



Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism

Hannah Arendt

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Alternate Cover Edition for 9780156906500.

In the final volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt focuses on the two genuine forms of the totalitarian state in history: the dictatorships of Bolshevism after 1930 and of National Socialism after 1938.

Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism Details

Date : Published 1985 by Harvest Books (first published March 20th 1968)

ISBN :

Author : Hannah Arendt

Format : Paperback 196 pages

Genre : Politics, History, Philosophy, Nonfiction, Political Science, Theory, Academic, School

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Arda says

Arendt's ideas have been really eye-opening for thesis.

Jelmer says

Arendts' haar inzichten in het totalitaristische apparaat zijn diep en geven een huiveringwekkend beeld over de mechanismes die hieraan ten grondslag liggen. Zeer relevant boek

Rohan Ramakrishna says

Incredibly comprehensive treatise on the origins of totalitarianism as seen in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Some notes.

Classless Society

Arendt is careful to draw a distinction between totalitarian governments and merely authoritarian ones such as the ones seen in Francoist Spain, Chile under Pinochet and the many military juntas in post-colonial Asia and Africa. Totalitarian ideologies, she states, occur when a breakdown of social classes causes the 'classes' to be transformed to atomized 'masses'. These masses are characterized by radical loss of self-interest. Himmler described his men as being interested in high ideas and not mundane questions. An interesting claim she makes is that totalitarianism depends on sheer numbers and that it is impossible in smaller countries. Italy was never totalitarian but an authoritarian dictatorship. Therefore, India and China, are easy pray for totalitarian governments as they are home to billions and where "the mass man's feeling of superfluosness has been prevalent for centuries". The horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the rapid rise of the crypto-fascist Hindutva right in India have proven her correct, I'm afraid.

Alliance between Mobs and Elites.

Elites saw war/fascism as escape from their decadent bourgeois lives. The early adopters of this ideology were the front generation, those that had been in the trenches. Contrary to popular opinion, experience of the horrors of war had not dulled their appetite. They hated more the fake security and dullness of the pre-war days. They clung to the memory of the war years as a baptism by fire and considered it as an experience to differentiate them from the *ancien regime* and as qualifications to be the new elite. Created a hodge podge ideology of social darwinism to give it a veneer of intellectualism/science. "They read not Darwin, but the Marquis de Sade". Elevated cruelty to a major virtue because it contradicted society's humanitarian and liberal hypocrisy.

In addition, there was another group of avant-garde artists who were attracted to fascist ideologies purely because of the novelty factor and indulged in it out of a sense of playful irony.

These intellectuals are soon shaken off as the movement gains power. The consistent persecution of every higher form of intellectual activity by the new mass leaders spring more from their natural resentment against everything they cannot understand.

Totalitarian Propaganda

Propaganda is the most important tool of totalitarianism for dealing with the totalitarian movement. There is strong emphasis on pseudo scientific research to back their claims. They are basically laying claim to the tools of power in the modern world. The true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization, something the current free speech absolutists would do well to understand. The 'Big Lie' and other smaller lies are maintained by a hierarchy of gullibility and cynicism which each level in the cadre believing that the lies are meant for a lower one and that only they understand it to be a tactical move. Arendt states "it has been one of the chief handicaps of the outside world in dealing with totalitarian systems that it...trusted that...the very enormity of totalitarian lies would be their undoing" i.e. sunlight is not any kind of disinfectant.

The last part deals with the organization of the totalitarian government once in power, its secret police and its deployment of terror. Not quite interesting.

The writing is incredibly precise, albeit suffering from long nested subordinate clauses. They are, apparently, an artifact of her native German. It has copious footnotes and is meticulously researched. The Origins of Totalitarianism is especially relevant today, a day after the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in the history of the United States.

PS: My dog-eared copy of the book, which was the first thing I ever bought from Alley Cat Books on 24th Street

Joel says

Arendt diagnoses the underlying causes and maladies of totalitarian governments and the people who embraced them. The atomization and isolation of masses gives fertile soil to the rise of such systems of control. The book contains a bit too much of her mid Twentieth century philosophizing, which sounds antiquated and Modernist now, but it is a helpful guide to the depravity of Hitler and Stalin.

Σωτήρης Αδαμαρτσός says

... και με αυτό το τμήμα, η Arendt ολοκληρώνει το μνημειώδες αυτό έργο περί ολοκληρωτισμού. Η δημιουργία των μαζών, η ολοκληρωτική διακυβέρνηση, η απομύκρυνση από την πραγματικότητα χρίν ενός φανταστικού, η παγκόσμια κυριαρχία, ο αντικειμενικός εχθρός - που αντικαθιστά τον ένοχο και τον έποπτο - η αυτοκαταπέση και ο αυτό-καταναγκασμός της λογικής ακολουθίας που γεννεί η ιδεολογία, αποκλείοντας την εμπειρία και την ίδια την σκέψη και φυσικά η τρομοκρατία (της μυστικής αστυνομίας, της νύκτας ηγετίδας τζιτζής) ως η απύλυτη και κυρίαρχη αρχή βίωσης του ολοκληρωτικού συστήματος, που καθοδηγεί τον άνθρωπο στους δόμους ρόλους που του αναγνωρίζει πολιτικός ο ολοκληρωτισμός: του Δέμιου και του Θύματος. Και τον προετοιμάζει να παζέει καλά και τους δόμους ρόλους, αφού ο τωρινός Δέμιος θα υποχρεωθεί, χρίν της ίδιας της ολοκληρωτικής σκέψης και ιδεολογίας, να γίνε το μελλοντικό Θύμα, για να αυτοδικαιωθεί...

Στο τέλος ο άνθρωπος οδηγείται στην μοναξιά και στην ερημιά! Ήχι με την φιλοσοφική έννοια

αλλ? ως αφαρ?ρεση του χ?ρου της ελευθερ?ας και απομ?νωσης μεταξ? των πολιτ?ν.
?τσι ακυρ?νεται και η γ?ννηση ν?ων ανθρ?πων ως αρχ?νισμα της σκ?ψης.
Αυτ? εξ?λλου ?δη ?χει εξαφανιστε? μαζ? με το αυθ?ρμητο....

Leonard Pierce says

The final installment of Hannah Arendt's towering trilogy brings all the threads together. This is a must-read book for understanding the truths and tragedies of 20th-century political history.

David says

I rated this book three stars only because it was not particularly gripping. This takes nothing away from the usefulness of the work, which is significant. One of the drawbacks is that, although Arendt uses two case studies, the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, she occasionally extrapolates to all possible Totalitarian movements. These statements, although not so numerous to be a serious detractor, might be a bit too strong.

Her book raises an interesting question, first posed to me by one of my professors some years ago: does one of the necessary precursors to a Totalitarian regime as described by Arendt, atomization of individuals across a society, have implications for our Internet-dominated world today? Although an interesting question, it is one that ideally remains purely academic.

Ivan says

Surprisingly clear-minded, open and witty for an academic dealing with the gravest subject there is.

Heidi says

Required reading for a class I won't even recommend.
Extremely biased view. Not worth wasting my time with.

Luke Echo says

An interesting analysis of totalitarianism with a particular resonance in the political space today.

The final chapter on Terror and Ideology (which I believe was added in the second edition) was the books main weak point. There was a stark contrast, discord even, against the earlier chapters, in tone, framing, argument.

The turn to ideology was deeply unsatisfying and quite shallow I thought. The kind of "thinking" that Arendt wishes to elevate seemed un-determined and vague. Arendt seems to insist that there is some kind of neutral viewpoint outside ideology which is a position that has become untenable today.
