

CHAPTER 2

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

Since its development in the mid-nineteenth century, bureaucratization has repeatedly been criticized for its dehumanizing nature. According to the critics, there is indeed a bureaucratic culture unsuitable to individuals, a point of view developed by William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man* in the 1950s.

Bureaucratization has deep intellectual, political and human consequences. Some have tried to define a specific “*homo hierarchicus*” whose behavior would be radically different from that of an individual living in another environment. But making such an assumption is unnecessary. A man’s fundamental behavior can remain the same even if the changes in the incentives and constraints generated by his environment influence profoundly his actions and decisions. The choice behavior itself can remain unchanged but lead to different decisions under different conditions. The constraints limiting individual choices and the results of constrained choices are changing, rather than basic behavior.

This distinction is essential because the belief that human nature can vary according to the circumstances and the environment prevents any systematic and rigorous description of behavior and thus deprives human sciences from stable foundations. If the slightest exogenous

shock can change the nature of man, there can be no human science. Besides, according to modern biology and the evolutionary theory, human nature has been largely determined by its biology under selective environmental pressures for hundreds of thousand years and can only change in the very long run after several thousand or ten thousands of generations.¹ Only environmental conditions, positive or negative incentives, and cultural factors can change significantly during a man's life or over a few generations. In other words, constraints vary but not the deep motives of the decision.

This is what happened with the administrative revolution, which disrupted profoundly the social environment as its specific culture contributed to destroy the individual.

THE SPIRIT OF BUREAUCRACY

Indeed, the hierarchical organization relies both on individuals' atomization (they are torn from their traditional environment) and standardization (the impersonal and standardized bureaucratic approach reduces each individual to a file number and tries to make him interchangeable with others).

First, the hierarchical organization isolates individuals from "horizontal" relations, relations with their peers at the same level in the hierarchy, to better integrate them in a vertical one-to-one relation with their superiors. But it also prunes their unique dimensions, their personal characteristics, to standardize them and make them easier to monitor and to control.

Such are the unavoidable methods, facilitating the functioning of bureaucracies and hierarchies, that were discovered and explained by the theoreticians and practitioners of the scientific organization of

1. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, Harvard University Press, 1978, and John Maynard Smith and Eörs Szathmáry, *The Origins of Life, From the Birth of Life to the Origin of Language*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

49

work when large-scale private administrations emerged in the early century.

In the wake of the Second Industrial Revolution, Taylor, Fayol (who was the first to use explicitly the term “administrative revolution”), and Ford developed the scientific management of work, its fragmentation, simplification and mechanization, thus opening the era of big firms and bureaucratic managers, whose consequences on the U.S. economy of the '20s and '30s were described by Berle and Means. Being based on the standardization of individuals, that is the depersonalization of human relations within the hierarchy, bureaucratic rationality resulted in line production whether industrial or administrative that increases productivity through the simplification of tasks and mechanization. This was in total contrast with pre-industrial farm work, where everyone was free to organize work except for a few collective tasks which required a few common rules.

In richer and more densely populated societies, the value of time grew as it corresponded to hourly pays and wages, which, according to the very definition of enrichment, rose with economic development. As a consequence, it became more interesting for both companies and workers to further economize time through an extreme specialization and a standardization of every gesture as a way to increase productivity and wealth.

Then, as giant firms became better established after World War I, people became gradually aware of the decisive role and power of the executives heading large organizations, more commonly known as “managers.” These new organizational structures had deep social consequences, and not only within firms. Indeed, they could also challenge the actual democracy and lead to corporatism, a possibility that was described by authors such as Pareto and Manoilescu.²

This was neither the liberal capitalism of the mid-nineteenth cen-

2. Mihail Manoilescu, *The Century of Corporatism: The Doctrine of Total and Pure Capitalism*, Alcan, 1938. J. K. Galbraith's comments on this issue in *American Capitalism* and *The New Industrial State* came much later.

ture nor socialism, but rather a system of large firms which concentrated capital and labor, characterized by private but dispersed control, and where managers were quite independent from the shareholders. It was a system of intense private bureaucratization which generated its own culture based on the constructivist bureaucrat rather than the individualistic entrepreneur.

That bureaucratic culture was to be found both in private bureaucracies and public hierarchies, and relied on the atomization of individuals, the development and diffusion of ideologies and the standardization of individuals.

THE ATOMIZATION OF INDIVIDUALS

The specific problem of hierarchies that sets them apart from the exchange mechanism of markets is not to choose what good or service to produce, its quality or its price, or even which innovation to promote. In a market, an individual entrepreneur must also face these issues and make the corresponding decisions. Instead, the peculiar hierarchical problem is to have individuals cooperate and work together, although they do not make decisions by themselves and only achieve targets set by others.

