

## The “Masses” in Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism

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This symposium has the intriguing objective of “learning from Arendt’s attack on cliché.” She was certainly wary of formulaic thinking. She was even more perplexed when cliché took on bodily form, as she claimed it did with Adolf Eichmann. Yet while Arendt was a daring thinker in many respects, she was by no means inoculated from the *topoi* of her own time. In this article I describe one of them: her evocation of “the masses.” This term has a complex history in nineteenth and twentieth century political thought. Socialists often used it in a positive sense. Conservatives and liberals, in contrast, perceived the masses to be a threat to order and liberty. Unstable, impulsive, credulous, and irrational, the masses threatened to overwhelm the body politic and cede power to the demagogue who best knew how to use them (Bellamy 2003). Arendt, a republican political theorist, also believed the masses to be a destructive force, and her depiction of them is entirely negative. Echoes of earlier, and contemporary, debates are audible in her work. For Arendt, as for Gustave Le Bon, Max Weber and many others, the masses are homogenous and amorphous. They are incapable of reasoning—or rather their reasoning is of a highly unusual kind, resembling that of a deluded logician. That “the masses” have an important play in her theory of totalitarianism has long been recognized by commentators. Yet the complex dimensions and equivocations of her argument have received less attention. I examine some of them here.

### II

Totalitarianism is only possible, Arendt claims, in societies in which classes have dissolved into masses, where party politics has been reduced to ideological posturing, and where the responsibilities of citizenship have succumbed to apathy on a large scale. “The totalitarian movements”, she says, “aim at and succeed in organizing masses—not classes” (Arendt 1958).<sup>1</sup> Classes are interest-bound formations, determined by their place in the productive process. They provide individuals with a sense of social membership. Conventional political parties represent class forces to various degrees. Masses are something quite different and are not to be confused with the riff-raff of bohemians, crackpots, gangsters and conspirators Arendt dubs “the mob.” Masses come in two complementary forms. First, they compose individuals who live on the periphery of all social and political involvements. These people exist within the interstices of class society and party politics.

The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organizations or trade unions. Potentially they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls (311).

Bereft of organizational affiliation, inexperienced in conventional politics, and lacking conviction, masses call down a plague on all houses. Having never been previously organized by the party system, or ever convinced by its rhetoric, they offer virgin territory for the totalitarian movements to harvest. Masses in this first sense are testimony to the fact that so-called democratic government functions amid a population that tolerates it without enthusiasm. Their typical quiescence and apathy is by no means the same as consent. When totalitarian movements colonize parliament and begin to destroy it, the masses show no regret; to them, parliament was a fraud to begin with.

Alongside this first meaning of “masses”—a permanent fixture of modern societies, witness to the inability of class formations to incorporate many segments of the populace—Arendt introduces another. On this reckoning, masses are the product of a specific conjuncture. They constitute the detritus of all social strata which have lost their former social identity and emotional bearings as a result of abrupt political, geopolitical and economic dislocation—the same conditions that Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons said produced anomie (a term Arendt assiduously avoids). In continental Europe, masses in this sense emerged in one of two ways. In the first manifestation they were an unintended consequence of the turmoil that followed World War I: revolution, military defeat, economic depression, break-up of empire, foundation of new ethnically based states, the resultant displacement of those now deemed aliens. This pattern was evident in most parts of central eastern and Western Europe. Social calamity smashed much of the class system. In its place arrived a “new terrifying negative solidarity”—a “structureless mass of furious individuals”—comprised of unemployed workers, dispossessed small businessmen, and “former members of the middle and upper classes” (315). Common to all was an undiluted sense of bitterness, betrayal and a loathing of status quo parties—especially those which had previously claimed to represent them.

