Am Soc (2014) 45:84–102
DOI 10.1007/s12108-014-9202-4

Totalitarianism in America? Robert Nisbet on the "Wilson War State" and Beyond

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Published online: 27 February 2014
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Abstract This article examines Robert Nisbet's claim that the first totalitarian experiment of the twentieth century occurred not in the Soviet Union or in Nazi Germany, but in the United States during the First World War. Totalitarianism appeared in the form of mass propaganda, surveillance and repression. It was accompanied by a messianic desire of Woodrow Wilson and his team to transform America into a "national community." By 1920, American totalitarianism was effectively at an end but, claimed Nisbet, it left a legacy of centralization that, over successive Democratic and Republican administrations, has stripped the Republic's citizens of social authority and independence; the political trumped the social. Nisbet's depiction of American totalitarianism is contrasted with Hannah Arendt's argument that totalitarianism, thus far in history, is restricted to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Keywords Hannah Arendt · Robert Nisbet · The social and the political · Totalitarianism · The United States · Woodrow Wilson

Introduction

Commentaries on totalitarianism stand like sturdy bookends in the work of Robert Nisbet. His first academic article—"Rousseau and Totalitarianism" (1943)—appeared in the same year that Nisbet prepared for military service in the Pacific theatre.[1] Among his last essays, composed almost 50 years later, was an appraisal of Hannah Arendt's classic study of Bolshevism and National Socialism.[2] Nisbet recalled:

[1]Nisbet 1986a: 26.

[2]"Arendt and Totalitarianism" (1992) was the penultimate article published during Nisbet's lifetime. In his valedictory—"Still Questing" (1993)—Nisbet returned to "the national community," the key totalitarian idea he descried in Woodrow Wilson and his successors. It "should be the prime purpose" of conservatives to "oppose it at every turn."

Research on the contrast between Nisbet and Arendt was facilitated by a Hong Kong Research Grants Council grant; CB11A2: "Hannah Arendt's Appraisal of Sociology."

This article has benefited from Joshua Derman's comments and suggestions.

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> "Totalitarianism" was not a ready concept in the minds of American political scientists and historians during the first three decades of totalitarianism's history in Europe. We were prone whenever some nondemocratic state arose with a clearly identifiable leader to give it the label of "dictatorship" or "tyranny" or "despotism," thus tending to interpret it as a recidivism, a lamentable throwback to the Louis XIVs and Cromwells of Western history. That in fact the new total states in the twentieth century were as modern as anything else in the century didn't often occur to us in the 1930s when we considered the matter (Nisbet 1992: 85).

Nisbet's linkage of Rousseau to totalitarianism shocked his academic American contemporaries. Surely, the great Genevan was the archenemy of tyrants, a lofty voice on behalf of all those desirous to break free from the chains of oppressive convention, in short, a crusader for freedom? So in a sense he was, Nisbet (1943: 102) agreed, but freedom is available in a totalitarian version. Freedom, to Rousseau, was conceived not as "immunity from the control of the state" but as "withdrawal from the oppressions and corruptions of society." Once liberated from society, isolated from it, the free individual was optimally placed to sublimate his will, now equal and virtuous, in the political community (1943: 98–9).[3] This is the freedom of the drone. More offensive still to Nisbet's academic cohort was the argument that Rousseau's totalitarian dispensation applied to the Soviet Union as well as to Germany. While we no longer blink at the contention that Russian Communist and German National Socialist regimes—polar types in their own self-image and in that of their supporters—displayed many structural features in common, such a view was "heretical" when Nisbet advanced it in the forties, prompting "at least a dozen letters, all sharply, even bitterly, critical."[4]

Many American sociologists of Nisbet's time wrote plentifully about fascism, National Socialism, and Russian Communism; authors such as Talcott Parsons, David Riesman, Hans Gerth, Daniel Bell, Barrington Moore, Everett Hughes, Alex Inkeles, spring saliently to mind. None wrote more substantively and with greater continuity than Nisbet about *totalitarianism*. It was a term he specifically adopted early in his career, a concept he developed over a lifetime of academic writing, a reality he illuminated from several angles. Nisbet advanced at least two bold claims about totalitarianism. He argued (a) that the first totalitarian experiment of the twentieth century took place in the United States, not Russia or Germany, and that totalitarianism thus emerged first under liberal, rather than Communist or National Socialist auspices; and (b) that Franklin D. Roosevelt was a dupe to Stalin because the American president

[3] "True freedom consists in the willing subordination of the individual to the whole of the state…Because the individual is himself a member of the larger association, despotism is impossible. By accepting the power of the State one is but participating in the General Will," Nisbet 2010 [1953]): 140. Nisbet incorporated unchanged the middle section of "Rousseau and Totalitarianism" into chapter 6 of *The Quest for Community* (2010 [1953]): 130–140.

[4] When Nisbet (1990b [1968]) reprised this essay in *Tradition and Revolt* the opening and closing discussions of Russia and Germany were excised. He explains the truncation in 1990a (1968): 8–9.

lacked a cogent concept of totalitarianism and hence failed to grasp that Stalin was a bona fide totalitarian leader.[5]

I propose to consider claim (a) in some detail, passing over claim (b) because it is hard to evaluate convincingly. The mind of FDR was his, not ours. We can glean it only through documents that allow different interpretations of his beliefs, motives and actions. But let us at least note the audacity of Nisbet's interpretation. That Roosevelt was outmaneuvered at the Yalta conference or that Yalta amounted to a betrayal of Central Europe is a commonplace. Truly original, however, is the claim that Stalin was able to play Roosevelt because the American president lacked *an idea*, the idea of totalitarianism that would yoke Stalin to Hitler, that would display the common coordinates of Bolshevism and National Socialism, and that would show why befriending Stalin was absurd when it was not tantamount to craven appeasement. While Churchill understood that if Hitler were to be defeated Britain must learn to hold its nose, that an alliance with Stalin was morally compromised but necessary and temporary, Roosevelt saw something quiet different: a Russia that, fitfully and against all odds, was pursuing something recognizably American: "equality, social justice, and social democracy" (Nisbet 1988: 12). If social life in Russia was harsh it was, even without the war, because the country was experiencing growing pains. If Stalin was brutal and crude, what could one expect in such primitive circumstances? The point was that Russia, through Stalin, could be influenced for the better. And Roosevelt was the man to do it.

