

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM PART 5: ARTISTIC AND INTELLECTUAL ELITES AND THE RISE OF FASCISM

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Capitalism Versus The Social Commons (published
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Arendt uses the term “elites” to mean the highly trained and educated intellectuals in Germany and Austria, and artists and composers and writers who together make up the intelligentsia. She begins by describing the breakdown of the class structure in those countries, “...when the smugness of spurious respectability gave way to anarchic despair...” The elites hated the pretensions of the bourgeoisie, hated the class structures they imposed to support their positions and oppress the rest of the people,

and hated the bogus morality they proclaimed in public and ignored in private. For decades, they assaulted the bourgeoisie, sometimes with satire, sometimes more directly, with attacks against their conventional religion and philosophy. They welcomed the First World War, hoping that it would wipe out the existing culture. After the war they rejected restoration of the prior structures.

Arendt attributes two desires to individual members of the post-war elites: the desire for anonymity, for losing themselves in the midst of the people; and a yearning for violence to wipe out any remaining influences of the old bourgeoisie morality and respectability.

These people felt attracted to the pronounced activism of totalitarian movements, to their curious and only seemingly contradictory insistence on both the primacy of sheer action and the overwhelming force of sheer necessity. This mixture corresponded precisely to the war experience of the "front generation," to the experience of constant activity within the framework of overwhelming fatality. P. 331.

The violence of the totalitarian movements was attractive to these elites precisely because it seemed to be a " ...kind of philosophy through which to express frustration, resentment, and blind hatred, a kind of political expressionism which used bombs to express oneself, which watched delightedly the publicity given to resounding deeds and was absolutely willing to pay the price of life for having succeeded in forcing the recognition of one's existence on the normal strata of society." P. 332 Arendt refers to this as a temporary alliance between the mob and the elites. In Part 3, we saw the distinction between the mob and the masses. The former are the unemployable, who at least shared some of the morality and attitudes of the class to which they once belonged or aspired to. The elites were thrilled to see the mob attack

respectability, for example, when the steel barons were forced to accept the housepainter Hitler.

Arendt claims that the elites believed that all of the theories they were raised to accept had failed utterly and spectacularly and had caused enormous damage. Even the bourgeoisie had only the public appearance of morality. In private their morals were those of the mob. It thrilled the elites to see the academic theories that had nurtured them, theories like dialectical materialism, replaced with crackpot ideas and conspiracy theories. In this atmosphere it was wonderful to shove the faces of the bourgeoisie in their hypocrisy, and to express the anger and cruelty hidden behind their public faces. There were no limits to this decadent idea, as the French writer Celine showed in his *Notes for a Massacre*, in which he proposed to kill all the Jews.

Andre Gide was publicly delighted in the pages of the *Nouvelle Revue Frangaise*, not of course because he wanted to kill the Jews of France, but because he rejoiced in the blunt admission of such a desire and in the fascinating contradiction between Celine's bluntness and the hypocritical politeness which surrounded the Jewish question in all respectable quarters. How irresistible the desire for the unmasking of hypocrisy was among the elite can be gauged by the fact that such delight could not even be spoiled by Hitler's very real persecution of the Jews, which at the time of Celine's writing was already in full swing. P. 335.

The current form of this idiocy is the ranting from the Republicans about political correctness. We don't have time for political correctness, says Trump, merely speaking more frankly than his dog-whistle competition, and handing out a license to his followers to express their misogynist, homophobic, racist and

other irrational hatreds.

Arendt also tells us that the elites recognized that the bourgeoisie were deeply cynical about the government. They operated it for their benefit in secret, and publicly claimed that all of their policies would benefit the rest of society. This blatant hypocrisy added to the hatred of the elites for the rich. Once they were content with the teachings of Karl Marx, who thought that the state would wither away. After WWI, that wasn't radical enough for the elites. They wanted action at the price of anarchy and violence. But when the leftists tried to overthrow the bourgeoisie and the post-WWI government, the Social Democrats sicced the right-wing Freikorps on them and killed them and their intellectual leaders, including Rosa Luxemburg.

Of course the project of dismantling the 19th Century morality and certainty of the middle classes continues today among some of our elites. Just look at the ideas about truth espoused by Richard Rorty (a follower of John Dewey), or the attacks on fundamentalist religion from Sam Harris and others, or this from the New York Times Magazine:

In person, [Rachel] Bloom comes across as someone who takes honesty to its natural conclusion. "I like deconstructing things, I like cutting the legs out from under something that feels secret. Something that's like - 'Oh, breasts are sexy.' They're floppy, Jell-O-filled sacks! In high school, I was once watching the surgery channel and ended up watching a breast reduction. The inside of a breast is disgusting. It looks like the inside of a couch."

Arendt's elites have been playing this game of *epater le bourgeoisie*, shock the middle class, for decades, and there is no end in sight. It's a fun game, with no physical violence, and no

real effect on politics or public life. Today, it's pretty much self-neutering. Elite discussions of performance art or post-structuralism are irrelevant to the lives of practically everyone.

There are many lessons in Arendt's story for the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party and for Trump Republicans. Among them is the simple fact that the rich and powerful people will use every tool to preserve their power and wealth.