

The concept of totalitarianism

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The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union has not put an end to the long-standing debate over the pertinence of the concept of totalitarianism or on its more or less limited usage. [1] Its physiognomy has, however, changed. Uncertainties over the future of the Soviet regime no longer weigh down on protagonists of the concept as they once did and science has taken the lead over political judgement, even though it sometimes retains the imprint of the old ideological oppositions. Discussions now tend to revolve around the circle of historians. What seems to me more remarkable is the persistence of the objections and reservations to characterising the communist system as totalitarian, or more generally to the idea of a new social formation emerging beneath the opposed traits of communism and fascism. Some of the arguments advanced under the sign of scientific rigour deserve to be examined inasmuch as they can help us to clarify the problem. I shall discuss four of these arguments: (i) communism and fascism are fundamentally different; (ii) the totalitarian phenomenon can only be detected in Germany and Russia during limited periods; (iii) the concept, as suggestive as it may be, has no practical value for the historian; (iv) it only becomes pertinent if it is introduced as an ideal-type in the Weberian sense of the term.

First argument: the characterisation of fascism and communism as two sides of a *new* social formation renders incomprehensible the radical opposition between the ideologies which informs them. The position appears to be even less permissible in the light of the observation that ideology is indeed constitutive of each of the regimes whose kinship is affirmed. Communism claims to hold universal values; it only denounces democracy because it appears to be formal, and in order to establish a real democracy, that is to say, one which gives full meaning to the concept of equality and to the participation of the people in public matters. Its main aim is to assure the common good within the society in which it is established; and its final aim is to safeguard the common good of humanity. Violence presents itself as counter-violence imposed by the domination of the bourgeoisie. Fascism, on the other hand, glorifies nationalistic passions and claims to realise the particular destiny of a people. In its extreme version, that of Nazism, it attributes absolute superiority to the people of Germany and associates this image with that of the pure race, summoned either to subjugate inferior races or to eliminate them; anti-

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Semitism lies at the heart of the ideology. Violence is then considered to be an expression of life. In one case, then, the referent is the Law of History, in the other it is the Law of Nature.

Two questions arise from this argument. The first has often been posed: does consideration of opposition of principles and claimed objectives relieve the analyst of the need to measure the difference between the ideology and the actual practice of communism? This gap has indeed remained concealed for a long time. Domination through Terror has been justified either by the need to overcome the resistance of those social classes born of the Ancien Regime and to confront the aggression of imperialist powers, or by the exceptional difficulties facing the construction of socialism in a backward nation. Such an interpretation has now become untenable. No serious historian would deny that Stalinist terror exceeded the scope of violence imposed by necessity, nor that the construction of socialism was sustained in spite of the excesses of Stalinism. This much has become clear over the last decades in the context of the disintegration of the regime and its eventual ruin.

Secondly, should we not question what is meant by ideology when we speak of the antagonism between communism and fascism. It seems that there is a tendency to use this term to designate the explicit aspect of the dominant discourse, that is to say, statements concerning the principles of the political and social order, the aims of the leaders, and more generally the aims of collective action. Although we should not underestimate the function of ideology, understood in this sense, nor reduce it to an instrument of domination, should the question not be raised as to how ideology acquires such a vast efficacy under Nazism and communism and how it succeeds in being diffused so widely in social life? The question already prompts us not to stop at the expression of ideas that are judged as characteristic of one regime or the other – for example, ideas on equality, the classless society and the emancipation of humanity, nor ideas on national greatness, the destiny of a people and racial differences. In effect, the dominant ideas reveal themselves to be in one shape or another tied to the existence of a party whose organisation and unity presents itself as untouchable.

To satisfy oneself by saying that the party is an organ created as a consequence of and subservient to a defined ideology, would be to neglect the fact that it implies within its very structure, that is to say, independently of its doctrine, a representation of interpersonal relationships in a community or rather an idea of what constitutes a social bond in its purity. If we conserve the commonly received notion of ideology

as a body of ideas or indeed a doctrine which shapes discourse about the meaning of social life and history, we cannot fail to observe that, in the communist regime as in the fascist, the discourse emanates from a single source, that of power materialised in the party whose leader is endowed with supreme authority. In this context ideology – as it has been formed in ‘bourgeois society,’ to use Marxist terminology, or, if you wish to avoid that, in modern, liberal democratic society – changes its character. Ideology of this type, assuming that it can be reduced to a small number of ideas, is characterised by the dispersion of those who guarantee its diffusion; it expresses itself in the spheres of politics, the economy, law, information, education, etc. By contrast, communist and fascist ideology – and is this not precisely a sign of the totalitarian phenomenon? – bears witness to a new ‘regime’ of political thought and language. The power of discourse and the discourse of the power become indistinguishable. To add a further suggestion concerning the change which has come about, I recall that Marxism (to the extent to which it can be defined as a doctrine) finds in social democracy an alternative outlet to that in communism. Even before the reign of Stalin, the Communist Party marks the birth of a political body which is at the same time a body of ideas.

