Review - Modernism and Totalitarianism

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JAMES WAKEFIELD, AUG 7 2013

Modernism and Totalitarianism: Rethinking the Intellectual Sources of Nazism and Stalinism, 1945 to Present
By: Richard Shorten
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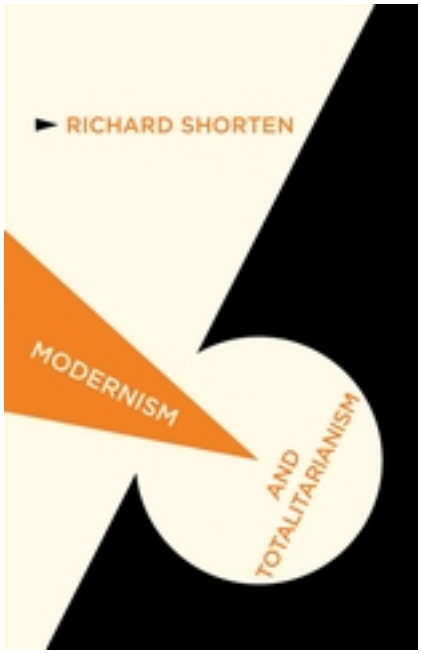

In *Modernism and Totalitarianism,* Richard Shorten aims to show that the 'classical' totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are best characterised in terms of their commitments to modern or modernist aims.[1] He restricts his focus to just Nazism and the Stalinism, since it was in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union that the distinguishing features of totalitarianism (or what we now call totalitarianism; the word was not often used by members of either regime) figured most prominently in both ideology and practice. Throughout the book he refers to three main bodies of work: post-War interpreters of totalitarianism; thinkers identified by these interpreters as its intellectual antecedents; and the works of Stalinist and Nazi insiders. Shorten's argument is presented as a rejection of the 'continuity thesis' according to which Nazism and Stalinism were 'products of the perpetuation of pre-modern characteristics.' Instead, he claims, the intellectual 'currents' of totalitarianism are better thought of as being constituted by distinctively modern 'counter– and post-Enlightenment ideas.'[2] To support his case, he looks to its 'elements' and 'sources.' The 'elements' include 'anything from institutions and practices, to behaviours and action, all the way through to beliefs, broader attitudes, or even general outlooks.'[3] Only once the defining characteristics of the two examples of 'classical totalitarianism' have been identified is it possible to locate the intellectual sources germane to both.

These preliminaries are taken up in the first two chapters. The first maps out the 'shared ideological space' of Nazism and Stalinism.[4] Referring to Arthur Koestler's novels *Darkness at Noon* and *Arrival and Departure* and

Jonathan Littell's recent bestseller *The Kindly Ones,* Shorten teases out the contrasts and points of overlap between the two ideologies. The crux of *Arrival and Departure,* writes Shorten, is a conversation between a Communist activist and a Nazi agent, with each extolling the virtues of his own ideology, as well as – according to Koestler's Nazi agent – some significant commonalities, such as 'the appeal to a collective held together […] by shared victimhood.'[5] Likewise in Littell's novel there is a conversation between the narrator (an SD officer)[6] and a Soviet prisoner of war. To defend his ideology, the narrator is compelled to provide 'a very rich précis of the Nazi worldview,' with its basis in *race,* as opposed to the version expounded in Fascist Italy, where the *state* was the fundamental concept.[7]

Shorten's use of fiction is unexpected but instructive. There is an abundance of academic literature about totalitarianism(s), but questions concerned with nebulous abstractions such as 'ideology' and 'modernism' defy clean-cut, straightforward answers. The discursive, exploratory nature of these fictional episodes gives us a sense of the complexity and nuance of the problems at hand. Strictly theoretical interpretations of totalitarianism are addressed later, but they, in general, tend to be too hard-edged to capture what was distinctively *modern* about it. Shorten criticises the familiar 'structural model' of totalitarianism, for example, on the grounds that focuses too exclusively on the role of all-encompassing, oppressive political institutions. While this accurately describes the formal makeup of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, it does not do justice to the ideological features that separate them from, say, the Italian Fascists, who, despite their authoritarian and coercive practices, never settled on a single, coherent set of commitments beyond the absorption of all social life into the state. For them this was an end in itself, not a means to realise any other aim or form of 'social identity.' In this respect Italian Fascism more closely resembles earlier forms of dictatorship.[8]

