

The Debate on Totalitarianism

The most influential work in the concept and theory of totalitarianism is Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958). Her conception of totalitarianism is founded on the theory of a mass society in which traditional ties and intermediate organizations and loyalties have been destroyed by the devastating effects of war. In these conditions, Arendt posits, the isolated individual is vulnerable to being mobilized to a new loyalty, a bond of total loyalty and subservience to a charismatic leader, such as Hitler, who by manipulating the masses can construct a system of centralized control which rules and subdues its opponents by means of state terror on a massive scale.

In my view, this remains the most persuasive and powerful theory of the origins of totalitarianism. In an influential study, which was originally published five years after Arendt's, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski identify the following key characteristics of a totalitarian system:

- (i) A totalitarian ideology professing to be universal in its applicability and a 'true' theory to govern the life of the individual and the state;
- (ii) a single mass party under the leadership of the dictatorship;
- (iii) a system of state terror in which the key instrument is the secret police;
- (iv) total control over communications;
- (v) a monopoly of control of the military and military armaments; and
- (vi) centralized control over the economy. The major point of difference between Friedrich and Brzezinski and Arendt is that the latter does not view a totalitarian universalist ideology as an essential component of a totalitarian system of rule, and she places greater emphasis on the role of absolute terror as an instrument of the totalitarian regime.

However, it is implicit in Friedrich and Brzezinski's concept that a truly totalitarian regime is only feasible in a relatively developed country with a high degree of industrialization, and modern communications and technology. It could be argued that, in the light of more recent developments in technology such as the internet, the degree of control over communications and the flow of information implied in the Friedrich and Brzezinski model is no longer practicable. New technologies have become a powerful weapon for challenging state power.

Rosemary O'Kane, one of the most perceptive comparative analysts of the coercive state, points to another serious problem with the classic theories of totalitarianism described above. In her analysis of the case of Cambodia in the zero years she shows that the Pol Pot regime, which massacred hundreds of thousands of Cambodians in the mid-1970s, did not have access to the modern technology and communications implicit in Friedrich and Brzezinski's model of totalitarianism, or a modern bureaucracy. Cambodia was an underdeveloped largely agrarian country. Nor did the Pol Pot regime have a complex universalist ideology. Instead the regime concentrated on inculcating socio-economic resentment among the peasants and used this, combined with a populist form of nationalism, to turn the rural dwellers against the city dwellers, and particularly against the small middle class and the intellectuals. However, as O'Kane concludes, there are features of the Pol Pot regime which bear a close resemblance to the Arendt model: Cambodia had been devastated by warfare; traditional ties and intermediate organizations at local level were severely disrupted or destroyed (and the regime's enforced movement of hundreds of thousands of the population exacerbated the level of socio-economic crisis); and, above all, the regime fully demonstrated its capacity for absolute terror by mass killing on a genocidal scale, albeit using its guerrilla army rather than a secret police to implement the terror.



Rosemary O’Kane makes the valuable proposal that the more accurate way to describe the Pol Pot regime is as a rudimentary totalitarianism, which has its origins in ‘the uprooting of societies through the decimation of foreign and civil war’. In other words, it may be a serious error to assume that the totalitarian model of the coercive state applies exclusively to developed, industrialized societies. The severe effects of conflict, destruction, and the uprooting of societies which can be witnessed in so many war-torn regions of the world could well have the effect of stimulating growth of fresh proto-totalitarian and rudimentary totalitarian regimes.