

HANNAH ARENDT'S ANALYSIS OF TOTALITARIANISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

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Abstract

*Hannah Arendt's critique of totalitarianism, especially in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, offers a thorough examination of the characteristics and effects of totalitarian governments in today's world. Arendt studies the emergence of totalitarian movements, concentrating on Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, in order to gain insight into the wider effects of totalitarian control on both society and individuals. According to Arendt, totalitarianism is not simply a type of government; it is a system that attempts to regulate every single element of human existence, including the way people think and act. She points out a number of important features of totalitarianism, including the concentration of authority in one individual or political party, the establishment of a comprehensive ideology that alters the perception of reality, and the employment of fear as a means of governing. Totalitarian regimes are different from previous kinds of tyranny in that they do not only want to govern; they want to change the fundamental structure of human existence by removing the divide between public and private life. Arendt also examines the psychological and sociological factors that allow totalitarianism to take hold. She emphasises the importance of mass movements, the collapse of established political organisations, and the decline of individual autonomy. She suggests that the emergence of totalitarianism in the contemporary period is connected to the breakdown of the nation-state, the dissolution of social standards, and the alienation of individuals in a society that is becoming more and more divided. Arendt's theory is still very relevant now because it highlights the risks of unbridled political power, the manipulation of the truth, and the disintegration of democratic institutions. Her work is a warning against the possibility of totalitarianism developing in nations that seem to be democratic, particularly when people do not see the indications of authoritarianism and give up their liberties.*

Keywords: *Hannah Arendt's, Totalitarianism, Modern*

Introduction

Hannah Arendt was one of the most important political thinkers of the 20th century. She made important contributions to the understanding of totalitarianism and the catastrophic impact it has on persons and society. In her groundbreaking book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt investigates the emergence and characteristics of totalitarian governments. She focusses on the Nazi and Soviet models in particular, in order to uncover the underlying factors that contribute to the establishment of these types of regimes. She wants to learn how totalitarian governments not only have power but also manage and control the most fundamental aspects of human existence, including thought, identity, and even reality itself. Arendt's investigation is based on her worry about the collapse of old political systems and the disconnection of

people in contemporary society. She highlights the psychological, sociological, and historical factors that led to the emergence of totalitarian movements, as well as the manner in which these regimes were able to take advantage of these factors in order to gain and keep complete control. Her thesis examines the ways in which totalitarianism is fundamentally different from other types of dictatorship and tyranny. She identifies it as a new and unique kind of power that entails the systematic destruction of the political and moral fabric of society. Arendt's investigation examines the effects of the decline of democratic institutions, the distortion of the truth, and the indifference of the public to the emergence of authoritarian governments. Her work is still an important analysis of the risks of uncontrolled power and the vulnerability of democratic regimes in the context of the modern world. It provides useful insights into the possibility of totalitarianism developing even in the most stable political situations.

