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The anti-totalitarian left between atrocity and justice

Abstract

This article is an exercise in historical retrieval for the purposes of clarifying, and endorsing, a normative political theory against totalitarianism. In the existing range of normative positions, one political platform squeezed is a convincing anti-totalitarian left. From one direction, the radical left engagement is Olympian; from the other, the legacy of Cold War liberalism mutes the critique of injustice, even whilst on the critique of repression and violence it is loud and clear. The moral and political authority of humanism is at stake in both these dominant positions. The radical left position – which is derived from Western Marxism – increasingly rejects humanism as sententious and non-heroic. Conversely, liberalism tells a falsely reassuring story in which humanism is tamed to a post-totalitarian vision of a moral and political minimum. 'Decency' is the thread the article finds by which to coax a post-totalitarian humanism away from the negative and liberal emphasis, and towards uses which are generative and geared to experience. The main contribution is to highlight underplayed and common aspects of the political theories of George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, and Albert Camus. In the latter part of the article, thumbnail sketches of these three thinkers are offered in order to tease out a core set of anchoring values for an anti-totalitarian – 'decent' – left: solidarity, moral nuance, and sensitivity to vulnerability.

What is the first virtue of an anti-totalitarian politics? A good case could be made that it is repulsion towards repression and violence. That is to frame a political platform negatively. Nevertheless, as I try to show in my book on the subject, *Modernism and Totalitarianism*, this political platform is the fruit of thinking critically about the sum total of the various anti-totalitarian schools that emerged in the second part of the twentieth century. My book suggested that in specific ethos what this platform amounted to was a 'genocidal' theory of totalitarianism. In other words, leaving aside particular issues concerning the criteria and application of this category, genocide is the combined – and predictable – outcome of the congruence of totalitarianism's core ideological elements.¹ There has been some dissent that such a view is guilty of moralism, a criticism which has been made of my book, in particular,

¹ Richard Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism: Rethinking the Intellectual Sources of Nazism and Stalinism, 1945 to the Present* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 51-58, 240-241.

by David Roberts.² In this article, I aim to show that it is not the presence of a strong normative stance which is the problem, rather the problem is that stated in these bare terms alone (and left unelaborated) the normative stance is ambiguous, and even flawed or inadequate.

There are two main problems regarding what is left unsaid in the platform. First, where does it leave social and political reform? Second, where does it leave the non-Western world? The first problem pits totalitarianism against radicalism, or an ‘atrocity paradigm’ against what we might call a liberation paradigm.³ The second problem pits an anti-totalitarian politics particularly against the politics of anti-imperialism and postcolonialism. By reputation, since the most familiar objects of historical explanation in totalitarianism theory are either European or Eurasian, so it seems that there is a diminution of concern for peoples in other regions of the world. Significantly, at stake in both problems is the place of humanism in totalitarianism theory and critique: in the first case, because humanism is perceived as lapsing into the complacent and ahistorical; in the second case, because it can appear as a false universalism in a different way, namely, as a cloak for assimilation to white and/or Western experiences and agendas.

But can we define an anti-totalitarian normative stance more satisfactorily such that these concerns drop away? Put differently, is there – or could there be – an anti-totalitarian left *between* atrocity and justice? My line of response to these questions is affirmative. Pursuing that line of response entails extemporising from a twofold, but simple, hypothesis: *moral reflection on atrocity should stir – not numb – the cause of social and political reform; and reflecting upon atrocities close at hand will incite – and certainly not harden – sympathy towards atrocities farther away.* The main finding is that the existence of an anti-totalitarian

² David D. Roberts, *Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020), pp. 44, 50-53.

³ Cf. Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

left is more an aspiration than reality (more ‘could be’ than ‘is’). Why? Partly, that is because such a left is missing much in the way of institutionalisation. To far greater extent, rival philosophical stories about the political meaning of totalitarianism are ‘embedded’; and between them, an anti-totalitarian left is squeezed.⁴ In the first two parts of the article, I present the rival stories (Western Marxism and Cold War liberalism). In the remaining parts, I construct the more satisfactory stance. I seek to contribute to the profile and recognition of an anti-totalitarian left by teasing out a set of anchoring values by which this political platform might become more expressly ethically grounded, and, equally, by providing a more developed account of provenance: by identifying key thinkers and rehearsing core arguments.

1.

Western Marxism enjoys the benefits of giving one line of the critique of totalitarianism quite rich institutionalisation. In particular, legacies centred around the founding Frankfurt School contributions are both established and varied. At one level, familiarity with these contributions is promoted by an appealing, well-known (and justly deserved) origins story: concerning the intellectual exile of leading theoreticians, uprooted by persecution in Europe, and led to find sanctuary in the United States.⁵ At another level, institutionalisation reflects in the entrenchment of some specific terminological repertoires: the product of a long process of adaptation over the course of this tradition, and hooked around the central arch-mobiliser, ‘critical theory’. However, the view of totalitarianism within these parameters is also indicative of a humanism which is selective, then eventually emerging dissatisfied.

Humanism, in the anti-totalitarianism of Western Marxism, is initially to the fore. Part and parcel of countering conservative-leaning appropriations of totalitarianism is reminding

⁴ For discussion of embedded ideas, see Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Cox (eds.), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso, 2016).

that once upon a time – in inception in fact – anti-totalitarian attitudes were socialist attitudes.⁶ To address the challenges of the twentieth century, Frankfurt School thinkers converged on a common set of diagnoses, which were roughly like so. In Russia, socialism was increasing statist and bureaucratic. To save it would require revolution in Germany; yet in Germany, revolutionary potential was now not only stalling, but also withering, in face of the face of a new historical reality which the left needed to gain a tighter conceptual grip upon: fascism. And in the struggle against this new reality, electoral and representative democracy was far from being relied upon, since in order to save capitalism, elites could prove quite ready to forgo this window-dressing outer face. How were these critiques sustained? And how could normative visions look constructively beyond them? Vital was that these Western ‘neo-’ Marxists were discovering a new Marx himself, a young Marx: the humanist (not the scientist) who manifested in the recently discovered Paris manuscripts of 1844. This new Marx was a humanist in several senses. Ethically, he was a critic of alienation, who thereby objected that human beings should always be accorded integrity and respect. Sociologically, he was the thinker empowering human agency, and who could therefore speak to the idea that ‘men make their own history’ with far less hesitance than the later Marx. And metaphysically, in the critique of religion re-worked from the young Hegelians, for example, he was a thinker involved in the modernist project of placing man, not God, at the centre of the universe. These are rich emanations of humanism – (re)assembled in timely fashion for the purposes of challenging scientism.⁷ The ethical inheritance could sustain solidarity. Hebert Marcuse, for instance, gave solidarity clear conception: the refusal of one person to allow their happiness to co-exist with the unhappiness of others.⁸ Or, equally, the ethical inheritance of humanism could

⁶ William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999)

⁷ Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism*, p. 150-157.

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 14.

help furnish an account of the ‘new barbarism’ (which was the case of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, staging a dialogue between Marx and Weber on the fate of modern rationality).⁹ And yet, the senses of humanism are also partial. Perhaps the metaphysical emanation is most telling – indicative of the Olympian perspective: lofty, theoretical, detached, and not much interested in the nature of experience as one other commitment of humanism.

The early radical left critique of totalitarianism already depreciated humanism inadvertently, and nor did it provide a vision encompassing the wider world to any great extent. When it corrected that – in the ’68-era enthusiasms for Maoism – it did so only by embracing romantic Third-Worldism, with aspects of Olympian idealisation transferred from the figure of the Western worker onto the now semi-orientalised agrarian peasant.¹⁰ In more recent times, the radical left tradition has troughed into outright rejection of humanism, both in a kind of soft form which is tentative, but also in a harder former which is anything but. The soft form is represented by Enzo Traverso – who, in virtue of an earlier study of the Holocaust sub-headed ‘Marxism after Auschwitz’, initially brought to the subject of totalitarianism moral credentials that were unassailable.¹¹ The harder form is represented by Slavoj Zizek. In circumnavigation of what (following Anson Rabinbach) can count as the two ‘moments of totalitarianism’ of the early twenty-first century – that is, turning-points when events force new alignments around lessons of the original – both these thinkers brought into their discussions topics which, fairly, were now appropriate.¹² These moments are, first, when the Islamist terror attacks on New

⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), p. ix.

