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I

MARGARET CANOVAN

Arendt's theory of totalitarianism: a reassessment

Introduction

The Origins of Totalitarianism, first published in 1951, established Hannah Arendt's reputation as a political thinker and has a good claim to be regarded as the key to her work, for trains of thought reflecting on the catastrophic experiences it seeks to understand can be traced to the heart of her later and more overtly theoretical writings. Half a century after the book's appearance there has been a revival of interest in the idea of totalitarianism, but the concept itself¹ remains controversial. Far more than a technical term for use by political scientists and historians, it has always incorporated a diagnosis and explanation of modern political dangers, carrying with it warnings and prescriptions. This chapter will argue that "totalitarianism" as understood by Arendt meant something very different from the dominant sense of the term. The final section will attempt a reassessment of her theory.

Two concepts of totalitarianism

There are almost as many senses of "totalitarianism" as there are writers on the subject,² but a few broad similarities have tended to hide a fundamental difference between Arendt and most other theorists. Like the rest, she is concerned with a novel political phenomenon combining unprecedented coercion with an all-embracing secular ideology; like the rest she finds examples on both the left and the right of the mid-twentieth-century political spectrum. But these apparent similarities conceal more than they reveal, and much confusion has arisen from failure to realise that there is not just one "totalitarian model," but at least two which describe different phenomena, pose different problems of understanding, and carry different theoretical and political implications.

The better-known model (on which there are many variations) depicts a totally coherent socio-political system: a state built in the image of an

ideology, presided over by a single party legitimized by the ideology, employing unlimited powers of coercion and indoctrination to prevent any deviation from orthodoxy. The construction of such a polity is associated by some theorists with the attempt to build Utopia; others interpret its perpetuation in a state of frozen immobility as a quasi-religious retreat from the anxieties of modernity. Despite the regular inclusion of Nazism under the “totalitarian” heading, the clearest examples have been found among communist regimes, and appropriate diagnoses and prescriptions have followed. Diagnostically, totalitarianism has been seen as an affliction caused by over-ambitious political ideas and radical actions. The remedy for this political fever is to avoid excitement: to lower our expectations from politics and ideas alike, falling back upon the invaluable if unglamorous blessings of liberal politics, skeptical philosophy and free market economics.³

Reassessment of Arendt’s theory is impossible unless we first realize that hers is quite different from this dominant model. True, the equation of left and right is still there (though including only the regimes of Hitler and Stalin, not Fascist Italy, nor the Soviet Union before or after Stalin); the stress on coercion and ideology is still there (though we shall see that Arendt understands these vital ingredients in distinctive ways), but the differences are crucial, and have a great deal to do with Arendt’s focus on Nazism and particularly on the Holocaust.⁴ In fact the picture of totalitarianism that she presents forms a stark contrast to the more familiar model. Metaphorically, one might say that if the dominant picture suggests the rigidity, uniformity, transparency, and immobility of a frozen lake, Arendt’s theory evokes a mountain torrent sweeping away everything in its path, or a hurricane leveling everything recognizably human. Instead of referring to a political system of a deliberately structured kind, “totalitarianism” in Arendt’s sense means a chaotic, nonutilitarian, manically dynamic movement of destruction that assails all the features of human nature and the human world that make politics possible.

A view from Auschwitz

The Origins of Totalitarianism consists of three volumes in one, *Antisemitism*, *Imperialism*, and *Totalitarianism*, and the theory it contains is enormously complex and notoriously hard to get to grips with.⁵ This section will pick out for examination some of the distinctive features of Arendt’s model, while the next will look at the way she approached the problem of trying to account for this new phenomenon. We can perhaps find a point of entry in a theme that she stressed over and over again: the *novelty* of the political phenomena with which she was concerned. “Everything we

know of totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality . . . its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions. . . .”⁶ In other words, totalitarianism illustrated the human capacity to *begin*, that power to think and to act in ways that are new, contingent, and unpredictable that looms so large in her mature political theory. But the paradox of totalitarian novelty was that it represented an assault on that very ability to act and think as a unique individual.

This new phenomenon seemed to Arendt to demonstrate the self-destructive implications of what she called “modern man’s deep-rooted suspicion of everything he did not make himself.”⁷ Believing that “everything is possible”⁸ totalitarian movements demand unlimited power, but what this turns out to mean is not at all the building of utopia (which would itself set limits to power and possibility) but unparalleled destruction. “Experiments” in total domination in the concentration camps that are the “laboratories” of the new regimes gradually make clear that the price of total power is the eradication of human plurality.⁹ The characteristics that make us more than members of an animal species – our unique individuality and our capacity for spontaneous thought and action – make us unpredictable and therefore get in the way of attempts to harness us for collective motion. Only *one* can be omnipotent,¹⁰ and the path to this goal, discovered separately by Hitler and by Stalin, lies through terror on the one hand and ideology on the other.

