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Decentering Europe in the Thinking of Evil

IMGE ORANLI 8 May 2021

This essay suggests that Continental Studies of Evil need a more global approach in thinking about political evils of today. Highlighting the need for a more comparative and global perspective, I explore two proposals: first, the in-between space of the geographical binaries of East/West and Global South/Global North cultivates many political evils. Second, taking issue with the conviction in Continental philosophy that the Holocaust caused a rupture in the thinking of evil, I argue for the continuity of evils and characterize the insistence on the unprecedented character of the Holocaust as an example of Eurocentrism.

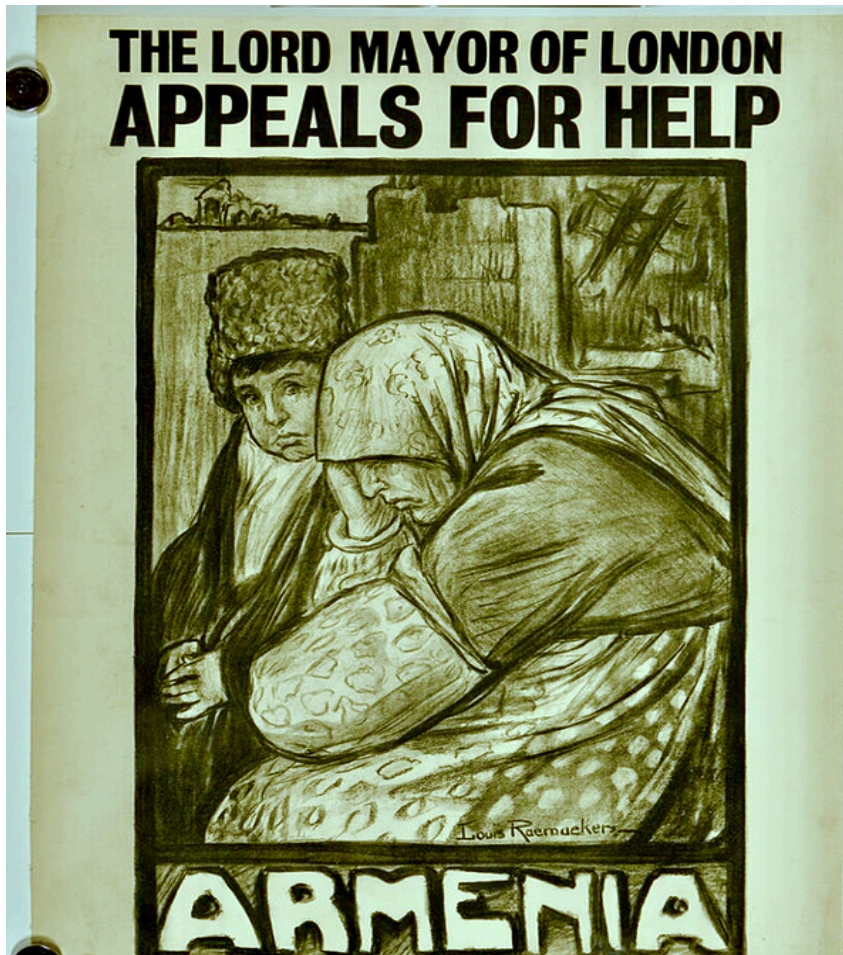




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Decentering Europe in the Thinking of Evil

One can talk about the production and distribution of evils in the same manner one talks about the production and distribution of goods or merchandise.

—Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils*



That the Western philosophical canon has a Eurocentric vision is no longer news. However, the canon's often limited preoccupation with political evils, confined to the borders of Euro-America, still begs for scrutiny. A Eurocentric perspective, however sophisticated and well established it is, inevitably falls short of understanding how events and acts come to be valorized as "evil" in other parts of the world. Terrorism, genocide, and genocide denialism are forms of political evil that continue to challenge the conditions for upholding peace and justice for humans on a global scale. This is why contemporary philosophical studies of evil would greatly benefit from a more global approach, one that takes seriously multi-sited perspectives and cross-cultural elements that should inform our ways of knowing and understanding the political evils of our times.

