

## **Evil, Agency, and Citizenship Education** **Le mal, le sentiment de pouvoir et l'éducation à la citoyenneté**

Kent den Heyer et Cathryn van Kessel

Volume 50, numéro 1, winter 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036107ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036107ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

den Heyer, K. & van Kessel, C. (2015). Evil, Agency, and Citizenship Education. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 50(1), 79–96. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036107ar>

Résumé de l'article

Nous possédons tous une conscience du mal. Or, plusieurs d'entre nous ne réfléchissent pas à sa nature ou aux manières dont celui-ci influence ce que nous enseignons ou apprenons sur les actions citoyennes, dans un contexte historique ou contemporain. Nous croyons que le mot et le concept du mal peuvent nuire au développement de bons citoyens. En effet, ce mot et ce concept peuvent être utilisés comme muselière politique et éducative (shibboleth), mettant un terme à toute pensée critique exercée envers des faits historiques ou des événements contemporains traumatisants. Cependant, à la lumière des ouvrages d'Hannah Arendt et Alain Badiou, allier l'engagement pédagogique à notre compréhension du mal offre la possibilité d'apprendre des événements difficiles de manière à potentiellement influencer les actions d'aujourd'hui, dans l'optique d'un avenir moins violent.

# EVIL, AGENCY, AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

KENT DEN HEYER & CATHRYN VAN KESSEL *University of Alberta*

**ABSTRACT.** We all have a sense of evil, but many of us do not ponder its nature or the ways in which our beliefs about evil shape what we teach and learn about the actions of citizens in historical or contemporary times. We argue that the word and concept of evil can be detrimental to the development of good citizens when it is used as a political and educational shibboleth to shut down critical thought about traumatic historical and contemporary events. Read through the work of Hannah Arendt and Alain Badiou, however, a pedagogical engagement with our understandings of evil offers an opportunity to learn from difficult events in a way that might inform contemporary action towards a less violent future.

## LE MAL, LE SENTIMENT DE POUVOIR ET L'ÉDUCATION À LA CITOYENNETÉ

**RÉSUMÉ.** Nous possédons tous une conscience du mal. Or, plusieurs d'entre nous ne réfléchissent pas à sa nature ou aux manières dont celui-ci influence ce que nous enseignons ou apprenons sur les actions citoyennes, dans un contexte historique ou contemporain. Nous croyons que le mot et le concept du mal peuvent nuire au développement de bons citoyens. En effet, ce mot et ce concept peuvent être utilisés comme muselière politique et éducative (shibboleth), mettant un terme à toute pensée critique exercée envers des faits historiques ou des événements contemporains traumatisants. Cependant, à la lumière des ouvrages d'Hannah Arendt et Alain Badiou, allier l'engagement pédagogique à notre compréhension du mal offre la possibilité d'apprendre des événements difficiles de manière à potentiellement influencer les actions d'aujourd'hui, dans l'optique d'un avenir moins violent.

Despite the frequent use of “evil” in political rhetoric and as a popular theme across the entertainment landscape, research communities in history and citizenship know very little about how understandings of evil frame what students or teachers learn from historical and contemporary events. The invocation of evil

in a simplistic fashion by politicians can all too easily serve as a tool to delimit what citizens might otherwise analyze and critique. Furthermore, notions of good and evil also colour the ways we read and learn from the presence of the traumatic in difficult events studied in school or encountered in museums and other places of remembrance. In this article, we examine evil as a social idea that requires research and pedagogical attention. In the context of citizenship, there is an opportunity to engage with philosophical understandings of evil in order to foster citizens who think critically about the world around them, avoid the processes that create evil, and act independently with an expansive circle of concern. Such citizenship education defines a good citizen as one who takes “action” in the sense of Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) to avoid the ordinary processes of evil as defined by Alain Badiou (1998/2001). Through such engagements, the future becomes more or less imaginable as a closed or relatively open time-space. This sense of future possibilities, then, shapes the extent to which those in a society believe that they can prevent or combat systemic violence.

### *Biesta and the aims of education*

Gert Biesta (2010) noted that the notion of the public in the Euro-American tradition carries an expectation that teachers and schools work with students towards three distinct but interrelated aims: “qualification,” “socialization,” and “subjectification.” The public expects schools to qualify students for public-private competency, ranging from acquiring specific training for a particular skill or job to more generalized preparation such as life skills or political and cultural literacy. Qualification thus tends to link the schooling system to economic justifications for public funding. A second and overlapping function, socialization, involves initiating students into existing, dominant orders of thought, ranging from ways of speaking and behaving to disciplinary “ways of knowing” (e.g., thinking like an historian or scientist) that are held to be necessary for effective citizenship. Such initiation can be judged as positive or negative, intentional or unintentional, depending on who does the judging.

Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Biesta (2010) posited subjectification as a third aim of education, one that has been neglected in contemporary discussions of schooling. By subjectification, Biesta refers to a process by which we take a critical distance from dominant orders of thought into which we have been qualified and socialized so as to become a subject to ourselves and our learning lives. In this realm, we should expect schools to help students become more unique (rather than alike) within a collective web of evolving contemporary and historically based social relations. Because the educational aim of subjectification involves unpredictability and the potential to create something new, the form this takes cannot be known by either teacher or student until it actually happens (Badiou, 1998/2001; den Heyer, 2009).

