



## Arendt, Kafka, and the Nature of Totalitarianism

Brian Danoff

To cite this article: Brian Danoff (2000) Arendt, Kafka, and the Nature of Totalitarianism, Perspectives on Political Science, 29:4, 211-218, DOI: [10.1080/10457090009600710](https://doi.org/10.1080/10457090009600710)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457090009600710>



Published online: 01 Apr 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 328



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Arendt, Kafka, and the Nature of Totalitarianism

BRIAN DANOFF

Anyone who is acquainted with Hannah Arendt's books will have noticed that they are peppered with references to the works of Franz Kafka. The preface to her book *Between Past and Future*, for instance, contains a fairly long discussion of one of Kafka's parables.<sup>1</sup> Shiraz Dossa has gone so far as to label Arendt's project as "literary political theory."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in Arendt one finds frequent references not only to Kafka but also to Conrad, Dostoevsky, Melville, Brecht, and Char, among other literary figures. Arendt's use of literature in general, and of Kafka in particular, is well known. What is not so well known is Arendt's *theoretical* debt to Kafka, specifically for her theory of totalitarianism.

At precisely the same time that Arendt was writing and thinking about the nature of totalitarianism, she was also immersed in the work of Kafka. As senior editor at Schocken Books during the late 1940s, Arendt was instrumental in having Kafka's works published in the United States, and she helped translate into English the second volume of his diaries. It was during the same years that Arendt wrote many of the articles that were eventually turned into *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.<sup>3</sup>

In a remarkable 1944 *Partisan Review* essay entitled "Kafka: A Reevaluation," Arendt wrote,

Kafka's technique could best be described as the construction of models. If a man wants to build a house or if he wants to know a house well enough to be able to foretell its stability, he will get a blueprint of the building or draw one up himself. . . . Kafka's stories are such blueprints [which] expose the naked structure of events.<sup>4</sup>

---

*Brian Danoff* is a doctoral candidate at Rutgers University. His research interests include modern political thought and American political leadership. His article "Lincoln, Machiavelli, and American Political Thought" appeared in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (June 2000).

But what precisely did Kafka's "blueprints" expose, according to Arendt? I argue that Arendt found revealed in Kafka's fiction many of the crucial elements of totalitarianism that she wrote about in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. As Arendt put it, "Kafka's so-called prophecies were but a sober analysis of underlying structures which today have come into the open."<sup>5</sup> According to Arendt, then, Kafka grasped the dangerous aspects of modernity that exploded into full view years after his death with the rise of totalitarianism.

Of course, it has now become rather hackneyed to argue that Kafka can teach us about totalitarianism. It should be remembered, however, that when Arendt was editing his works in the 1940s, it was not yet trite to associate Kafka with totalitarianism. Indeed, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl reports that Arendt was immersed in Kafka during "a time when a respected member of the *Partisan Review* circle could ask her at a party who 'Francis' Kafka was."<sup>6</sup> Arendt was inspired by Kafka at a moment when his insights into totalitarianism still seemed fresh.

Most of my argument for Kafka's importance to Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism is based on what Arendt herself explicitly stated about Kafka, especially in the *Partisan Review* essay. Other parts of my argument are more speculative, based on my own reading of both Arendt and Kafka. In the more speculative sections, I explore some striking similarities between Arendt's writings on totalitarianism and Kafka's fiction.

In recent years, much has been written about storytelling in Arendt's political theory. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, terms Arendt "the theorist as storyteller."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Lisa Disch argues that Arendt's methodological approach to totalitarianism is best described as "storytelling as critical understanding."<sup>8</sup> In contrast, my primary goal in this article is not to explore how Arendt's political theory is a form of storytelling but to analyze how she used the work of another storyteller to construct her own political theory.

After discussing Kafka's influence on Arendt and offering a sympathetic exegesis of Arendt's views on totalitarianism,

I argue that Arendt's use of Kafka compels us to rethink our views on her attitude toward "storytelling." In addition, I suggest that some of the most problematic but also most illuminating aspects of Arendt's theory resulted from her use of Kafka. I conclude with some remarks on the appropriateness of using imaginative literature for political theory.

I do not claim that Kafka was the single most important factor in the creation of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism. Obviously, Arendt's own experiences in the 1930s and her own theoretical imagination were more important than her reading of Kafka. What I claim is that Kafka's writings were a crucial influence on Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism.

