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**ABSTRACT: Book Burning and the Issue of Evil**

Modern book burning (a cover term for the intentional destruction of texts) triggers revulsion, sadness, anger and fear--responses that stem from perceptions of books as the living tissue of culture, fonts of identity, and pillars of civilization.

Book burning traumatizes those who hold books, like children, as objects of affection, vessels for society's hopes and aspirations, links between past and future, and barriers to mortality. Because of resultant fears of cultural regression, perpetrators are viewed as barbaric vandals driven by a hatred of learning, memory, and civilization. When book burning is embedded in larger violence, the perpetrators are viewed as devils or demons--as "evil."

However, the infusion of emotionality into discussions of book burning obscures the fact that the systemic destruction of books is usually a function of social and political problem-solving. When belief systems radicalize into ideology, polarization occurs; books, like individuals, either serve the interests of the true believers or are constituted as the weapons of their enemies or threats within themselves. Rather than spontaneous crimes of passion or the unique expression of "evil" by a specific group, book burning is a deliberate exercise in eliminating challenges to the collective good and purging alternatives. Book burning is an indicator of extremism on the march.

While rational explanations acknowledge the ability of ideology (whether political or religious) to override normal moral and ethical concerns and result in physical and cultural atrocities, they fail to fully address the overall context of social brutality that often results from extremism. Book burning, one manifestation, are often the occasion for expressions of joy in violence by individuals--as exemplified by the elation of German students at Nazi book burnings and the gratuitous torments wreaked on scholars during Cultural Revolution bonfires. Systemic book burning raises questions about cultural pathology or "sick societies." Virulent ideas seem to have a unique capacity for unleashing an evil, a hypothetical "beast" or pathology that may lurk within humans.

**PAPER: Book Burning and the Issue of Evil**

Modern book burning (a cover term for the intentional, usually public, destruction of texts) triggers emotional responses in outsiders--confusion, revulsion, sadness, anger and fear. These responses are calibrated according to the relative seriousness of the incident, the overall social context, and whether the incident expresses relative spontaneity or a systemic pattern. For example, isolated instances of book burning, a form of symbolic protest often conducted by religious groups, are experienced as misguided and reactionary, but not intensely threatening. On the other hand, systemic book burning indicates an escalated extremism that threatens an existing social and political order and, in addition, has the potential for spreading to other countries. The large scale destruction of books portends not only the immediate breakdown of order and peace, but the possibility of a compromised future, because the perpetrators are rejecting modern humanistic norms, increasingly international, in which books, like children, are viewed as objects of affection, vessels for society's hopes and aspirations, links between past and future, carriers of identity, and barriers to mortality. Because of such fears of cultural regression, perpetrators are viewed as barbaric vandals driven by a hatred of learning, memory, and civilization.

Metaphors pervade our consciousness and structure human actions. Indeed, the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 22). Barbara Tuchman (1980:13) has called books “humanity in print” and, indeed, there is a common perception that books are alive and constitute the living tissues of civilization. Metaphorical connections account for vocabulary which associates book burning with purging, cleansing, and excising as if society was a living organism. Piles of burning books are likened to “funeral pyres”; observers react as if something has died, often commenting on the ashes. The loss of books hurts, wounds, sets in motion a grief reaction. Metaphors that underlay the modern consensual taboos against violating the connection between people and their written records are related to norms against killing and maiming human beings. Perhaps because the psychological effect of destroying a community's institutions is so similar to that of destroying its people, violence to culture is almost as satisfying to the aggressor (Goldhagen 1997). It is the connection of book burning with physical violence that raises doubts in bystanders about human nature.

