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The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy
(Introduction)

(1952)

Note

The remarkable merit of Talmon is to have shown that "democracy" is not the absolutely wondrous political recipe for the solution of all problems. Since the time of the French Revolution, a current of thought has advocated and practiced what Talmon calls "totalitarian democracy".

The most evident sign of totalitarian democracy is the fact that "it treats all human thought and action as having social significance, and therefore as falling within the orbit of political action." So the space for personal decisions is continuously narrowed and politics (i.e. political men) reigns supreme. Politics becomes the new religion and it could very well be seen as the new "opium of the people."

This study is an attempt to show that concurrently with the liberal type of democracy there emerged from the same premises in the eighteenth century a trend towards what we propose to call the totalitarian type of democracy. These two currents have existed side by side ever since the eighteenth century. The tension between them has constituted an important chapter in modern history, and has now become the most vital issue of our time.

It would of course be an exaggeration to suggest that the whole of the period can be summed up in terms of this conflict. Nevertheless it was always present, although usually confused and obscured by other issues, which may have seemed clearer to contemporaries, but viewed from the standpoint of the present day seem incidental and even trivial. Indeed, from the vantage point of the mid-twentieth century the history of the last hundred and fifty years looks like a systematic preparation for the headlong collision between empirical and liberal democracy on the one hand, and totalitarian Messianic democracy on the other, in which the world crisis of to-day consists.

(1) The Two Types of Democracy, Liberal and Totalitarian

The essential difference between the two schools of democratic thought as they have evolved is not, as is often alleged, in the affirmation of the value of liberty by one, and its denial by the other. It is in their different attitude to politics. The liberal approach assumes politics to be a matter of trial and error, and regards political systems as pragmatic contrivances of human ingenuity and spontaneity. It also recognizes a variety of levels of personal and collective endeavour, which are altogether outside the sphere of politics.

The totalitarian democratic school, on the other hand, is based upon the assumption of a sole and exclusive truth in politics. It may be called political Messianism in the sense that it postulates a preordained, harmonious and perfect scheme of things, to which men are irresistibly driven, and at which they are bound

to arrive. It recognizes ultimately only one plane of existence, the political. It widens the scope of politics to embrace the whole of human existence. It treats all human thought and action as having social significance, and therefore as falling within the orbit of political action. Its political ideas are not a set of pragmatic precepts or a body of devices applicable to a special branch of human endeavour. They are an integral part of an all-embracing and coherent philosophy. Politics is defined as the art of applying this philosophy to the organization of society, and the final purpose of politics is only achieved when this philosophy reigns supreme over all fields of life.

Both schools affirm the supreme value of liberty. But whereas one finds the essence of freedom in spontaneity and the absence of coercion, the other believes it to be realized only in the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose. It is outside our scope to decide whether liberal democracy has the faith that totalitarian democracy claims to have in final aims. What is beyond dispute is that the final aims of liberal democracy have not the same concrete character. They are conceived in rather negative terms, and the use of force for their realization is considered as an evil. Liberal democrats believe that in the absence of coercion men and society may one day reach through a process of trial and error a state of ideal harmony. In the case of totalitarian democracy, this state is precisely defined, and is treated as a matter of immediate urgency, a challenge for direct action, an imminent event.

The problem that arises for totalitarian democracy, and which is one of the main subjects of this study, may be called the paradox of freedom. Is human freedom compatible with an exclusive pattern of social existence, even if this pattern aims at the maximum of social justice and security? The paradox of totalitarian democracy is in its insistence that they are compatible. The purpose it proclaims is never presented as an absolute idea, external and prior to man. It is thought to be immanent in man's reason and will, to constitute the fullest satisfaction of his true interest, and to be the guarantee of his freedom. This is the reason why the extreme forms of popular sovereignty became the essential concomitant of this absolute purpose. From the difficulty of reconciling freedom with the idea of an absolute purpose spring all the particular problems and antinomies of totalitarian democracy. This difficulty could only be resolved by thinking not in terms of men as they are, but as they were meant to be, and would be, given the proper conditions. In so far as they are at variance with the absolute ideal they can be ignored, coerced or intimidated into conforming, without any real violation of the democratic principle being involved. In the proper conditions, it is held, the conflict between spontaneity and duty would disappear, and with it the need for coercion. The practical question is, of course, whether constraint will disappear because all have learned to act in harmony, or because all opponents have been eliminated.

(2) The Eighteenth-century Origins of Political Messianism; the Schism

Enough has been said already to indicate that totalitarian democracy will be treated in these pages as an integral part of the Western tradition. It is vital to add that much of the totalitarian democratic attitude was contained in the original and general eighteenth century pattern of thought. The branching out of the two types of democracy from the common stem took place only after the common beliefs had been tested in the ordeal of the French Revolution.

