

INTRODUCTION

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(Guest Editor)

The following collection of writings represents a wide cross-section of perspectives and interests. As guest editor of this symposium issue of *Human Affairs*, it has been my pleasure to put together a selection that together forms an eclectic combination of research efforts from political and social theory, philosophy, and intellectual history. The most common and important theme that resonates throughout the issue is the need to clarify and explore the problem of anti-democratic politics and threats to democracy and human well-being against the history and development of totalitarianism. That the authors have widely differing and at times passionate views on the diverse issues discussed here is a testament to the complexity and fascination of the very topic.

Totalitarianism is a term with powerful historical connotations. In a sense, we are all the inheritors of both the defeat of fascism and the implosion of the Soviet bloc at the end of the Cold War, and it is our task both to come to grips with and to learn from these two pivotal events in the history of the last century. The end of the long struggle between Western democracy and capitalism with communism led some to speculate that we have entered a new post-totalitarian era in which history has “ended” and liberal democracy is the only game in town. Totalitarianism, on this view, is generally seen as an outmoded and deadly utopian option for social control. Others have claimed that the very term is irreparably tarnished by its associations with Cold War ideology, and should be relegated to the annals of political and rhetorical history. From the perspective of both of these groups of critics, totalitarianism is seen as a twentieth century Weberian ideal type, at best useless and at worst distorting in analyses of contemporary ideologies. Such critics share a resistance to the continued use of the term as a valuable notion in contemporary political analysis.

Others claim that although the term was coined by some of its early practitioners in fascist Italy, and continues to suffer oversimplifications in some applications, it nonetheless is useful in providing a comprehensive term for extreme and radical dictatorships with utopian ambitions. Such approaches are not purely historical in orientation. They also stress the reality of recalcitrant political extremism, the totalising character of extreme religious fundamentalism, as well as the constant wellsprings of totalitarianism in human psychology,

particularly in times of great social stress and conflict. On these accounts, the term remains a useful, if general notion. The tension between these two conceptual poles on the question of retaining the very term “totalitarianism” forms part of the background to the pieces in this special issue.

Alan Bloomfield begins the collection with a discussion of the neologism “Islamofascism”. The term has been used by a variety of commentators on religious extremism, including many neo-conservatives, and it is undoubtedly one of the most controversial notions in contemporary discussions of Islamic extremism. He argues that there are both similarities and differences between traditional fascists and contemporary Sunni extremism, which lends support to at most a restricted use of the term. Key similarities between the two ideologies, in Bloomfield’s view, include a totalising conception of political commitment and daily life, utopian aspirations, and the ideal of repressing civil society through violent methods in order to bring about a perfect implementation of political beliefs. However, he argues that there are also many differences between the global phenomenon of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s and contemporary Islamic radicalism. He holds fascism to be a largely modernising phenomenon, while Islamic extremism is very largely backwards looking in its advocacy of strict Sharia. Furthermore, contemporary Islamic societies are less vulnerable to radicalism than traumatised liberal European states once were, notably Germany, by virtue of the pervasiveness of authoritarian governments in the Islamic world, in Bloomfield’s view. He also claims that the willingness on the part of Muslim states to use force against Islamic extremists, coupled with the resolve of the great powers led by America to do so as well, contrasts sharply with the appeasement of fascism in the 1930s. So the term is thus seen to be insightful to a limited degree, while remaining distorting on certain key aspects of contemporary world affairs.

Kalliopi Kyriakopoulou addresses a phenomenon that did not, indeed could not, exist at all before the 1990s—the role of the internet in politics. She contributes to the debate over the power and influence of computer technologies in the areas of democracy and social control. Recent and ongoing events around the world in places as diverse as the Arab world, Iran, and East Asia have involved mobilisation for demonstrations against dictatorships in which the Internet and its social networking sites have figured prominently. To what extent is the Internet to be seen as promising new tool for democratisation, she asks. Her response is a mixed one. The question itself may be framed against the background of Cold War narratives and metaphors on totalitarianism, but the real problem of recalcitrant authoritarianism in the world today is confronted with new and creative uses of technology to oppose it, Kyriakopoulou holds. However, just as the new information technologies offer new online fora for resistance and deliberation, they also provide authoritarian states with new techniques of surveillance, disinformation, and control. Furthermore, the rampant consumerism on the Internet also provides a potential source of privacy violations to millions around the world. Access to the Internet is not a sufficient condition for democratisation, she claims, but when it is combined with significant organised and strategic dissent, online exchanges can serve as a basis for real world social capital and change. Constitutional and legislative frameworks ought to remain primary guarantors of rights, in Kyriakopoulou’s view. In an era of globalisation, those states that block or censor the Internet may suffer economically. They may choose to accept this in order to maintain their oppressive regimes,

she claims. However, recent events in which the Internet has assisted greatly in mobilising dissent and drawing attention to dictatorial abuses offer grounds for hope.

