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# Hannah Arendt: Prophet for our Time by James M. Campbell

Jim Campbell is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and was pastor of two Presbyterian churches in the southwestern side of Detroit, then became executive director of the Detroit Industrial Mission. Published by the Detroit Industrial Mission, 1970. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

**(ENTIRE BOOK)** The author summarizes the thoughts of Hannah Arendt, then uses them as a framework to ask whether America is slipping into a new kind of totalitarianism.

## Introduction

Hanna Arendt celebrates revolution as perhaps the grandest example of human action, and then she points out where it invariably goes wrong. By a combination of ideology and terror, elitist governments set out systematically to destroy a citizenry's capacity for action.

## Chapter 1: The Meaning of Action

Action is the key to maintaining life and humanity. By action, Arendt means a a group process, involving many men, a process which is the beginning of something new, the answer to futility, which results in the establishment or re-establishment of the public good.

## Chapter 2: Revolution -- Action's Finest Hour

To answer social questions is not to answer political questions. To end human poverty and privation and organize an effective flow of goods and services is a major challenge, a *must*, but it is not the same as establishing freedom. The revolution that establishes the opportunity and structures for freedom fulfills its reason for being.

## Chapter 3: Totalitarianism: The Annihilation of Action

Totalitarianism (organized loneliness) threatens to ravage the world as we know it, even before a new beginning has had time to assert itself. Arendt's faith is in the capacity of man yet to make that new beginning -- to act, a capacity guaranteed by each new birth.

## Chapter 4: Some Implications

We have action, freedom, rebellion, civil liberties flowing in our national veins. We also have racism, imperialism, vigilanteeism, and violence. The question is, which heritage will prevail in

the decade ahead?

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# Introduction

"What's happening?" How many of us wish we really knew! Or are relieved we don't.

It's not only that so much is secret -- Did the CIA engineer the Cambodian coup? Has an order gone out for a "final solution" to the Black Panther challenge? -- or that it's all so technical, so infinitely more scientific and complex than the average Joe -- even Joe College -- can grasp -- what with moon landings, electronic snooping, laser beams, micro-biotics. It's more like an impossible picture puzzle with fifty-thousand pieces, a half inch big, all looking alike. It's an information glut of contradictory events, ideas, interpretations, swirling around us until, like Simon Peter, we figuratively or literally go fishing to get away from it all. Or we turn to some devil theory, to one simple idea that explains everything and relieves us of complexity. There's a communist under every bed or a power elite behind every TV set.

And yet we *have* to generalize, we have to develop frameworks for what's happening so we can 'make sense" out of what's happening. Hannah Arendt is one of those rare persons who performs such a function today. Of course, in order to deal with her you often have to fight your way through Germanic, paragraph-long sentences. Then there's the problem of most scholars: defensive writing, which is writing with sufficient fogginess and enough qualifications to fend off the attacks of scholarly competitors and enemies in the field.

But even with such limitations, there's interpretive gold to be mined in her half dozen books and numerous articles, written over the past two decades. Her most basic works are *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, updated in 1958), *The Human Condition* (1958), and *On Revolution* (1963).

Miss Arendt is a political philosopher. A native of Hanover, Germany, with a Ph.D. from Heidelberg, she fled the Nazis in 1933, worked for Jewish emigration in France, came to the United States in 1941, and became an American citizen in 1951. She has been research director of the Conference on Jewish Relations, chief editor of Schoken Books, executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in New York City, visiting professor at a number of universities, and University Professor at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt examines the meaning of action, that most uniquely human of man's repertoire of capacities. In *On Revolution* she celebrates revolution as perhaps the grandest example of human action and points out where invariably it goes wrong. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she analyzes what happens when, by a combination of ideology and terror, an elitist government sets out systematically to destroy a citizenry's capacity for action.

In this paper I will try to summarize her thoughts and then use them as a framework for looking at what's happening in our country today.

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# Chapter 1: The Meaning of Action

Action is a favorite American word. "No more talk -- we want action!" is a sentiment as acceptable as apple pie. Political leaders, clergy, community militants -- all exhort us to get where the action is. "The South End" -- controversial student publication at Wayne State University -- denounces as hypocrites those would-be revolutionaries who spend their time taking dope instead of preparing for action. But what exactly does action mean?

