6. Who is Capable of Acting? Some Thoughts on the Importance of Personality

> "The miracle that saves the world from its normal, 'natural' ruin."
> – *Hannah Arendt on 'Action'*

Non-action and the Dilemma of Action in the Contemporary World

Hannah Arendt makes an intriguing supposition, namely that often, when all political action has died away, as during the totalitarian domination of Eastern Europe after the Second World War, all of a sudden people start to act and initiate a new beginning. It happened in Hungary in 1956 when the miracle of unexpected action led to a whole revolution. Though the revolution was crushed, it showed that action and a new beginning were possible even under extremely difficult conditions. This was followed by the "Prague Spring" of 1968 and finally the peaceful revolution in Eastern Europe in 1989. All these new beginnings were inspired by the knowledge that beyond the totality of the factual world, of "real existing socialism", there was another world, which was not identical to "real existing capitalism". That new world consisted of an open orientation towards the future, and in the free decisions of its actors, but it also consisted in the conservation and recovery of the 'suppressed and the replaced'.

In her theoretical essay on the Hungarian Revolution, Hannah Arendt describes with the help of an example she found in a newspaper what the persistence of the suppressed and the possibility of an alternative meant. This example deals with the Russian writer Boris Pasternak who was not killed under Stalin or forced into exile but nonetheless, as a form of protest, remained silent for decades. In 1946 he was invited to give a lecture in Moscow attended by "a huge crowd" although his name, after all the years of silence, was only known as a translator of Shakespeare and Goethe into Russian. He read some of his poems, but while reading an old poem, the sheet of paper slipped out of his hand." Arendt then continues citing from the text of the newspaper: "At that moment a voice in the room continued to recite the poem by heart. From several corners of the room other voices were heard. And the recita-

tion of the interrupted text ended in a chorus."[1] The suppressed and replaced had remained present the whole time.

Not only totalitarianism presents a challenge for the question as to whether or not independent thinking and action is possible – so too do our own times. Since the end of the bi-polar era and the Cold War, a vast transformation is circling the two poles: neo-liberalism on the one hand and terrorism on the other. Neo-liberalism, consisting of the withdrawal of the state, increased privatization of public services, increased public debt and the uncontrolled activities of banks and financial institutions[2]; terrorism, as a synonym for ethnic wars, declared by terrorist groups against whole populations or states to which those states respond and retaliate through asymmetric warfare and secret state and private surveillance programmes undertaken by intelligence agencies and business groups.

We are facing a dilemma, because the apparent conclusion is that there is no alternative, either in the conduct of finance as it pertains to crisis management of the global economy or of the conduct of the state regarding questions of national security. At the same time the criteria are lost by which we judge arguments and actions. Salman Rushdie asks who in our contemporary world can be regarded as a courageous politician? Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro as opponents of "imperialism"; or the French president Nikolas Sarkozy, who intervened militarily in Libya in order to support the insurgents against Gaddafi; the governor of the province of Punjab in Pakistan, who defended a Christian woman sentenced to death because of "blasphemy"; or the governor's bodyguard who killed him and was hailed in court and showered with rose petals by the public?[3]

Any action in the tradition of Hungary in 1956 or Prague in 1968 seems to be not just risky but clearly dangerous, because of the possibility of failure. Whistleblowers in the United States defending freedom of information are persecuted, as are users of Twitter in the Arab world defending freedom of speech and religion. The general conclusion might be: do not risk anything, do not endanger yourself, and therefore, do not act.

Moreover, it seems as if in a constitutional state with more or less well-organized institutions everything should work on its own: the constitution and democratic institutions, regulating general issues and caring as much as possible for the enforcement of the laws that ensure justice. During the European crisis most governing

1 In the German publication of Hannah Arendt: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution, in: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cleveland: Meridian 1958: Die Ungarische Revolution und der totalitäre Imperialismus, in: *In der Gegenwart, Übungen im politischen Denken II*, Munich: Piper 2000, p. 98. (Translated by WH)

2 See Wolfgang Streeck *Gekaufte Zeit. Die vertagte Krise des demokratischen Kapitalismus*, Berlin Suhrkamp 2013.

3 Salman Rushdie Wir müssen unsere Stimme erheben, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 2 May 2013.

politicians argue using a slogan of Margaret Thatcher: 'There is no alternative', so opposing views are silenced, and the crisis continues.

