IDENTIFYING THE UNPRECEDENTED: HANNAH ARENDT, TOTALITARIANISM, AND THE CRITIQUE OF SOCIOLOGY

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How does one identify a phenomenon as radically new or "unprecedented"? Do, in fact, "unprecedented" phenomena exist at all, as presumably some degree of continuity marks every state of affairs? If, however, the idea of continuity is taken too far, are we not at risk of domesticating a radical tendency by conceptually transmuting it into something that is already known? These questions are of pressing importance since September 11th, as commentators warn that America and its allies face radically new enemies in the guise of "rogue" states, movements, and terrorist organizations. Yet sociology has had to grapple with similar issues before. In the 1930s and 1940s, the consolidation of fascist and Nazi movements also taxed sociological understanding and competence to the maximum. This article describes aspects of American sociology's response to that earlier challenge, contrasting it with the approach of Hannah Arendt, who condemned the discipline for systematically failing to appreciate the uniqueness, enormity, and gravity of the events that assailed the epoch. Arendt's critique of sociological methods is followed by a case study—Theodore Abel's investigation into National Socialism—that lends some credence to her misgivings. The work of other sociologists of this period—notably, Talcott Parsons's—is also briefly considered. The concluding section of the paper examines the theoretical problems involved in seeking to conceptualize an "unprecedented" event (movement, institution).

A CHARACTERISTIC feature of all innovative authors is their ability not only to contest the "attention space" (Collins 1998:38–39) of influential contemporaries but also to challenge the entrenched habits of mind of those who pursue "normal science." Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was no "normal" scientist. She sought, in her investigations of totalitarianism, to understand the unprecedented. She developed her own vocabulary to interpret the modern world. And she saw herself at odds with the entire disciplinary matrix of her epoch. Trained as a philosopher, Arendt came to the disconsolate conclusion that philosophy was inherently hostile to the untidiness, noise, and "freedom" that constituted political experience. Largely as a protest against her own tradition, she described her profession as "political theory" (Arendt [1965] 2000:3),[1] but this was not the kind of vocation that American behavioral political science of the 1950s and 1960s would have recognized as its own. An author whose key works drew extensively on historical knowledge, Arendt claimed that history as a discipline had become so wedded to theories of structural causation that it had little room for contingency and uniqueness.

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[1] In this citation, and many that follow, the first date, in brackets, refers to the text's original date of publication; the second date refers to the publication date of the text I have used. Page citations relate to editions cited in the references.

Still, it was for sociology and psychology that she expressed her deepest misgivings.

In this article, I examine the nature, and assess the validity, of Arendt's critique of sociology. My key objective is to retrieve a little-known chapter in sociology's critical reception that clarifies a major *theoretical* problem: The extent to which sociology is disabled from recognizing and comprehending radically new political phenomena. Of special relevance is Arendt's disturbing claim that sociology had systematically, rather than casually, misunderstood the greatest danger of the twentieth century: totalitarian movements. Arendt's indictment was that sociology's terms, methods, and domain assumptions impeded the recognition of *political* novelty by absorbing it within ideal types, reducing it to a manifestation of structural causes, and ultimately making it functionally interchangeable with grossly dissimilar phenomena.

Following an examination of Arendt's critique of sociology, I consider Theodore Abel's and, to a lesser extent, Talcott Parsons's analyses of the "Hitler movement" as examples of the type of thinking to which Arendt objected. My aim is not to use Arendt to refute Abel or Parsons, a strategy that would entail a detailed reckoning of modern historical scholarship, but to show that the methodological reflex of two of sociology's finest interpreters of National Socialism was to treat it as an extreme case of something that was *already known*. It is this tendency, rather than the veracity of any of Arendt's claims, that is my primary concern here, although I occasionally offer evidence to support her interpretation of the Nazi movement.

Finally, I address the distinctiveness of Arendt's approach to social and political novelty by examining the concept of an "unprecedented" event and tackling the objection that *anything* can be seen as radically new or, alternatively, as archaic, depending on the observer's vantage point. Arendt's argument remains pertinent as Americans and their allies consider the nature of the enemies they currently face. "There is always the temptation—no less among self-proclaimed postmodernists—to reduce events to instances of already recognizable tendencies" (Fuller 2002:1.1). This is a temptation that Arendt urged us to resist.

SOCIOLOGY AND TOTALITARIANISM

By the time that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* ([1951] 1973) appeared, Arendt was already a familiar figure in the leftist and Jewish public intellectual circles of New York city, her home from 1941 until her death in 1975 (Bell [1977] 1980:127–37). Arendt's writings on Palestine, Zionism, imperialism, nationalism, racism, statelessness, and concentration camps had in part prepared her audience for the unsteady synthesis these themes would receive in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Less familiar to Arendt's readers at this time was knowledge of her early intellectual formation as a philosopher and her preoccupation, evident since the early 1930s, with the nature of the social sciences in general, and sociology and psychology in particular. Her second published article (Arendt [1930] 1994) was a critique of Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* ([1929/1936] 1985), which she condemned for denying the autonomy of thought and for suggesting that philosophy's traditional focus on ontological questions was less illuminating than understanding the shifting finitude of everyday life, the alleged source of the philosopher's categories.

Arendt's early criticisms of the sociology of knowledge, and the broader discipline of which it is a part, bear the impress of her university education. A student during the 1920s of Martin Heidegger (Marburg), Edmund Husserl (Freiburg), and Karl Jaspers (Heidelberg), she wrote as a champion of *Existenz* philosophy, defending it against what she saw as sociology's reductionism and ambition to replace it. The tone throughout her essay on Mannheim is dispassionate, the language turgid, the subject recondite. When Arendt confronts sociology again in the 1940s under the wider rubric of "the social sciences," the landscape of her life and of her conception of philosophy were by then radically reshaped. Behind her lay the ruins of the Weimar Republic, the capitulation of Heidegger to Nazism, the horrors of a genocidal war, and the painful experience of her own exile in France and America. Her tone is now urgent, the language clearer, the subject of incomparable and immediate gravity. Once more, she attacks reductive

kinds of analysis, but this time it is the alleged failure of such approaches to explain *totalitarianism* that is her prime concern.

Arendt was one of a group of Weimar intellectuals transplanted on American soil for whom the social sciences were anathema at worst, deeply suspect at best, "an abominable discipline from every point of view, educating 'social engineers'" (letter of Arendt to Mary McCarthy, December 21, 1968 in Brightman 1995:235). This distinguished group of scholars included Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and such prominent members of the Frankfurt School as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. Arendt's relations with Horkheimer and Adorno—"that pack of bastards" (letter of Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, August 2, 1941 in Kohler 2000:72)—were strained by personal antipathy, sharply contrasting political attitudes, and major philosophical differences. But she shared with them not only her Jewishness and the status of being a refugee, but also the key ordeal that brought Jewishness and immigration together: the experience of Nazism and the Shoah. It was this experience above all that led her to view sociology with growing apprehension and to see the social sciences more generally as deeply compromised by the mass societies they purported to explain (Aschheim 2001; Coser 1984; Pitkin 1998).[2]

Arendt offered a number of criticisms of sociology,[3] the strongest of which focused on the methodological principle of *sine ira et studio*;[4] the theoretical strategy of what she idiosyncratically called "functionalism"; and the related issue of sociology's tendency to become trapped in analogies and ideal types that impeded its ability to confront historical novelty.

SINE IRA ET STUDIO *AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION*

Any author concerned with understanding and explaining the Nazi "Final Solution" is confronted with an immediate and disconcerting question: What is the best—most accurate, most appropriate, most authentic—register to depict the camps? Arendt's response to this question in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* entailed a conscious departure from "the tradition of *sine ira et studio* of whose greatness" she "was fully aware" (Arendt [1953f] 1994:403, replying to Voegelin 1953). Arendt did not reject the attempt to be dispassionate and "objective" as such. She repudiated the supposed logical incongruity between objectivity and expressed indignation, and the related contention that impartiality is the only legitimate stance to assume in the analysis of any "human society." Her "particular subject matter"—notably, the Nazi death factories—did not lend itself to experimental detachment:

> To describe the concentration camps *sine ira et studio* is not to be "objective," but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself. When I used the image of hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally . . . In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more "objective," that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psy-

[2] A more generous approach to sociology was taken by another exile, Franz Neumann. Although in *Behemoth* ([1942/1944] 1966) Neumann acknowledged "the inadequacy of sociological categories" (p. 366) to understand the class structure of the Third Reich, he insisted that a sociology of knowledge was essential if one were to decipher the meaning of National Socialist ideology (p. 37). Also see Neumann (1953), which praises "Max Weber, whose name is known and honored wherever social and political science is taught" (p. 21). In contrast, Arendt was adamantly anti-Weberian. The problems this caused in her correspondence with the Weberiophile, Jaspers (1932:7; [1957] 1981:32, 57), are examined in Baehr (2001).

[3] Barbed comments about sociology, sociologists, social science methods, behavioral science, psychoanalysis, and psychology pervade the Arendt-Blücher correspondence. See the letters in Kohler (2000:62–63, 64, 69, 71, 75, 139, 231, 234, 250, 262–63, and, from Blücher's Common Course at Bard College, 394). For other criticisms of social science and psychology, see Arendt (1958:43, 45, 323) and Arendt (1963b: 11, 19, 25, 62, 73 , 96, 99, 100, 174, 220, 290).

