

thinking

togetherness

ANDREJ BOŽIČ (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIALITY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dean Komel — Andrej Božič Thinking Togetherness. Foreword	9
---	---

PRESUPPOSITIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Dragan Prole Sociality in the Husserlian Cave	15
---	----

Iaan Reynolds Abstraction and Self-Alienation in Mannheim and Husserl	31
---	----

Filip Borek <i>Schwingung</i> at the Heart of Phenomenon. Intersubjectivity and Phenomenality	45
---	----

TRANSCENDENTALITY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Zixuan Liu What Is the Irreality of Social Reality? Higher Visibility Transcendental Intentionality	63
---	----

Noam Cohen Subjectivity as a Plurality. Parts and Wholes in Husserl's Theory of Intersubjectivity	89
---	----

Anthony Longo Intersubjectivity, Mirror Neurons, and the Limits of Naturalism	103
---	-----

Ka-yu Hui The Expressive Structure of the Person in Husserl's Social Phenomenology. From Subjective Spirit to Cultural Spiritual Shape	117
--	-----

DEVELOPMENTS AND REFINEMENTS

Liana Kryshevskaja	
The Notion of the Social World in Gustav Shpet's Conceptualization and the Ways of Phenomenology	131
Daniele Nuccilli	
Wilhelm Schapp on the Narratological Structure of Intersubjectivity	143
Daniel Neumann	
Sharing a Realistic Future. Gerda Walther on Sociality	157
Jan Strassheim	
"Passive" and "Active" Modes of Openness to the Other. Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity	169
Andrzej Gniazdowski	
Phenomenology of the Total State by Aurel Kolnai	183
Max Schaefer	
Renewing the Erotic Relation. Michel Henry and the Lover's Night	205

COLLECTIVITY AND COMMUNITY

Marco di Feo	
The Ontological Root of Collective Intentionality	227
Lucia Angelino	
Sartre and Freud as Resources for Thinking the Genesis of a We-Perspective	241
Marco Russo	
The Theater of Appearances. Social Phenomenology of Excentricity	255
Nerijus Stasiulis	
The Ontology of Sociality	269
Dario Vuger	
On Circumlocution as Method. From Heidegger and Debord Towards a Philosophical Praxis	279
Silvia Pierosara	
Managing the Absent. On the Role of Nostalgia in Individual and Social Relations	299

PARTICULARITIES AND TOTALITARITIES

Michal Zvarík	
Socrates and <i>Polis</i> in the Thought of Jan Patočka and Hannah Arendt	313
Zachary Daus	
On the Significance of Mutual Vulnerability in Hannah Arendt's Conception of Freedom	327
Fabián Portillo Palma	
Isolation and Loneliness as Categories of Social Being. Arendt and the Origin of Totalitarian Movements	339
Gintautas Mažeikis	
Faustian Hope and Power. Bataille, Bloch, Habermas	351
Guelfo Carbone	
A Way Out of Nazism? Heidegger and the "Shepherd of Being"	365
Dean Komel	
On Totalitarium	381

7

INDIVIDUALITY AND EXPRESSIVITY

Evgeniya Shestova	
Communication in the Text Space. Phenomenology of the "Logic of Question and Answer"	401
Manca Erzetič	
The Hermeneutics of Testimony in the Context of Social Mediation	413
Andrej Božič	
"Mitsammen." Paul Celan's Poetry in the "In-Between" of (Cultural) World(s)	427
Antonia Veitschegger	
Disagreement about an Art Work's Value. Why It Is Unavoidable, What It Consists In, and How to Deal With It	443

TECHNOLOGIES AND CONTROVERSIES

Joaquim Braga	
On Don Ihde's Concept of Technological Background Relations	459
Žarko Paić	
The Body and the Technosphere. Beyond Phenomenology and Its Conceptual Matrix	475
Paolo Furia	
Uncanniness and Spatial Experience. A Phenomenological Reading of the COVID-19 Lockdown	511
AUTHORS	533
INDEX OF NAMES	539

Fabián Portillo Palma

ISOLATION AND LONELINESS AS CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL BEING

ARENDT AND THE ORIGIN OF TOTALITARIAN MOVEMENTS

Abstract: The paper reflects, with a declared practical interest, upon the conditions, which, according to Hannah Arendt's description of totalitarianism, may be playing a fundamental role in the rise of new movements of totalitarian resonances within the liberal democracies across Europe (and the entire world). The analysis of *world alienation*, *loneliness*, *isolation*, and the so-called victory of *animal laborans* will contribute positively to that. Our leading intuition is, in fact, that a perverse similarity exists between the conditions, under which historical totalitarianism appeared, and the conditions, under which human life exists in our current world.

