

Voegelin and Arendt on Religion and Politics  
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My dissertation research explores the relationship between Hannah Arendt's and Eric Voegelin's critiques of totalitarianism. When I began my research, I assumed that the best place to begin was with Voegelin's review of Arendt's book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and Arendt's reply to this review, which were published together in the *Review of Politics* in 1953. Given similarities in their biographies, and because the authors very often identified similar problems, I expected to find expressions of mutual admiration and wide-ranging agreement.

The tone of their exchange challenged this initial presupposition: Voegelin's review culminates in the suspicion that Arendt herself harbors totalitarian tendencies, and Arendt's reply insinuates that Voegelin's criticisms are based on the reactionary, perhaps even cynical, reintroduction of the influence of the religious tradition into the public realm. I discovered that the authors' somewhat heavy-handed misrepresentations of each other's work likely found their cause in Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*,<sup>1</sup> wherein she discusses Voegelin's article "The Origins of Scientism."<sup>2</sup>

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In "The Origins of Scientism," Voegelin considers the political implications of the rise of the new science in the sixteenth century by way of an examination of the idea of power through science.<sup>3</sup> The rational core of this idea corresponds to what he calls "the rational-utilitarian segment" of human existence (*OS*, 189). While the rational-utilitarian segment is a constituent of all human existence, the modern world has witnessed the growth of this aspect into the specific determinant of human life. Voegelin suspects that it could not have done so on its own, but rather was intentionally driven to exceed what would under normal circumstances be its reasonable limit. He argues that the rational-utilitarian segment is forcibly over-extended by an intellectual creed movement he calls "scientism." He calls it scientism because it draws its social effectiveness from the prestige of science, itself accrued by way of the easily recognizable utility of science. In contrast to those who practice science, those who idolize it are preoccupied by its eminent usefulness for the increase of power and wealth. The mass creed of scientism is indicative of a social process whereby the advancement of science is interwoven with the rationality of politics. Voegelin warns that the mass confusion manifest in scientism proceeds from its embrace of an absurd belief: "the idea that structure and problems of human existence can be superseded in historical society" (*OS*, 190). The desire to supersede the problems of human existence is evident in the will to extend to the problems of society and history the type of mastery specific to the knowledge of phenomena. While it is certainly true that "the knowledge of phenomena is the key to the

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951); hereafter, cited as *OT*.

<sup>2</sup> *OT*, 337-338.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Voegelin, "The Origins of Scientism," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 10, *Published Essays, 1940-1952*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 168-196; hereafter, cited as *OS*.

utilitarian mastery of phenomena, . . . the understanding of human substance is not the key to the mastery of society and history” (OS, 191).

Voegelin argues, then, that a particular sort of intellectual and spiritual confusion is the core of the problem of scientism.

The tendency to narrow the field of human experience to the area of reason, science and pragmatic action, the tendency to overvalue this area in relation to the *bois theoretikos* and the life of the spirit, the tendency to make it the exclusive preoccupation of man, the tendency to make it socially preponderant through economic pressure in the so-called free societies and through violence in totalitarian communities—all these are part of a cultural process that is dominated by a flight of magic imagination, that is, by the idea of operating on the substance of man through the instrument of pragmatically planning will. (OS, 191)

Further, he suggests that this confusion is the basis of the totalitarian mass movements as well as the “so-called liberal and progressive movements” (OS, 190). Thus, Voegelin moves from an assessment of the problem of scientism toward a general theory of the crisis of modernity: “We have ventured the suggestion that in retrospect the age of science will appear as the greatest power orgy in the history of mankind; we now venture the suggestion that at the bottom of this orgy the historian will find a gigantic outburst of magic imagination after the breakdown of the intellectual and spiritual form of medieval high-civilization” (OS, 191). This general theory associates the modern mass movements with one another according to the common desire of their members to escape permanently from the structure and problems of human existence.