[4] The phrase "without indignation and partisanship" was coined by Tacitus (Annals I:I) in his indignant and partisan history of the Augustan Principate.

chological nature. (Arendt 1953f:404; cf. Arendt [1946a] 1994 and Arendt [1951] 1973:445)

One might reply that Arendt's image of Hell, evoked to do justice to the suffering and madness of the camps, carries its own characteristic distortion. Depending on one's theology, Hell is a place for those who never received God's grace or who, having received it, viciously renounced God through sin, preferring the ways of the Devil to those of The Light. And how can an image of Hell be "literal"?[5] Still, was Arendt exaggerating the tendency of sociologists, impelled by methodological principles, to describe the camps in a grotesquely clinical manner? In 1947, the *American Journal of Sociology* published an article by Bloch, who had recently witnessed some of the German camps shortly after liberation. The "horrible mass exploitation by the Third Reich of concentration camp inmates" and others, Bloch declared, afforded a "remarkable opportunity for the study of social patterning and personality under a distinctive set of controlled circumstances." Study of the camps enables sociologists to see "what happens when modern man becomes stripped of his culture and is reduced to an animal state very closely approaching 'raw' motivation" (Bloch 1947:335). He continued:

> Under such conditions the process of assortative and differential association provide[s] a deeply penetrating view into genotypical forms of gregarious and adaptive social selection. Moreno has been pointing to these forms for some time in his sociometric patterning. What happens to the untrammelled socius when the usual social framework is removed? . . . It transpired that what developed was a process of "desocialization," resulting in a primal state of human association. It is possible to conceive of this as a heuristic prototype for comparative study with institutionalized and more normal patterns of groupings, leadership, and hierarchical class structure. (P. 335)

The idea that camps such as Buchenwald give us access to "a primal state of human association" is, surely, bizarre in the extreme—unless one imagines there to be such a thing as a state of nature in the first place and then concludes that such a state resembles a concentration camp. Similarly, "raw" motivation in a camp is unlikely to be similar to "raw" motivation elsewhere, unless one assumes that being beaten, starved, and terrorized reveals a primal human being, rather than one who has been beaten, starved, and terrorized. Furthermore, Bloch's description (1947:339) of the problems encountered in "reconditioning and retraining" Jewish child survivors of the camps and death marches—their case, he avers, is "analogous to the putative conditions involved in the retraining of classical feral children"—appears to ignore the signal difference between children abandoned at birth and those who have been forcibly removed from their parents and deliberately mistreated by people who wish to see them die.

My point is not that Bloch was inhumane or individually callous; probably the reverse is true.[6] Nor is it that he is a representative

[5] The representation of camp existence appears to elude the best attempts to make sense of it. Bettelheim struggled with this problem the moment he sat down to write his landmark article on "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations" (Bettelheim [1943] 1980; cf. Bettelheim [1960] 1971:107–235; on the paper's "forced objectivity of diction," see Bettelheim [1947] 1980:42; cf. Bettelheim 1980). Equally, Levi ([1986] 1989:36–69), wishing to avoid a simplistic view of camp life in Auschwitz as a Manichean battleground between the utterly innocent and the utterly evil—angels and demons—coined the term "Grey Zone" to depict the collusion of the victims in the destruction of their fellows and the compromises that, to varying degrees, were forced upon all who had survived. The idea of the "Grey Zone" contrasts markedly with the "ingroup-outgroup" dichotomy that was evident in early sociological writing about the *Lager* (e.g., Bloch 1947:336; Kirkpatrick 1946:68, 70).

[6] An editor's footnote to Bloch's (1947) article describes the author as

> . . . an executive officer and later head of the G-5 section of one of our leading combat divisions during the war" and "one of the first American officers and very likely the first professional American sociologist to enter the notorious German concentration camps, Buchenwald included, as well as numerous smaller foreign workers' encampments and barracks in Germany. He assisted in the organization of almost a hundred centers and communities for the liberated inmates and

figure of American sociology, whatever this might mean in such a diverse discipline; Bloch *was*, however, one of the few sociologists at the time who studied the death camps. (Another account of them, by Abel, raises different problems, as we shall see.) Finally, I do not assert that sociology has no business seeking to learn from the catastrophe, a proposition that is absurd (cf. J. Adler 2000:97; Bauman 1989:*xiii*; for a defense of social science methods in this context, see Hilberg 1996:87–88). Rather, the point is that in his attempt to recapitulate norms of scientific objectivity, Bloch fell prey to sociological occasionalism: the practice of using Nazism and the camps as an opportunity for grand theorizing *sine ira et studio*, devoid of the passion, sense of horror, and madness that Arendt believed must be conveyed if one is to be *true* to the phenomenon. Worse, in the attempt to offer a sociology that was rigorously detached, Bloch's "controlled circumstances" and "heuristic prototype" conjure up a sociological laboratory that disturbingly parallels the one the SS itself had established in the camps to conduct their own experiments. Reading Bloch, it is almost as if the SS had made a remarkable contribution to human knowledge, bestowed a providential gift to science, by providing sociologists with new material for their theoretical casuistries.

"FUNCTIONALISM"

Equally problematic for Arendt was the category of "function," a category she traces, not to Durkheim or Spencer, but to Marx, whom she describes as the "father of the social science methods" (Arendt [1953e] 1994: 374, p. 377 on Comte; cf. Arendt 1953a, image 1, 1953c, 1961). Her chief complaint is that sociology obsessively seeks to turn a peculiar episode or phenomenon into something that it is not, denying its reality and claiming that it is a symptom or token of a deeper substratum remote from the world of appearances. Correlatively, because any tangible thing is deemed a façade hiding something more real (developmental tendencies, historical forces), it is easy to identify one discrete phenomenon as being very much like any other, provided each of them can be shown putatively to serve the same common, underlying purpose. Hence religion and Communism can be considered "*functionally* equivalent," even though this requires that the social scientist never asks "what a religion actually is, and if it is anything at all when it is a religion without God" (Arendt [1953e] 1994:375).[7] The approach of the social sciences "is based on the fundamental assumption . . . that they do not have to concern themselves with the *substance* of a historical and political phenomenon, such as religion, or ideology, or freedom, or totalitarianism, but only with the *function* it plays in society" (Arendt [1953e] 1994:374). This disciplinary habit means that what people actually say can conveniently be ignored, a reflex that Arendt found both condescending and dangerous as it led to frequent miscalculations of what actors intended. Marx's notorious formulation that religion is really an opiate, when in fact it is often a source of action, suffering, and heroic endeavor, is predicated on the widely shared view among sociologists that the thoughts of a human being are "the ideological reflexes and echoes of his life process" (Arendt [1953e] 1994: 375).

This tendency to substitute and shuffle ideas, destroying the boundaries between them and their objects, was one she felt the historically minded should resist. Unlike "sociologists who methodically [ignore] chronological order, location of facts, impact and uniqueness of events, substantial content of sources, and historical reality in general" (Arendt [1953e] 1994:385), historians should reclaim the art of making distinctions. They should insist that "these distinctions . . . follow the language we speak and the subject matter we deal with." The alter-

foreign workers and handled 500,000 [sic] of such individuals. (P. 335)

[7] Arendt believed that the idea of Nazism's being a "political religion" was incoherent, a species of the functionalism she found risible. Many others (e.g., Emilio Gentile, Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron, Norman Cohn) have thought otherwise. For a bibliography on the concept of "political religion," see Burleigh (2000: 922–23). *Mein Kampf* brims with eschatological language of the "coming resurrection," a fact minimized by Arendt (see Hitler [1925–1926] 2001:305, 328, 336, 343–46, 348–49, 413, 416).

native was the Marxian "positive science of history" and the "underlying assumption" of the sociologists: "Every matter has a function and its essence is the same as the functional role it happens to play" (p. 385). Armed with such a method, it was no wonder that sociology had failed to understand the most momentous episode of the century: totalitarianism. Sociology simply assimilated it into its conventional categories, or deemed it "as some more radical form of something already well known" (Arendt in Friedrich [1954] 1964:76).

It is tempting simply to brush aside Arendt's complaints about sociology on the grounds that they are a caricature of a discipline that, even in the 1940s and 1950s, was complex and heterogeneous. Her frequent identification of sociology with the "social sciences" tout court, a rhetorical strategy that carelessly conflates disciplinary object domains and perspectives, invites similar irritation. Yet something of the force of Arendt's critique of sociology reasserts itself when we examine specific cases, particularly the use of generalization, analogy and metaphor to occlude substantive differences among social phenomena or to establish spurious historical pedigrees.

Consider for instance the claim of H. G. Adler, a former inmate of Theresienstadt, that the sociology of "slavery" was probably the best framework within which to understand the Nazi camps. Adler (1958b) argued that the existence of concentration camps necessitated "the construction of a sociology of 'the unfree'" that would include other "extreme forms of exclusion" such as the penitentiary (p. 514). To complement a wide-ranging sociology of the unfree, Adler suggested a social-historical investigation that would

> . . . not only describe the history of the modern concentration camp but seek out the institutions of earlier times that are akin to it and that exhibit elements likely to exist whenever men are significantly or totally excluded from a relatively free community. An understanding of the concentration camp is impossible without insight into the nature of slavery; the concentration camp is part of the history of slavery. (P. 514)

Adler acknowledged that Nazi "crypto-slavery" appeared novel, but insisted that, on closer scrutiny, the characteristics of "older methods" could be readily identified. Thus, the practice of arresting innocent relatives of those who opposed the regime was actually "a revival of the practice of taking hostages and of the ancient institution of kinship liability" (p. 517). To be sure, the "SS concentration camp" could justifiably be considered "unique and incomparable," but only, he added, "within the general framework of slavery" (p. 520).[8]

But it was precisely such transhistorical sociological frameworks that Arendt abhorred when applied to totalitarian regimes.[9] While acknowledging Nazi enslavement of occupied territories, Arendt ([1951] 1973) maintained that concentration camps were unprecedented and had a fundamentally different purpose than conventional slavery:[10]

> Throughout history slavery has been an institution within a social order; slaves were not, like concentration-camp inmates, withdrawn from the sight and hence the protection of their fellow-men; as instruments of labour they had a definite price and as property a definite value. The concentration-camp inmate has no price, because he can always be replaced; nobody knows to whom he belongs, because he is never seen. From the point of view of normal society he is absolutely superfluous, although in times of

[8] Adler goes on to say that "the totalitarian secret police became the greatest slave-keeper of all times" (1958b:520; also see Speer 1981). There is an excellent, sympathetic overview of Adler's neglected work in J. Adler (2000). For two appreciative sociological reviews, see Abel (1957) on Adler (1955) and Hughes (1961) on Adler (1958a). Arendt ([1963a] 1965:119–20, 134) drew on Abel's writings about Theresienstadt.

[9] So, too, at other moments, did Adler himself, who later argued that the Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy was inapplicable to the Nazi "administration" (Adler 1974:872–74, 915–17).

