The “Post-Colonialism” of Cold War Discourse*

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The idea of totalitarianism and the discourse of the cold war would seem to bear at most a negative relation to colonial discourse. By translating all political events and social struggle anywhere in the world into the master code of U.S./Soviet confrontation, there remains neither room nor need for the sort of colonial discourse so heavily relied on by Western states during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While I am overstating the case—obviously colonial discourse did not vanish after 1940—the function of cold war language as a substitute for the language of colonialism raises the question of the comparability and actual continuity of colonial and cold war discursive structures. Can the almost immediate recognition and acceptance of cold war discourse after the war be explained in part by its appropriation of ideologically familiar elements from the earlier discourse of Western colonialism? An examination of four of the most important contributors to the intellectual legitimacy of cold war thinking—George Kennan, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and Hannah Arendt—suggests that this is the case.

The idea of totalitarianism is the theoretical anchor of cold war discourse. As such, its abstract conceptual core—that of a society in which all arrangements are directly administered through state institutions—becomes secondary to its expression of the concrete, historical idea that communism and fascism are the same thing, and that they—or rather it—represent a fundamentally new political phenomenon. While the word as the signifier of this equation and assertion already had currency in the 1930s, culminating in this country in the 1939 symposium on “The Totalitarian State” held by the American Philosophical Society, it was in the years during and just after the Second World War that it achieved its full development and became the keystone of the dominant ideology of the period—an ideology which could declare the “end of ideology” and yet have no trouble distinguishing a true totalitarian like Mussolini or Tito from a mere authoritarian like Franco or Somoza. Grounded in history and

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fact through the equation of Stalin with Hitler and Soviet Russia with Nazi Germany, the general idea of totalitarianism could equate any form of total (hence “totalitarian”) social or economic planning with the project of the total political domination of a society. But the supposed specificity, the unprecedented novelty, of totalitarianism lay neither in its political nor in its economic totalizations, but rather in its use of new communications and weapons technology to enforce a total control over language, the expression of ideas, and even, ideally, over thoughts. It was this latter dimension of totalitarian government—what Orwell named the “Thought Police”—that, for the promoters of the discourse of totalitarianism, revealed its true historical significance.

Totalitarianism was understood to reveal for the first time in history the essence of ideology, because under totalitarian governments ideological language and thought found its proper and definitive supplement: technologically sophisticated police terror. In thus connecting with police terror as the necessary supplement for its social actualization, ideology revealed its essence to be the will of the political state to dominate the very processes of thought and subjectivity. When the will to power (to power for the sheer sake of power) is embodied in the political state, ideology is at last revealed as the sheer will to will: the will to will will, to will belief, opinion, consciousness, forgetfulness, desire or absence of desire—the will to control at will all that is most private and personal, all that is most essentially human. And yet it was this ultimate revelation of the essence of ideology that made it possible for intellectuals for the first time to stand beyond ideology. By recognizing the truth of totalitarianism and embracing an enlightened anti-communism, the intellectual arrived at the end of ideology as such, there by perfecting his or her vocation as an intellectual, that is, as a critic of the ideological corruption of the intellect. Thus the essence of being an intellectual was actualized in the theory of totalitarianism and the praxis of the cold war struggle against socialism.

And yet the evidence for the historical object of this grand discourse was tenuous at best. Indeed, at least one of the thinkers I am considering, George Kennan, came close to asserting about totalitarianism what Claude Levi-Strauss said about totemism: that it was the name for a social institution which never actually existed, but which was perceived to exist by the inventors of the term in order “to mark off certain human phenomena... which scholars preferred to regard as alien to their own moral universe, thus protecting the attachment they felt toward the latter.” While we are still trapped within the totalitarian illusion in a way Levi-Strauss was not trapped within the totemic illusion—unlike him, we cannot say that it is a “problem which today seems unreal”—we can see some obvious parallels between totemism as Levi-Strauss characterized it and totalitarianism. Proponents of both ideas perceived themselves to be true representatives of Western civilization, while the object of their study—an institution generating
a social order characteristic of a number of alien and otherwise very different societies—was proper to a state of savagery completely excluded from authentically civilized societies and minds. Levi-Strauss characterized the theory of totemism as an act of exorcism and denial, and the same may be said of the cold war theory of totalitarianism: construed as an unprecedented, radically novel phenomenon, it could be regarded as alien to the truly civilized heritage of the West, as not only a monstrous but an illegitimate birth.

It was George Kennan, in his contribution to the 1953 American Academy of Arts and Sciences symposium on totalitarianism, who voiced a doubt about its historical reality. Kennan noted the absence of any satisfactory definition of totalitarianism; and, while there was general agreement that the two best historical examples of totalitarianism were Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, these two states were so disparate in nature and origin that totalitarianism’s two paradigmatic examples themselves cast doubt on the coherence of the concept. Indeed, Kennan found the real unifying ground of this historical concept not in “objective” historical fact, but in a kind of collective historical delirium, in the social power of a public dream expressed by certain writers:

When I try to picture totalitarianism to myself as a general phenomenon, what comes to my mind most prominently is neither the Soviet picture nor the Nazi picture as I have known them in the flesh, but rather the fictional and symbolic images created by such people as Orwell or Kafka or Koestler or the early Soviet satirists. The purest expression of the phenomenon, in other words, seems to me to have been rendered not in its physical reality but in its power as a dream, or a nightmare. Not that it lacks the physical reality, or that this reality is lacking in power; but it is precisely in the way it appears to people, in the impact it has on the subconscious, in the state of mind it creates in its victims, that totalitarianism reveals most deeply its meaning and nature. Here, then, we seem to have a phenomenon of which it can be said that its deepest reality lies, strangely enough in its manifestation as a dream, and that it is by this manifestation as a dream that it can best be known and judged and discussed.4