As the productive performance of each individual merges within the work of the whole group of employees and is thus difficult to precisely identify and quantify, neither the intensity of the individual's work nor the consequences of his actions can directly affect his wage and living standard. Thus, the representatives of the hierarchies' interests must ensure that the orders expressed at the top of the pyramid are properly executed and that each member of the organization does his best to advance the group's interest.

The unique problem that the hierarchy is faced with is not to define its strategy (all the decision makers have to cope with this issue) but rather to specify clearly the tasks of each member. Those tasks have to be included into a pre-thought general plan without which

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

51

non-coordinated individual activities would lead to chaos. The hierarchy also has to control that each employee carries out his task properly.

It follows that the bureaucratic culture must necessarily be characterized by a plan which applies to everyone, a commonly shared view, where the community and the decisions are taken at the top prime. Instead of being creative, individual initiatives can prove particularly dangerous for the overall coordination and productivity of the organization. It can only be accepted if it has been submitted to the top of the pyramid and approved, then included in the general plan and finally returned to the basis as a new directive.

The cultural specificity of hierarchy is thus the general recourse to the “prêt à penser” or “ready to think” (central or directed thought) and the reign of conformity. It is vital that individuals comply with the instructions coming from the top of the organization. The choices and decisions of a single individual—supposedly the best informed and most competent—are thus conveyed to the rest of the organization and implemented by up to several thousands of people. Decision makers are only a few while order-takers are countless.

To obtain such a result, the field workers must first accept these rules and second be in a position that makes it easier to receive the information coming from the top and no other. The interferences and noises coming from other sources must be muted. Ideally, field workers should have only one source of information: the leader. In that view, they must be isolated from all the other possible influences. Putting them in a closed workplace under the permanent control of their superiors, with a fixed position and fixed hours, is one of the prerequisites to monopolize the downward information flow to that extent.

Horizontal exchanges between colleagues or with third parties outside the organization must also be avoided. Any relation with other individuals must thus be limited or even forbidden at least during working hours and at the workplace. This target is supposed to be

met through the simplification of the tasks and their fragmentation into small individual jobs making the control of workers by supervisors easier, because simple tasks are easier to control than complex tasks. Besides, a fragmented, well-defined and isolated task implies simpler relations with neighbors and colleagues.

In an interesting article about productivity and organization, Albert Breton and Ronald Wintrobe tried to associate these relationships between the individuals within the hierarchy with the notion of “trust capital” which builds up between various people—for instance, the level of honesty between superiors and subordinates or subordinates of the same rank.³

Trust is indeed the positive alternative to supervision. Both methods are substitutable and there are three ways to make sure that the directives coming from the top are implemented: mutual trust between superiors and subordinates, close supervision and a mix of these two options.

But most interesting in this article is that the authors underline the necessity of vertical trust-subordination relations and the rather negative impact on productivity of the horizontal relations between subordinates. Indeed, horizontal relations somehow compete with vertical relations for information transmission. They interfere with the messages and directives from the top. They can result in misinformation and disturb decision-making at various levels of the hierarchy, as they compete or contradict the directives coming from the top. They also favor collusion between colleagues of the same rank to resist the orders coming from higher levels, or to distort the directives before transmitting them to lower levels.

Thus, during the Russian revolution, the slogan “all power to the Soviets” was revolutionary as it advocated that groups of field workers at the basis of the pyramid should take concerted decisions instead of

3. Albert Breton and Ronald Wintrobe, “Organizational Structure and Productivity,” *American Economic Review*, June 1986.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

53

the top which was then deprived of its power. This phenomenon proved short-lived as it was replaced by the extreme hierarchization of Leninism and then Stalinism. But it clearly shows the incompatibility between the hierarchical organization and the introduction of strong horizontal communication and trust relations. To be efficient, the hierarchy must establish a vertical monopoly of information and lock up individuals in an exclusive one-to-one relationship with their immediate superior, who thus handles several one-to-one relationships with his subordinates. And indeed, his ability to manage a more or less significant number of bilateral relations will determine the number of his subordinates at every level of the organization. Then, the number of subordinates under the control of one superior determines the maximum size of the organization, if the maximum number of hierarchical levels that can be introduced without undergoing too heavy losses of control is known.⁴

This suppression of horizontal relations and enforcement of a vertical information monopoly, when pushed to the extreme, defines the position of soldiers in mass armies, prisoners in penal institutions or slaves working in the vast sugar plantations which prefigured in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the almost military organization of the nineteenth-century factories. Taken to its extremes and generalized to a whole society, this situation of vertical monopoly of hierarchical relationships leads to totalitarianism, a system where individuals are totally controlled by their immediate superiors in all the aspects of life and not only at work. All the activities previously considered as “private” become public in the totalitarian framework.

