

The Mind of Adolf Hitler: A Study in the Unconscious Appeal of Contempt

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How did the mind of Adolf Hitler come to be so evil? This is a question which has been asked for decades – a question which millions of people have thought had no clear answer. This has been the case equally with persons who dedicated their lives to scholarship in the field. For example, Alan Bullock, author of *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, and perhaps the most famous of the biographers of the Nazi leader, is cited in Ron Rosenbaum's 1998 book, *Explaining Hitler*, as saying: "The more I learn about Hitler, the harder I find it to explain" (in Rosenbaum 1998, vii). In the same text, philosopher Emil Fackenheim agrees: "The closer one gets to explicability the more one realizes nothing can make Hitler explicable" (in Rosenbaum 1998, vii).¹ Even an author as keenly perceptive and ethically bold as the Swiss philosopher Max Picard confesses in his 1947 book, *Hitler in Ourselves*, that ultimately he is faced with a mystery.² The very premise of his book is that somehow the mind of Hitler must be like that of ourselves. But just where the kinship lies, precisely how Hitler's unparalleled evil and the everyday workings of our own minds explain each other – in terms of a central principle – the author does not make clear.

Our Deepest Debate

I say carefully, as a dispassionate scholar but also as a person of Jewish heritage who certainly would not be alive today had Hitler succeeded in his plan for world conquest, that the answer Bullock, Fackenheim, and Picard were searching for can be found in the work of the great American philosopher Eli Siegel.³ First famed as a poet, Siegel is best known now for his pioneering work in the field of the philosophy of mind.⁴ He was the founder of Aesthetic Realism.⁵ In keeping with its name, this philosophy begins with a consideration of strict ontology. It presents reality as having an enduring aesthetic structure: the oneness of opposites. The core concept of Aesthetic Realism is this statement by Siegel: "The world, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites" (quoted in Kranz, 1969, 1).

On first sight, my essay has a very different focus: not ontology, but ethics; not the nature of reality as a whole, but the psychology of a single and very notorious instance of humanity. Yet – and this is an insight of the Aesthetic Realism method – these matters are interdependent. It is how the world is in our minds, Siegel explained, which determines who we are: our very selves. In every person, he stated, there is on-going debate: Do reality and the people in it deserve my respect or my contempt? As Aesthetic Realism sees it, our deepest desire is to find authentic and enduring grounds for respect. For that reason, the "greatest danger or temptation of man is to get

a false importance or glory from the lessening of things not himself; which lessening is Contempt” (quoted in Reiss, 1997, 7).

His classic text in the field of philosophic psychology is *Self and World*, written largely in the early 1940s – precisely when Hitler was close to succeeding in his desire to impose his will upon the rest of humanity. In this ground-breaking book, Siegel explains that every human being relies on two sources of pleasure and power (Siegel 1981).⁶ The first comes from finding meaning, value, and beauty in the world different from oneself. This is the pleasure of respect, and the power arising from it is completely healthy. It is an emotion earned through perception and in keeping with the facts of the world. It is honest.

The other source of pleasure is contempt. When we are after contempt, we hope to see the world and other people as beneath us, whatever the facts truly are. People become things to manipulate; they exist nearly as “inanimate” objects we have a right to use for our own advantage, with hardly a thought about what is just to them. If, to “convince” ourselves of our superiority, we need to change the facts, well then, too bad for the facts! “Contempt,” Siegel wrote in *Self and World*, “is not interested in knowledge as knowledge, only in knowledge making ego the one thing” (Siegel 1981, 7).

This second source of pleasure likewise gives a person a sense of importance and power. If one is only focusing on the immediate experience of pleasure, importance, and power it will be difficult to realize the difference between the two. Yet ethically there is all the difference in the world. When contempt is driving us, the power and self-importance we gain, and the pleasure we enjoy, are at the expense of outside reality. Contempt – or, put even more precisely, the *hope* for the victory of contempt over a world seen as different from oneself – is the source of all human evil.⁷

It is just here that we can see our relation to Hitler and to the Nazi period. Contempt is a quantitative phenomenon. Just as a thin dime and a thick wad of thousand dollar bills are, each, money; and a large tank of water and a thimbleful identical in terms of chemistry, differing only in terms of quantity – so it is with contempt. There is a continuity; contempt can be, and most often is, seemingly trivial, so everyday and familiar we hardly notice it. Contempt can also be monumental in scope, and historically earth-shaking. The magnitude differs, not the fundamental ethics.

