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## **Towards a Critique of the Category of Totalitarianism**

### **A polysemous category**

Already in 1951, when Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was first published, the concept of totalitarianism had been debated for decades. And yet, the meaning of the term still lacks a proper definition. Is it possible to find a way through what appears to be a maze? In this article, I shall not examine the examples in which the adjective 'totalitarian', even more than the noun that derives from it, bears a positive connotation. In other words, I shall not concentrate on the positive use of the term 'totalitarian' with reference to the capacity, attributed to a religion or to any ideology or world view, to posit solutions to *all* of the many problems that arise from a dramatic situation, or even to answer the question of the meaning of life, a question that concerns humans in their *totality*. In 1958, though rejecting 'legal totalitarianism', that is, totalitarianism imposed by the law, Karl Barth extolled the universalistic impulse and the all-encompassing effectiveness of the Christian 'message': 'The free grace of the Gospel, too, is "totalitarian", because it

aims at the *whole*, it demands all human beings, and demands each of them *totally* for itself'.<sup>1</sup>

Here, instead, I shall focus on the political debate. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno hardly discuss the USSR. Besides dealing with the Third Reich, they analyse 'totalitarian capitalism':

Previously only the poor and savages had been exposed to the untrammelled force of the capitalist elements. But the totalitarian order has granted unlimited rights to calculating thought and puts its trust in science as such. Its canon is its own brutal efficiency.<sup>2</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno consider the stages that paved the way to Nazism to be not only the violence perpetrated by the great Western powers against the colonial peoples, but also the violence perpetrated, in the very heart of the capitalistic metropolis, against the poor and outcasts locked in the workhouses. Simone Weil, another author influenced to some extent by Marxism, held to a similar perspective. Though Weil occasionally compared Hitler's Germany to Stalin's Soviet Union, when she denounced the horror of total power, of totalitarianism, she referred primarily to colonialism and imperialism: 'The similarity between Hitler's system and ancient Rome is so astounding that one is tempted to believe that, two thousand years later, only Hitler was able to faithfully copy the Romans'.<sup>3</sup> Between the Roman Empire and the Third Reich, we find Louis XIV's unbridled and unscrupulous expansionism: 'The regime he established already deserved, for the first time in Europe after Rome, the modern epithet of totalitarian'; 'the dreadful destruction of the Palatinate [carried out by the French conquering troops] was not even justified by the circumstances of a war'.<sup>4</sup> Moving backwards from ancient Rome, Weil gave a proto-totalitarian interpretation to the biblical event of the conquest of Canaan and the annihilation of its people.

Consider some liberal thinkers. In tracing the genesis of 'totalitarian democracy', Jacob Talmon comes to the following conclusion:

If . . . empiricism is the ally of freedom, and the doctrinaire spirit is the friend of totalitarianism, the idea of man as an *abstraction*, independent of the

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<sup>1</sup> In Pombeni 1977, pp. 324–5. Italics are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 43, 67–8.

<sup>3</sup> Weil 1990, pp. 218–19.

<sup>4</sup> Weil 1990, pp. 204, 206.

historic groups to which he belongs, is likely to become a powerful vehicle of totalitarianism.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Talmon's targets are the *Declaration of Human Rights* and the French revolutionary tradition as a whole (not only Rousseau, but also Sieyès).

As for Hayek, 'the tendencies that culminated in the creation of totalitarian systems are not confined to the countries that later succumbed to them',<sup>6</sup> and they are not limited to the communist and Nazi-fascist movements. With regard to Austria in particular:

It was not the Fascists but the socialists who began to collect children from the tenderest age into political organisations to make sure that they grew up as good proletarians. It was not the Fascists but the socialists who first thought of organising sports and games, football and hiking, in party clubs where the members would not be infected by other views. It was the socialists who first insisted that the party member should distinguish himself from others by the modes of greeting and the forms of address.

Hayek can therefore conclude: 'The idea of a political party that encompasses all of the activities of an individual, from the cradle to the grave', and that radiates a general *Weltanschauung*, this idea is associated first of all with the socialist movement.<sup>7</sup> Behind this movement is a much older tradition that can be found, as Hayek – the father of neo-laissez-faire – will observe later on, in "'social" or totalitarian democracy'.<sup>8</sup> At any rate, 'economic control and totalitarianism' are strictly connected.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, if, on the one hand, colonialism and imperialism are the main (though not the exclusive) indicted phenomena, on the other hand, the principal (though not exclusive) target of the polemic is the revolutionary tradition that from 1789 leads to 1917, passing through the 1848 demand for the right to work and the "'social" or totalitarian democracy'.

At this point, a further distinction can be made. So-called 'leftist' totalitarianism can be criticised from two quite different perspectives. It can either be regarded as the product of the unfortunate organicist ideology attributed to Marx, Rousseau, or even Sieyès (this is Talmon's and Hayek's

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<sup>5</sup> Talmon 1960, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hayek 1986, pp. 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> Hayek 1986, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> Hayek 1960, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Hayek 1986, Ch. VII.

approach); or it can be discussed by examining the material characteristics of the countries in which Communist totalitarianism has prevailed. This is the method used by Karl Wittfogel: the ‘comparative study of total power’ – reads the subtitle of his book – shows that this phenomenon manifests itself especially in the East, in a ‘hydraulic society’ characterised by an attempt to achieve total control over the necessary hydraulic resources for the development of agriculture and for the actual survival of the people. In this context, far from being the forefather of Communist totalitarianism, Marx is its critic *ante litteram*, as emerges from his analysis and denunciation of ‘Oriental despotism’, to borrow a category used by Wittfogel in the very title of his book.<sup>10</sup>

However, the implication is that ‘total power’ is not exclusively linked to the twentieth century, and therefore a further distinction is necessary. While Arendt insists on the novelty of the totalitarian phenomenon, Popper comes to an opposite conclusion. According to Popper, the conflict between the ‘open society and its enemies’ seems to be eternal: ‘What we now call totalitarianism belongs to a tradition which is just as old or just as young as our civilisation itself’.<sup>11</sup>

One final remark on this: we have seen that totalitarianism can be denounced from the right or from the left. Yet, in some cases, the denunciation comes from circles and figures associated with Nazism, and it is directed exclusively against its enemies. In August 1941, during the campaign, or rather, the war of extermination against the Soviet Union, faced with a relentless and unforeseen resistance, the German General Halder explained away such resistance with the claim that the enemies had carefully prepared for the war ‘with the absolute lack of scruples typical of a totalitarian State’.<sup>12</sup> Although he did not use the term ‘totalitarianism’, Goebbels explained the unexpected, unprecedented resistance that the invading army encountered in the East in a similar manner: by erasing every trace of free personality, Bolshevism ‘transforms men into robots’, ‘war robots’, ‘mechanised robots’.<sup>13</sup> The accusation of totalitarianism can even be targeted at the Western enemies of the Axis. In 1937, the aspiration of fascist Italy to form a colonial empire of its own clashed with the hostility that came first of all from England, and thus England

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<sup>10</sup> Wittfogel 1959.

