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Political violence and terror: Arendtian reflections

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Abstract

This essay takes a critical look at the rubric ‘Age of Terror,’ a rubric which has enjoyed a certain amount of theoretical and philosophical cachet in recent years. My argument begins by noting the continuity between this hypostatization and contemporary ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric, a continuity that is, in certain respects, ironic given the politics of the ‘Age of Terror’ theorists. It then moves—via Machiavelli, Max Weber, and Hannah Arendt—to a consideration of the topics of state violence (on the one hand) and totalitarian terror (on the other). I use Arendt’s theorization of totalitarian terror for a dual purpose: first, to emphasize the gap between totalitarian terror and the more familiar ‘terror as means’; second, to question the characterization of recent Islamic terrorism as totalitarian in essence. Arendt’s distinctions between violence, terror and totalitarian terror help us avoid the Schmittian logic installed by advocates of the ‘War on Terror’ and by a variety of writers anxious to identify a ill-defined and generic ‘totalitarianism’ as the transhistorical and transcultural ‘other’ of liberalism.

Keywords: *terror; Islamic terrorism; Hannah Arendt; Max Weber; totalitarianism; ‘Age of Terror’; liberalism; Machiavelli; evil as policy*

INTRODUCTION

As readers of a certain age might recall, October 25 to 28, 1961, constituted the period of maximum tension—and seemingly imminent nuclear war—between the USA and the Soviet Union. I don’t remember much about the public lead-up to the moment when the Soviets blinked and agreed to start disassembling the nuclear missiles recently based in Cuba (I was four at the time). I do, however, have one vivid memory: namely, being hustled out of a Sears Department Store by my mother on what must have been October 27, 1961. Like a lot of people in the USA, my mother was expecting a nuclear attack, and the last place she wanted herself and her child to be vaporized was within the confines of a Sears Department store.

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Why do I start with this ‘primordial’ memory? Simply to remind readers that—in my life and probably yours as well—terror has been an omnipresent background possibility that periodically, and sometime spectacularly, lurches into the foreground. Admittedly, relatively privileged Westerners of my generation have had little first-hand experience with terror, unlike European, Asian, and Slavic populations in the period between 1930 and 1950. However, the memory of the Cold War is sufficiently fresh to induce skepticism about the idea of a looming ‘Age of Terror,’ one marked off from previous periods in the same way that historians speak of an ‘Age of Revolution,’ an ‘Age of Empire,’ or an ‘Age of Organization.’¹

As Hannah Arendt reminds us, terror has been around as long as there have been tyrants, despots, states, and revolutionary movements.² This is to say that it has been around as long as recorded history. We should never forget Hegel’s famous remark (in the ‘Introduction’ to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*) that history is a slaughter-bench. Indeed, if any age deserves the title ‘Age of Terror’ it would be the period between 1914 and 1950 in which (conservatively estimated) somewhere in the neighborhood of 60–80 million lost their lives to political violence and terror.³ Of course, the bulk of that terror was unleashed by both established and revolutionary *states*, with the totalitarian regimes of the middle of the century claiming the lion’s share.

Contemporary advocates of the idea that we are currently entering a new ‘Age of Terror’ would hardly deny the hecatombs of the twentieth century. Writers like Paul Berman argue that a new and particularly virulent totalitarian ideology—one structurally similar to those that appeared in the inter-war period—has now emerged in the Muslim world. Since none of us can see into the future, the persuasiveness of the notion of the twenty-first century as an ‘Age of Terror’ thus depends upon something like the following syllogism: Terror is central to the ideology and practice of totalitarian regimes; a new form of totalitarian ideology has appeared in the Muslim world; as long as this ideology is around, we can expect to face an endless and shape-shifting terrorist threat, one comparable in stature to that posed by the totalitarian regimes of the not so distant past.

This persuasiveness of this syllogism depends, in large part, on whether one accepts the idea that Islamic fundamentalism is indeed a ‘totalitarian ideology,’ one comparable in strength, magnitude, and motivating power to Nazi racism and Bolshevik–Stalinist class war. If the Muslim world were indeed in the grip of an ideological fervor in which millions of boys and young men wanted to wage jihad, we would be justified in speaking of a totalitarian deformation of Islam—‘Islamofascism’—just as we speak of Stalinist ideology as a totalitarian deformation of Marxism. Yet however wide-spread anti-Western feeling is in Muslim communities, and however tirelessly radical mullahs attempt to indoctrinate the young, the number willing to sign up for Holy War on the West remains—relatively speaking—small. The signs of a genuine ‘mass movement’—one essential precondition for what we have historically called totalitarianism—are lacking.

Events like September 11th have an outsize (and therefore somewhat misleading) impact not simply because they were planned and executed as symbolic spectacles,

but also because they occur in societies that have been relatively immune to acts of political terror.⁴ Shortly after September 11th, America woke up to the possibility—or so it seemed—that the so-called ‘Muslim world’ might be as hostile to *its* existence as it was to, say, Israel’s. While officially dismissed by the Bush Administration, this possibility was seized upon by neo-conservative commentators (and some liberals, like Berman) eager to create a united battlefield against radical Islam and the supposed untold millions of its sympathetic ‘fellow travelers.’

Without underestimating the amount of anti-American feeling that exists in the ‘Muslim world,’ I would have to say that this vision of an entire civilization arrayed (or potentially arrayed) against us—equal parts Samuel Huntington and Carl Schmitt—is an ideological fiction, one crafted for specific political purposes.⁵ That said, terrorist attacks will no doubt continue—at both the ‘retail’ and ‘wholesale’ levels—in Europe, America and, of course, the Mid-East. There will be work of hundreds of young men (and some young women) who, though often Westernized themselves, have come to believe a new, radically anti-Western ideology, one cloaking itself in the garb of traditionalism. And, however, hyped the threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb may be, we have absolutely no guarantee that one of the loose weapons floating around in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse will not wind up in the hands of some of these young men or women. Only a fool would deny the reality of the *threat* of terror on a large scale, even if the mathematical risk remains (relatively speaking) small.