Hitler, Germany, and the Evocation of Contempt

“Hitler,” wrote Siegel, “was perhaps the greatest evoker of human contempt in history” (Siegel 1976c, 2). And he explained:

The first victory of contempt is the feeling in people that they have the right to see other people and things pretty much as they please. For this reason, the viewpoint of Aesthetic Realism that we have an obligation to see everything as well as we can, is a critical matter.

The fact that most people have felt there is no such obligation, that they had the right to see other people and other objects in a way that seemed to go with comfort—this fact is the beginning of the injustice and pain of the world. It is contempt in its first universal, hideous form. (Siegel 1981, 3)

To understand the evil of the Nazi era, we need to see the powerful unconscious appeal of contempt. It was not incidental to Hitler's way of seeing reality; it was its bedrock.

We see a hint of this in Rosenbaum's observation that "blackmail [was] an aspect of his primary nature, his defining relationship to the world" (Rosenbaum 1998, 49). Rosenbaum never says, directly, what this "primary" nature is – but certainly a self which relies on blackmail has a deep stake in seeing others as weak; it is a self which enjoys others cowering in fear before it. The German author Sebastian Haffner offers further evidence. In his 1978 historical study, *Anmerkungen zu Hitler*, a book which stayed on the best-seller list in his country for 43 weeks, we are told that Hitler's "positive characteristics – resolution, boldness, courage, perseverance – lie all on the 'hard' side. The negative ones even more so: ruthlessness, vindictiveness, faithlessness and cruelty." Further, Haffner notes: "'icily-cold' and 'lightning-quick' were favorite expressions of his" (Haffner 1997, 7,118).

What would make in a human self for such aesthetic and ethical disproportion? – such a one-sided preference for hardness, coldness, and speed? Would it be the hope for respect, or its contrary? And as Ernst Hanfstaengl, who in the early years of the Nazi movement was its Foreign Press Secretary, notes in *Hitler: The Missing Years*: "He simply could not bear not to dominate any situation in which he found himself" (Hanfstaengl 1994, 60).⁸ What does that indicate? What attitude towards the world?

What I am getting at, is that without the hope for contempt Nazism would never have come to be – first in the mind of Hitler himself and then in the millions who followed him. As Siegel wrote in a 1974 essay, entitled "Disliking the World, Continued," one of a series on the subject "Contempt Causes Insanity:"

We all have the unlimited possibility of seeing the world around us as an enemy; of despising it; of putting it aside...For the purpose of liking yourself exclusively, it is prudent to find the world only a welter, only an antagonistic mess. Hitler's broodings in Vienna apparently made for the discovery which ever so many people have made: the world has no beautiful clue in it. Therefore, we are more sensible than it. Therefore, we don't have to go by anything in the world. We are our own law. (Siegel 1974,1)

It is worth noting that in recent years some aspects of what Siegel was explaining decades back have found resonance in fictional attempts to comprehend the Nazi phenomenon. The sense of the world as a "welter," as "an antagonistic mess," is crucial in Norman Mailer's study of Hitler's childhood and family life, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007). In Jonathan Littell's recent

and much celebrated novel, *The Kindly Ones*, we see how the Führer's abundant dislike of the world set off sympathetic echoes in the minds of millions of others. That novel's main character, Dr. Max Auer, is an ex-Nazi official, and for nearly 1000 pages, he reminisces about the war and the party which he loyally served – reminisces, and defends himself. It takes only a few pages for the reader to see that this fictional Nazi had also made the “discovery... [that] the world has no beautiful clue:”

For a long time we crawl on this earth like caterpillars, waiting for the splendid, diaphanous butterfly we bear within ourselves. And then that time passes and the nymph stage never comes, we remain larvae – what do we do with such an appalling realization? (Littell 2010, 3)

Historical circumstances, as well as painful events in an individual's life, certainly make it easier for someone to rely on contempt. A world with injustice and disorder in it will likely fuel that preference. Nevertheless, contempt – the belief that reality is fundamentally ugly and inherently unjust – is a choice, if nearly always a sub-conscious one.

