

Totalitarianism

David D. Roberts

/t05/

KEY CONCEPTS IN
POLITICAL THEORY

Totalitarianism

Key Concepts in Political Theory

Charles Jones and Richard Vernon, *Patriotism*

Roger Griffin, *Fascism*

Peter J. Steinberger, *Political Judgment*

Fabian Wendt, *Authority*

Eric Mack, *Libertarianism*

Elizabeth Cohen and Cyril Ghosh, *Citizenship*

Peter Lamb, *Socialism*

Benjamin Moffitt, *Populism*

Mark Stephen Jendrysik, *Utopia*

David D. Roberts, *Totalitarianism*

Totalitarianism

David D. Roberts

polity

Copyright © David D. Roberts 2020

The right of David D. Roberts to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2020 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3239-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3240-7(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Roberts, David D., 1943- author. | Polity Press.

Title: Totalitarianism / David D. Roberts.

Other titles: Key concepts in political theory.

Description: Medford, Massachusetts : Polity, 2020. | Series: Key concepts in political theory | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "David Roberts outlines the contours and history of totalitarianism"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019038605 (print) | LCCN 2019038606 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509532391 (Hardback) | ISBN 9781509532407 (Paperback) | ISBN 9781509532421 (ePUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Totalitarianism. | Totalitarianism--History.

Classification: LCC JC480 .R635 2020 (print) | LCC JC480 (ebook) | DDC 321.9--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038605>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038606>

Typeset in 10.5 on 12pt Sabon

by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website:
politybooks.com

Contents

1	Why Should We Care about Totalitarianism?	1
2	The Career of a Concept	14
3	Totalitarian Trajectories During the Era of the Two World Wars	54
4	Movements and Regimes since World War II	83
5	The Future of Totalitarianism	112
	Notes	150
	Index	163

1

Why Should We Care about Totalitarianism?

A new political phenomenon

Coined by an Italian anti-fascist in 1923, the term “totalitarianism” quickly became part of our vocabulary, and the concept has now been central to political discussion for almost a century. However, it has long been one of the most uncertain and controversial of the key concepts in political theory. Some critics advocate abandoning it altogether. But after surveying the uses that have been made of the category, and looking again at the most prominent cases, this book will argue that totalitarianism remains essential to understanding the modern political universe. Still, the notion has often been misused or misconstrued, so we need a deeper, recast understanding of what totalitarianism might mean.

It is not hard to explain why we should care about the political phenomena most frequently labeled totalitarian, starting with three novel experiments that emerged in Europe in the wake of World War I. These were the fascist regime in Italy, the Nazi regime in Germany, and the communist regime in the Soviet Union, especially as it settled out the 1930s under Joseph Stalin. They were not only new but largely unanticipated, though in retrospect we can see

2 *Why Should We Care about Totalitarianism?*

foreshadowing in the “total mobilization” during World War I, including government coordination of the economy and manipulation of public opinion. For the influential Bulgarian-born Parisian intellectual Tzvetan Todorov, writing in 2000, the emergence of totalitarianism, leading to a long conflict with democracy, was nothing less than the central event of the twentieth century.¹

The trajectories of the Soviet, German, and Italian experiments profoundly affected not only the shape of our world but also our self-understanding, our sense of what can happen. So images of those regimes still trouble us, perhaps especially because of the violence, terror, and genocidal killing they spawned. But each was also overtly antithetical to liberal procedures and values – individualism, freedom, pluralism, representative democracy, and the distinction between public and private.

We still struggle to understand what fed those three departures from what seems the political norm. Totalitarianism has offered a way of characterizing, and possibly explaining, the most troubling features of the three regimes and what differentiates them from others, especially from liberal democracies. And thus, not surprisingly, the term has come to have overwhelmingly negative connotations of violence, domination, and oppression. Moreover, those three earlier regimes all led to failure, or even disaster, outcomes that seem to suggest the deep error of the totalitarian mode of action.

However, totalitarianism was not so obviously a negative at the time. Although it had been coined as a term of abuse by opponents, the Italian fascists promptly embraced the category in the 1920s to characterize the revolution they claimed to be engineering. Moreover, the utility of the category, and the desirability of the direction it seemed to indicate, were central to discussions among those seeking political innovation, especially on the Right, prior to World War II. By the 1930s, this discussion ranged well beyond Europe to include, for example, Turkey, Argentina, and Japan. As one of the novel possibilities on the table, totalitarianism everywhere attracted some, even as it also repelled or confused others. But what did its proponents see in it?

