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How to explain why dictatorships are so fascinating? Revisiting 20th century's paradigms

Introduction

In the mid-1930s the lawyer and political scientist Karl Loewenstein made the argument that the dictatorships of Europe were only temporary phenomena, because the process of modernization leading from autocracy to democracy was irreversible¹. In contrast, Diana Spearman perplexedly assessed in 1939 that authoritarian forms of rule even possessed a higher fascination under modern conditions than freedom did. This experience of the 1920s and 1930s was repeated at the end of the 1940s and at the beginning of the 1950s. Namely, the U.S.A. had to recognize that their concept of freedom was being set under pressure in the realm of foreign politics by the growing attractiveness of the *communist gospel*. Finally, after the breakdown of the Eastern bloc, the Western World only experienced a very short triumph. How the theoretical concepts of "Political Religion", "Permanent Revolution" and "Totalitarianism" did explain these phenomena in the 20th century, and do we have a deeper insight today?

"Political Religions"

The enthusiasm that was shown by large portions of the population in the effected countries for dictatorial systems and their ideologies led people in the 1920s and 1930s to draw analogies between ideologies and classical religions. Just as Bertrand Russell already in 1920 considered bolshevism to be a new religion², John Maynard Keynes said in 1925 that, like other religions, Leninism also had no scruples³; others labelled communism a "religion in disguise"⁴, spoke of National Socialism in terms of "political messianism"⁵, or of "replacement religion"⁶. The Methodist Bishop, John L. Nuelsen from the U.S.A., wrote in 1938: "Hitlerism cannot be understood when one

¹ See also G. Besier, *Political Religion, Totalitarianism and Modern Dictatorships*, „Politeja“ 2 (8), 2007, pp. 21–48.

² B. Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, London 1920.

³ J. Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, New York 1965, p. 4.

⁴ C. Christian Bry, *Verkappte Religionen*, Lochham ³1964, p. 167.

⁵ D. Glufke, R. Karwehl, «Politisches Messiasstum». Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kirche und Nationalsozialismus, *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für niedersächsische Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. 90, 1992, pp. 207–217.

⁶ H. Maier, „Politische Religionen“ – Möglichkeiten und Grenzen eines Begriffs, in: „Totalitarismus“ und „politische Religionen“. *Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs*, idem, M. Schäfer (eds.), Paderborn 1997, p. 304.

simply understands it as a political or social movement. It is a religion. It is certainly not a Christian religion, but a religion all the same. [...] Hitlerism is certainly not just a religion; rather it is an organized church.”⁷ Two years before this the Swiss ecumenist, Adolf Keller, described Mussolini: “the leader, *el Duce*, is the nation personified, a superman, a messiah, a rescuer”⁸.

Although the various patterns of interpretation of dictatorships as political religions did not play a distinguished role in the discussion of the 1930s, nevertheless the religious approach and the use of the vocabulary of Christianity were common practices of the early criticism of dictatorships⁹.

Communism and National Socialism¹⁰ have competed with the model of a Christian revelation religion, as they promise to minimize the contingencies of human life – seen as primarily caused by repression – through an enormous political restructuring, and, in so doing, to reveal or even to devaluate the function of classical religion: system stabilization. “Eternal peace will reign, where in the face of future abundance no one has to fear not to get enough. Under circumstances of abundance every reasonable desire and need can be met”¹¹. In dealing with the question of truth, Marxism-Leninism tried to outperform religious explanations by labelling the complex of its theory, dialectical and historical materialism, as “scientific philosophy”, a “scientific world-view”, or a “scientific theory”, “which discovered the objective laws of social development”¹².

As is well-known, the concepts of “political religion” or “secular religion” already appeared in the 1930s¹³ especially in the conception of the Austrian mindset-historian Lucie Varga¹⁴, the historical-philosopher Eric Voegelin (Vienna)¹⁵, the French sociologist Raymond Aron (Paris)¹⁶ and the British journalist Frederick Augustus Voigt¹⁷.

⁷ J. Nuelsen, *Religion and Church in Hitler's Germany*, „The Christian Advocate”, November 17, 1938.

