

LOGIC AND TOTALITARIANISM: ARENDT VS. ORWELL

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Résumé

Le dernier chapitre du livre de Hannah Arendt (1951) *Les origines du totalitarisme*, peut être utilisé comme un bon moyen pour schématiser la construction d'un gouvernement totalitaire tel qu'il a été décrit dans le roman d'Orwell de 1984. Autrement dit, Arendt montre trois étapes qu'un état exécute dans le but d'obtenir le meurtre d'une personne juridique, morale et spontanée, et nous trouvons les mêmes étapes chez Orwell. Malgré cette ressemblance, si on considère leurs points de vue à propos du rôle de la logique dans le totalitarisme, Hannah Arendt et George Orwell auraient des avis bien différents. Pour Orwell, la perte de sensibilité pour les contradictions est le point culminant du régime totalitaire qui se voit jonché d'elles : si tu ne remarques pas les contradictions dans l'histoire, alors ne te sens pas contraint de la changer. Au contraire, pour Arendt, c'est la peur de la contradiction qui garde les gens à l'intérieur du tunnel du totalitarisme : quand tu acceptes une idée initiale (par exemple « l'histoire c'est la lutte des classes »), alors tu dois développer logiquement toutes ses conséquences et tu ne seras pas plus autorisé à les fuir. Dans ce papier, nous allons considérer de façon plus détaillée les raisons de ces deux auteurs et essayer de les examiner.

ملخص

يمكن للفصل الأخير من كتاب حنا أراندت (1951): *أصول النظام الكلياني*، أن يستعمل كوسيلة جيدة لرسم بناء حكومة كليانية على شاكلة ما قام أوروال بوصفه في روايته عام 1984. و يعني ذلك ان أراندت تظهر ثلاث مراحل تنجزها دولة ما بهدف قتل شخص قانوني و أخلاقي و تلقائي، نجدها هي عينها عند أوروال. و لكن رغم هذا الشبه، فاننا اذا ما قارنا رأييهما حول دور المنطق في النظام الكلياني لتبين لنا اتّهما مختلفان كثيرا. فبالنسبة الى أوروال، يكون ضياع الشعور بالتناقضات ذروة النظام الكلياني الذي يظهر على أنه متخبّط فيها: فأنت اذا لم تلاحظ التناقضات في التاريخ، فلن تجبر نفسك على تغييرها. أمّا من منظور حنا أراندت على العكس فإنّ الخوف من التناقض هو الذي يبقي الأفراد داخل بوتقة النظام الكلياني : فأنت اذا ما قبلت بفكرة أولى (مثال ذلك : " التاريخ هو صراع الطبقات.")، فأنّ عليك ان تلزم نفسك منطقيا بكلّ استنتاجاتها و لن يكون بوسعك الهروب منها. سنقوم في هذه المقالة بدراسة بعض الاسباب التي يقدمها هذا الكاتب و ذاك و بمحاولة فحصها.

Abstract.

The final chapter of Hannah Arendt's 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* can be used as a good guide to schematize the construction of a totalitarian government as it was described in Orwell's novel 1984. Namely, Arendt points out three steps that a state performs in order to obtain the murder of the juridical, moral and spontaneous person, and we find the same ones in Orwell. Still, in spite of this similarity, Hannah Arendt and George Orwell have very different opinions, if we consider their views about the role of logic in totalitarianism. For Orwell, the loss of sensitivity to the contradictions is the culmination of the totalitarian regime, which he sees strewn with them: if you do not notice contradictions in history, then do not feel compelled to change it. On the contrary, for Arendt it is the fear of contradiction that keeps people within the tunnel of totalitarianism: when you accept an initial idea (for instance: "history is a class struggle"), then you have to develop logically all its consequences and you are no more allowed to escape from them. In this paper, we will consider authors' reasons in detail and try to take stock of them.

Introduction

The final chapter of Hannah Arendt's 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* can be used as a good guide to schematize the construction of a totalitarian government as it was described in Orwell's novel 1984. Namely, Arendt points out three steps that a totalitarian state performs in order to secure and keep its absolute power eternally: the murder of the juridical, moral and spontaneous person, respectively.

The first essential step on the way to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man [...] The destruction of man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely"²³ . "The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man. This is done in the main by making martyrdom for the first time in history, impossible. They have corrupted all human solidarity."²⁴ . Finally "Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity."²⁵

²³ Hannah Arendt's 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 447.

²⁴ P. 451.

²⁵ P. 457.