Second argument: the totalitarian phenomenon is only discernable on the conditions that on the one hand we distinguish between Nazism and Italian fascism and on the other that we define in the history of Nazism and communism the periods when it was fully realised. Hannah Arendt has herself supported this interpretation. Is it convincing? As far as Italian fascism is concerned, a subject whose assessment exceeds the scope of my paper, its project should certainly not become confused with that of Nazism. Its nationalism was not combined with an explosion of racism; the state did not become subordinate to the party in the same way as in Nazism; terror was not pushed to its extreme. Should we not admit, nevertheless, that Italian fascism departed from the traditional framework of nationalism, when it formulated for the first time the ideal of a totalitarian state, abolished not only political but also civil and individual liberties and claimed the creation of a new order based on the support of all sectors of the population, especially the young. Finally, even if it appears limited next to that of Nazism, fascist terror was not negligible. The Italian phenomenon indicates a new political orientation and sketches out a model that we would neglect only if we lost sight of the European dimension of the anti-democratic revolution.

Why then exclude Italian fascism from the field of totalitarianism? This step can be understood more clearly if we consider the concern of certain historians, including

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Hannah Arendt herself, to distinguish a pre-totalitarian phase within Nazism, and both a pre-totalitarian and post-totalitarian phase within communism. Arendt, who, we know, does not wish to be considered a philosopher, endeavoured to fix criteria of a scientific nature. It has always seemed to me that on this point she yielded to a 'realist' illusion. By that I mean that she struggles in vain to discern in reality the facts that indicate a complete domination. This was exercised in practice under Stalin from 1929 or perhaps 1934 to 1941, then after the interruption of the war which unsettled the system, from 1945 until the death of the Supreme Leader. On the other hand, under Hitler's rule it was the war which made possible the construction of a truly totalitarian regime. Now, however much it seems justified to heed the transformations of Nazism and of communism, we should take care not to confuse the totalitarian *project* and reality in which it was never entirely realised. That in a given period the *project* may expand, the capacity for action of the leaders may reach its highest level, the methods of coercion may multiply and at the same time there may be an increase in the mobilisation of the population demonstrating its adherence to the regime – all this should not let us forget the general direction of change taken since the party and its leader succeeded in taking power. It is true that the state of society, the scope of the institutions in place, define the field of the possible at any given time. The path that is taken, is taken under the impact of events that could only in part be predicted. However, the responses to these events are not the product of chance, they interlink and constitute a definite progression.

To adhere to a strict definition of a 'truly totalitarian' regime, we confront the well founded objection that we never discover a fully regulated society, rendered uniform under the effect of ideology and terror. In fact Arendt, inspired by the picture of the Nazi regime provided by Franz Neumann in *Behemoth*, highlights the confusion of functions between Party and State, and the doubling of responsibilities at various levels of the administration. She sees there quite rightly the sign of a cunning whose aim is to prevent all stabilisation of institutions and all consolidation of hierarchies that would risk providing a level of security and independence for the functionaries of the Party and State at the expense of the authority of the supreme leader and of the leadership core. Nevertheless, the description leaves no doubt about the discords of the system and the rivalries between apparatuses whose competencies overlap.

The situation is different in the Soviet Union, but these phenomena are much more accentuated. The purges carried out by Stalin in the bureaucracy justify even more Arendt's interpretation. Besides his obsession with plots, they reveal his wish

to maintain in a permanent state of insecurity the cadres of Party and State (the engineers and technicians themselves), but they engender a disorganisation that Germany never knew. Moreover, the territorial immensity, the regional inequalities, the complicated nature of the relations between the central authority and the local authorities, and finally, the subordination of the production system to political imperatives, doomed to failure the programme of co-ordination between all the sectors of activity.

One of the most disturbing characteristics of the totalitarian regime is the general disposition it arouses in the population to act with one movement in pursuit of a goal which defies understanding. Neither the means of constraint, as considerable as they are, nor the efficacy of propaganda are sufficient to explain this phenomenon; nor is the popularity from which the leader benefits nor faith in the doctrine of the Party. As so many witnesses have indicated, when instructions are lacking people attempt to guess them and obey an imagined will of the leaders. If there is hesitation over the line followed by the Party, the uncertainty remains that the line exists. In a way that surpasses appearance, everything is known, everything has been decided. Thus as soon as Hitler and Stalin are in power, not only do servants and executants of servants proliferate but also they have to divine their Leader's intentions. The period in which, according to Arendt, total domination was achieved in Germany, offers a disconcerting picture for one who only wishes to find the strict organisation of all activities.

Let us recall the process of exterminating Jews meticulously described by Raul Hilberg in *The Destruction of European Jews*. It requires a mass mobilisation involving very diverse sectors: the administration of several ministries, the railways, industry and the army. That the Final Solution was decided by Hitler and a small circle of leaders is not in historical doubt. But their plan remains a secret and only results in a considerable number of operations that are often independent of one another and may even ignore each other. In the mass of actors who form part of the process, there are countless individuals who are unaware of its final aim and yet everything passes as if their co-operation was controlled. Was I saying: they do not know? but neither are they blind and each one is responsible. As their actions are adjusted to one another, they are not deprived of sense in the double meaning of the term. The convergence of these actions, even if they are not the effect of a co-ordination exercised under a unique command, are not accidental. Moreover, if we recall the description made by Solzhenitsyn of the Terror in Russia, we are confronted by similar phenomena. The terror seems to have been decided by

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Stalin, but simultaneously a multitude of Party functionaries and ordinary people are working to 'feed' the Gulag, and it is impossible to say of them whether or not they are aware of what they are doing. From what Hilberg writes, the debate that has taken off between the 'intentionalist' and 'functionalist' historians seems senseless. To take into account a subjective intention does not dispense with the need to recognise at the social level an anonymous intentionality. The notion of anonymous intentionality, like that of the totalitarian project, does not give us the key to an interpretation; they only prompt us to abandon the image of a society which we could define by objective criteria as being truly totalitarian.