Arendt deals with this question in *The Human Condition.* In it she analyzes what to her are the three primary activities of man: labor, work, and action. Her understanding of action comes through most clearly in contrast to the other two. Labor. to Arendt, is that activity carried out in rhythm with nature, as in farming or feeding a household. Its goal is to maintain life -- to exist, it is cyclical; what is produced is immediately consumed and the process begins all over again. Labor is akin to the biological process itself

Work looks beyond immediate consumption It is man’s effort at permanence and durability in a sense, an attempt at immorality -- something beyond the limits of the biological process and the rhythms of nature. Work is the activity of man the craftsman the maker of things, creating a stable and durable world for himself and his posterity: a table, a city, a painting, a car. It is the human activity we have glorified most in our western civilization.

Both labor and work have to do with things, with the materials of nature or nature herself. Both can be carried on by solitary individuals -- the farmer in the field, the carpenter in his shop, the scientist in his laboratory.

In Arendt's view action is different. It is the activity not of man but of men. it requires other people. It is the only human activity that goes on directly between men without the go-betweens of things or matter. Its material is the web of human relationships of which we're all a part. Action is carried out by the words or deeds of men among men. The condition for action is plurality. The chief characteristic of action is that it is the beginning of something new, the starting of a process or a chain of events rather than the making of a product. Birth is human action in a most fundamental sense -- it is the beginning of someone new, a totally unique person, although in giving birth the mother labors in an equally fundamental sense.

All three activities are present. for instance in the life of an automobile plant. I was an assembly-line employee for several years, and there, despite the presence of hundreds, even thousands of other people, I could be as solitary as a peasant in a field or a herdsman tending sheep, laboring in rhythm -- not with nature, to be sure -- but with the conveyor belt that brought the auto body or its parts to me. I was a laborer, not a worker in Arendt's sense. There were those in the plant who *worked*, that is, created a product from an image in their minds. And there was action, when someone would begin something new in the human relationships of the plant community, would speak a word to stir trust or distrust, or issue a memo that raised or lowered the morale of others. I discovered the presence of action particularly when I became a union steward and began to take part in the public affairs of the plant, experiencing the risk of public words and deeds and feeling the consequent praise or blame of my peers.

Action is exposing yourself, showing your hand. It means leaving the privacy ot your solitary labors, moving beyond those expected work relationships in which the product is always the go-between, and saying or doing something about the human affairs -- the public realm -- of that organization or community of which you are a part. It's rocking the boat of human relationships for good or ill. There is risk, uncertainty, and a note of pathos in action, thus in part the I don't-want-to-get-involved syndrome in most of us.

Arendt pin-points this uncertainty in two further characteristics she assigns to action: unpredictability and irreversibility. We don't know ultimately what the results of our words and deeds will be and we can't take them back once spoken or done. How often we say, "I wish I hadn't done.. ." or, "If only I could take back what I said." Action is the sorcerer's apprentice calling into being a magic broom to carry water and ending with a flood in his master's mansion.

When we became involved as "advisors" in Viet Nam in the early 1950's who could predict the present situation? And who could take it back and start over? Involvement has escalated relentlessly until, thousands of violent deaths later, we are essentially debating how to stop the stupid spiral of events we started.'

The American Revolution, in the view of many, was one of the noblest collective actions in human history. But one crucial part of that action, unforeseen at the time, plagues us to this day. In order to assure the participation of the southern colonies, slavery was not abolished in the constitution. The terrible contradiction between the revolutionary affirmation "all men are created equal" and the subjugation of black people has been with us ever since. Belief in black inferiority -- the rationalization concocted to explain the contradiction -- will be with us even longer. The actions of the nation's founders were unpredictable and irreversible. (My examples.)

It is no wonder that men fear action, that despair and cynicism so easily make inroads in our minds and we flee to hobbies or bury ourselves in the routine necessities of existence. We have the freedom and the capacity for action, but we don't know what will result from our public words and deeds and we can't stop them once they're out.

Is the final meaning of action then uncertainty? Perhaps even futility? The remedy to futility, in Arendt's view, is in the nature of action itself. Any chain of actions can be broken or altered by new action -- a new beginning. Men rebel against necessity or fatal denouements. France leaves Viet Nam, gives up Algeria. The Czechs begin a ripple in the Russian "Empire" that may yet become a tide. The cry of "Black Power" arises while white America dabbles with integration. But such new directions are uncertain too. How do we bear the uncertainty? To Arendt we would not be able to except for two capacities -- themselves forms of action -- written deep in the nature of man: the capacity to promise and the capacity to forgive.

