

The Three Phases of Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism*

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HANNAH Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, is a bewilderingly wide-ranging work, a book about much more than just totalitarianism and its immediate origins.¹ In fact, it is not really about those immediate origins at all. The book's peculiar organization creates a certain ambiguity regarding its intended subject-matter and scope.² The first part, "Anti-semitism," tells the story of the rise of modern, secular anti-Semitism (as distinct from what the author calls "religious Jew-hatred") up to the turn of the twentieth century, and ends with the Dreyfus affair in France—a "dress rehearsal," in Arendt's words, for things still worse to come (10). The second part, "Imperialism," surveys an assortment of pathologies in the world politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading to (but not directly involving) the First World War. This part of the book examines the European powers' rapacious expansionist policies in Africa and Asia—in which overseas investment became the pretext for raw, openly racist exploitation—and the concomitant emergence in Central and Eastern Europe of "tribalist" ethnic movements whose (failed) ambition was the replication of those

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imperialist policies on the European continent. Only in part III, "Totalitarianism," does the author turn to the subject of totalitarianism itself. But here the diligent reader meets a surprise: this third part of the book makes remarkably little direct reference to the 300 pages that precede it, and confounds the expectation of a clear convergence of the tributary streams of historical narrative that flow through the first two parts. What the reader encounters instead in part III is an extended analysis of what Arendt insists is a wholly unprecedented kind of political organization, one embodied solely—and equally—in the regimes of Hitler and Stalin.

Given the contents of the first two parts of the book, with their focus on anti-Semitism and tribalist racism, one obvious puzzle is the unexpected shift from what had seemed to be a story of Nazism's sources to an analysis that accords equal standing to what she invariably calls Stalin's "Bolshevism" as well. (Her reasons for preferring that term to "Stalinism" will be taken up in the second part of this essay.) But there is a similar lack of explicit continuity with the first two parts of the book in her actual treatment of the Nazi dictatorship itself. For instance, the argument of the third part never follows up on the seemingly anticipatory claim in part II that "African colonial possessions became the most fertile soil for the flowering of what later was to become the Nazi elite" (206). Such puzzles are compounded by the author's own curious silence throughout the book—the title itself aside—concerning the intended structure of its overall argument. The three separate parts share only a short preface of less than three pages, which largely manages to avoid the question. Moreover, the text as we read it today omits the "Concluding Remarks" of the book's original 1951 edition, which had at least gestured toward a comprehensive perspective on the whole (though without really resolving these puzzles). In place of those "Concluding Remarks," the later editions of the book—starting with the 1955 German edition, and then the revised English-language edition of 1958—contain a new chapter on totalitarianism, "Ideology and

Terror.”³ Yet that new chapter only further compounds the reader’s disorientation, for it presents an argument that at times seems to be nearly as discontinuous with the prior chapters of part III as they in turn had been with those of the prior two parts.

There is a straightforward explanation for the book’s unruly organization. It is that Arendt arrived at her basic views on totalitarianism only after she had already written nearly all of what would become parts I and II. Until then, the chapters of those first two parts were to have led not to an analysis of totalitarianism, but instead to one of Nazism, which at the time she understood as the direct successor to imperialism.⁴ Her decision to treat Nazism as a species of totalitarianism instead—and to extend her purview to the Bolshevik version of it as well—occurred at about the same time she abandoned that view of the former, sometime around 1947. But to accommodate this twofold change, she did little more than graft a new theory onto the trunk of the old, adding a completely new third part to the nearly complete text of the manuscript as written. The reason “Totalitarianism” so confounds readers’ expectations is that she revised the previously written part of the text just enough (chiefly in the first chapter of “Antisemitism” and the last two of “Imperialism”) to avoid any outright inconsistency with the claims of the new third part, but without any alteration to its basic contents or organization—which thus continue to reflect the priorities of an earlier phase of her thought. In a similar way, the new chapter on “Ideology and Terror” added in later editions represents still another phase of Arendt’s thinking on the subject, displacing without fully dislodging the arguments of the one before.

This essay traces the three distinct phases of Arendt’s thought on Nazism and Bolshevism that correspond to the three successive phases of her book’s composition: her original, abandoned theory of Nazi “race imperialism,” as sketched in early articles and in the initial prospectuses and outlines for the book (all written before 1947); her first theory of totalitarianism, as formulated in the text of the book’s first edition (completed in 1949); and the

revised version of that theory, as emended through the added chapter and other changes (dating from roughly 1952 to 1955) that she made to the book's later editions. Because much of the argument leading up to her repudiated first view of Nazism is still retained in the part of the book devoted to imperialism (that is, with reference to imperialist policies and movements antedating the First World War), and because the later revisions to the main body of part III consist largely of additions (with only one significant excision), all three of these phases of Arendt's thought are in evidence in the text of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as it stands. For this reason, a clarification of the differences between them can serve to account for the incongruities in the book's overall contents and organization. Moreover, the latter two of these phases will each be seen to redress a significant theoretical *aporia* or lacuna in the one preceding it. Consideration of each of the three phases in turn allows for a more precise understanding of the aims and structure of Arendt's arguments in each.

I

Nearly all of parts I and II of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—all but the short first chapter of part I, and part of the last chapter in part II—is adapted from articles that Arendt had published separately between 1942 and 1946. In these articles she represents Nazism as the immediate heir to the racist, expansionist power politics that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, whose continental variant (the pan-German and pan-Slavic movements) had used anti-Semitism as a rallying cause. Hitler's genocidal dictatorship is treated simply as the horrific consummation of the malignant tendencies of imperialism's older forms. This first phase of her thinking on Nazism has its fullest published expression in "Imperialism: Road to Suicide," an article that appeared early in 1946 in the newly founded journal *Commentary* (Arendt, 1946a). That article contains a succinct statement of the

theory of imperialism that she would later present in her book, with one key difference: unlike in the book, she adds a further argument that specifically employs this theory of imperialism in order to account for the unprecedented violence and self-destructiveness of the Nazi regime.

Both in this article and in the later book, Arendt says that what set off the era of imperialism in the last decades of the nineteenth century was that the European bourgeoisie was no longer content to accumulate capital under the benign noninterference of the state and instead seized the reins of state power for the sake of expanding investments abroad. Her pointed condemnation of the capitalist elite's rapacity gives her account a passing resemblance to the influential theories of earlier writers like J. H. Hobson and Rosa Luxemburg. Unlike them, however, Arendt takes remarkably little interest in the workings of the capitalist economy as such, let alone a Marx-inflected analysis of it.⁵ Her concern with capitalism is restricted almost entirely to the *ethos* of the ruling bourgeoisie, and its concomitant understanding of political power. Imperialist policies may have begun simply as an attempt to use military force to safeguard foreign investments; nevertheless, she argues, "the resulting introduction of power as the only contents of politics, and of expansion as its only aim, would hardly have met with such universal applause. . . had it not so perfectly answered the hidden desires and secret convictions of the economically and socially dominant classes" (138). For a view of those "hidden desires and secret convictions," she turns to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which she takes to be the consummate (if also proleptic) expression of the bourgeois political outlook. On her reading, at least, what Hobbes depicts is a society of antagonistic individuals whose ceaseless struggle for competitive advantage is always just shy of violence, and who regard the state as a device for accumulating collective power for use against outsiders, not including the losers in that same competition—who for their part are free to form outlaw bands with much the same aims (Arendt, 1946a: 30-32).⁶

Arendt argues that it was this abiding, unavowed belief in the legitimacy of domination by force of sheer collective violence that made the imperialist financiers and politicians so readily able to draw upon the active participation of the “mob”—the denizens of the frankly criminal milieu that thrived in the bowels of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century capitalism, a motley assortment of “armed bohemians” who share the respectable bourgeoisie’s possessive individualism without the latter’s inhibited propriety, and who bypass the much-vaunted ethic of work in favor of more or less organized violence.⁷ (Note that she uses the term “mob” not in the word’s older sense of the merely uncouth and disorderly poor, but with the slang connotation of a specifically criminal underworld.) She holds that the bourgeois elite’s inevitable collusion with this mob in agitating for imperialist adventures abroad, and, when successful, the mob’s involvement in actually managing those adventures, is what ultimately transforms the mere exploitation of markets into a rapacious drive for the outright subjugation of native peoples—a Hobbesian accumulation of power for its own sake. The special importance of racism to the imperialist enterprise, according to her, is that it allows for the only kind of political organization that can capture the mob’s imagination and allegiance: one that promises its self-exalted members a share in the spoils of profit and power with no expectation of effort or responsibility in return. As such, moreover, it naturally sanctions a politics of hostile conflict among irreconcilably alien enemy groups—or the permanent subjugation of one such group to another—with none of the limits to geographical expansion inherent to the constitutional nation-state. And she argues that what made anti-Semitism in particular so useful as a rallying cause for the would-be imperialists of the continent is precisely this same ambition for a form of domination that could be “organized internationally and bound together by blood.” “The mob viewed the Jews enviously as a luckier, more successful competitor” (Arendt, 1946a: 34).

