INTRODUCTION

This is a study of Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which caused a furious uproar immediately after its appearance in 1963, especially in the American Jewish community. The level of controversy it caused remains unparalleled in political thought; once it broke out it really never calmed down. On the contrary, the first decade of the 21st century has witnessed the appearance of a number of new readings of the Eichmann trial and Arendt's impact on our understanding of both the character of the Nazi criminal and the historical and political significance of his trial.

In this book, I will re-examine both the "original" controversy and its background and some of the recent analyses of the Eichmann trial. I will ask why it was precisely Arendt's report of the Eichmann trial that caused such a heated debate given that she did not say much more in it than many others had said before her elsewhere.[1] I argue that Arendt's book was badly misread or misunderstood for several reasons. A significant portion of these misreadings were intentional and based on the fact that Arendt touched upon issues that were provocative and sensitive to the American Jewish establishment and the state of Israel. These quarters were politicking with the past in

1. In the Netherlands, for instance, Harry Mulisch's depiction of Eichmann as "the calm, dutiful civil servant" was received without much protest (cf. Mulisch 1961/2005) while Arendt's argument of Eichmann's ordinariness was immediately counter attacked. Harry Mulisch covered the Eichmann trial for the Dutch weekly *Elseviers Weekblad*. Similarly to Arendt, he later published his reports in book form revising and adding to his original accounts.

terms of their attempt to control the conceptions of wartime Jewish politics and the significance of Auschwitz for future generations. They attempted to suppress critical assessments of their own wartime policy. Nevertheless, most independent American Jewish intellectuals were also offended by Arendt's report. They found in it accusations of their own political passivity and irresponsibility with regard to the fate of European Jews during the war years.

I argue that these heated reactions can be explained by rereading the pamphlet in its proper context and analysing the debate in the light of this context. I claim that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a political judgement of the trial and deeds of the accused, and should be read as such. In addition, I argue that from a broader perspective, the book may be read as a political judgement of the entire European wartime political culture, both Jewish and gentile. These claims apply to both the interpretations of those who were involved in the controversy and Arendt's own understanding of her intentions in the book. I challenge the participants in the controversy by arguing that their fundamental mistake was – and still is – to argue in line with those who started the defamation campaign against Arendt. I challenge Arendt's own understanding by stating that she actually went much further than simply "reporting" on the trial, as she maintains in the book. She also made her own political judgements not only on the trial and the actions of the accused, but also on Jewish wartime policy and the entire European political tradition and field of thought. Consequently, I argue that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* should be read not as a theoretical treatise of political judgement (in the Kantian spirit), but, rather, as a concrete judgement of specific empirical case and situation.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that Arendt underestimated the possibilities of controversies and protests. As the present study shows, Arendt's "report" is full of accounts that were apt to give rise to vigorous protests. Among other things, Arendt was selective as to the themes she chose to deal with out of the totality of the

trial. For instance, she blatantly ignored the victims' testimony while dwelling heavily on Eichmann's personality and the tactics of the Israeli government. She focused on the normative setting of the Nazi Reich (obeying is accepting) and the political analysis of the wartime situation, suggesting that it could have unfolded differently. Furthermore, Arendt's conception of history as based on the contingency of human action and her rhetorical and narrative strategies based on the systematic use of irony and synecdoche were unusual and provocative. All of these themes were so controversial that it is not at all surprising that they provoked debate. What is surprising, however, is the sheer volume of the debate. While most corresponding provocative textual interventions are passed over in silence, Arendt's book provoked one of the most intense "literary wars" in world history. It is this fact that makes rereading the debate interesting.

Moreover, I argue that the book and the controversy surrounding it are not only related to political judgement. In retrospect, it is easy to see that Arendt's book and the reaction to it were also about politicking with the past. Irrespective of the fact that nobody talked in the 1960s about the "politics of memory," the "politics of the past," "Holocaust studies," or "victim studies," the decisive impetus for the public debate was the hidden controversy over exactly how the politically and ethically ambivalent and controversial war years ought to be remembered and the actions of the Jewish leaders judged.

In order to fully understand what *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is about, we should ask what and how Arendt judged, as it is only through these questions that we can reach the book's core and its gift to future generations. This gift is Arendt's uncompromising stance according to which political meaning – on the basis of which we may be able to distinguish right from wrong in political terms – appears in deeds and not in the essences behind them. In doing so, we are able to see that Arendt was indeed way ahead of her time. She courageously linked and openly stated things that everybody

knew but very few dared to say aloud, thus bringing their political meaning to light.