<sup>11</sup> Popper 1966, Vol. 1, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> In Ruge-Schumann 1977, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Goebbels 1991, Vol. 2, pp. 163, 183.

was condemned for its ‘cold, totalitarian discrimination against all that is not simply English’.<sup>14</sup>

### **The turn of the Cold War and Hannah Arendt’s contribution**

Since the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the polysemies of the debate we have briefly discussed have tended to be dispelled. In May 1948, Arendt denounced the ‘development of totalitarian methods’ in Israel, referring to ‘terrorism’ and the expulsion and deportation of the Arab population.<sup>15</sup> Only three years later, no room was left for criticism directed against the contemporary West. And, now more than ever, the only politically-correct position was the one that targeted exclusively Hitler’s Germany and the Soviet Union.

This position triumphed during the Cold War and onwards. On 12 March 1947, Harry Truman proclaimed the ‘doctrine’ named after him: after the victory in the war against Germany and Japan, a new phase in the struggle for freedom had begun. The menace now came from the Soviet Union: ‘totalitarian regimes imposed on free peoples, by direct or indirect aggression, undermine the foundations of international peace and hence the security of the United States’.<sup>16</sup>

The point is clearly indicated here: one should not move backwards from the twentieth century. Besides, it would make no sense to attack the socialists alongside the Communists; however serious their past faults might have been, the socialists were now usually allies of the Western world. And to use an approach similar to the one that would later be proposed by Wittfogel would be misleading for two reasons. The category of ‘Oriental despotism’ could hardly legitimate a US intervention, for example, in the civil war that broke out in China (where, immediately after the proclamation of his doctrine, and precisely in the name of the struggle against totalitarianism, Truman pledged to support Chiang Kai-shek).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, insisting on the actual conditions, which would explain the affirmation of ‘total power’, would make the condemnation of Communists more difficult and less aggressive. For this

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<sup>14</sup> Scarfoglio 1999, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt 1989, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> In Commager 1963, Vol. 2, p. 525.

<sup>17</sup> See Mao’s argument against the American Secretary of State, Dean Acheson (the speech is dated 28 August 1949).

reason, the deductivist approach ended up prevailing. The Cold War took on the shape of an international civil war, one that tore apart all countries transversally. The best way for the Western world to face this war was to establish itself as the champion in the struggle against the new totalitarianism, which was labelled as the necessary and inevitable consequence of Communist ideology and programme.

Where does Arendt's contribution fit in this context? Immediately following its publication, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was harshly criticised by Golo Mann:

The first two parts of the work deal with the prehistory of the total State. Here, however, readers will not find what they usually encounter in similar studies, that is, researches on the peculiar history of Germany, Italy, or Russia. . . . Instead, Hannah Arendt dedicates two thirds of her work to anti-semitism and imperialism, especially English-style imperialism. I cannot follow her. . . . Only in the third part, which represents the goal of the whole book, does Hannah Arendt really seem to tackle the subject.<sup>18</sup>

What Mann considered to be essentially off-topic are the pages dedicated to antisemitism and imperialism. And, yet, the point was to explain the genesis of a régime like Hitler's, which overtly aimed at creating, in Central and Eastern Europe, a great colonial empire based upon the dominion of a pure, white, Aryan race, once the Jewish germ of subversion, which fuelled the revolt of *Untermenschen* and inferior races, had been exterminated once and for all.

However, Golo Mann grasps an actual problem. How can the last part of Arendt's book, which exclusively targets Stalin's USSR and the Third Reich, coexist harmoniously with the first two parts, where Arendt criticises France (for its antisemitism) and particularly England (for its imperialism)? England was the country that played a central and ruinous role in the struggle against the French Revolution: Edmund Burke did not limit himself to defending the feudal nobility on an internal level, but he enlarged 'the principle of these privileges to include the whole English people, establishing them as a kind of nobility among nations'. This is where the genesis of racism, 'the main ideological weapon of imperialistic politics', must be sought.<sup>19</sup> Understandably,

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<sup>18</sup> Mann 1951.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt 1958, pp. 176, 160.

then, these unsettling ideologies took root particularly in England, where they fed off England's obsession with 'inheritance theories and their modern equivalent, eugenics'. Disraeli's position was not very different from Gobineau's: both were devoted defenders of 'race',<sup>20</sup> though only Disraeli succeeded in securing positions of such power and prestige. Furthermore, it was above all in English colonies that a power free of the limitations of the capitalistic metropolis began to be theorised and experimented against 'subject races'. Already within the English Empire, there emerged the temptation to use 'administrative massacres' as instruments to maintain supremacy.<sup>21</sup> This is the starting point for understanding the ideology and practice of the Third Reich. Arendt's portrait of Lord Cromer was rather similar to the one she would later give of Adolf Eichmann: the banality of evil seems to find its initial feeble embodiment in the British 'imperialist administrator' who, in his 'indifference and aloofness, in [his] genuine lack of interest in [his] subjects', develops a 'philosophy of the bureaucrat' and 'a new form of governing', 'a more dangerous form of governing than despotism and arbitrariness'.<sup>22</sup> Arendt's criticism of Cromer is quite harsh, but it mysteriously disappears in the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The fact is that Arendt's book is actually made up of two different layers, which were written during two different periods, and are separated by the momentous mark constituted by the outbreak of the Cold War. Still in France, Arendt viewed the book she was writing 'as a comprehensive work on anti-semitism and imperialism', and a historical investigation on what she then called "'racial imperialism", the most extreme form of the suppression of minority nations by the ruling nation of a sovereign state'.<sup>23</sup> At that moment, far from being a target, the USSR was, rather, a model. It had to be credited – as Arendt observed in the fall of 1942 (after moving to the United States and following, from there, Hitler's Operation Barbarossa) – with having 'simply eliminated anti-semitism' by means of 'a right and quite modern solution to the national question'.<sup>24</sup> In *Zionism Reconsidered*, written in October 1945, Arendt made an even more significant remark:

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<sup>20</sup> Arendt 1958, pp. 176, 183.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt 1958, pp. 131, 133–4, 216.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt 1958, pp. 211, 212, 213.

<sup>23</sup> Young-Bruehl 1984, p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> Arendt, 1989, p. 193.

What every political and national movement in our times should give its utmost attention to with respect to Russia – namely, its entirely new and successful approach to nationality conflicts, its new form of *organizing* different peoples on the basis of national equity – has been neglected by friends and foes alike.<sup>25</sup>

I have chosen to use the italics to emphasise the overturning of position that would take place a few years later, when Stalin would be accused of purposely disjointing the existing organisations in order to artificially produce the amorphous mass that constituted the basis for the advent of totalitarianism.

According to the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, what characterises Communist totalitarianism is the sacrifice, inspired and stimulated by Marx, of morals on the altar of the philosophy of history and its ‘necessary’ laws. In January 1946, however, Arendt had expressed herself in very different terms:

In the country which made Disraeli its Prime Minister, the Jew Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital*, a book which in its fanatical zeal for justice, carried on the Jewish tradition much more efficaciously than all the success of the ‘chosen man of the chosen race’.<sup>26</sup>

As a theorist of justice, Marx is seen here quite positively, and in sharp contrast to an English Prime Minister who formulated theories which would later be inherited and radicalised by the Third Reich.

During the passage from the first two parts of the book, which still possess the vehemence of the struggle against Nazism, to the third, which is instead tied to the outbreak of the Cold War, the category of imperialism (a category subsuming first of all Great Britain and the Third Reich as a sort of highest stage of imperialism) is replaced by the category of totalitarianism (which subsumes Stalin’s USSR and the Third Reich).