[10] "Of the three types of camps [concentration, death and slave camps], the slave labor camps—terrible as they were—present the least interesting problems. They were not all that different from the worst of other slave labor situations known throughout history" (Bettelheim 1980: 39). Elkins (1959:81–139) presents an influential account of the comparable psychological impacts of slavery and concentration camp experience on their victims, which, ironically, draws extensively on Bettelheim's work.

> acute labour shortage, as in Russia and Germany during the war, he is used for work. (P. 444)[11]

The salient point about the Nazi camps, Arendt argued, was that unlike slavery they had no obvious utilitarian value. The extermination of Jews and other "inferior races" in Birkenau (a section of Auschwitz), Belżec, Sobibór, Chełmno, and Treblinka proceeded apace at considerable cost to the German war effort, diverting logistical, manpower, and material resources that could have been employed to fight the allies. Moreover, the Nazi camps were unlike previous concentration camps—they sought not only to contain an enemy or terrify potential civil opponents of the regime, but also, and *primarily*, to conduct an experiment on their hapless captives. Here Arendt adapted the account of Bettelheim ([1943] 1980), an inmate of Dachau and Buchenwald between 1938 and 1939, who depicted the camps as "a laboratory for subjecting not only free men, but especially the most ardent foes of the Nazi system, to the process of disintegration from their position as autonomous individuals" (p. 83). Or as he put it later:

> In addition, the camps were a training ground for the SS. There they were taught to free themselves of their prior, more humane emotions and attitudes, and learn the most effective ways of breaking resistance in a defenseless civilian population; the camps became an experimental laboratory in which to study the most effective means for doing that. They were also a testing ground for how to govern most "effectively." . . . This use of the camps as experimental laboratories was later extended to include the so-called "medical" experiments, in which human beings were used in place of animals. (Bettelheim [1960] 1971:110–11; cf. Feig 1981:37–39 on "thanatology and experimentation")

Arendt ([1951] 1973) held a similar view, arguing that the concentration camp was the "central institution of totalitarian organizational power" (p. 438), experimentally designed to calibrate the optimum means through which one could transform spontaneous and diverse human beings into an artificial, isolated, and interchangeable creature that was little more than a conditioned set of Pavlovian reflexes.[12] It transpires that the camps were anti-utilitarian only by normal standards of utility maximization. By Nazi standards, the camps' usefulness consisted in their capacity both to exterminate "objective enemies" and to fabricate the "model citizen" of the totalitarian regime. Moreover, without concentration camps,

> . . . without the undefined fear they inspire and the very well-defined training they offer in totalitarian domination, which can nowhere else be fully tested with all of its most radical possibilities, a totalitarian state can neither inspire its nuclear troops with fanaticism nor maintain a whole people in complete apathy. The dominating and the dominated would only too quickly sink back into the "old bourgeois routine"; after early "excesses," they would succumb to everyday life with its human laws; in short, they would develop in the direction which all observers counseled by common sense were so prone to predict. (Arendt [1951] 1973:456)

As the "laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified (p. 437), and in which "the whole of life [is] thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment" (p. 445), the

[11] Patterson's (1982) major work on slavery avoids the parallel between slavery and the concentration camps. Even so, his concept of "social death" was adapted by Goldhagen (1996) in his discussion of the Jewish experience under Nazi domination: "violently dominated, natally alienated, and deemed incapable of bearing honor" (p. 169). Goldhagen remarks further that matters were no different for the hundreds of thousands of Slavs that Nazis enslaved to serve the "labor-starved war economy" (p. 174).

[12] "The camps are meant not only to exterminate and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself" (Arendt [1951] 1973:438; cf. Arendt [1953d] 1994:304). Arendt ([1950] 1994) also remarked: "The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under the extreme conditions of a human made hell. Total domination is achieved when the human person . . . has been transformed into a completely conditioned being whose reactions can be calculated even when he is led to certain death" (p. 240).

camps were the Nazi guarantee against social and political routinization.[13]

That being the case, Arendt considered it theoretically misguided at best, morally obtuse at worst, to extrapolate totalitarianism to institutions that were part of the history of conventional societies. Contrast, for instance, Arendt's notion of "totalitarianism" with Goffman's sociological category of "total institutions."[14] Totalitarianism is a term—not a metaphor—that describes a type of regime that, no longer satisfied with the limited aims of classical despotisms and dictatorships, demands continual mobilization of its subjects and never allows the society to settle down into a durable, hierarchical order. In addition, totalitarian domination rules through total terror;[15] pursues, by means of the secret police, "objective enemies" or "enemies of the people" who are typically not subjective opponents of, or genuine threats to, the regime; offers an all-encompassing ideological framework that abridges the complexity of life in a single, axiomatic, reality-resistant postulate that allows no cognitive dissonance; and is predicated on an experience of mass superfluity attendant on the growing mobility, insecurity, and "worldlessness" of modern human beings (Arendt [1953b] 1973). Arendt considered totalitarianism to be modern, unique, and singular (contrast with Moore [1958] 1962 and Stanley [1987] 1994). It was not a phenomenon that had early modern roots; nor was it the logical outgrowth of a peculiar national tradition or culture, even German culture, or of the rise of secularism and godlessness.[16] Totalitarianism was the result of an avalanche of catastrophes —World War I, the implosion of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and a global capitalist economic crisis—that brought the victory of a movement and the consolidation of a regime that was structurally different from classical dictatorship or tyrannies.

Because Arendt's notion of totalitarianism referred to a unique, unparalleled, and radically evil phenomenon, it would never have occurred to her to extend the adjectival prefix "total" to conventional forms of society. But this is exactly what Goffman ([1957] 1961) attempted with the concept of "total institutions." The result was an analysis that treated the Nazi concentration camps on a par with institutions that were substantively unlike them;[17] in short, we have a clear example of the kind of "functionalist" shuffling of content and generalization that Arendt attacked. Goffman, we know, had priorities of his own: The notion of "total institution" was a rhetorical shock-tactic, an act of *iconoclastic normalization*, aimed at challenging complacency by making "respectable" institutions appear in a disturbing new light. Nonetheless, to designate "jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps," (Goffman [1957] 1961:5) under the same rubric, one must ignore salient facts about them that call into question their being classified together. P.O.W. camps are designated for people granted a legitimate status under the con-

[13] For an early formulation, see Arendt (1946b, image 29), where she remarks: "Concentration and extermination camps are unique in history in the following respects: As instruments of totalitarian rule; as forms of the most extreme deprivation of human rights; as societies of the 'living dead'; as field [sic] of psychological experiments which have revealed to us unexpected and unsuspected patterns of human behavior in persecutor and victim alike."

[14] Although Goffman's *Asylums* was first published in 1961, its lead paper "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions" (Goffman [1957] 1961:43–84) was a revision of an article that first appeared in 1957. As Lemert (1997:*xxiii–xxiv*) reminds us, Goffman's "intellectual formation took place in the 1940s and 1950s."

[15] Modern research on the Gestapo indicates that terror within German society itself was under-resourced, selective rather than "total," and that, to a large extent, the German people policed themselves. See Gellately (1996), and for a more measured, but no less devastating portrait, Johnson (2000:253–375).

[16] Collins (1999b) stressed the geopolitical conditions of Nazism and remarked that, until World War I, in comparison with the extent and the violence of anti-Semitism in tsarist Russia, Poland, and Hungary, German anti-Semitism "was derivative and secondary" (p. 174).

[17] That such camps are the ones organized by the Nazis becomes clear from Goffman's chief source on this institution: Kogon's ([1946/1950] 1980) *The Theory and Practice of Hell*, also one of Arendt's key sources under its original German title of *Der SS-Staat*, an insider's account of Buchenwald.

ventions of war; jail and penitentiaries are for those who break the positive laws of a society. Conversely, the Communists, Jews, *Bibelforscher* (Jehovah's Witnesses), Poles, and others in the Nazi camps had no legitimate status among their captors, and had broken no positive laws: Rather they had been put outside the law through a deliberate set of discriminatory policies and decrees. The location of prisoners in a modern nontotalitarian society is usually known by the prisoners' families. Their death is evidenced by a body and marked by a grave. By contrast, concentration camps sought to swallow people into "holes of oblivion" (Arendt [1951] 1973: 434) and eliminate all traces of their ever having existed. Prisons are typically places of confinement rather than of slave labor or extermination. Other differences are easily enumerated. To be sure, Goffman ([1957] 1961) was aware that the attempt "to extract a general profile" from his "list of establishments" opened him to the charge that "none of the elements I will describe seem peculiar to total institutions, and none seems to be shared by every one of them" (p. 5). But that caveat, once registered, has no demonstrable impact on the argument that follows. Instead, Goffman contents himself with a taxonomy that stresses "general characteristics" and family resemblances.[18] He concludes:

> Certainly the similarities obtrude so glaringly and persistently that we have a right to suspect that there are good functional reasons for these features being present and that it will be possible to fit these features together and grasp them by means of a functional explanation. When we have done this, I feel we will give less praise and blame to particular superintendents, commandants, wardens, and abbots, and tend more to understand the social problems and issues in total institutions by appealing to the underlying structural design common to them all. (Goffman [1957] 1961:124)

Arendt's own portrait of "totalitarian" domination is contentious, of course, and some of the most damaging criticisms against it came from sociologists of her generation. Aron ([1954] 1993) followed Brinton ([1952] 1966) in arguing that terror and ideology, ostensibly elemental to totalitarianism, are in fact an "amplification of revolutionary phenomena" (Aron [1954] 1993:374). On such an account, the Bolsheviks, for instance, were "Jacobins who succeeded" (p. 374). Riesman (1954:415–16), observing that "overinterpretation is the besetting sin of intellectuals," found untenable the idea that terror could be so "omnipotent" as "to destroy all bonds of organization among its victims," a remark echoed in Bell's ([1956] 1962:25–26) criticism of Arendt's concept of the "masses." Besides, Arendt and Goffman had more in common than my truncated comments might suggest. Both writers stressed the primacy of "appearance" and denied what Gouldner (1970:379) called the "metaphysics of hierarchy": the notion that underneath life's surface lies some generative causal structure that conjures it into existence. Both Arendt and Goffman took an intense interest in public performance, employing dramaturgical metaphors to depict it (Canovan [1985] 1994). But whereas Arendt concentrated on the public realm as a space in which political actors could express their authenticity, lending significance and meaning to an otherwise transient, private existence, Goffman envisaged the social realm as a series of ritualized face-saving encounters. His portrayal of social actors as impression managers would have confirmed Arendt's worst fears about the manipulative superficiality and conformity of modern "society" (Arendt 1958:22–73; Arendt [1959] 2000: 231–46).

