

Totalitarianism and the Experience of Experience

TORA LANE

The question of the total lies at the heart of the cultural critique of modern times, be it in terms of totality or totalitarianism. Adorno claimed in his famous 1949 statement about poetry after Auschwitz that the problem of the relation between culture and barbarism consists in society becoming more and more total, and it hardly needs to be mentioned that Hannah Arendt was able to subsume her analysis of the development of political culture in the 1930s under the term of totalitarianism. But the total was not only the object of critique—within the Hegelian Marxist tradition the notion was also considered to be the primary, if not the only tool for criticizing the fragmentation and alienation of society under capitalism, precisely because of the way in which it penetrated all aspects of society and private experience, as for instance in the thought of Georg Lukács or Mikhail Lifshitz. The total, of course, implies a dominance of the all, of everything, and what is at stake in the political and cultural question of the total in modern societies is not the total as such, but, as Arendt also shows in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the all/the total as an object of political and/or economic explanation and exploitation. If the notion of the total on the one hand poses the question of the forms and conditions of political and economic domination of the world, on the other, it also implores us to understand the breaking points and forms of opposition or escape. It is, however, precisely with regard to the latter that the notion of totality and totalitarianism poses a radical problem, because it implies the elimination of all forms of escape—indeed, the elimination of the very ground that would make an escape possible. As Arendt understands totalitarianism, it means the elimination of experience itself, because experience would be the ground where the total explanation ought to chafe or even go to the ground. In other words, what is indeed at stake in modernity is the possibility of experience. But then how is it possible to think about experience and its elimination in modernity? Arendt turns to experience as a point of seclusion, a space of intimate and inner reflection where the world speaks as the own, but she does not engage in a deeper discussion of this issue because her focus is the workings of political dictates. In order to further examine the question, I will therefore bring together her thought in dialogue with Bataille's more thorough treatment of the nature of experience in *Inner experience* (1943/54), where he inquires into the nature of experience and its threat in modernity. The question that appears in relation to

both thinkers and the total movement of modernity is—can experience be understood as a given?

Arendt

Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism in the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is based on the role of the masses in the communist and fascist politics of the 1930s. Totalitarianism appealed to and was able to manipulate a "mob mentality"¹ typical of people in the period of early modern democracy, when they first appeared on the political scene. She describes totalitarianism less as a system or a structure than as a movement, or rather, a total movement, which at the same time is a movement of the masses and an atomized movement of individuals. In other words, it is a movement of the all, the masses, controlled by the one, the individual, and therefore it is a uniform movement of the masses, who are blind to their own singular experiences. In this movement, politics becomes only a tool, and all political assumptions must be framed in terms of the total, of "world rule."² In other words, politics and the political idea are secondary to the force of the movement. She distinguishes between the totalitarian ideologists (Lenin, Stalin) and the ideology from which they grew (Marxism) by insisting that Lenin and Stalin were more interested in the "logic of the idea" than they were in the idea itself, and she quotes Stalin, who had said that it was the "irresistible force of logic" that "overpowered Lenin's audience."³ Ideology has a central role or is a central tool in this movement because of the way that it can explain *everything* "scientifically". To paraphrase Descartes, armed with an idea, politics could become the master and owner of history. The subject matter of ideology is, she writes, "history, to which the "idea" is applied; the result of its application is not a body of statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change."⁴ This movement instead appears as a movement of history that is conceived as an aim in itself, an idea that can be traced to Hegel. Thus, history is in the paradoxical position of being at once the ineluctable force that carries itself forward and the aim that must be achieved and implemented. In other words, history is a destiny that must be attained through political struggle. Her definition is not so far from that of progress—perhaps not progress as an ideology in itself, but almost and at least progress as refracted through the idea. The perfect totalitarian government is one where "all men have become One man, where all action aims at the acceleration of the movement of nature or history [...]"⁵ The total appears as the machinery, as a single movement that allows

for no singularity, a constant change that allows for no change in its chain of changes, a *One* that is the total of what is in itself beyond and excludes any experience of it.