### I. ARENDT, KAFKA, AND THE "METAPHYSICS" OF TOTALITARISM

Margaret Canovan, in her superb book *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, convincingly argues that Arendt's entire body of political thought grew out of her effort to understand the great crisis of the twentieth century: the rise of totalitarianism under Hitler and Stalin.<sup>9</sup> Arendt believed that the emergence of regimes of "total domination" was completely unprecedented and therefore necessitated a new political theory. Many of Arendt's initial attempts to grapple with the crisis of her time have been published in *Essays in Understanding*, edited by Jerome Kohn. My discussion is based on those essays as well as her 1951 classic, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a brilliantly evocative and suggestive work, but it is also unwieldy and lacking in any sort of systematic organization. The precise relationship between the book's three large sections—on anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism—is difficult to pin down. The book's only unity lies in its continual quest to find "the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism," as Arendt put it in her reply to Eric Voegelin's criticisms.<sup>10</sup> Whether the subject is the Dreyfus Affair, the Dutch settlement of South Africa, or Benjamin Disraeli, Arendt's aim is always to discern the elements of modernity that were synthesized into a terrible new form of government by the Nazis and the Stalinists. "The elementary structure of totalitarianism is the hidden structure of the book," wrote Arendt in the reply to Voegelin.<sup>11</sup>

Arendt never systematically presents the various elements of totalitarianism, but through a careful reading of the book those elements emerge. As Arendt identifies them, they are of two sorts. Some are those that a sociologist might document; for instance, Arendt argues that the collapse of the class system and the resultant rise of "mass society" helped pave the way for totalitarianism. Other elements are more metaphysical, and hard to confirm empirically.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, it is primarily the more metaphysical elements of totalitarianism that Arendt found laid bare in Kafka's fiction.



Following Nietzsche and other existential philosophers, Arendt believed that in the modern world the authority of tradition in general and of religion in particular had broken

down, thereby leaving us with the burden of freedom. Arendt argues that people embraced totalitarianism because they were unable to accept the responsibility that comes with freedom and preferred to submit themselves to deterministic pseudolaws. In the case of Nazism, everyone was to submit to the "natural law" that declared certain races superior to others. In the case of Soviet totalitarianism, everyone was to submit to the "historical law" that declared that certain classes must die out. Rather than collectively determine their own future, people preferred to let themselves be swept up by those supposedly natural or historical forces, forces that came to seem necessary and almost divine.

This argument is found in its fullest form in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. But it is also found in embryonic form in "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation." There, Arendt argues that Kafka's novel *The Trial* reveals the dangers of the belief in "a necessary and automatic process to which man must submit."<sup>13</sup> She writes,

The force of the machinery in which the K. of *The Trial* is caught lies precisely in this appearance of necessity, on the one hand, and in the admiration of the people for necessity, on the other. In the landscape of *The Trial*, necessity becomes more important than truth. (70)

Arendt then quotes the priest chaplain, who tells K. that "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must accept it as necessary" (70). In such a world,

[I]ying for the sake of necessity appears as something sublime; and a man who does not submit to the machinery, though submission may mean his death, is regarded as a sinner against some kind of divine order. (70)

According to Arendt, Kafka anticipated that terrible atrocities would be "committed in the name of some kind of necessity or in the name—and this amounts to the same thing—of the 'wave of the future'" (71).

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt recounted how, similarly, many of the old guard Bolsheviks willingly went to their deaths after confessing to crimes that they had never committed; their commitment to "historical necessity" was more important to them than truth or even their own lives. They were like Joseph K., who at the end of *The Trial* willingly accepts his bestial execution as part of the order of things. Such people should be ashamed, according to Arendt, for they have renounced the uniquely human ability to act freely and spontaneously. Renouncing that ability, they willingly submit to pseudodivine, pseudonatural forces. Arendt writes that for such people, "anything more charitable can hardly be said than the words with which Kafka concludes *The Trial*: 'It was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him'" (71).

According to Arendt, then, Kafka foresaw the terrifying possibilities inherent in the modern belief that there are suprahuman laws of nature or history to which everyone must submit. To accept this modern belief is to renounce the human condition; for according to Arendt, the ability to begin something new and to collectively shape a common world, separate from nature and necessity, is what makes us distinctively human.



