

About the Belief that Everything is Possible: Hannah Arendt's Analysis of Totalitarianism

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The publication, in 1951, of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,¹ earned for Hannah Arendt an everlasting place in the gallery of great philosophers. A book, however, can be famous without being reader-friendly — because of its size (three volumes!) and complexity, and because it raises questions in the reader's head which it leaves unanswered. My own questions have to do with its method and genre — is it a historical account? a piece of social science? a form of political journalism? — the coherence between its parts — antisemitism, imperialism, totalitarianism — and its subject matter — is it about Nazism, about Nazism *and* Stalinism, or does it deal with an even wider phenomenon, that both Nazism and Stalinism are merely concrete appearances of?² Small wonder that this book has aroused such mixed feelings. The French historian François Furet formulates it in plain terms. He calls *The Origins of Totalitarianism* “an important book, yet dashed down, knocked together, comprising too many years, badly construed ... Though chaotic, peremptory, and full of contradictions, the book makes up for its length and its digressions with its all-pervading dark violence and the sheer brilliance of its third part.”³ This judgment clearly hits the mark, if only because many

¹ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New Edition with Added Prefaces) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966). (Henceforth, OT).

² For a clear overview of the difficulties, see Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 17-23.

³ F. Furet, *Le passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1996), pp. 500-501: '[Ainsi va ce] livre important, et pourtant écrit à la diable, fait de pièces et de morceaux, étirés sur trop d'années, mal composé ... Confus, péremptoire, contradictoire, le livre fait pardonner pourtant sa longueur et ses détours par la sombre violence qui l'habite tout entier et par l'éclat de sa troisième partie.' (My translation).

readers will sympathise with this way of cutting through the knot of mixed feelings. Furet's appraisal, however, is susceptible to interrogation, insofar as it overlooks Arendt's defence against similar, earlier formulated objections, and does not take Arendt's later work into account, as if *The Origins of Totalitarianism* represented her last word on the subject of totalitarianism. This is not to say the aforementioned problems will ever go away, but, "dashed down" and "knocked together"! Perhaps Furet has judged prematurely.

A History In Reverse

In "A Reply to Eric Voegelin,"⁴ one of the few places where she addresses the criticisms which have been made of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt takes into account the reproach that her book is "lacking in unity" (or, as Furet would have it, leaves a "chaotic" impression). She attributes this lack to her "particular method" and her "rather unusual approach to the whole field of political and historical sciences as such" (R, 77). Yet, her approach is not an arbitrary one. It is Arendt's way out of the dilemma that confronted her from the outset: how to write the history of something that one does not want to conserve, but to destroy? Is not all historiography necessarily a matter of preservation, and often justification? (R, 77) How to write, then, the history of total domination, "the only form of government with which coexistence is not possible" (OT, xxviii), because it has confronted humanity with the absolute, inconceivable evil, i.e. with crimes "men can neither punish nor forgive"? (OT, 459) How to write the history of acts that "have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment"?⁵ What counts in these formulations is, of course, Arendt's firm conviction that totalitarianism differs from conventional forms of tyranny or despotism, and that totalitarian crimes — "the mass production of corpses" (OT 441) — cannot adequately be indicated by the term, "murder" (see R, 80). What is really *unprecedented*, cannot be mapped out with the current methods of historical and political science. The

⁴ *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 15 (1953), no. 1, pp. 68-85. (Henceforth, R).

⁵ "Understanding and Politics," in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 309-310. (Henceforth, UP).

same dilemma has modelled the unusual style — “praised as passionate and criticized as sentimental” (R, 78) — of Arendt’s analysis. Both the “peremptory” tone Furet disapproves of and the “dark violence” he praises have to do with the impossibility of looking back upon totalitarianism *sine ira et studio* — without grief and sorrow (R, 78; OT, xxiii) — provided one is not willing to explain phenomena “by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt” (OT, xiv). How could one speak of real comprehension in this case, if comprehension means “the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality — whatever it may be or might have been”? (OT, xiv)

Precisely because she wanted “to describe the totalitarian phenomenon as occurring, not on the moon, but in the midst of human society” (R, 79), Arendt has given up the attempt to write a history of totalitarianism. She has tried instead “to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism” — by which she means anti-Semitism and imperialism — “and to analyse them in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary ... The book ... gives a historical account of these elements which crystallized into totalitarianism, this account is followed by an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarian movements and domination itself” (R, 77-78). This clarification puts the reader on the right track and guards against false expectations.

To begin with, it should be noted that elements are not causes. Arendt warns against the misunderstanding, caused in part by the term, “origins,” in the title of the American edition,⁶ that she had sought to determine the causes that, with an iron logic, have led to totalitarianism. Arendt clearly does not believe that necessity is at work in history. Indeed, to the extent that such a view (e.g. in the form of a scenario of progress or doom) incites people to experience themselves as the plaything of anonymous and superhuman forces and to forsake their responsibility for the world, it already forms a part of the totalitarian syndrome. The crystallisation of elements, scattered all over Europe, into totalitarian forms, was neither a matter

⁶ In Great-Britain the work was published as *The Burden of our Time* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), and in Germany as *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955).

