The concept of totalitarianism: three comments on Claude Lefort

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First point

Let me start with what I see as a crucial contribution of theorists of totalitarianism (like Claude Lefort but also Hannah Arendt) to contemporary social theory. [1] It is that they confront what Hannah Arendt called 'the burden of events' in history – in her words, 'neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise' (*Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. xiv). The concept of totalitarianism was developed by political philosophers as an attentive facing up to and resisting of a new and previously unthinkable social reality. The shadow of the Gulag and Auschwitz was so dark that the categories of modern political thought could not remain untouched. They continue to weigh upon our writings, casting into doubt all claims of modern political thought to innocence. Let us say, after Auschwitz and the Gulag implication is our condition.

It is not that Marx or Rousseau or Hegel or Nietzsche were somehow responsible for the rise of totalitarianism. We could equally well say that liberalism has so often demonstrated its inability to resist totalitarianism that not only its failure but also its complicity can be counted among the facts of our century. But it is to re-read the political tradition through a lens darkened by the Gulag and Auschwitz.

To be sure, the concept of totalitarianism was vulgarised. The question of how and why these events could happen was lost in 'pious banalities' (to use another of Arendt's terms) which do no more than hope for an eventual restoration of the old world order or 'to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury into oblivion.' Worse still, of course, the concept of totalitarianism was appropriated as a weapon in the armoury of cold-war anti-communism. In this usage the concept lost its critical edge: no longer was it an anguished expression of *how* and *why* but it became an accomplice to complacency on behalf of the world in which we live. For Arendt and Lefort, the whole point of theorising totalitarianism has been to break from such theoretical certainties; not to 'explain away,' as Arendt

put it 'the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalisations,' not to allow ourselves to be 'wheedled with the voice of common sense.'

The concept of totalitarianism was also developed out of and in response to the perceived limitations of Marxism. Not just the official Marxism of the Communist states which justified barbarism in the name of socialism, but also the left communism of the Trotskyists, socialist humanists and existential Marxists who never could quite from apologetics for Russia and its empire (although it should be said that in his last writings in 1939 Trotsky described Stalin's regime as totalitarian and similar in form to Nazi Germany except for the greater brutality of the former). Marxism's failure to go beyond a 'reformed totalitarianism,' as Claude Lefort put it, led him to re-examine his own relation to Marxism and to Marx's own thought. Their main weakness was seen as that of downgrading *a priori* what he calls the 'political or symbolic function.' The concept of 'totalitarianism' expressed the urgency of developing a critical relation to the revolutionary tradition: turning decisively from apologetics for Stalinism and allowing the political and the imaginary its own voice.

The promise to ground political thought in experience, to let it be touched by events, is a great advance over those for whom social theory remains untouched by events as vast as the Holocaust or the Russian Terror. The concept of totalitarianism is the emblem of a collective intellectual effort (in the past often marginalised) to express the primacy of experience over theory and avoid averting our eyes from horror.

Second point

My second point is both more critical and more contentious. It is about megalomania. The concept of totalitarianism was originally the brainchild of Italian fascists like Giovanni Gentile who defined it as 'comprehensive, all embracing, pervasive – the total state.' The self-aggrandising myth of a new class of political aspirants in the inter-war years was that they could control everything and everyone and remake man, woman and nature in their own image. Totalitarianism was at first, at least, the ideological expression of this grandiloquent self-deception, doubtless rooted in the history of imperialism and in the illusion of the modern state, and not an analytic category defining a new social formation. It was a dangerous illusion since it led its bearers to try constantly to prove the truth of their self-deception: into ever escalating, acts of destruction and displays of power to demonstrate the validity of their supra-human claims.

But should we not resist turning a self-deception of the modern political imagination into a would-be social and scientific category? It reminds me of what I would describe as Foucault's error: that of turning the advertising slogans of Bentham's *panopticon* – that it would be all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, a perfect machine for grinding rogues honest – into the truth of the disciplinary power it embodied. It seems to me we should not repeat the same mistake of taking the megalomaniac at his word and turning his rodomontade into theory. We may laugh at him, as Charlie Chaplin did in *The Great Dictator* or Lubitch in *To Be or Not To Be*, or we may psychoanalyse him, as Adorno did in *Elements of Antisemitism*, but not take his pretensions too seriously.