In the case of slavery—an ancient form of totalitarianism—the personal and family life of the slave was no longer private. It did not belong to him anymore as the owner was the sole decision maker. His “personal utility function”—as economists say—is supplanted by that

4. This issue was formalized and analyzed by Oliver Williamson in “Hierarchical Control and Optimum Firm Size,” *Journal of Political Economy*, April 1967

of his owner. The same is true of the soldier, the prisoner or the people living in totalitarian countries. This has been illustrated in China during the cultural revolution: the individuals' everyday life was totally subjected to the directives coming from the top and people were kept under constant collective watch. Even the term "cultural revolution," which sounded like an exaggerated exotic curiosity, had been perfectly chosen as it was indeed the culture of the whole Chinese society that was at stake.

Similarly, in terms of political systems, the Communists adopted the concept of a single party, thus reducing significantly the number of existing political organizations compared with a democratic system. Communism builds a whole society around a single giant pyramid.

Consequently, behavioral rules change: a much different morphology implies a different physiology. When there is only one economic decision-making pole in the country, the exchanges between the production units are governed by the authorities through administrative decisions and rules. But when there are several independent decision-making poles, exchanges are ruled by market mechanisms. The same is true in politics: a democracy with several parties develops arbitrages between the interests of these various organizations by confronting offer and demand within the Parliaments, whereas the single party settles the conflicts and oppositions using internal hierarchical procedures.

But once the individuals are atomized and virtually reduced to mere vertical relationships within their professional hierarchies, it is necessary to do the same with their private or political actions outside work. And this can be done through ideologies. In highly-centralized societies, their role is to provide all the members of the society with a common view of both its structure and all the aspects of their lives even outside work. That ideology is the same for everyone and constitutes the general conception of life, a practical philosophy. It reinforces the atomization by standardizing the individuals, a method which has the great advantage of making them interchangeable and

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

55

thus easier to handle for a bureaucracy that necessarily defines standardized tasks. Besides, standardization (and the interchangeability which results from it) leaves individuals powerless against the hierarchy, as they are easier to replace. Both voice and exit thus become ineffective. The society is then composed of a large number of similar individuals, forming a mass.

MASSIFICATION AND THE TOTALITARIAN IDEOLOGY

The first twentieth century is often described as the time of integrated systems of thought. It has been dominated by the vogue for totalizing interpretations of societies. Why has it been the era of “ism” philosophies or, in other words, ideologies?

That puzzling propensity is yet unexplained. It seemed to be an intellectual deviance, which then had to be corrected in view of the traumatic experiences that the implementation of these ideologies is supposed to have generated. But, in fact, the reason of this vogue is rather to be found in the usefulness of the ideologies for the management of large hierarchies. It is due to the bureaucracy's need for a single thought. Breton and Wintrobe's “vertical loyalty” and the sentiment of belonging to an organization are only tentative ideologies. They usually underline the opposition between “us” and “them,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” to develop team spirit in sports and business, or nationalism⁵ at the level of the country. In other words, the sociopolitical ideologies were the “business cultures” of the national societies with great ambitions of conquest.

Thus, ideologies were not the cause of the major societal transformations that took place during the twentieth century, but their necessary instrument. They spread because they were useful in the organizational and political contexts of the time. They were not arbitrary or simply false. They were instrumental. In short, they were

5. Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

endogenous and not exogenous regarding the world of production and material organization.

It is not ideas that create the world: it is the observation of the world that generates mental representations, inner images, ideas. The best proof of that is the time lag between the facts and the moment the idea is found, and also the persistent influence of ideas outdated by the evolution of social realities, as many authors like Keynes (most famously) but also Beniger underlined.⁶

Loyalty and trust, which Breton and Wintrobe believe to be crucial to hierarchical organization, can help to increase the hierarchy's productivity. They can be reinforced by the diffusion of an ideology, a common organizational thought, a kind of broadly-accepted personal software which prompts the individuals to adopt the same "values" (the same subjective preferences), make the same choices and take the same decisions—those the most in line with the directives coming from the top.

The ideologies, which include all the social moral codes—starting with religions⁷—are the mass doctrines that are used to control the individuals, adjust their reactions to those defined at the top and especially gain the trust of bureaucratic employees. They are necessary to the good functioning of centralized structures because they reduce individual deviances from the directives given by the top, even when the individuals are not kept under close watch, given each individual adjust his own preferences to the priorities set by its leader. At each stage of the hierarchy, there is an inevitable percentage of loss in the content of the top-management messages and directives because of misunderstanding, distortion by parasitic noises and interference or ill-will and sabotage, but it is minimized when ideologies have a strong hold on people. A well-indoctrinated individual who shares—inter-

6. See the introduction of *The Control Revolution*, op. cit.

7. This is how the first highly hierarchical societies turned theocratic and invented an hierarchy of deities.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

57

nalizes—the ideology of his organization is even able to trace back the initial content of an incomplete instruction.