Promise redeems unpredictability. By covenants, contracts, agreements. treaties, we create islands of stability in an uncertain sea. Consider marriage. In launching that venture, to apply a line from Whittier, "we know not what the future hath of marvel or surprise." But the man and woman say, "And I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful husband (wife); in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." And a new beginning is made, full of risk and unpredictability.

Forgiveness redeems irreversibility. It is itself an action, creating a new situation. It is the release of another from the consequences of his action; it releases the one wronged from the necessity of revenge. Revenge is cyclical and predictable; forgjveness is not -- it is a miracle. It is the best human antidote to the irreversibility of action. We might find many examples of forgiveness operating in Arendt's sense in individual relationships. But examples seem less likely in inter-group relations or international relations, either of forgiveness or of its antecedent repentance. But perhaps that is because neither goes under its own name or gets labeled as such. No nation or street gang says, "We repent" or "We forgive," But regrets are sent and accepted. Apologies are made, hidden in the face-saving rhetoric of diplomacy, and then the reply comes, possibly as a gloat, but carrying within it the willingness to let the other begin a new tack. Or forgiveness and promise combine in a treaty or a contract in which the parties acknowledge past misunderstandings and wrongs and mutually pledge to move beyond them. When this happens the irreversibility of past actions is checked, the slate is momentarily wiped clean, and men are able to act -- to begin a new thing.

As laborers, then, we are bound to the cycle of biological life, laboring and consuming in rhythm with nature. As workers we pursue the semblance of immortality, building a durable world that will outlast our individual lives. In action we seek by our public words and deeds to influence and shape the web of human relationships that connects us all. No activity of man is so potentially dangerous or rewarding, nor so uniquely human.

Action can bring us glory or mockery. Therein is its pathos and our ambivalence. We shout "action" as a shibboleth, applaud it in others, and shun it for ourselves. We want a say in our destinies, we want to

influence the machine, the system, but we avoid beginning any new thing, fearful of the uncertainty and danger it entails and the public or organizational commitment it demands, preferring instead the more charted activities of labor and work.

Arendt feels and expresses this pathos which always characterizes action. But what bothers her more is the seeming convergence of events and forces today that threaten to remove even the possibility of actions for instance, the increasing powerlessness felt by people whose lives are caught up in large bureaucracy, the pent-up rage of oppressed peoples, the breakdown of political structures, or the development of scientific knowledge and techniques far beyond not only the comprehension of the public but beyond the participation and control of government. At many points she is pessimistic about man's future. But despair is not the last word for her. She concludes a key chapter in The Human Condition with this affirmation:

*The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, In which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether, discounting the keeping of faith as a very uncommon and not too important virtue and counting hope among the evils of illusion in Pandora's box. It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their "glad tidings": "A child has been born unto us.* (The Human Condition, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.247)

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# Chapter 2: Revolution -- Action's Finest Hour

Once when asked the essence and aims of the Russian Revolution Lenin answered, "Electrification plus soviets." It was an un-Marxist remark because there is no mention of the party or of "building socialism." Instead the statement differentiates between economics and politics and suggests that technology is the answer to the problem of poverty and that a new form of government -- the soviets -- is the vehicle of freedom.

To Arendt this is a distinction that must be kept if we are to understand both the glory and the demise of revolution. What paved the way, in her view, for Stalinist totalitarianism was the fact that Lenin and his followers soon abandoned the second part of the equation for the sake of the first. They gave up the pursuit of freedom -- the political question -- in their determination to solve poverty -- the social question. Robespierre did the same thing in the French Revolution with the result that France ended up not with freedom but terror, followed by the tyranny of Napoleon.

Arendt maintains this counterpoint between the social and the political throughout *On Revolution,* insisting that to end poverty without establishing freedom is no revolution at all. Tyranny with an empty belly and tyranny with a full belly are both tyranny

The goal of true revolution, in her view, is political freedom. By that she means the constituting of the opportunity and the, means for a people to participate in their government, to determine their own political destinies, to act in the public realm. Revolution is a primary form of human action; it is, in a fundamental sense, the beginning of something new, built on the ending of something old. Men with a vision of a new thing renounced the sovereignty of a George III, took arms against the tyranny of Louis XIV, and defied and displaced the despotism of the Russian Czar. These were glorious moments of human action in pursuit of freedom. For freedom was the goal of the American, French, and Russian Revolutions. But in the French and Russian cases this political goal was quickly crowded out by a social goal, namely, the tremendous drive to end human want and misery.

The American Revolution made the best start toward freedom, perhaps because human want and misery were not major causes of colonial revolt, and thus the need to answer the social question did not easily replace the political goal of establishing freedom.