In his piece on the case of German politics and education, *Peter Carrier* examines what he takes to be a regrettably rhetorical and ideologically ambivalent usage of the very term “totalitarian” in a society deeply marked by both fascism and communism. In German parliamentary discourse, the notion of totalitarianism has played three key functions, he holds. It has allowed for criticism of the traditionally leftist elements of the German body politic, upheld the value of the 1949 Constitution, and affirmed the importance of European liberalism. Outside of its parliamentary context, Carrier claims that usage of the term has been broader, encompassing various forms of extremism. During the Cold War, West German usage of the term stressed the nation’s spatial and temporal distance from both the totalitarianism of East Germany and that of the Third Reich, respectively. At the same time, its use was rare in West German school history textbooks and entirely absent in East Germany. In West Germany, its use in school history textbooks tended to serve as a warning to students of the dual dangers represented by Nazism and East Germany, he argues. Whereas traditional anti-fascism was formed in opposition to a distinct threat of National Socialism, its anti-totalitarian Cold War successor elided key elements of that coalitional opposition. The end of the Cold War and German reunification have not, to his mind, resolved the inherent ambiguities and problematic dichotomies involved in political discussion involving totalitarianism. On the contrary, holds Carrier, totalitarianism continues to serve some as a sort of at once abstract and vague negative model to be contrasted with German democracy. Its value here lies in its contrariety. Anti-totalitarianism, Carrier holds, imposes an excessively binary dichotomy in which knowledge of the very meaning of the term is deferred, in favour of rhetorical usage and the very act of naming it as an adversarial doctrine whose meaning is wrongly presumed to be understood by all. He holds that a genuinely liberal perspective would either drop it entirely or properly explore the meaning of the term, in order to avoid excessively figurative and dichotomous usage.

Grant Amyot examines the complex politics of another post-totalitarian society, Italy. In this case, the reader is given a detailed account of an internal threat to the democracy of a major European power, in the aftermath of its own fascist regime. Indeed, given the fact that fascism was born in Italy, it is of particular interest to trace its continuing influence and threat in its country of birth since 1945. Amyot claims that both the reach and destructiveness of the post-war Italian extreme right have been regrettably underestimated in various quarters. He traces the continuing influence and threat of neo-fascism to the carry over of an important element of the fascist elite to the Italian post-war democracy, coupled with that elite’s terroristic strategies and campaigns in the hidden “deep state”—the hidden members of the extreme right who have sought for decades the opportune moment to seize power and destroy Italian democracy. Amyot sees the entire history of Italian post-war politics as being significantly influenced by the recurring threat of a neo-fascist *coup d’état*, as evidenced by investigations and trials of individuals involved in several waves of terrorist bombings and attempted insurrections since 1945. The overall effect of this right-wing extremism was a reinforcement in Italy of established patterns of power-sharing and the effective exclusion of both the extreme right and the extreme left through numerous coalition governments. The long term dominant rule of Italy’s Christian Democrats in exclusionary coalitional

governments, as well as its top-down organizational model, both reflect and institutionalize a worrisome anti-democratic tendency in the Italian body politic, he argues. Although the deep state has declined in power somewhat since the end of the Cold War, neo-fascism in Italy, according to Amyot, has clearly not been a marginal or fringe force. Furthermore, the current controversial Italian government has benefitted from a history of centralized power that requires considerable critical scrutiny to avoid changes to the Italian state in a presidentialist direction, which would put it at odds with parliamentary democracies.

In my own contribution to this issue, I offer an analytical overview of several key epistemic arguments against dictatorship. Such arguments from truth and knowledge ought to have, I claim, a central place in the case against dictatorial regimes, alongside better known ethical and historical arguments. Against the background of the thought of Communist bloc dissidents and intellectuals, as well as recent work on the general value of truthfulness, I argue for the epistemic case against dictatorial rule. We have much to learn from the lives and writings of former Soviet bloc dissidents, whose passionate commitment to truth in the face of massive oppression and propaganda was a testament to both the human quest for liberty and the endurance of important epistemic virtues under conditions of extreme persecution. Fallibilistic forms of moderate realism that emphasize the value of truth and knowledge through trial and error against elitism and dogmatism, and the importance of falsification in the development of knowledge are presented as far better alternatives than their authoritarian and totalitarian rivals. Defenders of what is sometimes termed “guardianship”, going back to the ancients, have consistently overestimated both the wisdom and the ethics of dictators and their allied oligarchies, I claim. Democracy is not utopian, but this is no flaw. For I believe that it is precisely the flexibility and deliberative character of democratic life that encourage respect for the fundamental values of truthfulness and the pursuit of knowledge. Although some of us know better than others on key issues, this ought not to encourage us to jump from the pan of variable knowledge and competence into the fire of dictatorship. I therefore conclude that epistemic arguments have an important role in explaining why that is the case.

