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Totalitarianism Revisited

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Michael Halberstam: *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Pp. 302. $45.00.).

Slavoj Zizek: *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (Scranton, PA: Verso, 2004. Pp. 380. $22.00.).

Aleksandras Shtromas: *Totalitarianism and the Prospects for World Order*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. Pp. 400. $90.00.).

Shlomo Avineri and Zeev Sternhell: *Europe's Century of Discontent*. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2003. Pp. 293. $32.55.).

"Totalitarianism" is a powerful word rich in historical associations and rebounding in current political usage. The four books under review reflect both the term's range of usage and the enduring fascination with the phenomena it described. Totalitarianism's initial terminological siblings, "nazism" and "communism," are applied chiefly to the original historical subjects that generated them. A close political cousin, "fascism," long ago escaped its close ideological family and is applied to everything from brutal police to road hogs. In contrast, "totalitarianism," formerly confined to a narrow political as opposed to a cultural context, is suddenly in play. In recent issues of the *New York Times*, David Brooks excoriates Iraqi proponents of "totalitarian theocracy" (5/16/2004); President Bush deplores the terrorists' "totalitarian ideology" (5/29/05), and Condoleezza Rice abhors Iran as a "totalitarian state" (5/29/2005). A Central Asian despot is characterized as a "fragile totalitarian" in a feature by David E. Sangler (5/29/2005), and the group of army officers (the Military Council for Justice and Democracy) that overthrew President Maouya Sidi Ahmed Taya in Mauritania in August 2005 defend their decision "to put an end to the totalitarian practices of the deposed regime."[1] Totalitarianism is back, but what does it mean?

The Italian Fascists first used the word "totalitarianism" to praise themselves and express delight in their supreme power. In June 1925, three years after the March on Rome, Mussolini hailed his followers' "ferocious totalitarian will," and four months later he coined his famous formulation: "Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state."[2] The ruling Bolsheviks gloried in their political

[1] *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2005.
[2] Philip Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1915–1945*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), 96–97.

hegemony but never adopted the term "totalitarianism." Lenin devised no equivalent expression, though he savored his dictatorship, as when he told the delegates to the Eleventh Party Congress "We are the state."[3] Foes and victims of Fascism and Communism later employed the term, although socialists did not necessarily condemn a powerful state. In the late 1930s, Russian émigré radicals described the Stalinist regime's political structure, though not its economic system, as totalitarian. No less an enthusiast than Leon Trotsky concluded that the Soviet Union "had become 'totalitarian' in character several years before this word arrived from Germany."[4] Early observers remarked on the dictators' urge for unlimited power. "The theory [of *totalitaria*]," warned Dom Luigi Sturzo, the head of Italy's Catholic People's Party in 1923 from exile in London, "is that Fascism, now National Fascism, is everything, the rest of the country nothing."[5]

Liberal political theorists soon adopted the term, identifying common features of the Nazi and Soviet regimes such as ideology, terror, a single mass party, control of information, a cult of the leader, and the suppression of civil society. More than a theory, "Totalitarianism was the great mobilizing and unifying concept of the Cold War," Abbott Gleason writes in his history of the term.[6] But even at the height of the Cold War, advocates could not agree which societies were totalitarian. Nazism was an exemplary case, as were Stalinism and later Maoism, but neither the Soviet Union after Stalin nor China after Mao was universally recognized as totalitarian. Japanese militarism, which shared with Nazism a fanatical racism, brutal expansionism, and efforts at thought control, was largely bypassed. Italian Fascists also eluded this characterization, though they had invented the term.

Cold warriors rallying an anti-Communist coalition did not need a precise definition, and in fact profited from vagueness. Through the prism of totalitarianism, Truman and Eisenhower contrasted god-fearing Americans with godless Communists, and Eisenhower added "one nation under God" to the pledge of allegiance in 1954. Thus, the notion of totalitarianism blended with the widely held Protestant belief that America was God's chosen instrument for illuminating the world. As the Cold War expanded, American ideologues contrasted democratic religiosity to anti-democratic disbelief, and the Soviet Gulag rivaled Auschwitz as an example of incomparable wickedness. President Ronald Reagan took a further step with his "evil empire" speech on

[3] *Pravda*, March 30, 1922.

[4] Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (Rpt. London: New Park Publications, 1973). Quoted in Andre Liebich, *From the Other Shore: Russian Social Democracy after 1921* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 239.

