THE DICTATORSHIP OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract: *Technology and totalitarianism seem to be separate domains of our contemporary world. These two categories are, however, strongly related: totalitarianism, which pertains to the essence of modernity, also has a cultural connotation that associates it with the exclusive character of technological hegemony. Technological dominance can be viewed as a special configuration of totalitarianism, the understanding of which can take us a long way towards a deeper comprehension of technology.*

Key words: *Consumption, Postmodernity, Techné, Technology, Production, Totalitarianism, Human needs.*

1. On dictatorship

The 20th century can be viewed as the century of totalitarianism in several respects. From a political perspective, few such fierce debates between freedom and constraint can be found in history as in this century, most often with serious practical consequences. The tragedy and thought-provoking seriousness of totalitarianism consisted in its necessary practical results (and it is even questionable whether we can speak of it in the past tense). Totalitarianism in its political sense is to be interpreted as autocracy, despotism, and dictatorship, while democracy, conceived of as its opposite, is the free will of the people (and not just in the political sense). However, we also have to be aware that such a lexical definition of totalitarianism will keep us away from its essence.

In the following pages, I will attempt to widen the semantic sphere of totalitarian phenomena beyond the political, in order to assess the character of technological dominance in the Heideggerian sense and to offer a metaphysical interpretation for this particular form of totalitarianism. As a first step, I will consider some observations regarding the essence of totalitarianism, and then I will proceed to the discussion of the metaphysical structure of totalitarianism that appears under the guise of technology.

The first idea we have to clarify regarding the essence of totalitarianism concerns its sphere of validity. Our present discussion attempts to draw a comprehensive outline of totalitarianism, including the demand to explore its metaphysical basis, if there is such a thing. First of all, totalitarianism is a cultural phenomenon that is absolutistic and encompassing, radically excluding any exception and counter-opinion. Its beginnings and original context date back to the first three decades of the last century, a period in which European humanity began to lose faith in the liberalism in force since the Enlightenment, and based on the philosophical reading of Hegel and Nietzsche, it began to play with power and to expose its destiny to power factors that were mostly political and social in

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character, but transcended their concrete embodiment from the perspective of their enforcement mechanism.

Totalitarianism began with the absolutization of state power and the significant limitation of individual freedom. However, it represented a clear-cut and relatively controllable apparatus in this respect. Any thinking individual could be aware of the measure of everyone's participation in political power and of its corruption level. In this sense, the totalitarianism of the communist state was a spectacular theatrical performance based on a well-planned and mutual lie.[2] People who enjoyed heightened levels of power lied in order to be able to preserve their dominant position, and ordinary people believed the fabulations about the State – motivated either by fear or immoral practicality. Thus, Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism has become a regime based on a double lie, which undermined its own functioning over time. A political and social formation in which people have to actively live a double lie – first, they promise illusory values to their peers, and second, they imitate their consent to ideologies based on very weak foundations – could not be long-lived. Hence, it can only be viewed today as a political-philosophical curiosity.

After analyzing it more carefully, we can even identify characteristics that question the legitimacy of our liberal society's values. Totalitarianism has a characteristic that can rather be grasped metaphysically than politically, insofar as it subordinates the individual in its entire identity to a supra-individual and uncontrollable power. Totalitarianism appears when the individual becomes a victim of the greater Whole. It would be superfluous to further elaborate here that the Hegelian objective and absolute idea, through its subjection of individuality to the general principle – based on the logically flawless argument of his philosophy of the spirit –, represents a uniquely statist standpoint within Western philosophy in its radicalism. Statist abuses of this kind are always short-lived because they somehow contradict the logic of common sense, and most absolutist theories do not pass the touchstone test of the subordination of individuality. This is also confirmed by the fact that all theories advocating the hegemony of impersonal forces have sooner or later become the subject of radical criticism. It is not by chance that we view Kierkegaard as the official opponent of Hegel and K.-R. Popper as the sober critic of statist excesses.

In fact, the totalitarianism that transcends individual freedom manifests itself whenever the ruling power acts as a self-sufficient factor. Totalitarian power always operates with the delusion of *unity*.[3] Supposedly, there is one will, one leader, and one law – nevertheless, political power acts according to its sole discretion. One could even say that the totalitarian regime is an anarchy from whose enjoyment and practice the masses are excluded. Searching for the roots of totalitarianism, H. Spiro has shown that its first occurrence dates back to 1929, to the *Times* daily newspaper, and it is used with reference to fascist and communist regimes (see Zăpârţan, 1994, p. 382). At the same time, C. Schmidt begins to use the concept of the "total state". Both thinkers were well aware of the fact that its emergence is based upon the values crisis and cultural impasse of the first three decades of the 20th century. The spread of massification, bureaucratization,

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[2] For this topic, see Gabriel Liiceanu's phenomenological analysis of the ethically justifiable *lie* that cannot be eliminated from political life, in Liiceanu, 2005.

