

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM: CONCLUSION

The point of this series was to examine the conditions which led to the rise of Fascism in the 1930s to see if there are useful insights that might guide our understanding of conditions in the US today. In introduction to this series, I suggested several points of convergence, and over the last three months I have tried to flesh out those ideas.

The book has problems. The history focuses on Europe, so it isn't helpful in understanding the rise of totalitarianism in Russia. There is much less focus on the economic situation in post-WWI Germany and Austria than I would expect. Arendt talks about the the large number of superfluous people, the mob and the masses, but there is little discussion of how or why that happened. Fortunately we already read *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi, so we have some idea about that. The reasons for the displacement don't seem important to Arendt's thesis, but the absence is jarring.

It seems to me that the most significant condition that led to the rise of fascism in Germany was the large number of displaced and unsettled people, which I think is the result of economic upheaval due to the costs of WWI and the reparations imposed on Germany. That mob was egged on by politicians and media pushing propaganda about the ideology of the Nazis and setting up scapegoats, especially the Jews. Another important factor was the lack of resistance from elites. But the Nazis would have been limited to the margins if not for the large number of people with no place in society. These are the superfluous people. They have no role in the productive sector of society, and no place or position to hold them reasonably close to the bounds of society. Here's how Arendt explains it:

The totalitarian attempt to make men superfluous reflects the experience of modern masses of their superfluity on an overcrowded earth. The world of the dying, in which men are taught they are superfluous through a way of life in which punishment is meted out without connection with crime, in which exploitation is practiced without profit, and where work is performed without product, is a place where senselessness is daily produced anew. ...
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That is true in the US and elsewhere today. People aren't stupid. They know that they are superfluous. They know they have no power, no security and no real hope of either. They hate it. When they see people fired from long-term jobs and told they only get severance if they train foreign replacements to do their jobs, it makes them sick inside. When they are told that their jobs are going to Mexico, and it's "strictly a business decision" but 1400 people are going to be fired, they are angry and hostile. They know that they mean nothing to their employers, and nothing to politicians. And mostly they know they mean nothing to the elites who dominate the political process and the economy, and who set the system up to screw everyone else. They know the elites despise them as the the NRO's Kevin Williamson and David French loudly say. They know the elites and specifically the tribe of economists, knew that they would be screwed by NAFTA and other trade deals, and didn't lift a finger to stop that from happening on the grounds that it all works out for the beset on average. So what if the rich elites took all the gains? The liberal elites will come up with incremental tweaks to fix everything, and the conservatives will resist and nothing will change, and they don't worry because it isn't them or their families.

Other factors work into this poisonous stew. There is an ideology: the neoliberal myth of the

almighty market, the supercomputer that works out all the details as long as mere humans do not interfere with its mysterious workings. This ideology permeates every aspect of our society, from claims that markets pay what you are worth to the strange idea that businesses should operate public schools.

Liberals deny that they share the ideology, but since 1992, the liberal elites have pushed "market-oriented" solutions to every problem. We can't use a Pigovian tax system to solve problems, especially a tax on fossil fuels or securities transactions. We need a market solution: cap and trade. Schools are a problem, but we can't throw money at them like they do in socialist hells like Finland. We need the market solution of charter schools competing with public schools, with the public schools funded primarily by local property taxes, so rich areas get good schools and screw the poor. We can't have single payer health insurance. We put the insurance companies and big Pharma firmly in control of which working age people get health care and cost of health care for all of us. Liberal elite theory results in the creation of new government sponsored "markets" which create opportunities for rich people and corporations to screw over consumers, like Enron did for electricity.

Then there are scapegoats. The primary targets are minorities, especially African-Americans, but recently the unemployed and the working poor. The neoliberal ideology justifies scapegoating. It tells people that if you don't succeed, it's your own fault because this is the best of all possible systems. The losers are labeled as leeches and takers by the winners. The ideology justifies their smugness and their sociopathic demands to cut the social safety net.

Neoliberalism is also an excuse for hating immigrants and Muslims, who are coming here to take the jobs of deserving people, so it actually works to deflect the anger of the first

group of scapegoats, at least for those who take the bait.

The conservative elites, such as they are, support this neoliberal ideology, and in pursuit of winning elections add the rejection of science and the imposition of ancient religious prohibitions and standards. The liberal elites are fine with the ideology, though they continue to support Enlightenment values, and occasionally offer a patch to salvage one or two lives. But when the crunch comes, they always side with the ideology and the establishment candidate.

Conclusion

As I reread the posts in this series, I realized how angry I am about the way politics operates here. I am repulsed by the elites who act as if there were no alternative. I am nauseated by liberal wonks whose views of what is possible are claustrophobic. They are the descendants of the liberals who told me and my generation that nothing could be done about the murderous war in Viet Nam. I cannot stomach the conservative elites. They are the scum who think their mission on earth is to undo the New Deal; the direct spawn of the John Birchers and the McCarthyites and the rest of the fear-mongers. They are the wreckers.

Polanyi says that when a social structure imposes too much stress on too many people it has to change. We don't know how many disaffected people there are in the US, but it is clear that there is an enormous number, in both parties and among the unaffiliated, and that change will come. The US has always prided itself on its openness to change. We believe that everything will work out for the best, because we are the exceptional people, the City on the Hill. We assume that change will be for the best. Arendt points out the sickening reality: some changes are deadly.

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