

EPSTEIN & THE BANALITY OF EVIL

I.

The Epstein affair is the greatest scandal of modern times. In its dimension, in the scope of participants representing a cross-section of elites here and abroad, in the intersection of multiple criminal and crassly unethical activities: sex trafficking and rape of minors, blackmail, financial duplicity, espionage, treason, abuse of their powers by public agencies and private institutions, Establishment coverups that span decades, perjury – among others. There is not a sinful action missing from its multifaceted violation of law and human morality.

These features of the scandal make it unique and distinctly ‘post-modern.’ It could not have occurred in past historical periods. For there did not exist the transcendence of class and vocational differences, the looseness of transactions among a wide mix of elites (including two U.S. Presidents, Prime Ministers of Israel and Norway and a Prince of the English royal family), the globalization of contacts and communication among the denizens of the celebrity world, the nihilistic culture that suppresses all manner of behavioral restraint and inhibition. Those were necessary/permissive elements. The sufficient factor was the willful, ruthless individuals who seized the opportunity to spin an intricate web of criminality, malevolence, maliciousness and mendacity.

How to characterize this odd beast? It is not a secret society, or a cult, or a camarilla of a power-seeking clique, or an organized mafia, a fraternity, or any other type of recognizable entity. What we see is the interlacing of elite networks with Epstein at the hub. It’s the world of power and celebrity whose members are aware of each other, but whose connective tissue is of varying strength and extent. They share one critical trait: each already commands enough respect and/or influence that the objective rarely was to achieve that status; rather, it was to reap the benefits of their status whether it be an enlargement of existing privileges – financial, access to the most influential and celebrated power-brokers, fantasy sex, or the pleasure of mixing with other elites in salubrious settings. It served no cause. It was ecumenical – entry observed no ascriptive or social requirement. In this sense, diverse egalitarian and inclusive.

These elites accepted Epstein and Maxwell as reputable members of high society worthy of status by virtue of their money, her pedigree, his conman's charm and the lure of erotic adventure; some partaking of his 'hospitality' with the self-justification that everyone does it/they are consenting/we the elite are above conventional morality and above the law; making the 'realpolitik' judgment that Intelligence agencies' exploiting of criminal activity for their own higher ends is legitimately in the national interest

Epstein himself played the key role. He had a brilliant talent for manipulating this world of huge egos, gluttony, greed and amorality. However, he was no evil genius. His personality was not mesmerizing, his intelligence unremarkable. So, how was the network conceived, planned, and able to generate tens of millions in its start-up phase? Here, we enter the murky waters of political connection. There is good reason to believe that these crucial ingredients were provided by Mossad. Epstein's partner in crime, Ghislaine Maxwell, was the daughter of Robert Maxwell – the prominent London news mogul who was a fixture at the highest levels of the British Establishment. It was well-known that he headed a loose network of Zionists and Israel sympathizers who pooled multiple forms of Intelligence for the Israelis.@ After his untimely, mystifying death by drowning off his yacht, he was memorialized at a Jerusalem service attended by two former Mossad Directors and a former Prime Minister – Shimon Peres.

It is entirely reasonable to think that the Epstein enterprise received inspiration and early financial support from those same sources as represented by his soul mate Ghislaine. The connection doubtless continued throughout – likely, providing political cover and helpful oversight. Epstein rendered a range of service to the Israeli government: as go-between in deals with some small African states, expediting various financial transactions of dubious legality, and hosting meetings between Israeli officials and targeted members of the global elite. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak was an especially close associate who collaborated with Epstein on a number of ventures of both a personal and Israeli interest. Indeed, he spent weeks at a stretch in the notorious Manhattan mansion. In addition, the Israelis (if not the FBI) might have provided the equipment and the technical know-how for installing there, and on the island, hidden cameras for recording the proceedings. That material, in FBI hands before and after 2006, had enormous blackmail potential which could be used to extract ransoms or as leverage by state agencies (Israeli or American) on

persons of interest. All that evidence has disappeared into the maw of the all-time coverup of the all-time scandal in London and Washington and Jerusalem.

For it is also certain that American authorities were conversant with the scheme and that they drew their own benefits from it. The exceptional treatment that Epstein received at the time of his 2006 conviction on orders from Washington, according to the Florida prosecutor, supports that contention. Moreover, let's bear in mind that all the documents recently exposed, albeit with large deletions, along with the notorious 'black book', have been in the hands of the FBI for 8 years at least. Yet, authorities have taken no action to investigate and to indict – other than the belated conviction of Ghislaine. She has been relocated to a salubrious country club facility after a secret meeting with Trump's personal lawyer – her denial of Trump's palship with Epstein over 15 years doubtless the price for those privileges. Even now, the DOJ has stated that further legal actions are unlikely – even while justifying the total deletion of victims' testimony from the massive document drop on the grounds that it could compromise future criminal proceedings.

