



Structural Exploitation and Total Domination

Leila Faghfour Azar

Amsterdam Law School, The Netherlands

l.faghfouriazar@uva.nl

Abstract: This review essay offers a critical reflection on Mattias Desmet's analysis of the foundations of modern forms of totalitarianism that he presents in his book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*. It provides evidence that the role of political institutions and the structural domination they produce is insufficiently addressed in Desmet's book. To this end the essay focuses on the example of relations of labor in connection with two chapters of the book. Particularly, the role of political structures in enforcing alienation and exploitation for the purpose of the efficient functioning and survival of totalitarian regimes is being examined.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; Desmet, Mattias; totalitarianism; ideology; hegemony; political structures; alienation; exploitation; domination.

Mattias Desmet's *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* presents an engaging analysis of the process of mass formation, which, according to him, is the psychological basis of totalitarianism.¹ As Desmet puts it, central to this process is the creation of a particular form of human subject, whose presence and functioning in the society is conditioned by a continuous, existential state of anxiety, which has become an ever-present aspect in one's life. The constant presence of anxiety in the living condition of the subject of totalitarianism is produced by a dominant ideology that justifies its rationale and enforces mechanisms of othering and domination in all spheres of social life. Desmet's examination of the role of ideologies of modern forms of totalitarianism illustrates how narratives of success and superiority become dominant in order to enable the construction of an ideal subject of totalitarianism.

Desmet's analysis of the process of mass formation under totalitarianism heavily rests on a thesis that Arendt, very famously, developed in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.² In a nutshell, Arendt identifies the emergence of totalitarianism as the third (historical) phase after the two phases of anti-Semitism and imperialism. On her vision of totalitarianism, the historical process of creating objects of fear through mechanisms of othering (that is, anti-Semitism) and expansionism for the purpose of exploitation (that is, imperialism) transforms them to the end of enforcing the ideology of fear for total domination under totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. In other words, this is a move from othering to first expansionism for exploitation, followed by total domination that defines the political structure of totalitarianism. It must be noted that Arendt's discussion on anti-Semitism and

¹ Mattias Desmet, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, transl. Els Vanbrabant, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2022. [Henceforth cited as *PT*]

² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Edition with Added Prefaces*, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973. [Henceforth cited as *OT*]

imperialism provides the historical and theoretical background for her discussion on totalitarianism. From a historical point of view, these two phases explain the factual legacy that totalitarian regimes rest on. From a political theory point of view, these two phenomena explain the origins of political institutions upon which totalitarianism as a distinctive form of mass governance emerged in the twentieth century. The formation and continuation of totalitarian regimes, in this sense, are conditioned on an ideology of othering (that according to Arendt becomes manifest most notably in racism) and structures of alienation and exploitation (for example labor camps and extermination camps). The key element to distinguish totalitarianism as a political regime from classic forms of dictatorship is, therefore, its ability to establish and functionalize political institutions through which the ideology of othering and structures of alienation and exploitation are being enforced. As this brief overview of the origins of totalitarianism shows, an analysis of totalitarianism that alleges to adopt an Arendtian approach needs to identify political structures of domination and to explain the purposes they serve.

Desmet's book is very illuminating when uncovering aspects of the role of ideology in the formation of ideal subjects of totalitarianism. It, however, remains inattentive to the role of structures of domination within which these subjects and their everyday lives are being framed. While I sympathize with Desmet's idea of the emergence of modern forms of totalitarianism in the twenty-first century, I find his analysis of the formation of ideal subjects of totalitarianism that solely focuses on the role of dominant ideology on individuals to be insufficient. This insufficiency pertains, primarily, to reducing the formation of subjects of totalitarianism to psychological causes independent from the political structures within which they live. This, in fact, is contrary to the essence of Arendt's thesis on totalitarianism according to which the political institutions and the structures that these regimes construct is the pre-text of the formation of submissive masses. I would like to elaborate this observation by focusing on the example of relations of labor under modern totalitarianism which, so I suggest, can be connected to two interesting discussions in the book.

In chapter two, "Science and its Practical Applications," Desmet adopts the notion of "bullshit jobs" to explain how the mechanisms and culture of

work in modern societies detach individuals from what could help them to feel important, useful, and engaged in social and economic life. In fact, the dominant culture of these jobs and its embeddedness in the construction of employment relationships in the form of growing demands for reaching targets, quantitative standards, and for producing statistics proliferates the experience of meaninglessness in almost every employment context. This explains very clearly the process of alienation which is a crucial element in the formation of masses and the ideal subjects of totalitarianism. In other words, alienation functions as an essential step in the production of subjects who are submissive to the totality of the dominant ideology. The hegemonic narratives of success as earning more by not doing what is meaningful but what is rewarded more facilitates the internalization of the feeling or belief that it is better to earn more by doing meaningless (or, alienating) jobs. As Desmet observes, individuals tend to follow this pattern in order not to fail to be part of the hegemonic narrative or of the desired mass. His observation is sharp and unravels a pivotal experience in the process of mass formation in contemporary societies. Still, the question remains as to why totalitarian regimes expose their subjects to alienation in labor relations in order to form submissive masses. What is integral in the process of mass formation for the purpose of domination that requires alienation in labor relations?