In Germany and Austria, National Socialism took advantage of this crisis, organizing masses that had been politically

disenfranchised and economically emasculated in the inter-war years. The masses furnished the social basis of the Nazi dictatorship and, after 1940, the totalitarian regime. But the point is that they *preceded* totalitarian rule. In the lands dominated by Bolshevism, conversely, masses were principally the *artifact of a deliberate policy* aimed at pulverizing all groups and factions that were independent of the state. Arendt argues that Lenin, fearful of the inchoate nature of Soviet society, deliberately sought to foster stratification by multiplying interests and identities based, for instance, on independent trade unions, councils, and nationality. Stalin reversed this process. He wished to “fabricate an atomized and structureless mass” (319) the better to dominate society as a whole. To do this he set about liquidating property owners, independent peasants, trade unions and councils, and purging the military and bureaucracy, including factory managers and engineers. All “nonpolitical communal bonds” (322) were similarly eradicated by a reign of terror which encouraged denunciation and the severance of friendship and family ties. The rapidity of the Bolsheviks’ ascent after the 1917 revolution meant there was no totalitarian movement comparable to that employed by the Nazis; the Bolsheviks assumed power immediately. Instead of a totalitarian movement organizing the masses, as in Germany, the totalitarian state in Russia created them.

So, in one sense or another, the masses are characterized by social and political marginality. Masses consist of people harboring an embittered feeling of superfluity—“an entirely new phenomenon in Europe, the concomitant of mass unemployment and the population growth of the last 150 years” (311). Masses are individuals of all social and intellectual persuasions, including the cultivated, who are “atomized” and “isolated” (323); “unstable and futile” (356), selfless, individuals without individuality (307), adaptable and fanatical. Arendt depicts them as people whose bitterness accompanies a “radical loss of self-interest,” a “bored indifference in the face of death”, a “passionate inclination towards the most abstract notions as guides for life”, a “general contempt for even the most obvious rules of common sense” (316), a “desperate superfluosity” all “too willing to die the death of robots” (363). It is not “brutality and backwardness” that typifies the “mass man” but rather “his isolation and lack of normal social relationships” (317), a fragment of a competitive and “lonely” society (317). Totalitarian propaganda, in its endless repetition of a few key ideas, is compelling for the masses because they are people with no discernment.

They do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part...What

the masses refuse to recognize is the fortuitousness that pervades reality. They are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate coincidences by inventing an all embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident. Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency (352).

When totalitarianism collapses, its mass adherents suffer no undue trauma because their conviction contained no independent source of idealism. They either find a new function for themselves or simply revert to an earlier inert state, ceasing to “believe in the dogma for which yesterday they still were ready to sacrifice their lives” (363). Deprived of what Hitler called the “living organization”—the movement in motion—the masses’ fantasy world collapses like a house of cards. Yet so long as totalitarianism exists, the masses are its prime source of support. In a Preface to the third edition of *Origins*, Arendt insists the “mass support for totalitarianism comes neither from ignorance nor from brainwashing” (xxiii). The masses are loyal not to an interest but to the “fiction” that totalitarian movements have concocted but which nicely synchronizes with their own experience. The fiction envisages the world in conspiratorial terms—the domination of world Jewry, Trotskyite “wreckers” and deviationists scheming to undermine the revolution—and reduces the world’s complexity to one central tenet—class or race, the dialectic of history or the law of genetic supremacy—from which everything else is derived. No facts can dispute it because the template’s vindication is to be found in the indefinite future, in centuries or millennia: world revolution, the Thousand Year Reich.

Whether masses are the social material of historical circumstance or the product of social engineering, they constitute a number of vital conditions for totalitarian rule. To begin with, masses supply the necessary social material for the movement’s ever-shifting policies. They provide its sympathizers and especially its militants, men and women who are prepared to surrender themselves utterly to the cause. Lacking real interests in society, as mediated by class or party, masses attest to a psychology of selflessness. Accordingly, they are the perfect vessel and instrument of totalitarian projects. Masses offer another kind of social material too. “Totalitarian movements and regimes are driven by a “perpetual-motion mania.” They can “remain in power only so long as they keep moving and set everything around them in motion” (306). That momentum translates into the purges, wars, deportations, and the identification of every new objective enemies to liquidate. The Bolshevik idea of permanent revolution finds its parallel in the Nazi “notion of a racial ‘selection which can never stand still’ thus requiring a constant radicalization of the standards by which the selection, i.e. the extermination of the unfit, is carried

