

## Introduction

As the twentieth century draws to a close, it is difficult to avoid being overwhelmed by moral nausea. There are well-known numbers: ten million dead in the First World War, a war fought over virtually nothing; roughly forty million in the Second World War, including the six million Jews killed in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps; twenty million or more in the Soviet gulag; thirty million dead as a result of the debacle of Mao's "Great Leap Forward"; plus the millions from a host of less spectacular but no less horrific massacres. Any conception of human dignity that hinges upon the presumption of the moral progress of the species has been shattered by these events.

—Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*

### I.

Rare is the case that the end we imagined at the beginning of a project is the end that we find or that finds us once all is at least provisionally said and done. It might be life or the world, each with its often unpredictable, surprising, and sometimes shocking turns; the work or critical interventions of like-minded (or not) scholars; it might be the unanticipated but unavoidable demands of narratives internal to the text itself that upset the particular trajectory one had thought one would or needed to traverse to turn a set of curiosities into questions and questions into themes and themes into arguments whose development might then shepherd an imagined audience, ideally, through the contained world we call a book. Such has been the story with this collection of loosely related chapters that orbit thematically around issues raised by Hannah Arendt in her 1963 report on the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

A reading of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the context of a graduate seminar I co-taught some years ago led me to begin thinking about Nazi atrocity and its continuously invoked presence in popular discourse and debate.<sup>1</sup> I had no intention at that time—which now turns out to be this project's particular moment of conception—of taking up Arendt or of using her oft-cited and controversial characterization of evil as banal as a point of entry for thinking about or linking contemporary moral discourses, contemporary preoccupations with the Holocaust, and contemporary political life refigured and disfigured domestically and abroad in the wake of 9/11. Yet Arendt's study of Adolf Eichmann—a midlevel bureaucrat in the Gestapo's Department of Jewish Affairs who facilitated the death of millions, murdered no one, and claimed only to have been a "transportation officer"—was both provocative and timely

in its effort to show how a world, ostensibly nested in modernity, could fracture in fundamentally irreparable ways. “The tradition is broken and the Ariadne thread is lost,” Arendt wrote. “If the series of crises in which we have lived since the beginning of the [twentieth] century can teach us anything at all, it is, I think, the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty.”<sup>2</sup>

Arendt’s study of Eichmann led me in a variety of directions but first, not surprisingly, to thinking about genocide. And of particular interest to me were the ways in which the specter of genocide—and here the dehistoricized, decontextualized death world of Auschwitz tends to be treated as the sole, paradigmatic model—was invoked by skeptics of “postmodernism” to underscore the limitations *and* dangers of an indiscriminately grouped ensemble of critical practices that appear, in the view of some detractors, stylishly hostile to notions of truth, value, progress, and rationality or those features typically regarded as hallmarks of modernity.<sup>3</sup> By rejecting all foundationalism, or so the argument goes, the postmodern turn proffers precious few resources for confronting or countering genocide when it appears on the political landscape; and it may well foster genocide’s very condition of possibility. If meaning and truth are social technologies, culturally shaped and contingent, indeed, if the distinction between what is called “fact” and “fiction” or “history” and “parable” is established and maintained (both discursively and materially) “only” through particular relations and practices of power, by what standards or principles are we then to identify, judge, or condemn (state-sanctioned) acts of genocide and those who perpetrate them?<sup>4</sup>

## II.

These are not unreasonable questions. And over the course of the past decade they have assumed additional practical urgency as the more immediate specter of terrorism has joined genocide in ostensibly exposing the bankruptcy of a particular contemporary turn in thinking. Readers might recall that in the confused weeks following the Al Qaeda–linked assault on the World Trade Center and on the eve of fighting a newly declared war in Afghanistan, commentary appeared in the *New York Times* as well as *Time* magazine, among other prominent and popular news venues, that sought to highlight the pernicious character of ideas promoting what some referred to as “a pseudosophisticated relativism.” These ideas, or so it was said, had managed to work their way into all corners of life over the course of several decades only to weaken the nation’s resolve, obscure its judgment, and render it blind to its now obvious responsibility as a

leading world power (and perhaps the only world power able) to use force in a benign and prudent fashion, always already for good.<sup>5</sup> Thus Edward Rothstein saw in the collapse of the Twin Towers—or perhaps heard better describes it—what he insists was an unmistakable “cry . . . for a transcendent ethical perspective.” Rothstein elaborates:

The rejection of universal values and ideals leave[s] little room for unqualified condemnations of a terrorist attack, particularly one against the West. . . . One can only hope that finally, as the ramifications sink in, as it becomes clear how close the attack came to undermining the political, military, and financial authority of the United States, the Western relativism of pomo [postmodernism] and the obsessive focus of poco [postcolonialism] will be widely seen as ethically perverse. Rigidly applied, they require a form of guilty passivity in the face of ruthless and unyielding opposition.<sup>6</sup>

In this same vein, Roger Rosenblatt offered commentary in *Time* that echoed Rothstein’s sentiments; Rosenblatt similarly saw in the collapse of the Twin Towers a clarion call for moral realignment:

