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Escape from Modernity
Doctoral Dissertation

THESES

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The Issue and Aim of the Dissertation

The Western Hemisphere had been defined by two types of regime in the 20th Century: democratic and totalitarian. Therefore, the normative political theory of the century was characterized by the juxtaposition of these two types. Democracy in effect meant the good order, whereas totalitarianism marked oppression, dictatorship, tyranny\(^1\) – that is, bad order. Regardless of their judgment, the topic for contemporary political thinkers was set: how could these modern regimes evolve? What explains the existence of National Socialist and Communist systems? What theoretical and practical preconditions did they have? Are there any identifiable economic, cultural, ideological and social processes which explain the coming into existence, the success or failure of one or the other type? And most importantly: what do they mean?

If I would only have relied on the identity of questions, it would not be clear why I chose the authors whose thoughts I would like to present in this paper. Therefore, it is worth assuming that there is something beyond questioning that binded them together also in their answers.

A probable explanation would be that modern totalitarian (or maybe tyrannical, dictatorial) regimes mean a falling back to the dark ages, i.e. the times before modernity. They represent barbarism, tribal mentality as opposed to the world after Enlightenment and the polities bred on it. Accordingly, the whig-anglomaniac or the more radical francophone approach to history is valid but there are people – especially in Center- and Eastern-Europe and in the third world –, which cannot get rid of barbarism. Those who sign up to this view stand on the side of modernity and Enlightenment, and more or less think that modern tyrannies, totalitarianisms – foremost National Socialism – represent the “dethronement of Reason”. The positive program in this case will be a return to Reason.

Another plausible view would be that both National Socialism and Communism are eminently modern phenomena, more or less necessary, but

\(^1\) The judgment and applicability of these idioms differ by the individual authors.
definitely possible consequences of modernity. The representatives of this explanation – from the authors discussed here to Zygmunt Bauman – there is some problem with modernity itself, moreover, with enlightened rationalism as well. This critique of modernity is not entirely alien to the more well-known part of émigré scholars, I should only refer to the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* here. According to this view not the “dethronement of Reason” is problematic but the way we think about “Reason”, and there is problem with rationalism itself, which is tyrannical; accordingly, there is a problem with modernity which is appealing to Reason. The authors discussed in this paper *partly* agree with that sentence. But in what do they differ from the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*?

First, the émigré scholars discussed here did not form a group. We cannot refer to them in a way in which we refer to the Frankfurt School. This of course is merely a formal criterion and only makes it more cumbersome to answer the question why I chose *these* authors. The first part of the more material answer is that most of these authors were not willing to bury “Reason” as it is. That is, they did not want to throw out the antique baby with the bathwater of modern rationalism. Authors like Strauss and Voegelin juxtaped some form of antique rationalism with its modern counterpart. They thought that these two did not have the same roots and defended the antique form of rationalism even if they rejected the modern one. Secondly, the views presented in this paper cannot be labeled postmodern. These émigré authors did not want to reckon with the past entirely, quite the contrary: they aimed at saving Western thought, civilization and politics through its past.

As regards for the above mentioned juxtaposition: these authors saw some disconcerting connection between modern democracy and totalitarian regimes. The measure and the emphasis was different by the individual authors, but it can be said that 1) *they either thought that democracy was weak and defenseless, 2) or that totalitarianism had evolved precisely from modern democracies.* Amongst the authors there are liberal anti-democrats or aristocratic liberals (e.g. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Talmon, and to some extent Hayek) as well as anti-liberals (Arendt,

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2 Kolnai Aurel dissented: he thought that National Socialism was indeed anti-modern.
I think that the majority of these authors in one way or another was searching for an answer for the problem of both modernity and totalitarianism beyond democracy, or at least they were looking for some buttress beyond it for democracy itself.

The choice of these authors might seem a bit arbitrary. That in any case in which they do not form some type of group or network is to some extent unavoidable. Of course what cannot be stated is that they did not have connections with each other, however their relationships were rather distant and foremost intellectual in kind – they were familiar with each others’ works – and seldom was it personal. What is more: it is not without precedent that they despised each other, as in the case of Strauss and Arendt. Nevertheless, I think that regardless of their not negligible differences there are numerous common marks in their thoughts which are not discovered yet. Most of these thinkers have such a tremendous commentary literature that can fill whole libraries but to examine them as a kind of “quasi-group” is, to my knowledge, not common. Therefore, it might be interesting what common and what differing points of views there are by émigré scholar who escaped from the same part of the world (foremost from Center-Europe), and found their new homes in the same part of it (United Kingdom, United States, Canada).