Missing, too, from Roosevelt's mind, Nisbet alleged, was the associated contrast between totalitarianism and democracy. In its stead was another distinction that FDR found more compelling: between imperialism and democracy. Empire was the greatest evil, evident in Japan's maniacal ambitions, empire the root cause of Europe's malaise for which Americans were paying with blood and treasure. This was also the opinion of General Patrick Hurley from whom Roosevelt had commissioned a report on imperialism. The implication is almost syllogistic: imperialism is evil; Britain is an imperial country; ergo Britain is—well, not evil, but at least culpable, mired in an imperial past, still in possession of India and other far flung colonies. Nisbet (2003 [1988]: 73) telegraphs:

> Armageddon would be, in short, between the modern United States and the 'archaic' and 'reactionary' imperialism of states like democratic Great Britain, not between democracies and totalitarianisms—the latter concept seemingly unknown to Roosevelt and Hurley. However odious in short-run situations the Soviets might be, as in Poland, the Balkans, and the Baltics, and however cruelly destructive of all parliamentary, representative states which they subjugated and occupied, the Soviets yet had to be recognized as vastly ahead in the line of progress of the imperialist czarist regime they had vanquished and ahead, too, in any proper philosophy of world history, of the Great Britains and the Frances of Europe.

[5] Arguably he offered a third bold interpretation (Nisbet 1986g [1983]): that what we moderns call totalitarian had been anticipated by eighteenth and nineteenth century conservative thinkers, Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville in particular. This requires considering Tocqueville as a conservative rather than as a liberal thinker. In fact, he leaned both ways, as Nisbet himself recognized. The impact of Tocqueville on Nisbet's thought is hard to overestimate. The basic idea of *Quest for Community* (that where local communities—authorities intermediate between individual and state—are demolished, an ersatz, centralized and despotic "social machine" will replace it) is de Tocqueville's (2008 [1856]: 77).

The argument that America itself was totalitarian—claim (a)—is easier to assess. One way is to check the facts that Nisbet adduces. The other way is to suggest that even if the facts are truly stated they still fall short of a credibly totalitarian scenario. I pursue the latter line of argument, believing it to be the stronger objection to Nisbet's claim. This chapter also contrasts his sociological account of totalitarianism with its premier political theorist, Hannah Arendt. Nisbet had met Arendt and admired her. He even, in places, emulates her. Yet, as we shall see, Arendt's analysis was not only more original than Nisbet's, it was more coherent too.

America and the Legacy of 1917

"To this day," Nisbet (1986g [1983]: 192) wrote, "few Americans have any genuine awareness of the sheer totalitarianism of the American war venture in 1917–18". The lapse is understandable. It was not a revolutionary gang, but acts of Congress, that transformed "laissez-faire, entrepreneurial America into a total state for the duration" of the war. To be sure, the state's grip loosened once the conflict ended.[6] But how could totalitarianism happen at all in the land of the free?

The Great War was the crucible of modern America. Before 1914, Nisbet (2003 [1988]: 2) recounted, America was little more than a "miscellany of cultures" threaded loosely by the Federal government. The latter's reach was superficial. The minds of most Americans were forged in villages and small towns. The radio, let alone television, had still to be invented. Granted, the outcome of the Civil War had proved decisively that the Union was a sovereign state. But for the most part it was the postal service, and then federal income tax (approved by constitutional amendment in 1913), that gave Americans a sense of living in the same country. Loyalty was above all to locality, to the state in which one was born and raised; a national culture was hard to identify.[7] The Founding Fathers were long dead but they had bequeathed a living testament of multiple powers. It would not survive America's entry into the European conflagration. A totalitarian night fell on the country preceding those that would soon afflict Russia and later Germany. No one doubts the peculiar brutality of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. But America shared with them some core features.

At the Union's pinnacle was a charismatic leader in the unlikely form of a Princeton professor: Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's Law—that "What America Touches She Makes Holy"—was an enlargement and, in foreign policy, a diffusion of American exceptionalism, the Puritan belief that America was the city on a hill, vouchsafed to be virtuous. But no president before Wilson took America's calling to such lengths, first, by transforming national interest into national morality and then by projecting the latter on to the big screen that was the world.

> Virtually everything he touched became instantly transformed into an Armageddon. As president of Princeton, as governor for 2 years of New Jersey, and finally as president of the United States, Wilson burned and burned as a moralist, seeing crises where others saw only problems, and endowing even his dispatch of American troops into Mexico, in retaliation for Mexican bandit crossings of the

[6] Nisbet 2003 (1988): 46; also 57–8.

[7] Nisbet 2003 (1988): 2.

border, with a mighty purpose that would benefit all mankind (Nisbet 2003 [1988]: 31).

When the war began, Wilson emphatically opposed American involvement in it; he reaffirmed that refusal in his second bid for president in 1916. But the certitude that had fixed his earlier neutrality was then superseded by an equal resolution to take up arms. A fully mobilized war state was the result. It consisted of several parts. The first was a tsunami of propaganda of a type never previously seen in America. Unleashed by the journalist-turned-head of war information, George Creel, it cascaded across America, submerging islands of dissent wherever they were located. What did a European war have to do with the farmer in Oklahoma or the abattoir worker in Chicago? The very question showed a dismaying lack of confidence in America's redemptive mission. Patriotic education was the answer. It was provided by the Four Minute Men, citizens charged to deliver, without prior warning to unions, lodges, schools, clubs and other associations, brief homilies on the government's war aims and the ways that all honest people should strive to discharge them. Equally the cold eye of suspicion fell on Americans with German names—many would soon be anglicized—and the legacies of German civilization: as late as 1926, Nisbet (2003 [1988]: 47) recalled, music books composed by German authors were not available in his school, having been withdrawn a decade earlier.

Conjoined with propaganda was fear and brute repression. It took multiple forms: the Palmer Raids; the Sedition and Espionage acts of Congress under whose provisions the labor leader, Eugene Debs, a socialist opponent of the war, was sentenced to a 10 year prison term; and a network of informers, in the neighborhood and at work, throwing victims to the government. Perverse incentives existed for doing so. A more intrusive state was, in many respects, a worker-friendlier one providing for works' councils, favorable arbitration, and amounts of cash in hand rarely seen before.