To understand Nazism, we need to acknowledge the impact of the vengeful Versailles Treaty, the ugly history of anti-Semitism and militarism in German culture, and the fear in German capitalists of Bolshevism. Yet without the desire for contemptuous victories over people seen as different from oneself, none of the factors just mentioned would have provided adequate reason for millions of Germans to become active Nazis. Hitler's words would have fallen on unwilling ears. The world would have had no Auschwitz, no Buchenwald, no siege of Leningrad to remember with horror.

Hitler's Relish of Contempt

That Hitler personally relished contempt is something well-testified to in the scholarly literature. I have already given some instances, and I will give more later. Yet I know of no one other than Eli Siegel who saw and asserted its central importance. Instead, the overwhelming tendency in Hitlerian scholarship has been to write of his contempt as an epiphenomenon, resulting from something supposedly more primal in Hitler's mind – something deeper and more central.

This is a mistake. The notion of Aryan supremacy, for example, did not *cause* Hitler's contempt for people, it was its *result*. Just as certainly, his anti-Semitism didn't precede his general relish of contempt for humanity, but was a manifestation of it: a ferocious, almost unimaginably brutal manifestation – but still a manifestation of something deeper, and more inclusive.

That Hitler by no means left the “Aryan populace” out of his general scorn of his fellow-man was felt by biographer Helmut Heiber, who noted:

[I]n the last resort the German masses served merely as a vehicle for Hitler's thirst for power, as the basis of a pyramid whose purpose consisted in its topmost stone; and in moments of excitement during the second half of the war made no attempt to conceal the fact. As a rule, however, he took good care not to parade his contempt. (Heiber 1961; quoted in Stein, 1968, 160)

Give Hitler at least this much credit: he knew it wouldn't be popular! What Heiber describes, once when gets past the extraordinary historical circumstances, is in fact a very ordinary and familiar thing. As anyone can verify from their experience of life, people tend to *enjoy* joining in "the fun" as contempt is had for a third party (preferably absent from the conversation). Everyday gossip depends on it; a good deal of contemporary politics (and media) do also. When Hitler pointed toward the Jews, the Russians, the Gypsies, Western parliamentarians, and . . . well, add your pick, the German people generally were happy to participate in the "contempt festival." But no one likes being himself the object of contempt! So Hitler hid one aspect of his universal contempt for humanity, until – as the Soviet armies approached Germany – he knew his fate was sealed, and had nothing more to lose. At last, he felt free to show what he had always felt: disdain for the German people who so easily had yielded to his mastery.

Contempt and the Youthful Hitler

One way of seeing the beginning appeal of contempt to Hitler, preceding any particular set of political considerations, is to spend some time with him as a young man. Let us start with an observation of August Kubizek, the one close friend he had as a teenager. Kubizek writes in *The Young Hitler I Knew*, "All he wanted from me was one thing – agreement" (Kubizek 2006, 33). How ordinary this sounds: the association of friendship with approval; of great friendship with great approval. But to expect another person, as Hitler does, simply to adopt your point of view on all matters, is to turn that person into a mere appendage. Later, of course, Hitler would expect all of Germany to give up its independence of thought, and serve his will.

It is important to keep in mind that Kubizek, who published the German original in 1953, had no desire to speak ill of Hitler. Instead, his book is shocking in its positive bias. Not a word about the millions who died in the war, or about the death camps. By contrast, we encounter many passages praising Hitler's "overflowing" heart. As Ian Kershaw, the noted British historian, observed in his introduction to the book, we can see in how Kubizek writes that "an unmistakable current of admiration remains" (Kubizek 2006, 11). Consider: Kubizek tells us that he first met Hitler when both teenage boys were at the Linz opera, watching performances from the standing-room section. Noticing each other, they struck up a conversation, and, as Kubizek notes, "We... rejoiced in our common adverse criticism" of the casting (Kubizek 2006, 28). "Rejoice" is the telling word. Others might regret finding weakness in an operatic performance. Not Kubizek and Hitler.

To those interested in the mind of the young Hitler, one of the most difficult issues is how to place the fact that we do see – on occasion – that he appears to be going after kindness. As Alan Bullock once said, “Let’s have the rawness of it, which is that he was a person like you and me in many respects” (quoted in Rosenbaum, 1998, 85). We cannot paint an entirely evil picture of Adolf Hitler and be honest. Yet what emerges from a close study of these acts of kindness, and also those moments when he truly seems moved by beauty in nature and in the arts, is that invariably another motive shadows it – indicating that the pleasure Hitler got through respectful thought about others, and respectful emotion about the world, was not enough to satisfy him.