out” (391). But in order for it to keep moving, and to voraciously consume human flesh, totalitarianism must have at its disposal a considerable body of people to waste—either in the form of domestic casualties or foreign hosts. And here “masses” is fused with a more customary meaning of that term: “sheer force of numbers” (308). This demographic is central to Arendt’s contention that smallish populations, even if they incubate totalitarian movements, are incapable of generating a totalitarian regime. Unable to feed the totalitarian juggernaut, and replenish its human fuel, they instead become mired in more traditional forms of dictatorship. That was the fate of prewar Rumania, Portugal, Hungary and Spain; totalitarian rule would have depopulated and hence destroyed these countries. Russia, in contrast, had people in abundance to consume; so did Germany—once war allowed it to expand across Europe incorporating millions of new subjects into its empire (310). Only then could it advance to a stage that was “truly totalitarian.” The prospects of totalitarian rule in India and China are “frighteningly good”, Arendt adds, precisely because they provide “almost inexhaustible material to feed the power-accumulation and man destroying machinery of total domination.” In societies with a long tradition of “contempt for the value of human life,” the feeling of mass superfluity is nothing new (311).

We have seen that masses constitute two vital conditions of totalitarianism. On the one hand they furnish its militants and sympathizers. On the other they offer it human bulk in terms of raw numbers to devour. Masses also—a third condition—lend totalitarianism domestic legitimacy. Totalitarian rulers are genuinely popular with “the masses” (306) and give the leadership its distinctive character.<sup>2</sup> Arendt claims that “neither the Moscow trials nor the liquidation of the Röhm faction would have been possible if these masses had not supporter Stalin and Hitler” (306). And she is emphatic that totalitarian rulers are “mass leaders” (306, 317, 318, 349, 350, 382), the transposition of mass qualities onto a single person or elite. “Hitler’s as well as Stalin’s dictatorship points clearly to the fact that isolation of atomized individuals provides not only the mass basis for totalitarian rule, but is carried through to the very top of the whole structure” (407). True, individuals such Hitler and Stalin rise from the dregs of society, the “mob” of social misfits and outsiders. But, by affinity, totalitarian leaders are mass men, aware of what the masses want and what they are capable of doing. Mass leaders understand, Arendt argues, that the masses value nothing more than fanaticism, the only thing that gives them an undiluted sense of purpose.

### III

Arendt’s analysis of “mass leaders” is fundamental to her account of totalitarianism as a whole yet it is easy to underesti-

mate.<sup>3</sup> Her treatment of the mob and the masses is heralded in sub-section titles to Chapters 4, 5 and 10. Totalitarian leaders receive no such attention. That narrative lacuna might suggest (erroneously) that she accorded Hitler and Stalin marginal significance. But the real reason for it, I surmise, is that leaders are not something “above” the masses, the movement or totalitarian organization more generally; they are entirely imbricated within it, a kind of personified vortex. In the totalitarian context, he who says movement or masses says leader too. All are part of the same formation, a contention that makes Arendt appear more sociological than the sociologists she detested. (Baehr 2002) The commonplace idea that totalitarian leaders exercise their power through the fascination they exert over an otherwise passive following was, she believed, absurd; more specifically, the idea was tautological. People are fascinated by people they are prone to be fascinated by. “Fascination is a social phenomenon, and the fascination Hitler exercised over his environment must be understood in terms of the particular company he kept,” company which was signally attracted by the “unbending consistency” with which he uttered every formula. (305) In an environment unfavorable to the plurality of opinion, and inimical to discernment, people mistake unshakeable conviction for rarefied truth. Albert Speer (Speer [1975] 1976), writing from his Spandau prison cell in December 1946, offers striking testimony to this bizarre environment:

And then this beastly way of talking! How was it I never really felt revolted by it, never flared up when Hitler—as he did almost all the time in the last few years—spoke of “annihilation” or “extermination.” Certainly those who would charge me with opportunism or cowardice are being too simplistic. The terrible thing, the thing that disturbs me much more, is that I did not really notice this vocabulary, that it never upset me ... At the time of August 1939, when Hitler had already decided to attack Poland, he stood on the terrace of his house at Obersalzberg and commented that this time Germany would have to plunge into the abyss with him if she did not win the war. This time a great deal of blood would be spilled, he added. How odd that none of us was shocked by this remark, that we felt ourselves somehow exalted by the fatefulness of such words as “war,” “doom,” “abyss.” In any case, I distinctly recall that when Hitler made this remark I did not think of the endless misfortunes it meant, but of the grandeur of the historical hour.

