

2. Phantasies of Omnipotence

In 1886 Friedrich Nietzsche noted in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “PROPORTIONATENESS is strange to us, let us confess it to ourselves; our itching is really the itching for the infinite, the immeasurable. Like the rider on his forward panting horse, we let the reins fall before the infinite, we modern men, we semi-barbarians—and are only in *OUR* highest bliss when we *ARE IN MOST DANGER*.”¹

What followed in the 20th century was full-blown immoderation and positioning on the fringes of extremism: the rule of totalitarian dictatorships, the Holocaust, and the use of the atomic bomb. The world seemed to end, as it did in every country impacted by civil war, state terrorism or armed groups after the Second World War and the Holocaust, such as Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Somalia, Syria, or Colombia.

What is it about Nietzsche’s statement that “our itching is really the itching for the infinite, the immeasurable”? I would argue that it is about transgressing boundaries and the feelings of omnipotence that produce such extreme criminals as Adolf Eichmann, the organiser of the extermination of the Jews, or Anders Breivik, the mass murderer in Norway. And, as we see with Breivik, this does not require a totalitarian society; extreme violence already exists in our society.

The capacity to act violently and to use violence is an intrinsic human capacity, something we forget in countries where the state monopoly on the use of force is effective, and violence seems largely banished from public life. The violence I am dealing with here serves as a force of order in a contested field, the distinction between Us and Them, Good and Evil, and the highest form of violence, omnipotence, conveys the sense of being master over life and death.

What makes the matter even more precarious is the fact that from our earliest childhood we are all no strangers to the feeling of omnipotence. I will first explain this briefly and then present three forms of border transgressions in more detail: those of hooligans, of military snipers, and those of the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik. Finally, I would like to ask what relations exist between Hannah Arendt’s thesis of the banality of evil and these forms of violence.

1 Friedrich Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 224

First, however, to our early childhood experience of omnipotence, from which arises a persistence of the pre-social in the human being.

A Controversy about the Persistence of the Pre-social in Humans

The American philosopher and psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook explained that there is an early childhood experience of omnipotence; according to Freud, at this earliest age there is no experience of limits and of the existence of others with equal rights. This means that “it was not capitalism ... that gave rise to human egoism, aggression and acquisitiveness; the potential for this was part of our basic anthropological and psychological equipment from the very beginning.”² In addition, “virtually all psychoanalytic theorists ... agree that experiences of omnipotence are a feature of both normal and abnormal childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Examples of this can be found in religious, aesthetic and erotic experiences, states of infatuation, in mass phenomena, and in certain forms of psychosis.”³

With this statement, Whitebook opposes an overly optimistic attitude of the philosophers Habermas and Honneth, who focussed on the possibilities of a free and rational society and mutual recognition. They did not appreciate what Whitebook calls the “work of the negative”⁴, that is, the persistence of human aggression and non-recognition. There is therefore not only the struggle for recognition, but equally the struggle for de-recognition, for humiliation and negation of the Other.⁵ In the development from a pre-social to a socially shaped being, a personality emerges, according to Whitebook, which to varying degrees continues to carry the pre-social.

Furthermore, Whitebook also relates creativity to destructiveness. Thus, the high level of creativity we see in science, art, technology, business and not least in global finance is also often accompanied by a high level of destructiveness. “Indeed, the idea may not be implausible that in modernity the magnitude of creativity and destructiveness are coextensive.”⁶

So we can conclude that both destructiveness and creativity are accompanied by Nietzsche’s “itching for the infinite, the immeasurable”, the feeling of being able to

2 Joel Whitebook Wechselseitige Anerkennung und die Arbeit des Negativen, in *Psyche*, 2001, 55/8, p. 759.

3 Joel Whitebook Die Grenzen des intersubjective turn. Eine Erwiderung auf Axel Honneth, in *Psyche*, 2003, 57/3, p. 254.

4 Joel Whitebook Wechselseitige Anerkennung und die Arbeit des Negativen, op. cit., pp. 755–789

5 Hans-Joachim Busch Intersubjektivität als Kampf und die Anerkennung des Nicht-Intersubjektiven. Kommentar zur Honneth-Whitebook-Kontroverse, in *Psyche*, 2003, 57/3, p. 265.