“Total terror” as practiced in the camps is, Arendt claims, “the essence of totalitarian government.”¹¹ It does not simply kill people but first eradicates their individuality and capacity for action. Any remnant of spontaneity would stand in the way of complete domination. “Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity. Precisely because man’s resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man.”¹² Unlike the violence and coercion used by ordinary tyrants it does not have a utilitarian purpose such as repressing opposition, and it reaches its climax only after genuine opposition has already been repressed; its only function is to further the project of total domination by crushing out all human individuality. “Common sense protests desperately that the masses are submissive and that all this gigantic apparatus of terror is therefore superfluous; if they were capable of telling the truth, the totalitarian rulers would reply: The apparatus seems superfluous to you only because it serves to make men superfluous.”¹³

Ideology complements terror by eliminating the capacity for individual thought and experience among the executioners themselves, binding them into the unified movement of destruction. Ideologies – pseudo-scientific theories purporting to give insight into history – give their believers “the total

explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future.”¹⁴ By making reality as experienced seem insignificant compared with what *must* happen, they free ideological thought from the constraints of common sense and reality. But in Arendt’s view the most dangerous opportunity they offer (seized by both Hitler and Stalin) is their stress on logical consistency. Both leaders prided themselves on the merciless reasoning with which they pursued the implications of race- or class-struggle to the murder of the last “objective enemy.” In their hands the ideologies were emptied of all content except for the automatic process of deduction that one group or another should die. Ideological logicity replaced free thought, inducing people to strip themselves of individuality until they were part of a single impersonal *movement* of total domination.¹⁵ For totalitarian ideologies do not support the status quo: they chart an endless struggle that is inexorable in its destructiveness.

Total power turns out, then, to mean inevitable destruction. The job of the totalitarian regime is simply to speed up the execution of death sentences pronounced by the law of nature or of history. Arendt points to the stress laid by both leaders on historical necessity: on acting out the economic laws of Marxist class-struggle or the biological laws of struggle for racial supremacy. Seeking to distinguish totalitarianism from the innumerable tyrannies that had preceded it, she laid particular emphasis upon this. The hallmark of tyranny had always been lawlessness: legitimate government was limited by laws, whereas tyranny meant the breach of those boundaries so that the tyrant could rage at his will across the country. But (as experienced by its adherents) totalitarianism was not lawless in that way, though its laws were not civil laws protecting rights, but the supposed “laws” of Nature or of History.

According to those inexorable laws, human existence consists of the life or death struggle between collectivities – races or classes – whose motion is the real meaning of history. For totalitarianism, “all laws have become laws of movement.”¹⁶ Neither stable institutions nor individual initiative can be allowed to get in the way of this frantic dynamism. “Total terror . . . is designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature,” and indeed to smooth its path, “to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action.” Human beings (even the rulers themselves) must serve these forces, “either riding atop their triumphant car or crushed under its wheels,”¹⁷ and individuality is an inconvenience to be eliminated by “the iron band of terror, which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of man the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature.”¹⁸

Arendt's theory of totalitarianism

The picture of totalitarianism in power presented by Arendt is very far from the familiar image of an omnipotent state with unified and coherent institutions. On the contrary, it is a shapeless, hectic maelstrom of permanent revolution and endless expansion, quite unaffected by utilitarian concerns.¹⁹ Its central institution is not the civil service or the army but the secret police, and even they have a function that defies comprehension in terms of ordinary common sense. Whereas in earlier tyrannies the job of the secret police was to ferret out covert opposition to the regime, their totalitarian successors are no longer concerned with anything that individuals may actually have done. "Suspects" are replaced by "objective enemies"²⁰ who need not be suspected of any subversive thought or action. In due course the killing machine may demand that the secret policeman himself should become a victim, and if the process of ideological indoctrination is working properly he will obligingly accuse himself of the required crimes.

To sum up, Arendt presents the baffling paradox of a new phenomenon which at one and the same time illustrates human inventiveness and is dedicated to its destruction. Testimony to the contingency of human action, which can bring forth utterly unexpected new things, the phenomenon represents a flight from contingency as individuals turn themselves and others into flotsam and jetsam on the supposedly inexorable current of history. Pursuit of total power leads to impotence: the faith that "everything is possible" only to the demonstration that "everything can be destroyed."²¹ Reflecting on the traditional assumption that "human nature" sets limits to human power, she observes with bitter irony, "we have learned that the power of man is so great that he really can be what he wishes to be."²² If men decide to reduce themselves and others to beasts, nature will not stop them.

Tracing the elements of totalitarianism

Starting from completely different backgrounds and circumstances, Nazism and Stalinism had arrived at this same terminus, demonstrating that what had happened under the two regimes could not be reduced to events within the particular histories of Germany and Russia.²³ The key factor making it possible was in Arendt's view the widespread experience of "superfluousness," which prepared the way for the concerted eradication of human individuality. "Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous."²⁴ Not only are uprooted people who have lost a stable human world easy victims for terror, but loss of the world also damages people's hold on reality. Such people are receptive to ideologies that may be insane but are at least consistent, and to movements that provide an alternative reality, a

“fictitious world.”²⁵ Furthermore, breakdown of the stable human world means loss of the institutional and psychological barriers that normally set limits to what is possible. But what were the sources of these general conditions and of the specific organizational methods used by totalitarian movements and regimes? To what extent could the advent of this hurricane of nihilism be explained?