Arendt was acutely sensitive to the power of this totalitarian rhetoric or “style,” as she called it. Prophetic confidence, she claims, is profoundly attractive to all those in “society” who either think in a similar way or who prefer dogma to the normal “chaos of opinions” (305).<sup>4</sup> Leader and masses share another feature as well: they, and indeed all ranks of the movement, take refuge in cynicism. The leader is cynical because he is consciously engaged in a “game of cheating,” seeking to disorient

with his lies all those who might oppose him.<sup>5</sup> As for the masses, they are by turns gullible and cynical. Experience predisposes them to believe everything and nothing; they assume that everything is possible and that nothing is true (382). Masses are unfazed by sharp reversals of policy—for instance the Soviet-German pact—because they deem such turnabouts as proof of the leader's tactical genius, something they have known all along. Falsehoods are simply more evidence of the leader's brilliant objectives which, “planned for centuries to come,” are removed from the test of immediate experience (383).

#### IV

We have seen repeatedly that the masses intrude into every level of Arendt's analysis. They form the bulk of the movement. Totalitarian leaders rise from the mob but incarnate the masses. The masses even figure prominently in Arendt's discussion of the concentration and death camps. There she argues that the camps provide the guards and administrators with vivid insight into what is possible under totalitarian conditions, a hell on earth that previous generations could only imagine. To such people “(and they are more numerous in any large city than we like to admit) the totalitarian hell proves only that the power of man is greater than they ever dared to think, and that man can realize hellish fantasies without making the sky fall or the earth open” (446). True, Arendt does not mention the masses specifically in these comments. But that they are the target of her warnings is plain, for she goes on to say that the masses of the modern era are distinguished by their loss of faith in a Last Judgment. “Unable as yet to live without fear and hope, these masses are attracted by every effort which seems to promise a man-made fabrication of the Paradise they had longer for and of the Hell they had feared” (446). Echoing a previous refrain, she says they are the product of a “period of political disintegration” which “suddenly and unexpectedly made hundreds of thousands of human beings homeless, stateless, outlawed and unwanted, while millions of human beings were made economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment” (447). The “totalitarian attempt to make men superfluous reflects the experience of modern masses of their superfluity on an overcrowded earth” (457).

In the first edition of *Origins*, Arendt leaves this last characterization in obscurity. The second 1958 edition clarifies it with the inclusion of a new chapter on “Ideology and Terror.” Discussing the “basic experience” that both provided the conditions of totalitarianism and also pervaded its machinery, Arendt drew a contrast between tyranny and totalitarianism. The vital experience that underpins tyranny, and on which it thrives, is *political* isolation and impotence; humans are unable to act in common to influence the commonweal or to engage in political action at all. Even so, domestic and family life, the sphere

of work, and the life of the mind remain largely intact, spaces of apolitical freedom that the tyrant leaves alone so long as his subjects remain quiescent. Totalitarianism is far more radical than tyranny and the basic experience that underpins it is also different. Like tyranny, it destroys the public realm and in such wise isolates people politically. But it does far more. “We know that the iron band of total terror leaves no space for such private life and that the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys men's capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action” (474). Corresponding to terror and ideology is “loneliness in the sphere of *social* intercourse” (474, my emphasis). Or, as she puts it, totalitarian domination is a new form of government which “bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of men” (475). She continues:

Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicity, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and supefluosness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to be belong to the world at all (475).

In turn, loneliness means that people lose a sense of reality, something that depends upon our interactions with others that can confirm the accuracy of our sense perceptions and even our identity as unique individuals sharing the world with others. Solitude is not the same as loneliness, for one can be by oneself—the condition for thinking—yet still be able to evoke in thought a dialogue with others as well as with oneself. Loneliness, in distinction to solitude, is a feeling of abandonment, of an absence of companionship, of being deserted by others even while one is in their presence. Logical reasoning is the complement to loneliness because the lonely person, bereft of the reality that comes from human relationships, is able to fall back on the one thing that makes any sense: a deductive process that requires only a single mind to do it, “and always arrives at the worst possible conclusions” (477).