of inevitable necessity nor of blind accident. To be sure, the Dreyfus-affair foreshadowed in many respects the murderous anti-Semitism of the Nazis: nevertheless, there is an abyss between the two: "The wrong done to a single Jewish officer in France was able to draw from the rest of the world a more vehement and united reaction than all the persecutions of German Jews a generation later" (OT, 91). It does not hold to point to anti-Semitism as a cause, and at the same time to blind oneself for human actions (or their absence) and their echo in the public opinion.⁷ The same is true for the transition from imperialism to totalitarianism: this is just as little a matter of automatism. How else does one "explain" the fact that Great Britain turned out to have less susceptibility to the totalitarian infection than countries on the continent? Partly thanks to its two-party system that, more than the continental multiple-party system, encourages political responsibility (see OT, 250 ff.), Britain managed not to have its domestic policies disrupted by the imperialistic strategies which it deployed overseas, whereas in Germany and Austria the alliance between capital and mob took effect at home, in the form of pan-movements, so that imperialistic politics could get hold of and strangle the nation (see OT, 155). Trying to explain totalitarianism from its "elements," as if these were causes, amounts to reducing history to the unfolding of a scenario, arranged in advance, in which nothing new can happen. Just because history, contrary to physics, is concerned with what happens only once, Arendt does not believe in the usefulness of the categories of cause and effect. They give the historian the air of a "prophet turned backward" (UP, 318), but in fact the meaning of an event always transcends the causes that can be pointed at — as is shown in the frequently occurring disparity between causes and effects (as in World War I). Even more, the "past itself comes into being only with the event itself, when something irrevocable has happened. The event illuminates its own past: it can never be deduced from it" (UP, 319). It may be true that, "in retrospect — that is, in historical

⁷ It is well known how the people and the government of Denmark managed to operate as spoilsports of the German *Endlösung* and how Arendt considers this story "as required reading in political science for all students who wish to learn something about the enormous power potential inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence." See H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 171.

perspective — every sequence of events looks as though it could not have happened otherwise, but this is an optical, or, rather, an existential illusion: nothing could ever happen if reality did not kill, by definition, all the other potentialities originally inherent in any given situation.”⁸ When the historian believes in causality, he denies human freedom or the capacity to begin something new (see *UP*, 325, n. 13).

One, then, should not read *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as “a gradual revelation of the essence of totalitarianism from its inchoate forms in the eighteenth century to the fully developed” (as Voegelin has done), for the simple reason that “this essence ... did not exist before it had come into being,” that is, in the midst of the twentieth century (*R*, 81). The book, rather, offers a kind of “history in reverse,” in the manner of Tocqueville.⁹ It takes its point of departure from what is *unprecedented* in totalitarianism, that is, not so much its ideological content, as well the fact that it has taken place, “the event of totalitarian domination itself” (*R*, 80). In the light of this event, the book selects from the past what is relevant to an understanding of the mentality of the Nazis and Bolsheviks or to whatever might clarify the horizon within which they operated: “I did not write a history of anti-semitism or of imperialism, but analysed the element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself” (*R*, 78). In view of these remarks, the best the reader can do is to begin his reading with the third part about totalitarianism as a new form of government (which transforms classes into masses, supplants the parties by a totalitarian movement, entrusts the secret police with the central power and aims at world domination), and to unwind from it the thread leading to the elements that crystallized into this kind of government. Paying attention to Arendt’s hint in the preface of *Imperialism* (1967), the reader should preferably continue his reading with the second part: “This book ... tells the story of the disintegration of the nation-state that proved to

⁸ “Truth and Politics,” in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 243. (Henceforth, *BPF*).

⁹ See M. Weyembergh, ‘La spécificité du totalitarisme selon H. Arendt. Analyse et critique,’ in Thanassakos et H. Wisman (Eds.), *Révision de l’histoire. Totalitarismes, crimes et génocides nazis* (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1990), p. 67.

contain nearly all elements necessary for the subsequent rise of totalitarian movements and governments" (OT, xxi). The first part, then, *Antisemitism*, should conclude the reading. It describes the precarious, thoroughly ambiguous position of the Jews in the nation-state, politically and socially. Yet, precisely because the fate of the Jews, more than that of any other minority, was bound up with the fate of the nation-state, the role of twentieth-century anti-Semitism can only be understood against the background of all those factors that destroyed the nation-state (such as expansion for expansion's sake, the alliance between mob and capital, and imperialistic racism). Only in the vacuum after the first World War, could anti-Semitism become, in the hands of the Nazis, the catalyst or amalgamating element, thanks to which all other elements could crystallize into a totalitarian movement and a totalitarian government. Furet is not wrong, then, when he claims that the book is badly built up: indeed, its table of contents is at odds with the train of thought it unfolds.

... *With an Important Sequel*

However, this does not solve all our difficulties. Furet contends that Arendt's book is full of contradictions, and in this statement, too, is an element of truth. The problem is that the third part lumps together Nazism and Stalinism, while the original subject matter of the book was clearly not totalitarianism in this inclusive sense. Only in the process of writing the book did Arendt come to understand Stalinism as a variant of this new form of government. *Ideology and Terror*, which elaborates this resemblance best, was not part of the original edition. It was written in 1953 and was included as the book's final chapter in the second edition onwards — together with an epilogue about the Hungarian revolution, which for that matter was omitted again in the subsequent editions. Now, this final chapter elaborates "certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature ... which I did not possess when I finished the original manuscript" (OT, xxiv). The consequence of Arendt's broadening of her view and aim was not only some vagueness concerning the actual subject matter of the book, but also the well known and often criticized imbalance (even contradiction, according to Furet) of the whole: on the one hand, some of the elements examined in the first parts of the book (which were supposed to have

undermined the nation-state), are particularly relevant to Nazism, but far less to the developments in the Soviet-Union — Furet mentions the pan-Slavism;¹⁰ on the other hand, there is barely, if any discussion of the specific elements of Stalinism — especially its ideological roots in Marxism-Leninism — with the result that the whole loses much of its persuasiveness, because the proposition concerning the fundamental similarity between Nazism and Stalinism, as appearances of one and the same, totalitarian domination, is not sufficiently founded.

