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**What is “Totalitarian” Today?**

**Arendt after the Climate Breakdown**

Larry Alan Busk, [lbusk@fgcu.edu](mailto:lbusk@fgcu.edu)

**Abstract**: This article reconsiders Hannah Arendt’s account of “totalitarianism” in light of the climate catastrophe and the apparent inability of our political-economic system to respond to it adequately. In the last two chapters of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt focuses on the “ideology” of totalitarian regimes: a pathological denial of reality, a privileging of the ideological system over empirical evidence, and a simultaneous feeling of total impotence and total omnipotence—an analysis that maps remarkably well onto the climate zeitgeist. Thus, while Arendt used the concept of “totalitarianism” to foreclose alternatives to liberal capitalist democracy, the climate impasse suggests that the totalitarian label more properly belongs to the prevailing system itself.

**Keywords:** Arendt, climate change, totalitarianism, ideology, geoengineering, liberalism, democracy, capitalism

According to the latest projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), anthropogenic climate change will precipitate an irreversible ecological catastrophe if the rise in global temperature tips beyond 1.5°C, which it will unless carbon emissions are dramatically reduced by 2030 and net zero is achieved by 2050 (IPCC 2022). The present emissions scheme is compatible with a temperature rise of 3–5°C by the end of the century (Hébert, Lovejoy, and Tremblay 2021; Voosen 2019). In addition to warming, such an increase will cause sea-level rise, massive crop failures, aberrant weather patterns, accelerated biodiversity loss, unprecedented refugee crises, and the intensification of armed conflicts. Accomplishing the necessary emissions reductions, the 2018 Report concludes, will require “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC 2018).

In spite of this dire warning (and similar warnings going back decades), the geopolitical centers of power (especially the United States) are slated to oversee and facilitate an *increase* in the rate of greenhouse gas emissions over the next several years (Rekker et al. 2018; Corbett 2019). This represents a flagrant disregard for the consequences of climate change—up to and including its existential threat to organized human life. Ostensibly, the necessary “complete overhaul of the global economy” is not considered politically viable (Geden 2018: 382). How can we understand this perplexing state of affairs in which, as Adrian Parr (2014:3) puts it, we are “poised between needing to radically transform how we live and becoming extinct”—and emphatically choosing the latter?

In this article, I reconsider Hannah Arendt’s account of “totalitarianism” in light of the climate catastrophe and the apparent inability of our political-economic system to adequately respond to it. In the last two chapters of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt focuses on the “ideology” of totalitarian regimes: a pathological denial of reality, a privileging of the ideological system over empirical evidence, and a simultaneous feeling of total impotence and total omnipotence—an analysis that maps remarkably well onto the climate zeitgeist. Thus, while Arendt used the concept of “totalitarianism” to foreclose alternatives to liberal capitalist democracy, the climate impasse suggests that the totalitarian label more properly belongs to the prevailing system itself.

*The* *Origins of Totalitarianism*, originally published in 1951,is a Cold War text. Whatever reservations Arendt may have held concerning liberalism, capitalism, and mass democracy, conflating Nazism and Soviet Communism under the collective heading of “totalitarianism” had the implicit effect of legitimating the Western bloc and exempting it from identification with “terror,” “ideology,” and “total domination.” *There*, totalitarian impulses prevailed, but *here*,ideology and terror do not (at least presently) constitute the reigning form of government. While she did not invent the term “totalitarianism,” Arendt’s book played a substantial role in consolidating the Cold War and post-Cold War narrative according to which, whatever its other faults, liberal capitalist democracy functions as a bulwark against both Left and Right forms of totalitarianism, and as such, represents the end of history for which there is no alternative. At this historical moment, however, there is an uncanny resemblance between Arendt’s description of the ideological functioning of totalitarian regimes and prevailing responses to the climate catastrophe.