[5] Luigi Sturzo, *Italy and Fascismo* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1926). Quoted in Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

[6] Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 3.

March 8, 1983. Dividing the world into totalitarian and nontotalitarian states, he marshaled an array of forces, from the liberal democracies to "authoritarian" regimes, in the euphemistic language of Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, his representative to the United Nations. Reagan chose Kirkpatrick because he liked her differentiation between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.[7] In terms of policy, Kirkpatrick's distinction had practical and religious significance, isolating the Soviet Union from even the most thuggish non-communist dictatorships and stigmatizing it as an evil beyond measure. President George W. Bush recast Reagan's evil empire in his "Axis of Evil" speech of January 29, 2002, and after September 11, America's enemies were again totalitarian.

Totalitarianism as an academic concept, however, had been losing appeal since the 1970s. Some American specialists suggested that the Soviet Union historically was characterized by a modicum of pluralism and local initiative even in such things as terror, and that its political practices could be found elsewhere in Europe and the world.[8] As this turnabout developed, a small group of European historians cited the Communists as the original source of Europe's horrors and fundamentally culpable in the rise of Nazism and Fascism.[9] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, debates about Soviet totalitarianism petered out, though efforts to rehabilitate Mussolini and Hitler continued, bolstered in part by information from newly opened archives about Communist atrocities.

That the adjective "totalitarian" is again in play could be a failure of political imagination or one simply of words. Today's demons lack the pretense to modernity and other features of the originals, but the political contexts are not dissimilar. The upsurge of militant Islamic states and movements is as unexpected and unwelcome in the post-Soviet era as was the Communist upsurge after World War II. Yet to tag the poorly understood opponents of the western world as "totalitarian" has broad implications that the books under review illuminate. The rhetorical strategy of dividing the world into good and evil is familiar, and the urge to contrast democracy with a demonized other is deeply seated.

Michael Halberstam addresses this issue in *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics*. Totalitarianism, he argues, is an essential construct for understanding the liberal tradition because liberal thinkers have traditionally invoked such an antithetical form of government. Although

[7]Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 157.

[8]See, for example, H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths, *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Jerry Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

[9]See *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1993).

Halberstam recognizes that actual societies were described as totalitarian, this is not his concern. Tracing the argument about compulsion, the state, and the individual back to Hegel's comments on the French revolutionary terror, Halberstam demonstrates the efficacy of the idea of a totalitarian state for the consideration of a broad range of issues tied to the understanding of liberalism. He also posits a reason for the allure of the concept in liberal societies in crisis, namely the need to confirm the liberal self-image in contrast to an idealized enemy.

Although he has little to say about the historical experience of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or Fascist Italy per se, Halberstam makes a powerful case for the usefulness of the idea of totalitarianism, or some equivalent, in studying such aspects of the liberal tradition as freedom of the will, the relationship between the individual and the state, and politics as theater. In his hands, totalitarianism becomes simply the philosophical antithesis to liberal thinking. "The impetus behind the writing of this book," he writes in his conclusion, "was my general sense at the time that the focus of political philosophy on the narrowly defined debate among liberal theorists, wedded to a quasi-scientific approach to politics, left little room for the engagement of questions that had traditionally occupied political and social thinkers" (204).

Halberstam derives his image of totalitarian society partly from the generalized image of totalitarianism found in the seminal imaginative texts of the early Cold War and partly from the liberal tradition itself. In addition to Hanna Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Human Condition* (1958), he draws on George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Jacob Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952). This may explain the most stimulating portion of the book in which Halberstam portrays the totalitarian leader as an ideal type, the inverse of a liberal society directed by its active and empowered citizens. The totalitarian equivalent to the aspirations of the self-directed actors of liberal society, he argues, is the will of the leader, for whom "everything is possible" (179). He stresses Arendt's vision of totalitarianism as the obliteration of the community and of the individual as self-interested agent and, therefore, of the idealized civic sphere of liberal society. The totalitarian leader thus expresses the society's yearning for progress and exercises the freedom to act that is denied society as a whole.

This image of the totalitarian ruler leading through the strength of his will corresponds to the self-understanding of the totalitarian societies. The Communists, Fascists, and Nazis each aspired to supplant the Europe of WWI and the Great Depression with something greater and more modern. General Franco captured the dictators' mood when he assured German Ambassador von Richthofen in January 1939, of his distain for Britain and France, which "had antiquated political and economic convictions and were declining powers whose methods were not suited to a rising Spain."[10]

[10]Quoted in Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 349.

