

Investing in Tech Stocks and Reconsidering Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism, Revolution, and Adolf Eichmann

What Happens Next - 11.7.2021

Richard Bernstein QA

Larry Bernstein:

Perfect. Thank you. Dick, I just wanted to compare Hannah Arendt's experience with my own family's escape from Germany as well. My grandparents escaped from Austria and ended up in France at the same time as Hannah Arendt. When the war started, my grandfather was sent to a similar camp in Nimes in 1940 after the Germans invaded.

Hannah Arendt found the good graces of a fellow by the name of Varian Fry, who was able to get her a US visa and other papers. Varian Fry was working for a group to help Jewish intellectuals escape from Europe. They saved Arendt. They saved Marc Chagall, the painter, and others.

Richard Bernstein:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

My grandparents and my mother escaped over the Pyrenees as well and out and got through to Portugal, but 2 years later than Arendt, they left in January 1943. I think what's interesting about Arendt is it's clear that having to run from the Nazis all over Europe did affect her thinking greatly. My first question for you is she was on an eight-year escape to run away from the Nazis. How do you think that very physical movement affected her philosophy and her fears in her ideas and her writings?

Richard Bernstein:

Yeah, it's interesting that you have grandparents that had a very similar experience. It had a deep effect. First of all, when she was in Germany, she said what really distressed her was not her enemies. They all had enemies. But when they saw that they're friends and other people were going along with the Nazis, she actually made a decision that she was going to leave intellectual life. When she went to France, she said, "When you are attacked as a Jew, you fight back as a Jew, not as a German, not as a world citizen, et cetera." When she went to France, she said you want to do only practical work. She actually worked for the organization called Youth Aliyah that sent young Jewish adolescents to Palestine. Many people think that she was primarily a university professor. She was not. She was an independent person. She was an independent thinker in that time. I think the whole experience of the rise of the Nazis and her experiences, even as a stateless Jew, I mean, deeply shaped her thinking, and the influence of that period is all over her work.

Remember, she was not in a concentration camp. She was not sent to be exterminated, and this is something also about Hannah Arendt, a wonderful irony. When she wrote the article, *Why We Have Refugees*, she says, we Jews are now a new type of human being. Our enemies

put us in concentration camps. Our friends put us in internment camps. That was the kind of telling remark about the Germans and the French.

Larry Bernstein:

I mean, it's interesting that later the French would hand the refugee Jews off to the Nazis and off they went to Auschwitz, so internment camp was a holding pen if you will.

Richard Bernstein:

I think this is another significant event that they only much later came to understand. The women who did not escape from the internment camp, Gurs, who stayed there were ultimately sent to Auschwitz by Adolf Eichmann. I think that Arendt never forgot that. If she hadn't escaped, she could have been sent off to Auschwitz.

Larry Bernstein:

For sure. You mentioned that what really surprised her when she was in Germany was that her friends went along with the Nazis. The most famous friend was also her lover and teacher, the philosopher Martin Heidegger. How do you think about that relationship, why she really never turned on him despite his support of the Nazi party and how she thought about that problem?

Richard Bernstein:

The first thing to recognize is this. When she had her affair with Heidegger, she was 18 or 19. It's before Heidegger showed any inclination of sympathy with the Nazis. It's much more to be put in the characterization that we know all too well in this country of a young student is infatuated with her professor. Heidegger had a wife and two children at that time. She then, after a year or two in this relationship, she left Heidelberg, and she did not have any contact with Heidegger until 1949, which is the first time that she ever went back to Germany. Many people are really perplexed because she condemned so many other people, while she never publicly condemned Heidegger for his role in the Nazi party. It's true that Heidegger was the great love of her life. She thought that Heidegger was the greatest philosopher of the time, but even though she could be sharply critical of all kinds of people, she never publicly criticized Heidegger. That's the facts and you have to draw your own conclusion.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, what conclusion do you draw from that?

Richard Bernstein:

I really think, this would take a long time, so I think of it as a certain type of blindness. After '49, they renewed a correspondence. She kept all his letters. She not only kept his letters at her bedside, before she died, she gave them to an archive, so she knew that this would someday be revealed. I mean, I do not have the full answer, but I think it has to do with modern matters of the heart that somehow, he was special and that Hannah Arendt, like anybody else had her blindness. She did, but what was so interesting is that in the period where she had no contact, she actually called him a murderer. She was very, very critical of Heidegger.

She went to Freiburg where he was teaching, he sent her a note, they met, and that was the start of their renewed friendship, which I think is a bit of a blight on the life of Hannah Arendt.