The second chapter contains much that would be of interest to intellectual historians without any special interest in Nazism and Stalinism. Here Shorten discusses the problems entailed in the notion of 'intellectual antecedents' of totalitarianism – or, for that matter, any other 'historical reality.' Plainly totalitarianism did not appear *ex nihilo,* and the cultural and historical narratives culminating in it have been discussed at length elsewhere. Charting the development of its intellectual content is a particularly tricky business, since it is unclear how we might reliably establish that one author influenced*,* still less *caused*, the development of another's ideas. Unless we are to accept a teleological reading of totalitarianism, according to which it was the *inevitable consequence of what went before* (which, incidentally, would seem to make the whole of prior history complicit in its rise), the mere expression of compatible or otherwise similar ideas at some earlier time is not enough to prove causation. It is easy enough to find commonalities between, say, Plato's vision of the just polis and a totalitarian state that is prepared to 'ride […] roughshod over the integrity of the individual.'[9] But this resemblance does not by itself tell us much about either Plato's intentions or totalitarianism's causes. Another problem is that, even where supporters of totalitarianism self-consciously identified specific sources of inspiration or influence, as certain Nazis did with Nietzsche, there is no guarantee that their interpretations are accurate or even plausible. Those readers of philosophical texts were at no less risk than political theorists today of projecting their concerns onto historical ideas, and thus consciously or unconsciously filtering out the parts uncongenial to their worldview.[10]

This is a genuinely knotty problem, and has implications that stretch beyond the scope of Shorten's book. It is hard to reconcile any Quentin Skinner-style 'contextualist' solution with the notion of precedents and sources, since on that account authors and their ideas are inextricably bound up in their particular circumstances. This is a problem when they self-consciously present their theories as innovative and unorthodox, selecting and revising elements of earlier works to fit their own ends. This tendency is by no means exclusive to advocates of totalitarianism, but among them it is particularly prevalent. Ideas often follow meandering paths from source to inheritor, with texts crudely or cynically interpreted, neglected and later popularised in a different form. Given such complex and convoluted genealogies, it not always deductively obvious what political consequences, if any, follow from an idea as originally presented. Charles Darwin's works, for example, have often been appropriated and applied in ways only tenuously related to his actual writings; Shorten agrees with Hannah Arendt that the theory of natural selection is in itself politically neutral.[11] His solution to the great problem of 'intellectual antecedents' is to acknowledge a wide (though not exhaustive) range of different classes: affinities as 'beginnings,' 'analogies' and 'representative thinkers'; and influences that may be 'indirect,' 'unconscious,' 'adoptive,' 'distorted' or 'cumulative,' or even some combination of these.[12]

The second half of the book puts the conceptual tools of the first into practice, addressing three modernist 'currents' of totalitarian thought. First is 'utopianism,' or the thought that totalitarianism enables man to attain or reclaim some higher state of being. This interpretation, notes Shorten, is more obviously applicable to Stalinism than Nazism, since the former was explicitly committed to carrying Marx's deterministic theory of history to its logical and political conclusion. Another central figure in Shorten's account is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose vision of a 'utopia of authenticity'[13], after percolating through the thought of utopian socialists like Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon, also influenced the architects of Stalinism. A different version of Rousseau's vision can be seen in Nazism, too, which makes it 'a utopia of nation' – Nazism's specifically racial elements belong to the current of 'scientism' – in which individuals would be 'inseparable from a collective political subject.'[14] In some respects closer to Nazism are J.G. von Herder and J.G. Fichte, who contribute to the picture of a people struggling to realise its collective identity. (The cultural nationalism of Herder, writes Shorten, is connected to Nazism only via a 'convoluted historical process,' but he was an influence on the political nationalism of Fichte, whose works represented the only 'serious […] philosophy' in Hitler's personal library.)[15]

While the idea of 'progress' can be found beneath the utopian strands of Stalinism and (to a lesser extent) Nazism, it is not clear what it has to do with modernism. It was convenient for Cold War liberals, like Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper and Jacob Talmon, to find the major fault of totalitarianism in its utopianism, since this made for a ready contrast with non-utopian liberalism. However, utopianism is a better fit for Stalinism than for Nazism, which, by the Cold War period, was no longer the pertinent point of reference. Shorten explains that critical theorists rejected this interpretation on the grounds that it 'ran close to constituting a blanket critique of the left,'[16] and pinned the blame for totalitarianism instead on the cool, instrumental rationality championed in the Enlightenment, which led to a reductive and amoral view of the world in which 'domination' was acceptable. (They believed that this kind of reason underpinned liberal thought, too.)[17]