6 Ibid. p. 59f.

master the challenges of the uncertain, the feeling of omnipotence, of being able to create and destroy, and to decide over life and death.

What does this look like in concrete terms? I want to describe this using three forms of border crossing as examples and at the same time concentrate on two questions – Why does it happen? And how does it happen?

Why Cross the Border?

In the first example, the answer to the why of extreme violence by hooligans is: desire for violence and temporary border crossing. Hooligans are football fans who differ from normal fans by a high degree of willingness to use violence and aggressiveness. They appear in larger groups and seek confrontation with similar opposing groups during or after football matches. There is a certain code of honour that the violence should be brutal but not deadly, that no bystanders are attacked, that no weapons are used and that the groups should be approximately equal in size. However, there are always clear deviations from these rules.

It is remarkable that the hooligans belong to the lower and middle classes, that their appearance is not an expression of social disadvantage and unrest, not a problem of insufficient education, nor of conspicuous mental problems. The vast majority of hooligans are normal neighbours.

These are ritualised fights of violent men between the ages of 14 and late 40. It is not about destroying the opponents, but only about defeating them. In this respect, their violence has nothing to do with the search for *omnipotence*, but with *power addiction*. Nevertheless, there is something in their behaviour that can open the way to omnipotence, which they themselves call a “kick”. It is a rush of violence that can be generated in a short time and only barely stops at the destruction of the other.

The American journalist Bill Buford lived for a time among British hooligans and observed in himself the excitement of each border crossing as a transcendent feeling that increased to ecstasy and made him, the individual, completely absorbed in the mass. “Violence is one of the most intensely lived experiences and, for those capable of giving themselves over to it, is one of the most intense pleasures”.⁷ It is possible in the fusion of individual and mass through violence to increase violence continuously. It does not need leaders – Buford experiences how the masses create and control themselves. And he compares his experiences with the theories of violence of Hippolyte Taine, Gustave le Bon and other scientists in the 19th century, who report of vagrants and criminals, of the overexcitable and the half-mad, of “people without reason, judgement or discrimination, who, because they are incapable of

7 Bill Buford: *Among the thugs*, London: Arrow Books 1991, p. 204.

thinking for themselves, are susceptible to agitators”⁸. None of this applies to hooligans. It is simply this “extraordinary, raw, uncontrollable force ... (that) is in all of us”⁹, or at least in the men, and precisely that work of the ever-present negative that Whitebook speaks of.

As far as crossing the border to omnipotence is concerned, a German police officer who was a member of a hooligan group in Bielefeld on his weekends for seven years describes in his memoirs how far the threshold between the feeling of power and the search for omnipotence can sink in the addiction to the experience of violence. Namely, when one of the hooligans tells him how much he wants to go even further beyond the limit of what is permissible – to the point of killing an opponent, so that, as he says, he can also experience the feeling of killing.¹⁰

The second phenomenon of crossing borders that I would like to present here briefly concerns snipers and also mercenaries, whose answer to the why of crossing borders is the desire to kill. The American Chris Kyle became the most successful sniper of his time during four missions in the Iraq war. Between 2003 and 2009, he officially shot 160 enemy combatants, but according to his own account, he shot over 250. Chris Kyle loved guns, at the age of eight he received his first rifle. He joined the SEALs, the special forces of the US Navy, his profession became killing, his field of work was war. “The first time you shoot someone, you’re shaken up. You think, can I really shoot this guy? Is it really okay?’ But after you kill your enemy, you see it’s okay. You do it again. And again. You do it so the enemy won’t kill you or your countrymen. You do it until there is no one left for you to kill.”¹¹ The killing finds justification in the existence of the enemy: “Savage, despicable evil. That’s what we were fighting in Iraq. That is why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy ‘savages’. There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there. ... I only wish I had killed more.”¹²

When his marriage threatened to fail, he returned to the USA. Death remained his theme there as well. For a while, he was involved in serious fights and was an alcoholic, shot two car-thieves as a civilian, founded a company to train snipers and looked after traumatised veterans by taking them to shooting ranges, among other things. He was finally shot by one such traumatised soldier on a shooting range in 2013. Chris Kyle received many awards; the nation was proud of him.