THE IDEAL TYPE

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* ([1951] 1973), Arendt's relationship to sociological investigation is decidedly ambivalent. On

[18] Jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps—institutions "organized to protect the community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it" (Goffman [1947] 1961:4–5)—are themselves only *one* of five groupings that appear under the rubric of "total institutions." Goffman's analysis is supposed to apply to all five. He says that he is "using the method of ideal types, establishing common features with the hope of highlighting significant differences later" (p. 5). But these "differences" are clearly peripheral to the argument as a whole.

one hand, she draws appreciatively on Simmel's ([1908] 1950) analysis of secret societies to show their affinity with totalitarian movements.[19] On the other hand, Arendt is extremely critical of attempts to employ Weber's ideal types of charisma and bureaucracy to totalitarian rule. Relying on these methodological lodestars is a "serious error" ([1951] 1973:361–62, note 57), a failing she attributes less to the deficiencies of Weber's original concepts than to their bowdlerized adaptation in the hands of Alfred von Martin, Arnold Koettgen,[20] and especially Hans Gerth (1940) for whom Arendt shows a particular disdain (Arendt [1951] 1973:362; [1953e] 1994:378, 388, note 24). A totalitarian regime, Arendt declared, is the antithesis of a bureaucracy because it permits no room for positive law, stability, or predictability, but instead unleashes unceasing, turbulent movement. Equally anomalous is the tendency of commentators to exaggerate the charismatic "fascination" of leaders like Hitler and Stalin and to see that fascination as the key to their success over the movement as a whole. Against this, Arendt argued that the major contributions of Hitler's and Stalin's oratorical gifts were, first, to confuse the opposition, who misread such rhetoric as mere ranting demagogy, and second, to help integrate plausible, propagandistic fictions—the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the Trotskyite conspiracy—into an ideological "region" that allowed no inconsistency or test of experience. The "true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization" (Arendt [1951] 1973:361): organization in the sense of an ideology that, in the Nazis' case, creates the *Volksgemeinschaft* here and now; and in the sense of social organizations—front organizations, paramilitary formations, secret societies—which, in various ways, shield the movement from having to confront the plurality, diversity, and inconstancy of real experience. In *Mein Kampf* ([1925–1926] 2001), Hitler contrasted the "living organization" of the Nazi movement, with the "dead mechanism" of a typical, bureaucratized party. Nazi propaganda sought to make this living organization a reality—and it succeeded, in part due to Hitler's "brilliant gifts as a mass orator" (Arendt [1951] 1973:361–62).

Arendt's portrayal of the leadership of totalitarian movements is complex and, though I will not pursue the issue here, somewhat inconsistent, in good measure because of her attempt to paint Stalin and Hitler in broadly similar colors. But her chief argument in relation to Hitler is that his much-vaunted gift of fascination[21] was a "social phenomenon" that had to be "understood in terms of the particular company he kept."[22] Hitler understood that modern bourgeois "society" wanted nothing more than to be freed of the "chaos of opinions" that any "social gathering" generates; that, under conditions of social atomization and the fragmentation of judgment, his own rigorous, ruthless and apodictic adherence to one postulate,[23] and

[19] Arendt's philosophical mentor, Heidegger, also thought highly of Simmel (see Grossheim 1991; Levine 1997:184–85).

[20] A decade before *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Fraenkel (1941:206) cites the work of von Martin and Koettgen as confirmation of his view that Hitler's Reich integrates "rational and irrational activities." He quotes Koettgen as follows: "It is precisely the Leader-state which cannot dispense with charismatic forms of leadership, but at the same time the rulers of the modern state, in order to satisfy the diverse, numerous demands of the population, are inevitably forced to depend upon highly rationalized and bureaucratized forms of organization." In turn, this quote derives from Chapter 3, which is devoted to "The Sociology of the Dual State" (Fraenkel 1941:188–208).

[21] Arendt ([1951–1952] 1994) is alluding to Gerhard Ritter's introduction to *Hitler's Table Talk* (but see Abel [1938] 1986:182).

[22] A broadly similar position is enunciated in Voegelin ([1964] 1999:114–21). Voegelin concluded that only those who were already spiritually compromised, and who, because of that debility, were allowed into the Hitler circle, could be swept away by the Führer's "aura." Voegelin and Arendt's diagnosis of the vacuity of Hitler's "fascination" finds some posterior support in the farce of the forged "Hitler Diaries." As Harris (1986:138, 198, 207, 328, 342–43, 351) shows, the management of *Stern* magazine *wanted* to believe in the diaries' authenticity and was "fascinated" by them, notwithstanding the utter banality of their contents.

[23] Hitler's unapologetic emphases on "fanaticism," "intolerance," and lack of compromise, are a leitmotif of *Mein Kampf* (Hitler [1925–1926] 2001:306, 318, 323–25, 388, 412, 485).

his enormous self-confidence, were deeply attractive. Under such conditions, "extraordinary self-confidence and displays of self-confidence . . . inspire confidence in others; pretensions to genius waken the conviction in others that they are indeed dealing with a genius" (Arendt [1951–1952] 1994:291; [1951] 1973:305). Defeat in war, economic crisis, and social fragmentation had transformed large sections of the German *people* into what Arendt called *masses*, a human detritus that had lost a "worldly" place and with it lost a sense of security and reality. Bereft of a stable social structure and feeling keenly its own expendability, this stratum latched onto Hitler's uncompromising views with a fanaticism and somnambulism ideally suited to the self sacrifice demanded by the Nazi movement.

Further, the totalitarian leader does not command a hierarchy of which he is at the pinnacle. Rather he is the personification of the movement itself, a living vortex assuming the movement's characteristics of turbulence, amorphousness, and radicalism. Arendt ([1951] 1973) argues:

> In substance, the totalitarian leader is nothing more nor less than the functionary of the masses he leads; he is not a power-hungry individual imposing a tyrannical and arbitrary will upon his subjects. Being a mere functionary, he can be replaced at any time, and he depends just as much on the 'will' of the masses he embodies as the masses depend on him. (P. 325) [24]

If that quotation strains the reader's credulity, it has, nonetheless, some similarities with Stern's (1975:13) lapidary description of Hitler as "a center of Nothing"—the phrase is redolent of Conrad's portrait of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* as "hollow at the core," and Harris's (1986) assessment that "this inner emptiness helped enable Hitler to use himself as a tool, changing his personality with shocking abruptness to suit the task at hand" (pp. 19–20).

So according to Arendt, ideal types such as "charisma" and "bureaucracy," however serviceable in other contexts, banalized the singularity of National Socialism.[25] As with "functionalism," she considered the ideal-type approach tantamount to one more sociological device to normalize the phenomenon, to make of it an item or case of something *already* known.[26] To the objection that Weber's express purpose in commending the ideal type was to help the investigator understand the individuality of historical configurations, to map their territorial *irregularity* (Weber [1904] 1949:89–104, and [1909] 2002:262–65), Arendt was silent, but for an understandable reason. Her opposition was directed not simply to particular ideal types, but to the neo-Kantian epistemology that underpinned them (Canovan 2000:37). While from a Weberian standpoint, "totalitarianism" is a model—a research *instrument* or heuristic—that enables one to delineate a unique historical conjuncture against an artificially constructed prototype, for Arendt "totalitarianism" is a term that *essentially* abbreviates an historical conjuncture, an elemental combination of terror and ideology that constitutes the terrible uniqueness of the totalitarian experiment. This entailed no reification because "totalitarianism" was not something disembodied or ethereal but was

[24] Arendt ([1951] 1973:325, 387) equivocated on this point. Also see the shrewd observations in Stanley ([1987] 1994:13).

[25] Gerth (1982:34–35) eventually responded to Arendt's strictures in an interview with Mathias Greffrath in 1977. He restated his opinion that National Socialism's "split personality"—pervasively bureaucratic, yet also infused with charismatic energy "accelerating the journey towards death"—characterized Hitler and thousands of other little Führers. Far from capitulating to sociologically banal concepts, Gerth saw himself as daringly seeking to show that Nazism evinced a symbiosis of charisma and bureaucracy that, he claimed, "was prohibited in Weber's analysis." Neumann ([1942/1944] 1966: 81) specifically endorsed Gerth's formula and devoted an entire chapter of *Behemoth* to a discussion of "The Charismatic Leader in the Leadership State."

[26] That the ideal-type method was execrable in principle for both Arendt and her husband, Heinrich Blücher, is plain from their correspondence. So it is that Albert Salomon, a fellow exile teaching at the New School, is the occasion for some stinging dismissals from Blücher (with which Arendt expressly concurs) of "sociological typology-experiments" that are "more of a new ritual that failed priests are trying to introduce than an advancement of reason" (Blücher to Arendt, July 23, 1941, in Kohler 2000:61–62; also 64, 69, 71–73).

rather a series of structured activities; it was not a "conscious project," but instead "the set of grooves into which people are likely to find themselves sliding if they come to politics with certain sorts of aims [the quest for omnipotence; the hubristic belief in a world in which anything is possible], experiences [uprootedness and superfluousness], and deficiencies [the loss of a stable civilization and 'common sense']" (Canovan 2000:38).

How plausible was Arendt's claim that sociologists wedded to ideal types in general, and to Weber's ideal types in particular, misunderstood the Nazi movement? I now offer two examples that, in their different ways, lend some support to her allegation.