In *Origins*, Arendt ignores Voegelin’s point about intellectual and spiritual crisis. Instead of addressing this, she makes Voegelin’s observation about the expansion of the rational-utilitarian segment of existence speak in defense of a certain misconception about totalitarianism. Arendt claims that preoccupation with the ideological use of science for propaganda purposes, itself only a characteristic of totalitarian organizational technique, often leads interpreters to misunderstand totalitarianism itself as only the most recent instance of a long-standing problem of modern pragmatic politics (OT, 337). As an example of this misunderstanding, she alleges, Voegelin’s “scientism” discussion characterizes totalitarian rulers and ruled masses according to their obsession with utility (OT, 338). Arendt denies the claim that the collectivism of totalitarian regimes is based on an objective, shared sense of the intrinsic value of utilitarian enterprise. She argues, rather, that totalitarian rulers were completely indifferent to, and totalitarian masses had long before abandoned, any concern with objective interest. Totalitarian masses are characterized by, and organized according to, their experience of superfluosity.

Arendt’s brief discussion of Voegelin’s “Origins of Scientism” gives his appreciative readers pause. Voegelin does not say that those who idolize science are like the totalitarian masses in being drawn together through their obsession with utilitarian concerns. He says, rather, that both totalitarian masses and masses that idolize science are similarly in a condition of spiritual and intellectual crisis. In his review of *Origins*, Voegelin is dismissive of Arendt’s concerns, supposing that her somewhat careless interpretation of his work must stem from her own “immanentism.”<sup>4</sup> Arendt replies that

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 11, *Published Essays, 1953-1965*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of

her study is a search for the essence of totalitarianism, “this one form of government and movement.” She charges that the main problem with Voegelin’s focus on spiritual and intellectual crisis is that he is “unable to point out the distinct quality of what was actually happening.”<sup>5</sup> At this point in her reply, we might pause for a moment, before following Arendt into her now very well-known questioning concerning the novelty of the totalitarian regimes, in order to consider more closely the accusation she is levying against Voegelin’s approach. In “The Origins of Scientism,” Voegelin does not provide a detailed explanation of the parallel that he is drawing between scientism and totalitarianism. Rather, he encourages rhetorically the formation of an association between, on the one hand, the well-known and rightly despised excesses of totalitarian organization and, on the other hand, the very subtle deformations at the core of the idea of power through science. Arendt is correct to say that it is not immediately apparent how Voegelin’s work aids our understanding of the totalitarian regimes themselves. Further, this ambiguity might be construed to suggest that Voegelin simply uses totalitarianism as a cautionary tale illustrating the consequences of lack of attention to the problems that he seeks to describe.

Given these considerations Voegelin’s readers may seek to consider further the specific reasons why Arendt is suspicious about historical generalizations in the case of totalitarianism. They encourage us to engage Arendt’s point about objective interest and the masses, and thus to look to her critique of nationalism in Part II of *Origins*. It is possible that Voegelin himself would endorse such a procedure, if only to shed some light on why he would identify this part of her study as “theoretically the most penetrating.”<sup>6</sup>

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In the second part of *Origins*, on imperialism, Arendt notices that nationalism is often explained as a progressive consequence of the transition from the feudal order to modernity. This view holds that the dissolution of feudal universalism entails the rise and emancipation of the state through a process of secularization. Political life is transformed through rationalism, a cunning influence purging the public realm of religious fervor, and religious life purified through Pietism, a radically apolitical trend insisting that religion divest itself of all trappings related to the inherent violence of the political. Without religion, political organization seems a “cold monster” (Hans Kohn). Under these specific historical conditions nationality achieves its fullest expression in nationalism, which subsequently begins to supply the emotional warmth and intimacy of union previously provided by religion. Thus, nationalism aids in the secular realm’s development of a dignity and splendor of its own.