One way to intervene and disrupt philosophy's conventionalism is to introduce applied and interdisciplinary methodologies, administered with a view to broadening philosophy's horizons beyond the Euro-American comfort zone. Especially within Continental philosophy, where my scholarship is based, approaching political evils by transcending the disciplinary limits of philosophy has proven very fruitful. Following the legacy of Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, and Michel Foucault, such a philosophical orientation demands that concepts are produced in concordance with real-life experiences, structures, and mechanisms. Not only did these thinkers work with real-life events and issues, they also employed interdisciplinary theoretical kits. Building on their legacy, it is incumbent upon us Global South scholars to bring Western (and non-Western) philosophical conceptualizations into contact with cases beyond the Euro-American geographical zone in pursuit of far-reaching conceptualizations of political evils.

In proposing a conversation within Continental studies for a more internationally enriched discussion of evil, I will discuss two issues. First, if the task is to analyze the *social and political production of evils* (1) from a non-Eurocentric and more global perspective, then one way to go about this is to care for the in-between space of the geographical binaries of East/West and

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Global South/Global North, discursively rigidified and epistemically charged as these binaries are. Postcolonial and decolonial studies as well as critical historical perspectives are invaluable in attending to that in-between space where many political evils come to fruition. A second issue emerges from reflecting on the implications of the well-known conviction in Continental philosophy that the Holocaust caused a rupture in the thinking of evil, and that this was because it presented an evil unknown before. In what follows, I will expand on both of these issues to elucidate and exemplify the contours of my proposal.

In response to the first issue: in my own research, having a global approach means being critically aware of the disproportionately unjust division of the world in terms of capital (epistemic, financial, cultural, and so on), in terms of goods, and in terms of evils. This translates into an insistence on *thinking with the difference* as well as *thinking the productive effect of that difference* between East and West, Global South and Global North; and more specifically, thinking how this oppositional, binary formation of worlds becomes productive in the implementation and distribution of social and political evils. To give you an idea of what this means, in my research on the ideologies governing the Armenian Genocide, I saw that the Turkish supremacist Ottoman elite (the Young Turks)—who seized political power in 1908 and who then ordered the systematic killings of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915 (2) (during World War I)—were greatly influenced by the dominant ideologies of 19th century Europe. (3) This was not surprising to me because I had read Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (4) and knew that “the phenomenon of ‘political modernity’—namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise—is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into... Europe.” (5) Here, the postcolonial outlook encourages us to seek out the connection between 19th century European ideologies and the early 20th century political evils of the Young Turks.

Social Darwinism was one of the leading ideologies Ottoman elites endorsed at the turn of the century, alongside other nationalist and racial theories, and Turkism is the prevalent social Darwinist ideology that they created and maintained, and which continues to be the backbone of contemporary Turkish nationalism. The Young Turks' predecessors were the Young Ottomans, another influential political movement of the mid-19th century. This was a movement in the vein of European political movements like “Young Germany” and “Young Italy.” (6)

In order to be more specific about the *productive* effect of the relation between 19th century Europe and late Ottoman political thought and action, I named a condition that characterized the collective mindset of the Young Turks: mimicry in hostility, (7) an ambiguous emotional attachment characterized by a combination of competitive hostility with, admiration of, and mimicry of Western and Russian imperialism. My view is that the evils of the Young Turks cannot be clearly understood if divorced from this constitutive condition of their collective mindset. Indeed, the degrees of admiration for and hostility towards the Western (and Russian) powers changed with respect to the Ottoman elites'

event is not readily evident to the public because the evil in question was socially and politically produced by the same ideology that continues to shape the collective social imagination of that very public.

stance in relation to European Orientalism. (8) As the Ottoman empire began to collapse in the late 19th century, social Darwinism became the dominant ideology of influential Ottoman elites; the “survival of the species” trope allowed them to distinguish Turks as a distinct nation, through which they envisioned the nation as a competing power among the imperialist and colonialist European nations.

The genocidal will of the Young Turks was a product of this milieu, steeped in a hybrid lust for power (a hybrid between the older form of Ottoman imperialism and the newer racialist-nationalist European paradigm of social Darwinism), a legacy of their imperialist past now rationalized under the banner of “survival of the species” (or “race”).