[3] The ideology of unity and equality is one of the most transparent lies, since the gap between the leader and those who are led widens, and social inequalities can at best be obscured through the methods of intimidation. As such, we can hardly speak about the metaphysical (substantial) basis of totalitarian power.

individualization, and vulnerability to manipulation, as discussed in the works of Nietzsche, Spengler, and Ortega y Gasset, began to suggest the idea of the necessity and imminence of the strong leader, who is capable to rule over the masses. No one, however, anticipated the dangerous opposition of philosophical considerations and political reality.

Ignoring the historical roots of the exclusivist expansion of power (e.g. bolshevism), let us further concentrate on its ideological background. From this perspective, totalitarianism is the victim of the following hypothesis, turned into an obsession: the dominance of unity is in any context a more fortunate solution than the parallel prevalence of individual wills. The association of individual happiness with universal dominance is based upon the hyperbolization of the general into a transcendent entity.[4] In this approach, individuals are not autonomous beings, but the building blocks of an organic system. Their dignity is entirely subject to power, and they acquire their personal values through the qualitative identification with the leader's identity. The leader becomes the symbol of the regime, the trustee of its values, and the representative of the general will, and the average citizen comes close to a point where he/she can only exist through him. This is the emergence of the absolute "egocrat", who violently tries to create the impression that he has completely identified himself with the "soul of the people" and with the problems of the masses, and thus he solely represents the "solution". This again makes the totalitarian regime suspect of the deception of the grossest kind in the eyes of the individual, who experiences the "human, all too human" character of manipulation when faced with the bloated and presumptuous political power.

It is worth noting that most dictatorships were based on *self-attributed power*. In this respect, all dictatorships stood on weak ground, as the growing opposition could always generate a revolution that removed it from power, since it is relatively easy to finish with a presumably flawed regime that in many respects betrays its own weaknesses. Thus, all totalitarian regimes proved to be self-destructive in the long run, since they undermined the initially strong faith of the working citizen in unity and solidarity, due to the confidentiality of official decisions, the elimination of civil society, and the subjection of individuality to the instruments of deception and violence.

H. Arendt (1972) has identified six characteristics of totalitarianism. Let me cite three of them here, in order to further strengthen my own arguments:

– Total loyalty to the regime, with the exclusion of potentially rival institutions (e.g. the Church).

– The imposition of unified ideals, even at the cost of sacrificing traditionalism or progressive ideas.

– The creation of an artificial social hierarchy on the basis of subjection to political power.

These three characteristics reveal the weaknesses of political totalitarianisms, much less visible in the case of technological dominance. Centralized power intentionally and demonstrably interferes in the private sphere, expresses its ideology in an itemized manner, spreads conspicuous propaganda, and even attributes a certain place to humans. All these aspects are much less clear in the case of technological dominance.

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[4] Regarding this thesis, we should think of the fact that dictatorial regimes used to attempt to consolidate the power of their leader through a specific rhetoric relating to them. The Romanian media debates of the last democratic decades have often discussed the censored rhetoric that used to envelope the leader in a transcendent light, e.g. avoiding any statements about his mortality.

The twilight of totalitarian regimes was brought about by the strengthening of the individual will's sovereignty and the prevalence of the postmodern mood. No wonder that philosophical discourse at the end of the 90s started addressing issues of solidarity, irony, and self-sacrifice, as shown by a published dialogue between Vattimo and Rorty (2005). Totalitarian regimes formerly presenting themselves as solely authentic world religions metamorphosed into the horror of production and consumption, as well as technological dominance.

As a closing remark, let me cite Fr. Chatelet: "...the totalitarian being is still there in its constantly menacing and terrifying presence. *It should be associated with the mystification of modern industrial societies* – as H. Arendt did –, *representing its monstrous consequence* (…). It is an issue of much graver concern for people, since it *does not deal with the problem of historical meaning* and of the values that should guide it" (Zăpârţan, 1994, p. 395, my emphases). Yet, in spite of its inhuman character, it also carries the potential of revealing its concealment on certain historical occasions, thus turning into its opposite, i.e. liberalism.

This is, however, not the case with technological dictatorship.

