Complicity

1.

The term complicity has seen frequent use in the twenty-first century across a range of discursive environments, from academic conversations taking place in disciplines like law, sociology, philosophy, and literary studies to social media, policy fora, think tanks and everyday conversation.[1] In 2017, *Dictionary.com* selected "complicit" as "word of the year," an indication that they perceived it not only to be in frequent use, but also that it carried a particular charge in relation to its historical present, a claim on the *Zeitgeist*.[2] Complicity's everyday discursive function tends to be in the second-person mode of accusation – "You are complicit!"; the performative act of disavowal – "I refuse to be complicit!"; or else the confession – "I have been complicit." It is instructive to notice the contexts in which these modes are deployed: the exploitation of workers and minority groups, authoritarianism, fascism, racism, atrocity, genocide. The term complicity promises a moral judgement on the

[1] Among literary and philosophical studies on complicity, I have learned in particular from Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Thomas Docherty, *Complicity: Criticism Between Collaboration and Commitment* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016); Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[2] "Why Complicit was Dictionary.com's 2017 Word of the Year." November 27, 2017. https://www.dictionary.com/e/word-of-the-year-2017/

individual subject's guilt and responsibility in relation to such urgent large-scale harms unfolding in the present, even if they appear to have little or no agency over them at all.

For all its contemporaneity, however, complicity has a rich conceptual history, which it is my purpose to excavate in part here. The discourse of complicity circulates now with such ubiquity that it risks becoming an empty placeholder for a generalized social anxiety about individual agency in relation to social harm. A return to its conceptualization by mid-twentieth-century transatlantic thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre will help to clarify what is at stake in its contemporary manifestations. In particular, I want to draw two further objects into complicity's orbit in order to constellate them: *liberalism* and *colonialism*. These terms have been notably absent from much of the complicity discourse circulating among both academics and the public. The historical development of complicity as a concept has most often understood it as a problem for the individual moral conscience, using a frame conditioned by the perceived clash between liberalism and totalitarianism. Once we loosen this frame and begin to consider complicity as naming a distinctively liberal structure of feeling, determined as much by the dynamics of colonialism and decolonization as by the history of Nazism and Stalinism, then we might be a in position to grasp complicity as a political concept in the present.

Before considering these historical co-ordinates, however, we can begin our approach by way of complicity's etymology. As several scholarly discussions of complicity have elucidated, the term derives from the Latin *complicāre*, meaning *to fold*. If we are complicit, we are folded into a harmful system over which we have little or no control. The term is thus a spatial figure, connoting ideas of confinement or claustrophobia. We are trapped or entangled in some larger structure, like fish in a net, and are consequently confined in a way that compromises us – and perhaps obstructs our view of the world outside. It is the complicit person's autonomous subjectivity that is at risk here. As we will discuss in more detail, to

remove oneself from a complicit position does not necessitate that the structure itself be dismantled. It is rather to extricate the self, and thereby to restore its freedom and integrity. One can sleep easy again.

Complicity shares its Latin root with the modern term *complicate*, and indeed complicity is sometimes experienced as a dizzying complexity in which conventional moral categories and logics are disrupted by ramifying indeterminacies. Binaries such as victim and perpetrator, individual and collective, agent and bystander, even subject and object are destabilized. Complicit subjects may be confronted with contradictory value systems that simultaneously lay claim on their conscience, or they may be compelled to reckon with affinities and desires that have lain dormant or unconscious through processes of denial and repression. The complicit subject is tempted to throw up their hands at such tangled complexity: *what can I do? It's complicated*. Here we encounter one of the principal questions raised by scholarly discussions of complicity, to which we will return. Does the recognition of complicity provide the necessary self-orienting conditions for making judgements and taking action in the world, or does its constitutive complexity tend rather to overwhelm the subject, causing them to become lost in its folds, falling prey to myopia, abjection and anxiety?

Over time, distinctive strategies and techniques have been established for tackling the representation of complicit situations in their complexity. In narrative configurations, there are dramas of recognition, in which the subject comes to a belated realization of their own complicity in past horrors. Here, recognition arrives retrospectively, when some new vantage is reached from which to look back. This temporality of complicity can be usefully compared to that provided by the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, sometimes translated as deferred action or afterwardsness, by which a past experience is activated for memory in the light of some trigger in the present, and renarrativized. Once we realize we are complicit, we

might be compelled to incorporate ourselves into a story we previously believed we played no part in. This temporality makes complicity an apposite theme for treatment by particular narrative genres, such as the confession, the Gothic, and the detective story, which feature formal apparatuses well adapted to engage it.

