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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

American Totalitarianism in the Age of Trump

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In a speech at Mount Rushmore on 4 July 2020 President Donald Trump stated that the United States was under threat from a "totalitarian" "cancel culture" which was eroding American liberty, "driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees."[1] Trump's invocation of 'totalitarianism' speaks to the lasting hold this highly flexible and powerfully evocative concept retains on American political discourse. Political commentators and politicians brought totalitarianism out of its brief retirement in the post-Cold War era to be deployed as a weapon in the 'war on terror,' as I show in my research on the life of this concept after its mid-century heyday.[2] In the early 2000s, totalitarianism was invoked by pro-war liberal intellectuals and the George W. Bush administration to link the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the 'good fights' of World War II and the Cold War.[3] In this construction, 'Islamofascism' took the place of Nazism and Communism as the ideology perceived to represent an 'existential' threat to Western civilization.

Since 2016, totalitarianism has undergone another revival in American political discourse. It has appeared frequently in public commentary not in order to identify America's external enemies, but rather to describe trends in domestic politics and culture. The term 'totalitarian' has been widely used by Trump's opponents as a critique of his presidency, as well as by the president and his supporters.[4] Despite this widespread usage, there is no clear consensus on what totalitarianism actually means. Hannah Arendt's seminal study of this phenomenon, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, has been widely invoked, but these references are often accompanied by little more than a surface engagement with the work of this complex theorist.[5] 'Classic' totalitarianism theorists, among whom Arendt is one of the most celebrated, sought to identify a new type of insatiably aggressive and unprecedentedly repressive state which emerged in the middle decades of the twentieth century, based on the shared characteristics of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In current discourse, it is clear that totalitarianism now has a much wider meaning than its mid-century conceptual innovators intended.

Not everyone accepts the usefulness of totalitarianism as a framework for analysing American politics. Last year, an article by historian Samuel Clowes Huneke published in the *Boston Review* countered popular claims about the totalitarian nature of Trump's presidency and

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[1] David Smith, "US under Siege from 'Far-Left Fascism,' Says Trump in Mount Rushmore Speech," *Guardian*, 4 July 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/04/us-under-siege-from-far-left-fascism-says-trump-in-mount-rushmore-speech.

[2] Sophie Joscelyne, "American Intellectuals and the Concept of Totalitarianism, 1960-2009" (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2020).

[3] Tony Judt, "Bush's Useful Idiots: On the Strange Death of Liberal America," *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2006, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n18/tony-judt/bush-s-useful-idiots.

[4] My aim in this essay is not assess the legitimacy of these uses nor to determine whether or not Trump's presidency is totalitarian. I am concerned not with what totalitarianism *is* (or is not) but rather how it has been used, what it means to invoke totalitarianism as a political argument, and why this concept has retained such a hold on American political discourse.

[5] Samuel Moyn, "You Have Misunderstood the Relevance of Hannah Arendt," *Prospect*, 20 October2020, https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/philosophy/hannah-arendt-misunderstood-philosophy-fascism-authoritarianism-trump.

asserted that "the idea of totalitarianism is a useless tool in assessing the decency of governance in any twenty-first-century state."[6] Such dismissals of the utility of the concept of totalitarianism are familiar. Historians, social scientists, and political commentators have been declaring totalitarianism a dead concept at regular intervals since at least the 1960s.[7] This most recent obituary for totalitarianism, however, provides a useful way into the complexities of totalitarianism discourse in the twenty-first century. For Huneke, it is essential that "we ... acknowledge that the Manichean worldview implied in the term totalitarianism is an outdated relic of the Cold War." One of the major problems with totalitarianism is that,

> By claiming that dictatorship and democracy are not simply opposed but categorically different, it disables us from recognizing the democratic parts of dictatorial rule and the authoritarian aspects of democratic rule, and thus renders us less capable of effectively diagnosing problems in our own society.[8]

This conclusion, and the accompanying dismissal of the utility of totalitarianism, rests on an incomplete assessment of the functions this concept has performed over time. Totalitarianism did indeed bolster the Cold War bipolar framework of American liberal democracy versus Soviet totalitarian Communism. However, running counter to this official narrative, a tradition of alternative anti-totalitarianism, used precisely to illuminate anti-democratic tendencies *within* America, has been an important and understudied part of the discourse.

The description of Donald Trump as a totalitarian president, rather than representing an aberration in the use of this concept, actually continues a twentieth-century tradition of turning totalitarianism inwards to criticise trends in American politics. During World War II African American intellectuals and activists reappropriated anti-totalitarian rhetoric as a means of highlighting similarities between American racism and Nazi policies. This practice continued during the Cold War, when totalitarianism was mobilised to expose the hypocrisy of American leaders' claims to champion freedom and democracy in the world, while African Americans and other minority groups faced oppression and inequality at home.[9] The use of totalitarianism as an internal critique of American society reached an apex in the 1960s when radical intellectuals redeployed this concept to subvert the conformism of Cold War culture.