⁸ A. Keller, *Church and State on the European Continent*, London 1936, p. 59. Cf. M. Jehle-Wildberger, *Adolf Keller (1872–1963). Pionier der ökumenischen Bewegung*, Zürich 2008, pp. 353 ff.

⁹ G. Stanton Ford (ed.), *Dictatorship in the Modern World*, Minneapolis 1935; B. Lavergne, *Die totalitären Staaten oder der Rückfall Europas in das 16. und 17. Jahrhundert (1937)*, *Wege der Totalitarismus-Forschung*, in: B. Seidel, S. Jenkner (eds.), Darmstadt 1968, pp. 64–85.

¹⁰ Concerning the methodological problems of the comparison, see: D. Nohlen, *Vergleichende Methode*, in: *Lexikon der Politikwissenschaft. Theorien, Methoden, Begriffe*, idem, R.-O. Schultze (eds.), München 2002, pp. 1020–1031. From a historic viewpoint, see: H. Möller, *Diktatur- und Demokratieforschung im 20. Jahrhundert*, „Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte”, Vol. 51, 2003, pp. 29–50.

¹¹ H. Lübke, *Freiheit statt Emanzipationszwang. Die liberalen Traditionen und das Ende der marxistischen Illusion*, Zürich 1991, p. 92; see also: T. Todorov, *Totalitarianism. Between Religion and Science*, „Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions”, Vol. 2, 2001, pp. 28–42.

¹² M. Buhr, A. Kosing, *Kleines Wörterbuch der Marxistisch-Leninistischen Philosophie*, Berlin (East) 1975, p. 173.

¹³ M. Huttner, *Totalitarismus und säkulare Religionen. Zur Frühgeschichte totalitarismuskritischer Begriffs- und Theoriebildung in Großbritannien*, Bonn 1999, pp. 255–259.

¹⁴ L. Varga, *Zeitenwende. Mentalitätshistorische Studien 1936–1939*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 115.

¹⁵ E. Voegelin, *Die Politischen Religionen*, Wien 1938; D. Herz, *Die politischen Religionen im Werk Eric Voegelins*, in: „Totalitarismus” und „politische Religionen”, pp. 191–209; M. Huttner, *Totalitarismus und säkulare Religionen*, p. 145; M. Henkel, *Konservativismus im politischen Denken Eric Voegelins. Überlegungen zum Problem der Verortung seines Ansatzes*, München 2001, p. 9.

“Interest in political religions experiences has a renaissance in several countries at this time”, wrote the British historian, Michael Burleigh a few years ago¹⁸. Richard Steigmann-Gall, a historian in the United States, ascribed the resurgence of the paradigm to the culturalistic *Turn*, but believed that National Socialism could best be understood as “religious politics”¹⁹. In Germany a far-reaching research project on the general theme of “totalitarianism and political religion” was undertaken in the 1990s, initiated and led by Hans Maier²⁰. This new project brought the two concepts “totalitarianism” and “political religion” together again. The results of Maier’s research project, which was released in three volumes, mirror the ambivalence of political religions²¹. On the one side they exhibited “phenomena similar to religions”, on the other they behaved in ways that are decidedly “anti-church” and “anti-religious”²². But this result might be not so surprising after all because modern ideologies do compete with traditional religions, and vice versa. It is because of this ambiguity as well as due to different understandings of religion, that it is still debated, whether dictatorial systems of the twentieth century should truly be called *political religions*²³.

¹⁶ B. Gess, *Die Totalitarismuskonzeption von Raymond Aron und Hannah Arendt*, in: „Totalitarismus“ und „politische Religionen“, p. 265; H. Seubert, *Erinnerung an den „Engagierten Beobachter“ in veränderter Zeit. Über Raymond Aron als Theoretiker des Totalitarismus und der nuklearen Weltlage*, in: „Totalitarismus“ und „politische Religionen“, p. 322; M. Huttner, „Totalitarismus und säkulare Religionen“, p. 152, T.M. Kjeldahl, *Defence of a Concept. Raymond Aron and Totalitarianism*, „Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions“, Vol. 2, 2001, pp. 121–142; M. Oppermann, *Raymond Aron und Deutschland. Die Verteidigung der Freiheit und das Problem des Totalitarismus*, Ostfildern 2008.

