

Commentary

## The Passion for Reality in Hannah Arendt's *Ideology and Terror*: How to Escape from Totalitarianism

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### ABSTRACT

*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt's masterpiece, does not contain philosophical theses, but is a historical and socio-political research about the rise of the totalitarian states and the reasons of their connected phenomena. One new chapter was added to the second edition of the book. I would suggest an interpretation of Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism based upon that last chapter of her book and I would argue for a philosophical understanding of totalitarianism: what is the role of human passions against the totalitarian ideologies and the bureaucracies? What are our weapons against the old and the new totalitarian forces?

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In 1953, Hannah Arendt wrote an article for "Review of Politics" that can be considered as an attempt to analyze totalitarianism, which is still not recognized in its true potential. This article was added as the last chapter of the second American edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1958, in a lightly revised form.

### WHAT WAS NEW?

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* is the classic work on totalitarianism and still is the necessary starting point to think about the historical and social reasons of the emergence of totalitarian phenomena: it is not strictly a philosophical book, because it does not offer an analysis of the philosophical roots of the totalitarian ideologies West has developed. Further it does not offer an elucidation about why political Western philosophy has made possible to reach that historical point.

Divided into three major parts, dedicated to antisemitism, imperialism and totalitarianism itself, the book was strongly criticized by his reviewers, mostly by the communists and the Marxists, who did not want to compare Nazism and Stalinism. In the two regimes Arendt had recognized similar power structures and the same totalitarian way to use terror as a technique of domination. In the article we are going to analyze, Arendt was trying to create a sort of "metaphysics" of totalitarianism, going back to the birth of political ideologies and to the logical mechanisms working on the totalitarian dynamics.

Before and after Arendt's article, the totalitarian regimes were and continued to be analyzed mostly in their political structures. On the analysis of totalitarianism, the perfect example of the return to the traditional categories of political science was written by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski and was published in 1956<sup>1</sup>: in those pages, totalitarianism was classified as a new and powerful form of domination. Nevertheless, by following the

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich & Brzezinski 1956.



authors' opinion, it was possible, to analyze totalitarianism under the paradigm, though revised in several parts, of the contemporary political science. According to this point of view, the above-mentioned authors stressed the changes totalitarianism has introduced into the techniques of political power and how totalitarianism organized repressive control and used censorship, terror and political police.

Something was lost, confronting it to the Arendtian approach, especially considering the 1953 article as an example. Here, Arendt tried to catch the philosophical, almost metaphysical, aspects of the totalitarian power: what have Auschwitz and the Gulag irremediably changed in the way we look at political power? Does it still make any sense to believe in the human rational behavior? One event in particular exemplifies how that conviction was merely a utopia and a useless instrument for a political science: when the Allies were arriving and all seemed to be lost, the order given to the Nazi troops by the German leaders was to intensify the killing of Jews, not to escape, nor to search to justify their genocide. Are we really sure that the lesson has been learnt and that nowadays we have overcome models of human action founded on the rationality of the actor?

Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, is not what we are used to think about – and what her contemporaries thought about. Starting from the Bolshevik Revolution, something has changed: totalitarianism could no more be reduced to a radical form of political absolutism, similar to the ancient tyrannies and to the modern dictatorships. The political power has shown its most terrifying face: the aim of totalitarianism has become that of creating a new man, by destroying every trace of the old and previous human identity. The “totalitarian man”, imagined in the dreams of some ideologists, was a new type of man and none of the previous moral standards could be useful to understand who he is. Totalitarian regimes have created

a system of values so radically different from all others that none of our traditional, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories could any longer help us to come to terms with, or judge, or predict its course of action. (Arendt 1953, p. 303)

Why? Many – probably, too many – words have been spent to prophesize that, after Auschwitz, nothing would have been the same but we can see that – though it is hard to give precise definitions –, to a large extent, disciplines like political theory, political philosophy and moral philosophy have not been changed so much and they maintained their principal paradigms and instruments.

#### **A REGIME OF MOVEMENT**

The article by Arendt has not been much influential on research studies about totalitarianism. On the contrary, the work which has been considered as the milestone in this area of political science, for various decades and still nowadays, was written by Friedrich and Brzezinski in 1956, a few years after Arendt's book. Friedrich and Brzezinski have created a structural explanation of totalitarianism, providing an impressive scheme of the totalitarian features through the comparison between it and the traditional dictatorships, while in Arendt's opinion totalitarianism is something different from all the other autocracies because it has exploded the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of governments have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power. That lawful government and legitimate power, on one side, lawlessness and arbitrary power on the other, belonged together and were inseparable has



never been questioned.<sup>2</sup>

This was the main reason why totalitarianism succeeded in destroying the main convictions and the previous categories of political philosophy and in creating a need for a new paradigm for the study of contemporary politics that questions the traditional distinction between legitimate power and arbitrary power.

We are used to thinking about totalitarianism as a regime of immobility as it is based on absolute laws. Taking it into consideration, the shift proposed by Arendt was radical and still not fully understood. Arendt defined totalitarianism as a sort of “regime of movement”: a chameleonic government that creates a superior form of justification of itself, a superior legitimation, «something which the legality of positive law admittedly could never attain» (Arendt 1953, p. 307). How did it work? The totalitarian regime shows itself as not interested in obeying the positive law, because «it claims to obey strictly and unequivocally those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring» (Arendt 1953, p. 307): totalitarianism created a radically new type of law, a totalitarian law. «It goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation» (Arendt 1953, p. 307).

The regime was continuously moving itself, trying to show that it was following the invisible forces of Nature or History that simple citizens could not see. Trusting Arendt’s words, the Nazi regime did not even respect its own laws: those laws were anything but temporal emanations of the eternal principles and the attention had to be focused mostly on the superior level, not on the human one, that was frail and subject to frequent changes. These changes were necessary to follow the obscure pendulum of the Nature, which was visible only to the Nazi hierarchs and to the official intellectuals, those selected by the Party.