Propaganda, surveillance, repression: these are the pivotal elements of American totalitarianism. They were always, Nisbet (2003 [1988]) allowed, a "mixture of parts," one "humanitarian" the other vicious. And the ideology that guided the whole was religiously inspired: a kind of malignant miracle by means of which America's providential mission gave license for war. Such totalitarianism had stopped by 1920, leaving a "divided legacy": on the one hand a "police-state atmosphere" of informers and intolerance; on the other, "a centralized, planned economy that seemed to work and work well, at least with the stimulus of the Great War…On the whole it was [this second legacy] that survived," while brute repression "eroded away under the heady influence of the 1920s and then the chilling effects of the Great Depression" (Nisbet 2003 [1988]: 49). And yet America was never the same again. The national state continued to accrete ever more functions and powers. Social planning became the intellectuals' idée fixe, the path of progress. Wars—big, small, proxy, hot and cold—were after 1917 never far away. (He predicted on the basis of Parkinson's Law, that once the Soviet threat had lifted, its place would rapidly be filled by other military justifications to keep the Pentagon busy and amply supplied.[8]) Even when physically unfought, warfare suffused the political atmosphere with allusion and metaphor; every problem became an enemy to defeat. Moreover, totalitarian ideas lingered. By the 1920s America had formed not just a national state but the image of a "national community."[9]

[8] Nisbet 2003 [1988]: 29.

[9] Nisbet cites his source as Schambra (1983).

Given Nisbet's topic it is unlikely that this phrase—mimicking the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*—is used fortuitously. It prefaces his account of the New Deal and the remarkable ambitions that FDR, a Wilson protégé, entertained in transforming American society. I return to the concept in the next section.

Readers will note from the dates of the previous citations that Nisbet's *specific* argument about totalitarianism in America was a late development in his thought. *The Quest for Community* (1953) has not a word about American "totalitarianism," though certain passages, to which I refer below, hint as such an association. I suspect that the book's provenance was just too close to the defeat of a bona fide totalitarian power to make comfortable—or plausible!—a totalitarian charge against the United States. By the nineteen eighties, in contrast, Nisbet and his contemporaries were far enough away from National Socialism and Bolshevism—the Soviet Union remained a brutal state but was no longer a totalitarian one—for historical perspective to be possible and parallels to be drawn. Even then, however, Nisbet's depiction of the United States is somewhat hedged.

In "1984 and the Conservative Imagination," he says that wartime America was "the first twentieth-century preview" of totalitarianism. The word "preview" is ambiguous. To preview a movie is certainly to see the movie in full but it is to see it in advance of the mass audience whose attendance will make it a success or a failure. More generally, a preview suggests something akin to a foreshadowing, a foretaste, a premonition as distinct from an actuality.[10] As if to clear up that wording, Nisbet (1986g [1983]): 192 comes back on the same page to assert that, even now, "few Americans have any genuine awareness of the sheer totalitarianism of the American war-venture in 1917–1918." That seems to settle matters, unless one distinguishes between the war venture—mobilization—from the wider political and social system within which it occurred. That would be no more than a quibble until we read in *The Present Age* that "totalitarianism had its origin in our century in the events of 1917 when the Bolsheviks, under Lenin's generalship, set up the first totalitarian state," a statement that contradicts the previous contention that America was the totalitarian pioneer.[11] Moreover, to say that America was "the first twentieth-century preview" of totalitarianism is not to say that it was the first totalitarian state. That prize for infamy belongs to France during the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution.[12] Be that as it may, Nisbet is emphatic that America was, under some description, a totalitarian power. This raises two questions: how did America exit totalitarianism? And what imprint, if any, did this phase of totalitarianism leave on the country?

To the first question, Nisbet is enigmatic, but then all totalitarian theorists are. Transition to, or reversion to, constitutional pluralism is the famous weakness of totalitarian theory. Nisbet (2003 [1988]: 43) acknowledges that Wilson "in diametrical opposition to the Robespierres and Lenins, demobilized completely the militarized

[10] Tocqueville's vision of democratic despotism is also considered by Nisbet (1986g: 196) to be a "preview" suggesting that a preview is a kind of prediction or, more accurately (as in Tocqueville and Orwell's prognostications), a scenario.

[11] Nisbet 1988: 63. The sentence is cloudy in another way as well; it is open to two interpretations. The first is that totalitarianism began in the twentieth century, in which case, contrary to an assertion referenced in note 12 below, the Jacobin government was not totalitarian. The second reading is that Bolshevism was the first totalitarian state of the twentieth century, though not in history.

[12] Nisbet 2003 (1988): 55.

society he had built only a couple of years earlier." But if Wilson's regime really was totalitarian, a term embracing the rule of Stalin and Hitler, how was peaceful exit possible? A transition to relative normalcy supposes that the American polity and society were never fully totalitarian to begin with.

To the second question, regarding the historical impact of totalitarianism on American life, Nisbet is more forthcoming. I turn next to his answer.

"Democratic Absolutism": Totalitarianism's Heir

By the time that Nisbet wrote about totalitarianism in America, an explanatory door beckoned on whose portal he halted. Many years before, the door had been opened and its threshold crossed by the political historian Clinton Rossiter. In *Constitutional Dictatorship*, Rossiter (2007 [1948]) rehearsed many infringements on liberty during the First and Second World Wars that Nisbet also describes.[13] But Rossiter's wider point was that *all of the major democracies*—including France and Britain—had resorted to extraordinary powers during times of national emergency: war, rebellion and economic depression. Martial law and, its analogue, a state of siege, extend military government to the civilian population. "Constitutional dictatorship" is just the kind of oxymoron that Nisbet cherished. Why did he, then, insist on a totalitarian designation of America instead of adopting Rossiter's nomenclature or another like it?

Rossiter's terminology was doubtless problematic for Nisbet because it suggested that statist inroads were temporary, a fleeting response to emergency, later corrected as liberal democratic principles and structures resumed their peacetime strength. For Nisbet, however, this kind of analysis radically underplayed the *social* destruction to which the Wilson period attested and which continues apace to this day, an ongoing centralization validated by the ideology of equalitarianism. Modern America is not totalitarian but the totalitarian legacy is palpable; Nisbet described it as the "new despotism" (2000 [1975]: 175) or "democratic absolutism" (2003 [1988]: 62). Such terms enabled him to stress the continuit*y* of wartime totalitarianism and the period that followed. The continuity was historical and structural.

