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## Several Thoughts on Newell's *Tyrants*

Martin Palouš

Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA

### ABSTRACT

This critical review of Newell's *Tyrants* consists of two parts. The first one departs from questions Jan Patočka, the most important Czech philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, raised in the 1970s in the context of his critical reading of a book by Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*. Patočka's criticism of Barraclough, suggested here as a starting point for a dialogue with Newell, departed from Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences* and his own interpretation of the current phase of history of mankind as the end of Europe and the arrival of a post-European age. The second part confronts Newell's treatments of tyrants usurping power throughout the human history and his efforts to offer a "homeopathic cure for the tyrannical temptations" that we might see emerging in the future with the concept of totalitarianism elaborated in the political thought of Hannah Arendt.

### I

When I was reading Waller Newell's *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, & Terror*, the United States presidential campaign that in the end brought Donald Trump to the White House was just culminating. Trying to organize my thoughts for this review—surrounded by all the political buzz and noise that resulted on November 8 in the decision of the American people that may be seen by future scholars studying the world politics of the first decades of the twenty-first century as one of its big turns—what was coming again and again to my mind was the dialogue Czech philosopher Jan Patočka<sup>1</sup> led almost a half century ago with British historian Geoffrey Barraclough. This dialogue was taking place in the early 1970s, during the last phase of Patočka's life, when he was working on the essay "*Europe and the Post-European Epoch*."<sup>2</sup> Barraclough's book *An Introduction to Contemporary History*<sup>3</sup> offered Patočka an opportunity to formulate his own philosophical interpretation of political transformations in the world he was experiencing during his lifetime.

I am convinced that today's readers of Newell's book should be at least aware of questions raised by Patočka, too.

### II

Barraclough opens his *Introduction to Contemporary History* by pointing to the basic problems connected

with the topic of his inquiry: "The very notion of contemporary history...is a contradiction in terms. Before we can adopt a historical point of view we must stand at a certain distance from the happenings we are investigating. It is hard at all times to 'disengage' ourselves and look at the past dispassionately and with the critical eye of the historian. Is it possible at all in the case of events which bear so closely upon our own lives?"<sup>4</sup> And where does contemporary history actually begin? "Contemporary' is a very elastic term," realizes Barraclough, "and to say—as it is often done—that contemporary history is the history of the generation now living is an unsatisfactory definition for the simple reason that generations overlap. Furthermore, if contemporary history is regarded in this way, we are left with ever-changing boundaries and an ever-changing content, with a subject-matter that is in constant flux."<sup>5</sup>

And finally, Barraclough's own point of departure: "Contemporary history follows...an almost contrary procedure"<sup>6</sup> to "history of the traditional type."<sup>7</sup> Although the latter "starts at a given point in the past... and works systematically forward, from the chosen starting point,"<sup>8</sup> the point of departure of the former is the presence of historian. What he needs to do first to start his study of the selected historical phenomena is to "establish its distinguishing features and its boundaries."<sup>9</sup>

To do just that, Barraclough suggested to his readers—before getting down to the reconstruction of the

selected segments of the recent past—to stay for a moment with their own perspective in the broader context of human history: with the “the sense of living in a new period”<sup>10</sup> dominating current historical consciousness; the sense of living in a world in which the element of change seems to be much stronger than the element of permanence and continuity; the sense of living in a time which is, as Hamlet put it, “out of joint”; the sense of living in a moment of human history perceived as a turning point; the sense of living in a “gap,” to use the formulation of Hannah Arendt, “between the past and the future.”

In short, contemporary history, the boundaries of which the historian must first establish, is his history—a history he simply cannot be disengaged from entirely and just observe from a safe distance. The starting point of his historical reconstruction is his relationship towards the past and his engagement with it! Only as long as “we keep our eyes alert for what is new and different...(and)...have the real gulf between the two periods fixed in our minds can we start building bridges across it.”<sup>11</sup>

And here comes Jan Patočka with his questions inspired by his teacher Edmund Husserl. Should “the sense of living in a new period”—that brings contemporary history into being and turn the historian into an active bridge builder between the world of the past sinking into oblivion, and the world of future that is unknown, unpredictable and thus threatening—be used as an impulse to open another important communication? Should it inspire a dialogue between a contemporary historian and a contemporary philosopher?