This much of Arendt's account of imperialism in the 1946 *Commentary* article is carried over to her eventual book. But only in the earlier version does she extend her argument to Nazism itself. In that version, "full-fledged" imperialism ultimately transcends rapacious expansion for expansion's sake to become destruction for destruction's sake, a transformation whose weird culmination is a form of collective suicide:

In Nazism we saw the first case of a thoroughgoing imperialist policy, whose lust for conquest is governed by the principle "All or Nothing," and whose wars end in "Victory or Death." And we also saw the workings of its peculiar, curious logic by which the All inevitably reverts to the Nothing, and even Victory cannot but end in Death. Following its own law, the power-accumulating machinery built by imperialism can only go on swallowing more and more peoples, enslaving more and more territory, destroying more and more human beings—until eventually it ends by devouring itself (Arendt, 1946a: 33-4).

Arendt does not mean here simply that the imperialist ambition for possession fuels a self-defeating hubris, but that the desire to possess somehow becomes a desire to consummate possession in destruction—since destruction "is the most radical form of domination as well as of possession," and "only what one possesses through destruction can be really and definitely dominated" (Arendt, 1946a: 33-4; cf. *OT*, 145). She goes on to claim that it was only this, with its resulting "insane preoccupation with death itself," that can account for the Nazis' mass slaughter of the Jews: "No matter what the rationale, real or alleged, for anti-Semitism might be, the building of death factories, the diversion of so many millions of people into the machinery of mass murder, made no conceivable sense in a war situation where all available forces were needed for actual fighting" (Arendt, 1946a: 35). The Nazi regime's mad devotion to its genocidal program during the last years of the war, in flagrant disregard for rational advantage or

minimally prudent concern for self-preservation, is thus presented as the workings of a "hidden drive for suicide" that imperialism had harbored from the start. "Nothing could prove more conclusively than this senseless slaughter how deeply and intimately Victory and Death were intertwined."

It is this last stretch of her argument that Arendt would soon abandon. She would continue to believe that the aspect of Hitler's regime that most cried out for explanation was its sheer disregard for rational advantage or its supporters' interest in self-preservation, a phenomenon that for her was most horribly evident in its willingness to divert desperately needed resources away from the battlefield in the last years of the war for the sake of a coldly calculated program of mass murder, inflicted on people who posed no conceivable threat. She would similarly remark at the outset of part III of her later book that "the disturbing factor in the success of totalitarianism is. . .the true selflessness of its adherents" (307). What she would repudiate of her earlier view is the further claim that this phenomenon of "selfless" violence could somehow be traced to its very opposite, a culminating negation of the insatiably rapacious lust for power she finds at the heart of imperialism. The most she offers in the *Commentary* article in support of that suggestion is the invocation of a mysterious, vaguely Hegelian dialectic, whose supposed climax only flaunts its essential *aporia*: "the All inevitably reverts to Nothing," the lust for power becomes a drive for suicide—with no real insight on how or why such an inversion would be bound to occur. (That is not to doubt the possible adequacy of her theory of tribalist expansionism on its own in accounting for other, less manifestly "suicidal" instances of state-sponsored genocide, from the European imperialists' massacres in Africa the turn of the last century to the "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnia in our own time.) As we will see in a moment, she would come to characterize the "selflessness" of totalitarianism and its resulting murderousness as a madness of another kind, attributable to an entirely different inner dynamic and governing mentality.⁸

The earliest documents among Arendt's papers that pertain to her book on totalitarianism are various drafts of a proposal that she prepared sometime in 1946 in response to a query that the *Commentary* article and others had elicited from an editor at the publisher Houghton-Mifflin.⁹ On the basis of those drafts, it seems that Arendt's original plan for the book—whose title was at first to have been simply *Imperialism*—was simply to expand upon her published articles on anti-Semitism, racism, and imperialism; these were to be rounded out with a chapter-length treatment of Nazism, under the heading "Race-Imperialism."¹⁰ A revised prospectus from later in the same year almost exactly matches the eventual contents of parts I and II of the final book (minus the short opening chapter of the book's part I), plus a single planned chapter on Nazism at the end.¹¹ It was apparently only in 1947, after most of her work on the manuscript (apart from that last chapter) was already complete, that Arendt decided to write an expanded third part—on not Nazism but totalitarianism in general, covering Stalin's version of it as well as Hitler's.¹² She began working in earnest on what became part III of the book the following year, after she had already submitted nearly all of the then-extant manuscript to her prospective editors at Houghton-Mifflin, who were already becoming increasingly impatient with her delays.¹³ (Houghton-Mifflin would later decline to publish the much-enlarged manuscript—for fear of finding no market for it—after Arendt finally submitted it complete in 1949.¹⁴ The book was eventually published, two years later, by Harcourt instead.)

The late substitution of "totalitarianism" for "Nazism" as the subject of the book's last part involved far more than the stretching of a previously conceived theoretical model to accommodate additional material on the Soviet Union. For even apart from the introduction of Bolshevism as a parallel object of study, the book's treatment of Nazism itself departs fundamentally from her original plan. The draft prospectuses and outlines that she prepared prior to the change clearly indicate that she continued to regard Nazism in the same way that she had in the *Commentary* article: as

the inverted consummation of imperialism. It is thus, more or less, that she describes the phenomenon in one of the sketches of her intended last chapter: "The first well-planned organization of a people as a race was based upon the alliance between capital and mob, aimed at illimited expansion (world conquest) and anticipated cheerfully the destruction of everything it could not possess."¹⁵ In the book, however, she would repudiate precisely this; there she pointedly remarks instead that "the totalitarian form of government has very little to do with lust for power or even the desire for a power-generating machine, with the game of power for power's sake which has been characteristic of the last stages of imperialist rule" (407). To be sure, she would continue to maintain that totalitarian parties copied some of their organizational devices from the continental pan-German and pan-Slavic movements, and that totalitarian rule draws on some of the same techniques of domination as imperialism had—rule by secret decree, "administrative massacres," and concentration camps (212, 222, 440*). But by the time she completed the manuscript, she had come to believe that the ends to which imperialist and totalitarian politics put those means are in fact essentially different—similar "only in appearance" (422).

In a November 1948 letter, written while she was at work on the new third part, Arendt confided to Karl Jaspers that the project had become three separate books—"at least as far as the historical material is concerned."¹⁶ And indeed the most striking difference between her early prospectuses and the book as written is the sheer lack of stated explanation in the latter as to how the disparate sections of parts I and II are supposed to relate to part III. That absence stands in pointed contrast to her succinct articulation of her project's overall organization in the early prospectuses, which clearly stated the ways the various "elements" discussed over the course of the book—anti-Semitism, imperialism, and racism—would later be "crystallized" (or "amalgamated") in the form of Nazism, in much the way her *Commentary* article had stated. No comparable explanation is offered any-

where in the book itself; Arendt conspicuously failed to produce the "comprehensive introduction" that she had at one point promised an editor at Houghton-Mifflin.¹⁷ The short preface to the first edition merely introduces the topics of the three parts seriatim, without adverting to any comparable structure to her historical argument (ix). A few years after the book's publication (in a published reply to a review by Eric Voegelin), she would expressly disavow the seeming implications of the reference to totalitarianism's "origins" in the title. Yet her corrective explanation of the book's organization at that time did no more than revive the metaphor of chemical combination used in her abandoned first scheme:

What I did. . . was to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism and to analyze them in historical terms, tracing the elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary. . . . The book, therefore, does not really deal with "origins" at all—as its title unfortunately claims—but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism; this account is followed by an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarian movements and domination itself (Arendt, 1994: 402-3).

