

Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism

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Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism: What are the Differences?

In one of the previous posts, I discussed authoritarianism and its misunderstanding in contemporary discourse. According to the common view, authoritarianism is the opposite of democracy. I argued that this view is wrong because, among other things, it presupposes that the two, whether as phenomena or as concepts, represent a mutually exclusive binary pair, similar to good and evil, or male and female (a society is either authoritarian or democratic, an action is either good or evil, a sex is either male or female, but never both together, never combined) – and this presupposition is incorrect. To begin with, authoritarianism is much older than democracy as an historical phenomenon and much broader in its application as a concept. For most of human history, societies larger than primary groups in size were through and through authoritarian in the sense that across all their institutions the relevant populations were divided into the few who exercised authority and the many who lacked it, and the minority with authority prescribed the correct behavior to the many without it and punished them if they disobeyed: this was so in the all-encompassing family and religious institutions as well as in the differentiated institutions organizing political, economic, and other special activities – the individual as such in none of them was recognized as an autonomous agent. And it is individual agency (freedom in this sense) which is the binary opposite of authoritarianism.

Democracy, in distinction, is the organization of political reality, specifically. It is a central implication of nationalism, which is a form of consciousness in the frame of which a political community is seen as a sovereign community of fundamentally equal members and shared identity. As such, it is historically recent, emerging in the 16th century in one small corner of the world (England) and only in the last century becoming characteristic of most of the world's polities. Nationalism is always based on the principles of popular sovereignty and fundamental equality of membership. Thus, it always implies democracy in politics. But the twin core principles of nationalism are interpreted differently, depending on whether the national community (nation) is originally defined as an association of self-governing (free) and equal individuals or as a collective individual with its own will and interests, independent of the wills and interests of human individuals composing it, which can be known only to a special few. In the former case, an individualistic type of nationalism develops; in the latter, a collectivistic type. Individualistic nationalism expresses itself in *liberal* democracy; collectivistic nationalism, in contrast, is likely to result in an *authoritarian* democracy.

Moreover, as I argued in the earlier post, the quality (liberal or authoritarian) of the democratic politics in nations does not determine other institutions in them. An authoritarian state may coexist with a liberal economy, as is now the case in China, with liberal science, with liberal art. Intellectuals in Russia, whose political regimes, before, during, and after the Soviet period, have been staunchly authoritarian, found a liberal refuge in classics, science, and creative literature, especially poetry, which have traditionally encouraged, even glorified, individual agency. Similarly, a liberal political regime, such as the one of which Americans are justly proud, may and today does coexist with coercive, brutally authoritarian cultural institutions.

There are several differences between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Authoritarianism is a structural, organizational phenomenon, as a concept referring to the authority relations within institutions, political or other. Totalitarianism, by contrast, is a psychological phenomenon, a result of specific psychological dynamics outwardly expressed in ideologies. There are no totalitarian political regimes, though there may be authoritarian political regimes supported by totalitarian ideologies, no totalitarian societies. In distinction to authoritarianism which is as old as history, totalitarianism, like democracy, is an implication of nationalism. At its root, it is a psychological reaction to individual freedom, individualism, which is also an implication of nationalism, and thus to individualistic nationalism and to liberal democracy. I published an article about totalitarianism in 2016 (“Back to 1984: The Role of American Universities in Dismantling Liberal Democracy,” *Society*) and suggest that the readers of this post consult it for greater depth. Here, I’ll quote some of its claims.

“Structurally uncrystallized totalitarianism is an important social current within every individualistic society and liberal democracy. In its essence, the totalitarian reaction is a reaction, within the conditions of a secular egalitarian society, against the idea of the individual as an autonomous actor. This implies the denial of the ideal of liberty (as unnatural and anti-social): the rejection of individual freedom and insistence on the subjugation of the individual to the collective as a matter of principle not only in overt behavior but also and especially in thought and feeling.”

It is the cultural elites of liberal democracies – a privileged stratum of the talking heads, professors in social “sciences” and some humanities, and their students in the media, facing the fewest limits to their individual freedom in their daily lives – who are most uncomfortable with individual freedom. Educated and affluent, both aware of the choices for self-definition offered by prosperous and secure liberal democracies, such as the United States, and finding them affordable enough, they remain forever the second-tier to the business and political elites whom they bitterly envy. This envy eats them from within: they become dissatisfied with themselves and their place in society. As a result, they turn against the ruling principle of their

society, clamoring for its very opposite – the dissolution of the individual in the group, the anti-freedom.

Many of them proceed directly to psychiatric hospitals. Mental health is the characteristic problem of this stratum. However, “The majority of those who are threatened by freedom are affected on the sub-clinical level and are likely to suffer from a generalized psychological discomfort, rather than actual disease. They are by definition maladjusted to the free society and uncomfortable with their position (with who they are) in it. Thus, they are naturally hostile to it and those who feel comfortable in it. While they do not become dysfunctional, they are easily drawn to socially disruptive activities – join oppositional, often violent, movements.... It is this much larger group ... that develops the totalitarian aspiration. In this sense, totalitarianism is the characteristic modern malaise, the predominant form the sub-clinical mental discomfort with oneself and one’s social environment takes.

Individuals who are afraid of freedom want to be dissolved in the collective, they want decisions to be made for them, they conform irrespective of the ideology. That is the reason for the easy, seamless transfer of modern fanatic devotions...: so long as we bleat in unison, it does not matter whether we bleat: “four legs good, two legs bad” or “four legs good, two legs better.”

The desire for limits on freedom, like mental illness, is, again, concentrated among those who have the fewest such limits and the greatest freedom. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that today in the United States the totalitarian tendency is strongest in the universities, both among the students and among the faculty. The two age groups express their frustrations – their maladjustment in a liberal democracy – differently: the young become activists, the older become ideologues. Through their ideology, the faculty reinforce the discomfort of the students and give direction to their totalitarian aspiration. Universities become hothouses of totalitarianism in the United States of America.”