

HANNAH ARENDT,  
TOTALITARIANISM, AND  
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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# Introduction

## Passion and Antipathy

Search, then, the Ruling Passion: There, alone,  
The Wild are constant, and the Cunning known;  
The Fool consistent, and the False sincere;  
Priests, Princes, Women, no dissemblers here

—Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*, Epistle I

This book examines the nature of totalitarianism as interpreted by some of the finest minds of the twentieth century. Russian Bolshevism and German National Socialism, personified by Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler, not only were responsible for the most devastating war in human history—excluding Chinese and Japanese casualties, it killed around 36 million soldiers and civilians. Bolshevism and Nazi aggression also produced camps and slave labor colonies that murdered millions more. Only a minority of those marked for extermination, exile, or forced labor were determined enemies of the regimes that slaughtered them. Given the opportunity, most would have kept their heads down, connived and colluded to be left alone. But totalitarian governments were the foe of tranquility. They unleashed wars, purges, and show trials. They demanded that completely innocent people admit to impossible crimes. They mobilized whole populations for conquest. They assigned death by category; it was not what you did that damned you, but what you were—a Jew, a Slav, an intellectual, a kulak, a “cosmopolitan.” Animating this culture of death were rituals and ideologies that prophesied earthly redemption: a

world of brotherhood or of race purity. Onlookers were baffled. What had caused such convulsions? What did the atrocities they perpetrated imply about the elasticity of human nature and its potential for evil? Were the Bolshevik and National Socialist experiments totally new phenomena or exacerbations of earlier tyrannies? Once defeated, could similar governments rise once again?

No writer asked these questions more searchingly, or arrived at more arresting answers to them, than Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), a thinker of Jewish-German origin who, following Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor, and her own brief detention by the Gestapo, fled Berlin in 1933. Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is a classic—perhaps *the* classic—treatment of Bolshevism and Nazism. It was an improbable achievement. A student of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, the stars of German “existentialism,” Arendt was in the 1920s a young woman of intelligence, sensitivity, and academic promise, but, judging by her doctoral thesis *Love and St. Augustine* (1929), by no means an exceptionally gifted thinker. If she possessed an identity, it was as a philosopher, continuing the tradition of German letters and cultivation. She had no firm plans for an academic career. Compelled to become a refugee, she watched, first from France, later from the United States, as the world was shaken by a force of unimaginable brutality that she, and others, called “totalitarianism.” Henceforth, Arendt employed all her creative powers to articulate its conditions and implications, even when dilating on the most arcane subjects—the faculty of thinking, the concept of action, the meaning of authority. Investigating totalitarianism was her ruling passion.

She was not alone in her endeavor. Many writers in America and Europe struggled to comprehend the totalitarian enigma. Quite a few she knew personally. Some remained lifelong friends; others she fell out with. This book makes no attempt to chart the whole of Arendt's network. It is not a biography of Arendt, though it contains many details of her intellectual relationships. It attends only to a portion—albeit the most innovative portion—of her writings. Readers looking for an Arendt *conspicuum* must search elsewhere. My topic is a group of Arendt's most acute social critics, men of the caliber of David Riesman, Raymond Aron, and Jules Monnerot. All, in their fashion, were impressed by Arendt's originality, by the boldness and paradoxical quality of her arguments. But all were skeptical of her theory of totalitarianism. In turn, Arendt had

strong disagreements with them on subjects that straddled politics, ethics, and the interpretation of history.

In great intellects, a ruling passion is often complemented by an abiding antipathy. Arendt loathed the social sciences in general and sociology in particular. Her second published article was a review of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), which she chastised for denying the autonomy of thought and for suggesting that philosophy's traditional focus on ontological questions was less illuminating than was understanding the shifting finitude of everyday life, the alleged source of the philosopher's categories.<sup>1</sup> Bearing the impress of her university education, Arendt wrote as a champion of *Existenz* philosophy, defending it against what she saw as sociology's reductionism and aspiration to replace it. The tone throughout her essay on Mannheim is restrained, the language turgid, the subject recondite. Dissent is tempered by a spirit of intellectual generosity. When Arendt confronted sociology again in the 1940s and 1950s under the wider rubric of "the social sciences," the landscape of her life and her conception of philosophy had been radically reshaped. Behind her lay the ruins of the Weimar Republic, the capitulation of her teacher, Martin Heidegger, to Nazism, the horrors of a genocidal war, and the painful experience of her own exile in France and, at least initially, in America. Her tone was now urgent, the language limpid, the subject of her reflections charged with immediate gravity. Once more, she attacked social science analysis, but this time it was the alleged failure of such approaches to explain *totalitarianism* that was her prime concern. The earlier spirit of engagement with sociology is replaced by tempestuous root-and-branch dismissal of it. It is this period of Arendt's life with which we are centrally concerned in this book.

Arendt was one of a group of Weimar intellectuals transplanted to American soil for whom the social sciences were deeply suspect, "an abominable discipline from every point of view, educating 'social engineers.'" <sup>2</sup> This group of thinkers included Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and such prominent members of the Frankfurt School as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse.<sup>3</sup> Arendt's relations with Horkheimer and Adorno—those "bastards"—were strained by personal repugnance, sharply contrasting political attitudes, and major philosophical differences.<sup>4</sup> But she shared with them not only her Jewishness and the status of being a refugee, but also the key ordeal that brought Jewishness and immigration together: the experience of Nazism and the Shoah. It was

this experience above all that led her to view sociology with growing distrust and to see the social sciences more generally as deeply compromised by the mass societies they purported to explain.<sup>5</sup> Arendt insisted that sociology was parasitical on “the social,” a modern sphere of life characterized by conformity rather than distinction. She inveighed against sociology’s “repulsive vocabulary.”<sup>6</sup> She argued that social scientific explanations couched in terms of structural theories of causality denied the existence of human freedom. Most of all, Arendt believed that the social sciences had chronically misconstrued the nature of Nazi and Bolshevik regimes. In her account, “totalitarianism” refers to a type of regime that, no longer satisfied with the limited aims of classical despotisms and dictatorships, demands continual mobilization of its subjects and never allows society to settle down into a durable, hierarchical order. In addition, totalitarian domination rules through total terror; pursues, by means of the secret police, “objective enemies” or “enemies of the people” who are typically not subjective opponents of, or genuine threats to, the regime; offers an all-encompassing ideological framework that abridges the complexity of life in a single, axiomatic, reality-resistant postulate that allows no cognitive dissonance; and is predicated on an experience of mass superfluity attendant on the growing mobility, insecurity, and “worldlessness” of modern human beings. Arendt considered totalitarianism to be modern and singular.<sup>7</sup> It was not a phenomenon that had early modern roots; nor was it the logical outgrowth of a peculiar national tradition or culture, even German culture,<sup>8</sup> or of the rise of secularism and godlessness. Totalitarianism was the result of an avalanche of catastrophes—World War I, the implosion of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, and a global capitalist economic crisis—that brought the victory of a movement and the consolidation of a regime that was structurally different from classical dictatorship or tyrannies. In sum, Arendt argued that totalitarianism was a cosmos so alien that it had rendered obsolete our familiar repertoire of concepts and judgments. Social science attempts to capture its essence in stock analogies and “ideal types” failed miserably to grasp its uniqueness.

Most studies of Arendt are composed by philosophers and political theorists. By disciplinary formation, they tend to share her antagonism to the social sciences, and sociology in particular. My approach is different. A critical admirer of Arendt, trained in a tradition she distrusted, I look sympathetically (Chapter 1) at her objections to social science and show that her complaints were in many respects justified. Yet this book does

more. Avoiding broad-brush disciplinary endorsements or dismissals, it reconstructs the theoretical and political stakes of Arendt's encounters with, or rebuttals by, men like David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, with whom Arendt corresponded in the 1940s about the limits of totalitarianism (Chapter 2); Raymond Aron, who argued that much of totalitarianism could be explained as an amplification of revolutionary ideology and violence (Chapter 3); and Jules Monnerot, with whom she sparred during the 1950s, in the pages of *Confluence*, a journal edited by Henry Kissinger, about the nature of "political religion" (Chapter 4). Along the way, we will greet other writers whom Arendt either reproached or failed to convince, including Theodore Abel, Hans Gerth, Alex Inkeles, Talcott Parsons, and Philip Rieff. It may appear odd to some readers that Daniel Bell plays only a cameo role in this book. To be sure, Bell was the foremost sociologist among her friends and a brilliant social thinker in his own right. But his critical engagement with her was meager.<sup>9</sup> He was unhappy about "mass society" theory and alluded to her in that connection. But Arendt appears in a list of five "varied uses" of mass society that, Bell cogently argues, fail to reflect the "complex, richly striated social relations of the real world."<sup>10</sup> A similar treatment graces his comments on totalitarianism in which, once more, Arendt's distinctive arguments are absorbed into a more general catalogue of criticism.<sup>11</sup> Bell's assessment of Arendt is hence muted and cursory. That cannot be said of Riesman, Aron, and Monnerot. There we see dissonance that is intensive and productive; we see great minds talking back to Arendt in a nuanced and elaborated form. Her critique is itself criticized; her refutations are contested, her alternatives disputed. Sociological explanation emerges as far more angular and robust than her categorical denunciations suggest.