Historically, the Great War planted "the durable seeds" of powers that were not just reactivated by the American government during the New Deal and the war against Japan and Germany. These seeds also sprouted into hardy perennials: "From Wilson through FDR, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Reagan we have seen America develop from its state of innocence in 1914 down to the highly sophisticated power complex than marks America today" (Nisbet 2003 [1988]: 43). As early as *Quest for Community*, and while not naming the United States as such, Nisbet was explicit that

> There is a kind of state that seeks to extend its administrative powers and functions into all realms of society, always seeking a higher degree of centralization in the conduct of its operations, always tending toward a wider measure of politicization of social, economic, and cultural life. It does this not in the name of power but of freedom—freedom from want, insecurity, and minority tyranny…

[13] Carl Schmitt's (1994 [1921]) eclectic discussion of "commissioned dictatorships" influenced, though is inferior to, Rossiter's nuanced account.

> Such a state may well call itself democratic and humanitarian.[14] All contemporary totalitarian states so refer to themselves. Such a state may found itself upon the highest principle of virtue, even as did the Republic of Plato. There can be such a thing as democratic totalitarianism even as there can be, as we have learned in disillusion, socialist totalitarianism (Nisbet 2010 [1953]: 261).

Thirty-five years later, Nisbet (2003 [1988]: 57–58) adapted the formula:

> There are respects … in which the contemporary democratic state is like the totalitarian states of this century: in the number and scope of political laws governing the most intimate recesses of our lives, in the sheer comprehensiveness of political identity, role, law, and power in each state. But there is one large and sufficing difference between even the most bureaucratized and paternalistic of democracies and the totalitarian states we have seen thus far, in Russia and Germany foremost. In the total state there is no pretense of free elections, free political association, and free choice of representatives in political office. Moreover, there is no instance, thus far at least, of a heavily bureaucratized, ordinance-saturated democratic Leviathan ever evolving into the total state…But while democratic absolutism of the kind and extent we are now thoroughly familiar with poses no threat of evolution into a Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, it does not follow that it may not possibly grow almost insensibly, by infinitesimal degrees, in to what is nothing less, for all practical purposes, than legal and administrative tyranny.

We live, Nisbet lamented, in an age as politically obsessed as it is infantilized. We talk incessantly about the "politics" of this, that and the other. Even as we grumble about its meddling encroachment, we expect the federal bureaucracy to nurture us, protect us, distribute entitlements to us, sort-out our social problems. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, most critical ideologies in the West either flatly opposed the modern state or approached it with the greatest suspicion.[15] Marxists condemned it as the coordinating brain, and pounding fist, of the bourgeoisie; following a post-revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat—a short, emergency period of rule mandated to expel all remaining capitalist detritus from society—the state would gradually wither away, its parasitical, exploitative functions no longer required in a free and equal society. Conservatives, pessimists by temperament, denounced the modern state as the political avalanche that had swept away or submerged the independent integrity of family, guild, village, and other primary groups, replacing allegiance to these plural bodies with dependence on its own. Anarchists, the hyperactive cousins of conservatives, agreed with them in some measure, demanding the restoration of local communities and descrying in Marxism a control mania and, later, a

[14] The "Wilson War State," Nisbet (2003 [1988]: 49) said later, "was from the beginning a structure of unprecedented mixture of parts." On the one side it was "humanitarian to the core: in high wages approved by the government, improved working conditions, moderation of ethnic tensions in the work place, and a variety of reforms aimed at the working class and the indigent." But on the other side, Wilson's War State was repressive, dispensing "intimidation, and quick, summary justice." This was the side of the Palmer Raids and the Four-Minute men, of informers, in short, "a police-state atmosphere".

[15] Other ideologies, such as Bonapartism and the republicanism of the Third Republic, envisaged a large role for the state but Nisbet does not consider them.

bureaucratic fanaticism that portended catastrophe.[16] Liberals also protested against the state in the name of individual liberty. With the exception of anarchism and, more recently, libertarianism, all those ideologies learned to love what before they had deplored or distrusted. Again, the Great War was the watershed, reinforced later in America by the New Deal. Today, Nisbet declares, the core value of contemporary liberalism is not freedom but equality. Its engine is public administration guided by an ethos of rights that happily bulldozes all settled social and moral arrangements in the name of progress and regulation. Movement conservatism, too, now wishes to capture the state rather than repulse it, all the better to influence the population over which the state rules.

Social science legitimates this development. When "the social" was first the object of studied attention in the early nineteenth century, it stood for the autonomy of family, village, parish, town, voluntary association and class. But the twentieth century "politicization of the social sciences" witnessed a sea change in the intellectual attitude towards social things; their merit was ever more evaluated in terms of "political values and aspirations." So much is this the case, Nisbet argues, that "it would be much more correct if [the social sciences] were called the political sciences." Or, indeed, the sciences of liberalism so as to convey the extent to which sociology and its cluster disciplines supports the "ideology of the provider state." Social problems of every possible type—crime, family breakdown, poverty, and so on—are considered the responsibility of the state, and "any social scientist's conclusion that does not end with an appeal to the national government to take immediate action, properly funded, is purely accidental."[17] So it is that the federal government, over the twentieth century, has assumed elephantine proportions though bereft, alas, of an elephant's grace of movement or its poignant memory of past affections.

It is fundamental to Nisbet's anthropology that people, as social beings, require others to lend meaning to their lives and provide limits for a stable existence. It is not possible for human beings, even in a culture of individualism, to dispense entirely with community. Once they try to do so, or are forced to do so, they are attracted to the ersatz, super Community that is the state. Nisbet refers to it often as "the political state," a pleonasm until one notices that he is describing both a polity and an existential condition. On the one hand, the state politicizes society, steadily expanding the radius of administrative and juridical control; on the other, it is our modern human "state" or condition to accept such politicization as normal. We are today made in a political image, our chief intellectuals are political, our chief causes are political. Rousseau's reshaping has born fruit. When he first wrote about Rousseau in the 1940's, Nisbet had thought of him principally as the totalitarian demiurge of National Socialism and Bolshevism. But soon Nisbet came to a more radical conclusion about this most radical

[16] Nisbet observes "two separate and distinctive manifestations in the nineteenth century" of the "social tradition of Western thought. The first is conservative, the second is radical, but what they have in common is profound belief in the necessity of protection of the social from the political. Whether it is Burke and von Haller among conservatives, or Proudhon and Kropotkin among radicals, there is identical emphasis upon the values of localism, regionalism, voluntary association, decentralization of authority, and also identical fear of the political state, whether monarchical or republican in character," Nisbet 2000 (1975): 225. The anarchist idea of the commune was, for Nisbet, the real origin of the Russian soviets that Lenin's party destroyed. On this, and the debt of Proudhon to Bonald and other French conservatives, see Nisbet 1986a: 26. The affinities between conservatism and anarchism are archly explored by Rebecca West (2003: 181–2).

