

# Democracy and the Road to Tyranny



## Critiques of Democracy

The following are some passages which provide witty and insightful critiques of democratic rule:

- “To highlight the offensiveness to liberty that democracy and majority rule is, just ask yourself how many decisions in your life would you like to be made democratically. How about what car you drive, where you live, whom you marry, whether you have turkey or ham for Thanksgiving dinner? If those decisions were made through a democratic process, the average person would see it as tyranny and not personal liberty. Isn't it no less tyranny for the democratic process to determine whether you purchase health insurance or set aside money for retirement? Both for ourselves, and our fellow man around the globe, we should be advocating liberty, not the democracy that we've become where a roguish Congress does anything upon which they can muster a majority vote.” (Walter Williams)
- “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There is never a democracy that did not commit suicide.” (John Adams)
- “A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51 percent of the people may take away the rights of the other 49 percent.” (Thomas Jefferson)
- “Every election is sort of an advance auction sale of stolen goods.” (H.L. Menken)
- “When the people find that they can vote themselves money, that will herald the end of the republic.” (Benjamin Franklin)
- “Democracy is the will of the people. Every morning I'm surprised to read in the newspaper what I want.” (Unknown Dutch comedian)
- “Of this I am certain, that in a democracy the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority. . .and that oppression of the minority will extend to far greater numbers and will be carried on with much greater fury, than can almost ever be apprehended from the dominion of a single sceptre.” (Edmund Burke)

- “Five men are in a room. Because three men take one view and two another, have the three men any moral right to enforce their view on the other two men? What magical power comes over the three men that because they are one more in number than the two men, therefore they suddenly become possessors of the minds and bodies of these others? As long as they were two to two, so long we supposed each man remained master of his own mind and body; but from the moment that another man, acting Heaven only knows from what motives, has joined himself to one party or the other, that party has become straightaway possessed of the souls and bodies of the other party. Was there ever such a degrading and indefensible superstition? Is it not the true lineal descendent of the old superstitions about emperors and high priests and their authority over the souls and bodies of men?” (Auberon Herbert, 19th century British politician and writer)

### **Totalitarianism Defined**

The following passages from Paul Gottfried’s book *Fascism: The Career of a Concept* summarize the views of various scholars regarding the distinguishing features of totalitarianism:

- **Totalitarianism is defined as a 20<sup>th</sup> century problem that is illustrated most dramatically by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.** It was radically anti-traditional as well as antiliberal, and it presupposed for its ascendancy what [Hannah] Arendt calls “the breakdown of the class system.” Further: “the fall of protecting class walls transformed the slumbering majorities behind all parties into one great unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals who had nothing in common except in their vague apprehension that the hopes of party members were doomed, that the most respected, articulate, and representative members of the community were fools and that all powers that be were not so much evil as they were equally stupid and fraudulent.”
  - o In Friedrich’s and Brezinski’s view modern technology, political chaos, and the lack of a firm constitutional tradition were all critical factors for nurturing the kind of government that Stalin and Hitler created. . . **These regimes devised elaborate ideologies that embraced every aspect of human existence and usually**

**featured a future Golden age, the realization of which was the goal of the subject population.** These new forms of control were also marked by parties and dictators who surrounded themselves with cadres of true believers. **The totalitarian regimes employed terror through the recruitment and deployment of secret police, for the purpose of instilling submission. The terrorist policy was aimed at dissenters or, less discriminatingly, at minorities who were condemned, often quite arbitrarily, as enemies of the regime.**

- o Declared enemies of the state were also designated, not incidentally, as opponents of the transformational experiment that totalitarian dictators claimed to be promoting. **Getting rid of insidious, dangerous troublemakers en masse would supposedly help advance the common project imposed by the leader and bring about the desired end of history more quickly. Furthermore, the leader and his party exercised a monopoly over all forms of mass communication and were able to manipulate reality to serve political ends. . Finally, centralized control was established over the economy and left in the hands of state servants.** Formerly independent corporate-industrial units were thereby made subject to the head of government and his inner circle. **Even if some semblance of private ownership was allowed to persist, the state and its leader determined economic relations and who owned what.**  
(Paul Gottfried)

- **Perhaps Arendt's most original perception beyond her description of how totalitarian states function, is found in her comments about how totalitarians approach "science" and "factualness."** They feel no compunctions about distorting reality, because making their subjects believe in what is patently false increases the states power. The Nazi and Soviet governments cynically presented lies as scholarship, and they mixed partial truths with glaring falsehoods (about class enemies or about those who are racially compatible or incompatible) in order to establish total power over their subjects' minds. Here **all ideological distinctions broke down before the exercise of might and terror without regard for truth or traditional authority.** (Paul Gottfried)

The following is Robert Nisbet's definition of totalitarianism from his book *The Quest for Community*:

