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The Totalitarian Paradigm: Unity and Conflict¹

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Abstract

The concept of totalitarianism is, undoubtedly, one of the most disputed terms in political language. This article investigates the conflict between the classical interpretations of totalitarian system that was frequently seen from the monolithic and revisionist perspective which offered some pluralistic models of Soviet and Nazi systems. The main purpose of the article is to show that, in this frame of the debates, the monolithic understanding of totalitarianism was inaccurate, therefore damaging the concept itself.

Keywords: *totalitarianism, revisionism, monolithic structure, pluralist model, conflict, unity.*

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The concept of totalitarianism is, undoubtedly, one of the most disputed terms in political language. The „completely polarizing nature” of the concept has divided the scientific and political community in fervent followers and equally passionate detractors of the concept. First of them are using it indiscriminately as a synonym for fascism, communism and, generally, for all non-democratic regimes; the second group is considering the term „contaminated” with political connotations, thus being useless or even harmful to scientific purposes. But beyond the political and normative connotations of the debate there are, however, significant theoretical issues on the both sides which advances our understanding of the past century political realities and enriches the human knowledge in general.

Therefore, the analysis of the totalitarian paradigm inevitably requires the examination of the conflict between “totalitarianism” and “revisionism”. Generally speaking, the antagonism between totalitarianism and revisionism assumes the antithesis between monolithic system and more or less pluralist system with complex decision-making mechanisms; between mass and atomized society and complex society with diverse reactions on regime’s policies and between the efficient, rationalized, planed governance and the chaotic and frequently improvised actions of the government and the failure to effectively implement plans.

In this paper we are going to analyze only the first part of that debate, more specifically the debate between “monolithic” and “pluralistic” view of the Soviet and Nazi systems. Both notions – “monolithic” and “pluralist” – are somehow confusing and inaccurate. The monolithic approach, it will be shown, does not correspond to all the classical approaches of totalitarian theory. Also the term “pluralism” is not used as “classical pluralism” encountered in western type systems, but it is adapted to a “totalitarian” or to more authoritarian regimes. Thus, our approach will be limited only to a single aspect of the debate.

The “pluralist” criticism of the totalitarian theory

The critique of the monolithic image of totalitarianism was developed by the Sovietological studies emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. The new generation of scholars, on the one hand, influenced by the political context of the Cold War, and on the other hand, benefiting by the fact that they started to have a direct access to the soviet society

they began to pay particular attention to decision-making process, to political elites, influence groups within the political process etc. In this context, the understanding of the soviet system through the lens of “totalitarian model”, the scholars of this kind of approach will say, excludes by definition the presence of the conflict and rivalry between groups (Skilling, 1983). The totalitarian model in opinion of revisionist scholars, assumed that the system is monolithic, omnipotent, super-efficient and super-organized, there are no internal conflicts, all political decisions are dictated exclusively “from above” and cannot be influenced “from below”. However, this perspective did not correspond to complex realities of the Soviet regime, especially with the changes in post-Stalinist regime. On that ground, the concept of totalitarianism was rejected and replaced by a number of other concepts that declared a different types of “pluralism” in the Soviet Union, namely “institutional pluralism”, “elite pluralism”, “interest groups approach”. The structural-functional approaches of Nazi Germany will develop a series of a similar criticism vis-à-vis the concept of totalitarianism. Thus, in the context of Nazi Germany, Peter Hüttenberger, for instance, developed the concept of “polykratie” to describe the rivalries between different power centers which were inherent, in authors opinion, in Nazi rule (Hüttenberger, 1976: 417 - 442).

Returning to the concept of “pluralist model”, this “model” includes a number of different approaches that have significant, not just nominal, differences³. In spite of that, Seymour Lipset will use this concept “for the sake of simplicity” to subsume all studies that have contested the unified and homogeneous perspective of Soviet socio-political system (Lipset, Bence. 2010: 23). The main thesis of the criticism of totalitarianism is that “the different social and economic interests to be found in any modern society were not only present but also articulated and represented in a Soviet-type political system” (Lipset, Bence, 2010: 23). The pluralist models, using Lipset’s shortcut, will