While I have already cited the IPCC report on the brutal realities of climate change, it is worth dwelling on the severity and urgency of the situation. The latest findings are essentially one long alarm bell that never stops ringing: July 2021 was the hottest month in recorded history (Milman 2021), arctic ice melt is crossing an irreversible threshold (Freedman 2019), plastic has become a permanent part of the oceans’ ecosystem (Thomas 2021), climate destabilization is poised to push 130 million people into poverty by 2030 (OHCHR 2019), up to 3 billion people will live under threat of deadly heat waves by 2070 (Xu et al. 2020), and so on (see Lynas 2020). I refer to the climate *catastrophe* rather than the climate *crisis*, because the latter term implies a disruption that can be overcome, a state of exception before things return to normal, while the former captures a permanent break with the status quo.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In spite of the apocalyptic overtones of the scientific consensus, however, a concerted and organized public or governmental response has not materialized. Popular climate denial is a well-documented phenomenon: no matter how overwhelmingly certain the science, many citizens of liberal capitalist democracies remain shockingly misinformed. In the great arsenal of climate denialism, basic misconceptions (e.g., it still gets cold sometimes, this is a problem for the next millennium) exist alongside measured counsels about the limits of science and the dangers of alarmism (Mann and Toles 2016; Norgaard 2011; Collomb 2014; Sterman and Sweeney 2007; Marlon et al. 2022). Prominent elected officials maintain that the very idea of climate change is a “hoax” perpetrated by forces that want greater state control over individual freedom (Inhofe 2022), or by the Chinese government to sap America’s power (Wong 2016).

Already we can observe a consonance with Arendt’s description of totalitarianism. In her account, the propaganda of totalitarian movements and regimes seeks to “emancipate thought from experience and reality” (Arendt 1973: 471). In our own context, the widespread currency of climate denialist ideas and their stubborn resistance to correction indicate the perceived legitimacy of forming an opinion without reference to any empirical verification. It is only a small leap from this disconnect to conspiratorial thinking. Between the assertion that scientists do not agree about climate change and the claim that the entire thing is a hoax, there is only a difference of degree. Arendt says the same thing about totalitarian ideology: once it effects its insulation from experience and reality, it “strives to inject a secret meaning into every public, tangible event and to suspect a secret intent behind every public political act” (ibid.). The result of this development, in both our present historical conjuncture and in Arendt’s account of totalitarianism, is the dissolution of any meaningful distinction between truth and falsity in a political context. “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule,” she writes, “is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction … and the distinction between true and false … no longer exist” (474). This is mirrored, of course, in our own experience of “post-truth” politics and “alternative facts.” At the same time, we cannot allow ourselves the comfort of assigning blame strictly to one political party or one cultural disposition. While the IPCC advises “rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society,” President Biden assures his donor base that “nothing” will “fundamentally change” (Derysh 2019). Obama’s disastrous climate record also speaks for itself (Richardson 2021; Prasad et al. 2016). Even international efforts like the Paris Accords appear to operate in isolation from the sobering facts of our present predicament—in Clive Spash’s (2016) memorable phrase, it should really be called “the Paris agreement to ignore reality.” An agreement to ignore reality is, in Arendt’s conception, the essential pact that totalitarian regimes make with their subjects.

Of course, ignorance and delusion do not by themselves amount to totalitarianism. The disconnect from empirical reality is motivated by what Arendt calls “ideology.” The positive, substantive doctrines of the totalitarian systems—racism writ into the fabric of nature or class struggle as the motor of history—take precedence over any evidence or information which might contradict them. The internal consistency and scrupulous logical inferences of an abstract *idea* supervene the contingencies of experience. At this point, our present conjuncture seems to part ways with Arendt’s account of totalitarian logic, as climate denialism is not immediately related to “radical” political beliefs on the far-Left or far-Right. But what can account for the pronounced disparity between the facts of climate change and the unwillingness or inability of the contemporary populace to acknowledge or confront these facts? How can we understand what Amitav Ghosh (2016: 126) describes as “the divergence between the common interest and the preoccupations of the public sphere”?

Andreas Malm (2016: 14) points out that the IPCC has posed this question as well, and their answer is revealing:

Measures necessary for an enforced, rapid, politically driven phaseout of fossil fuels may, as IPCC tersely notes … be “difficult to implement” due to what the panel labels a “key constraint”: namely “*resistance by vested interests*.” … So fossil fuels have to be discarded for human civilization to endure and thrive—but there are “vested interests” standing in the way.

