

TOTALITARIAN CONTROL¹

By Frank W. Elwell

The hypothesis examined in this essay is that governments throughout the world are rapidly moving toward totalitarian control of social, political, and economic life. This is a very common theme among futurists as well as some of the more serious science fiction writers. But the hypothesis is complicated by the fact that there are two distinct visions of totalitarianism in futurist literature. The first is the type of authoritarian government that is based on terror and force. This is the totalitarianism that we are all familiar with: jackbooted police, intimidation, state controlled propaganda, and constant terrorizing of the population. The exemplars for such a system are Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and the book, *1984*. The second vision can only be called the "new totalitarianism." This new totalitarianism is founded upon the ever more sophisticated methods of manipulation and control given us by science (including social science) and technology. Through techniques of targeted propaganda, press management, surveillance, computerized records, and the rise of the therapeutic perspective—all accomplished within democratic and free market forms—the bureaucratic state exerts its power more efficiently than was possible in the past. This "softening" of power, placing the velvet glove over the iron fist of state corporate bureaucracy, makes it much more difficult to detect or oppose. The exemplar for such a system exists, many claim, in the United States today.

There are two very popular social-evolutionary ideas in the West. One is the idea of material progress; the other is a tendency to view history as the unceasing march of humanity toward greater freedom from the constraints of the state. Aside from the frightening chord struck by George Orwell in *1984*, we almost take the march toward democracy for granted. With the bankruptcy of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, our faith in the march of democracy and freedom has been strengthened. But Marvin Harris detects a very different evolutionary trend.

¹ This essay is based upon "Totalitarian Nightmares" in *The Evolution of the Future*. 1991. Praeger Publishers,

"In anthropological perspective, the emergence of bourgeois parliamentary democracies in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe was a rare reversal of that descent from freedom to slavery which had been the main characteristic of the evolution of the state for 6,000 years."² Indeed, many futurists believe that democracy and freedom are threatened by the continuing intensification of the industrial mode of production.

One of the chief reasons given for the rise of totalitarian control is the headlong rush for industrial growth around the world. Industrialism, under the auspices of capital, is firmly committed to growth. Economic growth serves two main functions for the social system. First, it dramatically increases the wealth of elites, thereby rewarding those who dominate the system. Second, it provides a mechanism by which the income of the masses can be increased without seriously threatening the existing class system. With economic growth, there is no need for the government to play Robin Hood, taking from the rich to give to the poor; economic growth provides the necessary resources to keep the masses pacified. Growth is the mechanism by which capitalist society increases the absolute income to all classes (though the upper incomes significantly more), leaving the relative shares undisturbed.

There is a relationship between economic growth and bureaucracy. Max Weber posited that bureaucracy necessarily grows with the complexity of the economy. This enlargement of bureaucratic administration by the state includes the management of public works, taxation, war, foreign relations, justice, and coordinating an increasingly complex economy.³ Economic growth also causes the expansion of private bureaucracies to coordinate the increasing complexity. Capitalism and the state have acted in alliance, and bureaucracy inexorably advances; as the economy and the state become increasingly interdependent and coordinated through bureaucratic organization, so too does the population become more dependent upon its continuance.

The ruled, for their part, cannot dispense with or replace the bureaucratic apparatus of authority once it exists. For this bureaucracy rests upon expert training, a functional specialization of work, and an attitude set for habitual and virtuoso-like mastery of single yet methodically integrated functions. If the official stops working, or if his work is forcefully interrupted, chaos results, and it is difficult to improvise replacements from among the governed who are fit to master such chaos. This holds for public administration as well as for private economic management. *More and more the material*

² Harris, 1977: 264

³ Weber, 1946/1958, pp. 212-213.

*fate of the masses depends upon the steady and correct functioning of the increasingly bureaucratic organizations of private capitalism. The idea of eliminating these organizations becomes more and more utopian (emphasis added).*⁴

Both state and capitalist bureaucracies become more and enlarged and centralized as the economy expands. And these bureaucracies, as demonstrated by countless sociologists, are antithetical to democracy.⁵ By design, bureaucracy puts inordinate power in the hands of a few people at the top of the hierarchy; as a society becomes increasingly dominated by both public and private bureaucracies—economically, politically, socially—the masses of people necessarily lose power and voice.