Perhaps the best known of these radical theorists is Herbert Marcuse who, identifying totalitarian trends in American society in his 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*, argued that totalitarianism was "not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through manipulation of needs by vested interests."[10] Less well known is Norman Mailer's development of a theory of cultural totalitarianism to critique the conformity of Cold War American society.[11] In his 1957 essay "The White Negro" and other writings in the 1960s, Mailer warned that a new form of totalitarianism had "slipped into America," into the "psyche" of American citizens who were, whether they recognised it or not, "trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed ... to conform."[12] In a survey of the many meanings attached to totalitarianism in the late 1960s, political theorist Benjamin R.

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[6] Samuel Clowes Huneke, "An End to Totalitarianism," *Boston Review*, 16 April 2020, http://bostonreview.net/politics/samuel-clowes-huneke-end-totalitarianism.

[7] See, for example, Michael Curtis, "Retreat from Totalitarianism," in Carl J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis, and Benjamin R. Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969); Michael Walzer, "On 'Failed Totalitarianism,'" in *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in Our Century*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 103–21; Christopher Hitchens, "How Neo-Conservatives Perish," reprinted in Hitchens, *For the Sake of Argument, Essays and Minority Reports* (London: Atlantic Books, 2000).

[8] Huneke, "An End to Totalitarianism."

[9] See, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and Lester B. Granger's reference to "the totalitarian practices forced upon millions of our Negro citizens" in a 1958 statement to President Eisenhower. Quoted in Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 139–40. The full text of this statement is available online at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/statement-president-united-states.

[10] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 5.

[11] Sophie Joscelyne, "Norman Mailer and American Totalitarianism in the 1960s," *Modern Intellectual History*, FirstView, 2020, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244320000323.

[12] Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers* (St Albans, UK: Panther, 1976), 191; Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," reprinted in Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), 284.

Barber identified, in addition to the "statist" model attached to the Soviet Union, a "seepage model" of totalitarianism more appropriate to the United States. This type of totalitarianism manifested as "a gradual and largely unperceived evaporation of the distinction between private and public" facilitating "thought and behavior control of a far more subtle kind [than the statist model]."[13]

As these three descriptions suggest, one of the most important changes in the way totalitarianism is understood when it is applied to American society is a shift in focus away from the role of the state. These alternative theories de-emphasise the importance of state control and external political coercion and focus on methods of internal psychological manipulation. By contrast, 'classic' theories of totalitarianism in the 1950s centred on fears of coercive state control extending to all areas of life. As historian Abbott Gleason argued in his extensive study of the concept during the Cold War, the core meaning of totalitarianism was 'the idea of a radically intrusive state' which attempts not just to control 'citizens from the outside … but also attempt[s] to reach into the most intimate regions of their lives' and make them 'constitutionally incapable of challenging the rule of the state'.[14] Theorists variously emphasised the importance of state terror, state enforced ideology, propaganda, and surveillance, or state control of the economy. The popular image of totalitarianism was powerfully influenced by George Orwell's dystopian vision of a society in *1984* in which all aspects of life are controlled by the state and no personal freedom, even of private thought, exists.[15] By the 1980s, many of the nuances of the earlier theorists had been flattened into a singular focus on how totalitarianism represented the encroachment of the state, or the public sphere, into private areas of life.[16]

The alternative engagement of radical intellectuals with totalitarianism in the 1960s provides a starting point to consider how current understandings of 'American' totalitarianism differ from those 'classic' understandings. Though the specifics of their analysis were rooted in Cold War culture and are less applicable today, the crucial interventions of these intellectuals suggested that sources of totalitarian control could be located beyond the centralised state. Mailer's understanding of how cultural totalitarianism operated finds echoes in contemporary discourse on the perceived totalitarianism of 'cancel culture' – though critics of this phenomenon are now broadly on the political right rather than the left.

It is in the context of this tradition of non-statist formulations of totalitarianism that we can better understand Trump's description of 'cancel culture' as "the very definition of totalitarianism."[17] In very similar terms, political scientist Andrew A. Michta, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, compared 'cancel culture' to totalitarianism in the Soviet bloc states, "where the accusation of being out of step with the party was enough to end one's career and nullify one's reputation."[18] Although they are on the opposite end of the political spectrum to 1960s radicals, these contemporary critics of 'cancel culture' continue a tradition of American anti-totalitarianism which locates the totalitarian impulse away from the state. As Rod Dreher, senior editor at the *American Conservative*, starkly warned: "If you think totalitarianism is only something that the state can impose, you're wrong … Totalitarianism is coming. It will be softer than what existed in the Soviet bloc, but totalitarianism it certainly will be."[19] The shift away from statist conceptions of totalitarianism was further

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[13] Benjamin R. Barber, "Conceptual Foundations of Totalitarianism," in Friedrich, Curtis, and Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective*, 30.

