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Image of a Human Person in Totalitarian Regimes

In the paper, *image of a human person* mostly relates to the specific conception or idea of a human person, and not to a visual representation of physical appearance. In the article, we will present what was the totalitarian conception or image of a human person and how totalitarian regimes dealt with a human person on theoretical and practical level. In the first part, some of the most important personalistic emphases that uncover crucial features and capabilities of human persons will be introduced. In the second part of the article, we will show how totalitarian regimes violated and paralyzed those features and capabilities and what was the totalitarian image of a human person, in other words, we will present what type of a human being totalitarian regimes tried to create.

HUMAN BEING IN PERSONALISM

Personalism is based on conviction that a human person is a being with special and inalienable dignity, a being who is transcendent and can never be fully recognised; in the frames of Christian personalism, a human person is also eternal and similar to God. Because of these properties, a human person is always the aim and the highest value; it is never merely a means. Even though personalism is a complex and not unified philosophical movement, its central claim is that a human person can never become an object; it is always a subject, individual and unique (Žalec 2010, 29–30). Different

personalistic thinkers stress different features and capabilities of a human person, but most commonly their conception of a human person underlines importance of following elements: dignity, transcendence, relationships, language, dialogue, action, reason, and spirit.

A human person is an entity that distinguishes by his/her inalienable dignity, her/his incapability to become bare means for reaching any kind of goal. A person is an aim in himself/herself and a core, supreme value. Even though it is possible to treat a person as a thing, to classify her/him and to misuse her/him it is not possible to completely instrumentalize him/her. The essence of a human person is to transcend to knowledge and reason, it is not possible to completely define, determine it. A person also transcends the world with his/her spiritual nature, likeness to God and potential for eternal life. A person is undividable whole in which corporality and spirituality interweaves (Scheler 1998). Even though that according to personalistic thinkers every person is unique and special, the concept of a human person is not equal to the concept of an individual. The concept of a human person is inseparably connected with relationships; personalistic thinkers oppose to the concept of an individual as completely autonomous and independent, because in the personalistic view that kind of a conception atomizes and impoverishes human being. Personalists that stress importance of genuine relationships, dialogue and language for a human person are for example Martin Buber (Buber 1999), Karol Wojtyła (Wojtyła 1998), Gabriel Marcel (Marcel 2003).

Some personalists (for example Karol Wojtyła (Wojtyła 1998) and Emmanuel Mounier (Mounier 1990)) emphasize the authentic human action as an expression and uncovering of a human being and interconnectedness of the action with responsibility and freedom. Another philosopher and political theorist that emphasizes crucial importance of the human action for a full realization of a human person is Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1996). She is usually not classified as a personalistic thinker, but anyhow she develops some important conceptions that are able to enrich personalistic views. She does not deal only with politics, but also with most important human features that differentiate a human person from other beings and enable him/her to create his/her own story and include himself/herself in the common human world. Personalistic thinker who stems from the scholastic tradition and makes a strong emphasis on the human reason is Jacques Maritain (Maritain 2002). Nicolai Berdjajev on the other hand draws attention to

the importance of the level of human spirituality and that objectivation and instrumentalization of the spirit leads to violence, slavery and injustice (Berdjajev 1998).

HUMAN BEING IN TOTALITARIANISM

Opposite to the personalistic philosophy and its conception of a human person are nihilistic and instrumentalistic philosophies. Basic nihilistic convictions are that all beings are levelled; any being is neither more nor less morally valuable. Nevertheless, pure nihilistic views are practically impossible and so nihilism commonly transforms into instrumentalism. The problem with the instrumentalistic philosophy is that a person is just a means for achieving higher (ideological, utilitarian...) goal (Żalec 2010, 31–32). Totalitarianism can be properly described as an extreme form of instrumentalism because in totalitarian regimes extreme forms of objectivation, usage and exploitation of a human being materialized. Totalitarian systems aimed to degrade human beings and either change them into the instruments of the system or destroy them. The totalitarian final goal was the creation of a world and human being that would be completely different from existing, corrupted world and human being. Basic difference between Communism and Nazism is orientation towards the future (reformatory tendencies) in the first, and orientation towards the past (reconstructive tendencies) in the second case. Communistic ideologists predicted that golden times will come in future and they aimed to create a “new human being” and a “new world” that would be a form of a worldly Eden. Nazi regime on the other hand understood contemporary society, state and human as a degeneration of originally uncorrupted human being and society and consequently tried to reconstruct what they perceived as the “golden” past and “uncorrupted” human being (Żalec 2013, 354).