Complicity's representation has a dominant spatial register too, in which it is made visible through the use of various atmospheric effects: hazy, nebulous and airless spaces in which subjects struggle to find the necessary clarity of vision to make judgements, and from which they seem unable to exit. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), for example, Arendt described "the haunting specter of universal cooperation, the stifling, poisoned atmosphere which had surrounded the Final Solution."[3] This and other such evocations of complicity as atmosphere are responses to complicity's amorphous complexity and its recalcitrance. As Gernot Böhme noted, the term atmosphere is evoked conventionally in order to "indicate something indeterminate, difficult to express, even if it is only in order to hide the speaker's own speechlessness."[4] Complicit atmospheres provide a kind of shorthand for the crises of judgement that typically accompany states of complicity, in which the Kantian ideals of disinterested observation and rational transcendence of the senses are threatened by disquieting specters and shadows, and by feelings of shame and guilt. For Bohme, the key feature of atmospheres is that no one knows quite who is responsible for them: "we are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects and environments from which they proceed, or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They

---

[3] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006), 123.

[4] Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Component of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis 11*, vol. 36 (1993): 113.

seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling, like a haze."[5] So it is with situations of complicity, which disorientate the subject and place their ability to think and act as democratic citizens at risk.

Approached by way of these etymological and representational considerations, we can see that complicity can be profitably understood as what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling," one of those patterns of "thought as felt, and feeling as thought" – neither one extricable from the other – which the historian can discern or reconstruct across a multiplicity of discursive and expressive forms in a particular historical moment.[6] Williams' emphases that structures of feeling are to be found "at the edge of semantic availability," and that they "do not have to await definition, classification or rationalisation before they exact palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action" are useful to us here insofar as they make room for the historicizing of a concept notable for its intractability and for the many amorphous ways it is deployed (*ML* 132, 134). The concept of structure of feeling offers us a means by which to build a historical account of where our current preoccupation with complicity has come from, in a way that pays attention both to readily graspable chronologies, events, and institutions of the social, and to those more fluid, uneven and provisional qualities of experience that Williams called "the personal: this, here, now, active, alive, 'subjective.'" (*ML* 128).

2.

[5] Ibid., 114.

[6] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132. Henceforth *ML*, followed by page number.

Let's begin then with the here and now of the last decade in the United States before tracing our way back. One of the discursive contexts in which increased use of the term complicity can be noted was in discussions of Donald Trump's election and first presidency, when liberals began to worry about where responsibility for his election and the nation's consequent authoritarian turn might lie. An article published in one the United States' leading liberal newspapers, the *New York Times*, can be seen as indicative. Erica Newland was a lawyer who had served in the Department of Justice from 2016 to 2018. Her article in 2020 attested to being "haunted" by her complicity in the actions of the first Trump administration. Newland had worked on the "Muslim ban," which had prevented citizens of several predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States. Her job had involved tailoring executive orders to make them more palatable to the courts. She wrote:

> No matter our intentions, we were complicit. We collectively perpetuated an anti-democratic leader by conforming to his assault on reality. We may have been victims of the system, but we were also its instruments. No matter how much any one of us pushed back from within, we did so as members of a professional class of government lawyers who enabled an assault on our democracy—an assault that nearly ended it.[7]

We can pause here to note several of the features common to the articulation of complicit situations that we have already identified. One is the confessional mode with its attendant retrospective temporality: the realization of complicity in the present triggers a re-evaluation of one's past in a new light. The situation was entered in good faith and with good intentions, but what at the time had seemed like bureaucratic objectivity and professional

---

[7] Erica Newland, "I'm Haunted by What I Did as a Lawyer in the Trump Justice Department," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/20/opinion/trump-justice-department-lawyer.html.

disinterestedness now appears anti-democratic and prejudicial. Another is the occupation by the complicit subject of two positions simultaneously: they are both victim and instrument of the regime. The conviction that one was played is tempered by the realization that, in fact, one was a player all along.

Also in 2020, following the January 6 attack on the Capitol, Anne Applebaum's article for *The Atlantic*, "History Will Judge the Complicit," belonged to an adjacent genre in the writing of complicity: the accusation. Applebaum argued that high-ranking members of the Republican party should be compared to those who confronted the Nazis in France in 1940, or the Soviets in East Germany in 1945. Such individuals were "forced to accept an alien ideology or a set of values that are in sharp conflict with their own."[8] The dilemma was whether they should preserve their privileges and collaborate, or to risk losing them through flight or withdrawal. Applebaum's article, in its comparisons between the Trumpist wing of the Republican Party and mid-century totalitarianism, asked what good liberals should do when faced with the demands of an anti-democratic regime. She is more interested in the dynamics and contrasts of individual personalities than in the historical conditions underlying the dilemmas she investigates. There is no particular reason for collaboration, she argues, but a range of possible motivations that depend on private scruples and individual morality. The heroes of the present in her essay are those, like this Republican Senator Mitt Romney, who refuse to endorse the collective lies that totalitarian regimes impose, and withdraw with their consciences intact.