In addition, there is a common attitude among politicians that they do not need to study politics and the experience of those who have acted in the past. Very different from Machiavelli, for example, who compared his own experiences with those compiled by the classical historian Livy in order to discover similarities and to draw conclusions. In a similar way, there is the widespread opinion among academics and the public that theories are created at desks nearly out of nothing, that they are developed by hard, logical work by specialists and groups of investigators at universities and in think tanks.

But the life and work of Hannah Arendt proves the opposite. Her own work was based on her experience as a Jew, refugee and political thinker and actor. She also took into consideration the experience of others as lived according to the circumstances of their own times. For example, shortly before her emigration she began to study the problems of assimilation with the example of the Jewess Rahel Varnhagen in the form of a history, which Varnhagen "could have told herself … the description (following) the reflexions of Rahel with the best possible accuracy"[4] and that made any further interpretation unnecessary. In her book about totalitarianism Arendt describes the encounter of European colonialists with the inhabitants of Africa, drawing on Joseph Conrad's novella "Heart of Darkness" to trace the profound dismay and racism of the Europeans. And also the story about Pasternak's lecture plays a key role for Arendt in analyzing political phenomena.

In her seminar "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century", Arendt exclusively used literary and autobiographical documents, quite unusual in a seminar on political science, to make accessible real historical events as a mechanism for enlarging their mentality and to help them to acquire the facility of judgement. Theory for Hannah Arendt meant understanding, not science.[5]

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4 Hannah Arendt *Rahel Varnhagen. Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik*, Munich Piper 1981, p. 10–11.

5 In the notes for her seminar in 1965 Arendt asks at the end of her introduction: "What has this [the theory of the enlarged mentality, WH] to do with political theory? Distinction between theory and thought: Every event that is remembered at all is being thought about. The telling of a story is the appropriate way of thinking about it. Out of this comes Theory. Theory, made in the present, is like all present time between past and future – that is between remembrance and anticipation. Kafka's parable: The two forces acting upon man out of which he thinks and acts. This is not theory, but it certainly is the determination of the location of the theorists." Arendt: *Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century*, lectures, 1965, in: Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., sheet 023762. Published in parts, in Wolfgang Heuer / Irmela von der Lühe (eds.) *Dichterisch denken. Hannah* Arendt *und die Künste*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2007, pp. 213–223.

In her notes for the seminar "History of Political Theory" given at the University of California at Berkeley in 1955, she distinguished between authors and commentators. Concerning the classics of modern political thought; Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu, Arendt was not interested in them as theorists but as thinkers. Experiences, according to Arendt, precede words and not vice versa. She was interested in the quality of those experiences and how this was reflected in their writings. She was quite sceptical regarding the field of political theory. Political theory, according to Arendt, moves between the experiences in history and the concepts of philosophy and becomes "a kind of meeting ground"[6] for disappointed philosophers or statesmen. Authors in the literal sense are those who enrich the world with their works because they move in the same world as we do, namely the "real world", while commentators move in the world of books.

> The authors are *auctores*, that is, (they) augment the world. We move in a world which is augmented by the authors. We cannot do without them, because they behave in an altogether different way from the commentators. The world in which the commentator moves is the world of books. This difference becomes visible in a person like Machiavelli. Machiavelli was interested in Italy, not in political theory, not even his own. Only the commentator is interested in political theory per se.[7]

While the author as political writer also loves the world, the commentator only loves political theory. That is not to say we do not need the latter. Rather, according to Arendt, "we need to keep in mind that when we move in the world with the commentator, strictly speaking, it is not the author's world we inhabit, whereas when we read the author directly, we move in the same world as our own, but approached from a different corner."[8]