Especially after the Stalinist turn in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and the advent of Hitler’s regime in Germany

in 1933, the term “totalitarianism” was adopted by outside observers seeking to make sense of the three novel regimes, and it came significantly to shape our understanding. Above all, it seemed a way of characterizing what was new about them. To call them totalitarian was to suggest that although their hostility to liberal democracy gave them something in common with earlier authoritarian, dictatorial, and police-state governmental systems, they could not be understood in terms of those preexisting categories. Among the factors that, in combination, made these regimes unprecedented were mass mobilization, the expansion of state sovereignty, the political monopoly of a single party, and the turn to active population engineering. The state or party could intervene in anything and everything, from the educational system to the economy.

Writing in 1954, the political scientist Karl Deutsch summed up the consensus at that point:

Totalitarianism characteristically involves the extreme mobilization of the efforts and resources of population [*sic*] under its government. “In a democracy,” runs a well-known joke, “everything that is not forbidden is permitted; under an authoritarian regime, everything that is not permitted is forbidden; under totalitarianism, everything that is not forbidden is compulsory.” The citizen of a totalitarian state or culture has no time and no possessions that he could truly call his own.²

Though with obvious hyperbole, this formulation suggests, as a rough approximation, what differentiates totalitarianism from liberal democracy, on the one hand, and authoritarianism, on the other. Of the three, liberal democracy places the greatest premium on individual freedom, including the freedom to participate in public life. Authoritarianism, more concerned to keep society under control, restricts political participation but allows freedom within a restricted framework. Totalitarianism goes a step further and denies individual freedom altogether – not, however, simply to maximize control but to mobilize the population. That is why there is no place for privacy or even free time. And thus the insistence on compulsion. But why seek such total mobilization in the first place?

The range of totalitarianism

Although the totalitarianism category emerged in response to a particular era of political experiment, the era of the two world wars in Europe, it has also been applied more widely to a variety of political regimes, movements, aspirations, and visions – and even to non-political phenomena. The spectrum of uses has raised questions about the chronological, geographical, and topical range of the phenomena that might appropriately be considered totalitarian.

Although World War II brought about the end of the Italian and German regimes, the communist experiment continued in the Soviet Union; indeed, the Soviet Union emerged a major victor from World War II, its prestige and power much enhanced. The later 1940s saw the expansion of communism to the Soviet satellite states of east central Europe, as well as, not coincidentally, the advent of the Cold War. Despite a modicum of liberalization in the Soviet bloc after Stalin's death in 1953, totalitarianism continued to be applied to the whole Soviet system until it came crashing down from 1989 to 1991.

Meanwhile, in China the communists, led by Mao Zedong,³ took power in 1949 and, despite fits and starts, the ensuing regime followed a direction widely labeled totalitarian until Mao's death in 1976. Thereafter, his successors pulled back from what seemed the totalitarian excesses of the Mao era. But though the Chinese system became less overtly totalitarian, it entailed significant continuities from the Mao period and certainly no embrace of multiparty democracy. Meanwhile, other communist regimes emerged in, most notably, North Korea, Cuba, Cambodia, and Vietnam, all with features widely considered totalitarian. Each developed its own particular trajectory, however, and, as in China after Mao, the totalitarian thrust seemed to dissipate in some of them.

Just as totalitarianism might have seemed to be petering out in the communist world, Islamic extremism moved to center stage, first in 1979 with the revolution that created the Islamic Republic of Iran. That regime has been labeled totalitarian, and the term has also been used to characterize

other Islamist movements and regimes, most notably the self-described Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), established in 2013. Indeed, it may characterize the whole radical political ideology that some label “Islamism” to distinguish it from Islam the religion.

Moreover, some observers see a return to totalitarianism with the recent evolution of China under Xi Jinping, or even in Russia under Vladimir Putin. And if we add phenomena like the potential abuses of new technologies, to be considered under the topical range below, it is clear that, at least as a question worth raising, totalitarianism remains current.

The question of chronological range also points to the centuries before the term was applied. Some students of modern totalitarianism have found parallels and even continuities with premodern religious millenarian movements. Others have found the origins of at least the leftist brand of totalitarianism in the maelstrom of the French Revolution. Is use of the concept to characterize earlier phenomena inherently anachronistic? Reasonable observers will continue to differ, but totalitarianism has generally been considered a specifically modern phenomenon, presupposing at least indirect experience with secular liberalism and parliamentary democracy and requiring modern technologies for mobilization and indoctrination.

Precisely as modern, moreover, totalitarianism has generally been considered a specifically secular phenomenon. But that would appear to rule out earlier millenarianism, and it might seem to call into question any association of Islamic political extremism with totalitarianism. However, even those who deem such extremism totalitarian disagree over the nature of the relationship between the modern extreme and Islamic tradition. The extreme may be specifically modern and even secular, whatever the claim of a link to religious tradition.