Two thirds of Arendt’s long book is devoted to these questions. Not that she was looking for “origins” in the sense of “causes” that made totalitarianism happen or that could in principle have allowed it to be predicted. She insisted that any such determinism was out of place in the realm of human affairs, which is the arena of novel actions and unpredictable events.²⁶ What she offered instead was “a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism,”²⁷ and her choice of “elements” has often surprised her readers. Her first section is concerned with the question why the Jews in particular should have been singled out for destruction, a choice of priorities that underlines her stress on Nazism in general and the death camps in particular. But the heart of her argument lies in the second section, on “Imperialism,” for (without ever suggesting that Nazism amounted to a German copy of British imperialism) she argued that imperialism had set the stage for totalitarianism and provided its perpetrators with useful preconditions and precedents.

Before we consider these it is worth noting a few places where she does *not* look for explanations. We have already seen her justification for leaving aside the particular histories of Germany and Russia, in which others have tried to find explanations for Nazism and Stalinism. More surprising is her neglect of the personal role played by Hitler and Stalin and their responsibility or otherwise for the catastrophic course of events. This is particularly striking in view of the stress she places on the key position of the leader in totalitarian movements and regimes,²⁸ and even more so in the light of her own admission that the Soviet Union was totalitarian only during Stalin’s rule.²⁹ Unlike most theorists of totalitarianism, finally, she does not seek for its origins in intellectual sources. Even when, after publishing *Totalitarianism*, she set out to write a companion volume tracing the roots of Stalinism, and conceded that features of Marxist theory (and even of the whole Western tradition of political philosophy) had helped to make it possible, she still denied any direct causation.³⁰ Where the antecedents of Nazi racism were concerned she chronicled the theories of Gobineau and others, but observed that “there is an abyss between the men of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge.”³¹ Elsewhere she wrote that “what is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the *event* of totalitarian domination itself.”³²

Nevertheless, that event could to some extent be made comprehensible by looking at precedents for the modes of thinking, acting, and organizing developed by totalitarian movements, and at processes that had prepared the way for it by breaking down the political and social structures that would have stood in its way. In Arendt's view, both preconditions and precedents were to be found in the economic, military, and political upheaval known as "imperialism," which had in the late nineteenth century seen European conquest of great tracts of the world in the wake of capitalist expansion, and which had also disrupted European states,³³ economies, and societies. Much of the story she tells is a tale of disrupted structures and uprooted people, amounting to a massive loss of the human world of civilization. For to be civilized human beings (not just members of the natural human species) we need to inhabit a man-made world of stable structures. We need these to hedge us about with laws, to bestow rights upon us, to give us a standing in society from which we can form and voice opinions, to allow us access to the common sense that comes with a shared reality.

Arendt maintained that most of the recruits to totalitarian movements belonged to the "masses": uprooted, disoriented people who no longer had any clear sense of reality or self-interest because the world they had inhabited had been destroyed by the upheavals of unemployment, inflation, war, and revolution. But their condition was only one facet of a more widespread experience of "superfluosity." If these helpless, passive people were ideally suited to mass membership of totalitarian movements, the leaders and activists came from an older group of "superfluous" people whom Arendt calls "the mob": a criminal and violent underworld generated by the unsettling dynamism of economic growth.³⁴ Imperialism had exported unscrupulous adventurers like these across the globe and offered them "infinite possibilities for crimes committed in the spirit of play."³⁵ This nihilism and its practices, reimported into Europe by movements seeking to emulate imperialism, was one of the sources of totalitarian violence.

But why was it so easy for that violence to find victims on such a massive scale? What happened to the European tradition of protecting individual rights? Arendt finds part of the answer in a different experience of "superfluosity": statelessness. One of the first moves the Nazis took on the road to the "final solution of the Jewish question" was to deprive Jews of their citizenship. They joined the increasing number of those who had become stateless after the First World War. These were people who were not criminals but had no rights and were not wanted by any government. In a chapter on "the decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man," she describes how these events had exposed the fatal flaw of the classic European state. Supposedly a civilized legal order committed to defending the rights of all its

inhabitants, it was (when the crunch came) a *national* state, and only those who could successfully claim membership of the nation had rights. Lacking the rights bestowed by citizenship, “natural” human beings were simply a nuisance, even in liberal states. “If the Nazis put a person in a concentration camp and he made a successful escape, say, to Holland, the Dutch would put him in an internment camp.”³⁶ People who are “superfluous,” who have no place in the world, are ideal victims for totalitarian terror.