Despite this basic difference, totalitarian regimes have in general created quite resembling image of ideal “totalitarian human being:”

- without his/her own dignity;
- without his/her own “higher” meaning of life;
- completely transparent;
- only means for reaching regime goals;
- completely atomized;

- develops language only for transmission of information;
- has no capability for initiative action;
- instead of using reason and common sense follows tyrannical totalitarian logic;
 - could be described as a “living dead.”

a) Dignity. Totalitarian regimes tried to erase human dignity, human uniqueness and human plurality. Hannah Arendt shows how total terror in totalitarian regimes, especially in concentration camps, degraded human persons on three levels: firstly they destroyed juridical, then moral, and in the end individual level of a human person; total terror aimed to create people that could be categorized as living dead (Arendt 1962, 447–453). Destruction of individuality was the most dreadful because it simultaneously meant the destruction of freedom and spontaneity, in the sense of ability to start again from nothing, which is according to Hannah Arendt the most important attribute of a human person. The system tried to completely erase internees from the face of the earth, it prohibited even the recollection of them, and it was as if they have never existed. In Slovenia, historians Jože Dežman, Mitja Ferenc and many other researchers deal with tabuization of mass graves of victims of Slovenian revolution between and mostly after World War II and try to ensure that every human person in Slovenia has a right to dignified grave and memory (Dežman 2008, 197–205).

Zygmunt Bauman in his work *Modernity and the holocaust* gives an explanation of the structured process of totalitarian destruction and dehumanisation of specific groups,¹ which is in his view closely connected with modern society, technology and science (Bauman 2006, 286). At the beginning of this process stands definition of the social group that must be destroyed. The definition causes that the group is eliminated from the field of humanity. The standards, which are valid for all humankind are not valid for the defined group. All members of the group are stigmatised, they become specimens of a certain type. On the next level dismissals of employees and expropriations of business companies happen, common arrangements between defined group and the rest of the world are repealed, between the group and the others, there rises a large spiritual distance, the group rarely appears in the public. The third level is concentration, which enlarges the gap between the group and the rest of the humanity, communication

¹ Based on the theory of Raul Hilberg.

stops and there are no personal contacts left. The fourth level appears when the group is forced into starvation and nonhuman conditions by the exploitative work and stricter measures. On this stage, the defined group starts to acquire the negative characteristics that were in the definition of the group at the beginning of dehumanisation. Jews in the holocaust for example started to beg for food, they were dirty, ragged, and ill; they started to act unmorally... (Bauman 2006, 288). In those nonhuman conditions (forced by the Nazis), it came to the turn in the concept of morality, when even murder seemed to be an act of humanity. Every next step of dehumanisation of the defined group contributes to the suppression of morality, which is in the last two stages completely distorted, values are turned over. The last two stages of the destroying process, which are killing and deprivation of all property, in the context of dehumanisation appear as logical.

Moreover, Arendt stresses how for totalitarian regimes not only some groups of human beings, but all human beings were redundant. The highest value in totalitarianism was system itself, which was based on the logic of ideology that proclaimed some kind of “higher sense” (unleashed law of the movement of History/Nature) that in reality made no sense. “The aggressiveness of totalitarianism springs not from lust for power, and if it feverishly seeks to expand, it does so neither for expansion’s sake nor for profit, but only for ideological reasons: to make the world consistent, to prove that its respective supersense has been right. It is chiefly for the sake of this supersense, for the sake of complete consistency, that it is necessary for totalitarianism to destroy every trace of what we commonly call human dignity. For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world. No ideology, which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of all events of the future, can bear the unpredictability, which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it. What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself. The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested, and their shame-fullness. Therefore, it is not just the business of their inmates and those who run them according to strictly ‘scientific’ standards; it is the concern of all men.” (Arendt 1962, 458–459) For totalitarian systems,

all people are superfluous in the same manner and there exist no stable or permanent criteria for selection of people for concentration camps. Ideology prepares people to fit in both roles – in the role of perpetrator and in the role of victim. Human opinion, agreement and action – neither of them matters because human beings are mere means that execute the law of motion that is destined to create a different humanity.