Totalitarianism, then, despite the fact that it denotes certain desperately important historical facts whose reality must never be doubted, finds its ultimate ground of meaning and authority in the dream or social delirium made accessible to intelligent comprehension in the literary works of certain writers. Although I believe the category of “totalitarianism” blocks rather than helps our understanding of the concrete phenomena it is intended to characterize, at the end of this essay I will argue in favor of Kennan’s view that “literature” may be a privileged ground for interpreting (that is, for understanding what is true about) “totalitari-
Before examining the two contemporaries whom Kennan names as definitive dreamers of the totalitarian dream, I wish to consider the “post-colonialism” in the cold war writings of George Kennan himself.5

American cold war discourse about totalitarianism served a double function: in regard to the Soviets, it justified a policy of global anti-communism by reinterpreting all struggles for national self-determination in terms of the geopolitical contest for zones of power against totalitarian Russia (thereby also rejecting the case for a continuation of the British colonial empire made by Churchill in his famous “Iron Curtain” speech in favor of a non-colonial “Pax Americana”); in regard to Nazi Germany, it saved the traditional pre-war faith concerning “the values of Western civilization” held by post-war foreign-policy “wise men”6 by displacing the human essence of fascism into the non-Western world. Such a recovery of traditional ideals was especially important for old-style diplomats in the context of the new post-war world of electronic and aerospace military high technology and the new logics modeled on them, especially because what was most distinctive about the Nazis was their use of new police technology to further social terror. Here was an issue requiring a distinction. The necessary conscience-soothing exorcism was achieved by affirming the equation of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, combined with an historical interpretation of the essential Orientalness of the Russian mentality. The basic argument is that “totalitarianism” is nothing other than traditional Oriental despotism plus modern police technology. The appearance of the first truly totalitarian state in the heart of Europe was thus an accident, explainable by the fact that the technology permitting totalitarianism was invented by Western science and was thus first accessible in the West. Moreover, Germany’s totalitarian moment is characterized by Kennan as a “relapse” into barbarism; far from showing a flaw in Western culture, it proved the need for constant alertness in preserving our distinctly Western values.

These interpretive moves are evident in Kennan’s two key tests of the time: his famous secret cable from Moscow in February, 1946, in which he formulated the policy of containment which within the next year became the basis of official U.S. policy as expressed in the Truman Doctrine7; and his anonymous 1947 article in Foreign Affairs, which was the most articulate justification of the new commitment to a cold war policy, a policy which programmatically ruled out the very possibility of dialogue and negotiation with the Soviets. In both the cable and his essay, Kennan supported his argument by pointing to what he called “the natural outlook of the Russian people.” “At [the] bottom of [the] Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs,” Kennan’s cable states, “is [the] traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.”8 Kennan goes on to characterize Russian psychology (which he views as the basis of Russian policy) in terms Edward Said
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has taught us recognize as the colonialist language of Orientalist. "The natural
and instinctive urges of the Russian rulers," argues Kennan, cause the Russian
government to be pervaded by an "atmosphere of oriental secretiveness and
conspiracy."9 The Russians' Oriental "mental world" is explicitly contrasted with
that proper to the "Western" mind:

Their particular brand of fanaticism, unmodified by any of the Anglo-Saxon
traditions of compromise, was too fierce and too jealous to envisage any
permanent sharing of power. From the Russian-Asiatic world out of which
they had emerged they carried with them a skepticism as to the possibilities
of permanent and peaceful coexistence of rival forces.... Here caution,
circumspection, flexibility and deception are the valuable qualities; and their
value finds natural appreciation in the Russian or the oriental mind.10

History—specifically the pre-modern geopolitics of the Eurasian "ecumene" which
produced the "Russian-Asiatic world"—explains the Oriental essence of the
Russian mind.11 This mentality is distinguished by its ability, after centuries of
direct contact with Europe, to appear civilized and to use this facade of civility
for its own barbaric ends.

For Kennan and the cold war thinkers, communist Russia and totalitarian
governments in general were nothing other than "ancient oriental despotisms"
plus modern police technology.12 The presence of such technology, Kennan
argues, opened up Western nations (such as Germany) to the possibility of
totalitarianism—which he characterizes as a "relapse" for what he calls "Western
man had risen above Oriental despotism by his faith in "the dignity of the human
spirit." Kennan makes it clear that he is not willing to attribute such faith to
non-Western peoples:

[Totalitarianism] is a condition made possible by modern police weapons, a
state into which any great national entity can relapse, if it doesn't watch its
step. Whether it might be considered a natural state for peoples of other climes
and eras, I do not know. But for Western man, taught as he has been to look
for hope and solace in the dignity of the human spirit, it is surely a
pathological, abnormal state.13