2. On technology

The totalitarian phenomena have been made possible by the unreserved application of modern technological possibilities. The intrusion of political power into the private sphere, the trickling down of state measures to the level of the private sphere, or the monitoring of those who endanger collective interests can only be achieved through advanced electronic means of communication. The modification of the world's ontological borders cannot be separated from the spread of the dictatorial manifestations prevalent in the world. The conquest of distance through telecommunication and vehicles, the turning of the night into day with artificial lighting, and the possibility to follow in "real time" the events from remote parts of the world all contributed to the gradual emergence of a new world order. I do not wish to analyze here the ontology of this world order, but let me emphasize a single idea, namely that the technological dominance criticized by Heidegger has effectively changed the world's political landscape, as it absorbed the individual into a computerized machine and contributed to the global prevalence of power systems supervising individual initiatives. Thus, technological expansion is an inevitable corollary of totalitarianism, since technology itself also carries a certain totalitarian aspect.

So far, I have made several remarks on the technological dependence of totalitarian regimes and on the totalitarian character of technological dominance. In the following lines, I will discuss the philosophically relevant structure of the contemporary absolute power appearing in the guise of technology, trying to draw the lesson from political totalitarianism for its case.

One of the early critics of the objectifying effect of technological dominance is Husserl himself. Confirming Granel's views, he identified the crisis of the 30s in a misunderstood kind of rationalism. The crisis appears as the final manifestation of modern rationality and can be attributed to the naivety of treating the opposition of subject and object as self-evident, while ignoring the issues of their conditions of possibility. The roots of the endless consumption of postmodernity and the atomic age's dominance can be located in

the naïve cult of reason characteristic of modernity and in the dualistic approach based on conceptual pairs of good and evil.

The modern thinker charmed by the endless faith in progress could not foresee the consequences of the dualism between subject and object. As soon as everything turns into an object, things cease to exist as concrete and isolated entities for the subject, and the world becomes an immense energetic and instrumental network absorbing humans, as well as space and time. In this context, we cannot speak of a rationalizable relationship to the things that have to be worked upon, only about a circular neurotic process in which humans consistently attempt to occupy a dominant position, while becoming the victims of technological dominance as consumers. The endless and undetermined character of production brings about an anthropological and phenomenological loss of existence.

The dominance of neurotic and self-repeating was doubled by the similarly obsessive terror of consumption. In his essay on *Paradoxical happiness*, Lipovetsky offers an excellent description of the aimless joy of consumption as it is embedded into the empty experience of buying things. As soon as hyperconsumption transcends the borders of the consumerist behavior embedded into the existential context, it also goes beyond the framework of naturally facilitating living conditions and leaves behind the spirit of democratic consumption. The unfortunate effects of consumerism consist in the lowering of the self-value of things to the level of mere exchange values and the expression of values according to strict monetary standards, thereby turning people into powerless consumers. All these aspects have been pointed out quite rightly in E. Fromm's *To Have or to Be*, viewing the consuming subject itself as a consumer value integrated into social relations that dissolve its very essence.

According to Lipovetsky, limitless consumption represents an effect of the erroneous idea of happiness that is characteristic for Westerners. Moral cues are obscured within the new consumer ethics, and individuality is dissolved into the egoism expressed in the slogans of "I want this" and "this is mine".

The late Gadamer has some simple but deep remarks on the existential situation of man, as he realizes the threat to the authenticity of his selfhood within this new, "wordless" world, thereby proving to be a worthy disciple of Heidegger at least in this respect. According to the epistemological hermeneutics of Gadamer, modern applied sciences do not have any ties to the traditional *theoria*, i.e. the thirst for knowledge as it exists within human nature, or disinterested knowledge and the manifestation of things for cognitive awareness, that would determine the mind to adopt the authentically theoretical attitude of *circum-spection*. Current science excludes the questioning attitude and impels people to the unavoidable usage of technological instruments. While the scientist could have a freely affirming or negating attitude towards classical science, the usage of technological instrument is no more a question of individual options, but represents the condition for minimal social achievement. According to the late writings of Gadamer, the unified creative potential of *phronesis, poiesis*, and *techne* vanishes under the conditions of technological dominance, making room for the depersonalizing attitude of calculation.

In fact, on a philosophical level, Heidegger's and Gadamer's critique of technology corresponds to the ideas on the role and the development of technology prevalent in the 70s and 80s. However, there is also a major difference in the ideas about the finality of technology. Scientific opinions were content to present sociological analyses on the advances of technology forthcoming in the near future, while legitimizing its importance through the involvement of technology in all areas of life and its increasingly intense

occurrence, while mentioning only in passing the related doubts of public opinion, viewed as mere irrational fears of the unknown.