The level of violence that often accompanies book burnings heightens fear and confusion and suggests to the appalled that book burning is not only a product of latent barbarism, but expressive of a specialized evil, the work of devils and demons. And here is where academic reactions split. Believing that the word “evil” infuses discussion with emotionality, subjectivity, and the incalculable, modern scholars often find that attributing book burning to evil impulses is a seductive but non-productive mindset. They prefer to explain things in terms of systems; a unique set of variables puts events in motion and governs their course. On the opposite side of the argument are those who intuitively focus on evil or human involvement; they tend to believe that genocide or ethnocide is committed by a specific people temporarily possessed by pathological impulses. Sometimes conflicts over differing approaches are played out in the media as in 1996 when scholars of Nazi Germany who had explained the Holocaust in terms of structures and institutions were outraged by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* which posited anti-Semitism as the basis for the enthusiastic participation in genocide by millions of ordinary Germans (Bartov 2000b).

I would argue that far from being merely the product of evil, the destruction of written materials is goal-oriented, a function of social and political problem-solving, and carefully justified within conditions of extremism and struggles between competing worldviews. It is enforced as part of the institutionalization of totalitarianism so there are structural components. However, like Goldhagen, I think the question of individual agency is crucial. Systemic book burning begs the question of *where* evil (in the pathological sense) comes into play when decision-making is distorted by radical beliefs and the commission of cultural as well as physical atrocities becomes perfectly “rational” to extremists. It raises the question of whether a society can become pathological, sick, evil, and self-destructive and also whether the study of jubilant book burning provides the opportunity for confronting and struggling with the human capacity for extreme brutality (evil). This paper explores these questions.

Let's stop for a moment and examine the dynamics of widespread book destruction during the last century. When belief systems radicalize into ideology, polarization occurs; books, like individuals, either serve the interests of true believers or are constituted as the weapons of their enemies or threats in themselves. Rather than spontaneous crimes of passion or the unique expression of ‘evil’ by a specific group, book burning is a deliberate exercise in eliminating challenges to the collective good (as defined by a regime) and purging alternatives. Extremists are rejecting an evil contemporary world and acting on the expectation that only complete and radical change will produce a world without deficiencies, a transformed world of political or social perfection. For extremists, each act of book burning is instrumental, a “liberating, redemptive act” for humanity (Bartov 2000a:30). Book burning is an indicator of extremism on the march.

The systemic destruction of books is linked with mass murder. Ideological imperatives displace normal moral and ethical commitments and the totality of commitment leads followers into a moral abyss. In the twentieth century, genocide was identified as a specific phenomenon in which a group (identified as such by the perpetrators) is annihilated for, usually, ideological reasons. Ethnocide, the destruction of the culture of a group, is a related and sometimes intertwined pattern. I believe that there is an identifiable sub-pattern within ethnocide--libricide, the regime-sponsored, ideologically-driven destruction of books and libraries--that accounts for systemic book burnings (Knuth, unpublished). Genocide, ethnocide, and libricide are all purposeful forms of political violence and occupy the same universe. An examination of

the evil in one is per force an examination of evil in all.

Let us review some of the most egregious examples of the modern destruction of books. First, the Nazis. In the 1930s an internal war was fought against the “un-German” spirit: the rationalism, materialism, cosmopolitanism, egalitarianism, parliamentarism, pacifism, tolerance, assimilationism, ecumenism, and modernism the Nazis detested” (Hill 2001:11). Books linked with these ideas were pulled off the shelves of public institutions, bookshops, and private libraries and consigned to bonfires. Those who stoked the fires were SA and SS personnel and students; the mood was often celebratory because the perpetrators were convinced that they were responding to a spiritual crisis by fighting decadence, corrupt Judaism (linked with intellectualism), and the effete manifestations of humanism. This spirit suffused libricidal events throughout the Reich. A gleeful quote demonstrates the brutality that underlay book burning.

For us it was a matter of special pride to destroy the Talmudic Academy which has been known as the greatest in Poland.... We threw out of the building the great Talmudic Library and carted it to market. There we set fire to the books. The fire lasted for twenty hours. The Jews of Lublin were assembled around and cried bitterly. Their cries almost silenced us. Then we summoned the military band, and the joyful shouts of the soldiers silenced the sounds of the Jewish cries... (as quoted in Shaffer 1946:84).