It is the notion of ideology that permits Kennan to link modern totalitarian-
ism with the traditional Oriental psyche, with its alleged neurotic sense of
insecurity and lack of faith in human dignity. Kennan explains that in "Marxist
dogma" the Russians had found "a perfect vehicle for the sense of insecurity"14
which he earlier proposed as the central characteristic of the Russian-Asiatic
mind. Kennan, and cold war ideologues in general, justified a policy based on
the rejection of the very possibility of communication, negotiation, and compromise with communist totalitarians by presenting a double picture of the way the Russian-Oriental mind corrupts the very process of truthful language and reason by embracing an ideology which panders to their neurotic insecurity. On the one hand, Kennan writes that Russian communists are completely hypocritical, using Marxism merely as "the fig leaf of their moral and intellectual respectability." Any use of rational thought or principled justification is merely the cover for an irrationally paranoid and immoral pragmatism which has no allegiance to reason and honesty. But at the same time, according to Kennan, they follow absolutely the logic and dictates of Marxist dogma. "Like the white dog before the phonograph," Kennan writes, "they hear only the 'master's voice.'"¹⁶

Thus communist totalitarians are doubly irrational and untrustworthy: they are irrational in their hypocritical, nihilistic pragmatism, which makes rational speech a mere vehicle for hidden, irrational motives; and they are irrational in their blind obedience to the logic of Marxist ideology, which makes rational speech the vehicle of overrationalistic motives detached from pragmatic reality. Totalitarian irrationality is thus simultaneously subrational and hyper-rational. Kennan explains the possibility of this paradox by appealing to the Russian-Oriental capacity for denial and detachment from the real world, which permits a kind of "self-hypnotism":¹⁷

The very disrespect of Russians for objective truth—indeed their disbelief in its existence—leads them to view all stated facts as instruments for furtherance of one ulterior purpose or another.¹⁸

This ultimate explanation of the psychological ground of totalitarianism and ultimate justification of cold war policy by appealing to an apparently unprecedented (and yet all too familiar) capacity for irrationality and contradiction in the communist-Oriental mind based on a lack of all sense of the truth of objective reality is not peculiar to Kennan, but rather is characteristic of the other great forgers of the cold war discourse about totalitarianism.

Consider George Orwell's 1984, the definitive novelistic vision of totalitarianism (published in 1949). As Jacobo Timerman said during a PEN speech in the actual year of 1984, what is striking about 1984 as a historical prophecy is how completely wrong it has turned out to be. The power of the book, as Kennan pointed out, lay in its ability to render an authoritative nightmare rather than an accurate historical picture. Where in this nightmare do we find colonialist elements?

For Orwell, of course, British colonialism was not only a national but also a familial inheritance. Born in Bengal to a father in the British imperial service,
Orwell himself went into the family business as an imperial policeman in Burma after his unhappy years in English boarding schools. Orwell’s disgust with British colonialism is familiar to all of us who read his “Shooting an Elephant” in high school (a favorite assignment in high school and college composition courses, along with the classic cold war essay “Politics and the English Language”). I am concerned here only with 1984, a novel in which one might think all colonialist images have vanished in the vision of a warring world divided into three equally totalitarian empires. (Orwell was explicit in his letters of the time that the division of the post-war world into zones of power was a fundamental concern of 1984.) There is, indeed, a fourth global area (roughly encompassing sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, over which the totalitarian superpowers contend for control of cheap labor power; but, like the area of Winston Smith’s city inhabited by the “proles,” it is of no political significance in itself. In Orwell’s totalitarian empires, colonialism and racism, like anti-Semitism, are nothing in themselves and exist only as minor ideological instruments used in mass media propaganda. Indeed, Orwell writes that,

Colonial racism exists only as an image in propaganda, in the form of the Oriental faces of the hostile Eurasian army: “row after row of solid-looking men with expressionless Asiatic faces.” (Orwell, p. 7) So that, on the last page of the novel, when the broken hero Winston Smith thinks lovingly of Big Brother as “the rock against which the hordes of Asia dashed themselves in vain,” it is meant to be clear to the reader that behind the racist image is not the truth of colonialism, but a fraud, a displacement from the truth of totalitarianism.

Nevertheless, as in the case of Kennan, the persuasiveness of the vision of totalitarianism is due in part to its adoption of Orientalist stereotypes. This is especially evident in the philosophies Orwell attributes to the three totalitarian powers. While Oceania and Eurasia both adopt modern socialist political philosophies (English Socialism, or “Ingsoc,” for Oceania, and “Neo-Bolshevism” for Eurasia), the state of Eastasia simply promotes traditional Oriental philosophy, which Orwell calls “Death-worship,” or “Obliteration of the self.” This equation of socialism with Oriental philosophy to produce a convincing nightmare of totalitarian ideology is a key to the theoretical heart of Orwell’s book:
his conception of “doublethink.” It is the mentality of “doublethink” that Orwell presents as the psychological ground that makes totalitarianism possible. According to Orwell,

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them . . . to tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies. . . .