³ Gordon Skilling will show the differences between the “pluralistic” approach, “bureaucratic pluralism”, “corporatism” and “interest groups approach” (Skilling, 1983, pp. 7 – 14). The author argued that “theory of interest groups” was never pluralist. Although the presence of interest groups involves a “pluralist element” in communist politics, this pluralism is rudimentary and does not remove the authoritarian character of the state. Neither “pluralism”, neither “interest groups” from the Soviet system are not similar to those from west.

discuss, first of all, the presence of interest groups within the state and party institutions or bureaucracy, this view will be argued by the scholars of “bureaucratic pluralism” or “institutional pluralism”. Second, the scholars like Gordon Skilling, will argue the presence of the “interest groups” outside the institutional context, the “informal interest groups”. The advocates of “pluralist models” will not deny the central role of the state in Soviet system, the chronic limitation of freedom, and generally, the abuses committed by the regime, yet they will refuse to analyze Soviet system through the light of totalitarian theory considering that the regime was actually authoritarian.

One of the most representative authors of the pluralist model is Hough F. Jerry. Hough advanced the notion of “institutional pluralism” in the analysis of soviet system. Hough’s concept of pluralism, and generally the pluralism discussed in Soviet Union context as we already mentioned, is not equivalent to the occidental pluralism, but it is comparable. The Soviet Union will remain an authoritarian regime with the high level of control and coercion, but with prospects to transform into a democratic one. Hough Jerry was the one of the main promoters of the idea that the Soviet regime could evolve in the direction of the democratic state. This idea is, of course, refuted by the historical events. The “institutional pluralism”, the author will argue, differs from the “classical pluralism”, namely by “the framework in which the political process takes place and on the political behavior that are tolerated” (Hough, 1972: 29). If in a “classical pluralism” all citizens have the opportunity to choose between competing elites and to form pressure groups or political parties to promote their own interests, in the model of “institutional pluralism”, as Hough said:

Those who want to effect political change must, with few exceptions, work within the official institutional framework. Those who fail to do so run the danger of severe repression, especially when they call for nonincremental change in the fundamentals of the system. (Hough, 1972: 29)

However, there are some similarities between these two kinds of “pluralism”. First of all, Hough states the multiplicity of the interests in the Soviet system, “nothing is monolithic about society or the political system, and no single interest dominates either” (Hough, 1972: 28).

Second, the fact that political process revolves around some alliances of persons with divergent interests. Third, in Hough's words, "citizens and officials usually treat politics as "the art of the possible" and see it "as a set of give-and-take interactions in which each side bargains for a set of more or less limited objectives. So long as they stay strictly within this framework, they are free to express their views" (Hough, 1972: 29). Fourth, leaders are the main mediators in the political process. Fifth, the political decisions are mainly influenced by those "especially affected by them and especially knowledgeable about them." Sixth, as Hough suggested "to the extent that accommodation of the demands of some groups requires restrictions upon other groups, the changes are undertaken gradually and in a way that is accommodating to the disadvantaged group. Incrementalism is thus the hallmark of the system" (Hough, 1972: 29).

Although Hough will emphasize that not only official groups have the role in the decision-making process, noting the importance of the informal groups, in Skilling's (1983: 23) opinion, the concept of "institutional pluralism" suggests that only groups within the official structures have an impact on the political decisions. The same thing is true for bureaucratic or corporatist models. Or, the "interest group theory" advanced by Skilling will emphasize the presence of the informal groups intermediate between state and society. The specific feature of the "groups" within the Soviet system, as Skilling (1971: 29) will argue, is that they are "more often loose groupings of like-minded or like-interested persons", they are not "formally organized". Later on Skilling will consider dissidence a form of articulation of group interest.

Starting from the idea that every system or society is complex and heterogeneous, Skilling will argue that the presence of interest groups is not excluded even in authoritarian systems. The author believes that Soviet-type regimes are authoritarian and will distinguish five different categories of "authoritarianism" depending on the degree of the group activity: "quasi-totalitarian", "authoritarian consultative", "quasi-pluralistic authoritarianism", "democratizing and pluralistic authoritarianism" and "anarchic authoritarianism" (Skilling, 1970: 222 – 234). Skilling will use the concept of "quasi-totalitarianism" to designate the Stalinist regime, the Maoist regime before the Cultural Revolution and the East European countries after the World War. "The protagonists of the group approach did not rule out a strictly limited form of group

activity even under the Stalinist system” (Skilling, 1983: 6). But in this case the activity of the groups was highly limited, the leadership was consciously aiming to destroy any such activity. “Even the official groups are relatively weak and are used as instruments by the leadership” (Skilling, 1970: 223). The secret police instead had an enormous influence and was capable to subdue even the party and state bureaucracy. “The broader social groups such as the youth constitute “problems” for the leadership and are the subject of the later political concern and decisions. However, their interests are articulated, if at all, by the leadership, and not by the groups themselves” (Skilling, 1970: 223). This being said, Skilling will elaborate a “model” which is not a “genuine pluralism; it appeared rather to be a kind of imperfect monism in which, of the many elements involved, one – the party – was more powerful than all others but was not omnipotent” (Skilling, 1971: 17).

