

September 2023

## An Analysis of Individualism in Historiography through Mark Gilderhus and Hannah Arendt

Abigail M. Stanger

University of Louisville, [abigail.stanger@louisville.edu](mailto:abigail.stanger@louisville.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/tce>



Part of the [Holocaust and Genocide Studies Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stanger, Abigail M. (2023) "An Analysis of Individualism in Historiography through Mark Gilderhus and Hannah Arendt," *The Cardinal Edge*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/tce/vol1/iss3/5>

This Brief Research Report is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Cardinal Edge by an authorized editor of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

---

## **An Analysis of Individualism in Historiography through Mark Gilderhus and Hannah Arendt**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Johmann for his instruction and inspiration for this manuscript.

# An Analysis of Individualism in Historiography through Mark Gilderhus and Hannah Arendt

Abigail M. Stanger<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA

## ABSTRACT

Typically, the works of Mark Gilderhus and Hannah Arendt would not draw comparison or likely even be referenced in defense of the same argument. However, in the context of historiography and historical analysis, Gilderhus' *History and Historians* and Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* explore the role of the individual in the agency of historical events and the nature of historical analysis itself. Gilderhus utilizes a variety of anecdotes from significant historical individuals to frame his historiographical introduction. Arendt capitalizes on her position as a subjective party in retelling the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a mid-level Nazi and logistic figurehead of the Holocaust, sparking a large consideration of controversy. Although Hannah Arendt and Mark Gilderhus possessed varied arguments and aims in these two works, both provide complementary perspectives regarding the complexity of analyzing historical events.

**KEYWORDS:** historiography, individualism, historical analysis, Mark Gilderhus, Hannah Arendt, history

Typically, the works of academic historian Mark Gilderhus (1941-2015) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), German American political philosopher, would not draw comparison or likely even be referenced in defense of the same argument due to their specializations in differing aspects and eras of history and politics. However, in the context of historiography and historical analysis, Gilderhus' *History and Historians* (2007) and Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964) explore the role of the individual in the agency of historical events and the nature of historical analysis itself. Gilderhus investigated this topic extensively, publishing seven editions of *History and Historians* over the course of twenty years. Arendt, on the other hand, devoted her work to the intersections between political philosophy and sociology/Gilderhus utilizes a variety of anecdotes from significant historical individuals to frame his historiographical introduction; Arendt capitalizes on her position as a subjective party—a Jewish researcher imprisoned by the Gestapo—in retelling the trial of Adolf

Eichmann, a mid-level Nazi and logistic figurehead of the Holocaust. The two authors complement the other as Arendt's focus remains on the individual, and Gilderhus focused on where the role of the individual fits in historiography. Although Hannah Arendt and Mark Gilderhus possess varied arguments and aims in these two works, both provide complementary perspectives regarding the complexity of analyzing historical events.

In *History and Historians*, Mark Gilderhus explores the role of individuals in history—but primarily the nature of historical analysis (Gilderhus ix). The book provides a critical view of the history field and its practices, highlighting various challenges arising within the discipline. This includes the methodological problem of ancient Greek and Roman historians in “developing appropriate techniques for elucidating the meaning of historical artifacts within the context of their own times, places, and cultures” (31). Gilderhus asserts that

history can be learned and understood by a thorough analysis of an individual in the historical context, and that historical analysis is a complex process of synthesizing information and subjectivity. He wrote that “consumers and producers of scholarship,”—particularly historians—“require certain powers of retention and synthesis, a capacity to work over large bodies of information and to establish a measure of intellectual possession” (91). Furthermore, he develops the idea that individual actions and decisions are key to understanding history. He alludes that history is made by human individuals, not by unconscious historical forces—meaning that people's choices, beliefs, and actions shape the course of history. Through this assertion, Gilderhus challenges traditional views of history that have emphasized external factors and events such as wars, economies, or natural disasters. He utilizes an example of the bombing of Hiroshima after World War II, stating that while historians can write extensively on the experiences of American servicemen involved, histories of the event are largely understood through the “high-level decisions” of the Truman Administration (136). By using Truman as an example, Gilderhus shows that

individuals are not just passive agents in shaping history, but instead active participants in advancing social, cultural, and political changes.

Another important aspect that Gilderhus discusses is the subjective nature of historical analysis. He argues that historical analysis is subject to scholarly interpretations, the availability of sources, and the historian's own biases—the historian's interpretation always requires an interrogation of all the available information to provide a clear and nuanced interpretation of historical events (85). Gilderhus provided a helpful discussion of Italian Enlightenment theorist Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and his recognition that “different people in different places and different times” experience the world in different manners (41). Vico introduced the concept of philosophy in history, and consideration that individuals might possess fundamentally different schema of thought in different periods. Therefore, it is critical that historians “learned to see the people [their predecessors] as the people viewed themselves,” one way of which is through the utilization of folklore, myths, and legends—perspectives which “provided a means of investigating the conception those people held of themselves and their position in the universe (42). Hence, he highlights the ambiguity of primary sources and how the historian's interpretation can vary based on the context and time frame. Moreover, Gilderhus examines the current challenges of historical practice, highlighting the necessity of cultural diversity and interdisciplinary approaches as essential aspects of modern historical scholarship.