The suggestion that parts I and II trace the history of the "elements" that would later "crystallize" into totalitarianism is one she would make again in the foreword to the book's 1955 German edition.¹⁸ But the fact the metaphor is merely recycled from her earlier, very different understanding of her project—for which it was obviously much better suited—indicates how little light it actually sheds on the structure of the book as it is written. Had Arendt stuck with her original plans, the various topics discussed in parts I and II of the book would indeed have coalesced neatly in the concluding chapter on the Nazis' "race imperialism." What accounts for the loose ends and discontinuities in the text as it stands is precisely her decision to jettison her original account of Nazism, while retaining the parts of the text that were to have led

up to it. In part II, for instance, she traces the birth of modern racism to the imperialist "scramble for Africa," and draws upon Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to depict the way the European adventurers' self-understanding and conduct degenerated upon their uncomprehending, and brutally opportunistic encounter with Africa's putatively "savage" tribes (185-191). Her early proposals indicate that her original idea had been to use the ravings of the novel's Mr. Kurtz as a direct prefigurement of the Nazi mentality: "Conrad's Mr. Kurtz, inspite [*sic*] of being a fictional character, has become a reality in the Nazi character."¹⁹ In the book, however, she discusses Kurtz and his racist mentality solely in the context of overseas imperialism, in part II; neither is so much as mentioned when she turns to the Nazis themselves in part III.

That is not to say that the theory of totalitarianism Arendt presents in part III conflicts with the accounts of the rise of anti-Semitism and imperialism—as historically prior phenomena—that precede it in the book. Nor is it to deny that her accounts of all three share many of the same basic descriptive concepts and political concerns—which, as she would later put it, "run like red threads through the whole" (Arendt, 1994: 403). The first two parts add up to a bitter lament at the failure of constitutional institutions throughout continental Europe to withstand the hostile, opportunistic machinations of politically irresponsible social elites; when the curtain rises on part III, it is the decay of those discredited liberal institutions that gives totalitarian movements their chance. The work as a whole is suffused with a plangent sense that the crisis of the century is not so much the evil of totalitarian regimes themselves, but the political vacuum that they were able to fill—and that their demise would leave behind. (A large part of the book's abiding importance lies in such larger political arguments, which unfortunately are beyond the scope of the present essay.) Nevertheless, her account in part III of totalitarian movements and regimes—their organization, the basis of their mass support, and their tendency toward fantastic, self-

destructive violence—represents a fresh departure in her thinking about the catastrophe of totalitarianism itself, as distinct from the disasters that came before it.

II

The topical and theoretical discontinuities between part III of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the book's preceding two parts—along with the misleading impression left by the book's title—have fostered a certain amount of confusion concerning the actual argument of that third part. For instance, critics have frequently objected to Arendt's theory of totalitarianism on the grounds that anti-Semitism played no part in the origins of Bolshevism.²⁰ But Arendt never claims otherwise—and her theory involves nothing that would commit her to denying that fact.²¹ The contrary impression is merely a mirage-like distortion arising from the placement of "Totalitarianism" after the book's other two parts. A recognition of the third part's relative separateness from what precedes it should suffice to dispel such distortions, as well as the more general appearance of disproportion in its parallel treatments of Nazism and Bolshevism. And that recognition also allows for a further clarification of the structure and aims of the theory of totalitarianism that Arendt presents in the third part. For notwithstanding the title and ostensible structure of the entire work, the section on totalitarianism is not primarily a historiographical study. Its essential concern is neither the historical *genesis* of totalitarianism, whether out of imperialism or anything else, nor its subsequent historical development. Although Arendt distinguishes three formally successive "stages" of totalitarianism—the "pre-power" stage, the consolidation and exercise of state power, and finally "total domination"—hers is not really a *diachronic* analysis at all. She nowhere purports to explain (except incidentally) how Hitler or Stalin managed to get from one stage to the next. To fault her for failing to answer historians' questions

about the ultimate origins of either dictatorship—Hitler's no less than Stalin's—or about either dictator's path to power, is to miss the point of what she is trying to do.²² What she seeks to understand is not the sum of circumstances that allowed for Hitler's or Stalin's success, but rather a particular subset of conditions that were responsible for making the basic features of their rule even *possible*—namely, the factors enabling the inner cohesion of the “movements” they led, and the inherent tendencies of a movement organized on such a basis should it come to power.

The basic unit of Arendt's analysis in part III is not the totalitarian *state*, but rather what she calls the totalitarian “movement.” That is a reflection of her thesis that it is best to regard the “so-called totalitarian state” as the adaptation of the “movement” itself to the circumstances of political power, and the concomitant subordination of all state institutions to its internally generated needs (that is, rather than to suppose that the “movement” at issue were simply the organized means to attain or maintain despotic state power in the usual sense). What she understands as a totalitarian “movement,” then, is a concentric pattern of organization whose core is a highly disciplined party, and whose centrally directed perimeter may or may not extend to the institutions of government, depending on whether the movement is in its “pre-power” stage or the stage of “totalitarianism in power.” (The stage of “total domination” occurs once the institutions of the state are fully assimilated to the movement.) Arendt takes the term “movement” itself from the Nazis' own self-description, and her application of it to that case is straightforward enough. Her use of the phrase “Bolshevik movement” is somewhat less so, and may invite confusion. Contrary to what the phrase may seem to suggest, she holds that this Bolshevik movement—as a *totalitarian* movement, at least—came into being only with Stalin's reorganization of the Soviet revolutionary party and state after Lenin's death (319). Even so, Arendt consistently avoids the term “Stalinism,” which she evidently believed conveyed the false impression that the evil at issue concerned one

man's abuse of power, rather than the comprehensive system he had set into play (which she saw no reason to believe would come to an end with Stalin's own demise).²³ Her similarly consistent preference for "Bolshevism" over "Communism" presumably derives from the fact that the former term more closely resembles "National Socialism" in its lack of any meaningful political content apart from the movement's momentary aims. In any case, the "Bolshevik movement" in Arendt's usage essentially refers to the Soviet Communist Party under Stalin, along with the state institutions and nonstate organizations under its control—not only those in the Soviet Union and its postwar satellites, but also the prewar Comintern agencies and Popular Front parties all across Europe, from the Balkans to Spain.

That last geographic qualification deserves more explicit emphasis than Arendt herself gives it in the text, for it explains how she can speak of the Bolshevik movement's "pre-power stage" even while claiming that the movement itself did not antedate Stalin's command. It also explains why her recurrent focus on the social and political conditions in Germany in the decade after the First World War does not in itself indicate any analytic bias in favor of the Nazi case. The point for Arendt is that the parties of *both* totalitarian movements were active in Germany in those years—not only Hitler's N.S.D.A.P., but Thälmann's (that is to say, Stalin's) K.P.D. too.²⁴ That one movement rather than the other successfully came to power there in a quasi-legal coup d'état is in effect a matter of theoretical indifference to her, and hardly even enters her account. Nor does it much matter for her purposes if the Nazi or Communist party's seizure of state power in any given country may have come only on the heels of the Wehrmacht (as in Austria, say, or Holland) or the Red Army.²⁵ What interests her about the movement's "pre-power" stage is not how, or even whether, a totalitarian movement is able to seize state power in one country or another, but rather how such a movement recruits adherents and sustains their loyalty, whatever its absolute strength or eventual success. By the same token, her analysis of "totalitari-

anism in power" takes the fact of the movement's holding state power as an established *fait accompli*.

As in the prior phase of her thought, Arendt continues to consider the most disturbing feature of Nazism to be its adherents' flagrant disregard for self-interest in the execution of the movement's murderous designs, a feature for which she now finds ample parallel in the Bolshevik case. Yet she no longer understands this "suicidal" abandonment of self-interest as a kind of dialectical outcome of its seeming opposite, the rapacity of the mob. While she still sees the collusion of mob and bourgeoisie as the driving force of imperialism (that is, in the period prior to the First World War), she now argues that a totalitarian movement depends most crucially on a mass following whose members' mentality is wholly unlike that of either mob or bourgeoisie, in lacking either group's characteristic individualism (313-4). That is not to deny that the Nazis found support among both the bourgeoisie and mob, and indeed Arendt takes it as a salient feature of totalitarian movements that their actual leaders emerge from the sordid ranks of the latter (318, 326). But she now contends that neither bourgeois profit seeking nor mob rapacity can account for the fundamental character of these movements, or for the unprecedented destructiveness—and self-destructiveness—of their rule. She argues instead that totalitarian movements owe their strength not to the collusion of mob and bourgeoisie, but rather to the entirely "selfless" adherence of another fraction of the population, the group she calls the "masses."