At the first glance, the experience of meaninglessness, or alienation as I would call it, that is embedded in the structure of modern labor relations, appears to be a smart escape from improperly rewarding workers or low remuneration. It is worth recalling that low remuneration is a basic form of exploitation, which essentially refers to taking advantage of one's labor for the purpose of accumulation of capital (that is, money and wealth). Here, one could ponder whether the work culture that the prevalence of bullshit jobs fabricates could protect the subjects (of modern totalitarianism) against exploitation or not. I reflect on this question by putting an emphasis on the element of the internalization of alienation, which is an immediate consequence of the hegemony of the culture of bullshit jobs in the structures of labor relations. It is interesting to note that since modern totalitarian regimes draw on smart and advanced strategies to govern social relations, the mechanisms of exploitation and domination they put

in force are different from classic mechanism adopted by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. This is precisely how the rationale behind, and function of hegemonic cultures of work in the formation of ideal subjects of totalitarianism should be scrutinized. While alienation has been always the first and most crucial step in the commodification of labor and laborer for the purpose of exploitation, one might question the role of structures of exploitation in the process of mass formation under totalitarian regimes. In the particular context of Desmet's discussion of bullshit jobs, one needs to inquire the structural function of the dominance of the culture of alienating jobs for the production of subjects of totalitarianism. Here, I argue that the social structures of labor relations that are being built on the condition of internalized alienation aim at creating organized forms of exploitation, which are crucial to form masses that produce the necessary means for the efficient functioning and survival of totalitarian regimes. In fact, the organized structures of alienation-for-exploitation equips the institution of totalitarian leadership with necessary means to dominate masses. Desmet, however, overlooks the structural alienation and exploitation in the culture of meaningless jobs and the profit it produces for the totalitarian leadership.

In chapter seven, "The Leaders of the Masses," Desmet claims that it is a misconception that leaders of totalitarian regimes are driven by money. This, according to him, is because these leaders firmly believe in the ideological presuppositions regarding the narratives, they created, in order to govern the masses in a totalitarian manner. In my assessment, this analysis precludes a proper understanding of an essential element in the construction of totalitarian regimes, namely, the creation of structures of exploitation for the purpose of acquiring money and capital by totalitarian leadership. Here, I do not base my argument merely on the role of individual leaders themselves. I would, rather, bring attention to the structural function of the leadership institutions to accumulate money and capital under totalitarian regimes. If money, in Desmet's words, or accumulation of capital, as I prefer to call it, does not drive the leadership of totalitarianism to impose and reimpose the dominant narratives of inciting the masses, one could hardly explain the organized and systematic strategies of severe exploitation and extermination in mass scales in the twentieth century.

In order to further elucidate this point, I would

like to bring attention to behavioral patterns that are commonly accepted in current times. Under the economic and political leadership of today's technology giants, logistical and organizational structures of domination are put in place where social-media users (currently 3.78 billion of the world's population)³ in their everyday lives have deliberately accepted to produce data (which according to an opinion piece in *The Economist* is the most valuable capital of our time).⁴ So far it is still an open question as to whether this deliberate acceptance of producing capital for shareholders is reducible to its psychological grounds or whether it is a form of internalized alienation and self-exploitation. In other words, no affirmative answer has been presented yet whether the ideal subject of modern totalitarianism is solely subjugated to the dominant ideology (and the hegemon narratives that are based on it), or whether it includes the politically fabricated structures of exploitation (in order to produce benefit for the modern totalitarian leadership). Desmet's answer to this question, based on the main thesis he has developed in his book, would solely focus on the dominant ideology and the grand narratives it produces for shaping the psychology of the submissive masses, without identifying the role of political structures within which such grand narratives are being enforced. This, once again, shows how Desmet's analysis disregards the foundations of an Arendtian approach to totalitarianism.

In my assessment, it cannot be a coincidence that the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries created the most exploitative structures as apparatuses for both domination and profit making. If not individual leaders themselves, the institution of totalitarian leadership is both driven by and dependent on money and capital accumulation to maintain its power for the total control and domination of masses. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains how the obsession with wealth characterizes the modern age and social relations of work, which results in one's alienation from oneself and the world.⁵ In line of this,

³ Stacy Jo Dixon, "Number of social media users worldwide from 2018 to 2027," *Statista* 278414 (26 July 2022), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>

⁴ *The Economist*, "The Worlds most valuable Resource is no longer Oil, but Data," 6 May, 2017.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1958, pp. 208-9.

one could conclude that the dominance of alienating structures of labor enables the formation of shapeless masses of people who are submissive to the ideology of totalitarian regimes and produce the money they need for their efficient functioning and survival.

Desmet's argument of mass formation, builds upon primarily psychological variables and leaves out an examination of the role of political structures. Although I have navigated my discussion in this review based on the case of meaninglessness in labor relations, I should emphasize that the dominance of the culture of meaningless jobs is only one example through which one can observe Desmet's failure in his book to

recognize the role of political structures of totalitarian regimes and the subjects they produce. To conclude, I must reiterate that the transition from creating objects of fear to a total domination of masses, particularly in current times, necessarily requires creating structures of alienation and exploitation. The merit of Desmet's psychological approach to explain the formation of subjects of totalitarianism is undeniable. However, it does not satisfy the essential features of an Arendtian approach to analyze totalitarianism and its subjects, in an effort to examining the formation of masses in the context of totalitarian political structures.