In her essay on Kafka, Arendt writes that “the terror of Kafka adequately represents the true nature of the thing called bureaucracy—the replacing of government by administration and of laws by arbitrary decrees” (74). Similarly, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she suggests that the bureaucracies of the early twentieth century were one of the elements necessary for the totalitarian synthesis. Bureaucracies are useful to totalitarian regimes because they help to destroy what Arendt believes to be the *political* essence of the human condition: “plurality” and “natality.” According to Arendt, it is our “natality”—“the new beginning inherent in birth”—that makes it possible for us to act in ways that no one can predict. The ability to act anew, to *begin*, is for Arendt “identical with man’s freedom.”<sup>14</sup> Closely related to that concept is her notion of “plurality.” With the term “plurality” Arendt means to emphasize that “not a single man but Men inhabit the earth” (439). Taken together, the two terms suggest that all of us are unique and have the potential to act spontaneously, thereby renewing the human world.

Arendt argues that it is precisely the human ability to act spontaneously and unpredictably that totalitarianism seeks to destroy. In a totalitarian regime people are expected to commit themselves unthinkingly to suprahuman forces. Totalitarianism cannot tolerate unpredictable actions, and it aims to create a world in which everyone is equally superfluous so that any human “cog” can be replaced by another. Totalitarianism, writes Arendt,

strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual. [That] is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. (438)

The apotheosis of that process takes place in the concentration camps, which “serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing” (438).

The concentration camp is thus “the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power,” because it is only in the camps that the totalitarian attempt to “change human nature” is fully achieved (438). That is, it is only within the camps that “plurality” and “natality” can be completely destroyed.

Arendt argued that Kafka, in his fiction, depicted a similar process at work in modern bureaucracy. In Kafka’s world, bureaucracies leave no room for human action, spontaneity, individuality, or even thought. Those governed by a bureaucracy are thereby denied the qualities that make us distinctively human. All are thus metaphorically *akin* to Gregor Samsa of “The Metamorphosis”; when Gregor wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a hideous insect, his only concern is how he is going to get to work on time.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Arendt believed that Kafka’s bureaucracies anticipated totalitarianism because they replaced a government of laws with one of administration by arbitrary

decrees. Her description of bureaucracy in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* perfectly matches the nightmare world of *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Arendt writes,

In governments by bureaucracy decrees appear in their naked purity as though they were no longer issued by powerful men, but were the incarnation of power itself and the administrator only its accidental agent.<sup>16</sup>

That is precisely the world in which Joseph K. finds himself in *The Trial*. Those who arrest him and try him act as mere agents of “The Law” and know little about the details of his

---

**A**rendt argues that widespread loneliness is the crucial precondition of totalitarian domination.

case. Joseph K. never succeeds in penetrating to the source of “The Law,” and he becomes paralyzed before its mysterious and seemingly awesome power. As Arendt puts it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,

pseudomysticism . . . is the stamp of bureaucracy when it becomes a form of government. . . . [T]he people it dominates never really know why something is happening. . . . What happens to one then becomes subject to an interpretation whose possibilities are endless. . . . [W]ithin the framework of such endless interpretive speculation . . . the whole texture of life and world assume a mysterious secrecy and depth. (245)

Such is the texture of Kafka’s fictional landscape. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. never knows why he is being tried, and yet he comes to accept his trial as legitimate and finds himself speculating endlessly on the motivations behind the actions of “The Law.” Rather than view those actions as arbitrary—which they of course are—Joseph K. comes to see them as somehow divine, and thus as *necessary*.

Arendt herself contrasted the Joseph K. of *The Trial* with the K. of *The Castle*. In the latter novel, argues Arendt, K. is a heroic “man of good will” who refuses to submit to the arbitrary dictates issued “from above.”<sup>17</sup> The villagers all accept the edicts of the Castle’s bureaucrats as the word of God, but K. sees them as an outrageous attempt to usurp his freedom. Rather than submit to the bureaucrats’ demand that he remain a stranger forever, K. struggles to find his rightful place in the common world. Ultimately he dies of exhaustion,<sup>18</sup> but not before he has taught some of the villagers, as Arendt puts it, “that human rights may be worth fighting for, [and] that the rule of the Castle is not divine law, and consequently, can be attacked.”<sup>19</sup> K. may not have fully succeeded in his battle against the Castle, but he remains for Arendt an exemplary figure: “[S]ince he, unlike the K. of *The Trial*, did not submit to what appeared as necessity, there is no shame to outlive him” (73). If only the

same could be said for those who lived under actual totalitarian regimes, Arendt seems to imply.