Applied to the whole society and politics, supervision and ideological indoctrination—which requires “loyalty” to superiors in private bureaucracies, that is, complete subordination to the top management’s will and orders—can easily degenerate into totalitarianism, which is an absolute respect for hierarchical superiors and the disappearance of any protest and individualism. From then on, the Führer, the Duce, the Caudillo, the Father of People, the Great Helmsman or the Leader Maximo are always right.

Insofar as the individuals share the “values” of the ideology and do not consider looking for their own values, they align their “utility function” with that of the other members of the collective and their leaders. This partially reduces the divergences between the aims of the superiors and subordinates, and the risk of deviant behavior.

The ideologies, which are key to the organizational culture, usefully complement the written institutions such as rules, laws and constitutions. Being easier to understand, more general and internalized, they have a clear advantage over explicit rules in unexpected situations, as the latter are not meant for them. They enable individual field workers to imagine what the top directives would have been when they lack them and accept them more easily so that they will follow them more faithfully under normal circumstances.

Ideologies are an informal complement to culture, which takes over on laws and rules where they cease to exist. They are also used to justify the established order and alter the behaviors of the individuals who become part of that order. They are instilled in them to integrate them more fully into the organization. For an effective, plain, rapid and effortless assimilation, ideologies must be simple (up to the caricature). And they must emphasize the opposition between the members of the organization and the others.

The psychological consequences of that indoctrination are reflected in all societal behavior, and especially in politics. Individualistic

values encouraging initiatives, information and communication are replaced by collective values which give priority to organized social entities, conformism and eventually depersonalization. Masses are not just a large number of persons, they are a large number of all similar units.

This explains crowd reactions. A crowd is a mass: a group of standardized and anonymous individuals bound by no structure of social relations, no institution, but only by the belief in the same ideology, the pursuit of some immediate interest, by a submission to a strong view, a passion or a charismatic leader, in other terms, a common smallest denominator. The relations between those depersonalized individuals and their leader are mainly vertical. There is no need to refer to complex psychological reactions in the vein of writings such as Le Bon's *Crowd Psychology* to explain these moves. A simple economic calculation of the costs and advantages of petty and serious crime in conditions of relative anonymity is just enough.⁸

The massification and depersonalization of individuals not only account for the isolated crimes within the crowd but also the methods of state mass murder that characterized the twentieth century.

THE ECONOMICS OF POLITICAL MURDER

The standardization of individuals resulting from their atomization and the diffusion of the ideologies on which they depend gives birth to a mass society. Its government shows great ability to handle very large numbers and significant flows, just like big businesses after the administrative revolution. But that ability to manipulate is also accompanied by an impressively stronger hold on individuals. It becomes possible for a single hierarchy, which has developed the massification of the society enough, to eliminate the opponents of the regime or simply the non-conformists, there again in mass propor-

8. Gordon Tullock, *The Social Dilemma: The Economics of War and Revolution*, University Publications, 1974.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

59

tions. This is the case of mass murder and state crime, which will give birth to a notion specific to the twentieth century: crimes against humanity—mostly mass crimes.

On the political scale of a whole society, totalitarianism is the expression of generalized and extreme vertical control—the key to entirely centralized societies. But hierarchization is not limited to the imprisonment of individuals into a monopolistic vertical relationship. It also relies on the standardization, the “normalization,” of individuals—each aligning itself on the behavior defined by the center—which changes any organization member into a more easily controllable and interchangeable object. Thus, that member can be replaced at any time, and he is deprived of any power within the organization. Being immediately replaceable, individuals have no other choice than to obey orders.

In highly-centralized societies, the Fordist and Taylorist methods are applied to the whole social hierarchy organized by the state. Bureaucratization determines the “massification” of individuals. Indeed, bureaucracy must treat all the individuals equally without taking into account their particular characteristics—their personality. People become “files” or “numbers” (social security, schools, prisons, camps) behind which their personality vanishes. That makes the handling of those files and the anonymous decisions concerning those persons easier.

That broad depersonalization also makes it simpler to make decisions that are harmful and dangerous for the individuals. It leads to the trivialization and bureaucratization of murder. It is easier to carry out mass executions of depersonalized individuals than to murder individuals one after the other, physically and face to face. If the individuals are numerous and all similar, all substitutable, large-scale physical elimination becomes possible without any difficulty and without disrupting the productive process. The hierarchical organization and the massification of the individuals make state crime possible, especially as the productivity of the administration reduces the organ-

izational and moral costs of these collective executions. This is the key to the technological barbarism of the first twentieth century.

Indeed, that organization first diminishes the intrinsic value of individuals since they can be replaced at any time by other very similar individuals, all the personal characteristics having been ironed out or made identical by the bureaucratic mechanism. At the same time, it is in the interest of the society and its leaders to eliminate all the individuals and groups, who in their non-conformity to the dominant standards, actively or passively spoil the hierarchical transmission of orders. Non-conformity is the main obstacle to effective hierarchical organizations.

