THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: MASS DEMOCRACY, BUT ALSO MASS TOTALITARIANISM

Printed newspapers were just the first harbinger of the mass media age. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a long list of new communication and transportation technologies—such as the telegraph, the telephone, television, radio, the train, the steamship, and the airplane—supercharged the power of mass media.

When Demosthenes gave a public speech in Athens around 350 BCE, it was aimed primarily at the limited audience actually present in the Athenian agora. When John Quincy Adams gave his First Annual Message in 1825, his words spread at the pace of a horse. When Abraham Lincoln gave his Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, telegraphs, locomotives, and steamships conveyed his words much faster throughout the Union and beyond. The very next day *The New York Times* had already reprinted the speech in full,[52] as had numerous other newspapers from *The Portland Daily Press* in Maine to the *Ottumwa Courier* in Iowa.[53]

As befitting a democracy with strong self-correcting mechanisms in place, the president's speech sparked a lively conversation rather than universal applause. Most newspapers lauded it, but some expressed their doubts. *The Chicago Times* wrote on November 20 that "the cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat and dishwatery utterances" of President Lincoln.[54] *The Patriot & Union,* a local newspaper in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, also blasted "the silly remarks of the President" and hoped that "the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall be no more repeated or thought of."[55] Though the country was in the midst of a civil war, journalists were free to publicly criticize—and even ridicule—the president.

Fast-forward a century, and things really picked up speed. For the first time in history, new technologies allowed masses of people, spread over vast swaths of territory, to connect *in real time.* In 1960, about seventy million Americans (39 percent of the total population), dispersed over the North

American continent and beyond, watched the Nixon-Kennedy presidential debates live on television, with millions more listening on the radio.[56] The only effort viewers and listeners had to make was to press a button while sitting in their homes. Large-scale democracy had now become feasible. Millions of people separated by thousands of kilometers could conduct informed and meaningful public debates about the rapidly evolving issues of the day. By 1960, all adult Americans were theoretically eligible to vote, and close to seventy million (about 64 percent of the electorate) actually did so—though millions of Blacks and other disenfranchised groups were prevented from voting through various voter-suppression schemes.[57]

As always, we should beware of technological determinism and of concluding that the rise of mass media led to the rise of large-scale democracy. Mass media made large-scale democracy possible, rather than inevitable. And it also made possible other types of regimes. In particular, the new information technologies of the modern age opened the door for large-scale totalitarian regimes. Like Nixon and Kennedy, Stalin and Khrushchev could say something over the radio and be heard instantaneously by hundreds of millions of people from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad. They could also receive daily reports by phone and telegraph from millions of secret police agents and informers. If a newspaper in Vladivostok or Kaliningrad wrote that the supreme leader's latest speech was silly (as happened to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address), then everyone involved—from the editor in chief to the typesetters—would likely have received a visit from the KGB.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TOTALITARIANISM

Totalitarian systems assume their own infallibility, and seek total control over the totality of people's lives. Before the invention of the telegraph, radio, and other modern information technology, large-scale totalitarian regimes were impossible. Roman emperors, Abbasid caliphs, and Mongol khans were often ruthless autocrats who believed they were infallible, but they did not have the apparatus necessary to impose totalitarian control over large societies. To

understand this, we should first clarify the difference between totalitarian regimes and less extreme autocratic regimes. In an autocratic network, there are no legal limits on the will of the ruler, but there are nevertheless a lot of technical limits. In a totalitarian network, many of these technical limits are absent.[58]

For example, in autocratic regimes like the Roman Empire, the Abbasid Empire, and the Mongol Empire, rulers could usually execute any person who displeased them, and if some law got in their way, they could ignore or change the law. The emperor Nero arranged the murder of his mother, Agrippina, and his wife, Octavia, and forced his mentor Seneca to commit suicide. Nero also executed or exiled some of the most respected and powerful Roman aristocrats merely for voicing dissent or telling jokes about him.[59]

While autocratic rulers like Nero could execute anyone who did or said something that displeased them, they couldn't know what most people in their empire were doing or saying. Theoretically, Nero could issue an order that any person in the Roman Empire who criticized or insulted the emperor must be severely punished. Yet there were no technical means for implementing such an order. Roman historians like Tacitus portray Nero as a bloodthirsty tyrant who instigated an unprecedented reign of terror. But this was a very limited type of terror. Although he executed or exiled a number of family members, aristocrats, and senators within his orbit, ordinary Romans in the city's slums and provincials in distant towns like Jerusalem and Londinium could speak their mind much more freely.[60]