[17] This paragraph, and the quotes in it, draw on the entry "Social Sciences" in Nisbet 1982: 284–288.

of men. Rousseau's importance lies both in his influence and, even more, his synchrony with one of modernity's deepest trends: the transformation of plural social communities into a monolithic "political" or "national" community.

Totalitarianism is but "a single and corrupt" version of this broader phenomenon.[18] Democratic absolutism is another species. Together, they despoil society either brutally or kindly, through command or through market economies or a mixture of both, liquefying property or simply stealing it, depriving individuals of the close, fundamental allegiances that give them local autonomy. Born of totalitarianism, the "national community" has survived as a fundamental legitimating idea of the American state. It is not just that the term (Nisbet 2003 [1988]: 53, 71) is explicitly invoked and beloved by Democratic governors such as Mario Cuomo of New York. It is also that the idea epitomizes the assumption, increasingly the expectation, that the state should take care of the nation and that the state is itself tantamount to a large family, neighborhood, or community. Such a view is bound to divest actual families, neighborhoods and communities of their independence and integrity. And so while contemporary America is no longer totalitarian, it is the heir of an idea, a tendency, totalitarianism takes to extremes. Like totalitarianism, the democratic Leviathan understands that "freedom and community" can be reshaped through redefinition.[19] Democratic autocracy thrives in the political activism of the Supreme Court, in an intellectual class deeply attracted to power, and willing to serve it at a moment's notice, and in the royal countenance of American presidents; the last development, leavened by imperious amateurism in foreign affairs, Nisbet traced to FDR's administrations though it is now ubiquitous. In the past, American leaders had often to wait several generations before receiving the tribute of posterity. Their regal successors hate to tarry. Presidential libraries—theatres of flashy egomania—are the obligatory monuments of instant immortalization.

Hannah Arendt and Robert Nisbet

In the spring of 1974, Nisbet delivered a conference paper for the New School of Social Research on Arendt's interpretation of the American Revolution.[20] Later that year he wrote from Columbia University[21] to express "the high sense of honor that I felt both in meeting you after all these years of reading and admiring your rich mind and in being the recipient of a commentary by Hannah Arendt." With a trademark flourish, Nisbet signed off: "It is wonderful at long last to be a fellow citizen (in the medieval sense of the word) of yours."[22]

[18] Nisbet 1990a (1968): 9.

[19] "The greater despots of history, which is to say twentieth century history, like Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Mao, and Castro, have turned to both rhetorics—of freedom and community. Here the Rousseauian vision in Western political thought plays a major role," (Nisbet 2003 [1988]: 53).

[20] Published as Nisbet 1977. A companion piece is Nisbet 1986f [1974].

[21] Nisbet occupied the Albert Schweitzer chair of the Humanities. Under its auspices he straddled two departments, history and sociology. When he wrote to Arendt, who abhorred sociology, he did so on department of history notepaper. On the Schweitzer chair and teaching at Columbia, see Nisbet 1986a: 18–19.

[22] The Papers of Hannah Arendt, Library of Congress, Correspondence file, Nisbet to Arendt, letter of October 19, 1974. Arendt replied on November 11th with appreciation inviting Nisbet to join her for "a drink together." The rest of the correspondence, very brief and confined to niceties, indicates that this get together never came to pass.

Discussion of or allusion to Arendt's work by Nisbet was nothing new. As early as *The Quest for Community*, he was citing *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to give traction to his own theory. Considering that *Quest* was completed in 1952, and *Origins* appeared in 1951, Nisbet was quick off the mark. She, in turn, respected him. Nisbet was rare among his generation of sociologists in offering a systematic rebuttal of theories of development and of futurology (Nisbet 1963, 1969, 1986b [1970], 1986c [1971]).[23] This was music to her ears. It is true that many of Nisbet's contemporaries rejected the notion that capitalist and communist societies were converging; also true that, by the 1960's, the theory of industrial society was an increasingly beleaguered outpost assailed by neo-Marxist objections. But such criticisms, coming from the left, were and are ambivalent. While particular experiences of development are open to criticism as "uneven" or "unequal," development as such is among the most tenacious presuppositions of Marxist eschatology. Arrested relations of production burst under the pressure of emergent forces of production. Feudalism is a less developed social system than capitalism. Capitalism is less developed than, and pregnant with, socialism. The bourgeoisie nurtures its own gravedigger, the proletariat. These and other clichés of Marxism suggest that while Lenin's locomotive may not always run to schedule, its path deflected here and there, History's overall destination towards world revolution is unchanged. Liberals, meanwhile, champion history's benign disposition to extend rights from adults to children, animals and the environment as the circle of consideration continues to expand. Similarly, economic growth is a standard measure of material advance.

No one dissected these ideas more assiduously, with greater skepticism, over a longer period, than Robert Nisbet. He unraveled their metaphors showing, with mischievous irony, that development and "growth" were antique ideas, beginning with the Greek *physis*. He lampooned the conceit of forecasters to know the future before it happened. He pondered what it meant to live in a world where social scientists, professedly secular, adopted a curiously Calvinist view of determinism. All this drew warm applause from Arendt.[24] Indeed, to peruse Nisbet's *Prejudices* is to notice immediately how many he shared with her. Like Arendt, he abhorred depth psychology accusing it of legitimating rampant subjectivism—"awareness intoxication," he calls it—and, where applied to the study of history, of demeaning heroes "to the level of clinical patients." Like Arendt, too, he approached the term "human rights" with considerable misgivings; odd, he said, that rights deemed to be so intrinsically human had only recently appeared on the scene of historical consciousness and in so few places. Rights, he countered, were social, not abstractly, human things; they required communities as well as polities, to instantiate, nourish and reproduce them. Otherwise one was talking about "vague, amorphous, and basically meaningless" generalizations about humanity. And in a similar way to Arendt, Nisbet was critical of the politicization of the university—by government and corporate foundations before the students kicked down a rotting door—and convinced that modern intellectuals were among the most fanatical, reckless, self-regarding and power seeking persons of the modern age, competent, usually, within their narrow sphere of expertise, but a menace to all and sundry when lording it over the political sphere in the regalia of "experts".[25]

[23] Nisbet 1980 was published after her death.