In short, we are living in a world that is seemingly "without any alternatives" while there is always a possibility of action creating something new and unexpected. Such action requires "actors", but if we cannot turn to the commentators and the futurologists and instead must turn to the *auctores* and their experiences, then the question is: Who exactly are these actors and where are they supposed to come from? And here we find in Hannah Arendt's work descriptions of these actors, who are distinctive personalities (like the authors), but are not 'individuals' in the sense in which that term has come to be used. Because 'an individual' literally means the smallest, indivisible unit, while a personality is an actor playing their role in a world of interpersonal events. In what follows I would like to consider two aspects of the actor in

6 Arendt: History of Political Thought, lectures, *1955*, in: *Hannah Arendt Papers*, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., sheet 023943.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 023944.

more in detail: What is the difference between a "person" and an "individual"? And what does it mean to adopt a position and to be a judge?

What is the Difference Between a "Person" and an "Individual"?

The special marks of a person are their visibility and distinctiveness, they do not get lost in the general mass. They become visible because of their twofold characteristics, which are interpersonal as well as independent. A person acts together with others, but also in relationship to others; they act together but also alone. In her text "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" Hannah Arendt describes *being a person* as the precondition for being able to resist evil. "Being a person" is for Arendt "distinguished from being merely human". And if we follow her thesis of the inner dialogue as a dialogue between a "thinking I" and a "judging me", then:

> … we may now say that in this process of thought in which I actualize the specifically human difference of speech, I explicitly constitute myself a person, and I shall remain one to the extent that I am capable of such constitution ever again and anew. If this is what we commonly call personality, and it has nothing to do with gifts and intelligence, it is the simple, almost automatic result of thoughtfulness. To put it another way, in granting pardon, it is the person and not the crime that is forgiven; in rootless evil there is no person left whom one could ever forgive.[9]

Now, this inner dialogue does not need to be about or even depend on moral imperatives but rather only on the fact that "a mere human being" conducts an inner dialogue in order to be in accordance with themselves, and the very existence of that dialogue, irrespective of the subject, *already has a moral dimension*. "… it is almost a redundancy to speak about a moral personality".[10] And Arendt includes a highly interesting aspect. The consequences of not thinking or engaging in this inner dialogue, means not only the loss of morality and the possible transgression of the border between civilization and barbarity but also the loss of artistic quality. "Insofar as thinking is an activity, it can be translated into products, into such things as poems or music or paintings. All things of this kind are actually thought-things, just as furniture and the objects of our daily use are righty called use-objects". Hannah Arendt then goes on to observe, when commenting on mass murderers, that

> the point about these highly cultivated murderers is that there has been not a single one of them who wrote a poem worth remembering or a piece of music

9 Hannah Arendt: Some Questions of Moral Philosophy, in: *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken 2003, p. 95.

10 Ibid., p. 100.

> worth listening to or painted a picture that anybody would care to hang on his walls. More than thoughtfulness is needed to write a good poem or piece of music, or to paint a picture – you need special gifts. But no gifts will withstand the loss of integrity which you lose when you gave lost this most common capacity for thought and remembrance.[11]

This definition of personality refers to all human beings equally – to workers, academics, or politicians. The fact that moral and artistic quality rests in equal measure on independent thinking and on independent judgment is already visible in our everyday use of language whenever we speak of a "beautiful" or "ugly" gesture or figure of speech or of the "inner beauty" which a person possessing integrity shows by that integrity. These examples, according to Kant, are expressions of the harmony of the different powers of cognition both with regards to their inner proportions and the free coexistence of these powers and their mutual influence on one another.[12] It is a harmony which occurs between form and content as well as between 'enlarged thought' and reason, rather than being a purely rational judgment.[13]

Before Arendt studied Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement, she referred to the "understanding heart" of King Solomon in the Bible. It comprises equally heart and mind. "Only an 'understanding heart', and not mere reflection or mere feeling, makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world and makes it possible for them to bear with us."[14] The fact that this proximity between ethics and aesthetics and the interplay between heart and mind can be defined only approximately is the price for freedom and for the possibilities of a person to act.