In *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), Arendt articulated a conception of politics based on an innate human capacity to do something new, something unexpected – a political subjectification that both initiates and further refines the process of becoming subjects. Arendt (1958/1998) dubbed this “action.” Action, work, and labour form a triad of characteristics of the human condition, where “labour” entails what humans need to do in order to sustain our biological life and “work” is what we need to do to create and maintain a human world (pp. 7-8). Action, which most concerned Biesta, involves people doing what is unexpected: interrupting their routine and private activities to create a new public space. In this space, which can serve as an exemplar for future action, freedom is claimed or reclaimed.

Biesta connected this notion of action to subjectification for two reasons. As he detailed, the question of “what is educational about education?” is largely absent in mainstream Euro-American discussions about public education, and subjectification constitutes a compelling response to this question:

I take the position that subjectification should be an intrinsic element of all education worthy of the name.... It is... a normative statement expressing the belief that education becomes uneducational if it only focuses on socialization – i.e., on the insertion of “newcomers” into existing sociocultural and political orders – and has no interest in the ways in which newcomers can, in some way, gain independence from such orders as well. (Biesta, 2010, p. 210)

We explore this idea of subjectification further below, extending its formulation through the work of Arendt (1963/2006) and Alain Badiou (1998/2001). For now, we emphasize that the domains of qualification, socialization, and subjectification are not necessarily antithetical to each other nor exist in a zero-sum relationship.

In each of the overlapping domains of qualification, socialization, and subjectification, the word and concept of evil demands attention; however, engaging with the idea of evil is particularly crucial to the potential for subjectification. Citizens can undertake a process of qualification by becoming politically literate regarding politicians’ divisive use of “evil” in rhetoric while becoming socialized into a social and political web of relations from which they derive their sense of identity. Through action, however, we are called upon to articulate more inclusive circles of concern and, potentially, enter a process or subjectification as “becoming subjects” taking up the insufficiencies of those inherited divisions learned through qualification and socialization for our new and emerging sense of the world (Badiou, 1998/2001).

## QUALIFICATION AND SOCIALIZATION

Politicians use the term evil for public opinion management, as a political weapon functioning to eliminate further analysis and discussion (Dews, 2008). By labeling an enemy as evil – internal or external to the state – leaders encour-

age the citizenry to think in false binaries to support either their leadership or the evil / enemy. There is no room for middle ground, alternative perspectives, or shades of grey. There are many examples of this phenomenon by political leaders in both the United States and Canada.

In the United States, in a speech intended to discourage decreasing the United States' nuclear arsenal, President Reagan called the Soviet Union in 1983 an "evil empire." President George W. Bush used the phrase "axis of evil" in 2002 to rally support for the United States' war in Iraq. Current U.S. President Obama has labeled the organization ISIS as a "brand of evil" with which there can be no reasoning or negotiation, a statement that encourages military action to destroy the enemy rather than engaging in public analysis about how and why a group like ISIS has emerged (Borger & Wintour, 2014). Former Canadian Prime Minister Harper linked Nazism, Marxist-Leninism, and terrorism as reinventions of a similar evil that seeks to destroy "human liberty" (Perkel, 2014), a framework that the Canadian government deployed in their recent geopolitical dealings with Russia. Such rhetorical appeals to evil seek to encourage us to sacrifice our own rights as well as those of the "enemy" as forms of necessary collateral damage in the war against evil (Stern, 2004). These political incantations of evil also apply to how the writers of curricula and textbooks frame historical events, movements, and people as having been either with us or on the side of evil.

What happens, then, when the narrative becomes more complex? According to Schär and Sperisen (2010), the Swiss witnessed changes in the political literacy required for qualification and socialization into the Swiss political community. These scholars examined the oscillating internal interpretations of the country's role in the Holocaust from a neutral nation resisting evil to a complicit one faced with "moral challenges" (Schär & Sperisen, 2010, p. 650). Schär and Sperisen's concern (2010) lies with political uses of history and collective memory. The Swiss grappled with the switch from learning about the actions of their government as the best they could have been under the circumstances to critically examining the (in)actions of the Swiss people as a whole: a moral discourse of what the Swiss government, businesses, and ordinary citizens might have done differently in response to the Nazi regime. Whether they study the newer or older narrative about the Swiss role during the Second World War, students examine a problem already defined and determined by how the curriculum writers and textbook authors frame it; students work toward either vindicating their government's role or prescribing a particular alternative to that role. Yet, their capacities for "action" and subjectification through thinking about both the individual and collective implication and responsibility that contribute to acts and regimes later deemed evil — the very thing that might help a citizen during a crisis like war and genocide — remain unconsidered.

