

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM PART 7: SUPERFLUOUS PEOPLE

The last chapter of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is devoted to discussion of the totalitarian regime, which comes when the totalitarian movement has taken power. Arendt says that totalitarian movements don't offer a specific program for government. Instead, they propose to operate under a "scientific" program. For the Nazis, this was the law of nature with its eternal progress towards perfection, which Arendt thinks arises from a skewed form of Darwinism. For the Communists it was the laws of history as supposedly discovered by Marx. Once in power, the totalitarian regime becomes an instrument for the will of the leader, who in turn is an instrument for imposing and acting out those laws. It is here that Arendt takes up the issue of concentration camps. She says that they are instruments for studying ways to reduce individuals to oblivion, to being superfluous, which is the goal of totalitarianism.

Men insofar as they are more than animal reaction and fulfillment of functions are entirely superfluous to totalitarian regimes. Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous. Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity. Precisely because man's resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man.

...

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. Yet, within the framework of the totalitarian ideology, nothing could be more sensible and logical; if the inmates are vermin, it is logical that they should be killed by poison gas; if they are degenerate, they should not be allowed to contaminate the population; if they have "slave-like souls" (Himmler), no one should waste his time trying to re-educate them. ... P. 457.

Why is it necessary that people become superfluous? The answer appears in the final chapter, *Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government*. Ideologies are "...isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise...". P.468. They are the scientific programs offered by totalitarian movements as the organizing principles of societies. For Arendt, the Nazi ideology revolves around the idea of the laws of nature, of blood, while the Communist ideology revolves around the historical laws of Marxism. In both cases, human beings are in the way of the historical forces, and must be forcibly denied the ability to interfere with the primal force.

Terror is the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action. As such, terror seeks to "stabilize" men in order to liberate the

forces of nature or history. It is this movement which singles out the foes of mankind against whom terror is let loose, and no free action of either opposition or sympathy can be permitted to interfere with the elimination of the "objective enemy" of History or Nature, of the class or the race. Guilt and innocence become senseless notions; "guilty" is he who stands in the way of the natural or historical process which has passed judgment over "inferior races," over individuals "unfit to live," over "dying classes and decadent peoples." Terror executes these judgments, and before its court, all concerned are subjectively innocent: the murdered because they did nothing against the system, and the murderers because they do not really murder but execute a death sentence pronounced by some higher tribunal. The rulers themselves do not claim to be just or wise, but only to execute historical or natural laws; they do not apply laws, but execute a movement in accordance with its inherent law. Terror is lawfulness, if law is the law of the movement of some supra-human force, Nature or History. P. 465.

That idea, the idea of the unrestrained movement of supra-human forces, should sound familiar. That's how Arendt described Imperialism, the early form of unrestrained capitalism. It also describes today's world as seen by the architects of neoliberalism. They warn that everyone loses if The Market is subjected to even the slightest restraint, whether to movement of jobs and capital overseas or to prohibit dumping toxins into earth, air and water. They insist that foreign limitations on patents and copyrights are impossible restraints. They preach that the only legitimate goal of government is to enforce property rights to the utter maximum. For them, the restless

movement of money in the hands of the rich and powerful operates in accordance with its own internal logic, logic which cannot be questioned by quasi-humans not gifted with the power to control vast sums of wealth. They tell us that The Market knows all and fixes everything as long as we mere humans do not interfere with its workings. Neoliberal capitalism is a form of supra-human force that Arendt warned us about.

Neoliberalism forms world view of movement conservatives. Here's an article in the National Review on this issue by one Kevin Williamson. :

The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. Forget all your cheap theatrical Bruce Springsteen crap. Forget your sanctimony about struggling Rust Belt factory towns and your conspiracy theories about the wily Orientals stealing our jobs. Forget your goddamned gypsum, and, if he has a problem with that, forget Ed[mund] Burke, too. The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump's speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn't analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul.

Williamson's NRO colleague David French agrees:

My childhood was different from Kevin's, but I grew up in Kentucky, live in a rural county in Tennessee, and have seen the challenges of the white working-class first-hand. Simply put, Americans are killing themselves and destroying their families at an alarming rate. No one is making them do it. The economy

isn't putting a bottle in their hand. Immigrants aren't making them cheat on their wives or snort OxyContin. Obama isn't walking them into the lawyer's office to force them to file a bogus disability claim.

For generations, conservatives have rightly railed against deterministic progressive notions that put human choices at the mercy of race, class, history, or economics. Those factors can create additional challenges, but they do not relieve any human being of the moral obligation to do their best.

Williamson and French agree that the white working-class people are superfluous, and so are their communities and their way of life. Millions of them should just hire U-Hauls and move to the blessed land of plentiful jobs. They must all lose themselves and their way of life to the inexorable laws of movement, only this time, it's the inexorable laws of neoliberalism, of rampant unrestrained capitalism. By those rules, individuals cannot act collectively, through unions or through active government. They are permitted to act collectively in their Churches, which emphasize their helplessness in this world except through the will of the Almighty, and therefore pose no real threat to the interests of the rich and powerful.

These white working-class people and their communities aren't economically viable, and nothing can or should be done to make things different. They should surrender to the external and ungovernable force of hyper-capitalism. They are superfluous, and if they die in misery, leaving their families in poverty, it's just the natural law of economic freedom working itself out in the passive voice, with the invisible hand of the rich and powerful hidden in a fog of words.

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