Totalitarian Rule Essay, Research Paper

TOTALITARIAN RULE

The concept of totalitarian rule cannot be determined by purely logical means. It was explained and clarified only by those who went through the bitter experience of this form of government. As late as the end of the 1920’s the word “totalitarian” was used to designate any state which was governed in an authoritarian rather than a parliamentarian manner. The London Times, for example, on November 2, 1929, spoke of a reaction against parliamentarism “in favor of a totalitarian, or unitary state whether Fascist or Communist;” the quotation marks and the explanatory phrase “or unitary state” prove that at the time the concept was still fairly unusual.

In the 1930s and 1940s the experiences of the Third Reich and Stalinist Russia added to the definition the criteria of the synchronization and conformation of life, political police and concentration camps, and aIl the other horrors disseminated by these regimes. But admitting that in our century open terror has assumed particularly inhuman forms, such terror is nevertheless not confined to totalitarian rule and therefor is not sufficient to define it.

From time immemorial despots have imprisoned their opponents under particularly cruel conditions; they have tortured them, dishonored them, debased and executed them. The suppression of freedom has always assumed the same forms. what Tacitus wrote in his biography of Agricola concerning the despotism of the Emperor Domitian was experienced as reality by the high school students of Hitler’s Germany:

“Not only the writers but their very books were objects of rage, and . . .the triumvirs were commissioned to burn in the forum those works of splendid genius. They fancied, forsooth, that in that fire the voice of the Roman people, the freedom of the Senate, and the conscience of the human race were perishing, while at the same time they banished the teachers of philosophy, and exiled every noble pursuit, that nothing good might anywhere confront them. Certainly we showed a magnificent example of patience; as a former age had witnessed the extreme of liberty, so we witnessed the extreme of servitude, when the informer robbed us of the interchange of speech and hearing. We should have lost memory as well as voice, had it been as easy to forget as to keep silence.”

The unique particularity of the unfolding of totalitarian power was at first experienced only by those who were under its immediate subjection, and even they understood it only gradually because it was an entirely new experience– at least in our century. Totalitarian power grows beyond all standards of normal politics, it gains incalculable and sinister dimensions; under its dominion life falls into confusion and insecurity of all kind not known heretofore. Human beings find themselves not only oppressed and confined in their freedom but also delivered up to the regime, mercilessly exploited by it, and finally, as it were inadvertently, criminally involved in the regime,s activity. Characteristically, it was precisely the politically sophisticated observers who predicted all quick collapse of totalitarian rule, and from their point of view they were justified; for according to the traditional views and standards all such regimes destroy the preconditions that can give permanence to all government.

Everywhere it goes against the most basic Law of international diplomatic relations and economic life, destroys the ordered domestic government, openly goes back on its promises, at every step violates all loyalty and faith, is mendacious, unbalanced, repressed, unprofessional–nevertheless, totalitarian rule flourished, secured its position, manages to win over large sections of the population though they resist at first’ and can even place its opponents in its service.

Persons under totalitarian rule are always in the ranks, always under all strain. They may no longer show themselves as they really are but are constrained constantly to play prescribed roles in an atmosphere of false emotionality, joylessness, mistrust; and they must take care to put their loyalty “to the test… Not only does the regime forbid them to develop, but it seeks also to make of them other personalities than they are by nature; it not only restricts their freedom but tries as well to overpower them. This situation holds true for the declared adherents of the regime even more than for its opponents; for the adherents must always be anxiously concerned to move along whatever general line is currently in favor.

No corner of public life or private life offers refuge from control; one can inadvertently lay oneself open to suspicion anywhere. Applause, indignation, enthusiasm, willingness to serve are produced artificially. In general, artificiality is an outstanding characteristic of totalitarian activity, standing in grotesque contrast to the regime,s favorite appeal to the authentic forces of life (”die elementaren Krafte des Lebens”). But what is worse is that concepts, words, and values are robbed of their traditional meanings, and moral standards become disordered. As regards open terror, there is no doubt that it is to be abhorred; but when evil appears in the guise of historical necessity, the common good, the welfare of all people or all class, man becomes prey to nearly insoluble moral conflicts. Thus, though dictatorial procedures, open force, and the deprivation of freedom are also part of totalitarian rule, its true characteristic is the creeping assault on men through the perversion of thought and social life.