My point is that Newell’s book attracts the same questioning. Doesn’t he succeed and fail at the same time in the similar way as did Geoffrey Barraclough, according to Patočka’s diagnosis? I will cope with his take on the role of tyrants in the human history in the second part of this text. But I will first comment on Patočka’s basic observations and the arguments used in his critical review of Barraclough.

### III

What attracted Patočka’s attention was what Barraclough couldn’t fail to see when he started introducing his readers to contemporary history: the period between 1890, when Bismarck resigned his post of Chancellor of the German Empire, and 1961, when J. F. Kennedy became president of the United States—a great divide between the old and the new, an enormous shift in our perception of who we are as finite human beings living their lives in the time that has been accorded to them on earth.

What Barraclough tried to present to his readers was an era when people must first accept the fundamental fact that they are living in the world that is very different from the world inhabited and known by their immediate ancestors.

On one side, there is the Eurocentric modern world of the nineteenth century that ended with the outburst of the Great War.

On the other side, there is the world of the twentieth century, when Europe is being “dwarfed” and all other continents have started to play an increasingly significant role in the formation of its order; the period when non-Europeans have emerged as significant players in the world politics, shaping together, with the former hegemon of the world, a new global civilization.

“The European age... is over,” stated Barraclough in the last chapter of his book, “and with it the predominance of the old European scale of values... The civilization of the future...is taking shape as a world civilization in which all the continents will play their part.”<sup>12</sup>

Patočka agreed with Barraclough’s conclusion but decided to add his “critical follow-up,”<sup>13</sup> treating the arrival of the post-European epoch not just as a matter of “realpolitik” concerned with the distribution of world power but as a philosophical problem.

On one hand, Barraclough’s analysis offered “an approach which is perfectly pertinent for political analyses of this or that situation. It takes a stand in the middle of events and attempts to make from there a kind of sortie in different directions.”<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, this approach is fundamentally insufficient to articulate our present historical problems and “to illuminate and define the present in its essential relation to the past”<sup>15</sup>:

“The fact that the contemporary situation is post-European, that it is deeply affected by the negative element of the prefix ‘post’, hinders its real use by Barraclough. And further, ‘post-Europe’ presupposes an idea about Europe’s past, about what it was. The depth of this divide can be fully measured only when we try to grasp the contours of Europe as a whole. All of that can hardly be revealed if we stick to this method.”<sup>16</sup>

1. “Barraclough presupposes one single mankind in the sense of mankind already Europeanized.”<sup>17</sup>
2. “Barraclough accepts uncritically, without reflection, the European periodicity of history as if it were something that belongs to history as such. He does not consider the possibility—and most probably the necessity—of the existence of the pre-European historical epoch, the European epoch (further divided into antiquity, Middle

Ages and Modern Times) and the post-European epoch.”<sup>18</sup>

3. “Barraclough is unable to delineate in a convincing manner the contemporary situation, because he does not take into consideration its starting point in the inner sense.”<sup>19</sup>

There are three things that must be distinguished:

1. “The European principle, the principle of rational reflection, according to which all human activities, including the activities of thinking, must be based upon insight”<sup>20</sup>;
2. “Europe as a single historical reality, political, social and spiritual, including the ways in which this reality came into existence, the institutions created in the course of European history and also the forces working in the direction of its unity even after Europe disintegrated into a group of sovereign particular organisms”<sup>21</sup>;
3. “The European heritage, which consists of things which all heirs of Europe accept from her past and what they avouch to be as a matter of course, their common possession: science, technique, the rational organization of economy and society.”<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on the European principle of “logos and ratio” came clearly from Edmund Husserl. Its place in the philosophical discourse in the 1970s when Patočka was elaborating his “heretical” approach to philosophy of history,<sup>23</sup> however, had to be qualified and newly delimited in the moment of Europe’s end. At the same time, it is this principle, what still must be preserved as our fundamental point of departure—to “shed some light on the first short lap on our journey into the emerging post-European world”<sup>24</sup> and inspire philosophers—concrete men and women living in the today’s poleis (cities) with their fellow-citizens—to resist the personal and social disorders that go hand in hand with the historical transformations experienced in their times.

