

# Editorial

The new journal *'Totalitarianism and Democracy'* started out with a thematic issue, which focused on the current challenges to democracy from extremist movements and groups. The theme of this, the second issue, revolves around fundamental conceptual questions of totalitarian research – and, in general, *concerning* research on non-democratic, autocratic, and dictatorial regimes, or various other labels and conceptual categorizations that may be preferred by different authors and academic “schools”.

Totalitarianism concepts – the plural form has to be used as it has always been a matter of various approaches with considerable differences – as is generally known, unleashed fierce controversies in the past. The criticism of some exaggerations and narrow perspectives occasionally touched sore points, but the criticism itself was not free from dogmatism. Here too, the upheaval of 1989/90 lead to a more pragmatic approach and contributed to a breaking-up, if not dissolution, of the once firmly embedded ideological camps.

In the meantime, the terms “totalitarianism” and “totalitarian” became very common in everyday political talk. Not least of all did dissidents from East Central Europe contribute to their renaissance. Intellectuals and scholars, who dealt critically with the political reality of “real socialism”, came to choose their terms on the basis of the same experiences which had already lead to the dissemination of the term “totalitarianism” in the 1920s and 1930s: obviously, no other designation was nearly as suitable to express the distinctive features of the realities of repression, that they had experienced.

The number of historians and sociologists who work with the concept “totalitarianism” has risen markedly within the last two decades. Anthologies and comprehensive monographs in various languages show clearly a revived interest in its history. Fundamental scholarly criticism is still brought forward with great commitment. All in all, the heuristic potentials of the concept are met today with interest and open-mindedness.

“Totalitarianism” is again a widely discussed topic in the fields of history and political science, as well as in other related disciplines. The term is applied to political ideologies and movements just as it is with types of political systems. In this way, one can trace – in the footsteps of the German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt or the Israeli historian Jacob Talmon – the intellectual origins of the totalitarian thought or examine, with the aid of analytical categories – for instance those of Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron or Karl R. Popper – the intellectual architecture of totalitarian thinking and of “political religions”. The historical regimes of communism, fascism and national socialism continue to constitute core subjects of research. The former vanguard of those researchers of fascism who rejected totalitarianism as a concept, has dissolved, and nowadays it is possible to emphasize the distinctiveness, or even the “uniqueness”, of

National Socialism and at the same time to work out the intellectual, isomorphic aspects and common structures of power which existed in comparison with Bolshevism as well as Italian fascism. Analogous conditions can be drawn for the Soviet Union under Stalin. For a long time, Italian historians dealt with the *totalitarian* claim of the fascist movement in Italy in contrast to the reality of a more *authoritarian* political form, in which the powerful counterweights of the Catholic Church and Italian Royal Dynasty could still force concessions. Now these historians have increasingly been working out the totalitarian traits of the regime in the time between the Abyssinian war and Mussolini's fall from power.

In comparative systems research, "totalitarianism" has long since returned to the canon of forms of political rule. Moreover, the term is no longer simply applied to those systems that rose and fell in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but is also being used in regard to autocratic "cases" in recent times. This applies, for example, to the despotism of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which reached into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or to the Islamic Republic of Iran since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Some observers believe the concept of totalitarianism can also be a key to understanding the People's Republic of China in the post-Mao and post-Deng eras. In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, an ongoing debate started on the question of whether islamism presents a "third totalitarianism" – after fascism and communism.

The present issue can enrich this discussion in so far as it places the term, type, and research on "totalitarianism" at the center of attention. Jürgen Gebhardt, a political scientist from Erlangen, and director of the America-Academy in Munich, traces the winding history of the concept of totalitarianism, discusses the prevalent arguments of the critics, and pleads for the disclosure of the analytic potentials of this designation, which have remained until today partially forgotten. From his point of view those potentials are not to be looked for in a model of government imagined to be stable, but in the "motivating center of movement politics". The totalitarian project is said to revolve around the "chil- iastic idea of a perfect future society", though it does not aim at the establishment of an indifferently disposed system but rather at the overcoming of worldly limitations towards an "imaginary realm of the abundant being beyond the world of deprivation". Only the recalling of the driving intellectual forces of the totalitarian can make it possible to apply the concept fruitfully to non-European societies with a totally different intellectual and religious tradition.