Of this problem Arendt was thoroughly aware, and the least one can say is that she did not leave it at that. On the contrary, this problem has, to a great degree, directed the further development of her thinking. Not long after the completion of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she mulled over the production of a sequel to it, called, *Totalitarian Elements in Marxism*, to correct the first book's one-sidedness.¹¹ This was to be a very different book: it would no longer follow the "Tiefenweg" to the totalitarian catastrophe, but the "Höhenweg,"¹² for in contradistinction to Nazism — "a horrible gutter-born phenomenon"¹³ — Stalinism announces itself as an elevated, humanistic ideology traceable to a respectable current of Western philosophy. Her research would no longer have to be tied to the "subterranean stream of Western history" (*OT*, ix, xv) — phenomena such as racism and imperialism, the tribal nationalism of the pan-movements or anti-Semitism, "which emerged only when and where the traditional social and political framework of Europe broke down," but "have no connection with the great political and philosophical

¹⁰ "Reste que, s'il est facile, et même nécessaire, de mettre en rapport pangermanisme et nazisme, la liaison implicite que l'auteur suggère entre panslavisme et communisme soviétique apparaît au moins arbitraire." (*Le passé d'une illusion*, p. 498).

¹¹ Hannah Arendt: *A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, pp. 63–64.

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel 1926-1969* (München: Piper, 1985), p. 223.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, "Martin Heidegger at Eighty," in M. Murray (Ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy. Critical Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 302, note 3.

¹⁴ See E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 276 (with reference to Arendt's correspondence with *The Guggenheim Foundation* about the "Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism," Winter, 1952, Library of Congress).

traditions of the West"¹⁴ — but on the upper stream of these traditions.

Very soon, however, it became clear that this project would exceed the limits outlined at the outset. With Marx, after all, the whole tradition of philosophy is at issue: "to accuse Marx of totalitarianism amounts to accusing the Western tradition itself of necessarily ending in the monstrosity of this novel form of government."¹⁵ Although Marx (in a manner reminiscent of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), in confronting the problems of his time (such as the industrial revolution and capitalism), had explicitly rebelled against tradition and put its honoured order of activities upside down — labour, not reason or contemplation, constitutes the humanity of Man — he finally remained imprisoned by tradition. This imprisonment not only bothered him when it was a matter of distinguishing clearly between labour and work,¹⁶ it also blinded him to the irreducibility of action to work, so that he finally understood politics to be a "making of history."¹⁷ In this respect, Marx continues the tradition: the continuity of tradition outweighs the break with it. Moreover, it is difficult to see how Marx could have avoided this, for "occidental philosophy never had a pure concept of politics and could not have such a concept, because it always spoke of Man and never dealt with human plurality".¹⁸

Arendt never published her book on Marx. In connection with the project, Arendt, however, conducted an enormous amount of research, which she brought together in *The Human Condition* and a great part of *Between Past and Future* and *On Revolution*. It is no exaggeration to say that Arendt's dismantling of philosophy as a whole has its point of departure in this unwritten book about Marx. It is the missing link between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* — a point persuasively argued by Margaret Canovan. Making use of unedited manuscripts (such as the 1953 Princeton-lectures, *Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought*),

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt. *A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, p. 64. The quotation has been taken from "Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought," one of Arendt's unpublished manuscripts.

¹⁶ See *The Human Condition* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 87 and 99, note 36 (Henceforth, *HC*).

¹⁷ See "The Concept of History," in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 77-79.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel 1926-1969* (München: Piper, 1985), pp. 202-203.

Canovan argues the point that Arendt's *oeuvre* comprises a coherent whole. Arendt, in Canovan's view, never dropped the question of totalitarianism. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the later work illuminate each other.¹⁹

Let us return for a moment to Arendt's inclusive use of the term, "totalitarianism." The original subject matter of the book was imperialism; Arendt had thought to present Nazism as a full-fledged, racist imperialism.²⁰ In other words, Arendt had from the outset intended to link totalitarianism (even Nazism) to *modern* developments that were not specific to this or that country. She, accordingly, included Stalinism in her analysis. This point is relevant, not only if one wishes to gain insight into Arendt's position on the question concerning the equation of Nazism with Stalinism, as well as on the question concerning the extent to which Nazism (particularly the destruction of the Jews) may be said to have derived from German culture,²¹ but also if one wishes to understand Arendt's view of the postwar, post-totalitarian world – a topic to which we will come back at the end of this study. But it is time now to clarify the specificity of totalitarianism in Arendt's view.

Experiment With Human Nature

Arendt repeatedly distinguishes between totalitarianism and tyranny, in order to underscore the point that the specificity of the former does not consist in its cruelty: "Suffering, of which there has been always too much on earth, is not the issue, nor the number of victims. Human nature as such is at stake" (*OT*, 458-59). This statement must not be read as the battle cry of an overly optimistic revolutionary intent upon re-making society.²² Totalitarianism has nothing to do with

¹⁹ See above, note 2. For Canovan's discussion of *Totalitarian Elements in Marxism*, see Hannah Arendt. *A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, chapter 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19. The author refers to Arendt's correspondence (1946) with Mary Underwood. The term "racist imperialism" goes back to Franz Neumann, *Behemoth* (1942), a criticism of monopolistic capitalism.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23. See also M. Bittman, "Totalitarianism: the Career of a Concept," in G.T. Kaplan and C.S. Kessler (Eds.), *Hannah Arendt. Thinking, Judging, Freedom* (Sidney/Wellington/London/Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1989), pp. 56-58.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

revolution in that sense. It is, rather, “an attempt to rob man of its nature under the pretext of changing it” (*UP*, 316). It confronts us with “a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before” (*R*, 83).