One of Arendt’s main themes is the fragility of civilization and the ease with which (even in the heart of Europe) it could be replaced by barbarism once that protective world was swept away on a torrent of relentless dynamism. She traces this obsessive motion back to the dynamics of the capitalist market, arguing like Marx that dynamism is the crucial characteristic of capitalism, stemming from the conversion of solid property into fluid wealth. Before the advent of capitalism property had been a force for social and political stability, but once converted into capital it became mobile and expansive, with no respect for established boundaries or institutions and no natural limits. In nineteenth-century imperialism the economic imperative to expand one’s capital came out of the boardroom, burst the bounds of the nation-state and its institutions, and turned into “the limitless pursuit of power after power that could roam and lay waste the whole globe.”³⁷ “Expansion is everything,” said its representative figure, Cecil Rhodes. “I would annex the planets if I could.”³⁸ Arendt does not suggest that capitalism or any of the other sources she points to *caused* totalitarianism, only that the latter’s startling novelty becomes more comprehensible in the light of such precedents.

One of the most paradoxical features of totalitarian regimes was the spectacle of dynamic leaders turning the world upside down while proclaiming their belief in necessity. Looking for precedents for this strange combination of activism with dedication to the service of an inexorable process, Arendt finds them within the British Empire in the figures of the imperial bureaucrat and the secret agent. Both lent their initiative, ingenuity, and idealism to serving “the secret forces of history and necessity.”³⁹ In order to obey the empire’s “law of expansion”⁴⁰ they were prepared to break all ordinary laws, illustrating one of the ways in which imperialism subverted political institutions as well as undermining political responsibility. Dynamic movement, expansion for its own sake, submerged other considerations. But the most distinctive imperialist precedent for Nazism was the development of racism, which offered a way of gathering uprooted people into a community that needed no stable institutional structures to hold them together. Within racist movements, claim to membership in a superior community rested on what one genetically *is*, not on anything one has done. Once established, ways of

thinking and behaving that successfully denied the humanity of large sections of humanity were ready to be adopted in the practice of totalitarian terror.

Why should the Jews in particular have been such prominent victims of totalitarianism in its Nazi form? Arendt strongly resisted the notion that they became victims simply by accident. Her argument is that in the Nazi case anti-semitism became the “amalgamator” around which the other elements of totalitarianism crystallized, because the Jews were uniquely entangled with those elements in their peculiar relations with state and society. One important strand in her argument is that the Jews themselves (like those servants of empire who went with the tide of events) had shown a want of political responsibility. Another is that they had appeared to be a rootless community based on race and secretly working for global power. Where earlier anti-semites saw the Jews in this light and feared them, the Nazis saw them as a rival master race, a model to be emulated and overtaken. To them, “the Jews who have kept their identity without territory and without state, appeared as the only people that seemingly was already organized as a racial body politic. Modern anti-semitism wanted not only to exterminate world Jewry but to imitate what it thought to be their organizational strength.”⁴¹

The lessons of *Totalitarianism*

Looking again at Arendt's theory we can hardly fail to be struck by its *strangeness*: the phenomenon she pictures is not only terrifying but weird and senseless, much less comprehensible than that presented in the dominant model. Totalitarianism as usually understood may be alarming but it also seems a viable political system that may be a practical alternative to liberal democracy. By contrast, Arendt describes a phenomenon that is purely destructive and futile. Even in the first edition of her book, written while Stalin was still alive and the defeat of Nazism very recent, she argued that it might well be short-lived. Such a political hurricane cannot establish a stable system; it must keep up its momentum toward world conquest or fizzle out. Perhaps (she suggested) her own generation might see the end of it, as totalitarianism disappeared, “leaving no other trace in the history of mankind than exhausted peoples, economic and social chaos, political vacuum, and a spiritual *tabula rasa*.”⁴² Even so, it seemed to her a matter of vital significance, for both practical and theoretical reasons.

The practical reason was that it might recur.⁴³ “Totalitarianism became this century's curse only because it so terrifyingly took care of its problems,”⁴⁴ pointing toward a new and alarming set of predicaments. In the first place, all this senseless destruction was connected with the increasingly

widespread experience of “superfluousness.” Political upheaval, social rootlessness, unemployment, overpopulation: all were combining to produce increasing temptations to totalitarian solutions. But these new temptations and opportunities were appearing in a world where human power and human unwillingness to leave anything alone were greater than ever before, and where, moreover, human beings are now so interconnected that all our fates are bound up together. Responsibility for what happens across the entire world must be shouldered by human beings, acting without traditional authority to guide them. Arendt comments that “the greatness of this task is crushing and without precedent.”⁴⁵

The more theoretical reasons for trying to understand this new phenomenon were twofold. The first is simply the human imperative to “come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality” through understanding. “If we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism.”⁴⁶ But the other reason is that these unprecedented and catastrophic events cast into relief important and neglected features of the human condition. Running through the book, entwined with Arendt’s diagnosis of totalitarianism, are clusters of general reflections, many of them developed in her later work. One of these trains of thought concerns our relation to nature and to the human world of civilization. Reflecting on victims reduced in the camps to human beasts, on stateless people discovering the emptiness of “natural” rights, on imperialist explorations of the scope for barbarism at the edge of the human world, Arendt came to the conclusion that “man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ in so far as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.”⁴⁷ To be able to appear and act in our human plurality we need the frame, the limits and the setting provided by the human world of civilization, and that world is very fragile.

