

Explore the meanings of 'radical evil' and the 'banality of evil' and how they might relate to understandings of evil using the cases of Idi Amin and Adolf Eichmann

Idi Amin Dada was one of iconic leaders of the 20th century. He became infamous through stories of his peculiar behaviour as much as his cruelties. Through looking at some of the descriptions of Amin and academic work surrounding him this essay will consider both Hannah Arendt's theory of 'The Banality of Evil' (1963) in relation specifically to the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the theory of 'Radical Evil', put forward by various authors not least among them Slavoj Žižek (1993). With reference to these theories this essay will explore what different treatments of the concept of evil mean for our relationship to those who are referred to as evil and how these concepts may or may not apply to Idi Amin.

Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) caused huge controversy on its release. The book was a report, as well as a piece of political commentary, on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann was a Nazi SS officer charged with the deportation of Jews to concentration camps of the Second World War. Hannah Arendt's reporting was printed in segments in *The New Yorker*. A central concept of the reports, and later the book, was that of the 'banality of evil'. The concept placed emphasis on the fact that though Eichmann was a man who was considered to be 'evil', he was "neither perverted nor sadistic...[but] terribly and terrifyingly normal" (1963: 276)

Arendt's claim that "[it was] well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he [was] doing wrong" (ibid.) suggests that he passed responsibility to the wider social unit. Arendt writes in the epilogue her version of the judge's summary in a faux-monologue: "under more favourable circumstances it is highly unlikely that you would ever have come before us" (ibid: 278-9) meaning not only that had Eichmann been fortunate enough not to have been caught, but rather more.

First, the banality of evil places evil at a level that is attainable without conscious thought (Bergen, B.J. 1998: 39) or motive (Arendt, H. 1963: 287). This reduces evil from a reified and rarely achieved status to a position like

any other characteristic, where “circumstance” is the only deciding factor in whether a person ends up committing evil acts. This seems to pose a problem of agency; the lived experience of people is of some sort of interrogation into their own psychology. Arendt’s theory does not reify evil, but instead reifies interrogation as she characterises Eichmann's “sheer thoughtlessness” (ibid.) as what led him to act as he did. Bernard Bergen in his book about Arendt refers to this as “the problem of thinking” (1998: 39) that, Eichmann did not have the “ability to see himself by thinking about the meaning of who he is” (ibid: 49)

Secondly, Arendt’s interpretation broadens the meaning of evil to even the most innocuous actions such as the signing of a piece of paper. This redefinition certainly fitted Arendt’s experience of Eichmann and was summed up well in Leonard Cohen’s poem *All There Is to Know about Adolf Eichmann* (1964: 78 *See Note 1*) as not only was Eichmann “Medium” (ibid.) in every way but, he also “*merely...never realized what he was doing*” (Arendt, H. 1963: 287). His *involvement* in what could be classified as evil sentiments are put into doubt by the use of the word “merely”.

Finally, there are two problematic consequences to Hannah Arendt’s understanding of evil. Idi Amin as a subject of similar processes of academic literature helps to illustrate these problems. On one hand, the evil of society or the broad circumstances that lead to evil acts, are left untouched by Arendt’s focus on the individual and their actions. The individual’s responsibility is not totally absolved, but the problem still remains of what, if anything, makes a given situation evil. The case of Idi Amin in this sense is heavily influenced by Arendt’s argumentation. His roots in the Kakwa tribe of Northwest Uganda and his military upbringing have often been cited as having imbued certain values (or lack thereof) during Amin’s youth, though this is rarely seen as excusing his behaviour. A way of illustrating this problem would be to ask: What is evil in what makes someone evil?

On the other hand, Eichmann’s guilt according to Arendt is based on the logic of ‘an eye for an eye’ or as is written in her book “just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations ... no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you.” (1963:

279). Eichmann's guilt, Arendt writes, is not equivalent to those Nazi officers who boasted about "occasional disobediences" (1963: 276). Disobeying orders was not an option for Eichmann according to Arendt "he would have killed his father" (1963: 276). As a result conveying their agency the other Nazi officials do not qualify as banal.

Idi Amin cannot be said to have been completely following orders either since when he committed acts of violence that he is known for, he was in control of Uganda. But it can be said a confluence of forces weighed on Amin and in the Foucauldian sense, were embodied by him (1976: 92-95). The issue here is that the experience of Idi Amin's reign may be classified as evil, but whereas Eichmann was said to have a "lack of imagination" (Arendt, H. 1963: 267). The same cannot be said of Amin.

Facts about Amin's actions while in power can be found in such documentaries as *The Most Evil Men and Women in History* (2001), mentioned in Mark Leopold's work on the subject of Amin and the concept of evil (2009). Public media outlets often cite figures of around 400,000 (Baker, B. 2004: 1494) deaths at the hands Idi Amin as well as the public executions and tendency to keep the heads of his ministerial victims in a fridge to scare his peers (*The Most Evil Men and Women in History*, 2001).