Mikhail Bulgakov in his classic novel *The Master and Margarita* does not allot the power of life and death to the anonymous mechanisms of totalitarian rule but invokes a demonic Stalin-like figure who personally decides who lives and who dies. The Soviet press communicated this idea to Soviet citizens daily throughout Stalin's long rule, explaining again and again that Stalin was personally responsible for their well-being and for the accomplishments of Soviet society, including industrialization and victory in World War II. The promoters of Stalin's cult granted the leader full agency and freedom in creating Soviet society in their depictions of the leader in the press.[11] The very idea of the Führer-principle and the image of Mussolini as "Il Duce" signified this charismatic authority and power, as did General Francisco Franco's title of "Caudillo" (leader).

The image of the totalitarian leader imposing his personal will on society was not shared, however, by specialists professionally involved in defining the term at the peak of the Cold War. On March 6, 1953, a day after Stalin died, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences convened a previously scheduled conference to consider the theory of totalitarianism. Among the participants were theorists and well-known social scientists including Hannah Arendt, Karl W. Deutsch, Erik Erikson, Carl J. Friedrich, Aleksander Gerschenkron, Harold D. Lasswell, W. W. Leontief, and David Riesman. Also present were Adam Ulam, Merle Fainsod, and Bertram Wolfe, three historians associated with the Soviet Vulnerabilities Project, which, under Walt Rostow, had advised the government since 1951 with the help of McGeorge Bundy at Harvard and Philip Mosley at Columbia. George F. Kennan, the father of the American policy of containment, also attended.

The gathering deliberated through March 8, the day before Stalin's public funeral. As the luminaries met, the American and international press speculated about the consequences of Stalin's death. The gathered thinkers, however, decided to avoid the subject and stick to their stated mission, to discuss the theory of totalitarianism. George Kennan tried to put the issue on the agenda and asked if without Stalin the Soviet Union might lose "some of its totalitarian elements," but he was overruled. The majority rejected the possibility that the loss of the leader would affect the behavior of the Soviet state.[12] Friedrich, who edited the proceedings, later justified the decision to ignore Stalin's death on the grounds that "the 'problem' of

[11]I develop this theme in *Thank You, Comrade Stalin: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

[12]Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a conference held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 1953* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964, 1954), 83–89, 104–5, 312. Discussing the totalitarian leader, Alex Inkeles cites Weber and ignores Stalin. Besides Kennan, only J. P. Nettl and Paul Kecskemeti considered the succession. The American Philosophical Society sponsored a conference on totalitarianism in 1939 whose participants likewise ignored individual leaders. "Symposium on the Totalitarian State from the Standpoints of History, Political

what totalitarianism in fact is" was still unresolved and, hence, warranted undistracted attention. Yet the role of the leader in a totalitarian system was clearly germane to the nature of the system. Arendt allotted the leader considerable scope in her classic study of totalitarianism, but she did not support Kennan's view that Stalin's death was a subject the conference should discuss. Nor did she suggest in her famous study that the leader's personality or individual whims were a factor in the system's functioning. Although she describes the leader as the center of the system, he is the drive shaft of a machine rather than an individual agent and supremely empowered. Nowhere does she suggest that the totalitarian leader is supremely empowered to alter the character of the regime. As she puts it: "In the center of the movement as the motor that swings it into motion sits the leader."[13] Equally convinced that nothing would change, the Eisenhower administration refused to meet with Stalin's immediate successors in the spring of 1953. In contrast, both Hitler and Stalin viewed the role of the leader in their respective systems as paramount, and each developed an obsessive interest in the other.[14] Arendt later modified her view, and she suggested in a new introduction that after Stalin's death, "the Soviet Union can no longer be called totalitarian in the strict sense of the term."[15]

Halberstam is convincing on the need for liberalism's reliance on an illiberal double but less clear on why the twentieth-century term "totalitarianism" is the selected term. In an interesting recent book (*Interpretation of Voyages: Russia and America in Travelogues and Intertexts*), the Russian scholar and critic Alesandr Etkind traces the double image of Russia and the United States from the early nineteenth century and finds that the dualism between Russia and America with respect to freedom and the power of the state over society was already well established nearly a hundred years before Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power.[16] He records Pushkin reading Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville conversing with the Russian philosopher Petr Chaadaev, and James Fennimore Cooper listening to Russian aristocrats in Paris who envied Americans' freedom. This confirms Halberstam's argument that the dualism inherent in the contrast between democracy and totalitarianism was already in the making long before it received the classical articulation of the Cold War.