Correspondently, we find in the totalitarian state Oceania of Orwell's 1984, men and women dehumanised both physically and psychologically in the torturing chambers. In addition, there is no place for privacy, love, friendship, and loyalty. Everybody is afraid of the other, and nobody has any confidence in the other people. Finally, in Oceania man is utterly turned into an animal-like creature that reacts only to the conditioned reflexes, in a mechanical, not in a spontaneous way. Winston Smith is moulded, reshaped, and destroyed by the totalitarian state villainy in Oceania in line with Hannah Arendt's thesis of the totalitarian domination: the murder of the juridical, moral and spontaneous person.

Notwithstanding these analogies, Arendt's and Orwell's accounts of the origins of totalitarianism differ if we observe the role that each of them assigns to logic in this process. Let's see this closer.

1. Focusing on Arendt's position

Hannah Arendt describes the totalitarian regime as a variant of tyranny produced in the twentieth century. She stresses that the loss of connection with others and with reality is essential to a totalitarian regime: "The preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought. The ideal subject of totalitarian rule [...] is people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist." ²⁶. Such loss takes place firstly through isolation and secondly through estrangement. Isolation means that nobody acts with a man in his political arena. After isolation, a link for a man to human society would still be possible by producing objects: man could still be creative through the ability to add something to the common world. If, instead, the man decedes from homo faber to homo laborans, the opportunity of linking disappears: the man becomes "estranged". When man loses the link with others, he also loses his self: "All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact of my fellow men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought. The problem of

²⁶ P. 474.

solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others in order to become one again: one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other." ²⁷

In these conditions, i.e. if man is obliged both to isolation and to loneliness, then he has as the only resource logic, the unbreakable development of an idea – an axiom – independently of both empirical and historical reality. Namely, it is "the only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience as it is of thinking ". ²⁸. Furthermore, "the 'ice-cold reasoning' and the 'mighty tentacle' of dialectics which 'seizes you in a vise' appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon." ²⁹. Finally, "It is the inner coercion whose only content is the strict avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm a man's identity outside all relationships with others."³⁰

As soon as logic is applied to an idea, this is transformed into a premise; at that point "the merely negative coercion of logic, the prohibition of contradictions, became 'productive' [...] This argumentative process could be interrupted neither by a new idea (which would have been another premise with a different set of consequences) nor by a new experience "³¹. "The self-coercive force of logicity is mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking – which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the compulsory process of deduction "³². Consequently: The tyranny of logic begins with the mind's submission to logic as a never-ending process on which man relies in order to engender his thoughts. By this submission he surrenders his inner freedom as he surrenders his freedom of movement when he bows down to an outward tyranny. Freedom, as intimate human capacity, is identified with the capacity to begin."³³

Giving oneself to logic, i.e. to the necessary development of an idea, can lead men even to self-condemning. Arendt then provides an example of how, in the name of logic,

²⁷ P. 476.

²⁸ P. 477.

²⁹ P. 478.

³⁰ P. 478.

³¹ P. 470.

³² P. 473.

³³ P. 473.

people wrongly accused by Stalin, would have to accept the admission of guilt and punishment. Her description of the example runs as follows.

We all agree on the premise that history is a class struggle and on the role of the Party in its conduct. Historically, the party is always right (see Trotskij's quote: "You can be right only with the party and in it, because history has not done any other way to be right").

In accordance with objective historical process, the Party must now punish some determined crimes, which must inevitably take place at this time.

For these crimes the party needs responsible. You may not know the culprits. But the punishment of the crime is more important than these (in order to avoid history to be hindered). So either you have committed crimes or you have been called by the Party to play the part of the criminal: in any case, objectively you become an enemy of the Party.

If you do not confess, you cease to help the history through the Party, and you're a real enemy. So, "if you refuse, you contradict yourself, and through this contradiction, render your whole life meaningless."³⁴

By summing up, a totalitarian regime shares with tyranny the absence of law and relying on terror, but then it has, as its own peculiarity, a reference to "iron logic". As an evidence of this, Arendt points out the following statement: "According to Stalin, neither the idea nor the oratory, but 'the irresistible force of logic thoroughly overpowered [Lenin's] audience.'"³⁵

Arendt identifies logic with the necessary development of an idea and identifies the idea of freedom with the ability to start, therefore, she sees the first clashing with the second because the process of taking a new beginning is perceived as an interruption of the logical activity. She believes, however, that the tyranny bears the germ of its own destruction: she only regrets the fact that history had produced such form of

³⁴ P. 473.