Carlson's (1985) examination of the ideological teachings of the Cold War in the United States revealed how the use of the concept of evil adversely affects political literacy even while it also emphasizes a very particular kind of socialization. Carlson (1985), like Schär and Sperisen (2010), saw the semantic power of "evil" as preventing critical examination of history as a form of complex, often contradictory, storytelling. He issued a strong critique of the simplistic curricula about U.S.-Soviet relations in U.S. school history textbooks:

Whether there is some validity to these charges [e.g., Communist plots for world domination] is not at issue here. What makes these texts primarily ideological is their intent to simplify and distort a complex situation since events are presented in an uncontested, taken-for-granted manner. (Carlson, 1985, p. 58)

As with the contemporary use of evil by politicians to create simple binaries in a complex world, this ideological simplification of history delimits the qualification and socialization functions of students' political literacy and thus of their capacity to respond to a problem or concern that has been predetermined by curricula and textbooks.<sup>1</sup>

Ravitch (2002) counter-argued that the United States needs more, not less, ideological teaching and thus advocates for lessons about patriotism and recognizing the presence of evil in the post-9/11 world:

Part of our postmodern view of the world has required us as educators to assert that good and evil are old-fashioned terms and somehow obsolete. We have now seen acts of wanton evil, akin to what earlier generations saw perpetuated by the Nazis and Communists... As educators, we have a responsibility to the public, to the children in our schools, and to the future. The public expects the schools to equip students with the tools to carry on our democracy and to improve it. (pp. 7-9)

Ravitch (2002) thus made the claim that ideological teachings are vital to the socialization of democratic citizens. To socialize students into the sort of ideological use of evil that Ravitch (2002) supported, a sense of *a priori* evil is required because being a good person lies in our proper responses to a pre-existing evil. By a *a priori* evil we mean the notion that evil exists naturally on its own as an ontological reality that exists independently of human creation. Assuming that there is such a thing as "evil" out in the world entails that schooling works to counter that evil. In this way of thinking, being a "good" educator of democratic citizens would necessitate teaching in a way that reacts to those acts labeled as evil – terrorism. Such an assumption relies on a Kantian sense of radical evil, which stands in stark contrast with how Arendt (1963/2006) and Badiou (1998/2001) conceptualize evil. Ravitch's work warrants a necessary tangent into Kant's philosophical thinking before engaging with the contrasting thoughts of Arendt and Badiou.

### *Kant and radical evil*

For Kant (1793/1838), humans have a propensity for evil and self-love over moral law because we are sensuous beings: “Every human, even the best” has this propensity (6:36). For Kant, “propensity” is deeper than an “inclination,” which Miller (2015) explained through the analogy of having an inclination towards lollipops because of his propensity for sweets (p. 41). Humans possess inclinations either to subordinate moral law to self-love or to the opposite, and so ethically, we are good or evil (but not both), depending on whether or not we subscribe to moral law. Someone may be inclined towards evil because of: a frailty, a sort of weakness of will (e.g., they cannot resist the lollipop); an impurity, which means doing the right thing for the wrong reason (e.g., buying a child lollipops not to make them happy but so that you can have one, too); or a perversity, a selfish sort of wickedness to prioritize self-love over moral law (Kant, 1793/1838, 1:24-26). Perversity will result in wrongdoing when self-love conflicts with moral law, such as wanting so many lollipops that you demand more production from a factory reputed to have horrific working conditions due to the quest for maximum profit. Continuing our lollipop example, the management of the factory would be evil, not because of their self-love, but rather for their treatment of workers solely as “*laborans*,” those who function towards an already determined end.

Kant did not seek to prove a transcendental evil (e.g., he does not examine the Devil); rather, he examined situations in which humans prioritize natural desires, or the propensity and inclinations for self-love, over the moral law to which he posits rational beings also ascribe. Although we may not choose our propensity for good or evil, we can control whether or not we act upon our inclinations. We can reform our character through a revolution in our mode of thought to follow moral law. Radical evil for Kant, thus, was not “extreme;” rather, it was radical because it is at the “root of human action, the fundamental choice of maxim that subsequently influences our choice of particular maxims” (Miller, 2015, p. 30).

Self-love is our propensity to use our *subjective* reference point as an *objective* determining ground of a general will. In other words, humans can easily fail to see the world from other subjective perspectives (self-love over mutual recognition and respect). This state of affairs can be destructive when combined with evil inclinations. For Kant, however, humans can overcome this situation through their attention to moral law. Stated differently, evil exists as part of the natural order of things, and thus being “good” requires that we combat radical evil through adherence to an idealized rational morality.

### *Radical evil and socialization*

Once the label of “evil” is applied to someone or something, little to no discussion is needed regarding broader socio-political processes; rather, we can simply discard the evil as a result of an incomprehensible force paired with a lack

of individual rationality. In our view, Kant's call to socialize individuals into moral responses to radical evil delimits the good citizen to one who exercises self-control rather than takes action on the hopes and desires for better collective life (however "better" is defined). Furthermore, radical evil as applied to historical figures, movements, and events reduces their contemporaries, and by extension, citizens today, to spectators without any layered sense of their distributed agency across the social and cultural realms in which they live(d). Doing so allows us to avoid the necessary study of the more mundane social, cultural, and political sequences contributing to such events. Fortunately, several scholars have directed our attention to these sequences.