The range of these assertions becomes clear, if one takes into account Arendt's reflections on the concentration camps (in the third chapter of *Totalitarianism*). She calls these camps “the true central institution of totalitarian organisational power” (*OT*, 438) and “the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified” (*OT*, 437). Total domination “strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of beings as if all of humanity were just one individual.” In order to attain this goal, every person must be “reduced to a never changing identity of reaction, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other” (*OT*, 438). The camps not only degrade and exterminate people, they also

“serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not; for Pavlov's dog, which, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang, was a perverted animal.” (*OT*, 438)

Only in a concentration camp, that is, a laboratory hermetically sealed off from the outside world, is such an experiment possible at all. Common sense cannot grasp the existence of the camps, if only because it cannot conceive of a terror that is no longer a means to an end, but its own end. Hence, the temptation to explain away the novelty of the camps and to reduce it to a known cruelty of the past: the terror of French Revolution, the colonisation of America, Australia or Africa, the camps of the Boers in South Africa ... According to Arendt, such comparisons hold only for the camps in the early stages of total terror. The proper extermination camps differ from all precedents in the same way as “the belief that everything is possible” differs from “the belief that everything is permitted” or that “the end justifies the means.” The last conviction has not yet entirely cut itself off from utilitarian motives and the self-interest of the rulers. Common sense therefore can still digest it (see *OT*, 440). The camps,

however, confront us with the impossible task of seeking to develop an understanding of things that are beyond our comprehension: so we try to understand the behaviour of concentration-camp inmates and SS-men psychologically, "when the very thing that must be realized is that the psyche *can* be destroyed even without the destruction of the physical man" (OT, 441). Neither recollection, nor reports of eyewitnesses give us access to the end result of this terror. The survivors of the camps "are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion" (OT, 443). Nobody can report about the terror in the camps, "for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences. It is as though he has a story to tell of another planet" (OT, 444). For the same reason, every comparison (such as forced labour, banishment or slavery) falls short. The outspoken anti-utilitarian character of the camps (their lack of utility-value from the economic or military point of view) confers on the whole enterprise an air of madness and unreality, "the real iron curtain which hides all forms of concentration camps from the eyes of the world" (OT, 445).

Given the inaccessibility of total terror, the best that analysis can do is to describe the processes and methods which precede this mass production of corpses and which prepare people for this result. Arendt distinguishes three steps on the road to totalitarian domination. Firstly, there is the destruction of the juridical person in man. This step can be realised, on the one hand, by outlawing certain categories of people and by forcing the non-totalitarian world to recognise this illegality (by means of de-nationalisation), and, on the other hand, by putting the concentration camps outside the normal criminal system and selecting the inmates independently of normal judicial procedures. Ordinary criminals do not properly belong in the camps, "if only because it is harder to kill the juridical person in a man who is guilty of some crime than in a totally innocent person" (OT, 448). Apart from a limited number of criminals — the main function of whose presence is to make the camps acceptable for the outside world — the camps are for the most part populated by totally innocent people who have been selected in a totally arbitrary way. In a totalitarian system, the punishment of political opponents, too, plays only the role of pretext, for even if the whole population, under the

pressure of terror, more or less voluntarily would renounce its political rights, the system would not have reached its goal: "Free consent is as much an obstacle to total domination as free opposition" (OT, 451). Hence, the systematic use of the arbitrary arrest, which "destroys the validity of free consent, just as torture ... destroys the possibility of opposition" (OT, 451).

The second step on the road to total domination is the destruction of the moral person in man — which is accomplished through the annihilation of every form of martyrdom. Arendt quotes David Rousset (*Les jours de notre mort*): "When no witnesses are left, there can be no testimony" (OT, 451). The camps "are part of an organised oblivion, that not only embraces carriers of public opinion, such as the spoken and the written word, but extends even to the families and friends of the victim" (OT, 452). In these "holes of oblivion" (OT, 459), death becomes anonymous, and the individual is robbed of his own death: "His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed" (OT, 452). Under such conditions, conscience cannot function adequately: how to decide, if "the alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder or murder"? (OT, 452). After their conscience has been eliminated, the victims too can be involved in the consciously organised complicity of all people in the crimes of totalitarian regimes.

The last step represents the destruction of the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity. Arendt refers to the monstrous conditions of the transports to the camps, the humiliating measures at arrival and, finally, "the unimaginable tortures, so gauged as not to kill the body, at any event not quickly" (OT, 453). The irrational, sadistic torture of the initial phase (mostly conducted by the SA and rather a concession of the regime to its abnormal elements than a calculated institution) paves the way for the SS-conducted "cold, and systematic destruction of human bodies, calculated to destroy human dignity" (OT, 454). In this way, every kind of spontaneity is destroyed, everything that is more than a mere reaction to the environment, however harmless it may be. Finally, nothing remains "but ghastly marionettes with human faces ... which all react with perfect reliability, even when going to their own death ... This is the real triumph of the system" (OT, 455).