“Who was Jeffrey Epstein – this nonpareil hustler?” That is the puzzling question that challenges our understanding of human behavior. A non-descript secondary school teacher who becomes the ringmaster of a global spectacular of money, sex and power featuring the high & mighty from every sphere of endeavor, from every corner of the celebrity world. This outwardly ordinary man produced the extraordinary. Since there was nothing truly special about Epstein, other than his mastery of the conman's art and manipulator supreme of post-modern society's peculiar ways, a post-hoc psychological analysis would have produced only limited results in terms of comprehending the phenomenon that he embodied. We can say with confidence that he was not a 'monster' or some other sort of fiend. His conventional interactions with persons within or outside his circle appear quite normal. His language was uniformly casually colloquial – distinctive only in its sloppy spelling. There is no indication that he was mentally impaired; he would pass a psychiatric examination by any standard measure. This makes his conduct all the more perplexing: his total lack of a moral sense, his living without an evident superego.

The same holds for his accomplices, his enablers, his collaborative friendships with the many persons of fame and consequence who valued his company whether or not they participated in the sexual bacchanalias. Did he or they know right from wrong? – that's the question posed in determining the sanity

of somebody who committed extreme criminal acts. In one sense, they obviously did. Surely, they could cite the Ten Commandments or pastoral sermons punctuated by specific examples. They could recite acts that they never would commit or even contemplate. Have they suffered feelings of guilt or shame or contrition? No – zero signs of that. Only a very few were psychotic – the deranged Donald Trump being the outstanding exception. Still, they conducted their lives without a moral gyroscope – or, perhaps, one that was programmed by some means or other to operate only selectively.

So, we have to look elsewhere for clues as to the sources of their behavior: the nihilistic cultural/social setting infused with narcissism. Before shifting our attention in that direction, let us revisit Hannah Arendt's classic work on "*The Banality of Evil*."

II. THE BANALITY OF EVIL

Evil was very much on people's minds in the post-war era when the horrors of Nazism were still living memory. The capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1966 riveted the world's attention as nothing had since the Nazi chieftains had been brought to the bar at Nuremberg. The seeming incongruity between the monstrosity of the crimes and the tepid nature of the man in the dock was arresting. Eichmann was not a madman like Hitler; nor even the arrogant bully like Goering and his lot. He was 'normal' in clinical psychological terms. Arendt did not aim to explain Eichmann's blandness per se. It was her forcefully argued contention that ordinary people can commit enormous horrors that created a furor – a blazing fire of argument and recrimination whose embers burned for decades.

Arendt did err in slighting the emotional difference between the actual commission of an atrocity and the process of deciding upon and administering a program of atrocity. The temperament to do the latter, as Eichmann did, need not be as exceptional as that required to perform the act. Still, the portrayal of Eichmann missed the mark insofar as his behavior was not at all that of a robotic clerk. An educated, intelligent man, Eichmann was a passionate believer in the Nazi creed and fully understood its implications. Arendt asserted that Eichmann was in thrall to an ideology that suppressed all humane norms of conduct. But he was not passive in the transformative process. For, in his case, it was not just a question of complying with the dictates of the totalitarian regime since he had volunteered for the job he did and exhibited initiative in carrying it out.

Eichmann should be condemned not because he was intrinsically evil or willfully acted atrociously – according to Arendt. Rather, his main culpability lay in the failure to use his rational intelligence to recognize the implications of binding himself to a diabolical ideology. For Arendt, only the distinctive human faculty to think rationally can remind us of human dignity and to break the servile logic that leads us to behave abominably. Hence, adherence to a depraved ideology suggests that Eichman the rational human is only indirectly accountable for the crimes with which he is associated. Arendt assumed that humans are inherently ‘animals’ who by natural instinct will act rapaciously unless guided by high-grade rationality whether acquired through socialization as embodied in an enlightened creed or achieved through individual reflection.

This conception of our nature is false. Look at other mammals; they have no sadistic streak. Only homo sapiens are capable of committing atrocities. Moreover, it is in our nature to bond with and to protect members of our family, our tribe and even our species as much as it is to compete ruthlessly. All primates exhibit this propensity. An ethic of universal humanism as found in the traditions of all great civilizations would not have developed, been formalized and achieved a measure of success if it had run counter to the very essence of our being.