Thus one of Arendt's key "elements of totalitarianism"—the willingness to submit to pseudonecessity—may have been inspired in part by her reading of Kafka. That element of totalitarianism, like all of the others, is for Arendt a permanent potentiality of modernity. Submission to pseudonecessity is not a German or Russian trait, but a *modern* trait. The innovation of the Nazis and the Stalinists was to combine certain elements of modernity in a terrible new synthesis. Their regimes are gone, but the dangerous elements of modernity that they exploited remain with us. As Arendt puts it,

the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on.<sup>20</sup>

It should therefore be kept in mind that Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism is simultaneously a probing analysis of modernity itself.

This is not to say, however, that modernity *inevitably* leads to totalitarianism. In and of themselves, none of the elements of modernity are totalitarian. Only when combined in a particular way do they crystallize into totalitarian domination. Arendt argues that the totalitarian synthesis will long remain a modern temptation: "Totalitarianism became this century's curse only because it so terrifyingly took care of its problems" (430). Arendt's goal, then, is to understand the fundamental problems of modernity so that we can collectively forge *nontotalitarian* solutions.

But apart from the tendency to submit to pseudonecessity, what other elements of modernity do totalitarian regimes exploit? I turn now to Arendt's notion of "loneliness"—another dangerous aspect of modernity that Arendt found fully revealed in Kafka's fiction.

In her 1953 essay "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," Arendt argues that widespread "loneliness"—the feeling that one is not truly connected to the human world—is the crucial precondition of totalitarian domination. As Arendt puts it, "totalitarian domination . . . bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of men" (475). That experience of loneliness, Arendt argues, is a fundamental part of the modern experience; historically, loneliness is related to the rise of a mass "atomized" society of "uprooted" and "superfluous" individuals, which one finds in the nontotalitarian as much as in the totalitarian world. Loneliness, in short, is "the very disease of our time."<sup>21</sup>

Kafka's writings can plainly be read as artistic explorations of that "disease of our time." Max Brod once referred to *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika* as a "trilogy of loneliness," and Kafka's diaries and letters often refer to his own "fear of total loneliness."<sup>22</sup> Drawing on his own experience, one might say that Kafka gave voice to the loneliness which, according to Arendt, later became a fundamental part of the modern condition. In works such as "The

Metamorphosis" and *The Castle*, Kafka explored precisely the sort of loneliness that Arendt believed to be the underpinning of totalitarianism.

In "Ideology and Terror," Arendt writes,

Loneliness . . . is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness. . . . To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.<sup>23</sup>

In the earlier essay on Kafka, it is clear that she views the K. of *The Castle* precisely as a lonely stranger seeking to find his rightful "place in the world." According to Arendt, K. is defiantly struggling to avoid the modern conditions of loneliness, uprootedness, and superfluousness. His goals are to marry, to find a job, and in short, to build a life for himself in the village, a life that is "recognized and guaranteed by others." K. demands no more than the essentials of life, but those essentials are bestowed only at the arbitrary whim of bureaucrats. K.'s struggle, then, is a struggle for "the inalienable rights of man."<sup>24</sup> In a Kafkaesque world, however, human rights are guaranteed to no one, and K. dies a stranger—lonely, uprooted, and superfluous. And for Arendt, K.'s fate and the Kafkaesque world have become our own fate, our own world:

[T]he ever-increasing political and physical homelessness and spiritual and social rootlessness . . . is the one gigantic mass destiny of our time in which we all participate, though to very differing degrees of intensity and misery.<sup>25</sup>

In her discussion of Arendt's notion of "loneliness," Canovan usefully points out that the term is meant to signify "not only separation from other people, but also and especially separation from a human *world* inhabited in common with other people."<sup>26</sup> By this definition, Gregor Samsa of "The Metamorphosis" can be seen as a supremely lonely figure, for he is quite literally exiled from the common, human world. Transformed into a giant insect, he is no longer part of "the human circle," as he puts it.<sup>27</sup> Gregor can understand what the people around him are saying, but they cannot understand him: "Did you understand a word of it?" asks the chief clerk after listening to Gregor. "That was no human voice," he concludes (79). Arendt writes that "the lonely man . . . finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed."<sup>28</sup> That is precisely Gregor's situation. He is no longer able to connect with the people around him, and he indeed becomes exposed to their hostility: His father violently turns on him, and the family as a whole abandons him to his eventual death.

