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*Reason and Madness in the Holocaust: Mythologizing a  
Modern Narrative in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Prose*

(BA dissertation, University of Helsinki)

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## 1. General Introduction

Any discussion of the Holocaust inevitably turns and returns to the question, “How could it happen?” Proposals have been uneven, conjectural and unsatisfactory. Someone will feel comfortable in asserting that all was “caused” by the Great Depression and economic turmoil. Others will point to the long history of anti-Semitism in Europe and Germany. Still others will lay the blame on the paganistic, blood-thirsty character of “the Huns” who rebelled against Christian moral standards. This is contradicted by those who point out that the Christian myth of Jewish “blood guilt” of the killing of Jesus has led to countless persecutions of the Hebraic people under the banner of the cross; and wasn’t Luther, the great reformer, a violent anti-Semite himself? There are still those who would lay the entire blame on the Jews themselves, or the Zionists, or the International Bankers or any such fantasy... Of all the explanations, not one seems alone sufficient, and this is why philosophers have debated the question endlessly.

I will show that there are mainly two different, mutually contradictory approaches taken by philosophers in trying to answer the question: “Who or what is to blame for the Holocaust?” The first answer, offered by radical **critics** of Enlightenment, blames one of the following: Reason, Modernity, the State, Industrial Society, Bureaucratic Management and/or Technocratic Efficiency. On the other side, we have the answer given by liberal-democratic **defenders** of Enlightenment: It claims the Holocaust was caused the upsurge of *anti*-rational, irrational or pre-rational forces and a deep rejection of the humanistic principles and ethical values that underpin modernity. In this study, I want to analyze these two perspectives, comparing and contrasting their respective merits.

What, then, does a critique of “the self-oblivious instrumentalization of science” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1944: p.xii) have to do with Hitler and the gas chambers, and what relevance does a philosophical inquiry into the “dialectic of myth and enlightenment” bear to our understanding of Nazism, “the actual reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism” (p.xvi-xvii)? What is the connection between the Western ideal of efficiency – also called “instrumental reason” – and the murderous efficiency of totalitarian and Nazi politics? What did John Ralston Saul mean when he said that the Holocaust was an “act of pure logic carried out in a rational manner” (Saul 1992: p.74) – businessman-like – by “technocrats” (ibid.)? Or Arendt, when she describes Adolf Eichmann’s “special qualities” as being that “he could organize and he could negotiate” (Arendt 1963: p.40) and, again, that “[his] thoughts were entirely taken up with the staggering job of organization and administration” (ibid: p.135) - is she not talking about the same thing as Saul, who says that, thanks to the obedient and

resourceful technocrats, the “massacre [the Holocaust] was indeed ‘managed,’ even ‘well managed’” (Saul 1992: p.74)? Even if we recognize that these uncomfortable and highly abstract analyses of Nazism may be helpful or even ethically necessary, can we go as far as to “understand” Martin Heidegger’s much-discussed comments from 1949, when he infamously compared the mass slaughter of human beings to the industrial practices of intensive farming? I will argue that a kind of criticism of Modernity, of Reason, of Western Politics, underlies the otherwise quite different approaches of these various philosophers quoted above. They are united in their antipathy to Nazism as the primal *Myth of Evil* for our time. Yet it is not simply a matter of monsters and villains; Eichmann, for example, “was not a ‘monster’ -- [but] a clown” (Arendt 1963: p.49). The mythologizing of the actors and agencies of this tragic saga is a matter of extreme nuance and care. But what unites all these philosophers and critics is a belief in the *uniqueness* and *absoluteness* of the Nazi phenomenon. Even if Nazism belongs to some larger context of the “Enlightenment” or “barbarism” or “mysticism” or “nationalism” or whatever, it is always *the most potent reference point* one can draw, rhetorically and politically: “The worst kind of people are the fascists.” Literally, you can’t argue with that – or so it seems. There exists a fallacy by the proposed name of *argumentum ad Hitlerum*: illegitimate appeal to Hitler as a support for one’s arguments. Because it is easy to use the terms dishonestly, Hitler and the Holocaust, as rhetorical flourishes, are things to be used with caution in modern rhetorical argumentation. Constantly accusing one’s enemies of being fascists, for example, is seen as inappropriate - because crude and effective - behaviour.

At any rate, I don’t think I would accuse the philosophers in question of using the Holocaust example *simply* as a rhetorical device here; rather, *where* and *when* exactly the example of the Nazis is used reveals the points at which they are *the most serious*. To draw the ultimate card, the last argument, the example of all earthly evil - the Holocaust - is to consciously raise the stakes and wait for the pen to drop. Thus, philosophers have mythologized Nazism as a kind of rotten apple in a basket that needs to be explained away or otherwise dealt with. Why hasn’t Mussolini’s Italy, for example, had similar impact on Western philosophers? The answer is both complex and simple. I believe there is something in the combined *quantity* and *quality* of the (specifically Central European) Holocaust that baffles the mind. It is up to debate whether philosophical analyses of structures and concepts, in the end, take us closer or further away from the level of “actual” human suffering. But oftentimes only by careful reflection do we reach any lasting insights into the true nature of the predicament. The truths of history are not written in stone, but excavated by the rhetorical and argumentative chains of social discourse.

The general idea, then, is to analyze prose books within philosophy and cultural theory from the middle of the twentieth century onwards that deal with echoes and ripples of fascism. In all these various accounts, however abstract, we come to the doorsteps of profound and deeply moving accounts of human dignity, suffering and memory. As we move from the Holocaust to the present day, we find that philosophy shaped by these events is increasingly “humanitarian” – or at least ethical – even if, at the same time, typically cool and abstract. Overall, it seems that reflections of the Nazi horrors that have arisen after the Second World War entail a degree of *introspection* and, if you will, *aporia* – an inability to fully explain the extent of the “evil” involved (or to come to grips with the real *despair* in the face thereof). Arendt, for example, deals with the “evil” of Eichmann only to face the “banality” of it. If one were suspicious enough, one could characterize books, art and philosophy that strive, in whatever way, to depict, understand or even “humanize” the Nazis, as nothing more than barely concealed attempts of “disguising” or “ameliorating” (in a word, falsifying) the truth behind all the lofty words and pictorial excesses. Nonetheless, this seems to be an unsatisfactorily cheap retort to what, in my mind, is a real human need to understand and explain the causes of catastrophe and madness in the world. I will argue that most, if not all, of the books that deal with the enduring legacy of the Nazi era resort to some degree of mythologizing, perhaps out of necessity. So, I aim to pursue this question of what makes the Nazi narrative subject to such mythologizing.