Thus, when Kubizek’s viola teacher died (and Kubizek was later to be a graduate of the Vienna Conservatory and a serious professional musician) Hitler went to the funeral, “which,” says Kubizek, “rather surprised me as he did not know Professor Dessauer at all. When I expressed my surprise, he said, ‘I can’t bear it that you should mix with other young people and talk to them’” (Kubizek 2006, 34). The brutality of owning a person, and a desire to accompany that person in his private grief, are here co-mingled.

Hitler in Vienna

Some years later, sharing an apartment in Vienna, Kubizek observed the intensity with which Hitler thought through various architectural problems in order to improve the living conditions of the poor of that city. (Hitler was then imagining his professional future as having to do with architecture). “There was here a strange contradiction,” Kubizek wrote, “which always struck me: all his thoughts and ambitions were directed towards the problem of how to help the masses, the simple, decent but under-privileged people with whom he identified himself – they were ever-present in his thoughts – but in actual fact he always avoided any contact with people. The motley crowd in the Prater was practically repugnant to him” (Kubizek 2006, 164).

The essence of respect, I learned from Eli Siegel, is the belief that other things, other people, deserve our precise thought: they have rights, the most important of which is the right to be seen accurately. Hitler plainly had unconscious scorn for this basic ethical principle. Then again, so do many people – perhaps even most people. We can, and often do, invent a person in our minds rather than try to see who that man or woman really is. A rather absurd instance of doing just this can be found in Kubizek’s book, as Hitler talks to his friend for years about his great passion for a girl from Linz named Stefanie, and about how they see eye to eye on everything. There’s only one problem: Hitler has never once spoken to her!

This matter of whether reality has independence from our ego, including the reality of other people, is a pivotal matter – because the contemptuous mind will not allow it. Max Picard is at his best here, writing, “The Nazi...feels no responsibility towards reality because he feels no ties to it; that is why he does with it as it pleases him” (Picard 1947, 115). Thus, it is not surprising that the young Hitler, though a voracious reader, used books not so much to get an accurate picture of reality in his mind, as to glorify himself. “His attitude to books,” writes Kubizek, “was the same as his attitude to the world in general. He absorbed with fervour everything he could lay

his hands on, but he took great care to keep at a safe distance from anything that might put him to the test” (Kubizek 2006, 182). It is also revelatory that despite his wide reading, Hitler kept away from the strict sciences; in particular, mathematics. These are fields, after all, that will not bend easily to one’s ego.

To my knowledge, the only time Hitler ever admitted in print to being “at variance with himself” is when, in *Mein Kampf*, he tells of why he was unable to pursue an architectural career in Vienna. It was because earlier he had failed mathematics, and so lacked a diploma:

...what I missed out of obstinacy at the Realschule now took its bitter revenge. Admission to the School of Architecture was dependent on attending a technical school for building, and entrance to the latter required one to have matriculated from a secondary school. I did not meet any of these conditions and, as far as could be foreseen therefore, the fulfillment of my dream to become an artist was impossible. (Quoted in Kubizek, 2006, 130)

Note that in the word “obstinacy” there is even a flicker of self-criticism – the rarest of Hitlerian items. Even so, this self-criticism is the decorous version – smoothed-over-for-public-consumption.

This seems the moment to mention that there is a degree of scholarly debate as to just how much of Kubizek’s book is directly by him and how much by editors. There is also a question of how much Kubizek altered his memories to suit his imagined audience of readers. For the sake of argument, let us stipulate that one (or both) of these possibilities is so. Yet what would that indicate? If he (or his pro-Nazi editors) changed the facts to make Hitler “more acceptable” to readers, it only supports my point: that contempt was so pervasive in Hitler’s life that even with whitewash liberally applied, the evil intent still comes through.

In Kubizek’s book, it is clear that Hitler found the situation vis-à-vis the School of Architecture tormenting. The entire structure of his self was built on the notion that reality had no rights he was obliged to acknowledge. And so, as Kubizek witnesses, “it only needed the lightest touch...for his self-accusation to become an accusation against the times, against the whole world” (Kubizek 2006, 158–9).