One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony. For some 30 years—roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright—the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. . . . The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real—apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity—is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace. No more. . . . Are you looking for something to take seriously? Begin with evil. The fact before our eyes is that a group of savage zealots took the sweet and various lives of those ordinarily traveling from place to place, ordinarily starting a day of work or—extraordinarily—coming to help and rescue others. Freedom? That real enough for you? Everything we cling to in our free and sauntering country was imperiled by the terrorists.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, such charges did not go unanswered. Writing in response to these accusations and other anxious declarations, also in the pages of the *New York Times*, Stanley Fish questioned whether marshaling universal absolutes—a transcendent ethical perspective however defined—was necessarily the best or most effective strategy in defense of democratic ideals, particularly since it was precisely in terms of such absolutes that our adversaries claimed to be acting. Indeed, as Arendt cautioned in the context of thinking about an altogether different moment of political crisis, “The absolute . . . spells doom to everyone when it is introduced into the political realm.” And it “spells doom” for a number of reasons not least of these being that with absolutes there is no need for thought and there can be no ground for disagreement.<sup>8</sup> Moreover,

there is the additional, obvious issue of whose absolute gets to be absolute. This has tended, historically at least, to become a matter of fire power, bloodshed, and body counts. Fish also questioned whether “postmodernism”—“a rarified form of academic talk,” as he described it—while the apparent target of commentary was actually the issue. Speaking specifically to this issue in an article for the *New York Review of Books*, Joan Didion suggested that it clearly was not the issue, that critics had merely been opportunistic and seized the confused, destabilized moment “to stake new ground in old domestic wars.”<sup>9</sup> But on this front, Fish went further than Didion, noting that what, in his words, “seemed to be bothering people” was the idea that the “how” and “why” of 9/11, its precipitating conditions, might not be transparent and were certainly not questions answerable in the utterly reductive manner adopted by the administration and in most cases early on simply parroted by the press. These were not just “evildoers,” and this was not just a matter of a “freedom loving country” being set upon by “savage zealots.” Answering the question of how or why, he urged, required an understanding of a complicated history, logic, and set of motives; and acquiring such understanding was not, in turn, about endorsing or condoning the attack. This latter point may seem obvious, but it required repeated restatement as the field of public discourse constricted. Fish explains:

How many times have we heard these new mantras: “We have seen the face of evil”; “these are irrational madmen”; “we are at war with international terrorism.” Each is at once inaccurate and unhelpful. We have not seen the face of evil; we have seen the face of an enemy who comes at us with a full roster of grievances, goals, and strategies. If we reduce the enemy to “evil,” we conjure up a shape-shifting demon, a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counter-strategies. . . . The same reduction occurs when we imagine the enemy as “irrational.” . . . The better course is to think of these men as bearers of a rationality we reject because its goal is our destruction. If we take the trouble to understand that rationality, we might have a better chance of figuring out what its adherents will do next and preventing it. . . . Is this the end of relativism? . . . [I]f by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversaries’ shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end, because it is simply another name for serious thought.<sup>10</sup>

In the weeks and months following 9/11, there was little patience for drawing out the kinds of histories and connections that Fish and a host of other public intellectuals were insisting might, if nothing else, slow the drumbeat long enough to break the spell of fear and martial inevitability and thereby create an opening for reflection and debate. But a sense of emergency worked

against both, indeed rendered the call for either reflection or debate a sign of weakness and disloyalty. An otherwise alarmed public was encouraged in the impulse to confuse righteous anger with moral clarity and moral clarity with a reawakened sense of unity, purpose, and national ardor. Former secretary of education under Ronald Reagan, William Bennett, saw in this reawakening “all that is instinctually grand about the American character”— a goodness that defeated Hitler and was matched by none, a “new realism” that marked the end of decades of guilty passivity.<sup>11</sup> It was good against evil, indeed, us against them. But as the months advanced and rumor of a coming war now with Iraq entered the news cycle with some regularity, the much celebrated “new realism,” discursively linked to a rediscovered sense of moral purpose, anchored no less to a midcentury struggle against tyranny; this new realism displayed a chilling disregard for the reality, the worldly conditions, that had initially called it forth. But for being part of a larger ideologically driven strategy, what, after all, did Iraq have to do with the attack of 9/11?

That the answer to this question was treated for the most part as a public relations problem is something former members of the Bush White House have since confirmed.<sup>12</sup> But the sense in which it mattered hardly at all at the time is underscored by a now oft-cited account the journalist Ron Suskind gives of a conversation he had with an unnamed member of the Bush administration— widely believed to have been Karl Rove—in summer 2002. In this conversation, it was spelled out for Suskind precisely what the prerogatives of power were with respect to the real in the new world order that had been ushered in with the collapse of the Twin Towers. Suskind elaborates:

After I had written an article in *Esquire* that the White House didn't like . . . I had a meeting with a senior advisor to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend. . . . The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernable reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That's not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other, new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”<sup>13</sup>

What are we to make of these claims, the cynical dismissal of enlightenment principles and empiricism that after all form the basis of the Constitution and democratic political formation this senior advisor had sworn to protect? Moreover, how are we to understand the suggestion that reality is just a matter of

what the powerful make of it and say it will be? And, finally, what happened to the “transcendent ethical perspective” that was supposed to have anchored this new post-9/11 world in which good and evil were unambiguously clear; indeed, what do “good” and “evil” mean in a context in which, apparently, not merely “truth,” but reality itself are regarded as matters of manufacture?

Ironically, or perhaps not, those familiar with Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian War may hear in these comments resonances of claims repeatedly put forward by the Athenians as they subdued friend and enemy alike through subjection and slaughter in pursuit of empire. Insisting that traditional forms of justification and sanction were no longer necessary or relevant—being equal to none, Athenians were answerable to none—Athens proceeded without discursive or material restraint, appropriating what of the world and its inhabitants suited its sometimes capricious needs and interests while regarding its needs and interests as the sole measure of order and meaning: “right, as the world goes, is only a question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”<sup>14</sup> We know how this particular story ends: “the whole Hellenic world convulsed” into civil war, and Athens eventually came to ruin. But more significant still is what happened along the way to precipitate this end: accompanying death in every shape was the collapse of a culture of discourse, of established understandings, shared language, and structures of argument that enabled coexistence even among adversaries. And in this context, according to Thucydides, “words had to change their meaning and take that which was now given them.”<sup>15</sup> What followed was a kind of chaos, for as conventional meaning was destabilized so too were the shared forms and practices of life such meaning made possible. “When the language in which the world is constituted falls apart, it becomes impossible, as Thucydides shows us, not only to act rationally within it but to make satisfactory sense of it.”<sup>16</sup>