The New Totalitarianism

Robert A. Nisbet cites Weber's assertion of the ongoing conflict between democracy and bureaucracy: democracy promotes bureaucracy because such organizations are necessary to provide the coordination and control so desperately needed by complex society (and huge populations). Such functions as the administration of justice, education, voting, and other complex administrative tasks could never be accomplished without bureaucratic coordination. But while modern societies are dependent on these organizations, in the long-run bureaucracy tends to undermine both human freedom and democracy.⁶ Over time, State bureaucracy becomes resistant to the rule of elected officials—the bureaucracy is permanent and will always be there, elected officials are transient. The result, Nisbet asserts, is that elected officials often engage in demagoguery and the violation of form to get their way. But while most office seekers promise to cut bureaucratic waste and downsize staffs, bureaus and departments, once in office they never do. According to Nisbet, the bureaucratization of Western governments primarily comes from two sources: war and social reform.⁷ Nisbet predicts that this trend will continue. The rise in crime and the increasing threat of terror will cause the United States and other western countries to increasingly turn to military forms of government in order to restore confidence in the ability

⁴ Weber, 1946/1958, p. 229.

⁵ See Weber, 1946/1958, Michels, 1919, or Mills, 1956 for examples.

⁶ Nisbet, 1975, pp. 54-56.

⁷ Nisbet, 1975, p. 59. I would add a third source, the regulation of the economy.

of government to protect its citizenry. The rise in crime is predicated upon the rise in anomie as norms and values fail to be internalized and lose their effectiveness in disciplining egoistic individuals. The predicted increase in the amount of terrorism is based on the centralization and enlargement of power in Western (and other) governments; revolution from disaffected groups is now virtually impossible. This makes it “probable that the vacuum left by receding revolutionary hope is being filled by mindless, purposeless terror as an end in itself.”⁸

All this is strikingly reminiscent of Mills’ White Collar analysis—though there are some subtle differences. Mills focuses upon the “Power Elite,” the people at the top of enlarged and centralized bureaucracies of three dominant institutional sectors of American society—government, military, and economic. Nisbet’s initial focus is upon the political State as a unified “Leviathan.” It is his belief that the political State has rapidly absorbed military, economic, political, and social power in the process transforming all social organization in the West.⁹ In later writings he details the interrelationships between State, economic, and military power in language highly reminiscent of Mills, recognizing that State power is often intimately involved in economic activities and has been since the rise of capitalism itself. Like Mills, Nisbet also recognizes that war and the military caste of mind is responsible for tremendous centralization of government and the economy, and makes military adventure far more likely.¹⁰ Also like Mills, in his later writings Nisbet shares with Weber the concern that this concentration of power is counter to democracy and freedom. Beginning only with military power, it is the State’s subsequent absorption of political, economic, kinship, and religious functions as well as the State’s dislocation or outright destruction of traditional authority structures that has led to the decline of community, freedom, and democracy.¹¹

Like C. Wright Mills before him, Nisbet believes that the military caste of mind increasingly dominates our government. The threat of terrorism, the decline of civil authority, the breakdown of family and community structures of authority, all point to the rise of militarism. In fact, Nisbet asserts that if terrorism continues to increase in the coming decades as rapidly as it

⁸ Nisbet, 1975, pp. 61-64, quote on page 63.

⁹ Nisbet, 1953/1990, p. xxxiii; Nisbet, 1975, p. 154.

¹⁰ Nisbet, 1953/1990, pp. 94-95; Nisbet, 1975, p. 56 & p. 154; Nisbet, 1988, p. 105.

¹¹ Nisbet, 1953/1990, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

had in the decade previous to his writing, he could not conceive of representative democracy surviving. It is not that he predicted that the terrorists would win, but rather that the U.S. would feel compelled to abandon its Bill of Rights.¹² As evidence for the rise of militarism, Nisbet points to the increased incidence and intensity of war in the 20th century. Also evident is the increase in the “size, reach, and sheer functional importance of the military” in modern times. To believe that such an institution growing rapidly in our midst has not had serious impact on other parts of the sociocultural system—on domestic and foreign policy, the economy, on civil and cultural life—is ludicrous.¹³ “To imagine that the military’s annual budget of just under a hundred billion dollars does not have significant effect upon the economy is of course absurd, and it may be assumed that with respect to the military as with any other institution, beginning with the family, what affects the economic sphere also affects in due time other spheres of life.”¹⁴ Nisbet concludes that such a military establishment will necessarily have a significant and continuous effect upon the entire sociocultural system. The problem of the militarization of power would not be so critical if we only had to face the increasing centralization of government and the related decline of intermediate authority, or if we were only facing increased military and terror threats from abroad. “But the fact is, both of those conditions are present, and in mounting intensity, and against them any thought of arresting or reversing the processes of militarization of society seems rather absurd. The industrial-academic-labor-military complex President Eisenhower referred to in his farewell remarks has become vastly greater since his presidency, and the military’s ascendancy in this complex becomes greater all the time, though not, as I have noted, without much assistance from each of the other elements.”¹⁵ The “military industrial complex” and the “scientific-technological elite” that Eisenhower spoke of means that research universities and institutes, corporations, the military, and government leaders all have a vested interest in a large military, sophisticated weapons systems, and war.¹⁶ No nation, Nisbet warns,

¹² I believe this to be very prescient.

