

Simona Forti:

***Totalitarianism: A Borderline Idea
in Political Philosophy***

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Totalitarianism: A Borderline Idea in Political Philosophy provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of the concept of totalitarianism in political philosophy. Written by Simona Forti and translated by Simone Ghelli, this book traces the complex development and contested meaning of totalitarianism through various historical, political, and philosophical lenses.

The book is structured into four main chapters, with an introduction and conclusion framing the discussion. The Introduction situates the contemporary revival of the term “totalitarianism” within our current sociopolitical climate of populism, authoritarian regimes, refugee crises, and terrorism. It highlights the pressing need to reexamine this concept and its significance. Is totalitarianism used as a vague, media-driven term, or does it retain specific meaning as a 20th-century political category?

The early origins of the concept of totalitarianism are covered in Chapter 1. Beginning with the early usage of the term by Italian antifascist thinkers like Giovanni Amendola and Antonio Gramsci to describe Mussolini’s fascist ambitions in Italy in the 1920s (pp. 8 – 13), Forti shows how the concept gained wider usage in the 1930s, especially in France by émigré Russians and leftists like Boris Souvarine and Raymond Aron as a way to compare Nazism, fascism and Stalinist communism (pp. 17 – 25). By the late 1930s and 1940s, German thinkers like Franz Neumann and Hannah Arendt further developed the concept. According to Forti, Arendt’s seminal 1951 work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* provided the decisive synthesis of over two decades of debate on totalitarianism, giving the concept its fullest theoretical articulation (pp. 29 – 35).



In Chapter 2, Forti examines the attempts by political scientists in the postwar period, especially in the United States, to formulate definitive models to characterize totalitarian regimes, identifying the key similarities, especially between Nazism and Stalinist Russia, on a range of factors from monopoly of power and ideology to use of terror and concentration camps (p. 37). Prominent theorists like Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Raymond Aron, and Juan Linz are discussed here (p. 37 – 45). Their attempts to construct ideal types are contrasted with the views of Eastern European dissidents like Vaclav Havel and Leszek Kolakowski whose first-hand experience led them to a more radical questioning of Marxist-Leninist ideology itself as inherently totalitarian (p. 49). Though acknowledging the validity of dissident thought, Forti is critical of the polarized ideological uses, both leftwing and rightwing, to which the concept of totalitarianism was put during the Cold War period (p. 55).

The third chapter dwells on thinkers who have attempted philosophical reconstructions of totalitarianism by relating it to broader problematics in Western thought. Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Arendt, and the Frankfurt School saw echoes of instrumental rationality and the dialectic of Enlightenment reason in totalitarian ambitions (p. 71). Heideggerian philosophers like Karl Löwith traced it to the secularization of Western ideals of progress (p. 66), while Emmanuel Levinas located in Western ontology itself the roots of the totalitarian will to totality (p. 68). Other thinkers like Claude Lefort and Jean-François Lyotard associated totalitarianism with the closure of difference and negation of plurality in the name of speculative identity (p. 83). Though sympathetic to such radical questioning, Forti cautions against continuist readings of totalitarianism which may diminish the uniqueness of events like the Holocaust (p. 96).

Forti then engages with contemporary attempts to diagnose new forms of totalitarian dangers in phenomena like militant Islamism and global neoliberal capitalism in Chapter 4. While critical of reductive oppositions that demonize Islam as inherently totalitarian (p. 112), Forti finds value in Sheldon Wolin's formula of "inverted totalitarianism" to describe the totalizing tendencies in late modern techno-capitalism, which manages democracy in corrosive ways (p. 114). Engaging also with the ideas of thinkers like Agamben, Mbembe, and Esposito on biopolitics, thanatopolitics, and necropolitics (p. 118), Forti discerns clear lines of continuity with "classical" understandings of totalitarianism in their shared concern with dynamics of power over life. However, she parts ways from more apocalyptic visions which leave no space for resistance (p. 119). Finally, the book concludes with a call for critical theory

and political philosophy to continue examining both threats to pluralism and spaces of dissent in late modern societies.

Throughout its 182 pages, *Totalitarianism* compellingly demonstrates the slipperiness yet urgent contemporary relevance of its titular concept. By methodically covering various competing understandings and uses of totalitarianism, the book resists reduction to any single meaning while retaining a coherent through-line anchored in concrete historical cases. In focusing more on conceptual than empirical questions, it avoids strict periodization, freely moving from 1920s antifascism to 21st-century biopolitics within continuous argumentation. Such an approach testifies to the category's borderline quality of referring at once to a specific 20th-century political formation while gesturing toward something essential about modern exercises of power.

Indeed, a major strength of *Totalitarianism* is how it brings philosophical depth and historical consciousness together to probe deeper stakes in debates that often remain narrowly disciplinary. For example, Chapter 1 shows how Italian antifascist origins of "totalitarianism" contained insights political scientists later formalized into models, just as Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how many philosophical readings were directly spurred by confronting totalitarian realities. This interdisciplinary attention mirrors the book's own hybrid nature as a theoretically informed historical survey that manages to condense an astounding breadth of perspectives, from Carl Schmitt to Michel Foucault, into lucid exposition. Far from diluting its focus, these diverse voices feed the mosaic Forti assembles for rethinking totalitarianism.

In foregrounding open questions over clear-cut definitions, the book also avoids the reduction that has plagued this polarizing term. By tracking shifts in meaning across thinkers and contexts, it brings sensitivity to totalitarianism as an evolving problematic more than a static concept. Such nuance undercuts habits of rote classification that fuel Cold War mentalities, inviting reflection on how easy it became to label entire societies based on formalistic checklists. This links to the book's other great strength: illuminating totalitarianism's changing significance through history while linking it to perduring problems of politics and thought. The Arendtian motif of challenging philosophy "in the face of extremes" structures Forti's mapping of how seminal events compelled reassessments of core assumptions, yielding insights still relevant amidst new unpredictable crises.

While covering enormous ground, the book does have some limitations owing perhaps to its comprehensiveness regarding various positions that it risks

losing momentum as an argument in itself. Its descriptive approach masterfully conveys the complexity inherent in such a fraught idea but largely abstains from critiquing specific interpretations. While it clearly frames debates and traces shifts in discourse, Forti rarely intervenes directly to challenge or endorse particular stances. This restraint allows totalitarianism's contested, polymorphous aspect to emerge fully without foreclosing ongoing contention. However, it also leaves the reader lacking Forti's own distinct perspective on the disputes covered. Her neutrality counters the term's historical politicization yet slightly diminishes the book's polemical edge. Its capaciousness as a resource for understanding scholarly divisions around totalitarianism makes it less forceful as a partisan intervention against revived usages.

Nonetheless, *Totalitarianism* represents a long overdue philosophical reexamination of a notion that, despite its questionability, remains hauntingly apropos amidst global crises. Well-organized and tightly composed within its encyclopedic scope, the book reopens vital questions about tyranny and freedom, violence and law, technology and life that modern political thought has yet to adequately answer. By tracking disparate invocations of totalitarianism, Forti excavates a submerged refrain in 20th and 21st-century thought that compels critical vigilance against any system laying claim to total power, regardless of ideological banner. Both erudite and urgent, *Totalitarianism* warrants attention from scholars across disciplines concerned with liberty's precarious fate worldwide. It succeeds admirably as a provocation to further debate and, in keeping the memory of extremes alive, a bulwark against their repetition. Whatever positions one holds on this past century's unprecedented governmental experiments, grappling with Forti's sober, discerning analysis seems requisite for moving forward.

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