Keywords: Arendt, totalitarianism, loneliness, isolation, world alienation, *animal laborans*, Marx.

The impulse of this paper is to be found in the basic intuition: we are going to stand for the idea that the rise of discriminatory nationalist and racist movements, not only in Europe, but worldwide, is fundamentally linked to the generalization of certain experiences that are no different at their core from the ones that may be recognized as those of the past century. My scope is directed specifically to the experiences that lead to the totalitarian domination suffered by the entire world in the time period, which began after the collapse of the era of imperialism and ended with the nuclear era.

A deeper approach to the phenomenon of totalitarianism in its current resonances will bring us necessarily to the theoretical insights provided by Hannah Arendt's work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published first in 1951. Arendt bases

her well-documented and philosophically relevant understanding of the entire phenomenon of totalitarianism on the essential experience, which prepares masses for a totalitarian domination of their own lives. This experience has two faces: the phenomenon of *isolation*, related intimately with the impossibility or incapacity for *praxis*; and the phenomenon of *loneliness*, which is linked to the phenomena of *superfluousness* and *uprootedness*. Her thesis can be summarized thus: only a community, where loneliness and isolation turn out to be the main and general experiences, can be subjected to totalitarian domination. As a result of this, Arendt claims that totalitarianism was not an arbitrary historical event, but rather a phenomenon, which grows from a specific human attitude towards its surrounding world. A pre-theoretical sphere of experiences¹ set the conditions for totalitarian domination of a whole community.

In this paper, we refrain from elaborating a genealogical approach to those ideas or thesis, but we prefer, rather, to set the conditions to discuss with Arendt—and disagree with her about—the origins of totalitarian tendencies.

340 For that purpose, our exposition may be broken down into three sections: 1) we will first introduce the notion of *world alienation*, in order to point out the pre-theoretical realm, in which *isolation* and *loneliness* can be grasped as categories of social being; 2) a description of Arendt's explanation of the origins of totalitarianism will follow, based mainly—but not exclusively—on a reading of the chapter “Ideology and Terror. A Novel Form of Government”; and 3) we will conclude by reflecting with Arendt on the notion she extracted from the victory of *animal laborans* as a fundamental event of our times.

1. A genuine “*being-together*”: Totalitarian tendencies and world alienation

Our approach to the current totalitarian tendencies within liberal societies is based upon the principle that a philosophically relevant explanation of it requires a prior clarification of a certain type of attitude towards the world. In other words, a certain clarification of the so-called *being-in-the-world*.² This

1 In Arendt's oeuvre, one can recognize important phenomenological traces (cf. Arendt 2018 and Villa 1996.)

2 For Arendt, the Heideggerian concept of *being-in-the-world* (GA 2, 71–173) is of

is what in Arendt's work will appear as the *world* understood as the common space, within which human life can humanly take place.

In the same way that can be ascertained for the roots of the historical German and Soviet totalitarianisms, these new tendencies³ also arise upon a specific breeding ground, which makes them possible. The resemblances between the historical and the current totalitarian tendencies are based on the fundamental orientation of the modern human existence. Arendt explains in *The Human Condition* how modernity has shaped the human life by referring to the phenomenon of *world alienation*. She introduces this term while discussing how the three types of human activity—i.e., *labor*, *fabrication*, and *praxis*—have evolved with the beginning of the modern times. For her, three events defined the fate of the modern *being-in-the-world*: America's discovery by the European monarchies, the reformation initiated by Luther, and Galileo's invention of the telescope (Arendt 1958, 248).