The post-totalitarian example of Slovakia is examined by *Catriona Menzies*. It is an interesting case of a nation attempting to define itself through periods of dislocation and crisis. Achieving independence in 1993, and joining the European Union in 1998, Slovakia is described by the author as a post-totalitarian country that has witnessed great ideological dislocation and challenges in defining its identity. This has led to a dislocation of the Slovak left, and to a questioning of the boundaries of Slovak nationality. Menzies holds that an important part of this dislocation has been the use of a key term in its cultural and intellectual history: *národ*, or a rather specific idea of the Slovak nation. It has become salient in Slovak discourse at various periods of Slovakia’s history, including the Prague Spring of 1968, and the period immediately following the nation’s independence in the early to mid-1990s. Drawing from discourse theory, Menzies examines popular conceptions of *národ* with some analysis of its use in political and intellectual circles. She sees the notion as an example of a shared and floating signifier that can mean different things, depending upon one’s conception of Slovak nationality. She contrasts *národ* with what she takes to be a pervasive but empty signifier in Slovak political discourse, namely democracy. This latter notion has, she claims, achieved very widespread use and endorsement without a clear grasp

of its meaning. *Národ* has had several articulations in what she terms its “stronger versions”. These have been highly historicist, and they have tended to stress the linguistic character of Slovak nationality contrastively against Czech and Hungarian national identities. In some cases, this floating signifier has stressed the specifically Christian character of a Slovak identity that is often held to be rural and peasant-based. She analyses an important series of newspaper articles in *Republika* for insight into the parameters of the stronger versions of *národ*. Menzies argues that *národ* continues to be an influential notion in the educational system of independent Slovakia, and that recent tensions with Hungary over language and citizenship have brought it to the fore. She furthermore claims that its stronger versions clash with the diversity of Slovakia, given its significant Roma and Hungarian minorities. Slovakia’s membership in the European Union and entry into the Eurozone have, however, have mitigated its strong use, together with growing diversity and globalisation. So the future of *národ* continues to be uncertain, with its stronger versions in question.

Václav Bělohradský’s piece stands out in this symposium as a manifesto for the left in post-communist countries. He recalls us to the examination of key philosophical notions for political analysis, and in particular the question of the need for a new orientation in the aftermath of the Cold War. The left, he holds, has lost its way in attempting to resolve divisions and thus is not contributing to the essential process of learning from mistakes and ill-conceived policies. Bělohradský uses the metaphorical notion of a *rhizosphere*, borrowed from botany, in order to delineate what he takes to be the appropriate soil for in which a new and dynamic left can be planted. Rhizospheres are zones in which a plant’s roots have overgrown its soil, and the notion is here used as metaphor for the starting points for a new left. He claims that a tradition of oppression and colonialism should be subjected to rational scrutiny, even if reason itself has become a tradition. We require reflexive rationality, by which we examine the look of participants in encounter, and in particular, in the exchange between industrial civilization and native populations. Bělohradský stresses the importance of defining the role of sacrifice and reason in the face of tradition and local customs and myths, in the recognition that this is not a purely rational phenomenon. He warns us of the pitfalls of an ethos of entertainment over a salutary de-institutionalisation of politics, as occurs in the blogosphere. Fairness ought to take precedence over human rights, which he holds to be a culturally specific notion. Collective volunteer work, reasonable fiscal policy, and respect for the environment and civil society must be stressed over exploitation, he stresses. A genuinely planetary vision is thus called for, one in which the victims of externalities will be heard, including those caused by environmental degradation, and misguided urban planning. This attention to externalities is best served by the promotion of deliberative democracy, of the politics of dialogue. Bělohradský deplores the patenting of the commons, including genes and the environment by contemporary corporations, as well as the corporate model for universities. Knowledge should be seen as public property, in his view. He criticizes what has been termed *Sur-civilisation*, or a civilization characterized by the accumulation of raw power over people and nature, and wonders to what extent the contradictions between capitalism and communism can be overcome through revolutionary transformation. Bělohradský claims that we live in an increasingly secular era, in which human beings have lost their aura of authenticity and uniqueness in the face of biological and scientific reality. His appeal is at once political and ethical.

As this symposium issue is finalised, the wave of pro-democracy actions continue across the Middle East. Whatever one's views on the nature and scope of totalitarianism, it is salutary to be witness to an ongoing struggle for freedom.

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