From the point of view of this study the most important change that occurred in the eighteenth century was the peculiar state of mind which achieved dominance in the second part of the century. Men were gripped by the idea that the conditions, a product of faith, time and custom, in which they and their forefathers had been living, were unnatural and had all to be replaced by deliberately planned uniform patterns, which would be natural and rational.

This was the result of the decline of the traditional order in Europe: religion lost its intellectual as well as its emotional hold; hierarchical feudalism disintegrated under the impact of social and economic factors; and the older conception of society based on status came to be replaced by the idea of the abstract, individual man.

The rationalist idea substituted social utility for tradition as the main criterion of social institutions and values. It also suggested a form of social determinism, to which men are irresistibly driven, and which they are bound to accept one day. It thus postulated a single valid system, which would come into existence when everything not accounted for by reason and utility had been removed. This idea was, of course,

bound to clash with the inveterate irrationality of man's ways, his likings and attachments.

The decline of religious authority implied the liberation of man's conscience, but it also implied something else. Religious ethics had to be speedily replaced by secular, social morality. With the rejection of the Church, and of transcendental justice, the State remained, the sole source and sanction of morality. This was a matter of great importance, at a time when politics were considered indistinguishable from ethics.

The decline of the idea of status consequent on the rise of individualism spelt the doom of privilege, but also contained totalitarian potentialities. If, as will be argued in this essay, empiricism is the ally of freedom, and the doctrinaire spirit is the friend of totalitarianism, the idea of man as an abstraction, independent of the historic groups, to which he belongs, is likely to become a powerful vehicle of totalitarianism.

These three currents merged into the idea of a homogeneous society, in which men live upon one exclusive plane of existence. There were no longer to be different levels of social life, such as the temporal and the transcendental, or membership of a class and citizenship. The only recognized standard of judgment was to be social utility, as expressed in the idea of the general good, which was spoken of as if it were a visible and tangible objective.

The whole of virtue was summed up as conformity to the rationalist, natural pattern. In the past it was possible for the State to regard many things as matters for God and the Church alone. The new State could recognize no such limitations. Formerly, men lived in groups. A man had to belong to some group, and could belong to several at the same time. Now there was to be only one framework for all activity: the nation. The eighteenth century never distinguished clearly between the sphere of personal self-expression and that of social action. The privacy of creative experience and feeling, which is the salt of freedom, was in due course to be swamped by the pressure of the permanently assembled people, vibrating with one collective emotion. The fact that eighteenth-century thinkers were ardent prophets of liberty and the rights of man is so much taken for granted that it scarcely needs to be mentioned. But what must be emphasized is the intense preoccupation of the eighteenth century with the idea of virtue, which was nothing if not conformity to the hoped-for pattern of social harmony. They refused to envisage the conflict between liberty and virtue as inevitable. On the contrary, the inevitable equation of liberty with virtue and reason was the most cherished article of their faith. When the eighteenth-century secular religion came face to face with this conflict, the result was the great schism. Liberal democracy flinched from the spectre of force, and fell back upon the trial-and-error philosophy. Totalitarian Messianism hardened into an exclusive doctrine represented by a vanguard of the enlightened, who justified themselves in the use of coercion against those who refused to be free and virtuous.

The other cause for this fissure, certainly no less important, was the question of property. The original impulse of political Messianism was not economic, but ethical and political. However radical in their theoretical premises, most eighteenth-century thinkers shrunk from applying the principle of total renovation to the sphere of economics and property. It was however extremely difficult to theorize about a rational harmonious social order, with contradictions resolved, anti-social impulses checked, and man's desire for happiness satisfied, while leaving the field of economic endeavour to be dominated by established facts and interests, man's acquisitive spirit and chance. Eighteenth-century thinkers became thus involved in grave inconsistencies, which they attempted to cover with all kinds of devices. The most remarkable of these certainly was the Physiocratic combination of absolutism in politics with the laissez-faire theory in economics, which claimed that the free, unhampered economic pursuits of men would set themselves into a harmonious pattern, in accordance with the laws of demand and supply. But before the eighteenth century had come to an end, the inner logic of political Messianism, precipitated by the Revolutionary upheaval, its hopes, its lessons and its disappointments, converted the secular religion of the eighteenth century from a mainly ethical into a social and economic doctrine, based on ethical premises. The postulate of salvation, implied in the idea of the natural order, came to signify to the masses stirred by the Revolution a message of social salvation before all. And so the objective ideal of social harmony gave place to the yearnings and strivings of a class; the principle of virtuous liberty to the passion for security. The possessing classes, surprised and frightened by the social dynamism of the idea of the natural order, hastened to shake off the philosophy which they had earlier so eagerly embraced as a weapon in their struggle against feudal privilege. The Fourth Estate seized it from their hands, and filled it with new meaning. And so the ideology of the rising bourgeoisie was transformed into that of the proletariat.

