

# Totalitarianism

Historical Regime or Bio-Power Intimate Vocation?

February 28, 2017  
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Totalitarianism, a concept deep-seated in the tragedies of the two World Wars, is one of the most misused and contested terms in the political lexicon. As is known, in very general terms totalitarianism refers to a type of regime that is extreme in its repudiation of freedom and liberties. Conceived out of the similarities supposedly shared by Nazism and Soviet Communism — Stalinism in particular — totalitarianism was thought of as a regime with deep, radical ambitions. Its chief objective is to rule totally unhampered by legal restraints, civic or social oppositions, organized pluralism or party competition. Unlike authoritarianism, totalitarian political oppression serves to refashion human reality itself. The radical nature of its purposes convinced political historians that totalitarianism represented a new form of government rather than merely an extreme version of tyranny or despotism.

Coined in 1923 by Giovanni Amendola — a strong opponent of Mussolini’s fascism — the term has had a very interesting history. I retraced the genealogy of the concept, from Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski[1] in the first half of the 1950s, to Norman Davies[2] at the end of the 1990s, in one of my books.[3] I will not go through the various stages here, but I must recall very briefly the characteristics which political scientists agree upon as being typical of a totalitarian regime.

To be truly totalitarian, a form of government should combine the following traits:

1. A revolutionary ideology expressing faith in the necessary laws of history, announcing the destruction of the old order and the birth of a radically new and purified one;
2. A mass party structure headed by a charismatic leader who claims infallibility, and demands the unconditional personal devotion of the people;
3. A chaotic displacement of offices and roles so as to ensure rivalry and therefore dependence on the real site of power;
4. A collective economic system (capitalist or state socialist) intended to direct productive forces toward the regime’s autarchic and militaristic goals;
5. Total control of mass media, and with that, the formulation of a set language designed to prevent ambivalence and complexity;
6. Perpetual mobilization of the population through wars, struggles, or purges;
7. The pervasive use of terror by secret police to isolate, intimidate, and align all those whom the regime deems menacing;
8. The centrality of an “objective enemy”: the pursuit and elimination not simply of real opponents but also categories of people deemed guilty of

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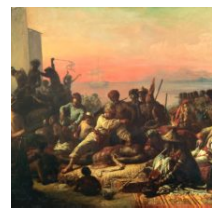
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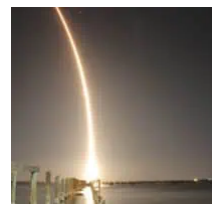
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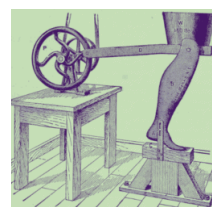
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wickedness in virtue of some ascribed quality such as race or descent.

Crimes against the state need not have actually been committed by the person accused of them;

9. The concentration camp, as laboratory of totalitarian domination: the space of experimenting on the conditions under which human subjects become fully malleable. In addition, a slave labor system existing side-by-side with a racial and/or class-oriented policy of genocide.

Historians have often criticized the typological rigidity of political science's characterization of totalitarianism. While the image constructed from the Nazi horrors and Stalinist domination can count as a reference, it's important to revise that historical reality in light of the category's own complexity. Totalitarian regimes are flexible and capable of mutation. They are not monoliths, but rife with competing, opportunistic cliques scrambling for authority.

Despite these criticisms, for many proponents of twentieth-century liberalism, the concept of totalitarianism has been an essential hermeneutical tool. For Marxists, on the other hand, who couldn't accept the similarity between Nazism and Communism, "totalitarianism" has never been anything but an ideological attempt to quash communism. As Abbott Gleason remarks,<sup>[4]</sup> it has been an ideological weapon of a particular kind of Manichaeism, dividing the world into good liberal democrats and evil communists. Moreover, the distinction between totalitarianism and other authoritarian regimes, Gleason and others argue, conveniently serves Western governments, who support military juntas and other regimes with bleak and bloody human rights records. Describing military juntas as authoritarian rather than totalitarian, they say, is a justification strategy, as if to not be totalitarian, but "only" authoritarian, made a difference to the people they murdered.

