

## On Superficialization – Part 1

By Fred Dewey

We tend to think of the superficial as harmless, of what is shallow as dismissable, bearable, as a passing problem. It's fun, entertaining, nothing to worry about. Maybe we avoid it, maybe we run from it. But what happens when it doesn't go away, when it is unbearable, when you can't avoid it? When it is everywhere? When it is bearing down on all of us like an aircraft carrier? When it assaults us, and saturates us, and rots out everything in sight? Perhaps you find it inside yourself and you can't and won't shake it because, well, frankly, it's a help. The problem arises when every last thing is taken from you and from others and handed back - in superficial form. You think you're so and so. But here's a little wakeup call, buster.

At a certain point, this becomes political. We have to superficialize all we say, do, think, and feel in order to survive, to not be erased, to not be forgotten, to make a living. To tolerate a job. And maybe the job doesn't pay. What a beautiful, what a handsome face. We are only genes. The earth is a resource. Greece needs to get its house in order. America on top of everyone. Germany on top of everyone. Russia or China on top of everyone. The market on top of everyone. I have to upload what I want people to know about, because if I'm not online I just don't exist. Look at all my friends.

German existentialist Karl Jaspers, addressing the University of Heidelberg and an audience full of ex-Nazis right after World War II, with rubble to every horizon, had the extraordinary courage to say something odd: that everything real and important had been *hidden* by "an enforced superficial community." I think it's worth it to take this very seriously. The point has nothing to do now with Germany. Jaspers was trying to talk about guilt and deeds done, and this could be well proposed for America, or Russia, or China, or Brazil, or Hungary, or whoever now rules the Antarctic, or will. For Jaspers, the thing that became a nightmare and horror was superficial and enforced and a community, or rather, a superficial community, an *enforced superficial community*. Jaspers had many very, very under-appreciated things to say, and this is one of them.

Before all hell broke loose, Jaspers had been a teacher of a very brave young woman who would go on to contribute a great deal to thinking through such matters - Hannah Arendt. Arendt had studied under him in Germany, and the two - Arendt fled Nazi Germany and Jaspers, with a Jewish wife, had stayed, all miraculously surviving - became close friends. Out of this, in time, years later, emerged an extraordinary phrase: the "banality of evil." Two decades after monstrous horror, Arendt invented this phrase to describe a person, or half-person, sitting before her on trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann. The shocking question Arendt raises is, what if evil is actually not from depravity, villainy, resentment, from ideology or any motives really, not from what is deep and twisted and interesting, but from shallowness? What if the crucial characteristic of evil is not that it is fascinating, but that it is a kind of fraud that defies words and even thinking? This goes to the heart of our delusions about even our misdeeds.

In trying to get at this formulation, one as controversial today as it was in the 1960s, the word superficial sheds much needed light. Or rather, superficialization. The point is not at all that evil's damage is superficial. The point is the forces destroying everything in sight are doing so through a kind of merciless superficiality. The damage might even be total - leaving no roots, no depths, everything burned out. Arendt's phrase raised a further question: looking at so much in

society and the social, what if it is superficiality that is fatal? Arendt's words on Eichmann, from the beginning of her last book, *Life of the Mind*, are worth returning to at length to begin thinking this through:

“...the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial – was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous... In the setting of the Israeli court and prison procedures he functioned as well as he had functioned under the Nazi regime, but when confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not exist, he was helpless and his cliché ridden language produced on the stand, as it evidently had done in his official life, a kind of macabre comedy.” This really upset people. A comedy? Well, “clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.” Or, as a famous person either said or didn't say, “Let them eat cake.”

Part II coming soon to screens in front of you...