Book burning and the immense social violence being perpetrated at the same time were considered necessary steps in the creation of a fit and purified environment for the German people, a super race that was destined to rule the world. The linked human and cultural purging (the social isolation of the Jews that was a precursor to ethnocide and genocide within Germany) was soon exported: during the attempted genocide of the Polish people (six million were killed), seventy-percent of the books in Poland were lost. The nation of Poland, along with its “racially-inferior” people and culture, had to be expunged to make *lebensraum*, living space, for the Germans.

The issue of purification is a recurrent factor in libricide. The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1965-1975) can be seen as the radicals’ compulsive push to bring about a long-promised revolution by destroying the last remnants of bourgeois reactionary thought. Bonfires burned throughout China as the Red Guards pulled books from the shelves of institutions and private homes and expressed contempt for traditional culture, intellectuals, and any object that embodied alternatives to Communism. The Red Guards, the ignorant and vicious instruments of revolution, answered only to their secular god, Mao. An estimated one hundred million human beings suffered some kind of persecution; up to ten million may have died. Millions of books were lost. Exportation of the Cultural Revolution to Tibet provided the impetus for accelerating patterns of ethnocide that had begun with the country’s occupation in 1949. Tibetan culture, deeply rooted in Buddhism, was an anathema to the Communists and had to be rooted out. Under the Communists, as many as 6,000 monasteries were turned into rubble; over 100,000 monks were imprisoned, killed, or set to physical labor; and most of their texts and records were burned. The violent and cumulative implementation of Communism and colonialism resulted in ethnocide (accompanied by libricide) and, some would argue, genocide.

In the 1990s, the ethnocide and libricide that was a function of the implosion of post-Communist Yugoslavia was a common feature on the nightly news. In a painful reversion to the politics of nationalism and racism, the Serbs sought exclusive possession of contested lands within Croatia and Bosnia. Religious and territorial differences were translated into racial rationales; the full weight of all Serbian institutions (governmental, religious, educational, intellectual) supported aggressive measures against the Muslims and all those who upheld the multicultural, cosmopolitan basis of modern Bosnia. Serbs set in motion processes of “ethnic cleansing” in which Croats and Muslims were killed or driven from targeted areas and all traces of their contemporary or historic presence were expunged. To leave nothing left to return to, churches and mosques were leveled as well as libraries, archives, and museums. The loss of unique and irreplaceable manuscripts and archival documents was devastating. Just as a sample, 200,000 Ottoman documents, primary source material for 500 years of history, were lost in the shelling of Sarajevo’s Oriental Institute (Riedlmayer 2001). Bosnia’s National and University Library was burned with a loss of 90% of its 1.5 million volumes. Many observers perceived these actions as fanatical attacks on the fabric of modernity and the Serbs as possessed of a kind of group psychosis.

Each of these cases demonstrates the ability of ideology (whether political or religious) to override normal moral and ethical concerns and result in physical and cultural atrocities. The motivation can be explained as rabid commitment to nationalism, racism, or communism. But fanaticism does not completely account for the gratuitous viciousness of individuals. It becomes apparent that the identification of these perpetrators as evil comes from their *embrace* of an overall context of social brutality that is so often the by-product of extremism. Book burnings have too often been the occasion for celebration of violence *per se*--as exemplified by the elation of German students at Nazi book burnings, the gratuitous torments wreaked on scholars during Cultural Revolution bonfires, the drunken reveling of Serb paramilitaries. It is the connection of systemic book burning with violence and the denial of the essential humanity of victim groups that justifies queries about evil. Because external observers are not convinced of the pathology of the victim group, they helplessly construe the actions as evil run rampant.

