it out (Zyklon B instead of shooting and gas wagons), and not vice versa. In other words, it could also be anti-Semitism combined with technological capabilities—after all, men control the machines and not the other way around—which led to the annihilation of European Jewry. The Holocaust is in many respects peculiar, but this does not entail that the choice of victims was inessential, as Arendt claims. Eichmann’s report to Himmler from 1944 in which he describes the success of his undertaking leaves no doubt: “I will jump into my grave laughing because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction” (Syrkin 1963: 347).

The introduction of the term “crime against humanity” does not by any means point to the birth of a new reality, as Arendt claims. It can also be a new formulation referring to an old reality that now draws attention or appears differently than before because of its new dimension (mass killing), consequences, and outcome of a conflict. Robinson shows how Arendt relied on the juridical processes in the Nuremberg Trials in order to corroborate her thesis about the novelty of the Holocaust, and to how great an extent she misunderstood it and misused the terms used in the Nuremberg Trials (Robinson 1965: 69). He writes:

Certainly the destruction of European Jewry was unique in its continental scope, in its psychological pressures, in its technical methods, in its masses of active perpetrators (members of one of the most educated peoples of the world), in its involvement of the three pillars of the Nazi regime (State, Army, Party), in its connection with pseudoscientific racial theories in general and Judaistic pseudoscience in particular, and in its absolute (six millions) and relative (the high percentage of the victims in relation to European Jewry—namely, two-thirds—and to world Jewry—namely, one-third) figures of victims. It was also unique in the revulsion of the non-Nazi world, in the universal realization of its inherent criminal character under existing law and the responsibility of individuals for these crimes, and in the determination of the world community to take measures for the prevention of its repetition by affirmation of the Nuremberg Principles, by adoption of the Genocide Convention, and by outlawing war in the United Nations Charter. But could it be really claimed—as Miss Arendt does—that history knows of no previous cases at all of genocide, and genocide of the Jews in particular? (Ibid: 71–72)

Like Heidegger in Being and Time but also like other 20th-century thinkers, such as José Ortega y Gasset, who was also influenced by Heidegger, Arendt talks about the mass-man who lives without distinction from others and with no ability to think and judge authentically. His existence is reduced to the consumption and selling of goods (Arendt 1945–1946a: 656).
What we have called the “bourgeois” [Spießer] is the modern man of the masses [Massenmensch], not in his exalted moments of collective excitement, but in the security (today one should say the insecurity) of his own private domain (Baehr 2000: 153–154 / Arendt 1945–1946b: 342–343).60

Against this background of the mass-person, and not of anti-Semitism, is where Arendt wants to see Eichmann. Hence she writes:

The mob man, however, the end-result of the “bourgeois,” is an international phenomenon; and we would do well not to submit him to too many temptations in the blind faith that only German mob man is capable of such frightful deeds. (Baehr 2000: 153 / Arendt 1945–1946b: 342)

Her last statement on Eichmann reads:

In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was “elated” and he forgot that this was his own funeral. It was as though in those last minutes, he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil. (Arendt 1965: 252)

Is the “banality of evil” the lesson we learn from Eichmann’s case, or is it what we learn from Arendt’s theory of the mob and the Spießer? The Spießer, Arendt claims, is an international phenomenon of banality, of being part of a huge machine and acting without intention. Eichmann, as Arendt portrays him, is a typical example of this machine. The problem with this theory is that Arendt needs to brush aside too many facts in order to maintain it. And then, what about the people who sacrificed their lives in order to save Jews? Were they also banal—the Danes and the Bulgarians and many others? Why not talk about the banality of the sacrifice or the banality of non-collaboration with the Nazis, or the banality of being a mensch? A wiser alternative would be to demonstrate that neither “evil” nor “good” is banal, or at least not in every case.

60 Canovan (1978) explores the discrepancy between the two central attitudes in Arendt’s work—democracy on the one hand and elitism and snobbism on the other.