

Hannah Arendt's Conception of Totalitarianism

While Hannah Arendt's work, The Origins of Totalitarianism was groundbreaking in its time and introduced the idea of totalitarianism as a novel political phenomenon, her theories are limited by the contradictions present within her arguments. These contradictions are particularly present in her discussion of the structural qualities of totalitarianism. Her arguments regarding the psychological explanations for how totalitarian movements come about, attain power, and are perpetuated are particularly compelling and not hindered by the inconsistencies present elsewhere in the book.

Arendt's explanation of the rise of totalitarian movements in the early 20th century hinge upon the concept of the "atomized man," someone who felt completely disconnected from all organizations and institutions, and was thus able to be swept up into the total sublimation of the self required by totalitarian ideologies. This willingness to sacrifice the self seemed to be a "...salvation from the automatic identification with pre-established functions in society and their utter banality, and at the same time to help destroy the functioning itself."¹ For those who had just lived through the unbelievable cruelty and waste of human life that was World War I, committing themselves to a movement whose ideology was based upon a certain level of cruelty was a way to combat the bourgeois and hypocritical liberal humanitarian ideals of the time. Joining a totalitarian movement was the ultimate renunciation of the status quo, and did indeed attract a disproportionate number of society's outcasts.

Totalitarian ideologies were devoted to the attainment of a utopian future world (whether race or class-based) and were so powerful precisely because they were so removed from the

¹ Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979. Pg 331.

average citizen's daily existence. By focusing on the achievement of a paradisiacal world rule, which would be achieved due to the supra-human forces of history (although it would take longer without the help of mankind), these ideologies were able to create a pseudo-religious fervor in their adherents. The leader of the totalitarian movement maintained power through his ability to correct interpret and predict the historical trends upon which the ideology was based, and which would direct the movements' course of action. The semi-religious nature of these ideologies made it impossible for a doubter to reason with adherents. Totalitarian ideologies "...presented disagreements as invariably originating in the deep natural, social, or psychological sources beyond the control of the individual..."² Prophecies and faith-based movements cannot be held accountable to logic, reasoning, or even facts.

The global ambitions of totalitarian movements allow them to demand complete self-sacrifice from their adherents, even before they attain power. As the ideology will, in time, encompass the entire human race, it would be absurd for followers not to be totally and unconditionally loyal and uncritical towards the movement.³ The prophetic nature of the leader's interpretation of totalitarian ideology does have its drawbacks, however. As the ideology is based on supra-human trends and the leader is the only person who is able to interpret these, the leader must be infallible. While totalitarian ideologies cannot be disputed through rational arguments from outsiders, inconsistencies within the movement might prove to cause disillusionment amongst the followers and potentially even be fatal to the movement itself. The leader must thus do everything within his power to make his prophecies come true, even if this means subverting

² Arendt. Pg 312.

³ Arendt. Pg 323.

the expressed aims of the original ideology.⁴ Once again, this shows how totalitarian movements can never be completely secure without world domination, for only in a world completely under the totalitarian leader's control can he manipulate actions so that he is never incorrect.

Arendt argues that structurally, "Nothing is more characteristic of the totalitarian movements in general and of the quality of fame of their leaders in particular than the startling swiftness with which they are forgotten and the startling ease with which they can be replaced."⁵ While theoretically this appears plausible, it is difficult to think of two leaders who have remained more enduring in the public consciousness than Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin – the two leaders that Arendt points to as exemplifying totalitarian movements. Although the notion that the actual person who leads a totalitarian movement is not as important as the fact that they have manipulated the governmental system to such a degree that they wield an unheard of amount of power in the individual citizen's life fits in well with Arendt's theories regarding the ephemeral structure of totalitarian governments, it does not correlate with the historical examples of totalitarianism. Some credence must be given to Raymond Aron's assertion that particular personalities matter; that to "...pass from the potential to the actual...something quite unique was needed – Stalin himself."⁶ Aron believes that while many autocratic regimes have the potential to become totalitarian, there must be a specific personality who is able to take the movement to such an extreme situation. Arendt would disagree with this assertion, as she

⁴ Arendt. Pg 350.

⁵ Arendt. Pg 305.

⁶ Aron, Raymond. Democracy and Totalitarianism: A Theory of Political Systems. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1965. Pg 202.

believed that totalitarianism was a completely novel form of government, not a matter of degree of extremism.

The inapplicability of Arendt's assertion on the importance of a specific totalitarian leader as compared to historical events is further heightened through her own contradictory statements. Later on in the book, when describing the amorphous hierarchy that she believes characterizes a totalitarian state, Arendt argues "...its whole hierarchy has been efficiently trained for a single purpose – swiftly to communicate the will of the Leader to all ranks. When this has been achieved, the Leader is irreplaceable because the whole complicated structure of the movement would lose its *raison d'être* without his command."⁷ Although it could be contended that Arendt is merely stating that there must always be a supreme leader, as opposed to a specific person remaining in power, this seems unconvincing. I tend to find Arendt's second assertion more compelling because it places a higher premium on the specific personality of the leader within a totalitarian system and the level to which the entire governmental structure is merely a reflection of their accumulation of power.

Arendt further contradicts herself when discussing the role of terror and violence within a totalitarian system. She begins by stating that violence is predominantly used by totalitarian movements in their initial power-seeking stage to frighten their political opposition. Later on, she argues, terrorism is used simply to further their ideological objectives.⁸ This makes sense as intuitively it seems as if totalitarian governments would minimize their use of terrorism once in power. However, later on Arendt states that, "Terror continues to be used by totalitarian regimes even when its psychological aims are achieved: its real horror is that it reigns over a completely

⁷ Arendt. Pg 374.

⁸ Arendt. Pg 341.

subdued population.”⁹ This contradiction confuses the reader as to the actual role of terror by a totalitarian government once in power. Although intuitively it seems as if violence would be decreased once the movement attained power, we know that historically this was not the case. It could be argued that all of the violent and terroristic actions which were undertaken in Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union were done for the purpose of fulfilling their ideological goals. The totalitarian governments would certainly maintain this was the case. In addition, it could be argued that whether or not the violence committed worked towards maintaining a feeling of instability within the state, which would have helped to solidify the power of the totalitarian government.

While Arendt does an exemplary job of explaining the psychological reasons behind the appearance of totalitarian governments in post-World War I society, her contradictions when discussing the structural nature of these movements significantly detracts from her arguments. The ideologies which totalitarian movements upheld attracted the atomized masses of the early 20th century, who felt that by subsuming themselves in a supra-human belief system which explicitly upheld the importance of cruelty, they were combating the liberal hypocritical nature of contemporary society. The global aspirations of these movements prevented their adherents from expressing any criticism of the ideology or those working on behalf of it. In addition, totalitarian leaders were motivated to global domination in order to ensure that their prophecies would come true. Arendt’s view of the importance of a totalitarian movement’s leader’s personality is muddled, but I feel that some significance must be attributed to Aron’s argument that it takes a specific personality to move from a totalitarian possibility to an actuality. Again,

⁹ Arendt. Pg 344.

contradictions limit the usefulness of Arendt's views on the role on terror within a totalitarian movement that has attained power.