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On the Misuse of the Concept of Totalitarianism

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Abstract: This review essay discusses Mattias Desmet's book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*. Given that Desmet claims to be drawing upon Hannah Arendt, I briefly present major aspects of her theory of totalitarianism that he disregards. My claim is that the author misuses both the concept of totalitarianism and Arendt's theory, and that, consequently, the book under discussion contributes to the misinterpretation of the predicament of current times instead of illuminating it.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; Desmet, Mattias; Montesquieu; Enlightenment; forms of government; institutions; politics; totalitarianism.

It is difficult to write about a book whose content belies the expectations that its title generates.[1] One of the reasons why it was hard for me to follow the argument presented in the book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* has to do with the way in which Mattias Desmet uses the concept of totalitarianism in it.[2] In the ensuing paragraphs, I will focus on Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism in order to substantiate the claim that this is, in effect, a misuse of both the concept itself and of Arendt's theory.

Given the book's title, Desmet's recourse to Arendt does not come as a surprise. Since its publication in 1951, her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has been a key reference for those who aim to understand what Arendt called "the central political issue of the era."[3] Arendt's first major book has been amply discussed, and criticized, from various angles, and while it has survived these criticisms and is now considered to be a classic, this should, of course, not obscure the fact that Arendt's theory is not the only theory of totalitarianism. Several other social scientists, political theorists, and philosophers have tackled the issue too: from mainstream American political scientists Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski to the French Weberian sociologist Raymond Aron; and from the heterodox Marxist philosophers of the Frankfurt School, to the French phenomenologist and political theorist Claude Lefort. The (often radical) differences between the diverse theories of totalitarianism testify to the obvious fact that, like all other political phenomena,

[1] A shorter version of this essay was presented at an online discussion of Desmet's book, organized by the Karl Jaspers Society of North America, on May 28, 2022. I would like to thank the KJSNA for the invitation.

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

[3] Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company 1994, pp. 307-27, here p. 312. [Henceforth cited as *UP*]

totalitarianism is the object of debate and dispute—not to mention the fact that there are theorists who reject the very pertinence of the concept of totalitarianism. Desmet however, does not seem to be aware of this factual situation.

Commenting on the advent of the concept "totalitarianism," Arendt writes:

> The choice of the new word indicates that everybody knows that something new and decisive has happened. [*UP* 312]

Her resolve to use this word and to give it the full status of a concept in learned political vocabulary goes hand in hand with her warning against

> the identification of the...specific phenomenon with something familiar and rather general [*UP* 312],

and with a constant effort to challenge the all too human

> unwillingness to admit that anything out of the ordinary has happened at all. [*UP* 312]

The concept designates a "novel form of government." Since there is no form of government without institutions, Arendt lays particular emphasis on the institutions that are proper to the new regime and whose absence would mean its collapse or its alteration—for instance, its transformation into a classic dictatorship. Arendt's interest in the institutional dimension of totalitarianism and of its prehistory is obvious throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; but it comes to the fore most clearly in the penultimate chapter of the book, entitled "Totalitarianism in Power" wherein Arendt starts by discussing extensively the totalitarian "state." Following Franz Neumann's pioneer analysis in *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, she insists on the "infinite multiplication of offices and confusion of authority"[4] that accounts for the peculiar "shapelessness" (*OT* 395) or "structurelessness" (*OT* 418) of the totalitarian order while also being correlated with the function of the totalitarian Leader. She then passes onto the secret police, "the true executive branch of the government" (*OT* 430), whose methods and standards permeate the whole of totalitarian society. In this context, Arendt also focuses on the crucial role that the legal categories of the "objective enemy" and the "possible crime" play in the system. Finally, she turns to concentration and extermination camps which, as "laboratories in the experiment of total domination" (*OT* 436), are "the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule" (*OT* 441). It seems to me that the concluding chapter (which was added to the second edition), where Arendt seeks to capture the specificity of totalitarianism *qua* form of government by drawing from Montesquieu, makes sense only on the background of these subchapters. According to Montesquieu, "essence" is what makes a form of government what it is, giving the government its particular structure, while "principle," which he understands to be the passions that inspire human actions, is what makes it move (*agir*).[5] Essence and principle are intrinsically related; they cannot be treated separately since they both sustain the form of government, thus giving it its coherence. Commenting on Montesquieu, Arendt suggests that this interdependence also points to a "fundamental experience...inherent in the human condition,"[6] an experience that, in each regime, forms "the common ground of structure and action" (*NT* 336)—for example

> the experience of living together with and belonging to a group of equally powerful men [*NT* 336]

in the case of republics, whose principle is, according to Montesquieu, virtue, namely, love of equality (*EL* 111). It is on this backdrop that Arendt develops the well-known analysis according to which terror is the essence of totalitarianism, ideology—to be precise, "the logicality of ideological thinking" (*OT* 474)—is its principle, and loneliness is the corresponding basic human experience.