This raises a further question: who could possibly have a “vested interest” in opposing decarbonization? The fossil fuel industry is an obvious culprit, but the organized and astroturfed climate denial movement goes well beyond this industrial sector. A broad coalition of corporate interests—many not directly related to fossil fuels—spend millions of dollars each year disseminating deliberate misinformation about anthropogenic climate change (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Dunlap and McCright 2015; Brulle 2014; Kramer 2020: 84–124; Schweickart 2017: 16–17). The vested interests blocking climate action seem to represent something broader, i.e., the economic system of global capitalism itself, which is predicated on a constant and expanding turnover of production and consumption, and therefore cannot tolerate a planned and strategic decarbonization (Christophers 2022; Hickel and Kallis 2019; Hornborg 2003; Pirani 2018; Longo, Clausen, and Clark 2015: 144–74; Burton and Somerville 2019; Gunderson 2017; Gunderson, Stuart, and Peterson 2018; Gunderson Stuart, and Peterson 2022; Foster, York, and Clark 2011). As Richard Heinberg (2011: 19) observes, “at the landmark international Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009, the priorities of the most fuel-dependent nations were clear: carbon emissions should be cut, and fossil fuel dependency reduced, *but only if doing so does not threaten economic growth*.”

The abject failure of subsequent emissions reduction efforts should indicate something about the compatibility of a profit-oriented economy and a shrinking carbon output. Little wonder, then, that the most reliable correlate of climate denialist views—more than age, race, or gender—is “system justification” motivation, i.e., the extent to which one is committed to maintaining the existing economic model (Jylhä and Akrami 2015; Feygina, Jost, and Goldsmith 2010; see also Heath and Gifford 2006). An approach indexed to “raising awareness” or “shifting consciousness” fails to register just how imbricated our economic system and the burning of fossil fuels have become. Countries like Nigeria, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia rely on oil exports as their economic base, and over half of the electricity generated in the United States comes from fossil fuels. The suburbanization that has done so much to shape the infrastructure of this country is likewise subsidized by the fossil economy (Huber 2013); indeed, the stability of the US dollar as a world currency is inextricably bound up with the circulation of petrodollars (Wight 2021). Those who appeal to “sustainable capitalism” or “green growth” must ask themselves if their commitment is rooted in an empirical analysis of present conditions or in an *a priori* faith in the viability of this economic system.[[2]](#endnote-2)

If the possibility of decarbonization is constricted by the structural necessities of capital accumulation, it also chafes against the liberal ethos of individual rights and consumer sovereignty. In affluent parts of the world, even people ostensibly concerned about climate change are largely unwilling to change their carbon-intensive lifestyles (Henley 2021; Huber 2013: viii–ix). Efforts to phase out gas stoves in favor of electric are being blocked by consumers who happen to prefer the former (Plumer and Tabuchi 2021). Imagine telling a citizenry resistant to wearing masks or getting vaccinated during a pandemic (“it’s an individual choice”) that they can no longer drive SUVs, eat beef, or use plastic bags—and staying in office. As a typical American voter tells Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016: 122):

The American Dream is not due to socialism or the EPA. Sure, I want clean air and water … but I trust our system to assure it. …

Environmentalists want to stop the American Dream to protect the endangered toad … but if I had to choose between the American Dream and a toad, hey, I’ll take the American Dream.

Confronting an electorate like this, we can understand why some theorists have wondered aloud about the compatibility of the democratic form and a habitable climate future (Oksala 2016: 55–58; Parr 2018: 75–84, 202–203; Mann and Wainwright 2018: 182; Malm 2018: 152; Mittiga 2021; Duvernoy and Busk 2020).

The constitutional safeguards and norms of civil association characteristic of liberal democracies have also proven to be obstacles to the urgent task of decarbonization. Even Biden’s excruciatingly modest climate initiatives have been blocked by federal judges (Joselow 2022). We can already read opinion pieces (in ostensibly left-leaning publications) preemptively defending the sacrosanct status of free speech, even when it comes to patent disinformation on climate change (Kochan 2021); this is reflective of the “both sides” fetishism, so integral to liberal politics, which has done so much to quarantine public discourse on this issue away from basic scientific realities (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). Can we fathom the uphill constitutional and public relations battles on the horizon if governments should attempt to nationalize fossil fuel companies, seize private lands for the development of wind farms, ration water supplies, or ground private jets? Contemporary liberal capitalist democracies put a premium on the value of private property and diverse opinion, but they discount the suffering, devastation, and death precipitated by an ecological collapse of their own making.