The *species* of the *genus* of imperialism do not coincide with the *species* of the *genus* of totalitarianism. Even the species that apparently remains unchanged, that is Germany, is described in the first case as originating with Wilhelm II at the earliest, and in the second case it appears as late as 1933. At least with regard to formal coherence, the initial plan appears to be more rigorous. After clarifying the genus of ‘imperialism’, in tracing the specific

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<sup>25</sup> Arendt 1978c, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt 1978a, p. 110.

differences of this phenomenon, the initial plan moved on to analyse the species of 'racial imperialism'. But how could the categories of totalitarianism and imperialism now blend together into a coherent whole? And what relationship connected them both to the category of antisemitism? Arendt's answers to these questions seem to seek an artificial harmonisation between two levels that continue to be scarcely compatible.

Rather than being one single book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* consists in reality of two overlapping books which, despite the adjustments later made by Arendt, fail to achieve any substantial unity. Renowned historians and historians of ideas (Carr and Stuart Hughes) reviewed the work with respect and occasionally with admiration, but they immediately noticed the disproportion between Arendt's actual and thorough knowledge of the Third Reich, and her inaccurate understanding of the Soviet Union. In particular, they emphasised the difficulties in Arendt's attempt to adapt the analysis of the Soviet Union (associated with the outbreak of the Cold War) to the analysis of the Third Reich (rooted in the years of the great coalition against fascism and Nazism).<sup>27</sup>

### **The Cold War and the later adjustments of the category of totalitarianism**

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt spoke of concentration camps always and exclusively in relation to the USSR and the Third Reich. What is particularly striking is the fact that Arendt did not even mention her own direct experience of this total institution: together with many other Germans who had fled Nazi Germany and had been considered suspicious after the outbreak of the war because they were citizens of an enemy state, Arendt had been confined for some time in Gurs. The living conditions must have been quite harsh: the common feeling – Arendt writes in 1943 – was that 'we had been shipped there "pour crever" [to croak] in any case', to the point that some of the inmates briefly considered the possibility of 'suicide' as a 'collective act' of protest.<sup>28</sup>

When *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published, concentration camps were a sinisterly vital institution in Yugoslavia, as well, though inmates were,

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<sup>27</sup> Gleason 1995, pp. 112–3, 257, note 30.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt 1978b, p. 59.

in that case, the Communists who remained loyal to Stalin. More generally, in this Balkan country, dictatorship was certainly no less strict than in Eastern Europe. However, in the case of Yugoslavia, which had sided with the Western world after the break with the USSR, ‘many aspects of despotism’ could be recognised, but nothing more than that, as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles affirmed in 1953.<sup>29</sup> Dulles’s position is somehow confirmed by Arendt’s silence with regards to this point.

Further proof of the impact of the Cold War can be furnished: ‘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’. Arendt assimilated fascist Italy with Franco’s Spain and Salazar’s Portugal.<sup>30</sup>

The accusation of totalitarianism spared Spain, Portugal, and Yugoslavia itself, but it struck or grazed even unexpected countries:

The chances for totalitarian rule are frighteningly good in the lands of traditional Oriental despotism, in India and China, where there is almost inexhaustible material to feed the power-accumulating and man-destroying machinery of total domination, and where, moreover, the mass man’s typical feeling of superfluousness – an entirely new phenomenon in Europe, the concomitant of mass unemployment and the population growth of the last 150 years – has been prevalent for centuries in the contempt for the value of human life.<sup>31</sup>

It is worth pointing out the fact that, despite its parliamentary régime, India was at the time allied with the USSR!

As we have said, according to Arendt, what characterised Communist totalitarianism was the sacrifice, inspired and stimulated by Marx, of morals on the altar of the philosophy of history and its necessitarian laws. The same argument presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* reappeared in a contribution, dated March 1949, by Dean Acheson, the United States Secretary of State during the Truman administration: NATO was the expression of the Atlantic and Western community, a community united ‘by common institutions and moral and ethical beliefs’ against a world that would not hearken to the

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<sup>29</sup> In Hofstadter 1982, Vol. II, p. 439.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt 1958, pp. 308–9.

<sup>31</sup> Arendt 1958, p. 311.

reasons of morals, indeed, a world inspired by the 'Communist belief that coercion by force is a proper method of hastening the inevitable'.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the substantial concessions to the ideological atmosphere of the Cold War, something of the original plan for *The Origins of Totalitarianism* continued to survive even in the third part of the book. What is immediately noticeable here is the distinction between Lenin's revolutionary dictatorship and Stalin's strictly totalitarian régime. Breaking with the Tsarist politics of oppression against minority nations, Lenin organised as many nationalities as possible, promoting the rise of a national and cultural awareness even among the most backward ethnic groups, which, for the first time, succeeded in organising themselves as autonomous cultural and national entities. Something similar occurred with the other forms of social and political organisation, as well: trade unions, for example, achieved an organisational autonomy they had never possessed in Tsarist Russia. All of this represented an antidote to the totalitarian régime, which presupposed a direct, immediate relationship between a charismatic leader, on one side, and an amorphous, atomised mass, on the other. The articulated structure built by Lenin was systematically dismantled by Stalin, who, in order to establish his totalitarian régime, had to disorganise the masses, so as to render them the object of the charismatic, undisputed power of the infallible leader.<sup>33</sup>

How can the shift from Lenin to Stalin be explained? And why was the articulated, organised society that had emerged out of the revolution unable to oppose the systematic tactics of disarticulation and disorganisation that led to the imposition of the totalitarian régime? According to Arendt, 'there is no doubt that Lenin suffered his greatest defeat when, with the outbreak of the civil war, the supreme power that he originally planned to concentrate in the Soviets definitively passed into the hands of the party bureaucracy'.<sup>34</sup> The shift toward a totalitarian régime, then, was not the inevitable result of an ideological original sin (Marx's history of philosophy); it was, first and foremost, the result of specific historical circumstances which directly put into question the responsibility of the Western powers, of the countries that had a consolidated liberal tradition and that were committed to fuelling, in any possible way, the anti-Bolshevik civil war. Incidentally, it is unclear how

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<sup>32</sup> In Hofstadter 1982, Vol. II, p. 428.

<sup>33</sup> Arendt 1958, pp. 318–9.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt 1958, p. 319.

the association, made by Arendt in the third part of her book, between Bolshevism and Nazism can still hold: it was Lenin, not Stalin, who founded the Bolshevik Party. And, above all, the accusation against Marx is hardly justified. Yet, according to Arendt, in his political strategy, Lenin was guided more by his instinct as a great statesman than by Marxist ideology as such. In reality, the steps taken to emancipate national minorities were preceded by a long, complex debate that revolved precisely around the national question examined from a Marxist perspective.

The change between the initial project and the actual composition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* involved a fluctuation on a methodological level, as well. On the one hand, Arendt indulged in a deductivist interpretation of the totalitarian phenomenon, one clearly similar to that of the liberal authors we have already mentioned: she interpreted Stalin's totalitarianism as the logical, inevitable consequence of Marxist ideology. On the other hand, Arendt was forced to make reference to the peculiar historical conditions that explained the advent of Stalin's totalitarian régime: civil war, international aggression by the Entente powers (though Arendt does not mention it), the undoing of organisational structures, and so forth. The distinction between Leninism and Stalinism, between revolutionary dictatorship and the subsequent totalitarian régime, interrupts the strict, merely ideological, line of continuity established by Hayek and Talmon in order to connect Marx to totalitarianism.