When we follow Arendt and her train of thought we find a whole tradition of thinking which is worth taking into consideration. It goes back to the discussions in the 18th century about taste as a power of cognition in a secular society increasingly oriented towards freedom. For example, Melchior Grimm, a more or less forgotten German illustrator, essayist and diplomat, wrote: "The condition of a pronounced and perfect taste is to have a sharp intellect, a sensitive soul and a righteous heart".[15] Here taste not only involves aesthetic judgment but also moral judgment. In

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11 Ibid., p. 97.

12 See Markus Arnold Die harmonische Stimmung aufgeklärter Bürger. Zum Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik in Immanuel Kants "Kritik der Urteilskraft", in *Kant-Studien*, 94, 2003, pp. 24–50.

13 Ibid., p. 32.

14 Hannah Arendt: Understanding and Politics, in: *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, New York: Schocken 1994, p. 322.

15 Melchior Grimm *Paris zündet die Lichter an. Literarische Korrespondenz*, Leipzig Dieterich`sche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1977, p. 121 "Voraussetzung für einen ausgeprägten und vollendeten Geschmack ist, daß man einen scharfen Verstand, eine empfindende Seele und ein rechtschaffenes Herz hat." He continues "Wenn Tugend und Schönheit nicht die sanfte Erregung

Grimm's trilogy all three elements are indispensable in their mutual conditionality. Reason can become inhuman without soul and heart; the sensitive soul can become apolitical due to an unchecked compassion; the righteous heart may be confused without reason. However, the era of investigations into the conditions for an independent judgment ended with Kant. During the 19th and 20th centuries the Kantian "capacity to judge" was replaced by logic, ideologies and systems.

But there are exceptions such as the writer and journalist George Orwell. His works are marked by a hypothesis; namely that the decency inherent in the everyday life of normal people can resist the general loss of orientation in an age of ideology. In an essay on Charles Dickens he wrote: "His whole "message" is one that at first glance looks like an enormous platitude: 'If men would behave decently the world would be decent' is not necessarily so shallow as it sounds."[16] Orwell tried to interpret what he called "common decency" as a compass not only of single persons but also of the social and political life of citizens. According to Orwell this common decency rests on general, practical everyday moral norms and habits. Common decency differs from explicit and rigid moral prescriptions of "the good human being" by its openness and flexibility. For Orwell it was not human dignity in an abstract way that had to be protected but the behaviour to which a society commits itself that was in need of defending. The decent life affords social regulations that consist of respect for others, the absence of domination or humiliation, and social, economic or cultural equality. The highest income should not be many times higher than the lowest. All laws should respect or support a decent life, as "the constituent power of ordinary lives".[17] Orwell, an early critic of totalitarianism, wrote that "In our country … it is the liberals who fear liberty and the intellectuals who want to do dirt on the intellect."[18] That means, "the direct conscious attack on intellectual decency comes from the intellectuals themselves"[19].

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in uns hervorrufen, die den Reiz und das Glück der edlen und empfänglichen herzen ausmacht, wie könnte wir dann Geschmack besitzen, der doch nur durch dieses Gefühl zu urteilen vermag? Daraus ergibt sich, dass die weisesten Menschen auch am meisten Geschmack haben."

16 *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, London: Mariner Books 1968, Vol. I, p. 417.

17 Bruce Bégout: *De la décence ordinaire*, Paris: Editions Allia 2008, p. 88.

18 The freedom of the press. Unpublished preface to Animal Farm. Ibid., p. 47. https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-freedom-of-the-press/ (2023.04.21).

19 Essays, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 70. – Also: "The thing that has frightened me about the modern intelligentsia is their inability to see that human society must be based in common decency, whatever the political and economic forms may be." op. cit., p. 531. – Robert Coles observes in Orwell a remarkable balance between concreteness and theory: "He himself had a sensibility that loved negotiating those two polarities, the concrete and the theoretical, and one wonders that he never lost his balance." (Georg Orwell's Sensibility, in: *Reflections on Amer-*

This aspect of decency refers to what for Arendt is the basis of all political action and independent judgment; the effort to recover in a political community the right middle ground and human scale that marks the place where civilization ends.