What one should conclude from the horror of the camps is not that all men are beasts, but “that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal” — which conversely implies “that man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man” (OT, 455). It is well known that Arendt in *The Human Condition* will give up the term “human nature,” in favour of the term “condition”: we would have to jump over our own shadow, in order to know our nature (see HC, 10). Nevertheless, although Arendt in *Totalitarianism* still sticks to the idea of a human nature, her thought here moves already in the direction of the later work. For with the destruction (or transformation) of human nature she has in mind, of course, the destruction of just those characteristics (plurality, individuality, spontaneity), which under normal circumstances make it impossible to ascribe to human beings a nature at all.²³ Total domination reduces man to a nature or a fixed identity, i.e. to something less than human: precisely this happens when people are robbed of their rights, and hence Arendt’s criticism of “human rights,” insofar as they are conceived of as natural rights, independent of the political community.²⁴ Seen in light of *The Human Condition*, the destruction (or transformation) of human nature amounts to the rebellion against the human condition as given and the wish to replace it with something that is man-made (see HC 2-3). The term, “condition,” on the other hand, enables us to think of man in rebellion against his condition: for no condition conditions us absolutely (see HC 11).

We adverted earlier to Arendt’s argument relating to the anti-utilitarian character of the camps. At the end of her description of the three roads to total domination, however, she modifies this statement. Insofar as the camps realise the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate people entirely — “the society of the dying” (OT, 456) — they are eminently useful. Their anti-utility from the economic and military standpoint only goes to show that they are indispensable to the totalitarian regime’s efforts to keep its power intact. Or in the absence of those terrifying training centres, the regime would not

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 104-05.

²⁴ See OT, p. 290 ff.; See also *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 148-49.

have been able to continuously stir up its nuclear troops, nor would it have succeeded in keeping the rest of the population in a condition of complete apathy. The camps serve total domination, and this unlimited power “can only be secured if literally all men, without a single exception, are reliably dominated in every aspect of their life.” This supposes that “new neutral territories must constantly be subjugated” and “ever-new human groups must be mastered ... or liquidated” (OT, 456). “Not a despotic rule over men is the goal, but a system in which men are superfluous.” And “as long as all men have not been made equally superfluous ... the ideal of total domination has not been achieved” (OT, 457). The model “citizen” of the totalitarian state is Pavlov’s predictable dog. On the other hand, spontaneity, on account of its incalculability, is the greatest of all obstacles to total domination (see OT, 456).

The camps daily produce senselessness. But what is entirely senseless in the eyes of common sense, trained in utilitarian thought — punishment without crime, exploitation without profit and work without product — is only too sensible and logical from the standpoint of totalitarian ideology: “Over and above the senselessness of totalitarian society is enthroned the ridiculous supersense of its ideological superstition.” For totalitarian ideologies pretend “to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe” (OT, 457). As long as they are not really believed in, ideologies are relatively harmless, nothing more than uncritical and arbitrary opinions. Once they are taken seriously, they become “logical systems, in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted” (OT, 457). What finally inspires totalitarian leaders, is not the personal profit of power (and its abuse), but the nightmare of complete consistency. They do no rest before reality is entirely made to conform to their ideology. This is the final reason why every trace of spontaneity must be destroyed: unpredictability is unbearable for whoever pretends to dispose of an integral explanation of the past and an infallible prophecy of the future. In this respect, total domination breaks radically with utilitarianism. It represents the end, not only of the age of the *bourgeois* (who is after his profit), but also of the age of nihilistic imperialism (which aims at expansion for expansion’s sake — see OT, 458).

Logicity as a Principle of Action

In the final chapter, *Ideology and Terror*, Arendt works out the role of ideologies as paranoiac systems.

“An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates; it is the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the ‘idea’ is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same ‘law’ as the logical exposition of its ‘idea.’” (OT, 469)

Accordingly, racism has nothing to do with a scientific curiosity about the diversity of human races: race is only the idea that enables the explanation of history as a consistent process. Everything turns around the “logic” or development of an idea, “that is, a movement which ... needs no outside factor to set it in motion” (OT, 469). Since the historical process is supposed to correspond with the logical process, everything that happens can be explained as corresponding with the idea. Hence the pretence to be able to fathom the mysteries of the historical process. The only possible movement within the realm of logic, however, is the process of deduction from a premise. “As soon as logic as the movement of thought ... is applied to an idea, this idea is transformed into a premise,” that is, the starting point of a compulsory, argumentative process, which neither a new experience nor a new idea can interrupt: one idea suffices for the explanation of everything. In this argumentative process, the inevitable insecurity of thought is exchanged for the total explanation of an ideology, freedom of thought for the “strait jacket” of logic, the coercive force of which is almost as violent as that of an outer force (see OT, 469-70).

From the decisive role racism and communism played in the formation of totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (Nazism and Stalinism respectively), it is tempting to conclude that they are the only totalitarian ideologies. Actually, however, every ideology can be used in a totalitarian way, by virtue of the three following characteristics: firstly, ideologies are never interested in reality as it is, but exclusively in history and its movement, which they pretend to explain and to predict. Secondly, every ideology emancipates itself from experience, by insisting on a concealed, true reality behind the perceptible things, which requires a sixth sense (or a *supersense*) that

enables us to become aware of it. Ideological indoctrination is nothing else than a training in the use of this peculiar sense. It injects a secret meaning into every palpable, public event and is suspicious of some concealed intent behind every political act. "Once totalitarian movements have come to power, they proceed to change reality in accordance with their ideological claims." Thirdly, every ideology calls upon certain methods of demonstration, necessary to emancipate thought entirely from reality. "Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolute logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it," without any intervention of experience: in other words, "it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality" (OT, 470-71).²⁵

