

# Hannah Arendt: From an Interview

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By Hannah Arendt

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*Hannah Arendt made the comments that follow in 1974 during an interview with the French writer Roger Errera.*

## Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism begins in contempt for what you have. The second step is the notion: “Things must change—no matter how, Anything is better than what we have.” Totalitarian rulers organize this kind of mass sentiment, and by organizing it articulate it, and by articulating it make the people somehow love it. They were told before, thou shalt not kill; and they didn’t kill. Now they are told, thou shalt kill; and although they think it’s very difficult to kill, they do it because it’s now part of the code of behavior. They learn

whom to kill and how to kill and how to do it together. This is the much talked about *Gleichschaltung*—the coordination process. You are coordinated not with the powers that be, but with your neighbor—coordinated with the majority. But instead of communicating with the other you are now glued to him. And you feel of course marvelous. Totalitarianism appeals to the very dangerous emotional needs of people who live in complete isolation and in fear of one another.

### Lies

The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to

judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.

### **Contingency and History**

The main characteristic of any event is that it has not been foreseen. We don't know the future but everybody acts into the future.

Nobody knows what he is doing because the future is being done, action is being done by a "we" and not an "I." Only if I were the only one acting could I foretell the consequences of what I'm doing. What actually happens is entirely contingent, and contingency is indeed one of the biggest factors in all history.

Nobody knows what is going to happen because so much depends on an enormous number of variables, on simple hazard. On the other hand if you look at history retrospectively, then, even though it was contingent, you can tell a story that makes sense.... Jewish history, for example, in fact had its ups and downs, its enmities and its friendships, as every history of all people has. The notion that there is one unilinear history is of course false. But if you look at it after the experience of Auschwitz it looks as though all of history—or at least history since the Middle Ages—had no other aim than Auschwitz.... This, is the real problem of every philosophy of history how is it possible that in retrospect it always looks as though it couldn't have happened otherwise?

## Facts and Theories

A good example of the kind of scientific mentality that overwhelms all other insights is the “domino theory.” The fact is that very few of the sophisticated intellectuals who wrote the *Pentagon Papers* believed in this theory. Yet everything they did was based on this assumption—not because they were liars, or because they wanted to please their superiors, but because it gave them a framework within which they could work. They took this framework even though they knew—and though every intelligence report and every factual analysis proved to them every morning—that these assumptions were simply factually wrong. They took it because they didn’t have any other framework. People find such theories in order to get rid of contingency and unexpectedness. Good old Hegel once said that all philosophical contemplation serves only to eliminate the accidental. A fact has to be witnessed by eyewitnesses who are not the best of witnesses; no fact is beyond doubt. But that two and two are four is somehow beyond doubt. And the theories produced in the Pentagon were all much more plausible than the facts of what actually happened.

## Jews

The “giftedness”—so to speak—of a certain part at least of the Jewish people is a historical problem, a problem of the first order for the

historians. I can risk a speculative explanation: we are the only people, the only European people, who have survived from antiquity pretty much intact. That means we have kept our identity, and it means we are the only people who have never known analphabetism. We were always literate because you cannot be a Jew without being literate. The women were less literate than the men but even they were much more literate than their counterparts elsewhere. Not only the elite knew how to read but every Jew had to read—the whole people, in all its classes and on all levels of giftedness and intelligence.

## Evil

When I wrote my *Eichmann in Jerusalem* one of my main intentions was to destroy the legend of the greatness of evil, of the demonic force, to take away from people the admiration they have for the great evildoers like Richard III.

I found in Brecht the following remark:

The great political criminals must be exposed and exposed especially to laughter. They are not great political criminals, but people who permitted great political crimes, which is something entirely different. The failure of his enterprises does not indicate that Hitler was an idiot.

Now, that Hitler was an idiot was of course a prejudice of the whole opposition to Hitler prior to his seizure of power and therefore a great many books tried then to justify him and to make him a great man. So, Brecht says, "The fact that he failed did not indicate that Hitler was an idiot and the extent of his enterprises does not make him a great man." It is neither the one nor the other: this whole category of greatness has no application.

"If the ruling classes," he goes on, "permit a small crook to become a great crook, he is not entitled to a privileged position in our view of history. That is, the fact that he becomes a great crook and that what he does has great consequences does not add to his stature." And generally speaking he then says in these very abrupt remarks: "One may say that tragedy deals with the sufferings of mankind in a less serious way than comedy." This of course is a shocking statement; I think that at the same time it is entirely true. What is really necessary is, if you want to keep your integrity under these circumstances, then you can do it only if you remember your old way of looking at such things and say: "No matter what he does and if he killed ten million people, he is still a clown."

### **Progress**

The law of progress holds that everything now must be better than what was there before.

Don't you see if you want something better, and

better, and better, you lose the good. The good is no longer even being measured.