Despite their varying modes – confession and accusation – when they are read together these two pieces exemplify the way that liberal complicity discourse in the twenty-

[8] Anne Applebaum, "History Will Judge the Complicit," *The Atlantic*, August 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/07/trumps-collaborators/612250/.

first century reaches back to mid-twentieth century concepts and histories of totalitarianism for its historical moorings. Both draw, whether consciously or not, on a common reference point in the figure of the Nazi or Stalinist bureaucrat in the liberal historical imagination: the Soviet *apparatchik* sending prisoners to the gulag, or the Nazi administrator sending Jews to the camps. They also demonstrate how liberal complicity frames the pursuit of racial projects at state level – such as the Muslim ban – as problems to be construed at the level of the individual conscience, as aberrations from a given moral norm. They use juridical and legal language. Nevertheless, the force of their arguments is directed not towards the courts but towards individual crises of conscience, and failures of moral judgment. In proceeding in this way, they prove unable to address the structural causes of the political problems that occasion them, which lie in longstanding practices of racial and colonial domination.

A third and more recent example helps us to see this interrelationship between the moral and legal uses of the term complicity. In July 2024, a group of US government officials from across the military, Department of State, and elsewhere issued a statement saying that they had resigned from their roles in the US state when faced with "undeniable complicity in the killings and forced starvation of a besieged population in Gaza."[9] US foreign policy, they claimed, had failed on several counts, being morally reprehensible and in violation of both domestic and international humanitarian law. Here, we find a distinction made between complicity as legal problem and as a form of moral injury, even if the two serve as separate motives for the same act of withdrawal. The signatories were right to be concerned at the

[9] "Service in Dissent: Joint Statement of U.S. Government Officials Who Have Resigned Over U.S. Policy Towards Gaza, Palestine, and Israel." *Counterpunch*, July 2, 2024. https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/07/02/service-in-dissent-joint-statement-of-u-s-government-officials-who-have-resigned-over-u-s-policy-towards-gaza-palestine-and-israel/

legal liability that accompanies situations of complicity under international law, given the International Court of Justice's determination in January 2024 that Palestine had plausible rights to protection from genocide, which were at risk.[10] The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to which both Israel and the United States are signatories, explicitly names complicity in genocide as a punishable offense in Article 3.[11] As the ICJ has explained, with reference to its previous rulings on genocide in the former Yugoslavia, complicity "includes the provision of means to enable or facilitate the commission of the crime."[12] The complicit party need not itself demonstrate genocidal intent in order to be liable, but it must "have given support in perpetrating the genocide in full knowledge of the facts." Given the US state's consistent provision of arms to Israel throughout its attacks on Gaza in recent years, and its presumably full knowledge of the facts, signatories of the statement had a clear motivation to avoid liability in any future international legal proceedings. This concern, like those of Newland and Applebaum, finds its roots in the mid-twentieth century response to totalitarianism and World War Two, here in the form of the 1948 convention, itself one of the crucial historical documents for the emergence of complicity as a key concept for the post-war liberal order.

---

[10] "Summary of the Order of 26 January 2024." International Court of Justice, January 26, 2004. https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454.

[11] "1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." United Nations, 1948. https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/legal-framework.

[12] "Application of the Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: Bosnia and Herzegovina vs. Serbia and Montenegro." Worldcourts, February 26, 2007. https://www.worldcourts.com/icj/eng/decisions/2007.02.26_genocide_convention.htm.

Complicity is treated quite differently in international law than it is in conventional moral contexts. Even if genocidal intent is not required to fulfil the conditions of complicity in the former, the complicit party must nevertheless take some positive action to support the perpetrator, such as providing weapons in the knowledge that they would be used in a wrongful act. In the moral context, however, and outside of the courtrooms, complicity is often consequent on inaction. What one has not done is just as important as what one has. This makes of complicity a particularly troublesome determination in the history of liberal thought. As John Stuart Mill wrote, for example, in *On Liberty*:

> A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury. The latter case, it is true, requires a much more cautious exercise of compulsion than the former. To make any one answerable for not doing evil to others, is the rule; to make him answerable for not preventing evil, is comparatively speaking, the exception.[13]

This exceptional status of complicit determinations has, in the intervening century and a half, become the rule, especially since the 1960s when accusations and confessions of complicity first risked recognition as cliché. This historical development is perhaps most visible today in the frequent use of the phrase "silence is complicity." Following the October 7 attacks in 2023, President Biden posted the phrase on social media, with the apparent intent of licencing condemnation of Hamas. Since then, however, it has more frequently been used by those protesting Israeli violence. "Silence is complicity" is now commonplace in political discourse in the US and UK. The signatories to the "Service in Dissent" statement concluded by

[13] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Bromwich and George Kateb (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 82.

emphasizing that "your voice matters . . . speaking up has a snowball effect, inspiring others to use their voice. There is strength in numbers and we urge you not to be complicit." Can one disengage oneself from a complicit situation simply by speaking?