Thus the problem of mob mentality in the totalitarian societies of the twentieth century was not so much the ideological content of its politics as it was the idealist reading of history it proposed, which inoculated the fanatical members of the movement against both experience and argument, thereby erasing “the very capacity to experience, even if it be as extreme as torture or the fear of death.”⁶ This statement—that is, that the members of the totalitarian movement can be reached by neither “experience nor argument” does not imply, as the mainstream critique of the problem of totalitarianism holds, that they were impervious to reality, hard facts and real arguments. Arendt is not saying simply that ideology is de-realizing—because then totalitarianism would not hold total sway—but that totalitarianism sidesteps the very basis for any judgment: singular experience. Experience, she says, may well be fiction, which she calls the “reality of experience”. Here there is an interesting parallel to Walter Benjamin, who argued in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction” that the reproductive art of the cinema will no longer appeal to contemplation, but instead take viewers in its grip and infuse them with a vision of reality. This is the reason why art must become political.

Totalitarianism is built on governing the logic of the movement of the world as an exterior—an exterior and a movement that can be *one* movement and *one* exterior only as long as it excludes the inner. It does so by making people lonely yet incapable of bearing solitude. Solitude is a form of intimacy with the self, where the world, the other, begins to speak in the self, where man “trusts himself as the partner of his thoughts”.⁷ Loneliness, on the other hand, merely confirms the logic of totalitarianism with its laws of exclusion and isolation, telling man that he does not “belong to the world at all” thereby setting one person against the other in a situation of utter and therefore manipulable antagonism. In other words, experience happens in seclusion, but this seclusion opens for an experience of belonging—it is a form of speaking and acting with the world. Arendt quotes the image of the feast at noon in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, when “One became Two”.⁸ Here, the world or the self as a homogeneity opens itself as heterogeneity. This is not a nocturnal Dionysiac commune of the all, but a diurnal opening of the belonging to the world in the self. This is also the space of the beginning. And this is what is excluded in totalitarianism.

Bataille

Bataille's *Inner Experience* begins with the epigraph "Night is also a sun",⁹ another quote from *Zarathustra*, and indeed the notion of the night and darkness is much more important for Bataille in his understanding of the inner. He emphasizes that *Inner Experience* is an essay in the sense of a sketch, an esquisse, or an attempt to understand the problem of experience in modernity. What is at stake for Bataille is experience as such, and more accurately, as experienced by him.¹⁰ He understands this experience much like Arendt, following Nietzsche, as a form of intimacy with the self, where there is an experience of the common, the shared in the inner of the self, of transcendence, if you wish. However, Bataille approaches the problem of experience in modernity with a vocabulary based on notions of homogeneity and multitude. The inner experience that he seeks to depict is opposed to the alienating homogeneity of the modern world, which is not read in terms relative to totalitarian societies. Instead, he speaks of an experience which is "distanced" from "present-day man" because it is an experience from which present-day man distances himself. This experience is an experience of multitude and communication, but, he also adds, one of entirety and fusion. He seems to be looking for a state akin to the mystical experience that he both confirms and rejects throughout. It is an "inner experience, which is an experience which in itself must be "a sovereign authority". It is "an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin, of any confession whatever",¹¹ and it is marked by the unknown. In his description of this experience, Bataille also turns to Nietzsche, but this Nietzsche is instead the Dionysiac Nietzsche and his ideas of nocturnal fusion. He writes:

In experience, there is no longer a limited existence. There a man is not distinguished in any way from others: in him what is torrential is lost within others. The so simple statement "Be that ocean", linked to the *extreme* limit, at the same time makes of a man a multitude, a desert. It is an expression that resumes and makes precise the sense of a community. I know how to respond to the desire of Nietzsche speaking of a community having no object other than that of experience (but designating this community, I speak of a "desert").¹²

The inner experience that Bataille describes is "a voyage to the end of the possible of man",¹³ a farewell to the authorities that determine the limits of the possible, but thereby also a restitution of individual sovereignty. And indeed, the question of limits becomes seminal for Bataille. By definition, the "inner" is a space delimited against the external world, and he also opposes

the external and internal categorically when he writes that it is necessary to reject external means of dramatization. However, the confines of the inner are at the same time what protects man from his own limits and exposes him to them as the inner opens up for the possibility of an experience of limitless torrential existence and communication with others as outsiders. The inner is the possibility of the experience of the world in its entirety—this experience is ecstasy, a torrential existence, which at the same time is bliss, the “most sublime”, the ocean that Nietzsche commands us to be, and at the same time, for Bataille, the desert as a desert of multitude. Why a desert? Allegedly because this place of utmost communication is also the place of utmost solitude. The biblical connotations take us to the hermit, who has left society and the world in order to open himself to God. For Bataille, therefore, the desert is the renunciation of the community communicated in society, the place of lost communication and revelation, because “[...] only revelation permits man to be everything”.¹⁴ In other words, the external community of society must be relinquished and renounced for the internal limitless society to take place.

