

# Introduction

## Passion and Antipathy

Search, then, the Ruling Passion: There, alone,  
The Wild are constant, and the Cunning known;  
The Fool consistent, and the False sincere;  
Priests, Princes, Women, no dissemblers here

—Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*, Epistle I

This book examines the nature of totalitarianism as interpreted by some of the finest minds of the twentieth century. Russian Bolshevism and German National Socialism, personified by Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler, not only were responsible for the most devastating war in human history—excluding Chinese and Japanese casualties, it killed around 36 million soldiers and civilians. Bolshevism and Nazi aggression also produced camps and slave labor colonies that murdered millions more. Only a minority of those marked for extermination, exile, or forced labor were determined enemies of the regimes that slaughtered them. Given the opportunity, most would have kept their heads down, connived and colluded to be left alone. But totalitarian governments were the foe of tranquility. They unleashed wars, purges, and show trials. They demanded that completely innocent people admit to impossible crimes. They mobilized whole populations for conquest. They assigned death by category; it was not what you did that damned you, but what you were—a Jew, a Slav, an intellectual, a kulak, a “cosmopolitan.” Animating this culture of death were rituals and ideologies that prophesied earthly redemption: a

world of brotherhood or of race purity. Onlookers were baffled. What had caused such convulsions? What did the atrocities they perpetrated imply about the elasticity of human nature and its potential for evil? Were the Bolshevik and National Socialist experiments totally new phenomena or exacerbations of earlier tyrannies? Once defeated, could similar governments rise once again?

No writer asked these questions more searchingly, or arrived at more arresting answers to them, than Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), a thinker of Jewish-German origin who, following Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor, and her own brief detention by the Gestapo, fled Berlin in 1933. Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is a classic—perhaps *the* classic—treatment of Bolshevism and Nazism. It was an improbable achievement. A student of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, the stars of German “existentialism,” Arendt was in the 1920s a young woman of intelligence, sensitivity, and academic promise, but, judging by her doctoral thesis *Love and St. Augustine* (1929), by no means an exceptionally gifted thinker. If she possessed an identity, it was as a philosopher, continuing the tradition of German letters and cultivation. She had no firm plans for an academic career. Compelled to become a refugee, she watched, first from France, later from the United States, as the world was shaken by a force of unimaginable brutality that she, and others, called “totalitarianism.” Henceforth, Arendt employed all her creative powers to articulate its conditions and implications, even when dilating on the most arcane subjects—the faculty of thinking, the concept of action, the meaning of authority. Investigating totalitarianism was her ruling passion.

She was not alone in her endeavor. Many writers in America and Europe struggled to comprehend the totalitarian enigma. Quite a few she knew personally. Some remained lifelong friends; others she fell out with. This book makes no attempt to chart the whole of Arendt's network. It is not a biography of Arendt, though it contains many details of her intellectual relationships. It attends only to a portion—albeit the most innovative portion—of her writings. Readers looking for an Arendt *conspicuum* must search elsewhere. My topic is a group of Arendt's most acute social critics, men of the caliber of David Riesman, Raymond Aron, and Jules Monnerot. All, in their fashion, were impressed by Arendt's originality, by the boldness and paradoxical quality of her arguments. But all were skeptical of her theory of totalitarianism. In turn, Arendt had

strong disagreements with them on subjects that straddled politics, ethics, and the interpretation of history.

In great intellects, a ruling passion is often complemented by an abiding antipathy. Arendt loathed the social sciences in general and sociology in particular. Her second published article was a review of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), which she chastised for denying the autonomy of thought and for suggesting that philosophy's traditional focus on ontological questions was less illuminating than was understanding the shifting finitude of everyday life, the alleged source of the philosopher's categories.<sup>1</sup> Bearing the impress of her university education, Arendt wrote as a champion of *Existenz* philosophy, defending it against what she saw as sociology's reductionism and aspiration to replace it. The tone throughout her essay on Mannheim is restrained, the language turgid, the subject recondite. Dissent is tempered by a spirit of intellectual generosity. When Arendt confronted sociology again in the 1940s and 1950s under the wider rubric of "the social sciences," the landscape of her life and her conception of philosophy had been radically reshaped. Behind her lay the ruins of the Weimar Republic, the capitulation of her teacher, Martin Heidegger, to Nazism, the horrors of a genocidal war, and the painful experience of her own exile in France and, at least initially, in America. Her tone was now urgent, the language limpid, the subject of her reflections charged with immediate gravity. Once more, she attacked social science analysis, but this time it was the alleged failure of such approaches to explain *totalitarianism* that was her prime concern. The earlier spirit of engagement with sociology is replaced by tempestuous root-and-branch dismissal of it. It is this period of Arendt's life with which we are centrally concerned in this book.