The work of Simon and Eppert (1997) and Simon (2005) offered a sense of an *a priori* evil, not, as with Kant, from an ontological basis, but rather as an epistemological question regarding how best we might respond to traumatic historical legacies. This work also differed substantially from forms of education, driven by qualification and socialization aims, into particular cultural agreements about what and who constitutes evil (see Ravitch, 2002, above and the Swiss example). These scholars instead called for the creation of communities of remembrance wherein, through witnessing the testimonies of social violence like genocide, colonialism, and slavery, ethical obligations potentially give rise to new forms of sociality. The hope animating such work is the potential for practices that can help transform society by "affirm[ing] life in the face of death" (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 189). The work of Levinas (as cited in Simon & Eppert, 1997) provided the ground upon which this pedagogical orientation proceeds:

To speak to testimony means to attend to the limits displayed when recognition of another's experience lies in the mis-recognition of that experience as something one already knows. In the confrontation with such limits lies the possibility of experiencing what Levinas (1969) refers to as the "traumatism of astonishment" (p. 73), the experience of something absolutely foreign that may call into question what and how one knows. (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 180)

The ethical obligation here lies in working through the event in a self-reflexive way and in being attentive as both judge and apprentice (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 180). Encounters with the traces of past others create opportunities to imagine a present and future potential of human society:

While remembrance does not ensure anything, least of all justice, it can concretize human aspirations to make present a world yet to be realized, thus present us with claims of justice and the requirements of compassion. (Simon, 2005, p. 102)

Simon (2005) eloquently navigated an ethical response to pre-existing historical examples of evil by calling upon students and teachers to both witness and respond to historical trauma. As with Kant, this approach proceeded with the positing of evil from which good might be redeemed.



Simon and Eppert (1997), Simon (2005), Carlson (1985), and Ravitch (2002) have all debated within the confines of qualification and socialization rationales for what the good or effective citizen needs to know and be able to do. We also read in both Carlson and Ravitch a call to engage the notion of evil in its ideological usage, either as a question students should study (Carlson, 1985) or as the basis for studying already decided formulations about who is / is not evil (Ravitch, 2002).

Another way of reading the work of Carlson (1985), Simon (2005), and Simon and Eppert (1997), however, is via Arendt's notion of "action." In their challenge to any simple formulation of an evil enemy and in their calls to disrupt the content and/or form of how we have been socialized to engage the past, these authors show a concern for subjectification. We read these scholars, however, as primarily concerned with a study of the past in ways they hope will inform future thinking. In these works, "the imaginative generation of future probabilities" is a hoped for by-product rather than an explicit object of study (den Heyer, 2009, p. 447). We see a need, instead, to attend more directly to a future dimension involved in processes of subjectification. This dimension is accessible through the writings of Arendt (1963/2006) and Badiou (1998/2001).

#### PHILOSOPHIES OF EVIL AND AGENCY IN SUPPORT OF "SUBJECTIFICATION"

Hannah Arendt (1963/2006) and Alain Badiou (1998/2001) returned evil to its secular realm. For Arendt, evil manifested in particular thought or desire for non-thinking (thoughtlessness). For Badiou, human capacities for good have become distorted into particular kinds of evil through a set of political sequences we examine further below. Arendt (1963/2006) and Badiou (1998/2001) both offered alternative ways to take up the ethical as that which begins when moral maps inherited through qualification and socialization processes fail to offer an adequate response to the question: What should be done?

##### *Arendt, agency, and subjectification*

In her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt (1963/2006) examined the Nazi logistical manager who facilitated the Holocaust, not as a demonic force, but rather as a thoroughly mediocre bureaucrat. In this case, the actions of a painfully ordinary citizen had massive repercussions. For Arendt, evil is not only organized, industrial-level violence against targeted groups, but also the bureaucratic and banal "non-thinking" routines that underlie such violence:

Indeed, her indictment of Eichmann reached beyond the man to the historical world in which true thinking was vanishing and, as a result, crimes against humanity became increasingly “thinkable.” The degradation of thinking worked hand in hand with the systematic destruction of populations. (Butler, 2011, para. 10)

As such, we are either passively or actively implicated in that which *becomes* thinkable.

Being passive, or the desire to remain unaware of the repercussions of our actions or inactions is just as destructive as active participation. Indeed, for Arendt (1963/2006), evil resided in the lack of thinking exemplified by Eichmann: “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (p. 49). When we assume that evil is an obvious presence, such as its embodiment in the devil or in historical individuals like Eichmann, study need not proceed to its more mundane manifestation as actions and inactions that facilitate industrial-level atrocities:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied [that this new type of criminal] commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong. (Arendt, 1963/2006, p. 276)

If there had been no Eichmann, someone else could have easily filled his shoes: in that situation, Eichmann himself was not exceptional.