Third argument: in the framework of comparative history, the task consists of reconstructing the evolution of fascist and communist regimes since their formation, in order to locate their similarities and differences. The idea of totalitarianism, as it was advanced in the very early years, primarily by theoreticians who had been persecuted by Nazism, risks prejudging the importance of the similarities. Comparison of the two regimes is justified on the basis that they emerged in the wake of the First World War and developed in the same historical conjuncture up until the Second World War. To understand this history, writes François Furet (in the chapter 'Communism and Fascism' from his work *Le passe d'une illusion* – a work that stands out for the breadth of its investigation and acuteness of its analyses), 'a concept like that of totalitarianism is only useful if the historian uses it sparingly. It indicates *at best* (my emphasis) a certain state reached by the regimes in question, and not necessarily all, at different stages of their evolution. But it says nothing about the relations between their nature and the circumstances of their development, nor about the origins they might have in common and their hidden reciprocities.' And, speaking of another path that opens itself up – 'the comparative history of 20th century dictatorships' – Furet states: 'it is not a case of examining them in the light of a concept, at a moment when they have respectively reached the peak of their curve [a phrase no doubt directed against Arendt], but one of pursuing their formation and progression in a way that enables us to grasp what is specific to each and what they have in common with the others.'

To wish to move away from the theory, therefore, does not necessarily mean rejecting its pertinence *in toto*: it is perhaps to recapture some elements of it in the course of historical investigation, but above all, it seems to me, it is to resist the temptation to conceive totalitarianism as a new social formation. It is a question of not yielding to the idea that the eventual kinship which exists between the two opposed regimes indicates a historical direction. I refer once more to François Furet:

in the first chapter of his book, after having pointed out the charm which continues to be attached to the beginnings of communism and after having explained it 'by the survival of this famous sense of history, another name for its necessity, which takes the place of religion for those who have no religion and is thus so difficult, so painful even, to abandon,' the historian notes that 'neither fascism nor communism have been the inverted signs of a providential human destiny. They are short episodes framed by what they wanted to destroy. Products of democracy: they have been buried by it. Nothing in them has been necessary and the history of our century, like that of preceding ones, could have occurred differently: It is enough to imagine, for example, a year 1917 in Russia without Lenin or a Weimar Germany without Hitler. The self-understanding of our epoch is only possible if we free ourselves from the illusion of necessity: the century is only explicable, to the extent that it is, if we reinstate its unpredictable character denied by those primarily responsible for the tragedy.' In these phrases we discover what is at stake in the critique of the concept of totalitarianism: to make it fully consistent would be to fall for the fiction of communists and fascists at the same moment as we condemn their enterprise.

To escape this fiction, we must observe the rule for all historians in assessing the events which mark the development of each regime to ask ourselves: *what would have happened if...?* – that is to say, if such an event had not occurred or had turned out differently. If we consider the First World War, we would have to admit that nothing proves that it had to break out and take such unheard-of proportions when the incident which originated it appears so minimal and the dispute appears so susceptible to being resolved by diplomacy: this war, however, creates the conditions for the take-off of Bolshevik and Nazi movements. Consider the Russian Revolution: its success was 'improbable' and due to the audacity and skilfulness of one man, Lenin. In his absence, as is shown by the hesitancy of his companions, events could have taken a different turn. There is no need to list all the hypotheses which give us back a sense of contingency. There is one among them, however, which stands out since it runs the risk of ruining the theory of totalitarianism. If Hitler and Stalin had not emerged, two exceptional personalities, what would have become of a Nazi or communist regime? The immeasurable desire for conquest, the senseless adventure of war against Russia, the paroxysm of hate against Jews, the very project to exterminate them – do they not bear the imprint of the will of the Fuhrer, or should we say of his paranoia? Similarly, in the frenzied politics of collectivisation, the deportation of entire peoples on Soviet territory, the succession of purges which devastated sectors of industry, administration and

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the army, the Terror which weighed down without intelligible discrimination on ordinary citizens, do we not recognise the mark of Stalin? Once we imagine for a moment a Nazism without Hitler or a communism without Stalin, once we remove in our thinking one or the other or both at the same time from what is called the course of history, what remains of the idea of a totalitarian logic?

The argument that I mention has some force. It has even too much because for it to be followed, historical inquiry would as a consequence always reduce a regime to a constellation of accidental facts that only lasts as long as it is not destroyed by further accidents that themselves might not have happened. This is not, however, Furet's view: one proof of this among others is that he says of fascism and communism that they are 'short episodes framed by what they wanted to destroy.' This is to admit implicitly that their failure was not accidental. It is giving necessity its due. And yet could we not object to this claim that 'the history of our century could have happened differently?' What are the facts that support this hypothesis? Concerning the defeat of Nazism, can we disregard the participation of America in the war and the role played by Roosevelt in abandoning isolationist politics? Concerning the exhaustion of communism, can we brush aside the possibility of an incident which would have provoked world war? The notion of the unpredictable is never erased after the event.