## **2. The Dialectic of Reason and Madness**

Before launching into the main body of my analysis, I wish to begin by looking at Hitlerism and the Nazi regime from the perspective of a historian who really wants to understand the conditions and preconditions of such a catastrophe. Since I hope to understand and explore the two-fold criticism of Hitlerism as 1) hyper-rational bureaucracy and 2) pre- or irrational barbarity, I want to spend a moment here thinking about the intertwined threads of Reason and Madness in Hitlerism.

In John Ralston Saul’s description, Hitler was both “a military planner” and “a hero” (Saul 1992: p.178) - hero, of course, in the purely descriptive, narratological sense of (national saga’s) *protagonist*. Now, as it happened, Hitler also harboured (barely concealed) aspirations to becoming semi-divine through messianic leadership, tying him to the *Völkisch* tradition of German Romanticism and paganism. And while Saul regards the Hero as an archetype typical of the Age of Reason, its universality is tinged with the primitive and

primordial, i.e. the pre-Modern. Drawing from the primitive psychology of early humanity, the Hero's (or, in this case, Anti-Hero's) self-righteousness has an element of childlike, or childish, certitude, typical of the self-assertive juvenile. The heroic imperative operates pre-rationally and irrationally, fighting to save the society from excessive Order and Rationality, typified in Hitler's eyes by the governments residing in the "Jewish-bourgeois" cities of Vienna and Berlin. The potent mixture of Reason and Irrationality, given flesh to by the Nazi Party organization and the death camps, brought together the childish desire for absolute freedom and wanton libertinism (in mass rallies and obscene public abuses, e.g. Kristallnacht) with the Technocratic orderly precision of efficiently-run government bureaucracy (the complex hierarchy of the Party, the S.S., the Wehrmacht and all the "bureaucracies of death").

The possibility for something as cold and inhumane as the Holocaust, then, is found in the deadly marriage of purely irrational forces of the liberated body (such as ecstatic street violence and orgiastic party rallies), on the one hand, and the rational machinery of the modern technocratic state (the "alphabet soup" of organizations of death) on the other. Technocratic reason provided the machinery, chemicals, manpower and "trains that run on time" needed by the impetuous, impatient and rampantly anti-Semitic elements of the "idealistic" Nazi ideologues. In other words, modern technocratic management provided the wherewithal for and ensured the timely execution of the irrational Nazi dream which became a real nightmare. Indeed, a similar process was operational across the whole spectrum of social life in the Third Reich. For example, Hitler's irrational and blood-spiritual quest to "heroize" the German Warrior and to "liberate" the German youth into the *Hitlerjugend* (where fun, "healthy" activities of manly vigour were provided) had the clear and rational subtext of building an army capable of conquering *Lebensraum* in the Slavic East. Likewise, Goebbels's propaganda in the *Völkischer Beobachter* was, on the one hand, irrational in its ideological chicanery and advocacy of racialist pseudo-science, but, on the other hand, rationally executed and artfully manoeuvred to suit specific propagandist (i.e. technocratic-managerial) purposes. The whole racial ideology, as a matter of fact, was the "purest admixture" (if that is not an oxymoron) of Reason and Irrationality, Science and Nonsense, "Facts" and Faith. The one lesson to be learned here is that neither Reason *nor* abandonment of Reason is alone sufficient to account for such large-scale devastation. It is only when the demarcation between the two polarities of human experience becomes blurred that all the barriers break loose. Only when the demons are allowed to run amok in pure daylight (Hitler in the Reichstag) are we in deep trouble; but as visitors of the night, our Shadows (as Jung called them) are containable and even necessary to the healthy functioning of our psyche.

My main analysis, commenced below, will take six philosophical contexts under discussion. First, I will look at three critiques of modern hyper-rationalism (three "Enlightenment pessimists"). Then, on the other side, I will look at three critiques of *anti-rationalism* (of a liberal-democratic bent and character). They will come together at some points, and diverge at others. In the end, I hope to show some common ground between their widely different analytical approaches to Hitler and the Holocaust. They all study the dialectic of "Reason" and "Madness" in the orchestration and creation of the concentration camps.

### 3. Technocracy: Reason and Rationality

#### 3.1. John Ralston Saul (b. 1947)

*"[B]y the end of the eighteenth century a whole new type of public figure had to be invented: individuals who could - as Mussolini put it - make the trains run on time. Napoleon was the first and is still the definitive model. These Heroes promised to **deliver the rational state, but to do so in a populist manner.** The road from Napoleon to Hitler is direct."* (Saul 1992: p.25, my emphasis)

Why Napoleon? He was, we should recall, the direct heir and an implementer of France's revolutionary ideals. *The Enlightenment of Reason led to Napoleon and, ultimately, to Hitler.*

That is the conclusion reached by our first thinker, a Canadian public intellectual and maverick, who wrote a book called "Voltaire's Bastards" (1992) in which he excoriates, even annihilates, much of modern history as deeply flawed in its conception. As any such far-reaching attempt, it ultimately falls flat, but not due to any shortage of insight. On the contrary, the book is full of wonderful explorations of the complexities of our modern world in a way that is both elucidating and deeply original. Written in an essayist style, the book is a deeply critical work, presenting itself as a dissenting voice against the mainstream of cultural self-adoration. His style belongs to the tradition of Voltaire, John Ruskin and Nietzsche, without, however, any great philosophical pretensions. In fact, Saul is a minor philosopher, and perhaps the least influential (and the least important) of all the philosophers that I have chosen for my treatise. This, if anything, makes him a good place to start, because his analysis is also the most recent "re-warming" of the idea that Reason is to blame for all the evils in the world. Of course this doesn't mean "reason" as in *reasonable* but as in *rational*: the principle on which the Enlightenment stood for. He has chosen "Voltaire" as a good example of a

fanatic for Reason, and Napoleon and Hitler as his "bastard" children, but he doesn't stop there. He sees a thread running through all forms of modern life, from the arms race and international politics to the technocratic management of societies and businesses, a thread of *excessive rationality* – the attempt to control, manage and hyper-organize everything and, in the process, make it more efficient. Saul's analysis places the rise of modern fascism in the context of this hyper-rationalization of society. Concentration camps and the brutal efficiency of the state machinery all function only because of centuries long efforts to make modern life amenable to micro-management, rational re-organization and unreflective overhaul. These are "techniques" used by liberal, socialist and fascist governments alike. More properly, there are simply the logical consequences of rational management principles. Totalitarianism – a term we will re-encounter in Arendt – is simply another name for *modernity*: the application of total rationalizing processes across the whole spectrum of social and individual life.