Not by chance, this distinction was one of the targets of Golo Mann's criticism. Another, even more relevant, target was represented by the first two parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in their entirety. Besides the reservations Mann expressed in his review, his conversation with Karl Jaspers (which Mann quotes in *Erinnerungen und Gedanken*) is particularly eloquent. Here, Mann urged Jaspers to move away from the heretical positions held by his disciple:

Do you believe that English imperialism, and especially Lord Cromer in Egypt, has something to do with the totalitarian State? Or French anti-semitism, the Dreyfus case? 'Is that what she wrote?' 'Certainly; she devotes three chapters to it'. Blindly trusting his dear friend, he [Jaspers] had recommended her book, which he himself had only read briefly.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Mann 1991, pp. 232–3.

Golo Mann was right. With regards to totalitarianism, Jaspers was unquestionably more orthodox than Arendt. And Arendt herself ended up yielding to the influences of the criticism directed against her, as emerges particularly in her essay, *On Revolution*. Here, Marx is regarded as the author of the 'most pernicious doctrine of the modern age, namely that life is the highest good, and that the life process of society is the very centre of human endeavour'. The result is catastrophic:

This development led Marx into an actual surrender of freedom to necessity. He did what his teacher in revolution, Robespierre, had done before him and what his greatest disciple, Lenin, was to do after him in the most momentous revolution his teachings have ever inspired.<sup>36</sup>

'The fanatical zeal for justice', which Arendt wrote about in 1946 and which had for the most part disappeared only five years later, had now completely vanished, and not only with regards to Marx. The most relevant shift was another: the line of continuity that led from Marx to totalitarianism (passing through Lenin) was now smooth and even. Behind Marx was the influence of the French Revolution, which Arendt condemned as well, thus moving further away from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The change in Arendt's position, now atrophied into Talmon and Hayek's deductivist approach, is now clear, as is the triumph achieved by Golo Mann. Beyond the concessions granted to Mann by Arendt, what prevails today is a reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that seems to take into account the ideological preoccupations he expressed. Indeed, concerning the debate on totalitarianism, is there anyone today who still remembers Lord Cromer and his 'new form of governing', 'a more dangerous form of governing than despotism'? Who mentions the temptation to use 'administrative massacres', a temptation that follows the history of imperialism like a shadow? Who discusses the category of imperialism anymore? Of the two parts that make up Arendt's book, the one commonly used and examined is the less valid section, the one more burdened by immediate ideological and political preoccupations. In his review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Golo Mann summarised his criticism thus: 'It is all too subtle, too intelligent, too artificial. . . . In short, on the whole we would have preferred a more vigorous,

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt 1963, pp. 58–9.

more positive tone'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the theory of totalitarianism later became less 'subtle', more 'vigorous' and more 'positive', fully meeting the needs of the Cold War. A product of organicism, or of right-wing or left-wing holism, and somehow inferable *a priori* from this poisoned ideological source, totalitarianism (in both its opposite configurations) explains all of the horror of the twentieth century: such is today the predominant vulgate.

### **The theory of totalitarianism and the selection of twentieth-century horrors**

This vulgate does not even attempt to investigate some of the major catastrophes of the century, though it nevertheless insists on explaining them. Let us move backwards from the October Revolution, which is supposed to constitute the starting point of the totalitarian era. How, then, should the First World War be regarded, with its total mobilisation, its total regimentation, its executions and decimations even within one's own camp, its ruthless collective punishments that included, for instance, the deportation and extermination of the Armenians? And, even earlier, how should the Balkan wars and their massacres be viewed? And still proceeding backwards, what interpretation should be given to the tragedy of the Herero, who were judged to be unfit as a servile work force and who, in the early twentieth century, were sentenced by an explicit order to be annihilated?

Now, rather than backwards, let us move forward from the First World War and the October Revolution. Just over two decades later, concentration camps appeared in the United States as well, where, in compliance with an executive order issued by Franklin Roosevelt, all American citizens of Japanese origin, including women and children, were locked up in concentration camps.

At the same time, in Asia, the war led by the Empire of the Rising Sun took on some particularly horrifying aspects. With the rape of Nanking, massacres became a kind of sport and pastime: who would be fastest and most efficient in beheading the prisoners? The dehumanisation of the enemy now reached a rare and perhaps 'unique' level: rather than on animals, vivisection experiments were conducted on the Chinese, who also served as living targets for Japanese soldiers' bayonet practice. Dehumanisation extended also to the women who, in the countries invaded by Japan, suffered brutal

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<sup>37</sup> Mann 1951.

sexual slavery: they became 'comfort women', forced to 'work' at frantic pace to provide pleasure to the war-exhausted occupying army, and often eliminated as they became worn-out or sick.<sup>38</sup>

The war in the Far East, where the Japanese tortured their English and American prisoners and even used bacteriological weapons against the Chinese, came to an end with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, carried out despite the fact that Japan had reached the end of its resources and was preparing to surrender: for this reason, some American authors have compared the annihilation of the civil population in the two helpless Japanese cities to the extermination of the Jews carried out by the Third Reich in Europe.

None of this is present in Arendt's book. Japan hardly appears in the analytical index: the war in Asia is only briefly mentioned to denounce China's totalitarianism, and not even limited to the Communist Party, but extended to the whole country, behind which, as we have seen, Arendt saw the influence of 'Oriental despotism'. Beyond the impact of the Cold War – in the meantime, Japan had joined the anti-totalitarian front – all the limits of the category of totalitarianism emerge here.

And the said category can provide no plausible explanation even for the tragedies it directly discusses. The 'Final Solution' was immediately preceded by two steps. During the First World War, it was Tsarist Russia (a country allied with the Entente powers) that promoted the mass deportation, from the borderland, of the Jews, who were suspected of being disloyal to a régime that oppressed them. After the collapse of Tsarism and the outbreak of the Civil War, it was the White troops (supported by the Entente) who unleashed the hunt against the Jews, labelled as the secret inspirers of the 'Judeo-Bolshevik' revolution: the massacres that ensued – as historians emphasise – seem to foreshadow precisely the 'Final Solution'.<sup>39</sup>

### **An arbitrary, inconclusive deductivism**

If the omissions that characterise the modern-day theory of totalitarianism are astounding, what is clearly untenable is the deductivist approach to which this theory appeals. In the communism proposed by Marx, state, nation, religion, social classes, all of the elements that constitute a meta-individual identity disappear; it makes no sense to speak of organicism and to derive,

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<sup>38</sup> See Chang 1997; Katsuichi 1999; Hicks 1995.

<sup>39</sup> For the general overview of the twentieth century, see Losurdo 1996, and 1998.

from this supposed original sin, the annihilation of the individual within the totalitarian system. And, with regard to the sacrifice of morals on the altar of the philosophy of history, this motif had previously been refuted or at least drastically problematised, in January 1946, by Arendt, who had portrayed Marx as a sort of Jewish prophet with a thirst for justice.