Doublethink is the ultimate violation of the principle of non-contradiction as the law guiding honest, rational, conscious thought. It is precisely what Sartre had already analyzed in his notion of “bad faith” and which, earlier still, Freud had studied within the phenomenon of sexual fetishism in terms of “disavowal” (Verleugnung). But around the time he was writing 1984, Orwell was characterizing Sartre as “a bag of wind.” What for Freud, Sartre, and many other thinkers was a crucial theoretical problem touching on a fundamental truth about the human psyche, Orwell and the inventors of totalitarianism rejected as alien to the human (or, at least, to the civilized Western) mind. This denial was, ironically, made possible by a contradictory pair of propositions: on the one hand, that totalitarianism was a radically novel, historically unprecedented phenomenon (O’Brien, the incarnation of the totalitarian spirit, explains that earlier despotisms were crude and ineffective by comparison because they did not seek to control subjectivity itself); and, on the other hand, that totalitarianism is simply the political expression of the traditional Oriental mentality. O’Brien is a new kind of man, a totalitarian superman, but his servant, Martin, has an “expressionless” “Mongolian face.” O’Brien and his “little yellow-faced servant” are a pair embodying the paradox of the complete novelty and the traditional Orientalness of totalitarianism. The expressionlessness of Martin’s Oriental face is the very capacity for doublethink (realized by O’Brien) made visible. That is, inscrutable expressionlessness represents the achievement of complete power in suppressing and concealing from others one’s true thoughts and reactions—hence behind the expressionless face anything is possible. This traditional “Oriental” power is the necessary ground for the final refinement of modern totalitarianism, the capacity for “doublethink,” the ability to conceal true thoughts and knowledge even from oneself, while at the same time one’s behavior takes them into account.

While the Orientalist ground of totalitarianism is mostly implicit in Orwell, it is perfectly explicit in the other great popularizer of the totalitarian idea: Arthur Koestler. In 1942, Koestler published an essay in Horizon magazine
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entitled “The Yogi and the Commissar,” which later became the title for a popular collection of his essays published in 1947. It was Koestler’s constant thesis that the non-Western, non-civilized, non-democratic part of the world could be viewed along a single “sociological spectrum” whose extreme policies of social behavior were represented by the communist Commissar (an activist who believes that his revolutionary end justifies even the most immoral means) and the mystical Yogi (a totally passive type who doubts all ends and thinks that means alone count). Koestler’s discourse, even more than Kennan’s and Orwell’s, demonstrates that redistribution and blending of discursive structures from older colonialist and anti-communist discourses characteristic of cold war language.

Lacking both Kennan’s grasp of political history and Orwell’s literary talent, Koestler authorized himself as a cold war sage through his stature as an ex-communist, his ability to construct popular essays around simplistic dualisms as “The Yogi and the Commissar,” and his enthusiastic use of the apocalyptic discourse of totalitarianism. In his 1950 “Berlin Manifesto,” Koestler wrote that “The theory and practice of totalitarianism are the greatest threat which humanity has faced in all its recorded history.” It is unprecedented among past “despotisms” because “the citizen of the totalitarian state must not only refrain from breaking the law, but must also adapt his thoughts and actions to the prescribed pattern.”

While the Hindu Yogi was Koestler’s favorite “Oriental” figure, the whole repertoire of colonialist stereotypes—rendered with an almost classical purity—can be found in Koestler’s essays and autobiographical writings, as when one reads of:

...the surly fanaticism of Islam—that harsh faith, born in the desert, which has never been reformed and liberalized, which became petrified at the stage of development that Christianity had left behind in the days of the Inquisition.

The constant thrust of such passages is to dissociate “the West” and its authentic values from historical phenomena—such as the Inquisition or the slave trade—which might demonstrate totalitarianism’s roots in European culture.

Like Kennan, but speaking with the authority of one who has experienced it from the inside, Koestler views Russian communism as shot through with the fanaticism, corruption, inefficiency, and small-minded irrationality of the Oriental despotic mentality. Describing his first meeting after joining the Party with his contact, “Herr Schneller,” Koestler writes:

It was my first experience of that unpunctuality which was de rigueur in the higher strata of the Party. The Russians, as semi-Orientals, are congenitally
unpunctual; and as, consciously or unconsciously, every Party bureaucrat tried to live up to the Russian style, the habit gradually filtered down from the top Comintern bureaucracy into every national CP in Europe.31

This anecdote functions in Koestler’s text as a sort of synecdoche for the corruption of the legitimate aspirations and moral integrity of European national communist parties by the “semi-Oriental” mentality and behavior of the Russians. European radicals in the 1930s became totalitarian, we are to believe, to the extent that they modeled themselves on the semi-Oriental Russians.

As for Kennan and Orwell, so for Koestler, the temptation and realization of totalitarianism is made possible by the double incapacity of the non-Western mind to be at the same time rational (guided by the principle of non-contradiction) and empirical (guided by objective facts). Either the Yogi abandons logical, non-contradictory thought in favor of direct mystical experience and irrational poetic language, or the Commissar becomes a hyper-rationalistic puppet of ideology, abandoning his capacity for reality-testing. Either way there is a loss of connection with what Koestler is pleased to call “objective reality.” Like Kennan, Koestler finds at the root of non-Western psychology the feeling of insecurity.”

In some essays, Koestler makes his point about the self-contradicting, “ideologized” nature of all non-Western thought by proclaiming the uniqueness of the Western “scientific” mentality. Here he appeals to the anthropologist, who is to the colonialist discourse about “primitives” what the Orientalist is to the discourse about “Orientals.” In “Anatomy of a Myth,” Koestler seeks to explain “the magic aura of the Soviet myth.” Koestler (appealing also to the science of psychology) posits that “the human mind is basically schizophrenic . . . . The hot stream of belief and the ice block of reason are packed together inside our skulls.” Koestler’s primary example of the “socially approved split mind patterns” characteristic of all non-Western cultures is the fetishism of “the Primitive”:

The Primitive knows that his idol is a piece of carved wood, and yet believes in its power to make rain; and though our beliefs underwent a gradual refinement, the dualistic pattern of our minds remained basically unchanged.35