[24] See the appreciative remarks in note 19 of "On Violence" (1969), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1969/feb/27/a-special-supplement-reflections-on-violence/

[25] Nisbet 1982: 169, 243, 247, 285. On intellectuals and academics: 31–2, 313–4. On the "political clerisy." Nisbet 1988: 65–74.

But something more than discrete common commitments explains the authors' attraction to one another. Underpinning it is a peculiar conservative style of thought. A style of thought is different from a policy; the former is a general, durable way of understanding the world, the latter is an expedient way of shaping it. And for both Arendt and Nisbet much of the policy of established "conservative" parties was anathema. Neither author was sympathetic to the Moral Majority or its equivalents. Both were hostile to the proponents of unfettered capitalism and to the military juggernaut. And if Nisbet is explicit in his debt to conservative traditions, while Arendt is more readily associated with classical republicanism, they are each in their way strong theorists of *limits*, the most fundamental of all conservative motifs since the writings of Edmund Burke.[26] The delusionary belief of totalitarianism, Arendt argued, is that "everything is possible," that human nature can and should be changed, that society must be in constant flux to allow nothing to settle, all the better to continually build it anew. That hallucination had caused unimaginable misery. Such a posture affects, in diluted form, post-totalitarian societies as well. Similarly for Nisbet, the modern state's growing army of bureaucratic retainers, its penetrative, all encompassing ideology of equality combined with the remorseless centralization necessary to secure it, resulted in a debilitating erasure of those islands of autonomy known as "the social." For Arendt and Nisbet alike, the great myth of modernity was that of fabrication: a conception of the world as plastic in the hands of humans, a belief that history could be "made" as a craftsman makes a clay vessel, the Promethean notion that all human problems can be solved if we are but rational enough, determined enough, to solve them. Such an attitude, pulsating through the bodies of liberalism and socialism alike, Nisbet saw foreshadowed in Rousseau, while, according to Arendt, its exemplar, was Marx. The upshot of fabrication is the same: a vision that voids the ineffaceable tragedy of the human predicament.[27]

Many more similarities between Nisbet and Arendt might be traced. Yet we should also note some salient contrasts. None is more instructive than their views of totalitarianism.

Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism

All attentive readers of Hannah Arendt's political writings will notice their uncompromising insistence that "totalitarianism" is a mode of domination so drastic and unprecedented that all orthodox categories of understanding are powerless to make sense of it. Arendt argued that totalitarian domination—common to both the Soviet Union from 1930 to Stalin's death in 1953 and the Third Reich from 1938 till its military annihilation in 1945—was not to be confused with authoritarianism or tyranny, regime types that have far more limited goals and powers than their twentieth century successors. Failure to recognize the differences among these modes of government is tantamount to ignoring the distinction "in principle between the restriction of freedom in authoritarian regimes, the abolition of political freedom in tyrannies and

[26] I draw on Canovan 1996 which, inter alia, compares Arendt and Michael Oakeshott .

[27] The danger of the metaphor of fabrication, as applied to politics is an Arendtian leitmotif. It is most systematically spelled out in *The Human Condition* (195d8). On Rousseau's ambition to reshape human nature as well as society, see, inter alia, Nisbet 1943: 107; 2010 [1953]: 1986d [1974]: 123–5; 1986e [1974]: 136 and passim; [2003] 1988: 118–9.

dictatorships, and the total elimination of spontaneity itself, that is, of the most general and most elementary manifestation of human freedom, at which only totalitarian regimes aim by means of their various methods of conditioning" (Arendt 1968 [1958]: 96). Tyrannies, for instance, seek to liquidate their overt opponents, eviscerate the public realm and isolate those over whom they rule. The tyrant is he "who rules as one against all, and the 'all' he oppresses are all equal, namely equally powerless" Arendt 1968 [1958]: 99). Fear is used to instil obedience. But once obedience is given, and political passivity—a "graveyard peace"—is achieved, the tyrant's key objectives have been realized. Family life and domestic relations are left relatively intact and unaffected.[28] In contrast, the signature characteristic of totalitarianism is terror, rather than simple intimidation, a terror that intensifies *after* the regime has dispatched its real opponents. For the primary foes of both Nazism and Stalinism, after initial resistance is overcome, are not real miscreants defined by intent and active resistance; they are "objective enemies" or "enemies of the people," defined by ascribed characteristics such as race or class. It makes no material difference to the regime that persons subsumed under these categories may, as individuals, be compliant and would, given the opportunity, acquiesce to the regime's initiatives. Death by category, dictated by the laws of race or history, is not to be deflected by such stolid pragmatism. The terminus of totalitarian detention is the camp system whose primary rationale, even more than extermination, is to deprive its captives of plurality, spontaneity, in a word, agency.

Moreover, where objective enemies cannot immediately be found, they must be invented. Thus the primary task of the secret police is not the prevention of actual crimes, but the prediction, creation, and subsequent neutralization of potential ones. The ascent of the S.S. and of the Cheka and its progeny (GPU, OGPU, NKVD, etc.) over the army as the organ of domestic and foreign coercion was, for Arendt, among the most fundamental characteristics of totalitarian domination. The secret police is the arm of totalitarian terror, the "essence" of totalitarian domination itself, and, in tandem with the Leader, the progenitor of lies (the more fantastic the better), fabrications, and portents of conspiracy—the Trotskyist plot, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Most regimes, tyrannical or otherwise, impose hierarchy on their subjects, offering thereby a modicum of repressive stability and predictability to society as a whole. Equally, regimes that are swept into power by social movements typically jettison or marginalize or discipline them once the new order is consolidated. Totalitarian rule is different. The movement continues violently to animate the regime. Stability and predictability are replaces by ceaseless turbulence. Instead of hierarchy, totalitarianism is characterized by "shapelessness" and a protean tension between party and state (Arendt 1967) [1951]: 395). For National Socialism, the key mechanism of totalitarian radicalization is the never-ending search for new categories of aliens to liquidate. Its Bolshevist counterpart is the purge whose institutionalization devours both the children of the revolution and their successors, as wave after wave of party and police bureaucrats are masticated by the regime. [29] Ironically, those who are most committed to the

[28] That this is a very selective, and somewhat tendentious, portrait of the characteristics of tyranny is argued by Stanley 1994: 30–33

[29] Compare Arendt's argument with Mann's 1997: 135–157. See also Kershaw's (1997: 95–6) remark that "a 'settling down' into the staid authoritarianism of a Francoesque kind is scarcely conceivable in the case of Nazism. Here, the dynamic was ceaseless, the momentum of radicalization an accelerating one incapable of having the brakes put on—unless the 'system' itself were to be fundamentally altered."

government's cause are also the most likely candidates for eradication, because commitment may indicate individual volition and volition inconstancy. The only truly reliable people for the regime are those without strong opinions, "functionaries" whose pliablility renders them useful instruments of the totalitarian apparatus (1994) [1953]: 305).