But the American Revolution eventually ran out of political steam too. Arendt thinks this was due in part to the inability or unwillingness of our political thinkers to conceptualize further the revolutionary experience and its implications for a new government. But primarily it was because the structures we created were inadequate to assure the continued participation of the citizenry in government. For to Arendt freedom does not mean voting every four years for one of two candidates for president handpicked by unseen party functionaries, or even every two years for representatives and local leaders. The essence freedom is not representation but participation and action. Freedom is the opportunity to participate in government daily and weekly. What we call democracy is really once again the few ruling the many. "This government is democratic in that popular welfare and private happiness are its chief goals; but it can be called oligarchic in the sense that public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of the few." (*On Revolution,* The Viking Press, 1963, p.273)

It is Arendt's argument that the founding fathers meant *"public* happiness" in the revolutionary phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," not private bohemias. And public happiness was the happiness Jefferson and Adams and the others experienced in public debate of Congress, in shaping by word and deed the web of relationships in a new country.

This is what has been lost in the case of every revolution – the real and continued participation of the people in their government. It was found for awhile in the American town meetings, in Jefferson's dream of wards at all levels of government, in the French societies, in the Russian soviets, and in the Hungarian and other revolutionary councils. Hut all too soon it was replaced by one-party dictatorships, two-party oligarchies, or multi-party chaos.

Arendt further suggests that we have failed to deliver fully on our own revolutionary tradition because all too soon we allowed "free enterprise" to become the meaning of freedom, replacing political participation. Freedom became a matter of laizzes-faire economics. The pursuit of happiness became the private accumulation of economic wealth and the chief end of government became protection of the market place. We sold our birthright of political freedom for a mess of economic pottage.

I have an additional hunch about the failure of American political thinkers to conceptualize further the revolutionary experience. It is that we gave up thinking about the revolution because we knew that to do so was an exercise in delusion. It was an exercise in delusion, if not hypocrisy, because all that we said about equality, life, liberty, public happiness, freedom, the right of assembly, participation, and the other noble principles applied in fact only to the white man, not to the majority of persons in this country, who at that time were red, or to a sizable minority who were black and in chains.

In a word, our racism prevented us from pursuing the profound implications of our own revolution. Our thinkers sensed this, and to avoid the issue, turned to other matters.

Arendt concludes *On Revolution* by suggesting we try once again to build structures of government in this country through which at every level all who want to participate in public debate can do so. She envisions a series of councils -- councils of. peers -- from local communities to the national level, with each council sending one of its members to constitute the next level council. Her recommendations are sketchy but they hold at least the possibility that new structures are yet conceivable and that political theorists need not be reduced either to defending what is or preparing rationales for tearing it all down.

As our interdependence as a people grows, and planning inevitably

replaces the "mystic hand of the market-place," who will make the decisions? An oligarchic elite of scientists, generals, executives, and government officials! With all the rest of us eating bread and watching TV circuses?

That's a whimpery end to a noble revolution. Fortunately, the drive for freedom still exists here and abroad. Two years ago, the Czechs were in the streets of Prague facing Russian tanks, not because of compassion for human want and misery, but because they were not free; the Vietnamese continue to resist America, as they did Japan and France before us, not because of hunger for food but hunger to determine their own destinies; black militants are in the streets of our cities today, not because they are famished -- though poverty and want still stalk our land, particularly black communities -- but because black citizens, more than any others, have been politically isolated and impotent, unable to act in their own governance. And so even a George Wallace, while plucking hard the strings of racist fears, can speak to the political isolation and impotence felt by lower and middle-class whites in the face of huge bureaucracies and complexities dominating their lives, and rightly say, "You are not free."

To answer social questions is not to answer political questions. To end human poverty and privation and organize an effective flow of goods and services is a major challenge, a *must*, but it is not the same as establishing freedom. The citizens in George Orwell's *1984* all eat enough, but they cannot act.

Revolution that does not deal with human want will hardly get off the ground; revolution that establishes the opportunity and structures for freedom fulfills its reason for being.

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## Chapter 3: Totalitarianism: The Annihilation of Action

The recognized forms of government are few in number and have been much the same ever since the Greeks analyzed and classified them to include monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, republic, and despotism. It is Arendt's claim in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that totalitarianism is a new form of government, ushered onto the stage of history with the regimes of Josef Stalin and Adolph Hitler. It is not just another form of tyranny, although there are similarities, but a unique and novel development, indeed, the ultimate tyranny.