This is a call to get engaged in a search whose aim is to scrutinize the basic presumptions of our thought in the current turmoil; in an investigation whose objective is, as Socrates proposed at the very beginning of European history, the “care for the soul.”

Much as Barraclough rightly identified the changing geopolitical constellation in the world connected with the arrival of the post-European age, he was still viewing this situation through the traditional European lens. What we can observe in the world today was considered by him as the next step in one history of one mankind that is progressing in a linear motion. He wrongly believed that one humankind is a historical given and passed up the fact that today’s humankind and Europe are not one and the same thing; that there is no one humankind yet, but multiple humankind still waiting to

be united, transformed into one global and genuinely post-European formation; that their unifier should not be just science, technology, the rational organization of economy and society, Europe has discovered and passed as a kind of collective possession to all its current heirs, but also, and in the first place, the legacy left to all of them by European philosophy (as Husserl reminded us).

Patočka’s criticism of Barraclough was targeted at his inability to formulate and think through with sufficient clarity and precision the real in-depth problems of the contemporary phase of world history, namely, the grand reawakening of pre-Europeans accompanying the arrival of the post-European age; the fact that makes the gap between the past and the future much deeper, more fundamental and thus more revolutionary than Barraclough could ever think. Here is how Patočka eloquently described this intrinsic contemporary phenomenon:

The moral superiority, the awareness of insurmountable strength, which had once spoken in the orders of Chinese emperors, even in the moments of their most profound humiliation, turns in the times when those who up to now ruled the world, have lost their power, into a new bond for enormous consensus. What claims its rights here is the energy kept intact by isolation, untouched by barbarian rule, strengthened by humiliation, steeled thanks to its entry into the world processes during the revolution which lasted for long decades, the energy zeroing in an unknown direction; mankind speaks here, all of a sudden, from the abyss of times, which were pre-European; unconquered Egypt which persisted in isolation and waited for its moment to come back and reveal itself in its full strength. Post-European humankind speaks here from the pre-European depth, and if the language used is the one of all contemporary revolutionaries – Marxist terminology – it is only conducive to the fallacy Europe so easily succumbs to...<sup>25</sup>

And then Patočka’s consequential questions:

What entitles us to expound the latest phase of the history of East Asia from the European perspective and view the phenomena such as the Chinese revolutions in 1912 and 1949, as the Europeanization of China as matter of course, instead of at least considering—mindful of Europe’s own evolution through various catastrophes to an ever more complex new formation of the same principle—that what we might be confronted with here is, on the contrary, “Sinicization” of certain European cultural elements?<sup>26</sup>

Is Chinese Marxism a continuation of the Marxian way of thinking, applied to the Chinese material, or it is rather the continuation of Chinese universalism which uses the conceptual equipment of Marx as a suitable means of how to articulate its own historical mission?<sup>27</sup>

It is certainly not Marxism or any other modern European ideology or fundamentalist dogma that can offer us guidance in our efforts to understand our

current situation in the world. Nor is it a postmodern relativism with its somewhat ridiculous attempts to get rid of all European metaphysics. Nor is Barraclough's approach to our contemporary history!

If we want to prevent in the future what Husserl was warning against already in the 1930s—"the fall into a barbarian hatred of spirit"<sup>28</sup>—we need to return to the core European principle of *logos* and *ratio*; to call in our historical situation on European classical philosophy departing from the Socratic fundamental question.

What is at stake today, however, is not whether we still can avert the final catastrophe of the European world as Husserl still believed in the 1930s—this catastrophe has already taken place—but the future of Europe's legacy in the post-European world. And here is Patočka's determined stance and his version of "heroism of reason" his teacher and the founding father of phenomenology tried pass to his pupils:

"Europe has put forward two ways the earth can be opened: the outward way of conquest and domination of the world, which brought about the eclipse of Europe as a single historical formation; the inward way of opening the earth in a sense of unlocking of the world, the transformation of the life-world of human existence as such. This is the course we should find, after all outside catastrophes and inner confusions, and stay on it to the very end."<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

Newell's *Tyrants* is a study trying to cover in its 232 pages some 2,500 years of tyranny: a form of government existing in ancient societies, undergoing all sorts of metamorphoses in the course of centuries, being creatively adapted for the local use by various cultures and civilizations, and in existence till today. Despite the quantum of historical information to be digested here, despite the enormous span of human history covered, it is, however—rather than a concise guide through the world of tyrannies of the past—a valuable contribution to *contemporary* history. Rather than aspiring to write a monumental opus concerning an important historical phenomenon accompanying the whole history of mankind, Newell has decided to take the role of an "engaged" historian, reacting to the needs of our time; trying to mobilize his knowledge of past tyrannies in order to reflect on our present situation and on the future of liberty in our world.