On the role of social Darwinism in the implementation of 20th century genocides, Robert Bernasconi is critical of Arendt’s lack of attention to this widespread ideology. (9) Arendt’s resistance to locating the Holocaust within a wider milieu of 20th century genocides seems to be related to a particular conviction I alluded to earlier within Continental studies of evil. This conviction, nicely formulated by Richard J. Bernstein, is “that the evil that burst forth during the Nazi period indicated a rupture with tradition and revealed the total inadequacy of traditional accounts of morals and ethics to deal with evil.” (10) This conviction stirred an uneasiness in me when I first read of it in Bernstein’s famous *Radical Evil*. (11) The insistence on the *rupture* and the *unprecedented* character of the Holocaust—is it an example of the legacy of Eurocentrism? Leaving aside this question for now, I will make a brief detour to articulate where this uneasiness landed me in my studies on evil.

As an international scholar from Turkey, a country whose official policy denies the Armenian Genocide, I, along with other Turkish and Armenian colleagues, have long felt a personal responsibility to address this historical and continuing act of evil perpetrated by the Turkish state. Genocide denial is a peculiar phenomenon that speaks to the ontology of evil. Here, the evilness of an evil event is not readily evident to the public because the evil in question was socially and politically produced by the same ideology that continues to shape the collective social imagination of that very public. Since it is this public that appraises what falls under the category of evil, there is an impasse. It is this very problem that makes genocide denialism such a powerful and urgent problem for contemporary philosophical studies of evil.

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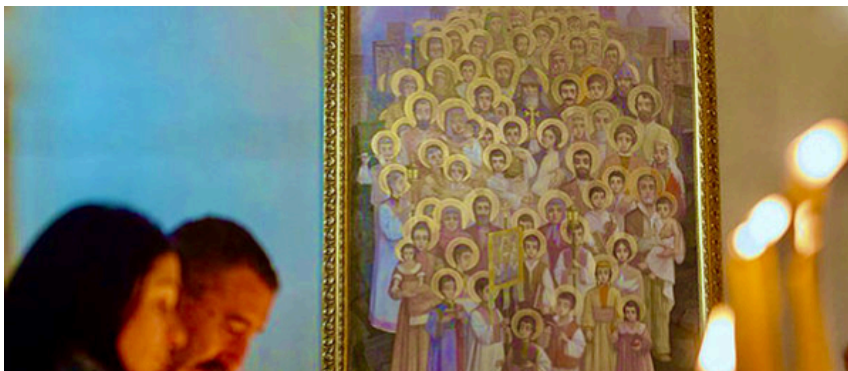





Photo of *Icon of martyrs of the Armenian Genocide*, painting in the Mother See of Holy Ecmiadzin Cathedral, Vagharshapat, Armenia (2018) ; Image credit: flickr

I was able to recognize this problem after reading Adi Ophir's brilliant work *The Order of Evils*. (12) Ophir's phenomenological approach offers a view of the conditions of production and distribution of evils, motivating me to develop a perspective that focuses on the gap between the occurrence of a harmful act and the failure to grasp that harmful occurrence under the category of evil. This is precisely what denial does: it prevents the harm from being represented under the category of evil. Ophir's articulation of an ontological difference "between a space in which damage and loss appear and the space in which suffering appears" (13) suggests that the suffering is not ontologically tied to the damage and loss, that suffering has its own existential ground as a particular experience of the sufferer, distinct from the fact of loss and damage. Now, imagine that the initial damage and loss has not even been counted. This inevitably causes another order of suffering that does not merely originate from the initial experience of damage and loss, but rather arises *because of the act of not counting* (i.e., the denial of) that initial loss. It is in this way that genocide denial multiplies the suffering of the initial loss and damage inflicted on the victims of genocide.