Science, Economics and Sociology, November 17, 1939," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 82 (1940), 1–102.

[13]Hanna Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 71, viii.

[14]Georgiii Cherniavskii, *Ten' Liutsiferova kryla: Bol'shevizm I National-Sotsializm: Sravnitel'no istoricheskii analiz dvukh form totalitarizma* (Kharkov, 2003), 209–29.

[15]Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three*, xviii.

[16]Aleksandr Etkind, *Tolkovanie puteshestvii Rossiia i Amerika v travelogakh I intertekstakh.* (Moscow, 2001).

Slavoj Zizek in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* is primarily concerned with how references to totalitarianism deflect criticism of liberal democracies. The book was published in 2001, so recent developments are not part of his argument. Zizek explores discussions of evil, the holocaust, religious fundamentalism, modernism, post-modernism, multiculturalism, and cultural studies. In these contexts, he argues, totalitarianism works as a rhetorical device to preserve "the liberal-democratic hegemony" (3). He agrees with Halberstam's reading of the liberal tradition, to the extent that he sees the invocation of the demonized alternative as supportive of liberalism's self-image. In a rather strained metaphor, perhaps most resonant with aficionados of organic foods, he describes totalitarianism as "one of the main *ideological* antioxidants, whose function throughout its career was to *tame free radicals*, and thus to help the social body to maintain its politico-ideological good health" (1). One does not have to share Zizek's viewpoint to recognize that invocation of totalitarianism can be used to close an argument by equating critics of liberal democracy with fascists and communists.

Zizek's comments on the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany are more perplexing than amusing. He argues, unconvincingly in my view, that Stalinism represents the perversion of an "authentic" revolution and, therefore, its violence was "more 'irrational' than fascist violence" (127–28). This echoes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's famous observation in *Humanism and Terror* (1948), to which Sartre subscribed, that the Soviet Union should be favored over the United States because its stated objective was humanistic and its repression more straightforward than capitalist repression. Observe Zizek's tortured reasoning concerning the distinctiveness of Soviet persecutions:

> Thus the Stalinist terror is not simply the betrayal of the Revolution—the attempt to erase the traces of the authentic revolutionary past; rather, it bears witness to a kind of "imp of perversity" which compels the post-revolutionary new order to (re)inscribe its betrayal of the Revolution within itself, to 're-mark' it in the guise of arbitrary arrests and killings which threatened all members of the nomenklatura as in psychoanalysis, the Stalinist confession of guilt reveals true guilt. (128–29)

Zizek never defines "authentic revolutionary past" or "true guilt." Furthermore, his explanation of the purges as "a reminder of the radical negativity at the heart of the regime" is not much help (128). Nor are statements such as "Precisely as Marxists, we should have no fear in acknowledging that the purges under Stalinism were in a way more 'irrational' than Fascist violence: paradoxically, this very excess is an unmistakable sign that Stalinism, in contrast to fascism, was the case of a perverted authentic revolution" (128). One is tempted to sympathize with the intellectual challenges of the Marxists of the twenty-first century, wish them "bon voyage" on their odyssey, and hope that they will find their Penelope at home somewhere. But to dismiss Zizek's book simply because of its tortured intellectual sophistry would be to lose an important message, that is, that liberal and democratic regimes should not avoid self-examination and self-assessment by focusing on an externalized and demonized "other."

The phenomenon Zizek describes is not a fantasy. A quick search of the *New York Times* turned up at least one instance in the past year in which "totalitarianism" was used in an effort to suppress criticism in the manner Zizek derides. Paul Krugman mocks a Florida Congressman who introduced a bill that would allow college students to sue leftist professors who turned the classroom into a "totalitarian niche."[17] In a highly polarized political environment, thoughtful and constructive questioning of social and political policy can be discredited by categorizing it as part of the demonized other, in the Floridian case, as in the past, totalitarian.