These "masses" for Arendt are neither the population at large, nor the members of any particular social class.²⁶ As she uses the term, "masses" are agglomerations of individuals not belonging to any settled class or other stable social interest group. According to her, it was in the troubled decade after the First World War that individuals of this description first shed their usual political apathy and entered the European political scene in huge numbers (311). She argues that what tends to drive these socially isolated individuals toward totalitarian movements is not a desire to satisfy

any real or perceived interest of their own, but rather a wish to escape from a human reality that their atomized condition tends to render unbearably senseless for them. It does so by depriving them of any shared perspective from which they might find solidarity or simply take solace in the face of personal calamity or even mundane frustrations—"the never-ending shocks with which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations" (353). The resulting inability to cope with reality that Arendt attributes to this condition is as much cognitive as psychological. What has been lost is the "measured insight into the interdependence of the arbitrary and the planned, the accidental and the necessary" that is won out of a genuinely shared social experience; she calls this a loss of "common sense" (352). On her view, totalitarian propaganda caters to precisely this incapacity to bear the messy contingencies of the real world by offering in its stead "a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself, in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home" (353). Totalitarian propaganda creates this "lying world of consistency" by reducing every fortuitous fact or accidental occurrence to the workings of a mysterious, all-encompassing conspiracy. The lack of evidence for this conspiracy is merely adduced as further proof of the imaginary enemy's success. Willfully flouting common-sense evidence or arguments, the totalitarian leader wins his mass following by acting as if he possesses a kind of ideologically informed "supersense," capable of discerning the consistent pattern of conspiracy joining disparate happenings; he maintains his aura of infallibility through the device of resting all his claims on predictions of future revelations.

In the case of the Nazis, the imagined conspiracy of choice was of course that of the Jews, as allegedly revealed in the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." (Hitler expressly cited the fact that the "Protocols" had been repeatedly exposed in the respectable press as a cheap forgery—a pastiche concocted from identifiable sources—as the decisive proof of the document's authenticity

[358, n. 42].) Arendt's discussion of the Nazis' propaganda success with the fiction of Jewish conspiracy is one of the few points in part III at which she returns to topics from the first two parts of the book. Yet in this discussion too, she takes care to distinguish the basis of that fiction's appeal to the masses and that of its earlier success in inciting the mob: "the discovery of the Nazis was that the masses were not so much frightened by Jewish world rule as they were interested in how it could be done, that the popularity of the Protocols was based on admiration and eagerness to learn rather than [the mob's] hatred" (358). If the mob had seized upon anti-Semitism opportunistically, for the sake of venting antisocial hostility and pursuing real or perceived personal advantage, the masses are attracted instead to the fiction's premise that organized, conspiratorial action—for whomever's advantage, and to whatever end—could suffice to control every aspect of the human world. Whereas before she had treated anti-Semitism and racism as essentially continuous, she now emphasizes instead an aspect of the Nazis' anti-Semitic propaganda that in practice has less in common with the racist doctrines used to justify imperialist aggression than with Stalin's more ad hoc fictions of ubiquitous anti-Soviet conspiracies. Indeed, she says that the Bolshevik movement's use of the latter, in comparison with the Nazis' recourse to the "Protocols," affords "a better illustration of the essentially fictitious nature of totalitarianism, precisely because the fictitious global conspiracies against and according to which the Bolshevik conspiracy is supposedly organized have not been ideologically fixed" (378).

By adopting the organizational forms and trappings of a counterconspiracy, Arendt argues, totalitarian movements "translate the propaganda lies of the movement, woven around a central fiction—the conspiracy of the Jews, or the Trotskyites, or 300 families, etc.—into a functioning reality [in order] to build up, even under nontotalitarian circumstances, a society whose members act and react according to the rules of a fictitious world" (364). The imagined power of the malignant conspiracies that the

leader purports to uncover thus not only satisfies his mass following's need for total explanations, but also serves to confirm their unwavering confidence in the equally boundless potential of the supposed counterconspiracy into which they have been inducted. Moreover, on her view, the organization of the totalitarian movement is such that it actually *heightens* the condition of social atomization that feeds its adherents' hostility to ordinary reality, not least among the elites at the movement's core (385). "The evidence of Hitler's as well as Stalin's dictatorship points clearly to the fact that isolation of atomized individuals provides not only the mass basis for totalitarian rule, but is carried through to the very top of the whole structure" (407). This thoroughgoing atomization is achieved through the use of various organizational devices to isolate members socially and psychologically from the outside world—strictly limiting membership, and imposing an aura of secrecy that instills contempt for outsiders' ignorance—while at the same time allowing for no secure status or stable hierarchy within the movement itself (377). According to Arendt, only the singular figure of the leader—Hitler or Stalin—stands secure at the movement's vortex; he owes his own position to his capacity to prevent the formation of any stable cliques or interest groups with independent clout or authority, and in this way keep the entire, amorphous movement dependent on nobody's will but his own (373). When in political power, he does the same by organizing the state itself as an extension of his movement, duplicating offices and constantly shifting the real chain of command (398). With the weapons of the state now at his disposal, the leader is then also in a position to use police terror to destabilize all other institutions in society at large, and thus further spread the condition of mass atomization upon which the movement thrives (323).

Arendt argues that it is because the totalitarian movement is so fundamentally invested in its imaginary fictions that the mere existence of the normal world outside is bound to appear as a threat. She holds that the incomparably destructive belligerence

of a totalitarian movement in power derives from precisely this: "The aggressiveness of totalitarianism springs not from lust for power, and if it feverishly seeks to expand, it does so not for expansion's sake nor for profit, but only for ideological reasons: to make the world consistent, to prove that its respective super-sense had been right" (458). In this phase of her thought on the subject, she contends that totalitarian terror consists primarily in the systematic use of state violence to vindicate the logically consistent yet utterly unreal fictions upon which the movement is based. (Her later emendation of this position will be taken up in the next part of this essay.) That is not to say, however, that she shares the view of those who see the unsurpassed suffering inflicted by totalitarian regimes (or at least communist ones) as the inevitable effect of a mad campaign to attain some unrealizable utopia. For the "fictions" at issue in this phase of Arendt's theory are not future utopias, but present *conspiracies*. (She has no patience for the view that Stalin's terror was but the misguided means to some rational collectivist aim, honorable or otherwise.) At least so long as it is still consolidating its power, the totalitarian movement needs enemies as much as adherents to maintain its *raison d'être*. According to Arendt, the chief reason a totalitarian movement cannot rest with the mere seizure and exercise of state power—in the manner of a conventional dictatorship—is that the very *lack* of opposition weirdly constitutes an embarrassment to its conspiratorial paranoia, and thus also to its own conspiratorial pretensions. She argues that it is precisely to forestall that weird embarrassment that the totalitarian ruler instigates, and that his secret police carry out, their otherwise senseless persecutions. "Practically speaking," she remarks, "the totalitarian ruler proceeds like a man who persistently insults another man until everybody knows that the latter is his enemy, so that he can, with some plausibility, kill him in self-defense" (402).

In the version of Arendt's theory presented in the book's first edition, it is this need to sustain the plausibility of the movement's central fictions that determines the functional logic of totalitarian

terror. When the regime no longer has any real or suspected enemies left to expose, the chief business of the secret police is to ferret out new "potential enemies" to be punished on the basis of the leader's "logical" deduction of the crimes they might have committed—or might yet commit (*OT*, 1st ed.: 401-2.). "Totalitarianism's central assumption that everything is possible thus leads through consistent elimination of all factual restraints to the absurd and terrible consequence that every crime the rulers can conceive must be punished, whether or not it has been committed" (427). In the "last and fully totalitarian stage" of the movement in power—what she calls "total domination"—the regime need no longer define itself in opposition to a conspiracy, but can instead itself assume the role of the master conspiracy regnant, and launch a frontal attack on the one remaining obstacle to the infallible consistency of its fictional world—the capacity for human freedom itself (458). At this last stage, even the pretense of "the logically possible crime" can be dropped, and "victims [are] chosen completely at random, and without being accused, declared unfit to live"—so as to make any actions or opinions of their own entirely irrelevant to their fate (432-3).