³⁵ P. 472.

government. Every man is a beginning, and thus a potential importer of freedom and novelty.³⁶

2. Orwell's viewpoint

The story of Orwell's 1984 takes place in the region called Oceania. There, "Party" is the absolute value, embodied by a bearded man's face - known as Big Brother - because the human form better catalyze the feelings of the masses. He is a meta-entity that projects in an eternal present and future the oligarchy, while he hides it. Externally, in fact, he is eternal, while membership to the oligarchy is not hereditary, a thing that reassures the old-fashioned socialists, accustomed to fighting the "class privilege", and thus defuses their possible reaction. The Party is not interested in perpetuating its blood but itself. It is not important who holds the power, provided that the hierarchical structure remains unchanged. The purpose of the Party is pure power, exercised by making others suffer:

Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation.³⁷

The mechanism that leads people to undergo an oligarchy consists of a four-fold component:

- 1) The party keeps its members at the right level of fear, hatred and fanatical credulity, using for this the human energy that normally would be exercised in a joyful sexual act and flattening this into a mere due reproductive act.
- 2) War is constantly being pursued against the other two superstates (Eurasia and Eastasia, in turn), held upright on purpose, because there is no real chance of winning another super-state. The enemy is changed periodically (maybe in order to make the situation more credible) but war is necessary both to persuade people to obey the Party by fears and in order to eliminate a great amount of the goods produced by technological innovations, so that small privileges, enjoyed by the upper class, are better perceived as such.

³⁶ P. 479.

³⁷ P. 264.

3) The masses are manipulated through cinema and television. In any case, in Oceania there are no laws: most of the beliefs and behaviours that are required are not clearly spelled out. If this happened, this would expose the contradictions inherent in the country.³⁸

4) No contact with the outside world and with the past is allowed. The following principle of “cultural integration” holds: there must be no contact with foreigners, and the knowledge of foreign languages is forbidden:

“If he [= the citizen] were allowed contact with foreigners he would discover that they are creatures similar to himself and that most of what has been told about them are lies. The sealed world in which he lives would be broken, and the fear, hatred, and self-righteousness on which his moral depends might evaporate”.³⁹

Isolation is therefore essential. But it is not limited to a geographic scope. It consists also of an (induced) mistrust against common sense and sensitive data:

Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy. The heresy of heresies was common sense. [...] The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears.⁴⁰

Isolation is also from history, so that any kind of comparison, theoretical and practical becomes impossible. Isolation is essential to avoid the possibility of imagining a reality that is different from what the party wants to offer, otherwise a rebellion would become possible. That’s why the Party slogan ran as follows: “Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (p. 34) On this purpose, a continuous work of recasting the historical data has been made so as to delete any track in memory.

Even a new lexicon is gradually introduced, the Newspeak that reduces the domain of choice of words that make up a sentence, so that old meanings are slowly forgot. In addition, if the lexicon gradually narrows, eventually also the domain of choice will become narrow. If a vocabulary is narrow, mind can wander less between emotions and concepts: the production of thought will become smaller. The progressive

³⁸ P. 211

³⁹ P. 196

⁴⁰ PP 80-81.

destruction of words takes place in each semantic area: for instance, among excellent, wonderful, etc. only "good" will be retained. The process continues for progressive unification of the words survived in areas of common semantics, within which, at the end, only one survives. It is clear that in this way, the semantic areas concerned will change markedly by words that were previously perceived as very different in meaning. Hence, "In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality, only one word."⁴¹ Finally, "There is a word in Newspeak. I don't know whether you know it: duckspeak to quack like a duck. It is one of those interesting words that have two contradictory meanings. Applied to an opponent, it is abuse; applied to someone you agree with, it is praise."⁴²

The collapse of the semantic areas is accompanied (in a sort of mutual hermeneutic circle) by a loss of sensitivity to the distinction between opposites, accentuated by the fact that a word and its opposite are different only by the prefix "S". Such numb is essential to permanently dull the mind of the citizens, who, being no longer able to discern between black and white, will mechanically rely on the immediate orders of the Party. We understand, therefore, the following statements: "In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have believed it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it."⁴³ "For it is only by reconciling contradictions that power can be retained indefinitely".⁴⁴ Namely, as Gottlieb stresses: "In analogy with the mystical logic of the "coincidentia oppositorum" (mysticism coming out of the oxymoron and the paradox), through contradictions the Inner Party attempts to draw attention to a power beyond the realm of Reason, and to generate faith in this power. In effect, the greater is the logical dichotomy, the greater the psychological intensity of faith."⁴⁵

What about logic in all this description? What aspect of logic do we find? The principle of non-contradiction has clearly a main role. At a superficial glance, it may seem that it is used in favour of the oligarchy, because we know that people working at changing history must have the watchful eye to flush out the contradictions that arise during

⁴¹ P. 51.