After surveying several versions of the scientist interpretation, from thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Michele Foucault, Shorten casts Charles Darwin as 'the decisive figure' in totalitarianism's scientistic current – although, as he is quick to note, 'cause is [not] the same as responsibility.'[18] The key concepts lifted from Darwin are those of 'progress' and 'a violent struggle for existence,' which in Stalinist hands became vindications of a determinist theory of history, in which Communism was the final stage, and revolutionary struggle, with classes crudely substituted for Darwin's species.[19] Meanwhile, the Nazis drew on the racial theories of Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, then combined these with elements of Darwin's theory in order to justify the classification of races as 'stronger' or 'weaker,' and subsequently the extermination of the latter. (This was viewed as an application of the law of natural selection, which could not be expected to operate independently of human will.)[20] The special focus on Darwin is a real strength of this chapter. A claim such as 'totalitarianism is a consequence of instrumental rationality' is so broad as to be practically immune from confirmation or disconfirmation, but Shorten is able to make some sense of it by locating the various elements of the 'scientistic' current in relation to Darwin, whose ideas and language were undoubtedly appropriated by both the regimes in question.

The fifth chapter, in which Shorten covers 'revolutionary violence,' has no such unifying key figure. To represent this interpretation, Shorten looks to the French authors Albert Camus, Raymond Aron and François Furet. The proposed antecedents of totalitarian revolutionary violence are Niccolò Machiavelli, who Shorten links with French revolutionaries like Maximilien de Robespierre; Karl Marx; Friedrich Nietzsche, who Shorten is careful to present as 'an intellectual source shedding light upon the way that totalitarian movements came to think of the place of violence in politics,' not 'Nazi thought's first cause';[21] and, more peripherally, Georges Sorel, whose arguments, 'even if National Socialist thought never gave anything like sustained attention to [them …] could lend legitimacy to [… Nazi] attitudes concerning violence'.[22] Again the relevant points of overlap and divergence between Stalinism and Nazism are pointed out – Nazism 'is characterised by a far more explicit celebration of violence as an intrinsic [aesthetic] quality in itself,' for example[23] – with reference to a wide range of primary and secondary sources.

The Nazi and Stalinist regimes' readiness to commit violence on a vast scale, even when political opposition was no longer a serious threat,[24] was one of their most striking and notorious characteristics. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the huge proliferation of literature on totalitarianism is largely due to the record of atrocities in the form of genocides, gulags and purges, which occurred separately from the military violence of the

Second World War. Characterising this propensity for 'revolutionary violence' in intellectual or ideological terms is no easy task, however, since although Nazi and Stalinist commentators were often remarkably untroubled by bloodthirstiness, their attempts to justify it showed inconsistencies both within and between their respective systems of thought. Camus, Aron and Furet trace the idea of revolutionary violence back to the French Revolution and the subsequent Terror, and Shorten uses their arguments to good effect, noting evidence of an ideological 'inheritance' that is carried through to totalitarianism. Here, perhaps inevitably, the analogies are more strained than before. Certainly French Revolutionaries and practitioners of totalitarianism were prepared to use violence to further their perceived ends, even when this was not politically expedient. But unless it is clear that the latter justified their policies with the former in mind, or at least by a reasonably consistent appeal to the same kinds of principle, then the link cannot be more than a loose family resemblance. Rather than a fundamental part of totalitarian ideology, revolutionary violence might be better considered a more-or-less direct consequence of other ideological characteristics that fail to guard against it.

Shorten's book is a fine study of a controversial and complex topic. Quite apart from its contribution to the vast literature on totalitarian politics and ideology, it will stand as a useful point of reference for intellectual historians interested in the conceptual issues pertaining to influence, interpretation and the relation between ideas and historical reality. It is harder to say for certain whether it meets its aim of identifying distinctively modern *ideological commonalities* between Stalinism and Nazism, for this task involves definition and interpretation as well as demonstration: there may be other, equally reasonable interpretations, based on different accounts of totalitarianism's 'elements,' that would yield different conclusions. For that matter, it is unclear how one could ever *prove* that totalitarianism was *really* a modern and modernist phenomenon with enough certainty to discount the structural model. Shorten gives us one account of the intellectual origins of totalitarianism, but leaves plenty of room for further debate about the particular thinkers he includes and the type and degree of influence he attributes to each.