The deductivist approach reveals itself to be arbitrary and inconclusive even in reference to the Third Reich. If we leaf through the genealogical tree of Nazism as it is commonly viewed by the most authoritative historians, we inevitably encounter Houston Stewart Chamberlain: according to Ernst Nolte, Chamberlain was a 'good liberal' who 'waves the flag of individual freedom'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, we are dealing with an author who maintains that Germanism (which, in the final analysis, is synonymous with the Western world) was characterised by the resolute rejection of 'monarchic absolutism' and any view of the world that would sacrifice the 'individual' for the sake of the community. Not by chance, Locke is seen as the 'one who re-elaborated the new German *Weltanschauung*'; and, as for previous examples, one would be William of Ockham, and another, even before him, Duns Scotus, who held that the 'individual' constituted the 'only reality'.

A historical reconstruction of the 'cultural origins of the Third Reich' cannot ignore Arthur de Gobineau, either: the author of *Inequality of Human Races* celebrated the 'liberal traditions of the Aryans', who long resisted against the 'Canaanite monstrosity', that is, the idea of a 'homeland'. And, if in this context we also include Julius Langbehn, as George Mosse, among others, suggests,<sup>41</sup> we can note his even stronger profession of individualistic faith, or rather, his celebration of the 'Holy Spirit of individualism', the 'German principle of individualism', this 'stimulating force, fundamental and original of every Germanism'. The countries that represented a model for this were, for the most part, the classic countries of the liberal tradition. If Gobineau dedicated his book 'to His Majesty, George V', Julius Langbehn celebrated the English people as 'the most aristocratic of all peoples' and 'the most individual of all peoples'. Analogously, Gustave Le Bon (an author admired by Goebbels) contrasted, in a constant and positive manner, the Anglo-Saxon world to the rest of the planet.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Nolte 1978, p. 351.

<sup>41</sup> Mosse 1964, *passim*.

<sup>42</sup> For the analysis of Gobineau, Langbehn, Chamberlain, and Le Bon, see Losurdo 2002, Chapter 25, § 1.

But why should we go so far, after all? Let us read *Mein Kampf*. Hitler harshly criticised a vision of the world which insisted on attributing a 'creative, culture-creating force' to the state, and not only belittled the value of race, but was also guilty of 'underestimation of the individual', or rather, of 'individuals'.<sup>43</sup> The 'progress and culture of humanity' rested first and foremost 'on the genius and energy of one's personality';<sup>44</sup> thus, we were never to lose sight of 'individual men', of the 'individual' [*Einzelwesen*] in its irreducible peculiarity,<sup>45</sup> in their 'thousands of the finest differentiations'.<sup>46</sup> Hitler proffered himself as the authentic, coherent defender of the value of 'personality', of the 'subject', of the 'creative power and ability of the individual personality', of the 'idea of personality' in contrast to the 'democratic mass idea', which found its most obvious and repulsive expression in Marxism.<sup>47</sup> If Marxism denied 'the value of personality', the Nazi movement 'must promote respect for personality by all means; it must never forget that in personal worth lies the worth of everything human; that every idea and every achievement is the result of one man's creative force'.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, Nazism also appealed to choral unity in the struggle against the enemy; but this was a motif used, for obvious reasons and in various manners, by the ideology of war in all of the countries involved in the Second Thirty Years' War. It would be necessary to examine the stages through which the celebration of the 'individual', 'personality', and the 'single' was transformed, in a conscious or surreptitious way, in order to extol a culture or a people truly capable of grasping these values, consequently hierarchising peoples and condemning 'races' considered to be intrinsically and irremediably collectivistic.<sup>49</sup> However, this dialectic also manifested itself within the liberal tradition, and, at any rate, it cannot be described by means of the categories of organicism or holism.

In the best of hypotheses, to insist on explaining totalitarianism through organicism or through the sacrifice of morals for the sake of the philosophy of history is equal to explaining the soporiferous effect of opium by referring to its *vis dormitiva*.

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<sup>43</sup> Hitler 1971, pp. 382–3.

<sup>44</sup> Hitler 1971, p. 345.

<sup>45</sup> Hitler 1971, p. 421.

<sup>46</sup> Hitler 1971, p. 442.

<sup>47</sup> Hitler 1971, pp. 443–5 and *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> Hitler 1971, pp. 65, 352.

<sup>49</sup> See Losurdo 2002, Ch. 33, § 2.

## Totalitarianism and one-party rule

Let us now put aside the cultural origins of totalitarianism and concentrate on its characteristics. These should consist of a '[state] ideology, a single party typically led by one man, a terroristic police, a communications monopoly, a weapons monopoly, and a centrally directed economy'.<sup>50</sup> Of the last two characteristics – as the authors of this definition admit – the first is perhaps associated to the nature of the state as such, and the second can also be found in Great Britain, which at the time (in 1956) was profoundly marked by nationalisation and social reforms. We should therefore concentrate on other characteristics. Is a communications monopoly exclusively linked to a 'totalitarian dictatorship'? As is perhaps well known, during the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson created a Committee on Public Information that provided 22,000 news columns to the press each week, withholding everything that was considered susceptible of favouring the enemy. Is it a 'terroristic police', then, which peculiarly defines totalitarianism? It almost seems as if the two authors of *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* were unaware of the history of the country to which they had moved. The Espionage Act of 16 May 1918 stated that a person can be sentenced to up to twenty years in prison for using 'any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag . . . or the uniform of the Army or Navy of the United States'. Renowned American historians have highlighted the fact that the measures launched during the First World War aimed 'at eliminating even the slightest traces of opposition'. And violence from above mingles with violence from below, a violence tolerated and even encouraged by the authorities and which consists in a ruthless hunt for anyone who may be suspected of insufficient patriotism.<sup>51</sup>

As for the 'single party typically led by one man', what we witness here is the parallelism and confusion between two problems which are considerably different. With regards to the role of the leader, a comparison may be interesting. In 1950, at the outbreak of the war in Korea, while President Truman did not hesitate to intervene independently of Congress,<sup>52</sup> Mao was instead forced to confront and defeat a strong opposition from the Politburo, an opposition

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<sup>50</sup> Friedrich-Brzezinski 1968, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> See Losurdo 1993, Chapter 5, § 4.

<sup>52</sup> Chace 1998, p. 288.

against which he was initially in the minority.<sup>53</sup> The fact remains that, unlike the United States, China was led by a one-party rule and that such a characteristic is typical of totalitarian régimes. Besides holding the monopoly of political action, the party is rather an army-party and, at the same time, especially in the case of the Communists, a Church-party. Is this enough to confirm the validity of the theory of totalitarianism?

On the contrary, if this theory exclusively targets Communism and Nazism, it was already refuted by Hayek, who correctly included the socialist parties into the comparison. Indeed, in deprecating the incapacity of the bourgeois press to influence the 'large masses' and in declaring that a lesson should be learned from the insurrection campaigns launched by 'Marxism', Hitler made reference first of all to the 'Social Democratic press' and to the 'agitators' (public speakers and journalists) of social democracy.<sup>54</sup>

However, Hayek too was guilty of remaining tied to empirical observation without questioning the reasons for the occurrence of the phenomenon (the army-party and the Church-party) he recognised and criticised. The socialist parties aimed at breaking the bourgeois monopoly of communications, and therefore they promoted the publication of party organs, the organisation of schools for the training of officials, and so on. This problem did not concern the bourgeoisie, since the latter could count on the control of the school apparatus and the great information organs, as well as on the direct or indirect support from the Churches and other associations and branches of civil society. The anti-socialist legislation launched by Bismarck forced the party to adapt to the conditions of illegality, and brought about the aspiration to break the bourgeois monopoly of violence. This dialectic had already developed during the French Revolution. The bourgeoisie tried to maintain the monopoly of violence by imposing eligibility clauses even regarding enlistment in the National Guard. Thus, on the opposite side, parties also became organisations for struggle.