The object of this book is to examine the stages through which the social ideals of the eighteenth century

were transformed - on one side - into totalitarian democracy. These stages are taken to be three: the eighteenth-century postulate, the Jacobin improvisation, and the Babouvist crystallization; all leading up to the emergence of economic communism on the one hand, and to the synthesis of popular sovereignty and single-party dictatorship on the other. The three stages constitute the three parts into which this study is divided. The evolution of the liberal type of democracy is outside its scope.

Modern totalitarian democracy is a dictatorship resting on popular enthusiasm, and is thus completely different from absolute power wielded by a divine-right King, or by an usurping tyrant. In so far as it is a dictatorship based on ideology and the enthusiasm of the masses, it is the outcome, as will be shown, of the synthesis between the eighteenth-century idea of the natural order and the Rousseauist idea of popular fulfilment and self-expression. By means of this synthesis rationalism was made into a passionate faith. Rousseau's "general will", an ambiguous concept, sometimes conceived as valid *a priori*, sometimes as immanent in the will of man, exclusive and implying unanimity, became the driving force of totalitarian democracy, and the source of all its contradictions and antinomies. These are to be examined in detail.

(3) Totalitarianism of the Right and Totalitarianism of the Left

The emphasis of this theory is always upon Man. And here is the distinguishing mark between totalitarianism of the Left, with which this study is concerned, and totalitarianism of the Right. While the starting-point of totalitarianism of the Left has been and ultimately still is man, his reason and salvation, that of the Right totalitarian schools has been the collective entity, the State, the nation, or the race. The former trend remains essentially individualist, atomistic and rationalist even when it raises the class or party to the level of absolute ends. These are, after all, only mechanically formed groups. Totalitarians of the Right operate solely with historic, racial and organic entities, concepts altogether alien to individualism and rationalism. That is why totalitarian ideologies of the Left always are inclined to assume the character of a universal creed, a tendency which totalitarianism of the Right altogether lacks. For reason is a unifying force, presupposing mankind to be the sum total of individual reasoning beings. Totalitarianism of the Right implies the negation of such a unity as well as a denial of the universality of human values. It represents a special form of pragmatism. Without raising the question of the absolute significance of the professed tenets, it aspires to a mode of existence, in which the faculties of man may - in a deliberately limited circumference of space, time and numbers - be stirred, asserted and realized so as to enable him to have what is nowadays called a wholly satisfying experience in a collective *élan*, quickened by mass emotion and the impact of impressive exploits; in brief, the myth.

The second vital difference between the two types of totalitarianism is to be found in their divergent conceptions of human nature. The Left proclaims the essential goodness and perfectibility of human nature. The Right declares man to be weak and corrupt. Both may preach the necessity of coercion. **The Right teaches the necessity of force as a permanent way of maintaining order among poor and unruly creatures, and training them to act in a manner alien to their mediocre nature.** Totalitarianism of the left, when resorting to force, does so in the conviction that force is used only in order to quicken the pace of man's progress to perfection and social harmony. It is thus legitimate to use the term democracy in reference to totalitarianism of the Left. The term could not be applied to totalitarianism of the Right.

It may be said that there are distinctions that make little difference, especially where results are concerned. It may further be maintained that whatever their original premises were, totalitarian parties and régimes of the Left have invariably tended to degenerate into soulless power machines, whose lip service to the original tenets is mere hypocrisy. Now, this is a question not only of academic interest, but of much practical importance.

Even if we accept this diagnosis of the nature of Left totalitarianism when triumphant, are we to attribute its degeneration to the inevitable process of corrosion which an idea undergoes when power falls into the hands of its adherents? Or should we seek the reason for it deeper, namely in the very essence of the contradiction between ideological absolutism and individualism, inherent in modern political Messianism? When the deeds of men in power belie their words, are they to be called hypocrites and cynics or are they victims of an intellectual delusion?