¹⁷ M. Huttner, *Totalitarismus und säkulare Religionen*, p. 99.

¹⁸ M. Burleigh, *Das Zeitalter des Nationalsozialismus. Eine Gesamtdarstellung*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 25. See also: P. Burrin, *Political Religion. The Relevance of a Concept*, „History and Memory“, Vol. 9, 1997, pp. 321–352. E. Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, London 1996, does for the comparison of almost religious ideologies not use the criterion “political religion”, but instead “civil religion”. See in this regard also: Idem, *Politics as Religion*, Princeton 2006; Idem, *The Sacralization of Politics. Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections in the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism*, „Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions“, Vol. 1, 2000, pp. 18–55; S. di Renzo, *The Non-Optional Basis of Religion*, „Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions“, Vol. 3, 2002, pp. 75–98.

¹⁹ R. Steigmann-Gall, *Nazism and the Revival of Political Religion Theory*, „Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions“, Vol. 5, 2004, pp. 376–398.

²⁰ See also: P. Steinbach, *Die totalitäre Weltanschauungsdiktatur des 20. Jahrhunderts als Ausdruck „Politischer Religion“ und als Bezugspunkt des antitotalitären Widerstands*, „Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte“, Vol. 12, 1999, pp. 20–46; and also: Wolfgang Dierker, *Himmlers Glaubenskrieger. Der Sicherheitsdienst der SS und seine Religionspolitik 1933–1941*, Paderborn 2002, pp. 539–549, who empirically shows for the religion policy of the Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service) the “specific interaction of ideology and practice” (p. 540), and aims to interpret its findings with the concept of “political religions” (p. 545).

²¹ H. Maier (ed.), Vol 1: „Totalitarismus“ und „politische Religionen“, Paderborn, 1996. Idem, M. Schäfer (eds.), Vol 2: „Totalitarismus“ und „politische Religionen“. *Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs* (1997). H. Maier (ed.), *Totalitarismus“ und Politische Religion*. Vol. 3: *Deutungsgeschichte und Theorie* (2003).

²² H. Maier, M. Schäfer, „Totalitarismus und „politische Religionen“, p. 13.

²³ Compare, e.g., the very different conceptions on National Socialism of Hans Mommsen and Julius H. Schoeps, among others, in: *Zwischen „nationaler Revolution“ und militärischer Aggression. Transformationen in Kirche und Gesellschaft während der konsolidierten NS-Gewaltherrschaft (1934–1939)*, G. Besier (ed.), München 2001. See also H. Maier, *Deutungen totalitärer Herrschaft 1919–1989*, „Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte“, Vol. 50, 2002, pp. 349–366.

In order to create a new loyalty and to awaken excitement for the system, the young dictatorships used symbols, rituals, productions, parties, celebrations, memorials, memorial and celebratory events as well as central buildings and monuments, which implied strength. This is true for the Bolsheviks²⁴ as well as for the National Socialists²⁵ and the Fascists²⁶. These arrangements not only carried away the actors themselves, but also sympathizers, nominal members and sometimes even opponents. Almost no one was able to evade the fascination of creating a new society and new, self-transcendent men, being allowed to dream of a redeemed existence, unless one was excluded from these final aspirations because of one's blood line – as the Jews – and was hence not allowed to take part in the revolution of life. Most symbolic for the decision to leave the old behind and start a new reality was the announcement of a new calendar.

The personality cult that was borrowed from religious tradition and revolved around a revolutionary superhuman, who one could thank for the own exaltation, was at its highest in Lenin's case, whose followers tried to make him "immortal" by mummifying him²⁷. In contrast to the glorified Lenin stands, the case of Mussolini, the toppled and reviled leader, whose corpse was presented to the mob in the marketplace in Milan, what also has quasi-religious meaning. Hitler wanted to prevent such a downfall by ordering that his corpse should be cremated.