¹⁰ Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Enzo Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide: Marxism after Auschwitz*, trans. Peter Drucker (London: Pluto, 1999).

¹² Anson Rabinbach, ‘Moments of Totalitarianism’, *History & Theory*, 45/1 (2006), p. 88.

York in 2001 brought to attention a new potential face of totalitarianism (followed shortly by a military response with disturbing innovations in violence of its own – the atrocity images broadcast from Abu Ghraib remain iconic); and, second, when the global financial crisis of 2008 – prompting widespread governmental austerity policies – eventually called up a political effect in a global turn to reactionary ‘populism’ circa 2016.¹³

Enzo Traverso advanced the view that ‘post-totalitarian’ thinking had become flawed because it was humanitarian, not political.¹⁴ He did not think that, for contemporary politics, lessons from the first part of the twentieth century were anachronistic; but he did think that that the lessons had been thought about in the wrong way, by trying to divine them through the emaciated liberal categories and ‘spectacles of Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls’. The dominant standpoint had become the victim gaze. It needed to be wrested to the hero’s gaze. That meant, above all, hallowing the memory of the anti-fascist *résistant*.¹⁵ To suggest that the pressing contemporary problem was to de-privilege the perspective of victims was already question-begging. But what was also troubling, in *The New Faces of Fascism* (which at least put the reins on more overhyped left interpretation, by circumscribing that Trump and Le Pen constituted ‘post-’, not ‘neo-’, fascism), was to address one of the new moments by slipping back into some earlier limits of Frankfurt School functionalism. Traverso, accurately, detected a ‘colonial matrix’ helping explain the upsurge in popular support for the reactionary right: the presence, in European societies, of populations of postcolonial origin, subjected to both discrimination and suspicion. However, arguing that ‘Muslims’ are today substituted for ‘Jews’, that ‘Islamophobia.... has replaced anti-Semitism’, was too crude, and an echo of

¹³ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945*, trans. by David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 5-6

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

Horkheimer and Adorno's own reductionism, for they, in the earlier era, had written 'the anti-Semitic plank' of German fascism was replaceable with any other designated scapegoat, which would be capable of performing the same function just as easily (both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred have their own causes).¹⁶ This contention, moreover, had less clear water between it and the more overhyped left interpretation of Le Pen, Trumpism, or even Faragism: to explain such phenomena in the terms of the persistence and/ or return of 'fascist rationalities' – and other such clichéd terminological abstractions – would not be such a leap.¹⁷

Slavoj Žižek upped the criticism by arguing that anti-totalitarianism meant the kiss of death for all political projects looking to pursue seriously social justice. Žižek did not think there was anything of substance in the idea of *les extrêmes se touchent*; but he did think that, in contemporary politics, the totalitarian paradigm played a suffocating role. It was a device for 'taming free radicals'.¹⁸ Effectively, under terms agreed by totalitarianism's 1990s – post-Cold War – moment, social justice projects had been de-legitimised by projection of the Gulag as the outcome. But this was to constrain anti-totalitarianism severely, as though its commitments concerned atrocity only, and not justice and atrocity combined. Along the way, there were some apt notes which Žižek did strike: the dominant horizons of anti-totalitarianism could, it was true, take attention away from those 'forms of Third World violence' in which 'Western states are co-responsible'.¹⁹ But where Žižek took the thesis of 'Holocaust uniqueness' to be the *sine qua non* of totalitarianism theory, that was not quite precise. Neither did Žižek give

¹⁶ Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, trans. by David Broder (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 70, 28; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 208.

¹⁷ See William Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), for an example of a view roughly along these lines.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), p.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67

any time at all to the politically progressive sensitivities which understanding of a foremost atrocity might nurture and build (moving outwards from initial object of explanation to far more expansive objects of concern). The main flavour of Žižek's book was, in any case, studied indifference to atrocity. This was where opposition to humanism was deployed as a perverse clarion call – and partly by Žižek's own deployment of a persona that knowingly confounded telling apart intention and exaggeration. In a lengthy disquisition on the difference between Nazi and Stalinist violence, deontological grounds for making a case were consciously suspended. The grounds chosen were deliberately those no humanist could endorse: not the irreducible gap between good intentions and ill effects (present in communism, absent in Nazism), rather the symbolic 'sacrifice' that Stalin's victims (but not Hitler's) could be called upon to make – rightly, Žižek implied – by fabricating their own false confessions. In the explication of this case, which was speculative to the point of being fantastical, the tack taken comprised raking over, in full tasteless detail, testimony given in court by Nikolai Bukharin during the Moscow Trials (and under severe duress);²⁰ less victim-blaming, in contemporary progressive language aptly learned from psychotherapy, than victim-mocking.

The solution of Traverso for maintaining an anti-fascist (but not anti-totalitarian) politics was to excavate the Marxist-Leninist revolution of 1917 from beneath the deep layers of negative meaning accrued over a century of anti-communism, and thereby re-establish a lost connection – heedless that some of these meanings might have been accrued for good reason.²¹ The solution of Žižek was more heedless still; more than simply set humanism aside, to

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 102-113.

²¹ 'Against Totalitarianism: A Conversation with Enzo Traverso', <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3644-against-totalitarianism-a-conversation-with-enzo-traverso> (posted 27 February 2018, last accessed 14 December 2020).

embrace an explicit anti-humanism, which in particular would eschew the moratorium on violence.²²

2.

The Western Marxist engagement with totalitarianism accents the authority of solidarity. But the stress on solidarity is increasingly unmoored from the humanism that once sustained it. It is also increasingly impatient with listening to victims. It is true that, in the recent era of success of the reactionary right, the authority of victimhood has become tarnished – the product of appropriation by unconvincing groups (for example, supposedly disenfranchised men, or those on receiving end of so-called ‘reverse racism’). However, stripped of mis-appropriation and, meanwhile, fetishisation, any normative political theory of anti-totalitarianism is unlikely to be worth its salt in the absence of a key precept that is salvageable; specifically, that is perhaps sensitivity to vulnerability. From an opposing political direction to the radical left, sensitivity to vulnerability is the notional emphasis of the liberal response to totalitarianism, which is increasingly recognised by the designator ‘Cold War liberalism’.²³ However, what features in Cold War liberalism is really a pale imitation of that value, which empties humanism to an idea of the moral minimum. Moreover, although the experiential aspect of humanism is caught onto – in the prominence of the trope of ‘decency’ – the force of decency itself, both rhetorically and politically, is mobilised only partially.

The Cold War liberal story about totalitarianism is almost certainly the most institutionally embedded anti-totalitarian story of all. In her well-known work, *Who Paid the*

²² Žižek, *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. xii, xiii, xv.

²³ See, *inter alia*, Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Fear and Freedom: On “Cold War Liberalism”’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 7/1 (2008), pp. 45-64; Malachi Hacoen, “‘The Strange Fact that the State of Israel Exists’: The Cold War Liberals between Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism’, *Jewish Social Studies* 15/2 (2009), pp. 37-81; and Amanda Anderson, ‘Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism’, *New Literary History*, 42/2 (2011), pp. 209-229.

