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Abstract

This essay discusses the interaction between totalistic worldviews on one side and biopower and perspectives on purity and impurity, on the other side. It does so by using the concept of totalism, a system of thought defined by its pursuit of the complete reconstruction of society in accordance with its soteriological-simplifying principles. Totalistic worldviews tend to enforce the implementation of what they see as purity and the combating of what they see as impurity by enforcing their ultimate aims on their host society or beyond.

Keywords

Totalism; biopower; heterodoxy; totalitarianism; purity; modernity.

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This essay discusses the interaction between totalistic worldviews on one side and biopower and perspectives on purity and impurity, on the other side. It does so by using the concept of totalism, a system of thought defined by its pursuit of the complete reconstruction of society in accordance with its soteriological-simplifying principles. Totalistic worldviews tend to enforce the implementation of what they see as purity and the combating of what they see as impurity by enforcing their ultimate aims on their host society or beyond.

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I. Biopower and Totalitarianism. Premodern Roots

This essay deals with the importance and the possible interaction of totality with biopower in premodern and modern contexts, taking into account perspectives that use categories of purity and impurity. This is achieved by making use of the concept of totalism, a system of thought that places a supreme value on totality, and which, particularly in militant variants, pursues the complete reconstruction of society in accordance with its soteriological-simplifying principles, while claiming a monopoly on interpreting the ideological truth of its own doctrinal core [1].

Before moving on, one must briefly approach Foucault's view on biopower, as well as his description and understanding of totalitarian regimes, particularly in the case of National Socialism. This is a

necessary step, since it is a perspective which is not only intrinsically linked with Foucault's own concept of biopower, but, in many respects, it also represents the apparent highpoint of its application. Yet, as it will be briefly developed later in the essay, totalitarianism arguably does not represent a fundamentally new development in terms of intent, but, rather, can be defined merely as a stage in the possible evolution of regimes which may be called totalist ideocracies. It is also worth mentioning that such ideocratic polities – and the totalist ideologies which typically precede them – would obviously not be as bound by the constraints of pluralist democracies when it comes to bioethical dilemmas, particularly when the totalist ultimate aims would demand a certain course of action. In the context of an apparent contraction of liberal-democratic normative power, and the increased visibility and success of various hybrid forms of illiberal, autocratic, and even ideocratic hybrids, a look at the possible evolution and importance of such factors in totalist contexts is all the more necessary.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault first mentions the “era of biopower” by referring to “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” [2] (p. 140). While Foucault would not revisit the concept of biopower in that particular work, he would later come to persistently focus on the importance of sovereignty when it comes to the right to kill, along with regularization:

Beneath that great absolute power, beneath the dramatic and somber absolute power that was the power of sovereignty, and which consisted in the power to take life, we now have the emergence, with this technology of biopower, of this technology of power over "the" population as such, over men insofar as they are living beings. It is continuous, scientific, and it is the power to make live. Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die [3] (p. 247).

Having said this, Foucault saw in National Socialism nothing less than the “paroxysmal development of the new power mechanism that had been established since the eighteenth century” [3] (p. 259). In his view, not only was there no state which could ever have more

“disciplinary power” than the National Socialist regime, but there was also no other state which regulated the biological so tightly and insistently:

Disciplinary power and biopower: all this permeated, underpinned, Nazi society (control over the biological, of procreation and of heredity; control over illness and accidents too). No society could be more disciplinary or more concerned with providing insurance than that established, or at least planned, by the Nazis. Controlling the random element inherent in biological processes was one of the regime's immediate objectives. But this society in which insurance and reassurance were universal, this universally disciplinary and regulatory society, was also a society which unleashed murderous power, or in other words, the old sovereign right to take life. This power to kill, which ran through the entire social body of Nazi society, was first manifested when the power to take life, the power of life and death, was granted not only to the State but to a whole series of individuals, to a considerable number of people (such as the SA, the SS, and so on). Ultimately, everyone in the Nazi State had the power of life and death over his or her neighbors, if only because of the practice of informing, which effectively meant doing away with the people next door, or having them done away with. So murderous power and sovereign power are unleashed throughout the entire social body [3] (p. 259).