It is on this logical possibility that advocates of a unified world ‘War on Terror’ pounce, pointing out that the idea of state-sponsored terrorism is—if not quite an anachronism—no longer adequate to the current threat. Huge numbers and the presence of organized ‘mass movements’ no longer matter. Terror—and the ‘totalitarian’ ideology that inspires it—has become nomadic and (in the parlance of the experts) ‘viral’ in nature. It is enough, the architects and advocates of the War on Terror imply, to make us nostalgic for the Cold War.

In this essay, I want to use Hannah Arendt—but also Machiavelli and Max Weber—to cut some of the ‘totalitarian’ pretensions of the so-called ‘Age of Terror’ down to size. My goal is to deflate a central claim of the ‘War on Terror’ ideologues: namely, that the political violence and terror emanating from Islamic fundamentalists constitutes a threat to Western freedom every bit as large, and potentially every bit as destructive, as Stalinist Communism or Nazi Fascism.⁶

I think such claims are remarkably overblown, and that they have functioned chiefly to facilitate adventurism abroad and the undermining of constitutional government at home. To repeat, terrorism is a real threat, and de-centralized terrorist cells pose a remarkable challenge to police and security officials in Europe, Israel, America and the Middle East. They have the potential ability not only to kill hundreds (perhaps thousands) of innocents, but to spread a type of fear that may ultimately render the ‘open society’ as we know it a thing of the past. The terrorists do not, however, pose quite the ‘existential threat’ the neo-conservative ideologues would like to claim: a threat to our basic ‘way of life’ and to our respective survival as political societies. I would like to challenge this Schmittian conclusion even though I,

like Schmitt, am fully aware of Hegel's dictum that quantitative changes, when large enough, are qualitative ones as well, and that this dictum has a specifically political relevance.⁷

My argument begins with some theoretical reflections on what we might call the 'standard' framing of violence in Western political thought. I then move on to say a word or two about how Hannah Arendt challenged this framing with her theory of political action and her conception of political power. Finally, I turn to consider what light, if any, Arendt's theory of totalitarianism throws on contemporary terrorism, the ideology that animates it, and those who would make the fight against it the central political fact of our time.

VIOLENCE, POLITICAL TERROR, AND TOTALITARIANISM

As any reader of Machiavelli or Max Weber knows, these two 'realists' posit a surprisingly intimate relationship between political action, the state, and *violence*. The *Prince* and the *Discourses* are full of examples intended to underline the necessity of dispensing violence if one is to maintain one's state, whether against internal competitors or external foes. Again and again, we find Machiavelli pointing to some 'extraordinary action' (such as Romulus's fratricide), justifying it in terms of either founding or preserving the state. As Machiavelli puts it in one of his more famous rules of thumb, 'it is indeed fitting that while the [extraordinary and violent] action accuses him, the result excuses him; and when the result is good, as it was with Romulus, it will always excuse him.'⁸

The brutal realism of this stance—the sheer nakedness of the 'end justifies the means' ethos it apparently endorses—has made Machiavelli a favorite target of both Catholic natural law theorists and liberal political philosophy. And it is true that the Machiavellian political cosmos is one that moves according to its own laws, bereft of the moral limits supplied by either Divine legislation or a widely dispersed recognition of individual rights. But—as Sheldon Wolin pointed out long ago—there is something like an 'economy of violence' in Machiavelli. This is the idea that, while violence may be an unavoidable *means* for founding and preserving states, it is of crucial importance to get the 'dosage' right, for the political actor to avoid dispensing *surplus* violence.⁹

Too much violence leads not to stability, glory and praise, but to instability, hatred and blame. The reason why Machiavelli praises an ambitious striver like Cesare Borgia, but condemns both Agathocles the Sicilian and Oliverotto of Fermo, is not because Cesare was less 'ferocious' in his energy and ability. Rather, it is because Oliverotto's and Agathocles' 'ability' manifested itself in an unrelenting 'wickedness,' that is, in an *inability* to moderate their use of brutality and violence in the pursuit of power.¹⁰ Cesare himself may have been far from limiting his violence to its strategic (and tactical) minimum; far, in other words, from finding the 'right dosage.' Yet Machiavelli's insistence on the necessity of violent means is hardly intended to cut all ties between politics and ethics. His overarching goal is, rather, to trace an ethic

distinctive to politics; one whose supreme goods are the stability and flourishing of the state (whether principality or law-governed republic). Such states are ‘islands’ of stability in an uncertain and dangerous world. They must be protected by actions that often go beyond ‘ordinary’ morality. At the same time, however, they make the practices and virtues of ordinary morality possible.¹¹ Or so the argument goes.

One finds a similar realism—and a parallel insistence on an ‘ethic specific to politics’—in Max Weber. In ‘Politics as a Vocation’ Weber famously insisted that the political sphere is characterized not by any specific end or set of purposes, but by a very particular indeed, ‘diabolical’—means: power backed up by violence.¹² For Weber, a political association is—irreducibly—one based on a relationship of rule or domination (*Herrschaft*). It is distinguished from other types of association in which command and obedience figure by its ultimate appeal to coercive power and what Weber calls its ‘monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory.’¹³

This means that *politics itself* must be defined as a competition or ‘striving’ to ‘share power’ or ‘influence the distribution of power.’¹⁴ A serious political actor is one who recognizes two things. First, that this striving for power is the formal goal of *all* political struggle. Second, that the successful political competitor will invariably have to employ morally questionable means in order to fulfill the particular duties and obligations his ‘vocation’ imposes on him. It follows that the relation between *politics* and *ethics* cannot be seen as continuous with the morality of everyday life. But neither can it be seen as *non-existent*, as if politics—the competition for power and the activity of rule—had, in the end, *nothing* to do with ethics.¹⁵ The political actor’s unavoidable recourse to ‘diabolical’ means clearly entails a willingness to get one’s hands ‘dirty.’ But it also entails, in Weber’s view, a keen sense of responsibility for the *consequences* of violence and coercion.