Suskind’s conversation with a senior Bush advisor on the eve of what turns out to have been a carefully orchestrated preemptive strike in the Middle East conveys certainly the conceit of power: as we represent the world, so it will be; “We’re an empire now and we create our own reality.” As political theorist Sheldon Wolin observes, “It would be difficult to find a more faithful representation of the totalitarian credo that true politics is essentially a matter of ‘will,’ of a determination to master the uses of power and to deploy them to reconstitute reality.”<sup>17</sup> We know now, nearly a decade later, that this particular “creation” of reality entailed an elaborate campaign of misinformation and deception on behalf of an ideologically driven vision that was as much about changing structures of authority and governance in the United States as it was about exporting freedom to Iraq.<sup>18</sup> From this campaign, the world and country continue to convulse. But more damaging still is the problem that persists of being unable

to clearly discern where precisely the fictions begin and end or what of the real owes itself to the lie: this erodes and is designed to erode a sense of bearing and a basis for taking one's bearing.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, these challenges return us to Arendt and an observation she proffered regarding the nature of what she called "the modern lie" in the context of an early effort to make sense of totalitarian techniques and their lasting legacy:

If Western philosophy has maintained that reality is truth—for this is of course the ontological basis of the *aequatio rei et intellectus*—than totalitarianism has concluded from this that we can fabricate truth insofar as we can fabricate reality; that we do not have to wait until reality unveils itself and shows us its true face, but can bring into being a reality whose structures will be known to us from the beginning because the whole thing is our product. In other words, it is the underlying conviction of any totalitarian transformation of ideology into reality that it will become true whether it is true or not. Because of this totalitarian relationship to reality, the very concept of truth has lost its meaning. The lies of totalitarian movements, invented for the moment, as well as the forgeries committed by totalitarian regimes, are secondary to this fundamental attitude that excludes the very distinction between truth and falsehood. It is for this end, that is, for the consistency of a lying world order, rather than for the sake of power . . . that totalitarianism requires total domination and global rule and is prepared to commit crimes which are unprecedented.<sup>20</sup>

### III.

If terrorism is a recent example invoked to demonstrate what a lack of fidelity to conventional notions of truth, value, progress, and rationality may foster, genocide remains the more commonly cited practice that challenges the postmodern turn in thinking: genocide demands an unambiguous response critics maintain cannot be given if the status of Truth, values, facts, and rationality is in doubt. If conventional knowledge-producing practices are discredited; if there is no universal or universally recognized ground for value;<sup>21</sup> if there is no domain of meaning, judgment, or law that escapes indeterminacy, by what standards or principles are we to identify, judge, or condemn acts of genocide and those who perpetrate them? These are important questions as I noted earlier, but we might ask as well or instead what standards or principles have been invoked to judge and condemn or thwart such acts since World War II? And we find that even with a world organized by a particular regime of truth in which conventional notions of objectivity, evidence, value, progress, and rationality are constitutive elements (or effects), genocide's reappearance has hardly been thwarted, indeed, has hardly been recognized as such except perhaps after the fact.

In a comprehensive study, aptly titled *A Problem from Hell*, Samantha Power notes that there have been at least four major genocides since World War II—Pol Pot in Cambodia, Saddam Hussein in northern Iraq, the Hutus' mass murder of Tutsi in Rwanda, and Serbian efforts to "ethnically cleanse" Bosnia. And were Power writing today, one imagines that she would surely add the continuing debacle in Darfur, with its displaced (2.5 million as of this writing) and its dead (200,000), to this list. These genocides have for the most part gone unacknowledged and/or unchallenged as they unfolded by both the international community and the United States, even while, in Power's words, policy makers "knew a great deal about the crimes being perpetuated . . . [and had] countless opportunities to mitigate and prevent slaughter."<sup>22</sup> What was happening on the ground in each of these regions, in other words, was not in question, nor were any of the many facts of each matter. Indeed, the "not on our watch" principles and convictions of the first world were recited repeatedly by leaders and their representatives in other places and contexts along with the vow, true to the spirit of Nuremberg, to "never again" assume a passive, disinterested posture when confronted with "the terrible crime of genocide." And yet, while ignoring, dismissing, or explaining away the seriousness of the slaughter, first world members of the international community often went to great lengths to avoid (and prevent others from) invoking the UN Convention (on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide). The critical question was not whether lethal violence was being employed (in each case successfully) to decimate marked populations; the critical question for policy makers was what significance to attach to it. And in each instance, determinations were shaped by particular geopolitical interests and worked to shore up the strategic imperative to look away.<sup>23</sup> In the context of contemporary mass murders, in other words, fidelity to conventional notions of truth, value, progress, and rationality saved no one.

What, then, of the dense dissonance that emerges when real-time atrocities across the globe are set alongside contemporary preoccupations with memorializing so as never to forget the mass murder of European Jewry? What of ongoing efforts to institutionalize the "lessons" of that genocide? Do contemporary "real-time" atrocities constitute genocide but for the international implications (and inconveniences) of addressing them as such? I mentioned the study of Samantha Power earlier. Consider the disconnect Power notes at a State Department press conference detailing the status of U.S. personnel and nationals in Rwanda. At this press conference, Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Prudence Bushnell announced the department's decision to temporarily close the embassy amid mounting violence that she described, despite reports from UN Peacekeepers, as yet another ethnic "flare-up." After Bushnell left the podium, Power writes,

Michael McCurry, the [State] department spokesman, took her place and criticized foreign governments for preventing the screening of the Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List*. "This film movingly portrays . . . the twentieth century's most horrible catastrophe," McCurry said. "And it shows that even in the midst of genocide, one individual can make a difference." McCurry urged that the film be shown worldwide. "The most effective way to avoid the recurrence of genocidal tragedy," he declared, "is to ensure that past acts of genocide are never forgotten." No one made any connection between Bushnell's remarks and McCurry's. Neither journalists nor officials in the United States were focused on the Tutsi.<sup>24</sup>