What are we to make of Arendt's overall discussion of the masses? We should begin by noting that the “masses” are by no means identical to “mass society.” In her lexicon, “mass society” refers to a society of consumption in which entertainment—a mode of bodily relaxation that forms part of the “metabolism of man with nature”—has become central to the idea and practice of leisure. Strictly speaking “mass culture” is a misnomer. Culture proper refers to durable things such as art works whose

quality is to arrest and to move us. In contrast, the entertainment industry offers a profusion of evanescent things whose only purpose is to stimulate our appetite for distraction and ephemeral pleasure. Mass society devours its products—movies, bowdlerized books, etc.—in much the same way as it devours Coke or pizza. The standard by which it judges commodities is novelty, freshness, and “cool” (as we would say today). And because mass society is obsessively consumer-oriented, it is unable to take care of the world; its “central attitude toward all objects...spells ruin to everything it touches” (Arendt 1994c, 211).<sup>6</sup> “Masses” are something quite different, neither synonymous with modern society in general nor designating the lower middle class. They are, as we saw above, the product of collective misfortune: economic and political catastrophe or deliberate state coercion. It is Europe, rather than the United States, that has produced masses in abundance.<sup>7</sup> That much is clear. Alas, other aspects of her account of the masses are not. One anomaly and one equivocation deserve special mention.

The anomaly is this. When Arendt discusses the Nazi *movement* and the *regime*, the footnotes bulge with sources and quotations that come straight from the actors’ mouths, be they protagonists, critics or witnesses. She draws on a considerable fund of primary literature in which people are allowed to speak for themselves. Hitler’s words are quoted. So are those of many in the totalitarian elite, notably Goebbels and Himmler, or pre-totalitarians like Ernst Röhm. Survivors such as David Rousset, Eugen Kogon, and Bruno Bettelheim are frequently cited, as is testimony from the Nuremberg Trials. On the other hand, Arendt’s verdict on the masses is as damning as it is unsubstantiated. She gives no empirical evidence for her strident claims about the masses’ “mentality” but relies instead on scholars who wrote before the Nazi period—such as Gustave Le Bon—or biographers of Hitler such as Konrad Heiden. Pertinent materials that she might have used—interviews, surveys, observations from the street—are entirely absent from her account.

And here is the equivocation. Typically, Arendt describes the masses as an atomized stratum of “completely isolated” people, “without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances” (323).<sup>8</sup> Yet in other contexts masses make their appearance in Arendt’s narrative as “respectable philistines” (33), “first and foremost job holders and good family men” (338; compare Arendt 1994b, 128). The “characteristic personality” of the mass man, she says, was “not a bohemian like Goebbels, or a sex criminal like Streicher or a crackpot like Rosenberg, or a fanatic like Hitler, or an adventurer like Göring.” The mass man’s epitome was Heinrich Himmler. At least it was Himmler who most shrewdly appreciated that the legions of killers he needed to organize wholesale extermination were people whose first priority was respectability and private interest. As Arendt remarked in one of the most acerbic passages of *Origins*:

The philistine is the bourgeois isolated from his own class, the atomized individual who is produced by the breakdown of the bourgeois class itself. *The mass man whom Himmler organized* for the greatest crimes ever committed in history bore the features of the philistine rather than of the mob man, and was the bourgeois who in the midst of the ruins of his world worried about nothing so much as his private security, was ready to sacrifice everything—belief, honor, dignity—on the slightest provocation. Nothing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives (338; my emphasis).<sup>9</sup>

How can it be that the mass man whom Arendt depicted as friendless and without family attachments is *also* the bourgeois philistine for whom family and property are the supreme values?<sup>10</sup> In the first case, mass man has lost all social moorings, in the second, only his class position. The confusion is deepened when Arendt writes about the graduated distinctions among party members and notes that “the ordinary member of the Nazi or Bolshevik movement still belongs, in many respects, to the surrounding world: his professional and social relationships are not yet absolutely determined by his party membership, although he may realize....that in case of conflict between his party allegiance and his private life, the former is supposed to be decisive” (367). Presumably these party members are the masses that the movement has organized. But the very fact that a “conflict” might arise between professional and social relationships on the one hand, and party allegiance on the other, presupposes modes of normal life which hitherto, or at least in other contexts, Arendt denied. Margaret Canovan (1992, 54), who notes this ambiguity, believes that Arendt was not offering one account of totalitarianism’s base but two, only one of which figures the masses. But Arendt uses the term “masses” in both contexts. And the theoretical problem of doing so is obvious. Unlike terms such as status group or class which are relational by definition—the proletariat, for instance, implies the bourgeoisie—“mass” is a homogenizing device, particularly when Arendt predicates it on the dissolution of classes. (If masses existed alongside classes one would at least have, however flimsy, an analytical distinction to work with.) Paths to mass-hood may be plural without contradiction because, for Arendt, it is the terminus that produces the mass. But the idea of a differentiated mass is incoherent.<sup>11</sup> Heterogeneity suggests stratification; it implies classes and sectors of classes. “Masses” is simply not a concept designed to handle plural strata, especially those which appear to be antithetical: the conformist mass man who puts family and property above all other interests on the one hand, and the fanatic, isolated and atomized individual on the other.