Piper?, Frances Stonor Saunders situates Cold War liberalism within the dynamics of hidden manipulation by the CIA; yet it is important to say that its ideas became established less by subterfuge than by being rendered in plain sight.²⁴ As Duncan Bell has lately shown, strong arming, naivety, or even ill will, would have been beside the point.²⁵ In the decade of the 1950s in particular, considerable – and wide – intellectual labour going on both in Western academic institutions and within agencies around government had the effect (while not coordinated intention) of minting the post-war liberalism that was freshly ascendant.²⁶ This intellectual labour included, variously, retroactively assembling a canon of founding philosophical inspirations; bolstering liberalism by rebranding it through the compound construction ‘liberal democracy’; and steering the ideological mobilisations of the recent past away from fascist totalitarianism and squarely onto communist totalitarianism in place. The specific story which became so dominant centred around utopianism in politics – and its dangers. Utopianism was computed solely in terms of its faults, albeit which were real enough (imposing straightjacketing moulds for human behaviour, dulling human creativity in collectivism); and in the meantime, little was done to preserve its benefits, if not necessity – the indispensability of guideposts for organising where human life might be headed. To delegitimize utopianism was to vindicate pragmatism, so in this sense a dystopic liberal story was perhaps, more exactly, a liberal conservative story. But the de-legitimation of utopianism also contributed to a cult of centrism, blunting the edges of any potentially left-leaning anti-totalitarianism by association.²⁷

²⁴ Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 2000).

²⁵ Nevertheless, some exposés – such as David Caute on the role Isaiah Berlin played to deny the New Left academic, Isaac Deutscher, a British university post – make for eyebrow raising. David Caute, *Isaac and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

²⁶ Duncan Bell, ‘What is Liberalism?’, *Political Theory*, 42/6 (2014), pp. 682-715.

²⁷ Cf. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1997).

On the question of ideological tone, sometimes this was waspish – typically so in reply to solicitations for reform – but more often, the tone was sombre (in quite self-aware fashion). None here of the cultivated cynicism of Zizek, nor the bravura of Traverso.²⁸ Because the pathos was sombre, solidarity could fall out of the top rank of values: it could be made to fall sacrificial to maturation into the disabused view of the world. In the writings of Friedrich von Hayek, totalitarianism was the threat of the modern welfare state when its scope was extended beyond all but the most rudimentary of safety nets.²⁹ In the writings of Karl Popper, totalitarianism was the utopian social engineering product of historicism, out of the wreckage of which all that could be saved was ‘piecemeal’ engineering and the promise of free and open discussion.³⁰ But for sombre tone, nothing beats Isaiah Berlin. For Berlin, post-totalitarian political philosophy had to be explicitly tragic.³¹ But tragic for who? In disavowing utopianism, the costs and losses do not fall evenly; hence unsurprisingly, the questions asked about the adequacy of the atrocity paradigm from both justice and global perspectives. Dystopic liberalism proposes to people that they lower their goals and expectations in exchange for safety and basic personal freedom; but this is an exchange which will make less sense relative to the investments a person has in the status quo (whether in terms of material security or the possession of recognition), and crucially, such a story can make even less sense depending upon positionality in the global political economy. The exchange presumes the possibility of the chastened political subject *falling back upon* the political goods of representative democracy, constitutionally assured rights and liberties, and social security. But, at the time during which the Cold War liberals were writing, these goods simply did not apply

²⁸ Anderson, ‘Character and Ideology’.

²⁹ Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁰ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 Vols (London: Routledge, 1999); and Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

³¹ E.g. Isaiah Berlin, ‘My Intellectual Path’ in *The Power of Ideas*, (ed.) Henry Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 23.

(often do not now), particularly in parts of the world still emerging from empire – and about the injustices of empire, the Cold War liberals had not much to say. This, then, is why the legacy of Cold War liberalism consists merely in a sensitivity to vulnerability which is diluted. Likewise, the reverence for the centre and for ‘moderation’ masks some falsity. Although Berlin’s companion to tragedy was the idea of the trade-off, Cold War liberal political philosophy employed stark binaries (Popper’s utopian versus social engineering, Berlin’s monism versus pluralism); and in the real world, binaries can plug into anything other than mid-way compromises, i.e. presented with two poles, the one negatively charged and other positively, the urge will be to come down very firmly in favour of the option that is vindicated.

Cold War liberalism does have more and less subtle voices. Judith Shklar is representative of the former. Theoretically, her writings elude the binary trap of thinking. Politically, rather than venture an outright reproach, they contain a mixed appraisal which finally resolves in a ‘nonutopian’ (not anti-utopian) vision.³² The prime distinction of her political theory is seeking to manufacture a normative vision on the basis of the *worst* that human beings do. This produces quite a novel accent on the role of humanism in anti-totalitarianism. The pathos becomes fear, which – with plausible grounds – she thinks is something that human beings will recognise with more ready intelligibility than the abstractions of justice. There is also an accented trope. That trope is ‘decency’. After the Second World War, Shklar’s voice became influential in framing future politics on the terms of a single, elemental choice: between decent politics and deadly politics. In her touchstone work, *Ordinary Vices*, the word decency appears several times, and the uses are revealing.³³

³² Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020). See, also, Katrina Forrester, ‘Hope and Memory in the Thought of Judith Shklar’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 8/3 (2011), pp. 591-620.

³³ Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 27, 53, 86, 93, 115, 154, 156, 166, 193, 204.

To maintain ‘standards of decency’ – even at the expense of ‘moral urgency’ – is what is admirable in people.³⁴ Also tellingly, decency features in one paragraph by helping to decontest the ideals of ‘limited government’ and ‘legal restraint’.³⁵ In Shklar, then, we get a picture of what a decent liberalism might look like: moderation, limited government, and a largely passive injunction on avoiding cruelty.

Yet decency, I submit, is thoroughly ambiguous. Only a brief detour into semantics is necessary to show this. One meaning is basic. First, decency can imply sufficiency: to proclaim something is decent is to say it is ‘up to reasonable expectations’, which can apply in a moral as well as non-moral sense, in which case the meaning is closer to ‘conformity to standards of propriety’.³⁶ Sufficiency is indeed the sense seemingly involved in the mend-and-make-do politics of liberal conservative pragmatism; and which equates also with the moral minimum, which is the idea ascribed to Berlin that, notwithstanding the ‘incommensurability’ of values, human beings share a common nucleus of needs and interests.³⁷ However, decency can also indicate something more capacious. Second, that is, decency exists as a notch on scale where virtue sits at optimal end.³⁸ The inferable lessons for politics are thereby not only negative – avoid the worst – but in addition, and in aspect, exhorting. Decency can also be compatible with positive actions: acts, characteristically in the direction of kindness and generosity, of the kind that moral philosophers call ‘supererogatory’. Most ambitiously, the inference could be that decency is generative: that is, capable of passing from person to person,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 193.

³⁶ ‘Decency’, *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam Co., 1971)

³⁷ Cf. Jonathan Riley, ‘Isaiah Berlin’s “Minimum of Common Moral Ground”’, *Political Theory*, 41/1 (2014), pp. 61-89.

³⁸ Johan Brannmark, ‘From virtue to decency’, *Metaphilosophy*, 37/5 (2006), p. 585.

of being reproduced by example, emulation and reciprocity, in an ever-expanding circle.³⁹ This idea of decency as generative resonates with the initial hypothesis we began from. Experiencing the worst stirs a person's resolve for building a better world; receipt of sympathy for one's own troubles begets a person's sympathy in turn.

Some of the broader theories of liberalism can be reconsidered in the light of this semantic parsing. Shklar proves not to be alone in using decency to vindicate a barebones liberalism. Isaiah Berlin, on occasion, latched onto 'decency' as a way of characterising the values he preferred ('decent respect for others', maintaining a 'precarious equilibrium' being the 'first requirement of a decent society').⁴⁰ And, in the 1990s, the later liberal political philosopher, John Rawls, specified decency as the standard for admitting non-liberal (but sufficiently consultative) polities to international society.⁴¹

3.