A contemporary exploration of this question has recently appeared in Omar El Akkad's *One Day Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (2025), one of the most sustained literary treatments of complicity in relation to Gaza. Akkad's excoriation of the failures of the political and cultural leadership over Gaza in the US is concentrated not on the possibility of future war crimes tribunals, but rather on the degradation of the liberal conscience itself. The future he imagines for those who remain silent on colonial violence in Gaza will "take the form of a quiet unheard reckoning in the winter of life between one who said nothing, did nothing, and their own soul. And there will be no words exchanged then, only a knowing."[14] This is a typical treatment of complicity as confounding the expressive powers of language, a theme which paradoxically enough tends always to generate more attempts to articulate complicity in language. But for Akkad as for the signatories of the "Service in Dissent" statement, a hopeful political horizon is projected through a call to collective withdrawal combined with public statements of disaffiliation. Such an optimistic vision is premised, as Akkad makes clear, on the hypothesis that "the entire system depends, in a very existential sense, on continued participation, on ever increasing participation" (*OD* 160) This position takes liberal democracy at its word, governing through the consent of the people. "What will always flummox the state," he claims, "is the prospect of the individual – of many individuals – employing negation as a political tactic" (*OD* 173). On the current evidence of expanding domestic militarization, however, the new regime has abandoned the

[14] Omar El Akkad, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2025), 164. Henceforth *OD*, followed by page number.

project of participatory democracy altogether in favour of an authoritarian project of domination without hegemony. We may be discussing a structure of feeling in its final death throes, persisting as the lingering afterimage of a liberalism which has already passed into history, belonging to its dwindling middle class.

3.

In the US, Akkad's politics of non-complicity finds an early and well-known precedent in the work of the nineteenth-century abolitionist Henry David Thoreau, and in particular his "Reform Essays," such as "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) and "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854). Though he tended not to use the term, many of the rhetorical tropes, ideas and arguments that Thoreau used in the mid-nineteenth century have a resemblance to what we now call complicity. Thoreau's advocations for withdrawal and disaffiliation from the apparatus of the state were made in response to one of the United States' first wars of colonial expropriation – the Mexican War of 1846-1848 – the ongoing theft of land from indigenous people, and the institution of chattel slavery, all of which he experienced as assaults on his own moral integrity due to certain remappings of space and distance, which created new proximities between himself and the harmful act. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, for example, obligated those north of Mason-Dixon to collaborate with Southern slave owners to return escaped slaves, thus bringing slavery to Massachusetts, and placing Thoreau within the space of complicity in his home state, symbolically disfiguring its very landscape:

> I dwelt before, perhaps, in the illusion that my life passed somewhere *between* heaven and hell, but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not belong *wholly within* hell.

> The site of that political organization called Massachusetts is to me morally covered with volcanic scoriæ and cinders, such as Milton describes in the infernal regions.[15]

This is another version of the complicit atmosphere we identified earlier, which makes situations of complicity visible through a spatial metaphor, enfolding the complicit party within a zone of responsibility from which they struggle to find a way out. Thoreau offers a potent articulation of the realization which compromises his self-image as autonomous intellectual, isolated from the masses:

> Suppose you had a small library, with pictures to adorn the walls – a garden laid out around – and contemplate scientific and literary pursuits, &c., and discover all at once that your villa, with all its contents, is located in hell, and that the justice of the peace has a cloven foot and forked tail – do not these things suddenly lose their value in your eyes? (*W* 871)

Thoreau's response to this kind of spatial enfolding, as "Resistance to Civil Government" famously shows, is a public declaration of disaffiliation. "I cannot for a moment recognize that political organization as *my* government, which is the *slave's* government also," Thoreau proclaimed in front of his audience at Concord Lycaeum (*W* 732). Though "Resistance to Civil Government" was occasioned by Thoreau's temporary refusal to pay his taxes, and therefore to fund war and slavery, it is rather the eloquent speech act that earned the essay its place in the canon. The ideology of withdrawal was one he revised in following years, as is evident in the sympathetic account he offered in the 1850s of violent rebellion in his essays

---

[15] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, The Maine Woods, and Other Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell and Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 2007), 871. Henceforth *W*, followed by page number.

on the anti-slavery radical John Brown. It was "Resistance to Civil Government," however, that found a privileged place in the US literary tradition during the twentieth century, and especially during the post 1945 era, when its exhortations for radical non-complicity through negation – disavowal, disaffiliation, refusal and withdrawal – found a sympathetic readership in the New Left, anti-war, counterculture, and civil rights movements. As Martin Luther King wrote in 1962, "Resistance to Civil Government" helped to convince him that "non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."[16]

