

## Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics

**Review Number:**

200

**Publish date:**

Friday, 1 June, 2001

**Author:**

Michael Halberstam

**ISBN:**

300071809X

**Date of Publication:**

1999

**Pages:**

287pp.

**Publisher:**

Yale University Press

**Place of Publication:**

New Haven, CT

**Reviewer:**

Richard King

Totalitarianism as a concept has made something of a comeback in recent years. During the Cold War, it dominated political analysis, particularly in the United States.<sup>(1)</sup> By the 1960s, the Right had largely commandeered the term to refer to the Soviet Union and its satellites, while the American Left sometimes adopted it to characterise everything from the architecture of the Pentagon (according to Norman Mailer) to political conformity in general. After the 1960s, the occurrence of 'totalitarianism' waned in frequency, without totally disappearing. Perhaps it was the collapse of the Soviet Union, hastened along by figures such as Vaclav Havel, who sought to revive genuine political thinking, which contributed to a certain rehabilitation of the term and its variants after 1989.

Though totalitarianism is a highly elastic term, it has been the concern most often to the political theorists and to historians. In his stimulating *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics*, Michael Halberstam approaches totalitarianism through political thought as it arises from the German tradition of philosophy from Kant to Heidegger. Though there are many things to be said about Halberstam's excellent, if difficult, book, I want to focus here on the gains and losses incurred by approaching the topic philosophically rather than historically. Such an approach to Halberstam's book is apposite, since it is Hannah Arendt, herself possessing an ultra-sensitive historical awareness yet trained as a philosopher, whose work stands at the centre of his concern.

Halberstam's central thesis involves several related claims. At its core stands the assertion that both liberalism and totalitarianism are 'outgrowth[s] of modernity' (p. 6). Specifically, both had to come to terms historically and morally with the 'loss of world' experienced by the modern subject and that in turn involved figuring out how 'to restore meaning to the world artificially' (pp. 6-7). A new order of meaning--a rough definition of the term 'world'-- was not to be found in the past, but rather to be constructed in the future. Thus, society and polity were 'artefacts' (p. 16). More pointedly, for Halberstam, totalitarianism was a

response to the failure of political modernity, especially of the Enlightenment project of emancipation. In other words, it was not just the outgrowth of conservatism grown murderous or an aberrant creation of a couple of charismatic leaders who appealed to the irrationalities of race, nation, ethnicity or class. One interesting implication of these claims by Halberstam is that modern politics has attempted to resolve what was essentially a *religious* problem, i.e. the problem of meaning, by *aesthetic* means. State-making as work as a work of art and the leader as artist were-and are-full of totalitarian potential.

Liberalism diverges from totalitarianism in its solution to this problem of the loss of community and authoritative traditions. As the 'heir of the Enlightenment,' liberalism 'privileges the freedom of individuals to pursue their own conception of the good' (p. 36), while the totalitarian solution 'denies its subjects their right to self-determination' (p. 39). Where liberalism depends upon civil society, i.e. the private and non-political sphere of life including its religious institutions, to supply its citizens with meaning, totalitarianism effaces the distinction between public-private, state-civil society, and uses the state to impose meaning by any means necessary. In all this, Halberstam sees Kant's fundamental assumption that the individual can and should act with 'rational autonomy' as central to the liberal doctrine of the self. Totalitarianism, on the other hand, assumes that appeals to irrational or non-rational foundations (race or class most notoriously, according to Arendt) will supply the moral glue to hold polity and society together.

Arendt is so important for Halberstam because, trained as she was in the tradition of Kant to Heidegger, she not only saw the horrors of totalitarianism but also was fully aware of liberalism's inadequacies. In contrast with the 'claim that liberal political self-understanding can largely do without a shared culture' (p. 60), Arendt understood that we need 'a nonrational intersubjective agreement in a *sensus communis* or *Gemeinschaftsinn*' (p. 66). If Arendt drew her concept of 'worldlessness,' from Martin Heidegger, her former mentor and erstwhile Nazi, she derived the notion of 'common sense' from Kant, one of liberalism's founding fathers. But though Kant established liberalism's central focus on the rational autonomy of the individual, his thought also provided the basis for Arendt's notion of judgement, that necessary political faculty which presupposes and also helps preserve a 'world,' without which experience itself is hardly possible.