As he frames his outlook: "The philosophers of Europe, England and America threw themselves into the arms of reason, convinced that birth would be given to new rational elites capable of building a new civilization. [--] And yet the exercise of power, without the moderating influence of any ethical structure, rapidly became the religion for these new elites" (Saul 1992: p. 7). Here he has defined the modern, state-obedient technocrat. Keep this character in mind: we will meet him again in Arendt's text, incarnated as Adolf Eichmann.

Soon enough, Saul claims, "the new elites began to develop a contempt for the citizen" (p.34). This recalls Franz Kafka's books on the deadening effects of bureaucracy. The result of the "utopian" and "progressive" thinking of Rationalists like Voltaire, Bacon and Descartes has been "a dictatorship of technocrats" (p.48). He wants to be clear that *all* of today's competing ideologies, including "Christianity, Nazism and Communism" (p.19), are only varieties of "blind reason" (p.30) characterized by an "obsession with efficiency" (p.20). Capitalism and liberalism are guilty of the very same: "The Right and Left, like Fascism and Communism, have never been anything more than marginal dialects on the extremes of reason" (ibid). He really wants to paint with broad brushstrokes. This also has its limitations: perhaps because of his naiveté, perhaps because of his need to exaggerate, he claims that "reason has nothing to do with democratic freedom or individualism or social justice" (p.34); but is that really so? On this point, he refuses to see the long and tortuous history of human rights discourse as it has developed in the spirit of the very same "skepticism" and "cynicism" (ibid.) that he laments has overtaken the new, abstract elites of Reason. In my mind, the belief in human rights cannot be separated from the history of rationalism. Indeed, someone like Heidegger would say: "You are wrong, dear Saul, humanism *itself* is the problem"; and a

democrat like Habermas or Rawls would say: "Humanism and reason are intertwined, and so be it - we should celebrate both! To criticize one is to criticize the other." Saul wants to have his cake and eat it too, but only ends up somewhere between exaggeration and unfocused criticism. However, he acts the important role of the village iconoclast in the true spirit of Voltaire, his (apparent) arch-nemesis. Philosophy is full of these delightful contradictions.

We do not need to spend more time with Saul, however, because the same themes are already found (decades earlier) in a philosophically more interesting and durable work by the Frankfurt School. Next, we shall continue on the topic of "the Critique of Reason," but shift our attention backwards in time, onto German soil itself.

### **3.2. Adorno (1903-1969) / Horkheimer (1895-1973)**

*"Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator towards men."*

(Adorno/Horkheimer 1944: p. 9)

It is the cruellest of ironies that the greatest critics of reason were among the most rational and eloquent people to ever pick up a typewriter. Typical of the authors' poetic style is the following sentence: "The dark horizon of myth is illumined by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose cold rays the seed of the new barbarism grows to fruition" (p. 32). Here, the "the sun of calculating reason" is the Enlightenment, and "the new barbarism" is Fascism.

Social criticism, in its modern form, was practically invented by a handful of German-Jewish intellectuals centred on Frankfurt and, later, the United States. This loosely knit group was largely composed of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "Dialectic of Enlightenment" (1944) is perhaps the most ambitious treatise produced by this so-called Frankfurt School, and the most explicit formulation of the historical viewpoint of its co-authors, Adorno and Horkheimer. (Benjamin was always a loner and an outsider.)

The book's date of publication is very significant: 1944. Written during the Second World War, exiled from their native Germany, Adorno and Horkheimer (both ethnically Jewish) set out to write an overarching criticism of the Western tradition of Enlightenment. The historical context, as the *raison d'être* for the pessimistic tone of the book, is explained in the introduction: "[W]e had set ourselves nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (p. xi); it is clear what "a new kind of barbarism" is here referring to. Not only does the book use fascism as an example for what's most fundamentally wrong in Europe



(and consequently West) today, but its authors revert to using the very terminology of anti-fascist political terminology in their analysis of Reason, Science and Enlightenment: "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (p.6), they say. Certainly Nazism is not the *only* thing wrong with what they call the Western tradition of Enlightenment – within which tradition, like Saul, Heidegger and Arendt, they indeed place the horrors of modern war – but fascism is important because it is modernity's most malignantly self-assertive ideology and, as such, an exemplary showcase of where European modernity *can* lead and *has* led: "Today the whole world has become the subject-object of repression" (p.204).

There is no escaping it: "In the service of the present age, enlightenment becomes wholesale deception of the masses" (p.42). People are like sheep, or minions of the machine of power. Their "herding" is effected by means of political propaganda, economic manipulation and technocratic management. Indeed, fascism has learnt from big business, and vice versa: the Nazis appropriated "the slogans of aggressive big business" (p.201) in order to win over followers, and turned the radio into a "mouthpiece of the Führer" (p.159). The Nazis were peddlers of new industrial solutions to the "Jewish problem." Their product - tyranny - was the best, or best advertised, brand of soap on the market. It was only logical that the people got what they wanted: a final solution to their problems, like some genocidal Kleenex. "Reason is the organ of calculation, of planning; it is neutral in regards to ends" (p.88). There are no moral rules, or safety valves, in the contemporary "industrial society" (p.84) where "the totalitarian order gives full rein to calculation" and abides by "its own brutal efficiency" (p.86). Mind you that for Adorno and Horkheimer, Fascism is simply *one* example of a totalitarian order, modern capitalist consumer society being another one. In both cases, the "totalitarian state manipulates the people" (p.89) into a state of powerless "alienation" (p.105). However, the horrors of Nazism make for an especially illuminating study. It is through their analysis of anti-Semitism that the authors hope to condemn Reason to oblivion.