Therefore, where to look for an anti-totalitarian left that might exceed this decent liberalism in capacious generosity? An anti-totalitarian 'decent left' was constituted – in discursive reality – for a short-lived time across the first totalitarian moment of the twenty-first century, when one formed in response to Islamism and Middle East authoritarianism. The meanings were narrow; the legacy is bitter.⁴² Most of all, perhaps, the fractiousness between an anti-totalitarian left and an anti-imperialist left has scarcely recovered. This embryonic anti-

³⁹ One emphasis of the literature on decency in moral philosophy is that behaving decently should entail overcoming non-trivial obstacles to such behaviour. See A.T. Nuyen, 'Decency', *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 36 (2002), p. 50

⁴⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 437; Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, (ed.) Henry Hardy (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 19

⁴¹ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴² See Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London: Verso, 2012).

totalitarian left was accused of having an unfortunate ideological tone of its own – sanctimony; and public stands rigidified on the template of pro-war left versus anti-war left (though it is worth saying that not all writers and thinkers grouped together at this time supported the war in Iraq). No lasting political platform became institutionalised; but the ideas expressed – and the opaque pathways supporting these ideas – are revealing.

In the United States, using the outlet of the magazine *Dissent*, the left-communitarian political thinker, Michael Walzer, asked, ‘can there be a decent left in a superpower?’.⁴³ To a degree, he might have asked the same question about the possibility of an ‘internationalist’ left (and so provoked less ire). But the decency suffix does tap into some of the rich polysemy we have exposed: Walzer meant the *least* that a left should be doing, but also behaviour that would tilt the left in the direction of *virtue*. Sententiousness, whether prudent or not, was the risk Walzer took in expressing his belief that elements of the anti-imperialist left *did* need chiding. He objected that the ‘root cause’ of terrorism could not be collapsed into poverty, and the material analysis of global financial structures would, in the least, need to be supported by an unembarrassed moral analysis, which, for one thing, would mean unequivocally endorsing electoral and representative democracy. One person’s sanctimony is another person’s earnestness? Also writing from the United States, the British-born social democratic historian, Tony Judt, used the authority of his writings on the historical political irresponsibility of an intellectual left to caution, similarly, against reductive (and shallow) anti-Americanism.⁴⁴ ‘Evil’, he said, would have to drift back into the left’s lexicon.⁴⁵ With a nod to Shklar, he also found some normatively compelling uses for fear, in contrast to some of the more histrionic left voices who saw in fear simply (and only!) political power’s manipulation of the public

⁴³ Michael Walzer, ‘Can There Be a Decent Left?’, *Dissent*, 49/2 (2002), pp. 19-23.

⁴⁴ Tony Judt, ‘Anti-Americans Abroad’ in *When the Facts Change: Essays, 1995-2010*, (ed.) and introduced by Jennifer Homans (London: Vintage, 2015).

⁴⁵ Judt, ‘The “Problem of Evil” in Postwar Europe’ in *When the Facts Change*.

perception of threats. Judt simultaneously responded to the global economic crisis: in the face of austerity policies, a ‘social democracy of fear’ was in this further sense a cause worth uniting around, i.e. the priority was to hold onto gains won previously.⁴⁶ In Britain, the ‘Euston Manifesto’ projected a broad alliance of ‘progressives and democrats’ which might reach beyond ‘the socialist Left towards egalitarian liberals and others’.⁴⁷ Two signatories made independent contributions to the embryonic, but derailed, anti-totalitarian left. Norman Geras was a self-identifying ‘liberal Marxist’. He had lately authored *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, a work which was rare in academic political philosophy for addressing the atrocity paradigm, and which was especially notable for the strength of conviction that universal vulnerabilities to suffering could potentially create global stores and reflexes of empathy. When we reject ‘indifference’ to the fate of others, Geras suggested, we will be moving a considerable step on the way from liberalism to socialism.⁴⁸ Nick Cohen registered a disdain which counterbalanced the perceived, prevalent tone of sententiousness. In his intervention, *What’s Left?*, he scorned the ‘middle-class left’ for leading the line against democratic left internationalism.⁴⁹ In France, a significant voice was Bernard-Henri Lévy, who was a survivor of the earlier post-Marxist anti-totalitarian polemics of France in the 1970s. He was not an ideal accomplice for ideological bridge building (‘BHL’ was a larger-than-life persona liable to grate as much as Žižek). He did, though, catch the notes the occasion called for. In *Left in Dark Times* (a parallel contribution to Cohen’s, which referenced it), Lévy dissected, like a physician, the state of one part of the contemporary left. Some of its constituent errors were anti-liberalism, anti-Americanism, unbounded ‘Empire’ rhetoric and, most ominously of all,

⁴⁶ Judt, ‘What is Living and What is Dead in Social Democracy?’ in *When the Facts Change*.

⁴⁷ www.eustonmanifesto.org [posted 25/05/2006, last accessed 12/01/2020]

⁴⁸ Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* (London: Verso, 1999).

⁴⁹ Nick Cohen, *What’s Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

left anti-Semitism.⁵⁰ In the era before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the line of provenance for an anti-totalitarian left gets thinner. France in the 1970s is one context.⁵¹ In parallel are the dissidence movements and discourses of East and Central Europe.⁵² But isolated swellings aside, the connective tissue is thin. This is what informs my argumentative strategy below. To retrieve where the tissue gets thicker will require, I propose, tracing the citation field of all these later writers: the intellectual debts; the common arguments; the positive topics; the thinker profiling; the shared reference points. What emerges? An impression forms of the centrality of three thinkers who are distinguished in virtue of being repeat, and cumulative, sources of citation. These three thinkers are George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, and Albert Camus. What is common and overlapping to their political theories of anti-totalitarianism (which, to note, in each case extend into discussions of imperialism and colonialism)? Which arguments and values arising may be distinctive, but lacking the embeddedness of other anti-totalitarian schools? The reasons for lack of embeddedness are, to admit, partly prosaic. Orwell, Arendt, and Camus led lives of political action that were geographically dispersed. And their own debts as thinkers – inasmuch as they possessed them at all – were to different intellectual traditions.

Explicitly, what is not being proposed is that Orwell, Arendt and Camus constitute an unproblematic canon: all were white and had ancestry in the Northern hemisphere. However, the case for grouping them is by way of two features. First, they did express a kind of elective affinity. This elective affinity can be conjectured on the basis of scattered remarks and mutual

⁵⁰ Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism* (London: Random House, 2010).

⁵¹ Aside from BHL, synonymous voices for a discursively-constituted ‘second left’ in 1970s France included François Furet, Pierre Rosanvallon and the veteran left anti-totalitarian, Claude Lefort.

⁵² Mark Lilla, ‘The Other Velvet Revolution: Continental Liberalism and its Discontents’, *Daedalus*, 123/2 (1994), pp. 129-157; Judt, ‘The Dilemmas of Dissidence: The Politics of Opposition in East-Central Europe’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 2/2 (1988), pp. 185-240.

personal appraisals. Orwell had arranged a rendezvous with Camus in a Parisian café in 1945, only for illness to preclude the meeting from going ahead.⁵³ Arendt heard Camus speak in 1952, and concluded that he was ‘the best man now in France... head and shoulders above the others’.⁵⁴ And Orwell and Arendt, in the post-war years, both published in the same independent left-wing journal, *Partisan Review*. Second, the grouping is suggested by implicit, sometimes explicit, acknowledgments of influence in the later generations of thinkers. Walzer, in *The Company of Critics*, profiles Orwell and Camus as situated public intellectuals whom he admires.⁵⁵ Judt, in *The Burden of Responsibility*, profiles Camus, and takes Arendt as primary interlocutor for his own reflections on political evil (and he also attributes his formula of a ‘social democracy of fear’ to Arendt plus Shklar).⁵⁶ Cohen and Lévy’s volumes positively reference all three figures. This list is indicative only. It could easily be extended at some length.