[Martin Heidegger - Arendt’s intellectual guide, muse and lover – was a proclaimed Nazi supporter who publicly displayed his allegiance – to the extreme of wearing a brown shirt while lecturing and betraying long-time colleagues. He never admitted moral error or made apologies. Belatedly, he did offer lame “explanations” that feebly rationalized his behavior. They were accompanied by outright lies. In this, he can be viewed as a precursor of today’s public persons who never do any wrong that cannot be excused or sloughed off. His philosophy, to the extent that its prolix tangle of ideas are decipherable, also was a harbinger in pointing to the fads of deconstruction, phenomenology, etc. They, in turn, have provided the intellectual cover for the post-modern world’s shallow but not innocuous nihilism that justifies and encourages garden variety egoists to indulge their impulses while eroding any sense of obligation or responsibility. The institutionalization of juvenilia.]

For Heidegger, as for many 20th century philosophers, the ultimate reality is ideational – not natural, or human. The thinker *par excellence* chose a course that made him an accessory to mass murder. One thing we do know, the ripples of the

tradition he represented – as much as the moral consequences of his immoral descent – outlived him. Heidegger foreshadowed the public performances of the present crop of leaders – as well as lesser lights. This is the democratization – and banalization – of the *obermensch*. Being liberated means never having to say “I’m sorry.” Public expressions of remorse when sins are exposed is not a prelude to acts of contrition; instead, it conveys a sense of regret that they allowed themselves to get into such a mess.

The implications of this analysis for understanding Epstein and his enterprise are these:

1. *Ideology was non-existent in the Epstein universe.* So, too, was religious passion or patriotic fervor. It is true that several of the main protagonists were unqualified devotees of the Zionist cause who viewed his active collaboration with the Israelis in a favorable light. That, in itself, does not mean that it was central to the dynamics of the network. In every other respect it was value-free. They were the product of a society that promotes the principle that individuals have a right to set their own course and implicitly to decide subjectively what is right and wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.
2. *High social standing – a compound of money, power and status – heighten the (usually) unstated conviction that I am answerable only to myself,* whatever the practical dictates of maintaining the outer appearance of conforming to conventional norms. The consequences are an ingrained sense of entitlement, an imperviousness to any idea of accountability, and a permission slip for brazen behavior.
3. *The present culture of permissiveness weakens fear of consequences from baneful behavior.* The less one fears chastisement and retribution, the less inhibited and the more self-indulgent one is.
4. *The Epstein associates typically don’t ponder whether something they do is ethical or not - that’s simply not a consideration. They are moved by want and desire.*
5. *Whatever moral perspective they possess is attenuated.* They are capable of moralizing about political matters at home or abroad even while engaging in criminal acts that cause victims severe harm. Or, more commonly, they can hobnob with and exchange favors with a man they

know is the impresario of that vile depraved extravaganza. Noem Chomsky is the personification of that unseemly, bizarre tolerance for cognitive dissonance (or, perhaps more precisely, emotional dissonance). Deepak Chopra is another example. Others who demonstrably are morally mute are *inter alia*: Larry Summers, Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky, Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, the Clintons and a host of luminaries from the worlds of business, politics, and academia.

There is an acute lack of empathy with the victims. By some psychological avoidance mechanism, they are objectified, their identity and their suffering disregarded as they carry on their friendship, collaboration, and scheming with Epstein. The conduct of the Epstein crowd conforms to the recrudescence in contemporary Western societies of a disposition to devalue innocent victims of one's actions. Witness Palestine.

6. Most striking about this perverse mentality, it not just the casual tolerance for violations of laws and every social norm of moral decency. Rather, it is the suppression/sublimation of the human's inborn instinct to protect others – especially the innocents – except in rare instances of an expedient reason to subordinate that innate empathy to some compelling survival need.

7. In this state of moral anomie, we enter the realm of psychopathology.

CONCLUSION

The Epstein affair, a sordid and criminal saga that encompasses 20 years of illicit conduct, epitomizes our contemporary that is the expression and perpetuator of nihilism. Those who acquire the status of celebrity, broadly defined, in the public eye and in their self-regard, form a privileged caste. That grants them license to do pretty much whatever they wish. No distinction is made between fame and infamy.

In that category are the persons who participated in Epstein's heinous crimes, embraced the man and/or gave Jeffrey Epstein legal cover amounting to immunity from condemnation or punishment.

They all are the spawn of a deformed society – miscreants without honor in a welcoming land.

**Peter Mandelson, in an earlier incarnation, was part of that network. Now, it is revealed that when serving as Business Secretary and then as Deputy Prime Minister under Gordon Brown, he sent ‘real-time’ emails to Epstein from the Cabinet Room within minutes of a decision taken on the monetary crisis or Middle East politics. Jamie Dimon, chief honcho at Morgan Chase, was another recipient of this choice information. Mandelson’s American counterparts are numerous.*

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