Alekandras Shtromas's collection of speeches, interviews, and essays from the 1980s and 1990s belongs to the world of the participants in the American Academy's conference on totalitarianism, but the collection also extends beyond it. A Lithuanian Jew who emigrated in 1973 and died in 1999, Shtromas witnessed both the Soviet and Nazi occupations of his country. He was by turns Stalinist, dissident, and finally a scholar and political commentator. To Shtromas, totalitarianism was a theory that helped prevent the West from compromising with the Soviet Union. In an essay entitled "To Fight Communism: Why and How" (1984), he complains of the Western willingness to see the Soviet Union as "a mere continuation of the pre-revolutionary (i.e., pre-1917) Russian Empire" (76). Such naïveté, he suggests, explains President Jimmy Carter's surprise at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The fact that Imperial Russia was no less interested in Afghanistan is conveniently forgotten. The lesson Shtromas draws is clear: "The simple and obvious truth is that with ideologically motivated powers, be it Nazi Germany or communist Soviet Union, no reliable or long-term compromise or coexistence is ever possible" (77). The only sensible policy, therefore, is to seek "the elimination of communist powers from the face of the earth" (80). He reiterated this position repeatedly until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Shtromas used the concept of totalitarianism differently than did Halberstam or Zizek; Shtromas sought to rally forces that could destroy the Soviet empire.

Shtromas believed that once this artificial system disappeared, the country would return to normal relations with the West based on mutual self-interest. He was inspired by Immanuel Kant's 1795 essay "Perpetual Peace" in which the sage suggested that a world of like-minded republican states might live in perpetual peace. Drawing on his interpretation of the lessons of the Lithuanian experience, Shtromas imagined a "global commonwealth of free and democratic nations" as the ideal solution for former Soviet republics in the post-Communist era (378). Shtromas's optimistic and

[17]*New York Times*, April 5, 2005.

arguably naïve pronouncements echo the very sentiments that helped to justify the support of non-Communist dictatorial regimes in much of the developing world during the Cold War: remove Communism and history will follow the yellow brick road to peace and prosperity. This vision of a future without conflict is eerily reminiscent of Marx's communist utopia. Shtromas's volume concludes with several additional speculative pieces. Sweeping away the legacies of totalitarianism seemed to him largely a matter reinstituting the market economy, granting non-Russian nations their autonomy, and re-establishing relations between Russia and the West on the basis of mutual interests. Thus, Shtromas reveals an unanticipated effect of the totalitarian paradigm: the inclination to minimize or ignore fundamental challenges of economic and political development that emerged after the collapse of the regimes to which the term "totalitarian" was applied. Francis Fitzgerald suggests in her book about Reagan and "Star Wars," *Way Out There in the Blue*, that "It was the ambiguity inherent in the idea which allowed Reagan to make the transition between a vision of the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire,' and a vision of world peace and disarmament."[18] Shtromas and others who believed that the fall of the Soviet Union promised universal peace were similarly entranced with totalitarianism as the sum of all evil.

Shlomo Avineri and Zeev Sternhell, co-editors of *Europe's Century of Discontent*, consider a variety of totalitarian systems, though for some contributors, totalitarianism is an unexamined given and for others, an unhelpful distortion. The thrust of the book is to differentiate among movements and regimes, each with its own trajectory, fanatical agents, and national incubator. Sternhell stresses the differences between the Nazis and the Soviets, particularly with respect to the old elites and the market economy. Charles S. Maier complains of the inclination of some historians to downplay Fascism as "a mere reflex of Communism" (48). It is easy to agree with him that "the Fascist impulse is as strong and as autonomous as the Communist impulse" (55). But perhaps he is too quick to write off the term "fascism" since some journalists are now using it as a substitute for "totalitarianism." Thomas Friedman has written in the *New York Times* of the "Fascist minority in Iraq" (2/10/2005) and David Brooks complains that in Iraq, "With U.S. acquiescence, fascists are allowed to preen, terrorize and entrench themselves" (9/14/2004). Unlike the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, however, as Robert O. Paxton suggests in his recent study of Fascism, Islamic fundamentalist movements such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda "are not reactions against a malfunctioning democracy" since they arose in "traditional hierarchical societies."[19]

Several of the other authors of the Avineri and Sternhell volume also contrast the Nazis and the Soviets. Cynthia Hooper compares the more

[18]Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 38.
[19]Robert O. Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 204.

stable Nazi hierarchy in which high officials rarely lost their heads with the Soviet system in which they lost them with predictable regularity. Hauke Brunkhorst distinguishes between Nazi and Soviet terror, arguing that Soviet pathology was rational while that of the Nazis irrational. He cites Raymond Aron's well-known comparison: "In one case, the outcome is the labor-camp, and in the other the gas chamber" (17). This argument requires that, like Zizek, Brunkhorst ignore the innocents shot for who they were rather than what they did and reevaluate the costs and benefits of the labor camp relative to those of the gas chamber, a repugnant and probably futile exercise.