Here is one of the questions to be investigated. This essay is not concerned with the problem of power as such, only with that of power in relation to consciousness. The objective forces favouring the concentration

of power and the subordination of the individual to a power machine, such as modern methods of production and the *arcana imperii* offered by modern technical developments, are outside the scope of this work. The political tactics of totalitarian parties and systems, or the blueprints of social positivist philosophies for the human hive, will be considered not for their own sake, but in their bearing on man's awareness and beliefs. What is vital for the present investigation is the human element: the thrill of fulfilment experienced by the believers in a modern Messianic movement, which makes them experience submission as deliverance; the process that goes on in the minds of the leaders, whether in soliloquy or in public discussion, when faced with the question of whether their acts are the self-expression of the Cause or their own wilful deeds; the stubborn faith that as a result of proper social arrangements and education, the conflict between spontaneity and the objective pattern will ultimately be resolved by the acceptance of the latter, without any sense of coercion.

(4) Secular and Religious Messianism

The modern secular religion of totalitarian democracy has had unbroken continuity as a sociological force for over a hundred and fifty years. Both aspects, its continuity and its character as a sociological force, need stressing. These two essential features permit us to ignore the isolated literary ventures into Utopia in the earlier centuries, without denying the influence of Plato, Thomas More or Campanella upon men like Rousseau, Diderot, Mably, or Saint-Just and Buonarroti. If one were in search of antecedents, one would also have to turn to the various outbursts of chiliasm in the Middle Ages and in the Reformation, especially to the extreme wing of the Puritan Revolution in seventeenth-century England. The coexistence of liberal democracy and revolutionary Messianism in modern times could legitimately be compared to the relationship between the official Church and the eschatological revolutionary current in Christianity during the ages of faith. Always flowing beneath the surface of official society, the Christian revolutionary current burst forth from time to time in the form of movements of evangelical poverty, heretical sects, and social-religious revolts. Like the two major trends of the modern era, the Church and the rebels against it derived their ideas from the same source. The heterodox groups were, however, too ardent in their literal interpretation of God's word. They refused to come to terms with the flesh and the kingdom of this world, and were unwilling to confine the ideal of a society of saints to the exclusively transcendental plane.

There were, however, vital differences between the chiliastic movements of the earlier centuries and modern political Messianism. The former were only sporadic occurrences, although the tension from which they sprang was always latent. A flame burst forth and was soon totally extinguished or rendered harmless to society at large. The crisis might leave behind a sect. The myth might survive and perhaps rekindle a spark in some remote place and at some later date. Society as a whole went on much as before, although not quite free from the fear and mental discomfort left by the conflagration, and not wholly immune to the influence of the new sect.

There was however a fundamental principle in pre-eighteenth-century chiliasm that made it impossible for it to play the part of modern political Messianism. It was its religious essence. This explains why the Messianic movements or spasms of the earlier type invariably ended by breaking away from society, and forming sects based upon voluntary adherence and community of experience. Modern Messianism has always aimed at a revolutionary society as a whole.

The driving power of the sects was the word of God, and the hope of achieving salvation by facing God alone and directly, without the aid of intermediary powers or submission to them, whether spiritual or temporal, and yet as part of a society of equal saints

This ideal is not unlike the modern expectation of a society of men absolutely free and equal, and yet acting in spontaneous and perfect accord. In spite of this superficial similarity, the differences between the two attitudes are fundamental. Although the Christian revolutionaries fought for the individual's freedom to interpret God's word, their sovereign was not man but God. They aimed at personal salvation and an egalitarian society based on the Law of Nature, because they had it from God that there lies salvation, and believed that obedience to God is the condition of human freedom. The point of reference of modern Messianism, on the other hand, is man's reason and will, and its aim happiness on earth, achieved by a social transformation. The point of reference is temporal, but the claims are absolute. It is thus a remarkable fact that the Christian revolutionaries, with few exceptions, notably Calvin's Geneva and Anabaptist Münster, shrank from the use of force to impose their own pattern, in spite of their belief in its divine source

and authority, while secular Messianism, starting with a point of reference in time, has developed a fanatical resolve to make its doctrine rule absolutely and everywhere. The reasons are not far to seek.

Even if the Monistic principle of religious Messianism had succeeded in dominating and reshaping society the result would still have been fundamentally different from the situation created by modern political "absolutism". Society might have been forbidden the compromises which are made possible by the Orthodox distinction between the kingdom of God and the earthly State, and as a consequence social and political arrangements might have lost much of their flexibility. The sweep towards the enforcement of an exclusive pattern would nevertheless have been hampered, if not by the thought of the fallibility of man, at least by the consciousness that life on earth is not a closed circle, but has its continuation and conclusion in eternity. Secular Messianic Monism is subject to no such restraints. It demands that the whole account be settled here and now.

