

Margaret Canovan

Beyond Understanding?

*Arendt's Account of Totalitarianism*¹

I. One of the ways in which the *Newsletter* can help students of Arendt's work is by providing a space for the expression of perplexity and bafflement. Problems of interpretation can of course be posed in articles for ordinary academic journals, but these are in general welcomed only if the author can also offer a solution. Even at conferences it is unconventional to stand up and say, "I have thought long and hard about this aspect of Arendt's work, but I still can't see what she means: can anyone help me?" In the *Newsletter*, by contrast, I hope that it will be possible to do just that. Arendt's thought is so complex, so idiosyncratic and so self-contained that there is plenty of scope for honest confusion. Many of us have had the experience of rereading her work and finding strands of thought that had previously eluded us; of coming in some cases to see what she is getting at – but also, in others, of remaining baffled. It may be that we can't make sense of what she says because there is no sense to be found. But experience has made me hesitate to dismiss what I can't at present understand.

The most notorious of these twilight regions surrounds the concepts of "society" and "the social". Many of Arendt's interpreters have struggled there, none more energetically and imaginatively than Hanna Pitkin, whose controversial conclusions have just been published.³ But another shadowy area occurs in her account of totalitarianism. This has been less noticed, partly because her distinctive theory has often been subsumed into a general "totalitarian model", and partly because for many years serious students of Arendt tended to concentrate on other regions of her thought. Recently, however, circumstances have changed the focus of attention. Since the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War, the taboo that prevented serious discussion of the concept of "totalitarianism" has weakened. Meanwhile, as more of Arendt's work becomes available in published form,

"Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt."²

there is increasing recognition of the key role within it of her attempt to understand the catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century.

The Origins of Totalitarianism is an immensely complex book crammed with interwoven themes and half-developed reflections, many of which would repay sustained critical study. What I am concerned with here, however, is the difficulty of understanding what might be regarded as the core of the book and of Arendt's subsequent reflections on totalitarianism: her account (set out most systematically in pieces written after the completion of the book itself)⁴ of what totalitarianism actually is. Briefly, the difficulty facing Arendt's reader is this. Her theory aims to get an intellectual grip on acts and events that were on the face of it incomprehensible. The crimes perpetrated under the regimes of Hitler and Stalin seemed not only wicked but *senseless*, of a kind that could not be "deduced from humanly comprehensible motives" such as "self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice".⁵ Ordinary utilitarian accounts of exploitation and repression simply did not cover them. Furthermore, the catastrophic scale of organised destruction seemed quite disproportionate to the human stature of those involved, from functionaries like Eichmann up to a "non-person" like Hitler.⁶ Arendt's lasting achievement was to make vividly apparent the challenge to comprehension (historical, political and moral) posed by these events. It seems clear, however, that she also believed she had herself achieved an understanding of them, not in the sense of offering a historical explanation⁷ but in the sense of putting into conceptual terms what was going on, encompassing it in thought. The problem for her readers is that these conceptual terms are themselves deeply mysterious. Seeking to understand incomprehensible horrors, she

1 I am grateful to Ursula Ludz for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 H. Arendt, "Preface to the first edition", *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), p. xxx. This edition is cited below as OT.

3 H.F. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

4 "Ideology and Terror" (1953), incorporated in later editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. See also the essays "On the Nature of Totalitarianism" and "Mankind and Terror" in J. Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

5 OT, pp. xxi, 459.

6 *Men in Dark Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 34.

7 "A Reply to Eric Voegelin", in Kohn, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 402-3.

8 A sample (by no means comprehensive) can be found in the pieces collected in *Totalitarianism Reconsidered*, ed. E.A. Menze, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1981).

9 For sources of this composite picture see e.g. K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 vols., (London: Routledge, 1945); J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952); R. Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965); H. Buchheim, *Totalitarian Rule: its Nature and Characteristics* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); C.J. Friedrich and Z. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1967); C. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988) and *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).

10 See R. J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), pp. 88-100.

11 "Understanding and Politics" (The Difficulties of Understanding), in Kohn, *Essays in Understanding*, 307-27, p.309.

12 OT, p. 459.

13 OT, pp. 436-8.

14 Writing to Karl Jaspers in 1951, Arendt traced the appearance in their time of a "radical evil" to delusions of omnipotence on the one hand and the destruction of human plurality

offers an account that is vivid and memorable but so enigmatic that it is hard to understand and even harder to evaluate.

