

The Banality of Ecocide

Contemplating Holocaust Memorial Day, I find myself pondering how we are all in danger of perpetrating outrageous acts simply by going with the flow. It calls to mind an account of Adolf Eichmann as he sat in a bulletproof glass booth built for his own protection. Virtually lost in the theatre of a Jerusalem courtroom in 1964, he was described as being alone, a man of medium size, “slender, middle-aged, with receding hair, ill-fitting teeth, and near-sighted eyes” (Arendt 1994: 5), charged for his part in the genocide of the Jewish people.

Far from expressing outrage at Eichmann, the Jewish reporter and philosopher Hannah Arendt was struck by the ordinariness of the man and his preoccupation with ‘doing a good job,’ with apparently little heed for the wider implications of his diligence. Reflecting on this spectacle, she famously coined the term ‘the banality of evil’ to describe the tendency of ordinary people to commit evil thoughtlessly because of a failure to think critically.

In the wake of The Holocaust, the United Nations began work on defining Crimes Against the Peace and Security of Mankind. The understanding that ecological damage can threaten our peace and security was reflected in attempts to make ecocide the fifth Crime Against Peace. Since the 1970s, numerous United Nations committees have met to discuss whether ecocide could be considered a crime in this way. Indeed, progress is being made; a legal definition of Ecocide was agreed upon in June 2021 (stopecocide.earth).

We are frequently reminded that our impacts on the biosphere, including the rapid loss of biodiversity and anthropogenic climate change, combined with the gross inequalities among people across the world, threaten our wellbeing if not the habitability of the Earth. But does any sane person set out to accelerate the annihilation of humanity? In common with Eichmann, we generally aim to ‘do a good job’; however, we often lack a critical awareness of how our trivial, commonplace actions are cumulatively perpetrating an ecocide of unimaginable complexity.

In an attempt to address this situation, there have been numerous international agreements and proclamations in support of education for sustainable development. Despite this, the situation has deteriorated while so many of our leaders dodge their responsibilities enabled in large part by those that elect them.

Somewhere in all this we find a multitude of teachers, lecturers, institutional leaders; fine educators all, preoccupied with ‘doing a good job’. This begs the question: if we are not directing our energies towards stimulating a regenerative way of life and using our positions to work proactively against potential global calamity, are we any better than Eichmann?

Reference:

Arendt, H. (1994) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* (revised edition). London: Penguin