He certainly would agree with Barraclough's observation that it is "the sense of living in a new period" that determines our personal relationship to the world history; that what we need first today—rather than the "objective" historical accounts subscribing to the maxims

of traditional historicism founded by Leopold von Ranke—is to find a basic intellectual and political orientation in our current situation; that what we are looking for in order to preserve freedom and resist the possibility of arrival of new tyrannies, are the "distinct features and boundaries" of our current epoch; that what we need to concentrate on and examine carefully are exactly the historical crossroads when the problems which are actual in the world today emerged and materialized in such and such historical realities.

The reason why this book has been written is actually clearly stated only in its last chapter: what is being looked for is "a homeopathic cure for the tyrannical temptations"<sup>30</sup> that are lurking around in the world of the twenty-first century. As democracy seemed to be triumphant in 1989 that brought the end of the "short" twentieth century—a century of "extremes," in the words of Eric Hobsbawm<sup>31</sup>—what we are witnessing in the first decades of the new millennium are phenomena that make us rightly worried. Aren't we on the verge of situation when some tyranny globalized—and thus even worse than all varieties of autocracy that attacked our European/Western civilization in the past—is going to hit us again and destroy our freedom?

To give us his answer to this troubling question Newell starts by making distinctions between three basic types of tyranny that can be discerned in the history of mankind and offers illustrations:

The first and the oldest category of tyrants is what Newell calls the "garden-variety." These tyrants ruled over entire countries and societies as if it had been their personal property. The principal aim of their rule was not a common good or commonwealth but the enhancement of their own pleasure and the profit of their own clan and cronies. The historical examples of this species suggested by Newell: Hiero I of Syracuse, the Emperor Nero, General Franco, the Somozas, Papa Doc Duvalier, Mubarak...

The second type of a tyrant is the "tyrant-reformer." The tyrants-reformers differ from the "garden-variety" tyrants by being not just hedonists or profit seekers. They are rulers with a vision to make the state they govern, usually with an iron fist, powerful, prosperous, and great again (to use the favorite slogan of Donald Trump's presidential campaign). Their aim is not just to please or entertain themselves but to really enhance their countries and develop their societies; to help the well-being of their people through the ruthless exercise of their unconstrained authority in order to keep the law and order and protect the state against all its external enemies. And again, the historical examples of this category mentioned by Newell: Alexander the Great, Caesar, the Tudors, Louis XIV, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Kemal Ataturk...

And finally the third type of tyranny: the “millenarian.” “These rulers are neither content to be mere garden-variety tyrants, gluttons, and exploiters, nor even to be reforming tyrants who make constructive improvements. They are driven by the impulse to impose a millenarian blueprint that will bring about a society of the future in which the individual will be submerged in the collective and all privilege and alienation will forever be eradicated.”<sup>32</sup> And again examples illustrating the nature and especially murderous potential of this species: Robespierre, Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot, and today’s Jihadists....

There is no doubt, according to Newell, that all three types of tyrants are usurpers of power ready to keep their subjects enslaved and to commit violent, atrocious, and morally reprehensible acts to achieve their goals. But whereas the two first types of tyrants can produce crimes that still can be judged with the help of human categories of good and evil, and especially measured by the Machiavellian standards of means and ends applicable in the world of “realpolitik,” the “millenarian tyrants” deserve his special attention and condemnation. The thing is that they are ready to instigate actions of a dramatically different nature than the previous two types. Their evil is absolute, historically unprecedented, really “out of joint,” that is, incommensurable with the fundamental principles of humanity—denying the basic condition under which the life was given to men who have ever lived, are living now, or will be living on our planet.

The first question that must be asked is whether Patočka’s perspective, distinguishing “the existence of the pre-European historical epoch, the European epoch (further divided into antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modern Times), and the post-European epoch” would have any resonance, or is rather entirely absent, in the Newell classification. I am afraid the latter is true and it is, in my opinion, a basic source of its deficiencies.

