

DIGGING UP HANNAH ARENDT

by Anthony F. Lang Jr.

From July 5 through July 10, 1995, Serb paramilitary forces surrounding Srebrenica advanced toward the predominately Muslim city in northern Bosnia-Herzegovina. As they advanced, UN officials and Dutch peacekeepers on the ground refused to stop the Serbs. When they took over the city on July 11, the Serb forces systematically slaughtered over 7,000 Bosnian men and boys. Both the UN and the Dutch government have published reports acknowledging some responsibility for failing to stop the massacre.¹ Journalistic and scholarly accounts of the events of that July describe them in excruciating detail.² The enormity of the crimes, however, remains difficult to comprehend.

How should we evaluate the fall of Srebrenica? In fact, two different actions demand our attention here: 1) the slaughter undertaken by Serb forces and 2) the failure of the United Nations and the international community more broadly to stop the attacks occurring in front of UN peacekeepers. How do we explain these actions? Do these two actions deserve the same moral evaluation? Do individuals involved deserve the same punishments? What institutional structures need to be changed to prevent similar catastrophes?

This essay is too short to answer these questions in any depth. Instead, what I propose to do here is suggest a framework for exploring the first two questions, those of explanation and evaluation. The bane of modern social science is that explanations and evaluations of political and social phenomena are assumed to be two different tasks. Social scientists explain and philosophers evaluate. To keep these two tasks distinct, however, fails to consider the overlap between morality and politics. One cannot understand political action without seeing the motives, intentions, and consequences of such actions from the perspective of ethics. If humans are truly “self-interpreting animals,” those interpretations inevitably involve moral evaluations that give meaning to actions.³ We cannot explain political actions unless we also evaluate them.

I want to examine the fall of Srebrenica through the lens of the concept of evil. Evil has recently become popular in the rhetoric of the Bush administration, used to condemn not only terrorists but “rogue” states and those who refuse to accept the U.S. military campaign. As a public policy tool, the concept of evil may not be the most productive means to pursue national interests.⁴ But as a conceptual tool for explaining and evaluating politics, it has more meaning than one might assume.

One of the most important political theorists of the 20th century employed the concept of evil for understanding that paradigmatic evil event, the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt, whose work generated both acclaim and controversy, explored the policies of the Nazis in two different works. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt found anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism to be three instances of “radical evil”—institutional structures and ways of thinking that progressively degraded human dignity until they resulted in large-scale slaughter in the pursuit of ideological ends. Especially in totalitarianism, the individual person loses her ability to think and judge as a system of

government seeks to privilege the “masses” above citizens. Because it removes the ability of individuals to participate in the deliberations and debates that constitute politics, Arendt argued that mass political behavior leads to slavish adherence to ideals that demean the individual.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt reported on the trial, before an Israeli court, of Adolph Eichmann, whose position in the bureaucracy of the Nazi political system made him an essential element in the pursuit of the Holocaust. In analyzing Eichmann, Arendt coined the phrase “banality of evil” to describe the inability of Eichmann, and many others, to think clearly about what they were doing. While critics saw this as a refusal to hold individuals responsible for their actions, Arendt believed that Eichmann demonstrated a lack of judgment, the concept that she had begun to explore in her last years.⁵

These two different interpretations of evil suggest two ways of evaluating political events like the Holocaust and the fall of Srebrenica. In the *Origins* approach, Arendt focuses on institutional and governmental structures that prevent the individual from partaking in political actions. These structures, while perhaps pursuing a noble end (e.g.,

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the emancipation of man in Marxist ideology), undermine the inherent worth of the person. They turn individuals into tools, exactly the outcome that Immanuel Kant sought to prevent in the categorical imperative. In this interpretation, evil is not an inherent characteristic of the human being, but a systemic element of an institution.

In the case of Srebrenica, the UN peacekeeping structures, while certainly not comparable to the Nazi political system, became bureaucratic structures that prevented individuals from thinking and acting in ways that might have saved lives. Leaders in New York and Zagreb focused on the UN’s tradition of neutrality rather than on protecting innocents from the Serb forces. General Bernard Janvier, the UN Force Commander, and Ambassador Yasushi Akashi, the Secretary General’s Representative in the Former Yugoslavia during the fall of Srebrenica, both refused the requests of the Dutch peacekeepers for close air support during the attacks.⁶ This failure to act outside of the box reflects the bureaucratization of the UN peacekeeping office that Michael Barnett sees as behind the failure of the UN to act to prevent the tragedy in Rwanda.⁷

While institutions can be characterized as evil, Arendt also explores the evil that individuals can do in the Eichmann approach. Like Plato, Arendt sees evil as the result of failing to think. Arendt, however, adds the additional criteria of judging, the ability to

differentiate between right and wrong in situations where rules do not exist. The moral failing of Eichmann was that in a situation where the rules quickly collapsed, he was unable to think and make judgments that would allow him to resist the orders he was receiving from his superiors. Arendt was most amazed at his failure, both during the trial and at his execution, to understand the crimes he had committed and why he was being held responsible for them.

The trials before the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ITFY) reveal over and over again the inability of Serb political leaders to see that their actions during Srebrenica were truly evil. While not directly implicated in Srebrenica, Slobodan Milosevic's protestations that he was defending his nation from terrorists mirrors the lack of thought and judgment that characterized Eichmann. Trials not only provide the mechanics of punishment, they also, perhaps more importantly, reveal the thinking or lack thereof behind evil political actions.

Hannah Arendt's explorations of evil provide an explanation and evaluation of the Holocaust. Her use of the concept of evil in two different ways suggests its potency for those interested in interpreting the international system in the 21st century. In some cases, global institutions need to be reconstructed to better reflect the needs of a quickly globalizing world order. In other cases, individuals need to be put on trial and punished for their failure to think and judge. Both individuals and institutions can embody evil; how we respond to that evil will require clear thinking and imaginative judgments.

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- 1 The Dutch report has not yet been published in English; an analysis of it can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/yugo/article/0,2763,682264,00.html>. The UN report is Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly resolution 53/35: The Fall of Srebrenica, Document # A/54/549 (New York: United Nations, 1999).
 - 2 See Jan Honig, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime* (London: Penguin, 1996); Laurence de Barros-Duchene, *Srebrenica: Histoire d'un crime international* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); and David Rhodes, *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1997).
 - 3 See Charles Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 45-76.
 - 4 See Douglas Klusmeyer and Astri Suhrke, "Comprehending Evil: Challenges for Law and Policy," *Ethics & International Affairs* 16, 1 (2002), pp. 27-42.
 - 5 See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
 - 6 See Anthony F. Lang Jr., "The United Nations and the Fall of Srebrenica: Meaningful Responsibility and International Society," in Toni Erskine, ed., *Can Institutions Have Morals?* (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming) for more details on the UN leadership during this crisis.
 - 7 Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).