Before addressing some of the problems with Halberstam's largely philosophical approach, it is necessary to identify its strengths. First, he rightly identifies the religious dimension of the crisis of modernity that made the totalitarian solution so appealing. For true believers, totalitarianism created, according to Arendt, a new world driven by an internal logic that had jettisoned the reality testing of a common sense. Enclosed in an ideological cocoon, totalitarian regimes often formulated policies at odds with normal self-interest. Second, according to Halberstam, 'Empirically oriented social science' and, I would add, professional history, tend to view society 'from the outside' and 'apart from the self-understanding by which it is constituted.' (p. 140). To attempt to remedy this defect was not, as Arendt came to understand, to recommend that the analyst of totalitarianism *empathise* with those who commanded, justified or lent support to totalitarian regimes. Rather, s/he must comprehend the loss of structures of meaning and significance that created the vacuum into which totalitarianism rushed. Social psychologists of a psychoanalytic bent (e.g. Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson) might argue that concentrating on concepts (and experiences) such as 'loss of world' neglects the elements of individual and social pathology that fed totalitarian movements. But Halberstam has a point to the extent that the descriptions and explanations offered by historians are usually 'third person' points of view that fail to convey what it was like to experience the loss of world or of the possibility of acting in common with others. Third, by focussing on the conceptual essence of liberalism and totalitarianism, Halberstam makes a powerful case for the subterranean relationship between the two. Totalitarianism was liberalism's 'secret sharer' it's 'other.' It takes no great historical, moral or political imagination to condemn totalitarianism, but Halberstam's identification of liberalism's reluctance to acknowledge the conditions of its own intelligibility or effectiveness-the pre-existence of a moral community in which individual rational choices are even possible-makes a good deal of sense.

There are, of course, problems. First, both totalitarianism and liberalism are what philosophers call 'essentially contested concepts.' This does not mean that Halberstam should have avoided using them; rather, he should have more fully acknowledged their problematic status and sought to 'thicken' his description of each. For instance, he follows Arendt in uniting National Socialism and Stalinism under the concept of

totalitarianism and thus scarcely distinguishes between the two. Nor does he really indicate whether Mao's China or Pol Pot's Cambodia might qualify as totalitarian regimes, as well. If so, does the Asian version of totalitarianism arise from the same 'loss of world' that marked German and Soviet totalitarianism? Are mass murder, extermination and genocide necessary or contingent characteristics of totalitarian regimes? In other words, Halberstam neglects to discuss to what extent totalitarianism was a peculiarly modern, western phenomenon and to what extent it was-and is-a transhistorical and transcultural.

Besides the absence of a comparative historical perspective, Halberstam largely ignores Arendt's own view that totalitarianism was not a product of the history of ideas and thus neither Plato nor Marx, Aristotle nor Darwin could be blamed for its emergence. Rather, totalitarianism 'crystallised,' as she liked to say, from the convergence of several economic and political trends (capitalism and imperialism), the destruction of European institutions and traditions by World War I, and the growth of racial and ethnic consciousness between the French Revolution and the post-World War I period. There was nothing inevitable about totalitarianism for Arendt; but it was repeatable. In fairness to Halberstam, he does not use Kant, for example, to explain totalitarianism in any strong sense. Rather, what he seems to be saying is that the tradition of philosophy from Kant and Hegel down to Heidegger gives us non-philosophers, including historians, useful new terms with which to re-think the phenomenon of totalitarianism. And yet, the philosophical 'working through' of the idea of totalitarianism which Halberstam so impressively offers only becomes fully cogent when we understand the specific historical context in which Hitler and Stalin emerged. For all its faults, one of the great strengths of Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* is its ultra-sensitivity to the history of the modern world, not in the sense that professional historians would mean it, but as the lived experience of a radical break with the past history and traditions of the West.