The opposition between inner and outer community and communication is built on a distinction between inner and outer ecstasy. There is an ecstasy of the self in the external commitments of the world, and there is an internal ecstasy in the self, where the self can be regained as an authority and sovereign, and therefore as the place of a voice and communication. In the modern world, this inner life is threatened, because with the death of God, there is no locus for this experience. In other words, religion—and more specifically, Christianity—provided an idea of transcendence for which inner experience plays an important role, and modern society faces the task of thinking inner experience without God. Thus, the question that Bataille poses can be reframed as asking: how can there be an authority for inner experience (or experience as such) after the loss of God? And he poses it in the form of a quest for deliverance from his “prison” and his “tomb” as a desert and a death that he desires.

Although Bataille does not really engage in an analysis of society, he writes that the loss of God does not become a loss to “present-day man”, because present-day man has resigned from raging against the dying of the light or of the night, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, and thus turned himself into “a mouse in the cat’s paws: you wanted to be everything, the fraud discovered, you will serve as a toy for us”.¹⁵ Present-day man becomes a toy because of his refusal to begin to approach experience and to face the “anguish” of experience. In other words, there remain consequences of the loss of God for society because

society has lost the cultural locus where transcendence in and through the self is thought. Bataille, that is, suggests that there is a form of individualized, if not internalized totalitarianism as an internal rejection of the inner. And perhaps, inversely, Bataille's desire for inner experience, for the desert and death, also stems from his contempt for present-day man and the way that his homogeneity takes over language. He writes:

this reign of words
continuity
without dread, such that dread
be desirable¹⁶

Moreover, what Bataille sees is present-day man speaking with "poetic facility, diffuse style, verbal project, ostentation and the fall into the worst: commonness, literature."¹⁷ In other words, what Bataille desires is communication, a community without commonness, without literature and the reign of words.

In relation to his description of inner experience, Bataille thus uncovers the processes or movements of experience in relation to the anguish and horror felt before inner experience in the homogeneity of "present-day man". In his view, the rejection of inner experience stems from a preoccupation with "projects". Life is projected in the form of projects, and projects mean "the putting off of existence to a later point". The world of "project" is also the world of "progress", the world in which we find ourselves that follows its own movement and thereby resists becoming ours as experience. And here there is a similarity to the resistance to experience that Arendt finds in totalitarian societies. Namely, both argue that the loss of experience results from a preoccupation with history, time in terms of a project as a total aim in itself. What experience does, and why it gives rise to such anguish, is that it breaks the project, and the refusal to face experience is the refusal to postpone projection to existence to a later point and to face it in its now: "Now experience is the opposite of project: I attain experience opposite to the project of having it."¹⁸

Yet in the midst of his desire for ecstasy, which appears at the same time as ecstasy in and beyond the world, Bataille also describes experience as "a fissure/ my fissure/ in order to be broken". Here, perhaps, there is another image of experience, or of the experience of experience, not of how the outer world breaks in the inner, divides, multiplies, but simply of how the projection of the world breaks. Thus, experience, or the experience of experience, appears as a fall out of time which nevertheless preserves the "experience" of

this time. And Bataille finds a beautiful quote from Proust to describe experience, namely “time made tangible to the heart”,¹⁹ which is not a movement into, but an experience of ecstasy in the self. Therefore, what Bataille can perhaps tell us with regard to the study of totalitarianism and the expression of those who have experienced it, is that although totalitarianism can effectuate such an erasure of the very ability to experience, perhaps we can look for points where experience breaks, where the loss of experience is experienced as in the forgotten words of Mandelstam:

And men can love, men can know,
 even sound pours itself into their fingers,
 but I forgot what I want to say
 and the unbodied thought goes back to the palace of ghosts.

That transparent thought keeps repeating the wrong thing,
 Keeps fluttering like a swallow, my friend, Antigone...
 And echoes of Stygian ringing
 burn on her lips, black like ice.²⁰

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism. Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁹ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) *Ibid.*, xxx.

¹⁰ In the “Psychological structure of Fascism” (1933), Bataille had made a rather opposite reading of fascism than that of Arendt, where homogeneity is accorded to the democratic state and heterogeneity to the abject and the sovereign supreme in the face of fascism. The question of fascism is not a central issue in *Inner Experience*, but the question of homogeneity is.

¹¹ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁰ Osip Mandelstam, *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, trans. Burton Raffel and Alla Burago (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), 110.