One way to underline the sheer strangeness of her account is to contrast it with the more conventional theories to which it has often been assimilated. There are almost as many senses of "totalitarianism" as there are writers on the subject⁸, but most can be squeezed without too much travesty into a general "totalitarian model" from which Arendt's differs fundamentally. The dominant model depicts a political system that is not mysterious but could on the contrary be seen as a perverse triumph of clarity and order: a totally coherent state, built in the image of an ideology, presided over by a single party legitimised by the ideology, employing unlimited powers of centralised coercion and indoctrination to prevent any deviation from orthodoxy. The construction of such a polity is associated by some theorists with the typically modernist attempt to build Utopia; others interpret its preservation in a state of frozen immobility (punctuated by the hunting out of heresy) as a quasi-religious retreat from the anxieties of modernity. Despite the regular inclusion of Nazism under the "totalitarian" heading, communism is what most theorists have in mind.⁹

Arendt's theory resembles this familiar model in drawing on examples from Left and Right (though including only certain phases in the regimes of Hitler and Stalin, not Fascist Italy or the Soviet Union before or after Stalin) and also in stressing coercion and ideology, understood in distinctive ways. But the differences are crucial, and are not simply a result of Arendt's primary focus on Nazism.¹⁰ There is a radical contrast between her picture of totalitarianism and the more familiar model. Metaphorically, one might say that if the latter suggests the rigidity, uniformity, transparency and immobility of a frozen lake, her theory evokes a mountain torrent sweeping away everything in its path, or a hurricane levelling everything recognisably human. Instead of referring to a political system of a deliberately structured kind, "totalitarianism" in her sense means a chaotic, nonutilitarian, manically dynamic movement of destruction that assails all the features of human nature and the human world that make politics possible.

Like many other theorists she stresses the novelty of the political phenomena with which she is concerned. "Everything we know of totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality... its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions..."¹¹ In a sense, totalitarianism illustrates the human capacity to begin, that power to think and to act in ways that are new, contingent and unpredictable that looms so large in her mature political theory. But her focus is on the peculiarly paradoxical character of that novelty, which represents an assault on that same ability to act and think as unique individuals. Again, although she stresses the quest for total power, there is much more to this than mere hubris. Believing that "everything is possible"¹² totalitarian movements demand unlimited power, but what this turns out to mean is not the building of utopia (which would itself set limits to power and possibility) but unparalleled destruction. "Experiments" in total domination in the concentration camps that are the "laboratories" of the new regimes gradually make clear the implications of the belief that "everything is possible", showing that the price of total power is the eradication of human plurality¹³ and the amalgamation of individuals into one being moving in a single direction. Only *one* can be omnipotent,¹⁴ and the path to this goal, discovered separa-

tely by Hitler and by Stalin, lies through terror on the one hand and ideology on the other.

"Total terror" as practised in the camps is, Arendt claims, "the essence of totalitarian government".¹⁵ It does not simply kill people but first eradicates their individuality and capacity for action, reducing them to interchangeable, predictable members of a species. "Precisely because man's resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man."¹⁶ The terror has no utilitarian purpose. It reaches its climax after genuine opposition has already been repressed, for its only function is to further the project of total domination by crushing out all human individuality. "Common sense protests desperately that the masses are submissive and that all this gigantic apparatus of terror is therefore superfluous; if they were capable of telling the truth, the totalitarian rulers would reply: The apparatus seems superfluous to you only because it serves to make men superfluous."¹⁷

Furthermore, it is not only the victims who are "superfluous" as individuals. Trained for dispensability by ideological indoctrination, the individual executioners are equally insignificant. Ideology complements terror by eliminating the capacity for individual thought and experience among the wielders of power. Giving their believers "the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future",¹⁸ and thereby making reality as actually experienced seem insignificant compared with what *must* happen, ideologies emancipate thought from the constraints of common sense and reality. In the hands of Hitler and Stalin, both of whom prided themselves on the merciless consistency of their reasoning, these systems were emptied of all content except for the automatic process of deduction whereby it was logically necessary that one group or another should die. Among their followers ideological logicity replaced free thought, inducing people to strip themselves of individuality and spontaneity until they were part of a single impersonal movement of total domination.¹⁹

Total power turns out, then, to mean

inevitable destruction, with no room left for individual initiative even on the part of the dictator. The job of the totalitarian regime is simply to speed up the execution of death sentences pronounced by the law of nature or of history. Arendt points to the stress laid by both leaders on acting out inexorable laws, whether those were supposed to be the economic laws of Marxist class-struggle or the biological laws of struggle for racial supremacy. According to those laws, human existence consists of the life or death struggle between collectivities – races or classes – whose motion is the real meaning of history. For totalitarianism, "all laws have become laws of movement".²⁰ Neither stable institutions nor individual initiative can be allowed to get in the way of this frantic dynamism. "Total terror... is designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature", and indeed to smooth its path, "to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action". Human beings (even the rulers themselves) must serve these forces, "either riding atop their triumphant car or crushed under its wheels",²¹ and individuality is an inconvenience to be eliminated by "the iron band of terror, which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of man the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature".²²