To sum up, retrieval of this resource in twentieth-century ideas can help political theory today if the fundamental anti-totalitarian stance on atrocity can be combined with active stances on global injustice and the fashioning of more avowedly reformist agendas in domestic spheres. Our exemplars of an anti-totalitarian left took judgments that frequently reconciled these pulls in different directions. They did so by recognising that humanism was very much part of the

⁵³ Dorian Lynsky, *The Ministry of Truth: A Biography of George Orwell’s 1984* (London: Picador, 2019), p.131

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 281, 216.

⁵⁵ Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002). And, elsewhere, Walzer takes Orwell’s sentence that ‘there’s thin man inside every fat man’ as a by-line for his own progressive humanism: Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

⁵⁶ Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Judt, ‘Hannah Arendt and Evil’ in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth-Century* (London: Vintage, 2009); Judt with Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London: William Heinemann, 2012), p. 38.

answer (though by conceding, equally, that totalitarianism did present humanism with significant questions to resolve). In order to re-imagine humanism, ‘decency’ – often in rich vernacular form – was the common rhetorical gesture they made. This made humanism both generative and more comprehensively geared to experience (in contrast to liberal minimalism and radical left dismissal). Crucially, it was around decency that these Orwell, Arendt and Camus got the anchoring values of an anti-totalitarian left to cohere: solidarity; sensitivity to vulnerability; and moral nuance (in place of weaker and more mechanical value, ‘moderation’). The presence – and interconnection – of these three values are the priority for emphasis in the thumbnail biographic sketches I now conclude by offering.

4.

The work of George Orwell ends in the totalitarian imaginary of *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, but the early themes help us re-think the received notion that, logically, anti-totalitarianism and anti-imperialism should be antagonistic. (His descriptions of these two systems he despised, imperialism and totalitarianism, operate in complementarity.) Equally, Orwell’s thought evolves to anti-totalitarianism from out of prior, discernibly left-leaning (and certainly not conservative) positions on anti-fascism. Decency is very direct trope. It is a consciously demotic: a function of Orwell’s famed plain style. Judging by recurrent semantic field, it possesses synonyms (honesty, fairness, privacy, country, common sense), and, in addition, *de facto* antonyms, sharpening up meaning further (swindle, racket and, most of all, ‘humbug’).⁵⁷ Summarising, as an organiser of political and moral values in Orwell, decency equals sufficiency but pushing up into the generative idea. The latter is well-expressed in his essay

⁵⁷ Cf. David Dwan, *Liberty, Equality and Humbug: Orwell’s Political Ideals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

tribute to Charles Dickens. Dickens' entire message, Orwell says, is 'one that at first glance looks like an enormous platitude: if man behaved decently the world would be decent'.⁵⁸

Evolution from anti-fascism to anti-totalitarianism attaches to emphasis on vulnerability in the particular guise of egalitarian-inflected compassion, and has the setting of the Spanish Civil War. Having gone there 'to shoot at fascists', his conversion to socialism of a particular type of gains greater form, in addition. This is encouraged by his first-hand experience of low dealings from Moscow,⁵⁹ hence the dictum of his essay on Koestler: 'the sin of nearly all left-wingers from 1933 onward is that they have wanted to be anti-Fascist without being anti-totalitarian'.⁶⁰ The testimonial argument of *Homage to Catalonia* literally is framed by decency. The opening chapter salutes 'the essential decency' of the Spanish working class', 'their straightforwardness and generosity'; and the book's coda is a positive note associating human decency with the defeat of 'disillusionment and cynicism'.⁶¹ The specific egalitarian-inflected compassion is epitomised in the well-known anecdote Orwell later regales: the man who is 'holding his trousers up isn't a "Fascist" who you should shoot', rather 'he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself'.⁶² Experiences in Spain also provide Orwell with his first intimations of the O'Brien interrogation and torture scenes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These sensitize the reader not only to cruelty and pain but, even more, to the near impossibility of ever repairing a life afterwards.⁶³ the lasting humiliation of Winston Smith's exclamation 'Do it to Julia', the metaphorical final knife in Winston's otherwise durable belief in the 'spirit of

⁵⁸ George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens' in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000).

⁵⁹ Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War' in *Essays*, p.220.

⁶⁰ Orwell, 'Arthur Koestler' in *Essays*, pp. 270, 271.

⁶¹ Orwell, *Homage To Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 10, 186.

⁶² Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War', p. 221.

⁶³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 180.

man' and the exposure of the totalitarian system in its kind of negative perfection.⁶⁴ That is, the Big Brother state, in its co-ordination of particular mechanisms of power, foreclose the very possibility of human beings practicing decency.⁶⁵ The argument from imagination in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* follows one other relevant virtue that Orwell finds in Koestler: to wit (and to quote), the capacity to be able to 'imagine oneself as the victim'.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the novel is not an unqualified dystopia: despite the critique of repressive state socialism, the novel does not call time on all possibilities of a better world, and hope is glimpsed in Smith's own struggle, as well as in the attitudes of the 'proles' – the part of the population which, aptly, 'had stayed human'.⁶⁷

Decency as solidarity, in social terms, is what commentators perceive regarding the target audience for Orwell's political message, namely, the working-class in alliance with the lower middle-class.⁶⁸ Fraternity and sociability morphing into common sense is particularly on display in the discussion of the meaning of socialism in *The Road to Wigan Pier*: there, he summarises, 'socialism means justice and common decency'. As he elaborates, the 'ordinary working man' thinks socialism means 'not much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about'; while it is the 'more revolutionary type' – interchangeable with the 'orthodox Marxist' – who issues socialism as a 'rallying-cry' coming accompanied by the 'vague threat of future violence'.⁶⁹ Whether this earthiness of social justice in Orwell does – and should – lead into progressive patriotism is moot (in Orwell's own country today, a section

⁶⁴ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 282.

⁶⁵ Anthony Stewart, *George Orwell, Doubtless and the Value of Decency* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003).

⁶⁶ Orwell, 'Arthur Koester', p. 270.

⁶⁷ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 229.

⁶⁸ Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018).

⁶⁹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 160-164.

of the main party of the left campaigns for a socially conservative left labourism, and often tries to draw legitimacy from Orwell – but the indistinct line between patriotism and nationalism means this position lacks anti-totalitarian credentials).⁷⁰ However, what is clear is that even in Orwell's writings in a patriotic cast, solidarity with the subordinated and oppressed in the global South, with those languishing under empire, was seldom far away. *The Lion and the Unicorn*, the most patriotic work of all, finishes with a programme for far-reaching change for the colonial relationship by which Britain and India, in the future, will exist in a partnership on equal terms.⁷¹ Precisely, for Orwell, maintaining this form of solidarity was a matter of recognising, and remembering, that the colonised were human beings.⁷²

Clarity is one of the remaining terms which Orwell makes synonymous with decency, and it has a close – if superficially puzzling – relation to the final of our projected values for an anti-totalitarian left, moral nuance. For Orwell, clarity was the product of applying nuance. A suitable illustration is his antipathy for moral equivalence arguments. In the record of Orwell's political judgements, there is one notable lapse from the general rule: in the late thirties (at a stage when he was still adhering to his pacifist position on the world war in prospect), there is a period over which his journalism falls into the *marxisant* trap of theorising fascism from crude anti-capitalism. In August 1937, he writes that 'Fascism and so-called democracy as Tweedledum and Tweedledee'.⁷³ However, by the time of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, the mistake is rectified. 'Imperfect' democracy and totalitarianism now become fundamentally incompatible, and the flawed reasoning of pacifists (together with apologists)

⁷⁰ Cf. Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (eds.), *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

⁷¹ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (London: Penguin, 2018), pp. 55-79.

⁷² Orwell, 'Marrakech' in *Essays*.