The ‘realism’ of Machiavelli and Weber consists, then, in their presentation of the political realm as one of endless struggle, and in their charge to the political actor to ‘do what must be done’ in order to preserve the state or (as Weber puts it) to responsibly serve their cause. As brutal as the resulting picture of politics may be, it is somewhat less than intellectually honest to present either Machiavelli or Weber as justifying state or revolutionary terror (as Leo Strauss has done).¹⁶ Rightly or wrongly, they thought that the state (or the ‘leading politician’) dispensed violence precisely in order to *avoid* terror. For a long time, this ‘moralization’ of *raison d’état* (shared, for example, by Hobbes) apparently held. It took the horrific political experience of the twentieth century to reveal terror as one relatively predictable outcome of the state’s ‘monopoly on violence’ and, indeed, the logic of sovereignty.

For Arendt—a different *kind* of theorist of the ‘autonomy of the political’—neither an ‘economy of violence’ nor a personal ‘responsibility for consequences’ were nearly enough. The collapse of balance of power politics in the World War I, followed by the death of responsible political leadership during the inter-war period, pointed to the need to re-think political power and political action in ways detached from ‘sovereign’ state actors. Thus, while Machiavelli and Weber may have been right to suggest that the ‘domain of the political’ constituted a quasi-autonomous realm (one

with its own peculiar ironies and moral paradoxes), they were wrong to insist that power was essentially a *commodity* possessed by the state or the leading political actor.

They were also wrong to think that political action was *strategic* in essence. Arendt's Burke- and Tocqueville-derived conception of action as the 'acting together' of plural political agents, her insistence on the intrinsic *meaningfulness* of political action (action as an 'end in itself'), and her categorical rejection of Weber's definition of political *power* as the capacity to *command* or impose one's will are all attempts to overcome what she saw as a disastrous (but in some sense defining) tendency within the Western tradition of political thought. This is the tendency—the ingrained reflex, if you will—to equate political action with a form of *making*. Viewed through this lens, the political actor appears as essentially a kind of *fabricator*, one who manipulates men and institutions just as the sculptor manipulates stone or the painter prepares a canvass.¹⁷

What Arendt calls 'the traditional substitution of making for acting' has deep roots in the Western tradition. Plato's *Republic*, in which the philosopher-kings create a rigidly hierarchical state in their capacity as 'political artists of character,' is the most obvious example.¹⁸ The recurring formulation of political action as a *means* to some extra-political end—whether this end be moral, religious, economic, or 'social' in nature—is but one effect of this age-old 'substitution.' Another is the tendency—evident, in different ways, in Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli and Rousseau, Marx and Weber—to view human beings as 'raw material' to be shaped by philosophical insight, the laws and institutions of the tutorial state, national purpose, or even their own 'laboring' activity.

On the basis of this reading of the tradition, Arendt rejects the instrumental or means/end conception of political action for two reasons. First, because she thinks it strips us of our dignity as *plural* individuals capable of action and self-government. Second, because she thinks the inner tendency of means/end reasoning is to legitimate *all* means in the pursuit of a theoretically or creedally defined 'just' end. While it was Bolshevik revolutionaries who made famous the notion that 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs' in order to justify their own violent political action, Arendt thinks the basic idea actually underlies much of the Western tradition.

These and cognate thoughts lie behind Arendt's rejection of the 'myth' of violent action as a means to self- and social re-creation. Whether espoused by Frantz Fanon, his philosophical sponsor Jean-Paul Sartre, or the 'revolutionary' elements of the '60s student left, this myth recycled some of the worst elements of 'political action as making' trope that dominated much of the Western tradition. However, the most remarkable aspect of Arendt's essay 'On Violence' is not her rejection of once fashionable ideologies of revolutionary or anti-colonial violence. Rather, it is her insistence that political *power* ultimately has little to do with either force or violence. The latter can prop up a regime that has lost the support of its people for a shorter or longer time, but—ultimately—*no* political structure can be lasting which does not find *some* way of continually re-generating the power that 'springs up wherever people get together and act in concert.'¹⁹ The so-called 'power' found in the coercive

and repressive practices of authoritarian regimes actually testify to a deeply rooted impotence at the heart of the regime.

In making the case for a *political* form of power that springs up *between* citizens in the public realm, Arendt is not being Utopian or Pollyannaish. She did not expect a world of ‘perpetual peace’ to flow from what some celebrants of the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe have called ‘people power.’ She did, however, want to contest the Machiavellian–Weberian assertion that politics simply *is* domination, just as she wanted to contest the traditional assumption that political action (considered as a form of making) is intrinsically violent or coercive in character. Politics as Arendt understands it is essentially the talk—‘the discussions, the deliberations, and the making of decisions’²⁰—that occurs between citizens as they attend to the all-important business of founding and maintaining a legally and institutionally articulated ‘system of power’—in short, a constitution. The central paradox of Arendt’s political thought—her notion that ‘the content of politics is politics’—vanishes once we realize that political action and discussion for her must be *about* the constitutional/institutional housing that shapes our public world if it is to be ‘authentically’ political.

Such talk and the power it generates come to an end whenever a formerly ‘revolutionary’ people loses the taste for political participation and public freedom, or—even more likely—when they are prevented from expressing this taste. *Losing* the taste for public freedom is relatively easy. All it takes is an exclusive focus on material happiness and the ‘freedom from politics’ so dear to the liberal tradition. *Preventing* people from expressing this taste, once it exists, is a more complicated affair. It can take the form of various monopolies (more or less ‘legitimate’) on public power, deliberation, and decision, such as we find in monarchies, oligarchies, etc. Or it can take the form of dictatorial rule, where *fear* of the ruler’s coercive strength is enough to make citizens withdraw from the public realm and attend to their private business alone. Finally—and most menacingly—it can take the form of a ruler terrorizing a formerly free population, with the aim of making individuals isolated, fearful, and constitutively incapable of the trust necessary for any ‘acting together’ to occur.