Still, terror alone is insufficient to determine the behaviour of totalitarian subjects. Terror determines what must be done, but not what to think—or rather what not to think. Adapting Montesquieu, Arendt argued that while terror is the essence of totalitarianism, *ideology* is its "principle of action" (or substitute for such a principle) whose axiomatic force allows no contradiction or dissonance among those who count as its adherents. Ideologies are more than general attitudes, ideal interests or *Weltanschauungen*, and they are recognized principally by their structure rather than their variable content. They entail total explanations of not only what is but also what will be, conceived as moments of a grand historical process in which actual events have no meaning, substance or import other than their wholly instrumental role in establishing World Communism or the Thousand Year Reich. The allure of ideologies resides in their ability to simplify a complex world into one necessary postulate whose grip on the mind is simultaneously mesmerizing and compelling (the "merciless dialectics" of Communism; Hitler's professed enchantment with "ice cold reasoning"). Intellectually comatose to new experiences, conspiratorial in outlook, eager to subsume awkward realities under pre-established formulae, the subjects of ideology have, in effect, stopped thinking for and among themselves. Yet that debility is explicable. Faced with a world characterized by "uprootedness," disintegration and superfluity, ideology provides a refuge and compensation for those "masses"—people devoid of any discernible human bond, the *disjecta membra* of war, collapse of empire, economic catastrophe—who have no purpose other than to serve the predatory teleology of the movement.

Aside from considering ideology and terror, Arendt also ponders the role of leaders in totalitarianism. She concludes:

> The totalitarian form of government depends entirely upon the fact that a movement, and not a party, has taken power…so that instead of the tyrant's brutal determination and the dictator's demagogic ability to keep himself in power at all costs, we find the totalitarian leader's single-minded attention directed to the acceleration of the movement itself (Arendt 1956: 408).

Whereas tyrants are contemptuous of all laws other than those they have made, totalitarian rulers claim to be the executors or instruments of "laws" of race or class struggle that are inexorable and that demand that inferiors be culled and the socially obsolescent be eliminated. Totalitarian leaders seek to clear all impediments to these laws of motion, facilitating their passage and encouraging their acceleration.[30] Arendt (1967 [1951]: 373) described Hitler and Stalin as the movement's "center", "the 'motor

[30] She (1968 [1958]: 99) added that in "contradistinction to both tyrannical and authoritarian regimes, the proper image of totalitarian ruler and organization seems to be the structure of the onion, in whose center, in a kind of empty space, the leader is located; whatever he does [….] he does it from within, and not from without or above."

that swings it into motion". "The machine that generates, organizes, and spreads the monstrous falsehoods of totalitarian movements depends again upon the position of the Leader," a man who uniquely divines the laws of race or history and whose prognostications—couched in centuries or millennia—can never be disproved by facts. Cocooned from the elite formations—SS, NKVD militants—by a court or "inner circle," the Leader transmits by osmosis "an aura of impenetrable mystery." And within this inner circle the Leader maintains ascendancy through his capacity for productive intrigue, his ability to shuffle personnel to maximize insecurity, and his skill in handling rivalries within the Party. Everyone, including the entourage and ministries, knows that their power has no independent basis of justification; it springs "directly from the Leader without the intervening levels of a functioning hierarchy." Instead of authority that, even when repressive, operates according to an idea of limits, totalitarian domination tends towards the abolition of freedom and the elimination of responsibility. The Leader's rule is fluid, impetuous, domineering; his voluntaristic language—"the never-resting, dynamic 'will of the Fuehrer'"—a much more accurate guide to his rule than the static leader-principle (quotes in Arendt (1967 [1951]: 405, 365, 404).[31]

Nisbet's Evaluation and an Arendtian Response

In his reappraisal of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, published 17 years after Arendt's death in 1975, Nisbet commends it as "the most perceptive and illuminating" study ever written on its topic. All the same, he faults *Origins* for its faulty architecture and for the deficiency of its explanation. The book, he points out, lacks unity. It consists of three separate essays—on Antisemitism, Imperialism, and Totalitarianism—each with little evident connection to the others; for that reason Harcourt Brace published them in separate volumes without embarrassment. Further, the emphasis that Arendt places on propaganda, the secret police, and the concentration camps is misleading; these horrors certainly "accompany the rise of the total state but they are not of its essence." More fundamental is "the internal invasion by the state of its civil society" because without that successful assault totalitarianism could never have been established in the first place nor its full depravity realized. The supremacist totalitarian *state*, in short, is erected on the prior despoliation of *society*, the site of intermediating powers (Nisbet 1992: 88).[32] While Arendt recognizes this fact, she fails to give it the primacy Nisbet believes it deserves.

[31] "The will of the Fuehrer can be embodied everywhere and at all times, and he himself is not tied to any hierarchy, not even the one he might have established" (405).

[32] Arendt's inattention to "social character" is a theme of two others Nisbet essays (1986f [1974] and 1977) that criticize her account of the American Revolution. Arendt, contends Nisbet, underestimated the social discontents of the nation that fueled a "social revolution" alongside the political one. In many respects, pre-revolutionary America retained vestiges of feudalism: primogeniture and entail existed in all of the colonies; large landowners were common in New York as well as in Virginia. Religious establishment also survived, nursing resentment and pitting rival sects against each other. The reason why Arendt missed the social background to the American Revolution, Nisbet explains, is because it lacked the spectacular violence evident in France and elsewhere. And that moderation, in turn, owed itself to the dispersal of revolution over 13 colonies, the pluralism of American religion, the profusion of voluntary associations, and the fortuitous gift of brilliant, measured, socially rooted intellectuals—such as Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Hamilton—who lacked the deracinated fanaticism of their counterparts in France.