THEODORE ABEL'S AND TALCOTT PARSONS'S STUDIES OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

Undoubtedly the most remarkable empirical study of National Socialism produced by an American sociologist in the 1930s, and one with which Arendt was familiar, was Theodore Abel's ([1938] 1986]) *Why Hitler Came into Power*.[27] Abel (1896–1988) was a Pole who immigrated to the United States in 1923 and who taught first at Columbia University, then at Hunter College. Following a visit to Germany in the summer of 1933, Abel hit upon the ingenious idea of self-funding a contest with 400 marks in prizes to find the "Best Personal Life History of an Adherent of the Nazi Movement."[28] The contest was launched a year later, and its 683 manuscript submissions remain to this day among the most important autobiographical sources available for documenting the makeup and motivations of prewar Nazi militants. It is true, both at the time and subsequently, that Abel's methodological protocols and techniques, or lack of them, drew pointed criticism, largely for their statistical or inferential limitations (e.g., see Kirkpatrick 1939; Lasswell 1939; Merkl 1975). But the fact remains that a great deal of later research on Nazi Germany confirmed Abel's chief finding: namely, that National Socialism was a highly diverse and differentiated social movement by no means overwhelmingly lower middle-class in composition (e.g., Childers 1983; Hamilton 1982; Kater 1983; Merkl 1975). By providing the reader of *Why Hitler Came into Power* with a selection of first-person life histories, or "biograms" (Abel 1947:114), that allowed his respondents to speak for themselves, Abel drove home the point of Nazism's social heterogeneity.

Moreover, after the war, Abel (1951b:150–55) turned briefly to a study of concentration camps that was bold and original, arriving spontaneously at many of the same conclusions that Arendt did in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Neither the camps, nor the policy that motivated them, could be attributed to some mainspring of German culture or, as he put it, "national character or specific historical conditions affecting Germany *only*" (Abel 1951b:152). In addition, there was no evidence whatsoever, Abel contended, that the SS perpetrators were generally psychopaths, or that their Jewish, Polish, and other victims were chosen principally because of "their *individual* anti-social activity" (p. 151). On the contrary, such people were targeted because they belonged to a "social category" (p. 151). Again like Arendt, Abel detected the distinguishing mark of the Nazi camp system not simply in "its systematic execution, the cold-bloodedness and rational organization of the procedure and the fact that several millions of people were involved in it" (p. 150) but also in the policy that animated it. Similarly, he insisted that what was characteristic of the Nazi camps was "not slave labor, detention, privation, extermination (all those things have been done many times before in history) but the systematic effort to reduce human beings . . . to bundles of reflexes, to debase and degrade them absolutely" (Abel 12:138, October 19, 1952). And he also warned ominously that the Nazi camp system was not a freak incident but "a pattern

[27] In this section I draw on Abel's *Journal of Thoughts and Events* (1930–1984) which is located in the Rare Book and Manuscript division of Butler Library, Columbia University. Part of this 23-volume, typewritten journal has been edited by Hałas (2001a). Wherever possible, I quote directly from this version. Where I cite entries that are not included in Hałas, these appear as "Abel" followed by the volume number and page number (e.g., Abel 11:142).

[28] He was unable to procure funds from Columbia!

of social behavior that is apt to emerge under certain conditions, the recurrence of which can be envisioned" (cf. Arendt [1963a] 1965:273–74).[29]

In other ways, Abel went even further than Arendt by coining new terms that he believed would do justice to Nazi barbarism (that word itself is, of course, antiquated). These included "social obliteration," a notion redolent of Patterson's (1982) analysis of "social death," and "democide," a label since augmented by Rummel (1992, 1994a, 1994b) and which Abel took to mean the destruction of a people as a social category:

> I propose to call this special feature of concentration camps *Democide*, of which genocide is a sub-form pertaining specifically to the extermination of ethnic or racial groups. The broader term democide pertains to extermination procedures against a population selected on the basis of *any* kind of social attribute, racial, religious, educational, political, cultural, and so forth, including even distinctions on the basis of age. (Abel 1951b: 151; on democide in a nuclear age, see Abel 16:7–10, August 3, 1960; cf. Schell 2000:51)

The specific "motivation" for Nazi democide within the camps "arose from the combination of negative eugenics with power politics" (1951b:151) and such a policy, far from being incomprehensible, was fully explicable in sociological terms. One hypothesis suggested by the "basic findings of sociology" was that "the more narrowly the membership of the in-group is defined, the greater is the range of permissible licence of behaviour towards those who are excluded from it" (1951b:152). Taken to an extreme, insiders are apt to view members of the outgroup as forming a different human species altogether, who can be treated with impunity and for whom conventional norms of restraint no longer apply. But how was one to depict, in a sufficiently realistic manner, the agents and the system of terror? What new terms would be suitable?[30] Abel's favored option regarding the agents of extermination—the SS, S.D., and the Gestapo—was "Myrmidons," the ferocious Phthian warriors of Greek mythology who, in the Trojan War, were led by Achilles. They are likened in the *Iliad* (XVI:187–93) to famished wolves "that rend and bolt raw flesh, hearts filled with battle frenzy that never dies . . . belching bloody meat." As for the *system* of brutality, extermination, deportation, and enslavement as a whole, terms ending in "-cracy" were inadequate, Abel contended, because "the issue is not the number and kind of people who ruled but the way in which they ruled." That being so, Abel chose the word "*raptorial*, meaning preying upon others, robbing them of their life, property, freedom, using deprivation of values as a method of conduct . . ." (Abel as quoted in Hałas 2001a:319, February 17, 1950).

This summary is enough to show that, far from being a sociological simpleton, Abel was an astute and audacious student of Nazism, notwithstanding a problem that I now, in the spirit of Arendt, seek to highlight. To grasp this problem, we must return to *Why Hitler Came into Power.*

When Abel turned from his documentary material to the task of making sense of it, he attributed the rise of the "Hitler movement" to four mutually reinforcing "general factors" or "causes":[31] (1) discontent within

[29] The only criticism of Arendt by Abel that I have been able to find occurs in Abel (12:138, October 18, 1952) where he accuses her of "the fallacy of assuming a sinister, masterful, infallible, and absolutely consistent scheme in the Nazi party. As a counterpart, I read Goebbels' diaries which clearly show the absence of consistency, the fallible human element, the contradictions and inadequacies of the usurpers. Hannah deals with an ideal type [!] to which Himmler aspired, but she assumes that it was actually being realized." A similar criticism of Arendt was advanced by Riesman (1951). Also see Riesman's enclosure in the Arendt-Riesman correspondence (Arendt 1938–1976, Riesman, David images 51–63, at 61; Young-Bruehl 1982:252–53).

[30] "What I need is to find a new name for the total enterprises of which the Concentration Camps is only the most tangible manifestation. Also find a name for the group combining S.S., S.D., and Gestapo, the 'henchmen of the regime,' the 'janissaries,' the 'executioners'" (Abel as quoted in Hałas 2001a, February 17, 1950).

[31] To avoid the charge of reification, Abel ([1938] 1986) was careful to say that the causes invoked "are not in themselves agents, but are general terms which give us the clues to the forces that made and sustained the movement. These forces are the specific motives, the con-

German society on account of crises within the social order, (2) the special appeal of Nazi ideology and its program for social transformation, (3) the distinctive organizational techniques used by the Nazi Party, and (4) the presence of charismatic leadership.[32] For our purposes, the fourth factor is the most relevant and Abel offered a number of perspectives on it. Drawing on his subjects' accounts, Abel ([1938] 1986:80–81) discerned a twofold "function of charismatic leadership." On one hand, Hitler "was the chief executive, the planner and organizer. On the other hand, he played the role of the prophet of the movement." Hitler's role as chief executive was conjoined to "an indomitable will" and unshakable self-confidence, similar to that of religious founders or imperial pioneers such as De Lesseps. "Like other leaders of the masses," Hitler combined authority over his colleagues with a sense of realism, qualities that amply equipped him to assume the role of the "driving power" and "directing genius" of the movement.

The "second function" that "Hitler fulfilled" is evident in the attitude of his followers towards him. To his supporters, Hitler was someone who possessed "superhuman power" and to whom the proper disposition was one of unquestioning obedience and submission. "To them he was a prophet whose pronouncements were taken as oracles." Abel quotes several reports among his respondents testifying to Hitler's "magnetic power" and "ability to cast a spell" (Abel [1938] 1986: 153–54), and he infers from these reports that we are dealing with "what Max Weber has called charismatic leadership" (Abel [1938] 1986:181). We should recall that Abel was one of the pioneers in bringing Weber to the attention of an American audience and that it was he, more than anyone, who was responsible for introducing the German term *Verstehen* into an Anglophone lexicon (Abel 1929:116–56, 1948, 1975).

This view of Hitler's charisma, with its reference to previous examples of the phenomenon, may have prepared the reader for a notable feature of Abel's account: his conviction that "the forces that brought about" the Führer's social recognition are "the very ones operative throughout history in creating charismatic leaders" (Abel [1938] 1986: 154). The result is that both the Nazi movement, and Hitler in particular, are historically normalized as yet another case, perhaps somewhat extreme but no different in essentials, from a well established lineage. More than that, we are encouraged subtly to expect a predictable charismatic trajectory. This is not because Abel specifically draws that conclusion but because he does not confront it. Hence, in the absence of a discussion of Hitler's peculiarities, or of properties of the Nazi movement that would make it different from previous movements, the clear implication is that Nazism is on the path to stabilization and routinization (Abel [1938] 1986:183).

That Abel did in fact entertain such a view is evident from an entry in his journal. On a visit to Berlin in June 1934, Abel was struck by the growing discrepancy between the zealotry of the National Socialist movement and the emphasis on mundane concerns that characterized the mass of "average" Germans, who were now convinced that the main crises (economic, social, and political) were over. Abel writes:

> We find in Germany today that activities common to the normal life of collectivities assert themselves. The individual is after his best interest: security and a rise of his standard of living. . . . The unity achieved in the hour of great emotional upheaval breaks up under the pursuit of individual tendencies and the sobering effect of realities. The problems of the revolutionaries become ordinary problems of management and life with all its complexities, contradictions, etc. reigns again. The holiday is over. Concrete deeds—promoting individual interests, become then, the issue, and not ideas and feelings. . . . The N.S. [sic] is fighting against the inevitable phenomena of ordinary life—impossibility of perpetual enthusiasm, selfishness, interest in the amenities of life which have no idealistic significance, domination by the circle of personal problems, neglect of community problems. The victory of every-day life is inevitable. . . . (Abel as quoted in Hałas 2001a:181–82, June 26, 1934)

crete actions, and the personal experiences and decisions of individuals" (pp. 184–85).