And yet, if this notion accompanies our inquiry, it does not distract from the task of understanding what actually happened and took shape in the world. The demand remains to understand the nature of new kinds of regime. Indeed historians do not ignore this demand: even if they reject the concept of totalitarianism, they try nonetheless to grasp the specificity and the novelty of communism and of fascism. In doing so, they tend to conceive of them as products of democracy that have remained 'within the framework of what they wanted to destroy.' To tell you the truth, I myself have long thought that Nazism and communism constitute two trends of an anti-democratic revolution and that we can only interpret their project on the basis of what Tocqueville – in order to make the larger context apparent instead of only sticking to the effects of a few great events like the American and French Revolutions – so aptly called the 'democratic revolution.' It is again essential, however, to ask ourselves if these 'products' (communism and Nazism) do not also indicate something other than a battle with democracy on democracy's own ground, something other than the destruction of a system of government based on democratic principles: the general will, the sovereignty of the nation, the equality

of citizens... something other, that is to say, than a revolution in the foundations of modern society.

It is a double question: on the one hand, it prompts us to re-evaluate what we call democracy, to understand how it could have generated within its own horizons a type of regime which seeks its destruction; on the other, it gives us notice that we should think what was previously unthinkable. It is this challenge to thought which lives on after the fall of the regimes born in the first part of the century. Their duration measured on the scale of centuries, appears brief – though not so much with respect to communism (70 years) if we use the advent of European democracy as a benchmark. But other than the fact that no one can deny the acceleration of change brought about by these regimes, the fissure in our universe has been so deep that it would be unwise to think it healed.

Let us not abandon, finally, the historians' argument without reverting to the image of two personalities whose power was exorbitant and whose will decided events to which we lend a sense of historical inevitability. I had already given part of a response to this objection when I remarked that we cannot dissociate the intention of the leader from an anonymous intentionality. More precisely the representation which should be called phantasmal, of a society unified in all its parts, released from the opaqueness which derived from the division of interests and passions, mobilised by the task of self-realisation and the aim of eliminating all those who conspire against the power of the people, does not this representation imply the position of *someone* who is detached from everyone, all-powerful, all-seeing, omniscient, thanks to whom the people calls itself One. From the total power of the Fuhrer or Supreme Leader we could certainly not deduce the personalities of Hitler or Stalin. But can one overlook the fact that the image of a man who considers obedience to legality as a simple prejudice, who is constantly proving his will of iron, who presents himself as invested by Destiny, elucidates the character of the regime. Those who doubt it should consider the role of Mussolini, an eccentric character whose captivation of Italians astonishes us. His paranoia does not reach the same level as that of Hitler. Be that as it may, the example is ambiguous. But when we then consider some other communist leaders instead of staying fixed on the image of the Hitler-Stalin couplet – for example, Mao Tse-tung, Kim Il Sung, Pol Pot, Ceaucescu or Enver Hodja – could they all be the children of chance or is there not some logic that governs the selection of personalities capable of interpreting the role of *Egocrat*. (to use Solzhenitsyn's term), the man in whom *social power* is embodied. Far from putting the concept of totalitarianism at fault, the singular position of the

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leader, incomparable with that of the classic tyrant or modern dictator, is the sign of a new social formation.

Last argument: the concept of totalitarianism is only pertinent if it is defined as an 'Ideal-type.' François Furet in particular associates himself with this interpretation in a passage in which he goes on to say of National Socialism and Stalinist Bolshevism that 'they are not only comparable, but they form in some way a political category which has won rightful recognition since Hannah Arendt. I understand well that acceptance is not universal but I do not see proposed a more adequate concept to define regimes in which an atomised society, made up of individuals systematically deprived of political ties, is subjected to the total power of an ideological party and its leader. Since it is a case of an ideal type [my emphasis], the idea does not suggest that the regimes are identical or even comparable in every respect, nor does it indicate that the trait in question is equally pronounced over the whole length of their history.'

Is it right that atomisation is the main characteristic of the system? Should we stick with the definition that Arendt gives: total domination by ideology and terror? Let us put this question aside for a moment. Furet's historical judgement is important to me because, without contradicting the former recommendation of only making limited use of the concept of totalitarianism, it marks an advance of his thinking to admit the validity of a new 'political category.' After all, this is what I want to say myself. However, can we be satisfied with this notion of an ideal-type? Borrowed from Max Weber, it has the merit of encouraging a break from the naiveté of a purely descriptive history. The historian certainly only has the chance to make facts intelligible if he formulates a question referring to them and elaborates hypotheses. An object of investigation is only defined on condition of selecting certain signs from the pure diversity of the real: an operation guided by the interest that the researcher finds in them according to his own values or those of his time and on the assumption that they have some connection between them. If his hypothesis is found to be confirmed in the course of his inquiry, relationships of causality appear whose validity makes itself apparent to anybody, whatever their own values may be, even to the Chinese, as Weber says. Put another way, science attains universal propositions as long as it does not yield to the illusion of treating them as if they were historical reality. On its own historical reality does not speak. Whoever claims to discover in facts the genesis of meaning, escapes into philosophy. No doubt we can observe that Max Weber himself infringes the rules of his method when he

shows the degradation of the Protestant ethic and the petrification of the spirit of capitalism. In spite of his care to demarcate the frontiers of his investigation and to connect strictly defined facts, he himself cannot avoid confronting a question which goes beyond science and bears on the nature of modern civilisation. We would thus be mistaken in concluding that speculation is not tied to scientific inquiry.