Arendt's most extended discussion of this condition of "total domination" in the book's first edition occurs in her famous account of the concentration camps. There she makes the striking claim that the concentration camps are the "central institution of the totalitarian power and organization machine" (*OT*, 1st ed.: 414; cf. *OT*: 438*). By this she does not mean simply that the camps are "central" in some emblematic sense, as the most horrible part of a horrible regime. Nor does she mean simply that concentration camps are indispensable instruments for such a regime's enormous crimes—though she does stress the way the camps serve as "holes of oblivion" into which victims are made to disappear without a trace, erasing their very existence. Rather, what makes the concentration camps quite literally the "central institution" of totalitarian power and organization is that they serve as the "training grounds" for the elite cadres of the secret

police, and as “laboratories” in which they perform “experiments” in total domination—perfecting devices in dehumanization for eventual use on the population outside. She argues that the deepest aim of these “experiments”—which rob their victims of first their juridical status, then their moral agency, and finally their individual identity as such—is precisely to render the human subject incapable of spontaneity, a wholly manipulable, fully conditioned “bundle of reactions”; a fully realized totalitarian state would aim to impose this same regimen of dehumanization not just in the camps, but everywhere in its dominion. For “the model ‘citizen’ of the totalitarian state,” she argues, is nothing other than “Pavlov’s dog, the human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions, the bundle of reactions that can always be liquidated and replaced by other bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way” (456).

When Arendt’s account of totalitarianism in the book’s first edition is considered in its own right—that is, viewed in its proper separation from the distinct, previously conceived analyses of prior historical phenomena contained in parts I and II, and also apart from the changes and additions made to part III in the book’s later editions—an unexpected lacuna in this phase of her thought comes to light. It is that despite her persistent emphasis on the murderousness of totalitarian terror, and her insistence on the central importance of the concentration camps to that terror, her theory has remarkably little to say to account for the scale of totalitarian regimes’ crimes of *genocide*, with their characteristic *specificity* in the selection of victims. Notwithstanding the contents of the first two parts of the book, the argument in part III (at least as it appears in the first edition) is at its most strained in dealing with the Nazis’ systematic destruction of the Jews *as a people*, a crime whose unyielding thoroughness surely surpasses what it would make sense to describe as the persecution of “potential enemies” for the sake of maintaining a conspiratorial fiction. The Nazis’ mass murder of Jews does figure prominently in the text, and she refers more than once to “extermination factories” in her

discussion of the concentration camps. Yet the main theoretical significance she attaches in that section of the text to the "vast numbers" of Jews shipped to the camps is simply that they served to provide the S.S. with the requisite supply of innocent victims for the kind of experiment in dehumanization that she describes; she presents physical killing itself as little more than an incidental effect of those experiments, and certainly not as the camps' primary aim (450, 455). Indeed, she remarks at one point that in the camps run by the S.S., the death of prisoners was "avoided or postponed indefinitely" (454)—evidence enough that what she primarily has in mind is the Nazis' older concentration camps in Germany proper, not the immense killing centers built in occupied Poland after 1941.²⁷

It happens that the core of Arendt's account of the concentration camps was first written not about the German camps at all, but Russian ones—it was adapted from a 1947 review of the book *The Dark Side of the Moon*, an anonymous compilation of testimony about conditions in Stalin's gulag.²⁸ (The anonymous author and her sources were Polish prisoners released when Stalin entered the Second World War on the side of the Allies.) Together with Arendt's surprisingly scanty treatment of totalitarian genocide, this circumstance points to a second unexpected aspect of this phase of her thought: her theoretical account of totalitarianism is more closely modeled on *Stalin's* rule than Hitler's, at least in a few important respects. She may discuss the Nazis at somewhat greater length—in itself no surprise, as she had far more documentary evidence to work with—yet it is the Bolshevik case alone that provides her most pertinent illustrations of certain key aspects of her theory. It was Stalin, after all, who had made famous the phrase "it is no accident" as the all-purpose device of ideological explanation (a fact she curiously neglects to mention); her entire analysis of the totalitarian movement's "refusal to recognize the fortuitousness that pervades reality" could be regarded as an extended gloss on his success with that formula (351-2). Stalin's practice also offers Arendt's most compelling illustration

of her claim that totalitarian terror is used not simply to silence opposition, but to mobilize active participation in its conspiratorial fictions from the masses it atomizes. The practice that she cites in this connection is the extension of Stalin's purges to everyone associated with the accused, from the most intimate relations to the most casual contacts, with the effect that everyone is forced to pretend "that their acquaintance or friendship with the accused was only a pretext for spying on him and revealing him as a saboteur, a Trotskyite, a foreign spy, or a Fascist" (323). Moreover, the kind of "selflessness" that she attributes to the mass adherents of a totalitarian movement is clearly modeled on a Bolshevik type. She says,

the amazing fact is that. . .he [is not] likely to waver when the monster begins to devour its own children, and not even if he becomes a victim of persecution himself, if he is framed and condemned, if he is purged from the party and sent to a forced-labor or a concentration camp. On the contrary, to the wonder of the whole civilized world, he may even be willing to help in his own prosecution and frame his own death sentence if only his status as a member of the movement is not touched (307).

Although the ostensible subject of this passage is "a Nazi or a Bolshevik," the particular spectacle that she has in mind is of course the Moscow Trials (and the countless repetitions of this same phenomenon in the interrogation cells of the N.K.V.D.). She (correctly) never suggests that Hitler demanded any such thing of his movement's members.²⁹ The lack of a close parallel for this in the Nazi dictatorship is a reflection of a basic difference in the two totalitarian regimes, namely, that acquiescent Germans outside the proscribed categories of targets—and certainly the Nazis themselves—were largely immune from the violence of Hitler's terror, while Stalin's struck most ferociously at the most loyal of Bolsheviks—including (and for a time, especially) the agents of his secret police. (The absence of any real equivalent to Stalin's

murderous purges in Nazi Germany is a point that she herself would later emphasize, in her informal remarks at a 1953 conference at Harvard, but she may not have fully appreciated the implications of that difference for her own theory while she was writing the book.)³⁰

For such reasons, the theory of "totalitarianism in power" and "total domination" as presented in the first edition of Arendt's book would seem better equipped to serve as a description of Stalin's untrammelled reign of terror in the late 1930s than of Hitler's more targeted program of mass murder. Arendt more or less acknowledges as much, with her repeated suggestion that the totalitarian potential of the Nazi regime was never fully realized because of its defeat in the war (390, 433). The very fact she takes that position is ample indication that Hitler's genocide per se is not at the center of her theoretical attention in this phase of her work. Yet it would be a mistake to regard this as a simple consequence of the relative priority her theory accords to Stalin's terror, because the same theoretical difficulty arises with respect to Stalin's own specifically genocidal (or quasi-genocidal) crimes, like the artificially induced mass starvation of the Ukrainian peasantry in 1932 and 1933. A more intriguing possibility (although an admittedly speculative one) is that the paucity of attention to genocide in this phase of her theory may have been an over-compensating effect of her rejection of her own previous view of Nazism as an instance of race imperialism. In any case, this lacuna with respect to the specifically totalitarian impetus to genocide is redressed in the next phase of her theory, the one presented in the book's later editions.

III

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as we read it today, the theory of totalitarianism that Arendt had formulated for the book's first edition—itsself grafted onto the trunk of what was at first to have

been an account of Nazi imperialism—co-exists beside still another phase of her thought on the subject. The chief embodiment of that later phase of her thinking is the new concluding chapter, “Ideology and Terror: A New Form of Government,” which was first published separately (with only minor differences) in 1953, and then added to subsequent editions of the book (starting with the 1955 German edition). Along with the new concluding chapter, those later editions of the book also include numerous small changes elsewhere in the preceding ones that subtly shift the first-edition text into closer alignment with this new installment.