[32] An earlier account of the relationship between ideology and charismatic leadership under National Socialism appears in Abel (1937:350, 352).

Although aspects of this picture of quotidian existence in Germany during the 1930s ring true and are supported by the testimony of witnesses, such as Klemperer ([1995] 1999), Abel's mistake was to assume, with Weber's ideal type of charisma in mind, that the reemergence of profane concerns was symptomatic of the movement's enervation.[33] On the contrary, the Nazi movement, and the regime itself, remained highly radical and "idealistic" to the end, attributes that were unsparingly compatible with the cynical attempt of its members to profit financially from colonization, expropriation, and genocide. Modern historians of the Nazi "dictatorship" are in broad agreement that its signature characteristics were "continuous revolution" (Mann 1997), "cumulative radicalization" (Mommsen 1997), and systemic "governmental disorder" (Kershaw 1997), notions that endorse Arendt's argument about the primacy of motion, the chaotic nature of governance, and the absence of routinization.[34] As we know, Arendt also believed that such characteristics revealed a regime type sui generis. In contrast, as late as 1945, Abel continued to portray the situation in Germany as essentially a repetition of causes and processes that were already well documented. In an article entitled "Is a Psychiatric Interpretation of the German Enigma Necessary?," Abel (1945) answered his question in the negative by invoking Durkheim's injunction to explain social facts in terms of other social facts.[35] Nothing about recent events in modern Germany, Abel remarked, indicated a specifically German phenomenon. Jewish persecution, for instance, in thirteenth-century England, fifteenth-century Spain, and nineteenth-century Russia reminds us of deeds "as black as the German record of the twentieth" (Abel 1945:460) Equally, "the sadism of the concentration camps" finds its counterpart in many other acts of sadism and torture throughout the ages, the Spanish Inquisition being only the best known.[36] Anyone even vaguely acquainted with history will surely not be surprised by recent German conduct, because behavior like it has been "repeated innumerable times." So why, even so, do we remain puzzled by German conduct? The reason lies not in its existence "but because it exists in the XXth century and is practiced by a nation which ranks exceedingly high in intellectual and cultural achievements. It is the anachronism that disturbs us," not the novelty (p. 460). To account for that anachronism, Abel offered a version of the German *Sonderweg*, claiming that it was Germany's backwardness that explained its current plight.[37] In Germany, unlike other Western nations, feudalism was never completely eradicated, the bourgeoisie failed to become the ruling class, representative government remained stymied by Junker domination, and the economic doctrine of the

[33] He later saw his mistake: "I realize the importance of the original study I made. It was a contribution to the understanding of social movements. What happens since 1933 is that . . . [c]ompromise, balance of power, justice, tact, perspicacity, moral standards were brushed aside and resulted in radicalization of every aspect of social life" (Abel as quoted in Hałas 2001a:318, February 17, 1950; also see Hałas 2001b: 12–13).

[34] Though note that Kershaw himself (1997: 98–106; 1998:*xix–xxx*) extensively employs the concept of charisma, while modifying it in a way that is quite different from Abel's usage.

[35] Abel's article reprised and augmented an earlier critique of psychological and psychoanalytical explanations of National Socialism ("reasoning by analogy") in Abel ([1938] 1986; cf. Abel 1951a).

[36] Arendt believed that "sadism" was a simplistic description of typical SS behavior because the SS were recruited precisely to be unfeeling, calculating and "dutiful." Their institutionalized, methodical and experimental cruelty was "absolutely cold" and systematic, "calculated to destroy human dignity" (Arendt [1951] 1973: 454). In agreement are Bettelheim ([1960] 1971:108, 110, 119–20, 124–27) and Todorov ([1991] 1996:122). On sadism within Buchenwald—the testimonies of prisoners provide ample descriptions of it—see the accounts collected in Hackett (1995:35–36, 152, 154–55, and passim).

[37] For a concise but effective critique of the notion of German backwardness, see Collins (1999b). Eley ([1980] 1984) makes the point that the typical sociological interpretation of Germany, after the war and up to the mid-60s, proceeded on the confident assumption of the "solidity and permanence" of scientific generalization. "There was little sense of the continuously regenerative potential of historical research—that it might subvert as well as confirm existing theoretical wisdom" (pp. 65–66).

state was protectionist rather than laissez-faire. All these factors, combined with accustomed "allegiance to a dynasty or 'Fuehrer'" and a virulent form of ethnocentrism, portended "a return to the primitive forms of tribalism," though Abel hastened to add that it is "feudalism" and "patrimonialism" that best characterize the German state. The rise of National Socialism is then simply a parasitic growth subsisting on something more ancient. Hitler succeeded in winning the admiration and plaudits of millions of Germans because "he appealed to deeply rooted sentiments and traditions." Similarly, the "old order—hierarchical, authoritarian, patrimonial—was re-established in full force" (Abel 1945:461–63).

That interpretation of German history and Nazism brings us back with a vengeance to Arendt's discomfiture with a sociology inured to looking backward, unable (Turner 1992:10–12) or unwilling (Bannister 1992) to recognize the new, although we should note that historical misidentification was widespread across all disciplines and political sympathies during the 1930s and 1940s. Consider only the left. While Russian, Italian, and German Marxists of the stature of Trotsky, Gramsci, and Thalheimer frequently identified fascism or National Socialism with some modality of Caesarism or Bonapartism, the majority of their sympathizers in France, invoking the great parallel with the French Revolution, were inclined to construe Bolshevism as analogous to the Jacobin republic devoid of the Thermidorean "reaction" (Baehr 1998:255–86; Furet [1995] 1999:89–90, 267–68, 419–20). Granted, Abel's analysis of the German "enigma" was composed before his concentration camp investigation sensitized him to novel features of Nazi rule, although even there it is significant that he chose to invoke concepts—Myrmidons,[38] raptorial—that resurrected ancient and prehistorical periods of earthly existence respectively. Abel claimed to be looking for "new insights, new approaches." But as he put it, when pondering in June 1964 whether he should resume his investigations into National Socialism, "a study of Nazism might illuminate a singular historical process, but I fail to see what can be derived from it of general import that has not been already discussed" (Abel 16:51, June 22, 1964).[39]

I have chosen to focus on the work of Theodore Abel to show that normalization of a new phenomenon—the tendency to fall back on dubious historical and conceptual pedigrees—was the default position of a sophisticated sociological mind. Talcott Parsons, a principled and indefatigable opponent of American isolationism, was another of sociology's great figures who had a penchant for comparing Nazi Germany with previous epochs and for invoking Weberian ideal types. In addition, Parsons ([1940] 1993:153, 156; [1942c] 1993:219) oscillated between warning of the new and terrible menace posed by National Socialism to liberal-humanist civilization and an analysis that emphasized the sclerotic, "traditional," and quasi-feudal qualities of the National Socialist movement. Even more than Abel, Parsons employed Weber's *Herrschaftssoziologie* to depict Hitler as a classic example of the charismatic leader who imperiously demands of his followers that they recognize his destiny, legitimates decisions by plebiscite, and discards all rational-legal restrictions to the *Führer*'s rule. Hitler's demagogic success owed itself to the exploitation of a deep and "unresolved tension" in German society (Parsons [1942b] 1993:174–75; cf. Parsons [1942a] 1993:237, [1942c] 1993:211–15). Although the development of rational legal authority in the West had eroded many conventional loyalties based on religion, kin, locality, and social class, it had not entirely destroyed these ties and sentiments. Nor had rational-legal authority effectively replaced them with substitutes that could secure the emotional loyalty of many sectors of the

[38] The term is resurrected ("Myrmidons' Strife") by Stern (1975:154–66) to describe the so-called Röhm purge: the massacre of Nazi storm trooper (*Sturmabteilung*) leaders and others by the SS between June 30 and July 2, 1934.

[39] Abel added: "When I wrote 'Why Hitler Came into Power' I had two motives: to understand what happened from the point of view of the participants, and secondly, to generalize from the case to the basic conditions for a successful movement" (Abel 16:51, June 22, 1964). The latter "motive" implies that all movements are essentially the same.

populace. The result was a conflict, born of widespread insecurity on all sides, between those who fancied themselves "emancipated" and for whom "debunking" tradition was tantamount to a professional sport, and others for whom such a stance was deeply insulting to, and threatening of, entrenched cherished sentiments and commitments. This second group was particularly vulnerable to demagogic appeals of the kind ventilated by National Socialism, a movement adept at mobilizing "fundamentalist" feelings. Capitalists, internationalists, emancipated Jews, political radicals—the groups National Socialism ritualistically demonized—become useful symbols of all that was wrong about the modern world, condensing a potent brew of subversion, atheism, immorality, deracination, and corruption.