This dialectic reached its highest point with Tsarist Russia. In developing his party ideology, Lenin had in mind the model of German social democracy, but he strengthened its centralised structure even more in order to combat Tsarist autocracy and a police régime that was particularly watchful and brutal. Understandably, then, the Bolshevik Party revealed itself to be, more

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<sup>53</sup> Chen 1994, pp. 181–6.

<sup>54</sup> Hitler, 1971, pp. 528–9.

than any other, prepared for the permanently extraordinary circumstances that, from the First World War on, characterised Russia and Europe. For this reason, the Bolshevik Party became a model not only for the Communists, but also for their antagonists. As Nikolai Bukharin observed at the XII Congress of the Bolshevik Party in April 1923:

More than the representatives of any other party, the Fascists have embodied and put into practice the experience of the Russian Revolution. If we consider them from a formal perspective, that is, from the perspective of the strategy of their political methods, we see a perfect application of Bolshevik tactics, and specifically, of Russian Bolshevism, in the form of a rapid concentration of forces and a vigorous action carried out by a steady and compact military organisation.<sup>55</sup>

The contiguity which, for Hayek, was synonymous with ideological and political proximity is here synonymous with antagonism. To the attempt, on the part of labour parties, to break the bourgeois monopoly of violence, the bourgeoisie responded by breaking the socialist and communist monopoly of revolutionary parties: this was Bukharin's interpretation.

After all, the time sequence established by Hayek is schematic and inaccurate. In other circumstances, it was the socialists who had to learn from their antagonists. In Italy, while the trade unions and political organisations of the working classes were systematically crushed by the fascist assault (on the eve of the March on Rome, that is, of the coup d'état by the king and Mussolini), in an attempt to organise a defence, Guido Picelli (then a socialist) felt the need to break away with the legal tradition:

We now need new methods. To contrast the armed forces we need armed forces too. Therefore, we need to form, in Italy, the 'proletarian red army'. Unfortunately, events have proved enough, and the few of us had maintained this from the very beginning: fascism can be beaten on the same ground of violence upon which fascism itself dragged us first. The Christian resignation advocated by the leaders of the reformist method have made the enemy bolder, and undone our organisations. . . . Proletarians need a new method of defence and battle: 'its army'. Our forces must organise and discipline themselves voluntarily. Workers must become soldiers, proletarian soldiers, but 'soldiers' nonetheless. . . . In order to attack us, the bourgeoisie did not

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<sup>55</sup> In Strada-Kulesov 1998, p. 53.

create a party that would have been inadequate, but an armed organ, its army: fascism. We must do the same.<sup>56</sup>

Above all, what is arbitrary is the point of departure indicated by Hayek. We can easily move backward from the starting point he indicated (the formation of socialist parties). Once again, we are in the presence of a dialectic that had already emerged during the French Revolution: if the people's Jacobin sections represented the answer to bourgeois, land-owning monopoly of the National Guard, the *jeunesse dorée* was the bourgeois land-owners' response to the people's monopoly of the organised revolutionary party. From this clash, the dominant class that professed liberalism was only apparently absent: the proto-fascist organisation that formed in France in the early twentieth century served as 'auxiliary police' for state power and the dominant class.<sup>57</sup>

A similar dialectic develops also with regards to the trade unions. Obviously, the capitalists – as Adam Smith had already noted – do not need them.<sup>58</sup> And yet, the trade unions inspired by Marxism and more-or-less radical opposition movements were followed by trade unions inspired by the Church and, later on, by others still, inspired by the fascist and Nazi movements. Finally, even 'unions' of capital are born.

In its drawing together and assimilating of two 'facts' (the socialists' and communists' appeal to the army-party and the Church-party, on the one hand, and the same appeal by the fascists and Nazis, on the other), Hayek's interpretation reveals itself as affected by positivistic superstition. And it is precisely this superstition that, in the final analysis, constitutes the foundation of the current theory of totalitarianism. Following Hayek's logic, we could even draw Roosevelt and Hitler together: indeed, the 'fact' is unquestionable that both resorted to tanks, war planes and ships!

On the other hand, in forging his weapons for struggle, Hitler did not limit himself to observing the socialist and Communist parties. As he denounced the incapacity of traditional bourgeois parties to influence the people, who were thus helplessly exposed to subversive influence and uprisings, Hitler resolved to learn not only from social democracy, but also from the Catholic Church which, in spite of everything, he admired for its ability to sweep up the masses and for recruiting cadres even from the poorest social classes.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> In Del Carria 1970, Vol. 2, p. 224.

<sup>57</sup> Nolte 1978, pp. 119, 146–8.

<sup>58</sup> Smith 1981, p. 67 (Book I, Chapter VII).

<sup>59</sup> Hitler 1971, pp. 481–2.

What the Führer especially praised was a religious order: 'It was with Himmler that the SS became this extraordinary militia, devoted to an idea, faithful unto death. In Himmler I see our Ignatius of Loyola'.<sup>60</sup> Already celebrated by Joseph de Maistre as the only organisation capable of standing up to revolutionary freemasonry,<sup>61</sup> and later used as a model by Cecil Rhodes for his imperialistic idea of 'rule through secrecy'<sup>62</sup> – as Arendt points out – the Jesuit order was finally viewed as the organisation of capable, disciplined and committed cadres needed by the counterrevolutionary civil war of the twentieth century. Should we then associate Masonic lodges, *Societas Jesu*, and *Schutz Staffeln*?

### **Racial state and eugenics: the United States and the Third Reich**

We would be providing a very poor definition of the Third Reich if we limited ourselves to highlighting its totalitarian character, making particular reference to the phenomenon of one-party rule. With regard to leaders of one-party dictatorships, it would not be difficult at all to put Hitler side-by-side with Stalin, Mao, Deng, Ho Chi Minh, Nasser, Ataturk, Tito, Franco, and so forth, but this pedantic exercise is quite inadequate as a concrete historical analysis. And even if we separate the two 'totalitarian' leaders Stalin and Hitler from the 'authoritarian' Mussolini, whose power was limited by the presence of the Vatican and the Church, we still will not have made much progress. More than an actual step forward, this argument would represent a drift: from ideology we have inadvertently moved to a completely different sphere, to realities and facts that are pre-existent and independent from the ideological and political choices of fascism.

With regards to the Third Reich, it is quite difficult to make a definite and concrete statement on it without mentioning its racial and eugenic programmes. And these programmes lead us to a very different direction from the one proposed by the category of totalitarianism. Immediately after his rise to power, Hitler made sure that he clarified the distinction, even on a juridical level, between the position of the Aryans and those of the Jews and the few mulattos who still lived in Germany (at the end of the First World War, coloured troops belonging to the French army had taken part in the occupation

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<sup>60</sup> Hitler 1952–4, Vol. I, p. 164.