According to Arendt,

Both loneliness and superfluity . . . are symptoms of mass society, but their true significance is not thereby exhausted. Dehumanization is implied in both and, though reaching its most horrible consequences in concentration camps, exists prior to their establishment.<sup>29</sup>

Is the linkage of loneliness with dehumanization not also a key theme of "The Metamorphosis," in which a lonely salesman becomes *literally* dehumanized? And in the story of Gregor's death, do we not have a prescient examination of the process by which people are conceptualized as "ver-

min” so that they can then be brutally exterminated? Indeed, as I will show in the next section, Gregor’s annihilation closely parallels Arendt’s own story of what happens to the individual in a concentration camp.

## II. ARENDT, KAFKA, AND THE TECHNIQUES OF TOTAL DOMINATION

At the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt offers her analysis of the concentration and death camps. She calls the camps “laboratories in the experiment of total domination,” which serve to verify the “fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible.”<sup>30</sup> The aim of the concentration camp, she argues, is to obliterate human individuality and freedom, to completely dehumanize individuals so that their actions will be completely predictable and controllable. Hence, “Suffering, of which there has been always too much on earth, is not the issue, nor is the number of victims. Human nature as such is at stake” (459). As Canovan points out, this bold claim is for Arendt no mere rhetorical flourish. By destroying our ability to act spontaneously, creatively, and freely, the camps destroy our distinctively human qualities—our very *nature*. The process of dehumanization exists throughout totalitarian society, but the destruction of humanness takes place fully only in the camps.

But how exactly do the camps destroy the individual? “The first essential step,” according to Arendt, “is to kill the juridical person in man.” That is done in part by “placing the concentration camp outside the normal penal system, and by selecting its inmates outside the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty” (447). The destruction of “the juridical person in man” has clear parallels in both *The Trial* and *The Castle*. When Joseph K. is arrested at the beginning of *The Trial*, he protests:

Who could these men be? What were they talking about? What authority could they represent? K. lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who dared seize him in his own dwelling?<sup>31</sup>

He soon comes to realize, however, and even to accept, that “this is not a case before an ordinary court,” as he tells his uncle (96). Joseph K. finds himself completely “outside the normal penal system.” He never knows what he is accused of, “[f]or the proceedings [are] not only kept secret from the general public, but from the accused as well,” as his lawyer explains to him (116).

According to Arendt, “Criminals do not properly belong in the concentration camps, if only because it is harder to kill the juridical person in a man who is guilty of some crime than in a totally innocent person.”<sup>32</sup> That is because a criminal has a clear juridical status; he or she has committed a “definite crime” and is thus given a “calculable punishment” (448). The innocent victims of the camps, however, are in a much worse position, for they are denied “the protective distinction that comes of their having done something.” Lacking a distinctive criminal status, they are left “utterly exposed to the arbitrary” (449).

Arendt’s argument that the criminal is better off than

the person who lacks a juridical status altogether has a clear precedent in the story of the Barnabas family in *The Castle*. When one of the Barnabas daughters refuses the advances of a high official, the family is completely shunned by the other villagers. Mr. Barnabas goes to the officials to get his family absolved of the “crime” that his daughter committed. However, the officials of the Castle tell him that there is no crime on record. Mr. Barnabas is thrown into despair, because he knows that “before he could be forgiven he had to prove his guilt, and that was denied in all the departments.”<sup>33</sup> Having failed to prove his guilt, he is left “utterly exposed to the arbitrary,” and is eventually utterly ruined. Kafka thus anticipated Arendt’s argument that it is better to be a criminal than to have no juridical status at all.