The fragility of the human world and the danger of losing its setting and its limits links this theme to another cluster of reflections, this time on contingency and novelty, freedom and necessity. The advent of totalitarianism itself (as of imperialism and capitalism) was evidence of the human capacity for novelty: anyone observing human affairs would do well to expect the unexpected, and this is alarming as well as encouraging. For human initiatives set off processes that are hard to stop and that may threaten or undermine the stable human world. Because the future is open and human powers are incalculable, we may destroy the world and ourselves, altering the conditions of human life to the point where we turn ourselves into beasts. “Human nature” itself is contingent and fragile, for totalitarianism and its antecedents show that we can perversely choose to embrace necessity and make

ourselves and others slaves of supposedly necessary processes. Arendt saw in modern conditions a vicious spiral, in which the human world is broken apart by disruptive processes inadvertently set in motion (notably by the growth of capitalism) and that breakdown itself facilitates more destructive processes, partly because there are no longer solid institutions to stand in the way of headlong change, and partly because uprooted people who have lost their world and the common sense that goes with it are only too happy to lose themselves in the momentum of a movement. Our only hope of escape from this danger must lie in the capacity for a new beginning that lies in every human birth.⁴⁸

Totalitarianism as portrayed by Arendt was not a plague that had descended on humanity from some external source. It was self-inflicted, the outcome of human actions and the processes they set off, and part of the story she tells is a classical tale of hubris followed by nemesis, as the quest for total power leads to destruction. While totalitarian regimes were exceptional events, they were in her eyes the most extreme example of a phenomenon that was alarmingly common in the modern world, as men set off destructive processes, and then (instead of trying to check them) do their best to speed these processes along. The most obviously dangerous examples are in science and technology.⁴⁹ Optimistic humanists suppose that what is gained by these developments is an increase in collective human power. "Everything is possible," and we can remake the world to suit ourselves. But that is to mistake action for fabrication and fail to see the significance of human plurality, which means that there is no collective subject, no "humanity" to exercise such power. All that happens when a process of this sort is set off and helped on its way is that the human world and all those in it are put at risk. Much of *The Human Condition* is concerned with the most far-reaching of these processes; economic modernization, which pulverizes the human artifice and casts off ever more "superfluous" human beings as it proceeds.

All theories of totalitarianism are dialectical, diagnosing an evil and *ipso facto* positing a good, but in most cases the dialectical opposites are conceived as rival political systems: totalitarianism casts into relief the virtues of pluralist democracy. The dialectic of Arendt's theory is more radical. What her analysis throws into relief is the political condition itself. Reading her later work in the context of *Totalitarianism* underlines the point that her account of the human condition is as much concerned with its limits as with its possibilities, including the limits and dangers of action. The only answer to the contemporary predicament lay, in her view, in affirming and putting our faith in the aspect of the human condition that totalitarianism had denied: human plurality, the fact that "not a single man but Men inhabit the

earth.”⁵⁰ If human beings stop worshipping necessity and recognize their own limited powers to establish “lasting institutions”⁵¹ by making and keeping promises, they can “give laws to the world”⁵² and bestow on one another rights not given by nature. The lesson totalitarianism teaches is the vital importance of politics as the arena of initiatives and agreements among plural human beings and the space in which the unique individuality denied by totalitarianism can appear.

Totalitarianism in retrospect

No one can deny that Arendt’s meditations on totalitarianism produced a rich harvest of political ideas, but how does her theory look in the light of half a century of controversy and historical research? Generalized comments on the defects of “the totalitarian model” tend to pass it by.⁵³ Nevertheless it is open to discussion at a number of levels. With hindsight we can distinguish three different aspects of Arendt’s enterprise. She was in the first place concerned to identify and describe events that called for understanding because they were new, dreadful, and baffling. Secondly she offered an account of a general phenomenon, “totalitarianism,” as a way of getting an intellectual grip on those events, and thirdly she pointed to sources and precedents that might make their advent more comprehensible.

The first aspect of her theory is simply her focus on events that pose a key problem for political understanding: the perpetration of ideologically justified mass murder under two opposed regimes. Contrary to common belief she does not pretend that Nazism and Stalinism were overwhelmingly similar.⁵⁴ What strikes her is precisely the fact that in spite of the many genuine differences between them, the two regimes committed similarly incomprehensible crimes, and as far as this point is concerned she seems to be on strong ground. In retrospect, the activities of both regimes seem as appalling and baffling now as they did in 1951, and the collapse of communism has indeed focused renewed attention on the parallels.