We can see, then, that the discourses of complicity, with their emphasis on moral injury, crises of conscience, and ethics of non-cooperation, has a long history in US liberal thought. Those moments when the discourse of complicity rises to the surface of public attention correspond to periodic crises in liberalism, when the contradictions between its professed commitments to individual rights and liberties came up hard against the reality of empire and racial domination, and erupted into plain sight even for those who did their best to preserve their innocence. If Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" exemplifies the first such crisis in the 1840 and 50s, responding to colonial wars of annexation on the territorial peripheries of the nation, and the threat of slavery extending its logic to the northern states, then the anti-racist, anti-war and anti-colonial struggles of the long 1960s inaugurated a second. This period saw the crystallization of our modern concept of complicity and a marked increase in its use as a term, alongside others such as "white guilt" and "liberal guilt." In the last decade, as we established in the first part of this article, we can observe a third, prompted by another – and perhaps terminal – crisis of liberalism in the US made visible by domestic repression and militarization, the resurgence of anti-Black and anti-immigrant racial

[16] Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Legacy of Creative Protest" in *Thoreau in our Season*, ed. John H. Hicks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966), 13.

projects, material participation in the destruction of Gaza, and the surging wealth inequality that is reducing the middle class, its traditional constituency. Yet the nature of complicity discourse is such that it is difficult to conceptualize from the inside, when one is already entangled in its folds. It is for this reason that we should turn to those mid-century transatlantic thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre, who made strenuous efforts in the years after World War Two to formulate theories of complicity from a position outside the orbit of the American liberal tradition, but able nevertheless to speak to it. Arendt and Sartre, for all their many divergences, held in common a scepticism about the political uses of complicity as a concept, which we would do well to consider today.

The best place to begin is Arendt's own criticism of Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government." In her 1969 book, *Crises of the Republic* Arendt took up the renewed interest in Thoreau by the New Left and counterculture movements and criticised them for what she saw as their fundamental misunderstanding of his work. If one could wipe one's hands clean through acts of disaffiliation and disavowal, as Thoreau exhorted this audiences to in Concord Lycaeum in 1840, what need of organized mass politics? It was a mistake, she argued, to consider Thoreau a political writer at all. Quoting the passage in which Thoreau writes of the duty of man to "wash his hands" of wrong and "if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support," Arendt claimed that Thoreau wrote not as a citizen, but as an individual conscience interested only in moral obligation. Consequently, "here, as elsewhere, conscience is unpolitical. It is not primarily interested in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences that the wrong will have for the future course of the world."[17] Thoreau's conscience, she went on, "trembles for the individual self and its

[17] Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 60-61.

integrity," while his readers in the counterculture and civil rights movement had mistaken self-interest for political action.[18]

The identification of the moral self as the focus of such a discourse does not have to be understood as derogatory. It may be necessary to proclaim such a disaffiliation in order to survive as an integral self. In her 1968 paper "Collective Responsibility," Arendt drew a distinction between classical notions of ethics, in which "the question is never whether an individual *is* good but whether his conduct is good for the world he lives in," and a Christian conception in which "the emphasis shifted entirely from care of the world and the duties connected with it, to care for the soul and its salvation."[19] Non-participation in the political realm is more likely to derive from the latter impulse. Arendt's touchstone for these judgments reached back to her experience of Nazism before her emigration to France in 1933. There, she observed ordinary Germans withdrawing from participation in public life as National Socialism began to take hold. "They decided it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves at all."[20] In that context, active resistance carried the risk of persecution and ultimately death. Faced with a choice between a collusion that violated the conscience, high risk resistance, or retreat, some – for perfectly

---

[18] Ibid., 63.

[19] Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 151-152.

[20] Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 44.

understandable reasons – chose the latter, with little or no material consequence to the Nazi regime.

Arendt was one of the first intellectuals to observe, name and theorize complicity as a collective social phenomenon. The initial germs for this process can be found not in her works of political theory but rather in her literary criticism. Her 1944 essay on Franz Kafka for *Partisan Review* identified the special achievement of Kafka's novel *The Trial* as the way he showed K.'s voluntary submission to the law as "obtained not by force, but simply through increase in the feeling of guilt of which the unbased accusation was the origin in the accused man."[21] The success of this logic is premised on the observation that such feelings are ubiquitous, leading K. into "mistaking the organized and wicked evil of the world surrounding him for some necessary expression of that general guiltiness which is harmless and almost innocent" (*FK* 70). This feature of Kafka's work, she claimed, showed "a quality of modernity which appears nowhere else with the same intensity" (*FK* 69). His nightmare worlds represented "a sober analysis of underlying structures which today have come into the open" (*FK* 73). She was thinking of course about the atrocities of what she later called totalitarianism, and how, from the vantage point of 1944, it was possible to discover the signs of the present in the past.

A year later in 1945 she developed these ideas in her essay "The German Guilt." She described how the Nazis used terror and propaganda to make neutrality about the regime impossible, which in turn "achieved the result of making the existence of each individual in

[21] Hannah Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation," in *Essays in Understanding, 2930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), 70. Henceforth *FK*, followed by page number.