Poets such as W.H. Auden knew that: "Maps can really point to places/Where life is evil now; Nanking; Dachau." In his coverage of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Journalist Peter Maas (1996) wrote about a "wild beast" that was neither animal nor human, but a spirit of evil that exists in all animals, all people, all societies: "Bosnia can teach about the wild beast, and therefore about ourselves..." (p. 273). Both Auden and Maas was raising questions about whether or not extreme destructiveness is a latent component in all peoples or whether particular groups could be uniquely possessed by evil. Bosnia, occurring as it did at the end of century, aroused questions regarding "modernity" and "progress." If mankind does not improve with each passing generation, but is subject to fits of bestiality and regression, than how do we hold on to modern beliefs about the march of progress? Is culture a disposable commodity to be easily stripped away in demonstrations of the thinness of the veneer of civilization?

Psychologists, who traditionally focus on the individual, have had great difficulty with genocide and ethnocide. However the sheer scale and malignity of the events of this century did cause some academics (in the fields of cultural psychiatry, psychiatric anthropology, and cultural psychology) to consider the possibility of cultural pathology or "sick societies," in which the violent behavior of groups can be attributed to specific societal conditions and responses. To frame this in the vernacular of evil, they are exploring, among other things, whether virulent ideas, legitimated by those in power, seem to have a unique capacity for unleashing a evil, a hypothetical "beast" or pathology that may lurk within humans. These academics agreed that, under the stresses of sociocultural violence, a group of individuals could reject previously held values, assume extremist beliefs, and become pathological. Chinese writer Ba Jin described such an experience during the Cultural Revolution:

I myself destroyed books, magazines, letters and manuscripts which I had kept as treasures for years.... I was really bedeviled...I completely negated myself, literature and beauty...I even believed that an ideal society was one where there was no culture, no knowledge, and of course no literary resources. I was in a trance. (as quoted in Ting, 1983, p. 148)

Robert Edgerton (1992), in his book, *Sick Societies*, argues that all societies have some maladaptive practices and that some populations have become seriously disordered as a result of pathogenic values and paranoid constructions of reality. There is, however, resistance to making the nation the primary unit of analysis--empirical research would be impossible with a subject so large as a nation, and in making categorical generalizations about an entire nation we risk over-simplification and attributions of collective guilt (the idea that an entire people can be held responsible for current and past national atrocities). Sovereignty issues further complicate matters: what, after all, would be the international community's responsibilities toward a "sick state"?

The question of sick societies and group pathology makes it hard to process issues of individual accountability and confront the possibility of a latent beast within all human beings. In a mechanistic sense, you could say the ideology allows moral and ethical switches to be clicked off. But something is also turned *on* and that is the desire to act on dark destructive impulses, for example, to throw books into the fire and otherwise destroy a people. The difference between extremism and humanism is that extremists take upon themselves the right to decide what is or is not evil; the interests of the collective are paramount. Humanists believe that there are universal values (for instance, the importance of preserving print culture--the memory of the world) that when transgressed invest the individual in corruption. The international community has steadily increased its commitment to humanism and international law prohibits the

destruction of cultural institutions (and thus systemic book burning) in war because it is so damaging to diversity, multiculturalism, pluralism, and a common sustainable heritage. And the trend is toward holding individuals accountable. The current trial of Slobodan Milosevic involves indictments for damage to culture, ethnocide, as well as genocide. Evil is a struggle within individuals in all societies. Constituting the agent as the state, as has been done at the global level, no longer means the individual is, de facto, absolved of responsibility.

The international community is assuming a portion of the responsibility for moral accountability that was once a function of religious organizations. The values of secular humanism are serving as the basis for global actions in defining and prohibiting crimes against humanity. These values are embodied in international laws that provide the basis for legal and political action against states, regimes, and individuals that transgress against humanity. It is essentially a cross-cultural attempt to determine universal norms and set punishments for egregious violations of these norms. This process is having a tremendous impact on the contemplation of evil.

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