Why then did Arendt encompass both types of people under this one rubric? She did so, I conjecture, because she believed that popular backing for National Socialism (let us stick to the

German case) could not be plausibly explained by reducing it to class. She was right. But rather than argue that Nazi totalitarianism was built upon the dissolution of classes, it would have been more accurate to say that support for National Socialism *cut across* class lines. To be sure, Arendt's position was different from that of Theodor Geiger, Sigmund Neumann, Harold Lasswell, Joachim Fest and Karl Dietrich Bracher who argued that "fascism" was overwhelmingly a petty bourgeois movement. Masses embrace more than the petty bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, however, her mass reductionism is just as problematic as the class reductionism she rejected. Consider the following statement:

For masses, in contrast to classes, want victory and success as such, in their most abstract form; they are not bound together by those special collective interests which they feel to be essential to their survival as a group and which they therefore may assert even in the face of overwhelming odds. More important to them than the cause that may be victorious, or the particular enterprise that may be a success, is the victory of no matter what cause, and success in no matter what enterprise (351).

That portrait smacks of caricature, the triumph of a certain kind of philosophy over history. The reality was far more complex. Richard Hamilton shows that NSDAP electoral support varied markedly by religious confession (for instance, in villages and small towns, Protestants were markedly attached to National Socialism, while Catholics were mostly averse to it). Equally, his research into voting records of fourteen of Germany's largest cities found that support for Hitler was strongly correlated with neighborhood prosperity:

In Hamburg, for example, where the party gained one-third of the vote in [the Reichstag election of] July 1932, the strongest support came from the three best-off districts, the percentages ranging from 41 to 48. The metropolitan area's most affluent suburban community gave the National Socialists 54 percent. With corrections, adjusting for the presence of Jews, Catholics, and working class minorities, the levels for the remaining upper- and middle-class voters would run well above those figures (Hamilton 1996, p. 113).<sup>12</sup>

With a somewhat different emphasis, Michael Mann (2004, 139–206) comes to broadly similar conclusions. "Fascism" certainly mobilized people from all classes. But not only were its militants a highly integrated group from backgrounds that were, in the main, anything but marginal, atomized or dysfunctional. Its supporters evinced a distinctive economic sectoral bias. National Socialism disproportionately attracted public sector workers and professionals such as lawyers, teachers, civil servants, doctors and the police—people, that is, occupationally remote from the heartland of class conflict in urban heavy industry or manufacture. Further, the perpetrators of ethnic

cleansing were far from being the frightened job-holders of Arendt's description. Collecting the biggest sample ever assembled of Nazi war criminals convicted with murderous cleansing—1,581 of them in all—Mann (2005, 212–239) reveals that individuals from border regions or "lost territories" are significantly overrepresented: notably, Alsatian Germans and ethnic Germans from Poland and other eastern areas. Many had been homeless or ended up in refugee camps (a fact that is at least consistent with Arendt's argument about the masses). They were embittered and ideological. From this circumstance Mann infers that anti-Semitism was part of a broader ethnic imperial revisionism by people who considered themselves to be the real victims. And like Nazis in general, perpetrator biographies show a sectoral bias, concentrating in professional, public, state-funded occupations. Perpetrators typically had a Nazi career. They were not "ordinary men" or ordinary bourgeois job holders but people who since the First World War had taken an active part in street-fighting, police duties, and Germany's own euthanasia program. Many were "old Nazis", having joined the party early. Before that, 30 percent had been members of the paramilitary *Freikorps*.