It would be an error, then, to construe governmental and popular ignorance of (or indifference to) climate change as a neutral or negative phenomenon, i.e., as merely an absence or a shortcoming. The ecologically necessary task of decarbonization seems to be *blocked* by an economic, political, and cultural system that cannot accommodate it. Climate deniers do not hate the environment; they recognize that reducing greenhouse gas emissions would represent a disruption of their growth-oriented, high-consuming, libertarian way of life (“the American dream”). Unable to incorporate the dire truth of the climate situation in a way consistent with its own maintenance, liberal capitalist democracy is forced to suppress this truth. It therefore represents an *ideology* in the precise sense that Arendt lays out: a “supersense” that overrides experience, the “simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors” (Arendt 1973: 458). The carbon footprint of gas-powered stoves is irrelevant if you prefer to use that product; owning a private jet is one’s constitutional right, while sea-level rise is an exaggeration. As an example of her own, Arendt mockingly cites the Soviet boast that only socialism could have created a functioning subway system; in order for this to be maintained, the existence of the Paris subway system had to be flatly denied (ibid). This logic is easily transposable to our present conjuncture: in order for liberal capitalist democracy to maintain its veneer of legitimacy and sustainability, anthropogenic climate change *cannot be true*, or it at least cannot be as cataclysmic as the scientific community would have us believe.

The ideology of our present moment thus requires that any strategy for climate adaptation or mitigation operate within the horizon of the existing system. Liberal capitalist democracy is the end of history for which there is no alternative, and no mere ecological breakdown is capable of shifting that perception. The “rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes” demanded by the IPCC are thus dismissed as unfeasible, unrealistic, etc., as if the prevailing socioeconomic model represented an inevitable and quasi-natural process that cannot be altered. Meanwhile, geoengineering has emerged as the most organized and well-funded response to the climate catastrophe. Public and private resources go toward research for various “earth hacking” schemes: spraying sulfate aerosols into the atmosphere to reflect sunlight (and other forms of “solar radiation management”), pumping iron into the oceans to absorb carbon, and covering deserts with giant white sheets, among others (Buck 2019; Klein 2015: 256–90). Changing the natural processes of the Earth itself is apparently more feasible than implementing the kinds of societal changes the IPCC Report recommends. The natural world must adapt to the political world, not vice-versa.

This simultaneous feeling of paralysis and omnipotence shows up in Arendt’s description of totalitarianism as well. She identifies two heterogeneous convictions that characterize the logic of totalitarian movements: that everything is determined and that anything is possible. The propaganda of Nazism and Stalinism, she claims, disseminated at once two essentially contradictory underlying messages. They claimed that their regimes represented the inevitable result of strictly determined historical or natural processes, and could therefore not be meaningfully challenged, *and* that the power of the regime was basically unlimited, that it could force nature itself to conform to its whims, and that through sheer will it could accomplish anything no matter how seemingly implausible. In its own self-conception, the totalitarian state is somehow both a passive force in the hands of an anonymous natural/historical necessity and a supremely active, supremely responsible agent that obeys no external command and respects no imposed limit. It combines “claims to obey strictly and unequivocally … laws of Nature or of History” with “the proud assumption of human mastery over the world” (Arendt 1973: 461, 458).

As we have seen, today’s ideology does not regard climate change as amenable to structural economic and political change, but it does locate some hope in “changing the way sunlight reaches us and *all other life on earth*” (Buck 2019: 3). In these two tendencies we can observe the ordered pair of convictions that Arendt identifies in totalitarian logic: everything is determined, but anything is possible. Our economic system demands that we keep emitting greenhouse gases, and so, the story goes, we are powerless before a process over which we have no control and for which we have no responsibility—we simply must obey economic laws. At the same time, the climate catastrophe can be averted through the awesome display of human mastery and ingenuity represented by geoengineering—we do not necessarily have to obey geophysical laws. A resigned fatalism goes hand in hand with a triumphant voluntarism. We are powerless before the social process, but powerful in the face of the natural process.[[3]](#endnote-3) Given the massive dangers inherent in any geoengineering project, Arendt’s (1973: 459) remark that “the belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed” may turn out to have more meaning than she intended.