Arendt's examination of totalitarianism is based on her wider philosophical worries regarding the nature of political authority, freedom, and the human condition. She argues that totalitarianism is not only a type of tyrannical government; rather, it is a phenomena that attempts to control all element of life, including the private, social, and intellectual spheres. In totalitarian regimes, political ideologies are not only tools for governing; they are turned into all-encompassing belief systems that affect every aspect of society and require individuals to be completely loyal and subscribe to the ideology. Arendt's theory is based on the premise that totalitarianism emerges when traditional political institutions and norms collapse, and mass movements take the place of democratic procedures. In these situations, people get disconnected from one another and feel alone, and their ability to think for themselves is weakened. Totalitarian leaders take advantage of this disillusionment and alienation to develop movements that appeal to people's yearning for a sense of belonging and their need for certainty in an unpredictable environment. According to Arendt, totalitarian regimes flourish by destroying individuality and manipulating reality. In these regimes, the state dictates what is true and defines the fundamental essence of reality, leaving individuals with little ability to discriminate between fact and fiction. Arendt also contends that the most important characteristic of totalitarianism is its use of fear, not just as a way to suppress political opposition, but also as a way to keep complete control over individuals. Terrorism is used to instill dread and uncertainty among individuals, which destroys any sense of trust or unity that they may have with one another. It allows the dictatorship to stifle any kind of opposition and to mould society in accordance with its ideological principles. Totalitarian regimes are different from traditional dictatorships in that they do not concentrate power in the hands of a single man or group. Instead, they build an all-encompassing system in which the state dominates every element of life, including the private domain, through its institutions. In addition, Arendt's work examines the importance of ideology in totalitarian regimes in a critical way. Totalitarian ideologies assert that they offer a complete explanation of the universe, frequently using basic and deterministic language. These ideologies rationalise the use of harsh means, including political persecution and bloodshed, as essential actions to establish an ideal society. Totalitarian ideologies undermine the ability of the general public to think critically and make autonomous decisions by portraying their view of the world as perfect and all-encompassing. Arendt considers the loss of public space and the destruction of political plurality when examining how totalitarianism affects human freedom. In these types of governments, the idea of political activity and discussion, which was formerly a crucial part of democracy, is replaced with a style of administration that aims to get rid of differences and disagreements. Arendt's ideas highlight the risks that come with political institutions that centralise authority and limit public discourse. She advocates for vigilance and active engagement in the preservation of democratic values. Arendt's book remains an important reference for the study of authoritarianism and

totalitarianism, offering useful insights for society today. Her study emphasises the need for a thorough understanding of the factors that weaken democratic institutions and the need of protecting individual liberties from the threat of unrestrained authority. Her cautions about the fragility of political institutions and the risks presented by totalitarian ideologies are still relevant and urgent as modern nations confront rising challenges to democracy.

Totalitarianism, the Inversion of Politics

Although Hitler had died and World War II had finished when Hannah Arendt released *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, Stalin was still alive and in power. By depicting totalitarianism as a horrifying new kind of governance, Arendt hoped to offer her readers an idea of the phenomenal reality of the phenomenon. Parts one and two of the book delve into the history of anti-Semitism and European imperialism, which came together to form totalitarian movements. Part three delves into the inner workings of these movements, analysing the rise to power of Stalinist Bolshevism and Nazism and their "double claim" to "total domination and global rule." Indeed, Arendt primarily focusses on Nazism rather than Russia. This is due to two reasons: first, the abundance of knowledge on the former, and second, her familiarity with Germany and the rise of totalitarianism there. She would go on to address the disparity in her earlier discussion (see "Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism" for more information) and the fact that their beginnings varied greatly across the two nations.

Understanding totalitarianism and describing its ascent and incarnation in Stalinism and Nazism are intricately interwoven throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which adds considerable intricacy to the book. In her outline for six lectures on totalitarianism that she gave at the New School for Social Research in March and April of 1953, Arendt gives a glimpse of the breadth of her conceptual goals (see "The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism"). To begin, the first lecture acknowledged the challenge of understanding totalitarianism by discussing its "explosion" of our conventional "categories of thought and standards of judgement." In the second lecture, she began by discussing the many forms of government as proposed by Plato, but then she skipped ahead several centuries to discuss how Montesquieu discovered the guiding principles of each type of government and how they relate to human experience. Thirdly, she distinguished three key points in the third lecture: first, between lawful governments and arbitrary ones; secondly, between human-established laws and the new totalitarian laws that control the development of nature and the passage of history; and thirdly, between totalitarian laws of motion, which stabilise human beings so that the predetermined paths of history and nature can freely flow through them, and "traditional sources of authority" that stabilise "legal institutions," thus accommodating human behaviour. The totalitarian "transformation" of an ideological belief system into a deductive principle of action was the topic of the fourth lecture. Presented in the fifth lecture, the universal human experience of totalitarianism is contrasted with the impotence of tyranny and distinguished from the isolation and solitude that are fundamental to creative processes but are considered "marginal phenomena in political life." "The political reality of freedom" was differentiated from its "philosophical idea" and the "inherent materialism" of Western political thinking by Arendt in her last speech.