Despite these disputes during the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept of totalitarianism has been revived at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with Islamism and the "war against terror," on the one hand, and with criticism of neoliberal globalization, on the other. Since September 11, 2001, a growing number of commentators have contended that the current of radical Islamism, the one associated with the legacy of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi Wahhabite movement, is totalitarian. Not to mention what many public intellectuals are repeating these days in Europe, after the attacks in Paris and Brussels: "Terrorist and nihilistic totalitarianism is back again in all its strength."<sup>[5]</sup> According to common interpretations, Modern Islamism is a radical movement in which pluralism and the distinction between public and private are abolished, because every authority and duty emanates from God alone. "Muslim totalitarianism," this reasoning suggests, demonstrates the capillary, totalizing organization of its Western precursors. Islamist militants combine the conspiratorial anti-Semitism of the Nazis, for whom they maintain a nostalgic admiration, with the pan-territorial ambitions of Bolshevik internationalism. Islamist language is also filled with millenarian images of struggle, merciless destruction, and "sacred terror." Bent on purifying

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the world of Zionism, liberalism, feminism, and “crusader” (U.S.) hegemony, Islamist ideology articulates a culture of submission, nihilism, terror, suicidal martyrdom for the cause, and mythological appeal to a world about to be reborn. The archaic demand for the reestablishment of the hallowed caliphate, pursued with all the means modern technology affords, is also consistent with the “reactionary modernism” of earlier totalitarian movements.<sup>[6]</sup>

Such parallels do not satisfy those historians who insist that, just as theorists had failed to account for the very different origins of fascism and communism, the idea of totalitarianism now fails to grasp Islamic terrorism as well. For example, Enzo Traverso,<sup>[7]</sup> a well-known historian of genocides, emphasizes that the violence of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century was tied to a strong, monopolizing state, whereas in the post-colonial era, terrorist violence is born within weak states, out of their crisis, their fragmentation, and their incomplete formation. Of course, such critics recognize a “totalitarian” orientation in Islamic fundamentalism in that it attempts to completely permeate the life of the individual. But this same tendency is shared by many other forms of religious fundamentalism. Moreover, critics argue, twentieth-century totalitarianism was supported by ideologies oriented toward the future, aimed at building a new kind of society; they cultivated the myth of the “new man,” and their vision of history was millenarian. Islamic terrorism, on the other hand, fights to re-organize society along lines that belong to the past. The reactionary modernity of the Jihadist deploys rockets, modern weapons, cellular phones and internet propaganda, but wants to bring the Arab world back to the mythical purity of an original Islam. In sum, the concept, as applied today, is no less weak and contradictory than it was when applied to European regimes between the two World Wars.

Undoubtedly, some of the past and present criticism of the concept is correct. Nevertheless, I have always found the disputes about the ideological use of the idea of totalitarianism bizarre — as if, among the various concepts of our political lexicon, totalitarianism were the only one to have suffered historical and ideological inaccuracy and adjustment; as if the same ambivalences and possibilities of instrumentalization did not adhere to each and every word of political theory. This is not to deny that at a certain point in history the concept of totalitarianism was *also* used as a Cold War weapon or as a legitimation strategy.

The typologies of totalitarianism that drew upon Hannah Arendt’s important 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,<sup>[8]</sup> or, rather, the elaboration of the list of characteristics supposed to constitute the “totalitarian syndrome” that we saw above, sometimes served anti-communism. It is more important for my point that they contributed to simplifying a complex category, reducing it to an aseptic taxonomy. I believe, nonetheless, that the aversion to the concept of totalitarianism does not lie exclusively in the ideological weight that has burdened it. That hesitation also concerns the stratifications of meaning of the category, which has been capable of breaking boundaries that were considered untouchable.