It is in relation to this last possibility that Arendt (in ‘On Violence’) distinguishes *terror* from *violence*. Terror, she tells us, ‘is not the same as violence; it is, rather, the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power [between people], does not abdicate, but, on the contrary, remains in complete control.’²¹

This definition of terror seems remarkably ill suited to discussing the prospect of a looming ‘Age of Terror,’ one in which non-state actors play such a decisive role. It does, however, point us toward an essential distinction, one developed at greater length in the essays ‘Mankind and Terror’ (1953) and ‘On the Nature of Totalitarianism’ (1954) as well as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* itself.²²

For Arendt, the essential thing about political violence is that it is overwhelmingly *instrumental* in character.²³ Not only is violence dispensed in order to achieve certain specific goals. It is, as Arendt put it, ‘ruled’ by the means/end category throughout.²⁴ Thus, violence cannot generate ‘power’ in Arendt’s sense of the word, but can only

destroy or go around it. It is violence that enables states to maintain domination wherever legitimating belief begins to falter.

Terror is also (generally speaking) a means, one typically employed by a tyrant or despot to keep individuals fearful and submissive. Throughout political history terror has been employed as a means ‘to retain power, to intimidate people, to make them afraid, and...to cause them to behave in certain ways and not in others.’²⁵ But when Arendt confronted *totalitarian terror* she emphasized a crucial difference. In the case of the Nazis and Stalinist Communism, terror was not just a means (although it started out that way). It was, rather the very *essence* of these regimes, their *raison d’être*. It is literally without end, the sacrifice of one class of innocents always being succeeded by the extermination of a new set of victims.²⁶ The perpetual violence of the regimes flows from the relentless dynamism of the movements themselves, their refusal to be limited by any semi-permanent legal or institutional boundaries whatsoever.

There is a logic here, but it is hardly that of strategic violence. Rather, it is the logic born of an ideological ‘super-sense,’ one that claims familiarity with the supra-human forces (Nature; History) that are supposedly moving us in a pre-ordained direction, toward the inevitable victory of the master race in the struggle of the races, or toward the (equally inevitable) victory of the proletariat in the struggle of the classes. Insofar as totalitarian ideology envisions a transformation of the world in accordance with what the ‘law of Nature’ or ‘law of History’ supposedly demand, *terror* serves as a crucial accelerator of what the totalitarians thought was going to occur anyway. The ‘goal’ of total terror is thus not to make people docile and fearful (the tyrant’s aim), but to ‘freeze’ them—to eliminate their capacity for spontaneity and joint action—‘in order to clear the way for the ‘law of movement’ that is Nature or History.’²⁷

The open-ended dynamic installed by totalitarian terror is thus one in which all legal and institutional structures are revolutionized and (so to speak) liquefied. All groups supposedly ‘destined’ for the ash-heap of history are ‘helpfully’ pushed off the stage, while the masses are relentlessly organized and pressed together into ‘One man of gigantic dimensions.’²⁸ Arendt’s unwavering insistence on the radical *novelty* of totalitarianism grows out of her conviction that the Nazi and Stalinist Communist regimes were up to something without precedent in the Western tradition: *total* terror not as a means, but as the embodiment of the ‘law of movement’ of either Nature or History itself. The cost/benefit analyses of the strategic use of violence—Machiavelli and Weber’s subject—meant nothing to men who thought in terms of ‘ideals’ that supposedly spanned millennia, and whose ultimate vision entailed a *transformation of human nature* itself.²⁹

CATEGORIZING ISLAMIST TERROR

This is an extraordinary and counter-intuitive interpretation of the essence of totalitarianism and its peculiar ‘radical evil’—an evil tied to its instantiation of ‘total terror.’³⁰ Arendt’s seemingly hyperbolic claims—arising from her analysis of the

concentration camps and the Gulag—were predictably seized upon by Cold Warriors, who saw them as useful ammunition in the ongoing struggle against the ‘enemies of freedom.’ In more recent times, Islamic fundamentalism and Saddam Hussein have been presented as ‘totalitarian’ threats, the better to marshal support for a ‘War on Terror’ that itself knows no clear boundaries or end. However, the moment we pay attention to Arendt’s *texts* rather than to slogans derived from them, we see that the terror practiced by Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups is of a much more limited—and far more familiar—variety.

Of course, the ideology of Jihad does not want to *accelerate* the process of Nature or History; nor is its aim permanent revolution or perpetual (destructive) motion. Rather, in its ‘maximalist’ version, it wants to *turn the clock back*, the better to recover Islam’s lost glory. Admittedly, nostalgia on such a grand, ideologized scale is itself extremely dangerous. Its proponents wish not to create a new world, but rather to ‘undo’ significant chunks of both history and modernity.³¹ Holding the present up to the standard of an idealized, long-gone past—like holding it up to a standard of ‘abstract reason’—can only produce the ‘fury of destruction’ that Hegel so famously analyzed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.³²

Yet chiliastic dreams of restoring the ‘Caliphate’ aside, the terror deployed by Islamic radicals has obviously been tactic—a *means*—designed to frighten ‘the West’ (and America in particular) into certain broad but specific policy changes. These include: the dismantling of military bases in the Mid-East (Saudi Arabia in particular); the undermining of support for Israel; and the abandonment of Iraq and Afghanistan to religious extremists. Jihadist terror, in other words, is a weapon of the self-proclaimed ‘weak’ (one must insist on scare quotes here) in their struggle against the more conventional (and apparently overwhelming) power of the USA and its allies.

I should state very clearly that I think the killing of innocents is always and everywhere wrong, no matter who does it (states, revolutionary parties, anti-colonialist movements or jihadist groups). My point in contrasting the jihadists with ‘real’ totalitarian terror is neither to minimize nor to rationalize what they do. Rather, in the spirit of Arendt’s *Eichmann* book, it is to de-glamorize their actions and their ‘cause,’ to deprive it of the demonic grandeur that some—including the Bush administration—have invested it with.