Arendt was one of a group of Weimar intellectuals transplanted to American soil for whom the social sciences were deeply suspect, "an abominable discipline from every point of view, educating 'social engineers.'"<sup>2</sup> This group of thinkers included Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and such prominent members of the Frankfurt School as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse.<sup>3</sup> Arendt's relations with Horkheimer and Adorno—those "bastards"—were strained by personal repugnance, sharply contrasting political attitudes, and major philosophical differences.<sup>4</sup> But she shared with them not only her Jewishness and the status of being a refugee, but also the key ordeal that brought Jewishness and immigration together: the experience of Nazism and the Shoah. It was

this experience above all that led her to view sociology with growing distrust and to see the social sciences more generally as deeply compromised by the mass societies they purported to explain.<sup>5</sup> Arendt insisted that sociology was parasitical on “the social,” a modern sphere of life characterized by conformity rather than distinction. She inveighed against sociology’s “repulsive vocabulary.”<sup>6</sup> She argued that social scientific explanations couched in terms of structural theories of causality denied the existence of human freedom. Most of all, Arendt believed that the social sciences had chronically misconstrued the nature of Nazi and Bolshevik regimes. In her account, “totalitarianism” refers to a type of regime that, no longer satisfied with the limited aims of classical despotisms and dictatorships, demands continual mobilization of its subjects and never allows society to settle down into a durable, hierarchical order. In addition, totalitarian domination rules through total terror; pursues, by means of the secret police, “objective enemies” or “enemies of the people” who are typically not subjective opponents of, or genuine threats to, the regime; offers an all-encompassing ideological framework that abridges the complexity of life in a single, axiomatic, reality-resistant postulate that allows no cognitive dissonance; and is predicated on an experience of mass superfluity attendant on the growing mobility, insecurity, and “worldlessness” of modern human beings. Arendt considered totalitarianism to be modern and singular.<sup>7</sup> It was not a phenomenon that had early modern roots; nor was it the logical outgrowth of a peculiar national tradition or culture, even German culture,<sup>8</sup> or of the rise of secularism and godlessness. Totalitarianism was the result of an avalanche of catastrophes—World War I, the implosion of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, and a global capitalist economic crisis—that brought the victory of a movement and the consolidation of a regime that was structurally different from classical dictatorship or tyrannies. In sum, Arendt argued that totalitarianism was a cosmos so alien that it had rendered obsolete our familiar repertoire of concepts and judgments. Social science attempts to capture its essence in stock analogies and “ideal types” failed miserably to grasp its uniqueness.

Most studies of Arendt are composed by philosophers and political theorists. By disciplinary formation, they tend to share her antagonism to the social sciences, and sociology in particular. My approach is different. A critical admirer of Arendt, trained in a tradition she distrusted, I look sympathetically (Chapter 1) at her objections to social science and show that her complaints were in many respects justified. Yet this book does

more. Avoiding broad-brush disciplinary endorsements or dismissals, it reconstructs the theoretical and political stakes of Arendt's encounters with, or rebuttals by, men like David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, with whom Arendt corresponded in the 1940s about the limits of totalitarianism (Chapter 2); Raymond Aron, who argued that much of totalitarianism could be explained as an amplification of revolutionary ideology and violence (Chapter 3); and Jules Monnerot, with whom she sparred during the 1950s, in the pages of *Confluence*, a journal edited by Henry Kissinger, about the nature of "political religion" (Chapter 4). Along the way, we will greet other writers whom Arendt either reproached or failed to convince, including Theodore Abel, Hans Gerth, Alex Inkeles, Talcott Parsons, and Philip Rieff. It may appear odd to some readers that Daniel Bell plays only a cameo role in this book. To be sure, Bell was the foremost sociologist among her friends and a brilliant social thinker in his own right. But his critical engagement with her was meager.<sup>9</sup> He was unhappy about "mass society" theory and alluded to her in that connection. But Arendt appears in a list of five "varied uses" of mass society that, Bell cogently argues, fail to reflect the "complex, richly striated social relations of the real world."<sup>10</sup> A similar treatment graces his comments on totalitarianism in which, once more, Arendt's distinctive arguments are absorbed into a more general catalogue of criticism.<sup>11</sup> Bell's assessment of Arendt is hence muted and cursory. That cannot be said of Riesman, Aron, and Monnerot. There we see dissonance that is intensive and productive; we see great minds talking back to Arendt in a nuanced and elaborated form. Her critique is itself criticized; her refutations are contested, her alternatives disputed. Sociological explanation emerges as far more angular and robust than her categorical denunciations suggest.