Koestler proceeds to establish the scientificity of this fundamental dualism—the basis of that capacity Orwell termed “doublethink”—by citing “recent progress in neurology” distinguishing the thalamus (“seat of feeling and emotion”) from the cortex (“the rind of the relatively new brain hemispheres”)36: “Thalamic behavior is dominated by emotion, cortical behavior by formal reasoning.” Speaking now with the authority of “science,” Koestler proceeds to argue that there is an
The disjunction between the argument Koestler makes and the manner in which he argues is breathtaking. His invocation of authorities is completely uncritical: Levy-Bruhl "proved," Freud "demonstrated," Jung "showed," Ogden and Richards "proved." Yet he invokes them in this way to establish the fact of the irrational credulity of all minds that have not yet reached the "stage" of "science." Western science, Koestler argues, puts us for the first time beyond the split-mindedness normal to humans (though even for us, a relapse into pre-scientific "schizophrenia" is always possible, since this is an organic condition overcome only by the intellectual discipline unique to Western science). His innovation here is to map the familiar "magic versus science" argument of the human sciences, which functioned to distinguish Westerners from primitives, onto current political arguments seeking to distinguish ideology from the mode of political reasoning proper to those cold war intellectuals who had arrived at "the end of ideology."39

I have thus far tried to support my argument that very similar uses of colonialist rhetoric and of a complementary theory about the nature of the ideologized "totalitarian" mentality can be found in the seminal cold war discourses of Kennan, Orwell, and Koestler. The same structure of argument appears in the 1951 book which lent an academic respectability to the new theoretical discourse about totalitarianism. This was The Origins of Totalitarianism by the reactionary political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Her theory of totalitarianism must be understood in the context of Arendt's lifelong Heideggerian project of destroying every category basic to leftist political
thought (above all, the concept of labor) according to a reactionary nostalgia for the
political life of the Greek city-state (at least, as the world of the polis was
conceived in the fantasies of thinkers such as herself and Leo Strauss).

For Arendt, the rise of “totalitarianism” means that “the essential structure of all civilizations is at the breaking point,” that it threatens to destroy the essence of man,” that for the first time in history “absolute evil appears,” that “history itself is destroyed.” For Arendt, totalitarianism’s novelty resides in the functional interdependence of ideology (whether Nazi or communist—she even equates the Nazi vision of a master race with the communist ideal of a classless society) with arbitrary, total terror. The coupling of absolute ideology with arbitrary terror, that is, of blindly hyper-rationalistic conformance to the logic of an idea (whose true appeal is its appeasement of one’s sense of insecurity) with the release of a sub-rational power of pure caprice in the form of arbitrary police terror, is another version of the double-structured discourse about ideology embraced by anticommmunist intellectuals wishing to deny any responsibility for fascism on the part of “Western civilization.”

Arendt’s particular contribution was to argue that totalitarianism was, in fact, the historical product of colonialism, an argument she developed in order to locate the true side of arbitrary social terror, and of racism as well, outside Europe, in “tribal” Africa. Arendt’s argument only makes sense in the context of her general political philosophy (most clearly articulated in the The Human Condition), which is at bottom a reaction against Marxist theory. Arendt’s philosophy is based on her distinction between “labor” and “work”: “labor” is the never-ending process of satisfying our organic, bodily needs; it is contemptible, though—like sex—necessary, because it relates only to our animal species being. There is nothing essentially human about labor. “Work,” on the other hand, involves the production of objects which endure and which build a specifically human environment (the city), which for the first time in history clears a space of appearance for action revealing the essence of what it is to be human, that is, political action. But the modern world is characterized by the intrusion of properly private, biological concerns into the public space of politics; with the French Revolution, a new actor steps onto the public stage of politics, “the mob,” a rootless deterritorialized mass of proletarians.

Arendt argues that “the political principles of the mob [are to be] encountered in imperialist ideologies and totalitarian movement.” To understand Arendt’s oracular pronouncement that “the organization of the mob will inevitably take the form of the transformation of nations into races,” one must follow her argument about the corruption of the European mentality by contact with the primitive societies of black Africa.

Arendt argues that imperialist adventures in uncivilized parts of the world
provided an outlet for the decivilized mob of Europe, Arendt's conception of "savages" is somewhere between those of Joseph Conrad and Edgar Rice Burroughs:

The world of native savages was a perfect setting for men who had escaped the reality of civilization. Under a merciless sun, surrounded by an entirely hostile nature, they were confronted with human beings who, living without the future of a purpose and the past of an accomplishment, were as incomprehensible as the inmates of a madhouse.

"Prehistoric men," as Arendt calls them, only begin to influence Western man during the scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, it is with the Boers in South Africa that the "post-historic" mob-man meets the pre-historic "tribal" man ("the accidentally surviving specimens of the first forms of human life on earth"). Such savages lack the work-built artificial environment necessary for truly human life to exist:

What made them different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skin but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality [Arendt was a literal-minded reader of the descriptions of the jungle in Heart of Darkness]—compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. They were, as it were, 'natural' human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder. Moreover, the senseless massacre of native tribes on the Dark Continent was quite in keeping with the traditions of these tribes themselves. Extermination of hostile tribes had been the rule in all African native wars.