Thus, despite its ideological overlay and the supposed novelty of suicide-bombing, the terror the jihadists practice is of a quite recognizable (limited and instrumental) sort. It is deployed for the specific ends I just mentioned. We may consider these ends to be wrong, hateful, or delusional, and see them as fueled by generic forms of anti-modernism and rabid anti-Semitism. They are, however, definable aims, and the recourse to terrorist acts is meant to facilitate them. To put this in slightly different terms: bin Laden’s ideology may be illiberal and anti-Western to its core, but its animating purpose it is not the destruction of *our* freedom and our way of life. Rather, terror is being used—as it has often been used in the past—to blackmail specific nations (the USA and its allies), to make them back down from specific commitments and abandon specific obligations (in the Middle East and elsewhere).

It in this sense, it is clearly not ‘totalitarian’ in quite the way the more ideological advocates of the War on Terror would like us to believe.

Say all this is (basically) true; that, whatever the current incarnation of terrorism is, it is not ‘totalitarian’ in the specifically Arendtian sense. A liberal advocate of the ‘War on Terror’ such as Paul Berman would presumably respond by saying, in effect, ‘so much the worse for Hannah Arendt.’ By emphasizing the novelty, specificity, and total quality of *totalitarian* domination and terror, Arendt’s work proves of limited utility (and interest) when it comes to illuminating the contemporary threat. And indeed, Berman’s own book, *Terror and Liberalism*, takes a tack quite opposed to Arendt’s emphasis on the novelty (and specificity) of totalitarian terror. Framing radical Islamist ideology as the latest historical threat to the West’s liberal order, Berman utilizes a survey approach, looking at various iterations of what he calls the ‘terrorist–totalitarian threat’ that have cropped up over the past 250 years.

Berman’s book revisits (by way of Albert Camus) the ground first staked out by thinkers like Jacob Talmon in the 1960s.³³ For both Berman and Talmon, ‘totalitarian’ has no connotation of either radical novelty or indeed radical evil. Rather, it refers to any number of ideologically driven mass political movements that have warred against liberal modernity and individual rights. Thus, Saint-Just and Robespierre pursued a ‘totalitarian democracy’ built around the ideology of a fictitious ‘General Will,’ while Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin pursued iterations of a ‘total state’ built on the systematic effacement of the distinction between ‘state’ and ‘society.’

Painted in such broad strokes, the concept of ‘totalitarianism’ applies to *any* mass movement that asserts centralized control in the pursuit of ‘chiliastic’ or purifying ends. It doesn’t matter whether this control is legitimated in Rousseauian, Marxist, *völkisch* or religious terms. The end result is always the same: a society without separate and distinct private, social, and political realms; a society bent on achieving ‘oneness’ and a purer form of unity.

Of course, one can accept certain elements of Berman’s—or Talmon’s—analyses without necessarily coming to the same conclusions, especially with regard to current policy options. It makes more than a little sense to see ‘terror’ and ‘totalitarianism’ as internally connected, even if—when making this observation—we are using both terms in senses far looser than Hannah Arendt. There are indeed a series of ‘family resemblances’ that can be drawn out of the radical, anti-liberal and anti-constitutionalist political movements of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, resemblances that are assiduously catalogued in Talmon’s books.

Liberalism—considered broadly, as a rights-based tradition focusing on the rule of law and non-arbitrary government—consists, in no small part, in the pursuit of what Michael Walzer has called ‘the art of separation.’³⁴ By this he means the articulation, protection and regulation of relatively autonomous spheres of life, in accordance with broad ideas of human dignity and individual liberty. So conceived, liberalism has time and again faced challenges from revolutionary, religious, and nationalistic forces bent on breaching its protective divides in the name of some more fundamental unity or power: the people, God’s law, or blood and soil. Written in the shadow of the Cold

War, Talmon's work focused on the genealogy of 'totalitarian democracy'—on various perversions of the idea of popular sovereignty from Rousseau through nineteenth century nationalism and beyond. In contrast, Berman's analysis focuses more tightly on the anti-Western ideology of Western educated figures like Sayyid Qutb—an ideology inherited by Khomeni and (later, in a vulgarized and radicalized form) by the current crop of Islamic extremists.

Does it make sense to call all these challenges 'totalitarian' and to see terror as their essence? Only if we realize that we are deploying the word 'totalitarian' in its most basic (not to say generic) sense, meaning *any* political ideology that aims at the 'overcoming' of the state/society distinction. Such a broad usage is, in fact, helpful in drawing out historical genealogies and the family resemblances between otherwise disparate ideologies. But it has the obvious and substantial (if not necessarily fatal) weakness of equating 'totalitarian' with 'anti-liberal.' That this is a clear debility may be seen from the following example. For most of its history, the Catholic Church has been doggedly anti-liberal and anti-democratic, mincing few words (and actions) when it came to the movement to 'privatize' the matter of religious faith. Does this make it 'totalitarian'? I doubt any responsible commentator—even the most ideologically Protestant—would go that far.