Modern totalitarian regimes like the Stalinist U.S.S.R. instigated terror on an altogether different scale. Totalitarianism is the attempt to control what every person throughout the country is doing and saying every moment of the day, and potentially even what every person is thinking and feeling. Nero might have dreamed about such powers, but he lacked the means to realize them. Given the limited tax base of the agrarian Roman economy, Nero couldn't employ many people in his service. He could place informers at the dinner parties of Roman senators, but he had only about 10,000 imperial

administrators[61] and 350,000 soldiers[62] to control the rest of the empire, and he lacked the technology to communicate with them swiftly.

Nero and his fellow emperors had an even bigger problem ensuring the loyalty of the administrators and soldiers they *did* have on their payroll. No Roman emperor was ever toppled by a democratic revolution like the ones that deposed Louis XVI, Nicolae Ceauşescu, or Hosni Mubarak. Instead, dozens of emperors were assassinated or deposed by their own generals, officials, bodyguards, or family members.[63] Nero himself was overthrown by a revolt of the governor of Hispania, Galba. Six months later Galba was ousted by Otho, the governor of Lusitania. Within three months, Otho was deposed by Vittelius, commander of the Rhine army. Vitellius lasted about eight months before he was defeated and killed by Vespasian, commander of the army in Judaea. Being killed by a rebellious subordinate was the biggest occupational hazard not just for Roman emperors but for almost all premodern autocrats.

Emperors, caliphs, shahs, and kings found it a huge challenge to keep their subordinates in check. Rulers consequently focused their attention on controlling the military and the taxation system. Roman emperors had the authority to interfere in the local affairs of any province or city, and they sometimes exercised that authority, but this was usually done in response to a specific petition sent by a local community or official,[64] rather than as part of some empire-wide totalitarian Five-Year Plan. If you were a mule driver in Pompeii or a shepherd in Roman Britain, Nero didn't want to control your daily routines or to police the jokes you told. As long as you paid your taxes and didn't resist the legions, that was good enough for Nero.

SPARTA AND QIN

Some scholars claim that despite the technological difficulties there were attempts to establish totalitarian regimes in ancient times. The most common example cited is Sparta. According to this interpretation, Spartans were ruled by a totalitarian regime that micromanaged every aspect of their lives—from

whom they married to what they ate. However, while the Spartan regime was certainly draconian, it actually included several self-correcting mechanisms that prevented power from being monopolized by a single person or faction. Political authority was divided between two kings, five ephors (senior magistrates), twenty-eight members of the Gerousia council, and the popular assembly. Important decisions—such as whether to go to war—often involved fierce public debates.

Moreover, irrespective of how we evaluate the nature of Sparta's regime, it is clear that the same technological limitations that confined ancient Athenian democracy to a single city also limited the scope of the Spartan political experiment. After winning the Peloponnesian War, Sparta installed military garrisons and pro-Spartan governments in numerous Greek cities, requiring them to follow its lead in foreign policy and sometimes also pay tribute. But unlike the U.S.S.R. after World War II, Sparta after the Peloponnesian War did not try to expand or export its system. Sparta couldn't construct an information network big and dense enough to control the lives of ordinary people in every Greek town and village.[65]

A much more ambitious totalitarian project might have been launched by the Qin dynasty in ancient China (221–206 BCE). After defeating all the other Warring States, the Qin ruler Qin Shi Huang controlled a huge empire with tens of millions of subjects, who belonged to numerous different ethnic groups, spoke diverse languages, and were loyal to various local traditions and elites. To cement its power, the victorious Qin regime tried to dismantle any regional powers that might challenge its authority. It confiscated the lands and wealth of local aristocrats and forced regional elites to move to the imperial capital of Xiangyang, thereby separating them from their power base and monitoring them more easily.

The Qin regime also embarked on a ruthless campaign of centralization and homogenization. It created a new simplified script to be used throughout the empire and standardized coinage, weights, and measurements. It built a road network radiating out of Xiangyang, with standardized rest houses, relay stations, and military checkpoints. People needed written permits in order to