Arendt denies that nationalism *per se* offers “an emotional surrogate for religion,” because “only the tribal nationalism of the pan-movements offered a new religious theory and a new concept of holiness” (*OT*, 233). The pan-movements were a new form of organization facilitated by the rootlessness of oppressed peoples in Southern and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century (*OT*, 231). Animated by “a concept of cohesive

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Missouri Press, 2000), 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, “[The Origins of Totalitarianism:] A Reply,” in *Review of Politics*, vol. 15, no. 1 (January, 1953), 80.

<sup>6</sup> Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” 18.

expansion,” the basis of which Arendt calls “enlarged tribal consciousness,” this form of social organization holds individuals together more through the establishment of a general mood than by appeal to specific experiences and tangible goals. Disavowing any connection to an established tradition, it begins with an absolute claim to chosenness.

Arendt observes that this claim to chosenness was the “precise perversion” of a religious understanding, based as it was “on the fear that it actually might be Jews, and not [the movement’s members], to whom success was granted by divine providence.” Like the pan-movements, the Jews were outside the pale both of society and the political body of the nation-state, but had found a way of constituting a society of their own. Thus, the Jews appeared to be their luckier competitors in inheriting what the movements would have to build from scratch, and on their own. The pan-movements simply disregarded the fact that Judaism as they themselves observed it was notably free of any radical immanence of the divine, and attempted impudently to “drag God into the petty conflicts between peoples” (*OT*, 242). Unlike the Jewish concept of chosenness, wherein an equality of human purpose is established on the basis of a common origin that is beyond human history (*OT*, 234), the pan-movements’ members behave as though future common endeavor serves only to confirm the pseudo-mystical experience of the absolute unequal relationship between one’s own people and all others.

Arendt’s account of tribal nationalism enables her to argue persuasively against any general theory that understands nationalism as an expression of common interest. She argues that even the Western European form of nationalism, itself an attempt to press nationality into service as a guarantee of a common interest threatened by group and class conflict, ended up providing little more than a sentimental expression of common origin (*OT*, 230). It certainly did not serve as an adequate substitute for absolute monarchy, which itself was an articulation of common interest that was the derivative outcome of a process of secularization. But tribal nationalism went even further from any sense of common interest in completely denying the common origin of man and in absolutely repudiating the common purpose of establishing humanity.

Given that the Nazi and Bolshevik totalitarian regimes consciously and explicitly held themselves to be the inheritors of the pan-movements’ organizational techniques (*OT*, 222), it is difficult to see how the organization of totalitarian masses amounted to an appeal to any sort of common interest.

Acknowledging the persuasiveness of Arendt’s argument, we notice nevertheless that her own account of tribal nationalism leaves unanswered an important question: how, in terms of the self-understanding of the pan-movements themselves, does a form of organization that is understood originally as the outcome of an ongoing story of human dignity and the equality of human purpose come to serve as the best confirmation of an absolute and permanent inequality between one’s own people and all others? Arendt asserts that the pan-movements radically broke with all tradition, and thus their appropriation and perversion of the religious basis of a social organization cannot be understood in terms of a derivation. But while relying on the obviousness of the observation that persecuted peoples tend to consider themselves in need of salvation, she does not explain how and why the pan-movements’ efforts toward self-salvation needed to be endowed with a mystical significance. With this question, we engage Voegelin’s discussion of modern spiritual revolt.

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In his *New Science of Politics* (1952), Eric Voegelin observes that Christianity's political victory in its struggle among the plurality of local cult divinities under Roman influence had the "fateful" result of the radical de-divinization of the temporal sphere of power. He argues that modern political mass movements must be understood in terms of the re-divinization of man and society.

Voegelin distinguishes between the historical origin of Christianity and the specific essence of Christianity. Christianity began as a Jewish messianic movement living in eschatological expectation of the Second Coming. When the Parousia did not occur, the church evolved from the eschatology of the realm toward the eschatology of trans-historical, supernatural perfection (*NSP*, 176). Augustine distinguished "between a profane sphere of history in which empires rise and fall and a sacred history that culminates in the appearance of Christ and the establishment of the church" (*NSP*, 184). Voegelin here reminds his audience that Christian society in its temporal articulation was historically concretized through the Roman Empire. Rome was built into the idea of a Christian society, and thus the end of Rome would mean the end of the world in the eschatological sense (*NSP*, 177).