Larry Bernstein:

All right, let's go next to her book on Eichmann, and the Eichmann trial, which was entitled, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. This book was extremely controversial. It was controversial primarily because of her views of both Eichmann and about the trial itself. And so, maybe I'll start with the trial. She condemned the kidnapping of Eichmann, and then bringing him to Israel to have what she referred to as a show trial in the Soviet style, where the evidence was not limited to his own actions, but more generally to the Holocaust itself. And she really had it in for the prosecutor of the trial, who she made particular fun of.

How do you make sense of her views related to the kidnapping of Eichmann? When Ben Gurion went to the Knesset to announce that they had kidnapped Eichmann, and he was coming to Israel, he received a standing ovation, and it was worldwide news that this horrible Nazi was going to be brought to justice. Why did she view this process as being so problematic?

Richard Bernstein:

I think that what you said is just slightly misleading, because ultimately, she justified the kidnapping. She justified that he should be brought to Israel. She justified the fact that, she argued against those people who said that the Israeli court conduct and make an objective judgment. In the end, what's so interesting, she even justified some crucial statements of the final vote about it. It's not completely accurate to say that she condemned all this. I think she was extremely hostile to them. She felt strongly, if you're bringing an individual to a trial, it's the individual that is on trial, not the whole of the history of anti-Semitism, not everything that happened in the Holocaust itself.

And it was clear that what you call a show trial, Ben Gurion and particularly the prosecutor wanted to make this trial about the history of anti-Semitism in the world. In fact, he begins his prosecution by going all the way back to Haman, and sees this as the culmination of anti-Semitism. He thought, and it's true, if you consider what any kind of criminal trial normally is, most of all that trial, was simply irrelevant. I'll give you one beautiful illustration. At a certain time, the diaries and notebooks of Hans Frank were introduced as evidence. He was the Governor of Poland that was overseeing Auschwitz himself.

And at one point, he released a defense. It was not a very strong defense of Eichmann. He asked a simple question. "Is the name Eichmann mentioned once in all those documents?" And the answer was no. It became, it was very dramatic. This was on TV. It was very moving for lots of people to hear the stories, and this was deliberate. Ben Gurion wanted the world to know what really happened to Jews, and he also wanted Israelis to know, because there had been a myth in Israel. Well, the Holocaust, just went to their gas chambers, rather innocently. And he wanted the Israelis to know the horror of what actually had taken place at that particular time, and it became a very significant event in Israel itself.

It's true. She's absolutely right. There were all kinds of myths about the book, that she exonerated Eichmann, that she blamed the Jews for being the victims that had to do with some

of the sections on the Jewish councils. I think this, that one of the main reasons why there was such a strong reaction to this book, you have to remember, that up until the '60s, the Holocaust was barely a topic of discussion, except for professionals. It's because people like to think, when you come to good and evil, there are the good guys and the bad guys. The bad guys are sadists, they're vicious, they're malicious, et cetera.

That's the way in which we think about it. We think about good and evil the way we think about Westerns. We think about good and evil the way we thought about Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. We are the good guys, and we're going to get them, better or worse. And Eichmann, her deepest message, if you want to think seriously about evil in the 20th century, those terms are too simplistic. They are completely simplistic about what actually happens to people in such a situation. But people don't really need that.

They want to hear he's vicious, and he's sadistic, and so forth. And she was saying, "That's not what he was." I don't want to completely exonerate her description of Eichmann, because I don't think it's completely right, but I think this deep conceptual point that people really always like to think of these as absolutely evil, no questions asked. She said at one point, "Most evil in this world is committed by people who don't claim they committed evil." That's not a message people like to hear.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about her most famous expression of her professional career, which is, the banality of evil. How do you think about whether or not that was an accurate description of Eichmann? How should we think about that as a concept, independent of Eichmann?

Richard Bernstein:

I think it was a mistake to use that term, because it has been completely, systematically misinterpreted. It was interpreted as her saying that the Holocaust and the murder of Jews were simply banal. She never said that, and that was not her point. Her point was something different, is that her understanding of Eichmann is that he a careerist. He was a real bureaucrat. If there hadn't been a Nazi era, he might have been either successful or a failure as a middle manager.

He was more concerned with his career; he was more concerned with advancing himself. The banality of evil refers to his intentions. His intentions were not by her view a systemically Jew-hater. It was wonderful wearing that uniform. It was wonderful having all that power. And so, that his motives were banal, and in the way she put it, and I quote her, "The deeds were monstrous. The man was not a monster."