In the 1966 Preface to the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt claims that

> we have every reason to use the word "totalitarian" sparingly and prudently. [*OT* xxviii]

This is another way of stating her preference for distinctions, for which she is well known and

[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Edition with Added Prefaces*, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company 1979, p. 405. [Henceforth cited as *OT*]

[5] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois.Vol. 1*, Paris, FR: GF Flammarion 1979, p. 143. [Henceforth cited as *EL*]

[6] Hannah Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company 1994, pp. 328-60, here p. 336. [Henceforth cited as *NT*]

often criticized. This preference is also obvious in another major aspect of her theory, namely the one concerning the status of the origins or the prehistory of totalitarianism (*OT* xv). In order to bring these origins to light, she turns to the "subterranean stream of European history" (*OT* xv) in which the elements that crystallized into totalitarianism were hidden. But this turn does not imply that Arendt comprehends totalitarianism as the symptom of deeper trends or as the necessary logical outcome of pre-existing ideological currents. To the contrary, she claims:

> What is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the event of totalitarian domination itself.[7]

Hence her warning against

> the tendency to simply equate totalitarianism with its elements and origins. [*OT* xv]

Such equations obscure the novelty of the regime, by reducing it to the already known; they also imply that, far from belonging to the realm of contingency and unpredictability, history is the realm of necessity.

I have briefly drawn attention to Arendt's construal of totalitarianism as a political concept designating a form of government as well as to her understanding of the prehistory of totalitarianism for it seems to me that Desmet's approach is situated on their antipode. Let me start with the historical perspective on totalitarianism. The author traces totalitarianism back to the Enlightenment. According to his analysis, at the core of the Enlightenment project is the idea that the world, humanity, and history can, and should, be controlled and mastered through science. Desmet explains that totalitarianism is the

> logical consequence of mechanistic thinking and the delusional belief in the omnipotence of human rationality. As such, totalitarianism is a defining feature of the Enlightenment tradition. [*PT* 7]

Whereas Arendt undertakes a nuanced investigation of the multiple elements whose crystallization into totalitarianism was contingently brought about by totalitarian movements, Desmet opts for a linear, monocausal and quasi deterministic explanation in which the Enlightenment´s scientific worldview is responsible for the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century as well as for the technocratic totalitarianism of current times. What is more, there are instances where Desmet's narrative comes close to implying that ideas and worldviews have an agency of their own.

According to Desmet,

> mass formation and totalitarianism are in fact *symptoms* of the mechanistic ideology. [*PT* 147]

Although this claim runs counter to Arendt's approach, the author nevertheless finds an ally in Arendt. After claiming that Arendt sees totalitarianism as the

> logical extension of a generalized obsession with science, the belief in an artificially created paradise [*PT* 48],

Desmet then quotes the following passage from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

> Science [has become] an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man. [*PT* 48]

Desmet correctly states that this is a phrase found in Eric Voegelin and quoted by Arendt (*OT* 346).[8] However, when one turns to *OT* 346 in order to read this citation in context, one realizes that Arendt does not agree with Voegelin. Here I quote the entire passage:

> Scientificality of mass propaganda has indeed been so universally employed in modern politics that it has been interpreted as a more general sign of that obsession with science which has characterized the Western world since the rise of mathematics and physics in the sixteenth century; thus totalitarianism appears to be only the last stage in a process during which "science [has become] an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man." And there was, indeed, an early connection between scientificality and the rise of the masses. [*OT* 346]

In the following paragraph Arendt explicitly states her disagreement with Voegelin:

> "Scientism" in politics still presupposes that human welfare is its object, a concept which is utterly alien to totalitarianism. [*OT* 347]

I will now move on to the question of totalitarianism as a political concept. In his introduction, Desmet states that he will not

[7] Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company 1994, pp. 401-8, here p. 405.

[8] Eric Voegelin, "The Origins of Scientism," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 15/4 (December 1948), 462-494, here p. 487.

> focus on that which is usually associated with totalitarianism—concentration camps, indoctrination, propaganda—but rather [on] the broader cultural-historical processes from which totalitarianism emerges. [*PT* 8]

This is a legitimate approach, on the condition that one explicates the manner in which one construes totalitarianism. To this end, I consider one of the few explicit—albeit too brief—formulations in this respect that I found in his book: totalitarianism is

> extreme government control, eventually resulting in the radical destruction of both the psychological and physical integrity of human beings. [*PT* 7]

Furthermore, the author maintains that he has a new kind of totalitarianism in mind, which, as I have already mentioned, he refers to as being technocratic. More precisely, Desmet's diagnosis is that humans now live in a period of

> transition from a democracy to a totalitarian technocracy, in which the coronavirus crisis was a Great Leap forward. [*PT* 132]

Among the signs that he enumerates as proof of the fact that this kind of totalitarianism is, in his words, "on the rise," are the following:

> intrusive actions by security agencies...the general advance of surveillance society; the increasing pressure on the right to privacy;...the sharp increase... in citizens snitching on one another through government-organized channels; the increasing censorship and suppression of alternative voices, in particular during the coronavirus crisis; loss of support for basic democratic principles; and the introduction of an experimental vaccination program and QR code as a condition for having access to public spaces. [*PT* 91]