Power casts an especially critical eye at the apparent inconsistencies that pervade U.S. foreign policy with respect to genocide—on the one hand, the rhetorical resolve, domestically, of decision makers across administrations who have rarely seemed reticent to leverage the nation's international position as moral arbiter in matters of human rights and their abuse; and on the other, their practical indifference to "gross ethical barbarities" being executed in some (culturally and geographically remote) region elsewhere. Still, Power concludes that what appears to be a glaring failure to mobilize in a timely manner on behalf of marked populations represents instead the successful pursuit of a twofold objective by leaders from both parties in the United States and the foreign policy establishment more generally. Policy makers in the executive branch (with the passive support of Congress, she notes) have sought to avoid becoming entangled in conflicts perceived to be outside American interests even as they have also sought to avoid appearing morally indifferent to such conflicts. And, as Power sees it, they have "by and large . . . achieved both aims. In order to contain the political fallout, U.S. officials overemphasized the ambiguity of the facts. They played up the likely futility, perversity, and jeopardy of any proposed intervention. They steadfastly avoided use of the word 'genocide,' which they believed carried with it a legal and moral (and thus political) imperative to act. And they took solace in the normal operations of the foreign policy bureaucracy, which permitted an illusion of continual deliberation, complex activity, and intense concern."<sup>25</sup>

I begin with Power's general formulation of the dissonance that emerges when we situate the repetitive injunctions, not to mention fervency, of contemporary holocaust discourse alongside the indifference and (con)strained response of the international community to what have been equally disastrous human catastrophes as they've unfolded since World War II. But moving on now from Power's work and by way of expanding the frame, other thinkers have similarly sought to account for and reframe modern genocide in ways that might demystify the logic of the practice and allow forms of address that include but also go beyond what have become the curiously reassuring polemics and now

comfortable impediments of the paradigm offered up by Nazism. And, to be clear, by “reassuring” and “comfortable,” I mean only to underscore the routine ways in which Nazi atrocity is treated as both a benchmark and an aberration, an event that is both inside and outside history; an event that marks modernity’s culmination or definitive failure; an event that must be understood even while it will forever escape understanding and defy commonplace forms of representation. In each instance, the discursive paths are well worn—but more on this shortly.

Notable among such efforts are the first two volumes of Mark Levine’s projected four-volume investigation, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*.<sup>26</sup> As the title of this project suggests, Levine rejects the notion that genocide can be construed narrowly as a distinctly twentieth-century aberration, the apogee of particular national imperatives, totalitarian tendencies, or cultural forces peculiar to Germany and possibly the former Soviet Union. He argues, instead, for a view that situates “exterminatory violence” in a broad conceptual and historical frame as part and parcel of modernizing processes that are more or less precipitated by “a handful of European maritime states” during the late fifteenth century;<sup>27</sup> that incubate over the course of several hundred years with the colonial expansion of “the West” and the gradual emergence of an international system of rules and conventions as well as global markets; and that culminate in the (geographically, politically, and economically) uneven (re)organization and transformation of territory, populations, policies, and practices into what comes to be known as the “nation-state.”<sup>28</sup> And it is, in Levine’s view, the consolidation and imperial advance of this modern state formation, for all its liberal and liberating constitutional and democratic features (and perhaps because of these features), that brings with it as a constituent component the universal potential for genocide. To be clear: Levine’s point is *not* that the nation-state per se is inherently genocidal but rather that its full emergence by the late nineteenth century fundamentally disrupts the structure and operation of older, ethnically heterogeneous, culturally diverse, politically decentralized world empires—Romanov Russia, Ottoman Turkey, Habsburg Austria-Hungary, and Qing (Manchu) China. In order to survive within an emergent global system of nation-states and remain economically, politically, and militarily competitive, even if only marginally so, these waning empires are driven “towards some form of national, territorially grounded coherence.”<sup>29</sup> And at least one of the means some adopt to achieve this coherence is ethnic consolidation through ethnic cleansing, or what is also called “genocide”:

Align late Habsburg and Romanov ethnic policies with the increasingly catastrophic Chinese and Ottoman behavior towards their subject peoples, in this period [1870–1914], and one cannot but come to the conclusion that what each

was doing was not simply responding to a series of unrelated internal exigencies but a single, relentless wave of *external* pressure which was threatening to engulf them all. . . . What was happening, of course, was a fundamental and apparently irreversible geo-political and economic shift in favor of the West. . . . The Western-led global political economy had arrived. . . . It is not simply a question of whether the new empires were perpetrators of genocidal action against the native peoples they directly encountered. There is also the question of the degree to which their political, economic as well as cultural penetration of the residual empires—puncturing in the process the latter's sense of a discrete universal self-sufficiency, and forcing them into an entirely unequal interaction with the West—was bound to have indirect yet serious repercussions on these empires' own relationships with their subject peoples.<sup>30</sup>

Levine provides an expanded historical and geopolitical framework for understanding the conditions that conditioned genocide's emergence and that function as its contemporary wellspring. In his view, genocide is inextricably linked to modern state formations, specifically, Western liberal capitalism and its particular forms of appropriating and regulating populations, resources, wealth, and power domestically and across the second and third worlds; of creating, distributing, and legitimizing concentrations of wealth and suffering; of generating and naturalizing new regimes of truth; of fostering, perpetuating, destabilizing, or undermining regimes abroad that guarantee, obstruct, or reject Western global dominance.<sup>31</sup> And to the extent that he situates and accounts for genocide in a considerably expanded geopolitical and historical frame, he proffers a significant shift in perspective. Power advances a view, both conventional and widely shared, that regards genocide as something that happens in socially, culturally, politically, and fiscally distinct worlds, an object "out there" or for the most part outside the purview of the interests and actions of first world nations—and thus something to which the first world may or may not opt to react or, even less likely, respond. Levine by contrast insists that there is no outside to these interests, and actions and genocide or at least its condition of possibility is precisely one of their effects.<sup>32</sup>