Other authors in the volume use totalitarianism as a tool of political analysis. Wolfgang Merkel maps a universe of totalitarian systems including Communist regimes, Fascist "Fuhrer dictatorships," and "theocratic-totalitarian regimes." He finds that "the Taliban regime of Afghanistan came very close to the ideal type of theocratic totalitarianism" but identifies only North Korea and Saudi Arabia as contemporary totalitarian societies (161). He could have included Myanmar and Eritrea as well. Antonio Costa Pinto, in an essay on decision-making in fascist dictatorships, stresses the charismatic quality of the leadership and concludes that "the authoritarian-totalitarian dichotomy has been an extremely useful classificatory tool for students of twentieth-century dictatorships" (129). Costa Pinto's essay would have been more informative had he indicated the purpose for which the tool has been useful.

Taking a different tack, Michele Battini describes "totalitarian fascism" as a political system extending at various times from Portugal to the Baltic nations. Battini's focus on language is productive, and "words do count," as he observes (99). Yet the term "totalitarianism" applied to societies that lack such a common language works less well. Shlomo Avineri in the last essay stresses the differences between the rightist and leftist societies that are grouped together under the totalitarian rubric. These include:

1. their access to power;
2. their practice in relation to their ideology; and
3. their demise. (287)

He observes that although "both Nazism and Soviet-type Communism are justly condemned on democratic principles, the totalitarian similarities should not mislead us as regarding the fundamental differences in assessing these types of government" (290).

Totalitarianism as a viable concept requires a close grouping of totalitarian societies and a single benign alternative. The effect is to collapse all nontotalitarian systems into one positive political universe. Yet as Adam Michnik argues in *Europe's Century of Discontent*, "Anti-Communism like anti-Fascism is not in itself a marker of human decency" (139). Michnik is worried that the Communists receive less scrutiny because of their purported anti-Fascist credentials. "Why is there less tolerance toward Haider than toward Communists and post-Communists?" Michnik asks, referring to the Austrian Nazi sympathizer Joerg Haider, leader of the Freedom Party that joined the Austrian government (149). His answer is to blame it on the myth of anti-fascism, a category that, like totalitarianism, served to bundle diverse political groupings in a dichotomous theoretical construct.

Mark Lilla suggests in one of the last essays in this volume that modern political discourse is in need of an alternative, and not only to totalitarianism. Lilla invokes the classical term of "tyranny" as one that could encompass the undemocratic modern regimes that do not fit the old rubrics of fascism, nazism, communism, or totalitarianism. As he writes: "Sooner or later the language of anti-totalitarianism will have to be abandoned and the classic problem of tyranny revisited" (29). On this point, Michele Battini is partly justified in concluding: "The category of totalitarianism has become a spent force and its ashes have fertilized the fields of critical reflection" (85). Perhaps those ashes, in addition to fertilizing, are clouding the atmosphere. The invocation of totalitarianism blocks criticism of liberal society, as Zizek suggests, but also of the anti-undemocratic states that the democracies support or ignore as well as of such phenomena of the resurgent European right embodied in skinheads, Le Pen, and Russian neo-Nazis.

These four books cover the same general terrain, which is presumably why they are grouped for purpose of review, yet they display an almost complete intellectual disconnect. Taken together, they serve as a reminder of the power of terminology and why taxonomy is not a fruitful approach to the study of historical phenomena. The terms "communism," "fascism," "nazism," and "totalitarianism" circulate in the language of our political planet like moribund satellites that have ceased to receive and transmit messages but still reflect light and heat. They featured importantly in the history of their times. As linguistic instruments, they helped those who lived in the era in which they were constructed identify themselves and others. They remain meaningful categories for the study of the history and the historical language of politics during the twentieth century. To treat them other than as artifacts of their era, however, to define them other than as their contemporaries variously used them, is to invite misunderstanding. None of these books provides a clear definition of these terms or a rigorous methodology of evaluation, yet each draws conclusions about their import. Many of the conclusions are interesting, some amusing, some provocative, but lacking a shared understanding of terms, they often slip into the category of polemic. Above all, these books are a reminder that the study of political institutions is very much a work in progress. The resurgent use of the terms, particularly "totalitarian" and "fascist" in today's political confusion, are suggestive of how much progress is needed.