While I will not discuss the coronavirus issue, allow me to underscore that all the other signs that he mentions belong to the repertoire of practices undertaken by dictatorial or authoritarian regimes. The author does not develop arguments that would substantiate the claim that these are specific indications of a new version of totalitarianism (the role that digital infrastructure plays notwithstanding). Several related critical aspects, equally crucial both in theoretical and in practical terms, also remain unnoticed; topics such as the following: The identification of the specificity of this new version of totalitarianism; the difference of this version from and the relation to the classic totalitarian regimes that Arendt had analyzed; the identification of institutions and political forces (movements, parties, and so on) that are the bearers of this new version; and the addressing of the alleged absence of institutions and forces of democratic societies that defy these totalitarian attempts. In my opinion, the discussion of mass formation is insufficient as an explanatory model for these political occurrences. At some points, Desmet's allusion to the masses implies an elitism that I believe is foreign to the spirit (if not the letter) of Arendt's work. Some of Desmet's claims even obscure these matters instead of clarifying them. For example, Desmet mentions the French Revolution (*PT* 92-3, 104) as being an instance of mass formation, without further precision as to the period of the Revolution to which he refers. Again, the author's approach is situated on the antipode of Arendt's, despite her (in my assessment partly unjust) interpretation of the French Revolution.

It seems to me that from Desmet's angle, totalitarianism is not at all viewed as a form of government but rather as a diffuse societal climate and a psychological setup. And, in some instances, he misreads Arendt by presenting her theory as if it were principally based upon a psychological approach. For example, when addressing the difference between totalitarianism and dictatorial forms of government Desmet literally claims that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt

> situates the essence of this difference at a psychological level. While dictatorships are based on instilling a fear [to its subjects], the totalitarian state is grounded in the social-psychological process of mass formation. [*PT* 90]

This passage in a sense encapsulates Desmet's total disregard of the political and institutional dimensions of totalitarianism, which, as I briefly showed at the beginning of this essay, are at the core of Arendt's theory.

So, in summary, I would say that one of the major flaws of the book under discussion resides in the fact that the author's proper understanding of totalitarianism remains unclear, moving between an over-thematized psychological conception and an under-thematized political conception. While Arendt is Desmet's primary (if not unique) reference in the field of political theory, he simultaneously distances himself from core dimensions of her understanding of totalitarianism. In contradistinction to Arendt, Desmet pays scant attention to the institutional aspects of totalitarianism (in neither its classic nor its alleged new

version), thus voiding the concept of its political content: the term does not designate a form of government but rather an unspecified psychological-societal condition. Thus, little space is left for Arendt's cautions against hasty equations or generalizations, or both, as well as for what she was trying to capture when discussing the essence, the principle, and the fundamental experience of this form of government.

Apart from the author's misuse of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, I should also mention another major flaw of the book: As a psychologist, Desmet is obviously unacquainted with the tradition of continental social theory, where the issue of the role of science in modernity has been raised and amply discussed beginning from the turn of the previous century. Apart from two brief references, Max Weber and the members of the Frankfurt School are completely absent from the book. It is as if Desmet's approach were executed in a theoretical vacuum, as if no social theorist or philosopher had engaged with this issue before. If the author had turned to Weber (whom Karl Jaspers held in high esteem), he might have profited from his rich analysis of the role that modern science and rationality have played in the formation of modern society and individuality; he might also have avoided the one-sided and superficial presentation of scientific rationality as the unique cause of deep and multifaceted societal and historical transformations. Furthermore, if the author had considered Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's thesis regarding the dialectic of Enlightenment, he might have avoided the reductive construal of Enlightenment and its relation to totalitarianism.

In the last chapters of his book Desmet proposes some possible answers to what he considers the present predicament—presumably of the Western world. He argues:

> The most fundamental change that we as a society have to aim for is not a change in practical terms but a change in consciousness. [*PT* 148]

For a reader of *The Human Condition* and of *On Revolution* this proposal sounds rather unfamiliar. To be sure, Arendt lucidly recognized that, after their appearance, totalitarian practices and their corresponding mindset became part of humanity's horizon of possibilities:

> Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man. [*OT* 459]

Clearly, Arendt did see a real danger in governments conducted by technocrats and experts. I believe she was right in this regard. But I also believe that this twofold danger can and should primarily be countered politically, which means practically: by trying, individually and collectively, to sustain or build institutions that correspond to and foster the people's power to act and to participate in public affairs; and by opposing, individually and collectively, those institutions, practices and political forces that aim at restraining or at destroying this power.

My comments do not stem from a will to defend something akin to an Arendtian purism. An author has the right to draw inspiration from other authors; it is nonetheless essential to state where the inspiration begins and where it ends. Mattias Desmet should have been more accurate in this respect. If he had rendered explicit the points where his approach differs from Arendt's, the argument of the book might have been easier for me to follow—even though my disagreement with his overall analysis and his diagnosis would have persisted. Unfortunately, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* contributes to the misinterpretation of the predicament of current times instead of illuminating it.