

Are We Sure It Can't Happen Here?

One runs a risk whenever one cites the 20th century's great terror states while discussing current ominous developments in the western democracies. Apparent comparisons of the United States or western and central European countries to Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia will inevitably be hooted down with accusations of alarmist conspiracy-mongering and worse, shameful ahistoricity. Nevertheless, that must not keep us from noticing and pointing to contemporary events that bear an eerie resemblance, however slight, to things that went on in those totalitarian terror states. Such regimes don't spring up overnight. They emerge, and looking at history, we can see that their more or less gradual emergence have telltale signs that we would do well to keep an eye out for. We can't rest comfortably with the cliché that "it can't happen here." Yes, we run the risk of overinterpreting events, but perhaps that is better than underinterpreting them.

America today (though this is not new) is a place where the embers of fear of the outsider are being vigorously fanned from the very top of the political system. This is too clear to need substantiation. Just reread Donald Trump's announcement of his candidacy for president three years ago, then observe his subsequent speeches, tweets, and actions. How revealing is his opportunism in seizing on any act of violence by an immigrant — "legal" or "illegal" — as though it were the rule rather than an anomaly! His not-so-subtle message is that *all* outsiders, and not just actual proven perpetrators, are by nature capable of atrocities against Americans and that those who have abstained until now can't be trusted to continue their nonviolent ways. It's not that they have the burden of proving their peaceful intentions; rather, it's that they can never prove themselves trustworthy and thus eligible to live among us.

To what purpose does Trump communicate this message? It would be a mistake to reply that it is only to advance his agenda of cutting — for cultural as well as economic reasons — even "legal" immigration and the admittance of refugees. It goes deeper than that. It is plainly to reinforce his "America First" nationalist religion with which he seeks permanently to transform — Trumpize, we may say — America. (His economic nationalist drive against global trade, the wealth-enhancing division of labor, is part of this program. In his eyes, it is ipso facto patriotic to "hire American and buy American" and therefore disloyal to think or do otherwise.) For Trump, the purity of America has been compromised long enough by the venal leaders of the past. Time to undo the damage. Step one: reduce, on the way the eliminating, the inflow of even more outsiders. And we can see the signs of step two: ridding America of "outsiders" who are already here, indeed, who have been living here peacefully for decades, including adults who were brought here "illegally" as children (so-called Dreamers) and who know no other society, and adults who are *suspected*, without hard evidence or due process, of having been granted U.S. citizenship only because of

allegedly fraudulent documents.

Such measures, supported by ranting tweets and ominously familiar rally harangues, communicate one thing: the targeted groups consist of lesser persons if they are persons at all. Thus their children may be seized and held in camps, and parents deported without knowing the fate of their children. Unaccompanied children seeking refuge from violence are shut away in overstretched detention facilities and “tent cities,” left in the charge of quintessential bureaucrats. (See “Detention of Migrant Children Has Skyrocketed to Highest Levels Ever.”) Trump partisans, who scream whenever local Child Protective Services takes Americans’ children away, are unmoved when the parents Trump targets are outsiders, or “aliens.” “It’s the law” is an entirely satisfactory explanation for those partisans in the latter case, but not in the former. Victimless technical violations committed by an American parent are rejected as grounds for such a drastic measure as family separation, but an equally victimless technical violation (“illegal entry,” failure to have government papers) is regarded as something approaching a capital offense. What does that tell us?

It tells us that outsiders are not only unwanted; they are intrinsically unworthy of being wanted because, as outsiders, they are less than human. So why care that many of the “illegals” seek asylum from inhuman conditions in their home countries? Send them back where they belong! They don’t belong here! So they are stateless, countryless, superfluous, rightless, which how Hannah Arendt described refugees, having been one herself.

It would be terrifying enough if what we are seeing in the Trump administration were novel. But it is not. We see it in other places, and we’ve seen it before in the not-too-distant past. In America, the novelty is that Trump’s recent predecessors, however ruthless their deportation programs, did not engage in Trump-style dehumanizing rhetoric. But, then, Trump wants to do more than just enforce bad “law”: through actions and words, he aims to brand the outsider as threatening to national security. (A similar tone can be heard in defenses of earlier American anti-immigrant statutes.)