8 Ibid., p. 208.

9 Ibid., p. 179.

10 Stefan Schubert *Gewalt ist eine Lösung. Morgens Polizist, abends Hooligan. Mein geheimes Doppelleben*, Munich Riva 2022, p. 239f.

11 Chris Kyle / Scott McEwen / Jim DeFelice: *American Sniper*, New York: Harper Collins, 2014, Prologue.

12 Ibid.

Kyle crossed the line into the pleasure of killing, but not the line into war crimes beyond “civilized” war. Others also crossed that line into war crime with ease. In the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s, for example, militias fought militias and snipers received bounties for people killed, including women and children.¹³ In Sarajevo in the 1990s, the civilian population was fair game for snipers posted on the mountains above the city.

The desire to kill is also widespread among mercenaries. To give just one example, an estimated 100 German mercenaries took part in the Kosovo war at the end of the 1990s, including a paratrooper dishonourably discharged from the German army, who carried out terrorist attacks and murdered dozens of people in the process. Neo-Nazis from Germany and Austria also took part, travelling to Bosnia over the weekend to fight alongside Croatian troops. Their pay was the spoils, and some of them became rich in unknown ways.¹⁴

The third form of border crossing is embodied by the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik. His border crossing was not primarily about the desire for violence or killing, but was ideologically justified to an extreme degree. In 2011, he carried out a bomb attack in the government district of Oslo, killing eight people, then drove to a holiday island disguised as a policeman to call together the young people of a social democratic camp and subsequently murdered 69 of them in a massacre lasting more than an hour. Before committing his crimes, he assumed that he would die in an exchange of fire with the police. To explain his reasons, Breivik had written a 1500-page manifesto entitled *2083 A European Declaration of Independence*, which he sent to 1003 e-mail recipients shortly before the attacks. Breivik was judged sane at the time of the crimes.

In court, he explained that he represented a Norwegian and European resistance movement that opposed liberals and representatives of a multicultural society. The latter had established a cultural Marxist dictatorship since 1968 and were allowing the Norwegian indigenous population to be outnumbered by a constant influx of migrants. This would lead to a loss of social cohesion and a crisis in the economy. Therefore, national resistance of the “indigenous population” was necessary. His goal was not a national dictatorship, but an ethnically segregated society like that of Japan or South Korea.

Breivik, unlike many hooligans or the American sniper, had been a difficult child, had started a number of businesses that failed, had undertaken criminal dealings, and had eventually moved back into his mother’s flat unemployed. But mass murder

13 Jussuf Naoum *Der Scharfschütze. Geschichten aus dem libanesischen Bürgerkrieg*, Fischerhude Brandes & Apsel 1983, p. 63.

14 <https://www.derstandard.at/story/644240/rund-hundert-deutsche-soeldner-in-ex-jugoslawien-aktiv> (2022/10/3)

does not follow from all this. For that, it took a free decision and overcoming the inhibitions of crossing the boundaries.

How to Cross the Border

For all perpetrators, crossing the border from a world of legal and moral norms to the world of the forbidden is difficult. It requires its own justification as legal, as legitimate, as morally right, or as obeying a higher law. In this process, new individual or collective norms are worked out. If they sound plausible and are also shared by others, the level of personal responsibility can be lowered, and the transition takes place all the more easily. The hooligans have their code of conduct, which includes bodily harm and damage to property, but excludes manslaughter. The rapid crossing of boundaries required from one hour to the next is considerably easier in a large group. It is legitimised by the mutual voluntariness of the fights with hostile groups and is additionally accelerated by large quantities of intoxicants.

Professional snipers in a regular army carry out a legal activity through their state mission, which legally distinguishes between killing and murder, war and war crimes, and is morally justified by the enemy image of the bad guys, the invocation of values such as human rights, or reason of state. As with all groups and all perpetrators, violent action crossing the border is a matter of short-term habituation. Already the second street fight, the second shooting is much easier.

