



BOOKS

Why We Should Read Hannah Arendt Now

The Origins of Totalitarianism has much to say about a world of rising authoritarianism.

By Anne Applebaum



Getty; The Atlantic

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This article has been adapted from the introduction to The Folio Society's new edition of Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism.

So much of what we imagine to be new is old; so many of the seemingly novel illnesses that afflict modern society are really just resurgent cancers, diagnosed and described long ago. Autocrats have risen before; they have used mass violence before; they have broken the laws of war before. In 1950, in the preface she wrote to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt, knowing that what had just passed could repeat itself, described the scant half decade that had elapsed since the end of the Second World War as an era of great unease: “Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest—forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries.”

The toxic nationalism and open racism of Nazi Germany, only recently defeated; the Soviet Union's ongoing, cynical attacks on liberal values and what it called “bourgeois democracy”; the division of the world into warring camps; the large influx of refugees; the rise of new forms of broadcast media capable of pumping out disinformation and propaganda on a mass scale; the emergence of an uninterested, apathetic majority, easily placated with simple bromides and outright lies; and above all the phenomenon of totalitarianism, which she described as an “entirely new form of government”—all of these things led Arendt to believe that a darker era was about to begin.

She was wrong, or partly so. Although much of the world would remain, for the rest of the 20th century, in thrall to violent and aggressive dictatorships, in 1950 North America and Western Europe were in fact just at the beginning of an era of growth and prosperity that would carry them to new heights of wealth and power. The French would remember this era as *Les Trente Glorieuses*; the Italians would speak of the *boom economico*, the Germans of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. In this same era, liberal democracy, a political system that had failed spectacularly in 1930s Europe, finally flourished. So did international integration. The Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the eventual European Union—all of these institutions not only

supported the liberal democracies but knit them together more tightly than ever before. The result was certainly not a utopia—by the 1970s, growth had slowed; unemployment and inflation soared—but it nevertheless seemed, at least to those who lived inside the secure Western bubble, that the forces of what Arendt had called “sheer insanity” had been kept at bay.

Now we live in a different era, one in which growth at those 1950s levels is impossible to imagine. Inequality has grown exponentially, creating huge divides between a tiny billionaire class and everyone else. International integration is failing; declining birth rates, combined with a wave of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa, have created an angry rise of nostalgia and xenophobia. Worse, some of the elements that made the postwar Western world so prosperous—some of the elements that Arendt’s pessimistic analysis missed—are fading away. The American security guarantee that underlies the stability of Europe and North America is more uncertain than it has ever been. America’s own democracy, which served as a role model for so many others, is challenged as it has not been in decades, including by those who no longer accept the results of American elections. At the same time, the world’s autocracies have now accumulated enough wealth and influence to challenge the liberal democracies, ideologically as well as economically. The leaders of China, Russia, Iran, Belarus, and Cuba often work together, supporting one another, drawing on kleptocratic resources—money, property, business influence—at a level Hitler or Stalin could never have imagined. Russia has defied the entire postwar European order by invading Ukraine.

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Once again, we are living in a world that Arendt would recognize, a world in which it seems “as though mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives”—a description that could almost perfectly describe Vladimir Putin on the one hand and Putin’s Russia on the other. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* forces us to ask not only why Arendt was too pessimistic, in 1950, but also whether some of her pessimism might be more warranted now. More to the point, it offers us a kind of dual methodology, two different ways of thinking about the phenomenon of autocracy.

Precisely because Arendt feared for the future, much of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was in fact focused on an excavation of the past. Although not all of the research that lies at the heart of the book has held up to modern scholarship, the principle that led her down this path remains important: To grapple with a broad social trend, look at its history, try to find its origins, try to understand what happened when it last appeared, in another country or another century. To explain Nazi anti-Semitism, Arendt reached back not only to the history of the Jews in Germany but also to the history of European racism and imperialism, and to the evolution of the notion of the “rights of man”—which we now more commonly speak of as “human rights.” To have such rights, she observed, you must not only live in a state that can guarantee them; you must also qualify as one of that state’s citizens. The stateless, and those classified as noncitizens, or non-people, are assured of nothing. The only way they can be helped

or made secure is through the existence of the state, of public order, and of the rule of law.

The Origins Of Totalitarianism

HANNAH ARENDT,
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

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The last section of *Origins* is largely devoted to a somewhat different project: the close examination of the totalitarian states of her time, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and in particular an attempt to understand the sources of their power. Here her thinking is equally useful, though not, again, because everything she writes matches present circumstances. Many surveillance and control techniques are much subtler than they once were, involving facial-recognition cameras and spyware, not merely crude violence or paramilitary patrols in the street. Most modern autocracies do not have a “foreign policy openly directed toward world domination,” or at least not yet. Propaganda has also changed. The modern Russian leadership feels no need to constantly promote its own achievements around the world, for example; it is often satisfied with belittling and undermining the achievements of others.

And yet the questions Arendt asks remain absolutely relevant today. She was fascinated by the passivity of so many people in the face of dictatorship, by the widespread willingness, even eagerness, to believe lies and propaganda—just consider the majority of Russian people today, unaware that there is even a war going on next door and prevented by law from calling it such. In the totalitarian world, trust has dissolved. The masses “believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true.” To explain this phenomenon, Arendt zeroes in on

human psychology, especially the intersection between terror and loneliness. By destroying civic institutions, whether sports clubs or small businesses, totalitarian regimes kept people away from one another and prevented them from sharing creative or productive projects. By blanketing the public sphere with propaganda, they made people afraid to speak with one another. And when each person felt himself isolated from the rest, resistance became impossible. Politics in the broadest sense became impossible too: “Terror can rule absolutely only over men who are isolated against each other ... Isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result.”

Reading that account now, it is impossible not to wonder whether the nature of modern work and information, the shift from “real life” to virtual life and the domination of public debate by algorithms that increase emotion, anger, and division, hasn't created some of the same results. In a world where everyone is supposedly “connected,” loneliness and isolation once again are smothering activism, optimism, and the desire to participate in public life. In a world where “globalization” has supposedly made us all similar, a narcissistic dictator can still launch an unprovoked war on his neighbors. The 20th-century totalitarian model has not been banished; it can be brought back, at any place and at any time.

Arendt offers no easy answers. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* does not contain a set of policy prescriptions, or directions on how to fix things. Instead it offers proposals, experiments, different ways to think about the lure of autocracy and the seductive appeal of its proponents as we grapple with them in our own time.

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