In response, Berman would no doubt say I miss his point. 'Totalitarian' as he uses it refers to *political* movements of varying ideological contents, all intent on using violence and terror to undo the separation of life spheres that liberal and proto-liberal regimes have gradually (and painfully) accomplished over the course of the past three centuries. The Church used violence, persecution and even terror (in the form of the Inquisition). But it did not, Berman would say, avail itself of a chiliastic ideology, the better to 're-make' society from the ground up in accordance with an abstract idea of purity (one born of the people, the nation, or even God's law). Since the Enlightenment, the Church has aimed at *slowing liberalism down* and curbing its 'individualistic' excesses. It has not tried to *destroy* either the idea, or the reality, of a liberal, at least partly secular, society (despite the wishes of such Catholic reactionaries as Joseph de Maistre). It is precisely such destruction, Berman would say, that the religiously inspired terrorists of today doggedly pursue, all in the name of an ideal of community (the *Umma*) which is founded on the repudiation of an independent civil society.³⁵

I do not find this (admittedly hypothetical) response convincing, and reiterate my original point. If we are talking about *totalitarian* terror, then we are well advised to give our definition of 'totalitarian' more texture than simply 'anti-liberal,' 'anti-modern,' or (even more broadly) 'chiliastic.' What I have been calling the *generic* sense of 'totalitarian' is a slippery slope, one which invites us to see virtually *any* act of terrorism as totalitarian (or proto-totalitarian) in either its structure, methods, ideology, or implications. Once *that* step is taken, it seems that the only rational response is—as neo-conservative Norman Podhoretz would have it—to embark on World War IV (or its moral and material equivalent).³⁶ But if this is the 'logical' outcome of recognizing 'totalitarian' enemies, I think it better to stay off the conceptual slippery slope altogether. We do that best by keeping Arendt's insistence

on the radical novelty of twentieth century totalitarian regimes—and the type of terror they practiced—firmly before us.

But this raises another objection. Everything Arendt wrote about ‘total terror,’ a terror that knows no strategic or utilitarian calculus, was written about existing totalitarian *regimes*. And, of course, the defining characteristics of a novel *regime form* cannot be taken as definitive for what is, at present, a mere *movement*. Radical Islamist groups may be pursuing terror *now* in their guerilla struggle with the ‘great Satan,’ but who is to say what terror would look like if it truly became a galvanizing mass movement in the Muslim world, let alone the new form of regime its proponents dream of?

Here one has to admit that there is much that Arendt wrote about totalitarian *movements* in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that often seems relevant to the discussion of radical Islamist terror and ideology. In the first chapter of Part III (‘Totalitarianism’), Arendt examines the outstanding preconditions and characteristics of totalitarian movements between the wars. Foremost amongst these preconditions are the following: a ‘dis-aggregated’ mass society born of the dissolution of social classes as a result of war and economic crisis; a widespread appetite on the part of these same masses for reintegration through the medium of all-explaining totalitarian propaganda and organization; the decline of traditional group interests; the growth of a mass personality, one that combined an ideologically based ‘idealism’ with a startling new form of ‘selflessness’; and, finally, a taste for activism that manifested itself in violence and terror (with the latter becoming a virtual ‘means to express oneself’ in the political world).³⁷

Needless to say, there are enormous differences between the sociological and spiritual condition of Europe between the wars and the conditions confronting a wide range of (quite various) Muslim populations today. Nevertheless, Arendt’s analysis of a ‘classless society’ operates at a high enough pitch of theoretical abstraction as to allow for a limited re-contextualization. We can apply her sociological–political description of a ‘massified’ Europe to the present conjuncture, using it to highlight the attitudes of alienation, disaffiliation, and a readiness for extremes that are evident in many contemporary Muslim communities. And it is difficult to ignore the fact that an ideology justifying and indeed glorifying terror has arisen precisely on these grounds. It may not be an ideology of ‘total terror’ in Arendt’s strict sense—but, the objector would say, isn’t the sociological similarity more than enough for us to take radical preventive action?

The answer to this question is: it all depends what one means by ‘radical preventive action.’ Of course, everything that can possibly be done to prevent future attacks—consonant with the human rights minimums of constitutional liberal states (no torture; no executive suspension of habeas corpus)—should be done. But even the enormously enhanced levels of surveillance most citizens of Western democracies are willing to put up (with a bit too much haste, I would add) are far from underwriting or instituting a new ‘Age’ or ‘Time’ of terror, let alone the declaration of World War IV. The latter course of action is urged by those who think that the Muslim world has rendered the debate about the ‘clash of civilizations’ moot. If *they*

believe it, the argument goes, then we have no choice but to treat it as a reality, and to respond in kind.³⁸

Without underestimating the violence espoused and practiced by radical Islamist groups, giving into the Schmittian logic of Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' argument would be a disaster. It would create the enormous reification of 'us' versus 'them' that people like bin Laden yearn for, and it would do so at the level of 'civilizational' generality. Instead of dealing with distinct perpetrators, distinct groups, and equally distinct enablers (material and otherwise), we would confront the enormous and impossible task of curing the 'Muslim world' of its various social and political pathologies. Pitching the argument at this level ensures our 'defeat' in the so-called 'War on Terror.' Armed with Arendt, we can, perhaps, understand more readily why and how an ideology of terror has become so attractive to many in the Muslim world. But—also armed with Arendt—we can dispute the idea that terrorist ideologies, terrorist cells, and even terrorist fan clubs add up to a 'totalitarian' cultural menace of world-historical proportions. To say it again, the Muslim world is made up of too many currents—religious, political, cultural and sociological—for it to present the unified 'other' some pretend that it is. What we have to fight—bin Laden, Al Qaeda, their affiliates and copy-cats—is bad enough. There is no point in inflating it to civilization-defining proportions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I should note that many on the American left have accused—and continue to accuse—Hannah Arendt of engaging in precisely such monster creation in the course of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.³⁹ The standard critique is that, by focusing so intently on the concentration camps as the 'laboratories' of total terror, Arendt wound up creating an ideal type totalitarian regime that had precious little to do with the concrete historical reality. Such commentators see Arendt's move from the attempt to define the 'radical evil' of totalitarianism (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) to her consideration of the 'banality of evil' (in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*) as more or less confirming their basic critique. At the end of the day, they say, not even Arendt could believe that totalitarianism constituted a regime form so novel and so radical that only concepts like 'total terror' and 'radical evil' could begin to do it justice.