Interestingly, a number of recent descriptions given by historians are strikingly evocative of Arendt’s account. The very strangeness of her picture of totalitarianism seems more adequate than most to the events with which she was concerned, especially in relation to Nazism. One of the leading scholars in the field tells us that “her emphasis on the radicalizing, dynamic, and structure-destroying inbuilt characteristics of Nazism has been amply borne out by later research.”⁵⁵ Her account of colossal human expendability for the sake of senseless motion seems to get close to the experience of those caught up in the frantic momentum of the regimes. Hans Mommsen speaks of “cumulative radicalisation and progressive self-destruction as structural

determinants of the Nazi dictatorship,”⁵⁶ and observes that “Nazi politics unleashed an unbridled political, economic and military dynamic with unprecedented destructive energy, while proving incapable of creating lasting political structures.” For Michael Mann, Nazism and Stalinism alike offer two of the rare examples of “regimes of continuous revolution,” characterized by extraordinary levels of terror and a “persistent rejection of institutional compromise.”⁵⁷ Treated simply as a piece of historical description, then, Arendt’s improbable picture of a political hurricane of frantic, irrational, nihilistic motion, shapeless and incapable of anything but destruction, seems to have some scholarly support, underlining her fundamental claim that what happened challenges our understanding of politics and of human potentialities.⁵⁸

The second aspect, her attempt to get an intellectual grip on these events through her analysis of “totalitarianism” as a general phenomenon, is much more controversial. In the (post-*Origins*) essays that contain her most explicitly theoretical accounts⁵⁹ she made it clear that she was consciously following in the footsteps of Montesquieu, adding a generalized account of a new kind of regime to the typology of “republic,” “monarchy,” and “despotism” he had provided two hundred years earlier.⁶⁰ Montesquieu had distinguished the familiar forms of government by analyzing the “nature” of each and the guiding “principle” that set it in motion,⁶¹ and Arendt believed that in doing so he had shown how these age-old forms of government were anchored in different aspects of the fundamental experience of human plurality from which politics arises.⁶² Her claim is that totalitarianism must also be recognized as a distinct phenomenon with a determinate nature and mode of functioning, which is despite its novelty also based on a fundamental human experience – the quintessentially modern experience of worldless “loneliness.” It is clear, in other words, that when she uses the general term “totalitarianism,” it does not indicate an abstract Weberian ideal-type used simply to aid research into particular cases. Instead she is engaged in an explicit attempt to recognize and understand a new phenomenon that has appeared in the world, manifested in certain aspects and activities of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes.

Vivid and haunting as her account is, it creates its own problems. The most serious is that she appears at times to reify “totalitarianism” and treat it as a subject with intentions of its own, as when she says that “totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous.”⁶³ How are we to make sense of this? There are undeniable difficulties of interpretation here, and the account I shall offer is to some degree conjectural.⁶⁴ However, I think there may be a way of reading such passages that is consistent with Arendt’s continual insistence on the

contingency of events and on human responsibility for human actions. This reading treats her theoretical analysis of totalitarianism as an account of the logic of a situation in which modern human beings (especially but not exclusively those caught up in the regimes of Hitler and Stalin) are liable to find themselves. According to the logic of this situation, and given certain aims, experiences, and deficiencies, people will tend to find themselves falling into certain patterns of behavior without consciously intending this, but also without being nudged into line by the Cunning of Reason.⁶⁵ Arendt gives color to this interpretation when she points out how remarkable it was that the very different regimes of Hitler and Stalin should have converged on the practice of similarly senseless terror;⁶⁶ when she speaks of the camps as “laboratories” carrying out “experiments” in the possibilities of domination, and when she says that totalitarian leaders only gradually discovered just what was involved in the course on which they had embarked.⁶⁷ On this reading, totalitarianism represents not so much a conscious project as the set of grooves into which people are likely to find themselves sliding if they come to politics with certain sorts of aims, experiences, and deficiencies, all of them characteristic of modernity. Foremost among the *aims* is a quest for omnipotence fueled by the belief that everything is possible and by “modern man’s deep-rooted suspicion of everything he did not make himself.”⁶⁸ The central *experience* is loneliness – that experience of “uprootedness and superfluousness”⁶⁹ that makes people cling to movements and to ideological logicity as a substitute for the lost world of common sense and reality. The key *deficiency* is the loss of the world itself, the stable human world of civilization that anchors human beings in a common experience of reality and hedges a space of free action with necessary limits and laws.

Reading Arendt’s theory in this way perhaps enables us to see Nazism and Stalinism neither as incarnations of an alien presence, vehicles through which the monster “totalitarianism” worked its mysterious will, nor as systems deliberately created by the demonic will of larger-than-life leaders, but as horrors bizarrely disproportionate to the human stature of their perpetrators, results of a great many people taking the line of least resistance and following the logic of their situation. In these particular cases (for contingent reasons to do with the aftermath of war and revolution) loss of the world and its restraints made it particularly easy to slip into the grooves of totalitarian practices, which converge on the elimination of human plurality. Having separately discovered the power that could be generated through the organization of uprooted masses, and concurrently hit upon the core of mindless logic at the heart of ideology, Hitler and Stalin (confirmed in their belief that everything is possible) found themselves presiding over regimes of terror that reduced human beings to beasts.