It may be objected that my argument has left out a key aspect of Arendt’s account of totalitarian power: terror. Totalitarian regimes rule by way of a totalizing violence that destroys human plurality and renders each individual superfluous. Whatever else may be said about it, the liberal democratic capitalist status quo does not do *that*. But once again, the coming catastrophe gives the lie to this comforting *apologia*. Three degrees of warming, which the status quo barrels toward every day, will likely result in far more deaths than the Holocaust and Stalin’s gulags put together. The wars and migration conflicts already under way due to climate change are well-documented (Parenti 2011; Miller 2017; Dyer 2011; Welzer 2012), as is the nightmarish freshwater crisis (Barlow 2011; Hargrove 2021). The armed forces of the imperial centers are presently preparing for a form of “green security” (Chaturvedi and Doyle 2016), or what some are rightly calling “climate terror” (Ghosh 2016: 138–41; see also Klare 2019). This violence is not only indirect. In a study of the “mortality cost of carbon,” R. Daniel Bressler (2021) calculates that the lifetime carbon emitted by every 3.5 average Americans will cause one “excess death” from extreme heat alone between 2020 and 2100. Of course, the proximate victims of what Nixon (2011) calls “slow violence” will be the people who have contributed the least in terms of greenhouse gas emissions: the poorest of the world’s economic and geopolitical peripheries. In the meantime, those of us (temporarily) spared from deadly heat waves and other major destabilizations will have to live with the knowledge of what we contribute toward every time we start our cars or send single-use plastic to a landfill. As Arendt says, totalitarian rule needs to prepare its subjects “to fit … equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim” (Arendt 1973: 468).

A system that requires untold millions to be sacrificed in the name of its own inevitability can only be called terroristic. It can also be called “genocidal,” as Marshall Islands foreign minister Tony de Brum has expressed (Pashley 2015). Ultimately, then, the moral difference between Auschwitz and a slow and deadly climate Apartheid that could have been prevented by reducing emissions is hazy at best. Much like Auschwitz, the perpetual increase in greenhouse gas emissions—and thus the perpetual increase in future death—occurs under the official protection of the law. Those who blow up oil pipelines are called terrorists while those who protect the fossil economy in the name of economic growth, private property, or democracy are called law-abiding. Once again, there is an uncanny affinity here with Arendt’s description of totalitarianism as collapsing the distinction between law and terror. “Terror is lawfulness,” she writes, “if the law is the law of the movement of some suprahuman force” (Arendt 1973: 465). In our case, the “suprahuman force” is not racial essence or the telos of history, but the ostensibly secular ideology of liberal capitalist democracy that was advertised as the end of all “ideologies.”

Without even invoking Right-wing extremists marching through the streets, it is difficult to imagine a more violent democracy than business as usual in the status quo. As I have argued elsewhere (Busk 2020; Busk 2021), we cannot simply dismiss this state of affairs as “antidemocratic.” Climate deniers are the *demos*. The United States may not be a “real” democracy, but we have no reason to assume that an authentic democracy (however conceived) would automatically translate into an ecological awakening. Against such idealist comforts, we must today recognize that those two categories so frequently opposed—democracy and totalitarianism—are becoming indistinguishable. We must likewise realize that the philosophical scaffolding of the present system was developed in the centuries before the reality of anthropogenic climate change became clear. In the context of a permanent ecological catastrophe, the talking points of both right and left advocates of liberal capitalist democracy—pluralism, popular sovereignty, individual rights, private property—must appear as anachronistic at best.

What does it mean if Arendt’s description of totalitarianism from 1951 rings true today, not of “authoritarian” regimes, but of the supposedly neutral and pluralistic governments which are imagined to be the former’s negative complement? The inability of the status quo to incorporate the reality of climate change into its discursive horizon—let alone to do anything about it—suggests that liberal capitalist democracy has become the “extreme” belief system and the “totalitarian” form of political organization against which it formerly defined itself. It is therefore time to reassess the alternatives. Fascism, beyond being morally hideous and patently false from the first premise, offers no better hope of navigating the climate catastrophe than the system in place; as Malm and the Zetkin Collective have pointed out, there is no “eco-Fascism” but only “fossil Fascism” (Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021: 133–79, 470–74). When we consider the intentional economic planning, curbing of luxury emissions, and centrally enforced control that will be necessary for rapid decarbonization, an ecological socialism might just have something to recommend it. Those who cry “totalitarianism!” at the very mention of these words would do better to look inward and consider the climate future, or lack thereof, the present system has promised.

*Fort Myers, Florida*

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1. I owe this distinction to Elizabeth Portella. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On the (im)possibility of “decoupling” economic growth from material throughput (i.e., increasing GDP while decreasing carbon emissions), see Haberl et al. (2020). See also Hickel (2020): 149–53. Aronoff (2021:59) puts it well: “the overriding assumption behind treating market-based solutions as a panacea is borderline religious.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Malm 2021: 145–48. Also worth mentioning in this context is the work of Persson and Savulescu (2012: 76–83), who argue that genetic “moral enhancement” through biomedical techniques is the only way to avoid a terminal climate scenario. For them, changing human biology is easier than changing the socioeconomic system. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)