The anti-Semite suffers from a "paranoiac insistence on rationality" (p.194). His hatred of the Jews is a "fixed idea" (ibid.) seen as absolute truth. In anti-Semitic paranoia, "the entire process of thought serves the hopeless purpose of particularized judgment" (p.195), i.e. unfettered hatred and persecution. For the rabid anti-Semite, "experience is replaced by clichés" (p.201) and "stereotypes" (p.200). Overall, Adorno and Horkheimer see in Nazism a dangerous mixture of hyper-rationalism and deeply irrationalist elements, and this indeed is the reason why Fascism unveils the "limits of Enlightenment" (p.168): it points, in all its brutal nakedness, to the underlying tension within modernity between the repressed irrational or pre-rational impulses and the technocratically organized, rationalized and ostensibly

"civilized" aspects of modern societies. In other words, anti-Semitism is both anti-rational and hyper-rational. Nazism, to recapitulate, combines the efficiency of modern technocratic rationalism with the primal tribal values of a pagan blood cult. In fact, the book's closing chapter is titled "Elements of anti-Semitism: the Limits of Enlightenment" (pp.168-208), where the colon should be seen as connecting "anti-Semitism" with Enlightenment's dark side. Nazism is like the "bad cop" in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, while liberalism or capitalism is the "good cop" who appears more innocuous but is so only on the surface. But if the Jews were the scapegoated shadowy nemesis of Enlightenment's unconscious, then by freeing ourselves from anti-Semitism we may also regain control of history, against the hegemony of totalitarian, blind reason: "If thought is liberated from domination and if violence is abolished, the long absent idea is liable to develop that Jews too are human beings" (p.199). This would represent a "turning point of history" (p.200). A credo for their project, however bleak it may seem, represents a scintilla of hope: "Mankind has other possibilities" (p.238). To see that, we must kill the two-headed beast: Reason-Totalitarianism. Only then can human beings become free of oppression, manipulation and domination.

### **3.3. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)**

*"Agriculture is now a motorized food industry - in essence the same as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of nations, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs." (Heidegger, quoted in Ferry/Renaut 1990: p.71)*

The above, as Ferry & Renaut point out, is the only sentence in which Heidegger expressed his views on the Holocaust. The year was 1949. These much disparaged and decried, rather brazen words reflect the philosophy of an uncompromising thinker who "devoted himself to a radical criticism of modernity" (ibid. p.79). His political leanings can be characterized by Habermas' odd but accurate description: "conservative/revolutionary" (1989: p. 150). This paradoxical duality illuminates the odd attraction/repulsion I feel to Heidegger.

However we look at it, Martin Heidegger ranks as one of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His "Sein und Zeit" (1927) is considered a modern classic. His influence gained strength during the 30's and 40's (in pre-war Germany), and peaked

during the 50's and 60's (in post-war France), and has never really subsided<sup>1</sup>. He single-handedly revitalized ontology as a serious field of study and kick-started the nascent existentialist movement in Europe. But he is not without his critics, even haters and defilers:

*“In Heidegger, I confront a philosopher who failed as a citizen – in 1933 and especially after 1945. But even as a philosopher, he is suspect to me...”* (Jürgen Habermas<sup>2</sup>, emphasis added)

To understand such reactions, we need to understand the circumstances of his life. Heidegger, already a professor of philosophy, held rectorship at Freiburg University during the years 1933-34 and maintained his social and academic standing throughout those turbulent years. Politically, he was aligned with the National Socialist “revolution” and expressed his sympathies explicitly in speeches and conduct, although the ambiguities and reservations of his engagements have puzzled historians and philosophers ever since. Most perplexingly, even after the War – “after 1945” – he never renounced National Socialism in any simple moral terms. Nor did he issue a *mea culpa* to the world. In the 80s, soon after his death, the debate over the “question Heidegger” was revitalized by the arrival of Victor Farias’s book “Heidegger and Nazism,” (1989) which sought a condemnation of his actions as a collaborator. Both Farias and Habermas condemn Heidegger *as a philosopher* in consequence; note how Heidegger’s failure to accommodate to liberal post-War – shall we even say “post-Holocaust” – values was his biggest fault, according to Habermas, and *not* his conduct *during* the Nazi era: Heidegger “failed as a citizen ... especially after 1945” (see above). This view was widely shared by the left-leaning post-1945 intelligentsia of Berlin, Frankfurt and Germany. Another philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, also thought that it was cold-hearted of Heidegger to so adamantly refuse to engage the ethical questions of the Holocaust. Heidegger's silence placed him "outside the realm in which a conversation among humans is possible at all" (Habermas 1989: p.163). This here is high rhetoric! The Holocaust, for Habermas and Marcuse, represents a moral ultimatum, a historical challenge, something that *cannot* be avoided. The dead speak out to the living: "the torture, mutilation and annihilation of millions of people" (ibid.) *demand*s an answer from every (admitted or suspected) fellow-traveller of Nazism, including someone whose affiliations were only minor, like Heidegger.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ferry/Renaut (1990): “Heidegger’s deconstruction of modernity provided a considerable part of the French intelligentsia with the bases and style of its criticism of the modern world” (p.54). We should add that aside from his politics (which was always secondary), Heidegger’s critical method paved way for Derrida’s deconstruction, Foucault’s archaeology of the human sciences and Gadamer’s hermeneutics – not to mention the existentialists.

<sup>2</sup> 2004 interview: [http://www.logosjournal.com/habermas\\_america.htm](http://www.logosjournal.com/habermas_america.htm)

Heidegger's thesis, like Adorno's, or Saul's, was that the momentum of modern rationality has led to catastrophic results in the fields of politics, society, science and so on. It is not my intention to sketch out his philosophy in detail, because it is highly complex. What we should keep in my mind, however, is that Heidegger was no friend of liberal values of the Enlightenment. It is even true, as far as it goes, that Heidegger's philosophy provided "a sweeping negation of the principles of democratic humanism" (Luc/Ferry: p.16). Primarily, however, his focus was not politics, but "first philosophy" a.k.a. ontology. But whenever he wrote about technology, modernity, politics and society, his tone was anti-modern and anti-Enlightenment and even "certain ultraconservative & fundamentalist militancy was in no way alien" (ibid: p.28) to his thinking. Without being an anti-Semite, he saw in National Socialism a chance for a national rebirth for the German *Volk*. He notoriously spoke of "the inner truth and greatness" (ibid: p.56) of National Socialism. He was clearly naive, to say the least. His initial hope with National Socialism (a hope he very quickly abandoned) was that it could be a true "third way" between Americanism (capitalism) and Bolshevism (communism). He saw that Germany had the unique opportunity to escape the trappings of cultural nihilism. So, in Nazism, at least for a moment, he saw a way out for the German people, as ludicrous as that sounds. He wanted nothing but total revolution, and hoped that Nazism could provide it.