Throughout his career, critical self-awareness remained a goal of Gilderhus—and one he advocated for

in popular scholarship. He argues that contemporary scholars should critically reflect on their role in shaping the historical narrative, their own bias towards certain groups or events, and consider the broader socio-political context of their scholarship, writing that “cultural assumptions and constructs do shape human behavior in countless ways, and historians who abandon the distinction do so at their own risk (139). This focus on historical consciousness is a product of the ideas presented by R.G. Collingwood, which Gilderhus references to explore whether the study of history is a science (Knowlton 572). Gilderhus asserts that the modern historian must be aware of the limitations of historical practice, and that their interpretations are based on context and multiple perspectives rather than a straightforward representation of historical events.

Gilderhus additionally advocates for the importance of reading, writing, and research in the reconstruction of history. As he puts it, “writing calls for an ability to communicate clearly; in the case of history, in plain, jargon-free prose; and research compels, among other things, orderly, systematic, and imaginative forms of inquiry. The degree to which students of history can attain such capabilities will determine their successes or failures” (133). Each of these aspects, according to Gilderhus, proves essential in the process of historical analysis and reconstruction of the past. *History and Historians* provides an essential view of the significance of a nuanced, multi-faceted understanding of history and its role in shaping the present and the future. The understanding of the past for which Gilderhus advocates is essential in understanding the work of Hannah Arendt, specifically her evaluation of the individual in history.

Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in*

*Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* is a deep reflection on the nature of historical analysis and the role of individuals in shaping history. In this book, Arendt explores the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a mid-level Nazi bureaucrat, yet central figure behind the Holocaust, and examines various themes that emerged from his contribution. Arendt, imprisoned herself during the Holocaust, faced immense criticism for this publication. First, she argues of Eichmann not as a monster, but a banal figure, which angered many as it challenged the view of the Nazi as a sadistic killer and to some, minimized the Holocaust. Moreover, she suggested the Jewish Councils had collaborated with the Nazis and evaluated the judicial system of Israel in a critical light, prompting accusations that Arendt was insensitive to survivors of the Holocaust—despite her position as a survivor herself. However, Devin Pendas argued in *New German Critique* that “the dilemmas with which it [the book] wrestles have, if anything, grown rather than diminished in significance” since its publication in the early sixties (Pendas 77). Arendt's argument challenges the conventional understanding of historical analysis and highlights the importance of individual responsibility and ethical judgment in shaping historical events.

Similar to *History and Historians*, one of the key themes explored in the book is the role of individuals in history. Arendt highlights the importance of understanding the actions of individual actors in historical events, criticizing the view that “it is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history” (Arendt 19). She argues that the actions of individuals are not

just a product of larger structural forces, but also arise from their unique personalities, preferences, and beliefs. Arendt's discussion of Eichmann is a perfect example of this theme. Eichmann cannot simply be written off as a mere cog in the Nazi machine, but a person who made conscious choices to participate in the Holocaust. In fact, Arendt wrote that "we heard the protestations of the defense that Eichmann was after all only a 'tiny cog' in the machinery of the Final Solution, and of the prosecution, which believed it had discovered in Eichmann the actual motor" (289). Thus, in the eyes of Arendt, the study of individuals like Eichmann can provide valuable insight into the nature of historical events and the role of personal responsibility in shaping them.

Devin Pendas challenged Arendt's evaluation as he explored the paradox present in her discussion of the individual criminal and analysis of banal evil. He stated, "if the notion of banal evil is to have any force, it must point to the systematicity of state-organized mass murder and the interchangeability of perpetrators in such cases. However, under these circumstances individual culpability becomes exceedingly difficult to assess because almost none of the perpetrators is, as an individual, either fully in control of events or indispensable to their completion" (Pendas 78). He argued that Arendt "ultimately falters" in escaping this paradox, largely because of her attempt to conceptualize a legal justice which would encompass the Holocaust "as a total social event," and a set of connected, yet individually perpetrated murders (79).

Another significant theme explored in the book is the nature of evil. Arendt challenges the conventional understanding of evil as something monstrous and otherworldly, arguing

instead that evil is banal and ordinary—Adolf Eichmann participated and actively contributed to the same common goal as Adolf Hitler. Arendt coins the term "the banality of evil" to describe the way in which individuals like Eichmann can participate in horrific acts despite appearing to be normal, unremarkable people. Furthermore, she alluded to the idea that the conceptualization of evil in Nazi Germany had "lost the quality by which most people recognize it," which is temptation (150). This idea challenges historic and modern perceptions of evil, insinuating that perhaps the monster not so out of the ordinary. Arendt's discussion of Eichmann challenges us to rethink our understanding of evil, highlighting the importance of individual responsibility in shaping the nature of evil.