I am not convinced by such arguments. The description Arendt provides of regimes of 'total terror' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is indeed an 'ideal type,' but hardly one conjured up out of thin air. What Arendt put her finger on—and what the critics take insufficient account of—is that Nazi fascism and Stalinist Communism largely succeeded in creating a fictitious world shorn of moral responsibility for both party members and the masses. Not only that. They also managed to transcend (if that's the right word) elementary considerations of strategic rationality and *raison d'état* in their pursuit of global domination and victory in the 'race' or 'class' wars that defined their broad view of reality. It is difficult for us, living at what is now a

substantial temporal remove from the horrors of both Nazism and Stalinist Communism, to imagine 'states' so immune to considerations of 'rational' self-interest, to the calculus of utility and means and ends.

'Total terror,' then, was not a figment of Arendt's overheated theoretical imagination. That said, we should not let this ideal type dominate *our* imaginations when it comes to understanding the myriad ways states have (historically speaking) pursued 'evil as policy.' The latter type of evil is far more common than 'radical,' anti-utilitarian evil. For this very reason, it is probably responsible for more deaths. Moreover, as the Eichmann book demonstrates, 'radical evil' and 'the banality of evil'—evil as policy—are hardly polar opposites or absolute contrasts. Those who, for 'banal' reasons (such as Eichmann's), carry out 'evil as policy' may well contribute enormously to the actualization of 'radical evil.' Most of the time, however, they are contributing to state-initiated/state-sponsored terror of the 'old-fashioned' sort: terror as a 'necessary' means in pursuit of the state's various ends (security, unity, territorial expansion, etc.). As Arendt reminds us, 'Many things that nowadays have become the speciality of totalitarian government are only too well known from the study of history.'⁴⁰ History was a slaughter-bench long before the rise of totalitarian movements.

To be sure, 'chiliastic' movements of the sort Berman decries have contributed greatly to this slaughter. But it is probably true that—historically speaking—their sporadic and intense violence has been excelled by the cold and brutal demands of *raison d'état* and power politics. As political theorists John Rawls and Judith Shklar never tired of pointing out, liberalism developed precisely in opposition to this double threat: the deadly danger of religiously inspired violence and intolerance (on the one hand) and cynical reason of state (on the other). 'Terror as means' knows both 'hot' and 'cold' varieties. The 'other' of liberalism is not, *pace* Berman, 'totalitarianism,' however widely or narrowly we conceive this notion. Rather, it is the violence, terror and coercion which tramples individual lives and rights. Morally speaking—from the point of view of the *victims*—it makes little difference if that trampling is done by religiously and ideologically inflamed fanatics, or by coldly calculating servants of the state.

Needless to say, I am not positing any sort of moral equivalence between the likes of Al Qaeda and George W. Bush. The *raison d'être* of Al Qaeda and similar groups is to spread terror and fear in pursuit of a radical and retrograde political agenda. To his credit, George W. Bush has sought to put a lid on terror. However, he has gone about it in the wrong way on virtually all levels. Even the 'necessary' war against the Taliban in Afghanistan has turned into a debacle few had the ability to foresee, while the war in Iraq has become the very definition of a 'quagmire.'

Here it is useful to return to Machiavelli and Weber. As a 'firewall' against excessive political violence, their shared idea of an 'ethic specific to politics' has—time and again—proven a dismal failure. Quite simply, it demands far too much character, intelligence, and self-control on the part of the 'leading political actor.' We should never forget that liberal constitutionalism exists—at least in theory—to radically restrict the occasions for the 'dispensation of violence.' It grew

out of a fear of Machiavelli's prince and distrust of the kind of *Machtspolitik* Weber thought inescapable.

However inadequate an 'ethic specific to politics' may be when it comes to curbing political violence and terror, the articulation of this ethic Weber provides in 'Politics as a Vocation' continues to illuminate. In that essay, Weber drew a contrast between an 'ethic of ultimate ends' (one where the political actor's only desire is to keep the flame of pure intentions alive) and an 'ethic of responsibility' (in which the political actor not only confronts the 'insoluble' question of justification of means by ends, but accepts *personal responsibility* for all the consequences that flow from his use of 'power backed up by violence').⁴¹ As 'good liberals' we should be fearful of *any* political-ideological movement that adopts an encompassing 'the end justifies the means' position. Similarly, we should be fearful of political leaders for whom a 'personal responsibility for consequences' has—for one reason or another—been taken off the table.

Hannah Arendt was—famously—no liberal. Yet her thinking about violence, terror, and 'total terror' is instructive for liberals—that is, for anyone who believes in universal human rights and the moral imperative of the limitation of state power. Her thinking reminds us that violence and terror are deeply rooted in Western political theory and practice. Likewise, her thinking reminds us that 'total terror'—terror not as means, but as an end in itself—is a novelty of the twentieth century, one not even fully realized by Hitler and Stalin's regimes at their most murderous.

In response to the suggestion that the twenty-first century is destined to be an 'Age of Terror,' a liberal instructed by Arendt will invariably tend toward skepticism. All ages have known terror, if not 'total terror.' The question is whether the immediate future promises a qualitative and quantitative leap in this regard. Only under such circumstances would the rubric 'Age' or 'Time' of Terror be warranted. As despicable as the crimes perpetrated by contemporary terrorists are, we only inflate their reputations to world-historical proportions by giving in to such rhetorical—and, ultimately, ideologically and politically motivated—excess.