Ophir distinguishes two orders of evil: a first-order evil is "the one that did not find expression" as evil, while a second-order evil is "the one tied to the prevention of expression." (14) These two orders of evil, read in light of the denial of Armenian Genocide, (15) convey the point that genocide denial presents a combination of both orders of evil. On the one hand, the fact of genocide is denied, and therefore this evil event does not find an expression as evil (i.e., the first order of evil). On the other hand, the regime of denial prevents articulations of this evil from being made by creating a social and political climate that criminalizes the act of announcing the past harm done (i.e., the second order of evil). In contemporary Turkey, a major evil (the Armenian Genocide) has no significant *presence* in the collective social imagination of the Turkish people. (16) The absence of this major evil doing is maintained by institutional lies, as well as by historical revisions and rationalizations, made through institutional politics.

In exploring genocide denial's particular place in the ontology of evil, I grounded myself in Continental studies of evil, wherein I noticed that not all genocides were as widely recognized as the Shoah. Reading Bernasconi's "When the Real Crime Began," (17) I was pleased to see that my uneasiness was not unfounded. The opening remarks of the chapter suggest that Black philosophers had been disturbed, as early as the mid-20th century, by the tendency to highlight the unprecedented nature of the Nazis' crimes against humanity. Despite numerous Black philosophers' rejection of "isolat[ing] the Nazi genocide from the history of the West," (18) many scholars early on agreed that the Holocaust was a

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rupture (an exception).

Was the Holocaust not an intensified version of the evil of colonialism and other genocidal practices of the early 20th century, yet this time taking place in the heart of Europe, and implemented with much more effective use of the “scientific” racism and technologies of the day? (19) I think it was. And recently, critical Holocaust scholars have been pointing out the ethical and political implications of viewing the Shoah as an exception. (20)

It is well known that anti-Semitism had been a form of governance in Europe centuries before the Nazis came to power. The Nazis radically intensified and multiplied anti-Semitic policies. Before 1933, the German military had already practiced the extermination of the Herero people in southwest Africa and violently attacked the Boxer Rebellion in China and the Maji-Maji Uprising in East Africa. (21) Historians like Hans-Lukas Kieser note that popular history covered over the German military’s experience as an Ottoman ally in Anatolia during World War I, as members of the German military witnessed firsthand the extermination of Armenians. (22) Moreover, Stefan Ihrig’s account (23) sheds light on how, even well before World War I, the 1890s Armenian massacres were very well known to German officials and the public alike. Disturbingly enough, many Germans were in support of criminal Ottoman policies against Armenians, according to Ihrig: “beginning in 1895, a dynamic was set in motion that was to play out repeatedly in the future of Germany: First denial, then more dissemination of information, then justification of violence—mostly on racial grounds.” (24) Above all, perhaps the most telling indication of the continuity is the fact that Raphael Lemkin, who coined the word “genocide,” was inspired by what had happened to Ottoman Armenians. (25)

Critical historical research suggests a continuity and not a rupture when it comes to locating the Holocaust in the context of 20th century genocides. Elisabeth Weber’s discussion of the “exceptionality paradigm” in Holocaust studies, as well as of its repercussions for efforts to recognize the Armenian Genocide, not only supports my point, but also hints at the connection between denialism and exceptionalism. (26) The unwillingness on the part of Israel and the U.S. to officially recognize the Armenian Genocide, accompanied by the institutional efforts of the Turkish Republic in denialism, both in Turkey and abroad, (27) leaves us to observe that still, in this day and age, some can talk as if there is no concrete evidence to support the claims of genocide. This poses a critical philosophical problem, which I believe has a potential to expand the scope of Continental studies of evil. My exploration of this problem provides an example of a non-Eurocentric, interdisciplinary, and transhistorical perspective—and an illustration of my initial proposal to intervene in philosophy’s Eurocentric tendencies.