Mainly by virtue of this third characteristic (to take their ideologies deadly serious), both Hitler and Stalin managed to transform their ideologies into instruments for coercing their subjects either into collaborating with the terror machine, or submitting to it as victims. Hitler took pride in his gift for "ice cold reasoning," Stalin in the "mercilessness of his dialectics." To accept that there are "dying classes" or "inferior races" and to do nothing to eradicate them effectively, is to display inconsistency: it is a token either of stupidity or of cowardice. "This stringent logicity as a guide to action permeates the whole structure of totalitarian movements and governments. It is exclusively the work of Hitler and Stalin, who ... for this reason alone must be considered ideologists of the greatest importance" (OT, 472). Ideologies prepare people for terror. But if they are able to provide (limited by definition, as we shall see immediately) the principle of action in a system of total domination, it is on account of what all take to be their inherent logicity: "You can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of the murderous alphabet. Here, the coercive force of logicity seems to have its source; it springs from our fear of contradicting ourselves" (OT, 471-72).

²⁵ Arendt returns to this consistent deduction, now in the context of physics, historiography and modern technology. She points to the frightening fact that "we can take almost any hypothesis and *act* upon it, with a sequence of results in reality which not only make sense but *work*. This means quite literally that everything is possible not only in the realm of ideas but in the field of reality itself" ("The Concept of History", p. 87).

Strictly speaking, a totalitarian regime has no use for a principle of action. Such a principle completes, according to Montesquieu, the structure or essence of a government. Under normal circumstances, it is the necessary counterpart of the legal structure of a regime: laws “set limitations to actions, but don’t inspire them ... they only tell what one should not, but never what one should do” (OT, 467). Therefore, a government needs not only a structure (which normally guarantees the regime its stability and durability), but also a principle of action, which can “inspire government and citizens alike in their public activity and serve as a criterion, beyond the merely negative yardstick of lawfulness, for judging all action in public affairs ... honour in a monarchy, virtue in a republic and fear in a tyranny” (OT, 467). Since the essence of a totalitarian regime is terror, and since all the actions undertaken by such a regime have only one aim, namely, the acceleration of those processes that render people (and their capacity to act) superfluous, a fully developed totalitarian regime has no use for a principle of action distinguishable from its essence. Terror alone, however, cannot manage the job. In a totalitarian regime, terror loses its usefulness; it does not help the victim to avoid the danger he or she fears. Terror does not select its victims on the basis of their convictions or of their deeds. They may display sympathy for and provide active support to the regime, but to no avail. Terror eliminates conviction as motive for actions. It is on this point that totalitarianism imports ideology, as a kind of substitute for the needed principle of action: ideology appeals not to action, but “to the craving need for some insight into the law of movement according to which terror functions ... What totalitarian rule needs to guide the behaviour of its subjects is a preparation to fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim” (OT, 468).

Omnipotence and Determinism

Believing that everything is possible amounts to believing in human omnipotence. That such a delusion inevitably must carry through to the destruction of human plurality and spontaneity, is obvious: even in heaven there is room for only one omnipotent God.²⁶ But how can

²⁶ In this way, Canovan (see *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of her Political*

people take such a delusion seriously? What leads them to think that they could ever destroy plurality? Here we touch upon a crucial point in Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism, namely, the paradoxical belief that omnipotence goes hand in hand with determinism.²⁷ The delusion of omnipotence is not accompanied by the belief in freedom and responsibility. In contrast to tyrants and dictators, totalitarian leaders do not view themselves as *carriers* of a power which they can dispose as they want, but as *servants* of the impersonal laws of the universe (history and nature). Spontaneity, then, is rendered superfluous not only for the followers and victims of totalitarian movements, but for their leaders as well (see *OT*, 459). In this sense, totalitarianism betrays humanity: instead of protecting the world from anonymous processes, it hands it over to them.

Totalitarianism explodes the age-old distinction between lawful and lawless government (or between legitimate and arbitrary power), insofar as it occupies both sides of this polarity: on the one hand, it defies all positive laws (those which it has itself established as well as those which it has never revoked); on the other hand, it does not operate without laws nor could it be described as arbitrary. Quite the contrary, "it claims to obey strictly and unequivocally those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring." "Far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature" (*OT*, 461). Its defiance of positive laws is said to be a higher form of legitimacy, which goes directly to the source of authority, "without translating it into general standards of right and wrong for individual behaviour." It does away with this detour — actually the source of the inevitable discrepancy between justice and legality — and pretends "to establish the direct reign of justice on earth." "The law of Nature or of History, if properly executed, is expected to produce mankind as its end product; and this expectation lies behind the claim to global rule of all totalitarian governments."

Thought, p. 27) paraphrases a statement of Arendt in a letter to Karl Jaspers about the relation between monotheism and omnipotence (see *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel 1926-1969*, p. 202).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The human species has to be transformed into “an active, unfailing carrier of a law to which human beings otherwise would only passively and reluctantly be subjected.” Totalitarianism consciously breaks with the *consensus iuris*, “because it promises to release the fulfilment of law from all action and will of man; and it promises justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of the law” (OT, 462). This is the fundamental difference between the totalitarian and all other concepts of law.