Furthermore, this new administrative efficiency enables isolating the deviant individuals that are more accurately identified thanks to the totalitarian information capacity of the hierarchy and also the deviant groups, which the administration can handle as a single element—thanks to the increased productivity of its rational methods—in a mass-production process.

Finally, the individuals within the organization who are responsible for the isolation of the deviants or opponents, and often for the decision to eliminate them physically, can do so with few moral scruples thanks to the depersonalized relationship with the victims resulting from both the standardization of the individuals and the impersonal file processing. Besides, the decision process is fragmented into several stages, often dealt with by different bureaucrats. One of them writes a name on the list of suspects, another one transfers that name onto the list of state enemies. A third decides to put them under arrest. A fourth person decides to deport them. And a lot of people take part in the process which ends in murder. Fragmented decision making dilutes responsibilities. And this in turn reduces the impact, the psychological “reality” and the subjective pain of the decision to murder people.

Murdering somebody by moving a file from one pile to another certainly does not affect someone the same way as murdering some-

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

61

body face to face with one's own hands. And for those who actually have to kill somebody physically, the ideology, the dedication to general interest, to the state or its leader, acts as a tranquilizer, if not a stimulant.

Conversely, in their article about the bureaucracy of murder, Breton and Wintrobe support the view that the managers at every level of that process are directly responsible, given they make everything possible to submit to their superiors more efficient extermination methods.⁹ But that argument is not incompatible with a feeling of lesser pain or guilt due to the very nature of the hierarchical process, much to the contrary.

A similar mechanism—but much less elaborated and bureaucratic given the more rudimentary context—was used as a basis for the policy of constant dehumanization of slaves that ancient and traditional societies generally carried out, especially in Africa. It was simply maintained and reintroduced with the modern expansion of the large plantations ruled by slave owners just before the Industrial Revolution. These were in themselves totalitarian societies, whose functioning bore a striking resemblance with the Russian Gulag, although the slaves were treated better than Solzhenitsyn's companions: the "zeks." The reason behind that is simple: the slaves had been bought by their owner and thus had a market value. Consequently, they had to be kept in good conditions to produce, whereas the zeks could be exploited until death without any yield considerations since they had no purchase price and thus no value in the state-owner's mind.¹⁰ Unlike the owners of "tradable" slaves, the Nazi or Communist state even viewed the value of their prisoners as negative: they hinder—really or supposedly—the good functioning of the hierarchy. This explains why they were more harshly treated than tradable slaves.

9. Albert Breton and Ronald Wintrobe, "The Bureaucracy of Murder Revisited," *Journal of Political Economy*, 1986.

10. For analyses of the way slaves were treated depending on the circumstances and the kind of organizations in which they worked, see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, Belknap, Harvard University Press, 1998.

The dehumanization of slaves, like that of the members of totalitarian societies, is a way to control individuals. It aims at reducing the personal targets, desires and ambitions of average individuals to replace them more easily by those of their leaders. Thus, the personal utility function—in other words, the personality—must be weakened to force individuals to give in to their hierarchical superiors' decisions. The terms used are also very telling: in prisons or in the army, the idea is to “crush the minds,” like one tames animals, to subject them to the will of their owners. The domestication of animals, the fruit of the prehistoric experience of man, consists in subordinating them to the aims of the humans to take advantage of their labor force or nutritional resources.

It is then easier to mass murder depersonalized and dehumanized individuals, often explicitly and systematically compared to animals, than to kill fellow humans. This is the reason why slaves have never been viewed as men but as cattle and depersonalized accordingly. It was thus easier to exploit them and treat them like animals, paying no attention to their aspirations but only to the preferences and interests of their owners. This also explains why the victims of the Nazi extermination policy were officially considered as “sub-humans.”

The methods used for the World War II genocide were not innovative. They were those of the Chicago slaughterhouses mentioned earlier to explain the progress of the Second Industrial Revolution which gave birth to the large-scale organizations of the late nineteenth century. In a way, the phenomena of mass murder and state crime do characterize the modern civilization as several authors have begun to underline.¹¹ The genocides look closely related to the mechanisms of bureaucratic dehumanization.

11. Especially R.J. Rummel, *Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder since 1917*; *China's Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900*; and *Democide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder*, Transaction Publishers, 1990, 1991, and 1992. See also the recent book by Lionel B. Steiman, *Paths to Genocide: Anti-Semitism in Western History*, Macmillan, 1998, and Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cor-

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

63

The mechanisms of these extreme crime cases can be understood since it appears that they only take to its extremes the logic of subordination, that is the individuals' renunciation of their own targets and their (in)voluntary submission to the aims, decisions and choices of their hierarchical superiors.

In most contemporary societies, subordinates do voluntarily forsake their utility function, but this consent is limited both in time and scope by the labor contracts they sign. The delegation of the freedom to choose and self-govern to the superior is consented and partial.