It is questionable of course, whether the fact of emigration is important in relation to the critique of modernity at all. Unequivocal answer cannot be given to this question because then the method of “what if” should have been used. It is perfectly reasonable to argue that these authors would have formulated the criticism of modernity even if they were not compelled to emigrate. It seems to be a strong hypothesis to state that these writers were more bound by the critique of modernity than the fact of emigration. Nevertheless, I think it is an interesting to add the feeling of “being an alien” which comes up in the works of these authors even in that case, and at least it adds something to their critique of modernity. The hypothesis is almost impossible to be tested because none of the authors proposed a statement in which they claimed that he or she became an opponent of modernity because of escape or
emigration, however the common view that connects them supports the presupposition of the essay in both cases.\(^3\)

The overview of all the existing critiques of modernity would be an almost impossible undertaking. Therefore, it was not in itself the criticism of modernity or in itself the work of émigré scholar that took my attention – which as well would have been an enterprise too big – but the intersection of these two. I have to emphasize that in this paper I do not deal with the issue of what I think about modernity, but instead try to follow what modernity means for the authors dealt with here. To make matters more difficult, these authors were implicitly or explicitly partakers in the quarrel between ancients and moderns, which manifested itself in the following form: is our age really a new era or instead just a pathology of the eternal *conidito humana*? My interest had been what they saw in the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century and why they criticized it. Therefore, I adhered to their texts and understandings. I chose the following method: I start with the issues that connects these authors – which is the thematic and criticism of certain aspects of modernity –, whereas at the end I discussed in what they differ.

To cover all the works of all these writers would have been a mission impossible both because of the obvious limitations of this paper and the lack of capacity on behalf of its author. Therefore, I aimed at focusing on their most important and relevant works according to the most important topics. Similar reasons led me to the method of viewing primary sources more important, to some extent overshadowing secondary sources.

My work is an undertaking in the field of history of ideas, therefore my sources are foremost those of the primary sources of the authors chosen. I tried to read these works as closely as possible, which does not mean that I sometimes do not make some subjective remarks. I also intend this paper to be a study in the history of ideas in that I do not wish to “de-contextualize” the works of these authors; for I

\(^3\) Of course the critique of modernity is eminently a German topic since Nietzsche and romanticism and the majority of the authors dealt with in this paper had grown up in German culture.
think that their reflections and understandings were influenced by the turmoil in politics and civilization of their age.

The Structure of the Dissertation and its Conclusions

The theme of the first chapter is basically epistemology, more precisely the critique of the modern concept of science, i.e. positivism and scientism. It seems that authors who dealt with the problem – Polanyi, Arendt, Voegelin, Hayek, Strauss – found these equally wanting and dangerous; both in its way in which modernity looks at science and its effects on morality and politics. I think it is justifiable to start with epistemology as a problem because in the view of the authors the relation to science – which is a special mode of understanding – is of key importance. They thought that the majority of modern views on science is false and even if sometimes unintentionally, these eliminate the basics of morals.

Even more importantly, they thought that positivism, scientism and modern politics based on these are against freedom. No matter what creed of freedom they held – this will necessarily differ for instance in the case of Arendt and Hayek –, they thought that the problem of the loss of freedom is of great importance. With this these authors rejected the whiggish dogma dominating the 19th-20th centuries which claimed that economic growth couples with the progress of science, with the moral progress of politics and the enlargement of freedom. In the end of the chapter I try to outline the problem of whether as critics of modernity these authors can be labeled postmodern or not, and in which way do they stand against postmodernism.

The second chapter aims at demonstrating the religious dimensions of modernity and totalitarianism. I found that some of these emigrant authors paid special attention to this question which is in itself a remarkable phenomenon. Why did they think it is important to deal with religion, the questions of religion in politics in general and in modernity in particular? I try to demonstrate that according
to these authors the questions of religion are inescapable even in modernity, and the modern age, contrary to its intentions, could not reckon with neither religion nor the religious. Besides the heavily contested thesis of secularization, religion appeared in new forms, most dominantly in the most anti-religious regimes, such as the French or Bolshevik revolutions. According to the authors discussed there, religion took up new forms in modernity and totalitarianism, however, these new forms have old roots. This issue is at most discussed by Voegelin.