This is quite a claim -- and for those of us who are amateurs in the field of political science, accustomed to using tyranny, fascism, dictatorship, and totalitarianism interchangeably -- something of a shock.

What is it that makes totalitarianism so novel and so demonic? To Arendt totalitarianism is the total domination of a people through a combination of simplistic ideology and constant terror. It appears to no traditional laws or forms of government but rather to its own concocted Law of Nature (survival of the fittest, master race) or Law of History (a classless society and that one class the proletariat). Its goal is the extension of that total domination to the entire world.

Arendt is not speaking of German facism or Russian communism in general but of the particular forms of government developed under

Stalin and Hitler. Her chief references, however, are to the Nazi government, perhaps because in 1951, the year her book was first published, more was known of Germany than of Russia, but also because she is German and experienced first-hand the rise of Nazism.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* appeared in an enlarged edition in 1958. This edition includes the chapter "Ideology and Terror:

A Novel Form of Government," which embodies, as Arendt says in her preface, "insights of a more general and theoretical nature." The earlier and original chapters are more historical in nature. In them Arendt traces the roots of totalitarianism to European anti-semitism and imperialism. Totalitarianism didn't just drop out of the blue. It used the anti-semitism that had been prevalent in Europe for a long time as a rationale for fanaticism. It used nineteenth century European imperialism as the model for its global goals.

Thus Hitler could appeal to the threat of a Jewish plot to rule the world as an excuse for illegal and tyrannic moves by the government. The savagery of German, Boer and Belgian imperialism in Africa and the inhuman, bureaucratic efficiency of British administration of her colonies in Asia and Africa were forerunners of the Nazi drive to rule the world, savagely and efficiently. It was Leopold II of Belgium who was responsible for the extermination of ten million natives in the Congo between 1890 and 1911. Hitler's extermination of six million Jews thus becomes runner-up in enormity to what white empire-builders had done before him to the blacks of Africa.

The Pan-Slav and Pan-German movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were additional roots for Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, breaking open, as they did, the traditional notions of nationhood and territory.

Arendt analyzes these historical origins in a fascinating manner. But it is in her chapter "Ideology and Terror" that she probes the essential nature of totalitarianism. It is this analysis which I find most informative for us today, and to which I now turn.

**Terror**

"If Lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of

totalitarian domination." (*Origins of Totalitarianism,* 1964 Meridian Book edition, p.464) All traditions, all values, all legalities and illegalities, all political institutions are destroyed and all behavior, public or private, is controlled by terror. In an ordinary dictatorship such as Mussolini's thousands of people were arrested for political crimes, but hundreds of these were acquitted by the Italian courts. In Nazi Germany there were no acquittals. To be arrested was to be convicted -- more, it was to be dropped off the face of the earth, to be erased from memory. For if anyone dared to ask why, if any loved one inquired as to what charge was made, that person was next. By terror -- culminating in the concentration and extermination camps -- the people are made incommunicado -- atomized -- afraid to bare their thoughts to their closest friends.

The maintenance crew of terror is the secret police In most tyrannies it is the military who are the elite. In totalitarian states it is the secret police -- the Gestapo, the SS, the NKVD. Their job is to destroy the internal and external enemies of the totalitarian movement. They seek to know about every citizen and all his connections. No warrants are needed for arrests, no stated reasons of any kind. Terror is different from fear, for in the grip of terror no one knows what to fear, what to avoid, what constitutes a crime or even a mistake.

But as laws in a traditional government are of a negative nature, defining the boundaries of behavior, but insufficient in themselves to inspire it, so terror is insufficient in a totalitarian state to motivate and guide human behavior. Some guiding principle is needed that provides a positive basis for public behavior, a goal around which to rally the people.

**Ideology**

In the totalitarian state the guiding principle is a simplistic ideology. For the Nazis the ideology is a contorted version of the Darwinian thesis "survival of the fittest." The only real law is this "Law of Nature," this essential process to which all other processes are subservient. And since the "Aryan" race is obviously the fittest, then why not help the process along -- by removing all the scum as soon as possible, the Jews first, then the Slays, then all the mentally ill, the incurably sick, etc. Or, as in Stalin's ideology, if the Law of History dictates the ascendance of one class and the withering away of all others, then we are the true servants of history if we help the process by wiping out all dommed classes and

all enemies of the process of history, including those enemies within the proletariat itself.