My point is that to speak about tyranny makes sense only when this form of government appears within the orbit of European civilization that came into existence with the emergence of Greek poleis and their Hellenic culture; that tyrannies could emerge only among people who recognized freedom of assembly, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech as the basic organizational principles of political bodies they were part of; who were aware of the fundamental value of human liberty and thus ready to participate at their “unsheltered life”—“a life of outreach and initiative without pause nor ease.”<sup>33</sup>

Were the rulers of empires existing before in the ancient world and surrounding Graecia Magna around 800 B.C. when the process of formation of city-states began, tyrants? They, for sure, were used to crush mercilessly any disobedience with the iron fist and kept the

whole population in servitude, but they were not. They acted as mediators between earth and heaven. They were guardians of order among mortal men—entrusted to their hands by immortal gods who were in charge of maintenance of order of the whole universe. It was the divine descent of these rulers that legitimized their absolute power over huge state entities formed in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia—treated by them, as Patočka put it, as it were just gigantic households.<sup>34</sup>

What was totally absent in the societies administered by the pyramid of governmental institutions on the top of which these rulers stood, was exactly what was built into the origins of European civilization; what formed Europe as such and set her on the path of history: the possibilities of free human life offered by politics and philosophy the ancient Greeks discovered, cultivated, and passed to the future generations of Europeans.<sup>35</sup>

The kings of Babylon, Persia, Lydia, or the pharaohs of Egypt were not tyrants who usurped power and ruled by force, but Athenian Peisistratus was. He ruled over his DEMOS composed of free citizens—and his regime kept itself in existence for more than two decades—not only with the help of his heavily armed and well-trained guards and loyalists but also helped by the fear of his powerless peers to stand up against him and depose him from the post he illegitimately usurped.

## V

I see, however, a more serious problem in Newell’s treatment of tyrants as they appeared in the human history, in its contemporary phase, characterized by Patočka as the post-European age. Newell again doesn’t seem to pay any attention to the reality of such an epochal change and it is this omission which, in my view, seriously distorts substantively his approach to the third and the most dangerous category of this species: millenarian tyrants.

He sees their spritual origin in the philosophers of European Enlightenment—he especially blames Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a kind of chief ideologue and intellectual inspiration—and points to Maximilian Robespierre and other Jacobins that installed the reign of terror in the relatively short phase of French Revolution—before they themselves were devoured by the beast they helped to bring into existence—as the first examples of this brand. He argues that it is they who represent the main inspiration for all future millenarian tyrants ready to murder not only all their opponents but an unlimited number of innocent people in order to realize their political objectives; to achieve radical transformation of human society from its present wicked form (unjust, materialistic, and selfish<sup>36</sup>), to its future desired form

(spiritually pure, selfless, and communal<sup>37</sup>) as it allegedly once was in its Golden Age.

First of all, what was constantly coming to my mind when I was getting acquainted with Newell's approach to the role of millenarian tyrants in world history was a profound philosophical critique of gnosticism: political religions replacing Christianity with the arrival of Modern Age that can be found in the political thought of Eric Voegelin.<sup>38</sup> But, unfortunately, Voegelin is not even mentioned by Newell. It is a real pity, because it is exactly here, I believe, where he could get a number of important arguments supporting, deepening, and eventually correcting his own analysis.

What I have found even more troubling, however, than Newell's omission of Voegelin, was that he decided not to pay any attention whatsoever in his book to the important debate, taking place throughout the twentieth century and concerning the peculiar nature of new autocratic regimes—unprecedented and radically different from all previous autocracies—the regimes that started to emerge in Europe as political responses to the postwar European crisis and brought the term totalitarianism into existence.

Isn't it exactly this debate where the Newell search for a homeopathic cure for the current and future totalitarian temptations should have departed from? Isn't it exactly this debate—started in the 1920s when the term was first coined (not by the critics of totalitarian regimes but by their proponents) and going on and on throughout this century where his analysis of the achievements of millenarian tyrants should have begun? I am aware that for many scholars nowadays the very concept of totalitarianism does carry too many ideological overtones inherited from the Cold War and is overloaded with personal memories and emotions; that because of that it simply cannot serve as a solid basis for their science and it is advisable rather to retreat from it.<sup>39</sup> But isn't it just such an emotional and personal point of departure that can help us better than anything else to discover a cure for this deadly disease?