This assault follows from the fact that the totalitarian claim to power is not kept within the bounds of possible governmental competence but –as the name makes clear–is in tended to dispose unreservedly over the totality of human life. The claim is not confined to the areas for which the state is responsible but is allowed to encompass all areas, aha to have an exclusive voice even where the political regime can at best play an ancillary role–as, for instance, in family life, in scientific research, and in art.

Totalitarian rule attempts to encompass the whole person, the substance and spontaneity of his existence, including his conscience, It does not acknowledge the primacy of society over the state as an area of freedom which, in principle, lies beyond governmental control, but rather interferes in it deliberately, to change it from the ground up according to its own plan; for the regime wishes to create–in accordance with its own ideological scheme and with social engineering techniques–all wholly new society, all “new type of man,” as Lenin put it–even all new world. It undertakes the production of an artificial, synthetic society.

Under these circumstances, men can have validity only as building blocks or structural elements, raw material, “human material”; totalitarian rule cannot as a matter of principle acknowledge the citizen’s personal autonomy, on which political liberty is based, but must render him available for whatever service seems desirable. While it is of the essence of the human personality in the last analysis not to be the available object but the partner of another human being, totalitarian rule attempts to make the unavailable accessible to itself. It destroys the old social elements and social processes and sets new, artificial ones in motion. Groups that are considered harmful are expunged; and attempt is made to form new elites, and there is no hesitation in modifying the personality of the individual by means of drugs and surgery. In this spirit the National Socialists were eager to create all new society by means of biological breeding and selection.

The totalitarian demand to create all new society was not restricted to bringing to power a new social stratum–the proletariat, for example, instead of nobility or the bourgeoisie–or to imposing new legal standards and institutional forms; such is the aim of any revolution and not all peculiarity of totalitarianism. Totalitarian interventions are directed to the basic forms of social life that arise directly from man,s personal nature and political activity. Society is now no longer intended to emerge from the spontaneous unfolding of the individual; it may no longer be all network of relationships of freely reciprocal, cooperative, and oppositional activity. It must now consist of all planned, mechanical continuity of functions; the place of free play to be taken by a precalculated meshing of forces.

A typical example of the fundamental character of totalitarian intervention is the circumstance that the Russian bolsheviks were not content with the creation of a new marital law but believed themselves capable of abolishing altogether this basic institution of human life. It is no less characteristic, however, that this attempt failed because it amounted to an assault on the very nature of man.

Another example of how basic is the totalitarian demand to create all new society is offered by what is called indoctrination. In contrast to education, which presupposes all spontaneous and free unfolding of the human person and which first of all furthers and regulates such development, indoctrination is training toward specific modes of thought and con duct that are predetermined and can therefore be calculated to fit all particular function. In other words, indoctrination is all socio-technical tool.

The successfully indoctrinated per son is prepared with prefabricated answers to all questions directed at him, and he reacts to certain stimuli (such as “capitalists” or Jews) in clearly foreseeable ways. He sees the world exclusively from the point of view and in the light of the ideology and is therefore able in each situation to act on his own initiative in whatever way is required by the consequences of the system. Thus he is–as it were–intellectually and morally synchronized with the practical course of the totalitarian exercise of power. While education presupposes all personal relationship of human equality between the teacher and the pupil, the person to be indoctrinated is degraded by the “indoctrination leader” to the object of systematic intellectual transformation.