But, in many situations, the renunciation of personal liberties and of the personal utility function can go further, although it has been freely consented. For instance, this was the case with the voluntary servitude of the Europeans that emigrated to the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As they could not afford to pay the journey across the Atlantic to the New World, they accepted to sell themselves as slaves for a few years to the "buyer" who would finance the trip.

And it is mostly because these temporary slaves were too few and sometimes did not fulfil their commitments that a large number of unwilling African slaves were imported to the American continent for the highly-profitable cotton and sugar plantations. At that time, the vast plantations were the largest integrated production organizations and they already implemented the labor fragmentation and standardization methods that were to become widespread in Europe with the Industrial Revolution.

But the extent of the inhuman treatment depends mostly on the size of the organization. To avoid the risk of a drift towards non-conformity and the loss of information and efficiency that increases proportionally to the population studied, the mass organization, the mass hierarchization, needs to resort to increasingly harsh sanctions.

nell University Press, 1989, which explicitly develops the argument that mass murders there are intrinsically linked to the very nature of twentieth-century society.

This can go as far as murder and even mass murder in the largest state hierarchies because of the monopoly of violence.

Far from being an inexplicable aberration due to a fit of madness at the apogee of the Western civilization, mass murders and crimes against humanity now appear as the immoral but logical consequences of the centralized organization of ever-growing masses.

THE VALUE OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE COST OF STATE MURDER

A typical example of the theory of the irrationality or the absurdity of state murder, absurdity which is an extreme form of error, is the current explanation of state slaughters of the past century, and more especially those of Nazi Germany and Russian communism.¹² The idea that it was pure madness mainly results from the moral revulsion caused by those slaughters and genocides. It is the same reaction that prompts us to ascribe most of the individual criminal acts to psychological abnormality or lunacy.

Like individual crimes, state crimes are often described as a sudden fit of madness, an aberration or an abnormal behavior with no rational justification. In view of that conclusion, observers then look for the causes of this fit of madness in the ideas, intentions, motives, perverted preferences of the murderers, errors, illusions or cowardly acts of those who let them commit their crimes. The aim is to identify the perversions of the human mind—in this case, the harmful ideologies—that are at the origin of these crimes and to prevent their resurgence through morals, persuasion or constraint.

Even if one believes that this approach may be effective, it does not explain the variations of criminality in space and time, especially as the proportion of abnormal or inhuman individuals in a given population can probably be considered as constant.

Since the pathbreaking analysis of Gary Becker, criminality and

12. Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

65

delinquency theories have evolved by relying on another hypothesis that many empirical works then confirmed: the motivations of delinquents (or even criminals) can differ more or less from those of other individuals, with for instance low moral standards or absolutely no respect for other people's lives. But, despite that, their deviant behaviors are not necessarily mad or irrational. They opt for crime mostly because it is more profitable than respecting the laws and the other people. Their level of delinquency will thus be affected by the society's positive and negative incentives. For a given degree of abnormality in the population, a high arrest rate and severe sanctions will reduce criminal activity. On the contrary, inefficient police forces and a lax justice system will encourage delinquency and criminality. Similarly, the opportunities of making profits that potential criminals are faced with will drive them either toward criminality if the legal structure is very weak or dissuade them from crime if it strengthens—for instance, in the event of an economic recovery and increased opportunities of lucrative legal jobs.

That does not necessarily imply that the society is responsible. Criminals are. But their actions depend on the risk/reward of legal and illegal activities that is determined by the society. For instance, this is true of drug traffic: that activity is so profitable that the risk of an arrest and a sentence is minimized and the traffic develops despite the numerous “wars on drugs” periodically launched by the governments.

In that light, is the barbarism of the twentieth century an aberration, an inexplicable “fit of madness”? Or, on the contrary, is it intrinsically linked to the original characteristics of the contemporary civilization? That assumption was first made by Lionel B. Steiman.¹³ Could barbarism be the (partial) consequence of the incentives generated by the modern organization of our technological and bureaucratic society? Obviously, to carry out mass slaughters, mass bureaucracy is needed.

13. *Paths to Genocide: Anti-Semitism in Western History*, Macmillan, 1998.

Whatever their nature, the procedures of political selection cannot prevent an abnormal person from reaching the top of the state. But, obviously, when that leader governs a totalitarian country and has huge power as was the case with Hitler, his destruction capacity becomes terrifying. That capacity would have been much more reduced in a democratic society, where the power is shared and decisions are decentralized.

What distinguishes the modern state from the previous political organizations is the extraordinary concentration of the political, economic and legal authority within the hands of a sole leader. The sentence “I am the state,” which is commonly credited to Louis XIV, perfectly summed up that situation. However, the state has much more power now than in the seventeenth century, as it did not yet rely on the social concepts of nation and nationalism invented in the nineteenth century. But it was already bureaucratic and centralized, looking for the rational and anonymous efficiency that Max Weber described later on.

