

Comment by Ira Katznelson

Evil & politics

In the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, it was hard to know what to say. We seemed bereft of “a terminology,” as Madame de Staël observed after the Jacobin Terror, in a situation “beyond the common measure.” In the days that followed, my own thoughts turned to Hannah Arendt, and the works she had written in an effort to grapple with another situation beyond the common measure. “The problem of evil,” Arendt forecast in 1945, “will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe – as death became the fundamental problem after the last war.”

‘Evil’ is a word one heard with some frequency in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, though rarely deployed with Arendt’s precision. Within some intellectual circles, a denunciation of these acts as evil has been accompanied by a far too simple justification of liberalism and the Enlightenment as decency incarnate. Evil, in this view, implies more than doing harm or inflicting pain on

innocents. Behavior is evil when it attacks valued goods proffered by Western modernity.

Disputing the integrity and worth of these goods, critics in other intellectual circles have focused instead on the evils of postcolonialism and the exploitative relationships characteristic of global capitalism. It is these iniquities that should command our attention, not the acts of terror they consider in a cooler, sometimes icy, register.

I find the impulses at play in both responses unsettling. Each group is better at assuming a posture than developing ways of acting and living decently in a world riven by heterogeneous, interconnected, and sometimes conflicting cultures. A rote defense of Western liberalism could very well authorize a new brand of colonialism, once again making many non-Western peoples ineligible for its core values of rights, toleration, participation, and consent. A wholesale rejection of enlightened liberalism as a mere figment of Western imperialism could very well license an irresponsible and foundationless antimodernism, reinforcing a mirror-image view of ‘us’ against ‘them.’ Intransigently advanced, each perspective evades asking how we can shade the sensibilities, deepen the capacities, and address the limitations of the liberal tradition in full awareness that credulous notions of human perfectibility have been mocked by the global diffusion of human superfluosity, the central hallmark of modern

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“radical evil,” as Hannah Arendt argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Writing in the aftermath of total war and the *Shoah*, Arendt sought both to apprehend the appearance of “radical evil, previously unknown to us,” and to transform the eschatology of evil into a systematic tool with which to name and explain the terrible cost Nazism and Stalinism had exacted. By ‘radical evil,’ she understood the project of erasing the moral and the juridical person as a prelude to physical annihilation. Justified by millenarian ideologies and advanced by what Arendt called manufactured unrealities, radical evil literally erased human plurality by stripping large populations of their rights as citizens, including the right to a name, as a prelude to mass killing. Turning innocents into nonpeople, both the Nazis and the Soviets thus elided the liberal tradition’s central puzzle of how to make it possible for incommensurable values and identities to coexist, perhaps even flourish, in a climate of toleration.

Although today’s constellation of Muslim fervency, fascist-style mobilization, and Internet-friendly coordination may be new in some respects, it is manifestly as capable of producing radical evil as the barbarous offshoots of Western civilization Arendt addressed, even if thankfully it has yet to equal them. Familiar, too, are the challenges that Islamic zealotry can pose to the tradition of Enlightenment and to the possibilities of a decent liberal politics.

Given these hazards, we need to explore whether the Western liberal tradition can effectively contest radical evil without sacrificing its own best features. I think it can, though not on its own and only if liberals can find a terminology and institutional practices to engage with nonliberal beliefs and cultures without dismissing them too hastily as irremediably antiliberal.

Any meaningful effort to refine the language and institutions that a robust liberalism requires must move beyond a thin and often misleading claim to universality; it also can gain confidence from a fresh appreciation for the Enlightenment’s rich, though often neglected, lineage of realism and a recognition of liberalism’s history of invention and transformation. Kant, for example, worried about the demagogic uses of reason and the possibility that a new set of ostensibly enlightened “prejudices [can] serve, like the old, as the leading strings of the thoughtless masses.” He also well knew that demonic violence has long characterized human affairs. Such realism is quite distinct from the rosy optimism of those eighteenth-century *philosophes* who supposed that systematic understanding would trump torture and barbarism, as if to realize the title of Pierre-Paul Prud’hon’s painting of 1798: *Darkness Dissipates as Wisdom and Truth Descend to Earth*. Rather than Prud’hon’s canvas, it is Goya’s etchings of *Los desastres de la guerra* after the Spanish insurrection of 1808 and the Peninsular War with Napoleon that might better be adopted as chastening emblems of a humane realism.