Let's not forget that the terms "totalitarian" and "totalitarianism" date back to far before the Cold War. In the 1930s, Paris served as a sort of intellectual laboratory where all kind of dissidents, from Soviet Union Bolsheviks to Italian fascists, struggled for heterodox ideals; it was from here that totalitarianism emerged as a concept:<sup>[9]</sup> a concept aimed at pointing out an unprecedented, all-encompassing dynamic of political power.

The transmission of this legacy is pivotal. From Hannah Arendt to Jean-Luc Nancy, George Bataille to Michel Foucault, Simone Weil to Jean-François Lyotard, Emanuel Levinas to Jacques Derrida — to name just some of the protagonists and heirs of that Parisian milieu — a radical and libertarian trend of thought, not dogmatically Marxist, was able to elaborate a theoretical category out of historical experiences, especially those of Nazism and Stalinism, which goes beyond the concrete configuration of those regimes.

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A few years ago, one of the greatest independent historians of political thought, Sheldon Wolin,<sup>[10]</sup> a radical leftist but not a Marxist, published a book titled *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Wolin names "inverted totalitarianism" the way in which, in the West and especially in the U.S., corporations and governments work together to keep the general public in thrall. Propaganda and the suppression of critical thinking serve to promote pro-growth, pro-business ideologies which see democracy as dispensable, and potentially an obstacle to what they consider to be progress. Wolin's analysis tries to make the reader aware that those totalizing dynamics of power, born from the horrors of the two World Wars, were and still are opposed to the fundamental principles of constitutional democracy. This doesn't mean to equate different historical realities. Wolin's thesis doesn't present neoliberal policies as a replica of Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union: "Inverted totalitarianism" differs from twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Unlike classic totalitarianism, it doesn't force society into a preconceived totality, in the name of a revolutionary reshaping of all political, social and economic relations. "Inverted totalitarianism," in fact, does not involve a precise, ideological design. Furthermore, it is only partially state-centered. Wolin points out that it represents the "*political* coming of age of corporate power" and, accordingly, it brings about a *political* demobilization of the citizenry.<sup>[11]</sup> This new form of totalitarianism, while exploiting the authority and resources of the state, gains its strength through a symbiotic relationship between traditional government and the system of "private" governance, represented by modern corporations. States, especially the United States, rely on corporate economic power, and giant corporations, which have become more and more expansive and aggressive, need the coordinating power of the state. Together, the state and corporations have become the main sponsors of science and technology. The result is an unprecedented combination of totalizing tendencies that challenge the idea of boundary itself, politically, intellectually, ethically and economically.

Wolin works more from a political theory perspective than a political science one. My reflections are even more philosophically oriented. The topic of my works has been the philosophical heritage of the concept. From this perspective, I propose to distinguish the phrase “totalitarian regime” from “totalitarianism.” This allows us to emphasize a crucial difference between historical reality — whose unrepeatable uniqueness cannot be subsumed under general categorizations — and theoretical-philosophical conceptualizations, but also to dig out, among the tangle of the present, the dynamics, started off by the World War II-era regimes, that are still at work.

In this sense, “totalitarianism” can designate not only a regime type in opposition to constitutional, democratic, parliamentary, and pluralistic forms, as it does for political science. It can even describe something beyond the political oppression achieved through the symbiosis between government and corporations. More radically, it has to do with the pervasive, intricate relationship between power and human life.

As a philosophical concept — this is my main point — totalitarianism provides a useful tool for dismantling dualistic oppositions. Shelter can no longer be found in the comforting antithesis between Nazism or fascism, as an irrational and particularistic anti-humanism, and Stalinism, as a pathological deviation from a communist route that is in itself perfectly sound, rational and universalist.