Not only genocidal massacres, but institutionalized slavery as well, are not essentially European, but rather are ways Europeans "adjust" to the non-Western cultures to which such practices are proper. We should remember that is was only with the political de-colonization of Africa beginning in 1955 that Western scholars "discovered" that primitive "peoples without history" did, in fact, have histories. Fortunately, there is now more than enough scholarly writing to discredit the historical accuracy of Arendt's obscene characterization of African societies. (However, Arendt's argument about the "tribal" politics of Africans is still a factor shaping actual American policy toward Africa.) I am here concerned only with tracing the logic of Arendt's argument about the colonial roots of totalitarianism.
The lack of a built environment (and, thus, of a human culture) leaves Africans determined by the mere animalistic principle proper to "labor." This finds its social form in the biologically kin-oriented "tribe," whose logic is essentially that of race. Indeed, Arendt argues, racism is nothing other than the mode of thought proper to primitives; racism entered Europe by way of the Boers, who learned it from the Africans:

The Boers were the first European group to become completely alienated from the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself. . . . The Boers lived on their slaves exactly the way natives lived on an unprepared and unchanged nature. When the Boers, in their fright and misery, decided to use these savages as though they were just another form of animal life, they embarked upon a process which could only end with their own degeneration into a white race living beside and together with black races from whom in the end they would differ only in the color of their skin. . . . [The Boers] had transformed themselves into a tribe and had lost the European's feeling for a territory, a patria of his own. They behaved exactly like the black tribes who had also roamed the Dark Continent for centuries.47

Arendt's vision of the nomadism of African "tribes" is meant to indicate such cultures' ceaseless movement (allowing no space—literally—for philosophical reflection or human [i.e., political] action) as determined by the ceaseless flow of biological need and physical labor. Western man is susceptible to such nomadism, and the racist politics proper to it, only when he has been reduced to the rootless, deterritorialized mob:

Rootlessness is the characteristic of all race organizations . . . the rootlessness of the Boers was a natural result of early emancipation from work and the complete lack of a human-built world.48

Arendt is here also adapting Hegel's master-slave dialectic, with its argument about the stagnant fate of the master, to her distinction between work and labor. Ruling over a merely natural world of labor, lacking entirely a human world built by work, "the Boers had sunk back to the level of savage tribes. . . . They were perfectly willing to pay the price, to recede to the level of a race organization. . . ."49

The racism with which tribal Africa infected Europe by way of the Boers initiated a new form of politics, "tribal nationalism," which is to be distinguished from the good nationalism proper to the liberal European nation-state. "Tribalism [was] the nationalism of those peoples who had not participated in national emancipation and had not achieved the sovereignty of a nation-state."50 It is
tribal nationalism, “the driving force behind continental imperialism,” which was responsible for the emergence of anti-Semitic politics in Europe:

The clue to the sudden emergence of anti-Semitism as the center of a whole outlook on life and the world ... lies in the nature of tribalism rather than in political facts and circumstances.

It was Arendt’s signal achievement to frame a set of historically grounded political concepts capable of locating the origin of “totalitarianism” in general and modern European anti-Semitism in particular—and by implication, the responsibility for the Nazi holocaust—outside Europe, in the savage “tribalism” of “the Dark Continent.”

The principal concern of this essay has been to demonstrate the use of colonialist discourse by those writers most responsible for the construction of cold war rhetoric during and after World War II, that is, at the moment when America and the geopolitical logic of zones of power dividing the world between the “superpowers” replaced the colonialist vision of the world proper to the epoch of the British Empire. Specifically, cold war discourse mapped certain traditional Orientalist stereotypes onto the Russians (not only did this justify the practical policy of containment, but it contributed to a new theory of the neurotic psychological basis of all “ideology,” that is, of all left political argument); in addition, primitivist stereotypes were used to explain the component of state-backed social terror so prominent in twentieth-century European history. Cold war discourse was grounded in the theory of totalitarianism, which in this essay I have sought to debunk. The truth of “totalitarianism,” I would argue, is to be found precisely in the use of technologically-marked state terror in a radical assault on human subjectivity (more radical in its attempted dehumanization than that degradation inflicted on the nineteenth-century industrial proletariat, to whose contrary assertion of basic humanity and right to power Marx looked for the impulse toward that condition of radical human liberation called communism.) If the technologically-assisted assault on subjectivity by the state in secret prisons and detention centers is the truth of “totalitarianism”—a truth erasing the conceptual boundaries between capitalist, socialist, and “Third World” states—how does this help us understand the use of colonialist elements in the discourse of the cold war?

Use of torture and sadistic technique in interrogation is not new: what is new is the context of what Donna Haraway calls “the informatics of domination.” In a number of recent essays, Haraway has pointed out the general intellectual paradigm shift in the conception of power which occurred during and just after World War Two. The application of the new electronics and
computer technology to fulfill the essential state functions of surveillance and accountability, along with the military centrality of related new aerospace technologies, gave rise in those years to new models and habits of political thought based on cybernetics and information systems theory, and ultimately, on the general category of C3I—“command-control-communication-intelligence.” This mode of thought, novel in the 1940s, is all too familiar to us today: newspaper reports of the international “intelligence community” are full of such phrases as “backchannel communications” and who was or was not “in the loop.” It is only natural that in his rewrite of 1984 (in his film Brazil), Terry Gilliam renames Orwell’s “Ministry of Love” with the title “Information Retrieval Services.” The emergence of this new intellectual paradigm caused a fundamental ideological problem in the immediate post-war years: “technology,” as the physical sign of “Progress,” was essential to the myth of the West through which politicians and intellectuals alike understood themselves and their role in world history. Yet the unprecedented evil of the Nazi concentration camps, and of the Gestapo and the S.S. as police institutions, was characterized by the rational application of sophisticated Western technology. How to save the myth of the West, with its essential ideological component of “technology,” in the face of Nazi Germany? The theory of totalitarianism, with its adoption of accepted colonialist “ideology” was the answer. Fascism and Nazism could be identified as examples of totalitarianism, whose Russian version revealed the unprecedented use of technologically sophisticated police terror by twentieth-century European states to be, in essence (that is, in its social and human truth) nothing but traditional Oriental despotism. In a complementary fashion, the new component in state terror of the radical and violent assault on subjectivity could be attributed to the savagery of “pre-historic” primitives. In this way, the ideology of “Western civilization” was preserved among cold war intellectuals.