The precise instances by which Arendt brought the ingredients of totalitarianism to light are the most illustrative of the combination of knowledge and imagination that gives *The Origins of Totalitarianism* its artistic richness and complexity. For instance, in chapter 7 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she paints a terrible picture of Disraeli and writes tragically about the "great" and "bitter" life of T. E. Lawrence, among

other literary luminaries culled from works by authors like Kipling and Conrad. Arendt regarded Heart of Darkness by Conrad as "the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa," with the emphasis being on the term "experience." This book stands out as an example of the second kind. In "the merry dance of death and trade," Conrad's imperialistic explorers hunted for ivory and had no qualms about butchering the natives of "the phantom world of the dark continent" for the precious material. The interaction of Africans with "superfluous" Europeans "spat out" of their civilisations is the theme of Conrad's novel, in which an unidentified narrator recounts the account narrated by the constantly ambiguous Marlow. By creating both the main story and its subplots, Conrad did not want "to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters."¹ The "conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing," Marlow knows, even though he is two steps removed from the reader. That quality resides in the "remarkable" and "eloquent" individual. Mr. Kurtz, Marlow is on a quest for the "idea" that, by itself, may provide salvation: "An idea at the back of [the conquest], not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea."

As Marlow's steamboat continues its journey "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" in pursuit of Kurtz's distant trade post, the African continent grows more and more "impenetrable to human thought." Marlow notices the Africans on the beach in a passage that Arendt cites:

No one knows if the ancient guy was blessing us, punishing us, or praying to us. As reasonable men would be just before a hysterical outburst in a lunatic asylum, we... slid by like ghosts, curious and secretly horrified. We travelled through the dark of the earlier centuries, when there was little left behind but a trail of dust and a lack of memory, so we had no way of knowing what was going on or how to get past our disorientation. Both the planet and the humans appeared otherworldly. They certainly weren't inhumane. That suspicion that they are not inhuman was, you know, the hardest part. To someone, it would happen gradually. All you could think of as you watched them yell, jump, spin, and make hideous expressions was that they were human, just like you. The idea of your distant connection to this ferocious and passionate commotion excited you.

One word, "Ugly," makes up Marlow's next statement, and it is this word that brings him face-to-face with Kurtz, the object of his obsession. In it, he finds a report that Kurtz—the proto-imperialist European—wrote for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs." ("All Europe contributed to [his] making"). In the guise of advancement and "good practically unbounded," it provides Marlow with a feeling of "of an exotic Immensity ruled by an August Benevolence." But on the very last page of the report, under the heading "luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky," Kurtz has written, "Exterminate all the brutes!" So, racism is shown to be Kurtz's "idea" and the evil in his heart is compared to the "uncivilised" but not inhumane, black Africa. The grisly specifics are as follows: African heads severed and fastened to poles, facing inward towards Kurtz's home. The "lack of restraint" that Kurtz exhibited is explained by Marlow as follows: "the wilderness.. had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know," and this whisper "echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core." Whether Marlow is less hollow when he tries to lie about Kurtz's dying words, "The horror! The horror!" in "fright" at the end of the piece is debatable. Now that we've covered every aspect of race, even Marlow's enigmatic narrator faces "the heart of an immense darkness" where the picture of Kurtz's bigotry hovers in the minds of Conrad's readers and the world at large.

Arendt argues that totalitarianism—including racism—was not the root cause of the Hitler and Stalin regimes, but rather that anti-Semitism, expansionism in and of itself, the collapse of the nation-state, and the alliance of capital with mobs crystallised in the movements that gave rise to those regimes. As she reflected on her book in 1958, Arendt stated that her aims "presented themselves" to her "in the form of an ever recurring image: I felt as though I dealt with a crystallised structure which I had to break up into its constituent elements in order to destroy it." Her realisation that writing history was a "impossible task to destroy" rather than a "impossible task to save and conserve and render fit for remembrance" made this a problematic situation. So, even though she did historical research, it "dawned" on her that Totalitarianism's rise was more of a political book than a historical one. In this book, the author viewed past events through a modern lens, and the events surrounding totalitarianism's rise illuminated them. "They only became origins—antecedents—after the event had taken place. The origins are not causes." Examining, or "breaking up," a crystal into its "constituent elements" breaks the crystal, but it doesn't break the elements themselves. Arendt included this and other key issues like this in the 1953 chapter she wrote for *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and included in all later editions (see "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government").