The most important change to the previously existing chapters of part III consists in the addition of several scattered passages that together serve to impart a striking new dimension to Arendt’s model of a totalitarian movement. In the first edition, the term “movement” (in the cases of both the totalitarian movements and the prior, pan-German and pan-Slavic movements described in part II) simply connotes an amorphous organization in the service of a pseudo-spiritual cause, whose leaders disavow the institutional constraints and responsibilities of normal political parties (251). In the revised edition, she finds a new metaphoric resonance in the term “movement” itself, treating the totalitarian “movement” (though not the predecessor ones in part II) as an inherently “mobile” entity that must continuously propel itself forward—along a vector defined by its ideology—if it is to survive at all (see *OT*: 326*, 389*, and 398*; cf. *OT*, 1st ed.: 318, 376, and 383, respectively). Closely related to this altered description of the totalitarian movement is another change, one of the few direct emendations of the original text: the thoroughgoing replacement of the phrase “potential enemy” with the subtly different notion of an ideologically defined “objective enemy” as the primary target of the totalitarian secret police.³¹ Her use of “potential enemy” in the first edition had corresponded to the thesis that the totalitarian leader and his agents mainly persecute the supposed perpetrators of the imaginary conspiracies—which

may lie anywhere—in supposed opposition to which the movement is itself conspiratorially organized. By replacing this term with “objective enemy,” Arendt subordinates that thesis (without actually removing it from the text) to a new one, namely, that ideology sets the totalitarian movement on an implacable, “objectively” determined course, and in so doing identifies supposed enemies whose very existence stands in the way of the movement’s self-described advance. As she now puts it, “The concept of the ‘objective opponent,’ whose identity changes according to the prevailing circumstances—so that, as soon as one category is liquidated, war may be declared on another—corresponds exactly to the factual situation reiterated time and again by totalitarian rulers: namely, that their regime is not a government in any traditional sense, but a *movement*, whose advance constantly meets with new obstacles that have to be eliminated” (425*).

The added chapter on “Ideology and Terror” continues this line of argument with the introduction of still another new concept, that of a “law of movement” that guides the totalitarian regime in its crimes. It is this “law of movement,” as she now describes it, that inevitably drives the regime toward an escalating fury of genocidal or quasi-genocidal murder. Unfortunately, the argument of this new chapter is somewhat obscured by the exceptional abstractness and opacity of much of its writing (that is, exceptional even by the standards of Arendt’s work). On account of this abstractness, Arendt may seem to be attributing a kind of ghostly agency to “totalitarianism” or “totalitarian rule” itself, which in turn would make the social ontology of this posited “law of movement” something of a mystery (see Canovan, 1999). But this particular obscurity can be dispelled by consulting Arendt’s German-language version of this same chapter, which was apparently written first.³² Where the English-language text seems to speak mysteriously of “totalitarian rule” as if the regime had a mind of its own, the German version indicates more straightforwardly that the mind at issue is none other than that of the totalitarian *ruler* himself.³³ Arendt’s notion of a “law of movement,”

then, is her own distillation of what she takes to be Hitler's and Stalin's own self-understanding as the authoritative "executor" of a dynamic "law" governing the course of human history—a pseudo-Darwinian law of racial struggle, in Hitler's case, or a pseudo-Marxist law of class struggle in Stalin's.³⁴ As she puts it, "The rulers themselves do not claim to be just or wise, but only to execute historical or natural laws; they do not apply laws, but execute a movement in accordance with its inherent law" (465*).

That Arendt would attribute such central importance to the self-understanding of the totalitarian leader should come as no surprise, given her prior emphasis of the movement's utter dependence on his supposed infallibility. But only now does she single out Hitler and Stalin by name as "ideologists of the greatest importance"—not for any new "ideas" (they had none) but for the radical innovation of making the "stringent logicity" of ideological reasoning permeate the whole structure of their regimes to the extreme of dictating that "a 'dying class' consisted of people condemned to death; races that are 'unfit to live' were to be exterminated" (471-2*). In other words, their importance as "ideologists" derives not from any contribution to the contents of their respective ideologies, but from their making the worst imaginable consequences to be deduced from those ideologies the driving purpose of their politics. The aspect of ideology that she now emphasizes is thus not the one she had discussed in parts I and II of the book with respect to pre-totalitarian anti-Semitism and racism—that is, its division of humanity into irreconcilably polarized groups, used as a device to secure the mob's opportunistic allegiance. Nor is it the one she had discussed in the prior chapters of part III with respect to totalitarian ideology generally—that is, its projection of all-encompassing, conspiratorial fictions, used as a device to win over the willfully credulous atomized masses. The aspect of totalitarian ideology she now treats as decisive—as the motor of the movement's crimes—is instead the *process*-character of ideological reasoning itself, even apart from its actual contents: "What distinguished these new ideologists [i.e., Stalin

and Hitler] from their predecessors was that it was no longer primarily the 'idea' of the ideology—the struggle of the classes and the exploitation of the workers or the struggle of races and the care for Germanic peoples—which appealed to them, but the logical process which could be developed from it" (472*). In her previous analysis of the totalitarian movement, Arendt had already drawn attention to "the rather simple-minded, single-minded purposefulness" with which Hitler and Stalin chose "those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of another, entirely fictitious world" (362). The difference between this and her new characterization of the two leaders' role as ideologists corresponds directly to the change in her characterization of the totalitarian "movement": what had before been described as their artful fabrication of an essentially static (though unstable) fiction is now represented as their setting off and sustaining a dynamic process of becoming.

Insofar as Arendt's new account of the totalitarian ruler's self-understanding as the "executor" of an unyielding ideological law represents a shift away from her prior emphasis on the leader's putatively infallible "supersense," it may also indicate an adjustment in the relative theoretical priority she accords to the examples of Hitler and Stalin. That is, it may represent a shift in her theoretical attention away from the model of Stalin—who always favored the epithet "genius" in conjunction with his name—to that of Hitler, whose self-description as the *Führer* of his people was more avowedly "executive" with respect to his movement's singular ideological mission. (Recall that she had previously said that Stalin's practice offered a better illustration of the kind of fiction upon which a totalitarian movement is based precisely because his fictions were *less* constrained by a preconceived ideological pattern than Hitler's [378].) In any case, her new argument about the directly murderous implications of "stringent" ideological reasoning as a "law of movement" allows her to deal more squarely with the phenomenon of totalitarian genocide, whether in the form of Hitler's state-sponsored slaughter of the Jews or Stalin's

forced starvation of the putatively “capitalist” kulaks (the property-holding peasants). It also affords her a new way to account for the “anti-utilitarian” and even “suicidal” quality of these same genocidal crimes: she now says that it is the totalitarian leader’s monomaniacal aim to make the actual course of human history conform with the logical (or, for Stalin, “dialectical”) process of his own ideological reasoning that fuels the inevitable escalation of violence to the point of engulfing even the original content of the ideology itself (464*, 472*).

The amended theory also provides a new, more internally coherent account of the impetus for the kind of “total domination” that she had posited in the book’s first edition as the ultimate aim of totalitarian rule—that is, the aim to reduce everyone in its control to the level of fully conditioned Pavlovian dogs in human form. In the original chapters of part III, she had argued that the totalitarian leader’s aspiration to total domination derives fundamentally from his effort to validate the pretense of all-encompassing ideological fictions upon which his movement is based. If this leads to an assault on human freedom as such—as she had suggested that it inevitably does—it is an assault she was able to explain only as a defensive (or pre-emptive) assault on what is in effect an incidental (if inevitable) threat to the specious consistency of the movement’s fictional world. By reconceiving the basis of the clash between ideological thinking and human freedom, the new argument in “Ideology and Terror” is a good deal better suited to account for Arendt’s basic thesis that the campaign of total terror only escalates as the totalitarian regime consolidates its power. In the revised version, the hostility to independent human agency becomes the very essence of the totalitarian leader’s ideological campaign, for his investment in that program derives from his uncompromising demand that human history as such be made to move in lock-step in accord with a singular, transhistorical law. As she now describes it, the aim of totalitarian terror is for this reason precisely to destroy the plurality of human agents and make “out of many the One who

unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature" (466*).