The totalitarian state is not a structure, but a movement. No settling down, no stability, no return to the normal relationships of life can be allowed, or the whole thing will crumble. Everything must be kept in motion -- including the secret police, whose members are constantly being shifted and are never allowed to stay in one area too long.

The ideology calls for a movement to win the world and all is subservient to that ideology no matter how much it flies in the face of reality -- of factuality. The greatest threat to a totalitarian movement, once it gains power, is factuality. For the ideology has created a fictitious world, a set of glasses through which all are to see life, and once those glasses are removed, even momentarily, the fictitious world begins to crack. There are in fact three totalitarian elements to all ideological thinking, Arendt points out.( Arendt seems to be in that school of thought which considers ideology in and of itself a "bad" thing. She often uses the word prejoratively. My own feeling is that that is too narrow a use of the concept of ideology. Clifford Geertz, in his paper "Ideology as a Cultural System" offers a less negative understanding. [Published as a chapter in *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David Apter, New York, The Free Press, 1964.]) One is the claim to total explanation not of what is but of what becomes -- of history. The second Is the claimed "sixth sense" that sees a secret meaning in everything and allows nothing to be experienced or understood in its own right. Third is the emancipation" of thought from experience by logical or dialectical argumentation from a self-generated idea or dialectical argumentation from a self-generated idea or thesis in addition to which no other ideas or experiences are needed or allowed.

As terror, in atomizing every citizen, ruins all relationships between men, Arendt argues, so simplistic ideology or logic ruins all relationships with reality. Ideology in a totalitarian state is the final rationale and all things are lawful that are done within the aegis of its logic or dialectic.

Citizens of a totalitarian state are either victims or executioners and the movement by its ideology seeks to prepare them to fill either role (or both) equally well. Thus the spectacle of persons in Stalin’s Russia willingly confessing deeds or words they never committed or spoke, not out of guilt or masochism but out of loyalty to the necessities of the

movement's logic which has called for a certain kind of crime to be committed and confessed at a particular point in history.

**The Basis of Appeal**

But how can terror and ideology quench so completely the sense and reason and human initiative of a nation or a continent? What need does totalitarianism speak to, no matter how grotesquely, that it can find entry and gain mastery over the minds of millions? Arendt ponders this question and concludes that it is through the human experiences of isolation and loneliness that totalitarianism gains entry and then mastery.

[1]Arendt seems to be in that school of thought which considers ideology in and of itself a "bad" thing. She often uses the word prejoratively. My own feeling is that that is too narrow a use of the concept of ideology. Clifford Geertz, in his paper "Ideology as a Cultural System" offers a less negative understanding. (Published as a chapter in *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David Apter, New York, The Free Press, 1964.)

Isolation is a political experience. Isolation is the inability tQ act because there is no one to act with. It is political impotence. It is both the seedhed of totalitarianism and an end result, tyranny also builds on isolation. Totalitarianism, however, builds on a combination of isolation and loneliness.

Loneliness is more than isolation. It is feeling deserted from all human companionship, of not belonging to the world at all. Loneliness concerns human life as a whole.

The isolated, politically atomized man can still work, or labor, can still fall back on the intimacies and support of private life, as men have done under many tyrannies. But totalitarianism is not content with creating isolation. It invades the private sphere as well. It is based on loneliness dominating both the political and social spheres of life. "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century."(op. cit., p. 475)

Uprooted people with no place in the world recognized and guaranteed by others, superfluous people who feel they do not belong to the world

at all, these are the fodder of the movement.

To lonely, isolated people totalitarianism comes, enfolds them with the iron bands of terror, clears their agonies of mind with one idea and its easy train of syllogisms, one thesis with all other ideas the antithesis, and by this brief, false Camelot wins them in order to crush them.

In a sense, totalitarianism is organized loneliness and as such is considerably more dangerous than the unorganized impotence of all those ruled by traditional tyrants. "Its danger," Arendt concludes, "is that it threatens to ravage the world as we know it -- a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end -- before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself." (ibid., p. 476)

But her faith is in the capacity of man yet to make that new beginning -- to act -- a capacity guaranteed by each new birth.

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## Chapter 4: Some Implications

*"The streets of our country are in turmoil. The universities are filled with students rebelling and rioting. Communists are seeking to destroy our country. Russia is threatening us with her might and the Republic is in danger. Yes, danger from within and without.*

*'We need law and order. Yes, without law and order our nation cannot survive. Elect us and we shall restore law and order."*

The above appeared in the April 26, 1970 issue of the Sunday supplement "Parade" under the heading "Quotation to Ponder." It is a quote from a speech ofAdoiph Hitler in Hamburg, 1932.