I will illustrate here that Arendt's critique of the Jewish establishment and Jewish wartime politics in general only become intelligible and clearly visible when related to her early writings on Jewish politics and Zionism, which were published in the 1940s and 1950s. I challenge the widely adopted way of reading the book as a quasi-philosophical treatise inspired by Kantian philosophy. For me, the book is a *political* judgement, which means that its arguments make sense only *in concrete*. The guiding principle of my reading strategy is the Arendtian conviction that political meaning can never be deduced from universal and timeless categories or imperatives but, rather, always emerges from individual events and phenomena.

One possible way of defining judgement is to distinguish it from thinking, which is not situated in a temporal or spatial sense. The act of judging is thinking in a given time and space. Whereas thinking is a profoundly solitary and inherently endless enterprise which does not necessarily require expression, judging always requires being heard and appearing in front of others. This is what connects it to rhetoric: political judgement cannot be expressed, i.e. actualised, without speech acts. It is always expressed in rhetorical form, and it always uses rhetorical skills. Political judgement, along with some other modes of political action, is an activity which takes place, either directly or indirectly, in public.

As a political judgement, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, too, ought to be read as a public speech act. This means that attention should not only be paid to *what* Arendt says but also to *how* she says it and how she presents her arguments. I argue that the book has mainly been misread as regards its rhetorical style and strategy. The most common misreading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the result of readers taking everything Arendt writes literally. This kind of literal reading strategy has prevented readers from seeing and understanding one of the most important aspects of Arendt's rhetorical style, which is

based on the systematic and even extreme use of synecdoche and irony, based very much on the Burkean model. It is virtually impossible, for example, to understand Arendt's analysis of Eichmann's personality and deeds or her critique of Rabbi Leo Baeck without seeing them as full of ironic remarks that are not intended to be taken literally.

Nevertheless, Arendt's use of irony is a central aspect of her political critique and judgement. In other words, for Arendt, irony is a stylistic tool of political analysis and judgement and should be seen as a constitutive element of her textual strategy. More precisely, Arendt constructs dialectical ironies by means of synecdoche, which she understands as a representative anecdote in the Burkean sense. Arendt highlights this irony by putting opposing representative anecdotes against each other or drawing parallels between them. It is by drawing out and highlighting such ironies that she manages to politicise the phenomenon under scrutiny. Things which initially seem self-evident, such as, for example, Rabbi Baeck's wisdom as a Jewish leader, begin to appear ambivalent, doubtful and contradictory when viewed in this way. It is precisely by means of these politicising ironies that Arendt pinpoints the ambivalent and questionable aspects of Jewish leaders and their politics.

A number of Arendt's most important arguments in the book are built upon ironies and paradoxes that are not only sharp but also rather extreme, and quite intentionally so. In my view, her intention was to push certain characteristics of the phenomenon under scrutiny to the extreme in order to illuminate her own point as effectively as possible. The problem with extreme ironies is that most people seem to be unable to face them and admit their politicising effect. Instead, extreme ironies tend to paralyse people's sense of humour and their ability to judge. I suggest in this book that if our goal is to carry out an adequate and well-grounded analysis of politically extreme situations – such as the destruction of the European Jews – we cannot do so without pointing out the paradoxes and ironies related to them, as there are simply too many of them to ignore. I will also

argue that the inability to understand and conceptualise extreme ironies can be interpreted as a sign of political illiteracy and the poorly developed capacity to make political judgements. It is possible that our political literacy and ability to judge can be improved and potentially grow to transgress a certain limit of sentimentality only if we learn to face and read extreme ironies.

In the subsequent chapters I will reread *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the debates surrounding it in the spirit of a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. This means three things. First, I will not provide a general account of the contents of the book, as my assumption is that the reader is acquainted with it. Second, my intentional and unavoidable perspective on the book and the events dealt with in it is that of a scholar who belongs to a later generation and thus has no personal memory of the original context of the Holocaust or the Eichmann trial. More precisely, I approach the Eichmann controversy from the spatial and temporal distance of a scholar who comes from a country in which the number of the Jews has been quite limited and the political status of the Jews has been marginal. This kind of peripheral position provides me with a perspective that allows me to pose and deal with questions that have not been widely discussed so far. Third, I will approach *Eichmann in Jerusalem* from the context of its background, aiming to prove that Arendt's arguments only become intelligible when viewed through it. In other words, I attempt to shape the most relevant characteristics of Arendt's own intellectual, historical, political and personal context, i.e. what she had in mind when she wrote the book. In doing so, I am able to avoid drawing my own conclusions prior to presenting my empirical analysis of the context and debates, presenting my own interpretation only in the final three chapters of this book. Even then, I will not attempt to present an interpretation of everything Arendt wrote, focusing only on the most important arguments of the book in the context of the present study.

