

Trump and Brexit: How to Think about the Unprecedented

The candidacy, campaign and election of Donald Trump to be the forty-fifth president of the United States of America challenged the ways many people, including experienced political reporters and commentators, made sense of this new political phenomenon.

For almost two years many people struggled unsuccessfully with the meaning of the situation as it unfolded because they were using conventional categories of thought for something those categories could not help explain.

The emergence of someone like Mr. Trump, who could claim that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and still be elected as president, actually being elected (albeit while losing the popular vote), is an unprecedented outcome in U.S. politics. After the fact, there has been a scramble to explain him and to contain the implications of his behaviour.



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None of these explanations are very convincing (e.g., 'voters wanted 'change' rather than 'continuity'). **This is not surprising as, so far, the mainstream media at least are operating with existing categories of thought: if a situation is unprecedented, then the categories formed on the basis of past experience will not be appropriate.**

In the U.K. there were many similarities between the Brexit campaign and Mr. Trump's campaign, most notably, perhaps, in the abandonment of any

recognition – not to mind obligation – of truthfulness. The behaviour of the campaigners and voters in both countries – many of the latter having little regard for facts – is unprecedented and the big question posed by this extraordinary experience is:

How to Think About the 'Unprecedented'?

Hannah Arendt faced that question when she went to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 in order to see Eichmann at first hand and to report on the trial. We can look to her response to that experience as **an exemplar of HOW to THINK about a new phenomenon.**

Thinking with Arendt

Arendt went to the trial of Adolf Eichmann, not out of ego or seeking acclaim, but because **she needed to understand the unprecedented situation of a state policy for the industrial 'processing' of people.** She wanted to take what she believed would be her last chance to see an example of a real Nazi who was involved in that horror and she spent much time contemplating the transcripts of Eichmann's lengthy pre-trial interrogation and of the trial.

Arendt, of course, was no ordinary reporter; as a 'journalist' she had unusually strong skills of observation and looked at such things as free of pre-conceptions as possible. Her awareness from this experience led her to the insight that **it was necessary to think anew.**

Her method was to look at a particular (Adolf Eichmann) in order to formulate a new way of understanding, rather than subsume it under existing ready-made

generalisations or categories, e.g., 'monster', which she decided was not appropriate for this unprecedented phenomenon.



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For Arendt *judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand*. Here's an everyday example of what she means:

When we go to a restaurant and enjoy a 'good' dish how have we determined that the dish was 'good'?

How did we decide since this is literally a matter of taste – there are no rules, no formulas for deciding. Yet, while we may have more or less confidence in our assessment, we may have a sense of it being more general than just a whim. (Think food critic-writer.) That sense is what Arendt, following Immanuel Kant, meant by 'Judgment'.

(The obvious questions which our assessment raises for us are: How reliable is that sense of mine? What confidence can I (or others) place in it? And, most importantly, why can I be confident about the reliability of my judgment? These are questions which we park here.)



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Arendt proposes that judgment is a way of proceeding in which critical categories are inspired by one's engagement with a phenomenon, such as the dish in the example above.

The critical categories are not imposed on the phenomenon with which one is engaging. Judgment is the human faculty of knowing which can assess particulars without subsuming them under general rules or abstractions which can be taught and learnt.

The Faculty of Judging Particulars is the ability to say: "this is wrong/right", "this is ugly/beautiful", "this is bad/good, and "this is untrue/true".

Arendt says that judging involves reasoning without categories that are “deeply ingrained in our mind but whose basis of experience has long been forgotten and whose plausibility resides in their intellectual consistency rather than in their adequacy to actual events”.

As human beings, she considers that we are each born with the Faculty of Judgement, but like any faculty or talent it can and will be less or more developed in different people. To develop one’s power of judgment is a matter of personal discretion.

We Think (Judge) in Categories

What about Adolf Eichmann? How do we understand him?

This is not a question about the acts of extermination. We can agree that there is no question that the acts to which he contributed, and thereby supported, were an evil of the worst order ever. These need not be considered at this time.



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The question with which we are engaged is about our understanding and our method of making meaning, i.e., how do we make sense of such behaviour? Under what category of thought do we classify him so that we understand him?

Is he a ‘monster’?

To see him as a ‘monster’ would be a very common solution to the problem and it would be completely satisfactory to many in the sense that it would bring their consideration to an end.

We must ask, however, what does it mean to say someone is a ‘monster’?

‘Monster’:

C13th: misshapen creature, abnormal or malformed animal.

Mod. Def.: imaginary beast such as centaur, usually made up of various animal or human parts; person, animal or plant with a marked structural deformity; cruel, wicked, or inhuman person (Collins English Dictionary: 21st Century Edition)

How do we use this concept? **How would using the concept of 'monster' advance our understanding of the phenomenon?** How would it justify punishing an act committed by such a person? How would it put us in a position to prevent or destroy such behaviour?