The desire to blame others rather than honestly criticize oneself is clearly a sign of a preference in a self for contempt. Again, we must ask: how universal is this temptation? Is it only a Hitlerian weakness? Only a fault in the German character? Only a lifestyle choice of the 1930s and 1940s? Or is it present in everyone? It is; and let us have the courage to explore what that means. As Siegel has explained: “Contempt, it seems to us, is the foundation we need for our desire to be somebody; to matter [. . . Fascism] is the ego made metallic. It is the unwillingness to understand, as power” (Siegel 1976b, 1; Siegel 1982, 2; Siegel 1993, 2). In support of this view of the Nazi era, let me once again quote Max Picard: “The shouters – Hitler, Goebbels, and all the rest – wanted to prove by their shouts that they existed. The dictator [. . .] felt his existence only by shouting some command” (Picard 1947, 36). Daniel Jonah Goldhagen and

Berel Lang have also documented richly the contemptuous relish with which the Nazis went about their work degrading other human beings (Goldhagen 1996; Lang 1992).

Hitler's "Table-Talk"

I turn now to another remarkable book: *Hitler's Secret Conversations: 1941–1945* (1953). It consists of transcripts of conversations Hitler had with his associates at his command center on the Eastern front, the "Wolf's Lair." Late night conversations, over pastry and tea; conversations like those many people have: to relax, to unwind after the day's work. Only this work was the attempt, literally, to conquer the world.

Let's begin with a striking fact: the ruler of Germany feels impelled to tell, again and again, about schoolboy victories over teachers. It seems he loved to humiliate teachers in front of their classes: for example, Herr Koenig, who, in an earlier job, had endured an explosion from a nearby steam boiler that left him with a speech defect: the inability to pronounce the letter 'h.' "When he read out the names of the class," said Hitler: "I pretended not to hear, although I was sitting right in front of him. He repeated it several times [. . .] When he had [finally] identified me, he asked me why I didn't answer. "My name's not Itler, sir. My name is Hitler" (1953, 158). This is so ordinary. Something like it – one person trying to make another look ridiculous – happens hundreds of times today in Philadelphia, New York, Berlin. And that is what the child Adolf is doing: exploiting his teacher's troubles for a cheap laugh.

In "The Mind of Hitler," a searching essay which also serves as the introduction to this volume of transcripts, the historian H. R. Trevor-Roper quotes Hitler as saying something whose very wording is a mocking paraphrase of Christ: "I have not come into this world to make men better, but to make use of their weaknesses" (1953, xxviii–xxix). Now, truth to be told, *everyone* has played around – to a greater or lesser degree – with the terrible equation central to Hitler's mind: that weakness in another means strength for ourselves. Not just Nazi dictators, but people generally like to imagine that we are superior: superior in cleverness, family background, intellect, etc.

Throughout the book Hitler constantly pats himself on the back for all of these things. Simply being Aryan – his "family background" if you will – makes him, he tells himself, far above most other people. He praises himself for his clever ability to outsmart opponents: his deftness at lying. And he fancies himself as having more intellectual courage than anyone else: the only person unafraid of the utter cruelty of Nature. "One couldn't imagine a better activity on nature's part," he tells those present, "than that which consists in deciding the supremacy of one creature over another" (1953, 321).

The continuity of Hitler's mind on the last point, concerning the cruelty of reality, can be seen in the fact that twenty years earlier, in a speech which John Lukacs cites in *The Hitler of History*, the Nazi leader says: "There is only defiance and hate, hate and again hate." Only two things matter: "to hate and to be hard [. . .] a lesson devoid of love." "This brutal [. . .] view of the world," comments Lukacs, is "by no means rare" (1998, 71).

True enough; yet it was felt by Hitler and his ardent Nazi followers with a rare intensity: an intensity perhaps unmatched in human history. Wrote Siegel in a 1976 essay, “The Suppression of Good Will”:

The Nazis around Hitler in 1932 and later possessed strongly the feeling that kindness would be in their way [. . .] How much we can do in the field of annulling some consideration of another has not been measured yet. There is no limit to how rigid, fixed [. . .] merciless we can be. There is no limit, this means, to the suppression of good will. (1976a, 1–2)

Returning to the 1940s, it is important to see that for nearly 600 pages of conversation transcript, Hitler never asks a single question other than rhetorical ones which he intends to answer himself. And he hardly ever acknowledges learning anything. Moreover, he says he can't read novels. “That kind of reading annoys me,” says Hitler (1953, 292). As Siegel once observed, to read a novel is to spend hours deeply affected by the inner lives of other people; and this is something the ego sees as a threat. Hitler is incapable of reading a novel because he doesn't want to give full reality to anyone.