Just as Arendt now reconceives the way in which ideological reasoning drives the designs of the totalitarian ruler, she also proposes a new understanding of its grip on the minds of his followers. In the previously written chapters of part III, as we have seen, she had claimed that the logical consistency of propagandistic fictions provides an irresistibly attractive escape from reality for the atomized individuals of the masses, whose estrangement from normal social relationships had made their personal experience unbearably senseless. She had further held that the movement's mode of organization serves to heighten that condition of atomization among the movement's adherents, as does the deployment of arbitrary terror once it comes to power; both of these devices make the individuals thus isolated all the more susceptible to the escapist allure of such fictions. That had been the extent of her explanation in the first edition for the peculiar selflessness she observed in the movement's adherents—their willing consent to their own undoing for the sake of the movement's success, even while lacking any matching personal convictions strong enough to survive the moment of its failure (307-308). Now, in this later phase of her thought, her newly honed theoretical attention to the *process* of ideological reasoning leads her to an entirely new thesis concerning ideology's hold on the movement's adherents—and, by extension, its potential hold on all the subjects of a fully perfected totalitarian rule. It is that an individual's prolonged conditioning in ideological reasoning *itself* constitutes a form of terror, a means of "dominating and terrorizing human beings from within" (*OT*: 325*; cf. *OT*, 1st ed.: 319.). Once the adherent is induced to accept and act on the ideology's single, unassailed premise—the alleged fact of ubiquitous racial competition or class struggle—he finds himself bound to accept every last malignant deduction derived from it as well, lest he lose the "last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon. . . [except] the strict avoidance of contradictions"

(478*). As she now puts it, "The coercive force of the argument is this: if you refuse, you contradict yourself and, through this contradiction, render your whole life meaningless; the A which you said dominates your whole life through the consequences of B and C, which it logically engenders" (473-4*). In this way, she argues, the coercive force of ideology overwhelms the last refuge of human freedom, the capacity to form independent thoughts of one's own.

This newly conceived notion of the "inner domination" effected through the coercive force of ideology's "stringent logicity" leads Arendt to a similarly new understanding of the nature of the isolation suffered by the atomized masses under the totalitarian movement's thrall. On her prior view, that isolation was simply a matter of a loss of stable social relationships, and a concomitant loss of "common sense." She now characterizes it as an even more extreme condition, the desperately disorienting one of losing the company of even one's own solitary thoughts. Her term for that condition is simply "loneliness":

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, the capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time. (477*)

To her previous argument that external terror both preys upon and worsens the condition of social isolation, even as it presses men into the movement, she now adds that the inner coercion of ideological reasoning does much the same to those it pushes to this lonely extreme, who have not even themselves to rely upon. Hence, she does *not* claim that belonging to a totalitarian movement alleviates its members' loneliness, but rather just the opposite. By "teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of

loneliness where man knows that he will be utterly lost if he ever lets go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started," she argues, the totalitarian movement not only isolates individuals from one another, but also obliterates the presence of each to himself as well (478*). In this new formulation of her theory, the "selflessness" attributed to the adherents of the movement is quite literally a loss of self.³⁵

IV

The fact that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is the product of several distinct, successive phases of Arendt's thought on the nature of totalitarian politics certainly does not diminish the book's importance. On the contrary, the presence of these multiple strata—once discerned—should contribute to an appreciation of the work's theoretical and descriptive plenitude. Yet this fact does suggest that what the book officially presents as a single model of totalitarianism involves elements that may turn out to be more fully separable than Arendt herself ever acknowledges. For instance, it may be possible for an extreme political movement to be recognizably totalitarian in the sense of her theory's first full formulation—a mass movement organized on the basis of all-encompassing, conspiratorial fictions—while lacking the kind of ever-escalating ideological propulsion described in the revised text. By the same token, it may be possible for a movement with the latter kind of ideological drive to lack that kind of conspiratorial basis. In any case, the enduring value of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism lies not so much in our being able to glean from it some exhaustive checklist of features needed for a party or state to pass muster as an instance of totalitarianism, but rather in the theoretical and descriptive resources she offers for making sense of the psychological and organizational dynamics involved in the most violently extreme of political movements of her time. And those resources may turn out to be just as perti-

ment for attempting to make sense of the extreme political movements in our own time as well, whether or not we wish to call those movements totalitarian.

So it is perhaps appropriate to conclude this essay by noting that late in the year of the book's fiftieth anniversary, world politics was unexpectedly transformed by the deeds of just such a movement—that is, the “movement” comprising the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda and its various allied radical Islamist groups. At very least, the crimes of September 11, 2001, have proved that this newly emergent movement is no less “international in organization, all-comprehensive in its ideological scope, and global in its political aspirations” than the Nazis and Bolsheviks had been, even if those global aspirations have thus far taken a different form from theirs.³⁶ To be sure, this movement differs in a number of obvious respects from the two totalitarian movements Arendt discusses in her book, not least in its (ostensibly) religious orientation. Whether—or to what extent—the various phases of the theory Arendt presents could give us real purchase on the motives and mentalities of the leaders of this movement, or on those of its all-too-selfless adherents, remains perforce an open question. This essay has simply sought to clarify the way in which such questions might be posed.

Notes

¹Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973); henceforth abbreviated as *OT*. Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical references in the body of this essay are to this text. All such citations, except those marked with an asterisk (*), refer to passages that are also contained in the differently paginated first edition (1951). Those marked with an asterisk refer to passages added in the editions of 1958 or later. (Of the passages cited, the only ones that are not included in the 1958 edition are those from the new prefaces that were written for separate paperback editions of each of the three parts, and added to the larger text in 1973.) Note that nearly all the additions and alterations in the 1958 edition reflect changes that Arendt had already made in preparing

the book's first German-language edition, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (1955), henceforth abbreviated *TH* in the notes to this essay.

²As Margaret Canovan has remarked, "The case is not simply that Arendt used an idiosyncratic method. . .but rather that there are problems in grasping what the book is actually *about*. The bewildered reader, picking his way through dazzlingly complex analyses of Disraeli, the British Empire, the philosophy of Hobbes, the idea of human rights, and all the rest of this extraordinary book, may feel that if (as Arendt wrote to Voegelin) "the elementary structure of totalitarianism is the hidden structure of the book,' then the author has hidden it rather too well." Canovan (1992: 18), quoting Arendt's "A Reply" to "The Origins of Totalitarianism" by Eric Voegelin, *Review of Politics* 15:1 (January 1953): 77-8. (Reprinted in Arendt, 1994: 402-3; further references to this text in this essay cite the latter publication.) My account of Arendt's project and its evolution in this essay is much indebted to Canovan's treatment of the subject (1992: 17-62; 1999; 2000), although differing on some basic points of interpretation. I am likewise indebted to the account in Kateb (1984: 52-82).

³In the 1958 edition only, "Ideology and Terror" was joined by another new chapter, an epilogue entitled "Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution." This epilogue, which also includes an extended discussion of the Soviet satellite system, was dropped in all later editions, most likely on account (at least in part) of Arendt's prominent claim that the Soviet Union remained totalitarian under Khrushchev, a judgment she would later disavow. See *OT* (1958 ed.): 483-92; cf. the 1967 preface to "Totalitarianism" in *OT*: xxxv-xxxvii*.

⁴For Arendt's own recollections of this change in her project, see Arendt, Letter to Gary Kornblith, April 2, 1973, in the Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress. Correspondence File: General (Ki-Ko misc.), image 55. This archive is henceforth cited simply as Arendt Papers; the file names and image numbers correspond to those of the recently completed digital reproduction of the entire archive. With the exception of the Houghton-Mifflin correspondence cited later, all the archival materials cited in this essay is now available online through the library's Arendt Papers website, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/arendthome.html>.

⁵Arendt's unconcern with the Marxist analysis of capitalism can be seen most clearly in the following remark, which is representative of her approach: "The classification of the bourgeoisie as an owning class is only superficially correct, for a characteristic of this class has been that *everybody could belong to it* who conceived of life as a process of perpetu-

ally becoming wealthier, and considered money as something sacrosanct which under no circumstances for should be a mere commodity for consumption." *OT*: 145 (emphasis added).

⁶In the same year Arendt would also present a more detailed version of this same interpretation of Hobbes and his pertinence to imperialist politics in a separate article, "Expansion and the Philosophy of Power," much of which would later be directly incorporated in part II of *OT*. See Arendt (1946b); cf. *OT*: 135-147.

⁷Arendt borrows the phrase "armed bohemian" from Konrad Heiden's biography of Hitler. See *OT*: 317, citing Heiden (1944: 100).

⁸This argument does seem to be retained in a few passages of the first chapter of part II of *OT*, in Arendt's initial discussion of the bourgeoisie's putatively Hobbesian philosophy. At the very end of that discussion, she remarks: "The philosophy of Hobbes, it is true, contains nothing of modern race doctrines, which not only stir up the mob, but in their totalitarian form outline very clearly the form of organization through which humanity could carry the endless process of capital and power accumulation through to its logical end in self-destruction" (157). Nevertheless, this argument is entirely absent from Arendt's account of totalitarianism itself in part III of the book.