Snipers in non-regular militias replace legality with their group affiliation and the invocation of an overriding legitimacy that must be particularly exaggerated in view of the border crossing to war crime or crime against humanity.

The same happens in guerrilla groups. The essential prerequisite is the ideologically based dehumanisation of the potential victims and their own transformation into cold-blooded killers. Relatives or so-called lackeys of “imperialism” must not only be murdered, but the murders must be carried out as cold-bloodedly as possible in order to have the greatest possible effect. Thus, the adventurer Che Guevara declared in his “Message to the Tricontinentalists” in 1967: “Hatred as a factor of struggle; the unyielding hatred towards the enemy that drives far beyond the natural limits of a human being and transforms it into an effective, violent, selective and cold killing machine. Our soldiers must be like that.”¹⁵ Similarly, in 1970, German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, a respected journalist who had gradually become radicalised as part of the student movement, justified violence first against property, then against people, and finally the cold-blooded murder of police officers: “We say, of course, the cops are pigs. We say the guy in uniform is a pig, not a human being. And so we have

15 Che Guevara *Message to the Tricontinental*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm> (2022/10/2)

to deal with them. That means we don't have to talk to him, and it's wrong to talk to these people at all. And of course, they can be shot. Because we don't have the problem that these are human beings, insofar as their function or their job is to protect the crimes of the system, to defend and represent the criminality of the system."¹⁶

Where the perpetrator acts alone, as Breivik did, a particularly strong ideological justification must replace the lack of exoneration by the collective, whether state, ethnicity or group. Hence the scenario of a seemingly fantastic present that appears highly threatening due to an overpowering enemy, hence the self-image as a member of an ethnic group threatened with extinction, and hence not only the justification but also the presumed immortal merit of sacrificing oneself for this ethnic group like a martyr. But ideological isolation from reality alone is not enough to commit mass murder as a lone perpetrator. Breivik knew that he had to distance himself emotionally from his fellow human beings beforehand. He avoided interpersonal contacts for months and spent his time exclusively playing killer games on the computer.

The Banality of Evil

What differs from these forms of violence is state-wide organised terror, as first practised in the 20th century by totalitarian rule encompassing the whole of society. In a letter to her teacher and friend Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt characterised the difference between conventional and totalitarian violence as that "between a man who goes to murder his old aunt and the people who, as it were, without any direct calculations of utility ... build factories, for the production of the dead." And Arendt surmised that in the process "it is not individual human beings who are beaten to death for human reasons by other individual human beings, but an organised attempt is made to eradicate the concept of man."¹⁷ To do this, human beings must be made superfluous, which is more than merely using them as a means to an end or violating their human dignity. "All this ... is connected with the delusion of man's omnipotence (not simply addiction to power). If man *qua* man were omnipotent, then indeed it would be impossible to see why men should exist ... man's omnipotence makes men superfluous."¹⁸ This difference between an addiction to power that

16 Ulrike Meinhof, in *Natürlich kann geschossen werden. Ulrike Meinhof über die Baader-Aktion*, in *DER SPIEGEL* 25/1970, p. 74. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-44931157.html> (2022/10/3)

17 Hannah Arendt / Karl Jaspers *Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, Munich-Zurich Piper 1985, p. 106 (17 December 1946).

18 *Ibid.*, p. 202 (4 March 1951).

wants to control others and omnipotence that wants to dispose of the bodies of others and their lives like God is the difference between pre-totalitarian and totalitarian society.

Unlike Breivik, Adolf Eichmann did not murder anyone, or even use physical violence. He had “only” organised the transport of over 5 million Jews to the sites of their murder. He did not act as an individual perpetrator, but as a leading functionary of a totalitarian apparatus of domination and extermination, whose actions were accompanied by an ideologically closed world view of friend and foe, domination and race. However, Arendt also discovered in him a pleasure, namely that of functioning well. In an interview with Joachim Fest, she said he wanted to “join in. He wanted to say ‘We’, and this taking part and this wanting to say ‘We’ was quite enough to make the greatest crimes possible. [...] In this acting there is a very great feeling of pleasure.”¹⁹

In contrast to the psychoanalyst Whitebook, Arendt was not interested in the anthropological possibility of a “work of the negative”, but rather in the question of how completely normal people organise state-planned genocide without batting an eyelid, and in the next moment, as law-abiding citizens in a democracy, are not guilty of anything. In the postscript to her trial report *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt wrote of Eichmann that “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post.”²⁰ “No motives” here means no base motives.