An interpretation along these lines also helps to answer critics of the third aspect of her enterprise, which concerns the sources and precedents (not causes) of totalitarianism. As many commentators have pointed out, its apparent weakness is the lack of symmetry between the sources of Nazism and of Stalinism. While she may be right to point out that the Nazis drew on precedents set by the European overseas empires,⁷⁰ where Stalinism is concerned such precedents fade into insignificance beside more specific factors ranging from Russian political traditions and Leninist ideology to Stalin's paranoia and the legacy of the Civil War.⁷¹ But if Arendt was talking not about causes but about contingent responses to the logic of a modern situation, such objections have less relevance. Although her theory was initially formulated in response to the experience of Nazism, convergent Stalinist experience could on this view only add confirmation. In revolutionary Russia just as much as in Nazi Germany, the *aim* of omnipotence, the *experience* of uprootedness, and the *deficiency* of a world that had been shattered were amply present, allowing Stalin (like Hitler) to stumble into totalitarianism.

Half a century later, similar aims, experiences, and deficiencies have not gone away. Should we therefore treat Arendt's account of totalitarianism as a diagnosis of a continuing danger? Or did her proximity to the disasters of mid-twentieth-century Europe distort her perspective? Despite Mao's Cultural Revolution, Cambodia's Year Zero, and assorted horrors from Rwanda to Bosnia, the past half century has been less grim than Arendt anticipated, especially in Europe. Part of the reason for this (again, especially in Europe) was that some people did make good use of the political capacities for forgiving and promising, and for erecting "lasting institutions" on which she laid such stress. But another very important reason for the success of these endeavors was surely the long post-war economic boom, which made it much easier for people relieved from the pressure of necessity to rebuild the human world.⁷² Reassessing Arendt's hostile characterization of capitalism in the light of these developments, we may observe that in giving rise to so much economic growth capitalism may have prevented political catastrophes rather than facilitated them. She might answer, though, that the process of economic modernization does not stand still, but (aided by millions of willing servants of necessity) continues on its apparently inexorable path, destroying traditional worlds and uprooting millions, generating "superfluous" people as well as bringing unprecedented riches to others. Despite the defeat of the imperialist politics and racist ideology that provided the setting for Nazism, and the Leninist project that gave Stalin his chance, the possibility of a global recession on a scale much greater than that in the 1930s makes it unwise to assume that nothing like the political disasters of those years could happen again.

Looking around us at a time when ideological politics is discredited, and when free market liberalism has thawed frozen political systems and set them in motion, we might suppose (following more orthodox theories of totalitarianism) that the omens for the twenty-first century are encouraging. But Arendt's theory gives us no such grounds for complacency. Brilliant and baffling in equal proportions, it cannot yet be safely laid to rest.

NOTES

- Some passages in this chapter have appeared in an article, "Beyond Understanding? Arendt's Account of Totalitarianism," in the first issue of the *Hannah Arendt Newsletter* (Hannover, 1999).
- 1 Not of course invented by Arendt: there is a useful survey of the background to her use of it in J. C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 39–45.
 - 2 Some sense (though an incomplete one) of the range of variation emerges from the pieces collected in *Totalitarianism Reconsidered*, ed. E. A. Menze (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1981).
 - 3 For sources of this composite picture see e.g. K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 vols., (London: Routledge, 1945); J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952); R. Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965); H. Buchheim, *Totalitarian Rule: Its Nature and Characteristics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); C. J. Friedrich and Z. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1967). C. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988) and *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).
 - 4 See R. J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), pp. 88–100.
 - 5 For a more detailed attempt at summary see M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 17–62. See also P. Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), chapter 4.
 - 6 "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)", in *EU*, pp. 307–327, at p. 309.
 - 7 This quotation is from the "Concluding Remarks" to the first edition of *OT*, published in Britain under the title *The Burden of our Time* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), pp. 434–435. In later editions these were replaced by the essay "Ideology and Terror."
 - 8 *OT* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 459.
 - 9 *OT*, pp. 436–438.
 - 10 Writing to Karl Jaspers in 1951, Arendt traced the appearance in their time of a "radical evil" to delusions of omnipotence on the one hand and the destruction of human plurality on the other. Arendt to Karl Jaspers, March 4, 1951, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. L. Kohler and H. Saner