One segment of the human race which Hitler sees as very different from himself – and, of course, inferior – is women. “Intelligence, in a woman,” he says, “is not an essential thing.” And he continues: “My mother, for example, would have cut a poor figure in the society of our cultivated women. She lived strictly for her husband and children. They were her entire universe. But she gave a son to Germany” (quoted in Trevor-Roper 1953, 292). This is grandiose conceit; but how many children see their parents this way? More specifically: how many young boys see their mothers in that light? – and then go on later to view all women that way: as existing, not in their own right, but to serve *us*, to make us important?

An aside: one form contempt for women can take, a form having in it at once the desire to blank her inner life out of existence as well as the desire to have her passively in one's service, is pornography. So it is not at all surprising to be told by Ernst Hanfstaengl that Hitler had an interest in such publications. Not only did he own (among other such books) a “well-thumbed” edition of Eduard Fuch's *History of Erotic Art*, but apparently Hitler himself sketched a series of pornographic drawings of his niece, Geli Raubal – “the sort of thing,” Hanfstaengl comments, “only a perverted *voyeur* would commit to paper, much less oblige a woman to model for” (Hanfstaengl 1994, 48, 163).⁹

Returning to the main point: it is plain that Hitler judged people not by who they were, but by how important they made him. He was ruthless with anyone who questioned his importance. All through the 1920s in Bavaria, he had his political enemies murdered while the right-wing judiciary and the local police looked the other way; and once he became Chancellor of Germany in 1933 – not through a clear election victory, but through a backroom deal brokered by wealthy people convinced he would defend their economic superiority – he continued to murder.¹⁰

Contempt and an Economic Viewpoint

Hitler's anti-Semitism was an important aspect of his politics. But there was a second element: from the very start Hitler took a key idea in leftist politics – that the land and resources of the world should be owned equitably – as a personal insult. Some scholars, notably Arno Mayer, have argued that his anti-Bolshevism was the more primal of the two hatreds (1988). The philosophy behind this new economics Hitler described in *Mein Kampf* as: “[a] doctrine [which] denies the aristocratic principle of Nature, and sets mass and dead weight of numbers in place of the eternal privilege of strength and power” (Hitler 2001, 60). This is raw contempt for people: seeing millions of other men and women as nothing but “dead weights.” Yet Hitler was hardly alone; contempt for “the masses” was arguably a key feature of industry at that time – not only in Germany, but in England, France, and the United States. There was a feeling among the defenders of profit economics that people exist, from a “business-point-of-view,” simply to make money for you.

Stripped of pretence, the cruelty and ill will of this way of economics leaps out at one in sharp relief. It denies people their full reality, reducing them to the status of ready-at-hand tools whose function in life is to augment your private financial position; and if they can't do that for you, well then, discard them, and search for greater profit elsewhere. “Fascism,” Siegel observed in a 1970 lecture, “is an attempt to see that capitalism functions, by getting rid of its enemies. Fascism is the desire to kill good will if it is a fight between good will and our ego” (quoted in DeFilippis and Kestenbaum, 1984, 2).¹¹

As I worked on this article, I had a chilling memory. As a teenager, growing up on Long Island, in a town that was perhaps 80% Jewish, the board-game I loved most was “Stalingrad” – a detailed reconstruction of the war between Hitler and the Russian people. Either side could win. I remember with shame that I preferred to play the Nazi side. Certainly, I knew what Hitler had done. I knew about the gas chambers, the ovens; I knew about Auschwitz. But Hitler also fascinated me, and for a terrible yet logical reason: he embodied, in a near-ultimate degree, a desire I also had – to have the world and other people bend to my will. It is not accidental that at this same time, though I was young, I was also a fervent supporter of the Vietnam War – in my opinion the most terrible instance of international ill will America has ever had. It was a war which in which thousands upon thousands of innocent people died; a war which arose not from a need in America to defend itself, but from a desire to impose our economic system on people who didn't want it.