Today’s terror forces, or should force, an engagement not just with this year’s instance of evil but with a proper role for realistic reason and institutional innovation in the face of a persistent human capacity for desolation, now enhanced by the legacy and diffusion of twentieth-century models of radical evil. Times of turmoil and fear urgently pose two questions: whether liberalism can thrive in the face of determined adversaries and what kind of liberalism we should wish to have. Answers to ‘what kind’ affect the possibilities for ‘whether’ by offering choices not only about doctrines but also about institutions and public policies.

The ideals of the liberal tradition,

properly appreciated, represent an open sensibility rather than a fixed set of arrangements or ideas. The most important moments of innovation and change in the modern West's liberal political tradition have come in circumstances governed by anxiety and alarm. Consider not only Locke's institutional formula for toleration in conditions of religious warfare between Catholics and Protestants, but his specifications for political consent and representation in the context of a century of civil war in England. Consider, too, the constitutional innovations of Benjamin Constant in France when faced with a global war and the collapse of legitimate kingship. Consider, finally, the development of the twentieth-century liberal welfare state in response to depression, class conflict, and the rise of Bolshevism, Fascism, and Nazism.

Especially at moments of danger and innovation, the liberal tradition has been neither self-contained nor homogeneous. There have been liberal democrats, liberal socialists, liberal republicans, liberal monarchists – and also liberal Christians, liberal Jews, liberal Muslims. In each instance, the absence of a partnership with political liberalism has proved an invitation to oppression. Without a commitment to such a cardinal liberal value as toleration, even a declared democrat may be tempted by despotism. The liberal tradition is thus necessary to an effectively decent politics. But it is not sufficient. An abstract commitment to universal human rights by itself, without depth, passion, and historical particularity, cannot possibly contend with radical evil. An effective liberalism modifies but does not replace other commitments.

The more global our world, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, the more imperative it is to register that the prove-

nance of an idea may affect its status but not its value or capacity. Even if liberal political thought is inescapably Western in origin, it no longer belongs only to the West. "Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on," he observes, "all bear the burden of European thought and history." These secular and universal categories and concepts were preached "at the colonized and at the same time denied . . . in practice. But the vision," writes Chakrabarty, "has been powerful in its effects. It has historically provided a strong foundation on which to erect – both in Europe and outside – critiques of socially unjust practices. . . . This heritage is now global." Even when contradicted by such deep injustices as slavery and Jim Crow, European imperialism, and today's spectacular global inequalities, struggles based on these orientations ensue "because there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity." Or at least, one might say, no attractive struggles are possible wholly outside their frame.

Both liberalism and the Enlightenment within which it nestles advance a philosophical anthropology of rational actors and rational action, insisting that human agents develop the capacity to deliberate, choose, and achieve sensible goals. In their effort to cultivate such rational citizens, liberal regimes in the past have all too often imposed various limits, drawing boundaries that stunt the capacities of individuals based on their religion, race, gender, literacy, criminality, or colonized status. But after centuries of struggle about the dimensions of freedom, enlightened political liberalism

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today acknowledges *no* legitimate barriers to reason, hence no legitimate ascriptive barriers to liberal inclusion and liberal citizenship.

The result is a deep paradox. The global appeal of an enlightened liberalism cannot help but jeopardize the local attachments, the historical particularities – the human plurality – that constitute its most important rationale.

Here, then, lies liberalism's most basic current conundrum: how to broaden its endowments in order to protect and nourish heterogeneity while coping with its perils.

As our version of this challenge beckons, it is not a war on terrorism that will define the early twenty-first century, but a series of battles for the soul – that is, for the content, rules, and respectful inclusiveness – of a properly robust, and realistic, liberalism. This endeavor, rather than a stylized conflict about the merits of Enlightenment, had better be the struggle we make our first priority.