

Hannah Arendt The Origins of Totalitarianism

Read the brief introduction. It will provide important background.

Arendt was one of the first philosophers that I studied. In the 1960's she was relatively current. Also, several of my professors were greatly influenced by her work. She is difficult to read, but if you work at it you will gain some insights into totalitarianism

Did you notice that she is discussing both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. She argues that they are the best examples of totalitarian government. Do you agree?

She begins by saying "The totalitarian movements aim at and succeed in organizing masses- not classes....*totalitarian movements depend on the sheer force of numbers to such an extent that totalitarian regimes seem impossible, even under otherwise favorable circumstances, in countries with relatively small populations.*

These are two key points

Totalitarian Movements are mass movements

Totalitarian regimes can only be established in large countries

Point to ponder. What do you think is the difference between a totalitarian government and an authoritarian government?

Notice what she says about Mussolini on p574 first edition

yet even Mussolini, who was so fond of the term "totalitarian state", did not attempt to establish a full-fledged totalitarian regime and contented himself with dictatorship and one-party rule

On page 576 she clarifies her distinction between totalitarian movements and totalitarian rule(government) Fascism in Italy was a totalitarian movement but it did not succeed in creating a totalitarian government

Why Not?

Simply put, Italy and similar countries were not large enough?

The truth is that these countries simply did not control enough human material to allow for total domination and its inherent great losses in population

Only when when great masses are superfluous or can be spared without disastrous results of depopulation is totalitarian rule, as distinguished from totalitarian movement, at all possible.

She is saying that for totalitarian government requires large masses of people to be manipulated, mobilized, and/or sacrificed. As Albert Camus would say, to be victims or executioners. Perhaps both.

So she is saying that while totalitarian movements can happen in smaller countries, truly totalitarian governments, require large countries. This is one of her key points. Do you agree? North Korea?

Who are the masses? p 576

Potentially they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls

It was characteristic of the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany and the Communist movement in Europe after 1930 that they recruited their members from this mass of apparently indifferent people whom all other parties had given up on as too apathetic or too stupid for their attention

They found a membership that had never been "spoiled" by the party system. Therefore they did they not need to refute opposing arguments, and consistently preferred methods which ended in death rather than persuasion, which spelled terror rather than conviction. They presented disagreements as invariably originating in deep natural, social, or psychological sources beyond the control of the individual and therefore beyond the power of reason. p 587

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced nazi or the convinced communist, but the person for whom the distinction between fact and fiction(i.e. the reality of experience) and true and false(i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist. p 587

Do you see any contemporary parallels to this?

She seems to agree with following sentiment p. 577

It has frequently been pointed out that totalitarian movements use and abuse democratic freedoms in order to destroy them.

Can you think of examples of this?

Terror p 582-583

Total terror, the essence of totalitarian government, exists neither for nor against men. It is supposed to provide nature or history with an incomparable instrument to accelerate their movement

Practically speaking, this means that terror executes on the spot, the death sentences which Nature is supposed to have pronounced on races or individuals who are “not fit to live”, or History on “dying classes” without waiting for the slower and less efficient processes of nature or history themselves....

The inhabitants of a totalitarian country are thrown into and caught in the process of nature or history for the sake of accelerating its movement; as such, can only be executioners or victims of its inherent law. The process may decide that those who today eliminate races or individuals, or the members of dying classes and decadent peoples are tomorrow those who must be sacrificed.

What Arendt is saying is that genocide and terror are rationalized as simply carrying out the natural or historical process.

Ideology pp 584-586

This ties in with another of Arendt's major points. A totalitarian movement requires a totalitarian ideology. Immersion in the ideology will prepare the masses for their roles as executioners or victims

Arendt sees the totalitarian ideology having three characteristics

First is their claim to total explanation,.....The claim to total explanation promises to explain all historical happenings, the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present and the reliable prediction of the future

Secondly, ...ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it

This reminds me of fans of conspiracy theory, who are convinced that they see the hidden truth, and the rest of us “sheeple” are just not paying attention.

Thirdly,Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it: that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality

Again, it reminds me of conspiracy theory. If you accept the premise that events are orchestrated by unseen conspirators, , and that there are no coincidences, then everything follows logically. You, don't have to agree with me on this.

Arendt's says that the totalitarian is following a logic of inevitability. It is inevitable that the superior race vanquish the inferior race. It is inevitable that the proletariat overthrow the bourgeoisie. ((personal note: Marx is one of my favorite philosophers, but terrible things have been justified in the name of historical inevitability)

Thoughts. Arendt's book was influential but also controversial. Many on the left disagreed with her conclusion that nazism and communism were morally equivalent. She would probably agree that the ideals of communism are noble. However, she would argue that in practice Stalin was as evil as Hitler.

The Banality of Evil was the topic of another book written by Arendt

In the 1960's nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann was captured and taken to Jerusalem for trial. Arendt was sent by *Commentary* magazine to cover the trial. She wrote a long article that later became a short book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil*

Arendt had expected Eichmann to be a monster. After all, he had played a major role the murder of three million jews. What struck her though, was just how ordinary he was. He was simply an ordinary man "doing his job-as evil as it was. Her characterization of Eichmann outraged many in the jewish community. She was condemned as a "self hating' jew. But they may have missed her point. What made Eichmann and other nazis so evil was their banality. Their sense that they were just doing their jobs just following orders.

In Arendt's words

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him , and that they were neither perverted or sadistic, that they were, and still are. terribly and terrifyingly normal