My analysis in the subsequent chapters will begin with Arendt's relationship to Zionism. Any reader of the present study should be aware and informed about both Arendt's early writings on Zionism and her personal yet often critical commitment to the Zionist movement. These writings indicate that Arendt was never actually an anti-Zionist, as some of her critics have claimed. Rather, she was a passionate critic of Zionist politics whose greatest dream was that one day the Jews would be able to think politically and create a community of their own in political terms – a community which would allow them to share the world with other groups of free and equal people. During the 1930s and 1940s, Arendt developed a political critique of the Zionist movement and Jewish politics in general. The cornerstone of this critique was the notion that the principal mistake made by European Zionist and Jewish political leaders was that they applied the same general policy of concessions for centuries despite the significant changes which took place in the political situations. The Jewish politics of concessions was based on an understanding of the nature of antisemitism as a permanent, unchangeable, and "eternal" phenomenon. In the context of this understanding, it was impossible to distinguish between different kinds of enemies. It never dawned on the Jewish leadership that the Nazi enemy was entirely different from their earlier enemies and that the application of the same policy of concessions they had used in the past would not work with the Nazis and would ultimately prove fateful for the entire European Jewish population. I argue that it was in the light of this critique of Jewish politics that Arendt also judged the wartime politics of the European and American Jewish leadership.

In Chapter Two, I will review the empirical context of Eichmann's capture and the pre-trial discussion of it in the American press. This is crucial if we hope to reach an understanding of what really happened, as so many untrue or biased versions of this story have been told and continue to persist to this day in the literature on

the subject. It is also important to keep in mind that Eichmann's trial was profoundly political by nature, as Israel's Premier David Ben-Gurion deliberately attempted to use it for his own political purposes. In addition, this chapter points to the fact that most of Arendt's arguments about the trial and the accused had already been presented by journalists and intellectuals before the trial even began. In other words, a fair amount of Arendt's evaluations and arguments may be seen as a kind of summary of the general public discussion before and during the trial. The odd thing is that they were only received as scandalous and controversial when she presented them.

Chapter Three will begin with a description of how Arendt's own stance towards the trial developed step-by-step from the days immediately after the kidnapping to the first days of the trial. Contrary to Karl Jaspers, with whom she actively corresponded during the pre-trial months, Arendt defended Israel's right to indict Eichmann. It was only during the trial itself that she grew critical of many of its aspects. I will continue by presenting the most important aspects of the beginning of the defamation campaign against her trial report and analyse how the "front lines" of the controversy began to take shape. I will also demonstrate that the very first reactions to Arendt's report were by no means exclusively negative and that a campaign had to be organised in order to turn the entire body of American Jewish intellectuals against her. This campaign was based on a very selective and distorted reading of the book. I will argue that the campaign against her was a clear case of political persecution which would stigmatise Arendt for the rest of her life. Hannah Arendt became a victim of the attempt of the leading Jewish organisations to conceal and hide certain unpleasant characteristics of their own wartime policy.

In Chapter Four, I will analyse the first phases of the controversy proper and demonstrate how it originally took shape on the pages of the German Jewish immigrants' weekly *Aufbau*. I will also point

to the fact that Arendt's position in the American Jewish community would probably never have become so threatened without her public excommunication by the highly esteemed Jewish philosopher Gershom Scholem. I will show that the two major themes of the controversy surrounding Arendt's report concerned Jewish cooperation on the one hand and the nature of Eichmann's evil on the other. The debaters were not able to get past this empirical level of the book and really fully grasp what Arendt was trying to say. This becomes most clear when viewed in the light of the analysis of the debate among intellectuals. Because it was less directed and shaped by the Jewish organisations than the debate which took place in the newspapers and weeklies, it provides a good context in which to approach the question of why the entire Jewish intelligentsia became so enraged over Arendt's book. In other words, the debate which took place within the intelligentsia is interesting and important because it was not motivated by direct political or power interests; something else was at stake here. What was at stake was the question surrounding the personal responsibility of American Jewish intellectuals for what had happened to European Jews in particular and what was going to happen to the Jews of the world in general. The Jewish intelligentsia read Arendt's critique of the Jewish leadership as an accusation of its own political ignorance and irresponsibility, which was shaped by self-deception. This is why much of the debate was about what people should and could have known during the 1940s. In addition, it was characteristic of the American Jewish intellectuals that they were seemingly unable to separate Arendt's book from their then ongoing debate over modern Jewish identity, reading it instead as a contribution to it.