I did a similar thing in publishing in the Spring, 1970, issue of LIFE AND WORK, DIM's newsletter, the following:

> ***Martin Niemoller Revisited***
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> *They came for the Black Panthers; but I was neither black nor a Panther, so it was of no concern to me.*
> *They came for the draft-resisters; but I was over draft age, so it was of no concern to me.*
> *They came for the Hippies and Freaks; but I wore a tie and kept my hair trim; so it was of no concern to me.*
> *They came for all the black militants; but I was white and mild, so it was of no concern to me.*

> *They came for their political opponents; but I just did my job and avoided politics, so it was of no concern to me. They came for me; and there was no one left to stand with me.*

We are seeing an increasing number of references in speeches and articles to parallels between America in 1970 and pre-Nazi Germany of the twenties and early thirties. We hear charge and counter-charge of insipient facism coming from various quarters in the American political scene.

In reading Hannah Arendt -- and especially "The Origins of totalitarianism" -- it is likewise possible to find innumerable potential parallels. For example, the similarity of today's collapse of traditional values to the challenge which the "front generation" of the 1920's (veterans of the trenches of World War I) made to all the traditions of state and culture that had held Europe together for so many years; or the comparison between Hitler's anti-semitism and the cynical use of racism for political purposes in the political campaigns of George Wallace and others; or the similarity between American actions in Indo-China and European imperialism in Africa at the turn-of. the-century.

Such comparisons are easy and tempting, especially when they support one's point of view. In such cases we lift up the similarities and ignore the differences.

It is equally possible to blind ourselves to the lessons of history, stressing the differences between our situation and the past, and ignoring similar steps that once led to ruin.

Really prophetic insight avoids both these traps. It points to fundamental human experiences and raises them up as warning signals to decision-makers. This is what Arendt does in her writings.

At the risk of misinterpreting both Arendt and our times, I will conclude this review by noting both the questions and the signs of hope that her theses raise in my mind about what's happening today.

**Bureaucracy: Organized Impotence?**

Day in, day out in the work of industrial mission we meet with persons

at various levels in the auto industry. We find union members cynical even about their local unions in which at least technically they have a voice. We meet corporation executives who feel impotent and superfluous but are too well paid to complain. We work closely with leaders in business and governmental agencies who have a vision of what is needed but are becoming tired and depressed in the face of the seeming impossibility of fundamental change.

We see engineers and technicians who, like assembly line workers, are little more than Arendt's "animal laborans," performing by rote in rhythm with the auto year. Not craftsmen, certainly not men of action, and cut off by affluence and technology from any direct tie with the elements of nature.

I see in myself, in friends and neighbors, signs of futility

about influencing anything. There are "concerned" citizens easily falling back on just doing their unfulfilling jobs in the huge organizations that employ them, getting their paychecks, and devoting their creativity to planning a vacation or creating a private bohemia at home.

How widespread are these maladies of impotence and public isolation? Is it conceivable that we can reshape our bureaucratic structures such that the deep human experiences of labor and craftsmanship are really present and the fundamental capacity for action can be exercised in the plants and offices of our land? Or are our bureaucracies organized impotence? Is their only human product "good Germans," fodder for a latter day "Fuhrer"?

**Slipping Into Totalitarianism?**

How serious is repression in the USA today? The purpose of repression is political isolation. Cut off the dissidents; assure the leadership of a silent, obedient majority. There is evidence both of repressive efforts at political isolation and political awakening.

The current game of "Capture the Flag" is a case in point, with one side arguing "my country right or wrong" and the other side arguing "America: change it or lose it." The lesson of Nuremberg, which established an international principle that no one can escape responsibility for his actions on the basis of obedience of orders, seemingly is fading in the minds of many. Army personnel who refuse

to obey unjust orders, draft resistors, people who withhold income taxes because of Vietnam are being branded traitors. Particularly sinister is the recent statement by Vice-President Agnew that tarred former statesmen Averill Harriman, Clark Clifford, and Cyrus Vance with the brush of traitorism. The encouraging aspect lies in the fact that there is strong debate about such matters. Some day soon will there only be silence?

