

ANTI-TOTALITARIAN RHETORIC IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN POLITICS (ITS AMBIVALENT OBJECTS AND CONSISTENT METAPHORS)

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Abstract: The concept of totalitarianism was particularly prevalent in intellectual and political debate in Germany in the 1970s, and was motivated largely by anti-totalitarian convictions. Although it did not enter everyday language, it persists in political rhetoric, where it is used today as a political football in speeches and constitutional reports. In response to historical approaches to the concept of totalitarianism, which generally contextualise the term and put forward alternative terms, this article probes the meaning of this term as it is actually used and misused in political and educational contexts in contemporary Germany. It concludes by highlighting the fictitious (figurative, semantic and epistemological) dimensions of the rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism, and calls for a more genuinely liberal, non-totalitarian, posture.

Keywords: ambivalence, deference, education, Germany, non-totalitarian, politics, rhetoric.

The Political Uses of Ambivalence

It is well known that the demise of communist regimes and the historical upheaval of 1989 triggered vibrant new academic discussion about totalitarianism, driven largely by an anti-totalitarian consensus (Courtois 1997, Furet and Nolte 1998, Gauchet 2010, Jesse 1996, Kuehnhardt and Tschubarjan 1999, Söllner et al. 1997). Less well known are the practical applications of similarly motivated discussions about totalitarianism in the public sphere, as expressed in politics and education, for example. Unlike existing studies of the anti-totalitarian rhetoric which followed the attacks on New York in September 2001 (Shorten 2009), this article aims to shed light on a more longstanding genealogy of anti-totalitarianism in a European context. Speeches held in the German parliament, for example, testify to an inflation of evocations of the concept of totalitarianism since 1989 as a means to underpin anti-totalitarian convictions. These evocations largely have one of three functions. First, they serve as a basis for negotiations of domestic political party tradition, which in practice consist in polemic debate driven by liberal and centre-right parties' repudiation of The Left (*Die Linke*) party, whose roots lie in the German Democratic

Republic.¹ Second, they serve to reassert the political and moral values inscribed in the German constitution of 1949 in order to negate those upheld by the National Socialist regime and the communist regime of East Germany. For example, speeches by the former French minister Simone Veil in January 2004 (Veil 2004), by the Israeli president Moshe Katsav in May 2005 (Katsav 2005), or the inaugural speech of the German president Roman Herzog on 1 July 1994 (Herzog 1994) characteristically juxtaposed totalitarianism and humanism and the need to defend the latter. Finally, anti-totalitarianism is frequently evoked in order to affirm, by negation, a European political culture based on liberal values and laws. German delegates participated in, and now regularly refer back to the European Commission's hearing about "Crimes Committed by Totalitarian Regimes" in April 2008, to the decision to introduce a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, and likewise endorse the European Parliament's resolution on "European Conscience and Totalitarianism" of April 2009, devoted to "keeping memories of the past alive", and to "stand against all totalitarian rule from whatever ideological background".² Outside of parliament, in constitutional reports since 2006, totalitarianism is also evoked in relation to contemporary right-wing, left-wing and Islamic extremism or "aspirations" ("*Bestrebungen*"), and even to Scientology.³

What is surprising about these anti-totalitarian evocations of totalitarianism is neither their frequency nor the unvarying consensus among the speakers, but rather the lack of precision of the meaning conveyed by the word in these contexts, as well as the almost complete lack of rhetorical techniques of persuasion—which attest the silent assumption that both speakers and their audiences know what totalitarianism means. The political rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism in contemporary German politics therefore appears to draw its legitimacy from the ritual conjuring up of an abstract notion, referring to an appalling political and moral system which is distant in either time (when applied to National Socialism) or space (when applied to the German Democratic Republic before 1989), or in *both* time and space (after 1989). Moreover, its legitimacy is fuelled by the mutual consent of both speakers and listeners alike to defer to the diffuse meaning of this notion.⁴

The revival of academic discussion about totalitarianism, and in particular deference towards the notion of totalitarianism in political rhetoric, is also remarkable because it is not reflected in everyday usage. This pattern is not new, for it also characterised discussions of the 1970s and 1980s (see Plum et al. 1980, Schlangen 1972). Since the 1960s, everyday language has employed the polemic terms "communism" and "fascism", or the generic terms "authoritarianism" and "dictatorship". And even when East-West relations were

¹ See, for example, the liberal MP Marco Buschmann's fierce attack on "every totalitarianism", with explicit reference to The Left party. See Deutsche Bundestag. Plenar Protokoll. 17/49 (17 June 2010), 5011. Such rhetoric taps into the tradition of anti-totalitarian rhetoric upheld by Konrad Adenauer and Franz-Josef Strauß from the 1950s.