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- (Munich: Piper, 1985), p. 202. Cf. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, pp. 137–153.
- 11 *OT*, p. 466.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 457. Cf. “Mankind and Terror,” and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” both in *EU*, pp. 304, 354.
- 13 *OT*, p. 457.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 469–470.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 472–473.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 463.
- 17 “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” p. 341.
- 18 *OT*, pp. 464–466.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 389–419.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 459.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 456.
- 23 “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” p. 347.
- 24 *OT*, pp. 459.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 352–353, 438.
- 26 “Understanding and Politics,” pp. 319–320.
- 27 “A Reply to Eric Voegelin,” in *EU*, p. 403.
- 28 *OT*, pp. 373–375, 404–409. In a footnote to her 1966 essay on Rosa Luxemburg she dismissed the two as “non-persons,” unworthy of full-scale biographies. *MDT* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp. 33–34. See the reflections on Arendt’s treatment of totalitarian leadership in Hansen, *Hannah Arendt*, pp. 145–147; J. Stanley, “Is Totalitarianism a New Phenomenon?,” in L. P. and S. K. Hinchman, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 7–40, esp. pp. 12–14.
- 29 *OT*, pp. ix, xviii–xxi.
- 30 Cf. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, pp. 85–86.
- 31 *OT*, p. 183.
- 32 “Reply to Eric Voegelin,” p. 405.
- 33 Arendt’s account of “the decay of the nation-state” under the impact of imperialism is too intricate for summary here, but see Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, pp. 31–35.
- 34 *OT*, p. 150.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- 37 “Preface to Part Two: Imperialism” (dated 1967) in *OT*, paperback edition (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986), p. xviii.
- 38 *OT* (1967 edition), p. 124.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 41 “Preface to Part One: Antisemitism” (dated 1967) in *OT*, paperback edition, pp. xv–xvi.
- 42 “Concluding Remarks,” p. 430.
- 43 Cf. *EJ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 250.
- 44 “Concluding Remarks,” p. 430.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 437.

- 46 “Understanding and Politics,” pp. 308, 323.
- 47 *OT*, p. 455.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 479.
- 49 *HC*, p. 148.
- 50 “Concluding Remarks,” p. 439.
- 51 *OR* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 81. *OR* consists largely of reflections on this.
- 52 Cf. *OT*, p. 221.
- 53 See for example J. Hiden and J. Farquharson, *Explaining Hitler’s Germany: Historians and the Third Reich*, 2nd edn., (London: Batsford, 1989), p. 169; R. W. Davies, in *The Stalin Phenomenon*, ed. A. Nove (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. 65.
- 54 Thereby making irrelevant critical comments that draw attention to their differences, including some in my 1974 book on Arendt.
- 55 I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 3rd edn. (London: Arnold, 1993), p. 21. Ian Kershaw is more critical of her treatment of Stalinism and of her claim that totalitarianism is linked to mass society.
- 56 This is the title of Mommsen’s chapter in I. Kershaw and M. Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 75–87. See also Martin Broszat, quoted in Kershaw, *Nazi Dictatorship*, pp. 112–113.
- 57 M. Mann, “The Contradictions of Continuous Revolution,” in Kershaw and Lewin, *Stalinism and Nazism*, pp. 135–157, at pp. 136, 144.
- 58 Kershaw, *Nazi Dictatorship*, p. 3.
- 59 Arendt tells us that the essay on “Ideology and Terror” contains “certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature” that she had not possessed when she completed the book itself. (*OT*, p. viii). That essay emerged out of her reflections on the “totalitarian elements in Marxism” and their connection with the tradition of Western political thought (cf. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, chapter 3), and it incorporates subtle shifts of emphasis which complicate the problem of interpretation.
- 60 *OT*, p. 467; “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” pp. 329–338.
- 61 Arendt observes that unlike the types of regime Montesquieu analyzed, totalitarianism does not need a “principle” of action, since its “nature” is the frantic motion of terror. Ideology, which prepares its subjects equally for the role of executioner or victim as required, substitutes for a principle of action. *OT*, p. 468.
- 62 Cf. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, pp. 206–207.
- 63 *OT*, p. 457. Hanna Pitkin maintains that totalitarianism-as-subject represents the first appearance in Arendt’s work of what she calls “the Blob,” a kind of monstrous force that seems to take over human beings and use them as its instruments. H. F. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 93–96.
- 64 For a more extensive discussion, see Canovan, “Beyond Understanding?”
- 65 Or by Pitkin’s “Blob.”
- 66 “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” p. 347.
- 67 *OT*, p. 436.
- 68 “Concluding Remarks,” pp. 434–435.

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69 OT, p. 475.

70 M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), p. 184; A. Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: Fontana, 1993), pp. 756–757. Compare Ian Kershaw's account of "working towards the Führer" with Arendt's account of imperial servants working with the flow of expansion. I. Kershaw, "Working towards the Führer: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," in Kershaw and Lewin, *Stalinism and Nazism*, pp. 88–106.

71 A. Nove, "Stalin and Stalinism – Some Introductory Thoughts," in Nove, *The Stalin Phenomenon*, p. 9; I. Kershaw and M. Lewin, "Afterthoughts," in Kershaw and Lewin, *Stalinism and Nazism*, pp. 354–355.

72 Cf. OR, pp. 62–63, 90.