Although a controversial argument for Arendt to make at the time, she refused to ascribe genocidal evil to religious or *a priori* grounds. In her work on Eichmann, Arendt was at pains to point out that we are not dealing here with transcendent evil but with the banal everyday choices to not question or think: “a failure to take distance from the requirements that law and policy imposed upon him [Eichmann]; in other words, she faults him for his obedience, his lack of critical distance, or his failure to think” (Butler, 2011, para. 12). We must take seriously the implications of Arendt’s observations: our potential to retreat from thinking about or engaging with the plight of others in ways that allow atrocities to start or continue.

Arendt noted how communities of citizens took thoughtful action against the Nazis, who “possessed neither the manpower nor the will power to remain ‘tough’ when they met determined opposition” (1963/2006, p. 165). When the Nazis encountered resistance from the fully informed Belgian Jews or the majority population of Denmark, the extermination of Jews in those areas was thwarted (Arendt, 1963/2006, pp. 166-175). The Danes, in particular, revealed the power of civil disobedience to authority, even one as ruthless as

the Nazi regime, as most Danish Jews escaped the Holocaust. The sense of agency among many Danes — their sense that they could *do* something about their situation — was their strongest weapon against the Nazi plan for Jewish annihilation.

### ***Badiou, agency, and subjectification***

Like Arendt, Alain Badiou (1998/2001) posited a banal sense of evil. As with Arendt, Badiou refused to simplify evil as a demonic force or an *a priori* fact. Rather, evil becomes only possible as the result of human capacities to engage (or not) in the good of “truth processes” or “procedures” (Badiou, 1998/2001). This is a complicated argument that requires that we first explain Badiou’s notion of the good that makes evil possible. However, we will arrive back, in Arendtian fashion, to an evil that results from the failure to think well about “what is in the interest of all.”

Badiou began with an ontological premise: “since differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences then are precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 27). Differences are simply the state of affairs: self-evident and more in the realm of trivia than of thought. For Badiou (1998/2001), as many differences exist between him and his cousin in Lyon as between “the Shi’ite ‘community’ of Iraq and the fat cowboys of Texas” or between “myself and anybody at all, including myself. As many, but also, then, *neither more nor less*” (p. 26, emphasis in original).

The arrangement of differences in the form of in-groups and out-groups and the ways in which some differences count more than others are what Badiou names as “the situation,” those concentrically overlapping social territories through which we gain an identity and orientation towards the world. These sites of socialization range from family to State to economic relations wherein we learn to act, desire, and dream appropriately or identify ourselves as belonging to one but not another grouping. Truth procedures defy and traverse these given spaces of learned difference. This potential for truth, however, requires us to see evil as secular and as either a failure to uphold, or a perversion of, a truth procedure. By truth procedure, Badiou named the process of engaging with a situation once the images and ideals we have learned about such situations have been shattered via an “event.”

Badiou asked that we secularize evil and think about ethical subjectivity (as an educational aim) in relation to the “without-one” that is the Lacanian “void” at the heart of all situations built out of differences: “The multiple ‘without-one’ — every multiple being in its turn nothing other than a multiple of multiples — is the law of being. The only stopping point is the void” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 25). In short, there is no One. The “void” lies at the heart of all knowledge claims: At any given and unpredictable moment, one may en-

counter a person, a thought, or a question that causes an “event” that utterly voids the legitimacy of what we just had thought or desired about ourselves or anything in particular (e.g., falling in love shatters everything we thought about “our” situation as an any-“one” minding our own business before the “event”-ful “fall”). Encountering the void via an event shatters the legitimacy of what we had previously been socialized to believe as common sense or “just the way it is.” On this point Arendt, too, was concise:

The new always happens against the over-whelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle... Like action... in the language of natural science, it is the “infinite improbability which occurs regularly.” (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 178, 246)

As becoming subjects seek to articulate (via their truth procedures) what the event will have meant, they produce residue (e.g., books, art, manifestos, policies, challenges to existing laws) that can alter the material and symbolic situation. Indeed the logic which provides the situation legitimacy can also be altered, for example: Pluto is considered as a planet one day, the next day not; “boys will be boys” justifies actions deemed unacceptable at other times; anti-miscegenation at one time passed legislative muster; and the former “common sense” view that women did not belong in certain professions is now challenged. In this way, something new, or beginnings, emerge from within the very status quo situation that leaders deny can produce anything new. Here, a crucial basis of this ethic must be stated: as with Arendt’s (1958/1998) notion of action, for Badiou, “beginnings will be measured by the re-beginnings they authorize” (as cited in Bartlett, 2011, p. 118).

In encountering an event, we are confronted with the question and task of “fidelity” which is where, for Badiou, the question and work of ethics, and we suggest subjectification, begins:

There is always only one question in the ethic of truths: how will I, as someone, continue to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known? (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 50)

The ethical maxim is to “keep going!”, in the sense of “thinking and practising” to articulate what the “event”-ful encounter will have meant (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 52). In this process, a becoming subject embodies a “disinterested interest” in inherited opinions and instead attempts to articulate what is in the interest of all, regardless of identification, concern for status, or self-interest:

All my capacity for interest, which is my own perseverance in being, has poured out into the future consequences of the solution to this scientific problem, into the examination of the world in the light of love’s being-two, into what I will make of my encounter, one night, with the eternal Hamlet, or into the next stage of the political process, once the gathering in front of the factory has dispersed. (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 50)

An event potentially changes the trajectory of our thinking and actions without foreclosing other ways of knowing, leaving the future open to encounter new articulations that constitute the material remains of a truth procedure (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 70). Evil, then, is a perversion of a truth procedure and can occur in three forms: *simulacrum* / *terror*, a false pretense pursued as if it were a truth; *betrayal*, the failure to continue to articulate what an event will have meant via a truth procedure; and *disaster*, the imposition of a truth assumed to be objective and universal. Thus, “there can be Evil only in so far as there proceeds a Good” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 71).