If the first objective of this book is to retrieve debates that have been largely forgotten, the second objective is substantive: to distill from these disputes a series of issues that continue to tax the modern mind. Notably, to say that the social sciences were intrinsically unable to grasp unprecedented phenomena raises the question of what "unprecedented" actually means. How does one recognize things that are utterly strange? Arendt gives us little to go on, so we need to develop answers of our own. This book was written in the shadow of the West's struggle with radical Islamism. Giles Keppel, an informed and honest modern commentator on Islam, remarks that "naming the adversary [has] created the illusion of having identified it," short-circuiting "the search for operational concepts

that could assimilate a complex reality and, in the process, restructure existing cognitive categories.”<sup>12</sup> What, then, is the alternative? How might we more adequately grasp this “complex reality”? That is a quintessentially Arendtian question, and I give my own response to it in the final chapter. Or take Arendt’s blistering attack on the concept of “political” or “secular” religion: Arendt believed that describing National Socialism or Bolshevism as religions, secular or otherwise, was a travesty when it was not a heresy. Can we today—faced with new religious radicalism—extract from her indictment, and Monnerot’s rejoinder, a less polarized perspective on the relationships between religion and totalitarian politics? I show that we can.

### The Title of This Book, Its Scope, and Ways to Read It

Why does the title of this book refer to the social sciences and not simply to sociology? In the first place, Arendt typically invoked the latter when she sought more generally to excoriate the former. She saw sociology as the most egregious example of a modern intellectual trend that concatenated structural history, empiricist political science, and psychology. Writing before the ascendancy of rational choice theory, she believed economics to be a somewhat provincial discipline dealing with a very basic activity, the satisfaction of material needs. This “initial science” had been extended, or rather eclipsed, by “the all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as ‘behavioral sciences,’ aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activity, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal.” She continued:

If economics is the science of society in its early stages, when it could impose its rules of behavior only on sections of the population and on parts of their activities, the rise of the “behavioral sciences” indicates clearly the final stage of this development, when mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and “social behavior” has become the standard for all regions of life.<sup>13</sup>

Sociology, the putative science of the social founded by Marx more than Comte,<sup>14</sup> was symptomatic of this broader decadence, but it did not work alone. Positivist political science and, in particular, psychology were its dehumanizing allies and, in consequence, additional targets of her scorn.



A second reason why this book, notwithstanding its sociological bias, summons the social sciences more generally is that Arendt's interlocutors had complex intellectual identities. David Riesman was originally a student of law. He later wrote as a social commentator, or culture critic, rather than as a specialized sociologist. Raymond Aron was as much a political writer and a theorist of international relations as he was a sociologist. Jules Monnerot mixed sociology and psychology.

We should also appreciate that Arendt's assault on social science reasoning was part of a much larger appraisal of the Western intellectual tradition. Originally enamored of classical philosophy, Arendt was increasingly struck by its limitations. From Parmenides and Plato, through to Spinoza and Heidegger, she spied an entrenched prejudice against Man as a terrestrial and transitory being, and a denial of the dignity of human affairs. "The tradition," as she summarily called it, had repeatedly denigrated the realm of action while elevating the contemplative spirit. It craved peace and tranquility, distrusted the body and its passions, and oscillated between utopia and despair. Politics, from this standpoint, was secondary to the life of the mind, the *bios theōrētikos*; worse, the confounded noise of politics—its long, drawn-out, and inconclusive discussions; its haphazardness; its entrapment in sense perceptions; and hence its failure to conform rigorously to a template of the Good or the Rational—was essentially demeaning. More elevated was the soul, the quest for ultimate, disembodied Truth, and for refuge in heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Even those who later, like Karl Marx, believed that they had transcended philosophy were essentially intolerant of politics. Marx, after all, wished ardently for the dissolution of the state and identified politics with class domination. The Marxist notion that violence is the midwife of history justified the use of force to speed up the historical process, to aid in the "making" of history against defunct classes.<sup>16</sup> But, for Arendt, the idea that history can be "made" was chilling; it implied that human beings were disposable objects of nature, a brute mass to be designed and recreated by a master fabricator. It also suggested that the theorist, like the craftsman, knows the end of the process he is manufacturing. But, short of apocalypse, history has no end. We cannot foretell or control humanity's future any more that we can foretell or control our own. Marxism lent itself to the totalitarian project "because of its perversion, or misunderstanding of political action as the making of history."<sup>17</sup> A different kind of book from the one I have written might examine Arendt's evaluation of

Western thought as a whole. My purpose here is more limited: to examine her estimation of twentieth-century social science and her engagement with some of its most brilliant representatives.

It is essential, in a work of this sort, to listen to both sides of the arguments in which Arendt was engaged, to give a fair hearing to those with whom she disagreed. Accordingly, this book affords roughly as much space to Arendt's opponents as to Arendt herself. Indeed, I hope the book will be valuable to readers who, even if unsympathetic to Arendt, would like to know more about what Riesman, Aron, and Monnerot (and Abel and Parsons) said about totalitarianism. Readers should be forewarned, however, that each of the chapters assumes a somewhat different shape. Posterity records for all to see the dialogue between Arendt and Riesman, and between Arendt and Monnerot; the first took place largely in correspondence to which we now have access; the second was rehearsed in a magazine polemic. With Raymond Aron, however, the situation is quite different. He furnished various objections to her account of totalitarianism; she did not reply to them. In sum, we have heterogeneous and asymmetric encounters to consider, only some of which were conducted as real person-to-person conversations or exchanges.

I have avoided the temptation to update Arendt's analysis of National Socialism and Bolshevism by recourse to modern historical evidence *unless one of her interlocutors anticipated a relevant finding*. Facts are important; Arendt herself often said so.<sup>18</sup> But to simply "correct" Arendt's errors of fact would be patronizing, the author playing the role of schoolmaster instructing a less resourceful pupil. It would also be anachronistic, judging her statements by standards of evidence that may simply have been unavailable in the 1940s and 1950s. Far better to ask, what did Arendt's critics spot at the time, and point out to her, that later scholars have vindicated? In this way, we keep the analysis historical and eschew pedantry.

Perusing this book as a whole will give the reader a historical, many-sided sense of Arendt's depiction of totalitarianism, her attack on social science, and the rebuttals of her social science critics. But perhaps you don't want a comprehensive view. You are concerned only with a particular debate, say, between Arendt and Riesman, or you want to know the nature of Raymond Aron's intellectual qualms about Arendt. With that priority in mind, I have made the chapters relatively self-contained; they can be read individually. This has produced a little repetition of Arendt's chief claims; in compensation, each chapter deals with her evaluation of

the social sciences in a different way. Moreover, the present work is itself the first volume of a two-book project. Each book can be read separately or together. The successor volume takes us further back into Hannah Arendt's career by examining her critique of Karl Mannheim and Max Weber. The first she confronted directly; the second, a towering absence in the life of Arendt's mentor Karl Jaspers, she handled with greater circumspection. Neither influenced her thought in any positive way. But Arendt's rejection of both thinkers tells us a great deal about her own intellectual framework and the origins of her hostility to social science.

Hannah Arendt called totalitarianism the burden of our time. Is it still? The legacies of the Second World War, Stalinism, and the Cold War continue to shape us. But jihadist movements and states of terror raise different problems and, correspondingly, call for new, robust responses. Western publics—generally timid, convinced that enmity is at root a misunderstanding rather than a conscious decision—face a martial, courageous, and inventive foe. Arendt and her social science interlocutors urged us to think afresh. Worldly and astute, they struggled to grasp the unique dangers of their century. Their example encourages us to confront, with sobriety and realism, the perils of our own age.