Retracing the history and analysing the political implications of what is commonly referred to as the crisis of our century leads inevitably to the conclusion that this crisis is not an external threat, is not the product of aggressive foreign policies of either Russia or Germany, and will not go away just because Stalin died any more than Nazi Germany did. If this is indeed the case, then totalitarianism is an inevitable component of this crisis. Maybe the real problems we're facing now won't become apparent until tyranny is no more, and even then they won't be the worst.

Regarding the "disturbing relevance of totalitarian regimes... is that the true problems of our time cannot be understood, let alone solved, without the acknowledgement that totalitarianism became this century's curse only because it so terrifyingly took care of its problems" (see "Concluding Remarks" in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), Arendt argues that fact. For example, in rejecting the totalitarian racial theory, we expose rather than solve the dilemma that develops when racial identity is considered the source of human variety. The great and unsolved political conundrum of human plurality—how historically and culturally diverse groups of human beings can coexist and share our planet—remains on an overcrowded planet after totalitarianism's elimination of naturally determined "inferior" races or historically determined "dying" classes.

The Origins of Totalitarianism offers a shocking interpretation of intellectual currents and political events in contemporary Europe, defying categorisation under a single academic subject like history, sociology, politics, or philosophy. For some of Arendt's readers, the most disturbing images of the disfigured corpses of the already-dead were less impactful than the book's final depiction of the living dead, of those "inanimate" beings who felt the full force of totalitarian terror in concentration camps. Such readers came to see that death isn't the worst possible fate, as Arendt portrayed in her work as the desire for death felt by individuals who were once believed to be damned to hell. She intended for this vision of hell to be understood literally, not metaphorically; after all, Christians had shown time and time again that they couldn't build the city of God to house humans, but now they'd proven they could build hell on Earth instead of in the afterlife.

Totalitarianism was added by Arendt to the list of ancient and unchangeable forms of government that already included monarchy (the rule by one) and its corrupt variant, tyranny; aristocracy (the rule by the best) and its corrupt variant, oligarchy or clique rule; and democracy (the rule by the many) and its corrupt variant, ochlocracy or mob rule. In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argues that the rise of what she terms "radical and absolute evil" is the defining feature of totalitarianism, a political system backed by "superfluous" masses looking for a new reality where they might be publicly acknowledged. Totalitarian regimes are not "opposite" to anything; in fact, the only way to view totalitarianism as a contemporary dilemma is to imagine a world without them.

Moving from National Socialism's legal framework to its socio-theoretical framework - Franz L. Neumann and Ernst Fraenkel

It is well-known that scientific research and careful observation were conducted on National Socialism from its inception, similar to the treatment of Italian fascism a decade earlier. Defeating Mussolini, Hitler, and eventually fascism across Europe was an integral part of the first hour's produced writing. Given that the new dictatorships' initial targets were the political left, it stands to reason that any analysis of these governments, whether grouped under fascism or National Socialism, would be heavily influenced by political considerations. Although it did not originate only from the left-wing elite, a scathing "anti-discourse" emerged.

There is another kind of political exile that differs from this first one; this one's political resistance was just as severe, but it resulted in a deeper theoretical focus and the need to provide a thorough theory. Here we enter what I would term the heroic period of fascism and National Socialism's interpretation, when the Hitler-regime stood out as the inhuman enemy who, thanks to his own achievements and the western powers' policy of appeasement, became a superhuman foe. During this second stage, the presentation takes on a more monographic tone and there is an almost monomaniacal focus on the National Socialist governing structure. The works of Fraenkel and Neumann are not only relevant to this setting, but they also demonstrate the emigrant authors' potential for peak performance in the face of adversity. The remarkable history of its birth may help us grasp the defining characteristics of the work, which was released in the US in 1941 under the title "The Dual State": Former union jurist Ernst Fraenkel had to sneak the book out of Germany before he could escape from Nazi thugs in 1938; he had gathered the material while still practicing law, albeit that job was already seriously hindered.