⁷³ Cited in Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003), p. 127.

becomes grist to the mill of the fallacy of moral equivalence: ‘they will proceed to argue that, after all, democracy is ‘just the same as’ or ‘just as bad as’ totalitarianism’, that ‘there is *not much* freedom of speech in England; therefore there is *no more* than exists in Germany’, and so on and so forth.⁷⁴ There is a similar stance on the other side of Second World War hostilities. At the prospect of a ‘cold war’ turning hot (a term Orwell, and not the Cold War liberals, invented),⁷⁵ the rejection of moral equivalence is reprised. All the more remarkably, again Orwell is arriving at this position of moral nuance against the competing pulls of other of his instincts: not this time against the imperfections of bourgeois democracy, so much as against the inequities – and to a degree, for Orwell, the vulgarities – of American capitalism. Protagonists of several of Orwell’s prior novels had pilloried American capitalism: the hero of *Coming Up for Air*, for example, complains persistently of modern life being ‘streamlined’.⁷⁶ Yet in private correspondence in 1947, Orwell now writes – with hesitance – that ‘if one were compelled to choose between Russia and America – and I suppose that is the choice one might have to make – I would always choose America’.⁷⁷ This is a hard truth that eluded many of the otherwise solidarity-affirming anti-anti-communists of the day.

5.

The work of Hannah Arendt engages totalitarianism from a global perspective – even if, from a present standpoint, imperfectly – and can be decoded as mapping out socially and politically reformist positions by manipulating a term which is cognate to decency, namely, ‘dignity’.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, pp. 79, 80.

⁷⁵ Orwell, ‘You and the Atomic Bomb’ in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, (ed.) Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968).

⁷⁶ Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 22, 24, 54, etc.

⁷⁷ Cited in Lynsky, *The Ministry of Truth*, p. 156.

⁷⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en> (accessed 23/11/20)

It is within her early 1940s writing about Jewishness and refugee status that, in occasional pieces, she appears to give special charge to decency and, on close reading, she could move easily between the generative and minimalist meanings: contemporary society had driven ‘the man of good will’ into isolation; it had also rendered impossible the living of ‘a simple, decent life’.⁷⁹ In a way that was characteristic of her writing (and exposed most spectacularly in the Eichmann controversy), she could also deploy decency in senses that were barbed and ironic – and which might make us think further about the rhetorical possibilities of inverted use. Refugees, she thought, were left with the bare option of practicing truth-telling. That is, one thing they *could* do was to call out that ‘the comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted’. What refugees were involved in doing when they did so was telling the truth ‘to the point of “indecenty”’, i.e. risked ostracism from any community, a comment more than anything else on the state of ‘respectable society’ (to use another of Arendt’s phrases).⁸⁰ In current Arendtian thought, there exist glimpses of how to get decency to coincide with an anti-totalitarian politics in the concern with statelessness and the ‘right to have rights’.⁸¹ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, refugees confront a plight in which the rights of citizens are revealed for what they truly are: hollow, in the absence of the protection afforded by membership of privileged national groups. As such, nationalism is not a faithful ally of left values, and where even the accommodation of patriotism may be risky. Arendt also indicted modern man the ‘bourgeois’ in the disturbances she saw around her (in a sense, a false universalism); and although this emphasis does come a little too

⁷⁹ Hannah Arendt, ‘The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition’ in *The Jewish Writings*, (ed.) Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2008), p. 297

⁸⁰ Arendt, ‘We Refugees’ in *The Jewish Writings*, p. 274. Meanwhile, political truth-telling also entailed facing up to the sort of fact of humanity; that is, to the status of being ‘nothing *but* human’ (ibid., p. 273).

⁸¹ See esp. Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and, more recently, Stonebridge, *Writing and Righting: Literature in the Age of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

close to reactionary Weimar tropes, it does operate as a square rebuke to negatively liberal solution to the totalitarianism problem. Narrow, rights-based liberalism cannot be a satisfactory answer. It is complicit in its rise, and, by logical extension, possible future.⁸²

Where Shklar, for example, counsels negative rights as all the better for acknowledging fear, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* censures ‘loneliness’. Loneliness – experiential and also, in Arendt’s additional sense, epistemological – was one key background condition for popular mobilisation into National Socialism and, ultimately, for recruitment into commission of atrocity (i.e. lonely people doubt their perceptions).⁸³ The soundings against loneliness are what point to the value of solidarity in Arendt. The indispensability of solidarity – on condition that it should not be overwhelmed by an emotional pull towards ‘pity’, a tendency which Arendt discerned in revolutionary violence projects – is written into the general body of her thinking (and plays a particular role in *On Revolution*).⁸⁴ Decency, dignity, and solidarity are combined in Arendt.⁸⁵ Human dignity – self-respect, due appreciation of gravity – is an egalitarian principle. The originality of Arendt’s argument, though, is to observe that it is not intrinsic, not inborn. To realise and sustain dignity is one purpose of her conception of the post-totalitarian political space: because dignity is dependent on expression, and then recognition in public view, it must be communally (and not individually) constituted.⁸⁶ That is the post-totalitarian instinct at stake in the right to have rights. As such, the Holocaust is a dramatic illustration of a break with dignity; and in its wake, Arendt responds, ‘human dignity

⁸² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin, 2017).

⁸³ See also ‘Organised Guilt and Universal Responsibility’ in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Schocken, 2003).

⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

⁸⁵ E.g. Jeffrey C. Isaac, ‘A New Guarantee on Earth: Human Dignity and the Politics of Human Rights’ in *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁸⁶ John Douglas Macready, *Hannah Arendt and the Fragility of Human Dignity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), pp. 71-77.

needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle'.⁸⁷ It is in the same spirit, regarding far-reaching social and political reform, that she frequently indicates that such a political order will need to be transnational, federated, and, approximately, social democratic. Gross inequalities of wealth would inhibit the establishment of a 'common world', where seeing 'from the other person's standpoint' could be possible.⁸⁸ And seeing from the standpoint of another is a further implicit condition of Arendt's post-totalitarian political space.

The fragility of dignity meanwhile indicates the prominence in Arendt's thought of the value of sensitivity to vulnerability. Alertness to vulnerability – the capacity to be wounded and hurt, extending to senses both physical and emotional – could be said to represent a moral, but also historical, sensibility of anti-totalitarianism. At present, arguably, its main contingent historical form – which has been Holocaust consciousness – is in retreat. There are legitimate arguments both for and against drawing upon *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to frame a position strongly opposed to militant 'totalitarian' Islam.⁸⁹ What is nonetheless clear is that Arendt was especially animated by the dangers of 'counter-ideology'.⁹⁰ In Arendt's day, counter-ideology was counterposing communism with McCarthyism – which disclosed new vulnerabilities. In the contemporary world, counter-ideology is fresh anti-Muslim hatred. Arendt wanted to convey lessons about genocide; but she also wanted to press lessons which Western ex-colonial states have only been tardy to learn, and hence which are now framed, quite accurately, as problems of rectification and historical injustice. She saw 'ideology' – in her rather absolutizing sense – as the adjunct to terror (and hence, conceivably also, to terror-

⁸⁷ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. ix.

⁸⁸ Patrick Hayden, *Political Evil in a Global Age: Hannah Arendt and International Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.46.

⁸⁹ Respectively, see the arguments of Samantha Power, 'Introduction' to Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Schocken, 2004); and Corey Robin, 'Dragon-Slayers', *London Review of Books*, 4 January 2007.

