

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM. By Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951. Pp. ix, 477. \$6.75.

ANYONE who hopes to find in a bookstore a book published three years ago is an optimist. This is particularly true if he is looking for books on current events. These seem to be written for the moment; they organize the substance of current clichés into a sequence of chapters; obtain, if their authors are lucky, rapt reviews on the first page of the New York Times and New York Herald Tribune book sections, and are deservedly forgotten within the year. No wonder the editors of this *Journal* lost patience with this reviewer for withholding a review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* since 1951, when he promised it. Editors, publishers, booksellers and reviewers alike are conditioned to the publishing conveyor belt and find it difficult to cope with an original book.

The usual book is easily reviewed. A neat summary and a few highlighted points of dissent and consent lead to an airing of the reviewer's own opinions on the subject of the book, if not on some other subject, and the review is done. But to apply these easy directions to Hannah Arendt is a different matter. This reviewer, at any rate, found it impossible to summarize a book that has new, profound and original things to say about, among other things, Jewish bankers, Proust, the Dreyfus Affair, Disraeli, Cecil Rhodes, the Union of South Africa, the Viennese theatre under the Hapsburg monarchy, bureaucracies in France, India, Czarist Russia, Soviet Russia and Germany, the French Revolution, and the Treaty of Versailles, and that shows the bearing of these on the concentration camps, wars, migrations and scandals of our contemporary world. He hesitates to agree or disagree with Hannah Arendt by a deadline, but he does want to record in this *Journal* his opinion that Hannah Arendt's book should be read by everybody and particularly by lawyers, law students, and law professors.

The book should be read because it contributes more to the understanding of the new and central problem of our age, totalitarianism, than any other book published within a decade or so and because that problem is understood by far too few. The meaning of totalitarianism is obscured by a multitude of false observations and analogies. Totalitarianism is being equated with everything conceivable from the old-fashioned brands of tyranny to a disagreement about the methods of one's favorite senator. Not so long ago it was fashionable to consider it an exclusive product of something sometimes called "the German character" and sometimes "Prussian militarism," and now it seems almost obligatory to consider it a monopoly of the Soviet Union. Hannah Arendt demonstrates that totalitarianism is one, catholic, and unholy, that its Hitlerian and its Stalinist branches were substantially identical and that its attraction is powerful in most countries of Western culture. She analyzes the texture of daily life under totalitarianism and the reasons for its perverse seductiveness. "[T]he point about everyday life under totalitarian conditions is that only the agents of the NKVD in an industrial enterprise are informed of what Moscow wants when it orders, for instance, a speed-up in the fabrica-

tion of pipes—whether it simply wants more pipes, or to ruin the director of the factory, or to liquidate the whole management, or to abolish this particular factory, or, finally, to have this order repeated all over the nation so that a new purge can begin.”¹ Moreover “Moscow may not yet know, when it gives its order for pipes, whether it wants pipes—which are always needed—or a purge.”² “Simply because of their capacity to think, human beings are suspects by definition, and this suspicion cannot be diverted by exemplary behavior, for the human capacity to think is also a capacity to change one’s mind. . . . Mutual suspicion, therefore, permeates all social relationships in totalitarian countries and creates an all-pervasive atmosphere even outside the special purview of the secret police.”³ “[W]here careers are extremely insecure and where the most spectacular ascents and falls have become everyday occurrences, every word becomes equivocal and subject to retrospective ‘interpretation’.”⁴ “[W]e do not know the extent of character transformation under a totalitarian regime. We know even less how many of the normal people around us would be willing to accept the totalitarian way of life—that is, to pay the price of a considerably shorter life for the assured fulfillment of all their career dreams.”⁵

Hannah Arendt thoroughly illuminates and documents the aspect of totalitarianism which normal people find hardest to understand: its irrational and anti-utilitarian aspect, the aspect that misled Chamberlain in the thirties and misleads the neutralists in Europe today. Concentration camps, for instance, cannot be explained as a convenient device for obtaining cheap labor. In Russia all labor is slave labor in the old-fashioned sense, for no worker outside the camps has any choice of movement or influence on his pay. Yet the camps are deemed necessary, although in them the output of a worker has been estimated to be 50 percent below that prevailing outside, and highly qualified engineers compete for the right to do plumbing jobs, repair clocks, electric lighting, and telephones in times of acute shortage of technical skill.⁶ “The Nazis carried . . . uselessness to the point of open anti-utility when in the midst of the war, despite the shortage of building material and rolling stock, they set up enormous, costly extermination factories and transported millions of people back and forth.”⁷

The purposes of concentration camps are other than economic. They serve as experiment stations of totalitarianism in its purest form, they serve as training grounds for the secret police; they serve, by the rumors emanating from them, to spread an all-pervading atmosphere of terror; and, most important of all, they serve as a main instrument for exterminating the concepts of the individual and of individual dignity. It is in order to destroy these

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1. P. 403.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. P. 407.
 4. P. 408.
 5. P. 413.
 6. P. 390.
 7. P. 417.

concepts that the concentration camps must contain not only enemies or opponents of the regime but also groups selected at random. If they contained only opponents, the camps would point an unequivocal way to martyrdom that is possible only if there is a choice between good and evil. But "free consent is as much an obstacle to total domination as free opposition,"⁸ for free consent assumes the possibility of dissent, and hence it admits of individual merit. The camps make martyrdom impossible for the first time in history.

These are but a few quotations, ideas and paraphrases culled from only twenty-nine out of 439 pages. Every one of them calls for reflection, for comment, for further development; none of them can be fully understood removed from its place in a carefully constructed argument rooted in painstaking research of almost incredible scope.

Again, this book should be read; read by everyone who hates the spectre of totalitarianism, and who senses that it needs to be fought outside the political sphere as much, if not more, than within it. The few passages quoted, which point to worship of success and surrender of spontaneity as invading roads, as well as symptoms, of totalitarian infection, need to be read and pondered in the climate of American life, and alongside such studies as *Is Anybody Listening?* by Whyte and the Editors of *Fortune*.

In a law school no discussion of jurisprudence, of immigration law, of the Bill of Rights, and of administrative law, should remain untouched by Hannah Arendt. It is perhaps too much to hope, but it is worth hoping for, that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* be present in the minds of our legislators and statesmen as well.

No book of such originality and scope is without flaws. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* could have been made more readable by disciplined editing. As it is, it demands efforts from its readers; it baffles by sudden jumps and short-cuts in its reasoning, and it may irritate some by repetition. In short, it is not a well-written book, but neither was Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. And it may well be that analysis and reflection will find demonstrable errors among the multitude of Miss Arendt's insights. For instance, it is doubtful that her economic theories about the course of empire and colonialism, which she traces to surplus wealth and surplus population, can be substantiated.

But this reviewer promises that those willing to overcome the difficulties of composition and to take issue with Miss Arendt, for or against, will find their reward.

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8. P. 422.

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