In terms of geographical range, there have long been questions about the applicability of totalitarianism to movements or regimes beyond the Soviet Union, Italy, and Germany during the era of the two world wars. This includes several in Europe, from Spain and Portugal to Poland and Romania. Whereas most specialists do not consider Franco’s Spain totalitarian, the label is routinely applied to it by journalists and the general public. But the same question

6 *Why Should We Care about Totalitarianism?*

comes up concerning others outside Europe, such as Imperial Japan and Kemalist Turkey. We have seen that totalitarianism was part of political discussion in both countries during the 1930s, but whether it applies to the actual practice of those regimes is much less clear.

However we draw the lines, it is undeniable that the geographical range of totalitarianism has extended across the globe. In the wake of the Russian Revolution and the foundation of the Russian-dominated Third or Communist International (Comintern) in 1919, other communist parties in Europe and beyond were founded under the Comintern umbrella. Among them was the Chinese Communist Party, launched in 1921. In adopting the communist label, they distinguished themselves from the socialist parties of the earlier Second International and committed to following the communist model under the tutelage of Russia (which became the Soviet Union in 1922). Entailing centralized discipline and control, the communist direction was arguably totalitarian precisely as the mainstream socialist direction was not.

Totalitarianism has also been used to characterize tendencies even in liberal democracies. Critics on both the Left and the Right have sometimes claimed to discern a disturbing totalitarian potential inherent in secular modernity itself. The Left points to the modern reliance on instrumental reason and the use of knowledge for power and domination. Critiques from the libertarian Right often ran parallel as they lamented the seemingly relentless expansion of the modern state, assuming ever more powers and responsibilities, arguably at the expense of individual freedom.

From either direction, that totalitarian potential might be considerably enhanced by new methods of government surveillance through social media and the internet, or of societal manipulation through genetic profiling and engineering. But is the totalitarianism category, which was, and to some extent remains, intertwined with the era of fascism and Stalinism, sufficiently flexible to illuminate such contemporary phenomena or, with all its baggage by this point, is it more likely to throw us off?

We must keep in mind, to be sure, that our key categories inevitably evolve or even “grow” with historical experience,

as the trajectory of other key concepts in political theory, such as revolution, freedom, and sovereignty, make clear. Studying more recent instances might add to what we mean or understand by totalitarianism. But though the range is not delimited in some predetermined way, such concepts may get diluted, losing analytical power, as they are stretched to encompass ever more cases. So how much can the totalitarianism category grow with new experience?

Quite apart from the question of flexibility, a tendency toward careless usage, resulting from overfamiliarity, has threatened to make the category flabby. Even in scholarly discourse, totalitarianism is often used in a largely unexamined way, and in general discussion, usage sometimes veers from dilution to over-the-top sci fi fantasy.

In a television documentary on Evelyn Cameron, a pioneering English-born photographer who settled in remote eastern Montana in the late 1890s, a British photography expert refers to her “almost totalitarian feel for the image.”⁴ Filmmakers, especially, have sometimes been accused of seeking total control in order to manipulate the audience. But totalitarian? Such casual usage surely waters down the category unduly.

More plausible is Anna Burns’s use of the category in a recent novel to characterize the tense, oppressive, tightly controlled environment on the local level during the recent sectarian struggles in Northern Ireland.⁵ All aspects of life had become intensely politicized, with no escape. But though her narrator memorably conveys the sense of stifling oppressiveness, Burns too is stretching the category because there is no totalitarian intention or system but simply the atmosphere that has resulted from the sectarian struggle itself.

Masha Gessen, a highly regarded American journalist with a Soviet background, uses “totalitarianism” more conventionally to characterize a full-scale political regime in the subtitle of her recent book *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*. However, she invokes the category in a casual, unthinking way, seemingly because authoritarianism, autocracy, or dictatorship would not have had the same critical bite.⁶ She displays little sense of why most observers have seen Putin’s Russia as merely authoritarian instead. But perhaps that consensus reflects a delimited

8 Why Should We Care about Totalitarianism?

understanding of totalitarianism. And Gessen may be onto something, despite her too casual usage. We will return to the issue when considering Putin's Russia in chapter 5.

Grounds for doubt about the category

Although "totalitarianism" continues to be widely used, some observers have come to feel that it obscures more than it illuminates. By the 1970s, it was widely charged that totalitarianism had become a mere Cold War propaganda tool to discredit the Soviet Union through association with Nazi Germany. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War, such concerns have diminished, but they have by no means disappeared altogether.