⁹⁰ Arendt, 'Preface to Part 3' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. xxiv.

ism). But she was also adamant that the contribution of colonial and imperial histories should not be allowed to fall off the radar of comprehension. This is the reason why an entire one third of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is devoted to ‘Imperialism’. The late nineteenth-century ‘scramble for Africa’ of imperialism was the setting for the adaptations to political rule which twentieth-century totalitarians then practiced and took further in Europe and Eurasia. Specifically, in the perpetration of atrocity, Arendt judged that Nazism added up to colonialism come home: a ‘boomerang’, in a metaphor she both liked and shared with the Martinique thinker Aimé Césaire.⁹¹ It is true that her way of viewing imperialism and totalitarianism in their interrelationship has flaws – she imagined imperialism from a one-side actors’ perspective, a strategy which was probably misconceived (for failing to be adequately dialogical, and, in Arendt’s terms, appreciative of ‘plurality’) – and she failed to adequately carry insights from the study of ‘race-thinking’ under imperialism into her engagement with race and segregation in post-war America.⁹² Yet, the task is to take forward the mainline of Arendt’s thinking and make amendments suitably. Arguably, the limits of Arendt’s sensitivity to vulnerability tie into details of the way she configures the public realm: listening seems to come in at a distinct third place to ‘speech and deed’ and, as Michal Aharony as has shown, her interpretive work – the crutch to the normative work – shows a preference for reconstructing the voice of perpetrators. Victims tend to remain silent: not just the victims of the expulsions, forced labour, and large-scale massacres of the imperialist era, but the inmates of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps.⁹³

⁹¹ See Pascal Grosse, ‘From Colonialism to National Socialism to Postcolonialism: Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 9/1 (2006), pp. 35-52.

⁹² See esp. Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁹³ Michel Aharony, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Total Domination: The Holocaust, Plurality, and Resistance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

A fitting illustration of Arendt's stress on moral nuance can be found in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In an account that has often been deemed amoral, but which is actually moralised to a much greater degree than radical engagement with totalitarianism would have patience with, Arendt's lays great emphasis on Eichmann's flapping during the final stages of the war about missing lunch invitations, his knack for consoling himself with *cliché*, and his pompous grandstanding about Kantian duty.⁹⁴ This, of course, is hardly moderation, in the sense of declining the license to shock when that might be justified or purposeful. The nuance, however, lies in proposition – which remains rich in implication – that evil acts can have their origin in banal, not evil, perpetrators and mindsets. The book is perhaps a little too vituperative (and unsympathetic) in its judgment about the Jewish councils who operated the ghettos, or the behaviour of comprised actors like the *kapos* or the *Sonderkommando*. Yet, in the face of radical scepticism about post-totalitarian humanitarianism, the acknowledgement of what Primo Levi, in a kindred account, called the 'grey zone' is timely.⁹⁵ It might also be noted that thinking through the case of Eichmann gave Arendt plenty of occasion to reflect on humanism – past and future – in big picture terms. On seeing Eichmann in the dock, her first reaction to his comportment (she records) was to think he is 'not inhuman';⁹⁶ ultimately, developing the category of 'crimes against humanity' become her substantive response to his example; and, although she did not doubt that some preceding traditions of European humanism bore a share of responsibility for the Holocaust, parallel to the normative prescription of the post-totalitarian political space was her proposal that humanism, from now on, would have to focus on the capacity of people to think and exercise moral judgment.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

⁹⁵ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1989).

⁹⁶ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 328,

⁹⁷ Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' in *Responsibility and Judgment*, (ed.) Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003).

6.

The work of Albert Camus crosses into three major political episodes of the twentieth century: Nazi occupation of France, post-war Soviet expansion into East and Central Europe, and the post-war stirrings of a decolonisation movement in the French empire. In each case the stands he took are our final focus of interest for building an anti-totalitarian stand for the present, even if criticism due of these stands, in particular aspects, is probably no less than Camus would have wanted. The uses of decency in his writings are first-hand and direct (without a surrogate, such as dignity in Arendt); though the uses are less frequent than in Orwell. There is a special frequency in the act of constructing a positive political ethics. A single other notable occasion concerns the anecdote that he told several times across his writings to symbolise his rejection of capital punishment: his father, ‘a decent man’, had witnessed an execution, and then retched (which was meanwhile ‘one of the few things’ Camus knew about him).⁹⁸ The key works for an anti-totalitarian left are arguably *The Rebel* and *The Plague* set together. The context for these works is Camus’ enjoyment of a post-war reputation that was immediately highly favourable, owing to his Resistance activities, but which was then steadily brought down to earth, first – and unfairly – by his stand on Marxism, and then second – where the legitimacy is less clear-cut – by his position on Algeria. The shared thematic is collective rebellion – and more so than individual-focused ‘existentialism’, which Susan Sontag rightly perceived was to large degree simply a language of times that Camus, like others, was obliged to trade in.⁹⁹ All of the values of an anti-totalitarian left are once more in evidence. These are given modulation especially by the distinctiveness of elements of Camus’ voice: from tranquil and impassive prose style, through to ‘moralist’ persona, and then onto emotional register. How does

⁹⁸ Albert Camus, ‘Reflections on the Guillotine’ in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death: Essays* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 175.

⁹⁹ Susan Sontag, ‘Camus’ Notebooks’ in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 52.

sensitivity to vulnerability feature? The bare answer is that this features in a refusal to sacrifice other people – a rule of conduct which, accurately, he judged a certain type of leftist to be either recklessly or indifferent about. What is the permutation on moral nuance? Moral nuance is to be found in a sense of moral measure over intransigence – which is not quite reducible to counter-ideological moderation, and still less to arithmetic ‘trimming’.¹⁰⁰ Solidarity, lastly, receives its own recurrent stand-in word – generosity (which signals a corrective to the reluctance in Arendt’s case to concede ground from reason to emotion).

That the liberation paradigm could make the sacrifice of others too easy provides an extra sense to the meaning of decency not so far recovered. Decency will not yield to necessity in the notional pursuit of justice – which, simultaneously, is Camus’ gloss upon sensitivity to vulnerability. There is an important rider in this ‘notional’. Under fire from a question from the audience in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, Camus was reported to have replied – *à propos* of bombs detonated in proximity to civilians in Algerian cities – that ‘I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice’, and in doing so gave left critics exhaustless ammunition for ostracising him; for placing his thinking firmly inside the cold war liberal camp, and hence for cutting off the ground for his vision of a second left. But the riposte, emotionally honest as it was, might well have been misunderstood. As Alice Caplan suggests, a better translation would be ‘if that is justice, then I prefer my mother’.¹⁰¹ Meaning changes accordingly. Not *either* justice or the protection of loved ones; rather, in the absence of respect for human life, a just end is no justice at all: opposing atrocity and promoting change are not mutually exclusive, but instead co-dependent. On the sympathetic side of interpretation of Camus are both Walzer and Judt, both of whom are

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Aurelian Criautu, *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in the Age of Extremes* (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

¹⁰¹ Alice Caplan, ‘New Perspectives on Camus’ Algerian Chronicles’ in Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, trans. By Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 21.

concerned to stress his anti-colonialist credentials, and hence take the edges off the rebarbative critique of his thought delivered posthumously by Edward Said.¹⁰² Camus stands on Algeria – complex; in the last analysis inadequate, but maybe unavoidably so in virtue of the subject position he inhabited – resolve, finally, in silence. This silence is best seen in the short stories in *Exile and the Kingdom*. But, nevertheless, the standards in exhibit are in keeping with both the philosophical explanations and ethical precepts set out in *The Rebel* and *The Plague*. In *The Rebel*, the object of critique was totalitarian left revolutionaries, who followed consequentialism to endorse the sacrifice of present lives for the utopian future; or who, worse, travelled one step further than justification by necessity, and so indulged in a theorisation of regenerative violence.¹⁰³ The standard of minimally ‘culpable’ violence was tough, unquestionably moralised, yet clear: just transformative or ameliorative political action ‘recognises limits and, if it must go beyond them, at least accepts death’.¹⁰⁴ It is true that this test could not work in the same way in Algeria. Camus, and the *pied noir* community to which he belonged, were structural beneficiaries of the absence of justice; and so in the least had a basis from which to condemn which was compromised, because unlike French Algeria’s Arab and Berber subjects they were, by colonial privilege, in full possession of the rights of citizenship (notwithstanding that Camus’ own record of complaint about this state of affairs was admirable, stretching back to his 1930s journalism).¹⁰⁵ The ethic in *The Plague*, however, did allow for some leverage over this ‘implication’ of the situated critic (to use Michael

¹⁰² Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, p. 145; Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility*, p. 117; Said, ‘Camus and the French Imperial Experience’ in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 204-224.