My difficulty with the concept of totalitarianism and its admission to the lexicon of social theory – the difficulty that Lefort wrestles with – is that it signifies a succumbing of thought to appearances, an insufficiently critical acceptance that the way people present themselves is what they are. The Nazi may dream of total domination but it is less realisation of this dream than its abject failure that led the Nazi into an escalating orgy of destruction in the death and concentration camps. Total domination, we might say, you should be so lucky! And yet do we not slip into a confusion between megalomaniac dreams and what totalitarianism actually was?

Third point

It is a common enough phenomenon that criticism mirrors in some sense what it most opposes. Just as totalitarianism itself purports to eliminate the space between the 'enunciation and that which is enunciated,' to use Lefort's own words, so too I wonder whether anti-totalitarianism in its own way does the same. Those theorists who have seriously confronted the phenomenon of totalitarianism and drawn it into the interiority of their thinking (i.e. those who have not treated it as a blip in the great project of enlightenment or as anomaly in search of 'rectification') have in general moved away from social theory and into political or moral philosophy or even into aesthetics. I think that this tendency is apparent in the writings of Hannah Arendt, where the 'rise of the social' appears pervasively as the fundamental source of all totalising tendencies: the erosion of both private and public life, the degeneration of the revolutionary tradition in all its different forms, the collapse of classical politics, the homogenisation of the masses, etc. It is as if understanding totalitarianism demands not so much another or a different social theory but rather a break from social theory itself.

Why a break from social theory? Because social theory seems caught within the parameters of the social; it turns into a realism – that is, into something incontrovertible – that which seemed to Arendt to lie at the heart of the problem of modern existence. For Arendt what was needed instead was to speak about the unspeakable; to tell the story of 'total domination' in camps in which were conducted 'the ghastly experiment of eliminating under scientifically controlled conditions spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour'; to capture the stages in the process of extermination – the murder of the juridical person, the murder of the moral person and finally the murder of the uniqueness of the individual in addition to merely physical annihilation; to grasp the sheer madness of totalitarianism – the lack of economic or military or any other utility that was manifest in the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis or the devouring of the bureaucracy and military officer corps by itself under the Stalinists; to understand the anti- structural quality of totalitarian regimes – where party gives way to movement, bureaucracy to multiple, non-hierarchical lines of authority, the rational architectonic of the state to the will of the Leader, juridic principles of law and right to the Law of Nature or History, the nation to unlimited expansion, order to perpetual motion. To speak about all this is to speak about the absurd. To do it from the conventional point of view of social theory is a refusal to confront the phenomenon. It's like the living telling us what it is like to be dead or the camp survivor (as Levi recounts) telling what it is like to be one of the *immersi*.

For Arendt (and perhaps for Lefort too) what is required is not social theory, not a theory that hypostatises the social, but a philosophy in which the 'supreme capacity of man' is identified with the capacity to begin; or by the 'incalculable grace of (Christian) love which says with Augustine 'Volo ut sis' (I want you to be) without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation; or by moral recognition of 'the fact of difference as such, of individuality as such ... the disturbing miracle that each of us is made as he is – single, unique, unchangeable.' I think Claude Lefort would call this a form of knowledge which 'brings to light the question of the Other, the question of Being.'

Next to this question of Being, Arendt placed society on the side of that which suspects, resents and relegates our uniqueness, as if it is in the nature of society to portray difference as alien and insist on homogeneity in the hope of eliminating difference. She wrote of how society is bound to reify racial identities, so that all the deeds of a 'negro' are 'explained as the necessary consequences of some "Negro" qualities.' That society may individualise as well as homogenise, differentiate

as well as equalise, seemed ruled out from this world. Society appears fixed and unchangeable – the one thing that individuals cannot act upon. In this exile consciousness freedom could only be escape from society. But if this is true, my question is simple: what role is left for social theory?

My brief comment does not address the extraordinary complexity of Lefort's engagement with Arendt. Its purpose is twofold: to re-affirm with them the necessity of the concept of 'totalitarianism' if political thought is to open itself up to the events of this century – or if not 'totalitarianism' then some other category of the same order; but also to acknowledge the *element of illusion* that is present in any notion of total domination and the *retreat from the social* that thinking about totalitarianism may imply. The meaning of the concept is as much about its uses as its referent. If 'totalitarianism' lends itself on the one hand to a mode of *reification* which obliterates the gap between the concept and its existence in the world, and on the other to a mode of *abstraction* which takes flight from the whole terrain of social relations and social theory, this is not enough reason to abandon the concept. It demands only that we continue to refine its use.

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Notes

[1] This comment on Lefort's 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).