Whether the verdict is one of distorted ideological (read usually communist or "totalitarian") formation, ethnic conflict, the vestiges of some benighted or god-forsaken strata of pre-modernity, the toxicity is nearly always taken to be a product of mad, bad, or sad polities, societies, structures or predispositions outside or entirely beyond the universe of the ordered, civilized, legally constituted, democratically elected West. . . . The possibility that the emergence of an international political-economic system dominated, controlled and regulated by the West might be intrinsic to the causation, persistence, and prevalence of genocide in the modern world . . . remains an entirely marginal notion.<sup>33</sup>

In its insistence, therefore, that the global economic interdependence of and competition between politically sovereign states has and can have often devastating implications for populations that are or are made marginal, indeed superfluous, to use Arendt's language, by the shifting needs and effects of capital, Levine's analysis compels us to think from and beyond the paradigmatic claims of Auschwitz to reassess what it is we think we know about genocide. His analysis, moreover, throws into sharp relief the ways in which conventional accounts of genocide draw too narrow an analytic frame. Such accounts obscure precisely the broader histories of economic exchange, interest, and interdependencies that not only contribute to genocide's possibility, but make it make a decidedly different kind of sense—a component of global arrangements and the flow of capital, the regulation of goods, and the distribution of suffering, differentially borne among those “who have arrived late at the partition of the world,” rather than a regrettable spectacle that happens within discrete borders elsewhere, precipitated by ethnic or tribal rivalries, class conflict or religious wars, deeply rooted “exterminatory” impulses or politically expedient ideologies that gain social momentum and institutional sanction.

Similarly challenged by Levine's analysis are conventional notions of state sovereignty and the right of noninterference. Both have been central in explaining the reluctance of formal bodies to interfere in the domestic operations of states suspected of or known to be pursuing or sanctioning genocidal activities. Indeed, even at Nuremberg, the war crimes trials that followed Allied victory in Europe, the reach of the atrocity charge was largely restricted to acts committed against civilian populations *after* the outbreak of war in 1939, in effect placing prewar atrocities against the Jews and other marked populations within Germany beyond the Tribunal's jurisdiction. As Supreme Court justice and chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, Robert Jackson, explained, “We do not consider that the acts of a government against its own citizens warrant our interference.”<sup>34</sup> However, through the analytic lens that Levine provides in which geopolitical interdependence is the given, what counts as interference and noninterference is hardly self-evident (and perhaps utterly irrelevant when considered in light of the claims of Suskind's unidentified White House official). In either case, understanding and rethinking the impact and implications of the ways in which this distinction is drawn, policed, and protected is imperative, a critical if preliminary first step in demystifying and addressing the institutionalized mechanisms and the all too familiar structural disparities and displacements that allow atrocity to emerge and, at the same time, remain utterly unrecognizable as such.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV.

If the notion that genocide happens “elsewhere,” outside the frame of first world interests, activities, and direct responsibilities, in socially, culturally, politically, and fiscally distinct worlds; if this notion for the most part dominates how genocide’s appearance in the late twentieth century has been configured and addressed, an oddly similar mode of construction and address can be discerned in contemporary and especially popular representations of World War II’s Holocaust. These representations work principally from the assumption of radical discontinuity and historical rupture. And perhaps the most obvious example in this genre of writing are the densely structured discursive regimes that produce and police the Holocaust as a uniquely evil and unknowable event, otherworldly and without parallel in history. As such, and in some essential sense, it is beyond the limits and for some the possibility of representation. As David Carroll formulates it, the Shoah exists as “the limit case of knowledge and feeling, in terms of which all . . . systems of belief and thought, all forms of literary and artistic expression, seem irrelevant or even criminal”;<sup>36</sup> and as Terrence Des Pres has instructed on behalf of the disciplinary formation that is Holocaust studies, “The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case, and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history. . . . The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead.”<sup>37</sup>

Atrocity images from the period, especially the now iconic images of the liberation of the concentration camps, contribute to and reinforce viscerally what these scholars assert as a matter of fact—that the Holocaust is at the limit of knowledge and feeling. And this sense of being transported to some strange other land of inhumanity works in turn to obscure the larger historical frames and continuities that need to be brought to bear to explain the lethal conjunction of processes and practices that together allowed genocide to emerge as more than an abstract possibility; indeed, that directly facilitated the reorganization of bodies of law around laws of the body and worked to produce systematic mass murder as a highly rationalized and medicalized vehicle for reconfiguring social worlds and political territories. For example, however critical to understanding the formative conditions of genocide in Europe, rarely are the colonial projects of European states in Africa and Asia and the racial-imperial hierarchies that developed through them directly linked to the genocide of the Jews in Europe;<sup>38</sup> rarely are the continental imperialism and tribal nationalism of central and eastern European states regarded as an iteration of these colonial projects; and rarely do we encounter the images from the liberation of the

concentration camps, or images from Poland's ghettos, or images from army records along with the now more widely published "photographic souvenirs" of *Wehrmacht* veterans and think, "this is what the building of an empire entails; this is what imperialism looks like."<sup>39</sup>

A wide-angle historical lens permits the highlighting of critical links and continuities, and these in turn go a significant distance in actually situating Germany's genocide and demystifying it. But no less important for understanding this genocide are the ways in which conventional regimes of knowledge production and collection principally in the domains of science, law, economics, anthropology, and demography worked together to set the stage for the mass murder of marked populations. And here too one finds a pervasive impulse in the literature to rescue these domains from a contaminating association with the program and practices of Nazism. And while this impulse takes a variety of forms, it is expressed most clearly in the insistence that these and other disciplinary arenas were colonized by a political agenda and ideology, much as Europe itself was colonized, and are thus at best aberrant expressions of methods and practices of inquiry that are otherwise disinterested, in the sense of having no binding relation to power, and value-free.