Hong Kong, August 2009

## § I Hannah Arendt's Indictment of Social Science

This chapter sets the scene for Arendt's collision with David Riesman, Raymond Aron, and Jules Monnerot. It begins by offering a summary of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, before delineating the most common general objections that she leveled at social scientists trying to understand totalitarian phenomena. While Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will offer a critical look at Arendt's assertions and arguments, here I present her case in its strongest, most cogent form.

### Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is a concept rooted in the horror of modern war, revolution, terror, genocide, and, since 1945, the threat of nuclear annihilation. It is also among the most versatile and contested terms in the political lexicon. At its simplest, the idea suggests that despite Fascist/Nazi "particularism" (the centrality of the nation or the master race) and Bolshevik "universalism" (the aspiration toward a classless, international brotherhood of man), both regimes were basically alike—which, as Carl Friedrich noted early on, is not to claim that they were wholly alike.<sup>1</sup> Extreme in its denial of liberty, totalitarianism conveys a regime type with truly diabolical ambitions. Its chief objectives are to rule unimpeded by legal restraint, civic pluralism and party competition, and to refashion human nature itself.

Coined in May 1923 by Giovanni Amendola, *totalitarianism* began life as a condemnation of Fascist ambitions to monopolize power and to transform Italian society through the creation of a new political religion.

The word then quickly mutated to encompass National Socialism, especially after the Nazi “seizure of power” in 1933. By the mid-1930s, invidious comparisons among the German, Italian, and Soviet systems as totalitarian were becoming common; they would increase considerably once the Nazi–Soviet pact was signed in 1939. Meanwhile, recipients of the totalitarian label took different views of it. Although in the mid-1920s Mussolini and his ideologues briefly embraced the expression as an apt characterization of their revolutionary élan, Nazi politicians and propagandists saw a disconcerting implication. Granted, Hitler and Goebbels, during the early 1930s, had a penchant for cognate expressions such as “total state”; so too did sympathetic writers such as Ernst Forsthoff and Carl Schmitt. At around the same time, Ernst Jünger was busy expounding his idea of “total mobilization.” But “totalitarianism” was treated with greater circumspection. The *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community), Nazi spokesmen insisted, was unique: the vehicle of an inimitable German destiny based upon a racially based rebirth. “Totalitarianism” suggested that German aspirations were a mere variant on a theme; worse, a theme that current usage extrapolated to the Bolshevik foe.<sup>2</sup>

Hannah Arendt entertained no such reservations. Her theory of totalitarianism advanced three central claims—claims to which we will return repeatedly in this book. First, totalitarianism is radically new, an original development that attended Europe’s economic, political, and moral ruin during and after the First World War, and which became manifest in National Socialism after 1938, and Bolshevism from 1930 to the late 1950s. From Arendt’s perspective, attempts to locate a long-established lineage of totalitarianism are fundamentally mistaken. So too are analogies of totalitarianism with Caesarist, Bonapartist, and other dictatorial or tyrannical regimes. National Socialism and Bolshevism are a phenomenon sui generis, not an extreme version of something previously known. On those grounds Arendt opposed the view that totalitarianism was a perverted outgrowth of the Luther-sanctioned authoritarian state, or an exaggerated legacy of Tsarist intolerance. Similarly, she found risible arguments such as Franz Neumann’s that “totalitarian dictatorship” was an ancient phenomenon, prefigured in the Spartan state or the Roman imperial regime of Diocletian; and his contention that National Socialism revived the “fascist dictatorship” methods of the fourteenth-century Roman demagogue Cola di Rienzo.<sup>3</sup> “The problem with totalitarian regimes,” Arendt countered,

is not that they play power politics in an especially ruthless way, but that behind their politics is hidden an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power, just as behind their *Realpolitik* lies an entirely new and unprecedented concept of reality. Supreme disregard for immediate consequences rather than ruthlessness; rootlessness and neglect of national interests rather than nationalism; contempt for utilitarian motives rather than unconsidered pursuit of self-interest; "idealism,"—i.e., their unwavering faith in an ideological fictitious world, rather than lust for power—these have all introduced into international politics a new and more disturbing factor than mere aggressiveness would have been able to do.<sup>4</sup>

A second defining feature of totalitarian formations is their conjoined shapelessness and radicalization. Totalitarian regimes, far from settling down once they attain full control of the state, are driven incessantly toward world domination. Their domestic populations are continually mobilized through war, campaigns, "struggles," or purges. Moreover, and notwithstanding ideological obeisance to ineluctable Laws of History and Race, totalitarian domination insists on febrile activity. The will of the leader and that of the people as a whole must constantly be exercised to produce the impossible, combat backsliding, and accelerate the direction of the world toward its cataclysmic, if never fulfilled, culmination. To that extent, Arendt's delineation was consistent with other classical academic accounts of totalitarianism that emphasized the centrality of flux and activism. Franz Neumann, in *Behemoth* (1944), called the Third Reich a "movement state." Ernst Fraenkel dubbed it *The Dual State* (1941), in which the normal functions of the legal and administrative apparatus were constantly undermined by party "prerogative"—Fraenkel's term for the maelstrom of feverish Nazi initiatives that unleashed bedlam without respite. Similarly, Sigmund Neumann entitled his comparative study of the Nazi, Fascist, and Bolshevist hurricanes, *Permanent Revolution: The Total State in a World at War* (1942).

Third, totalitarianism comprises a peculiar combination of terror and ideology. Totalitarianism's victims, once real opponents are liquidated, are principally social categories: "enemies of the people" or "objective enemies"—"dying classes" or "decadent races"—putatively fated by history or evolution to disappear. Terror is total to the extent that no one knows who will be the next victim, no matter how compliant they are. The point of terror is, among other things, to create a kind of being that accepts its own expendability. This New Man is trained to be superflu-

ous, bereft of most recognizable human qualities, especially reflection and spontaneity. The laboratory in which he is created is the concentration and death camp where, through terror, people can be reduced to a bundle of sensations and, once consumed, disappear without trace in a "hole of oblivion." As for ideology, Arendt defines it not by any specific content it might idiosyncratically possess, but by its formal properties. Ideology is a type of cognition that is reductive (based on one overriding postulate—class or race) and proceeds by deducing everything from that postulate. The person in the grip of an ideology thinks in terms of clichés and also in terms of logical consistency. Yet, rather than logic being an aid to rational argument, it is a replacement of it, since anything that appears to conflict with totalitarian logic is disregarded. The real world is a colorful, cacophonous place. Ideology is monochromic and tone-deaf.

It is worth distinguishing Arendt's approach to totalitarianism from two others saliently embraced by her contemporaries. The first sought to track down modern totalitarianism to ancient, medieval, or modern *ideas* that had ostensibly animated it. Karl Popper found proto-totalitarianism in Plato; Eric Voegelin glimpsed it in millenarian Gnostic heresies. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno spied a totalitarian dialectic evolving out of an "Enlightenment" fixation on mathematical formalization, instrumental reason, and the love of the machine. J. L. Talmon discovered a creedal "totalitarian democracy" arising from one tendency among eighteenth-century *philosophes*. Enunciated by Rousseau, Morley, and Mably; radicalized by the French Revolution, especially during its Jacobin phase; and reincarnated in the Babouvist conspiracy, "totalitarian democracy" amounted to a leftist "political messianism" that preached the arrival of a new order: homogeneous and egalitarian, yet supervised by a virtuous revolutionary vanguard able to divine the general will. Arendt queried much of this intellectual detection. True, she did believe that Marxism contained various totalitarian elements. But she insisted that totalitarianism was so radical in its rupture with civilization that harvesting the past for totalitarian ideas was largely a fool's errand. Totalitarianism was above all a movement and a set of institutions, rather than a system of concepts.

Similarly, she evinced a marked hostility to the claim that Bolshevism and National Socialism were "political religions" (or "secular religions"). We will pursue her reasoning in Chapter 4. It suffices here to note, however, that most modern writers on totalitarianism have found its religious

strains too salient to ignore. Nazi ideology was replete with notions of national redemption, the spirit of a rejuvenated people, and even the divine mission of the SS.<sup>5</sup> The First World War, and the community of front-line soldiers (*Frontgemeinschaft*) or “trenchocracy” it witnessed, was typically identified as the crucible of this steely resurrection. Coup d'état strategizing, the battles to defeat the Whites during the Civil War, and the perennial trumpeting of the class struggle promoted a similar mentality among the Bolshevik leaders. Lenin, Stalin, and Mao notoriously gained the status of demigods.