In this case, the most important thing to take away from Foucault's interpretation is that he accurately points to the totalistic nature of the National Socialist regime, both in its potential and its application. Once again, it is the combination of the sovereign right to kill and the new mechanism of biopower, of managing of life that “coincide exactly,” with momentous consequences:

We have, then, in Nazi society something that is really quite extraordinary: this is a society which has generalized biopower in an absolute sense, but which has also generalized the sovereign right to kill. The two mechanisms—the classic, archaic mechanism that gave the

State the right of life and death over its citizens, and the new mechanism organized around discipline and regulation, or in other words, the new mechanism of biopower—coincide exactly. We can therefore say this: The Nazi State makes the field of the life it manages, protects, guarantees, and cultivates in biological terms absolutely coextensive with the sovereign right to kill anyone, meaning not only other people, but also its own people. There was, in Nazism, a coincidence between a generalized biopower and a dictatorship that was at once absolute and retransmitted throughout the entire social body by this fantastic extension of the right to kill and of exposure to death [3] (p. 260).

Nevertheless, this combination of – at least apparent – absolute control over both life and death, while relatively rare in terms of historical occurrences, is not quite as “extraordinary” as Foucault suggests, unless one explicitly focuses on its scale alone and its use of industrial modernity to achieve its purpose. Indeed, the pursuit of such power is far older than the National Socialist project, with its origins already clearly identifiable in the great totalistic socio-political reconstruction projects of the premodern era. Certainly, in a premodern context, there had been no real possibility for entire societies to be organised and regimented with quite the same efficiency. However, the idea of pursuing a series of soteriological-simplifying principles and of applying them in a total manner on a local host society or even on a universal level can be encountered time and again in the case of premodern totalist heterodoxies. As such, it is in heterodoxies which placed a supreme value on totality that one finds the roots leading up to the formation of modern totalitarianism and biopower. And if a totalitarian phase represents the greatest and most dangerous use of biopolitics and biopower, as well as in organising the dealing of death, it is can only originate from totalist visions.

Rather than being born from the tensions inherent in the project of modernity, totalist projects – either in a quietist or militant variant – can be encountered far earlier, along with the formation of complex premodern societies and the implications posed by systems of thought which hold totality as a supreme value. Thus, whereas modern nomic crises can certainly contribute to the emergence of such worldviews, their roots go far deeper. Perhaps most importantly, the pursuit of a

totalistic social reconstruction by militant heterodox groups or by successfully established totalist ideocracies typically leads to a distinct outlook on human life and on how it should be led. Whether they are religious, secular, or hybrid in nature, such totalistic perspectives tend to enforce the implementation of what they see as purity and the combating of what they see as impurity. To reiterate an essential point here, totalism is not to be confused with totalitarianism, despite the similarities which they share in their supreme focus on totality. Thus, totalism represents a system of thought pursuing the reconstruction of society in accordance with the soteriological-simplifying principles forming its doctrinal core, to which it claims a monopoly of interpretation.

In a Western European context, it was the overall failure of the great eschatological and utopian heterodoxies of the Middle Ages – such as those expanded upon by Cohn [4], Eisenstadt [5], and Kaplan [6], that decisively contributed to the triumph of the State, as its eventual alliance with either the established Church or with more pragmatic reformist movements eventually allowed it to move fully into the centre of political power. The case of heterodoxies mixing eschatological expectations with distinctly renovative or utopian totalism is encountered across Eurasia, with certain common features uniting them, both in success and failure – such as their readiness to take on established authority in pursuit of their own take on an ideal human existence and how it should be organised. Manifesting with a high degree of regularity, although with varying intensity in their potential for militantism, these heterodoxies form an important part of what may be called the shadow history of modernity.

To make only a brief point, three major Eurasian civilizational areas, (Christendom, Islamdom, and the Sinic cultural sphere) provide one with a large number of heterodox movements that sought the overthrow and transformation of their host societies. Nevertheless, most eventually lost their battle with the polity they were up against, with some exceptions, particularly in the Islamic case, which repeatedly saw such heterodoxies overthrow the established order successfully and

begin implementing their vision upon their host society.¹ This is part of cyclical patterns that have been part of Islamdom since its beginnings, due in no small part to the great reverence held for the first three generations and for the person of Muhammad.²

It was only in the 20th century that European and Asian states collapsed under the onslaught of such totalist heterodoxies, whether in the case of Russian Bolshevism, Italian Fascism, German National Socialism, or Chinese Communism, to name only the most influential. With them, they brought the recurrent tendencies of the totalist mindset – the desire and necessity to totally reconstruct society according to the soteriological-simplifying principles dominating their doctrinal core. The main difference was that modernisation now granted them the means which other premodern, totalist heterodoxies and ideocracies had lacked. At least in theory, the whole of society was now unprecedentedly open to the power of the state – and, in those ideocracies which did not abandon their ideological purity to the pragmatism necessary for governing a relatively stable realm, this unleashed the revolutionary implementation phase of their ultimate aims, or what is commonly understood as totalitarianism.³