Then there is liberalism. Halberstam belongs to the 'blame it on the Enlightenment' school of analysis of modernity. The problem is that identifying the core of liberalism with the elevation of the individual over the community and privileging the rational over the traditional self, smoothes over too many differences within the broad church of liberalism. Without argument, John Stuart Mill emphasises the centrality of individual self-realisation, but the Madisonian tradition, and the tradition of Christian Realism identified with Reinhold Niebuhr in this century, emphasise the imperative of dividing and balancing power as the central core of liberalism. One older brand of nineteenth century did see progress through rationality as the destination of human history; but in the second half of the twentieth century, Isaiah Berlin has famously stressed value pluralism and the incompatibility between various goods as central to liberalism's task. Indeed, with the exception of someone like John Rawls, and that is admittedly a big exception, Halberstam's insistence that the liberal self is ideally a rational, autonomous self seems to me a distinctly minority position within the liberal tradition. Rawls does stand in the mainstream, along with most other forms of liberalism, in rejecting the state or a unified community as the moral arbiter of our individual or collective lives. I confess I see little in the twentieth century to suggest that was a wrong move.

None of this is to deny Halberstam's tightly argued claims about liberalism's inadequacies, for liberalism does depend upon the existence of some sort of moral community, whose conditions of existence or survival it cannot directly encourage. But the liberal tradition is much more historically self-conscious, more savvy about the uses and abuses of power, and has a much more complex view of the self than Halberstam's Kantian emphasis upon rational autonomy would allow. Put in disciplinary terms: Halberstam needed more intellectual history and less history of philosophy in his discussion. As a type of thinker who used history to illuminate politics and vice versa, Arendt sits more comfortably in the company of Tocqueville, Montesquieu, Burke and Machiavelli than she does alongside Kant or Heidegger. And her thought is all the more compelling for it.

Finally, there are problems with Halberstam's approach to Arendt's work itself. Though Arendt's first work, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, was 'about' what its title indicates, Halberstam tends to repair to *The Human Condition* (1958) or even *The Life of the Mind* (1971) for concepts relevant to his analysis of totalitarianism, specifically her ideas of 'world' and 'judgement'. But much changes in Arendt's thought between 1951 and 1958 or between 1951 and 1971. In short, it does matter from which Arendt text one is quoting.

Moreover, by relatively ignoring *Origins*, a work saturated by history, Halberstam never has to deal with issues that get washed out when he focuses on Arendt the philosopher. Halberstam scarcely mentions Arendt's analysis of the rise of anti-Semitism or racism. Yet it was just the point of Arendt's political-historical analysis that, first, modern racism and anti-Semitism were different and more virulent than their precursors; and, second, that the ethnic and racial state was profoundly destructive of the Enlightenment-based republic of citizens. Arendt could certainly be critical of the Enlightenment tradition, but her formulation of a new political ideal -a political community in which everyone had 'the right to have rights'-retained Enlightenment terminology and goals.<sup>(2)</sup> Halberstam also fails to analyse fully the central role of terror in totalitarianism. He does discuss it in terms of Hegel's thought and raises, quite interestingly, the concept of the 'sublime' as relevant to the topic at hand. But the specific historical role of the 'camp system' in the maintenance of totalitarianism hardly gets a mention. Something deeply philosophical and religious was at stake there-the nature of human nature. It was in the camps, Arendt claimed, that the conception of personhood itself was specifically undermined and all but destroyed. The camp system was a giant experiment in attempting, as she put it, 'the transformation of human nature.'<sup>(3)</sup> In creating, not just in exterminating, millions of superfluous human beings, totalitarianism manifested what she saw as radical evil. Indeed, the problem of evil itself would seem worth discussion in this context, but Halberstam stays away from it, except for some comments on Eichmann.

Nor does Arendt buy the notion, as Halberstam seems to imply (pp. 192-93), that the problem of totalitarianism is the problem of absolute state power. What the history of Nazism revealed to Arendt was that race not the state was the highest good of National Socialism. The power of the state was ultimately less important than the creation of a purified Aryan race. The state was a means rather than an end in itself. Thus, again, it is impossible to discuss Nazi totalitarianism without saying something fundamental about race (or to discuss Soviet totalitarianism without saying something about class and Party). By not confronting concepts of 'race' and 'class' philosophically, Halberstam's *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics*, for all of its real strengths, helps perpetuate the isolation of political philosophy from the concepts that were so central to modernity and continue to shape our lives.

## Notes

1. Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 2nd ed. (Cleveland, OH. Meridian Books, 1958), pp. 296-97.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ibid. p. 458.[Back to \(3\)](#)

### Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/200#comment-0>

### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1203>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>