

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

Week 5. Totalitarianism





Agenda

- From masses to movement
- A new form of politics?
- The stages of total domination
- Radical evil
- Ideological thinking
- Loneliness



- 'If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, it never happened — that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death?'
- 'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten.'

- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

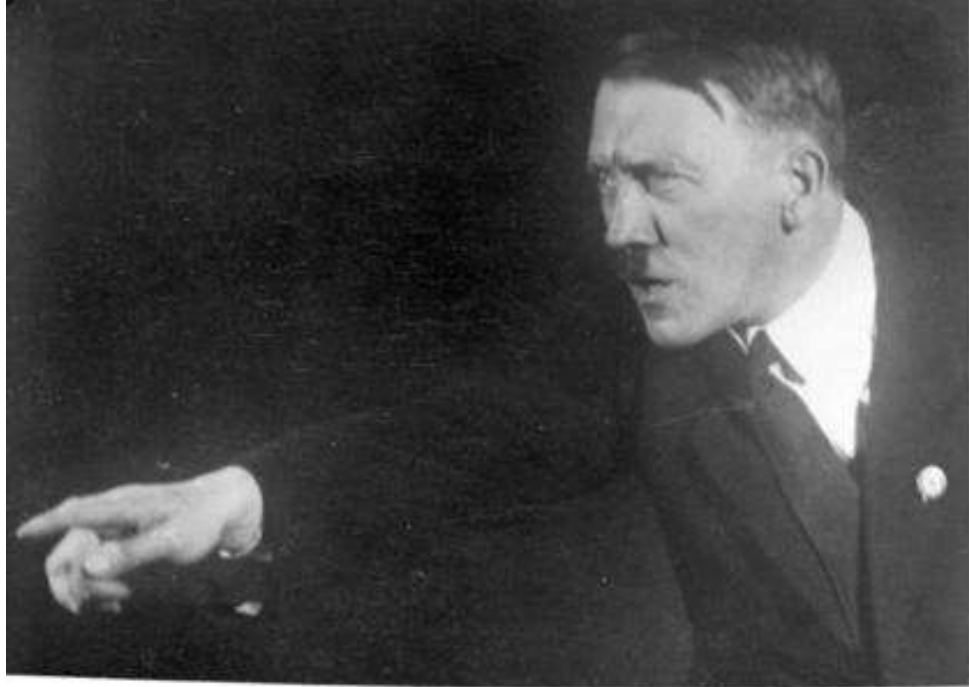
‘what kind of basic experience in the living-together of men permeates a form of government whose essence is terror and whose principle of action is the logicity of ideological thinking’?





The Masses

- Movements “conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself.”
- They appeal to a large superfluous mass fallen out of the class system and party politics, created by imperialism, war, unemployment, and a crisis of legitimacy
- ‘Potentially, they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls.’
- ‘The mob always will shout for ‘the strong man,’ the ‘great leader.’ For the mob hates the society from which it is excluded, as well as Parliament where it is not represented.’



Masses into movements

- ‘What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part’
- ‘Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction . . . [and] can outrageously insult common sense only where common sense has lost its validity.’
- Totalitarian movements don’t aim to discredit particular facts; they seek to breed ‘extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it.’



Motion-mania

- Consistency of narrative, repetition of falsehoods, and cynicism
- ... Each lead into a dangerous reality where the truth doesn't matter
- Movements led by a demagogue offer power to the lonely
- The infallible leader and a propaganda machine that presents a singular logic or law of history, making predictions about the future in order to avoid arguments or reason, because no proof of it yet exists
- A world where 'everything is possible'...

‘The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.’

A new form of politics?

- Are totalitarian states any different to tyrannies? Were their crimes substantially different from past massacres or concentration camps?
- *Yes*, argues Arendt...
- *Whereas* some kind of utilitarian self-interest explained past crimes...
- Totalitarian states pursued a complete logic of total domination and destruction of the human person
- They created living corpses, without spontaneity, who lived in a state of permanent loneliness and terror



Робітники та Селяни!

Всі на допомогу борцям за Світовий Жовтень

A new form of politics?

- ‘Wherever it rose to power, it developed entirely new political institutions and destroyed all social, legal and political traditions of the country. No matter what the specifically national tradition or the particular spiritual source of its ideology, totalitarian government always transformed classes into masses, supplanted the party system, not by one-party dictatorships, but by a mass movement, shifted the center of power from the army to the police, and established a foreign policy openly directed toward world domination.’ (Ch12, 461)



Total Domination – Over to you

Let's explore Arendt's arguments in depth. In groups, pick a question:

1. What are the steps to total domination? (128-134)
2. What is the 'radical evil' of the new totalitarian regimes? (140)

‘The aim of an arbitrary system is to destroy the civil rights of the whole population, who ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and homeless. The destruction of a man’s rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely. And this applies not just to special categories ... but to every inhabitant of a totalitarian state. Free consent is as much an obstacle to total domination as free opposition.’ (131-2)



- 'They have corrupted all human solidarity. Here the night has fallen on the future. ... Grief and remembrance are forbidden.' (133)
- The killing of man's individuality, of the uniqueness shaped in equal parts by nature, will, and destiny ... creates a horror that vastly overshadows the outrage of the juridical-political person and the despair of the moral person.' (135)



‘There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluousness as much as in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born. The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms.’

(140)



Loneliness and solitude

- Loneliness, the feeling of being 'deserted by all human companionship'; 'the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.'
- Loneliness is social, whereas isolation is political ('I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me')
- But isolation isn't necessarily a bad thing: we work, think, create alone
- Philosophers have praised solitude as being 'together with oneself', an autonomous state for self-discovery and reflection
- But the lonely cannot find strength in anyone, even themselves

Loneliness and spontaneity – over to you

Let's now explore some of Arendt's lasting reflections from the end of the last chapter, produced in 1958. In groups, decide a question:

1. Why does loneliness so important to totalitarianism? (478)
2. What do you think of Arendt's lasting argument for human spontaneity as an antidote to totalitarianism? (478-479)

Atomisation, Superfluous

- 'The fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century'.
- Totalitarianism offers 'a 'suicidal escape from this reality', 'a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon', an 'inner coercion'
- 'there remains the fact that the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on' (478)

NEW YORK



Spontaneity

‘Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin, just a freedom as a political reality is identical with a space of movement between men. Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can have any power, because its chain presupposes, in the form of a premise, the beginning. As terror is needed lest with the birth of each new human being a new beginning arise and raise its voice in the world, so the self-coercive force of logicity is mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking-which a the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction.’
(473)

Nativity

‘But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only "message" which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – "that a beginning be made man was created" said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.’
(478-479)

Next week... Lying and Politics

We'll turn to two essays by Arendt on politics, truth and lying

- "Truth and Politics" (1967) – originally in the *New Yorker*, republished in *Between Past and Future*, 2nd edn (1968)
- "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers" (1971) – first in the *New York Review*, republished in *Crises of the Republic* (1972)
 - I've included Section I of the essay, but the full version is on Moodle
- Are politics and truth-telling incompatible, or fundamentally one?
- How can democracies respond to powerful lies and 'image-making'?

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