Whatever the problems posed by Weber's methodology, I do not see how one could reduce totalitarianism to an ideal-type. If we speak of it as a political category, it is to confer on the term 'political' a broader meaning than it ordinarily has – when it is distinguished from the economic, the religious or the juridical. This political category is as indispensable as that of democracy, for example, or of aristocratic society. In each case, the intention is to designate a system, or to use a more neutral term, a regime, which may be distinguished by a certain number of characteristics: notably, determination of the locus of power, the legitimacy which it claims, the scope of its prerogatives, the right which underpins a certain type of social differentiation, the links between property relationships and the mode of production, dominant beliefs and customs. Could one say that the nature of modern democracy is not inscribed in facts, that its existence may be debated? There is no ground to conclude that it is merely the product of an intellectual construction.

Let us recall the researches of Tocqueville (to which historians always feel obliged to return): he endeavours to decipher the signs of a new type of society, focusing attention not only on political institutions but on transformations of social life and the dominance of new passions – those of equality, welfare and individual liberty. The element of construction cannot be separated from that of exploration. Now Tocqueville does not rely on a theory of Reason for thinking history. He lets himself be guided by signs of new meaning which he discovers in the breaking up of the old social framework in which people previously apprehended their relations of dependence together with their experience of time, nature, the order of world and the distinction between the 'this worldly' and the 'other worldly.' In the passage from the aristocratic society of the *Ancien Regime* to democratic society, Tocqueville discerns a mutation of the symbolic order, that is to say, something other than intelligible progressions of thought whose validity would be recognisable to the Chinese, once the author's initial hypotheses are accepted. The author's interpretation does not leave him in a position of neutrality; it enjoins him to think what previously exceeded the limits of the thinkable.

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One might think that the construction of an ideal-type allows the historian to escape from the alternatives of philosophy and descriptive history, but it does so only by converting the historian into a subject of knowledge external to the historical account in which he is implicated and seeks orientation.

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Hannah Arendt (who, I have noted in passing, insists that the recognition of the totalitarian phenomenon be limited to certain periods of Nazism and Communism) has elaborated a theory to which most analysts refer, either to contest it or to make it less abrupt: that of total domination by means of ideology and terror. What does she understand by total domination? She informs us that it is not only exercised from above by external means, but also imposes itself 'from within.' It is apparently ideology that makes this possible. How does ideology obtain such efficacy? Arendt mentions the function of propaganda, and then more precisely that of *indoctrination*. Its success seems to derive from the very character of a doctrine which leaves no place for doubt. But should it not be added that all questioning of the truth values of the doctrine is rendered impossible? Then we should have to admit that in the absence of terror, the outlawing of all opposition and the threat which weighs on all potential opponents, indoctrination would be an insufficient means. This phenomenon accounts for the diffusion of ideology among the circle of militants which, despite its scope, remains limited; it does not shed any light on the subjection of the population. Moreover, the term 'indoctrination,' which implies action on the part of the doctrine's bearers on those subjected to it, does not fully express the idea of domination from within. On the other hand, Arendt herself points out that the efficacy of the doctrine does not lie in its novelty. In the case of Stalinism, the doctrine derives from Marxism which teaches that history is the product of class struggle and that it will terminate in the destruction of the last dominant class engendered by capitalism. For its part, Nazism adopts the already widely diffused themes of Pan-Germanism, racism and social Darwinism. The new fact would consist, therefore, in the intensification of the belief into a comprehensive intelligibility and predictability of the processes of history or of nature. That which was implicit would become explicit once Communism or Nazism placed the doctrine at the service of a plan for total domination. From a doctrine affirming the elimination of the dominant class, Arendt notes, the decision to exterminate all those who hindered the course of history could not be deduced. No more could the decision to exterminate inferior races, and above all the Jewish race, be deduced

from racial theory. But if we stopped at this interpretation, there would be a risk of attributing to the doctrine a purely artificial quality. Hannah Arendt leads us in a different direction when she speaks of a domination from within. According to her argument, the transition from doctrine to totalitarian ideology, from a conception of history or nature to an action which results from a command issued by history or nature, implies a regression of thought into a logical construction so complete that it dissolves the frontier separating thought from experience, and by the same token thought from action. So, necessity makes law – not a necessity imposed from without, but a necessity internalised by the Subject who surrenders herself to a chain of ideas which, so to say, merge into one single idea. Arendt, it may be recalled, comes to define ideology as the logic of an idea. By this criterion Nazism and Communism would be reunited.