There is obviously no space here to analyze all the stages, twists, and turns of this debate, so I will focus in my response to Newell's *Tyrants* only on the deepest and the most provocative participant in it: Hannah Arendt.

## VI

Hannah Arendt was a German Jew and for obvious reasons totalitarianism couldn't be, as she said repeatedly, merely one topic of her academic research among others, but represented a real, personal problem. Her first exposure to "totalitarian radiation" took place when Hitler

seized power in the Weimar Republic in 1933. She described this experience more than 30 years later in an interview she gave on German public television<sup>40</sup> in the following way: what was shocking for me, she said, was not the radicalism of Hitler's political program, but the strange social change that occurred almost instantly. Anti-Semitism as such was definitely not anything new and all Jews in Germany were used to its occasional manifestations. The radicalism of the Nazis in this respect was indeed a gloomy, ominous sign for the future, but it was not at all surprising: "We didn't need Hitler's assumption of power to know that the Nazis were our enemies!"<sup>41</sup> What was much more depressing than the political changes was to see "not what our enemies did but what our friends did," that is, how quickly they "got in line":

In the wave of *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination), which was relatively voluntary—in any case, not yet under the pressure of terror—it was as if an empty space formed around one. I lived in an intellectual milieu, but I also knew other people. And among intellectuals *Gleichschaltung* was the rule, so to speak. But not among the others. And I never forgot that.<sup>42</sup>

This is, in my view, the first strong signal why the primary focus on the utopian ideologies inspiring the policies of totalitarian dictators—or millenarian tyrants in Newell's terminology—may be too one-sided, or even missing the very nature of totalitarian regime being formed under their leadership. What helped such monstrosities come into existence was not just a blueprint to be turned into reality by the activities of utopia-builders, but a surprising element of popular consent; their capacity for coordination with the new realities—shown not only by the intelligentsia of the societies hit by this plague, but, of course, by the whole population at large.

Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism based on her personal encounter with it seems to be quite different from the analysis offered to us by Newell. And here are the main points of her approach:

The emergence of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century was not the result of an attack against Europe led by barbarous villains who came from the outside and struck like a bolt from the blue, but it was enabled by the striking inability of modern European societies to find an adequate response in the moment when totalitarianism appeared.

Totalitarianism represents the most radical denial of human freedom, unknown and unprecedented in human history. The crimes against humanity, committed against millions of innocent people, genocides, that took place in the heart of "civilized" Europe, have revealed the depth of the crisis of modern European civilization.

What comes under fire in the moment of confrontation with the totalitarian threat are not only the institutions of the modern nation-state but the European political identity as such. Neither social sciences, describing and analyzing social reality from the neutral, value-free point of view (equating totalitarianism “with some well-known evil of the past, such as an aggression, tyranny, conspiracy”)<sup>43</sup>, nor the perspective of traditional liberal politics can help us here.

The main difficulty with totalitarianism lies in our inability to understand it; “to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all”;<sup>44</sup> to regain the capacity to act in the moment when totalitarian tendencies emerge in the midst of turmoil of political crises; to keep public space open even if the plurality of existing options are fading away and the seemingly invincible Laws of Nature or Laws of History are requiring our “coordination.”

Modernity allegedly liberated man from the shackles by which his Promethean human nature had been bound to the earth. The political experience of the twentieth century, however, puts the whole modern period into a radically new perspective.

If we want to understand this event, it is Europe’s entire modernization project that has to be put in question. Totalitarianism must be studied in the proper historical perspective and its “crystallizing elements” traced back to their origins in previous centuries.<sup>45</sup>

But what did it mean for Arendt’s research? Her aim was certainly not to offer a causal explanation of historical phenomena but to let the event of the emergence of totalitarianism “illuminate its own past”; by enfolding the “story” of totalitarianism in order to obtain its comprehension. It could not be achieved by “denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities, that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt.”<sup>46</sup>

To be occupied with totalitarianism meant for Arendt “examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be.”<sup>47</sup>

What had to be established first was a proper historical context. The totalitarian movements emerged in Europe after the Great War (1914–1918). This first pan-European military conflagration after the long period of relative peace and prosperity (which began in 1815 when the Vienna Congress of leading European states ended the decades of turmoil and disorder triggered by the French Revolution) was indeed an epochal event.