Widely disseminated hagiographical depictions of the movement as well as its leader and holy books, which were given away at weddings and other special events, were designed to provide the quasi-religious institutions and the people with an aura of infallibility²⁸. On top of the book production was the holy doctrine itself, for which one was willing to withstand hunger, repression, violence and terror as a concomitant to the wonderful. One can not only see analogies here to religious history, but also between dictatorships. "Even though they are contrary in their contents, national socialist and Stalinist ideologies converged by justifying every sacrifice during their realization and the ability to commit in disregard of humanity. In this sense, they were connected as functional equivalents"²⁹. There is an entire list of common religious characteristics, such as the cadre's "need for deliverance", the establishment of rituals and celebrations, the creation of symbols, the staging of cultural worship as well as the justification of destitution and cruelty.

The main objection against the model of "secular religion" is that it does not provide any specific characterization of the dictatorships of the 20th century. The French

²⁴ K.-G. Riegel, *Der Maxismus-Leninismus als „politische Religion“*, in: *Politische Religion und Religionspolitik. Zwischen Totalitarismus und Bürgerfreiheit*, G. Besier, H. Lübke (eds.), Göttingen 2005, pp. 15–48.

²⁵ C.-E. Bärsch, *Der Nationalsozialismus als „politische Religion“ und die „Volksgemeinschaft“*, in: *Politische Religion und Religionspolitik*, G. Besier, H. Lübke (eds.), pp. 49–78.

²⁶ E. Gentile, *Der Liktorenkult*, in: *Faschismus und Faschismen im Vergleich*, Ch. Dipper, R. Hudemann, J. Petersen (eds.), Vierow 1998, pp. 247–262.

²⁷ N. Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, Harvard 1983, p. 165.

²⁸ O. Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches. Adolf Hitlers „Mein Kampf“ 1922–1945*, München 2006, p. 405.

²⁹ M. Hildermeier, *Kommunismus und Stalinismus: „Säkularisierte Religion“ oder totalitäre Ideologie?*, in: *Zwischen Politik und Religion. Studien zur Entstehung, Existenz und Wirkung des Totalitarismus*, K. Hildebrand (ed.), München 2003, pp. 91–111; here: p. 109.

Revolution and nationalism were also clothed in quasi-religious garb³⁰. Moreover, what must be remembered, is that the concept of “political religion” does not consider the aspect of ruling structures³¹.

“Totalitarianism” as “Permanent Revolution”

Sigmund Neumann (1904–1962), an almost forgotten German-American scholar, did avoid this problem as well as other ones in his concept. The research on dictatorships was dominated by the analytical figure *Totalitarianism* during the 1920s and 30s as well as during the Cold War, as is well-known. In the first phase, emigrants like Luigi Sturzo, Hannah Arendt³², Franz Borkenau³³, Paul Tillich, Waldemar Gurian and many others³⁴ brought the perception of the paradigm to Anglo-American world³⁵. For an entire generation of intellectuals, the theory of totalitarianism was rooted in the “physical threat of death and its existential turn in criticism”³⁶.

Not so for Sigmund Neumann³⁷. In his perspective, totalitarianism merely was a “political chameleon” in a time of transition. That’s why he argued against the wide-

³⁰ H.U. Wehler, *Nationalismus. Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*, München 2001, p. 32.

³¹ It might be “of little help to use the idea of ‘political religion’ to describe the claims to rule and the ruling practices of the Third Reich, especially since an inner logic and consistency is suggested, which the system lacks.” Quoted according to Hans Mommsen, *Der Nationalsozialismus als säkulare Religion*, in: *Zwischen „nationaler Revolution“ und militärischer Aggression*, p. 53, in contrast: J.H. Schoeps, *Erlösungswahn und Vernichtungswille. Die so genannte „Endlösung der Judenfrage“ als Vision und Programm des Nationalsozialismus*, in: *Der Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion*, idem, M. Ley (eds.), Bodenheim 1997.

³² Cf. G. Besier, *Who was Hannah Arendt?*, in: *Kirke, protestantisme og samfunn. Festskrift til professor dr. Ingun Montgomery*, J. Roger, D. Thorkildsen, A.V. Tonnessen (eds.), Trondheim 2006, pp. 297–308; G. Besier, K. Stoklosa, A. Wisely (eds.), *Totalitarianism and Liberty. Hannah Arendt in the 21st Century*, Kraków 2008, esp. pp. 101–123.