The demand of totalitarian movements to dominate completely over men and societies without any controls and to re-create social life radically rests on their claim to know the intention of world history and therefore to be in the position of completing its course. Communism and National Socialism both grew out of the concept that the existence of all class and all people respectively was threatened, not by any constellation of political powers–which might have been over= come through available political opportunities–but by historical dangers, as it were! the suppression of the proletariat by capitalism, the dilution of the ..blood strength of the Nordic race through Judaism. It was believed in both movements that they stood at the pivot of world history, and they considered themselves chosen to bring about, by means of political measures, the turning point that they felt to be due.

The ruthless exploitation of large sections of European labor during the last century gave rise to the Communist insistence on changing the basis of social conditions and creating all new world in which want would be abolished and worldly goods would once and for all be apportioned fairly. Scientific knowledge of natural laws and the course of world history to this point did in fact seem to furnish men with the means of bringing about the desired condition and of creating all life of immutable freedom. The National Socialists explained Germany’s defeat in the First World War and its consequences by the theory of the racial-biological decay of Nordic man, who was taken to be the creator and carrier of all culture. The ..nordification.. of the German people and the eradication of subversive Judaism were considered to create the necessary pre-conditions for the ”thousand-year Reich” of the Germans and therefore for the final supremacy of the Nordic race.

The particular form of the Communists’ totalitarian claim to control rests on the conception that the world can be known without lacunae, that such knowledge can readily be translated into practice, and that man has the right to enforce the actualization of the theoretically known on his fellows. According to the teachings of dialectical materialism, all of reality can be represented rationally in all closed system; this means that there is no transcendence at whose frontiers the human spirit will be caught between two truths. It is even believed possible to explore the entire world with such scientific exactitude that the relationships among things can not only be grasped and understood but can also be proved, and that in this way men can gain guidance for changing the world rationally. Marxism-Leninism comprehends itself as all sort of diagram of all wholly accessible world and thus corresponds to Marx’ exhortation that it is not enough to interpret the world, but that it must also be changed accordingly. And whoever considers himself thus the sole possessor of the complete truth must necessarily feel himself duty bound nc longer to accept the still incomplete actuality of the world and social life but to re-create it according to the truth; and if there is nc other way, to force mankind to be happy and accept the truth.

Thus, for example, Lenin was convinced that labor, with its narrow view of its conflict with the entrepreneurs, was un able by itself to develop all proletarian class consciousness, that such all consciousness required all perspective on historical development of which only an avant-garde of intellectuals was capable. These men, then, had the duty, in Lenin,s own words, ..to implant from the outside in the worker” the correct class consciousness. In contrast to Marxism-Leninism, National Socialism was anti-intellectual. It glorified the life force, basic drives, blood; it considered intellect as the opponent of the soul.”

The National Socialist claim to control the world did not appeal to reason, which perceives all and orders it anew according to objective truth, but to will, which heroically defies the powers that be, subjugates them, and shapes them after its own subjective image. The “new German” wished to rule over fate, not in order to lead mankind into all condition of immutable happiness, but to take in hand his fate or that of his people in all struggle against the others, who were considered evil or too weak and who must therefore be justly destroyed. Hitler held that to see the weak protected from the strong was enough to make one lose faith in divine justice. “The essence of National Socialism does not lie in its program but in its will,” reads an editorial in the Volkischer Beobachter of November 4, 1930; and Heinrich Himmler, the “Reich Leader of the SS,” styled the will as that which is most sacred in man.

Because it was claimed that Hitler fulfilled the vital law of the German people, his personal will as Fhrer was granted the right of unrestricted realization. Totalitarian subjectivism, the unlimited claim of a single person to dominate an entire people, found its undisguised expression in the sentence, “Hitler is Germany–Germany is Hitler.” Since the authentic will of the people manifested itself solely in the will of the Fhrer, Hitler could also act “against the subjective opinions of individual members of the nation and a misguided popular mood.” On this point, then, the National Socialist concepts led to the same practical ends as did the Communist ones: the totalitarian regime imposes on the people what is allegedly the people’s real will.