Like Hannah Arendt and George Orwell, Albert Camus stressed the importance of moderation but instead observed excess among Marxist intellectuals after WW II, among them Sartre, in his most provocative book *The Rebel*. Revolutionary errors, he declared, disregarded natural limits and in so doing betrayed human inviolability. The experience of modern revolutions shows that "revolutions when they have no limits other than historical effectiveness, mean endless slavery."[20] For Camus it is the task of revolt to redefine the place of the right middle and human scale in a permanent critical confrontation with present conditions.

Herein lays the actuality of these three authors, Arendt, Orwell and Camus. Writing about totalitarianism they described the conditions of a decent society, which is now menaced not by revolts, or mass protests but on the contrary due to the destruction of politics and the common good by neo-liberalism.

What Does it Mean to Adopt a Position and to Judge?

For Hannah Arendt, adopting a position and judging means three things: firstly, the necessity of what she called "being in the world"; secondly, freedom as "freedom for", as inter-subjective, common freedom, inseparably connected to responsibility; thirdly, the formation of a community of judgment, which means the selection of those with whom we want to act and judge and who also serve as models.

On the first point, "to be in the world" means a clear change of perspective in the history of thinking in the modern age. Arendt no longer defines the world from the perspective of modern subjectivism, from an individual facing the masses, but from the *in-between* of people acting together. It is the standpoint of those who act or of spectators who are interested in judging action. Those who are not interested in the common world exclude themselves from this in-between. From the perspective of this common world, Arendt defines what unites people. It is not the reason, which we are proud of because it distinguishes us from animals, but rather what she calls an *enlarged mentality*. In her *Denktagebuch* (Thinking Diary) she wrote:

> Because of the fact that not self-bound reason but only an enlarged mentality makes it possible 'to think in the place of another', it is not reason, but the en-

ica,1984. An Orwell Symposium, ed. by Robert Mulvihill, Athens and London: University of Georgia Press 1986, p. 52). It is not surprising that Orwell, faced with the political and social world he analysed, found a balance in gardening, see Rebecca Solnit: *Orwell's Roses*, London: Granta 2021.

20 Albert Camus: *The Rebel*, Penguin Classics 2000, p. 294.

> larged mentality which forms the link between human beings. Against the *sense of self* fuelled by reason, by the *I-think*, one finds a *sense for the world*, fuelled by the others as common-sense (passive) and the enlarged mentality (active).[21]

From this interpersonal perspective follows the second aspect that freedom is to be understood as "freedom for", as inter-subjective, common freedom, which is inseparably bound to the responsibility for everything that happens in the political community. This responsibility does not deal with moral or juridical guilt for one's own actions but rather is the responsibility of someone who is "a responder", who understands that the actions of all decide whether or not we live in a decent society. In her essay "Collective Responsibility" Arendt explained:

> The vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellowmen, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.[22]

This standpoint, from the perspective of interpersonal relations within a political community means that the faculty of judgment is inter-subjective, a common judgment. Here too, we encounter again the heritage of the 18th century Enlightenment, where Arendt in her essay "The Crisis in Culture" argues that taste possesses an organisational force of peculiar strength.

> We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this experience, it is as though taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it."[23]

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21 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch, 1950–1973*, ed. by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann, Munich-Zurich Piper 2002, p. 570.

22 Hannah Arendt: Collective Responsibility, in: James W. Bernauer (ed.): *Amor Mundi*, Dordrecht: Springer 1987, p. 50.

23 Hannah Arendt: The Crisis in Culture. Its Social and its Political Significance. In: *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin 2006, p. 220. ("We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this common experience, it is as though taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it.") Arendt calls it "quality-consciousness" (ibid.) and characterises it as "die Fähigkeit für die Evidenz des Schönen" (in the German variant of the same text "Kultur und Politik", in *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Übungen im politischen Denken I*, ed. by Ursula Ludz, Munich-Zurich Piper 2000, p. 301).