[14] Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.

[15] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

[16] This approach was typified by neoconservative intellectual and Reagan-era diplomat Jeane Kirkpatrick who argued that, more than any other secondary factor, totalitarian regimes were defined by their determination to "dramatically extend the scope of governmental activity,' 'claiming for the state the whole life of the whole people." Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Reflections on Totalitarianism," *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 98–99.

[17] Smith, "US under siege."

[18] Andrew A. Michta, "The Captive Mind and America's Resegregation: Idol smashing and cancel culture are part of a broad ideological project to dominate society," *Wall Street Journal* (online), 31 July 2020, ProQuest.

[19] Rod Dreher, "American Totalitarianism," *American Conservative*, 3 August 2020, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/american-totalitarianism-live-not-by-lies-woke/.

illustrated by the fact that Michta called upon the state to protect Americans *against* cultural totalitarianism, arguing that the "U.S. is roiled by spasms of violence and intolerance today because government at all levels … has abdicated its duty to protect the public space."[20]

Trump's inflammatory remarks, and Michta's article, were intended to demonise 'antifa' and 'Black Lives Matter' protestors, but fears of 'cancel culture' have also been expressed by more liberal political factions in the United States. A letter in *Harper's* magazine, published three days after Trump's speech and signed by over 150 prominent writers, artists, and academics, stated that the "forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world." It argued that America was "paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus".[21] The letter thus expressed sentiments very similar to Mailer's more dramatic assertion in "The White Negro" that in his own "years of conformity" a "man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life" and, as a result, Americans were suffering from "a collective failure of nerve."[22]

The letter in *Harper's* argued that "[t]his stifling atmosphere" in America "will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time." Significantly, in keeping with previous descriptions of cultural totalitarianism, it warned that the "restriction of debate" was equally damaging "*whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society.*"[23] The letter did not use the term 'totalitarian' (though the reference to 'illiberalism' is telling), but there are striking similarities with Trump's description of 'cancel culture.' Although the signatories of the letter claimed to support contemporary protests for racial and social justice, and identified Trump as a "powerful ally" of the "forces of illiberalism," it nonetheless seems that 'cancel culture' is an enemy shared across a broad spectrum of American politics, including American conservatives, the populist right, the liberal establishment, and the left. These recent discussions reveal that the idea of a *totalitarian culture*, in which the sources of control are not directed centrally from the state but are diffuse throughout society and operate primarily through psychological means ("shaming dissenters"), remains an important part of the discourse on totalitarianism in America.

Reconfigurations of totalitarianism which focus on an American context have, since the 1960s, necessarily sought to show how this phenomenon can flourish under a capitalist free market system. In this respect, Marcuse's description of the "economic-technical" "manipulation of needs" in society was one such explanation, as was Mailer's focus on the psychological manipulations of the mass media and advertising. This points to another important change which is manifest in current uses of totalitarianism. If theorists originally conceived the centralised control of the economy by an all-invasive state to be a vital feature of totalitarianism, commentators now worry about the manipulation of government by powerful economic forces. In this regard, the close alliance between oligarchical business interests and the state symbolised by Trump's presidency is, for some critics, a worrying feature of America's totalitarianism. A pre-Trumpian version of this argument was advanced in the 2000s by political theorist Sheldon Wolin, who argued that totalitarianism in America took the form of the "political coming-of-age of corporate power."[24] He too, de-emphasised the centrality of the state, arguing that totalitarianism in America "is only in part a state-centered phenomenon."[25] Wolin's definition of inverted totalitarianism has been employed more recently by scholars and political commentators to analyse the significance of Trump's presidency.[26]

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[20] Michta, "The Captive Mind."

[21] "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," *Harper's Magazine*, 7 July 2020, https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/.

[22] Mailer, "The White Negro," 283.

[23] "A Letter on Justice." My emphasis.

[24] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xxi.

[25] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, xviii.

[26] Sasha Breger Bush, "Trump and National Neoliberalism," *Dollars & Sense* (January/February 2017) http://dollarsandsense.org/archives/2017/0117bregerbush.html; Chauncey Devega, "Donald Trump's 'Inverted Totalitarianism': Too bad we didn't heed Sheldon Wolin's warnings," *Salon*, November 23, 2016, https://www.salon.com/2016/11/23/donald-trumps-inverted-totalitarianism-too-bad-we-didnt-heed-sheldon-wolins-warnings/; For more on Wolin and inverted totalitarianism in the context of Trump's presidency see Lucy Cane, *Sheldon Wolin and Democracy: Seeing Through Loss* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 29–69.