Consider, by way of example, Nazi science and medicine: both are typically bracketed as perversions of "real" science and medical practices, tainted by racially informed policies, irrationally driven by an obsession with identifying pathological alterity, and dangerously devoted to expanding an array of lethal programs aimed at expunging the racial subaltern on behalf of the health of the individual and national body.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Nazi law is similarly implicated as having subverted "real" law. As the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg presented it, Nazi law was a superficial guise, a vehicle and grand alibi, for a criminal conspiracy against the existing international and political order. Indeed, as chief prosecutor throughout the course of the secondary series of twelve trials at Nuremberg, Telford Taylor, notes, Nuremberg itself was selected as the site of the International Tribunal precisely because it represented "the physical geographical manifestation of all that was wrong with Nazi law";<sup>41</sup> how much more dramatic and evocative would the Allies' performance of real law appear, by contrast. And finally, still by way of example of postwar efforts to bracket knowledge-producing fields and practices under the Nazis, consider economics, demography, and statistics. Each of these fields and practices was crucial to rationalizing the regime's management, mobilization, and destruction of populations across occupied Europe. And the efficiency and expansion of each field and practice during this period was largely beholden to IBM and its custom designed and maintained punch card machine and card sorting system:<sup>42</sup> this machine and system allowed administrators to more easily name,

distinguish, and track laboring bodies, reproductive bodies, racially marked bodies, bodies deemed genetically productive or pernicious; in short, to manage what the regime regarded as raw materials in ways that could be mobilized, disciplined, resettled, exploited, and discarded by offices and functionaries as needed.

Regarding the Holocaust as a “kingdom of its own” and the Nazi period as a period of rupture writes radical discontinuity into the record and in effect places the period under quarantine. This works most obviously to stabilize and preserve what Mario Biagioli refers to as a “symbiotic relationship” between knowledge production and “the values of modernity as expressed in the culture of Western democracy.”<sup>43</sup> But pathologizing and quarantining the Nazi period works less obviously to obscure or, at best, render vague the continuities in what are conventional techniques and practices or components of modern statecraft, deployed to map the social and enable both order and governance. Systems of classification and objectification, regulatory regimes, juridical apparatuses, administrative technologies, organizations of knowledge, and their overlapping infrastructures designed to both capture and facilitate life—these were hardly unique to Hitler’s Germany; and they were elaborated in Germany as elsewhere in the context of social modernization efforts to “make the world better.” These systems, regimes, technologies, and techniques have as their object the care and security of populations; and in this respect they are the constitutive components of what organizes the project of modernity. But the point is also that they combined as well to make a death world, or combined to create the conditions under which genocide could appear as an administratively plausible and practical “necessity,” as part of “the price one pays for progress.” These systems, regimes, technologies, and techniques have, in other words, a murderous potential—but a potential that is neither inevitable nor anomalous. The care of life, the distribution of suffering, the administration of death: this is the triangulated relationship on which the German genocide casts an especially bright light, and it is but one, significant, manifestation of the relationship that promised, as others continue to do, a more “perfect” society. To quarantine the period as an aberration, to insist that it poses an enigma in the developmental trajectory of modernity, mystifies to master. It leaves in the end uninterrogated the all too familiar mechanisms and processes by which more deadly worlds are born. As historian Raul Hilberg observes with respect to the German Holocaust, it all began innocuously with a change in definition: do we today recognize the radical potential of such changes?

## V.

Toward the end of an account of the forces that congealed to create totalitarianism's condition of possibility, Arendt noted that the particular techniques of terror and mechanisms of population management were likely to be marshaled again in a world where greater numbers of increasingly isolated strangers would be living in closer proximity, competing for ever shrinking resources; a world in which more people in more parts of the globe could expect to be expelled, to potentially catastrophic effect, by political as well as economic systems that found no place or use for them. "Totalitarian solutions," she wrote, "may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man."<sup>44</sup> That these potential solutions would take new and even unexpected forms went without saying.

What could not be undone in Arendt's view, what was original to the Nazi project and thus subsequently changed the conditions of the lifeworld or the living-together of people after the regime's defeat, were efforts "to make human beings as human beings superfluous." These efforts were evidence of what she called "radical evil"—radical because they represented crimes that were beyond the parameters of extant juridical and moral systems (and here she pointed specifically to the Ten Commandments) and thus could be neither punished nor forgiven; evil because they aimed to kill all that was, in Arendt's view, specifically human in the individual. The concentration and death camps were initially the sites at which this project of remaking was most fully implemented: these were sites where individuals were killed en masse and degraded, to be sure; but they were also, and more significantly for Arendt, sites of experiment for the production of "living corpses" where the capacity for spontaneity, freedom, and solidarity and therefore identity in-relation was crushed.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, a related, integral component of the project of remaking human beings also entailed a shift in the self-understanding of perpetrators. For even as they colonized the world as Nature's chosen, they were also Nature's instruments and as such schooled in their own potential superfluousness, according to its changing needs and demands.<sup>46</sup> As Detlev Peukert notes, to ensure the survival, strength, and triumph of the race, expressed in and through the body of the people, not only were designated enemies of the *Volk* or "pathogens" to be identified and killed; the *Volk* itself would need to be culled: "possibly more than twenty percent of the Aryan population were genetically unfit and [would be] slated for elimination through euthanasia or sterilization."<sup>47</sup> And within this scheme, terror operated in the service of Nature, fixing and stabilizing human beings so that it might then advance unimpeded.