b) Transcendence. Totalitarian ideologies claim that they have the access to complete comprehension of the world, history, future and human person. They fundamentally exclude mysteriousness and transcendent nature of human person and they classify him/her on the level of things. Ideologies on the basis of one idea and logics that is supposed to stem from this idea, explain all phenomena and whole world order. Hannah Arendt writes about totalitarian “tyranny of logics,” that succeeded to enforce itself as a very effective tool of (self)control of human persons, because it completely excluded field of human experiences, that is crucial for human learning about the world and including in the world (Arendt 1962, 468–470).

c) Relationships and language. In totalitarianism, authentic relationships and bonds are destroyed. Ubiquity of terror, secret police, suspicions, distrust, interference in privacy, forced unanimity, etc. disable establishing and preserving of relationships and construction of community. The more human bonds were genuine and devoted, the more totalitarian regimes tried to destroy them. Good example of that kind of efforts is endeavouring to destruct family bonds and to create family as a unit that would serve only for reproduction of loyal members of totalitarian state (Friedrich, Brzezinski 1956, 239–247). According to H. Arendt basic experience of people in conditions of totalitarian rule is loneliness or atomization. Loneliness is not the same as solitude or isolation; loneliness is the state of the greatest absence of relationships, because it doesn’t exclude only relationships with fellow man, but even relationship of human person with himself/herself that enables inner dialogue and thinking; and even relationship with the world, that enables experience (Arendt 1962, 475–478).

Moreover, totalitarian regimes damaged role of language as a core human capability, as something that reveals human person (Arendt 1996), something that is fundamentally connected with relationships (Buber 1999), with mysteriousness and sanctity of human person (Marcel 2003), and with signification of human life (Guardini 1991). Devastation of deeper layers of language was realised in various ways: through propagandistic rhetoric,

extensive use of abbreviations, ideological phrases, prohibition of dialects; through terror over people that paralyzed sincere communication; and through radical terror in concentration camps, where internees had no names and language and communication was on the lowest possible level (compare Levi 2003, 75–83; Jezernik 2013, 145).

d) Action. Leaders of totalitarian regimes aim to reach total unanimity and agreement of population through means of propaganda, modified elections, terror, and liquidation of people that oppose to the system (or are accused of opposing the system). They demand that people actively and enthusiastically show their loyalty and commitment to the regime. For manifestation of total unanimity in totalitarian regimes suffices only constant and enthusiastic declaration of agreement with regime and ideology on public gatherings, speeches and active membership in regime party and its sections (Friedrich, Brzezinski 1956, 135–136). In totalitarian regimes only that kind of action of human person is allowed and stimulated that is in line with regime principles. That means that human person is able to act only on behalf of the regime; initiative and spontaneous action of human person through which person could express himself/herself and fulfill himself/herself is strictly forbidden.

A completely passive role of human beings in totalitarian regimes was stressed also by Hannah Arendt that highlighted striving of totalitarian regimes to disable any human action and any spontaneity and unpredictability that is otherwise inborn in human person. Totalitarianism endeavors to paralyze human being and destroy his/her capability to act spontaneously, his/her unpredictability and thereby attempts to ensure realization of ideological prophecies (dominance of Aryan race/dominance of proletariat) and free way for law of movement of nature/history. Totalitarian terror and ideology deprives human being of precondition for freedom – that is of possibility of movement or living space (Arendt 1962, 465–466). Totalitarian regimes aim to reduce human diversity and plurality and to produce human beings that would be completely the same, so that with observation of one single person one could gain knowledge about behavior and insight in the core of every human being or with other words all human beings would act in same way and live in same way; Arendt uses metaphor of One Man of gigantic dimensions (Arendt 1962, 465–466). The field of action is in totalitarian systems separated from the field of human being: from responsibility, efficiency and from freedom.

CONCLUSION

Image of human person that totalitarian regimes tried to create was appalling; it was neither human neither personal. If plans of totalitarian regimes had succeed on global level and in long term, human persons would have been replaced with living regime instruments. Luckily, totalitarian plans failed and totalitarian regimes disappeared in most countries. Nevertheless, totalitarian past of many European and world countries should teach us that it is important to be attentive to what kind of image of human person political systems and governments are encouraging with their policies. Political systems that try to damage human dignity, reduce human initiative action to minimum and atomize human beings probably try to enforce high level of control and threaten human freedom and full life of human persons.

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