The book's open-endedness is no indication of failure. Shorten never claims that his interpretation is definitive or final. The relationships between particular thinkers remain to be explored in future works – after all, the 'thought' or 'ideology' of Nazism and Stalinism is only a generalised extension of the thoughts of their individual supporters, and any attempt to find a wholly authentic version of either is likely to end in disappointment. Interpretation will always be needed. But *Modernism and Totalitarianism* gives us one answer to the question of how best to understand the relation between totalitarianism and its intellectual antecedents, and Shorten's case for considering it a properly modern phenomenon is scholarly in the best sense of the word, providing an insightful overview of the evidence and drawing an appropriately qualified conclusion.

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James Wakefield *is a PhD candidate at Cardiff University, where he also teaches on a range of undergraduate modules. His main research interests are in political theory, and include the ethics of education, liberal perfectionism and the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile.*

[1] The series editor writes in his introduction that the term 'modernism' refers to not to *'*a general historical condition […] but a generalised revolt against even the *intuition* made possible by a secularising modernisation that we are spiritual orphans in a godless and ultimately meaningless universe. Its hallmark is the bid to find a new home, a new community, and a new source of transcendence.' He adds that the contributors to the *Modernism and…* series have been 'encouraged to tailor the term […] to fit their own epistemological cloth, as long as they broadly agree in seeing it as the expression of a reaction against modernity […and] driven by the aspiration to create a spiritually or physically "healthier" modernity through a new […] order.' See Roger Griffin, 'Series Editor's Preface,' in Richard Shorten (2012) *Modernism and Totalitarianism* (hereafter *MaT*), pp.ix-xvi [xv-xvi]

[2] *MaT* [7]; emphasis removed

[3] *MaT* [23]

[4] *MaT* [24]

[5] *MaT* [28-38; quotation 29]

[6] The SD, short for *Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers-SS*, was the intelligence division of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) in Germany.

[7] *MaT* [40-43]

[8] Shorten notes in his conclusion that 'the state' of the Italian Fascists, represented in the works of, for example, Giovanni Gentile, 'could never have competed' with the 'powerful constructions of social identity' that the Nazis and Stalinists articulated as race and class. It is for this reason that 'Italian Fascism should (continue to) be excluded from the category of totalitarianism, properly speaking.' [240, 42] This argument deserves further elaboration, but Shorten's conclusion has a good deal of support from other authors writing about Italian Fascism. Within the scope of *MaT,* it is enough for him to have stipulated that he is interested in Nazism and Stalinism.

[9] *MaT* [84]

[10] *MaT* [102-103]. Shorten points out that 'all philosophic doctrines shift character when employed with practical ends in view.' [102]

[11] *MaT* [166]

[12] *MaT* [105-106]

[13] *MaT* [121]

[14] *MaT* [133-134]

[15] [137 and 144-145]; Shorten here quotes Timothy W. Ryback (2010) *Hitler's Private Library: the Books that Shaped his Life.* London: Vintage.

[16] *MaT* [150]

[17] Shorten notes that, according to Foucault, the term 'totalitarianism' was used by liberals as 'a rhetorical prop to the interests of Western capitalism.' [158-159]

[18] *MaT* [166]

[19] I say 'crudely' because, as Shorten notes, classes differ from races in that 'race is an inherited characteristic; membership of class is not rigidly fixed.' [167] He later adds that 'the delineation of class […] only ever veered on a Darwinian conception,' but 'the [Stalinist] theory of history […] was fully Darwinian.' [188]

[20] *MaT* [170]

[21] *MaT* [209]

[22] *MaT* [233-234]

[23] *MaT* [255]

[24] Citing Hannah Arendt, Shorten writes that totalitarian violence 'tended to ratchet up a gear in a stage subsequent to any real sources of political opposition having been eliminated.' [192]

About the author:

James Wakefield teaches political theory and intellectual history at Cardiff University and Swansea University. He is the author of *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism* and co-editor, with Bruce Haddock, of *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*. His research interests are in political and moral theory, and include the ethics of education, liberal perfectionism and the role of the emotions in reasoning.