Badiou explored what constitutes a simulacrum of an event through reference to the German Nazis of 1932–1945. In their political takeover and subsequent actions in Germany (and beyond), we have what looks like an “event” that appears to break apart the then-existing “situation.” However, the Nazi takeover was the simulacrum of an event as they embraced a promised plenitude to come (i.e., the German nation’s destiny for greatness) rather than the “void” of the existing situation. However, the Nazis tapped into the same sort of petty nationalism ubiquitous in Euro-American history since the 1800s. Nothing new was created; there was no real break with what had previously been conceptualized or actualized. Based on a falsely posited German “soul, [with] its blood, and its race,” the Nazi pursuit of truth really was nothing more than the “continuity with [that which came] before... faithful only to the alleged national substance of a people” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 73). As Badiou writes, “when a radical break in a situation convokes not the void but the ‘full’ particularity or presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a *simulacrum of truth*” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 73, emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> Much like infatuation is not love, the couplet of racism and nationalism does not constitute a break with history prior to the 1930s.

As part of their simulacrum of truth, Nazis invoked “the Jew” to avoid the void of the situation they promised to actualize. After all, just as no such thing has ever existed as a single German soul, blood, or teleological destiny, so too has there never been such a thing as “the-Jew-as-One.” Rather, “the-Jew-as-One” served to provide a name to cover the void at the heart of the promised German destiny and to designate a group whose disappearance through extermination would complete the political sequence and fulfill the fantasy, viz., the terror (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 75).

Betrayal is the second type of evil according to Badiou. Betrayal, in a sense, is the opposite of simulacrum. While simulacrum involves adherence to the promise of what is to come through any means necessary, betrayal is the absence of fidelity to a truth procedure instigated by an event, avoiding fidelity (with its inherent risk) to endure a truth procedure instigated by an event. The reasons for betrayal can be for such ordinary reasons as corruption, exhaustion, or social discouragement to continue. Following a new path can be frighten-

ing to a becoming subject and the effort required to maintain a new way of thinking is no easy task. Adding to the difficulty can be opposition from the community who might disapprove of thinking in new ways and would rather hold fast to the existing norms of socialization. Returning to the example of love, betrayal can be simply ignoring the event due to emotional fatigue or family-societal opinions as to who is and is not an appropriate partner: a plot familiar from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Disaster constitutes Badiou's final category for understanding evil. This evil consists of the imposition of a truth out of arrogance: the attempt to make this truth objective and absolute for everyone. Like the victims of the mythological figure of Procrustes, who forced his houseguests to fit the guest bed through the tortures of stretching or amputation, populations can be seriously harmed through the imposition of the One-Truth that fits all. When we confuse a subjective truth with the final point, we negate the continuance of a truth procedure's necessary trajectory. Charlemagne provides another example as he forced people to convert to Christianity or die by the sword. Assuming that your "truth" is the One-Truth constitutes a failure to continue to think in relation to the voiding event. Such a failure too often births desire and actions for either the correction of the offending or their annihilation. In short, disaster "is terror directed at everyone... the pure and simple reduction of all to their being-for-death" through the denial of everyone's capacity to encounter an event-truth procedure-trajectory and its substitution with a final, single, and terrorizing Truth-Point (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 77).

For Badiou (1998/2001), it is not a matter of resisting evil but preventing it. Maintaining fidelity to a truth procedure despite hardships and with a mind alert to the dangers of simulacra and hubris works against the creation or continuation of evil. Thus, evil is not an entity in itself, nor is good the human response to evil; rather, evil exists only as a perversion of the always present human capacity to engage in the good of articulating truths. The process of subjectification, then, entails a sense of agency to "keep going" after an "event" in our articulations of what is "in the interest of all." Evil is failing in this ethical endeavour.

The implications of embracing Badiou's calls for thought and fidelity to be returned to the socio-political realm cannot be overstated. Returning to the Nazi example, a study of the political sequences that led to the extermination camps via Badiou's evils of simulacrum / terror and disaster might open up thought to similar procedures at play in contemporary society. Such insight allows us to engage with groups often neglected, those who are positioned as abject to those who proclaim themselves the norm. Badiou (1998/2001) draws explicit connections in this regard between the state of affairs in France during the Second World War and that country's contemporary situation.