Stripping human beings of their personhood as well as their natural rights should make us all recoil. It is not only immoral in its own right; it is corrosive to our society because it encourages people to emote (I hesitate to say *think*) and act in immoral and self-destructive ways. Consider the fact that the Trump administration has no trouble finding men and women who are willing to seize children from their mothers and fathers and place them in strange facilities; to capture people who are trying only to escape violence and tyranny; and cage people who are simply looking for work and a better life in a freer land. Those government agents are not conscripts. They can quit their jobs. Why don’t they? Is this Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil”: unexceptional people just “doing their jobs” in order feed their own children, advance in their careers, and someday retire in modest

comfort? (See her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.) Do they sleep well at night? Can they look at themselves in the mirror? Why wouldn't they be able to do those things? They are being good citizens, serving their country, following lawful orders. Indeed, they are involved in something greater than themselves, which happens also to relieve them of personal responsibility, or at least they might think so. (In this connection, I recommend Leonard E. Read's important essays "On That Day Began Lies" and "Conscience on the Battlefield.")

Are there parallels in the past? We need only consult Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Note carefully the full title. Horrors can begin small, putting good people off-guard perhaps until it's too late.

Discussing the prelude to the horror that was Nazi Germany, Arendt wrote:

In comparison with the insane end-result — concentration-camp society — the process by which men are prepared for this end, and the methods by which individuals are adapted to these conditions, are transparent and logical. The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses. The impetus and what is more important, the silent consent to such unprecedented conditions are the products of those events which in a period of political disintegration suddenly and unexpectedly made hundreds of thousands of human beings homeless, stateless, outlawed and unwanted, while millions of human beings were made economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment. This in turn could only happen because the Rights of Man, which had never been philosophically established but merely formulated, which had never been politically secured but merely proclaimed, have, in their traditional form, lost all validity.

The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man. This was done ... by putting certain categories of people outside the protection of the law....

The road to domination requires the extinguishing of individuality, Arendt wrote, which represents "spontaneity," subversive thought, and perhaps resistance. In Trump's rants do

we find any clue that the people he targets are individuals, each with his or her own story and aspirations? If we were to think about the victims that way, we — I include in the “we the border agents and detention officers — would be less likely to acquiesce, much less participate, in their mistreatment.

If “illegals” can be dehumanized, can we be so sure that groups of “legals” and even certain citizens won’t be subjected to the same sort of process? Arendt warned that “the politically most important yardstick for judging events in our time [is] whether they serve totalitarian domination or not.”

I am not saying that immigrant-detention facilities resemble the concentration camps that Arendt spent so much time examining. We are fortunate that traditional hard-fought minimum legal protections and the constellation of civil-liberties organizations that stand ready to pounce on as-yet illegal mistreatment certainly pose obstacles to any significant advance toward the terror state. But who can rest comfortably with just that?

We need something more. We need a broad-based and vigorous moral campaign to trumpet the humanity of detainees and those seeking entry, whether as immigrants or refugees. The public must be reminded that these are *persons* with names and loved one, and not merely numbers in a cold bureaucracy’s database.

Further, those who know better must work overtime to cultivate not only a love of the “Rights of Man” but a love of individuality, that is, diversity and pluralism. Ultimately, as Arendt suggested, it’s the only insurance policy against dehumanization, oppression, and its ultimate consequence: genocide.

This humanitarian campaign ought to include lessons in basic economics. Recession, depression, and unemployment breed superfluity, despair, intolerance, bigotry, resentment — and, finally, the scapegoating of the outsider. We’ve seen this happen when the “outsiders” were Americans with darker skin. In contrast, people who have a sense of economic security and optimism have one less pretext for eying the outsider with suspicion. So we must preach that widespread and chronic economic distress has only one source: the state, with its manipulation, monetary and otherwise, of our economic relations. A freed economy — freed of trade and other restrictions — is thus another insurance policy against dehumanization and genocide. (For this reason, Albert Jay Nock, for example, worried in 1941 that economic upheaval spawned by the U.S. government’s profligacy endangered Jewish Americans. Similarly, in 1922 H. L. Mencken expressed this fear regarding the Jews of Germany.)

Waging this campaign would not be mere altruism. It would also be self-regarding in the noble sense of the Socrates, Aristotle, Benedict Spinoza, Frédéric Bastiat, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, etc. By being good to others

we are also being good to ourselves. Pluralism enables us to extend ourselves by giving us access to more knowledge, goods, and experiences than we as limited beings could ever acquire alone. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle said that a “friend is another self.” Thus a freed and open society is like a super-self. Spencer and Menger analogized society to an organism, not to diminish the individual but to emphasize how a pluralist society augments each individual. Indeed, it maximizes each person’s *power* in Spinoza’s sense of the capacity to move toward excellence as rational social beings in the vast and infinite world.

To repeat, I am not saying Trump’s rants and policies constitute an inevitable prelude to a totalitarian nightmare. I am saying the nightmare could not befall us if dehumanization never took place.

“Totalitarian solutions,” Arendt wrote, “may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.” Decency, then, depends on widespread understanding that a worthy remedy is indeed available: freedom, pluralism, and social cooperation.