From the mid-twentieth century onward, a large part of philosophy — at least of “continental” philosophy — established a hermeneutical circle with totalitarianism, which culminated in the “scandal” of thinking there was continuity between totalitarianism and the Western tradition, namely by trying to trace the involvement of Western reason itself in totalitarian logic.

Now the question is: what still remains vital, for us, from those analyses if, of course, the past will not present itself again with those specific features? I’m convinced that in those philosophical reflections something was discovered about power that can still help us to understand the potential risks of contemporary totalitarian dynamics. Maurice Blanchot writes, “there are no dishonored concepts, betrayed or treacherous; there are only concepts which require to be re-thought over and over again.”<sup>[12]</sup>

In my opinion, this is what philosophy must try to do, rescuing totalitarianism from the danger of vulgarization and refusal. It must be re-thought on the grounds of a cumbersome presupposition, not always accepted by everyone: in totalitarian regimes it became apparent, no longer “with any shadow of doubt,”<sup>[13]</sup> that political power, although not at all an evil in itself, always has a totalitarian vocation. That is to say, it is a force that seeks constantly to expand its grasp, so that “naturally” it tends to have a strict control over everything and everyone.<sup>[14]</sup> The temporality of power, in fact, is unabated. It does not tend to an end, but it constantly devours every goal achieved. In this sense it is not only devoid of limits, but it is aimed at destroying limits.<sup>[15]</sup>

From the excesses of totalitarian domination in the past, philosophy worked out one of the most interesting reflections we have today: Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics. He first discussed this in *The Will to Knowledge* (1975), and in his lectures at the College de France, *Society Must Be Defended*, in 1975-76[16]. Foucault describes biopolitics as a "new technology of power that appears in the XVIII century." According to him, the entrance into the modern age can be characterized by a rupture in the way power is exercised within the state. The power in the hands of the early sovereign was more about a holding back the absolute right to kill. Modern state power has turned its focus to how to "maximize life" through a proper administration of the population and the quality of its biological life as a whole. The idea of bio-power has been elaborated over and over again, involving some of the most interesting contemporary intellectuals.[17]

If the aim of every totalitarian system is the total transformation of a given reality, especially human reality, this is articulated in a twofold strategy: the production of the "absolute victim" — "non-humanity" — on the one hand, and the realization of an ideal of "hyper-humanity," as the only true humanity, on the other. Thus, from a philosophical perspective, totalitarianism today assumes the function of a twofold limit.

On the one side we have the limit of total power over life, the situation called by Giorgio Agamben "bare life." By this he recalled the expressive force of Primo Levi's *Musselman*: the concentration camp inmate who has been transformed by deprivation into a sort of sheer biological being for whom any choice has been eliminated.[18] On the other side, we have the limit of the identification, without remainder, of each and every singular individual with the great symbolic political body of totalitarian community.

Although it remains perplexing in some ways, I maintain that the biopolitical approach is the most valuable philosophical tool to detect the continuities and discontinuities between the twentieth century past and present forms of totalitarianism.

Giorgio Agamben is the thinker who, after Foucault, has led contemporary philosophical discussion to focus again on the biopolitical paradigm. His book *Homo Sacer*[19] implicitly uses the paradigm, though not the term. At the intersection of the ways that Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault provoked us to rethink total domination lies "thanatopolitics," the politics of death. The very different terminology and styles of Arendt and Foucault converge in identifying the inclusion of life, understood in its biological aspect, in the mechanisms and calculations of political power. Although Arendt never used the terms "biopower" or "biopolitics," there are many comparisons that can be made between her work and Foucault's. For both the authors, we enter into a context that is modern and biopolitical when power is no longer only concerned with the life and death of the individual, but also with the vital processes of society and the population as a whole. Biopolitics is a heuristic tool for bringing into view a crucial discontinuity in the continuum of Western power.