The state is equally rational and efficient when it applies its resources to war and mass murder. Concentration camps were invented by Great Britain during the Boer War in the late nineteenth century. The Nazi state only took to its extremes the bureaucracy of modern war, against a fraction of civilians, arbitrarily selected according to the beliefs—whatever they were—of the few persons that had seized the centralized power. Large-scale murders had already been committed by the German state much before the systematic deportation of Jews and Gypsies living in the occupied countries: it had been used against the Communists and Socialists, against Hitler’s rivals within the party, against homosexuals and other “social misfits.”¹⁴

Violence against the troops of the totalitarian state must not be underestimated either. Thus, several tens of thousands of German soldiers of the Wehrmacht were executed during the war. That process

14. Steiman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

67

is not peculiar to the German army: French soldiers had been shot as a warning during World War I following the mutinies of 1915, and the diffusion of the film *Path of Glory* describing that episode was long forbidden by public authorities.

So, why were there not more revolts in Germany, Russia or China? Although those totalitarian regimes were more efficient from economic and foreign security standpoints than other imperialist organizations that were even more dangerous for local populations, the terror that these regimes exerted on their population and opponents must not be forgotten.¹⁵ It required exceptional courage—which is by definition very rare—to risk the death penalty, deportation and torture by taking position against a totalitarian machinery which isolated and persecuted its opponents and which, above all, seemed to be the solution of the future that would remain indefinitely, as people believed it would be the case with the totalitarian regimes, in the 1930s.

In fact, resistances only developed where they benefited from outside support and where a future defeat of the totalitarian regime could at least be considered a real possibility.

But as Germany was not the only country to pursue that bureaucracy of murder, it is also necessary to explain the mass slaughters that were not motivated by anti-Semitic or anti-Communist hatred. Thus, from the start of the 1930s, Stalin had exterminated, through systematic starvation, millions of Ukrainians while he set up the Gulag system. In that case, there was no aberrant hatred against the Ukrainians as such and the idea was rather to use a convenient tool of mass bureaucracy to get rid of the regime's opponents. Here, the cause was the search for maximal power and not a particular ideologically based hatred of a social group.

And the extermination of entire ethnic groups was not totally new at the time as the slaughter of the Armenians by the Turks during

15. To be convinced of that greater danger, just study how the German army treated the Russian population during World War II and vice versa.

World War I shows. It was thus a characteristic of that period which could differ according to the organizational structures of each society and was more or less marked, but nevertheless widespread, as the events in China, Kampuchea, North Korea and eventually in Rwanda (among others) proved later on. Even democracies were not free of political crimes, as Erich Weede underlined, evoking the importance of “death by government” during the century.¹⁶

Besides the fact that it concentrates the power within the hands of a few men that can turn out to be abnormal or dangerous once they have reached the top, centralizing bureaucracy also allows slaughters, because it mechanizes, automates and depersonalizes the treatment of individuals, who are reduced to mere abstract cases. This is where its productivity comes from. But this also explains the strange “banality of evil” in these mass slaughters. It does not fundamentally differ from the murder of civilians by military forces during modern wars: the anonymity, the distance between the killer and its victims, the resulting depersonalization of the latter, make their elimination possible. Moreover, that murder is justified by hierarchical authorities to which everyone is subjected in the various aspects of life. The goal is thus legitimated, the psychological cost of the action is minimized and all the conditions are met to maximize criminality so that “everything is possible” as David Rousset wrote about the Nazi slaughters.¹⁷

That long digression about one of the most enigmatic and dramatic aspects of the century shows that mass murders cannot simply be justified by error, illusion, aberration or collective madness, and illustrates how incomplete this explanation is. Whatever the point of view, the choices made during the past century were not inexplicable aberrations or errors that could have been avoided with persuasion

16. “Death by government” studied by Rummel, quoted by Erich Weede, *Economic Development, Social Order, and World Politics*, Lynne Rieder, 1996, p.18.

17. “Normal men do not know that everything is possible,” quoted by Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harvest Books, 1973.

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

69

and ideological opposition. It resulted from the extremely deep conditions governing human choices, conditions that could not be altered easily and with very significant impact.

These underlying organizational forces determined the fate of nations, the choice of the economic and political systems and the cultural and human dimensions of the civilization, which in turn defined the outlook of the twentieth century.

We must not try to find—as we often do—the cause and responsibility for this century's troubles in the ideologies, since they are largely endogenous and merely fulfill the functioning needs of the dominant organizations. Totalitarian ideologies are nothing but the caricatured reflection of the centralizing organizations' implacable efforts to dominate ever-growing groups of human beings.

Yet, the traditional interpretation of fascist, communist or even corporatist totalitarianism mainly concentrates on individual psychological or psychoanalytic motives or even on the interests of some social groups.

