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 Fourth Paper

Origins of Totalitarianism or Revisions to Liberalism

Individuality and spontaneity are key facets in Hannah Arendt's equation for totalitarianism and consequently in her definition of freedom. This is to say that a totalitarian state relies on destroying the individual, yet conversely, freedom is equally buttressed by man's individuality. Arendt's nuanced perspective allows for a modern progressive characterization of freedom, contrasting the traditional liberal definition which Arendt believes is built on sand.¹ Nevertheless Arendt's critique of totalitarianism— *and traditional liberalism*— and her innovative notion of freedom are situated on a less grainier foundation, placing great emphasis on the individual, spontaneity, and autonomy— providing a preventative theory against totalitarianism, in unison with a theory on the importance of autonomous agents.

By equating freedom to an agent's ability to start something new *or produce novelty in the world*, Arendt in turn creates a link between conformity and autonomy; and through this link she arranges her theory that totalitarian states seek conformity, ergo the anecdote is autonomy, with freedom being a crucial fulcrum for both. Freedom for Arendt is more than a simple non-interference delineation given her emphasis that freedom in the traditional sense could also be attributed to "forced labor camps that live in relative freedom,"² and even goes so far as to compare the traditional conception of freedom to that of animals "whose only freedom consists in preserving species."³ If anything a totalitarian state wishes to achieve the freedom-state-model

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, Meridian Book, Inc. p.142.

² Arendt, 443.

³ Arendt, 438.

of Hobbes and Locke insofar as Arendt's warning against the utilitarian-freedom deriving from viewing humanity as one individual. Arendt reveals the slippery slope which modern states descend when the individual is reduced to an expendable means for a greater end— a goal for the traditional liberalist. For this reason, her theory is not *simply* an explanation to understand the impetuses for totalitarian states, but rather a direct critique, reframe, and inversion of the modern liberal theory. She accosts and likewise blames the traditionalists because their theories gave foundation— based solely on power and built in sand, according to Arendt⁴— for total domination, “which strives to organize the infinite plurality of human beings as if all of humanity were one individual”⁵— another allusion and even forewarn of the dehumanization characteristic of the utilitarian-liberal-leviathan-theory where “every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other.”⁶ When the populace is reduced into an individual via a Hobbesian leviathan— though collective freedom may be present relatively— Arendt is concerned this government model is the seed if not the prelude for a totalitarian state. However, Arendt recognizes that freedom “under normal circumstances” is relatively present given that spontaneity “can never be fully eliminated insofar as it is connected not only with human freedom but with life itself;” rather Arendt argues only through the concentration camp an experiment of eliminating spontaneity can occur.⁷

⁴ Arendt, 142.

⁵ Arendt, 438.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Arendt, 438.

Arendt's clear emphasis on freedom, individuality, and spontaneity is non-nugatory in her theory or simply for an arbitrary pro-autonomous argument; she accentuates these dimensions because they are the same attributes which a totalitarian state must eliminate, making freedom, individuality, and spontaneity all more essential to preserve.

Ascertaining that the rights of man “had never been philosophically established but merely formulated, [nor] politically secured but merely proclaimed,”⁸ the first elimination— *and as mentioned before the seed for totalitarianism*— has already occurred. Yet the totalitarian state is situated on three more eliminations for accomplishing what Arendt calls producing a *living corpse*. The killing of the *juridical man* is the process of removing a group of people outside of the law where they have a predictable relationship with the state— a prerequisite for a totalitarian state given its justification for persecuting innocent persons, *who are now outside of the law*, in concentration camps while still keeping an exhibitory pseudo-penal-system.⁹ The second is the murder of the *moral person* which is accomplished through creating “conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible—” death becomes anonymous, meaningless and impossible to mourn, and “the consciously organized complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total.”¹⁰ Destroying a *person's individuality* is the last murder in preparing living corpses, however it the hardest killing, yet this elimination is almost always successful if the previous two succeed.¹¹ To kill individuality is to eliminate spontaneity— “man's power to begin something new out of his own resources—” ergo without spontaneity, freedom vanishes and the state ultimately accomplishes totalitarian control vis-à-vis the concentration camp.¹²

⁸ Arendt, 447.

⁹ Arendt, 447-455.

¹⁰ Arendt, 452.

¹¹ Arendt, 455.

¹² Arendt, 455-457.

Although Arendt acknowledges that the concentration camp is the sine qua non for the totalitarian state and even the sole method for curating living corpses,¹³ it is *not* the improbability and exactness of such variables needed for a future totalitarian state's equation for success that makes Arendt's theory nuanced and historically renowned. Rather what is most curious is her critique of how modern liberalism lays foundation for such totalitarian states to form so easily.¹⁴ As some suggest, her theory could be seen as a checklist for totalitarianism, where a state *needs* to satisfy all exclusive prerequisites for qualifying as a totalitarian state.¹⁵ Yet it is the unpredictability in which liberal governments could quickly metamorphose into totalitarianism through neglecting human individuality, spontaneity, and freedom— in the form of dehumanizing men as expendable pleasure receptacles, using citizens as expendable means to an end, and reducing the populace into a singular Leviathan— that is most avant-garde in political theory and even more provocative in raising suspicion of the liberalism which modern governments are founded on. Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* is truly an explanatory theory of how freedom is lost and total power is gained yet serves equally as much as a critique and revision of traditional liberalism, given the two's mutual linchpin relationship, both anchored on the precarious handling of individuality, spontaneity, and freedom.

¹³ Arendt, 438.

¹⁴ "It seems as though Hobbes's picture of man defeats his purpose of providing the basis for a commonwealth and gives instead a consistent pattern of attitudes through which every genuine community can easily be destroyed. This results in the inherent and admitted instability of Hobbes's Commonwealth, whose very conception includes its own dissolution— 'when in warre (forraign or intestine) the enemies get a final Victory...then is the commonwealth dissolved, and every man at liberty to protect himselfe'— an instability that is all the more striking as Hobbes's primary and frequently repeated aim was to secure a maximum of safety and stability." Arendt, p. 140.

¹⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Lüdtke. "Energizing the Everyday: On the Breaking and Making of Social Bonds in Nazism and Stalinism." Chapter. In *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, edited by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, 266–301. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.