As an illustrative reference, I will cite here some thought-provoking conclusions of a 1982 conference dedicated to the development of microelectronics, quite biased with regard to the use of technology: „...according to certain estimations, the factories of the 2000s will consist of a modular system of computers, distributed among users, ranked according to functional criteria, and fed by databases. Such an integrated system will be able to process all functions of the company..." (*Noile tehnologii de vârf şi societatea*, 1983, p. 304). The rapid development of microelectronics and the auxiliary effect of artificial intelligence greeted those who dreamt about an "easier life" in the disguise of its promises related to efficiency, speed, optimum price-value ratio, manageability, and flexibility.

However, in contrast with these attitudes, philosophical approaches were left undisturbed to explore the shaky ontological grounds of the technological reality that does not carry the "facilitating" potential attributed to it by its designers for business reasons. In this sense, David Harvey's book on postmodernity offers extensive data on the terroristic consequences of contemporary production and technology.

The danger of technological terror lies in the fact that it appears under the disguise of the promise of a better life. According to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Americanism and Fordism represented the hitherto greatest collective effort for creating a new type of human being. The "new man" is essentially a new worker, who accepts with a rational conviction the possibility of expressing his/her workforce and working time in monetary terms. The quantifiability of workforce is one of the crucial points of Henry Ford's economic reforms, since the eight-hour working day, mechanized production, paid leave, and the fast circulation of money demanded employers to adopt a single economic policy. This policy carried the promise of prosperity and of ending unemployment, but in the long term it effectively created a new way of life and a new attitude, which according to Gramsci can even result in the restructuring of the private life.

Ford was convinced that a new society can be constructed simply through economic reforms, or more exactly, through adequately managing the power held by the companies. He could not foresee that the "five-dollar day", which theoretically leaves enough free time for the workers to enjoy their possessions, will turn into a self-destructive mechanism in the long run, in which the worker is unable to endure his/her vulnerability and exposedness.

As Lipovetsky writes about the covert psychological effects of the welfare societies: "the post-Fordian regime that is about to come is accompanied by significant changes in the ways in which the demand is stimulated, as well as in sales processes, consumer behavior and imagination" (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 18). Fordism is in itself an empty economic strategy, which, lacking a metaphysical background that would give meaning to it, could result in the endlessness of the psychology of consumption.

At the same time, the new relations of production have also interfered into en-route spatial relations and lifetime itself. Since any complex production system applies strategies which order and organize space and time, Fordism also allocated part of its income to the enhancement of applicability and habitability. However, these enhancements were never carried out according to the interests of the workers, but always depending on the requirements of the system. The average worker was left with the joy of

more easily overcoming spatial distances and the illusion of controlling the precisely measurable clock-time (Harvey, 2002, p. 250-256).

Individuality as well as the focus upon totality and tradition gradually disappear behind the continually improving strategies for controlling space and time. There are virtually no more producing subjects, since workers must adhere to standards turned into rigid economic stereotypes and templates. Individual initiative is substituted with the dominance of the personal imagine that is adjusted to the parameters of acceptability. The image confers success and identity (the bank official dressed in an expensive suit is a good example in this respect. In the world of totalitarian production, our authentic identity is absorbed into the dictatorship of the anonymous *das Man* – "the They" exposed in Heidegger *Being and Time* – who produces and consumes the same things as everyone else, since "quality can be found in quantity" according to the new American trend. "The They" enjoys the heyday of the totalitarianism of production and technology under the levelling influence of "the same" (i.e. mass consumption, aimless imitation, the cult of quantity, and the identification with foreign models).

The new world order that is imposed as a result of their hegemony confronts man with the ethics of accountability, insofar as he will further safeguard the essence of his humanity and question the global processes entangling him through his meditative thinking as the "shepherd of being". Here we have arrived at a point where we can refer back to the category of the Heideggerian *Ge-stell*, or "the Enframing" that is far from being an eternal and supra-individual power with a finalized structure, but a stage in the development of our Western society, that will someday be overcome by itself. From a historical perspective, technology is not an ultimate goal, but a *possibility*, and as such it necessitates an attitude of care from man as a thinking being, so that he can outgrow in his own time the totalitarian character of its present adolescence.

Thus, as a final thought, let me cite the following remark of Heidegger: „We are thinking of the possibility that the world civilization that is just now beginning might one day overcome the technological-scientific-industrial character as the sole criterion of man's world sojourn. This may happen not of and through itself, but in virtue of the readiness of man for a determination that, whether listened to or not, always speaks in the destiny of man, which has not yet been decided" (Heidegger, 1994, p. 261).

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