The analysis of the Soviet system through the lens of the concept of totalitarianism, Skilling will consider, excluded the possibility that interest groups could contest or influence the policies of the single party, totalitarianism, *by definition*, excluded any “area of autonomous behavior by groups other than state or party”, Skilling will add:

“Stressing the hierarchical nature of political control and the penetration of the whole of society by state and party, the traditional view tended to deny the existence of autonomous and intermediate associations between state and society, and recognize group conflict only in the form of factional struggles among the top leaders and, in a limited degree, of bureaucratic competition among the organs of administrative power such as military, police, party, and state” (Skilling, 1971: 19).

Indeed, the totalitarianism excludes any degree of autonomy and only acknowledged the existence of factional conflict, the conflict which was tolerated or even encouraged by its leaders, on the *divide et impera* principle. However, this conflict was not recognized only in a limited extend but was considered by the totalitarian theory protagonists as inherently to the system. Authors of the totalitarian theory have considered that this tension is if not an essential feature, in that sense that it does not usually appear in the series of defining characteristics of totalitarianism, then one of the particularly importance. The conflict

between factions, the duality between state and party, the continuous tension between them was considered crucial for the system.

The criticism of the monolithic image of the totalitarianism, as previously mentioned, was not only developed in the Sovietological studies, but also in studies of Nazi Germany. In the Nazi studies, the disputes were between “intentionalist” and “functionalist” approaches. The functionalist analysis will consider that the Hitler’s government, far from being homogeneous and a product of Führer exclusive decisions, it was rather an “administrative chaos” of competing power centers. Hans Mommsen, one of the most representative authors of the German revisionism, will emphasize the lack of cohesion of the system; the rivalries between the power holders at all state and party bureaucracy levels that had a great importance to the system. Also the same author will point out that the National Socialist party did not have a central position in the system, as totalitarian theory presumes, but rather such a function had the SS which became some kind of “state in state”. Mommsen will emphasize in his work “Reappraisal and Repression” that the application of the concept of the totalitarianism in Nazi Germany studies supposed that:

the structure of the National socialist system of domination was fundamentally monolithic, thus echoing the regime’s own propagandistic self-interpretation. Later research, based primarily on the documents impounded by the Allies and released after 1961, lent only partial support to the assumptions of the totalitarian model. This research revealed political fragmentation and instability in the institutions the Nazis created as well as those they had inherited. In doing so, it contradicted the image of a totalitarian system organized down to the last detail of power consideration (Mommsen, 1990: 174 – 175).

The revisionist scholars, in Stephen Cohen’s opinion, contested three central thesis of totalitarianism:

First, their various approaches constituted a rejection of the static conception of Soviet politics (...). Second, they developed a broader picture of political conflict and concluded: “The conception of the Soviet political system as a monolith is a

myth.” They saw instead a complex process of Soviet policymaking that involved competing factions, interest groups, bureaucratic networks, and elites. Third, they dismissed the totalitarianism school’s contention that the Soviet Union was *sui generis*, akin only to Nazi Germany and a few other extremist systems, and called for a broader comparative study of Soviet politics (Cohen, 1986: 30).

Totalitarian Theory

Generally speaking, totalitarianism as a political theory mainly states the emergence of a *new* form of rule, radically different from the previous non-democratic regimes as far as its aim and policy goes. This novelty comes from the fact that totalitarian regimes, unlike the other non-democratic regimes, as Sartori mentioned, tend to “exercise an all-embracing political domination over the extra-political human life” (Sartori, 1999: 189). Regarding the structure of the system, the main assumptions of the theory of totalitarianism asserts, first of all, the presence of a leader with unlimited power who is also the ultimate source of the political decisions. Secondly, it argues that the existence of the centralized mass-party, which is led obviously by the leader concept and which controls all political, social, cultural and economic organizations and associations. Ideology plays one of the most important roles in the totalitarian theory, it is considered a source of legitimacy of the system and the essential feature that differentiates totalitarian regimes from the non-democratic ones. Moreover, the theory of totalitarianism emphasizes the aspirations of the regime to “eliminate the infinite plurality and differentiation of the human beings” and to replace it with “unanimity” and “compliance”. Following this assumptions we can easily conclude that indeed totalitarian theory creates the image of a monolithic, homogenous and uniform system.