Now, let us look at his post-War statements from 1949, where he compares the mass death toll of concentration camps with "mechanized agriculture" (cf. epigraph). This, coming from him, meant the worst possible indictment of both. He, after all, had constantly and consistently criticized the modern principles of rational organization of industries and state apparatuses according to the logic of "increased efficiency." In making agriculture more efficient, businesses were destroying the soil and wrecking nature. In a similar fashion, making state bureaucracy more efficient, the Nazis were destroying human lives and wrecking civilization in the process. Although very brutal and cold, Heidegger's few words on the subject should be read with utmost care, because they are far from being the "flippant" and haphazard comments that many unsympathetic readers have made them out to be. Indeed, I claim that we shouldn't take Heidegger's statements about the Holocaust as frivolous or belittling, but rather as a serious (however untenable) attempt to radicalize our criticism of modernity by pointing our eyes to the destruction of the earth in the name of mechanized processes of agricultural degradation. Heidegger was a deep ecologist *avant la lettre*. To be sure, he was also a German nationalist, a parochialist and a conservative soul. But I propose we should recognize that his analysis of the Holocaust stands as perhaps the most serious *political* statement of his career. The shock value, the cognitive dissonance and the violent

counter-reaction prompted by his comments only goes to show that he really meant what he said, and he must have weighed his words carefully. So: Heidegger, just like Adorno and Saul, posits the Holocaust as *ultimately* the greatest horror of the modern era – precisely because it is the culmination of the processes of technological and technocratic organization of modernity. We can see that all the four great thinkers against Reason and Modernity (counting both of the authors of the *Dialectic*) converge on the point of the death camps and shout out, in shame and disgust: “Didn’t we tell you so? Reason and Modernity lead inevitably into this catastrophe!” In this regard, their criticisms are at least highly consistent with their principles, *whatever* we may think about the quality of their moral virtue...

Even Habermas will admit that "Heidegger pursues critical insights about reason that have not been superseded even today" (1989: p.154). Furthermore: "The moral judgment of a late generation [--] must not be allowed to cloud our view of the substantial content of his philosophical work" (ibid: p. 140). However, having failed the Holocaust "challenge", even his work has been stigmatized in the eyes of contemporary, politically conscientious readers. This is a shame, because many of his philosophical works deserve to be called classic texts.

Next, we will look at three thinkers of a very different ilk. Their analysis highlights the dangers of irrationalism and lapses into pre-modern barbarity. They are defenders of liberalism, socialism and democracy. As a consequence, they are more defensive about the principles of Enlightenment and of what Reason stands for. They are both more optimistic and, sometimes, more naïve about the wonders of modernity. In my paper, I will try not to take sides (in any obvious way), because I think *both* types of analysis are indispensable and useful tools for understanding “what went wrong” with 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism, leading to genocide in the heart of civilization.

#### **4. Democracy: Freedom and Responsibility**

##### **4.1. Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)**

*“[T]his long course in human wickedness [the trial of Adolf Eichmann] had taught us [--] the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.”* (Arendt 1963: p.231)

The trial of Eichmann began with the capture of the suspect in 1960 in Argentina, where he had settled in forced, permanent exile from Europe. Caught up on, intercepted and smuggled

(illegally as it happens<sup>3</sup>) into Israel, Eichmann was put on trial in Jerusalem the following year and duly hung in 1962. The facts of history were on trial with the man. But not only were there facts at stake. The world knew enough beforehand to make the trial only a formality; indeed, his death was a foregone conclusion. There emerged a new, more important, purpose to the event: to test out the moral fabric of world opinion and to lay out ground-rules for the treatment of war criminals everywhere - "in the spirit of Nuremberg," as the mantra went. But if Eichmann's case was a belated extension of Nuremberg, subsequent trials were to be conducted with the Eichmann precedent in mind. Holocaust, as a catchword, was about to become a mind-stuttering example of criminal inhumanity, a mega-event of our times, and a turning point in modern history. The trial, in the end, was a test case of *international moral* jurisprudence, even if the Jerusalem court operated under Israel's *national legal* jurisprudence. It was not a fair trial, not even meant to be one. It was a condemnation reached many years ago, before and in lieu of the capture of the slippery "notorious" Nazi escapees. No, the desire was not to see justice done or to "prove" (beyond a shadow of a doubt) a legal case but rather to explain the self-obvious moral failings of one man. For the majority of the people, excluding the work of Arendt and other acute commentators, the point was not to understand, certainly not to excuse, but simply to grant peace and quiet to the survivors of the death camps who were in dire need of a purgatory event. Was it a show trial, then? Did it amount to a public stoning or, more appropriately, lynching? Not necessarily; and next, by a reading of Arendt's classic commentary, I want to explain why.

We should mention that Arendt was a student (and erstwhile lover) of Heidegger. Despite many differences (Jewish vs. German; female vs. male; socialist vs. conservative) this bridge from German nationalist philosophy to Jewish internationalist philosophy is an interesting one, for it shows that not everything is as simple as it seems. There was certain openness in Heidegger's philosophy which enabled many democratic "interventions", such as Arendt's, whose reference point is Aristotelian philosophy and a Socialist critique of totalitarian politics. Her earlier work, "Origins of Totalitarianism" (1951), is devoted to the utter demystification of both Nazism and Stalinism as two sides of the same coin. Yet her most obsessive exposé of the Nazi mentality is precisely to be found developed in the trial of Adolf Eichmann, about whom she coined the phrase (which has stuck) "the banality of evil" - by this she meant as well "the evil of banality." In opposition to someone

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Arendt, 1963, p.242: "A clear violation of international law had been committed in order to bring [Eichmann] to justice." However justified this particular action (as Arendt seems to think), we should keep in mind that this same extra-legal imperative has been exercised by Mossad in much more problematic cases, e.g. Mordechai Vanunu.

like Saul's analysis, Arendt's 1963 book contends (reporting the feeling in the court) that Holocaust was "a crime that could not be explained by any utilitarian purpose" (p. 252) – and in this sense it was not simply "rational" or "logical" or "technocratic". Nonetheless, Eichmann *was* the ultimate technocratic middle manager: his "special qualities" were that "he could organize and he could negotiate" (p.40). What went on in his head were not complex moral thoughts: "To evacuate and deport Jews had become routine business; what struck in his mind was bowling" (p.76). Arendt almost "laughs out of court" the prosecutor's claim that Eichmann was "a perverted sadist" (p.253); No, "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him ... that they were, and still are, *terribly and terrifyingly normal*" (ibid, my emphasis). This evilness of normalcy and banality is what struck her most: "it was essential that one take him seriously, and this was very hard to do ... Everybody could see that this man was not a monster, but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown" (p.49). Appearances could be deceiving: behind this layer of averageness and normalcy, the capability for deep evil lay hidden. But with this guy, there was "nothing there" to discover, nothing hidden or arcane or secret: "[Eichmann] was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. ... The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (p.44). This is the saddest truth of them all, according to Arendt, that the ideology of the Holocaust was *a banal cliché* that could have been perpetrated by anybody under the right (rather: wrong) circumstances, even if certain psychological characteristics (shortcomings, shall we say) made Eichmann more suitable than others. Recall that, according to Adorno & Horkheimer, "anti-Semitic judgments have always born witness to stereotyped thought" (1944: p.200): the banality of evil lies in clichés.