Germany depend either on committing crimes or on complicity in crimes."[22] This was of the first uses of the term *complicity* in Arendt's work, and it carried a particular valence. As with the guilt feelings in the Kafka essay, it represents a means by which to draw individual subjects into compliance and submission, only this time it was in a collective register. Guilt is "organized" into complicity, with corrosive effects on the very possibility of justice: "where all are guilty, nobody in the last analysis can be judged."[23] It was a phrase she was to repeat with minor variations throughout her career.

Arendt's concept of complicity received its fullest articulation in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which received renewed attention during Trump's first administration in 2016-2020, as liberals sought to make sense of the United States' seeming descent into authoritarianism. An important aspect of Arendt's landmark book that gets persistently overlooked is the way it extended her earlier argument that the Nazis systematically and deliberately implicated the whole of German society in their criminality, causing the individuals in it to experience guilt feelings about crimes for which they were not in any conventional sense responsible. She described how the murders committed by the SA (*Sturmabteilung)* and SS (*Schutzstaffel*) were "publicly paraded and officially admitted by the upper Nazi hierarchy so that open complicity made it well-nigh impossible for members to quit the movement."[24] "By extending complicity," she added, the aims was to make "every party member aware that he has left for good the normal world which outlaws murder and that he will be held accountable for all crimes committed by the elite." In the later period of

---

[22] This essay was given a different title when collected. Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," in *Essays in Understanding*, 124.

[23] Ibid., 126.

[24] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin, 2017), 487.

consolidation, this form of "gangster complicity" was extended to society in general, "for totalitarianism uses its power precisely to spread this complicity through the whole population until it has organized the guilt of the whole people under its domination." Arendt was drawing on her earlier insights to suggest complicity should be understood as a method serving ruling interests by inducing loyalty through a sense of shared exceptionalism, and reducing the space for resistance by exploiting the shame associated with guilt feelings.

Arendt's skepticism about the social and political functions of complicity, and her conviction that the feelings associated with complicity could allow gullible liberals to be exploited by anti-democratic regimes, stayed with her. In the Sixties, as the Black freedom struggle gained prominence in public discourse, she left her readers in no doubt: "There is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them. This is an important point, worth making loudly and clearly at a moment when so many good white liberals confess to guilt feelings about the Negro question."[25] By the Sixties, such expressions of white liberal guilt and the fraught debates surrounding them had become ubiquitous. Arendt tried to cut through them, but with little effect. The discourse of complicity had already become embedded in American liberal life, just as it is today.

Yet for all Arendt's willingness to contradict and criticize liberals in this period, there were other aspects of her worldview that attenuated or obstructed her ability to extend her thinking on complicity in relation to the United States. In *Origins*, she identified European colonialism in Africa, and the horrific racial violence that accompanied it, as one of the historical events that had created the conditions in which totalitarian regimes could later

[25] Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," 147.

thrive. The institution of chattel slavery in the US, however, and the nation's histories of racial projects, were to be grasped as autonomous developments. The US, for Arendt, had no empire and its "color question" was "soluble only within the political and historical framework of the Republic."

> The fact that this question has also become a major issue in world affairs is sheer coincidence as for as American history and politics are concerned; for the color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nations – that is the one great crime in which America was never involved.[26]

The US had a "color question," while the European Great Powers had a "color problem." It was a classic formulation of Cold War American exceptionalism and obfuscation, which managed simultaneously to minimize the reality of Jim Crow segregation and to consign organized guilt safely to the history of World War Two and the Holocaust. Arendt's determination to preserve American innocence with regard to colonialism and fascism flew in the face of Black US intellectuals from Richard Wright and Langston Hughes to Chester Himes and W. E. B. Du Bois, who had developed historical and conceptual frameworks for understanding colonialism, fascism, and domestic racism as facets of a wider white-supremacist project, what Hughes called "Jim Crow for the world."[27] As a result, Arendt's

---

[26] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6, no. 2 (1959): 46.

[27] Langston Hughes, "From Here to Yonder," *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1945, 12. Sarah C. Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 148–236.

conceptualization of complicity in relation to the United States and the decolonization movement of the post-war period was never permitted to develop.

4.

For an account of complicity that does attend to such matters, we can turn to another European intellectual whose ideas were shaped by their experience of Nazism and World War Two: Jean-Paul Sartre. For fifteen or so years after World War Two a large number of Americans would have considered Sartre the most prominent philosopher in the world. The ideas he proposed under the banner of "existentialism" during the war, and then presented to a receptive new public in the United States immediately afterwards, were easily assimilated into a nascent Cold War liberalism: the individual subject was alone in a Godless world and had to confront their radical personal responsibility for both their own freedom and that of others. Existentialism was in vogue both among the highbrows and the mass culture. But during the course of the 1950s and 60s, Sartre's unrepentant Marxism, his support for violent resistance to colonialism and neocolonialism in Cuba, Algeria and elsewhere, and his conviction that the American war in Vietnam was straightforwardly genocidal, eventually made him *persona non grata* for mainstream intellectual life in the United States and much of Western Europe. His reputation there, it must be admitted, has hardly recovered. Yet, Sartre's relatively unexamined writing on complicity and colonialism can speak to our present moment in ways that Arendt's cannot.