Just as political science had no explanation available for totalitarian rule, Arendt could find nothing useful about the phenomenon of Eichmann in the philosophical or even theological theories of evil. Kant examined the conditions of a self-orientation and self-responsibility of man along the great questions: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope? What is man? Evil, for Kant, like good, is a matter of free will – of wanting to do evil. Eichmann, on the other hand, did not primarily want to do evil, but to be part of what everyone was part of, to get a leading position and to function particularly well there. He was not a conventional murderer, Arendt explained, “He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*.”²¹

What we do when we think, and what we do when we act, therefore became for Arendt the central issues facing us today in modern mass societies. That Eichmann was very creative as a functionary does not contradict his inability to think and judge

19 Hannah Arendt / Joachim Fest *Eichmann war von empörender Dummheit. Gespräche und Briefe*. Munich-Zurich Piper 2011, p. 38f.

20 Hannah Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report of the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press 1965, p. 287.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 287.

humanely, to distinguish right from wrong. This inability, according to Arendt, was also expressed in his language. His language during the trial was bizarre, whereby the horrific sounded comical to Arendt's ears, as did his "heroic fight with the German language"²², in which he mixed metaphors and strung together clichés. "The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, ..." ²³ This was also evident in the many conversations with former SS member Willem Sassen and other Nazis in Buenos Aires in the late 1950s, which were recorded on tape and have been preserved as the so-called Sassen Protocols. Eichmann, seeking recognition, appeared as a pompous expert in extermination, but he also used strangely crude language²⁴.

As a good functionary, he boasted of having done a proper job of exterminating the Jews. He didn't have to concoct any ideological exaggeration; average anti-Semitism and a warlike world view with a final battle between Nazis and Jews were enough for him to do everything for the smooth functioning of the state extermination programme. He knew that he had crossed a boundary in a hitherto unknown way, but that was beside the point, because the whole state had crossed that boundary, and he, Eichmann, was protected by the state, so that on the one hand he could boast of his deeds to the former functionaries, and on the other hand he could declare to the representatives of the old world of law and morality that he had been only a small cog in a large functional structure.

Finally, the question: What do hooligans, snipers and Breivik have in common with Eichmann? They belong to what Arendt called the elements and origins of total rule in non-totalitarian modernity. The totalitarian movement did not come from outside, rather it arose within its own society. It gathered together all those who, in Kant's words, wanted evil and were characterised by hatred, humiliation and the work of the negative. Eichmann, however, had gone a decisive step further – no longer wanting evil but wanting to function well in totalitarian society. There were two stages: the conquest of power and the institutionalisation of totalitarian omnipotence. Arendt also described these two stages of the Nazi movement: "In contrast to the earlier units of the SS men and Gestapo, Himmler's overall organization relies not on fanatics, nor on congenital murderers, nor on sadists; it relies entirely upon the normality of jobholders and family men."²⁵ The English historian and

22 Ibid., p. 48.

23 Ibid., p. 49.

24 Bettina Stangneth: *Eichmann before Jerusalem – The unexamined life of a mass murderer*, London: Vintage 2016, *passim*.

25 Hannah Arendt: *Organized Guilt*, in: *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, New York et al.: Harcourt, Brace & Company 1994, p.129.

Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw summed up this development with the simple and apt sentence: “The road to Auschwitz was built by hate but paved with indifference.”²⁶

Written in 2016. First Published: El mal como omnipotencia: ir más allá de los límites, in: Antonio Gómez Ramos/Cristina Sánchez Muñoz (eds.): *Confrontando el mal. Ensayos sobre violencia, memoria y democracia*, Madrid: Ed. Plaza y Valdés 2016, pp. 51–68.

26 Ian Kershaw: *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich, Bavaria 1933–1945*, Oxford University Press 2002, p. 277.