While not an anti-modernist like Adorno or Heidegger, Arendt nonetheless shares something of their critique of technocratic rationality. She observes with horror the "'objective and scientific' attitude" (Arendt 1963: p.97) of the Nazi system: "the extermination machinery had been planned and perfected in all its details long before the horrors of war struck Germany herself, and its intricate bureaucracy functioned with the same unwavering precision in the years of victory as in those last years of predictable defeat" (p.103). Eichmann explains how he used "the assembly line" (p.40) as a model for the deportation centres where Jews were to be given passports with an ultimatum to leave the country: "When everything was ready and running smoothly, Eichmann 'invited' the Jewish functionaries from Berlin to inspect it. They were appalled: 'This is like an automated factory

[where the Jew] comes out at the other end without any money, without any rights, with only a passport” (p.41).

In the state machine, everybody has a role. The Nazi regime’s psychological indoctrination was a strange combination of authentic (if skewed) idealism and pragmatic “do-as-you’re-told” mentality: “This new type of criminal commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong” (p.253). This “starry-eyed” criminal is, in fact – if not enjoying himself – at least observant in his duty. The most idealistic of them even had “the notion of being involved in something historic, grandiose, unique (‘a great task that occurs once in two thousand years’)” (p.93), following the dictum of Hitler’s visionary leadership. But even the ones who had not completely shut off, or *killed* off, their inner voice of conscience, would be able to rationalize the dirty deeds to themselves. Eichmann, for example, liked to quote Himmler’s stupid mantra: “These are the battles which future generations will not have to fight again” (p.92). Arendt is incredibly perceptive here: “Instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people! the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!” (p.93). Defensive mechanisms of this kind prove that our sense of what is right is socially conditioned; group pressure can inhibit and override our private moral conscience (“I was just following my orders!”).

According to Arendt, the Third Reich’s horrors were perpetuated under “the aura of systematic mediocrity” (p.47) that allowed the state brutalities to continue unchecked. Still, the “yes-men” and technocratic control freaks were not immune to pangs of conscience: “Eichmann claimed that his organizational gifts [--] had in fact helped his victims; it had made their fate easier. If this thing had to be done at all, he argued, it was better that it be done in good order” (p.171). This is the mind of a *respectable* and *rational* psychopath.

Aside from Arendt’s perceptive commentary with its lasting philosophical impact, another result of the trial which we should keep in mind (in anticipation of Rawls) was that it “demonstrat[ed] the urgent need for a permanent international Criminal Court and for the formation of a valid international penal code” (p.248). The case’s legislative subtleties “emerge with sufficient clarity to become part of a future international penal code” (p. 252).

A new legal terminology was born: The Holocaust was “an unprecedented crime” (p.245), “of different nature from all the atrocities of the past” (p.246), a “crime against humanity” (p.247). These would form the backbone of international human rights legislation to follow. As for Eichmann, he was hanged - in another banal moment in history.



## 4.2. Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929)

*"Beneath the debate on the question in what sense the Nazi mass crimes were unique lies the deeper question of what attitude we want to take toward the continuities of German history - whether we can affirm our political existence while maintaining a clear awareness of a break with our more sinister traditions."* (Habermas 1989: p. 193)

We have already encountered Habermas in the context of Heidegger. We will now see that Habermas not only leveraged the Nazi horrors as the ultimate test of personal and philosophical integrity (thereby condemning purported collaborators, if not into the lowest pits of hell, at least to the status of undesirables), but moreover found in the year of 1945 a turning point, both a national and an international one, which has grounded and shone light on his own philosophical project. Indeed, his philosophical values (democracy, socialism, communication) represent the “new” Germany of Adenauer and the social democrats, of tolerance, openness and multiculturalism, in direct opposition to the “old” Germany of the National Socialists, the Wandervogel Romantics, Heidegger, Nietzsche and the 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalists, poets and folklorists. His polar opposition to people like Saul, Adorno and Heidegger can be summarized in his own words: "there is still much to be accomplished - contemporary naysayers to the contrary - for the ethico-political program of the Enlightenment" (1989: p. xxvi). It is hard to believe that he "began his academic career as the assistant of Theodor W. Adorno" (1997: p. xii), because for Adorno it is *precisely* the ethico-political program of the Enlightenment that has led to Nazism and all the horrors of modern society! Habermas disagrees, strongly: "Anyone who today questions [the democratic tradition] must know that he is appealing to traditions that have already failed before the critical authority of history" (1997: p.12), namely the voice of history calling for the universal condemnation of the Holocaust. "Never again," as the mantra goes. The year 1945, for Habermas, provides such a "sharp break with the past" (p.1), a "turning point in German history" (p. x) and a "challenging break" (p. 12), after which – after Auschwitz - Enlightenment has decisively proven itself superior to all forms of irrationality like Nazism. The irony isn't lost on us: Habermas draws exactly the opposite conclusions from history than Heidegger, Saul and Adorno/Horkheimer, emphasizing the powers of memory to heal.

"We [Germany] have to learn to publicly confront a traumatic past [--]. A liberal political culture could develop in a culturally highly civilized society such as Germany only

after Auschwitz" (p.164) and indeed "because of Auschwitz" (ibid.). Like Phoenix from the ashes! Germany rises again, but this time as a cosmopolitan, rational and enlightened state.