There is no doubt in my eyes that Arendt reaches the essential point in her analysis when she shows that the idea of a law which governs the course of history or nature is confounded with that of law as command. The new idea of law, in her view, reveals the radical novelty of the totalitarian regime and the function of terror. This regime, she emphasises, is distinguished from tyranny which is a regime without laws. She could have added that it is also distinguished from a despotism which turns the supreme Master into a being endowed with supernatural powers or even into a demi-God; or no less from a modern dictatorship which justifies itself by reference to the circumstances or the particular character of a type of society. Totalitarianism is, in effect, accompanied by an absolute affirmation of law. It deprives all positive laws of their function and destroys the consensus juris which assures people of their rights and mutual obligations in a common world. At the same time, the Subject finds herself deprived of the capacity to determine her own conduct and to account for her actions to herself and others according to norms of justice and injustice, truth and falsity, good and bad. Where the transcendence of law is abolished, there results in Arendt's terms an 'identification of man with the law,' or the emergence of a humanity that becomes the 'living incarnation of law.' To be sure Arendt does not let one forget that a change of this kind requires the position of a mediator, of a leader, in whom is concentrated infallible knowledge and absolute power. She says of him in one place that he monopolises knowledge, and in another that his will is incarnate in all places and at all times. This supreme and unconditional authority, however seems to derive from a conception of law as a law of history or of nature: a law of movement in both cases, of a movement which inhabits the Subject.

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Without minimising the importance of this belief, I wonder if it does not bear the mark of a rationalisation serving to justify all initiatives of power and unconditional obedience to orders. We come back to the question: how does the notion of a law which dispossesses individuals of the markers of legality and morality establish itself in social reality? This question brings me back to the critique, previously mentioned, of a definition of ideology which stands up poorly to the phenomenon of totalitarianism. Arendt still seems to be sharing in it when she speaks of ideology as the logic of an idea and seeks to grasp in that logic the key sign of a 'domination from within.'

However, she indicates a new direction when she acknowledges the phenomenon of *organisation*. Unfortunately her considerations (in Chapter 11 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) are disconnected from her subsequent reflections on the new status of law. It is precisely after having noted that total domination implies a domination from within, that she affirms the practical objective of the movement, whether Communist or Nazi, to 'enlist the greatest number in their organisation.' Following her penchant for excessive formulae, she adds that this does not respond to any political objective. Returning later to this theme, she specifies that the aim of propaganda is not to persuade, but to organise.

To this end, originality of ideological content can only be considered an obstacle. It is not by chance that the two totalitarian movements of our time, so horrifyingly new and ingenious in their methods of domination, have never invented an ideology which was not previously popular. The masses are not won over by the public success of demagoguery, but by the visible reality and power of a 'living organisation' (*an expression taken from Hitler*).

What is important, for example, in the fabrication of a Jewish conspiracy is the conjunction of fiction and organisation. Thus the fiction remains even after the massacre of the Jews – as it did in the Stalinist regime when the fiction of a Trotskyist conspiracy continued to exist after the liquidation of the Trotskyists and the assassination of Trotsky himself. The efficacy of fiction is not denied, but it proves itself correct by being tied to organisation. In my own words, I would say: ideas become 'substantial' where people believe together and adapt to one another within an organisation. Arendt says of the Nazi movement, once it has developed, that 'in practice it materialised daily in the hierarchy of a political organisation, in which context it would have been unrealistic to question it' (the term 'unrealistic' must be understood in the sense of contradictory to a sense of reality). With regard

to Bolshevism, once it has developed, Arendt notes that 'it no longer needed to engage in a discussion on class struggle, internationalism and the unconditional submission of the proletariat's interest to that of the Soviet Union: the organisation of the Komintern, as it functioned, is more convincing than any ideological argument.'

As I have previously indicated, we should not conclude that organisation reveals the reality of the regime beyond its ideas. In one sense it consists of an actual transformation of social relations. The most obvious illustration of this transformation is the creation of the Bolshevik and Nazi parties. To some extent both of them have something in common with mass parties operating in a democracy, whose own tendency is to multiply grass root organisations in cities, towns and country. A totalitarian party, however, constructs a pyramid of committees whose members, as Arendt notes, perceive the organisation as 'the essence of their lives.' The division of functions, continuous mobilisation, the common discipline required in the application of orders from the Centre, do not have a limited objective, that of ensuring that leaders who share the same political affiliation prevail in the organs of public decision-making, be they in the state apparatus or at the regional level. Their objective is to control and regulate behaviour in all spheres of social life, in all professions, but also in all situations where human relations are formed outside institutional frameworks. No doubt it is in this sense that Arendt can affirm that it is not a question of a 'political' objective: this objective, I would say, is to render *everything organisable*, everything becomes matter for party organisation. Nor should we confuse – if we wish to account for the formation of totalitarian regimes – the process of bureaucratisation characteristic of all modern societies which, whilst possessing its own dynamic, remains subordinate to particular technical imperatives of a different order, and the process of organisation whose objective is to impose on the whole of society common norms. To be sure, the Party exploits the process of bureaucratisation, it accelerates it; but in eliminating the distinction between the political and the non-political, it changes its nature.

That the ideal of *total organisation* has a material existence does not prevent us from recognising that it has a phantasmal quality. I have already pointed this out, in connecting on this point with Arendt's analysis: that the form of domination within the Party as well as the Party's domination of the state bureaucracy contradicts the image of a perfectly arranged system. But, independently of this observation, the fantasy is revealed in my view in the split in the representation of *total organisation*. It is that of a totally active society and that of an amorphous society which is

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like material in the hands of builders. Inside the Party this split on the one hand converts a militant into an activist distinguished by his or her voluntarism, whose energy is constantly mobilised, and on the other hand into a pure product of the organisation, a creature of the Party.