In his book *Interpretations of Fascism*, A. James Gregor gave his four main interpretations of totalitarianism, which merely consisted of explaining the choice of political systems as a consequence of the widespread and indisputable success of totalitarian ideologies.¹⁸ They all come down either to the Freudian explanation—individuals' psychological imbalances and aspirations find an outlet in politics—or to the Marxist explanation—meeting class interests. But why have those aspirations and frames of mind, which had undoubtedly always existed, gained a new significance during the first half of the century, and why have those caricatured conceptions lost their power in the more recent period? There are two answers to these questions: either the theory of error and learning, according to which the people were lured into wrong ideas and then rejected them when their consequences became obvious, or the theory of exceptional circumstances

18. Transaction Publishers, 1997.

(for example, the Depression and the world wars resulting from various kinds of imperialisms). But communism spread long before the Great Depression. And although the previous one (1873–1896) was profound and global, it did not lead to the same political consequences. Besides, the rise in imperialism in itself requires an explanation that the psychological and Marxist interpretations have failed to provide so far. We will show, on the contrary, that the economic analysis of the organization accounts quite well for state expansion which generates first nationalism and then imperialism.

But the totalitarian ideology is above all the instrument that hierarchized bureaucracies, benefiting from a very vast monopoly encompassing whole societies, needed. In a decentralized society, individual frustrations and group interests still exist, but they are no longer expressed through a totalitarian ideology simply because there is no social demand, no productive necessity, for a mass doctrine. Much to the contrary, organizational needs favor individualism, initiative and difference.

The level of competition or monopoly depends on the organization's structure and dynamics, and determines the ideology, that is the general conception of the way the society at large must be organized: a society of independent farmers is unlikely to adopt an ideology advocating collectivization.

The social values chosen and defended in a given society are more or less those which are useful to that particular society and which facilitate its functioning. Otherwise, they would be fanciful, utopian, and would not be adopted by a majority of individuals.

A highly hierarchical society cannot accept much liberty of action and thought. A society of serfdom or slavery cannot advocate a universal vision of dignity and of the inalienable rights of all human beings or else it must give a restrictive and discriminatory definition of human belonging.

Conversely, in an extremely decentralized society, each person must make his own judgments and take decisions autonomously. This

The Political Consequences of Hierarchy

71

is only compatible with a conviction of individual competence and dignity. Philosophical and moral conceptions will thus have to change according to the places and periods to meet the needs of social organization. After all, this is pure common sense if we think that morals mainly aim at setting and enforcing rules to make the life in society possible.

Each transformation in the organizational systems of private productions or public administrations thus change human relationships, that is the culture and “moral atmosphere” of the society. Thus, totalitarianism is the political and social expression of the complete monopolization, of the full centralization of the systems organizing political and economic hierarchical concentration. It represents the most extreme version of dictatorship, that of the single social monopoly.

The race for monopoly itself generates exacerbated conflicts at all levels. When the size of the existing organizations increase, there is only room left for a small number of them, and sometimes just for one. Each must fight for survival with all its might and means. This is what makes interest and ideology conflicts so destructive in these particular circumstances, and leads to the use of the most barbarous methods. In the race for dimension that leads to monopoly, it is no longer a question of making marginal corrections to the frontiers but rather to suppress all the opponents. Unlike during the limited wars of the eighteenth century, the opponent’s defeat is no longer enough and its death must come in the end.

If centralization can continue efficiently without any limits, only one society, one organization, one ideology will survive. Most unfortunately, this reminds us of the Hitlerian slogan of “one people, one empire, one leader.” This is simply the pathological ideal of total centralization, of the absolute organizational monopoly.

In more normal conditions, where societies, systems and business firms are faced with “atomistic” competition, where the dimension of each agent is too small to affect the overall social equilibrium, each does its best and works for his own interests without being directly

affected by his neighbors' behaviors. Competitors are anonymous and there is room for newcomers. It is important to defend one's business but there is room for everybody, or almost.

But this is no longer the case when being a large organization is a growing decisive advantage. The number of participants must diminish. There is only room left for a decreasing number of firms or states. The aim is no longer to meet the needs of a reduced clientele but to eliminate the neighbor without disappearing. The initial competition between independent actors thus changed into a competition of interactive destruction. Competition within a field has been replaced by competition for the field.

The organizational culture and its ideological expression inevitably reflect the necessary transformation of goals and behaviors. The organization determines the culture and ideology, but not the contrary as claimed by the intellectuals who overestimate the role of the products they manufacture and market, that is the ideas.

This is how the great reversal of the end of the twentieth century was to occur with the decentralizing revolution which reduced the dimension of all the organizations and re-introduced atomistic competition: with this reversal, we drift away from the hierarchical order that was condemned in books such as Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Orwell's *1984*, and Huxley's *Brave New World*. It also revived the anarchist movements, the trend of "small is beautiful" and the autonomist, independentist and secessionist movements within the nations.

The second twentieth century began with the return of individualism and markets, more especially the political market. In other words, democracy.