These facts were often accented with rumours, often started by Amin himself, of other acts of violence such as cannibalism. "Amin boasted about his appetite for human flesh" (Pottier, J. 2007: 827), Pottier cites Leopold who affirms that the "stories of cannibalistic practices are noticeable by their absence (2005: 80). The imagining of Amin is also a product of his actions and it is the combination of the lurid nature of his behaviour with his creativity in relation to spreading rumours of his actions that has made him the epitome of 'radical evil'.

To return to Arendt's position on evil, it seems not to negate the radical nature of Amin's behaviour. Its validity in the case of Amin relies on a radical reading of the limits of banality. That is, for Amin to be described as "banal" to the point where he "*merely...never realized what he was doing*" (Arendt, H. 1963: 287) his social context would have to implicate Amin's outcome as a murderous psychopath as necessary. This radical reading of the banality of evil does not seem to fit with the sentiment of Arendt's, which

condemns the “occasional disobedi[en]t” (1963: 276) Nazi officers. Amin had a very specific background, but one of his characteristics was his unpredictability (*The Most Evil Men and Women in History*, 2001). Arendt writes of Eichmann that he “certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post” (ibid.). The same could not be said of Amin.

The geographical area where Amin was purportedly from held a population that was widely regarded as “strong, primitive and potentially violent...[and]...they became disproportionately involved in the colonial army and other coercive institutions such as the police and prison services” (Leopold, M. 2006: 181). Amin’s military upbringing and enforcement of colonial law on his national kin goes some way to explain his volatility towards Britain when in power. What must be interrogated is whether the seemingly creative acts of violence carried out by Amin, surpass the acts of Adolf Eichmann.

The concept of radical evil differs to that of the banality of evil in very drastic ways. To take Slavoj Žižek’s version of this concept, quoted by Mark Leopold in direct reference to Idi Amin, it is described as “a move beyond the simple dualism of good/bad” (2009: 8 *See Note 2*). Žižek expands on this by saying that evil is the “radical reversal of the “natural relationship”” (1993: 96) referring to the natural wish to live rather than die, Amin’s actions are once again reified, into a type of ‘other’ category. This reaction of separation to actions that are seemingly unintelligible seems to be the initial reaction of the critics of Hannah Arendt to the case of Adolf Eichmann.

The radical evil reading of Amin also places him “against the constitutive antagonism of today’s capitalism” (ibid: 223-24). That is to say that evil is based on not conforming to the current, yet arbitrary, paradigms of virtue. This means that instead of Arendt’s reading of evil, which implicates the very nature of normativity as potentially evil, radical evil instead defines it by the extent of the “excess” beyond the *current* normative paradigm of what is good or bad and therefore places a much more substantial agency at the hand of the actor. This reading also is much more culturally relative, taking into account different paradigms and different cultural configurations of evil.

The central problem for radical evil though is its lack of an explanation of Arendt’s banality of evil. According to Žižek, radical evil is characterised as

excessive and as figures such as Eichmann demonstrate, this is not necessary for the experience of evil. Arendt's understanding creates meaning both for what is experienced as banal and as beyond the pale of the good/bad paradigm, it is reductive in the sense that a person is no more than a sum of their parts, but it does not face the same problem as that of radical evil.

This essay has shown the vital importance of our everyday understandings of evil using two prominent public experiences of evil in the West. Through the contrasting examples of Adolf Eichmann and Idi Amin it is clear that both the understandings of evil as 'banal' or 'radical' do not map accurately onto what one refers to with the word in the on a daily basis.

Notes:

1. All There Is to Know about Adolph Eichmann

EYES: Medium
HAIR: Medium
WEIGHT: Medium
HEIGHT: Medium
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES:.....None
NUMBER OF FINGERS:Ten
NUMBER OF TOES: Ten
INTELLIGENCE: Medium

What did you expect?

Talons?

Oversize incisors?

Green saliva?

Madness?

- Leonard Cohen, from *Flowers for Hitler*, 1964

2. Page References for *Sex, Violence and History in the Lives of Idi Amin: Postcolonial Masculinity as Masquerade* were given with the text formatted to size 12, Times New Roman text and 1.5 Line Spacing.

Bibliography

Leopold, M. *Inside West Nile*, James Curry (2005)

Arendt, H. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, The Viking Press (1963)

Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Penguin Books (1978 [1976])

Bergen, B.J. *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution"*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (1998)

Cohen, L. *Flowers for Hitler*, Jonathon Cape (1964)

Pottier, J. 'Rights violations, rumour, and rhetoric: making sense of cannibalism in Mambasa, Ituri (Democratic Republic of Congo)' in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 13, No. 9 (2007: 825-884)

Baker, B. 'Twilight of Impunity for Africa's Presidential Criminals' in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 8 (2004: 1487-1499)

Channel 5, Uden Associates. Tx. *The Most Evil Men and Women in History*, 10/09/2001 – 15/10/2001

Žižek, S. *Tarrying with the negative: Kant, Hegel, and the critique of ideology*, Duke University Press (1993)