² See "European Parliament Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism": http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=IM_PRESS&reference=20090401IPR53245&language=EN (last accessed on 5 January 2011).

³ See annual reports of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution since 2005.

⁴ On the practice of deference towards the unknown or unknowable, see Bloch 2005.

strained in the early 1960s, few school history textbooks published in West Germany (with the exception of Niebensiack 1964, and Binder 1964) categorised either the National Socialist regime or the East German communist regime as “totalitarian”. No textbooks in East Germany referred to totalitarianism, opting instead for “fascism” and “state monopolism” (Meyer 1977, 38). And almost all textbooks in West Germany, as in the united Germany today, referred to “regime” (*Herrschaft*), “dictatorship” (*Diktatur*), “the contest between systems” (*Wettstreit der Systeme*) (Cornelissen et al. 1987), “divided Germany” (*geteiltes Deutschland*), “bloc systems” (*Blocksysteme*), “East-West conflict” (*Ost-West Konflikt*) (Hug 1986), “surveillance state” (*Überwachungsstaat*), “Eastern bloc” (*Ostblock*), “confrontation and cooperation of the blocs” (*Konfrontation und Kooperation der Blöcke*) (Cornelissen et al. 1997), “bloc formation” (*Blockbildung*), “National Socialist dictatorship, Bolshevik dictatorship” (*NS-Diktatur, bolschewistische Diktatur*), and “terror” (*Terror*) (Berger 1999).

The recent revival of totalitarianism as an operative term of political discourse is also remarkable because its evocations, both in the past and the present, are fraught with an ambivalence⁵ which not only reflects the complexity of and longstanding theoretical controversy over this concept, but also derives from the historical context in which it has been used. For evocations of totalitarianism in Germany, whose recent history has been indelibly marked by twelve years under the rule of the National Socialist regime and forty years of ideological divide between the liberal Federal Republic and the communist Democratic Republic, are rarely merely theoretical. The ambivalence of this term in the context of German political rhetoric is therefore twofold, both thematic and ideological, and characterised its usage both during and after the end of the Cold War.

The thematic ambivalence of totalitarianism has been evident primarily in West German responses to the perceived dual threat of National Socialism and communism. In the wake of antisemitic violence in the early 1960s, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic (KMK or *Kultusministerkonferenz*) characteristically made a formal resolution to ensure that state education included teaching about the history and consequences of the period under National Socialist rule.⁶ Two years later, in 1962, at a period of heightened tension overshadowed by the Cuban crisis and the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Standing Conference passed a second resolution in the form of “Guidelines for the Treatment of Totalitarianism in Teaching” (“Richtlinien für die Behandlung des Totalitarismus im Unterricht”, 1962) calling for formal education about totalitarianism. The aim of these guidelines was to “make pupils familiar with the characteristics of totalitarianism” (“Richtlinien” 1962, 497), and to “ward off the claim to power of totalitarianism” (Detjen 2007, 118). The parallel but separate emphases placed on education about the National Socialist and East German regimes in 1960 and 1962 were consistent with the fears aroused by the temporal and spatial proximity of West Germany to these regimes during the Cold War. Unsurprisingly, therefore, both resolutions were annulled in 1991 after the end of the Cold War.

⁵ For a detailed examination of the ambivalence inherent in this concept, see Podoksik (2008).

⁶ “Richtlinien für die Behandlung der jüngsten Vergangenheit”.

Yet one would be mistaken to believe that the end of the Cold War, which ushered in a temporal and spatial breach with a sense of immediate threat posed by the German Democratic Republic, marked the end of ambivalent attitudes towards totalitarianism, in opposition to which the political cultures of successive West German governments were defined. The historical demise of “really existing socialism” did not foster greater intellectual detachment. For although the official resolutions calling for formal education about National Socialism and totalitarianism were annulled, political rhetoric evoking the two regimes as negative models continued. Moreover, the question as to which of the two regimes should be evoked as a negative totalitarian model was inconsistently answered. While political speeches since 1989 have referred most frequently to the recent past of the German Democratic Republic, the social and biographical consequences of which are still tangible even in 2011, the constitutional court declared in 2010 that the Basic Law (that is, the constitution) of Germany is a “counter-model to the totalitarianism of the National Socialist regime”.⁷ However, the court’s selective quotation of paragraph 130 of the German criminal code is misleading, because the criminal code in fact refers in equal measure to the spectre of communism and National Socialism. In other words, the inherently ambivalent rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism in Germany has not been resolved since the end of the Cold War.