Starting from the work of Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State*, scholars of the totalitarian theory and the later revisionists as well, will recognize the existence of the specific relations between state and party in the totalitarian regimes. Fraenkel will observe the existence of a dispute and a constant tension between what he will call “the normative state” and “the prerogative state”, meaning by it the existence of an authority that is limited by law – “the normative state” and of an authority which is absolutely above the all laws – “the prerogative state”. The “prerogative

state” deals with all matters of political nature and the “normative state” generally deals with administrative functions. “The prerogative and normative state, Fraenkel (1969: 46) will assert, are competitive and not complementary parts of the German Reich” and this duality, not dualism, is under the direct and absolute control of the leader.

Regarding the above, Hannah Arendt will highlight in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

What strikes most the observer of the totalitarian state it is not, of course, his monolithic structure. On the contrary, all the serious researches of this issue agree at least on the coexistence (or a conflict) of a dual authority, the Party and the State. Moreover, many of them stressed the particular “deformity” of the totalitarian government (Arendt, 1994: 515).

The duality between state and party rises from the existence of the dual authority - a real authority and fictitious one. Due to the dynamic nature of totalitarian movement “the real center of power” is changing all the time and remains “a mystery by definition” even for the “members of the ruling clique”. The existence of the power struggles and the rivalries between different factions also results from the same feature of the movement and the duality between the state and the party. Arendt will notice at one point that:

The SA was looking with resentment the loss of its rank and power in the Nazi hierarchy and tried desperately to keep the appearances. In their magazines – *Der SA-Mann, Das Archiv, etc.* – there can be traced many veiled and overt clues of this powerless rivalry with the SS (Arendt, 1994: 521).

Since this tension was distinguished, the authors of the totalitarian theory have emphasized that the “monolithic image” of the system is rather a “stereotype” and has its origins in the very image promoted by totalitarian propaganda. In that sense, Karl Dietrich will state in *The German Dictatorship*:

In fact, skillful handling of the legal and national revolution would in itself not have sufficed to smooth transition from

constitutional state tot totalitarian dictatorship. This required yet another aspect of the technique of power seizure and rule, and Hitler now made use of it: the dualism of state and party, which continued to exist in the one-party state as well. Contrary to a widespread stereotype, total rule does not necessarily mean closed, monolithic, single-track governmental structure. It is also not true that it operates more efficiently and effectively or that it is superior to the complicated pluralism of democracy. As a matter of fact, Hitler refrained from a complete fusion of party and state. Rival agencies continued to exist or even were newly set up at all levels of public life. (...) Instead of simplifying the administration, the expansion of the principle of the one-man rule only served to complicate jurisdictional relations. Friction, waste, duplication were the result, and it soon became apparent that this was not a childhood disease of the new system but intrinsic to it (Bracher, 1973: 268 – 269).

Regarding the Soviet system, Raymond Aron in *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, starting from the contradictions between doctrine and the practices of the communists will ask such questions as “who takes decisions? Or who takes what decisions?” and “how real is the unity of the party? To what extent there are factions within the party? To what extent the factions are tolerated? What is the destiny of the heretics?” (Aron, 2001: 191) Aron will answer these questions considering that in the different stages of the regime the processes were conducted differently. Only at the height of Stalinism, Aron will assert, “power is at the top of the party hierarchy and a single man owns it” (Aron, 2001: 194). The factions within the party in this period will be eliminated not only politically, but also physically. As far as the period before Stalin achieved the absolute power and the post-Stalinist one, Aron noted the presence of the rivalries, factional debates and participation of more people in the decision-making process.