To sum up Arendt's picture of totalitarianism, instead of the familiar image of an omnipotent state with unified and coherent institutions she portrays a shapeless entity in a condition of permanent revolution and endless destruction, bafflingly paradoxical in its nihilism. Pursuit of total power leads to impotence: the faith that "everything is possible" only to the demonstration that "everything can be destroyed".²³ Reflecting on the traditional assumption that "human nature" sets limits to human power, she observes with bitter irony, "we have learned that the power of man is so great that he really can be what he wishes to be".²⁴ If men are determined to reduce themselves and others to beasts, nature will not stop them. In totalitarianism (as she asserted with great emphasis) "human nature as such is at stake".²⁵

on the other. Arendt to Karl Jaspers, 4th March 1951, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926-1969*, ed.L. Kohler and H. Saner (Munich: Piper, 1985), p. 202. Cf. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, pp. 137-53.

15 OT, p. 466.

16 OT, p. 457. Cf. "Mankind and terror", and "On the nature of totalitarianism", pp. 304, 354.

17 OT, p. 457.

18 OT, pp. 469-470.

19 OT, pp. 472-3.

20 OT, p. 463.

21 "On the nature of totalitarianism", p. 341

22 OT, pp. 464-6.

23 OT, p. 459.

24 OT, p. 456.

25 OT, p. 459.

Above all, how are we to understand her when (as frequently happens) she uses language that seems to treat “totalitarianism” as a subject with intentions of its own? To cite one example among many, she says that “totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous”.³³ Such language raises awkward questions. Flying in the face of her insistence that we must resist any impulse to mythologise the horrible,³⁴ it evokes images of totalitarianism as a perverted version of Hegel’s *Weltgeist*, causing radical evil to happen by using human beings as its tools. Reading her along these lines, Hanna Pitkin maintains that totalitarianism-as-subject represents the first appearance in Arendt’s work of what she calls “the Blob”, a kind of monstrous force that (Pitkin maintains) seems at various points in Arendt’s writings to take over human beings and use them as its instruments. For according to Pitkin’s account (focused on the puzzling concept of “the social”) Arendt’s thought as a whole is haunted by a fundamental inconsistency. “People experiencing their own activity as an overwhelming alien force is the disease she wants to diagnose; the mystery is why she succumbs to it herself.”³⁵ Looking for a solution to this mystery, Pitkin turns to Arendt’s experiences as a Jew and a woman, at times falling back on conjectural psycho-history and speculating about her relations with her parents and with Heidegger. This is not the place to discuss Pitkin’s provocative book, except to make a general point about hermeneutic strategy. To accept such an approach is to foreclose discussion on whether what Arendt says may actually make sense, and to replace questions about what she may have meant with quite different questions about intellectual pathology. Methodological prudence would recommend such an approach to her understanding of totalitarianism only *after* we have tried to make sense of what she says.

But how else might we read these passages in which “totalitarianism” appears as a subject, and what are we to make of Arendt’s Montesquieu-style enquiry into its “nature” and her diagnosis of “loneliness” as its source? It is clearly her intention to signal the advent

of a new and particularly alarming kind of political behaviour, but how is her general type supposed to be related to her two specific examples? Is she claiming that Nazism and Stalinism represented the practical achievement of systematic projects deliberately envisaged either by Hitler and Stalin or by some sort of personified “Totalitarianism”? What exactly is she up to? Frankly, I am not at all sure, which is why I would like to encourage debate. Neither am I sure how significantly her understanding of totalitarianism changed between the writing of *Origins* (dominated by reflections on Nazism) and the essay on “Ideology and Terror” that contains her most consistent theoretical account – an essay that emerged out of her reflections on the “totalitarian elements in Marxism” and their connection with the tradition of Western political thought.³⁶ That essay, which contains (Arendt tells us) “certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature” that she did not possess when she finished her book,³⁷ is not only more systematic but makes a more explicit connection between totalitarianism and “loneliness” as well as laying more stress on the ideological aspect of total domination. These shifts of emphasis do not make the task of interpretation any easier.