⁴² P. 54.

⁴³ P. 80

⁴⁴ P.216

⁴⁵ Gottlieb 2007, p. 63.

their changes. In fact, at a closer glance, one sees that the "prohibition of contradiction" is the great enemy of the oligarchy, which does everything to refrain people from being sensitive to contradictions. People involved in changes must have sufficient intelligence to carry out a review into all the details (and therefore must have an eye for identifying data rate that may be contradictory) and sufficient capacity to ignore logic and then believe in the result. This form of "reality control" is called doublethink: "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, [...] and above all to apply the same process to the process itself – that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even understanding the word 'doublethink' involves the use of doublethink"⁴⁶. Party members are subjected from childhood to a sophisticated mental practice concentrated around the word "crimestop". It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments if they are inimical to the Party, and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction."⁴⁷

We can look at Winston, the protagonist, in order to see how the doublethink works. Exhausted by the treatments, launched into an exercise of crimestop as follows:

It was not easy. It needed great powers of reasoning and improvisation. The arithmetical problems raised, for instance, by such a statement as 'two and two make five' were beyond his intellectual grasp. It needed also a sort of athleticism of mind, an ability at one moment to make the most delicate use of logic and at the next to be unconscious of the crudest logical errors. Stupidity was as necessary as intelligence, and as difficult to attain.⁴⁸

After that, the connection to empirical reality, emotions and the richness of the lexicon have been removed, the last possible tool of rebellion would be logic and, therefore, it is disabled, too.

⁴⁶ P.35

⁴⁷ P.212

⁴⁸ P. 279.

Now, we can consider Stephen Ingle's objection to Orwell: "The writer and thinker Michael Frayn pointed out that the truth value of mathematics and logic is entirely formal and A. J. Ayer had earlier argued that it was an error to suppose that we can deduce any information about matters of fact from analytical propositions. Unfortunately, he does not appear to have told his friend Orwell. To suggest, as Orwell did, that it was logical that the Party would one day announce that $2 + 2 = 5$, and that it would be necessary for everybody to believe it (to accept it would not be enough), is simply misguided. The laws of mathematics are independent even of Big Brother and would stand despite the fact that the last man in Europe had lost faith in them." Ingle adds that, in any case, faith in reason is not a milestone in man's life. On the contrary, he agrees with Dostoevsky (Dostoevsky 1972, 33–34) that thought that it is in rejecting rationality that man safeguards his autonomy. He recalls (2007, p. 736) Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*. Namely, this agreed that two and two make four was an excellent thing, but he then specified: "To give everything its dues, two plus two make five is also a very fine thing" (Dostoevsky 1972, 36).

We can clear up the question. What Orwell has in mind is not mathematics as a source of truths (that, obviously, remain in mathematical domain and have scarce influence in the existential aspects of life), but the critical power of the principle of contradiction inside society. " $2+2=4$ " is an analytical truth because it is based on the principle of contradiction, and we don't assert " $2+2=5$ " because we respect such principle. Where logical contradictions are allowed and people is made insensitive to their presence (" $2+2=5$ " is a sign of such lack of sensibility) anything can be admitted, we have no criteria for judging by ourselves and we have to accept anything coming from the Party. The principle of contradiction is a good safeguard to our autonomy. If a system has to be rejected, one should not reject logic, but the principles of the system.

4. Arendt – Orwell: Head to head

At the beginning of this work we've see that it is possible to use Arendt's three-steps scale for schematizing Orwell's account for building totalitarianism. Now, we go further and check out the details in order to establish whether there is a complete similarity between their viewpoints about totalitarianism. According to Orwell, the pillar of totalitarianism is the terror of war (on which all life in Oceania is conveyed) together

with a number of tools to disable the ability to think, such as: the continuous bombardment of opinion through the media, the drastic and progressive reduction of the words used in everyday language, the desensitization to the contradiction. For Arendt it is terror (not of war but of the possible repression) together with the logical development of the idea that cements totalitarianism.

For Orwell, the loss of sensitivity to the contradiction is the culmination of the totalitarian regime, which he sees strewn with contradictions even when there is no necessity, while for Arendt it is the fear of contradiction that keeps people within the tunnel of totalitarianism.