It is important, therefore, to see that this identification of man and law has nothing to do with the traditional *lumen naturale* or voice of conscience, “by which Nature or Divinity announce their authority in man himself.” Nature or Divinity are normally thought of as remaining distinct from man, as permanent sources of authority for positive laws, which while they might change in accordance with the circumstances, are understood to possess a relative permanence as compared with the more rapidly changing actions of men. “Positive laws, therefore, are primarily designed to function as stabilizing factors for the ever changing movements of men.” Totalitarianism, on the other hand, considers all laws as laws of movement (either of Nature, as in Nazism, or of History, as in Stalinism). “Underlying the Nazis’ belief in race laws ... is Darwin’s idea of man as the product of a natural development ... just as under the Bolsheviks’ belief in class-struggle ... lies Marx’ notion of a gigantic historical movement” (OT, 463). In the end, the differences between this historical approach (Marx) and the naturalistic one (Darwin) become less important than their similarities. Both approaches blend into one another. Darwin’s introduction into nature of the notion of a progressing development underscored the point “that natural life is considered to be historical.” Marx’s introduction into history, as its driving force, of the notion of class-struggle, tied historical forces to productive forces, with origins traceable to natural-biological forces — the “labour-power” of men. The opposition between Darwin and Marx is weakened further by the central role of the idea of development in both theories, which supports “the consistent interpretation of everything as being only a stage of some further development.” Moreover, in both Darwin and Marx, the law itself changes its meaning, expressing no longer the framework of stability, but the motion itself. Finally, totalitarian politics points to the “true nature” of this movement by stressing its

endlessness: to halt the movement would mean the end of history or of nature (see OT, 463-464).

The traditional body politic's system of laws is supposed to translate the immutable *ius naturale* or the eternal commandments of God into standards of right or wrong. "In the body politic of totalitarian government, this place of positive laws is taken by total terror, which is designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature ... If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination" (OT, 464). Terror is the realisation of the law of movement. It must make it "possible for the force of nature and history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action." Free action cannot "be permitted to interfere with the elimination of the 'objective enemy' of History or Nature." "Guilt and innocence become senseless notions: 'guilty' is he who stands in the way of the natural or historical process, which has passed judgment over 'inferior races,' over individuals 'unfit to live,' over 'dying and decadent peoples.'" Terror merely executes these judgments. All concerned (murderers and victims alike) are subjectively innocent. And since "the ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind," terror "eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the 'parts' for the sake of the 'whole'" (OT, 465).

The reason why total terror is frequently mistaken for a symptom of tyranny, is that "totalitarian government in its initial stages must behave like a tyranny" (hence defy all laws). "But total terror leaves no arbitrary lawlessness behind it and does not rage for the sake of some arbitrary will or for the sake of despotic power of one man against all." It substitutes for the laws (which function both as boundaries and as channels of communication between individuals) "a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as tough their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions." Hence, total terror does more than tyranny: it not only robs men of their liberties (as tyranny does), "but destroys at the same time the lawless, fenceless wilderness of fear and suspicion which tyranny leaves behind." "By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them; compared to the condition within this iron band, even the desert of tyranny ... appears like a guarantee of

freedom." Totalitarian government "destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom, which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space" (OT, 465-66).

Omnipotence and determinism: we now can understand this curious connection. Total terror appears to be an excellent instrument by which the movement of natural or historical forces can be accelerated. In the long run, Arendt asserts, this movement, proceeding according to its own law, cannot be hindered by human actions. "But it can be slowed down and is slowed down almost inevitably by the freedom of man," which is the capacity to make a new beginning. From the totalitarian point of view, this fact "can only be regarded as an annoying interference with higher forces." "Terror, therefore, as the obedient servant of natural or historical movement, has to eliminate from the process not only freedom in any specific sense, but the very source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man." The iron band of terror appears to be "a device ... not only to liberate the historical and natural forces, but to accelerate them to a speed they never would reach if left to themselves" (OT, 466). It translates into the on-the-spot-execution of the death sentences already laid down by Nature and History.

Finally, Arendt emphasizes that the iron band of terror is complemented by the self-coercive logicity of ideology: both "correspond to each other and need each other in order to set the terror-ruled movement into motion and keep it moving." "Just as terror, even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form ruins all relationships between men, so the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality." Ideology prepares people for terror, and this "preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought" (OT, 474). The common ground of terror and the logicity of ideology is *loneliness*, "an experience which, for whatever reasons, has never before served as the foundation of a body politic and whose general mood — although it may be familiar in every other respect — never before has pervaded, and directed the handling of, public affairs" (OT, 461). Loneliness, "the experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody," is closely connected with uprootedness ("to have no place in the world, recognised and

guaranteed by others”) and with superfluity (“not to belong to the world at all”). Loneliness is “at the same time contrary to the basic requirements of the human condition” (which is characterised by plurality) “and one of the fundamental experiences of every human life” (as realised in the anticipation of death, in other words, in the awareness of being superfluous) (*OT*, 475-76). This experience could never have become the fundament of a new form of government, if it had not become the everyday experience of the modern mass man who emerges in the throe of imperialism and its constant uprooting of people.

Totalitarianism and Modernity

How did the totalitarian “belief that everything is possible” come about? From what elements did it, together with the paradoxical combination of omnipotence and determinism, crystallize? Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, traces the elements which foreshadow (or prepare the way for) the totalitarian delusion of omnipotence to the beginning of the Modern Age. Yet one can raise the question whether, notwithstanding her assertions in the “Preface,”²⁸ *The Human Condition* does not also deal with, at least indirectly, the post-war world, insofar as this world can be understood to be a post-totalitarian one. If this hypothesis is right, then this book is also about the totalitarian elements in the post-war world: the defeat of Hitler and Stalin may well have destroyed their respective totalitarian regimes, but not necessarily the elements that had brought about their crystallization (see *UP*, 324, note 4).²⁹ For as long as these elements continue to exist, the prospect of a new crystallisation (undoubtedly in a different, unpredictable manner) cannot be precluded. Meanwhile, our world remains vulnerable to a totalitarian catastrophe. In this sense, totalitarianism is not a thing of the past, and certainly not defeated once and for all: “The Nazis and the Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation ... are as much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of

²⁸ “I do not discuss this modern world, against whose background this book was written” (*HC*, p. 6)

²⁹ See also *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, pp. 20 and 42.

totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social or economic misery in a manner worthy of man" (OT, 459).

