

The Banality of Evil

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Book Review

The book "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil" was written by Hannah Arendt and published in 1963 [1,2]. Arendt, a political philosopher who was persecuted by the Nazi regime, had followed the Eichmann trial for war crimes and highlighted how this brutal criminal was an absolutely "normal" person in everyday and family life, in contrast and asymmetry to the ruthlessness that he practiced in his "work". Is it possible, asked Arendt, that apparently normal individuals, judged as such by expert psychiatrists, can in particular circumstances become heinous criminals without the slightest sense of guilt? How widespread could this anomaly of the human soul potentially be? Arendt argued that such circumstances might occur when there are no roots, no memory of past mistakes, no reverting to one's own thoughts and actions, in short, a lack of inner dialogue. "Gnotzi seauton" (know thyself) was the highest exhortation engraved on the front of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. You need to know your own mind to understand the world and the people around you, claimed Plato [3,4]. However, it seems that this propensity has been lost in our time, leading to everyone being less independent in making choices in life, devoid of critical thinking skills and imagination but influenced by an invasive and ratifying cultural model that turns the masses into a sort of "plankton" at the mercy of the waves and the wind, unable to look within.

Thus, those terrible, insistent and troubling questions return today because every single day, we passively and absent-mindedly become accustomed to the "normality" of horrors, crimes, brutality, corruption and widespread immorality often committed by people who are "normal", perhaps to imitate, with connived or often colluded or hidden control systems. The recent and atrocious episodes committed by good and splendid young men in the Abu Ghraib prison, in those countries that needed democracy brought to them, are the evidence. These young men, who in their countries were considered lovable by all, incapable of malice and wickedness became a band of merciless torturers. It is said that they too followed the rules from above and from military leaders who have never been reprehended. "From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together" Arendt wrote, but is it any different today? This piercing question is a fundamental thought of Zygmunt [5,6] who asks what evil is; essentially, why do good people turn bad?

We probably need to go back to Arendt's considerations of the loss of the inner moral structure that has become weak and inconsistent, remote from roots and without memory. Indeed, moral behaviour presupposes a capacity of mind - self-reflection - to understand which action is good or bad and then act accordingly, but without such inner structure one easily becomes prey to passive behaviours that make us

slaves to an external order imposed by higher interests [7-10]. To understand, we must look at the socio-cultural model that has shaped our lives in which the single techno-rational thought has established itself as incontrovertible truth and economics as a moral science.

The dominant techno-rational culture in our times makes us see the future as the only guarantee of success where the sun never sets; the past and mistakes are forgotten, so memory and foresight are absent, which is what distinguishes us from most animals. The "techné" has detached us from the intimacy of real personal relationships that are felt, lived and partaken in. Important events in life such as conception, birth, illness and death are now considered as mere biological events. Relational modes are virtual, fleeting, swift, superficial entailing a limited number of words; a cultural model that surfs the waves much faster than the time it would take to go down deep. A non-culture is forming that is making interpersonal relationships increasingly sterile and aseptic, "surfing" that prevents continuous reflection and inner dialogue [11-12]. In substance, sterilizing the sense of social morality where "all are against all" but not "all together for the common good". The individual deprived of this intimacy loses the "person" dimension and becomes economized: a non-human man. The "banality of evil" could really become the "normal" and the horrors of the past no longer a singularity (Anders, "Man is antiquated").

The rational culture has changed the concept of the relationship between man and nature, albeit to a lesser extent in our country. Nature is often referred to as "mother" for the values she inspires, the binding rules for all knowledge and natural actions providing the sense of value of our existence.

Yet this intimate relationship has broken down to the extent that "technique" began to have an independent and dominant role in guiding society, the way of life and the values of the modern world. This thrust for change increasingly helped replace and change the concept of utility to one of dominion, in the extreme sense expressed in a new conception of society and man's relationship with nature that is no longer direct but always more intermediated by calculation and technique, rendering it somewhat more sterile. Indeed, man knows much more today than he can see or feel with his senses, designing and building things that he cannot feel, increasingly detached from the natural world and contributing to increasing his coldness of heart and making real interpersonal relationships with others difficult. Man is thus in danger of no longer being able to feel and experience personally, but tends to transform his work into the organization of means and their control, becoming impersonal: a non-human man [13-14].

Technical progress should have freed us from the sorrows and miseries that fatally limit the life of man and instead the opposite is true: increased inequality, poverty, moral degradation, unemployment

and insensitivity to others expose us to the aforementioned risks, also defined by Zimbardo as "The Lucifer Effect" (Random House). Thus, is everything that we continue to define as an "economic crisis" due to the erroneous functioning of economic techniques or exacerbated technicality unable to recover or is it due to the collapse of a socio-cultural model? Are inequality and immorality technical or cultural problems? The evidence is apparent to everyone but nobody wants to see these negative "externalities" as economists call them or the "collateral damage" in the words of Bauman. In a time when we should affirm a sense of social solidarity and return to a spiritual dimension of the soul, the core values of "equality, freedom and solidarity" seem to have scattered in the wind, devoured by a new pseudo-cultural totalitarianism [15-24].

"I believe that the role of the networked society will be judged according its impact on the inequality between the nations. Of course, there are advantages of the networked society which are well-known. Think about medicine, or business. However I believe the judgment has to be based on more fundamental criteria. The American philosopher Whitehead has stated that already the Greeks have developed two aims for humanity: first, the intelligence of nature that is a rational formulation of the laws which rule matter or life and on the other hand the establishment of a democracy based on the role of values. Will the networked society be a step in the direction of the realization of this goal? From this point of view, it is interesting that each bifurcation in the past resulted in people who benefited from it and in people who became victims. The Neolithic society led to extraordinary realizations in the field of arts. It led to the construction of pyramids for the pharaohs but also to common graves for the common people. Slavery started probably with the Neolithic civilization and continued till recently. Similarly, the industrial civilization led to the development of the proletariat at the same time as to an increase of wealth [25-44].

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