Commentators who stress the mythological component of totalitarianism—writing of “ersatz religions,” “political religions,” the “myth of the state,” the “sacralization of politics,” and “palingenesis”—include Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, Ernst Cassirer, Norman Cohn, Waldemar Gurian, Jacob Talmon, and Eric Voegelin. Worthy successors are Michael Burleigh, Roger Griffin, and Emilio Gentile. Civic religions, such as those found in the United States and France, are different from political religions because they celebrate a republican concept of freedom and law. Church and state are separated, and each has its legitimate sphere of activity. In contrast, the sacralization of politics under totalitarian rule, together with its liturgies, festivals, and cults, was marked by the deification of the leader, idolatrous worship of the state that arrogates to itself the exclusive right to determine good and evil, orgiastic mass rallies, immortalization of the party fallen, the appeal to sacrifice, and the cult of death. Of this Arendt had little to say.

## Social Science: The Failure of Theory and Method

In “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” Arendt declared that “every science is necessarily based upon a few inarticulate, elementary, and axiomatic assumptions which are exposed and exploded only when confronted with altogether unexpected phenomena which can no longer be understood within the framework of its categories.”<sup>6</sup> The concentration and extermination camps, she contended, were precisely the “unexpected phenomena” that had exploded the assumptions of social science.

The core assumption totalitarianism shattered was the idea that human conduct springs essentially from self-interested, instrumental, and utilitarian considerations. Yet not only were the concentration camps



“non-utilitarian”—she adduced the “senselessness of ‘punishing’ completely innocent people, the failure to keep them in a condition so that profitable work might be extorted from them, the superfluousness of frightening a completely subdued population,”<sup>7</sup> the camps were also *anti-utilitarian*, because the exterminatory program of the Nazi regime diverted valuable logistical and other resources from the war effort. “It was as though the Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war.”<sup>8</sup> Originally, the German camps, run by SA bullies and sadistic grudge-holders, had been built to imprison and intimidate the Nazis’ foes. But once the Nazis’ real enemies had been eliminated, the staff of the camps changed, as did their nature. SS guards were chosen on the basis of physical and “racial” criteria. They were, in most respects, “completely normal” and committed their crimes “for the sake of their ideology which they believed to be proved by science, experience, and the laws of life.”<sup>9</sup> Their job was to ensure that the “fabrication of corpses” proceeded smoothly, ensuring “a regulated death rate and a strictly organized torture, calculated not so much to inflict death as to put the victim into a permanent status of dying.”<sup>10</sup> “The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination,” determined to show that human spontaneity is capable of being altogether extinguished. The geographical isolation of the camps and the deliberate stripping away of the juridical, moral, and individual personality of the victims were attempts to transform the unique human person “into a completely conditioned being whose reactions can be calculated even when he is led to certain death.” Indeed, what confronts the outside observer is the “complete senselessness” of the *Lager*, “where punishment persecutes the innocent more than the criminal, where labor does not result and is not intended to result in products, where crimes do not benefit and are not even calculated to benefit their authors.”<sup>11</sup> Being “normal men,” accustomed to the precepts of Western civilization, social scientists are ill equipped to explain a hellish world where motives of utility and even of passion are characteristically absent. It follows that categories based upon these precepts and presuppositions will necessarily fail to grasp the “insane consistency” of the camps and the enormity of the deed committed in them—a crime beyond crime that “the Ten Commandments did not foresee,” and for which the perpetrators showed so little remorse.<sup>12</sup>

At this point it is worth pausing to note a curiosity of Arendt’s argument. Though she claims to be writing about “social science techniques,”

her actual discussion contains no mention of them. Indeed, behaviorist psychology appears to be Arendt's main target, and what she offers is a metacritique of it. Perhaps, with some inventiveness, it might be possible to reformulate her remarks to indict models of economic man or of rational choice. Even so, it is hard to see how criticisms of instrumentalism could sensibly be extrapolated to sociology—a discipline that for the most part has strenuously opposed “utilitarian” explanations: Durkheim, Weber, and Talcott Parsons all offered trenchant alternatives to them. Moreover, to the extent that the death camps were unprecedented—“the ‘nightmare of reality’ before which our intellectual weapons have failed so miserably”<sup>13</sup>—it follows that *every* mode of cognition, not simply that of social science, has been thrown into question. And this is exactly what Arendt does contend elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> and why she punctuates her analysis with formulations—“ideological nonsense,” “a world of the dying in which nothing any longer made sense,” “fabricated senselessness,” “human-made hell,” “atmosphere of unreality,” “insane consistency”—that stress the horrendous absurdity of camp existence. So if the camps confound all conventional social, political, legal, and ethical notions, and not simply those articulated by the social sciences, we need to know more about the *specific* ways in which social science has failed.<sup>15</sup>

Arendt focused on three aspects of social scientific enquiry that she believed to be systematically obfuscating: the methodological principle of *sine ira et studio*;<sup>16</sup> the theoretical strategy of what she called “functionalism”; and the related issue of social science's tendency to become trapped in analogies and ideal types that impeded its ability to confront historical novelty.

#### *SINE IRA ET STUDIO* AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION

Any author concerned to understand and explain the “Final Solution”—the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jewry—is confronted with an immediate and disconcerting question: What is the best—most accurate, most appropriate, most authentic—register to depict the death camps, the core phenomenon that, as we saw above, had ostensibly exploded social science's presuppositions? Arendt's response to this question in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* entailed a conscious departure from “the tradition of *sine ira et studio* of whose greatness” she “was fully aware.”<sup>17</sup> Arendt did not reject the attempt to be dispassionate and objective as such. She repudiated the supposed logical incongruity be-

tween objectivity and expressed indignation, and the related contention that impartiality is the only legitimate stance to assume in the analysis of any "human society." Her "particular subject matter"—notably, the Nazi death factories—did not lend itself to experimental detachment:

To describe the concentration camps *sine ira et studio* is not to be "objective," but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself. When I used the image of hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally. . . . In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more "objective," that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature.<sup>18</sup>

One might reply that Arendt's image of Hell, evoked to do justice to the suffering and madness of the camps, carries its own characteristic distortion. Depending on one's theology, Hell is a place for those who never received God's grace or who viciously renounced God through sin, preferring the ways of the Devil to those of the Lord. And how can an image of Hell be "literal"?<sup>19</sup> Still, was Arendt exaggerating the tendency of sociologists, impelled by methodological principles, to describe the camps in an inappropriately clinical manner? In 1947, the *American Journal of Sociology* published an article by Herbert A. Bloch, who had witnessed German camp conditions shortly after liberation. The "horrible mass exploitation by the Third Reich of concentration camp inmates" and others, Bloch declared, afforded a "remarkable opportunity for the study of social patterning and personality under a distinctive set of controlled circumstances." Study of the camps enables sociologists to see "what happens when modern man becomes stripped of his culture and is reduced to an animal state very closely approaching 'raw' motivation."<sup>20</sup> He continued:

Under such conditions the process of assortative and differential association provide[s] a deeply penetrating view into genotypical forms of gregarious and adaptive social selection. Moreno has been pointing to these forms for some time in his sociometric patterning. What happens to the untrammelled socius when the usual social framework is removed? . . . It transpired that what developed was a process of "desocialization," resulting in a primal state of human association. It is possible to conceive of this as a heuristic prototype for comparative study with institutionalized and more

normal patterns of groupings, leadership, and hierarchical class structure. (p. 335)

The idea that camps such as Buchenwald give us access to “a primal state of human association” is, surely, bizarre in the extreme—unless one imagines there to be such a state in the first place and then concludes that such a state resembles a concentration camp. Similarly, “raw” motivation in a camp is unlikely to be similar to “raw” motivation elsewhere, unless one assumes that being beaten, starved, and terrorized reveals a primal human being, rather than one that has been beaten, starved, and terrorized. Bloch’s description (p. 339) of the problems encountered in “reconditioning and retraining” Jewish child survivors of the camps and death marches—their case, he avers, is “analogous to the putative conditions involved in the retraining of classical feral children”—appears to ignore the signal difference between children abandoned at birth and those who have been forcibly removed from their parents and deliberately mistreated by people who wish to see them die.