When politics assumes, as its object, life in its elementary and primary biological aspect; when political power is directed toward living itself, in its purely biological sense; when, therefore, political strategies overrun the very body, of the individual and of the population, a radical metamorphosis of power relations can be witnessed. Contrary to what Agamben argues,<sup>[20]</sup> in Arendt we detect a very tight bond between the observations contained in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* about the extermination camps and “non-persons,” and those in *The Human Condition* on the birth of the social and the triumph of the *animal laborans*.<sup>[21]</sup> It is not entirely accurate to state — as Agamben does — that Foucault failed to investigate the locus of modern biopolitics par excellence: the extermination camp. Both Arendt and Foucault, in their own ways, did in fact attempt to think through the complicated relationship of continuity and discontinuity that connects the modern form of biopower — the power that has taken charge of life even in its biological aspect — to the extreme, revelatory event represented by the genocides of the twentieth century. Both view Auschwitz, and in many ways the Soviet camps as well, as the extreme pathology of power, but at the same time as the fulfillment of a politics, however paroxysmal it may be, that has elevated life into a universal category with an undisputed value.

In the totalitarian glorification of blood (Nazism) but also in the ennobling of the working man (Stalinism) is an implicit primacy of the body. From the edification of the New Man’s body to the annihilation of the superfluous or corrupting body, a new use and appraisal of the biological emerges. It brings forth the total involvement of a naked existence in the now capillary web of power. Therefore, beyond its specific contents, the ideological project cannot be understood simply as a secularized religion that requires an assent of absolute faith; nor can it be read exclusively as the justification that legitimizes the dismantling of the juridical and legal system.

Ideology, far more than an *instrumentum regni* to obtain consent and obedience, is a device that allows for shifting and redefining the boundaries of the human, of what is included and excluded from the great body of humanity, from the organism of Hyper-Humanity. Hence, the *Lagers* (camps) not only served the purpose of exterminating, but also of experimenting with the modification of human reality.

In totalitarian regimes, power exerted itself over life not merely by suppressing it. It was not simply a question of an enormous, unprecedented, abuse of power that quelled the rights of the individuals. Political power succeeded in turning itself into both a total and capillary domination, by setting itself the as warrant of the *security*, the *health*, the *prosperity* and the *life* of the people, who required the elimination of a harmful and destructive “living part” in order to incarnate the ideal of a Hyper-Humanity.

In other words, totalitarian bio-politics has shown us what a political apparatus can achieve: in the name of security and public health, by appealing directly to the “productivity” of life, it is able to invade, with unparalleled

intensity and capillarity, the existence of all, and entire existence. Using a paroxysmal logic, which avails itself of different strategies and various techniques, it is an exercise of power in which the logic of the legal pact no longer works. If bio-power proved to be so functional to total domination — and this is particularly the case for Nazism — it is in part due to the fact that it used an enormously powerful instrument: the idea of race, namely, the value or disvalue of the body in its organic and biological condition. This allowed for the organization of manslaughter in terms of a planned and systematic enterprise of healing the body politic. But more than a radical nihilism was at work, a death drive expressing itself. It's too simplistic to explain that kind of political evil in terms of a collapse of morality, or in terms of the downfall of humanism and its values.

It's not by chance that another intellectual vector converged in driving Nazi bio-politics to its extreme procedures — something that is far more familiar to our philosophical tradition than evolutionary race theories. Racism proceeds not only from a biological ideology, but also from a so-called “metaphysics of the form.” This theory, using Plato rather than the laws of genetics, holds that the “supreme spiritual value” of a race lies in the achievement of the perfect somatic form, as nothing short of the expression and confirmation of the ideal or soul of the people, of the Volk.