This remark has been rejected by readers time and again as the expression of an elitist, aristocratic and therefore undemocratic attitude. However, such criticism overlooks the fact that Arendt was concerned not only with common judgment but also with "quality-consciousness", the sense that "the truly beautiful (is) easily recognized". It is not decisive *that* we judge together but *how* we judge. It is all about quality and also about a consciousness of quality through which the humanity of a society increases. Transferred to politics, it means to be able to identify and judge the quality of political wisdom and thus to contribute and to improve that political wisdom. It is also evident that ethics and aesthetic are closely tied together for Arendt. "This humanism … has the task of arbitrating and mediating between the purely political and the purely fabricating activities"[24], which "share the public space."[25]

Therefore, personalities possessing the capacity for action and judgement have a big responsibility for the humanization of their societies. Therefore, it is not by chance that Arendt in her portraits of writers, politicians and scientists, which she wrote on various occasions and published in her book *Men in Dark Times* always came to speak about their personal qualities. For example, Lessing's critical faculty fascinated her:

> Criticism, in Lessing's sense, is always taking sides for the world's sake, understanding and judging everything in terms of its position in the world at any given time. Such a mentality can never give rise to a definite worldview which, once adopted, is immune to further experiences in the world because it has hitched itself firmly to one possible perspective.[26]

Arendt praised Rosa Luxemburg's cultural background of an assimilated Jewish life in Poland characterized by excellent literary taste, independent moral concepts and the absence of social prejudices.[27]

And in an obituary for her friend Waldemar Gurian, Dean of the American University at Notre Dame, she praised his virtues in a very personal-political tone, which is completely unusual in an academic journal like *The Review of Politics*.

In this obituary, Arendt described his personal qualities, which take the place of political virtues. Among them the capacity for public friendship (rather than private friendship) based on a common responsibility for our destiny. He came as a stranger but "he had achieved what we all must: he had established his home in this world, and he had made himself at home on the earth through friendship."[28]

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24 Ibid., p. 222.

25 Kultur und Politik, op. cit., p. 302.

26 Hannah Arendt: *Men in Dark Times*, San Diego, 1968, p. 7/8.

27 Ibid., p. 33f.

28 Ibid., p. 262.

She praised the fact that his "faithfulness to his friends, to everybody he had ever known, to everything he had ever liked, became so much the dominant note on which his life was tuned that one is tempted to say that the crime most alien to him is the crime of oblivion, perhaps one of the cardinal crimes in human relationships."[29] She praised his humanity, which meant more than mere friendliness and gentleness and which makes us realize the error that

> people daily and gladly (...) identify themselves wholly with what they do, proud of their intelligence or work or genius, and it is true that remarkable results can be the outcome of such identification. ... (But) true greatness of genius ... appears only where we sense behind the tangible and comprehensible product a being that remains greater and more mysterious because the work itself points to a person behind it whose existence can be neither exhausted nor fully revealed by whatever he may have the power to do.[30]

And finally, she praised his independent judgment,

> an unerring sense for quality and relevance ... In the not frequent cases where men have possessed it and have chosen not to exchange it for more easily recognizable and acceptable values, it infallibly has led them far – far beyond conventions and established standards of society – and carried them directly into the dangers of a life that is no longer protected by the walls of objects and the supports of objective evaluations.[31]

Therefore, Gurian was simultaneously a non-conformist and a realist: "His whole spiritual existence was built on the decision never to conform and never to escape, which is only another way of saying that it was built on courage."[32] "He was delighted when he could break down the(se) barriers of so-called civilized society, because he saw in them barriers between human souls."[33]

Who would not like to live together with these people in our world?

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29 Ibid., p. 254.
30 Ibid., p. 257.
31 Ibid., p. 258.
32 Ibid., p. 261/262.
33 Ibid., p. 258.