- **There is the kind of State that seeks always to extend its administrative powers and functions into all realms of society, always seeking a higher degree of centralization in the conduct of its operations, always tending toward a wider measure of politicization of social, economic, and cultural life.** It does not do this in the name of power but of freedom – freedom from want, insecurity, and minority tyranny. It parades the symbols of progress, people, justice, welfare, and devotion to the common man. **It strives unceasingly to make its ends and purposes acceptable – through radio, newspaper, and document – to even the lowliest of citizens.** It builds up a sense of the absolute identity of State and society – nothing outside the State, everything in the State.
  - Increasingly, in this type of State, **the basic needs for education, recreation, welfare, economic production, distribution, and consumption, health, spiritual and physical, and all other services of society are made aspects of the administrative structure of political government.** This process of transfer comes to be accepted by almost everyone – by business men in search of guaranteed production and profit, by educators in need of funds, by labor in the interests of guaranteed jobs and living wages, and by liberal reformers in the interests of housing programs or other projects. Autonomous areas of economy, education, and other spheres of culture shrink constantly.
  - **Such a State may well call itself democratic and humanitarian. All contemporary totalitarian States so refer to themselves.** Such a State may found itself upon the highest principle of virtue, even as did the Republic of Plato. **There can be such a thing as democratic totalitarianism . . .** (Robert Nisbet)

## The Appeal of Totalitarianism

Robert Nisbet's book *The Quest for Community* is full of fascinating insights on totalitarianism, here are a few passages where he discusses the appeal of totalitarianism to the masses:

- **The greatest appeal of the totalitarian party, Marxist or other, lies in its capacity to provide a sense of moral coherence and communal membership to those who have become, to one degree or another, victims of the sense of exclusion from the ordinary channels of belonging in society.** To consider the facts of poverty and economic distress as causes of the growth of communism is deceptive. . . **To say that the well-fed worker will never succumb to the lure of communism is as absurd as to say that the well-fed intellectual will never succumb.** The presence or absence of three meals a day, or even the simple possession of a job, is not the decisive factor. **What is decisive is the frame of reference.** If, for one reason or another, the individual's immediate society comes to seem remote, purposeless, and hostile, if a people come to sense that, together, they are victims of discrimination and exclusion, not all the food and jobs in the world will prevent them from looking for the kind of surcease that comes with membership in a social and moral order seemingly directed toward their very souls.
  - o Marxism, like all other totalitarian movements in our century, must be seen as a kind of secular pattern of redemption, designed to bring hope and fulfillment to those who have come to feel alienated, frustrated, and excluded from what they regard as their rightful place in a community. **In its promise of unity and belonging lies much of the magic of totalitarian mystery, miracle, and authority.** (Robert Nisbet)
- We must recognize that there is no single intellectual image intrinsic to the totalitarian design. There is no single spiritual or cultural value inherently capable of being made into the central image of a totalitarian society. It can as well be racial equality as inequality, godly piety as atheism, labor as capital, Christian brotherhood as the toiling masses. **What is central is**

**not the specific image held up to the masses but, rather, the sterilization and destruction of all other images and the subordination of all human relationships to the central power that contains this image. (Robert Nisbet)**

### **Tocqueville's view of Democracy**

The following is a very interesting passage from *How Democracies Perish* by Jean Revel in which he describes some of Alexis de Tocqueville's famous concerns with democracy. Revel then examines whether these concerns have played out in modern Western democracies as Tocqueville anticipated:

- **Tocqueville foresaw that democracy could suffocate itself, in a sense, by following its own logic to its extreme. . . Tocqueville described this ultimate phase as a mild dictatorship of public opinion, an age of homogenous feelings, ideas, tastes, manners that enslave the citizenry, not to an external force, but to the omnipotence of their will toward consensus.** The more perfect egalitarian democracy becomes, the more naturally its citizens resemble each other, the more they will all freely desire the same things. Diversity would gradually be banished from such a society, not by censure, but by a general disapproval or mere indifference. The majority's omnipotence would eliminate even the urge to stray from prevailing opinions.
  - **Tocqueville the visionary depicted with stunning precision the coming ascension of the omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient state** that 20<sup>th</sup> century man knows so well: the state as protector, entrepreneur, educator; the physician-state, impresario-state, bookseller-state, helpful and predatory, tyrant and guardian, economist, journalist, moralist, shipper, trader, advertiser, banker, father and jailer all at once. . . **Its powers border on the absolute partly because it is scarcely felt, having increased by imperceptible stages at the wish of its subjects, who turn to it instead of each other.**
  - **In one sense, history has endorsed Tocqueville's reasoning and, in another, has invalidated it.** He has proven right in so far as the power of public opinion has indeed increased in the

democracies through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But public opinion has not grown more consistent or uniform; it has in fact become increasingly volatile and diversified. And the state, instead of gaining strength in proportion to its gigantism, is increasingly disobeyed and challenged by the very citizens who expect so much from it.

- o So the omnipotence based on consensus that Tocqueville forecast is only one side of the coin of modern government. The other is an equally general impotence to deal with the conflicting daily claims made on it by constituents eager for aid but less and less willing to assume obligations. **By invading every area of life, the democratic state has stuffed itself with more responsibilities than powers.** The very contradictions among special interests that are as legitimate as they are incompatible, all expecting to be treated with equal goodwill, show that the state's duties are expanding faster than its means of performing them.
- o This sort of behavior splinters democratic societies into separate groups, each battling for advantage and caring little for the interests of others or society as a whole. **Public opinion, instead of being united by uniform thinking, is fragmented into a variety of cultures that can be so different in tastes, ways of living, attitudes and language that they understand each other only dimly, if at all.** They coexist but do not mingle. Public opinion in today's democracies forms an archipelago, not a continent. (Jean Revel)