Fears of surveillance have been a part of the conversation about totalitarianism from at least the 1940s. Societal surveillance remains vital to understandings of totalitarianism in America, though the primary focus of concern has shifted from the state to 'Big Tech' companies, including Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Google.[27] Warning of the dangers of ignoring non-statist forms of totalitarianism, Dreher, of the *American Conservative*, highlighted "surveillance capitalism" as a major source of totalitarianism in American life. Similarly, Carole Cadwalladr, who uncovered the Cambridge Analytica data-mining scandal, compared Facebook's surveillance practices to those of the last remaining state considered totalitarian in a 'classic' sense, North Korea.[28] The persistency of this perceived threat of intrusive surveillance shows how some aspects of totalitarianism discourse have endured, though they have been transformed by the general shift away from the mid-century preoccupation with the intrusions of the state.

The meaning of totalitarianism in American political life is complicated by thriving discussions of 'fascism' in the United States – a related but separate conversation. This essay cannot begin to do justice to the complexities of the debate about fascism in America, though it is worth noting some of the distinctions between the discourses on these two concepts. Discussions of Trump's fascist tendencies tend to invoke statist models of totalitarianism and focus on politics and violence, as opposed to the cultural concerns highlighted in this essay. The term 'fascist' more often refers specifically to Trump's right-wing populist appeal and is used to make direct comparisons to previous right-wing dictators. Important work has recently been done to excavate the history of anti-fascism in American politics, particularly in reference to the history of African American engagement with this concept, which, as historian Robyn C. Spencer has noted, has been marginalised in contemporary discourse.[29]

Analysing contemporary totalitarianism discourse in the United States shows how far the debate has shifted from 'classic' mid-century understandings of this concept, when totalitarianism referred overwhelmingly to America's external enemies and was wedded to notions of state control. It also highlights the fact that reconfigurations of this concept to suit an American context are far from new, and that looking back to earlier alternative uses can help to illuminate the meaning of totalitarianism in America today. The fact that totalitarianism has been invoked by people on opposite ends of the political spectrum for vastly differing purposes may well throw into question its ultimate usefulness as an analytical tool. However, considering what unites these contradictory uses does tell us something about American politics. It reveals a distinctly American preoccupation with the *unseen* erosion of personal freedom – an obsession with insidious cultural and psychological forms of control, rather than overt statist and coercive versions.

Recent political commentary has provided a link back to the early 2000s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which sparked my original interest in totalitarianism as a concept. The security crackdown in Washington DC following the 6 January invasion of the Capitol by Trump's supporters inspired one commentator to invoke Hannah Arendt's 'boomerang thesis' to explain events. Comparing the heavily militarised situation in Washington to the 'Green Zone' in Baghdad after the 2003 invasion, the author suggested that these developments "may represent a new stage of the 'imperial boomerang,' in which tactics developed by empires to maintain control abroad end up being used against the residents of the homeland."[30] This latest twist in a convoluted intellectual history speaks to the inherent mobility – geographic, temporal, and conceptual – of totalitarianism. This mobility gets to the heart of this concept's staying power in American political life.

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[27] The power of 'Big Tech' was also linked to the discourse on cancel culture, free speech, and totalitarianism by Trump's supporters following Twitter's announcement that the president would be permanently banned from the platform. Trump's son, Donald Trump, Jr., took, ironically, to Twitter to announce that: "We are living Orwell's 1984. Free-speech no longer exists in America. It died with big tech and what's left is only there for a chosen few." @DonaldJTrumpJr, 9 January 2021.

[28] Dreher, "American Totalitarianism;" Carole Cadwalladr, "Facebook is out of Control. If it Were a Country it would be North Korea," *Guardian*, 5 July 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/05/facebook-is-out-of-control-if-it-were-a-country-it-would-be-north-korea.

[29] See Bill Mullen and Chris Vials eds., *The US Antifascism Reader* (London: Verso, 2020); Robyn C. Spencer, "The Black Panther Party and Black Anti-Fascism in The United States," Duke University Press (blog), 26 January 2017, https://dukeupress.wordpress.com/2017/01/26/the-black-panther-party-and-black-anti-fascism-in-the-united-states/.

[30] Lois Beckett, "'This is Not Freedom': Militarized US Capitol a Sign of Forever Wars Coming Home," *Guardian*, 20 January 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/20/capitol-breach-washington-dc-war-zone.

conservatism, liberal interventionism in the twenty-first century, and the role of ideas in American foreign policy from the Cold War to the 'war on terror'. Her article "Norman Mailer and American Totalitarianism in the 1960s" has been published in the journal *Modern Intellectual History.*