This is not to deny the crucial importance of a certain “Nazi philosophical anthropology.”<sup>[22]</sup> These texts provide a clear answer to the question “What is human in the Third Reich?” However, besides these very crude racist pamphlets, there was a “cultivated” Nazi literature that re-defined the human, helped by an appeal to a “true humanism.” In establishing the *form* of hyper-humanity, the new concept of *Humanitas* sanctioned the impossibility for a part “of the living beings” to elevate themselves to participating in the Idea, in other words, to achieve the reality of the human. Thus, what was at work was not — as many well-intentioned neo-humanists would like to believe — simply a rhetoric of the Aryan Super-Man, who despises the vulgar democratic “little and last men,” thus overthrowing the egalitarian and universal values of the noble humanistic tradition.

Europe has not only been the land of civilization, of Enlightenment and reason, or, in other words, of the glorious and civilizing power of *Humanitas*. What took place on that very land was the tragic shift into action of genocide and destruction, a language which also spoke without hesitation the words of humanism.<sup>[23]</sup> By this of course I do not mean to say that Nazism was a humanism. I would only like to stir up some suspicion toward a comfortable and uncritical dualistic vision, and toward all humanist rhetoric, which too often and too quickly defines totalitarianism as the death of humanism. Hence, the necessity to dig deeply in order to bring to light the possible twofold face of humanism, its dialectic open to the possible complementariness of the hyper-human and non-human.

And hence the appeal to watch over a will to dominate, which points directly at

life, a will to govern our lives in name of safety, not only through those restrictions of liberties that a state of emergency against terrorism would imply, but also through a soft, pervasive intrusion which speaks the language of securing our health. Although treating life as the absolute value of a collective entity — ethnicity, people, or race — has seen a decline, it has been replaced by the imperative to maximize the life of the individual. A powerful social imaginary governs our Western lives, nurtured by continuous technological advances, which encourages elaborate fantasies of enhancement and prowess, even eternal life.

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Our problem is no longer what Foucault labored over in the late 1970s, when he explained how biopower — the power that in the modern age took charge of the biological life of the population and its improvement — was able to easily transform itself into total domination over life and death. As he himself pointed out at the beginning of the 1980s, although the regimes between the two World Wars had focused on the life of the collective body, and promoting its health, the biopolitics of neoliberal societies in the West is different.<sup>[24]</sup> The societal functioning in which we find ourselves immersed exerts control over our lives and directs our behaviors and styles of conduct, but it does so not by limiting or impeding our movements, or by imposing prohibitions and regulations. We are witnessing the fragmentation and multiplication of powers that claim the right to regulate our lives. Without imposing transcendental norms, they manage and promote the protection of life by endorsing the performance of what are presumed to be “normal” and “physiological” human behaviors and by incentivizing processes that are supposed to lead to well-being. Having entrusted birth, death, and disease to the power and knowledge of the life sciences, these increasingly appear to us as something we can control.

The critics of neoliberal biopolitics are right when they say that an imagination imbued with the idea of optimizing life is fundamental to the mutual reinforcement between new medical and biotechnological sciences on the one hand, and the demands of capital accumulation on the other. But simply removing the demand for profit may not be sufficient to give individuals back their joyful, independent life power. Symbolic order and social imaginary are historical and concrete stratifications of meaning, both individual and collective, that act on all players involved without their necessarily being aware of them, inducing them to share in the system of presuppositions. Though not forcing anyone to comply with them, these norms prompt people to reproduce their assumptions and content. For instance, how many agents, among private corporations, associations, leagues and public actors, are mobilized nowadays in the name of the absolute and illusory ideal of “perfect health”?<sup>[25]</sup> Today’s hyper-humanity corresponds to a potentially immortal human ideal, for whom the constitutive limits of existence, which we have known up to now, seem the heritage of an “antiquated man.” This is addressed to human beings in their individuality or singularity, rather than the collective *body politic*. It’s a dream-

laden culture of ever-expanding control and possibility; it's a social imaginary that implies constantly challenging and going beyond current capabilities, inhibitions and constraints. It is as if we were compelled to live at our best, enhancing and actualizing to the utmost all the potential that we have been given. In response to this implicit injunction, our core values become our faith and hope in a life without limitations, in which nothing is left unexpressed.