For Arendt, it was the Third Reich that grounded her thinking on complicity. For Sartre, though he had lived through the Nazi occupation and spent time in a prisoner of war camp, it was the operation of French colonialism, combined with a sustained engagement with Marxism. Whilst Sartre's existentialism had taken as its chief concern the turbulent

interior life of the individual subject, the twinned encounters with the Algerian independence struggle and Communism in the 1950s led to a materialist reorientation of his thought that paved the road towards reconsiderations of colonialism, and ultimately to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960. His essays on Algeria written for *Les Temps Modernes* are important staging posts in this journey.

"Colonialism is a System" (1956) begins with an outright denunciation of what Sartre calls "neocolonialist mystification," whereby material problems are deliberately misframed as ethical ones: "Neocolonialists think that there are some good colonists and some very wicked ones, and that it is the fault of the latter that the situation of the colonies has deteriorated."[28] In place of this mystification, he offers a materialist analysis of colonialism as a system operating on "internal necessity," arguing that even "the purest of intentions, if conceived within this infernal circle, is corrupted at once." There is an echo of Adorno here, for whom, in *Minima Moralia*, "wrong life cannot be lived rightly."[29] Within the context of a society organized so fundamentally to enable exploitation and domination, questions of moral conduct are already confounded even as they are recognized and articulated. The essay was written during the period in which Sartre cooperated with the French Communist Party between 1952 and 1956, one he later described as being characterized by "amoral realism."[30]

---

[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Colonialism Is a System," in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (London: Routledge, 2001), 30. Henceforth *CS*, followed by page number.

[29] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 43.

[30] Jean-Paul Sartre, Philippe Gavi, and Pierre Victor, *It Is Right to Rebel*, trans. Adrian van den Hoven and Basil Kingstone (London: Routledge, 2017), 77.

While the systemic nature of colonialism should not distract from the horror of its impact on the world, "this reality is embedded in a million colonists, children and grandchildren of colonists, who have been shaped by colonialism and who think, speak, and act according to the very principles of the colonial system. For the colonist is fabricated like the native; he is made by his function and his interests" (*CS* 44). In contrast to the radical autonomy Sartre ascribed to the individual in his existentialism, here there seems little room for the individual responsibility: "For it is not true that there are some good *colons* and others who are wicked. There are *colons* and that's it" (*CS* 32). There was no question of ameliorating colonialism. Influenced by the Martinican thinker Frantz Fanon, Sartre saw that violence was integral to the functioning of the colonial system. The only solution was to shatter it. Sartre's essay attempted to persuade metropolitan France to turn its energies to achieve that goal.

The following year, Sartre's essay "You are Wonderful" went further than "Colonialism is a System" in addressing the problem of distant complicity with colonial violence. He returned to the matters of conscience he had previously dismissed, but only in order to jolt his readers out of their habits of self-examination and into political action. By this point in the Algerian War, news of French atrocities against Algerian civilians, including widespread use of torture, were filtering through to the French public, though they were not publicly acknowledged by the government. Sartre's essay addresses the ways French citizens preserved a state of denial about the nature and extent of these atrocities. Its distinctive power is in the way Sartre evokes the curious state of "guilty innocence" by which people managed to continue their lives as if they didn't know what they clearly did: that France was perpetrating war crimes and crimes against humanity in its colony. According to this paradox of "guilty innocence," one simultaneously knows and doesn't know what is being done in

one's name.[31] Sartre describes how the French desperately try to avoid discovering details of the torture, and to avoid discussing it with their neighbors. The result, however, is a kind of nightmarish atmosphere descending on French society, leading everyone to exist in their own private shame.

For Sartre, the paralyzing sense of guilty innocence distributed among the people of a colonial power is precisely what the country's leaders want.

> We are not naive, we are dirty. Our consciences have not been disturbed, and yet they are not clear. Our leaders know this full well; that is how they like us; what they want to achieve by their attentive care and well-publicized consideration is, under the pretence of fake ignorance, our complicity. (*YW* 57)

The French government had deliberately degraded the morality of the state. "As for the procedure," Sartre tells us, "everyone knows it: by precipitating us into a despicable adventure, they have instilled in us, from without, a sense of social guilt" (*YW* 55). Clearly, we are now in terrain comparable to Arendt's discussion of complicity as "organized guilt." Why might a ruling class wish to install social guilt among its citizens? For Sartre, the experience of complicity atomizes them, placing them into a relationship of what he would later in the *Critique* call "seriality," as separate and fungible units.[32] Suspicion presides over social relations, since nobody knows for sure what anyone else believes, knows, or is trying

---

[31] Jean-Paul Sartre, "You Are Wonderful," in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (London: Routledge, 2001), 61. Henceforth *YW*, followed by page number.