In any case, the Cold War objection points to a more general question concerning the legitimacy of lumping fascism and communism as instances of totalitarianism when they seem so radically different, even diametrically opposed, in origin, ideology, and initial purpose. Moreover, the communists eliminated most forms of private property while the fascists did not. Both fascist regimes, though especially the Italian, rested on compromise with preexisting elites and institutions. The Soviets did away with the old regime far more systematically. Even if totalitarianism might account for certain common features, lumping fascist and communist regimes under the one category might seem inherently to be glossing over too much.

In their important co-edited volume, provocatively entitled *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick do not object to the category on the grounds of its political valences. Rather, they worry that, as applied to the Nazi and Soviet cases, it has led to an overemphasis on commonalities at the expense of deeper differences, as indicated, they argue, by the innovative new research, conducted without the prism of totalitarianism, conveyed in their volume.⁷ In a similar vein, Michael David-Fox, introducing a book treating Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany as entangled histories, writes that since 1997 "many scholars have begun to search for new

ways of looking at the two fields that challenge or go beyond the older comparisons written in the vein of totalitarianism theory.”⁸ Like Geyer and Fitzpatrick, he takes it for granted that, even if it might have been useful earlier, the totalitarianism approach must be left behind if we are to develop fresh insights.

Use of the totalitarianism category surely did reflect Cold War hostility to the Soviet Union on occasion, but resistance to the category on the part of those relatively sympathetic to the Soviet experiment also reflected Cold War pressures. In any case, the possibility of misuse does not in itself undermine the utility of the category, either as an analytical and comparative tool or as a way of characterizing aspirations and dynamics in practice. Put differently, the fact that it could serve Cold War purposes does not mean that this was the primary purpose, or that it did so in every case.

But I noted that doubts about lumping together fascism and communism cut deeper. Few would deny that *some* combination of similarities and differences was at work, but those objecting to lumping may not do justice to the real-world dynamic bringing the particular fascist and communist regimes at issue closer together than an abstract consideration might recognize.

The difference in originating aspirations does not rule out such commonalities, especially in light of the Leninist break from orthodox Marxism and the Stalinist break from within Leninism. Once the Soviets began pursuing “socialism in one country,” their Marxist underpinnings, which might seem especially to differentiate them from fascism, became ever more tenuous, even mythical. It remains the case that the Soviets made an anti-capitalist revolution as the fascists did not, but the Soviets and fascists were moving in a common statist, or arguably totalitarian, direction as an alternative to free market capitalism.

The fascists had concluded that the problem was not capitalism or private property but the wider liberal culture, which seemed responsible for what was most objectionable about capitalism. A change in political culture might yield a qualitatively superior relationship between the political and economic spheres even if major aspects of private property remained. For their part, the Soviets concluded that socialism

10 *Why Should We Care about Totalitarianism?*

in one country required crash industrialization based on forced collectivization in agriculture – a process very much directed from the top. Whether the break came with Lenin or with Stalin, the actual Soviet regime ended up sufficiently overlapping with the fascist regimes that not only can it be compared with them but it can fruitfully be considered together with them as instances of totalitarianism. It must be emphasized, however, that though totalitarianism cuts across the conventional Left–Right axis, it does not replace that axis, which remains essential for certain questions.

At the same time, we must ask how much difference the persistence of preexisting elites and institutions actually made. They could be co-opted, even caught up in synergistic relationships with genuine fascists, so that it may be misleading to assume that one side had to be winning and the other losing and that conservative elites were marginalizing genuine fascists. Even in this particular, it may be too easy to overplay differences between the fascist and the Soviet regimes.

A second objection concerns the image that had come to surround totalitarianism, based on a “structural model” positing top-down “total domination” as the aim, whether to serve power for its own sake or to pursue some fanatical ideological vision. Though it may linger in our imaginations, that model came to be largely rejected by specialists as research showed how chaotic, messy, and ultimately out of control the putatively totalitarian regimes actually were. Thus some came to find totalitarianism singularly inappropriate, even for dealing with Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. In his widely admired study of the two regimes, published in 2004, Richard Overy found totalitarianism almost a joke, a “political-science fantasy” presupposing “domination through fear by psychopathic tyrants” who wield “total, unlimited power.”⁹ To discuss these regimes in terms of totalitarianism seems bound to throw us off.

The brief defense against this objection is to ask who says it was all about total control in the first place? And even insofar as, for whatever reason, that was part of the aim, totalitarianism might plausibly be understood as an aspiration, a tendency, with no implication of complete realization. Could we recast the category as a novel mode of collective action