³³ Cf. B. Lange-Enzmann, *Franz Borkenau als politischer Denker*, Berlin 1996.

³⁴ Cf., e.g., G. Besier, *Hans Ansgar Reinhold (1897–1968): a forgotten theologian in American exile*, in: *Exile and Patronage. Cross-cultural negotiations beyond the Third Reich*, A. Chandler, K. Stoklosa, J. Vinzent (eds.), Münster 2006, pp. 109–125.

³⁵ A. Söllner, *Das Totalitarismuskonzept in der Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Totalitarismus. Eine Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, idem, R. Walkenhaus, K. Wieland (eds.), Berlin 1997, pp. 10–21. For a history of the developments of research in detail, see: B. Seidel, S. Jenkner (eds.), *Wege der Totalitarismusforschung*, Darmstadt 1968; M. Jänicke, *Totalitäre Herrschaft. Anatomie eines politischen Begriffs*, Berlin 1971; W. Schlangen, *Die Totalitarismus-Theorie. Entwicklung und Probleme*, Stuttgart 1976; E. Jesse (ed.), *Totalitarismus im 20. Jahrhundert*; Baden-Baden 1996; M.-P. Möll, *Gesellschaft und totalitäre Ordnung. Eine theoriegeschichtliche Auseinandersetzung mit dem Totalitarismus*, Baden-Baden 1998; A. Siegel (ed.), *Totalitarismustheorien nach dem Ende des Kommunismus*, Köln 1998.

³⁶ A. Söllner, *Das Totalitarismuskonzept in der Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Totalitarismus. Eine Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, idem, R. Walkenhaus, K. Wieland (eds.), Berlin 1997, pp. 10–21; here: p. 18.

³⁷ See P. Lösche, S. Neumann, in: *Deutsche Historiker*, Göttingen 1989, pp. 82–100; K. Dietrich Bracher, preface to: S. Neumann, *Die Parteien der Weimarer Republik (1932)*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 1970, pp. 7–12; A. Söllner, *Sigmund Neumann’s „Permanent Revolution“. Ein vergessener Klassiker der vergleichenden Diktaturforschung*, in: *Totalitarismus*, 53–73; G. Besier, *Totalitarianism as a „political chameleon“ in a time of transition – The analysis of Sigmund Neumann (1904–1962)*, in: „Totalitarismus und Demokratie/Totalitarianism and Democracy. Zeitschrift für Internationale Diktatur- und Freiheitsforschung/An International Journal for the Study of Dictatorships and Liberty” 5 (2008), pp. 115–126.

spread paradigm of *Totalitarianism* – also for methodological reasons. The application of comparative social science is a method of central significance to Neumann's analyses – a procedure which is more interested in the genesis of a phenomenon than its current form, and one which also brings out the differences between the various dictatorships of the 20th century. In his ground-breaking volume entitled *Permanent Revolution. The Total State in a World at War*, which was published in 1942³⁸, Sigmund Neumann went in the face of the prevailing consensus of the anti-Hitler coalition, in that he fully integrated the USSR – an ally of the USA in the ongoing war – into his dictatorship comparison. A posthumous second edition of *Permanent Revolution* was published twenty-three years later. Important seem Neumann's warning that one should be careful in one's differentiation between the various autocracies: "Even the modern autocracies [...] are worlds apart from one another [...]. But in actual fact, significant and numerous as their structural similarities and common human traits are, the dynamic movements of our day – the awakening nationalism of the Near East, Latin-American one-man rule, Far Eastern neo-feudalism [...], Russia's Bolshevism, even German National Socialism and Italian Fascism – must be differentiated in time and space. They have their distinct national climate. They arrive from a specific historical background. [...] Hence a full definition of modern dictatorship must include this diversity with all its shades and conflicting aims. Any sweeping formula should therefore be regarded with suspicion"³⁹.

Neumann is convinced that the modern dictatorships "have changed radically since their inception"⁴⁰. In his view this necessitates the study of the transformation of dictatorships and the comparison of the various stages of totalitarian development – both within a dictatorship and between various dictatorships. This call for a detailed analysis of specific changes was not only referring to dictatorships in Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union, but also to regimes in countries such as Yugoslavia, Poland and China. Neumann comes to the conclusion that: "This very fact may call for greater hesitancy in making quick generalizations towards an all-inclusive theory of totalitarianism"⁴¹.