The Human Condition, then, describes both the pre-totalitarian and the post-totalitarian world, looking for totalitarian elements in both of them. In this way, Arendt offers her readers a broad panorama of *society* in our own times, in which nineteenth-century imperialism, with its drive for expansion (described in *Imperialism*), and modern science, with its typical action into nature, continue to inflect the dynamics of the world. There are some striking similarities between the three modern phenomena just mentioned – society, imperialism and science – and Arendt's description of them reminds unmistakeably of her description of total terror, understood as the liberation and acceleration of the forces of nature or history.

Let us look briefly at some of these similarities. *Firstly*, we have in each of the three cases to do with a liberation (in the sense of an unchaining) of processes from their original embedding: modern society liberates the life-process from the family and the household; imperialism liberates the life-process from its straitjacket, the nation; science, finally, liberates the processes of nature, either from their earthly or cosmic surroundings. *Secondly*, in each of these cases processes are provoked that, in the absence of human intervention would not occur (or at least, not to the same extent). Arendt speaks in this respect about an "unnatural growth of the natural" (HC, 47), by which circular processes, kept in check by nature, are transformed into linear, endless ones. (Therefore we deal, strictly speaking, no longer with natural processes, but rather with quasi-natural or pseudo-natural, partly historical processes.) *Thirdly*, the liberation of these processes is in every case the outcome of *action* — the only human activity capable of "start[ing] new unprecedented processes" (HC, 231-32) — not of work or labour. This is true not only of modern technology — splitting the atom is, of course, a man-made process (see BPF, 60) — but also, paradoxically enough, of the swarming of the life-process throughout society: with labor's adoption, for example, from the public realm, of the organisational principle of the division of labour, labour's "productivity" (or fertility) has climbed to levels that could be described as "excessive." Indeed, modern labour has taken on the character of a "public" activity (see HC, 47-48). That

we have to do here with processes started up by action (or by human initiative) implies at the same time that their outcome is both unpredictable and irreversible. Action into nature is dangerous because, in contradistinction to action within the web of human relationships, it can fall back neither on the “remedies” of promising and forgiving, nor on the stabilizing effect of institutions and human laws. (What do we know, after all, about the unintended side effects of cloning or of genetic manipulation of growth and other living organisms?)³⁰ *Fourthly*, in each of the cases mentioned the unchained processes either corrode the stability of the world or threaten the continued existence of the earth. That is because the liberation of the life process transforms stable, immovable property into movable property (or wealth) and so destroys the non-privative meaning of privacy, understood as “a tangible, worldly place of one’s own” (*HC*, 69-70). It leads to a waste economy (*HC*, 134), which not only consumes the stable world of things, but also introduces disorder into the household of mother earth, by putting it relentlessly under pressure. Worst of all, it condemns people to the worldless, unpolitical life of *animal laborans*, that is, to the life of jobholders, which, if they are lucky, can indulge in as a hobby. Moreover, the expansion process of 19th-century imperialism seems to receive a continuation in the present globalisation of the economy — with this difference, however, that while at present there are colonies, there no longer are colonizing nations.³¹ But as in the period of colonization, politics is expected to accommodate to the economic process, and the world has to deal with the threat of an uncontrollable flood of refugees. Finally, modern science and technology embody in an exemplary way both the triumphs of modern man and his twofold alienation (from the world and from the earth). Or, as Kafka formulated it in his inimitable way: “He found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition” (*HC*, 248). So while genetic and nuclear technology

³⁰ See in this respect Slavoj Žižek’s reflections on the risk-society in: S. Žižek, *Pleidooi voor intolerantie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1998), pp. 72-82. (Dutch translation and revised edition of S. Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or the Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, 1997, Sept.-Oct.).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

are generally conceded to be dangerous, there is less of a willingness to see that, under the impact of science and the suspicion which drives it, the objectivity of the common world evaporates into private sensations, common sense atrophies into the capacity to reckon (see HC, 283-84), and judgments degrade into subjective judgments of taste.³² Finally, in each of the three cases, the paradox of omnipotence and determinism is at work: man seizes the omnipotence he desires by submitting himself to forces he is not able to control; freedom capitulates to necessity (see OR, 61). Omnipotence, then, turns out to be illusory. Meanwhile, modern man despises the only real power that lies in his reach, i.e. the power that "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert."³³ People are likely to forget that the possibility of power, i.e. plurality, is at the same time its limitation.

Is it not time, then, if we want to make our world less vulnerable to a new totalitarian catastrophe, to restrain, with united forces, the monopoly of calculating thought, "*das rechnendes Denken*" (Heidegger)? Is it not time also to put up barriers against global capitalism — barriers that could dike in again the stream of the life-process? This is not a plea for a new form of state capitalism, but a plea for a new re-politicising of the economy³⁴ and for intolerance against the all-embracing worldlessness of *animal laborans*. ↪

³² See "The Concept of History," p. 53.

³³ "On Violence," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 143.

³⁴ *Pleidooi voor intolerantie*, p. 98.