If the first objective of this book is to retrieve debates that have been largely forgotten, the second objective is substantive: to distill from these disputes a series of issues that continue to tax the modern mind. Notably, to say that the social sciences were intrinsically unable to grasp unprecedented phenomena raises the question of what "unprecedented" actually means. How does one recognize things that are utterly strange? Arendt gives us little to go on, so we need to develop answers of our own. This book was written in the shadow of the West's struggle with radical Islamism. Giles Keppel, an informed and honest modern commentator on Islam, remarks that "naming the adversary [has] created the illusion of having identified it," short-circuiting "the search for operational concepts

that could assimilate a complex reality and, in the process, restructure existing cognitive categories.”<sup>12</sup> What, then, is the alternative? How might we more adequately grasp this “complex reality”? That is a quintessentially Arendtian question, and I give my own response to it in the final chapter. Or take Arendt’s blistering attack on the concept of “political” or “secular” religion: Arendt believed that describing National Socialism or Bolshevism as religions, secular or otherwise, was a travesty when it was not a heresy. Can we today—faced with new religious radicalism—extract from her indictment, and Monnerot’s rejoinder, a less polarized perspective on the relationships between religion and totalitarian politics? I show that we can.

### **The Title of This Book, Its Scope, and Ways to Read It**

Why does the title of this book refer to the social sciences and not simply to sociology? In the first place, Arendt typically invoked the latter when she sought more generally to excoriate the former. She saw sociology as the most egregious example of a modern intellectual trend that concatenated structural history, empiricist political science, and psychology. Writing before the ascendancy of rational choice theory, she believed economics to be a somewhat provincial discipline dealing with a very basic activity, the satisfaction of material needs. This “initial science” had been extended, or rather eclipsed, by “the all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as ‘behavioral sciences,’ aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activity, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal.” She continued:

If economics is the science of society in its early stages, when it could impose its rules of behavior only on sections of the population and on parts of their activities, the rise of the “behavioral sciences” indicates clearly the final stage of this development, when mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and “social behavior” has become the standard for all regions of life.<sup>13</sup>

Sociology, the putative science of the social founded by Marx more than Comte,<sup>14</sup> was symptomatic of this broader decadence, but it did not work alone. Positivist political science and, in particular, psychology were its dehumanizing allies and, in consequence, additional targets of her scorn.

A second reason why this book, notwithstanding its sociological bias, summons the social sciences more generally is that Arendt's interlocutors had complex intellectual identities. David Riesman was originally a student of law. He later wrote as a social commentator, or culture critic, rather than as a specialized sociologist. Raymond Aron was as much a political writer and a theorist of international relations as he was a sociologist. Jules Monnerot mixed sociology and psychology.

We should also appreciate that Arendt's assault on social science reasoning was part of a much larger appraisal of the Western intellectual tradition. Originally enamored of classical philosophy, Arendt was increasingly struck by its limitations. From Parmenides and Plato, through to Spinoza and Heidegger, she spied an entrenched prejudice against Man as a terrestrial and transitory being, and a denial of the dignity of human affairs. "The tradition," as she summarily called it, had repeatedly denigrated the realm of action while elevating the contemplative spirit. It craved peace and tranquility, distrusted the body and its passions, and oscillated between utopia and despair. Politics, from this standpoint, was secondary to the life of the mind, the *bios theōrētikos*; worse, the confounded noise of politics—its long, drawn-out, and inconclusive discussions; its haphazardness; its entrapment in sense perceptions; and hence its failure to conform rigorously to a template of the Good or the Rational—was essentially demeaning. More elevated was the soul, the quest for ultimate, disembodied Truth, and for refuge in heaven.<sup>15</sup>