Attempts to Historicise Anti-Totalitarian Vocabulary

Not only has the ambivalence of anti-totalitarianism since the effective historicisation of totalitarianism in Germany since 1989 not decreased. Rather, temporal detachment has led to the increased abstraction of references to totalitarianism. It is for this reason that the historian Enzo Traverso, in his pungent response to the works of François Furet (Furet 1996) and Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth and Jean-Louis Panné (Courtois, Werth and Panné 1997), has attempted to replace the term in its historical context. Although, claims Traverso, totalitarianism has explicit historical origins in the German-Soviet Pact of 1939-1941, when the National Socialist and Soviet regimes entered into a formal alliance, the supposition (made by Furet and Courtois, for example) that liberals and liberalism are the legitimate historical antipodes of fascism and communism (which is the standard premise of anti-totalitarian doctrine) is not valid historically insofar as fascism emerged out of the collapse of liberalism at the end of the First World War (Traverso 2009, 322). In response to the rise of fascism, claims Traverso, people turned not only to liberalism but to one of many movements, whether Marxist, communist, liberal, Christian or republican (*ibid.*, 315). A sense of unity among these movements was acquired only in the face of the common National Socialist enemy, a unity which was weakened in 1945 and ultimately broken in 1956 following the suppression of the Hungarian revolution by the State Security Police and Soviet troops—an event which caused many Western liberals to shed their anti-fascist convictions and adopt an anti-totalitarian standpoint opposed to fascism and communism alike (*ibid.*, 324). The suppression of the Hungarian uprising therefore lent short term ideological legitimacy to anti-totalitarian doctrine, which consequently overlooked the

⁷ Quoted in Wehner (2010).

historical complexities out of which it had emerged: the plurality of anti-fascist movements, the anti-Stalinist and non-Stalinist forces among anti-fascists, and the fact that National Socialism was defeated in 1945 by an alliance of Western Allied and Soviet forces (Traverso 2009, 319; Faulenbach 1999, 129).

In light of the fact that the abstract, dehistoricised, form of anti-totalitarian doctrine, opposed to National Socialism and communism alike, today belies the historical and ideological complexity of its origins, one may wonder why the term “totalitarianism” continues to be used in contemporary political rhetoric in Germany, where sensitivity to the effects of extreme political regimes is exceptionally high. Historians in and of Germany have therefore sought to provide documented alternatives to this controversial and often misleading concept. “Welfare dictatorship” (*Fürsorgediktatur*), a “society drenched with authority” (*durchherrschte Gesellschaft*) and “bureaucratic-totalitarian system” are among the terms used to refer to the East German regime which, moreover, changed in character over time, leading some historians to distinguish between totalitarian and late totalitarian periods (Faulenbach 1999, 128f; Fulbrook 2004, 45). Inroads into political rhetoric have certainly been made by the alternative term “extremism”, yet this term is also subjected to criticism for being too vague and apolitical (Neugebauer 2010, 3f).⁸

The Figurative Consistencies of Anti-Totalitarian Rhetoric

Despite the attempts by historians to redress the deceptive images of the past and present by revising the concepts we use to describe them, the fact remains that the concept “totalitarianism” is still used as a linguistic medium of political representation. We must therefore take this term seriously as a form of political representation today by enquiring what it means and what it conveys in everyday language. Work has already been carried out on this term as a descriptive and political term, or as an ideal type (Fulbrook 2004, 43), yet few studies recognise its *figurative* qualities. In spite of the ambivalence of this term, therefore, and in spite of its historical indeterminacy, it testifies to figurative consistencies which require close attention because they offer insight into what is meant when the spectre of totalitarianism is raised in order to make an anti-totalitarian statement.

For example, totalitarian regimes are consistently presented as something *external* in time or space. Prior to 1989 in Germany, both the East and West German governments derived moral and political lessons from recollections of a totalitarian regime (that of 1933-1945) which was distant in time, referred to variably as “National Socialism”, “dictatorship”, or “authoritarianism” (in West Germany), and as a “form of rule of monocapitalism in a period of decline” (in East Germany) (see Meyer 1977, 38). At the same time, the East and West German governments each externalised totalitarianism spatially by defining their national counterpart as the political heir of National Socialism. The East drew attention to economic and biographical continuities after 1945 in West Germany, while the West drew attention to analogous forms of governance before 1945 and after 1949 in East Germany. Each argument served as a socially stabilising “master narrative” on each side of the East-West divide

⁸ For a survey of earlier debates about extremism, see Backes and Jesse 1985.

insofar as it provided legitimation for each state. Since 1989, totalitarianism in Germany has been conceived as doubly external, both temporally and spatially.