The first of the aforementioned events is to be considered as the initial stage of a longer process that could not come to an end until the 1960s, when the first human achieved to leave our planetary homeland. Nevertheless, such an ephemeris turned ironically into its opposite, since humankind remains the more distant from its homeland the more distance its artefacts can cover. With the second of the events, it could be that the conditions were set for the era of *animal laborans*, where human nature is explicitly denied by the rhythm imposed upon it by the capitalist system of production. Luther's struggle to reform the Catholic Church and the later segmentation of the Western Christianity had a deeper meaning than a mere theological conflict. It allowed the dissolution of properties and its conversion into capital, forcing a huge mass of worldwide population to become a working mass. A new type of human specimen arose, since a vast majority of the global population was forced out from their shared world and coerced to convert themselves into a wandering manpower, which in Arendt's work will appear as the expression of a process of animalization. A common world of useful things is displaced by one of

341

outstanding political value, for it allows a philosophical thematization of the realm of commonness (cf. Arendt 2018, 122).

3 Such as the reactionary movements like the Fidesz party, AfD, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or Vox.

consumption and exchangeable goods:⁴ the world of *animal laborans* is also *the consumer's world*. Galileo's invention constitutes a symbol for what Arendt calls *the Archimedean point*, through which the Western civilization started to doubt information coming from the senses and thus based knowledge on the logical and experimental procedure of modern science.

The world as the object of human knowledge displaces the world as the space where human life takes place, as the artificial sphere of a community where free acts in the forms of a collective discussion of the common and shared world are still possible. The experience where the world is the result of a scientific vision and where no immediate experience of communal ties to it can be found is what describes mainly the modern *being-together*. Just as can be said for the historical totalitarianism, this was the self-reaction to the superficiality of modern individuals. The new version we are witnessing is based on the new radicalization of the conditions, under which modern humankind dwells in the world. Following Arendt's words, the totalitarian regimes

342

[...] can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are as much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social or economic misery in a manner worthy of man. (1951, 602–603.)

2. The origins of totalitarianism: Isolation and loneliness as socio-ontological categories

For Arendt, totalitarianism is a new phenomenon in human history, although its newness does not make it an external event to humankind itself. From that idea, she deduces the following:

⁴ At this point, it is worth mentioning that Arendt distances herself from Marx's *theory of alienation*. The latter is based on the disregard for the specific phenomenon of *world alienation*: labor and *human alienation* are problematic effects of the capitalization process, because they deny explicitly the possibility to disclose a world in Arendt's sense (cf. Arendt 1958, 254).

The crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on, just as other forms of governments which came about at different historical moments and rested on different fundamental experiences have stayed with mankind regardless of temporary defeats—monarchies, and republics, tyrannies, dictatorships and despotism. (1951, 628–629.)

Beyond the conclusion warning us that such a historical event has not yet been removed from humankind, although it has historically been defeated, the current essay finds the other element of her conclusion much more interesting. Totalitarianism is based on the fundamental experience of humankind within a certain historical period. That experience is what Arendt calls *terror*, which goes alongside with *ideology*, understood in a particular way. *Terror* is the human experience defined by the phenomena of *isolation* and *loneliness*.

The experience of *terror*, as already mentioned, is composed of two different phenomena: isolation and loneliness. *Isolation* is to be understood as a kind of human experience defined by the impossibility to act along with others in a social sphere. This happens when we cannot find a supportive institution that enables us to raise our voices or to make a claim against an injustice. An isolated human is the one who lacks the power to act, who lacks the capacity to have an impact on their surrounding world. Isolation and powerlessness, or incapacity, go hand in hand. Arendt continues by explaining that the experience of isolation is the defining element of tyrannical domination: a tyrant seeks to place himself in a position of power through the elimination of all types of dissidences within his kingdom or republic, but he keeps the private sphere of those who are under his rule intact. When a type of human life frees a certain space to act, even if that action is not of the sort of social or public activity, this maintains the realization of the human condition possible; even when it is limited. That is the case with tyranny: a life under it lacks public action, which is what Arendt calls *praxis*, but not *labor* and, even more importantly, *fabrication*.⁵ For the purposes of the production of goods and human articles,

343

5 For a more schematic explanation of this tripartition within the *vita activa*, cf.

which constitute our artificial but essentially human surrounding world, isolation can be recognized as a need. It is required to withdraw to one's own private sphere to be able to invent or produce something that will be included as part of the above-mentioned world. The human condition is then limited by the tyrannical domination, but not expressly denied. This is the fundamental difference, according to Arendt, between tyranny and totalitarianism. While the first attacks the public and collective activity of men and women, the second consists of denying reaction to that human condition, since it makes both fabrication and praxis impossible.