In Kafka’s fiction we find an illustration of Arendt’s claim that *arbitrariness* is a crucial element in the destruction of “the juridical person in man.” Arendt argues that “the arbitrary selection of victims indicates the essential principle” of the concentration camp.<sup>34</sup> That crucial method of totalitarian domination was seen by Kafka with uncanny precision. In the opening sentence of *The Trial*, Kafka writes: “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.”<sup>35</sup> K.’s arrest, trial, and execution bear absolutely no relation to anything he has done. Arendt writes that the victims of the camps were for the most part “people who had done nothing whatsoever that, either in their own consciousness or the consciousness of their tormentors, had any rational connection with their arrest.”<sup>36</sup> That is precisely the nightmarish situation of Joseph K. in *The Trial*. According to Arendt, “The aim of an arbitrary system is to destroy the civil rights of the whole population” (451). In the arbitrary arrest and execution of one Joseph K., Arendt must have found a model for the totalitarian destruction of civil rights.

After the murder of “the juridical person in man,” Arendt writes, “[t]he next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man. This is done in the main by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible” (451). Martyrdom becomes impossible because the camps’ victims are not merely killed, but relegated to total oblivion. Arendt argues that throughout Western history, the slain enemy has always been granted the right to be honored and remembered. But in totalitarian regimes, mourning and remembrance are forbidden, and death is thus rendered anonymous. “In a sense,” argues Arendt, the camps “took away the individual’s own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed.”<sup>37</sup>

This horrifying notion of death as total oblivion can be found, I think, in “The Metamorphosis.” It is a story not merely of Gregor Samsa’s death, but of his complete annihilation. As the story progresses, he finds himself more and more cut off from the common world. First, his speech can no longer be understood. Later, his sense of sight also becomes useless. In a moving passage, Gregor crawls onto a chair and gazes out the window,

obviously in some recollection of the sense of freedom that looking out of a window always used to give him. For in reality day by day things that were even a little way off were growing dimmer to his sight; the hospital across the street, which he used to execrate for being all too often before his eyes, was now quite beyond his range of vision, and if he had not known that he lived in Charlotte Street, a quiet street but still a city street, he might have believed that his window gave on a desert waste where gray sky and gray land blended indistinguishably into each other.<sup>38</sup>

In this passage, the common world is growing ever more distant from Gregor, leaving him imprisoned in a barren

---

**A**rendt emphatically did *not* treat Kafka's stories as ambiguous texts open to a multiplicity of interpretations.

desert wasteland. He is left in a metaphysical condition of total loneliness and worldlessness.

As the common world grows more and more distant, so too does Gregor's humanity. At one point Gregor is appalled when he finds himself wishing that all of his belongings would be removed from the room, so that he could crawl around freely:

Did he really want his warm room, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be turned into a naked den in which he would certainly be able to crawl unhindered in all directions but at the price of shedding simultaneously all recollection of his human background? (102–3)

Gregor decides that his belongings must not be removed from the room, because they are the only things left connecting him to the common, human world. He is thus thrown into a frenzy when his sister and mother begin to move everything out:

They were clearing his room out; taking away everything he loved; the chest in which he kept his fret saw and other tools was already dragged off; they were now loosening the writing desk which had almost sunk into the floor, the desk at which he had done all his homework when he was at the commercial academy, at the grammar school, and yes, even at the primary school. (104–5)

Gregor panics, and he vainly attempts to rescue the last trappings of his individual human identity. Poignantly, he clings to a framed photograph on the wall: "This picture at least, which was entirely hidden beneath him, was going to be removed by nobody" (105). It is as if he senses that as each object is removed from his room, he is pushed further down the road toward the total annihilation of his unique self.

Arendt writes, "After murder of the moral person and annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of individuality is almost always successful." She argues that the destruction of individuality manifested itself most clearly in the fact that most camp inmates "allowed themselves to be

marched unresistingly into the gas chambers."<sup>39</sup> Without a sense of individuality, people will no longer act spontaneously or resist the fate that has been imposed on them, no matter how dreadful. Similarly, near the end of "The Metamorphosis," an utterly dehumanized Gregor comes to accept his fate:

The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible. . . . [H]is head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last faint flicker of his breath.<sup>40</sup>

Like most victims of the concentration camps, Gregor refuses to resist his own obliteration.

In the anticlimactic final pages of the story we learn about the family's plans to sell the house and move to the country. It is clear from this denouement that Gregor has been utterly forgotten by his family. Since no one even remembers him, his terrifying annihilation is complete. Arendt's chilling words regarding the concentration camp victim here seem apt: "His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed."