Orwell admits that the regime wants some consistency, because: 1) it avoids to write its oral rules (in order to hid their intrinsic contradictions); 2) it makes continuously review the historical evidences for change (in accordance to what the regime wants at each specific moment that people believe about the past), requiring the ability to expunge data that might appear conflicting. However, overall, the Party aims to bi-thought, i.e. it aims to hide notice the most glaring contradictions and thus avoid that something is changed in society. The principle of non-contradiction, then, for Orwell, only in a minor (very minor) part supports the totalitarian regime. Instead, it is the insensitivity towards the contradiction that blocks any possible mechanism that, historically, from contradictions produces revolutions. For Orwell the role of logic in society is not the development of an idea. He does not sees in the programmatic presentations of Big Brother any special "logic", a particular "coherence", which should leave the audience stuck. No, he sees a series of slogans praising the country against a fictitious enemy outside or against a hypothetical internal conspiracy. Nothing else: logic is not involved.

Moreover, for Arendt it is important that a man could not distinguish between true and false (i.e., she considers this as the basis for a totalitarian regime); still, she does not see this as linked to the principle of non-contradiction (of which it is the meta-theoretical expression, referred to utterances instead of to states of affair), but as linked to the eradication of reality. True or False can be distinguished from each other only on the basis of a comparison with reality. If this is missing, everything is flattened as equivalently acceptable. For Orwell, however, disconnection from reality is the basis

for a totalitarian regime, but then, within the reality bubble created by the regime, everything is accepted as true / false, changing from moment to moment, because the sensitivity for the contradiction is annihilated.

So we are faced with two conflicting reconstructions of the basis of totalitarianism. How can they be conciliated with each other?

I think that there are some weaknesses in Arendt's description of the role of logic for totalitarianism. Firstly, regarding the conflict freedom-logic, we should analyze the meaning of "thought" (which is, according to Arendt, the ultimate expression of freedom). Certainly it includes more than logic. Thought can be any product of the human mind or, more limitedly, thought includes induction, metaphor, analogy, etc., problem-solving. Still, why does she oppose by definition thought and logic? She puts this by definition, but she should justify her choice. Arendt contrasts the logical ability to the ability to start over, because when you apply to deduce from premises, you keep fixed your premises. And it is true: its task is to receive the premises to carry out a deduction. It does not argue the premise. It is not its task. Still:

1) It does not fear different premises: they cannot be changed during the procedure of deduction, but it is possible to start deducting from other premises. Logic is not the single deduction, but the procedure of inference itself, or - if it is clearer - every possible deduction. Moreover, no one can fear that logic no longer has a job (so to say) or a sense, if at some point one challenges the premises on which it was working. Simply, logic will work on new premises.

2) It can still serve in order to discuss the premises, precisely because it allows a look along its consequences. The fact that logic, applied to an idea, leads to conclusions destructive may be the wake-up call to think that there is something wrong with the starting idea(s). Of course, this is not a task of logic, but it is through its capability to show such paradoxical conclusions that we can have far-sightedness on the outcome of an idea.

Furthermore, if one talks about "fear of contradiction" referring to a behaviour that is in contrast with what would be a consequence of the initial "idea," one concerns in fact a fear of infidelity and is an ethical (not a logical) problem. A behavior can "contradict"

an idea or the consequence of an idea, i.e. it can be the opposite of such idea, but this is neither a denial of the principle of contradiction nor an example of its violation. An example of violation would be namely the contemporary assertion and negation of the same statement (it would be so if we would say that from a certain idea both A and not A derive!), but here we have on the one side a behaviour and on the other a statement. And when logic lets me know that a certain behaviour would be inconsistent with those that necessarily follow from the idea that I accepted as a premise of my actions, this means that, if I decide to take such behaviour, in fact I deny my departure-idea, on the basis of modus tollens (if A then B; not B, then not A). For instance: If I start from "I am democratic" (A) and this has as a consequence (B) that I respect others' opinions, then if I don't respect others' opinions (not B), I'm not democratic (not A). Logic does not tell me that I must continue to accept such idea (being democratic), but only that, if I want to have a non-contradictory behaviour, then I should either behave differently or change my initial statement.

It should also be noticed that since the "ideas" concerning the social sphere are very complexes, it is not possible to give them a precise definition as it would happen in mathematics: by developing their logical consequences, new nuances of them can be pointed out. Therefore, in order to avoid self-deny, premises should always be accepted under condition, that is, with the caution that they may be withdrawn as soon as one becomes aware of their unacceptable consequences. This is not always possible: sometimes it is necessary to make irreversible choices. But the choice to maintain adherence to the premises is and remains ethical and not logical.

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