344 As well as isolation, *loneliness* is a fundamental human experience that in the years following World War I became extensive, as it started to affect more sectors of the global population. It is not a new experience that totalitarian domination has brought up, but rather a very limited one: prior to this, it had affected those elements of society that were marginalized, for instance, the elderly. However, currently it has started to define a general way to dwell in the world; it is a form that, as Arendt points out, has the particularity of being a human experience that denies the basic elements of the human condition. In fact, totalitarianism's aim "is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself" (1951, 601). To be lonely is not the same as being isolated: while isolation is to be understood as a lack of the institutions or the tools to act in the public sphere, loneliness is the experience of not belonging to the world where we live (1951, 624). It points to a collapse of all sorts of connections to the world, and is therefore intimately linked to the more concrete phenomena of *uprootedness* and *superfluousness*. Arendt will describe them as follows: "to be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all" (1951, 624–625). Totalitarian movements define a singular form of sociability, a form that is characterized as a constant conflict of everyone against everyone; as well as a particular form of subjectivity that can be described as an experience of being part of a huge movement, which goes beyond oneself and the individuals with whom one is in contact, and from the perspective of which every individual

is a dispensable part of a bigger and more important event. The epitome of totalitarian domination is the concentration camp.⁶ Here, both elements found out in the experience of loneliness can be clearly noted. On the one hand, one's own existence is to be recognized as being in a constant conflict within the context of deep instability, while, on the other hand, this particular existence is irrelevant to the broader point of view of the movement, to which one belongs.

Hannah Arendt makes a huge effort to keep the difference between *loneliness* and *solitude* clear. Solitude is a better-known experience within the human history, for it has been felt by many individuals since the beginning of time. It is defined as a type of human experience that is based on the withdrawal into one's self, with whom we start a sort of an inner dialogue. Both are experiences whose basis is that of the disconnection from the social or collective world, but in their inner constitution lays a fundamental difference. While we are in solitude dialoguing with someone else (in this sense with our own self, which supposes that we are discussing with our own culture, our own history, or, to sum up, with our own world), in the phenomenon of loneliness we lack such a connection, since we have been separated even from our own self (cf. 1951, 625). Under such conditions, only one human capacity is left, the one, through which modern philosophy tried to renew itself: logical and deductive thinking, whose criteria to discern between true and false, right and wrong are a self-evident experience. This ability, referred to by Arendt somewhere else as the discovery of the Archimedean point (1958, 257–268), is the condition of ideology, since it does not need any external input, it needs only its own thinking path and logic. Deductive and logical thinking is a type of thinking that fails to reach a certain type of truth, because it does not disclose anything, any type of world shared with others. The *truth* “is of communicative nature and disappears beyond the sphere of communication” (2018, 119).

345

Ideology is therefore not to be seen as a malfunction of human understanding or a combination of lies that, because of one reason or another, has a great effect on human communities, but rather as “the result of their atomization, of their loss of social status along with which they lost the whole sector of communal relationship in whose framework common sense makes sense” (1951, 461).

6 Cf. Arendt 1951, 573–603.

Ideological constructions, such as the global Jewish conspiracy of the 1930s or the pandemic conspiracy of nowadays, find a fertile ground in societies, where human activity has been reduced to its minimum level or, in other words, where human action has been denied as a fundamentally common experience. As Arendt points out:

346

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in a certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century. The merciless process into which totalitarianism drives and organizes the masses looks like a suicidal escape from this reality. The “ice-cold reasoning” and the “mighty tentacle” of dialectics which “seizes you as in a vise” appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon. It is the inner coercion whose only content is the strict avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm a man’s identity outside all relationship with others. [...] [B]y teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of loneliness where man knows that he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started, even the slim chances that loneliness may be transformed into solitude and logic into thought are obliterated. (1951, 627–628.)