### III. THE USE (AND ABUSE?) OF LITERATURE FOR POLITICAL THEORY: THE CASE OF KAFKA AND ARENDT

I have argued that certain aspects of Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism may have been inspired largely by Kafka's imaginative universe. Modern loneliness, the terror of bureaucracy, the dangerous modern tendency to submit to pseudonecessity, the mechanics of total domination—all of these "elements" of totalitarianism were found by Arendt in Kafka's "blueprints" or "models."

What bearing does Arendt's use of Kafka's stories have on the contemporary debate regarding "storytelling" in Arendt's thought?

According to Lisa Disch, Arendt valued stories because they can be "both ambiguous and meaningful at once. . . . Ambiguity in a story encourages the permanent contestation and multiple reinterpretation of meanings that make situated impartiality possible."<sup>41</sup> I would argue, however, that Disch's view of Arendt is contradicted by Arendt's actual approach to Kafka. For Arendt emphatically did *not* treat Kafka's stories as ambiguous texts open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Rather, she viewed them as "blueprints" that revealed a specific and singular meaning. As Arendt puts it,

the common experience of Kafka's readers is one of general and vague fascination . . . until one day the hidden meaning reveals itself to them with the sudden evidence of a truth simple and incontestable.<sup>42</sup>

Arendt, then, did not view Kafka's stories as a source of perennially deferred meanings that provide for "permanent contestation"; on the contrary, she viewed his stories as a source of "*incontestable*" truths that "expose the naked structure of events."

According to Disch, Arendt believed that "storytelling . . . communicates one's own critical understanding in a way that invites discussion from rival perspectives."<sup>43</sup> But in the

essay on Kafka, Arendt in fact attempts to *close* discussion by completely dismissing rival perspectives: She calls the theological approach to Kafka a "misinterpretation," and the psychoanalytical approach a "misunderstanding."<sup>44</sup> Arendt therefore does not, as Disch argues, leave readers "with the responsibility to undertake the critical task of interpretation for themselves."<sup>45</sup> Instead, Arendt seems to suggest that her own political reading of Kafka is the only correct one.

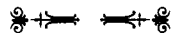
Arendt's narrow approach to Kafka is particularly striking because his texts are considered by most critics to be extremely "open," as Umberto Eco says.<sup>46</sup> The fact that Arendt viewed even Kafka's texts in such a closed manner should give pause to those who would argue that Arendt valued stories for their ambiguity and plurality of perspectives.

The argument that Arendt valued stories for their ambiguity is motivated, I think, by the desire to make Arendt accord with certain streams of postmodern thought that place a high value on indeterminacy, multiplicity, and ambiguity. I think that in her attitude toward *politics*, Arendt does indeed anticipate certain postmodern concerns, for she argues that the public realm is a place of plurality in which claims to absolute truth have no place. However, in her attitude toward literary narratives, Arendt was by no means postmodern, for she argues that Kafka's stories, or "blueprints," yield a determinate and unambiguous meaning.

Arendt's approach to Kafka should therefore give pause not only to Disch but also to Frederick Dolan. Dolan writes,

The experience of literary meaning in Arendt's sense would then suggest the very opposite of Plato's metaphors of craftsmanship, in which everything is guided and judged according to the stable, end-determining vision possessed by the author of the fabrication process; in literature, on the contrary, such meaning as one finds could not have been posited or even imagined in advance of the reading process, at least not determinately.<sup>47</sup>

Arendt's essay on Kafka seems to contradict Dolan's claim; Arendt there refers to Kafka exactly as a kind of craftsman who fabricates "models" to reveal certain truths about the world.



Arendt's use of Kafka also raises a more general question: Is it appropriate for a political theorist to use imaginative literature as a blueprint or map for understanding political realities?

It may in fact be the case that the most problematic aspects of Arendt's theory were the results of her use of literature. Two examples are Arendt's arguments, inspired by Kafka, that the concentration camps destroyed human nature by eliminating spontaneity and made martyrdom impossible by relegating victims to total oblivion. Both of these ideas are clearly exaggerations.