NOTES

1. The locution 'time of terror' and, on occasion, 'Age of Terror' runs through the volume edited by my friend, the philosopher Giovanna Borradori. See Giovanna Borradori (2003) *Philosophy in a time of terror: dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 21. The notion of an 'Age of Terror,' which the present essay criticizes, has been taken up by a diverse array of writers. One purpose of the present essay is to suggest the ways in which the 'age/time of terror' locution underwrites—albeit sometimes unintentionally—'War on Terror' policy. In this regard, it is important to note the caution with which both Derrida and Habermas express themselves in Borradori's volume.
2. Hannah Arendt (1994) *Mankind and terror*, in: Jerome Kohn (Ed.), *Essays in understanding, 1930–1954*. New York, Harcourt Brace and Company, 298. Cf. Hannah Arendt (1976) *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York, Harcourt Brace & Co., 440 (hereafter cited as *OT*).
3. Estimates vary widely if not wildly. The authors of *The black book of communism* claim that revolutionary and established Communist regimes have the blood of 85 million on their

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- hands. If we add the 25 million killed in the World War II, and the 10 million in the first, we have a total in the neighborhood of 120 million. See Stéphane Courtois *et al.* (1999) *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (trans., Jonathan Murphy & Mark Kramer). Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
4. See Jürgen Habermas's remarks in Borradori, *Philosophy in a time of terror*, 28.
 5. The most obvious purpose has been to 'join at the hip' Likud Party policy/ideology and American foreign policy—a central, perhaps defining, neo-conservative goal. As someone who tends to identify with the moderate Israeli left—people like Amos Elon and Avashai Margalit—I think this strategy has been all too successful, and has done enormous damage to both Israel and America's long-term interests.
 6. Irving Kristol and son William are good examples of 'War on Terror' ideologues.
 7. See Carl Schmitt (1996) *The concept of the political* (translated and Introduction by George Schwab). Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 62.
 8. Machiavelli (1979) *Discourses*, Bk. I, ch. IX, in: Peter Bondanella & Mark Musa (Eds), *The portable Machiavelli*. New York, Penguin Books, 200–201.
 9. See Sheldon Wolin (1960) *Politics and vision*. Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., chapter 5.
 10. See Machiavelli, *The prince in portable Machiavelli*, 101–104.
 11. The Machiavellian 'realist' advocates violence as means, then, only insofar as its use leads to the creation of a *civilized* world characterized by proportionately less violence. Machiavelli's contrast of those who found republics versus those who destroy them (*Discourses*, Bk. I, Ch. X), or his contrast of 'good' Roman emperors with 'bad' in Chap. 19 of *The prince* leave little doubt that his advocacy of immoral means—however, distasteful it may be to those who have five centuries of experience with *raison d'état*—is bounded by the ultimate end of a thriving, strong, and free public world.
 12. Max Weber (1958) Politics as a vocation, in: H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (Eds), *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. New York, Oxford University Press, 78, 121.
 13. Max Weber (1958, p. 78).
 14. Max Weber (1958, p. 78).
 15. Max Weber (1958, p. 118).
 16. See Leo Strauss (1988) What is political philosophy? in: *What is political philosophy? And other essays*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 40–47.
 17. See, in this regard, Hannah Arendt (1958) *The human condition*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, sec. 33, 'The traditional substitution of acting for making'.
 18. See especially *Republic*, book 6, 500a.
 19. Hannah Arendt (1972) On violence, in: Arendt (Ed.), *Crises of the republic*. New York, Harcourt Brace, 151.
 20. Hannah Arendt (1990) *On revolution*. New York, Penguin Books, 119.
 21. Arendt, *On violence*, 154.
 22. Both essays are published in Arendt, *Essays in understanding, 1930–1954*.
 23. This theme is also emphasized in *The human condition*.
 24. Arendt, *On Violence*, 150.
 25. Arendt, *OT*, 302.
 26. Arendt, *OT*, 303.
 27. Arendt, *OT*, 342.
 28. Arendt, *OT*.
 29. Arendt, *OT*, 458–459.
 30. See Terror and radical evil, in: Dana R. Villa (Ed.), *Politics, philosophy, terror: essays on the thought of Hannah Arendt*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, 11–38.
 31. Paul Berman's (2004) analysis of Sayyid Qutb's writing in his *Terror and liberalism*. New York, W. W. Norton & Co. is, from this perspective, the most useful and illuminating part of his book. More generally, Berman's position in the American debate is as follows. A writer with strong ties to the social democratic-liberal journal *Dissent*, Berman was among the first

- to argue—in a (relatively) intellectually sophisticated way—that Islamic terrorism represented a new totalitarian threat ('Islamofascism'). This threat to liberal democracy could be dealt with only by an aggressive military and ideological mobilization, one in certain respects parallel to that demanded by the Cold War. While critical of President Bush's prosecution of the war in Iraq, Berman remains convinced that 'Islamofascism' constitutes the main threat—and represents the main crisis—of our time.
32. See G. W. F. Hegel (1977) Absolute freedom and terror, in: Hegel (Ed.), *The phenomenology of spirit* (translated by A. V. Miller). New York, Oxford University Press, 360–363.
 33. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, chapter 2, 'Armageddon in Its Modern Versions.' See J. L. Talmon (1960) *The origins of totalitarian democracy*. New York, Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers; J. L. Talmon (1985) *Political messianism: the romantic phase*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press; J. L. Talmon (1985) *The myth of the nation and the vision of revolution: the origins of ideological polarisation in the twentieth century*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
 34. Michael Walzer (1984) Liberalism and the art of separation, *Political theory*, 12 (3), 315–330.
 35. See Ernest Gellner (1996) *Conditions of liberty: civil society and its rivals*. New York, Penguin.
 36. Norman Podhoretz (2007) *World War IV: the long struggle against islamofascism*. New York, Doubleday.
 37. See Arendt, *OT*, 315; 331–332; 350–352.
 38. See Berman, *Terror and liberalism*, 181–183.
 39. For a recent example, see Corey Robins' (2004) otherwise intelligent *Fear: the history of a political idea*. New York, Oxford University Press.
 40. Arendt, *OT*, 440. She continues: 'There have almost always been wars of aggression; the massacre of hostile populations after a victory went unchecked until the Romans mitigated it by introducing the *parcere subjectis*; through centuries the extermination of native peoples went hand in hand with the colonization of the Americas, Australia and Africa; slavery is one of the oldest institutions of mankind and all empires of antiquity were based on the labor of state-owned slaves who erected their public buildings. Not even concentration camps are an invention of totalitarian movements.'
 41. See Weber, *Politics as a vocation*, in: Gerth & Mills, 115–128.