What changed after its termination was not only the political map of Europe but also the general climate of ideas on the continent. European politics after the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920) took place in an environment that was radically different from the prewar period. As distinct from the wonderful and in many ways delirious and seductive “Belle Epoque” that European society was living through immediately before the First World War, the postwar era made Europeans to wake up to very different realities. What disappeared in the first place was the relaxed, self-confident “Eurooptimism” that accompanied the European politics throughout the whole nineteenth century. Four million members of European middle-class societies killed on the fronts were not the only victims of the first all-out conflict after ninety years of stability in Europe; there was also the central political idea of European modernity: the idea of progress.

The twentieth century “has become indeed, as Lenin predicted,” as Arendt stated in the opening sentence of her study *On Violence*, “a century of wars and revolutions, hence a century of that violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator.”<sup>48</sup> It has become a century when European civilization, instead of leading the world to its better future, has found itself in mortal danger, threatened by the totalitarian attempt at global conquest and total domination. It has become a century that has undermined and radically problematized the very foundations of European modernity and ended the European supremacy in the world history.

Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest-forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries. It is as though mankind had divided itself between those who believe in human omnipotence (who think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it) and those for whom powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives.<sup>49</sup>

To understand the nature of totalitarianism presupposes the realization above all that despite their opposite attitudes as far as the necessary outcome of historical processes is concerned, “Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal”;<sup>50</sup> that the task is not to stick to one or the other and to become either a reckless optimist or a reckless prophet of despair, but to emancipate our thought from the superstition that all events in the human world are in the end dictated by “historical necessity.”

What Arendt tried to open up when studying totalitarian phenomena is an entirely new paradigm of modernity that transcends the way we think about human



history. What she had been looking for with her writing was a comprehension of the human situation that would help people regain insight into what they—and not the blind forces of Nature or History—are doing; a comprehension that aims at restoring the original free, spontaneous character of human political activity, at recovering the dignity and the full power of human agency.

To comprehend the totalitarian attempt at global conquest and total domination does not mean only to study certain sets of empirical observable facts—political and social systems, the methods of enforcement of state power, spontaneously grown worldviews and popular beliefs, the official state ideologies, and so on—but above all to be ready to receive from God the greatest gift a man could desire: the open or “understanding” heart King Solomon was praying for: “the divine gift of action, of being a beginning and therefore -being able to make a beginning.”<sup>51</sup>

And Arendt’s final advice and appeal:

What can save us from the spell or curse our century of totalitarianism imposed on us is not an intervention from outside or from above, but our faculty of imagination,

which alone enables to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair ... Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. We are contemporaries only so far our understanding reaches. If we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century; we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism.<sup>52</sup>

## VII

Newell’s treatment of modern and contemporary millenarian tyrants seems to be out of touch with the deep problems of current political situation of global mankind Arendt and Patočka are occupied with, and it is the reason that his analysis of the past is rather flat and his recommendations as far as the future threats unconvincing.

Taking into consideration Patočka’s observations concerning the twentieth century as a period of the end of European era and arrival of the post-European age, it is hard to believe that the main inspiration of Cambodian or Iranian millenarian tyrants, for instance, came just from their French education. Isn’t it true that the revival of non-European cultures speaking to the

current post-modern situation “from the pre-European depth,” as Patočka put it, has to be factored in any meaningful analysis of these frightening phenomena—including the current rise of China, which seems to stick to authoritarianism and definitely not to democracy, or Putin’s revisionist Russian Empire, or the current Jihadists or any other brand of aspiring revolutionaries in our world? And as he follows up observing the current Third World radicals, “if the language used is the one of all contemporary revolutionaries—Marxist terminology—,” isn’t it “only conducive to the fallacy Europe so easily succumbs to?”

And what shall we do, as the readers of Newell’s book, with Arendt’s difficulties of understanding of totalitarianism and her call for *the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism*? Isn’t it true that what we are confronted with, are not just the dangers connected with the wickedness and the lust for power of the past, present, and future millenarian tyrants but something much bigger and larger—what already is or at least can become our personal problem, too? That just wiping these wicked monsters out from the surface of the earth would not most likely do the job but would lead to the birth of their new, and most likely more dangerous generation?