In his unpublished essay *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism* (1962), Sigmund Neumann describes the fundamental sequences of totalitarianism interpretation. Bolshevism was initially understood by the Western world as a singular, abnormal phenomenon "resultant of strange historical circumstances of national traditions and

³⁸ S. Neumann, *Permanent Revolution. The Total State in a World at War*, New York–London 1942. A posthumous second edition of *Permanent Revolution* was published twenty three years later in 1963. Up until his death Neumann had been working on a preface (of which there were two versions) and a new chapter (*Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*). Hans Kohn, who released the posthumous 2nd edition, did not include Neumann's new sections. He did, nonetheless, change the subtitle of the work according to Neumann's suggestion, which therefore saw it become *Totalitarianism in the Age of International Civil War*.

³⁹ S. Neumann, *Permanent Revolution*, ix.

⁴⁰ S. Neumann, *Preface I*, in: *Sigmund Neumann Papers, File „Permanent Revolution”*, „Deutsches Exilarchiv 1933–1945”, Frankfurt am Main (within the German National Library).

⁴¹ *Ibidem*. The last sentence is almost identical to a corresponding sentence in *Preface II*, *ibidem*.

misfortunes of defeat”⁴², a temporary episode not worthy of any in-depth analysis. It was only the rise of the Central European dictatorships which, “partly in response to the Soviet challenge”⁴³, made the “Soviet matter” interesting to “civilized society”. The various interpretations of this historic phenomenon which followed over a period of decades “were more a mirror of the changing times than of the nature of the matter in dispute”⁴⁴.

The first explanation offered by Neumann for the rise of dictatorships is the psychoanalytical paradigm, which is to falsify it straight away. The neuroses of the leading protagonists did not account for these “one man rules” to a sufficient extent. The next, historic attempt at an explanation took the characteristic mass basis of the movements as its starting point, and saw the developing dictatorships as the natural response of a proud nation which had lost the First World War and been humiliated by its victors. Yet this explanation is not accurate, at least not in the case of the USSR, though one could perhaps say that Lenin used Russia’s defeat in the imperialist war as the ideal basis for a radical coup. This hypothesis also created the connection between war and revolution.

Although Neumann found this humiliation theory unconvincing, it had brought about a predominant mood of appeasement amongst the victorious Anglo-American countries during the 1930s. People felt guilty and tended towards concessions – particularly as the National Self-determination slogan came from the ideological repertoire of the Western democratic countries. The toleration of annexations carried out by the USSR – for instance in the Baltic – were seen by the Western powers as an opportunity to appease and neutralize the potential revolutionary threat posed by both the USSR and the fascist regimes by making territorial concessions.

It was only by the end of the 1930s, by which time the dictatorships had consolidated and set about spreading themselves across the continent, that the Western powers began to deliberate upon the issue of which of the dictatorships was the lesser evil. Left-wing intellectuals had labelled fascism the “last stage of capitalism”. Fascism and National Socialism turned this slogan into a positive, referring to themselves as “bulwarks against the Red Peril”. As the USSR regarded the fascist dictatorships as the last stage of capitalism even before the dawn of the socialist revolution, and the Western conservatives tolerated these dictatorships as a bulwark against communism, both National Socialism and fascism were able to spread further in the shadow of these images.

The military successes of these dictatorships – initially on the part of the National Socialists, and then on the part of the Soviet Union – led to the extremely flattering wording of “totalitarianism as an efficiency [sic!] state of master organizers and propagandists”⁴⁵. According to Neumann, even serious students of behavioural sciences in the United States were impressed by the powerful protagonists’ ability to

⁴² S. Neumann, *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*, p. 9, Sigmund Neumann Papers, File *Permanent Revolution*, *ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

even be able to mobilize mass support in the occupied states. Indeed, the fascist movement fascinated not only a large portion of Europe, but also those across the Atlantic. In 1927 the Americans associated dictatorships with Italian conditions and *Il Duce*. Mussolini seemed to have had such positive charisma in the USA (power, efficiency, modernity, control and erotic appeal), that Studebaker named its EU Standard Six-model “dictator” and was still able to sell 40,000 of the cars.