In Chapter Five, I will deal with Arendt's ironies and how she used them in her book. I will begin by discussing irony as trope in Burkean terms in order to clarify what I mean by synecdoche and irony in the context of this book. I suggest that Arendt's way of approaching and understanding reality and its events might be

characterised as what Burke refers to as "poetic realism". This poetic realism is very much built upon synecdoche and irony in such a way that it allows the political meaning of the phenomenon under scrutiny to emerge. I will continue by rereading Arendt's ironies in terms of Burkean tropes. I will carry out a closer examination of the three themes in Arendt's book that caused the most controversy. They are the themes of Jewish cooperation and the role of the Jewish leadership, Arendt's thesis of the collapse of political judgement and the character of Eichmann's evil. Finally, I will reread Arendt's own judgement of Adolf Eichmann and his crimes, which she presented in the final chapters of her report. In fact, she judged not only Eichmann the man but also the trial of the man, discussing the lacunae of Western international law. As to Eichmann, she characterised his evil as a particular kind of thoughtlessness that grew into the extensive and pervasive political irresponsibility also exhibited by most other Nazis. In other words, Eichmann's callousness was in no way exceptional amongst high-ranking Nazi officials, but was rather almost too typical an example of the organised irresponsibility upon which Nazi politics was based. The fidelity to Hitler was the reverse side of this very same phenomenon, as the understanding of Hitler's words as law meant that one did not have to take personal responsibility for his or her own actions.

In Chapter Six, I will examine the newfound interest in Arendt's book in the beginning of the 21st century, which is related to various new readings of the Eichmann trial on the one hand and the debate surrounding the singularity of the Holocaust on the other. One of the main characteristics of these new readings is that they tend to exaggerate the impact of Arendt's pamphlet on our conception of the Nazi criminal in particular and the Holocaust in general. I will begin this chapter by introducing some of the periodisations of the phases of remembering the Holocaust carried out by some Holocaust historians. I will then discuss a recently presented thesis according to which Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann has cast a

dark shadow over all attempts to engage in historical research on Eichmann and his trial for decades. Next, I will take up a few of the new readings of the trial, in which Arendt's book is used as a kind of buffer text against which the authors introduce their own readings of the themes dealt with by Arendt. Finally, I argue that Arendt's book has been included in the debate surrounding the singularity of the Holocaust over the past 20 or so years. In my view, recent readings of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* become comprehensible if they are situated in this context.

I will conclude by arguing that in recent decades, Arendt's report of the Eichmann trial has been displaced from its original context of political judgement to that of the dispute over the singularity of the Holocaust and the politics of the past. Attention is not often paid to the fact that Arendt's thesis of the unprecedented nature of the Nazi totalitarianism and the uniqueness of the Holocaust comes very close to the singularity thesis. Nevertheless, what decisively distinguishes these notions from one another is the fact that Arendt never understood uniqueness in absolute terms, which is how the thesis of the singularity of the Holocaust has often been presented in the recent debates amongst historians and other scholars. Arendt's conception of the uniqueness and unprecedentedness of the Holocaust stems from her understanding of the character of political phenomena in general. It is characteristic of the events and phenomena of the human world that they take place only once and without predetermination. Given the contingent character of human action and its outcomes, the events and phenomena of the human world should be assessed and judged in terms of their uniqueness without confusing it with absoluteness, which tends to mystify and depoliticise the events under scrutiny.

I will also argue that many scholars often fail to recognise that Arendt was one of the first critics of the postwar "silence" about Auschwitz. She wrote a number of articles from Germany over the course of the 1950s based on her own impressions of her first

visits to Europe after the collapse of the Nazi Reich. In retrospect, it is easy to see that these accounts were strikingly "ahead of their time". In them, Arendt not only criticised the widespread and widely accepted notion of "collective guilt" of the Germans but also pointed to the pervasive unwillingness to take political and personal responsibility for what had taken place. She belonged to those very few who determinately spoke out on the importance of both remembering what had happened and of passing these memories on to future generations without confusing memory with experience. She knew it would not be possible to actually transmit the experience of annihilation, but suggested that it was possible to tell the story of what had happened; only by telling and retelling not only the story of the Holocaust but of the entire Third Reich it would be possible to really grasp the political meaning of these events and pass them down to future generations.

Finally, I will suggest that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can be understood as one of the first attempts to read the Holocaust politically. In contrast to the present-day scholars of the Holocaust, Arendt emphasised the importance of reading the Holocaust in the general European political context as opposed to separately and immanently in its own terms. While Holocaust studies tend to absolutise and depoliticise the Holocaust by claiming it was an indecipherable and incomparable phenomenon, Arendt invites us to approach it in political terms as an historical and political phenomenon that can be understood only by looking at it in its general context. I will argue that Arendt's book remains controversial to this day because it goes against the prevailing trend in Holocaust studies of mystifying victims and putting them on a pedestal as heroes of survival, thus refusing to see them as active contributors to their own history.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that none of this actually makes Arendt the "mother" of Holocaust studies and "victimology". Instead, Arendt's writings might best be understood as attempts to go against the general currents of her time. These

attempts did not give birth to the field of "political Holocaust studies", as Arendt might have hoped. Arendt's insights into how the Holocaust in particular and the entire European political history of the 20th century in general might be read politically remain primarily unused. This provides present-day scholars of political theory and the Holocaust with a valuable source of research material and methodology.