Even so, Parsons did not believe that a revolutionary movement could become a status quo. Weberian categories rendered such a prospect impossible. Given Nazism's hostility to the rule of law, "there is a strong presumption that long-term predominance of National Socialism would strongly favor a traditionalistic rather than a rational-legal outcome of the process of routinization" (Parsons [1942b] 1993:176). That of course presupposed the likelihood of what Weber had described as "routinization of the movement," a developmental process that Parsons believed bound to occur, in some form, if Nazism survived. But in what form? Currently, the party organization resembled a mixture of charismatic and bureaucratic modes, just as Gerth had argued (Parsons [1942b] 1993:186, note 23), with the "charismatic absolutism of the dictator" (Parsons [1942b] 1993:177) most prominently on display. Loyalty rather than law was the key principle of solidarity, and that principle was likely to continue. Yet, once Hitler died and the movement's basic dependence on him evaporated, a rather different configuration of forces was conceivable. Already there was evidence of organizational factionalism within the regime, accentuated by the success of the Nazi Party's security apparatus—notably the Gestapo and the SS—in appropriating state powers. Hence "in the longer run the break-up of the hierarchy into a variety of different elements which jealously guard their own rights, territorially or functionally segregated from the whole, is probable. This might well lead to a situation akin to feudalism except that the relation to land would presumably be different" (Parsons [1942b] 1993:178–79). In the longer term, the pattern of charismatic provision (gifts and booty) that characterized the revolutionary movement (e.g., "Aryanization" of Jewish business) would need to be put on a more stable basis, probably by a quasi-feudal arrangement of "benefices" owned by party functionaries. More generally, a metamorphosis toward feudalism would affect everything liberal-humanists hold dear. "That the most distinctive cultural features of our civilization could not long survive such a change, would scarcely seem to need to be pointed out" (Parsons [1942b] 1993:179).[40]

DISCUSSION: IDENTIFYING THE UNPRECEDENTED

Arendt's grasp of sociology was sparse, idiosyncratic, and prone to caricature. Although a friend and correspondent of Raymond Aron, Daniel Bell, and David Riesman, Arendt had little direct experience of sociology beyond the debates in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s over the sociology of knowledge. Onto those early impressions she grafted her later literary encounters with Hans Gerth, Albert Salomon, Franz Neumann, and other émigrés, but there was little significant intellectual interchange between Arendt and the American sociological mainstream. It is true that articles by Arendt (1942) and Parsons ([1942b] 1993) appeared together in the April 1942 issue of *Review of Politics*, and that both authors had common interlocutors in Eric Voegelin and Waldemar Gurian. It is also true that Arendt visited Harvard a number of times during Parsons's tenure there, and, in the fall of 1953 delivered a univer-

[40] In *The Social System*, Parsons (1951:520–35) broadened his analysis to encompass the "charismatic revolutionary movements" of both National Socialism and Bolshevism. Acknowledging that his theory of routinization had no time to work itself out in Germany, he turned to the Soviet Union as the paradigmatic case of what he now called "adaptive transformation." The analysis is in many respects acute and prescient.

sity lecture that she later mocked as a "real disaster. The sociologists, whom I've been irritating for years, finally went into a rage and let me have it. It was a lot of fun. I take pleasure in a good fight" (Arendt to Jaspers, December 21, 1953, in Kohler and Saner [1985] 1992: 235). Pleasurable or not, Arendt failed to see the more *general* "functionalist" logic of some of her own arguments (e.g., the pivotal role of concentration camps in maintaining the regime), while her appraisal of ideal types degenerates into parody when she fails to distinguish between a key logical purpose of such instruments (to establish historical uniqueness) and the empirically dubious or hackneyed use of them by the epigones. Moreover, the relationship between the employment of ideal types and clinical moral withdrawal is contingent but not necessary, a matter that Arendt fails to clarify. Who would maintain that there was anything ethically anemic about Weber's ideal type of the Puritan ethic or H.G. Adler's ideal type of Nazi "administration"? Guided by a map whose configuration blurred or omitted great swaths of sociological territory, Arendt failed to see the extent to which sociology's practitioners have, from the beginning, labored to differentiate radically new terrain from conventional and orthodox landmarks. Obvious examples include Comte's theory of the emergence of the positive sciences, Weber's insistence on the specificity of modern rational bourgeois capitalism, and Durkheim's examination of the consequences of the cult of the individual. "Contract," "secular," "utility," "disenchantment" are all terms that the classical sociologists adapted to denote a new social order. Today, their legacy is flourishing in sociological discussions of "post-industrial society," "computerized society," "risk society," "late modernity," "postmodernity," "information age," and "globality," to name only the most obvious of contemporary neologisms. Whatever one thinks about the adequacy of these concepts, it is impossible to deny that they denote an acute awareness that modern society is perpetually in a state of redefinition.

Arguably, however, such a response misses the point Arendt wished to impress on her readers. She was concerned with regime types rather than with societies, considered that it was far more difficult to recognize new political (or anti-political) formations than social ones, and believed that sociology's grasp of political realities was tenuous at best. Besides, it is one thing for sociologists to vouchsafe a general concern with the new, quite another to redeem that concern during any particular conjuncture, especially if there are *other* disciplinary proclivities that work to obscure the times we live in or the practices we encounter. Here we might summon Merton's ([1949] 1968: 21–25) celebrated analysis of the inclination among historians of sociology to discount or minimize scientific discoveries by claiming them to be little more than fraudulent "adumbrations" of a more "congenial ancestor." Summarizing that predilection, Merton described the adumbrationist's credo in the following way: "The discovery is not true; If true, it is not new; If both true and new, it is not significant" (p. 22). Yet, ironically, the opposite danger—exaggerating the plenitude of novel ideas, events, breaks, and ruptures—can be just as sociologically distorting. For to the degree that everything is vaunted as epochal, sociology loses its prudential capacity to discriminate between sensational claims and empirically serious ones. I hope to have shown that *despite* Arendt's limited familiarity with sociology, she did raise some acute objections to aspects of its practice in dealing with National Socialism. The conclusion that her own time had witnessed an unparalleled regime type was, Arendt observed, "extremely daring. For throughout our history there have been few forms of government, all of them already known to and described by the ancients. It seems so unlikely that we of all people should be confronted with a novel form of government" (Arendt in Friedrich [1954] 1964:76).

Arendt's concern about the singular character of totalitarianism raises two urgent questions for contemporary sociologists to consider: (1) Are there such things as unprecedented events/institutions (e.g., the Nazi concentration camps) or regimes (the Third Reich) at all, and if there are, (2) how are we able to identify them? Let me sketch one possible response to these questions that goes beyond, while building on, Arendt's own intuitions. I respond here in the spirit

of inquiry and will rehearse some possible objections to the argument.

If we translate Arendt's own philosophical formulations into a more analytical idiom, we might say that an event has a precedent if it is possible to identify another event that has taken place at an earlier time that is *sufficiently* similar to the later event in *relevant* respects. The point about invoking a preceding event is that it is better understood than the more recent event that has attracted our attention. An event is "unprecedented" if it is impossible to identify an earlier event that is *sufficiently* comparable to the more recent event in *relevant* respects. Highlighting the term "sufficiently" indicates that there will always be a judgment involved; highlighting the term "relevant" indicates that that judgment itself is inevitably affected by our theoretical purpose. For all their cogency, Arendt's arguments against "functionalism" and sociological analogies come perilously close to the dogma that there is only one correct judgment and one credible theoretical purpose: her own.

But the necessity for judgment and theoretical orientation is not a mandate for the kind of interpretive nihilism that asserts that anything at all (the Nazi camps or September 11) can be seen as "new" or "old" depending on one's vantage point. Although that broad assertion cannot be, in principle, flatly gainsaid, it is sociologically unenlightening because it appears to deny a fundamental condition of any argument: The presupposition that some interpretations are *more* plausible, illuminating, and precise than others. That presupposition applies to all sociological research that advances an argument; hence, also to that species of sociological research that advances an argument about novelty—which is where we began. To insist otherwise is obviously self-defeating because the person articulating the contrary position must assume what he or she claims to refute—a view that is more credible than the alternative. Besides, once we descend from the stratosphere of general theorizing and return to historical instances and sociological cases, it takes no great perspicacity to identify, nonarbitrarily, some things that are demonstrably and importantly new and others that are already well established. To say that there is nothing "new" in a terrorist attack, even the attack on the World Trade Center, is obviously correct. But to declare that September 11 was "like Pearl Harbor," a Pacific military base, thousands of kilometers from the mainland, whose destruction led to the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans, is not simply a viewpoint as valid as any other. On the contrary, the analogy is a clear obfuscation because: (1) Unlike Japan, al-Qaeda is not a nation state. (2) The organization denied responsibility for its action. (3) The purpose of the attack was and remains unclear—the destruction of the United States? Christianity? The West? Capitalism? (Kermani 2002:14). (4) U.S. retaliation required the destruction of a government in Afghanistan that harbored the organization but which had not directly perpetrated the outrage. (5) The U.S. authorities made great efforts to avoid discriminatory actions that would inflame popular prejudice against Muslim residents and citizens.[41] In short, and as unpalatable as this is for a certain kind of postmodernist sensibility, some interpretations are simply better—more complete, more revealing—than others. To demonstrate that fact requires no mysterious gift of insight; it entails, among other things, the prosaic, but effective, art of the comparative method for which ideal types, *pace* Arendt, are indispensable tools.

The key difficulty in suggesting that an action, event, or institution is unprecedented—in juridical terms, that there is no previous instance of it—is the requirement to show its utter dissimilarity with anything that has come before. Presumably, we would need to start by distinguishing an unprecedented event from one that is "merely" new or unique. Strictly speaking, all actions and events are new because nothing can be a perfect repetition or recapitulation of something else. Nevertheless, the majority of actions and events in the world are simultaneously new *and* habitual (breakfast each morning),

[41] For disparate arguments that stress the "unprecedented," yet syncretic and hybrid, character of al-Qaeda, see Bergen (2002:41), Kermani (2002:15), Luttwak (2002:13), Rumsfeld (2002), and Young-Bruehl (2002:573). On the novelty of the George W. Bush administration's doctrine of "preemptive self-defense," see Koh (2002:15).

new *and* institutionalized (periodic general elections), new *and* expected (frost in winter), affording the durability and calculability without which human lives would be chaotic (Weber [1906] 1975:125). Similarly, every child is unique, but children themselves are not unprecedented. If the term "unprecedented" is to have any purchase at all, then, it must refer to something sharply unlike anything previously new and previously known, devoid of an institutional series or lineage, and governed by no previous convention or custom. Minimally, this means that unprecedented events are different from those phenomena with which we are already familiar and which have become, manifestly or latently, parts of the social and political order. These events and tendencies help shape their unprecedented counterparts; the latter, like everything else that is social or political, are historically conditioned. But unprecedented events or episodes, let us say, instantiate a caesura that not simply recombines but, more important, *metamorphoses* or transmogrifies previous modes of organization in unexpected and unanticipated ways. The outcome is something not simply new but sui generis and *original.*

Now to the degree that something is original, it could not have been predicted, although this does not mean that everything that is unpredictable is original. The result of a football match between two equally talented teams may be unpredictable, but the victory of a football team is not an original phenomenon. Still, sociological predict*ors* (e.g., relationships among family origins, educational attainments, and labor market outcomes) and historical-sociological predict*ions* depend on the identification of tendencies that are themselves well established. An example will help here.