My point is not that Bloch was inhumane or individually callous; probably the reverse is true.<sup>21</sup> Nor is it that he is a representative figure of American sociology, whatever this might mean in such a diverse discipline. Bloch *was*, however, one of the few sociologists at the time who studied the death camps. (Another account of them, by Theodore Abel, raises different problems, as we shall see.) Finally, I do not assert that sociology has no business seeking to learn from the camp catastrophe, a proposition that is self-evidently absurd.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the point is that in his attempt to recapitulate norms of scientific objectivity, Bloch fell prey to sociological occasionalism: the practice of using Nazism and the camps as an opportunity for grand theorizing *sine ira et studio*, devoid of the passion, sense of horror, and madness that Arendt believed must be conveyed if one is to be *true* to the phenomenon. Worse, in the attempt to offer a sociology that was rigorously detached, Bloch’s “controlled circumstances” and “heuristic prototype” conjure up a sociological laboratory that disturbingly parallels the one the SS itself had established in the camps to conduct their own experiments. Reading Bloch, it is almost as if the SS had made a remarkable contribution to human knowledge, bequeathed a providential gift to science, by providing sociologists with new material for their theoretical casuistries.

## “FUNCTIONALISM”

Equally problematic for Arendt was the category of “function,” a category she traces not to Durkheim or Spencer, but to Marx.<sup>23</sup> Her chief complaint is that sociology obsessively seeks to turn a peculiar episode or phenomenon into something that it is not, denying its concrete, elemental reality and claiming that it is a symptom or token of a deeper substratum remote from the world of appearances. Correlatively, because any tangible thing is deemed a façade hiding something more real (developmental tendencies, historical forces), it is easy to identify one discrete phenomenon as being very much like any other, provided each of them can be shown to serve the same common underlying purpose. Hence, religion and communism can be considered “*functionally* equivalent,” even though this requires that the social scientist never asks “what a religion actually is, and if it is anything at all when it is a religion without God.”<sup>24</sup> This disciplinary habit means that what people actually say can conveniently be ignored, a reflex that Arendt found both condescending and dangerous, as it led to frequent miscalculations of what actors intended. Marx’s notorious formulation that religion is really an opiate, when in fact it is often a source of action, suffering, and heroic endeavor, is predicated on the widely shared view among sociologists that the thoughts of a human being are “the ideological reflexes and echoes of his life process.”<sup>25</sup>

The tendency to substitute and shuffle ideas, destroying the boundaries between them and their objects, was one she urged the historically attentive to resist. Unlike “sociologists who methodically [ignore] chronological order, location of facts, impact and uniqueness of events, substantial content of sources, and historical reality in general,” historians should reclaim the art of making distinctions. They should insist that “these distinctions . . . follow the language we speak and the subject matter we deal with.”<sup>26</sup> The invidious alternative was the Marxist “positive science of history” and the “underlying assumption” of the sociologists that “every matter has a function and its essence is the same as the functional role it happens to play.”<sup>27</sup> Armed with such a method, it was no wonder that sociology had failed to understand the most momentous episode of the century: totalitarianism. Sociology simply assimilated it into its conventional suite of categories or deemed it “as some more radical form of something already well known.”<sup>28</sup>

It is tempting to brush aside Arendt's complaints about sociology as a caricature of a discipline that, even in the 1940s and 1950s, was complex and heterogeneous. Her frequent identification of sociology with the "social sciences" *tout court*, a rhetorical strategy that conflates a variety of disciplinary object domains and perspectives, invites similar dismissal. Yet something of the force of Arendt's critique reasserts itself when we examine specific cases, particularly the use of generalization, analogy, and metaphor to occlude substantive differences among social phenomena or to establish spurious historical pedigrees.

Consider, for instance, the claim of H. G. Adler, a former inmate of Theresienstadt no less, that the sociology of "slavery" was probably the best framework within which to understand the Nazi camps. Adler argued that the existence of concentration camps necessitated "the construction of a sociology of 'the unfree'" that would include other "extreme forms of exclusion" such as the penitentiary. To complement a wide-ranging sociology of the unfree, Adler suggested a social-historical investigation that would "not only describe the history of the modern concentration camp but seek out the institutions of earlier times that are akin to it and that exhibit elements likely to exist whenever men are significantly or totally excluded from a relatively free community. An understanding of the concentration camp is impossible without insight into the nature of slavery; the concentration camp is part of the history of slavery."<sup>29</sup> Adler acknowledged that Nazi "crypto-slavery" appeared novel, but insisted that, on closer scrutiny, the characteristics of "older methods" could be readily identified. Arresting innocent relatives of those who opposed the regime was actually "a revival of the practice of taking hostages and of the ancient institution of kinship liability."<sup>30</sup> To be sure, the "SS concentration camp" could justifiably be considered "unique and incomparable," but only, he added incongruously, "within the general framework of slavery."<sup>31</sup>

But it was precisely such transhistorical sociological models that Arendt abhorred when applied to totalitarian regimes.<sup>32</sup> While acknowledging Nazi enslavement of occupied territories, Arendt maintained that Nazi concentration camps were unprecedented and had a fundamentally different purpose than conventional slavery:<sup>33</sup>

Throughout history slavery has been an institution within a social order; slaves were not, like concentration-camp inmates, withdrawn from the sight

and hence the protection of their fellow-men; as instruments of labor they had a definite price and as property a definite value. The concentration-camp inmate has no price, because he can always be replaced; nobody knows to whom he belongs, because he is never seen. From the point of view of normal society he is absolutely superfluous, although in times of acute labor shortage, as in Russia and Germany during the war, he is used for work.<sup>34</sup>

The salient point about the Nazi camps, Arendt argued, was that unlike slavery they had no obvious utilitarian value. The extermination of Jews and other “inferior races” in Birkenau (a section of Auschwitz), Belżec, Sobibór, Chełmno, and Treblinka proceeded apace at considerable cost to the German war effort, diverting logistical, manpower, and material resources that could have been employed to fight the Allies. Moreover, the Nazi camps were unlike previous concentration camps—they sought not just to contain an enemy or terrify potential civil opponents of the regime, but also, and *primarily*, to conduct an experiment on their hapless captives. Here, Arendt adapted the account of Bettelheim, an inmate of Dachau and Buchenwald between 1938 and 1939, who depicted the camps as “a laboratory for subjecting not only free men, but especially the most ardent foes of the Nazi system, to the process of disintegration from their position as autonomous individuals.”<sup>35</sup> Or, as he put it later:

[T]he camps were a training ground for the SS. There they were taught to free themselves of their prior, more humane emotions and attitudes, and learn the most effective ways of breaking resistance in a defenseless civilian population; the camps became an experimental laboratory in which to study the most effective means for doing that. They were also a testing ground for how to govern most “effectively”; . . . This use of the camps as experimental laboratories was later extended to include the so-called “medical” experiments, in which human beings were used in place of animals.<sup>36</sup>

Arendt held a similar view, arguing that the concentration camp was the “central institution of totalitarian organizational power,”<sup>37</sup> designed to calibrate the optimum means through which one could transform spontaneous and diverse human beings into an artificial, isolated, and interchangeable creature that was little more than a conditioned set of Pavlovian reflexes.<sup>38</sup> It transpires that the camps were anti-utilitarian only by normal standards of utility maximization. By Nazi standards, the camps’ usefulness consisted in their capacity both to exterminate

“objective enemies” and to fabricate the “model citizen” of the totalitarian regime. Moreover,

without the undefined fear [the camps] inspire and the very well-defined training they offer in totalitarian domination, which can nowhere else be fully tested with all of its most radical possibilities, a totalitarian state can neither inspire its nuclear troops with fanaticism nor maintain a whole people in complete apathy. The dominating and the dominated would only too quickly sink back into the “old bourgeois routine”; after early “excesses,” they would succumb to everyday life with its human laws; in short, they would develop in the direction which all observers counseled by common sense were so prone to predict.<sup>39</sup>

As the “laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified,”<sup>40</sup> and in which “the whole of life [is] thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment,”<sup>41</sup> the camps were the Nazi guarantee against social and political routinization.