And exactly in this context: is what Newell suggests as his “homeopathic cure” really an effective treatment of the disease, or rather a part of this problem? Is it his advice to turn attention to geopolitics and realistic policies based on the paradigm of “national interests”—to make America first and great again, as the new president wants it—that can help us out from the current dangers?

To be sincere, I doubt it. I could have added my personal observations based on my own experiences with totalitarianism in Central Europe during the second half of the twentieth century—and thus contribute in my way to the dialogue suggested by Arendt about its “essence,” but I stop here and leave it as an open question for further discussions.

## Notes

1. Jan Patočka, one of the most influential Czech philosophers of the twentieth century, was born on June, 1, 1907, in Turnov and died on March 13, 1977, in Prague, having suffered a heart attack following prolonged police interrogations. He became an Associate Professor at Charles University (docent) in 1936 and Full Professor in 1968. He was allowed to lecture only in the years 1945–1950, then forced to leave Charles University and returned, thanks to the Prague Spring, in 1968, and forced to leave finally in 1972. In the meantime he worked in various academic institutions as a researcher, being under the surveillance of the Communist regime, always considered its ideological enemy. In the fall of 1976 he was actively involved in the process of the formation of Charter 77, the

- most important Czechoslovak human rights movement, and became together with Jiri Hajek and Vaclav Havel one of its first spokespersons. Despite his limited possibilities of teaching publicly, he raised at least two generations of students, lecturing and having seminars in all sorts of private and semiprivate places and venues, laying the foundations of what was in the years of Charter 77 nicknamed as Patočka's "flying university."
2. Jan Patočka, *Evropa a doba poevropská* (Lidové noviny Prague, 1992) and *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky* (SSJP2), Vol. 2 (OIKOUMENE, Prague, 1999). The quotations from the Czech text of Patočka have been translated to English by Martin Palouš.
  3. Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, originally published in 1964 by C.A. Watts. All references in this text are from the 9th edition of Barraclough's book by Penguin Books, 1976.
  4. Barraclough, 14.
  5. Ibid., 13–14.
  6. Ibid., 17.
  7. Ibid.
  8. Ibid.
  9. Ibid., 12.
  10. Ibid., 13.
  11. Ibid.
  12. Ibid., 268.
  13. Patočka, SSJP2, 85.
  14. Patočka, 96.
  15. Ibid.
  16. Ibid.
  17. Ibid., 97.
  18. Ibid.
  19. Ibid.
  20. Ibid., 84.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Ibid.
  23. Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. E. Kohák, ed. J. Dodd (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).
  24. Patočka, SSJP2, 83.
  25. Ibid., 94.
  26. Ibid., 96.
  27. Ibid.
  28. Edmund Husserl, "The Crisis of European Man," in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Q. Laurer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 192.
  29. Patočka, SSJP2, 94.
  30. Newell, 229–32.
  31. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, A History of the World 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).
  32. Newell, 4.
  33. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 39.
  34. Ibid., 15–16.
  35. "History arises and can arise only insofar as there is ARETÉ, the excellence of humans who no longer simply live, but who make room for their justification by looking into the nature of things and acting in harmony with what they see—by building a POLIS on the basis of the law of the world which is POLEMOS, by speaking that which they see as revealing itself to a free, exposed yet undaunted human (philosophy)." Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 43.
  36. Newell, 144.
  37. Ibid.
  38. Voegelin's analysis of modern gnosticism and political religions in: Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 5, *Modernity without Restraint*, ed. and introduced by M. Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
  39. Cf. Martin Palouš, "Totalitarianism and Authoritarianism," in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, L. Kurtz (Editor-in-Chief), 2nd. Ed., Vol. 3 (Oxford: Elsevier, 2008), 2129–42.
  40. Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Gunter Gaus," *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1994), 1–23.
  41. Arendt, 10.
  42. Arendt, 11.
  43. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, 309.
  44. Arendt, 308.
  45. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), crf. Prefaces, pp. vii–xl.
  46. Ibid, op. cit., p. viii.
  47. Ibid, p. viii.
  48. Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).
  49. Arendt, *Origins*, p. vii.
  50. Ibid.
  51. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 322.
  52. Ibid., 323.