If it is important to scrutinise so much the Communist or Fascist ideal according to which social relations, modes of knowledge and actions are articulated with one another and derived from a single principle, it is because it masks, even as it also bears the trace of, the work of domination. While power is manifested in the person of the leader, it does not stop appearing as a social power. The image of the infallible leader and the allegiance which he is granted concur with the vision of a society all of whose parts are in harmony with each other and whose law impresses itself on each and everyone.

Now, the ideal of organisation gives one of the keys to terror since it implies, to the point where it would be impossible to identify the first cause, the destruction of the existing social fabric, of all the ties – previously ensured by rights that were not only political but civil and individual – which attest to a spontaneous mode of socialisation. It would be equally mistaken to reduce the Terror to the elimination of those judged responsible, here and there, for the organisers' failures. In the very definition of the enemy, the dual character of the totalitarian phantasm is revealed: to the image of the activist militant corresponds that of the maleficent adversary who is everywhere active, conspiratorial, the agent of a foreign organisation or a saboteur of production. The image of a perfectly malleable material corresponds with that of waste which must be removed in the operation which gives shape.

Nonetheless to limit oneself to this analysis would be to neglect another task of Communism and Fascism: that of the *incorporation* of individuals into a collective body, the absorption of the many into the One. While the organisation is concerned with the project of artificially building the social, taken to its extreme but already present in the modern world, where it accompanies the rationalisation of diverse spheres of activity, notably the political, economical and religious, the task of incorporation is concerned with a more substantialist ideal. Once more, it is the Party with the new characteristics it has acquired which reveals to us the sense of the totalitarian dynamic. The Party is not only perceived as an organisation, in the received political sense of the term, it is a 'mystical being' in which its members are merged, and as such, it incarnates the people. The image of the indivisible people projects itself on the party, the image of the indivisible party projects itself on

the people. Within the party itself, the hierarchy is half concealed by a logic of identification which binds the militant to the supreme leader. Now, if we could say from our initial viewpoint that the Party concealed the project of *total organisation*, we can now add that it conceals that of making *total incorporation*. Witness its effort to create throughout the whole of society a myriad of collectives which possess the property, each apart from the other, of presenting a bodily image of an organic whole: these are unions, youth movements, cultural groupings, unions of authors and artists, academies of science, associations of lawyers and doctors, etc.

In considering this formidable enterprise, with its tendency toward the re-establishment of '*corporeality*' in the social, I am surprised at the atomisation thesis of totalitarian society obstinately maintained by Arendt. Generally so careful not to detach understanding from the notions formed by common sense and to find in the non-critical use of the word 'totalitarian' a sign of some initial understanding, she takes no account of this naive vision, very soon formed, of collectivism. It is true that this term, used above all to describe the Communist system, often formed part of the vocabulary belonging to the Right and bore the mark of a defence of bourgeois individualism. Nevertheless, it bears witness to the perception of a new phenomenon. Arendt only wishes to retain from the totalitarian project the domination of a population transformed into a mass of individuals, each of whom is separated from others and finds a substitute for the feeling of existence only through binding themselves to others under the shadow either of a subjugating authority or of Terror. To Hitler she attributes the intention of pursuing a process of atomisation which already characterised Weimar Germany; to Stalin, that of fabricating the mass through the programmes of collectivisation and frantic industrialisation. Without doubt Arendt does not allow one to ignore what in a passage devoted to the Terror she calls 'the creation the One out of the many.' In the same chapter she writes: 'For the barriers and channels of communication between individuals, [Terror] substitutes an iron link which binds them so closely together that plurality has almost vanished into a single man of gigantic dimensions.' In another passage she evokes Hitler's pleasure when faced with the spectacle of millions of militants appearing to him as a single human being. Observations of this kind, however, always portray the One as the objective of domination. Whatever the adequacy of this view, it leaves out the appeal, for those called upon to submit, of belonging to a party, a group or a people united; it also leaves out the satisfaction gained for the multiple appetites for power which operate under the cover of participation in a common cause. For my part, I associate the image of the One with the image of the body. This notion is charged with all the connotations associated with aesthetics

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and social hygiene. Beauty, vigour and health are the attributes of the 'new man' by contrast with the decrepit and sick man of the democratic world.

Within this context I can only allude to a totalitarian aesthetic which has rightfully drawn the attention of some historians. On the other hand I must emphasise the relation which links the Terror with the image of the parasites to be eliminated. The attraction of the good social body goes hand in hand with the repulsion of foreign elements. In the case of Nazism, the phenomenon is obvious. There is no need to multiply the numbers of citations drawn from Hitler and more eloquently from Himmler. The enemy, above all the Jew, is labelled a louse or a bug; he infects the German population. Anti-Semitic propaganda is not bound to the logic of organisation which I was referring to. Hatred is disguised under the imperative of extirpating from the social body everything which is thought to endanger its integrity. Meanwhile, in a language which is not that of an exaltation of racial purity, Communism also claims for itself a programme of social prophylactics. And it has to be recognised that Communism gave the first signs: already in 1918 Lenin called for the cleansing from Russian soil of all its harmful insects. The hunt for parasites evolved under Stalinism: Trotskyists in particular found themselves continually branded as vermin. One need only recall Vyshinski's vocabulary.

