

The banality of evil

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The extraordinary movie by Margareth von Trotta, “Hannah Arendt”, is now playing in São Paulo, and reports a crucial moment in the life of the remarkable philosopher: her decision to watch Eichmann's trial in Israel, in 1960, and to write a series of articles for the *New Yorker*, which later became the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Instead of simply portraying Eichmann as an evil genius, as expected by the readers of her articles, instead of describing him as a violent and racist man, she described him as a mediocre bureaucrat who followed orders, as a normal man who lacked the ability to evaluate the evil he did. And then she makes a fundamental discovery: she identified the banality of evil, the fact that evil only becomes immense when it becomes banal and, therefore, shared by many.

Faced with this revelation, I ask myself: how do this banality of evil manifest itself nowadays? Hannah Arendt arrived at this notion in view of a genocide of gigantic proportions and of the trial of one of its actors. But evil is not limited to such extreme moments. How can we define evil? How did evil manifest itself in this beginning of the twenty-first century? And did many people react banally to the evil episodes they experienced?

Evil is a philosophical concept that I lack the competence to define, but I risk a definition that is suggested by Arendt in the movie. Evil is the violence against human being and, therefore, against mankind.

From this definition, I stress three major manifestations of evil in the beginning of this century: the Islamic terrorism against innocent citizens, the Iraq war, and the civil war “for democracy” in Syria. In those three cases we saw or are seeing extreme violence against innocent human beings. There is nothing to justify the thousands of deaths caused by Islamic terrorism, by the Iraq war, and now by the civil war in Syria supported by Saudi Arabia and by Western powers. And, in those three cases, we see the banality of evil.

For the radical Islamism that wants to install the caliphate in the Arab world nothing is more commonplace than terrorist attacks, including suicidal ones, in which violence against human being is also a self-inflicted violence.

For the political leaders who decided to wage the Iraq war, killed dozens of thousands of individuals, and established disorder in that country, there is also

nothing more banal. After all, this was already done so many times before in the name of the “Western civilization”.

It is also commonplace for Syrian “rebels” and for those who support them in the West the death of more than a hundred thousand people in order to set up a “democracy” there – a curious Islamic democracy, since today the Sunni Islamic groups became dominant among those rebels who try to overthrow an authoritarian leader who for a long time guarantees order in a backward country.

Evil is, therefore, among us. It is in the crimes associated with drugs, it is in the violence and disrespect against the poor in many countries. But it is difficult for us to feel indignant, because this is commonplace evil. It is only when evil is no longer banal and society becomes indignant that it may be fought and, sometimes, defeated.