Lastly, when it comes to the distinct environment shaped in totalitarian regimes, Padovan is right to point to the “unique, unrepeatable, convergence between State policy, Social Science and political ideology, a convergence that makes it possible to formulate a whole system of strategic knowledge about society” or, in other words, the creation of “a ‘total’ system of biopsychosocial control” [7] (p. 494).

¹ Relevant premodern examples range from the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt and the rise of the Iranian Safavid Empire to the Fulani jihad and Mahdist state in West and East Africa, respectively.

² To this one must add the strength of the *mujaddid* tradition, which essentially pursues religious renewal. This led to periodical attempts at “restoring” this ideal state of affairs and correcting the divergences separating the many Muslim societies.

³ The process through which such heterodoxies were affected and, in turn, sought to affect themselves the project of modernity, will require a more detailed approach elsewhere since it does not represent the primary focus of this essay.

II. Purity and Impurity in Service of Totalism

As it has been mentioned previously, the apparently exceptional nature of totalitarianism is somewhat reduced when the modern means of control and organisation are no longer considered their primary traits. It is, after all, no coincidence that Carl J. Friedrich, one of the foremost scholars of totalitarianism, gradually came to regard the existence of a totalist ideology as the key essential aspect for such systems [8] (p. 126). Moreover, rather than being truly extraordinary, totalist worldviews – including non-militant ones – represent instead a deep-seated aspect of human culture, even though factors such as perceptions towards contradictions may influence their evolution. Nevertheless, totalism as a scientific concept is first encountered in German social science debates during the early 1920s, after which it resurfaced in the United States, most famously in a psychological context in the works of Erik Erikson and Robert Lifton, yet always tied to totalitarianism and, ultimately, to what can be called totalist ideologies. Somewhat unsurprisingly – due to their scientific backgrounds – Erikson and Lifton tend to use the term in an individualistic manner, representing the propensity of the individual for all or nothing alignments, rather than going any further.

Lifton's eight criteria which may be associated with totalism are worth mentioning here. These are as follows:

- Milieu control
- Mystical manipulation
- The demand for purity
- The cult of confession
- The “sacred science”
- Loading the language
- Doctrine over person
- The dispensing of existence

Lifton points out that each of these features possesses a totalistic quality, depending on an “equally absolute philosophical assumption”, whilst mobilizing certain individual emotional tendencies which are “mostly of a polarizing nature”. Moreover, Lifton argues that such features, when combined, “create an atmosphere which may temporarily energize or exhilarate, but which at the same time poses the graves of human threats” [9] (p. 420). In approaching these eight

themes, Anthony and Robbins have rightly pointed out that some of the most important factors identifiable here are the presence of total commitment, the presence of duality, and an “apocalyptic” worldview [10].

Yet, it must be considered that totalism itself as a concept need not be understood merely as an individual predisposition for adherence to totalist ideologies, but may also be expanded to include a system of thought which places a supreme value on totality and which, consequently, is typically inimical to plurality and ambiguity. Moreover, totalist projects can include both religious and secular perspectives, since totality as a concept may be – at least in some cases – more important than ideological features. And while totalism can also be encountered in quietist movements, it is its potential for fuelling militancy that is the most dangerous. Lastly, the potential for conflict increases when such worldviews must interact with ambiguity and pluralist values.

The ideal evolution path of a totalist movement typically has its starting point in a charismatic heterodoxy, which, when insufficiently challenged, morphs into a movement able to achieve political hegemony, with the final and most difficult step being the transformation into an ideocracy, with the potential for undergoing a totalitarian phase. Furthermore, when looking at the common features encountered across the wide spectrum of totalist heterodoxies, premodern or modern, quietist or militant, secular or religious, the following points tend to stand out in their doctrinal core:

- Totality as supreme value
- Pure-Impure dichotomy
- Truth-Untruth dichotomy
- Ambiguity-Plurality as minimal values
- Soteriological-simplifying principles