This is more or less articulated in the theoretical construction of the "Dual State": Fraenkel focusses on the evolution of legal theory and practice since 1933 and proposes the idea that Nazi-Germany's development was marked by the presence of two competing legal systems: the "measure state" which gradually dismantles old legal structures and guarantees, and the "norm state" which retreats and is confined to maintaining capitalist production and directing it towards weapons production. By seizing jurisdiction and removing constitutional and legal constraints on police and other institutional power, the National Socialist movement has solidified its position and assumed the reins of political power. By using physical force, it has eliminated its enemies, destroyed social group autonomy, and imposed social equality. It has also turned racist propaganda into reality by distorting administrative and legal protections, namely by stripping minorities, particularly Jews, of their social and legal standing (see, for example, Fraenkel 1999).

Unfortunately, the most disheartening part of this analysis was the proof that university-educated and dedicated jurists must have found the most painful. Fraenkel provided only circumstantial evidence to support his claim, but the main point was that many authorities and elites in the field of law, who had been raised in positivism and had believed in the rule of law during the Weimar Republic, either served an unjust state or had a history of anti-democratic writing and had used the law to und This is best shown by the case of constitutional judge Carl Schmitt, whom Fraenkel portrays as both a key figure in the rise to power of the National Socialists and the most perceptive guide to their political philosophy. According to Fraenkel's summary of his argument, the national state's anti-Semitic racial policy is merely the application of Schmitt's political enemy theory. From this vantage point, the National Socialist ideologists' programmatic anti-liberalism was only the last, horrific disappointment; all these perversions, however, could only have come about as a result of the long and effective decline of the tradition of reasonable natural law, of legal protections, and of the related notions of man's inalienable rights.

It is possible to use Fraenkel's emphasis on the transition from a just to an unfair society and his normative return to natural law as a jumping off point to show how and where the 1942 publication of "Behemoth" analysis goes beyond this. Neumann had been Fraenkel's legal associate under the Weimar Republic, but he had to leave Germany in 1933 and had taken a second political science course in England (with Harold Laski and Karl Mannheim) (see Dubiel/Söllner 1984). His integration into the Institute of Social Research in the late 1930s—which had also had to emigrate—allowed him to fortify a modified Marxism within the context of the research conducted there.

Even though these were the deciding factors in scientific history, the publication of "Behemoth" was a watershed moment from a political perspective as well. It analysed the inner workings of National Socialism during a pivotal period when the US decided to join the war against the Axis powers, when their victory hinged on fully exposing the aggressive dynamism and destructive potential of their enemy. Beginning with a critical and in-depth analysis of the Weimar Republic, Neumann's attempt was so compelling that the "Behemoth" is still regarded as the first all-encompassing analysis of National Socialism. Many historians of the modern era have used it as a reference point for their own work. There are three main stages of an argument that must be distinguished:

Upon a thesis that already forms the basis of Neumann's all-encompassing interpretation rests the analysis of National Socialism's political system: while the "totalitarian state" rhetoric and the ideological struggle against liberalism and democracy were prominent during the rise of National Socialism, this did not mean that the movement's demand for the subordination of state authority had been implemented without obstacles. Instead, a difficult-to-define symbiosis emerged between the state and the party, necessitating hard-won concessions; these were the only means by which the two could attain equality in all spheres of society and politics (cf. esp. Fraenkel 1999b).