Larry Bernstein:

She traveled to Jerusalem, she participated in the trial for like four days. It was a contemporaneous account of the trial, and a contemporaneous view of the evidence that was provided. Since then, there have been a number of biographies on Eichmann. The most important I think is by Bettina Stangneth, and her book is entitled, Eichmann Before Jerusalem, which plays on Hannah Arendt's book title, The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer. And

Bettina was able to get access to Eichmann's recordings and writings that he did while he lived in Argentina. And what came across from that, was that Arendt's description of this careerist, and not really a Jew-hater, was misleading, that he in fact was a Jew-hater, had worked very hard to achieve the death of millions of Jews. How do you think about whether her historical analysis or psychological analysis of Eichmann holds up with the current thinking of biographers and analysis of Eichmann himself?

Richard Bernstein:

Yeah, I myself have gone through all this literature, and I know what he's talking about, and I know what Eichmann did in Argentina. I think, let me just say this. I think that Arendt was wrong, although sometimes, she has insights into it that he was much more vicious, proud of his anti-Semitism than she acknowledged. He wasn't simply a careerist in it. I sometimes think that Eichmann was like a movie, the Woody Allen movie, a Zelig figure. And if thrown into a situation where you are to be a vicious anti-Semite, that's what you do.

If you're thrown into a trial where you're supposed to be a moderate person, that's what you do. And he had no depth to him whatsoever. I want to say this. If you're going to argue simply on the historical grounds, that I think that Arendt gives too favorable of a portrait of Eichmann. But I think there are two issues, the historical issues about which I think there are a lot of questions, and what I call the conceptual issue. The conceptual issue, can people do horrendous, evil deeds out of banal motivations? And I think that the answer is yes, and I think that we see that all the time in our lives.

I think that I would say, I would give her, critical of her on the exact historical, but people don't go further. She's making another point about the motivations for doing evil, and here I think she's profoundly right. I remember when Abu Ghraib became so popular, and everybody was blaming the immediate people. People weren't blaming our administration. They weren't blaming Rumsfeld. Those were the people who created the conditions for the possibility of something like that.

And they could say, "Oh, we didn't intend any kind of evil," but you created the conditions in which this could happen. So that's why I think the concept is an interesting concept even though the judgment of Eichmann historically is not accurate.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go to your last point about creating evil out of an opportunity, and I think one of the great moral questions we face is what would we do *if* you get in these very strange situations? I mean, Eichmann is given the opportunity to lead the mass murder of a people, and he takes it by the horns and rides with it as best he can. I think a lot of people when offered the chance to lead a genocide might want to pass, may not want to choose that, make that decision, maybe even commit suicide or run. Why are you giving Eichmann a bit of a pass or that he was just an opportunist? Well, an opportunist in the most horrible of ways. Should we judge a man when you have an opportunity to do bad things that you choose not to do it?

Richard Bernstein:

No, wait a minute.

Larry Bernstein:

Or do it with such zeal?

Richard Bernstein:

Yeah, what I object to what you said is giving him a pass. I don't think that she was giving him a pass because the main positive argument. She called him one of the greatest criminals of all time. He was responsible for what he did. He could have done otherwise and we know there's plenty of evidence that there were many, many Nazis who were asked to do awful things who didn't want to do them and they were not penalized. So I think the main issue is responsibility. Responsibility is that he had the opportunity, he could have asked to be transferred to a different division. He could have done all sorts of things.

And so you can't get him off the hook for being responsible for what he did because we know there were other people in analogous situations who refused to participate and were not necessarily penalized. It was so interesting that there's a book by Christopher Browning who shows many people were asked to murder Jews in Eastern Europe. There were a number who refused to do it. They were not punished. They got away with it. He had choices and he bears responsibility for what he did, and I'm with Arendt on that point. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Maybe we tread on similar ground. I think one of the things that really shocked Arendt when she went to the trial was Eichmann's use of language and his constant use of cliches. And she said, "Oh, my God. This guy's just an idiot." I think that's what really got under her skin. "This guy's a half-wit.

Richard Bernstein:

Yes.

Larry Bernstein:

"I can't believe that someone who speaks like this, someone who thinks like this, could be so successful at killing millions of people. I mean, how is it even possible?"

And I wonder if, yes, it's true Eichmann spoken in cliches and was incoherent. One of the things that she mentions in her book is the first thing... We're an hour before Eichmann's execution and the first thing he says is, "I don't believe in an afterlife." And then a half an hour later, he says, "I will see you in the next life." It's like, he couldn't even get that straight in his last couple of moments.