In this respect, the relationship between purity and truth is critical, since it represents a powerful driving force for the implementation of the “good” and the combating of the “evil.” Considering the importance placed by totalist heterodoxies on achieving their ultimate aims, the first focus is on the implementation of what they associate with purity – or, in other words, staying true to the doctrinal core of the original charismatic heterodoxy and its expansion as a model across its

host society. The second focus is on the combating impurity, namely counterideological factors, potentially dangerous neutrals and elements providing contradictions. Totalistic social reconstruction projects may take various forms, such as concentrating on ideological adherence, on the idea of race, or of class [1] (p. 73). Unsurprisingly, in a socio-political sense, is this very attempt at total implementation of what is associated with purity and the combating of what is associated with impurity that has historically contributed to massive human mobilisation, as well as to disastrous human tolls – as the biopolitics of both totalist heterodoxies and modern totalitarian phases have made repeatedly made clear.

The pure-impure dichotomy – which tends to function alongside an equally powerful truth-untruth dichotomy – is, in turn, influenced by the intensity with which contradictions are handled. There are a variety of ways to react to and deal with contradictions in social situations, ranging from the usually extreme gesture of embracing the contradiction, to not acknowledging its existence (or reinterpreting its nature), to attempting to modify the contradiction. In the case of totalist movements, especially in the militant variants, the focus will be on a direct countering of the impure contradiction to the pure model offered by the doctrinal core. This is made clear even briefly analysing the main ideological features of two apparently different movements, such as in Anabaptist ideocratic experiment in Münster (1534-1535) and the movement known today as Islamic State. Thus, for the Anabaptists, the following features stand out:

- Pure Model: The perfect society is found in the imagined, early Biblical community.
- Impure Contradiction: Those who have not chosen re-baptism and, as a result live in a state of impurity and untruth. Essentially all who do not belong to the chosen community are included in this category.
- Ultimate Aim: Property, behaviour, and spiritual life are to be organised according to the doctrinal core of the movement, namely, the Anabaptist interpretation of the Scriptural traditions. Implementing this model on a worldwide scale, through elimination of impure, counterideological factors.

By comparison, despite being overall a much more deadly and bloody movement, Islamic State shares both the totalist vision and the ideological ambition to expand its value system and implement its ultimate aims across the world:

- Pure Model: Islam as an unchanging, perfect guide, which enables the model to appear both relevant and implementable.
- Impure Contradiction: Any existing contradiction to the ideal model must be eliminated and the purity of the original community and its model restored. Those who are part of the chosen group may wage war or eliminate those who are not, even as the impure categories have their own hierarchy, from Sunni rival movements, to Shia “heretics”, to Western “Crusaders” and Jews.
- Ultimate Aim: The community must be organised solely according to the rules of the doctrinal core, namely, Islamic State’s interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadiths. Ignorance must be destroyed, even if the majority of the population itself judged to be guilty of it. The pure chosen community has the task to implement purity and reconstruct society worldwide according to its doctrinal core, once again with a licence to eliminate any counterideological factors deemed impure.

While both are movements which can be associated with the renovative totalism type –that is, a type of totalism focussed on the past as an ideal implementable model – they also share a number of other features, such as attempting to maintain control over the lives of their followers, while seeking to expand the principles based on their doctrinal core beyond their political centres.

III. Conclusion

Thus, if a distinct type of biopolitics and biopower converged in an unprecedented manner with the rise of modernity and the emergence of ideocratic polities, such processes have deep roots in the premodern era, namely, in the series of socio-political projects which formed the doctrinal core of numerous totalist heterodoxies. If the totalitarian phase may be considered an overall exception in its ruthless and total attempt at implementing control over society and organising of life and death, then totalist movements, with their inherent focus on a pure-

impure dichotomy, must necessarily be taken into account for any such conceptual archaeology. And if the convergence between science, policy, and ideology can be associated with totalising programs, the contemporary era has added yet another dimension to the mix, that of personal choice in the creation and customisation of the body – both of the present and of the future. This can be seen in the growing debates on issues such as reproduction autonomy, along with the possibility of effectively customising infants by the use of various enhancements. As it can be deduced from understanding the main features of totalism, if pluralist contexts themselves make the abuse of such developments far less likely, such is not the case in totalist ones, where little if any limit can be considered when it comes to the totalist ultimate aims. Lastly and most importantly in this regard, as society becomes ever more complex and fragmented, the demand for all-encompassing, soteriological-simplifying solutions increases, which turn leads to opportunities for the emergence and expansion of new totalist movements.

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