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Book review: political evil in a global age: Hannah Arendt and international theory - by Patrick Hayden

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Book Review of 'Political Evil in a Global Age: Hannah Arendt and International Theory' by Patrick Hayden. Abingdon: Routledge. 2009. 145pp. £76.00/ £23.50 (paperback). ISBN: 978 0 415 45106 2 hbk/ 978 0 203 88253 pbk
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There has been a significant groundswell of interest among international political theorists in the work of Hannah Arendt in recent years, and Patrick Hayden's book makes innovative claims about the ways in which Arendt is relevant to those struggling with contemporary problems. The book is structured around discussion of four 'political evils': genocide and crimes against humanity; global poverty; statelessness; and neoliberal globalization. Hayden uses Arendt's work to explain why each should be classified as evil and, occasionally, what we might do to confront them.

Before setting out a theoretical and empirical analysis of each evil, Hayden sensibly begins with a justification of his use of the vocabulary of 'evil'. He recognises that readers may be put off by his use of this term in preference to more conventional contemporary concepts such as injustice or harm, but argues that 'evil' is an indispensable idea as it signifies acts which, following George Kateb, 'deserve the utmost condemnation' (p2). 'Political evil', for Hayden, is found in acts which obliterate personhood – which render human beings, humanity and the political superfluous. The four evils discussed in the book are linked by the fact that each renders some category of people, or the political sphere more broadly, superfluous. They do so, however, in different ways, and it is here that Arendt's contribution is particularly interesting. There is much literature (particularly that concerning genocide) on radical evil, or the atrocious acts of supposedly evil individuals, but little that uses a framing of banal evil to explore harm generated through structures. Arendt did not understand evil in modernity as a supernatural phenomenon, or as manifesting for the most part in deviant individuals, but as an all-too-common property of structures. Hayden demonstrates that political evil does not just take the form of direct violence, but also appears in indirect or structural violence which debases the human status by denying humans a home, resources, equal standing and political recognition – in short, by making humans superfluous. The chapters on global poverty and on statelessness demonstrate very well the dangers of sovereignty, capitalism and rule by bureaucracy, with the discussion of contemporary asylum policies standing out as particularly powerful. Hayden provides good reason to think that complacency in the face of global poverty or statelessness is equally as unacceptable as complacency in the face of genocide, as all are manifestations of evil. While the vocabulary of evil still carries too much theological baggage and suggestion of maniacal intent for many readers to accept its use here to describe the more mundane and, for the most part (one hopes), unintended harms of poverty and statelessness, and while the claim that evil defines the self-understanding of our age is something of a stretch, the framing of the book around political evils does serve to emphasize disconcerting connections between seemingly discrete forms of severe injustice.

Hayden outlines effectively the most important contributions Arendt has to make to contemporary international political theory, and does so with reference to her full body of work instead of just one or two key texts. He shows why we must understand 'human' as a political rather than biological status, why we should develop our capacities for good judgment and guard against thoughtlessness, and why we should

challenge those systems – in particular sovereignty and neo-liberalism – which cause much more suffering than many of us are prepared to admit, yet are much less entrenched or natural than they are generally portrayed to be. Arendt's work has great relevance in entreating us to focus less on individual acts and more on the effects of ideologies and organisations in developing solutions to the most urgent issues of our age.

Unlike some other recent work in this field, Hayden also makes a concerted attempt to bridge the gap between Arendt's writing in the post-war period and the international political theory of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. He generates a conversation between Arendt and thinkers as diverse as Thomas Pogge, Michel Foucault and Ulrich Beck which, while at times frustratingly brief, does show how Arendt can be used to support, enrich or extend a range of more well-known positions.

Where the book disappoints is the lack of political engagement and concrete suggestions for transformation that an Arendtian position would seem to entail. Hayden is convincing in his condemnation of the four political evils he discusses, but offers little by way of alternatives. Early in the book he outlines a 'realistic cosmopolitanism' which he sees as necessitated by the contemporary conditions we face, not least the appearance of 'humanity' as a discrete political category, and he goes some way towards explaining what such a cosmopolitanism would require. However he does not engage in any depth with the variety of cosmopolitanisms that have appeared in international theory in the last decade, nor justify why his realistic cosmopolitanism is preferable to, for instance, Toni Erskine's 'embedded cosmopolitanism', Andrew Dobson's 'thick cosmopolitanism', Kwame Anthony Appiah's 'rooted cosmopolitanism' and the like. Much more could have been said to substantiate the position Hayden develops through Beck and Arendt which claims cosmopolitanism not as a truth about the world but as an unpredictable and uncertain process, which we should take a principled political (rather than philosophical) decision to align ourselves to. Nor does he intervene in political debates about whether and how the grave injustices inherent in the sovereign state system and the global neo-liberal economic system can be overcome. Even if one accepts that these systems can be overthrown, there is little point in doing so unless a convincing case can be made that other types of political and economic organisation would result in less 'evil'.

Hayden describes his purpose in this engaging book as to make an innovative contribution to the emerging literature linking Arendt to international political theory and debates around globalization. In outlining, however briefly, a 'realistic cosmopolitanism' and using Arendt to challenge the existing order and the 'evils' which result from it, he succeeds in his aim and provides a sound basis for further work on how we can use Arendtian ideas to reject the status quo, reconceptualise freedom and rejuvenate the political sphere.

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