NOTES

1. Ophir, Adi. *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals*. New York: Zone Books, 2005.
2. See Kévorkian, Raymond. *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*. New York: I.B. Tauris,

2011; Bloxham, Donald. *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; Suny, Ronald Grigor, Göçek, Fatma Müge, and Naimark, Norman M., eds. *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

3. Oranlı, Imge. "Epistemic Injustice from Afar: Rethinking the Denial of Armenian Genocide." *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 2 (2020): 120-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2020.1839593>

4. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

5. Ibid., 4.

6. Zürcher, Erik Jan. *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement, 1905-1926*. Leiden: Brill, 1984, 6.

7. I coined this term in connection with Partha Chatterjee's thoughts in a previously published article: Oranlı, Imge. "Epistemic Injustice from Afar: Rethinking the Denial of Armenian Genocide." *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 2 (2020): 120-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2020.1839593>. Also see, Chatterjee, P. 2008. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, A Derivative Discourse*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

8. Kushner, David. *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism, 1876-1908*. Totowa: Frank Cass, 1977, 7-14.

9. Bernasconi, Robert. "When the Real Crime Began: Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the Dignity of the Western Philosophical Tradition." In *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History, Imperialism, Nation, Race and Genocide*. Edited by Richard H. King and Dan Stone. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008, 59-60.

10. Bernstein, Richard J. *Radical Evil, A Philosophical Interrogation*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 168.

11. Ibid.

12. Ophir, Adi. *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals*. New York: Zone Books, 2005.

13. Ibid., 330.

14. Ibid., 341.

15. I discuss Ophir's analysis of these two orders of evil in an earlier essay, though I arrive at a different conclusion. See Oranlı, Imge. "Genocide Denial: A Form of Evil or a Type of Epistemic Injustice?" *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4. No. 2 (2018a): 45-51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26417/ejiss.v4i2a>

16. In my above-mentioned 2020 article, I discuss the three pillars of genocide denialism in Turkey. In discussing one of these pillars, I focus on the "Turkish" individual's being prone to denialism. See Oranlı, Imge. "Epistemic Injustice from Afar: Rethinking the Denial of Armenian Genocide." *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 2 (2020): 120-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2020.1839593>. For a sociological and historical study of Turkey's denial of collective violence against Armenians, see Göçek, Fatma Müge. *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789-2009*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

17. Bernasconi, Robert. "When the Real Crime Began: Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the Dignity of the Western Philosophical Tradition." In *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History, Imperialism, Nation, Race and Genocide*. Edited by Richard H. King and Dan Stone. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008. 54-67.

18. Ibid., 54.

19. I pose a similar question in an earlier article's footnote. See Oranlı, Imge. "Evil's Inscrutability in Arendt and Levinas." *Science et Esprit. Revue de Philosophie et de Théologie*. 70. No. 3 (2018b), 350-34n.

20. See Kansteiner, Wulf and Presner, Todd. "Introduction: The Field of Holocaust Studies and the Emergence of Global Holocaust Culture." In *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*. Edited by Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, and Todd Presner. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 1-42.

21. Weitz, Eric D. 2011. "Germany and the Young Turks: Revolutionaries into Statesmen." In *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*. Edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek, and Norman M. Naimark. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 175-198.

22. Kieser, Hans-Lukas. *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, 19-20.

23. I would like to thank historian Lerna Ekmekçioğlu for introducing me to Stefan Ihrig's work.

24. Stefan Ihrig, « Germany and the 1890s Armenian massacres: Questions of Morality in Foreign Policy », *Études arméniennes contemporaines* [En ligne], 11 | 2018, mis en ligne le 15 octobre 2018, consulté le 06 mars 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/eac/1871> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/eac.1871>

25. Lemkin, Raphael. *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*. Edited by Donna-Lee Frieze. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. See also Kieser, Hans-Lukas. *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, 17-18.

26. Weber, Elisabeth. "Catastrophes: Afterlives of the Exceptionality Paradigm in Holocaust Studies." *In Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*. Edited by Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner and Todd Presner. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 389-409.

27. Erbal, Ayda. 2015. "The Armenian Genocide, AKA the Elephant in the Room." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (4): 783-790. doi:10.1017/S0020743815000987; Bayraktar, Seyhan. 2015. "The Grammar of Denial: State, Society, and Turkish-Armenian Relations." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47 (4): 783-790. doi:10.1017/S0020743815001014.



Philosophy World Democracy

not be a world democracy, since it must be the people themselves who themselves and arrange themselves. Rather, we affirm a democratic e of the world: peopled by all the living and by all the conversing, configured by their existence and by their words.

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