In Neumann’s view, once the Third Reich had collapsed the Western victorious powers took to interpreting the totalitarian German state as a mysterious quirk of the German national character. The Germans were labelled abnormal and attempts were made to ban them from the international scene or to place them in quarantine under a military leadership. Essentially one wanted to strike up again from the point where the dictatorship had interrupted “normal” proceedings. The triumphal impression that such a development would never be able to happen on their soil took root amongst the victorious Anglo-Americans. A far-sighted line from Neumann comments on this stage of dictatorship analysis: “Serious students, however, from the outset realized that totalitarianism was not and could not be defeated on the battlefield”⁴⁶.

Neumann delineates three post-War approaches to totalitarianism according to their methodology: “An existentialist theory, very much in tune with a prevailing mood of the aftermath, was probing more deeply into human condition which had brought about the origins of totalitarianism and revealed many insights into modern man’s predicament”⁴⁷. He names Hannah Arendt as an excellent example of this paradigm, suggesting that her originally British title *The burden of our time*⁴⁸ is a good introduction to this type of interpretation. Nevertheless, he rejects this concept as unconvincing: “Vis-a-vis such radical destruction of the world around us, it seems indeed understandable to retreat to the inner core of individual conscience as the last defence and only redeeming force of naked existence. Yet such an interpretation, while quite persuasive and potent on a personal plane, does not comprehend the historical complexity and the social reality of the phenomenon itself. Above all, it hardly applies to the most critical antagonist of our time, the USSR, nor does it grasp the revolutionary dynamics of evolving Red China and the still groping forces of newly developing nations”⁴⁹.

Neumann does not see it as a coincidence that during the post-War period – for him “a lull period for imaginative thinking and theoretical insights”⁵⁰ – totalitarianism could only be portrayed as a syndrome of interrelated characteristics. He names the work of Carl Joachim Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski as an example of such a concept⁵¹. “Friedrich-Brzezinski’s cluster analysis rightly reflects and records the substantive progress of differentiated research in the field, yet such a careful catalogue

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt originally named her book not *The Origins of Totalitarianism* but *The Burden of Our Time* (London 1951).

⁴⁹ S. Neumann, *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁵¹ Cf. C.J. Friedrich, Z. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Cambridge/Mass. 1956.

obviously cannot answer the quest for a full comprehension of the phenomenon's intrinsic nature"⁵².

The concept of modernization as the key to the explanation of totalitarianism moves the most recent advancements of the mature Soviet model into focus and explains its attractiveness to developing countries. Centrally-planned socio-economic transformations of this pace and radical nature can be enticing when compared with the slow, strenuous change processes witnessed in democratic states. "The dictator's directed efforts can surely lead to short-cut solutions which in their immediate and impressive achievements let their followers forget the price to be paid and leave their opponents crippled in their self-confidence to remain masters [...]"⁵³. In Neumann's view it is nonetheless naïve to believe in an automatic transfer ranging from economical development to a political modernity featuring public participation and civil responsibility. "Neither does the search for modernity lead the royal road to guaranteed democracy nor is this speed-up drive for economic development the one and only expression of modern totalitarianism"⁵⁴.

Nonetheless, Neumann states that all of the theorems mentioned – for a particular phase in the development of totalitarianism – included an element of truth. That's very similar to Roger Griffin's plea for a cluster model⁵⁵. Yet Neumann also notes that all blinkered explanations are dangerous and lead to confusion if they are taken as the whole truth. Neumann sees the "totalitarianism" theorem as a "political chameleon"⁵⁶, which, in his view, is best labelled as "permanent revolution". In 1962 Neumann spoke of the modern dictatorships as "total, demagogic, institutionalized and driven to unlimited expansion"⁵⁷. According to him, the limitlessness of modern dictatorships in terms of time and space differentiates them from the classical Roman dictatorships through to the dictatorships of the 18th and 19th centuries. [...]"⁵⁸. Neumann writes that, in contrast with earlier revolts, Lenin linked the romantic idea of a revolution with an academic concept, thereby turning revolution into a rational matter and raising it to a new level. Prerequisites for modern revolutions include the existence of wide social classes which are not integrated into the existing society and therefore constitute the raw material for a movement "promising them a new haven of communal existence"⁵⁹. The demi-god's appeal to these classes makes him into their spokesperson and charismatic leader. According to Neumann, the successful implantation of a dictatorial system requires the execution of further transformation processes after the seizure of power. He describes the first step as the targeted destruction of pluralist society, which is then to be replaced by a "new order" which brings "conformity

⁵² S. Neumann, *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*, p. 18.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 19 f.