Closely intertwined with the threat of repression is the issue of racial conflict. The key question is, can white America face its own racism, take responsibility for it, and move to change it? Racism in the form of anti-semitism became a powerful tool in the hands of the Nazis and to a lesser degree the Stalinists. Recently passed arrest and detention laws imposed by Congress on Washington, D.C., with its plurality of black people, suggest the beginning steps in removing the basic civil rights of people, with blacks once again the first and prime victims. We know that something fundamental is being tampered with when a solid conservative like Sam Ervin of North Carolina denounces the Washington laws as violating constitutional rights. Mr. Agnew's provocative assertion that increasing black enrollment in universities will produce inferior diplomas gives high level approval to the assumption of black inferiority that is already written so deeply in our white bones. Yet there is also growing anti-racist effort, "new white consciousness" as well as new black identity. Will it be soon enough and sufficient to defuse racism as a tool of insipient totalitarianism?

Debate continues to rage about U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. That political and economic imperialism is a strong factor in our exploits there and elsewhere in the world can hardly be denied, despite our rhetoric about freedom, democracy, and self-determination. Older citizens well remember Hitler's justification for invading the Sudetenland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia -- protection of the lives and rights of Germans living in those countries -- when they hear administration explanations of American actions whether in the Dominican Republic or Cambodia. Russia offers the same explanations of its actions in eastern Europe. Can a non-imperialist role be fashioned for our country now? Or will the forces pushing for "victory" and economic domination continue to make imperialism -- that second major root of totalitarianism -- a policy of our government? And from such policy and action will a "Pan-America" ideology develop that rallies the "hard-hats" (our latter-day brown shirts) to flag and nation and justifies the suppression of all dissent?

Such questions point to danger from the right. But the Russian experience reminds us that totalitarianism can come on stage from the left wing as well.

**Memo to the Radical Left**

Students for a Democratic Society began in 1962 under the banner of participatory democracy -- bright young men and women committed to freedom and exercising their human capacity for action, for beginning new things. Then and now they denounce racism, imperialism, and capitalism as evil. They call for "power to the people." They want to change the system; they increasingly speak of political revolution that will right all social ills.

Their beginning is auspicious, like that of Jefferson, Robespierre, and Lenin.

But there are warning signs to watch for. Is sharp political and social analysis becoming simplistic ideology -- one idea that explains everything, that provides a secret meaning for every event? Today the young left cherish their local chapters, communes, or particular factions, in which everyone has a voice and criticism is valued, like early Lenin's love for the soviets and Robespierre's exaltation of the local societies of French towns and cities. But one day hence will a one-party dictatorship or an all-powerful leader strike down these structures of freedom within the movement, like later Lenin crushing the soviets or Robespierre leading the chapter-societies to the guillotine? Will freedom again be sacrificed to the logic of history or nature as it eventually was in the totalitarian states of Russia and Germany or abandoned for the sake of social liberation as it was in France? The political history which Arendt documents prompts us to raise this question despite the best of rhetoric coming from the Movement's analysts.

**Signs of Hope**

But despite these warning questions, the rise of the young left, to me, is a sign of hope. Their call for a new political consciousness in the culture of America, accustomed as older Americans are to viewing political involvement as a decidedly secondary activity if not a dirty one, is a mighty affirmation of the human capacity for action and a long needed antidote to the "just do your job, take care of your family, and stay out

of controversial matters" philosophy of most Americans.

So is the rise of black power. That the black man in America no longer submits to daily oppression and insult without a fight and white people and white institutions can no longer do anything they want to blacks with impunity is a sign of hope. Black militancy is an instance of human beings refusing to be isolated and impotent; it is men and women acting in behalf of their own freedom.

Similarly, it is a sign of hope that there are rank and file members of huge organizations -- unions, corporations, government, universities, and churches -- who are beginning to question orders from on high and to say no to previously unquestioned authority. For again, in doing so, men and women are affirming initiative and freedom in pushing influence upward.

Community organization as a political methodology and the drive for "community control of schools" in large urban areas are further instances of hope in that they strike me as strong efforts at -- in Arendt's phrase -- constituting or structuring

freedom. The pragmatic struggle is to find the right blend of the "participatory democracy" of such efforts with the technical knowledge and skill possessed presently by large centralized systems. People in many quarters are working at finding that blend, and this in itself is encouraging.

Finally, I find hope in our heritage. Unlike the Nazis -- who could build on the Prussian militarism and authoritarianism that dominated Germany's past -- we have action, freedom, rebellion, civil liberties flowing in our national veins. We also have racism, imperialism, vigilanteeism, and violence. The question is, which heritage will prevail in the decade ahead? Will the bicentennial in 1976 celebrate the renewal or the abandonment of our revolutionary tradition and the freedom that the founding fathers constituted?

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