Finally at the other pole of the totalitarian phantasmagoria, how can one neglect the vision of the body of the Fuhrer or the Supreme Guide? In both of them are concentrated vital forces, youth and invulnerability. Could we say that this representation of the leader is accidental? How could one forget the face of Mao, Kim Il Sung, Castro and some others? In vain would one like to dissolve this phenomenon into the more general one of the dictator's popularity? In the visible person of the 'Egocrat' is projected the image of the body of the community.

Why does Arendt present totalitarian society as a society which has been deliberately atomised so that it may become the material for total domination? The reason seems to me to be that she already sees in democracy, or at least in Europe, the advent of a mass society accompanying the decline of the nation state and the destruction of the class structure which guaranteed individuals permanent frameworks for their existence and made it possible for them to relate to one another on the basis of common interest and intelligible forms of opposition. At the origin of the Nazi and Communist movements' success Arendt thus discovers the appearance of a new category of people, literally *disinterested*, who have even lost a sense of their own survival. According to the argument she develops in the

third part of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Nazism and communism exploited the effects of social disintegration in order to destroy liberties which only continued to exist because they were linked to bourgeois individualism and to an economy based on competition.

An interpretation of the kind (incidentally based on rather unconvincing facts for the class structure and that of the parties and unions which derived from it, were not broken up in Germany on the eve of Hitler's taking power) does not allow for an understanding of the two 'revolutionary' movements whose objective, taking off from opposite points of view, is to abolish the constitutive principles of modern democracy; that is to say, not only the representative system, a juridical-political category, but a form of social life in which is tacitly accepted the legitimacy of different interests, opinions and beliefs, of class conflict and of modes of activity, of forms of knowledge and expression which are not derived from common norms but which confront in their limits the question of their foundation and finality and whilst participating in a common experience of the world.

We can only conceive the 'reduction of the many to the One' which operates within totalitarian regimes, on condition that we do not confuse 'multiplicity' with the multitude, that is to say, with the mass of isolated individuals, and that we find there the sign of the unfolding of civil society and of the differentiation and creativity which accompanies it.

The fact that the totalitarian phenomenon has no precedent, as is noted by Arendt, should not let us forget that the modern democratic phenomenon itself has no precedent. Communist and Fascist regimes present the same characteristic: complete occupation of the place of power by the holder of supreme authority, while at the same time power appears as a social power and the leader as one who embodies it. By the same token, all distinction between the instances of power, law and knowledge are eradicated. This is to say that notions of what is just and unjust, like those of what is true and what is false or a lie, are absent from all discussion and instead are derived from the one who from moment to moment holds the power, either directly or through his representatives, to decide the course of events.

We cannot understand the full significance of this phenomenon without appreciating the importance of the rupture marked by the advent of democracy in the history of Europe. With the affirmation that power belongs to no one, is associated the idea that it indicates a place which can be neither occupied nor

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represented or embodied in any figure. Those who exercise public authority, thanks to the existence of suffrage, appear like ordinary mortals destined to be replaced by others. The method by which they are appointed and their actions are subjected to the law and their competence stops at the frontiers of domains recognised to be non-political. It is not a question there of simple rules designed to ensure national cohesion. The notion of a power confined within limits is separated from that of the law whose foundations are concealed and which from now on can only be put to the test by demands of new groupings and material changes which affect social life.

Democratic principles were affirmed in opposition to the Ancien Regime, in which power appeared to be embodied in the person of the sovereign who, without being master of the law, bore the imprint of God's will or of the order of nature, and seemed invested with a legitimacy and wisdom which escaped ordinary mortals. The new distinction, applicable only to democracy, between the locus of power – an empty place resistant to appropriation or representation embodiment, shielded from religious dramatisation, a purely symbolic place – and the exercise in reality of the means of decision-making and command; the disimbrication of the instance of Law and that of knowledge; the acceptance of divisions which traverse society: here is what totalitarian regimes reject. Not, of course, in order to re-establish an old order but to forge the fiction of an undivided society with which power is consubstantial. This kind of soldering which totalitarianism attempts to establish at once between those in Power and the people, and between power, law and knowledge, has the same meaning as the soldering between the classes or, to put it better, as the negation of all internal, social opposition – a negation which is accompanied by the return of the sharp divide between the people and its enemies.

Is it simply the sign of a project of domination that totalitarianism reveals, one which would be accomplished in favour of an ideology that elevates the movement of history or of nature into a supreme law? Should we not rather discern a new, symbolic constitution of the social? I hesitate, however, to use this term. It is meant to indicate a chain of interdependent relations which make reference to one another and are constitutive of an experience of social life, I am not afraid to say, a logic. But in another sense, it would be better to speak of a destruction of the symbolic, of a logic determined by the negation of articulations of the social which provide each individual, at different registers of his or her existence, with the possibility of apprehending reality in its limits. Linked to the notion of a homogeneous society is that of closure: the abolition of the mystery of its beginning

and of the indeterminacy of its history. With the demand for a 'real' democracy to substitute for formal democracy, or for a concrete community freed from the reign of abstraction, is attached the endless elimination of the enemy.

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Notes

- [1] This paper was presented at the ESRC Research Seminar on *Social Theory and Major Social Transformations* at the University of Warwick in June 1997. It was first published in *Papers in Social Theory, No.2* (1988, Warwick Social Theory Centre and Sussex Centre for Critical Social Theory) and was translated by Robert Fine and Peter Wagner.