⁵⁵ R. Griffin, *God's Counterfeiters?*, in: *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, idem (ed.), London 2005, p. 21.

⁵⁶ S. Neumann, *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

on all levels of social existence (*Gleichschaltung*)⁶⁰. The mobilization of the masses is indispensable to this new order⁶¹; the masses are to receive the impression that they are participating in the political system “in some ways in an even more active manner than democratic systems which rely on the free interplay of competing social forces”⁶². The survival of modern dictatorships is linked to a further highly-significant factor: “Modern dictatorships, autocratic as they may be, have to fulfil the social needs of security, material welfare and spiritual belonging for their mass following if they expect any degree of permanence”⁶³. We have learned from analyses of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc that these dictatorships were not in a position to satisfy the material and spiritual needs of their followers on a sustained basis. In describing modern dictatorships as “post-democratic” Neumann brings both systems close together: “[...] one ought to recognize that both rival systems belong to the same historical era”⁶⁴. This means that both systems must provide answers to problems and questions common to them. In Neumann’s view both democracies and dictatorships feature leaders and followers. Yet the difference lies in the specific selection, character and functions of the competing institutions. The decisive difference is that a dictatorship institutionalizes revolution. This makes it total: it seeks to pervade every fibre of society. The body with the most important role if this total pervasion of society is to be achieved is the party machine⁶⁵. When Neumann draws parallels between Dictatorship and democracy this may remind us, that after the collapse of Communism some social scientists are talking about a decreasing of democracies, too.

It is his multifactorial and multi-dynamic point which differentiates Neumann from other totalitarianism theorists. It is this concept which enables him to also include theorems from other thinkers as validating elements in his much more complex concept. This explains his distinctly constructive discursive style when compared with his peers. On the 30th of November 1949 Sigmund Neumann wrote to Carl Joachim Friedrich: “I hope that our discussion was useful for you and your group. It was most assuring to find that in spite of our all too infrequent get-togethers we seem to agree on the fundamentals”⁶⁶. “Fundamentals” here is presumably less about methodical and methodological processes regarding the research subject than the common platform both took as their base: the conviction that free democracy is the form of political order which is to be defended and secured.

In order to stress this point of view, Neumann favours “definition by contrast” in the form of comparative analysis of “constitutional democracy” and “totalitarianism”. He states that the modern ideological war between systems sees the opponents appropriating each other’s ideas and concepts; these are then ideologically bent, as the

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁶¹ One of the more recent theories to explain why crowds seem to act together is the emergent-norm theory by Turner & Kilian (1987). Cf. W. Heitmeyer, J. Hagan (eds.), *Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung*, Opladen 2002, pp. 1465 ff. (English: *The International Handbook of Violence Research*, 2003).

⁶² S. Neumann, *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*, pp. 25 f.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁶⁶ Sigmund Neumann Papers, File S. Neumann’s Letters 1949–1961.

example of the people's democracies had already shown. "A comparative confrontation alone can articulate their true character and clash in our time. [...] It defines the opposing camps in a threefold approach: political, sociological and ideological, by addressing itself to the crucial questions of their source and scope of power, their divergent interrelations of leaders and followers, and their contrasting concepts of man in this triple involvement on the international, national and personal plane"⁶⁷. Neumann suggests a bipolar model very similar to the most recent models, with extreme democracy on the one hand and totalitarianism on the other⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ S. Neumann, *Toward a Theory of Totalitarianism*, p. 34.

⁶⁸ See W. Merkel, *Systemtransformation. Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung*, Opladen 1999, p. 55.