III. My main objective in this paper is to draw attention to the difficulties of following Arendt’s thinking on this subject. However, I will end with some suggestions (offered in a rather tentative spirit, since I cannot offer conclusive confirmatory evidence) for a way of reading her that might make sense of her claims about the “nature” and “essence” of totalitarianism and of her references to totalitarianism-as-subject, while remaining consistent with her continual insistence on the contingency of events and on human responsibility for human actions. This reading treats her theoretical analysis as an account of *the logic of a situation* in which modern human beings (especially but not exclusively those caught up in the regimes of Hitler and Stalin) are liable to find themselves. According to the logic of this situation, and given certain starting-points, objectives and deficiencies, people will tend to find themselves falling into

33 OT, p. 457.

34 Arendt to Karl Jaspers, 17th December 1946, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel*, p. 106.

35 Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob*, p. 229.

36 On those reflections, see Canovan, *Hannah Arendt – A Reinterpretation*, Chapter 3.

37 OT, p. viii.

38 "On the Nature of Totalitarianism", p. 347.

39 OT, p. 436.

40 This quotation is from the "Concluding Remarks" to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in Britain under the title *The Burden of our Time* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), pp. 434-5. In later editions these were replaced by the essay "Ideology and Terror".

41 OT, p. 475.

42 "Concluding Remarks", p. 428.

Margaret Canovan's latest publication on Hannah Arendt is her "Introduction" to Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (second edition, University of Chicago Press, 1998). Due for publication by Cambridge University Press in 2000 is her contribution "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism: A Reassessment" to *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (edited by Dana R. Villa).

certain patterns of behaviour without consciously intending this, but also without being nudged into line by the Cunning of Reason or the Blob. In our ordinary understanding of social activity, accounts along these lines are familiar to the point of banality. The best known example is no doubt the economists' analysis of the workings of the free market. Economists can find systematic patterns in the uncoordinated activities of individuals in the market, not because anyone has deliberately set out to create such a pattern, still less because "Capitalism" has done so, but simply because economic men maximising their utility and taking the line of least resistance tend to find themselves moving along certain predictable grooves. Given certain preconditions, that is the logic of the situation.

Although Arendt would not have welcomed comparisons with economic thinking, the example may, I think, help to shed some light on what she may have been up to. For although in her account of totalitarianism the logic of the situation leads to something even more senseless than the gyrations of the stock market, the structural features of her theory may be rather similar. She gives colour to this interpretation when she points out how remarkable it was that the very different regimes of Hitler and Stalin should have converged on the practice of similarly senseless terror;³⁸ when she speaks of the camps as "laboratories" carrying out "experiments" in the possibilities of domination, and when she says that totalitarian leaders only gradually discovered just what was involved in the course on which they had embarked.³⁹ On this reading, totalitarianism represents not so much a conscious project as the set of grooves into which people are likely to find themselves sliding if they come to politics with certain sorts of aims, experiences and deficiencies, all of them characteristic of modernity. Foremost among the aims is a quest for omnipotence fuelled by the belief that everything is possible and by "modern man's deep-rooted suspicion of everything he did not make himself".⁴⁰ The central *experience* is loneliness

– that experience of "uprootedness and superfluosity"⁴¹ that makes people cling to movements and to ideological logicity as a substitute for the lost world of common sense and reality. The key *deficiency* is the loss of the world itself, the stable human world of civilisation that anchors human beings in a common experience of reality and hedges a space of free action with necessary limits and laws.

Reading Arendt's theory in this way perhaps enables us to see Nazism and Stalinism neither as incarnations of an alien presence, vehicles through which the monster "totalitarianism" worked its mysterious will, nor as systems deliberately created by the demonic will of larger-than-life leaders, but as horrors bizarrely disproportionate to the human stature of their perpetrators, results of a great many people taking the line of least resistance and following the logic of their situation. In these particular cases (for contingent reasons to do with the aftermath of war and revolution) loss of the world and its restraints made it particularly easy to slip into the grooves of totalitarian practices, which converge on the elimination of human plurality. Having separately discovered the power that could be generated through the organisation of uprooted masses, and concurrently hit upon the core of mindless logic at the heart of ideology, Hitler and Stalin (confirmed in their belief that everything is possible) found themselves presiding over regimes of terror that reduced human beings to beasts.

IV. An interpretation might perhaps be developed along these lines that would allow for Arendt's account of totalitarianism as a systematic phenomenon never yet fully realised in practice,⁴² while preserving her insistence on historical contingency and individual freedom. On this reading there is nothing inevitable about the occurrence of totalitarian regimes, but the implications of worldlessness are such that others may slip into the same grooves and hit on the same set of expedients. Was this, perhaps, what she had in mind? I don't know. Can anyone help me out with comments or suggestions?