There is no doubt that modern Western democracies have given us countless opportunities for self-realization. My point is not to dispute the results of "civilization," culture, or the sciences; nor is it about impugning all policies for care and protection. Rather, my point is to question the side effects of this new social imaginary. Ours is a never-ending quest that, like it or not, reinforces the various powers on which it depends. The reason it has proved to be so ingrained is because it responds to the desire rooted in our deepest passions, the one that is so easily overindulged but at the same time so often abused. It is the desire to be more and more powerful. Our contemporary "you ought" demands exactly the sort of self-affirmation that the moral law was meant to prevent. The new imperative in the West is to maximize our own life — first and foremost our biological life. We might almost rephrase the categorical imperative as: "Make improving your life the absolute, universal law of your conduct." Absorbed by the peremptoriness of this infinite project (maximizing life can only be an endless commitment), we have neither the time nor the space to perceive and judge the often painful reality that calls to us for political change.

## Footnotes

[1] I refer here to the classic collection by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Harper, 1956). It follows the fundamental work by Friedrich, *Totalitarianism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1954), which is deeply indebted to Hannah Arendt's analysis.

[2] Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[3] Simona Forti, *El totalitarismo: trayectoria de una idea limite*, (Barcelona: Herder, 2008); S. Forti, *Il totalitarismo*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2015).

[4] Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[5] See Agnes Heller, "E' un nuovo totalitarismo, la sua ideologia è il terrore" — an interview Agnes Heller gave to *La Repubblica* on November 17, 2015, where the Hungarian philosopher recalls the thesis she put forward in her essay "9/11, or Modernity and Terror" in *Constellations* Vol. 9, Issue 1 (March 2002), 53-62. For a "classic" overview, see Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2010).

[6] For the “canonical” thesis, see D. J. Macdonald, *The New Totalitarians: Social Identities and Radical Islamist Political Grand Strategy* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2007). A broad, scholarly bibliography would include at least Bassam Tibi, “The Totalitarianism of Jihadist Islamism and its Challenge to Europe and Islam,” in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 28 (2007); Peter Baehr, [\*Marxism and Islamism: Intellectual conformity in Aron’s time and our own\*](#), “Journal of Classical Sociology”, Vol. 11, no. 2 (2011), 173-190; Peter Lentini, [\*Neojihadism: towards a new understanding of terrorism and extremism?\*](#) (Northampton MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013); lastly, see Joel Hodge, *Terrorism’s Answer to Modernity’s Cultural Crisis: Re-sacralising Violence in the Name of Jihadist Totalitarianism*, “Modern Theology” Vol. 32, no. 2 (2016), 231-258.

[7] See Enzo Traverso, *Totalitarismo: Storia di un dibattito*, (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2015) and Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945*, (London: Verso, 2016).

[8] Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential thinkers of 20th century Political Philosophy, escaped Germany as a Jew in 1933, arriving in New York in 1942. There she wrote many books which are still milestones in contemporary political philosophy. The work that made her famous was *The origins of Totalitarianism*, first printed in 1951, with a very important re-issue in 1958. It’s the book anybody cannot avoid to refer to when discussing on totalitarianism and genocides. See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Harcourt, New York 1976; and the essays collected in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994).

[9] See Simona Forti, *El totalitarismo: trayectoria de una idea limite* (Herder, 2009), 10-40.

[10] Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated. Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008). See also the last chapter, “Postmodern Democracy: Virtual or Fugitive?” in Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 587-705.

[11] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, 30.

[12] Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre*, (Paris : Edition Gallimard, 1980).

[13] This is what, for example, Foucault wrote in *La sécurité et l’Etat*, in *Dits et écrits II*, 1967-88 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 383.

