

## Totalitarianism: A Guide for the Perplexed

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Totalitarianism or totalitarianisms?

To answer this question we need a definition of this word.

1.

Totalitarianism has always been a very controversial word, to the extent that many scholars reject it, whilst some others consider it as a by-product of the Cold war.

This word actually rose in Italy before the beginning of the Cold war in the 1920s and occurred in the works of anti-fascist and anti-Stalinist émigrés in the 1930s. After its scientific codification in the 1950s by H. Arendt, C. Friedrich and Zb. Brzezinski, the category of totalitarianism has been tested by historians, political scientists and sociologists whose main focus was on USSR. This is not casual: to welcome the word 'totalitarianism' in one's own scientific vocabulary means to adopt a comparative approach which at least includes Nazi Germany and USSR.

After the de-Stalinization in the 1950s and 1960s and thanks to the increase of information about the communist countries and to the development of interdisciplinary methodologies, some scholars (Brzezinski, Huntington, Inkeles, B. Moore jr.) suggested a historic-sociological approach which adopts a new comparative perspective. They compared one-party socialist societies with democratic capitalist societies on the basis of the question of modernization. In summary, these scholars considered Soviet socialism as a development strategy peculiar to a backward society. They tended to emphasise all signs of change to corroborate their own opinion that socialist societies are on the move towards a goal common to Western societies, i.e. modernity. These scholars reject the category of totalitarianism as unable to explain this dynamism. From this viewpoint, for instance, post-Stalin Ussr cannot be considered as a totalitarian regime, but rather as an autocratic one.

This kind of interdisciplinary approach had the merit of improving the analytical power of scientific approaches to socialist societies. The major actual limit of the 1950s classical studies on totalitarianism (especially of Friedrich and Brzezinski's work) was to classify all the regimes different from Western capitalist democracies under the label of totalitarianism. Therefore they tended to make the category of totalitarianism trivial and to use it as a polemical means. On the other side, the major limit of the interdisciplinary approach is to analyse socialist countries – strongly atomised and characterized by weak civil society and widespread political apathy – by using categories peculiar to Western societies. This pushed some scholars to overestimate the chances of change, to anticipate a gradual evolution, whereas what mostly happened was an escape from communism.

This is the main reason why we cannot abandon the category of totalitarianism: without it we cannot answer for the basic continuity of political power and its through the decades, especially in Ussr.

Today whoever uses the category of totalitarianism accepts the following definition: in a totalitarian regime one political party monopolizes the government and tends to subject the whole society by spreading physical and psychological terror according to the guidelines of the official ideology. Other characters, such as the economic command, are still at issue.

2

Some scholars recently proposed a synthesis between interdisciplinary approaches and totalitarian theory by introducing the category of *post-totalitarianism*. This category: *a)* identifies a crucial step in the evolution of socialist countries which explains why some of them were able to escape totalitarianism towards democracy and free market; *b)* the notion of post-totalitarianism highlights some crucial problems common also to Western societies.

According to Linz and Thompson, a new post-totalitarian regime rises when a charismatic leader disappears. In this moment the issues of economic reforms and individual safety become very strong among the members of the party elite, mindful of the previous persecutions. Thompson describes this situation in the following way: "Post-totalitarianism is substantially 'weaker' than totalitarianism. Lacking a charismatic, all-powerful leader, its leadership is collective-bureaucratic, often divided and increasingly gerontocratic. Purges within the party are no longer as extensive or brutal, and extreme terror is no longer used against oppositionists or the population as a whole. Although repression of open dissent continues, small opposition groups arise. Post-totalitarianism appears to maintain a commitment to ideology. But while the official canon still exists, actual belief in it gradually diminishes. There is a growing disjunction between ideology and reality, which leads to increased cynicism both among power holders and the general populace. The end of the 'frenzy' of the movement-regime, led by an unquestioned leader, increases bureaucratic rationality at the price of long-term stagnation. Opportunism and careerism become rife among ruling élites. Instead of active mobilization, post-totalitarian regimes rely on passive compliance even if ritualised demonstrations continue. [...] Not only does the decline of coercion make opposition more thinkable [...] but the loss of ideological conviction both in society and the state diminishes the enthusiasm for punishment and the dissidents willingness to confess to 'crimes' against the state. Moreover, when circumstances prove favourable [...], society may turn *en masse* against the regime and there will be defections from power-holders lacking in 'any authentic inner conviction'." (83-4)

3.