That being the case, Arendt considered it theoretically misguided at best, morally obtuse at worst, to extrapolate the concept of totalitarianism, or its cognates, to institutions that were part of the history of conventional societies. Contrast, for instance, Arendt’s notion of “totalitarianism” with Erving Goffman’s sociological category of “total institutions.”<sup>42</sup> Because Arendt’s notion of totalitarianism referred to a unique, unparalleled, and radically evil phenomenon, it would never have occurred to her to extend the adjectival prefix “total” to conventional forms of society. But this is exactly what Goffman did with the concept of “total institutions.” The result was an analysis, in *Asylums*, that treated the Nazi concentration camps on a par with institutions that were substantively unlike them;<sup>43</sup> in short, we have a clear example of the kind of “functionalist” shuffling of content and generalization that Arendt attacked. Goffman, we know, had priorities of his own: The notion of “total institution” was a rhetorical shock tactic, an act of iconoclastic normalization, aimed at challenging complacency by making respectable institutions appear in a disturbing new light. Nonetheless, to designate “jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps” under the same rubric, one must ignore salient facts about them that call into question their being classified together. POW camps are designated for people granted a legitimate status under the conventions of war; jail and penitentiaries are for those who



break the positive laws of a society. Conversely, communists, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles, and others in the Nazi camps had no legitimate status among their captors and had broken no positive laws; rather, they had been put outside the law through a deliberate set of discriminatory policies and decrees. The location of prisoners in a modern nontotalitarian society is usually known by the prisoners' families. Their death is evidenced by a body and marked by a grave. By contrast, concentration camps sought to swallow people into "holes of oblivion" and eliminate all traces of their ever having existed.<sup>44</sup> Prisons are typically places of confinement, rather than of slave labor or extermination. Other differences are easily enumerated. To be sure, Goffman was aware that the attempt "to extract a general profile" from his "list of establishments" opened him to the charge that "none of the elements I will describe seem peculiar to total institutions, and none seems to be shared by every one of them."<sup>45</sup> But that caveat, once registered, has no demonstrable impact on the argument that follows. Instead, Goffman contents himself with a taxonomy that stresses "general characteristics" and family resemblances.<sup>46</sup> He concludes:

Certainly the similarities obtrude so glaringly and persistently that we have a right to suspect that there are good functional reasons for these features being present and that it will be possible to fit these features together and grasp them by means of a functional explanation. When we have done this, I feel we will give less praise and blame to particular superintendents, commandants, wardens, and abbots, and tend more to understand the social problems and issues in total institutions by appealing to the underlying structural design common to them all.<sup>47</sup>

Yet Arendt and Goffman had more in common than my truncated comments suggest. Both writers stressed the primacy of "appearance" and denied what Alvin Gouldner called the "metaphysics of hierarchy": the notion that behind life's surface lies some generative causal structure that conjures it into existence.<sup>48</sup> Both Arendt and Goffman took an intense interest in public performance, employing dramaturgical metaphors to depict it. But whereas Arendt concentrated on the public realm as a space in which political actors could express their authenticity, lending significance and meaning to an otherwise transient, private existence, Goffman envisaged the social realm as a series of ritualized face-saving encounters. His portrayal of social actors as impression managers would

have confirmed Arendt's worst fears about the manipulative superficiality and conformity of modern "society."<sup>49</sup>

#### THE IDEAL TYPE

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt's relationship to sociological investigation is ambivalent. On the one hand, she draws appreciatively<sup>50</sup> on Georg Simmel's analysis of secret societies to show their affinity with totalitarian movements.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Arendt is extremely critical of attempts to employ Max Weber's ideal types of charisma and bureaucracy to totalitarian rule. Relying on these categories is a "serious error,"<sup>52</sup> a failing she attributes less to the deficiencies of Weber's original concepts than to their bowdlerized adaptation in the hands of Alfred von Martin, Arnold Koettgen,<sup>53</sup> and especially Hans Gerth, for whom Arendt shows a particular disdain.<sup>54</sup> Hans Gerth, a pupil of Karl Mannheim, was a former student friend of Arendt's first husband, Günther Stern (alias Günther Anders). A *former* friend because Stern later turned on Gerth, claiming him to be a Johnny-come-lately who had emigrated in 1938 only after attempts to ingratiate himself with the Nazi authorities, as a journalist for the *Berliner Tageblatt*, had failed. That assessment is almost certainly a travesty of Gerth's conduct, a matter I will not pursue here.<sup>55</sup> Hannah Arendt's analytical rejoinder to Gerth is that totalitarian regimes are the antitheses of bureaucracy, because they permit no room for positive law, stability, or predictability. Instead, such regimes unleash unceasing, turbulent movement. Equally anomalous is the tendency of commentators to exaggerate the charismatic "fascination" of leaders like Hitler and Stalin and to see that fascination as the key to their success over the movement as a whole. Against this, Arendt argued that the major contributions of Hitler's and Stalin's oratorical gifts were, first, to confuse the opposition, who misread such rhetoric as mere ranting demagoguery; and, second, to help integrate plausible, propagandistic fictions—the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the Trotskyite conspiracy—into an ideological "region" that allowed no inconsistency or test of experience. The "true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization,"<sup>56</sup> organization in the sense of an ideology that, in the Nazi case, creates the *Volksgemeinschaft* here and now, and in the sense of social organizations—front organizations, paramilitary formations, secret societies—which, in various ways, shield the movement from having to confront the plurality and inconstancy of real experience. In *Mein Kampf*,

Hitler contrasted the “living organization” of the Nazi movement with the “dead mechanism” of a typical, bureaucratized party. Nazi propaganda sought to make this living organization a reality—and it succeeded, in part due to Hitler’s “brilliant gifts as a mass orator.”<sup>57</sup>

Arendt’s portrayal of the leadership of totalitarian movements is complex and, though I will not pursue the issue here, somewhat inconsistent, in good measure because of her attempt to paint Stalin and Hitler in broadly similar colors. But her chief argument in relation to Hitler is that his much-vaunted gift of fascination<sup>58</sup> was a “social phenomenon” that had to be “understood in terms of the particular company he kept.”<sup>59</sup> Hitler understood that modern bourgeois society wanted nothing more than to be freed of the “chaos of opinions” that any “social gathering” generates; that, under conditions of social atomization and the fragmentation of judgment, his own rigorous, ruthless and apodictic adherence to one postulate<sup>60</sup> was deeply attractive. Under such conditions, “extraordinary self-confidence and displays of self-confidence . . . inspire confidence in others; pretensions to genius waken the conviction in others that they are indeed dealing with a genius.”<sup>61</sup> Defeat in war, economic crisis, and social fragmentation had transformed large sections of the German people into what Arendt called *masses*, a human detritus that had lost a “worldly” place, and with it a sense of security and reality. Bereft of a stable social structure, and feeling keenly its own expendability, this stratum latched onto Hitler’s uncompromising views with a fanaticism ideally suited to the self-sacrifice demanded by the Nazi movement.

Further, the totalitarian leader does not command a hierarchy of which he is at the pinnacle. Rather, he is the personification of the movement itself, a living vortex assuming the movement’s characteristics of turbulence, amorphousness, and radicalism. “In substance,” Arendt argues, “the totalitarian leader is nothing more or less than the functionary of the masses he leads; he is not a power-hungry individual imposing a tyrannical and arbitrary will upon his subjects. Being a mere functionary, he can be replaced at any time, and he depends just as much on the ‘will’ of the masses he embodies as the masses depend on him.”<sup>62</sup> If that quotation strains the reader’s credulity, it has, nonetheless, some similarities with J. P. Stern’s lapidary description of Hitler as “a center of Nothing”—the phrase is redolent of Conrad’s portrait of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* as “hollow at the core”—and Robert Harris’s assessment that “this inner

emptiness helped enable Hitler to use himself as a tool, changing his personality with shocking abruptness to suit the task at hand.”<sup>63</sup>

In sum, ideal types such as “charisma” and “bureaucracy,” however serviceable in other contexts, banalized the singularity of National Socialism.<sup>64</sup> As with “functionalism,” she considered the ideal-type approach to be one more sociological device to normalize the phenomenon, to make of it an item or a case of something already known.<sup>65</sup> To the objection that Weber’s express purpose in commending the ideal type was to help the investigator understand the individuality of historical configurations, to map their territorial *irregularity*, Arendt was silent, but for an understandable reason. Her opposition was directed not simply to particular ideal types, but to the neo-Kantian epistemology that underpinned them. While from a Weberian standpoint, *totalitarianism* is a model—a research instrument or heuristic—that enables the social scientist to delineate a unique historical conjuncture against an artificially constructed prototype, for Arendt *totalitarianism* is a term that abbreviates a real historical conjuncture, an elemental combination of terror and ideology that constitutes the frightful uniqueness of the totalitarian experiment.

How plausible was Arendt’s claim that sociologists wedded to ideal types in general, and to Weber’s ideal types in particular, misunderstood the Nazi movement? I now offer two examples that, in their different ways, lend some support to her allegation.