<sup>61</sup> Maistre 1984, p. 205.

<sup>62</sup> Arendt 1958, p. 214.

of the country). In other words, a major aspect of the Nazi programme was that of building a racial state. And what were, at the time, the possible models for a racial state? Even more so than South Africa, the first example was the Southern United States. Still in 1937, Alfred Rosenberg made explicit reference to South Africa: it was well that it remain 'in the hands of northerners' and whites (thanks to appropriate 'laws' not only against 'Indians', but also 'blacks, mulattos, and Jews'), and it should serve as a 'solid bulwark' against the menace of a 'black awakening'. However, the main point of reference was represented by the United States, this 'wonderful country of the future', which had the merit of formulating the well-thought-out 'new idea of a racial State', an idea that should now be put into practice, 'with youthful vigour', by expelling and deporting 'the blacks and the yellows'.<sup>63</sup> We only need to take a look at the Nuremberg legislation to recognise analogies with the situation that was taking place on the other side of the Atlantic: clearly, in Germany, it was first of all Germans of Jewish descent that occupied the place of African-Americans. 'In the United States' – Rosenberg writes in 1937 – 'the Negro question is on top of all crucial questions'; and once the absurd principle of equality has been eliminated concerning the blacks, there is no reason why they should not reach 'the same resolution for the yellows and Jews, as well'.<sup>64</sup> Even for his plan to build a German continental empire, Hitler had in mind the United States model, which he praised for its 'extraordinary inner strength'.<sup>65</sup> Germany was called upon to follow this example, expanding to Eastern Europe as to a sort of Far West and treating the 'indigenous people' in the same way as the redskins were treated.<sup>66</sup>

We come to the same conclusion if we examine eugenics. As is well known, with regard to this 'new science', the Third Reich was indebted to the United States, where eugenics, which was invented during the second half of the nineteenth century by Francis Galton (a cousin of Darwin's), became very popular. Well before Hitler's rise to power, on the eve of the First World War, a book was published in Munich, *Die Rassenhygiene in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika* (*Racial Hygiene in the United States of North America*), which, already in its title, pointed to the United States as a model for 'racial hygiene'. The author, Géza von Hoffmann, vice-consul of the Austro-Hungarian

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<sup>63</sup> Rosenberg 1937, pp. 666, 673.

<sup>64</sup> Rosenberg 1937, pp. 668–9.

<sup>65</sup> Hitler 1971, pp. 153–4.

<sup>66</sup> See Losurdo 1996, Chapter 5, p. 6.

Empire in Chicago, extolled the US for the ‘lucidity’ and ‘pure practical reason’ it had demonstrated in confronting, with the necessary energy, a very important problem that was instead so often ignored: to violate the laws that forbid sexual intercourse and interracial marriages could be punished with up to ten years in prison, and not only the people responsible for the act, but also their accomplices, could be condemned.<sup>67</sup>

Even after the Nazi rise to power, the ideologues and ‘scientists’ of race continued to claim that ‘Germany, too, has much to learn from the measures adopted by the North-Americans: they know what they are doing’.<sup>68</sup> It should be added that this was not a unilateral relationship. After Hitler’s rise to power, the most radical followers of the American eugenic movement looked up to the Third Reich as a model, and even travelled there on an ideological and research pilgrimage.<sup>69</sup>

It is now necessary to ask ourselves a question: Why, in order to define the Nazi régime, should the argument regarding the one-party dictatorship be more valid than that of racial and eugenic ideology and practice? It is precisely from this sphere that the central categories and key terminology of the Nazi discourse derived. This is the case with *Rassenhygiene*, which is essentially the German translation of *eugenics*, the new science invented in England and successfully exported to the United States. But there are even more sensational examples. Rosenberg expressed his admiration for the American author Lothrop Stoddard, credited with coining the term *Untermensch*, which already in 1925 stood out as the subtitle of the German translation of his book, *The Revolt against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man*, published in New York three years earlier.<sup>70</sup> As for the meaning of the term he coined, Stoddard clarified that it indicated the mass of ‘savages and barbarians’ who live inside or outside the capitalist metropolis, who are ‘essentially un-civilizable and incorrigibly hostile to civilization’, and who must necessarily be dealt with once and for all.<sup>71</sup> In the United States, as in the rest of the world, it was necessary to defend ‘white supremacy’ against ‘the rising tide of colour’: what incited the coloured people to revolt was Bolshevism, ‘the renegade, the traitor within the gates’ which, with its insidious propaganda, reached

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<sup>67</sup> Hoffmann 1913, pp. ix, 67–8.

<sup>68</sup> Günther 1934, p. 465.

<sup>69</sup> See Kühl 1994, pp. 53–63.

<sup>70</sup> Rosenberg 1937, p. 214.

<sup>71</sup> Stoddard 1925a, pp. 23–4.

not only the colonies, but even ‘the “black belts” of our own United States’.<sup>72</sup> The extraordinary success of these theories is quite understandable. Even before receiving Rosenberg’s enthusiastic comments, Stoddard had already been praised by two American presidents (Harding and Hoover), and he was later welcomed and honoured in Berlin, where he met not only the most renowned representatives of Nazi eugenics, but also the highest officials of the régime, including Adolf Hitler,<sup>73</sup> who had already begun his campaign to decimate and subjugate the *Untermenschen*.

One more term should be examined. We have seen that Hitler looked at the white expansion into the Far West as a model. Immediately after invading Poland, Hitler proceeded to dismember it: one side was directly incorporated into the Great Reich (and the Poles were expelled from it); the rest constituted the ‘general Governatorate’, within which, as General Governor Hans Frank declared, the Poles would live as in ‘a sort of reservation’ (they were ‘subject to German jurisdiction’ without being ‘German citizens’).<sup>74</sup> The American model was copied here in an almost pedantic manner.

At least in the beginning, the Third Reich planned to also establish a *Judenreservat*, a ‘reservation for the Jews’, once again based upon the model of the reservations where Native-Americans were segregated. And, as far as the expression ‘Final Solution’ is concerned, it was not in Germany, but in the United States that it first emerged, though it referred to the ‘Negro question’ rather than the ‘Jewish question’.<sup>75</sup>

In the same way that it is not surprising that ‘totalitarianism’ found its most concentrated expression in the countries involved in the Second Thirty Years’ War, so it is not surprising that the Nazi attempt to build a racial state drew its inspirational motifs, its categories and key terminology from the historical experience that possessed the richest heritage of these elements, namely, the historical experience accumulated by white Americans in their relationship with Native-Americans and African-Americans. Of course, one should not lose sight of all the other differences, in terms of government, law, limitation of state power (with regards to the white community), etc. But the fact remains that the Third Reich represents the attempt, through total war

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<sup>72</sup> Stoddard 1925b, pp. 220–1.

<sup>73</sup> On all of this, see Kühl 1994, p. 61. President Harding’s flattering comment is quoted at the beginning of the French translation of Stoddard 1925b.

<sup>74</sup> In Ruge-Schumann 1977, p. 36.

<sup>75</sup> See Losurdo 1998, pp. 8–10.

and international civil war, to create a régime of world-scale *white supremacy* under German hegemony by resorting to eugenic, sociopolitical and military measures.