A further figurative consistency of the terminology of anti-totalitarianism is the relative lack of rhetorical sophistication, if not the outright lack of argumentation. A characteristic history textbook, which appeared in 1964 in response to the resolutions of 1960 and 1962, called “Between Dictatorship and Freedom”, omits all analysis of totalitarianism and of distinctions of its types, confining references exclusively to substantival or adjectival descriptions in the indicative mood. The authors claim, for example, “For totalitarianism [...]” (Binder 1964, 130) or, “In totalitarianism [...]” (*ibid.*, 135), and refer to life “in totalitarian states [...]” (*ibid.*, 141), “in totalitarian dictatorships [...]” or “in totalitarian systems [...]” (*ibid.*, 142), and thus reduce totalitarianism to a statement of fact rather than subjecting it to analysis. Moreover, the rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism in the 1960s relied, as it does today, on dichotomy, commonly conceived as the opposition between Christianity and communism, good and bad, freedom and the absence of freedom, terror and peace (Niebensieck 1964), or lightness and darkness (see Roloff and Bigott 1970, 201). Finally, the rhetorical effect of description and dichotomy is often reinforced by what could be called political metonymy, referring to one aspect of totalitarianism (such as the one-party state) in order to define what was, despite its shortcomings, a more complex form of rule.

The Fictitious Dimension of Anti-Totalitarianism

What conclusions can we draw from the rhetorical inertia of references to totalitarianism, that is, their relative lack of rhetorical devices, both today and in the 1960s? It seems that the reliance of authors and speakers on rhetoric rather than on analysis in political and educational contexts echoes what Hannah Arendt identified as one of the core characteristics of totalitarianism itself, that is, the tendency to disseminate central fictions which, by dint of repetition, turn into a “functional reality” (Arendt 1951, 364). The fictitiousness of totalitarianism, according to Arendt, lies in the ritual evocation of an idea or assumption which is popularly assumed to be true for the sake of convenience. In light of the above examples, the rhetoric of anti-totalitarianism in contemporary Germany thus uncannily converges with that of totalitarianism itself. Of course, the objects of anti-totalitarianism are not the fictions of a “Jewish world conspiracy” (Arendt 1951, 354), “Trotskyites” (Arendt 1951, 364), of “human omnipotence” (Arendt 1951, 436) or “the conviction that everything can be done through organisation” (Arendt 1951, 436). Instead, the fictitiousness of anti-totalitarian rhetoric is conveyed not via such *narrative* fictions, but rather by the *act of naming* totalitarianism, the fictitious dimension of which is simultaneously figurative, semantic and epistemological. On a *figurative* level, the concept of totalitarianism imposes (by means of its superlative predicate of totality) a dichotomous categorisation of political systems as either all-encompassing, absolute and (by implication) oppressive, or else open, representative and liberal, the metaphorical effect of which is perhaps all the more persuasive because totality is merely *implied*, rather than argued (see Burke 2006, 10). On a *semantic* level the concept of totalitarianism is fictitious in the sense that it is rarely commensurable to its object. In other words, few political regimes of the twentieth century were literally “total”, as Faulenbach (1999) and Fulbrook (2004) have argued convincingly in their studies of the

German Democratic Republic. In practice, therefore, anti-totalitarianism is defined only in relation to what it is not. In Roloff and Bigott's terms, "The concept of totalitarianism serves to bolster one's self-understanding by positing an ideal definition of one's own democratic order by referring to its opposite" (Roloff and Bigott 1970, 21). In *epistemological* terms, the effective rhetorical usage of the concept of totalitarianism in anti-totalitarian rhetoric relies on a considerable degree of deference on the part of both speakers or writers and their listeners or readers. For if the participants in this rhetorical exchange ritually name totalitarianism while avoiding analysis, that is, if they hold disparaging evocations of totalitarianism to be true without necessarily *understanding* to what the term refers (because the phenomenon is cited out of context, or fleetingly and without historical detail), then we must assume that speaker and audience both defer knowledge, that is, they accept that the authority in possession of such knowledge (of the meaning of totalitarianism) lies elsewhere (see Bloch 2005, 126).

Is there a way of evading this threefold fictitiousness of anti-totalitarian rhetoric? And is the ongoing political ambivalence and concomitant inertia of this rhetoric in spite of the political upheavals of 1989, likely to persist? Pragmatically, one might strive to abandon deference towards the terms "totalitarianism" and "totalitarian" by attempting to understand what they mean rather than holding them to be statements of truth. Or, one might relinquish these terms, using one of the alternative terms (each applied in its appropriate context) suggested by historians such as "bureaucratic system" or "welfare dictatorship". For this would require adopting a *non-totalitarian*, rather than an anti-totalitarian, posture (see Arendt 1951, 419, 436-37) against totalitarianism. By either understanding or relinquishing anti-totalitarian rhetoric, political rhetoric or expressions thereof in official media such as the textbooks used in state education and elsewhere might foster a more accurate, non-dichotomous, and therefore genuinely liberal language of political persuasion than its anti-totalitarian counterpart.

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