Surely the most striking aspect of the cold war discourse about totalitarianism was its proclamation of the “end of ideology.” Ironically, this anti-theoretical position was based on a quite specific theory of the psychological basis of the ideologized consciousness, whose *locus classicus* is Orwell’s theory of “double-think.” This theory is understood to explain the human reality underlying the horrifying image of Winston Smith at his job, rewriting history in a manner determined by the standards of totalitarian ideology rather than empirical truth. The fact of such practices is not to be denied: I recall the account of a friend’s son who recently spent time in Russia describing his inability to convince his scandalized Russian friends that there had been such a thing as the “Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.” The ideological distortion of historical truth by American and European textbooks and by the mass media—which was, after all, the primary referent of Orwell’s satire—is hardly superior. (Agreement or disagreement with this last statement is surely some sort of cold war shibboleth.)
It is not the historical fact but the explanatory theory which deserves to be challenged. The theory of “doublethink” is an updated version of British empiricist argumentation: the totalitarian mentality is said to involve the disregard of “objective truth” in perception and the abandonment of the principle of non-contradiction in thought. While proclaiming itself as the champion of honest scepticism and tolerance, this discourse was ever at the service of colonialist ideology, going back to the racist tirades of David Hume. The cold war attack on “theory”—most recently in the denunciation of “textual leftism”—denies the presence of “non-logical” mediations (i.e., mediations structured by productive contradictions) and hence of their status as legitimate objects of study. According to empiricist ideology, those of us who would employ a model of the text, rather than a narrowly analytic model of logical argument, to study political and cultural history would also deny that there is any such thing as objective truth. Relativists and nihilists, it is we who leave the door open for the totalitarian ideologue, because we, the “yogis,” do not raise the banner of “objective truth” and “logical argument” which alone can resist the abuse of language by the “commissar” of ideology.

Perhaps for those who teach the humanities, one useful response to the current unproductive and abstract disputes about the political and ethical status of “theory” and “deconstruction” is to try to change the conversation, to turn with a fresh eye to literature which presents to us the reality and meaning of the radical attach on human subjectivity enacted by the agencies of modern state terror. If such works are no longer viewed as exemplifications of the politics of “totalitarianism,” then they must be confronted afresh. In the PEN speech I referred to earlier, the Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman, whose Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number reflects on his experience as one of “the disappeared” during the state terror of 1976-82, denied the historical accuracy of Orwell’s view that rationally administered torture could successfully extinguish the singular subjectivity of the victim. To examine the literature of Timerman and others as it reveals to us the politics of subjectivity might be one way to escape the cold war ideology which still stifles our political culture in general and the academic humanities in particular.

NOTES

1. The symposium papers were published in Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 82 (1940). The principal paper, Carlton J.H. Hayes’ “The Novelty of Totalitarianism in the History of Western Civilization,” concludes: “In sum, the dictatorial totalitarianism of today is a reaction—nay more, a revolt [he refers approvingly to Ortega elsewhere in the essay]—against the whole historic civilization of the West.” (p. 101)
3. Levi-Strauss, Totemism, p. 15
Western civilization. This line of thought denies any distinctiveness or transformative capacity to Western civilization. This line of thought denies any distinctiveness or transformative capacity to Western civilization. This line of thought denies any distinctiveness or transformative capacity to Western civilization. The ultimate decision of Russia to embrace the West is viewed not as a turn to "Western values" but as a continuation of the Oriental power-logic: specifically, with the rise of Sweden as a military competitor in Lithuania through its use of the new cannons and firearms, Russia is forced to turn to an industrialized factory production system beyond the organizational capacity of stateless hordes. And thought which had to be embraced to fight the successive waves of Huns, Tartars, and Mongols and Policies of the Truman Administration, ed. Barton J. Bernstein). Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), pp. 53-55.