Sticking to Weber's idea of charismatic leadership and adding an exhaustive stock-taking of the intellectual formulation and practical application of National Socialist ideology makes it easier for Neumann to define this new construct of everyday power and bureaucratic rationality. This leads Neumann to trace the development of anti-Semitic ideas about race and humanity in nineteenth-century Germany and their "modernisation"; more specifically, he is keen on the ways these ideas were used to justify economic and legal discrimination against Jews. In contrast to the enemy's inwardly focused proclamation, the "German lebensraum" and the supremacy of the Germanic race were outwardly focused

notions that contributed to the destruction of international law and the horrific actualisation of these ideas during WWII.

Conclusion

Final thoughts: totalitarianism as seen through Hannah Arendt's eyes provides a fresh and important look at the causes and effects of this kind of government. She shows via her writings that totalitarianism is more than just a dictatorship; it involves a complete metamorphosis of government, culture, and reality. Totalitarian regimes, as Arendt points out, eliminate the boundary between public and private life and censor any type of autonomous thinking or action by manipulating ideology, using fear, and taking advantage of popular movements to attain ultimate control. By highlighting the risks of mass alienation, the collapse of conventional political institutions, and the degradation of democratic standards, Arendt's research also discloses the psychological, social, and political circumstances that enable totalitarianism. By highlighting how totalitarian regimes alter people's lives from the inside out, she shows how this kind of government is one of the most harmful in contemporary politics since its goal is to change people's fundamental identity rather than just their actions. At their core, Arendt's writings are a warning about the precarious nature of democratic institutions and the significance of protecting personal liberties. Both political theorists and ordinary individuals might learn from her scathing predictions about the emergence of authoritarian ideologies and the distorting of reality in today's society. Her analysis highlights the need of staying vigilant and actively participating in order to protect democracy. She urges people to fight against the loss of their liberties and to stand up to authoritarianism before it takes over completely.

Reference

1. As Chinua Achebe says he ought to have done (C. Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd ed. [New York, 1998], 256).
2. The concept of history derives from the Greek verb *historein*, to inquire, but Arendt found "the origin of this verb" in the Homeric *histor*, the first "historian," who was a judge (see *Thinking*, "Postscriptum"; cf. *Illiad* XVIII, 501).
3. Such a view, as Arendt points out, accurately describes many historical accounts of anti-Semitism, none more so than D. J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).
4. *The Burden of Our Time* is the title of the first British edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, 1951). Arendt frequently cited Tocqueville's remark in the last chapter of *Democracy In America*: "As the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity" (see "[Philosophy and Politics: The Problem of Action after the French Revolution](#)" and *Between Past and Future*, "Preface").
5. Typical of this genre is the form of the political pamphlet, books are rather the exception: for the social-democratic left cf. e.g. Heller (1929). At the other end of the democratic spectrum we often find sympathy with the new regimes (cf. e.g. Leibholz 1933).
6. Other examples from the same period, which can however not be analyzed here, are: Loewenstein (1939) and Ebenstein (1943). Almost every emigré political scientist has at one stage written at least one essay against Hitler!
7. The emergence of the dual state is now documented in detail (by Brünneck 1999:7-32).

8. While this thesis of political science is itself retained, its class-theoretical foundation is weakened on the way from the German „primary dual state“ (Fraenkel 1999a) to the American „Dual State“ (Fraenkel 1941).
9. Arendt, H. (1951). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt, Brace & World. This is Arendt's seminal work in which she examines the rise of totalitarian movements in the 20th century, focusing on Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.
10. Arendt, H. (1961). *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press. In this work, Arendt expands on her political philosophy, which is relevant to understanding her thoughts on the nature of power, freedom, and the rise of totalitarianism.
11. Arendt, H. (1973). *The Life of the Mind: Volume 1: Thinking*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. In this book, Arendt explores the nature of human thought, which connects to her broader ideas about totalitarianism and the importance of independent thought in resisting authoritarianism.
12. Young-Bruehl, E. (2004). *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. Yale University Press. This biography of Arendt offers insight into her life and intellectual development, including her analysis of totalitarianism.
13. Canovan, M. (1992). *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Cambridge University Press. This work provides a detailed examination of Arendt's political thought, including her theories on totalitarianism.