

# THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM PART 3: SUPERFLUOUS CAPITAL AND SUPERFLUOUS PEOPLE

Previous posts in this series:

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 1:  
Introduction.

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 2:  
Antisemitism

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Interlude on the  
Tea Party

In Part 2 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*  
Arendt discusses the history of European  
Imperialism, primarily focused on England,  
France and Germany.

“Expansion is everything,” said Cecil Rhodes, and fell into despair, for every night he saw overhead “these stars ... these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could.” He had discovered the moving principle of the new, the imperialist ...); and yet in a flash of wisdom Rhodes recognized at the same moment its inherent insanity and its contradiction to the human condition. Naturally, neither insight nor sadness changed his policies. P. 124, fn omitted.

The driving force of imperialism the search for profits, The people pushing it were the bourgeoisie, the principal capitalists. Until the 1870s, the bourgeoisie were content to leave politics to others, and focus on manufacturing and infrastructure in the home country. Politicians were generally wary of the push into foreign countries.

Beginning in the 1870s as the money invested in foreign lands increased, the risks to the bourgeoisie and their money increased, as nations expropriated their assets or refused to cooperate, or threw them out. The bourgeoisie liked the enormous profits of these investments, but were not interested in taking the risks. They demanded that the nation-state provide the armed forces necessary to protect their profits, and the nation-states complied. Arendt says that this demand for intervention was its assertion of control of the government. She dates the Imperialist period to 1889-1914.

The goal of imperialism was neither assimilation nor integration.

Expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism. Since it implies neither temporary looting nor the more lasting assimilation of conquest, it is an entirely new concept .... [T]his concept is not really political at all, but has its origin in the realm of business speculation, where expansion meant the permanent broadening of industrial production and economic transactions characteristic of the nineteenth century. production of goods to be used and consumed. P. 125-6.

The goal was to impose a system of capitalist production on the conquered territories for the enrichment of the capitalists. The power behind this drive for expansion was superfluous capital.

Imperialist expansion had been touched off by a curious kind of economic crisis, the overproduction of capital and the emergence of "superfluous" money, the result of oversaving, which could no longer find productive investment within the national borders.

The money was superfluous in the sense that it had no utility within the nation-states. There were no profitable investments that could absorb it, and there was little to purchase with it. The newly rich wanted income from their wealth even though neither the money nor the investments would provide anything of value to the nation-state or its citizens. They invested their money abroad and the nation-state protected their investments at enormous cost to the rest of their citizens. Arendt calls the bourgeoisie parasites.

Superfluous capital is not the only problem with unrestrained capitalism.

Older than the superfluous wealth was another by-product of capitalist production: the human debris that every crisis, following invariably upon each period of industrial growth, eliminated permanently from producing society. Men who had become permanently idle were as superfluous to the community as the owners of superfluous wealth. That they were an actual menace to society had been recognized throughout the nineteenth century and their export had helped to populate the dominions of Canada and Australia as well as the United States. P. 150.

Arendt calls these superfluous people the mob. They are not the same as the nascent working class, but were the people who could not find work at all, whether because of disability or some personal defect or just plain bad luck. The mob included refuse from all social classes. Polanyi refers to this as well. There were the working people, and everyone else. The impoverished and the unemployed able-bodied people were both in this group.

Imperialism provided a partial solution to the problem of superfluous men. They could be pushed into the armies and navies needed to protect the wealth of the rich, and they could be used as

supervisors and workers in the mines and factories and on the transport ships carrying the investments of the capitalists and the products of those investments.

The mob of the mid to late 1800s is similar to the “masses” that emerged after WWI.

The relationship between the bourgeois-dominated class society and the masses which emerged from its breakdown is not the same as the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the mob which was a by-product of capitalist production. The masses share with the mob only one characteristic, namely, that both stand outside all social ramifications and normal political representation. The masses do not inherit, as the mob does (albeit in a perverted form) the standards and attitudes of the dominating class, but reflect and somehow pervert the standards and attitudes toward public affairs of all classes. The standards of the mass man were determined not only and not even primarily by the specific class to which he had once belonged, but rather by all-pervasive influences and convictions which were tacitly and inarticulately shared by all classes of society alike. P. 314.

The rich, with their superfluous and restless capital, demand profits with no responsibility to the society from which the wealth sprang. The constant movement of capitalism, generated by that demand, destroys the lives of superfluous people, who have no place in that society, and feel no obligation to it. The nihilism that infected the mob and the masses eventually infected the bourgeoisie, destroying any remaining social values. This destructive combination was fertile ground for the rise of the Nazis.