As a leading German intellectual and a promoter of *communication* as a democratic ideal, Habermas reflects a generation of Germans highly sensitive to (and painfully aware of) Germany's modern history. Just recently, the fall of the Berlin Wall has set the tone for the nature of the unification process of millennial Germany. Yet, not far from anybody's mind is the fact that underneath the current splendour of Berlin's *Alexanderplatz* lay the ruins of Nazi Germany. Habermas warns us of the dangers of national amnesia. The question today, he claims, is not simply of moving towards a more democratic and pluralistic society – which he certainly supports – but, rather, he says that Germany must reflect on, and reinterpret, Second World War and the horrors committed in Germany's name; not as a matter of generational guilt or repentance, but as a matter of caution and self-awareness, a powerful weapon against resurgent German nationalism. Habermas, like so many other cultural theoreticians, recognizes and capitalizes on the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an event and, by doing so, partakes in the mythologizing of modern *politics* as something defined in relation to the excesses of Nazism. Liberal democratic values, as well as democratic socialist values, are in direct, anti-nationalistic opposition to fascist and totalitarian principles. This defines not only German parliamentary politics but the *Zeitgeist* at large; cosmopolitanism has found its ultimately nemesis in fascism and nationalism. This, of course, is simply a restatement of the old battle formation: Cosmopolitanism, Social Democracy and Judaic Morality versus Nationalism, Authoritarianism and Tribal Warrior Ethics. Now it becomes possible to see why Habermas, in the interview quoted earlier, would excoriate Heidegger for having "received Nietzsche precisely as a neo-pagan"<sup>4</sup>: For Habermas, democracy, rationalism, Judeo-Christian ethics, Greek civilization and liberal enlightenment values are in direct opposition to all forms of mysticism, obscurantism, paganism, anti-modernism and irrationalism. We may point out that this is not a universal truth: Adorno and Saul, for instance, would consider themselves anti-rationalist *but also virulently anti-Nazi*. Likewise, Heidegger's anti-modernism was much more complex than simply a version of German parochialism (shared as it was by leftists such as Sartre, Foucault and Derrida). He, after all, conceded that his Nazi involvement was his "greatest blunder" (quoted by Ferry/Renaut, p.41). Overall, I have attempted to show that it doesn't matter whether one believes in liberal

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.logosjournal.com/habermas\\_america.htm](http://www.logosjournal.com/habermas_america.htm)

values or in illiberal values<sup>5</sup>; the Holocaust posits itself as an argumentative device and a moral ultimatum. Habermas's condemnation of Auschwitz is just as total as Adorno's.

At any rate, as a tireless defender of liberal democratic socialism (and social democracy), Habermas represents a transitory form between the properly German tradition of pre-1945 (represented by Heidegger and Adorno, but also - to an extent - by Arendt) and the pre-dominantly Anglo-American way of thinking which has harboured pro-Western sentiments within Europe ever since the end of the Nazi era and the closing of the gas chambers. It would be foolish to overlook the importance of these "foreign" ideas and interpretations of modernity, liberal values and the importance of ethics of tolerance imported into Europe (not only by way of gun and conquest but also through the universities, media and capitalist markets) from America and Great Britain. That is why next in our line of liberal democratic thinkers we encounter... an American.

### **4.3. John Rawls (1921-2002)**

*“Hitler’s redemptive anti-semitism strikes us as demonic madness”*

(Rawls 1999: p.22)

The last of our cast of theoreticians (and certainly the most “liberal” in the Anglo-American sense) is John Rawls, the famed political and moral philosopher, whose theoretical writings in the last couple of the decades have provided the realm of political philosophy ample fodder for thought, both in terms of issues of “justice” and “fairness” in internal state politics (e.g. rights and responsibilities) as well as in external – international – politics. His theoretical grounding of liberal values in participatory democratic pluralism has enabled a generation of thinkers to look beyond democratic platitudes and to assess and rethink the bases of modern, liberal values from a fresh, engaged perspective. What he launched in “Theory of Justice” (1971) and developed further in “Political Liberalism” (1992), he extrapolated into the field of international relations in “The Law of Peoples” (1999); it is this last book that is of interest to us here, because it contains explicit justifications for its program of principled defence of an international order of “liberal and decent” peoples under principles of justice and fairness (or

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<sup>5</sup> Obvious neo-nazis and fanatics excluded. They, anyway, are completely without philosophical defenders in the media space and the academia of liberal countries today. It was not always so: we should remember the tremendous popularity of various fascistic movements in Europe in the early parts of the century and, in the last couple of decades, the upsurge of neo-fascistic Phalangist movements in South America, and of various terrorist movements in Middle and Far East.

“justice *as* fairness,” *ibid*: p.7).<sup>6</sup> It is these justifications which provide a link to the Holocaust theme, by way of an Arendtian critique of totalitarianism combined with a Habermasian defence of left-liberal values in the framework of liberal humanitarian international politics.

Rawls (1999) wants to provide a theoretical basis for “a realistic utopia” (pp.10-23), grounded not in revolutionary hopes but in liberal democratic values of tolerance. Such a utopia promises (and possibly delivers), in addition to protection of minority rights and other democratic-liberal values, perennial peace and prosperity: “Constitutional democratic societies don’t go to war with one another” (p.8). For this reason he is unequivocal: “I believe the idea of a realistic utopia is essential. Two main ideas motivate the Law of Peoples. One is that the great evils of human history – unjust war and oppression, religious persecution and the denial of liberty of conscience, starvation and poverty, not to mention genocide and mass murder – follow from political injustice, with its own cruelties and callousness. ... The other main idea [is that after] establishing just (or at least decent) basic institutions, these great evils will eventually disappear” (pp.6-7). So, the impetus for his project is the prevention and eradication of all “great evils of human history”. Even before Rawls explicitly mentions “the fact of the Holocaust” (p.21) as a “demonic possibility” (*ibid.*) and talks about “Hitler’s demonic conception of the world” (p.20), we should be at no loss to interpret the frame of reference behind such expressions as “genocide and mass murder”; the very term “genocide” is born out of the Holocaust debate. Ergo, Rawls’s explicit motivation is the prevention and eradication of Holocaust-like events in human history.

At any rate, it is clear just how closely the modern liberal principles (as exemplified by Rawls) are shaped by the experience of the persecution of the Jews; Rawls’s examples of illiberal (unfair and unjust) acts read like a list of Nazi horrors: “the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities, the denial of their human rights” (p.9); think of Kristallnacht, the Nuremberg Laws and the whole Nazi apparatus of dehumanization.