The extreme wing of English Puritanism at the time of the Cromwellian Revolution still bore the full imprint of religious eschatology. It had already acquired modern features however. It combined extreme individualism with social radicalism and a totalitarian temperament. Nevertheless this movement, far from initiating the continuous current of modern political Messianism, remained from the European point of view an isolated episode. It was apparently quite unknown to the early representatives of the movement under discussion. While eighteenth-century French thinkers and revolutionary leaders were alive to the political lessons of the "official" Cromwellian Revolution as a deterrent against military dictatorship, and a writer like Harrington was respected as a master, it is doubtful whether the more radical aspects of the English Revolution were much known or exercised any influence in France before the nineteenth century. The strongest influence on the fathers of totalitarian democracy was that of antiquity, interpreted in their own way. Their myth of antiquity was the image of liberty equated with virtue. The citizen of Sparta or Rome was proudly free, yet a marvel of ascetic discipline. He was an equal member of the sovereign nation, and at the same time had no life or interests outside the collective tissue.

(5) Questions of Method

Objections may be urged against the view that political Messianism as a postulate preceded the compact set of social and economic ideas with which it has come to be associated. It may be said that it is wrong to treat Messianism as a substance that can be divorced from its attributes; to consider it altogether apart from the events which produced it, the instruments which have been used to promote it, and the concrete aims and policies of the men who represented it at any given moment. Such a procedure, it may be said, presupposes an almost mystical agency active in history. It is important to answer this objection not less for its philosophical significance than for the question of method it raises.

What this study is concerned with is a state of mind, a way of feeling, a disposition, a pattern of mental, emotional and behaviouristic elements, best compared to the set of attitudes engendered by a religion. Whatever may be said about the significance of the economic or other factors in the shaping of beliefs, it can hardly be denied that the all-embracing attitudes of this kind, once crystallized, are the real substance of history. The concrete elements of history, the acts of politicians, the aspirations of people, the ideas, values, preferences and prejudices of an age, are the outward manifestations of its religion in the widest sense.

The problem under discussion could not be dealt with on the plane of systematic, discursive reasoning alone. For as in religion, although the partial theological framework may be a marvel of logic, with syllogism following syllogism, the first premises, the axioms or the postulates must remain a matter of faith. They can be neither proved nor disproved. And it is they that really matter. They determine the ideas and acts, and resolve contradictions into some higher identity or harmony.

The postulate of some ultimate, logical, exclusively valid social order is a matter of faith, and it is not much use trying to defeat it by argument. But its significance to the believer, and the power it has to move men and mountains, can hardly be exaggerated. Now, in Europe and elsewhere, for the last century and a half, there have always been men and movements animated by such a faith, preparing for the Day, referring all their ideas and acts to some all-embracing system, sure of some pre-ordained and final denouement of the historic drama with all its conflicts into an absolute harmony. Jacobins may have differed from the Babouvists, the Blanquists from many of the secret societies in the first half of the nineteenth century, the

Communists from the Socialists, the Anarchists from all others, yet they all belong to one religion. This religion emerged in the second part of the eighteenth century and its rise will be traced in these pages. The most difficult problem of the secular religion was to be the antinomy of freedom and the exclusive Messianic pattern.

Complex, intricate and at times magnificent as the theories evolved by the various Messianic trends in the later days were, the original phase, which is the subject of this study, reveals the first elements and threads in a crude, naive and simple form. This fact should help towards understanding the historic phenomenon as a whole. For some of the basic ideas of the late and highly developed Messianic secular religion, especially, as it will be shown, those relating to human nature, ethics and philosophical principles, have remained the same as they were in the eighteenth century.

It is in the nature of doctrines postulating universal abstract patterns to be schematic and grey. They lack the warmth, limpidity and richness which is to be found in living human and national tissues. They do not convey the tensions which arise between unique personalities, in conflict with each other and their surroundings. They fail to offer the absorbing interest of the unpredictable situation and the pragmatic approach to it. But all these, absent in the doctrine, emerge in the vicissitudes of the doctrine as a sociological force.

This study is neither purely a treatise on political theory, nor a recital of events. Justice would not be done to the subject by treating it in terms of the individual psychology of a few leaders. Nor would the point be made clear by an analysis in terms of mass psychology. Religion is created and lived by men, yet it is a framework in which men live. The problem analysed here is only partly one of behaviour. The modern secular religion must first be treated as an objective reality. Only when this has been done will it be possible to consider the intellectual and historical patterns created by the interplay between the secular religion and particular men and situations. This interplay becomes particularly interesting, when it results in contradictions between, on the one side, the impersonal pattern and, on the other, the demands of the particular situation and the uniqueness of personality.