The third chapter targets the critique of utopian thought. I discuss in this chapter the problem of the functioning of utopian thought, its presuppositions and consequences according to the authors. In general it can be stated that utopia builds itself on moral perfectionism which is coupled with scientistic hopes in modernity. The authors juxtaposed perfectionism with the tenet of human imperfection, and the importance of politics and contingence – as opposed to the striving of utopia for calculability and its anti-political edge – which mean the guarantee of freedom. The most negative consequence of utopianism according to these authors was that it eliminates human freedom.

The topic of the fourth chapter is special. Because the majority of the authors were fled national socialism, they reflected on the issue of persecution. I try to illuminate through the writings of Arendt and Strauss that they connected the problem of persecution with the failure of the liberal-democratic emancipation experiment. Arendt and Strauss were led from the question of persecution to the fundamental criticism of liberalism. It might not be an overstatement, that this only applies to the authors from the German world: in the case of Polanyi and Kolnai for instance it is more reasonable to speak about a pursuit of assimilation.

The fifth chapter deals with the critique of liberalism and liberal democracy, foremost in the view of Strauss, Arendt and Voegelin. These thoughts tell the most about the fact that these authors were looking for the alternative to modernity beyond liberal democracy or at least outside of it. Even if they, and I shall emphasize this, were living in the most successful liberal democracy of their age, the United States, and they practically embraced its political and social structure.
The sixth chapter the thoughts of the liberal critics of modern democracy will be outlined. This chapter leans foremost on the thoughts of Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, supplemented with the Tocquevillean reflections of Arendt and Kolnai. As it will be clear, the main points in the criticism of democracy will be majoritarianism, conformism, identitarianism and egalitarianism. This form of the critique of democracy wants to secure freedom from the danger of the tyranny of the majority, is almost always anti-egalitarian, therefore it can be labeled classic or aristocratic liberalism.4

The seventh chapter deals with the question of totalitarian democracy. It will be shown that even though the authors saw the problem similarly, they viewed it with different optics. These differences can be led back to their presuppositions, i.e. which idioms are they attached to (e.g. “individualist” or rather republican). I shall deal with the problem of modern revolutions in this chapter as well as the critique of planning which were outlined by Hayek, Mises and Polanyi.

Lastly, the eighth chapter aims at discussing the difficult issue of whether these emigrant authors can be described as conservatives – do they want to “conserve” something? The question itself does not seem to be particularly arresting, however time and again the label pops up in reference to some of them. I shall enumerate their presuppositions and I will decide if this label is apt in describing them. The key is the authors’ relation to the idiom of tradition and other criterions of conservative thought. I found that even though there are connections of conservative thought with the thoughts of Strauss, Voegelin, moreover with that of Arendt as well, only with serious modifications can they be described as conservatives.

The authors discussed in this paper, then, turned against modernity, however, as opposed to The Dialectic of Enlightenment and postmodernists, they did not wish to reckon with the past. Quite the opposite: in one way or another, they viewed the past as the possible source for renewal. In this sense their theoretical

4 The problem of egalitarianism is more specific in Arendt’s case. I shall reflect on this issue in the respective chapter.
experiments are of a “restaurative” nature, even if this does not end in some sort of practical program.

Without doubt the element of critique is stronger in any of these authors than the sum of positive statements. Beyond the criticism of totalitarian regimes they were quarrelling with the basic tenets and dogmas of contemporary liberalism. The question is that if they rejected modernity *in toto* – totalitarian enterprises as well as liberalism and democracy – what do they suggest instead? This is a common question, we should be reminded however that these authors were philosophers and thinkers and not politicians. They did not have practical programs. The other argument would be that they saw it as precisely the problem of modernity that moderns want to give concrete programs to the world all the time. It seems that the émigrés thought questions are more important than answers. Representatives of modernity seem to have forgotten about questions, wanted to end debates. Therefore, according to these emigrant authors, we have to remember the questions themselves in the form in which they were posed by the ancients before modernity.
Selected Bibliography


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**Related Publications**


(Thomas Molnar Institute for Advanced Studies Working Papers) 1.