Even those who later, like Karl Marx, believed that they had transcended philosophy were essentially intolerant of politics. Marx, after all, wished ardently for the dissolution of the state and identified politics with class domination. The Marxist notion that violence is the midwife of history justified the use of force to speed up the historical process, to aid in the "making" of history against defunct classes.<sup>16</sup> But, for Arendt, the idea that history can be "made" was chilling; it implied that human beings were disposable objects of nature, a brute mass to be designed and recreated by a master fabricator. It also suggested that the theorist, like the craftsman, knows the end of the process he is manufacturing. But, short of apocalypse, history has no end. We cannot foretell or control humanity's future any more that we can foretell or control our own. Marxism lent itself to the totalitarian project "because of its perversion, or misunderstanding of political action as the making of history."<sup>17</sup> A different kind of book from the one I have written might examine Arendt's evaluation of

Western thought as a whole. My purpose here is more limited: to examine her estimation of twentieth-century social science and her engagement with some of its most brilliant representatives.

It is essential, in a work of this sort, to listen to both sides of the arguments in which Arendt was engaged, to give a fair hearing to those with whom she disagreed. Accordingly, this book affords roughly as much space to Arendt's opponents as to Arendt herself. Indeed, I hope the book will be valuable to readers who, even if unsympathetic to Arendt, would like to know more about what Riesman, Aron, and Monnerot (and Abel and Parsons) said about totalitarianism. Readers should be forewarned, however, that each of the chapters assumes a somewhat different shape. Posterity records for all to see the dialogue between Arendt and Riesman, and between Arendt and Monnerot; the first took place largely in correspondence to which we now have access; the second was rehearsed in a magazine polemic. With Raymond Aron, however, the situation is quite different. He furnished various objections to her account of totalitarianism; she did not reply to them. In sum, we have heterogeneous and asymmetric encounters to consider, only some of which were conducted as real person-to-person conversations or exchanges.

I have avoided the temptation to update Arendt's analysis of National Socialism and Bolshevism by recourse to modern historical evidence *unless one of her interlocutors anticipated a relevant finding*. Facts are important; Arendt herself often said so.<sup>18</sup> But to simply "correct" Arendt's errors of fact would be patronizing, the author playing the role of schoolmaster instructing a less resourceful pupil. It would also be anachronistic, judging her statements by standards of evidence that may simply have been unavailable in the 1940s and 1950s. Far better to ask, what did Arendt's critics spot at the time, and point out to her, that later scholars have vindicated? In this way, we keep the analysis historical and eschew pedantry.

Perusing this book as a whole will give the reader a historical, many-sided sense of Arendt's depiction of totalitarianism, her attack on social science, and the rebuttals of her social science critics. But perhaps you don't want a comprehensive view. You are concerned only with a particular debate, say, between Arendt and Riesman, or you want to know the nature of Raymond Aron's intellectual qualms about Arendt. With that priority in mind, I have made the chapters relatively self-contained; they can be read individually. This has produced a little repetition of Arendt's chief claims; in compensation, each chapter deals with her evaluation of



the social sciences in a different way. Moreover, the present work is itself the first volume of a two-book project. Each book can be read separately or together. The successor volume takes us further back into Hannah Arendt's career by examining her critique of Karl Mannheim and Max Weber. The first she confronted directly; the second, a towering absence in the life of Arendt's mentor Karl Jaspers, she handled with greater circumspection. Neither influenced her thought in any positive way. But Arendt's rejection of both thinkers tells us a great deal about her own intellectual framework and the origins of her hostility to social science.

Hannah Arendt called totalitarianism the burden of our time. Is it still? The legacies of the Second World War, Stalinism, and the Cold War continue to shape us. But jihadist movements and states of terror raise different problems and, correspondingly, call for new, robust responses. Western publics—generally timid, convinced that enmity is at root a misunderstanding rather than a conscious decision—face a martial, courageous, and inventive foe. Arendt and her social science interlocutors urged us to think afresh. Worldly and astute, they struggled to grasp the unique dangers of their century. Their example encourages us to confront, with sobriety and realism, the perils of our own age.

Hong Kong, August 2009