Interestingly, he makes a passing reference to “the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust” (p.19), a nod towards the Jewish interpretation of the Shoah as a “historic” event. By repeating this phrase, he is faced with certain unanswerable questions: “Were there evils greater or lesser than the Holocaust?” (p.22) He refuses to answer, perhaps out of respect for the sensitivity of the issue, yet makes some comparisons to Inquisition (!), and it alone; one wonders why no mention is made of other mass murders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in this context? He later states that “Nazism portended incalculable moral and political evil for civilized life

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<sup>6</sup> See also his 2001 book “Justice as Fairness: A Restatement”; for the statement of the formula, see Rawls: 1971.

everywhere” (p.99) and that “[this] kind of threat, in sum, justifies invoking the supreme emergency exemption” (ibid). So, not only did fighting the Holocaust (and events like it) provide the starting point for Rawls’s theory, but Hitler is, again, invoked at a crucial point to argue in favour of a “Just War Doctrine” (pp. 89-105), showing just how formative the “Churchill-Roosevelt” period was for Anglo-American pragmatic and moral conceptions.

The conclusions he draws are - all things considered - hopeful and lucid: “[We] must not allow these great evils of the past and present to undermine our hope for the future of our society as belonging to a Society of liberal and decent<sup>7</sup> Peoples around the world. Otherwise, the wrongful, evil and demonic conduct of others destroys us too and seals their victory. Rather, we must support and strengthen our hope by developing a reasonable and workable conception of political right and justice applying to the relations between peoples” (ibid). So, to summarize, Nazis and Nazi-like thugs would win (“seal their victory”) unless a liberal, international order (of “right and justice”) is instituted according to the outlines developed by Rawlsian political philosophers. Note also the reference to “evil and demonic” conduct – a direct allusion to the Nazis as almost supernatural, hellish beings. Such narrative structures (good vs. evil) we have seen before. Every single one of the liberal-democratic philosophers discussed above has singled out the Holocaust as a paragon of evil, a supreme event of awe-inspiring (in the sense of aw-ful) philosophic significance, although few have been as explicit and forceful as Rawls here. Perhaps the difference is between European and American styles and temperaments? At any rate, for our generations, the temporal demarcation line is World War II: there’s *before* and *after* the Holocaust. Philosophy, it is clear, has been deeply affected by these experiences, whether stemming from liberal (Rawls, Habermas, Arendt) or radical (Heidegger, Adorno, Saul) perspectives and critiques.

## 5. Conclusion: Art, Memory and Hope

*“In a few more years all the witnesses capable of imagining what the Hitlerian regime actually did will be dead. [--] Then mythology will be free to do whatever it wishes. And what will mythology do with the murder of six million Jews?”*

(Saul 1992: p.75)

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<sup>7</sup> His use of the adjective “decent” – as opposed to just liberal – has a technical meaning. It refers to “nonliberal societies whose basic institutions meet certain specified conditions of political right and justice” (1999, p.3, footnote 2).

The only thing I would contest with Saul's estimate is that we do not have to wait for future generations for mythologies to be written: it is constantly being written and rewritten by the motley crew of historians (because all history is "revisionistic" in the neutral sense), philosophers, poets, politicians, media, society and public at large. Of course it is somewhat true that early (immediate) sentiments of condemnation have a tendency to be followed, in due time, by reflexive attempts at reconciliation and yes, even forgiveness. Yet the process of writing – that is to say, the process of mythologizing – does not show signs of stopping its weaving of prose; the stories we tell just become more nuanced. Saul himself partakes in this mythologizing, and we all do (the authors mentioned in this essay included) as members of a culture that remembers and reflects. Whether Hitler "deliver[ed] the rational state" to the yearning *Volk* (Saul 1992: p. 25), or whether Hitler "strikes us as demonic madness" (Rawls 1999: p. 22) is in the eye of the beholder. Our culture is enriched by such healthy debate.

We have seen how 20<sup>th</sup> century criticisms of modernity and rationality, whether in the German variants of Heidegger and Frankfurt School or in the Canadian version of John Ralston Saul, however distant from each other in the detail, at critical points of their studies, revert to the example of the Nazi slaughter machine as a rhetorical and narrative device of shocking their audiences into believing their arguments about the horrors of Reason. We have also seen how the liberal, modernist and rationalist side of the argument (as represented by our three "democratic liberals" from Arendt and Habermas to Rawls<sup>8</sup>) use the same tactic – but to prove the opposite point, to reach the very opposite conclusion, that in fact Rationality was most *lacking* in the Hitler scheme and regime. It is clear, then, that the Holocaust can be interpreted from radically different perspectives. Moreover, the Holocaust *has been* and *will be* interpreted as a means of proving almost any point imaginable. Yet this is not simply a case of pointing out the "cheapness" or "laziness" of such rhetoric machinations (by showing that "the Nazi card" can be used to support almost *any* argument whatsoever). No, that would be easy enough. More is at stake here than words. In fact, there is an authentic historical memory at play here, consisting of writing, of images, of emotions. The Holocaust experience is almost a *necessary* drawback position for us in the West. It is a ghost-like remainder (and reminder) of the authentic - but already subdued - cries of the forgotten and forlorn. The past haunts us, and we haunt *it*, in desperate need of answers, conclusions and closure, grasping

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<sup>8</sup> Factually, John Ralston Saul would belong to this camp of liberals and democrats (he is a strong supporter of Canadian multiculturalism and liberal tolerance), but because of his idiosyncratic views of modernity's failures in "Voltaire's Bastards", he is enough of a maverick to classify on the side of Nietzsche, Voltaire, Chomsky and other complex characters whose political and social ideologies are rather hard to classify and never easily predictable. Likewise, Arendt's position is somewhere between these two antipodes, not far from the centre.

for some supreme logic behind it all. Any moment of insight and clarity, however tenuous and however dependent on our presuppositions and background assumptions, serves to satisfy that basic hunger, and makes us carry over a memory of something bigger than words can convey – and so we feel our social and moral values again grounded, firmly, on the reality of the supreme, non-repeatable, not-to-be-repeated, experience of pure evil that was the Second World War, as crystallized by the continuous weaving of the story of the Holocaust.

1. For the critics of Reason, the Holocaust represents the culmination of Rationality.
2. For the critics of Irrationality, the Holocaust represents the utmost form of Madness.

For all the philosophers – left or right – shaped by these experiences of the Modern, the Holocaust represents an inexhaustible cornucopia of discourse, debate and thought.

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