[32] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. Jonathan Ree, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004), 256.

to forget. “Mistrust teaches us a new solitude: we are separated from our fellow citizens by the fear of having to despise or of being despised” (*YW* 59). Seriality makes objects of its members, who, lost in the folds of complicity, are unable to conceive a collective response.

At the root of Sartre’s thinking here is his signature concept of bad faith. Bad faith is the state we exist in most of the time. It describes the ways we run away from, or deny, our own capacity as actors in the world, with responsibility for its injustices. In states of bad faith, we imagine ourselves to be things acted upon rather than selves capable of changing the world. We kid ourselves that we are not free to choose our actions, our commitments, our politics. This is the logic behind the description of the massacres in Gaza as a “humanitarian catastrophe” to be addressed by sending “aid,” as if it were a natural disaster that had done the killing. Complicity in colonial violence, for Sartre, is a form of collective bad faith in which we accept limited guilt in return for being freed from responsibility.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre had metaphorized bad faith as a kind of sleep, but here it turns into a nightmare that presents itself simultaneously as both an objective world to be inhabited *and* an imaginative projection of consciousness. “The fact is that we are ill,” he writes, “very ill; feverish and prostrate, obsessed by her old dreams of glory and by the sense of her shame, France is struggling in the midst of a vague nightmare which she can neither flee nor decipher” (*YW* 55). This is the language of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, which uses dreams, hallucinations, specters, ghosts and shadows to represent ideology as what subsequent thinkers such as Geörgy Lukács would theorize as “false consciousness.” The salient factor in this case is that Sartre is trying to account both for complicity’s objective existence as a real structure of feeling, and for its indeterminate, illusory quality in a way that Arendt – for whom there was “no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without

oneself actively participating in them" – never did. Sartre, then, gives us a complicity which can be recognized and transcended, rather than dismissed. To flee would be to fall into bad faith, but if we can *decipher* complicity then we open the door over overcoming it in the movement towards collective political action.

After "You Are Wonderful," complicity played an increasingly important role in Sartre's writings on colonialism and neocolonialism, both conceptually and rhetorically. Many of these were directed at the United States. He discussed how the United States had deliberately created a complicit class of landowners in Cuba, who would grow sugar for export and stunt the island's development. "This complicity is indispensable," he wrote. "It saved face; puritanism kept a pure conscience."[33] Here complicity emerges as a key neocolonial tactic, allowing the state to employ indirect financial and ideological forms of coercion on Cuba while preserving and projecting its innocence elsewhere. In "On Genocide" (1968), he described the perpetration of bombings, massacres, and other atrocities in Vietnam as a strategy of "blackmail" against all the peoples of the world, deliberately being undertaken in plain sight in order to render "all who do not denounce it accomplices of those who commit it."[34] These were similar arguments to that advanced in "You Are Wonderful." Complicity was more that an epiphenomenon of colonial practice. Rather, it was tactic pursued by neocolonial strategists searching for ways to distribute responsibility for colonial violence across compliant liberal societies in the First World.

---

[33] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Cuba* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1961), 36.

[34] Jean-Paul Sartre, *On Genocide*, trans. Arlette Elkaim-Sartre (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), 84–85.

For both Arendt and Sartre, then, complicity is socially produced as a liberal structure of feeling with an anti-democratic function. It degrades social standards of morality by confounding the relationship between guilt and responsibility, making moral judgements and decisions of conscience more difficult or even impossible. In doing so, it also creates seriality, obstructing collective forms of political action and thus contributing to the reproduction of relations of domination. This does not mean that we can or should discard complicity as a political concept. For if complicity now circulates, as I have suggested, as an empty discursive signifier, then it is fulfilling its anti-democratic functions only too well. Conceptualization reanimates its political dimensions, making them visible, and thus decipherable.

In the academic context, this task is made more difficult by the valorization of complexity as an end in itself for intellectual endeavor, for as we have seen, the anti-democratic function of complicity relies precisely on processes of complication that require the subject to orient themselves among contradictory intentions, motivations, affiliations and desires experienced across multiple chronologies and spatial scales. For many in the academy today, the willingness to parse complexity in this way is part and parcel of their professional *habitus* as intellectual workers. In this sense, many will need to ask questions of their own professional formation in order to be able to step outside the fold of complicity themselves and see it – however temporarily or provisionally – as an objective structure rather than another facet of intellectual practice.

Structures of feeling are above all historical. The process of reconceptualizing complicity with Arendt and Sartre brings to the surface the sense in which debates about complicity in the US are really debates about liberalism since World War Two, in its long state of denial about ongoing colonialism and racial projects both at home and abroad. What then of complicity after the retreat of liberalism's long ideological reign, in the new era of

domination without hegemony? Complicity has a history, and it will also have an end. Only by deciphering it can we start to determine the nature of that end, and thus what might succeed it.