Introduction: Arendt, Terror and Cliché

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Hannah Arendt often used cliché as a window into the public understanding of an event or social problem. Phrases such as, “better dead than red”, “forced integration is no better than forced segregation” and “you cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs” are all taken by Arendt as provocations to examine public thoughtlessness on matters that call for serious political judgment. In her work on mass societies, Arendt explored the relationship between totalitarian terror and the clichés and how they facilitated ordinary people to commit atrocities. Perhaps Arendt’s most poignant expression of this problem is in Eichmann in Jerusalem, where she notes that Eichmann’s last words evoked “the cliché used in funeral oratory... He forgot that this was his own funeral.” This iminimal connection between cliché and thoughtlessness became one of the lenses through which she considered the crises of her new republic.

Certainly, the world has changed since Arendt’s death. Technology has transfigured our understanding of terror, citizenship, and responsibility, as well as our notion of which interventions might stay the course of ruin. Yet this situation is not so different from that which Arendt confronted in The Human Condition, when “the ability to destroy all organic life on earth” was juxtaposed with “a world where speech had lost its power.” As our destructive capacities increase, new bureaucracies and networks of ruin have supplanted the threat of atomic annihilation that Arendt feared. It seems that bureaucratic thoughtlessness has once again succeeded in rendering speech, deliberation, and consent impotent, just as it seemed in Arendt’s time. The revelation that it is possible for nineteen motivated and well-funded people to kill thousands has triggered the revival and repackaging of old clichés: “9/11 changed everything,” “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality” or “They hate us for our freedoms.” The political decisions required in the face of recent traumas have been made by a stupefied public, overwhelmed by acts so novel, that, the clichés tell us, the world they have created is utterly incomprehensible using the lessons of the past or the judgments of history.

We believe that the Arendt, who autopsied the hazy thinking and self-deception that guided the Vietnam War in “Lying in Politics” would not have remained silent during these tumultuous times. In her absence, we invited the contributors to discuss these dark times in a similar vein. We suspect that we can discern much about contemporary problems by clarifying Arendt’s understanding of the relationship of language and judgment generally, and her judgments more specifically on topics such as isonomy, membership, and collective responsibility. If the cliché serves to short-circuit judgment, then only thoughtful institutions can re-wire the damaged trains of thought and jump-start our self-reflection. After all, our institutions owe us more than results in these changing times: they must also provide the space to judge what has happened and what should be done.

For this symposium, we asked the contributors to reflect on how the work of Hannah Arendt could be applied in an age presented with the idea of “War on Terror.” We gave no restrictions except to request that they focus on Arendt’s own explorations of cliché and responsibility as they relate to the contemporary tension between terror and judgment.

Peg Birmingham elaborates the fundamental challenge of rhetoric to political thought in the present age. Her account of the development of political lying in Arendt’s work follows Arendt’s account of the history of deception and the modern form that such dissembling has taken since the rise of totalitarianism, which she analogizes to “arguing with a potential murderer over whether the future victim is dead or alive,” an argument settled when the murderer shoots the victim. Birmingham diagnoses the efficacy of current rhetoric as hazardizing what Arendt called a ‘lying world order,’ in which reality is criminalized and truth is remolded through a quick and dirty act of violence. She charges modern political deceivers with authorial hubris, the illusion that we can control both our actions and their results. The modern schemer attempts to master the world by remaking facts and history as if they were simply a text to be edited. This was the effect that Himmler’s rhetorical manipulation had upon Eichmann and others, his ‘winged words’ served to rewrite the vocabulary and syntax of ethical discourse with elation and fantasies of omnipotence. Birmingham shows that Himmler’s stock of clichés managed to ‘voice over’ the call of conscience and in so doing, to authorize monstrous evil. In the face of such manipulation, the act of asserting factual truths is the height of political risk, but all the more necessary to create a world that will outlast our brief but inevitable deaths.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl uses the trope of prophecy to work out the novel form deception takes when it confuses image-making for utilitarian realpolitik. She analyzes the different forms such deception took in totalitarianism, McCarthyism, and Johnson’s Pentagon. She contrasts Arendt’s ‘method and example’ with the
ideologies of Progress and Doom, both outpourings of an Enlightenment project to transform and rationalize prophecy until it serves human purposes rather than divine conflict. She gestures towards the murderer’s self-fulfilling predictions when she casts modern intellectuals as ‘Cassandras of the present tense,’ whose explanations, while true, are ignored in favor of fear.

Where Young-Breuhl implies a judgment of the war in Iraq through her use of Cassandra, the prophetic catastrophe, George Kateb asks us to account for what is new and what is not in the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror and its main front in Iraq. Rather than presuming that every new word (‘enemy combatant,’ for instance) names a new thing, he launches an investigation into the rhetorical tropes of the war’s run-up and the political phenomena that rhetoric describes. In so doing he voices a judgment of the war as a novel, but egregious confluence of image-making, self-deception, and totalizing prophecy. Kateb concludes that we are dealing with an intensification of past trends in militant foreign relations and democratic self-deception. He agrees with Arendt that the most dangerous political actors ignore both facts and utility, and makes a case for the charge that the Bush administration is such an actor, whose policies have been pernicious to American interests abroad while ignoring substantial political losses domestically.

Finally, Peter Baehr applies the premise of the provocation to Arendt’s own text. His in-depth analysis of the theory of the masses in Origins of Totalitarianism serves as a warning to those inspired by Arendt’s understanding of the relationship between plurality and thoughtlessness. He reminds us that the totalitarian state was peopled not by terrorized hermits but by ambitious bourgeois householders, who allowed themselves to become organs of the state’s murderous impulses in exchange for advancement and prestige. He reminds us that we must work with the same attention to facts in our readings of Arendt that she asked us to apply to the world. Moreover, he leaves open the possibility that imbricating the supposedly undifferentiated masses would force us to rethink several key concepts in Arendt’s work, for instance, her account of violence and terror that imputes to force the ability to destroy social and political organization. Much of Arendt’s work on power, revolution, constitution and reconstitution is potentially indicted.

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