The Augustinian experience and symbolization held sway until the late Middle Ages. By this time, Christianity was a worldly success; an increasing number of people were drawn into accepting its influence in their lives. At the same time Christianity underwent "an internal process of spiritualization, leading to a more complete realization of its essence." But given that its essence is the uncertainty of the tenuous bond of faith (Hebrews 11:1), Christianity involves a "heroic adventure of the soul" (*NSP*, 187-188). In terms of the psychology of experience, Voegelin says, only the very few can withstand its pressures. "When the predicament of a fall from faith in the Christian sense occurs as a mass phenomenon," he explains, "the consequences will depend on the content of the civilizational environment into which the agnostics are falling" (*NSP*, 188).

At the time of the late Middle Ages, loss of faith occurred on a socially relevant scale. The crumbling away of the institutions and sentiments underlying the traditional Christian articulation left Western society without a civil theology for the growing masses of the nation states. Individuals who had fallen from faith in the Christian sense desired "more massively possessive experiences" and would no longer bear easily the "Augustinian defeatism with regard to the mundane sphere of existence." In particular, they sought greater certainty about the meaning of history (*NSP*, 184). New speculations thus emerged that attempted to endow "the immanent course of history with a meaning that was not provided in the Augustinian conception." Traditionally, only the transcendental history of the City of God had direction toward eschatological fulfillment. When the new speculations attempted to endow the immanent course of history with meaning by putting the premium of salvation on their intramundane activities, when the moderns fallaciously immanentized the Christian eschaton, they were attempting nothing less than the re-divinization of man and society. According to Voegelin, the development of the idea of immanent fulfillment had a long history. When it first began, it retained a connection with Christianity. In its later stage, however, it became a completely intramundane phenomenon. Voegelin calls this later phase "secularization."

A short time after the exchange in the Review of Politics, Voegelin argues that, like our own experiment with constitutional democracy, the National Socialist and

Stalinist mass movements were efforts to solve the problem of a lack of civil religion. This is not an attempt to say that there are no significant or important differences between constitutional democracy and totalitarianism: constitutional democracy presupposes that the constitution is in a way an article of faith. Fulfilling this condition allows for the establishment of a “pluralistic society,” which includes, but does not privilege, traditional approaches to the cultivation of the life of reason.<sup>7</sup> The totalitarian regimes, by contrast, were attempts “on the part of sectarian communities to impose by force their immanentist beliefs on a society as a state cult.”<sup>8</sup>

Voegelin’s argument about re-divinization attempts to develop the means of establishing a meaningful comparison between different approaches to specifically modern problems. He is attempting to account for just the sort of phenomenon that Arendt notices when she speaks of the pseudo-mystical character of the pan-movements’ tribal nationalism. Voegelin’s argument, thus, appears compatible with, and even bolsters, Arendt’s attempts to be careful regarding the subtle details of the history of the development of totalitarian organizational techniques. Even though, in light of these observations, Voegelin may not appear to be seeking to preserve totalitarianism as a cautionary tale, Arendt’s critique forces Voegelin’s readers past any merely rhetorical associations between totalitarianism and other specifically modern problems toward his more substantive discussion of spiritual revolt, thus highlighting his best contribution to the discussion. By understanding in detail Arendt’s reasons for caution against accepting Voegelin’s claims at face value, her readers allow themselves to follow her own account to a point where Voegelin’s critique of spiritual revolt might help answer outstanding questions.

With these things in mind I would argue that readers stand to benefit from bringing Arendt and Voegelin into dialogue, particularly if we allow them to question one another. This remains true despite the fact that the authors on one occasion chose to very publicly misunderstand each other.

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Industrial Society in Search of Reason,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 11, *Published Essays, 1953-1965*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 183.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin, “Industrial Society in Search of Reason,” 182.