¹⁰³ Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism*, pp. 190-236.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Rahan Jahanbegloo, *Albert Camus: The Unheroic Hero of our Time* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 20.

¹⁰⁵ See Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*.

Rothberg's term):¹⁰⁶ 'All I can say is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims – and as far as possible one must to be on the side of the pestilence'.¹⁰⁷ The plague (or 'pestilence') was primarily a metaphor for fascism, but it transposed into any context where violence had become the law of the land. And, hence, that applied as much, too, to the limitless violence of the Algerian war; the escalation of which, through torture, through murder, Camus called the 'mutual suicide of madmen'.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the setting and plot imagined an inclusive – not divided – political community. In a similar temper, after the end of the Nazi occupation, the newspaper which Camus edited, *Combat*, for a period of time ran with the strapline 'Neither Victims nor Executioners'.¹⁰⁹ This was a roadmap for a political and ethical space in which, finally, universal vulnerabilities might be given their due. 'Deadly ideologies' were so because they deadened the sensitivity and receptiveness of those consuming them. 'To save bodies' was the first and fundamental demand of political action: 'to keep living human beings from becoming corpses'.¹¹⁰ Camus' writing speaks in a self-identified 'voice' of 'anguish', but one which pictures a universal – human – audience for the message, uniting (not dividing) speaker and hearer.¹¹¹ The disingenuousness of some contemporary victim talk – self-serving, self-deluding – is likely something he would have recognised (as well as despised), but without feeling the need to retract the category. Anguish in voice required it.

The permutation on the value of moral nuance of '*la mesure*' was one Camus was given to lyricizing. Partly, measure was homage to the North Africa of his birth, as well as to his

¹⁰⁶ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ Camus, *The Plague* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 95.

¹⁰⁸ Camus, 'Call for a Civilian Truce' in *Algerian Chronicles*.

¹⁰⁹ Camus, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stick, 2008).

¹¹⁰ David Carroll, *Albert Camus: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

ancient Greek sources. On the page, it was closely related to '*la pensée de midi*', implying Mediterranean thinking.¹¹² However, Camus also said enough things to make us think that he knew well enough that measure ought not to mean the trimmer's value of moderation in all situations, regardless, for instance, that one in the pair of extremes defining any mean can be utterly wrong. Most vitally to his thought, he considered that it was a matter of measure – 'limit' – which called authentic rebellion into being: when a metaphorical slave drew the line at rising oppressive treatment, and did so, concurrently, on behalf of all other slaves being subjected to the same.¹¹³ And yet, moderation was the stick that Camus' radical left critics used to beat him with, presuming – ascribing – that it must have meant submitting to our (their) existing conditions: 'beautiful soul', crowed Francois Jeanson; 'counter revolutionary' and 'Red Cross mentality', Sartre complained.¹¹⁴ This was because the rule of limit gravely prohibited the actions fellow-travellers were not minded to. On the eve of the Second World War, Camus had written, accurately, that 'the USSR is, today, one of the nations of prey. Revolutionary imperialism is still imperialism'.¹¹⁵ And after the war, he spoke out regarding communism in its Stalinist form, when the view of Sartre and other was that to denounce the Gulag was to disillusion French workers. Saving bodies may indeed have been the first (and negative) demand, but there also existed positive goals; and had Camus been inclined to use more precisifying language, he might have said duties as well (admonishment for philosophical insufficiency and dependence on putatively second hand ideas was the snider accompaniment of the radical left criticism). Aristotle may have valorised the mean as a sure-fire way for always finding the course of action which is right, though Camus never cited Aristotle; and this

¹¹² Camus, *The Rebel* (London: Penguin, 2000), esp. pp. 243-266.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹⁴ Adrian van den Hoven and David A. Sprintzen (eds.), *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation* (New York, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), pp. 99, 132.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 90.

despite the Greek sources of his thinking being expansive.¹¹⁶ In his *Notebooks*, he also recorded the maxim, ‘find excess in moderation’.¹¹⁷ Perhaps best put, what Camus presented was an ethic – albeit remaining undeveloped – for doing justice to, and in, circumstances of complexity. One criticism of the pro-Iraq war anti-totalitarian position was that it committed itself to ‘the lesser evil’ theory of political action.¹¹⁸ This does not seem a fair projection of Camus’ political judgments. For all his problems of stance regarding Algeria, one was never that he could be permissive about performing wrongs to secure ends considered prior.¹¹⁹

The value of solidarity reconfigured as generosity amounts to Camus’ final contribution. By no means did he always prefer this warmer emotion-word over ‘solidarity’: in retrospect wistfully, and of Algeria, he wrote ‘French and Arab solidarity is inevitable’;¹²⁰ and another synonymous expression was ‘active fraternity’.¹²¹ But generosity receives enough emphasis to be indicative. Tellingly, particular use features in an essay on André Gide, which can be decoded, perhaps, as touching on the relationship between solidarity configured as generosity and the impersonal aspects of love: ‘those deprived of grace simply have to practice generosity among themselves’.¹²² This is Camus the post-Nietzschean: indebted to the rigour of Nietzsche’s intellectual method, but impatient with his normative solutions. The proposition is post-Nietzschean in its moral residue argument about secularisation: human beings deprived of belief in God will have to anchor the gifts of grace on their own terms. The takeaway is

¹¹⁶ Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 97.

¹¹⁷ Camus, *Notebooks, 1935-42*, (ed.) Philip Thody (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2010), p. 85.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder*, p. 250

¹¹⁹ Still less would Camus have endorsed the implicitly right-leaning aesthetic of lesser evil thinking: of tough people making tough decisions.

¹²⁰ Camus, ‘Call for a Civilian Truce’.

¹²¹ Camus, ‘Encounters with André Gide’, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, (ed.) Philip Thody (London: Vintage, 1970), p. 173.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

positively un-Nietzschean in its stress upon love, and in this sense even echoes the Rousseau of the *Second Discourse*, who cast generosity as a fundamentally human-izing quality for humankind to adopt: pity applied to the weak. There are two semi-formalised applications of this transposable slant on solidarity-as-generosity in Camus' post-totalitarian ethics. In *The Rebel* – and versus the consequentialist's surrender of now to the future – there was the compulsion to give everything 'to life and to living men'.¹²³ In *The Plague*, there was the tentative elaboration of a model of political action and commitment that might, meanwhile, be a fitting point to end on, for the endorsement of an anti-totalitarian left animated by decency. The protagonists of *The Plague* propose a model of action in the non-heroic mould; which is appreciative of what is owed to other people, substantially victim-oriented, rooted in ordinary experience and, likely as not embarrassed to admit as much, based on intense feelings of affection. Dr. Rieux, the closest approximation to a central character, professes to possess a 'very different idea of love' to the character of the Catholic priest, Father Paneloux, who places it closer to the acceptance of God's will (including of suffering).¹²⁴ Rieux further observes that it is 'an idea that may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is common decency'. And, though 'I don't know' what it means for others', 'in my case I know that it consists in doing my job'.¹²⁵ The basic meaning is that nobody can show solidarity to an abstraction. Humanism, for a historically-informed left, is not a sell-out. It is more like a bottom-line.

¹²³ Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 10

¹²⁴ Camus, *The Plague*, p. 178.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.