3. Barbarians at the empire’s borders: Totalitarian tendencies and the victory of *animal laborans*

The conditions behind such experiences have not changed, and that is one of the more important impulses that holds the directive intuition of this paper. Totalitarianism and terror are based, as we have already exposed, upon more basic phenomena, such as isolation and loneliness. Such phenomena originated within a particular group of shared conditions, which, despite the historical defeat of totalitarian regimes, can still be found today. What is then the fundamental condition that is still present in the 21st century? Something

that Arendt calls the victory of *animal laborans*,⁷ which is, as we have already seen, one of the fundamental elements that constituted the modern *being-in-the-world*. As we can read on the last pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

In isolation, man remains in contact with the world as the human artifice; only when the most elementary form of human creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world, is destroyed, isolation becomes altogether unbearable. This can happen in a world whose chief values are dictated by labor, that is where all human activities have been transformed into laboring. Under such conditions, only the sheer effort of labor which is the effort to keep alive is left and the relationship with the world as a human artifice is broken. Isolated man who lost his place in the political realm of action is deserted by the world of things as well, if he is no longer recognized as *homo faber* but treated as an *animal laborans* whose necessary "metabolism with nature" is of concern to no one. Isolation then becomes loneliness. (1951, 624.)

347

The era of *animal laborans* is defined by a striking loss of world experience, since all sort of human activity is reduced to an expression of labor, which Arendt equates with a pure natural, or rather animal, process. As we can read at the end of *The Human Condition*:

The last stage of the labouring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality [...] (1958, 322.)

This automatic process looks similar to the life most of us are familiar with: a life oriented towards labor, to a non-stopping activity that leads merely to the production and reproduction of our own humankind. This reduction of human life could be perfectly seen in the working conditions imposed by the Fordist

⁷ Cf. Arendt 1958, 320–326.

model, but also, we would add, in the conditions, under which we are developing our labor nowadays. Under the slogans of flexibility, entrepreneurship, and “be your own boss,” we are facing with a similar reality: a world, in which the production of new elements to be incorporated into the world of the things as well as the praxis of free and plural participation in the public and political spheres are gone. A world, in which the human condition has been demoted to a mere activity oriented towards the satisfaction of natural needs.

Since activity aiming towards satisfaction of natural or basic needs is a relatively individual activity—concludes Arendt—, society inhabited by *animal laborans* is such, where no one is of concern to anybody. Our threat, today, remains the same as in 20th century: a certain type of shared existence, where the only bond with others is a sort of organized loneliness. Following Arendt’s appreciations, the latter:

348

[...] is considerably more dangerous than the unorganized impotence of all those who are ruled by the tyrannical and arbitrary will of a single man. Its danger is that it threatens to ravage the world as we know it—a world which everywhere seems to have to come to an end—before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself. (1951, 628.)

To conclude, we would like to seek a distance from Arendt’s last diagnosis or, rather, from her conclusions concerning the “victory of *animal laborans*.” Against Arendt, we must state with Marx (and many others)⁸ that the recreation of the political character of Athens (1958, 133), which in her—as well as in Marx’s—eyes seems to be the only efficient remedy against totalitarianism, must be achieved by a concrete human emancipation from labor.⁹ This cannot be equated to a mere transformation of the conditions, in which the working masses perform their duties, but rather to a transformation of the whole phenomenon of labor in such a way that what Arendt considers

8 Good examples among them are Lafargue’s iconic appeal to laziness (1883) as well as Marcuse’s critique of the Soviet (1958) and the Western societies (1964).

9 For an overview of Arendt’s reading of Marx, cf. Arendt 2002 and Fonti 2001, 226–240.

unbearable—i.e., the primordial position of labor in our current times—can, in fact, be overcome. An emancipation of labor will lead to an overwhelming consumption—as she states—, only if the over-all framework that makes it possible does not change as well.

If we agree on the fact that the current stage of capitalist development deepens the conditions that generated historical totalitarianism in the sense explained in this paper, then we might also agree that everyday explanations of this new totalitarian tendencies—which are based upon a malfunction of human understanding due to fake news or directly to the effects of ideology—are vague or imprecise. The resurgence of that type of human existence can be due to a revival of the same scenarios that brought up organized lonely masses as leading powers in the interwar period: a new mass of dispossessed, lonely, and isolated people is at our doors, and endangers not only the already obsolete liberal institutions, but every type of collective existence. It consists not of barbarians who stand at the empire's external borders, but of citizens who, due to the conditions, have been forced to desert their prerogatives and duties as active parts of a cultural and political community.

349

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Institute of Philosophy, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

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Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Sebastjan Vörös**

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