¹³ Nisbet, 1988, p. 1. By 1988 Nisbet was calling the U.S. an “imperial power,” likened to Great Britain in the eighteenth century. Like Mills before him, Nisbet saw the militarism of the federal government as one of the greatest threats to freedom in this country and abroad.

¹⁴ Nisbet, 1975, pp. 147-148. Today (2007) the U.S. military budget is over 625 billion dollars!

¹⁵ Nisbet, 1975, p. 193.

¹⁶ Nisbet, 1988, pp. 24-28.

has ever managed to retain its “representative character” along with a massive military establishment; the U.S. will not be an exception.¹⁷

Also like Mills, Nisbet sees the intellectual class as being complicit in their support of the military state. Under Wilson and later Roosevelt, intellectuals were brought into government service and gave their full support to the centralization of power in the federal government (and increasingly the executive branch), and to the militarization of that power in World War, Cold War, and increasingly in its war on terror. Aside from designing the programs, staffing the upper levels of the bureaucracies, creating the strategies, and setting foreign and domestic policies, the intellectual creates the slogans and ideologies that motivate the masses; spin the moralizing and rationalizations necessary for war, and define the crises and the strategies of conflict.¹⁸ Few intellectuals have the independence of mind or the will to oppose either centralization or militarization. With the notable exception of Marx, the founders of sociology—Durkheim, Spencer, Weber, and Sumner—were all extremely skeptical of centralization and the State. But modern practitioners of the social sciences almost without exception look to the centralization and enlargement of the State as if it were part of the natural order of sociocultural systems.¹⁹

Again like Mills and his assertions that power in a bureaucratized society is increasingly based on manipulation rather than force, Nisbet is not predicting the evolution of American society into something akin to Nazi Germany, rather, he sees America rapidly moving toward “legal and administrative tyranny.”²⁰ Nisbet sees power in contemporary America as becoming “invisible,” removed first from family and community to elective office but now increasingly placed in the hands of the many State bureaucrats who regulate government, politics, economy, educational institutions, medical facilities—our very social existence. The reason that this power has become invisible is two-fold: (1) it is done in the name of humanitarian goals, the government as protector and friend; and (2) the State manipulates the media, the educational

¹⁷ Nisbet, 1988, p. 39.

¹⁸ Nisbet, 1975, p. 190.

¹⁹ Nisbet, 1975, p. 249. Again, echoes of Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*.

²⁰ Nisbet, 1988, p. 57.

system, the smallest details of life so that the will of the State becomes internalized by the individual.²¹ “The greatest power,” Nisbet asserts,

is that which shapes not merely individual conduct but also the mind behind the conduct. Power that can, through technological or other means, penetrate the recesses of culture, of the smaller unions of social life, and then of the mind itself, is manifestly more dangerous to human freedom than the kind of power that for all its physical brutality, reaches only the body.²²

The most revolutionary change of the twentieth century, Nisbet asserts, is that power and authority has been transferred from the offices of constitutional government to bureaucracies “brought into being in the name of protection of the people from their exploiters.”²³ This “softening” of power, placing the velvet glove over the iron fist of the State, makes such power much more difficult to detect or oppose.²⁴ “In the name of education, welfare, taxation, safety, health, and the environment, to mention but a few of the laudable ends involved, the new despotism confronts us at every turn.”²⁵ The new totalitarianism is not based on terror or external force, although the police powers of the state ultimately undergird its authority. Human organization that depends on the constant use of force and intimidation to discipline its members is extremely inefficient and ultimately ineffective. A system based solely on force must expend too much energy policing its members; it stifles initiative, and it provides an obvious target for rallying opposition. Rather, the new totalitarianism is founded upon the ever more sophisticated methods of control given us by science (including social science) and technology, based on manipulation. Government power is far greater today than it ever was, Nisbet asserts, but it is far more indirect, impersonal, and based on manipulation rather than brute force.²⁶ While the old totalitarianism is based on force and terror, the new totalitarianism is based on the art of manipulation. The bureaucratic growth of the State to absolute power and authority over the

²¹ Nisbet, 1975, p. 195-197.

²² Nisbet, 1975, pp. 226-227.

²³ Nisbet, 1975, pp. 195-196.

²⁴ Nisbet, 1975, p. 223.

²⁵ Nisbet, 1975, p. 197.

²⁶ Nisbet, 1975, p. 223.

masses is even more absolute than old forms of totalitarianism because it encompasses humanitarian concerns.²⁷ Using technologies of mass media, advertising, and propaganda, the goal of the new totalitarian State is to control its population, to get them to mobilize, believe, and act in accordance with the wishes of the State.