9. Kennan’s Cable on Containment,” p. 203


11. From the perspective of cold war history, whose definitive textbook is William McNeill’s 1963 The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, naturally), Russians could be viewed as victims of the millennium-long “steppe gradient” in which barbarian Oriental nomads were pushed westward across the great Eurasian steppe by even more barbaric hordes further to the east. Positioned in the northern forest at the western edge of the steppe, yet receiving Western influences from the Christianity of Byzantium and from the military-economic challenge of the Baltic Knights Templar, the non-nomadic Russians suffered a centuries’ long choice between the civilizing process offered by Western influences and the brutal barbarian modes of life and thought which had to be embraced to fight the successive waves of Huns, Tartars, and Mongols sweeping west from the Orient. In good cold war fashion, McNeill attributes the end of the Eurasian nomads as a historical force to the rise of modern European weapons technology: firearms end the competitiveness of horse nomads with agrarian states because these new, superior weapons require an industrialized factory production system beyond the organizational capacity of stateless hordes. The ultimate decision of Russia to embrace the West is viewed not as a turn to “Western values” but as continuation of the Oriental power-logic: specifically, with the rise of Sweden as a military competitor in Lithuania through its use of the new cannons and firearms, Russia is forced to turn to the West in order to acquire the new weapons technology. Thus Russian society is nothing other than the adaptation of Oriental barbarism to the new world of industrialized military power which has made the traditional form of barbarism, Asiatic horse nomadry, obsolete. From their geopolitical position in world history, the modern Russians are thus viewed as the passive product of two alien cultures—Oriental barbarism and Western civilization—whose irreconcilable principles cannot be synthesized, thus leaving the Russian mentality as a sort of Manichean internalization in which the irrational but cunning, power-worshipping Oriental side suppresses, or worse, displays as a deceptive façade (as a “human face”), the authentic humanity internalized through centuries of contact with Western civilization. This line of thought denies any distinctiveness or transformative capacity to
Russian culture in itself; this erasure of substantial difference by imposing the “West versus Orient” grid on Russia itself enables the subsequent denial of difference to all “Third World” cultures through imposition of the “West versus Soviets” framework of argumentation.

12. Kennan himself can be more circumspect, but he still accepts the basic categories that define the discussion: totalitarianism is the combination of traditional non-Western Oriental despotism with the novel surveillance and enforcement technologies produced by Western science. “I have heard it said by well informed people [hence Kennan authorizes the interpretation but defers to professional Orientalists] that all the essential features of Soviet Communism could be observed in certain ancient oriental despotisms. I cannot be a good judge of this, for I know nothing about oriental history. I would be inclined to doubt that this could be wholly true, precisely because of the importance of the technological component in the totalitarian system as we know it today. In any case, so far as the West is concerned, totalitarianism does seem to have been something made possible only by the technological developments of the past century and a half, which have operated to enhance enormously the potential scope and intensity of absolute power.” (George Kennan, “Totalitarianism in the Modern World,” p. 21)

The component of Western-produced modern police technology explains the historical novelty of totalitarianism, as well as its emergence in Europe, that is, in the very heart of the West. The attribution of the mentality proper to the political abuse of this technology to Oriental despotism locates the historical ground and proper sphere of the human essence of totalitarianism in the non-Western world. In his 1947 Foreign Affairs article on “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Kennan simply assumes the correctness of the argument that totalitarianism is Oriental despotism plus modern technology: “The Soviet leaders, taking advantage of the contributions of modern technique to the arts of despotism. . . .” (p. 576)

20. Ibid., p. 131; see also p. 8.
21. Ibid., p. 87.
22. Ibid., p. 95.
24. Ibid., pp. 74, 77.
25. Ibid., p. 75.
26. In colonial discourse, the great companion of Orientalism is primitivism. While I will argue that Arendt, and in general the discourse about totalitarian terror, adopt discursive structures from earlier language about primitive savagery, Orwell makes little use of it, although at one point early in 1984, during the “Two Minutes of Hate” when the people are chanting “B. B.” (for “Big Brother”), we read that the chant became “a heavy, murmurous sound, somehow curiously savage, in the background of which one seemed to hear the stamp of naked feet and the throbbing of tom-toms . . . an act of
self-hypnosis [a notion employed by both Kennan and Koestler], a deliberate drowning of consciousness by means of rhythmic noise. . . . The general delirium [was caused by] this subhuman chanting. . . .” (p. 9)


32. Ibid., p. 219.

33. Ibid., p. 129.

34. Ibid., p. 117.

35. Ibid., p. 117.

36. Ibid., p. 117.

37. Ibid., p. 118.

38. Ibid., p. 118.

39. In 1960 Koestler turned his dualizing analytic grid onto non-communist Asia alone; his book entitled *The Lotus and the Robot* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), now finds the same polar extremes expressed in India (the lotus) and Japan (the robot), the sub-rational Yogi or the hyperrational technocratic potential commissar. Writes Koestler: “Common to both [cultures] is a type of reasoning indifferent to the ‘laws’ of contradiction and excluded middle, to the distinction between subject and object, between the act of perception and the thing perceived . . . an approach to Reality which is intuitive and a prioristic rather than rational and empirical, and relies on fluid analogies rather than well-defined concepts.” (p. 227.)


41. Ibid., p. 156.

42. Ibid., p. 157.

43. Ibid., p. 190.

44. Ibid., p. 192.

45. Ibid., p. 192.

46. “Slavery in the case of the Boers was a form of adjustment of a European people to a black race, and only superficially resembled those historical instances when it had been a result of conquest or slave trade. . . . Ruling over tribes and living parasitically from their labor, they came to occupy a position very similar to that of the natural tribal leaders whose domination they had liquidated. The natives, at any rate, recognized them as a higher form of tribal leadership, a kind of natural deity to which one has to submit; so that the divine role of the Boers was as much imposed by their black slaves as assumed freely by themselves.” Ibid., p. 193. This is standard nineteenth-century colonialist argument, given an extra philosophical charge from Arendt’s reading of Conrad (the Boers are essentially “Mr. Kurtz”).

47. Ibid., pp. 194, 196.

48. Ibid., pp. 196-97.

49. Ibid., p. 207.
50. Ibid., p. 227.
51. Ibid., p. 229.
52. Ibid., p. 229.
53. Certainly the U.S. (and Germany) had established dominance over Britain in heavy industrial production by the turn of the century, and had emerged out of World War I as the dominant power in world finance, but only with World War II did the United States displace Britain as the dominant political power in the world.