Vichy France passed a law that regulated the status of Jews based on their supposed threat to society. Today, in France, as elsewhere, there are those pushing for similar laws against illegal immigrants, advocating that they are viruses sickening the economic-political body of Our-One people-nation (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 33). Badiou (1997/2003) asks how the “noxious question ‘What is a French person?’ come[s] to install itself at the heart of the public sphere” (p. 8). This mirrors the questions that the Nazis asked: What is a German person? There are those who are “arbitrarily designated” as not belonging — not French, not German, not “us” (Badiou, 1997/2003, p. 8). Such an “us-as-one versus (through expulsion or extermination) them-as-one” mentality can easily pervade socio-political discourse in Canada and the United States regarding those underserved in our contemporary situation, including those without adequate housing, Indigenous peoples, and those dubbed as “youth-at-risk” or “illegal aliens.”<sup>3</sup>

While powerful interests run their presses to support such noxious opining, the opinions and actions of ordinary people perpetuate these situations through a failure to think about what is in the interest of all. Of course, distinct socio-political processes play out in every given historical situation. We avoid critically examining such processes when we attribute the characteristics of a Kantian *a priori* evil to others, coupled with the simulacrum of the We-The-One. Thus, it is vital to rethink evil in the context of banal politics and procedures while still maintaining a fidelity to all people’s capacity for “action.”

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Teachers who wish to foster a sense of political efficacy here in Canada require examples that implicate us as Canadians, such as the still on-going political processes we refer to as the Indian Residential Schools. Rather than simply labeling residential schools and then dismissing past, present, and future concerns of those directly affected, thought about evil in the sense of Arendt and Badiou requires an examination of the more banal types of non-thinking that made those operations seem sensible to both those in the past and those who excuse the effects of this system in the present.

According to the executive summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015), “it will take many heads, hands, and hearts, working together, at all levels of society to maintain momentum [for reconciliation] in the years ahead” (p. 8). Banal processes account for the evil of residential schools and thus the healing must similarly be in the realm of ordinary, average Canadians. Such a call is clear in the TRC report:

The Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth of our country have told the Commission that they want to know the truth about the history and legacy of residential schools. They want to understand their responsibilities as parties to the same Treaties — in other words, as Treaty people. (TRC, 2015, p. 239)

Moving into the future with the knowledge that all Canadians are Treaty people and the understanding of residential schools as terror and disaster instead of a force of otherworldly evil implicates us all in the quest for reconciliation to think well.

The educational goal of subjectification and becoming subjects comes into play because concepts like evil and agency offer the actual content, rather than mere abstractions, to implicate students in their own thinking about their role as citizens. Examining a sense of agency through Arendt and Badiou's conceptualizations of evil provides not only an existential engagement but also a highly political one. Particular forms of non-thought (e.g., betrayal, simulacrum / terror, and disaster) distort the good, which makes evil possible. Thus, the study of evil as citizenship education entails fostering citizens who are willing both to think and to take action independently and with the public good in mind.

In this existential vein, a necessarily secularized engagement with evil requires a set of questions that potentially extend our educational conversations beyond what might constitute good inquiry practices into the past or what qualities constitute the good citizen. For example, while it is imperative to learn about Indian Residential Schools and their continuing effects, we also need to ask about the extent to which we are influenced by a still-present worldview that made these schools and their practices appear reasonable (den Heyer, 2009). Here, several questions might be considered: What beliefs and logic from both the various treaty First Nations and the Canadian government made Indian Residential Schools desirable? This question acknowledges that the elders representing treaty First Nations requested education into the newcomers' ways but that its implementation (i.e., the forced removal of their children, the beating out of "The Indian" within the child and the various forms of sexual, physical, and psychic abuse) were likely, for most elders, unforeseen or unimaginable. This leads then to another question: To what extent does the logic expressed by the Canadian government and those charged with delivering education in Indian Residential Schools still continue today? In what ways might we take up our responses to this question to guide our thinking about a better future for Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations?

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Depending on which interpretation of evil is foregrounded, students' sense of citizenship and agency in the socio-political sphere will be affected differently. An understanding based upon a radical or otherworldly evil can foreclose an exploration of our implications in terror and disaster. Arendt argues that this was the case with Eichmann. For example, if we dismiss historical figures as pure evil, then the political processes leading to history's disasters will be left unexplored. If, however, we engage with a more mundane and secularized



sense of evil, students might see the ways in which past horrors and those possibly in the future could have been and can be prevented through a kind (of) thinking which proceeds in relation to the void.

History is wrought by violent events, including wars and genocides. We would benefit from asking how teaching history can both face up to these difficult pasts while maintaining a sense of present-future efficacy (Osborne, 2000). Dissecting students and teachers' conceptualizations of evil opens up the potential to affect historical thinking and avoid fatalism, fostering agency and hope. Biesta (2010) saw good education as promoting active participation in a deliberative democracy. A students' sense of agency in the face of present and future evils is part of what shapes active political and social participation. Despite the potential for "evil" to enhance subjectification as part of citizenship education, there is a distinct paucity of scholarship in this area. By engaging with the philosophies of Arendt and Badiou regarding evil in the context of history and citizenship education, we can examine historical and contemporary events (such as the Holocaust and Residential Schools) in a way that fosters both agency in our everyday situations and our potential for becoming subject to what is in the interest of all.