Wolfgang Merkel, chair of political science at the Humboldt University and researcher at the *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin*, does not hesitate to apply the term "totalitarianism" to non-European countries. For Merkel, the only truly totalitarian regime existing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is North Korea. However, it cannot be referred to as being "modern." It represents more an archaic, anachronistic and moribund system. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, totalitarianism as a form of rule appeared to be a "discontinued model." While communism and fascism as totalitarian ideologies of domination have had their day, fundamentalist-theocratic legitimations of power have, so far, not been able to

take their place. Incidentally, Merkel allocates to the concept of totalitarianism a steady place within his morphology of power. This takes place in the framework of a universal typology of political regimes, that intends to avoid the classification problems and analytical weaknesses of well-known models. Particular attention is given over to the problem of drawing a clear dividing line between *autocratic* and *democratic* forms of rule, as well as to working out the systematic disparity between *authoritarian* and *totalitarian* regimes within the basic type of *autocracy*. Despite a systematized typology, not all of the gray zones amongst the basic types can be illuminated. Therefore, in addition to typology, Merkel draws on a continuum, which allows real-existing regimes to be arrayed somewhere between the polar types of “ideal democracy” and “perfect totalitarianism”.

The philosopher Hermann Lübbe contributes to the examination of the reasons used to legitimize totalitarian rule in particular, and, in a still broader sense, to the justification of politically motivated violence in general. Illustrated by the case of the theology student Karl Ludwig Sand, who murdered the playwright August von Kotzebue in 1819 because of his mockery of the high ideals of national liberation and political emancipation, the connection between virtue and terror is shown: “The more radical an individual, out of higher political purposes, offends against conventional morals and existing laws that are passed down traditionally, then all the more certain must the subject be convinced of the higher legitimacy of the exceptional use of his terrorist act, as the moral consciousness is always the last authority of legitimacy.” Against the objection that terror in totalitarian systems is not only committed by “idealists”, but springs much more frequently out of “lower motives”, Lübbe counters with the consideration “that the strategic utilization of a pathologically corrupted common moral, always increased the need of legitimacy for the initiated terrorist acts, and, with that, the dependence for the clear conscience of the perpetrator on this higher morality, whose integrity, in its ‘common sense’ transcendental esotericism, is guarded by philosophers and ideologists.”

The German-American historian Klemens von Klemperer sheds light on the aesthetic fascination of violence with his reflections on the intellectual roots of totalitarianism on the Right in Germany in the inter-war period. A key scene constitutes the – certainly literarily stylized – diary of Ernst Jünger. In it, he describing his sensations while observing a Royal Air Force squadron flying over the rooftop terrace of a Parisian hotel on May 27, 1944, where he had been summoned to the staff of the German High Command-West: “During the second wave, I held in my hand a glass of burgundy with strawberries floating in it. The city with red towers and domes lay stretched out in breathtaking beauty like a chalice that is overflowed for deadly pollination. Everything was spectacle, pure power, affirmed and exalted by pain.” The act of romanticizing force using a stylistically brilliant and seductive language, that at the same time does more to mystify than to explain, is ranked by Klemperer as among the characteristics of a “fascist minimum” that shaped the spiritual physiognomy of those political

movements and groups who orientated themselves on the model of Italian fascism.

This publication closes with a contribution by Lothar Fritze, political scientist from Dresden. It is based on a paper that was originally meant for internal discussion at the Institute, and was supposed to reflect the research assignments and purposes of the Hannah Arendt Institute and, most of all, to serve as self-reflection. The author's considerations are more in the nature of research strategy and methodology; it is not for him to submit concrete conceptual proposals or to even describe the current state of research on totalitarianism.

Lothar Fritze, who has been working for the Institute since its foundation, has expressed his thoughts in times of personnel changes and a new beginning. This is, by its nature, a time of stocktaking and conceptual profiling. He was conscious of articulating topics that can be discussed controversially, and if only for this reason they deserve attention. Apart from that, he points out misunderstandings and misconceptions, which have been circling around the Institute for years, and he calls principles to mind, which, despite their obviousness, need to be mentioned from time to time. With the publication of this essay we combine the hope for initiating a general discussion on the substance, purpose, and results of totalitarianism research. Fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, and in times of new challenges, it should be possible to overcome the controversies within the research concerning contemporary history and political science.

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