This essay was written to shed light on the evolution of Hitler's mind, and why that mind, and the political ideas which emerged from it, had the powerful appeal it, and they, did for millions of ordinary, representative people. Though what I write about took place three-quarters of a century ago, it matters enormously to our world today. For two reasons: First, because in terms

of everyday life we all need to examine our personal reliance on contempt – question it, criticize it, lessen it, simply in order to like ourselves on an honest basis, and be thoughtful about, and kind to, other people. But there is a second reason: the world, once again, is deeply turbulent. Hitler came to power during a period of much financial unrest; a period, too, in which faith in democracy was weak. Once more, we are hearing fascist-like appeals from some politicians. As Robert O. Paxton noted in *The Anatomy of Fascism*:

Fascism [. . .] is still visible today. Fascism exists at the level of Stage One [the creation of political movements] within all democratic countries—not excluding the United States. “Giving up free institutions,” especially the freedoms of unpopular groups, is recurrently attractive to citizens of Western democracies, including some Americans. We know from tracing its path that fascism does not require a spectacular “march” on some capital to take root; seemingly anodyne decisions to tolerate lawless treatment of national “enemies” is enough.

And he adds: “Determining the appropriate responses to fascist gains is not easy, since its cycle is not likely to repeat itself blindly. We stand a much better chance of responding wisely, however, if we understand how fascism succeeded in the past” (Paxton 2005, 220). Paxton is right. The world needs an education which can enable it to be in the clear, ethically. The key to achieving that clarity is studying what Eli Siegel explained: the hope for contempt is the beginning point, the precondition, of all human evil; fascism, included.

Notes

1. Fackenheim was a German-born rabbi, imprisoned for a year in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp before fleeing to England just before the outbreak of the war.
2. See, in particular, “The Face of Hitler” (Picard 1947, 78–85) where Picard speaks about Hitler and “nullity.”
3. For a compact biography, see this Google Knol which I authored: <http://knol.google.com/k/eli-siegel#>.
4. Siegel won *The Nation*’s poetry prize in 1925 for his poem “Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana,” a work about which William Carlos Williams wrote in 1951, “I say definitely that that single poem, out of a thousand others written in the past quarter century, secures our place in the cultural world” (quoted in Siegel, 1958, xvi; see also: Breslin, 1985, 229–252).
5. For a short presentation of the fundamental concepts of his philosophy, and how they are to be differentiated from other, and more recent uses of the term “aesthetic realism,” see: Green, 2005.

6. Though first published as a whole in 1981, various chapters were in print separately as early as 1946. See, in particular, the “Preface: Contempt Causes Insanity” (Siegel 1981, 1–20) and the chapter “The World, Guilt and Self-Conflict” (Siegel 1981, 81–122).
7. Perhaps the closest Max Picard comes to a definition of evil is on page 16 of his 1947 text. There he equates “the germ of evil” with “selfish isolation” and “the disease of fragmentation.” That the ground upon which we justify our isolation is the belief that we are superior to other people is not said. And that belief arises from the hope for contempt.
8. By 1937, Hanfstaegel, having gotten on Hitler’s bad side, and in fear for his life, fled Germany. During WWII, he lived and worked in Washington D.C., and was useful to the war effort in providing “inside information” about the Nazi leadership.
9. That Hanfstaengl is outraged at these drawings, which he says have “every anatomical detail,” is clear from his calling them “depraved.” He knew something of the ethical and aesthetic difference between art and pornography; one of the most prestigious fine art publishing houses in the world was owned by Hanfstaengl’s family, and for several years he worked in it. The difference, often forgotten now-a-days, is that art exists to satisfy humanity’s desire to have more respectful for reality; pornography, the reverse. It is not a matter of the degree of nudity; it is a matter of ethical purpose – in the artist, and in the viewer.
10. Early in the 1930s, the Nazi Party allied itself with the German National People’s Party. As George Stein notes: “this party of the far right represented Germany’s conservative establishment: the aristocracy, the East-Elbian landowners, the officer corps, the great industrialists, and the high-ranking civil servants” (Stein 1968, 10).
11. In support of this perspective, note the following by Helmut Heiber: “[T]o the very end, Hitler indeed succeeded in maintaining a stable level of prices through his price-stop policy, but the wage-level also remained unchanged and what organized body of workers would have accepted that at a time when profits were rising continually!” (Heiber 1968, 163).

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