With the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt was led to reconsider her assessment of the Nazi project and in particular her understanding of the character of evil it represented. She stepped away from the spurious grandeur and mythifying effects of an account that saw in the regime's crimes and the criminals that perpetrated them an expression of "radical evil" and moved toward an understanding of evil as "thoughtless" and thought-defying. "It is my opinion now," she wrote, "that evil is never radical"; neither was it, moreover, nor was it necessarily a reflection of evil motives or an expression of natural depravity. The evil she encountered in the figure of Eichmann was better understood, she argued, as the outcome of a certain *thoughtlessness* or inability to think from another's point of view. "One cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann," she claimed, "He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. It was sheer thoughtlessness—by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. . . . [S]uch thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together . . . —that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem."<sup>48</sup>

It is with Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial, her report on the "banality of evil," and the "lesson" with respect to thoughtlessness she insisted the proceedings boldly featured that this study begins. The war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 was an especially important event for a number of reasons. First, as Jeffrey Shandler notes, it was televised and presented as a major news story in the United States; more significant still, it was during these broadcasts that "American television audiences [were] most likely to have first heard the word *Holocaust* used to describe the Nazi persecution of European Jewry."<sup>49</sup> Second, the trial shed an entirely new light on a dimension of World War II that many insist had been ignored, misnamed, or downplayed at Nuremberg, to wit: that Hitler's war had been driven by a virulent anti-Semitism and waged in large measure against the Jews of Europe for whom a "Final Solution" had been imagined and partially implemented. For fear of alienating public sentiment at home—anti-Semitism was still very much a component of American life—and seeking to avoid charges of staging a show trial organized around the emotionally charged spectacle of obviously biased and fallible victim testimony, chief prosecutor Robert Jackson had opted to build a case against the Nazi leadership on documents gathered by Allied forces in the months following the regime's surrender. Indeed, Jackson refused all but a handful of survivors who sought to testify against the Nazi leadership and in effect rendered their stories for them within the narrative frame of Nuremberg's indictments as crimes against the peace. It was, therefore, in the context of the Eichmann trial that Europe's Jews were given a voice and emerged to

bear witness to events that the Nazis had never meant for them to survive. Against all odds, finally, to quote Soshana Felman, the victims were authorized to speak—to create a living record and “writ[e] their own history.”<sup>50</sup> In the words of Gideon Hausner, Israeli attorney general at the time and chief architect of the case against Eichmann:

It was beyond human powers . . . to present the calamity in a way that would do justice to six million personal tragedies. The only way to concretize it was to call surviving witnesses, as many as the framework of the trial would allow, and to ask each of them to tell a tiny fragment of what he had seen and experienced. . . . Put together, the various narratives of different people about diverse experiences would be concrete enough to be apprehended. In this way I hoped to superimpose on a phantom a dimension of reality.<sup>51</sup>

Third and finally, the Eichmann trial is especially important because it begins to organize the Holocaust in large measure as we know and understand it today, as a discrete and coherent event with a distinct narrative structure and set of moral incitements. As Felman notes, “Prior to the Eichmann trial, what we call the Holocaust did not exist as a collective . . . [or] semantically authoritative story.”<sup>52</sup> And while the pathos and affect of that story have been inflected and situated in the popular imaginary of different nations in distinctly different ways, the definitive message across national boundaries was that the Holocaust, while past, could never be just history: it was and would remain a “permanent scar on the face of humanity.” Hausner again:

When I stand before you here, Judges of Israel, to lead the prosecution of Adolf Eichmann, I am not standing alone. With me here are six million accusers. But they cannot rise to their feet and point an accusing finger towards him who sits in the dock and cry “I accuse.” For their ashes are piled up on the hills of Auschwitz and the fields of Treblinka, and strewn in the forests of Poland. Their graves are scattered throughout the length and breadth of Europe. Their blood cries out, but their voice is not heard. Therefore, I will be their spokesman and in their name will I unfold the terrible indictment.<sup>53</sup>

Arendt rejected the terms in which Hausner opened and framed the case against Eichmann and insisted that, however guilty the defendant was—and about his guilt she had no doubt—the prosecution had fundamentally failed to understand both the unprecedented nature of the crime it had called upon the court to judge and the novel nature of the criminal. Chapter 1 of this study, then, takes the Eichmann trial as its point of departure and examines Arendt’s assessment of the proceedings—in particular her assertion that in the figure of Adolf Eichmann she encountered “the banality of evil.” The chapter also takes up the vitriolic debate that her assessment inspired and continues to inspire both in Israel and in the United States.

With chapter 2, I turn to consider the Nazi genocide directly. In describing what opportunities the Eichmann trial missed, Arendt suggested that by building its case entirely around the unimaginable atrocities committed against Europe's Jewish population, the prosecution succeeded in establishing the "who" of genocide but failed utterly to grasp the "how"; to grasp, in other words, how administrative murder became part of the rational functioning of an orderly society. Drawing on the research of several contemporary German historians, most centrally Götz Aly, chapter 2 shifts the focus away from the trial and from the mesmerizing centers of destruction to examine the infrastructure of genocide. Aly maintains that it was the pursuit and repeated failure, between 1939 and 1941, of economic and utilitarian goals drafted by demographers, space planners, sociologists, economists, and anthropologists in the context of social modernization efforts that created the conditions for mass murder to emerge as an administratively plausible and practical course of action.

Although controversial in his effort to piece together the logic of mass murder—he assumes what some consider the suspect task of reconstructing the perspective of the perpetrators—Aly proffers a provocative set of arguments that move to the foreground the material effects of otherwise innocuous, easily ignored, and on the face of it utterly banal systems of classification and registration, of knowledge collection and production. These proliferating systems of classification, regimes of knowledge, and ever more refined matrixes of measurement along with the expanding state apparatuses they engendered were conventional, ostensibly unexceptional (because "scientific") components of twentieth-century statecraft. Under the direction of then-President Woodrow Wilson, for example, they were deployed to racially organize and rationally partition the continent after World War I so as to better serve a lasting peace.<sup>54</sup> And these regimes of truth, modes of order, and mechanisms of governance were similarly deployed by the Nazi state—essential to the spread of terror during World War II and to the formulation of ever more radical solutions that culminated in systematic mass murder. To be sure, state racism and the technocratic, managerial logic animating it were not always and everywhere expressed, understood, or practiced in identical ways.<sup>55</sup> But the critical if often understated or ignored point of some consequence is that they nevertheless constituted (and constitute) a structural feature of nearly all modern states.<sup>56</sup>