### Theodore Abel’s and Talcott Parsons’s Studies of National Socialism

Undoubtedly the most remarkable empirical study of National Socialism produced by an American sociologist in the 1930s, and one with which Arendt was familiar, was Theodore Abel’s *Why Hitler Came into Power* (1938).<sup>66</sup> Following a visit to Germany in the summer of 1933, Abel hit upon the ingenious idea of self-funding<sup>67</sup> a contest with 400 marks in prizes to find the “Best Personal Life History of an Adherent of the Nazi Movement.” The contest was launched a year later, and its 683 manuscript submissions remain to this day among the most important autobiographical sources available for documenting the makeup and motivations of prewar Nazi militants. It is true that, both at the time and

subsequently, Abel's methodological protocols and techniques, or lack of them, drew pointed criticism, largely for their statistical or inferential limitations.<sup>68</sup> But the fact remains that a great deal of later research on Nazi Germany confirmed Abel's chief finding: namely, that National Socialism was a highly differentiated social movement by no means overwhelmingly lower-middle-class in composition.<sup>69</sup> By providing the reader of *Why Hitler Came into Power* with a selection of first-person life histories, or "biograms,"<sup>70</sup> that allowed his respondents to speak for themselves, Abel drove home the point of Nazism's social heterogeneity.

Moreover, after the war, Abel turned briefly to a study of concentration camps that was bold and original, arriving spontaneously at many of the same conclusions that Arendt reached in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Neither the camps, nor the policy that motivated them, could be attributed to some mainspring of German culture or, as he put it, "national character or specific historical conditions affecting Germany *only*."<sup>71</sup> In addition, there was no evidence whatsoever, Abel contended, that the SS perpetrators were generally psychopaths, or that their Jewish, Polish, and other victims were chosen principally because of "their *individual* anti-social activity." On the contrary, such people were targeted because they belonged to a "social category." Again like Arendt, Abel detected the distinguishing mark of the Nazi camp system not simply in "its systematic execution, the cold-bloodedness and rational organization of the procedure and the fact that several millions of people were involved in it," but also in the policy that animated it.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, he insisted that what was characteristic of the Nazi camps was "not slave labor, detention, privation, extermination (all those things have been done many times before in history) but the systematic effort to reduce human beings . . . to bundles of reflexes, to debase and degrade them absolutely."<sup>73</sup> And he also warned ominously that the Nazi camp system was not a freak incident, but "a pattern of social behavior that is apt to emerge under certain conditions, the recurrence of which can be envisioned."<sup>74</sup>

In other ways, Abel went even further than Arendt by coining new terms that he believed would do justice to Nazi barbarism (that word itself is, of course, antiquated). These included "social obliteration," a notion redolent of Patterson's analysis of "social death," and "democide," a label since augmented by R. J. Rummel, and which Abel took to mean the destruction of a people as a social category.<sup>75</sup>

I propose to call this special feature of concentration camps *Democide*, of which genocide is a sub-form pertaining specifically to the extermination of ethnic or racial groups. The broader term *democide* pertains to extermination procedures against a population selected on the basis of *any* kind of social attribute, racial, religious, educational, political, cultural, and so forth, including even distinctions on the basis of age.<sup>76</sup>

The specific “motivation” for Nazi democide within the camps “arose from the combination of negative eugenics with power politics.”<sup>77</sup> And such a policy, far from being incomprehensible, was fully explicable in sociological terms. One hypothesis suggested by the “basic findings of sociology” was that “the more narrowly the membership of the in-group is defined, the greater is the range of permissible licence of behaviour towards those who are excluded from it.”<sup>78</sup> Taken to an extreme, insiders are apt to view members of the out-group as forming a different human species altogether, who can be treated with impunity and to whom conventional norms of restraint no longer apply. But how was one to depict, in a sufficiently realistic manner, the agents and the system of terror? What new terms would be suitable?<sup>79</sup> Abel’s favored option regarding the agents of extermination—the SS, the SD, and the Gestapo—was “Myrmidons,” the ferocious Phthian warriors of Greek mythology who, in the Trojan War, were led by Achilles. They are likened in the *Iliad* (XVI. 187–193) to famished wolves “that rend and bolt raw flesh, hearts filled with battle frenzy that never dies . . . belching bloody meat.” As for the *system* of brutality, extermination, deportation, and enslavement as a whole, terms ending in “-cracy” were inadequate, Abel contended, because “the issue is not the number and kind of people who ruled but the way in which they ruled.” That being so, Abel chose the word “*raptorial*,” meaning preying upon others, robbing them of their life, property, freedom, using deprivation of values as a method of conduct.”<sup>80</sup>

This summary is enough to show that, far from being a sociological simpleton, Abel was an astute and audacious student of Nazism, notwithstanding a problem that I now, in the spirit of Arendt, seek to highlight. To grasp this problem, we must revisit *Why Hitler Came into Power*.

When Abel turned from his documentary material to the task of making sense of it, he attributed the rise of the “Hitler movement” to four mutually reinforcing “general factors” or “causes”:<sup>81</sup> discontent within German society on account of crises within the social order; the special

appeal of Nazi ideology and its program for social transformation; the distinctive organizational techniques used by the Nazi Party; and, finally, the presence of charismatic leadership.<sup>82</sup> For our purposes, the last factor is the most relevant, and Abel offered a number of perspectives on it. Drawing on his subjects' accounts, Abel discerned a twofold "function of charismatic leadership." On the one hand, Hitler "was the chief executive, the planner and organizer. On the other hand, he played the role of the prophet of the movement." Hitler's role as chief executive was conjoined to "an indomitable will" and unshakable self-confidence, similar to that of religious founders or imperial pioneers such as De Lesseps. "Like other leaders of the masses," Hitler combined authority over his colleagues with a sense of realism, qualities that amply equipped him to assume the role of "driving power" and "directing genius" of the movement.<sup>83</sup>

The "second function" that "Hitler fulfilled" is evident in the attitude of his followers toward him. To his supporters, Hitler was someone who possessed "superhuman power" and to whom the proper disposition was one of unquestioning obedience and submission. "To them he was a prophet whose pronouncements were taken as oracles." Abel quotes several reports among his respondents testifying to Hitler's "magnetic power" and "ability to cast a spell" and infers from these reports that we are dealing with "what Max Weber has called charismatic leadership."<sup>84</sup> We should recall that Abel was one of the pioneers in bringing Weber to the attention of an American audience, and that it was he, more than anyone, who was responsible for introducing the German term *Verstehen* into an English idiom.<sup>85</sup>

This view of Hitler's charisma, with its reference to previous examples of the phenomenon, may have prepared the reader for a notable feature of Abel's account: his conviction that "the forces that brought about" the Führer's social recognition are "the very ones operative throughout history in creating charismatic leaders."<sup>86</sup> The result is that both the Nazi movement, and Hitler in particular, are historically normalized as yet another case, perhaps somewhat extreme but no different in essentials, from a well-established lineage. More than that, we are encouraged subtly to expect a predictable charismatic trajectory. This is not because Abel specifically draws that conclusion, but because he does not confront it. Hence, in the absence of a discussion of Hitler's peculiarities, or of properties of the Nazi movement that would make it different from previous movements, the

clear implication is that Nazism is on the path to stabilization and routinization.<sup>87</sup> That Abel did entertain such a view is evident from an entry in his journal. On a visit to Berlin in June 1934, Abel was struck by the growing discrepancy between the zealotry of the National Socialist movement and the emphasis on mundane concerns that characterized the mass of “average” Germans, who were now convinced that the main crises (economic, social, and political) were over. Abel writes:

We find in Germany today that activities common to the normal life of collectivities assert themselves. The individual is after his best interest: security and a rise of his standard of living. . . . The unity achieved in the hour of great emotional upheaval breaks up under the pursuit of individual tendencies and the sobering effect of realities. The problems of the revolutionaries become ordinary problems of management and life with all its complexities, contradictions, etc. reigns again. The holiday is over. Concrete deeds—promoting individual interests, become then, the issue, and not ideas and feelings. . . . The N.S. [*sic*] is fighting against the inevitable phenomena of ordinary life—impossibility of perpetual enthusiasm, selfishness, interest in the amenities of life which have no idealistic significance, domination by the circle of personal problems, neglect of community problems. The victory of every-day life is inevitable.<sup>88</sup>