[15] From this same perspective, Wolin differentiates two distinct and opposite imaginaries: a constitutional imaginary and a power imaginary. The constitutional imaginary sets legitimation requirements to power, and prescribes constraints and terms of accountability. It emphasizes stability and limits. The power imaginary, on the contrary, is usually accompanied by a

justifying mission (to defeat communism or, as Wolin observes in his own days, to “hunt out terrorists, that requires capabilities measured against an enemy whose powers are dynamic but whose exact location is indeterminate”). One consequence of the pursuit of an expansive power imaginary is the blurring of the lines separating reality from fancy, and truth telling from self-deception and lying. In its imaginary, power is not so much justified as sanctified, excused by the lofty ends it proclaims, ends that commonly are antithetical to the power legitimated by the constitutional imaginary. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, op cit.

[16] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (New York: Random House, 1978), especially 115-132. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003). See also Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Picador, 2007), and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

[17] In this regard the bibliography is huge. Here I will mention only the pivotal works around which the debate has been built: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1999). Written in the same period from a closely allied perspective, see the work of Alain Brossat, *L'épreuve du désastre: Le XXe siècle et les camps* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996); Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For a mapping of the disciplinary areas pertaining to biopolitics, see the work of Christian Geyer (ed.), *Biopolitik: Die Positionen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001); Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitik zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2007); Arona Moreau, *Le biosiècle: bioéconomie, biopolitique, biocentrisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009); Laura Bazzicalupo, *Biopolitica: Una mappa concettuale* (Roma: Carocci, 2010). From a complementary perspective, see also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Miguel Vatter, *The Republic of the Living*, (New York: Fordham UP, 2014); Simona Forti, *New Demons. Rethinking Power and Evil Today*, (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2015).

[18] Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (1948) (Torino: Einaudi, 1963).

[19] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

[20] As G. Agamben expresses it in *Homo sacer*, 45ff.

[21] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958) (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988).

[22] It is nevertheless worthwhile to cite some of the most influential “anthropologist-philosophers:” A. Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts*,

vol. II, Hoheneichen Verlag, München, 1933, Id., *Gestalten der Idee*, Hoheneichen Verlag, München, 1936, and *Blut und Ehre* Hoheneichen Verlag, München, 1934. Ernst Krieck, *Völkisch – politische Anthropologie*, Armanen-Verlag, Leipzig, 1936. Similar anthropological premises can be found in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Besides them, we must remember those several writers who, between 1932 and 1934, link Plato's philosophy to the National Socialist movement. The most widely read and circulated include: J. Bannes, *Hitler und Platon*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Leipzig, 1933; and Id., *Hitlers Kampf und Platons Staat*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Leipzig, 1933; A. Gabler, *Platon und Der Führer*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Leipzig, 1934; The most important is Hans K.F Günther, who would have reformed in a solid doctrinal organism the early theories of Gobienau. He is, indeed, one of the most widely read authors of the Nazi era, and his works had extensive success and were often reprinted. In the 1920s, he published many treaties on race: *Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes*, Lehemanns Verlag, München, 1922, reprinted 16 times in more than 100,000 copies (Id., *Rassenkunde des Jüdischen Volk*, Lehemanns Verlag, München, 1929; Id., *Platon als Hüter des Lebens*, Lehemanns Verlag, München, 1928; Id. *Humanitas*, Lehmanns Verlag, München 1937.

[23] On this, see S. Forti, *New demons*, cit, pp. 200ff; also P. Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1999.

[24] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, cit.

[25] On the 'Health Ideology', see, at least, J. Ruffiè, *Naissance de la médecine prédictive*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 1993; L. Sfez, *La santé parfaite. Critique d'une nouvelle utopie*, Seuil, Paris, 1995; M. Fitzpatrick, *The tyranny of Health. Doctors and the regulation of lifestyle*, Routledge, London, 2005; J. Goffette, *Naissance de l'anthropotechnie. De la médecine au modelage de l'humain*; but still the 'classic', I. Illich, *Medical Nemesis: the expropriation of health*, Marion Boyars, London, 1976.

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