The quaint old forms and trappings of democracy--elections, supreme courts, Congress, and the Constitution--will remain in place. The traditional names and slogans will continue to be called upon and broadcast; freedom and democracy will continue to be the theme of presidential speeches and editorials. And certain freedoms will reign. "There are, after all, certain freedoms which are like circuses. Their very existence, so long as they are individual and enjoyed chiefly individually as by spectators, diverts men's minds from the loss of other, more fundamental, social and economic and political rights."²⁸ But this, Nisbet asserts, is simply an illusion of freedom, yet another way of softening power. As in the present, political scientists and sociologists will continue to debate the totalitarian hypothesis. But it will be democracy and freedom in a trivial sense, unimportant and subject to "guidance and control" or manipulation by the State.²⁹

The first condition for the rise of the totalitarian State is that intermediate groups be severely weakened or destroyed. "We may regard totalitarianism," Nisbet writes,

as a process of the annihilation of individuality, but, in more fundamental terms, it is the annihilation, first, of those social relationships within which individuality develops. It is not the extermination of individuals that is ultimately desired by totalitarian rulers, for individuals in the largest number are needed by the new order. What is desired is the extermination of those old social relationships which, but for their autonomous existence, must always constitute a barrier to the achievement of the absolute political community.³⁰

The second condition is that the State extend its administrative structure, control, and regulation to all aspects of social life—aspects that used to be the purview of these intermediate groups.³¹

²⁷ Nisbet, 1988, p. 61.

²⁸ Nisbet, 1975, p. 229.

²⁹ Nisbet, 1953/1990, p. 185; 1975, p. 229.

³⁰ Nisbet, 1953/1990, p. 179.

³¹ Nisbet, 1953/1990, p. 182.

Any new groups or associations formed must be subject to the regulation and control of the State. Intermediate groups become “plural only in number, not in ultimate allegiance of purpose.”³² And this destruction and cooptation of intermediate organizations is the true horror of totalitarian rule for it destroys the very foundation of identity, individual morality, protection from arbitrary rule, and freedom itself. Intermediate institutions, Nisbet argues, are essential in inspiring individuals to restrain their appetites, to internalize social morality and thus make civil society possible. Intermediate institutions also form the walls that heretofore contained the State’s appetite for power.³³ Therefore, “total political centralization can only lead to social and cultural death.”³⁴

Nisbet sees the trend toward militarism, centralization, and the weakening of primary groups as inexorable and is skeptical that there will be any significant and long lasting reversal of these trends any time soon. However, he does offer some hope. Echoing Weber, he states that a charismatic—a prophet, a genius, or a maniac—might well stop or even reverse the trends.³⁵ He also echoes Durkheim in his claim that high levels of anomie cannot long be endured by people. “Human beings cannot long stand a vacuum of allegiance, and if, as seems evident enough, the political state in its present national, collective, and centralized form is no longer capable of fulfilling the expectations and supplying incentives, human beings will surely turn, as they have before in history, to alternative values and relationships.”³⁶

What Nisbet advocates for the cultural disease that he has so thoroughly described is institutional reform based on the principles of libertarianism and pluralism. He states that distinctive institutions—economic, educational, family, religion—must be left as free as possible from the regulation and dictates of the State. He advocates a program of decentralization, devolving powers from the federal government to the states and from the states to local community organizations. He calls for the strengthening, re-creation, or creation of viable intermediate associations, groups and communities that can buffer the effects of the State upon

³² Nisbet, 1953/1990, p. 186.

³³ Nisbet, 1975, p. 74

³⁴ Nisbet, 1953/1990, p. 187.

³⁵ Nisbet, 1975, p. 233.

³⁶ Nisbet, 1975, p. 283.

the individual; such groups must have real functional importance in the allocation of goods and services, for only then can such groups stimulate solidarity and commitment from individual members.³⁷ He asks us to give up our passion for equality and recognize that hierarchy is part of the social bond and essential for social order as well as the transmission of our culture across generations. He calls for a recommitment to tradition, to abandon attempts to regulate every aspect of life through formal law and administrative regulation and rely upon custom and folkway in their stead. “Pluralist society is free society exactly in proportion to its ability to protect as large a domain as possible that is governed by the informal, spontaneous, custom-derived, and tradition-sanctioned habits of mind rather than by the dictates, however rationalized, of government and judiciary.”³⁸ We are becoming a nation of lawyers; our relationships are increasingly adversarial and defined by legal code or administrative decree. But freedom, liberty, and authority are all rooted in tradition and in primary group association, and it is to this foundation that we must return.

³⁷ Nisbet, 1975, p. 278. This parallels Durkheim’s call for the establishment of these same types of associations.

³⁸ Nisbet, 1975, p. 240.

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