Consider Jean Amery's account of his experience at Auschwitz. Amery recalls how certain camp inmates (particularly the religious and the politically committed) *were* in fact able to maintain their spontaneity and refused to submit to supposed necessity.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, most empirically minded social scientists have found little of use in Arendt's

exploration of totalitarianism. Herbert J. Spiro's entry "Totalitarianism" in the 1968 *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* devotes a small paragraph to Arendt but dismisses her work as an "unsatisfactory explanation" of totalitarianism that cannot account for its rise in certain countries and its absence in others.<sup>49</sup>

But to criticize Arendt's theory for its factual inaccuracies may be to miss the point of her project, and perhaps the point of political theory as a whole. For as Sheldon Wolin has written, "the picture of society given by most political theorists is not a 'real' or literal one." The political theorists of the past "believed that fancy, exaggeration, even extravagance, sometimes permit us to see things that are not otherwise apparent."<sup>50</sup> According to Wolin, then, every great political theory contains an "imaginative dimension" that provides "insight" into reality even though (or perhaps precisely because) it fails to represent reality accurately (19).

From this perspective, we can consider *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to be a truly great work of political theory. The book does not offer testable propositions about totalitarianism, but it offers a wealth of insights. As I have shown, the "imaginative dimension" of Arendt's theory was inspired in part by Kafka's fictional universe. That dimension indeed led her to make exaggerated, fanciful, and even extravagant statements, such as "the camps destroy human nature," or "the Nazis made martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible." But it is precisely such exaggerated and fanciful statements that illuminate totalitarianism far better than most other studies of the phenomenon. As Wolin puts it, "Fancy neither proves nor disproves; it seeks, instead, to illuminate, to help us become wiser about political things" (19).

Spiro may be right that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* cannot explain why totalitarianism arose in one country rather than another; nevertheless, perhaps no other book so successfully helps us to "become wiser" about totalitarianism. If we agree with Wolin that political theory should be "an imaginative undertaking, with its full share of speculation, playfulness, [and] proclivity to error," then we will deem it entirely appropriate for Arendt to have used Kafka's imaginative universe in the formulation of her theory of totalitarianism.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, in Atlanta, Georgia, September 1999. I thank Pamela K. Jensen, the discussant, for her comments on that occasion. I also thank Tracy Strong, Jerome Kohn, and Robert Boyers for reading and commenting on an earlier version of the article. Above all, I am grateful to Jim Miller for his advice and constant encouragement.

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 7–14.

2. Shiraz Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 1.

3. For an account of Arendt's activities at Schocken Books, including her work on Kafka, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 189–92.

4. Hannah Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Reevaluation," in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 76–77.

5. *Ibid.*, 74.

6. Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 192.

7. Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Nar-



rative," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 186.

8. Lisa Disch, "More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 665.

9. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

10. Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 403.

11. *Ibid.*

12. In his excellent review of Elzbieta Ettinger's *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger*, Alan Ryan argues that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* "provides an account of what one might call the 'metaphysics' of totalitarianism that would have been unthinkable without Heidegger" (*New York Review of Books*, 11 January 1996, 23). I think that this is only half-right. Arendt does indeed examine totalitarianism from the perspective of philosophy, but at other times she examines it from the perspective of sociology.

13. Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation," 74.

14. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951, 1973), 479.

15. Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," in *The Penal Colony* (New York: Schocken, 1948, 1976), 69.

16. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 244.

17. Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 84, 87.

18. Kafka never wrote the final chapter of the book, but he described the ending to Max Brod.

19. Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation," 73.

20. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478.

21. Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 358.

22. Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1984), 255, 425.

23. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475.

24. Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation," 72.

25. Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," 357.

26. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 92.

27. Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," 80.

28. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476.

29. Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," 360.

30. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 436–37.

31. Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Schocken Books, 1937, 1984), 4.

32. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 448.

33. Kafka, *The Castle* (New York: Schocken Books, 1926, 1958), 275–76.

34. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 450.

35. Kafka, *The Trial*, 1.

36. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 449.

37. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 452.

38. Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," 97.

39. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

40. Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," 127.

41. Disch, "More Truth than Fact," 688.

42. Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation," 70.

43. Disch, "More Truth than Fact," 689.

44. Arendt, "Franz Kafka: A Revaluation," 72.

45. Disch, "More Truth than Fact," 687.

46. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 9. Eco writes, "It is easy to think of Kafka's work as 'open.' . . . The various existentialist, theological, clinical, and psychoanalytical interpretations of Kafka's symbols cannot exhaust all the possibilities of his works."

47. Frederick Dolan, *Allegories of America: Narratives, Metaphysics, Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 182–83.

48. Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), esp. 11–14.

49. Herbert J. Spiro, "Totalitarianism," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 113.

50. Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 18.

51. Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory: Trends and Goals," *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 329.