How would it explain all the other Germans involved in the extermination of Jewish, Gypsy, Gay and other people? All 'monsters'?

Where do we draw the line about people contributing in some way, however indirectly, to the exterminations?

Note, for example, the role of IBM people inside and outside Germany in supporting the development, operations and logistics of the extermination system: you can read more [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Further, was (is?) 'monsterism' something peculiar only to many (all?) of the German population (including Jewish Germans?)? Only during a certain period or always? Would this apply only to Germans?

Aside from the evolutionary realities of human beings (we are all much the same biologically), note [Asch](#), [Milgram](#) and [Zimbardo](#) Experiments with U.S. subjects.

Let us set aside for a moment the extreme situation in which the people we are taking for our case studies had to operate and which we are using to explore how people construct their meanings.

Consider a normal everyday situation in Ireland where the act is not on the evil scale but would at least be likely to be regarded as improper if not wrong by many if not most people: [HSE's Bid to sack whistle-blower Grace Foster](#)

How would you judge the reported act of the General Manager, HSE South-East – how would you explain the act of moving to dismiss the whistle-blower who is credited with bringing the abuse to light?

How would you assess the myriad of similar acts, e.g., workplace and managerial bullying, throughout organisations and companies in Ireland every day?

Recall also Arendt's view of a 'truth' bringing the 'liberating soundless dialogue of me with myself' to an end.

Arendt's Question

Let us return to Arendt's case study and the question we are posed by Eichmann:

What is the right category to help us understand the awful phenomenon of how apparently 'ordinary people' can participate in monstrous deeds?

In other words, how do we organise the reality of 'ordinary Germans' engaged in extermination programmes to make a sense which will serve to grow our minds (our immediate focus), have us ready in case of similar phenomena in the future

(not all events have to be on the scale or as evil), and also, perhaps, provide guidance as to how it can be prevented or destroyed if occurring?

On the basis of her observations and contemplation, she formulated a new category, '**thoughtlessness**' – '**the inability to see things from the standpoint of another**' -for us as a way of constructing an understanding to enable us to decide for ourselves.

She poses the question for us to provide our answer: **Was Adolf Eichmann 'thoughtless'? Was he unable to put himself in the position of the targets of the**



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persecution? Or was he able to do so, but declined to do so or decided to ignore it?

While Arendt focused on Adolf Eichmann, the issue for us is not whether she was right about him (as argued by Eichmann's biographers David Cesarani, Christopher Browning), but whether her generalisation and explanation is useful to us for understanding how 'ordinary people' could do what they did.

We don't have to accept her specific conclusion about Adolf Eichmann to find the ideas, which she formulated out of the 'Eichmann' materials she thought about, useful to us. Also we do not need to get tied up in words – labels are just a convenient way of working with concepts/categories and communicating with others. It is the content – meaning – that matters.

What do we do with Hannah Arendt's offer of an alternative way of knowing, i.e., seeing Adolf Eichmann under the category 'thoughtless (as defined by her) rather than reaching for a conventional category, e.g., 'monster', for him?

Reject it out-of-hand? Why? Because we are committed to (trapped in?) a particular way of knowing? Or conduct an experiment, one attending to ourselves: explore HOW we understand a situation – HOW we know WHAT we know (believe) – and, perhaps, also identify what we feel we (might?) have to lose by exercising a different way of knowing.

An Experiment: Using Arendt's Way of Knowing



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We could use Arendt's ideas to construct an alternative understanding of 'the Eichmann phenomenon', i.e. first practice working with the ideas she presents to us, to see how we do with them before dismissing them?

Rather than giving up your own way of understanding Adolf Eichmann, what we would like you to test is adding to your way of constructing your knowledge on a trial basis.

The experiment is to put yourself into Hannah Arendt's standpoint, as best you can imagine it, to understand her meaning making and possibly (but not necessarily) Adolf Eichmann's meaning making?

Then, having practiced working with the ideas she gave us, we can consider whether it gives us a better understanding of this particular phenomenon and that helps us understand similar situations of 'good people' doing 'bad things'.

Through this experience and ones like it we can enhance our Power of Judgment and think afresh about phenomena like Trump or Brexit.

The Trump Phenomenon has been understood through existing categories although it has also been described as unprecedented. The result is the confusion we have today about what exactly has happened beyond the obvious pollster explanations, e.g., many voters wanted change, many voters didn't care about the truthfulness or otherwise of Mr Trump's utterances.

To go beyond this we have to think anew about what we are doing, as Arendt would say. In both ways illustrated above – using the Arendtian concept of 'thoughtlessness' for thinking about Mr Trump's behaviour during the campaign and the awareness she raises that existing categories of thought (including 'thoughtlessness') may not do – we could hardly have a better start than Thinking with Arendt.

Like this post? You might want to learn more about our *Through the Lens of Arendt Film Club*.

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