What is at the heart of Nazism is the idea of *Herrenvolk*, which is associated with the racial theory and practice carried out in the Southern United States and, more in general, with the Western colonial tradition. It is precisely this idea that the October Revolution attacked: not by chance, in fact, the revolution called upon the 'slaves in the colonies' to break their fetters. The common theory of totalitarianism concentrates exclusively upon the similar methods attributed to the two antagonists and, besides, claims that they derive univocally from a supposed ideological affinity, without making any reference to the actual situation or to the geopolitical context.

### **Towards a redefinition of the category of totalitarianism**

The main flaw of the category of totalitarianism is that it transforms an empirical description tied to specific characteristics into a general logical deduction. It is easy to recognise similarities between Stalin's USSR and Nazi Germany. Starting from those, it is possible to construct a general category (totalitarianism) and to highlight the presence of this phenomenon in the two countries. However, to transform this category into a key to explain the political processes that took place in the two countries is an unjustifiable leap. The arbitrariness of this move should be evident, for two main reasons. We have already discussed the first: surreptitiously, the analogies between the USSR and the Third Reich with regards to the question of the one-party dictatorship are considered to be the decisive ones, whereas the analogies on the level of eugenics and racial politics (which would lead to very different associations) are ignored or eliminated.

Let us now concentrate on the second reason. Even if we focus on the one-party dictatorship in the two countries, why should we make reference to the two ideologies rather than to the similarity between the political situation (the permanently extraordinary circumstances) or the geopolitical context (the peculiar vulnerability) that the two countries were facing? I strongly believe that the totalitarian phenomenon is determined not only by ideologies and political traditions, but also, and quite powerfully, by the objective situation.

In this respect, it may be useful to reflect on the origin of the term 'totalitarianism'. Two years after the outbreak of the October Revolution, in the aftermath of the First World War, the criticism of 'revolutionary totalism

[*revolutionärer Totalismus*]' emerged.<sup>76</sup> The use of the adjective seemed to imply the existence of a different kind of totalism from the revolutionary form. While it pointed directly to a species ('revolutionary totalism'), the genus (totalism) calls to mind, though indirectly, a different species, that of warlike totalism. Indeed, the noun used (which precedes the later term, 'totalitarianism') was placed immediately after an adjective which, from 1914 on, began to resound in an obsessive way. There was thus talk of 'total mobilisation' and, a few years later, of 'total war' and even 'total politics'.<sup>77</sup> 'Total politics' was the politics that could face up to 'total war'. Was not this, too, the actual meaning that should have been attributed to the category of 'totalitarianism'? Both Mussolini and Hitler explicitly declared that the movements and régimes they led were born out of war; and war inevitably determined the revolution that broke out against these movements, as well as the political régime that resulted from it.

If this is the case, to associate the USSR and Hitler's Germany as the expressions *par excellence* of totalitarianism becomes even banal: where else should the political régime that corresponded to total war have revealed its fundamental characteristics if not in the two countries that were at the centre of the Second Thirty Years' War? It was not at all surprising that the institution of the concentration camp took on a much more brutal shape here than, for example, in the United States, which was protected by the ocean from the threat of invasion, and which suffered losses and devastations that were much less significant than those suffered by the other countries involved. About a hundred and fifty years earlier, on the eve of the launch of the new federal constitution, Alexander Hamilton had explained that the limitation of power and the establishment of government by law had been successful in two insular-type countries which were protected by the sea from the threat of rival powers. Were the Union to fail and a system of states similar to the ones in Europe to emerge from its ruins in America, too – warned Hamilton – a permanent army, a strong, central power, and even absolutism would appear. In the twentieth century, even though it continued to represent an element of protection, the insular position was no longer an insurmountable obstacle: following the total war against the great European and Asian powers, the United States, too, witnessed the rise of totalitarianism, as demonstrated by

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<sup>76</sup> Paquet 1919, p. 111. Nolte 1987, p. 563 has drawn attention to this.

<sup>77</sup> Ludendorff 1935, p. 35 and *passim*. Clearly, the motif of total mobilisation is particularly tied to Ernst Jünger.

the terroristic legislation that aimed at crushing any and all opposition, and above all, by the emergence of the most typical institution of totalitarianism, the concentration camp.

It could be argued that, in comparison to the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, concentration camps in France and in the United States were much tamer (though it would be superficial and irresponsible to see them as a mere trifle). Regardless of this, the fact remains that, in order to be adequate, a theory must be able to explain the emergence of this institution in all four countries, including those that enjoyed a liberal system, and it must clarify to what extent the differences are due to ideological diversity or to diversity in the objective situation and in the geopolitical context. A truly adequate theory must also explain the concentration camps in which the liberal Western world as a whole segregated native people in the colonies (for centuries the target of total war). And, in more general terms, it must explain why, since the outbreak of the First World War, even in liberal countries, the state was endowed, in Weber's own words, with 'a "lawful" power over the life, death, and freedom' of its citizens. Far from providing an answer, the contemporary theory of totalitarianism cannot even formulate the problem.

### **Performative contradiction and the ideology of war in the contemporary theory of totalitarianism**

Marx sowed the seeds of the Communist totalitarianism he influenced: this notion was present in Arendt's work from the Cold War onwards, and it has now become an integral part of the contemporary theory of totalitarianism. However, to paraphrase a famous expression used by Weber with regard to historical materialism, the theory of the non-innocence of theory is not a taxicab one can get in and out of at will. So, what role did the common theory of totalitarianism and the banner of the struggle against totalitarianism play in the massacre that in 1965 took the lives of hundreds of thousands of Communists in Indonesia? And with regard to Latin America's contemporary history, its darkest moments are not tied to 'totalitarianism', but to the struggle against it. Just to give an example, a few years ago, in Guatemala, the Truth Commission accused the CIA of having strongly helped the military dictatorship to commit 'acts of genocide' against the Mayas, who were guilty of sympathising with the opponents of the régime supported by Washington.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Navarro 1999.

In other words, with its silence and repressed thoughts, has not the common theory of totalitarianism itself turned into an ideology of war, of total war, one that has helped to increase the horror it supposedly condemned, thus falling into a tragic performative contradiction?

Nowadays we constantly hear denunciations, directed toward Islam, of 'religious totalitarianism'<sup>79</sup> or of the 'new totalitarian enemy that is terrorism'.<sup>80</sup> The language of the Cold War has reappeared with renewed vitality, as confirmed by the warning that American Senator Joseph Lieberman has issued to Saudi Arabia: beware the seduction of Islamic totalitarianism, and do not let a 'theological iron curtain' separate you from the Western world.<sup>81</sup> Even though the target has changed, the denunciation of totalitarianism continues to function with perfect efficiency as an ideology of war against the enemies of the Western world. And this ideology justifies the violation of the Geneva Convention, the inhuman treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, the embargo and collective punishment inflicted upon the Iraqis and other peoples, and the further torment perpetrated against the Palestinians. The struggle against totalitarianism serves to legitimate and transfigure the total war against the 'barbarians' who are alien to the Western world.

*Translated by Marella and Jon Morris*

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<sup>79</sup> Friedman 2001.

<sup>80</sup> Spinelli 2001.

<sup>81</sup> In Dao 2002, p. 4.

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