⁹Letter of Mary Underwood (of Houghton-Mifflin) to Arendt, June 12, 1946. Arendt Papers, Correspondence File: Houghton-Mifflin, im. 1; see also the subsequent correspondence between Arendt and Underwood contained in this file.

¹⁰Arendt, "Imperialism" [1946]. Arendt Papers, Speeches And Writings File: Outlines and research memoranda (2d folder), items 8-10, im. 41-44.

¹¹Arendt, "Outline/The Elements of Shame: Antisemitism-Imperialism—Racism" [1946]. Arendt Papers, Speeches And Writings File: Miscellany—Outlines and research memoranda (1st folder), item 4, im. 9-14.

¹²The earliest indication of Arendt's changed plans seems to be in a September 1947 letter to her mentor, Karl Jaspers, to whom she reports, "The third and concluding part [of the book] will be devoted to the structures of totalitarian states. I have to rewrite this completely because I've only recently become aware of some important things here, especially in regard to Russia." Arendt, Letter of September 4, 1947 (Letter 61) in Arendt and Jaspers (1992: 98). See Canovan (1992: 18-20); also Young-Bruehl (1982: 203-4).

¹³See Letter of Arendt to Paul Brooks (of Houghton-Mifflin), February 13, 1948. Arendt Papers, Correspondence File: Houghton-Mifflin,

im. 24. Arendt states in this letter that it was accompanied by a manuscript including all of part I, and all but the last two chapters of part II; she indicates for the first time in her correspondence with the Houghton-Mifflin editors that the promised chapter on Nazism is now to be a separate part III. Although she says in this letter that this new third part is to be about Nazism, that is presumably nothing more than an attempt to allay those editors' understandable anxieties about the state of her long overdue manuscript, as she had already divulged to Jaspers that her topic in part III was going to be totalitarianism in general, including the Soviet variety.

¹⁴See Letter of Paul Brooks to Arendt, October 23, 1949. Arendt Papers, Correspondence File: Houghton-Mifflin, im. 34.

¹⁵"Outline/The Elements of Shame," im. 14 (p. 6).

¹⁶Letter of Arendt to Karl Jaspers, November 19, 1948 (Letter 77), in Arendt and Jaspers (1992: 122).

¹⁷Letter of Arendt to Paul Brooks, February 13, 1948. Arendt Papers.

¹⁸Arendt, "Vorwort" to *TH*; see also *OT*: xv*.

¹⁹"Outline/The Elements of Shame," im. 12 (p. 4).

²⁰For two examples of this common criticism, notable because they come from largely sympathetic readers of Arendt's work, see Whitfield (1980: 33-4) and Benhabib (1996: 68).

²¹Arendt does note in passing the emergence of anti-Semitic propaganda in the later years of Stalin's rule, both in the original text (425) and also in the new preface to part III written in 1967 (xxxix*, xxxix*). But nowhere does she suggest that this was an essential "element" of his brand of totalitarian rule or its origins.

²²In considering Arendt's theoretical aims in this respect, I am deliberately disregarding her much-quoted claim in her 1953 reply to Voegelin that a more conventionally historiographical treatment of totalitarianism would somehow be impossible, on account of the unprecedented evil of the phenomenon (1994: 402). That strained apologia seems to me both plainly specious and also irrelevant.

²³See Arendt, "Rand School Lecture" [1948] (1994: 217-227). In the epilogue to the 1958 ed. of *OT*, Arendt notes that it was only with Stalin's death that the problem of the totalitarian leader's succession became apparent (i.e., to her), yet there too she expresses qualified confidence that Soviet totalitarianism would persist even after Stalin's posthumous discrediting. See *OT* (1958 ed.: 483-91*).

²⁴See *OT*: 264-5, 315, 355. The first of the passages cited comes from a section of part II that was evidently modified to correspond with the

theory of totalitarianism in part III, as can be seen through comparison with the relevant previously published articles.

²⁵To be sure, she says that neither Hitler nor Stalin would have been able to rule had they not maintained “the confidence of the masses” (306). But this statement must be considered in light of the particular sense she gives to the term “masses” (discussed later in this essay).

²⁶Arendt’s earlier articles on imperialism do not yet contain this sharp distinction between the “mob” and the “masses,” which may account for a few instances of ambiguous usage on her part in part II of the book—including one anomalous reference to “mob masses” in the discussion of the continental “pan-movements.” *OT*: 226; see also 232.

²⁷The first-hand testimony regarding Nazi camps that she cites comes mainly from David Rousset and Bruno Bettelheim, former inmates of Buchenwald and Dachau, camps of the first type. See *OT*: 439, n. 120. It is also notable in this respect that the date she mentions with reference to the arrival of Jews in concentration camps is 1938 (*OT*: 449, 450)—that is, several years before the so-called Final Solution was launched.

²⁸Arendt (1947). The book under review is *The Dark Side of the Moon*, pref. by T. S. Eliot (New York: Scribner’s, 1947). The general impression that Arendt takes Nazi camps as her focal case seems to derive from a memorable passage in which she compares the Nazi camps to “Hell on Earth” (on account of their greater cruelty), and the Russian camps merely to “Purgatory” (presumably with a pun on the word “purge” in mind) (*OT*: 445). But that is not to say that the former count as any more paradigmatically *totalitarian* for her—especially given her observation that the Nazi camps became more fully totalitarian when Himmler’s more “professional” S.S. took over their command from the brutally sadistic S.A. (*OT*: 454-5). In an unpublished lecture delivered in 1950, Arendt follows that same observation with an explicit remark to the effect that this introduction of the “completely passionless executioner” to the Nazi camps under Himmler brought them more closely in line with those of the Soviet secret police. See Arendt, “Ideology and Propaganda” [1950]. *Arendt Papers, Speeches and Writing File: Essays and Lectures—“Ideology and Propaganda,”* im. 14 (p. 12).

²⁹Arendt herself acknowledges (in a footnote) that the particular spectacle to which she refers in this passage is “a specialty of the Russian brand of totalitarianism” (*OT*: 307, n. 7). The ostensibly comparable example she offers of the Nazis’ “selflessness” is the spectacle of their *abandoning* the movement after Germany’s defeat in the war, which she takes as evidence that their willingness to sacrifice their lives before had been motivated by no true personal convictions at all (*OT*: 308). What-

ever the merits of that observation, it is surely not the same phenomenon as the willingness of loyal communists to incriminate themselves for imaginary crimes, and clearly admits of other possible explanations.

³⁰See Arendt's comments in Friedrich (1954: 337-8). (I am grateful to Peter Baehr for this reference). It is notable that in these remarks Arendt expressly discounts the significance of the single instance of Hitler's murder of Röhm and his followers as a parallel to Stalin's bloody purges; in the first-edition text of *OT* she appears to suggest otherwise, although the text is somewhat ambiguous on this point. See *OT*: 390, 407; cf. 401*.

³¹*OT*: 423-5*; cf. *OT* (1st ed.): 401-3. Although the change at issue concerns just a single phrase, it has the effect of completely altering the meaning of certain statements. For instance, compare "The introduction of the notion of 'potential enemy' is much more decisive for the functioning of totalitarian regimes than the ideological definition of the respective categories" (*OT* [1st ed.]: 402), with the same sentence substituting the word "objective" for "potential" (*OT*: 424*)—the former version implies an ideological flexibility, while the latter connotes implacability instead.

³²For the sequence of composition, see Ludz (1996: 278-9).

³³*TH*: 675-7; cf. *OT*: 461-3*. In a roughly contemporaneous manuscript from her *Nachlass* called "On the Nature of Totalitarianism" (which contains a great deal of overlap with the text of "Ideology and Terror" itself), Arendt explicitly defends the interpretive practice of accepting the totalitarian dictator's own self-understanding as the clue to the "principle" that animates his regime, a hermeneutic principle for which she invokes Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* as a precedent. See Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism" (c. 1953) (1994: 338-9).

³⁴The prefix "pseudo" in both cases is my own; the extent to which Arendt regards the "laws" in either case as accurate reflections of the views of the thinker at issue is not entirely clear from the text of this chapter.

³⁵The notion that the evil-doing adherents of a totalitarian regime might suffer from an "inability to think" is one that Arendt would explore at length a decade later in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1965), her report on the trial in Israel of the sometime Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, and also in her unfinished last work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978). Yet these works represent still another phase of Arendt's thought on the matter, one in which she seems to attribute far less importance to the "inner compulsion" of ideological reasoning.

³⁶The quoted phrase is from *OT*: 388.

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