I hear a sigh of irritation from the reader. Is it fair to hold Arendt up to modern historical scholarship, judging her by a standard that was impossible in her own day? The problem with that complaint is that Arendt did, in fact, have a source at her disposal—cited in the bibliography of the first and third editions of *Origins*—which pointed her in a markedly different direction to the one she took on the "masses": Theodore Abel's *Why Hitler Came Into Power* (Abel 1986). Abel let NSDAP supporters speak for themselves, something Arendt always thought important. His 600 Nazi life histories of workers, farmers, soldiers, youth, "anti-Semites" and others show a range of motives for supporting National Socialism, which, in their very humanity, belie the notion of "the masses." The result is a social portrait in which confession, geography, and economic sector all have their place. Thomas Childers, himself a beneficiary of Abel's work, says of *Why Hitler Came into Power*. "I know no more powerful or revealing grassroots testimony in the vast literature on the NSDAP" (*ibid*, p. xix). Arendt seems to have ignored it.

## V

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* is an extraordinary text. The argument brims with paradoxes that continually upend the reader's expectations. The overall effect is disconcerting. It is the work of a great thinker, certainly, but also a great artist from whose creative palette springs a tableau of suffering and folly. Still, while Arendt was a fervent critic of cliché she was not entirely immune from caricature. Her theory of the masses was poetic and rich in human pathos. It was also tendentious,

presumptive, and historically wrong. Philosophers may wish to ignore that fact. The sociologist must insist on it.

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### Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all page references that follow refer to the second enlarged edition (1958) of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

2. In “Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” (1958), Arendt returns to this theme remarking that “the first stage in the succession struggle”, following Stalin’s death, was “a competition for popularity” among Zhukov, Khrushchev, Malenkov and, most unlikely of all, Beria, *Origins* (1958 edn.), pp. 483–4.

3. See also the pertinent remarks in Canovan, 2004.

4. She points out that Stalin’s 1930 forecast to the CP Central Committee about “dying classes” was simultaneously a death sentence. Once the “dying classes” were killed, the oracle was vindicated (349–50); “...the method of infallible prediction, more than any other totalitarian propaganda device, betrays its ultimate goal of world conquest, since only in a world completely under his control could the totalitarian ruler possibly realize all his lies and make true all his prophecies” (350).

5. One might ask how the Leader’s cynicism is consistent with his fanaticism. Reconciliation is easy, says Arendt. In everything that touches particulars, the Leader has no firm commitment; policies and tactics are merely tools to fabricate the future, as disposable as those who employ them. Dogmatic rigidity lies elsewhere: in the determination of totalitarian leaders “to make their predictions come true,” a concern “which overrules all utilitarian considerations” (349, 413); and in the “faith in human omnipotence, the conviction that everything can be done through organization” which leads them to the ultimate test of omnipotence: the death camps, the “laboratories in the experiment of total domination” (436).

6. Arendt distinguishes “mass society” from “society”—both are terms of opprobrium. For her analysis of the different ways in which “society” and “mass society” treat culture, see: Arendt 1990, pp. 200–205.

7. “America, the classical land of equality of condition and of general education with all its shortcomings, knows less of the modern psychology of masses than perhaps any other country in the world”, p. 316.

8. Cf. Arendt 1994a, p. 406, on “mass men who lack all communal relationships.”

9. What “we have called the ‘bourgeois’ is the modern man of the masses, not in his exalted moments of collective excitement, but in the security (today one should say the insecurity of his own private domain” (Arendt 1994b, p. 130).

10. A similar tension is evident when Arendt describes the masses as worldless in some contexts and utilitarian minded in others. Contrast her characterization of the masses as inclining

towards “the most abstract notions as guides for life, and the general contempt for even the most obvious rules of common sense” (316) with her reference to “the utilitarian common sense of the masses” (459).

11. I am not saying, of course, that Arendt’s treatment of the masses means that she is blind to other collectivities. As Margaret Canovan (Canovan 2002) points out, Arendt distinguished among a number of such categories: the tribe, the mob, the mass, and the people. I would also mention the intellectuals, a group that Arendt discusses typically with disdain. For Arendt “the people” are to the “masses” what the “hommes de lettres” are to the “intelligentsia/intellectuals,” the first term in each case being an object of praise, the second of obloquy. See Arendt 1990, p. 122.

12. However, this same election shows that by this time the NSDAP was winning around 40% of its votes from workers, 30% of all votes cast. (In 1932 about half of German workers were voting Communist or for the SDP.) See Mann 2004, p. 190.

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