If chapter 2 attempts to make some sense of how the unprecedented might emerge from a deadly conjunction of otherwise "mundane" state policy and practice, chapter 3 returns to Arendt's encounter with Eichmann to restage the *how* of genocide on the historically more familiar terrain of individual responsibility and judgment. The centerpiece of this chapter is Arendt's claim that in the figure of Eichmann she encountered evil in the form of thoughtlessness rather

than diabolical monstrosity. Such *thoughtlessness* she described as an inability to think from the standpoint of another; and this inability she regarded as potentially more destructive “than all the evil instincts taken together.” Part of my effort in this chapter is to draw out Arendt’s position while also situating it alongside what is a relatively common, certainly instructive, but nevertheless mistaken rendering that sees in thoughtlessness “merely” an absence of empathy.<sup>57</sup> This interpretive move—equating “thinking from the standpoint of somebody else” with empathetic identification—marks a significant shift in registers in the context of Arendt’s argument. It perhaps understandably follows from the constitutive (though not uncontested) place empathy occupies in contemporary accounts of moral development as well as conventional understandings of what anchors moral sensibility. But there are a number of problems, I argue, with reading Arendt’s Eichmann through the optics of empathy. Perhaps the most consequential is that such a reading renders what she claimed was fundamentally a political failure (a question of solidarity) primarily a moral one (a question of sentiment). A move, then, by many commentators to clarify Arendt’s position ultimately ends up undermining it.

To follow this thread I turn at the end of chapter 3 to Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman’s 1999 documentary/drama, *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal*.<sup>58</sup> Using restored and manipulated (which is to say, extensively edited and remixed) video footage from the Jerusalem proceedings, *The Specialist* follows the narrative arc of Arendt’s argument to interrogate anew what was both novel and commonplace about the criminal, Eichmann, and his crime. It presents and scrutinizes for a contemporary audience the panoply of issues that the Jerusalem court, at least in Arendt’s view, failed fully to grasp. Of special interest to me is the logic of a particular sequence early in the film which then quite inadvertently hijacks its subsequent argument. In this sequence, the courtroom is darkened and we watch Eichmann watching a screen on which is projected footage, originally shot by the Allied forces as they liberated camps across Europe and subsequently used to facilitate denazification in the months following Germany’s defeat. I argue that with this sequence—in which thoughtlessness is staged and clearly enacted or conveyed as a kind of *apathy*—Sivan and Brauman’s documentary inadvertently reproduces precisely the problem it seeks to challenge. In other words, despite the film’s otherwise quite controversial alliance with Arendt’s assessment of the trial—it was referred to as a “forgery” by the former director of the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in part because of this alliance—and notwithstanding its best critical efforts, the apathetic indifference of Sivan and Braumann’s Eichmann reinforces the view that the problem he represents is one of pathology rather than politics, organized by an absence of feeling rather than thought.<sup>59</sup>

In chapter 4 I again step back from Arendt, narratively, to revisit the war crimes trial at Nuremberg whose record the trial of Adolf Eichmann aimed to set straight. I take up what some might regard as a relatively minor or incidental component of the overall legal effort in terms of its bearing on the case, to wit: the use made during the Nuremberg proceedings of the same documentary film footage shown some fifteen years later in Jerusalem (and incorporated in the sequence of *The Specialist*, considered in chapter 3). Introduced at Nuremberg a mere eight days into what was more or less an eight-month trial, the visual texts lent the proceedings a certain visceral immediacy, urgency, and credibility that Justice Jackson's marshaling of documents did not initially inspire. Indeed, at the time the visual texts had everything to do with how (and for what) "the Nazi regime was given official 'criminal status'"; and likewise they have everything to do with Nuremberg's legacy, now, at least as this legacy lives on in popular memory and understanding.<sup>60</sup> Finally, and most significantly in terms of the themes and arguments taken up in earlier chapters, I argue that a certain regime of truth was set in place at Nuremberg with respect to the images that established a set of imperatives (and injunctions) about looking and a powerful set of rules for remembrance and understanding; both we see reiterated in Jerusalem and remain even today more or less in place.<sup>61</sup>

Following an account of the Nuremberg proceedings, I return in the book's final chapter to Arendt and her widely considered but enigmatic characterization of evil as banal: what "this long course of wickedness had taught us," she wrote at the end of her report on the trial of Eichmann, was a lesson about the "word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*." Many commentators insist that she meant only to portray Eichmann as banal, but about this reading I am skeptical. If evil is, as Arendt came to suggest, "action which destroys the conditions of its own possibility,"<sup>62</sup> our attention is directed well beyond the figure of Eichmann to a lifeworld organized now as then by practices and processes that while designed to sustain life nevertheless work as well to efface it.

In what follows, and to conclude now, readers can expect to find five chapters that are linked thematically by a broad and resonant set of concerns. Because the chapters do not follow a strictly linear trajectory that marches toward or culminates in a set of sweeping recommendations or conclusions, they can be read sequentially or in an order of one's choosing. That said, a critical task of this book is to take apart the serviceable myths that have come to shape and limit our understanding both of the Nazi genocide and of totalitarianism's broader, constitutive, and recurrent features. These myths, I argue throughout, are inextricably tied to and reinforced viscerally by the atrocity imagery that emerged with the liberation of the concentration camps at the war's end and came to play an especially important, evidentiary role in the postwar trials of

perpetrators. At Nuremberg, as I noted earlier, particular practices of looking and seeing were first established that have since (and through) the Eichmann trial become simply part of the fabric of fact. They constitute a certain visual rhetoric that now circumscribes the moral and political fields and powerfully assists in contemporary mythmaking about how we know genocide and what counts as such. Arendt's claims about the "banality of evil" disrupt this visual rhetoric and may provide just enough critical leverage to consider how this rhetoric works and on behalf of what; her claims may also go some distance toward explaining the nature of an age that seems content to confuse solidarity and spectacle and is thus inclined to "put up with anything while finding everything intolerable."<sup>63</sup>