In 1980, Collins offered a geopolitical theory that predicted the demise and break up of the Soviet Union within 30 to 50 years. (This theory was incorporated into Collins [1986].) A valid prediction, he noted, requires both a theory and empirical information; lacking a theory, a prediction is no more than an empirical generalization. A predictive theory offers more than extrapolation. Conjoined with empirical data, it sets out principles that are inferential in character, specifying a chain of events on an "if-then" basis (Collins 1999a: 56–69).[42] I will not enter here the debate about whether prediction is a proper object of sociological inquiry (Flyvbjerg 2001:25–37; MacIntyre [1981] 1987:89–108;), an issue that is contentious even among naturalistic philosophers of the social sciences. We know that there can be nonpredictive explanations, nonexplanatory predictions, and that the presence of "open systems" poses special difficulties for social sciences that are lacking in physics and astronomy (Bhaskar [1979] 1989; Sayer 1984). Be that as it may, the validation of Collins's geopolitical prediction of the collapse of the "Russian Empire" presupposed the identification of tendencies—size and resource advantage, geopositional (i.e., "marchland") capacity, fragmentation of interior states, periodic long-term simplification of states, overextension—that, in various combinations, provided the mechanisms for state breakdown. This in turn presupposed unstable stability: State changes that were nonetheless circumscribed and directed by the processual mechanisms that Collins adumbrated. Significantly, too, his theory predicted an ending, not a beginning in the sense of an order that was fundamentally different from anything previously recorded.[43]

My point is that there were no comparable tendencies that could have led one to predict the emergence and character of the Nazi state, a fact that I take to be negative evidence of its originality. Nor was there empirical information. Suppose someone says

[42] A predictive theory may, alternatively, be formulated as moves in a game played by various "stakeholders." See Mesquita, Newman, and Rabushka's (1996:165–86) application of the expected utility model to post-1997 Hong Kong. The model presumes rational action and the possibility of estimating the relationships among preferred outcomes, capabilities, and "salience."

[43] Popper (1963:117) once distinguished between two kinds of scientific prediction: the prediction of "*events of a kind which is known*, such as eclipses or thunderstorms" and the prediction of "*new kinds of events* (which the physicist calls 'new effects')." In sociology, we can predict only what we already, in some sense, know: an ontic series, a preestablished series of mechanisms. Totalitarianism, Arendt suggested, was outside the range of our previous experience, norms, judgments—and science.

that tendencies—bureaucracy, technology, racism—could in fact have been identified by an observer in 1914. That assertion is necessarily compromised by the fact that one now knows of the existence of Nazism. It is counterfactual history posing as a counterfactual sociological prediction. Suppose, further, our imaginary interlocutor says that Nazism was not unprecedented and is able empirically to substantiate that assertion. The demolition of Nazism's status as an unprecedented event would still leave other putative examples intact (the Reformation, the American Revolution), unless one was able to show that the very *idea* of something's being unprecedented was incoherent, a logical problem rather than an empirical one. That might be attempted by arguing that what are called unprecedented phenomena are really transformations of extant ones. Thus, nothing is really unprecedented. But that is trivially true in so far as nothing exists de novo. An event's originality derives, one might reply, not from the particular materials of which it is formed but from the irregular realization of those materials into the event itself.[44] We are left with the prima facie consideration that there appear to be phenomena that are utterly strange and have no evident affinity with things previously known and established.

An unprecedented event, then, would appear to be a configuration that confounds all expectations based on familiar practices. Once established, it becomes ontic—absorbed into the world—and repercussive. Unprecedented events, like all others, can be local and containable, or they can be epochal and osmotic, continuing to reverberate throughout the social universe long after the occasions that produced them have passed. Traces of Nazism persist today, not merely among fringe groups in Germany, who nostalgically crave its resurrection, but in the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis: For without the Shoah, the Balfour Declaration notwithstanding, there would be no Israeli state. Unhinged from its own social structures and shattered by military defeat, Nazism has endured to become the debris, irritant, and occasion for a thousand actions that we can see, and thousands more that we cannot.

Unprecedented events, if there are such things, clearly pose major obstacles to the faculty of understanding. This is not simply because their identification supposes extensive historical knowledge. For instance, the last decade, and particularly the war in Kosovo, has seen a dramatic erosion of a fundamental ground rule of the international system that sharply distinguished between "internal" and "international" conflicts and, in so doing, made an equally sharp distinction between a condition of war (officially declared) and of peace. Hobsbawm (2000:9–10, 45) called the destruction of that "golden rule . . . a completely new phenomenon" (p. 10) but what he meant is that it is a throwback to the time before the Westphalian system was established in 1648 following the Thirty Years' War. Another difficulty is that what we call unprecedented is often a process with no clear time limits, rather than an act or an episode. Accordingly, it is difficult to recognize where it begins and where it ends. A good example is the long-range processes that we describe as technological or scientific "revolutions."

Moreover, as Marx declared in the opening paragraphs of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the originality of events is generally obscured by the tendency of actors and interpreters to appeal to previous historical models, to envisage them as repetitions from, or adaptations of, the past. And indeed, once they happen, unprecedented events gradually become part of the ontic world, their tendencies and elements now available as topics of knowledge and as resources for emulation.

How do we know that we have confronted an unprecedented event? We are most un-

[44] As Arendt wrote:

> The elements of totalitarianism comprise its origins, if by origins we do not understand "causes." Elements by themselves never cause anything. They become origins of events if and when they suddenly crystallize into fixed and definite forms. It is the light of the event itself which permits us to distinguish its own concrete elements from an infinite number of abstract possibilities, and it is still this same light that must guide us backward into the always dim and equivocal past of these elements themselves. In this sense, it is legitimate to talk of the origins of totalitarianism, or of any other event in history. (Arendt [1954] 1994:325, note 12)

likely to know until we are well into it because, by definition, originality means that we are on terra incognita. Still, one possible index of our being in the presence of the unprecedented is that extrapolations, predictions, and analogies all break down. Neologisms proliferate. As in Kuhn's ([1962] 1970:111–35) description of a scientific revolution, the event taxes our categories to the maximum, creates distortions in our language, and leaves us in a state of perplexity. The difference between an unprecedented episode and a scientific revolution, however, is that a scientific revolution registers an epistemic innovation—new ways of seeing, new explanations—of an intransitive event or structure, while the unprecedented episode indexes a breach in intransitivity itself. Scientific revolutions, even in the conventionalist language in which Kuhn clothes them, are tantamount to genuine scientific discoveries of an enduring universe. Unprecedented events, conversely, signal a realignment of the social and political order per se. They create new modes of normality and familiarity, including the familiarity of horror.

This is only a sketch of what "unprecedented" might mean; it is not an argument for concluding definitively that unprecedented things exist. One obvious objection to the concept is the difficulty of drawing clear temporal and spatial boundaries around phenomena of sufficient precision as to identify them as unprecedented. Hence the Nazi camps were horrifically distinctive, but polices of genocidal extermination were not, as the historical record shows all too dismally in the genocidal campaigns against aboriginal peoples, among aboriginal peoples, and against "nations." In the twentieth century, the best-known pre-Nazi instance is the Young Turk movement's assault, culminating in 1915, against the Armenian population in Turkish Armenia and Asia Minor. Another problem is the difficulty of determining how much of a break with the past is required of an event to call it unprecedented. Raising this question, Marrus ([1987] 1989:20) qualified it by remarking that since all events have antecedents, "we are speaking in relative terms." But if this is the case, we end up with an oxymoron—the "relatively unprecedented"—that looks dangerously close to a contradiction.

A perplexity of a different kind arises when we think about the relationship between imagination and reality. Many occurrences that ordinary language describes as unprecedented have been previously anticipated, and sometimes quite specifically. Aldous Huxley's depiction in *Brave New World* of "soma," the drug that produces immediate elation, uncannily resembles Prozac. Indeed, as Fukuyama (2002:4) points out, the whole book prefigures one strand of the biotechnology revolution, namely, neuropharmacology. Fantasies, or warnings, of extirpation (Rawson 2001, chap. 4) are also a part of modern literature. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* recounts the Houyhnhnms's regular debate on whether "the Yahoos should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth"; Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* contains Kurtz's injunction to "[e]xterminate all the brutes." And of course both of these examples have precedents in the merciless insouciance with which the heroes of the *Iliad* slay and enslave the inhabitants of a conquered *polis*[45] and with which Yahweh liquidates his enemies (Deuteronomy XX:16–17; Joshua VI–VII). Joshua's destruction of the Amorite cities was so complete that "he left nothing remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded" (Joshua X:40).[46]

For all these reasons, we may be persuaded to develop an argument about social and political change that stresses continuity, not rupture, or that, admitting rupture, sees

[45] For extirpations that are historically documented see, for instance, Thucydides's (*Peloponnesian War* V:116) remarks on the aftermath of the Athenian siege of Melos, in 415 BCE, (the men are slaughtered; the women and children enslaved) and Polybius's (*Histories* X:15; Scott-Kilvert translation) description of Scipio Africanus's duly executed order to his troops, on the capture of New Carthage in 209 BCE, to "exterminate every form of life they encountered, sparing none" (even the dogs were dismembered).

[46] "But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee" Deuteronomy XX:17. Because the archaeological evidence for the destruction of these peoples is inconclusive, I present Yahweh's command as fictive (cf. Ste. Croix 1981:331–32).

it as an anomaly that will be corrected by history's course or its "end." But the danger of continuity types of argument is that they bring us back to where theoretically we started: normalizing a phenomenon *in advance of rethinking it*. Long stretches of time are subsumed under simplistic portmanteau labels such as the "civilizing process," "millenarianism," or "rationalization." Al-Qaeda becomes an example of the clash of civilizations, or "a desperate rearguard action that will in time be overwhelmed by the broader tide of modernization" (Fukuyama 2002:*xii*), or of a threat as grave as Nazism itself. Arendt warned against such presumption. Her challenge to received categories and intellectual reflexes is sobering and, in a dangerous world, necessary if we are to recognize what we might tragically ignore.

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