

CULTURE

The New Totalitarians Are Here

Totalitarians want their rule, and their belief system, to be accepted and self-sustaining - even if it takes bludgeoning every last citizen who disagrees.

There's a basic difference **in the traditions of political science** between "authoritarians" and "totalitarians." People throw both of these words around, but as is so often the case, they're using words they may not always understand. They have real meaning, however, and the difference between them is important.

Simply put, authoritarians merely want obedience, while totalitarians, whose rule is rooted in an ideology, want obedience *and* conversion. Authoritarians are a dime a dozen; totalitarians are rare. The authoritarians are the guys in charge who want to stay in charge, and don't much care about you, or what you're doing, so long as you stay out of their way. They are the *jefe* and his thugs in a brutal regime that want you to shut up, go to work, and look the other way when your loudmouthed neighbor gets his lights punched out by goons in black jackets. Live or die. It's all the same to the regime.

Totalitarians are a different breed. These are the people who have a plan, who think they see the future more clearly than you or who are convinced they grasp reality in a way that you do not. They don't serve themselves—or, they don't serve themselves *exclusively*—they serve History, or The People, or The Idea, or some other ideological totem that justifies their actions.

They want obedience, of course. But even more, they want their rule, and their belief system, to be accepted and self-sustaining. And the only way to achieve that is to create a new society of people who share those beliefs, even if it means bludgeoning every last citizen into enlightenment. That's what makes totalitarians different and more dangerous: they are "totalistic" in the sense that they demand a complete reorientation of the individual to the State and its ideological ends. Every person who harbors a secret objection, or even so much as a doubt, is a danger to the future of the whole project, and so the regime compels its subjects not only to obey but to believe.

This is what George Orwell understood so well in his landmark novel “1984.” His dystopian state doesn’t really care about quotidian obedience; it already knows how to get that. What it demands, and will get by any means, is a belief in the Party’s rectitude and in its leader, Big Brother. If torturing the daylight out of people until they denounce even their loved ones is what it takes, so be it. That’s why the ending of the novel is so terrifying: after the two rebellious lovers of the story are broken and made to turn on each other, the wrecks left by the State are left to sit before the Leader’s face on a screen with only one emotion still alive in the husks of their bodies: they finally, truly love Big Brother.

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Americans Are Getting Too Comfortable With Thought Control

I’ve gone down this road of literary and academic exposition because I fear an increasing number of my fellow Americans are, at heart, becoming totalitarians.

Now, by this I do not mean America is creating Nazis or Stalinists. It’s true, of course, that both Nazism and Stalinism were species of the genus “totalitarian,” but both have since died the deaths they deserved. I mean that ordinary people, and not a few opinion and thought leaders, are adopting the same insane belief that human minds can be molded and shaped and made to think in new ways by sheer force.

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Yes, I mean people like actor George Takei and his odious attack on Justice Clarence Thomas. **Takei called Thomas a “clown in blackface”** and said Thomas had “abdicated” his status as an African-American. (Also, much like “1984,” some of the journals ostensibly committed to liberal thought **have already tried to scrub their pages of Takei’s comments** and consign the matter to the Orwellian memory hole.) I also include people like Quartz.com journalist Meredith Bennett-Smith, who disagrees with writer **Cathy Young about sexual conduct codes on U.S.**

campuses, and thus **wants the *Washington Post* never again to publish the “horrendous rape apologist” Young** in its pages. This isn’t political debate or even name-calling: this is the incendiary dehumanization of an African-American judge and a female writer.

I grant that overall, American political debate on all sides has become nastier and less tolerant. What makes these kinds of attacks, however, smack of totalitarianism—and I could reel off dozens more examples, but your computer would run out of pixels—is that people like Takei and Bennett-Smith are lighting their torches and demanding rough justice even on issues where they’ve *already won*. In other words, it isn’t enough that Thomas was in the Court’s minority, or that no college in America is bothering to listen to Young. They want Thomas and Young silenced, stripped of their status in their peer group, and to recant—even after being defeated in public on the issue at hand.

That’s terrifying, because it means that for a fair number of people in what’s supposed to be a democracy, “winning” in any normal political sense simply isn’t enough. They are not really trying to capture something as pedestrian as political equality, nor are they satisfied if they get it. They are not really seeking a win in the courts, or a legal solution, or a negotiated settlement. Those are all just merit badges to be collected along the way to a more important goal: what they really want, and what they in fact demand, is that you *agree with them*. They want you to *believe*.

Love Your Terror

It is not enough for these Americans to say: “I have had my day in court and prevailed.” In effect, they now add: “You do not have the right to hold a different opinion, even if you lose in the public arena. You may not hold on to your belief as a minority view, or even as a private thought. And if you persist and still disagree, I will attack you without quarter and set others on you to deprive you of your status in your profession, of your standing in your community, and even of your livelihood.”

This attitude promises social warfare without end, because there is no peace to be had until the opposing side offers a sincere and unconditional surrender. It means that **the people on the Left taking bakers to court, de-Africanizing Justice Thomas, and making Young an accomplice to rape** will not be satisfied with winning. For the new totalitarians,

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prevailing in the courts or at the ballot boxes isn't enough if there's still a suspicion that anyone, anywhere, might still be committing thoughtcrime.

Most of all, they do not want you, Present Reader, to even *think* about agreeing with people like Thomas or Young. By attacking everyone in the public sphere from judges to writers, they're sending a clear warning that there's plenty of room in the bonfire. It is a vow that you will be held to account for your personal thoughts, even if you've already been defeated in a democratic or judicial contest.

No, even after losing, you will be forced to admit the error of your ways. You must accept that you've sinned. You must discard your own values and accept the ideas of your betters. You must denounce yourself for undermining the construction of a better world.

You, too, must love Big Brother.

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