This technique of legitimization of power gives rise to two orders of reflections: on the one hand, we can analyze the reasons why totalitarian movements succeeded in destroying the previous liberal institutions and the positive law; on the other hand, we have to reflect on the possible methods of resistance to the totalitarian domination. How to question the legitimacy of the totalitarian power? How to catch this power, which is characterized by continuous movements? Where can we hit it? We have to fight the terror, which is «the essence of totalitarian domination» (Arendt 1953, p. 310) and «the realization of the law of movement» (Arendt 1953, p. 310). How does terror work? Arendt’s intuition was that terror begins inside the human being, when we feel lost because we are losing our compass, the logical coherence.

### IS LOGIC TOTALITARIAN?

Arendt’s article provides the most interesting analysis of the concept of ideology, after Marx’s presentation. «An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the *logic of an idea*» (Arendt 1953, p. 316): an ideology is what a philosophy that aims to change the world needs. «Ideologies are known for their scientific character: they combine the scientific approach with results of philosophical relevance and pretend to be scientific philosophy» (Arendt 1953, p. 315): the concept of ideology is used here not so differently than in Marx, insofar Arendt underlined the negative aspects of the ideological blindness. Nonetheless she opposed Marxian epistemology in the many pages she devoted to the analysis of the social conditions that favored the advent of the totalitarian regime and to the epistemic effects of totalitarian domination.

Ideologies are the most logical forms of thinking West has developed: ideological thinking does not require a contact with reality, nothing can contradict its premises and the flux of

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt 1953, p. 306.



thought will come to an end without any errors.

Just as terror, even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form ruins all relationships between men, so the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality. (Arendt 1953, p. 321)

Totalitarianism based itself on an ideal human condition, that of loneliness.

By destroying all space between men and pressing them against each other, even the productive potentialities of isolation are annihilated; by teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of loneliness where man knows that he will be utterly lost if he ever let go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started, even the slim chances that loneliness may be transformed into solitude and logic into thought are obliterated.<sup>3</sup>

The “logical reasoning of loneliness” is executed by a man who has lost anything but the logical laws: in his mind, «self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time» (Arendt 1953, p. 325) and finally he can wear every mask. The continuous movement of the totalitarian regime has been replied, in the totalitarian society, by the deadly carnival of the citizens’ masks, ruled by the totalitarian logic, into which the process may decide that those who today eliminate races and individuals or the members of dying classes and decadent people are those who must be sacrificed tomorrow. What totalitarian rules need in order to guide the behavior of their subjects is a *preparation* to fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim.<sup>4</sup>

#### ***THE HUMAN PASSION, THE PASSION FOR REALITY***

Who are those who will resist against new totalitarianisms? We cannot recognize them, but Arendt tried to elucidate this core point and to give some hints about how to become a subject of resistance. We have to resist and to remain capable of distinguish between the truth and the fictions created by the totalitarian regime.

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.<sup>5</sup>

Reality is imperfect and delusive. It is what makes resistance against our will, what often destroys our convictions: but reality is real and no ideology will totally defeat it. When the single human being leaves the ideological world he has created for himself, many things are going to change: many problems will appear, but he will meet other single human beings and he will reconquer a common language and they will start to talk each other. What are the truths even a perfect totalitarianism cannot destroy?

The elementary rules of cogent evidence, the truism that “two and two equals four” cannot be perverted even under the conditions of absolute loneliness. It is the only reliable “truth” human beings can fall back upon once they have lost the mutual guarantee, the common sense, men need in order to experience and live and know their way in a common world.<sup>6</sup>

Arendt’s words recall those of another deep thinker of totalitarianism, George Orwell: in his well-known dystopic totalitarian state, Winston Smith, the protagonist of the novel, understood that his resistance against the Party and the Big Brother has to begin from a simple point: «Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four» (Orwell 1954, pp. 67-68).

<sup>3</sup> Arendt 1953, p. 327.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt 1953, p. 315.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt 1953, p. 321.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt 1953, p. 326.



These words were preceded by those of Gilbert Keith Chesterton. At the beginning of the century, he wrote: «Fires will be kindled to testify that two and two make four» (Chesterton 1905, p. 305).

#### **A TWIN APPROACH TO TOTALITARIANISM**

Starting from Arendt's article, it is possible to recognize the birth of two new approaches to the study of totalitarianism: the one belonging to political anthropology, the other belonging to political epistemology. I would define the first approach as the study of the anthropological and social mechanisms implied into the totalitarian domination and created by it, such as the never-ending creation of scapegoats, the lack of social trust and the obsessive control on everyone's life; the second approach has to be well defined and it is the most neglected one.

Political anthropology, relying on the works of René Girard, may help us to understand what are the inner human dynamics that are played out in political struggles and especially under a totalitarian regime such as the fear for the collapse of social order, the immediate search for scapegoats and the tranquility obtained by the recurrent restoration of order, in a renewed state of peace. In this perspective, the rise of political ideologies may be explained as the modern prevalence, after the French Revolution, for presenting someone as a victim of anybody else.

A political epistemology of the totalitarian domination will link epistemic models to political regimes. On the one side, the related question is: what are the epistemic consequences of some forms of political power? On the other, what are the political effects of certain epistemic attitudes? Arendt's article may provide a good basis for the foundation of such a discipline. A central concept in this research area is that of *ideology*, which is a form of 'seeing' the world that is already a form of action on the world itself in order to change it. Arendt's insistence on the perfect and unattackable logic of ideological thinking explains how much she was feeling that she had discovered the core of totalitarianism.

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