Richard Bernstein:

I want to interrupt you on that. That's the only time in the book she speaks about the banality of evil. Here he is professing this, "Long live Germany. I'll see you all after," and she thought

that summed up the whole thing, but the truth is it's the only time in the entire book that she uses the word banality. Okay, continue. I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, I was just thinking, did she misunderstand Eichmann's poor language skills to miss his management talents and his ability to manage bureaucracy and his evil intent to succeed in this endeavor? Or at the heart of this whole concept, it's really not about Eichmann himself, but the evils of bureaucracy in general, that-

Richard Bernstein:

Yes.

Larry Bernstein:

... bureaucracies work their petty sort of ways to achieve whatever the objective of the leaders are.

Richard Bernstein:

Her positive explanation is, and it sounds odd to an American ear, is what she calls his faultlessness. That he was so caught up in his cliches, he was so caught up in bureaucratic language, that he had the inability really to think about what... I mean, look, by the way, we know he was a master bureaucrat. He was very successful in sending millions of people, organizing the transportation to send them to the various camps so he wasn't stupid. He was a very sophisticated bureaucrat, but that's different from thinking about what you're doing and coming to understand it.

And the way she liked to put it, he simply lacked the imagination to enter into the kinds of minds of the victims that were being murdered when he sent them in those trains. So that's, I think, her point. She calls it faultlessness, is it was his inability to think. And she didn't mean inability to think like a bureaucrat, but to stop and think what you're doing. She loved that English expression, stop and think. Eichmann for her, like many, many bureaucrats, do not stop and think what it is that they really are doing. They just do it automatically, yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

One last question on the word banality for a second. You're right. Let's say she just uses it once in the book but she also uses it in her title. I mean, she calls it a report on the banality of evil. You can't miss it. In other words, it's as if the whole book had come to that one point and, bang, she slammed it home with that. Do you not view that as the core essence of the entire book?

Richard Bernstein:

No, I do not look at it as the essence of the book and it's a very interesting historical fact. Much earlier with her great teacher, Karl Jaspers, she had a discussion about Nazi crimes and she was arguing that Nazi crimes are crimes which are beyond any kind of normal crimes, and so forth. And said... This is 25 years before she used the expression, she said, "You know, you have to

understand evil in all its banality. It's like a fungus that can spread throughout the world." And I think that that's the view that she really... That's another aspect of the banality.

It's not something big. It's not something deep. It's on the surface and it spreads like a fungus that can do terrible damage. I'm a little bit hesitant to say that, "Oh, the whole thing is really just about the banality of evil. I think there's so much more about human nature, the failures of human nature, the attempt that we always want to use simplistic categories to understand difficult events where they don't work, and that you have to understand the complexity of what's really going on, particularly, I think, after totalitarianism.

You cannot think about evil, as George W Bush once put it when he was talking about Saddam Hussein, "We are the good guys. They're the bad guys and we're going to get the bad guys." Like the old Western type of thinking. That's the way people want to think about evil. It's just completely inappropriate, the way evil really works. I think that's something I want to emphasize. Okay? Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session with a note of optimism. Dick, what are you optimistic about?

Richard Bernstein:

I am optimistic about what I call the other aspect of Hannah Arendt. I think that one of her great messages is no matter how dark things look, no matter how despairing they can be, and she says it happens sometimes almost like a miracle that people can come together and change things, and I deeply believe in that message. I see, for example, that the time that we're in is a very dark time. I think the probability is that America is going to be succeeded, a high probability, by a fascist state, and that's the way it looks.

I mean, indeed, if you look at all that information that was revealed about Trump just before... He really wanted a coup and who knows, next time there could be a coup. But the other side is there is the possibility, not the necessity, that people will say no and will begin to act together and put it end to it. We've seen this happen. Yeah, I give a very good example. It's not comparable, but it's an example.

I lived through the McCarthy period and when you've lived through the McCarthy period, people thought this the worst that America is ever going to see. What was so fascinating about McCarthy is how it ended. The question, "Have you no sense of decency?" And within a short period, I think America came to their senses and realized what a terrible demagogue he was.

Something like this could happen again, although I make no predictions. If you ask if I'm optimistic, I wouldn't put it as optimistic, but hopeful that somehow, we'll get out of this mess of polarization, that people will realize that we're destroying democracy, that there will be a return to a certain amount of compromise and civility. We've seen it before in this country. Why not again?

Larry Bernstein:

Dick, thank you so much. That was wonderful.