Although much more elaborated, Juan’s Linz theory can still be considered an extension of classical analysis. The author will notice in *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, first of all, the presence of the tension between state and party which he considers is one of the biggest problem of the totalitarian system and that without this tension the totalitarian system degenerates into bureaucratic authoritarianism, losing

its linkage to the society and much of its mobilization and dynamic potential (Linz, 2000: 94). Secondly, the presence of a power struggle between different organizations and local leaders which is encouraged and supported by the totalitarian leader, this internal conflict being one of the main characteristic of the totalitarian system. Thirdly, Linz will show that the “tension between the government and the society, although on a limited scale, is far from ceasing to exist”.

Moreover, in author’s attempt to give the defining characteristics of the totalitarian regime, Juan Linz will conclude that there are three of them:

- There is a monistic but not monolithic center of power, and whatever pluralism of institutions or groups exists derives its legitimacy from that center, is largely mediated by it, and is mostly a political creation rather than an outgrowth of the dynamics of the preexisting society.
- There is an exclusive, autonomous, and more or less intellectually elaborate ideology with which the ruling group or leader, and the party serving the leaders, identify and which they use as a basis for policies or for manipulation in order to legitimize them. The ideology has some boundaries beyond which lies heterodoxy that does not remain unsanctioned. The ideology goes beyond a particular program or definition of the legitimate political action boundaries to provide, perhaps, an ultimate meaning, a sense of historical purpose and interpretation of social reality.
- Citizen’s participation and the active mobilization for accomplishing political and collective social tasks are encouraged, demanded, rewarded, and channeled through a single party and many monopolistic secondary groups. Passive obedience and apathy retreat into the role of “parochial” and “subjects,” characteristic of many authoritarian regimes, are considered undesirable by the rulers (Linz, 2000: 70).

Another important contribution of Juan Linz is the creation of the “post-totalitarian” category to describe the post-Stalinist Soviet system. “Post-totalitarianism”, in author’s opinion, represents a kind of regime which is different from authoritarianism and also totalitarianism. It differs from authoritarianism because it still has some features from previous totalitarian regime and its leadership is still recruited from the mass-party but also it is not a totalitarian regime because its government

has more “pluralistic” character, the ideology is no longer so important and the mobilization of the people is not realized only through coercion and terror.

Conclusion

The revisionist studies have played a major role in our understanding of Soviet and Nazi systems. The variety of the empirical studies indeed expanded the problematic field of the communist and Nazi studies. However, the models proposed by the revisionist authors of Sovietological studies have proven to be insufficient for complete understanding of the Soviet system. In their turn, they provoked a lot of discussions and criticism. First of all, they are considered too particular to provide a full understanding of the system or its character. An example can be the ideology, which plays a vital role in the system, but which seems neglected or even absent in revisionist studies. Secondly, the extension of the comparative field of the Soviet Union and its comparison with Western democracies “led to the trivialization of the differences between democratic regimes and communist ones” (Lipset, Bence, 2010: 24). Giovanni Sartori will consider that if we read much of anti-totalitarianism literature we can ask ourselves at some point if there ever was a state that was a dictatorship, which was also definitely “total”: the most intrusive, pervasive and enslaving regime. Vladimir Shlapentokh, a Soviet-born researcher, will consider that in spite the fact that revisionism conducted some useful studies, the rejection of the concept of totalitarianism “made it almost impossible for them to understand the character of the Soviet system. (...) Soviet insiders could only shake their heads when they became casually familiar with these new ideas coming from the other side of the Atlantic” (Shlapentokh, 2001: 10).

Although taken in a broad sense totalitarianism gives the image of the unified and monolithic system, yet the totalitarian theorists are far from the asserting such a view and they will notice that the totalitarian system is monolithic only on the surface. The protagonist of the totalitarian theory emphasizes the importance of the tension between state and party and the rivalries between different factions. These tensions originate in the “monistic” center, as Linz will argue, are very limited and cannot be considered autonomous, but they undermine the much maligned monolithic image of the totalitarian system and show

that the totalitarianism does not exclude or is not compatible with the presence of the antagonisms within the system. Therefore, the understanding of the totalitarian system as monolithic is rather inaccurate and insufficient. The concept of totalitarianism is an ideal type, as it was often argued, with a high degree of generalization, it indeed omits certain aspects of empirical reality, which is the strength of the revisionist theories. However, as Giovanni Sartori said, its importance is to suggest “an unprecedented intensity and penetration – both in extent and in depth – of the political domination” (Sartori, 1999: 189).

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Biodata



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