Nisbet also addresses the tricky question of how a state once totalitarian can stop being one. That, as we saw, is the gaping omission in his own account of Wilsonian America. Having just witnessed the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, however, Nisbet asks: "Doesn't this amazing—and marvelous—spectacle undermine, indeed falsify, the Arendtian concept of totalitarianism?" Not at all. Arendt's reply might be twofold, Nisbet helpfully suggests. The Soviet collapse proves, first, that totalitarian regimes failed fully to erase the attributes of human plurality and spontaneity. Second, Communism's ruin shows that although atomized "masses" are a vital condition of totalitarian government, they are neither the cause of revolution nor masters of its fate. It is elites that "retain the capacity to take initiatives and inaugurate changes."[33] As the world's geo-political axis shifted, Soviet elites sought desperately to adapt and survive.

Whether, and to what extent, Arendt herself would have accepted this inventive interpretation we can never know with certainty. But it is clear more generally that Nisbet's totalitarianism theory divergences from hers at some crucial points. In *The Quest for Community*, Nisbet (2010 [1953]: 182) reiterates her argument[34] that when masses do not already exist, they must be created; that is what Lenin and Stalin violently achieved by abolishing the soviets, destroying the trade unions, and pulverizing the peasantry. But Nisbet then goes on to say that alongside the masses, totalitarianism possesses a second "central element," namely, "the ideology of the political community." The relevant fact here is that Nisbet's construal of these terms—ideology, political community—is a far cry from what Arendt meant by them. On Nisbet's construction, ideology is the doctrine and program of a centralized, militarized state whereas, for Arendt, ideology is a compulsive reality resisting "logic" of frenzied deduction. Just so, totalitarianism is the opposite of a political community, as Arendt understands such a thing. Politics requires plurality, spaces for dissent, citizenship participation in the commonweal, elements that are anathema to totalitarianism. Nisbet sees matters differently. Totalitarianism is a super—political community. True, the "political *enslavement* of man requires the *emancipation* of man from all the authorities and memberships (obstructions to the popular will, as the Nazis and Communists describe them) that serve, in one degree or another, to insulate the individuals from external political power." But having deprived individuals of primary bonds, the totalitarian state goes on to reconfigure them on its own terms by creating new allegiances and dependencies. It fashions "new forms of association…each based upon some clear and positive function" and from these spring "informal relationships" that "reach like a chain from the lowliest individual to the highest center of government."[35]

Even in regard to the "masses," a subject on which Nisbet and Arendt appear largely to concur, the American sociologist sounds a jarring note. From Nisbet's analytical and normative standpoint, the masses are the very opposite of things "social". Whether as noun or adjective, *social* signals a cluster of human associations that provide individuals with a sense of order and identity independent of state administration. A condition of mass ensues precisely to the extent to which the social is sterilized by the chief instrument of state intrusion: bureaucratic regulation. In contrast, Arendt's view of the

[33] Nisbet 1992: 90.

[34] Nisbet mentions her by name.

[35] Quotes from Nisbet 2010 [1953]): 185, 189.

social, while less stable than Nisbet's, is overwhelmingly—though not ubiquitously[36]—reproachful.[37] In her lexicon, *society* and *the social* are vehicles of conformity not wilful autonomy. And while the social is never identified as a cause of totalitarianism, nor is it understood as an obstacle that must be removed before totalitarianism prevails. On her account it is citizenship—the quintessential political relationship—that must be disabled before totalitarian triumphs, not the social group as such.

Arendt would further have considered "American totalitarianism" a notion as far-fetched as it is theoretically spongy. We saw her ceaseless insistence that totalitarianism is unprecedented and unique. We know as well that Arendt identifies just two fully-fledged totalitarian governments. The United States is not one of them. Because the Soviet Union under Stalin and Nazi Germany belong to a *sui generis* type of regime,[38] Arendt is able to draw tight historical and political boundaries around "totalitarianism." Terror must be present and total in contrast to the episodic, parcelized fear that is a pronounced aspect of tyrannies. Ideology, a cognitive system reduced to a few core axioms pursued with dedicated frenzy, must impede any dissonant thought. No party competition, no genuine elections to choose the leader are allowed. War and purge are endemic. And there can be no peaceful, rule-governed exit to a democratic system. In contrast, Nisbet's characterization of totalitarianism would seem to her too loosely drawn. Where in twentieth century America are the death camps or gulags? Where are the constant purges? Where is the ongoing attack on "objective enemies" or the extermination of entire classes? Where is the destruction of party rivalry and competitive elections? Extract these features from "American totalitarianism" and you are left with a period of repression that has none of the extremity and madness of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Extract all this and you have something other than totalitarianism.

Conclusions

For all her agreements with Nisbet on matters small and important, Hannah Arendt would have likely considered his account of American totalitarianism a failure. Nisbet's net catches too much which is not distinctly totalitarian. It lets escape too much that is.[39] To make America look totalitarian one must analogize rather than examine real institutions and persons at their head. Creel was not Goebbels. Wilson and FDR were not Hitler and Stalin. The Four Minute Men were not the *Freikorps*. Nor were the camps into which Japanese Americans interned during the Second World War the equivalent of the Gulag Archipelago. Robert Nisbet is the greatest writer on equality

[36] Arendt (2000 [1959]) actually defends the integrity of social relationships.

[37] For Arendt's most explicit attempts to articulate the concepts of the "social" and of "society," see Arendt 1958, chapter 2 ("The Public and the Private Realm") and Arendt 1963 chapter 2 ("The Social Question"). However, these protean terms have a long and complex career in Arendt's intellectual biography. For a brilliant reconstruction of their meaning and trajectory, see Pitkin 1998. The best book overall on Arendt's political thought, in which the issue of the social and of society is much discussed, is Canovan 1992.

[38] Arendt's oscillating and rather confused understanding of the People's Republic of China in its Maoist phase is examined in Baehr 2010b. On her broader critique of sociological theories of totalitarianism, see Baehr 2010a

[39] Contemporary attempts, from both the right and the left, to portray America as "totalitarian" suffer from the same boundary problem. See Goldberg 2007 and Wolin 2004.

and its dangers that modern social science has produced. He is the foremost defender of the importance of society, the social, and hence of sociology in its classical articulation. Yet, as many have noted, community and civil society can be vicious as well as vital. They can be both at the same time. Conversely, the state through its laws and regulations can be and has been a source of civilized manners and stability, protecting persons against groupings notable for their violent cohesion. Nisbet never denied these facts. Nor did he confront their implications for his theory of society.

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