## NOTES

1. While a topic of encyclopedic proportions, we understand ideology to be the necessary simplification of unfathomable complexity to more manageable categories, stereotypes, and funneled desires to enable human functioning within particular cultures that serve some social interests in those cultures more than others. See our description of Badiou's notion of "situation" in the section titled "Badiou, Agency, and Subjectification."
2. The idealization of North American citizenship discourse is instructive here: when we finally get our conceptualizations right, our methods straight, and our goals aligned, then, and only then, will we fulfill the democratic potential of our founding principles for the promised plenitude to come. This is however a topic for another paper.
3. Since this manuscript was accepted, such a situation has indeed been present regarding the Syrian refugee crisis.

## REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published in 1958)
- Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin. (Original work published in 1963)
- Badiou, A. (2001). *Ethics: An essay on the understanding of evil*. (P. Hallward, Trans.). London, United Kingdom: Verso. (Original work published in 1998)
- Badiou, A. (2003). *Saint Paul: The foundation of universalism*. (R. Brassier, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published in 1997)
- Bartlett, A. J. (2011). *Badiou and Plato: An education by truths*. Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.
- Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

- Borger, J. & Wintour, P. (2014, September 24). Obama vows to destroy Isis's 'brand of evil' as Iraq requests help from Britain. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/obama-isis-brand-of-evil-uk-air-strikes-iraq>
- Bush, G. W. (2002, January 29). *State of the Union address*. Presidential Speeches Archive. Charlottesville, VA: Miller Center. Retrieved from <http://millercenter.org/president/gwbush/speeches/speech4540>
- Butler, J. (2011, August 29). Hannah Arendt's challenge to Adolf Eichmann. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/29/hannah-arendt-adolf-eichmann-banality-of-evil>
- Carlson, D. (1985). The Cold War in the curriculum. *Educational Leadership*, 42(8), 57-60.
- den Heyer, K. (2009). Education as affirmative invention: Alain Badiou and the purpose of teaching and curriculum. *Educational Theory*, 59(4), 441-463.
- Dews, P. (2008). *The idea of evil*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Kant, I. (1838). *Religion within the boundary of pure reason* (Trans. J. W. Semple). Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Thomas Clark. (Original work published in 1793)
- Miller, E. N. (2015). *Kant's religion within the boundaries of mere reason*. London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury.
- Osborne, K. (2000). Our history syllabus has us gasping: History in Canadian schools – past, present, and future. *Canadian Historical Review*, 81(3), 404-436.
- Perkel, C. (2014, May 30). Harper goes on full-scale verbal attack against 'evil' communism. *The Canadian Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harper-goes-on-full-scale-verbal-attack-against-evil-communism/article18938819/>
- Ravitch, D. (2002). September 11: Seven lessons for the schools. *Educational Leadership*, 60(2), 6-9.
- Reagan, R. (1983, March 8). "Evil empire" speech [Transcript]. Presidential Speeches Archive. Charlottesville, VA: Miller Center. Retrieved from <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3409>
- Schär, B. C. & Sperisen, V. (2010). Switzerland and the Holocaust: Teaching contested history. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 42(5), 649-669.
- Simon, R. (2005). *The touch of the past*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Simon, R. & Eppert, C. (1997). Remembering obligation: Pedagogy and the witnessing of testimony of historical trauma. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 22(2), 175-191.
- Stern, J. (2004). Fearing evil. *Social Research*, 71(4), 1111-1126.
- Truth and Conciliation Commission. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Retrieved from [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec\\_Summary\\_2015\\_05\\_31\\_web\\_o.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf)

KENT DEN HEYER is an Associate professor in the Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta. He has published extensively on history and social studies education, thinking education through the work of Alain Badiou and related topics in curriculum theory and teacher education. [kdenheye@ualberta.ca](mailto:kdenheye@ualberta.ca)

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL is a doctoral candidate at the University of Alberta. Her research focuses on youth conceptualizations of evil and social studies education. She explores not only how evil might be defined in historical and contemporary contexts, but also the effects evil as a word and concept has on our sense of agency. [vankesse@ualberta.ca](mailto:vankesse@ualberta.ca)

KENT DEN HEYER est professeur agrégé au département d'enseignement secondaire de l'Université de l'Alberta. Il a publié plusieurs articles portant sur l'enseignement de l'histoire et des sciences sociales, repensant l'éducation en s'inspirant des travaux d'Alain Badiou et de concepts similaires portant sur la théorie des programmes et la formation des maîtres. [kdenheye@ualberta.ca](mailto:kdenheye@ualberta.ca)

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL est doctorante à l'Université de l'Alberta. Ses recherches portent sur les conceptualisations qu'ont les jeunes du mal et sur l'enseignement des sciences sociales. Elle s'intéresse non seulement à la manière dont l'on peut définir le mal dans des contextes historiques et contemporains, mais également aux impacts que le mal peut avoir sur notre sentiment de pouvoir, comme mot et comme concept. [vankesse@ualberta.ca](mailto:vankesse@ualberta.ca)