Although aspects of this picture of quotidian existence in Germany during the 1930s ring true and are supported by the testimony of witnesses, Abel’s mistake was to assume,<sup>89</sup> with Weber’s ideal type of charisma in mind, that the reemergence of profane concerns was symptomatic of the movement’s enervation. On the contrary, the Nazi movement, and the regime itself, remained highly radical and “idealistic” to the end, attributes that were unsparingly compatible with the cynical attempt of its members to profit financially from colonization, expropriation, and genocide. Modern historians of Nazism are in broad agreement that its signature characteristics were “continuous revolution,”<sup>90</sup> “cumulative radicalization,”<sup>91</sup> and systemic “governmental disorder,”<sup>92</sup> notions that endorse Arendt’s argument about the primacy of motion, the chaotic nature of governance, and the absence of routinization. As we know, Arendt also believed that such characteristics revealed a regime type *sui generis*. In contrast, as late as 1945, Theodore Abel continued to portray the situation in Germany as essentially a repetition of causes and processes that were already well documented. In an article entitled “Is a Psychiatric Interpre-



tation of the German Enigma Necessary?"<sup>93</sup> Abel answered his question in the negative by invoking Durkheim's injunction to explain social facts in terms of other social facts. Nothing about recent events in modern Germany, Abel remarked, indicated a specifically German phenomenon. Jewish persecution, for instance, in thirteenth-century England, fifteenth-century Spain, and nineteenth-century Russia reminds us of deeds "as black as the German record of the twentieth." Equally, "the sadism of the concentration camps" finds its counterpart in many other acts of sadism and torture throughout the ages, the Spanish Inquisition being only the best known. Anyone even vaguely acquainted with history will surely not be surprised by recent German conduct, since behavior like it has been "repeated innumerable times."<sup>94</sup> So why, even so, do we remain puzzled by German conduct? The reason lies not in its existence, "but because it exists in the XXth century and is practiced by a nation which ranks exceedingly high in intellectual and cultural achievements. It is the anachronism that disturbs us," not the novelty.<sup>95</sup> To account for that anachronism, Abel offered a version of the German *Sonderweg*, claiming that it was Germany's backwardness that explained its current plight.<sup>96</sup> In Germany, unlike other Western nations, feudalism was never completely eradicated, the bourgeoisie failed to become the ruling class, representative government remained stymied by Junker domination, and the economic doctrine of the state was protectionist rather than laissez-faire. All these factors, combined with accustomed "allegiance to a dynast or 'Fuehrer'" and a virulent form of ethnocentrism, portended "a return to the primitive forms of tribalism," though Abel hastened to add that it is "feudalism" and "patrimonialism" that best characterize the German state. The rise of National Socialism is then simply a parasitic growth subsisting on something more ancient. Hitler succeeded in winning the admiration and plaudits of millions of Germans because "he appealed to deeply rooted sentiments and traditions." Similarly, the "old order—hierarchical, authoritarian, patrimonial—was re-established in full force."<sup>97</sup>

That interpretation of German history and Nazism jolts us back with a vengeance to Arendt's discomfiture with a sociology inured to looking backward, unable<sup>98</sup> or unwilling<sup>99</sup> to recognize the new, although we should note that historical misidentification of National Socialism was widespread across all disciplines and political sympathies during the 1930s and 1940s. Consider only the Left. While Russian, Italian, and

German Marxists of the stature of Trotsky, Gramsci, and Thalheimer frequently identified fascism or National Socialism with some modality of Caesarism or Bonapartism, the majority of their sympathizers in France, invoking the great parallel with the French Revolution, were inclined to construe Bolshevism as analogous to the Jacobin republic devoid of the Thermidorean “reaction.”<sup>100</sup> Granted, Abel’s analysis of the German “enigma” was composed before his concentration camp investigation sensitized him to novel features of Nazi rule, although even there it is significant that he chose to invoke concepts—Myrmidons,<sup>101</sup> raptorial—that reprised ancient and prehistoric periods of earthly existence. Abel claimed to be looking for “new insights, new approaches.” But, as he put it when pondering in June 1964 whether he should resume his investigations into National Socialism, “a study of Nazism might illuminate a singular historical process, but I fail to see what can be derived from it of general import that has not been already discussed.”<sup>102</sup>

I have focused on the work of Theodore Abel to show that normalization of a new phenomenon—the tendency to fall back on dubious historical and conceptual pedigrees—was the default position of a sophisticated sociological mind. Talcott Parsons, a principled and indefatigable opponent of American isolationism, was another of sociology’s great figures who had a penchant for comparing Nazi Germany with previous epochs and for invoking Weberian ideal types. In addition, Parsons oscillated between warning of the new and terrible menace posed by National Socialism to liberal-humanist civilization and an analysis that emphasized the sclerotic, “traditional,” and quasi-feudal qualities of the National Socialist movement.<sup>103</sup> Even more than Abel, Parsons employed Weber’s sociology of rulership/domination (*Herrschaftssoziologie*) to depict Hitler as a classic example of the charismatic leader who imperiously demands of his followers that they recognize his destiny, legitimates decisions by plebiscite, and discards all rational-legal restrictions to the Führer’s rule. Hitler’s demagogic success owed itself to the exploitation of a deep and “unresolved tension” in German society.<sup>104</sup> Although the development of rational legal authority in the West had eroded many conventional loyalties based on religion, kin, locality, and social class, it had not destroyed entirely these ties and sentiments. Nor had rational-legal authority effectively replaced them with substitutes that could secure the emotional loyalty of many sectors of the populace. The result was a conflict, born of widespread insecurity on all sides, between those who fancied

themselves “emancipated,” and for whom “debunking” tradition was tantamount to a professional sport, and others for whom such a stance was deeply insulting to, and threatening of, cherished sentiments and commitments. This second group was particularly vulnerable to demagogic appeals of the kind ventilated by National Socialism, a movement adept at mobilizing “fundamentalist” feelings. Capitalists, internationalists, emancipated Jews, political radicals—the groups National Socialism ritualistically demonized—become useful symbols of all that was wrong about the modern world, condensing a potent brew of subversion, atheism, immorality, deracination, and corruption.

Even so, Parsons did not believe that a revolutionary movement could become a status quo. Weberian categories rendered such a prospect impossible. Given Nazism’s hostility to the rule of law, “there is a strong presumption that long-term predominance of National Socialism would strongly favor a traditionalistic rather than a rational-legal outcome of the process of routinization.”<sup>105</sup> That of course presupposed the likelihood of what Weber had described as “routinization of the movement,” a developmental process that Parsons believed bound to occur, in some form, if Nazism survived. But in what form? Currently, the party organization resembled a mixture of charismatic and bureaucratic modes, just as Hans Gerth had argued, with the “charismatic absolutism of the dictator” most prominently on display.<sup>106</sup> Loyalty rather than law was the key principle of solidarity, and that principle was likely to continue. Yet once Hitler died and the movement’s basic dependence on him evaporated, a rather different configuration of forces was conceivable. Already there was evidence of organizational factionalism within the regime, accentuated by the success of the Nazi Party’s security apparatus—notably the Gestapo and the SS—in appropriating state powers. Hence, “in the longer run the break-up of the hierarchy into a variety of different elements which jealously guard their own rights, territorially or functionally segregated from the whole, is probable. This might well lead to a situation akin to feudalism except that the relation to land would presumably be different.”<sup>107</sup> In the longer term, the pattern of charismatic provision (gifts and booty) that characterized the revolutionary movement (e.g., “Aryanization” of Jewish business) would need to be put on a more stable basis, probably by a quasi-feudal arrangement of “benefices” owned by party functionaries. More generally, a metamorphosis toward feudalism would affect everything liberal humanists hold dear. “That the most

distinctive cultural features of our civilization could not long survive such a change, would scarcely seem to need to be pointed out.”<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter examined, in a sympathetic light, Arendt's critique of sociology. We witnessed her objections to value neutrality, to the functionalization of concepts, and to the ideal type. We saw, too, that Arendt's general depiction of sociology as methodologically hidebound in its portrait of totalitarianism was in many respects accurate. Yet to say that sociology had failed to grasp totalitarianism as an “unprecedented” episode raises questions about what *unprecedented* actually means, whether any event can actually *be* unprecedented and, if it can, whether totalitarianism was such a phenomenon. I return to these questions in the final chapter of this book. My intention now is to attend to specific debates in which Arendt's interlocutors launched their own critiques of her theory and method. I begin with David Riesman.