One of the most influential sources of post-totalitarianism is V. Havel: in him direct personal experience and deep intellectual insight strengthen each other. Western political scientists who support the notion of post-totalitarianism easily forget that according to Havel it does not indicate a social or political experience isolated from the rest of the world. In a post-totalitarian society we may find the same hierarchy of values peculiar to Western countries: *de facto* it is a different species of the same

genus of consumerist industrial society. What Havel says is disturbing as he holds that post-totalitarian regimes are still totalitarian, even if in a way different from “classic” totalitarian systems.

NB: to take Havel seriously means to leave the long safe path of political scientists’ analysis and their ingenious taxonomies to throw oneself on the “second navigation” of the reflection on personal experience guided by Husserl’s phenomenological method. We enter therefore the marshy land of philosophy. Is it worth the effort? This question can be answered only *ex-post*.

4.

What is common to Western free societies and Eastern European communist countries in 1978, to the extent of inducing Havel to consider them two species of the same genus? Both of them are *modern* societies.

According to Husserl’s *Krisis* modernity is characterised by *objectivism*, that is by the principle according to which personal experience (*Lebenswelt*), with its demands and evidences, is something merely individual, a new version of Plato’s cage which is the source of any kind of prejudices and therefore of any kind of violence.

In the early modernity, facing the religious wars which set on fire and destroy Europe in the second half of XVI century and in the first half of the following century, scholars and statesmen decided to consider any kind of belief (based on a religious faith or on a moral doctrine) as something private, as mere opinions. From this viewpoint moral conscience is seen as the source of disagreement, conflicts and civil wars. This perspective can be defined as *strategy of neutralization*. The only effective instrument of peace is the government, whose legal procedures represent the only *objective* entity from the juridical and political point of view. State power is *innocent* because it is *impersonal*, therefore it is supposed to be *absolute*, i.e. there should be no superior power that could judge it.

The major outcome of this is the *reduction of legitimacy to legality*: law is no more justified when it matches a certain idea of good, but rather when it is issued by the government.

What are the negative aspects of this historical process, which involves all European countries? In the long run social and political institutions become senseless and unable to give reasons for social cooperation, as they cannot match the original demands and evidences of people. This is what happens in 1968 when, both in Eastern Europe and in the Western world, comes out what Havel calls “good madness”, peculiar to the ones who challenge what seems obvious, granted, but actually is not. It is a question on the meaning of individual and social life that shakes the ordinary sense of things, the conventional ethos, something that produces new perspectives and new values. This rebellion of moral conscience reaches the pick within the post-totalitarian regimes, whereas this attitude requires to risk one’s life. It is just in the so-called ‘dissent’ that they experience a new kind of *community* – a community that rises when each member provides for the demands and evidences of her own and of the others, when each one is liable in front of herself and the others, when each one is no more available to “live within a lie” (V. Havel). In the long run

this community gets a political relevance so much that it drive the system to implosion. On the contrary in the Western world this anti-conformist drive is soon absorbed in a new kind of politically correct conformism that removes its original subversive power and finds its major expression in the pacifist slogan: 'Better red than dead!'. This slogan, according to Havel, brings to a nihilist perspective. In other words, if there is nothing worth to die, there is nothing worth to live.

5

Today in a globalise world neutralization has dramatically increased. Political correctness pushes every faith and every moral belief into the private domain, i.e. into the domain of mere subjectivity. In the Western world liberalism (considered as an ethos and not as a political doctrine) still looks at moral conscience as something to be excluded from the public realm as potential source of civil war. Life – with its basic evidences and needs – is never considered as a resource to tackle the problems of multicultural society. Moral neutralization of conflicts is seen as a an unavoidable requirement for their rational solution. The unique convincing factor which can unify the goals of people is in the last resort the standard ethos of consumerism.

The experience of dissent in the post-totalitarian communist regimes is the example of how politics can see human beings and their 'hearts' (moral consciences) not as a scandal but as a resource. Resistance to evil, the rejection of living an ideological lie, rises not as a political platform but as an answer to the deepest existential evidences and demands. From this kind of experience new personal bonds spring out – bonds that can reconstruct civil society, where people can be responsible to each other and to themselves. In this experience of peril and sacrifice public realm rises again as a domain where each one can appear to the others with her own beliefs. This domain is essentially plural: it is the place for competition (in the ethimological sense of the word: *cum-petere*) – a competition about sense that does not destroy social bonds. On the contrary this rises and develops through the mutual acknowledgment of one's own evidences and demands and one's own beliefs, which therefore are deprived of their own absoluteness.

Dissent is the example for everybody of an existential and political practice able to prevent nihilism produced by the neutralization of the public domain.