Like Gilderhus, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* also explores the nature of historical analysis. Arendt argues that history is not simply a record of events, but also an interpretative exercise. She critiques the traditional approach to historical analysis, which focuses on objective facts and empirical data. Particularly, she critiqued the Eichmann trial for its concern with "historical truth," which paid no attention to factual connection between extermination programs in the Eastern gas factories and Hitler's euthanasia programs (107). Instead, Arendt emphasizes the importance of subjective judgments and interpretations in shaping our understanding of historical events. She argues that our interpretation of history is influenced by our values, beliefs, and experiences. She stated, "on nothing, perhaps, has civilized jurisprudence prided itself more than on this taking into account of the subjective factor. Where this intent is absent, where, for whatever reasons, even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed" (277). Through this description, Arendt argued that while Adolf Eichmann—as a matter of historical fact—never personally killed

a single Jewish person, his implication in "a central role in an enterprise whose open purpose was to eliminate forever certain 'races' from the surface of the earth" is a crime against humanity and justification for his death punishment (277). Thus, historical analysis should not be confined to the study of objective facts but should also involve ethical and moral judgments.

Hannah Arendt does not simply argue in support of subjectivity, but her contribution in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* lends itself to be a prime example of subjective contribution to scholarship. In an article, "Identity, Perspective, and Narrative in Hannah Arendt's 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'" Seyla Benhabib described the book as "Arendt's most intensely Jewish work, in which she identifies herself morally and epistemologically with the Jewish people." This identification with the Jewish community did not guarantee her contribution would be wellreceived; specifically, Benhabib explained, "it was also her passing judgement on these events and the individuals involved in them [the Jewish Councils] which earned her the wrath, rejection, condemnation and contempt of the established Jewish community." Instead, Arendt likely would have faced more positive recognition if she provided more attention to distinguishing "various stages of 'silent' cooperation" between members of the Nazi regime and Jewish organizations and committees (38). Although *Eichmann in Jerusalem* generated "the most acrimonious and the most tangled controversy" for Arendt, her perspective allowed for a valuable and unique contribution in the search for

“moral, political, and jurisprudential bases” on which the trial and sentence of Adolf Eichmann occurred (35).

This comparative overview of the two works shows that both *History and Historians* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* reflect upon methods and aims of historical analysis—Arendt through a critique of the legalistic approach of the Eichmann trial and Gilderhus through emphasis of historical context and consideration of multiple perspectives to effectively understand the past. Furthermore, the two contributions—one historical, the other more historiographical—both challenge the idea of individuals as passive participants in historical events, or “men of their time,” instead putting forward their role as active agents who construct the historical narrative. Arendt explained that the Eichmann types, despite his intention to simply play his role and climb the bureaucratic ladder, are far more common in the historical narrative, stating: “the Hitlers, after all, really aren’t the ones who are typical in this kind of situation—they’d be powerless without the support of others” (2013 Arendt Interview 43). The authors suggest that viewing history through the perspectives of individuals—a bottom-up form of storytelling as opposed to “great man” history—proves critical to our comprehensive and accurate understanding of the past.

Although Hannah Arendt and Mark Gilderhus possessed varied arguments and aims in these two works, both provide complementary perspectives regarding the complexity of analyzing historical events—and specifically the role of individuals and institutions in influencing them. Gilderhus offers a comprehensive, critical view of history, emphasizing the importance of individual agency, the subjective nature of historical interpretation, and the need for modern historians to be

self-reflective and approach history from multiple perspectives. Arendt additionally challenges the traditional understanding of historical analysis, emphasizing the importance of subjective interpretations. She also sheds light on the nature of evil, urging us to rethink our understanding of this concept. Overall, Arendt highlights the importance of acknowledging individual responsibility and ethical judgment as critical factors in shaping historical events. Through completely different works of historical causation, the two highlighted the necessity of intentional, detailed analysis and critical reflection in order to not only reconstruct an image of the past, but additionally attempt to understand what it has to offer for the pursuit of understanding humanity.

## REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah, and Jens Kroh. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press, 1964.

Arendt, Hannah. “Eichmann was Outrageously Stupid,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013).

Benhabib, Seyla. “Identity, Perspective and Narrative in Hannah Arendt’s “Eichmann in Jerusalem.”” *History and Memory* 8.2 (1996): 35-59.

Gilderhus, Mark T. *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction, Sixth Edition*. Pearson: Prentice Hall, 2007.

Knowlton, B. C. “History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction, 3rd ed Review” *The History Teacher* vol. 32, no. 4, 1999. pp. 572–73, JSTOR.

Nelson, Scott G. “The Communal Machinery of Evil: Reflections on Hannah Arendt”. *SPECTRA*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2014.

Pendas, Devin O. “Eichmann in Jerusalem”, Arendt in Frankfurt: The Eichmann Trial, the Auschwitz Trial, and the Banality of Justice.” 100 (2007): 77-109.

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Johmann for his instruction and inspiration for this manuscript.