

Review of: "Carl Friedrich's Path to "Totalitarianism""

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What is the alternative to totalitarianism? This is not a question often posed in polite society. There, however, have been moments in American history when it was germane. For example, as Ira Katznelson relates in *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, while Franklin Roosevelt and his aides "never thought that the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany could provide workable models [for resuscitating the American economy], they were drawn to Mussolini's Italy, which had self-identified as a country that had saved capitalism." Both the U.S.'s and other liberal democracies' flirtation with totalitarianism during what Katznelson characterizes as "a time when uncommon uncertainty at a depth that generates fear had overtaken the degree of common risk that cannot be avoided" left an imprint on Western thought. As W.H. Auden wrote in his 1964 poem "The Cave of Making,"

... The Cosmic model became German, and any faith, if we had it, in immanent virtue died. More than ever

life-out-there is goodly, miraculous, lovable,

but we shan't, not since Stalin and Hitler,

trust ourselves ever again; we know that, subjectively,

all is possible.

Carl Friedrich, at times working with Zbigniew Brzezinski, was during his long career one of the principal authorities on the characteristics, nature, and teleology of totalitarian regimes. In this lucid and arresting article on Friedrich's theory of totalitarianism, Stephen Turner argues that Friedrich's effort to argue that his definition of the modern state—a definition that seemed, at least at first blush, to include many of the properties that Friedrich had identified as characteristic of totalitarian regimes—did not endorse totalitarianism is a good example of how intellectual biography can illuminate the torturous path that theory-building often takes.

Turner notes early in this piece that for Friedrich, "the fundamental concept of politics was community." Friedrich, however, understood "that elevating community over individual freedom apparently led to the totalitarianism that he condemned." Mussolini's statement that "All is for the state, nothing is outside the state, nothing and no one are against the state" captures how a demagogue's paeans to community can end in the stripping away of citizens' rights and autonomy.

It is perhaps, at least to some, paradoxical that Friedrich would maintain that the bureaucracy, not the electoral process,

“was the center of the state.” Hannah Arendt memorably stated in *On Violence* that

- The greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence. In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant.

Friedrich, in contrast, views bureaucrats as capable of using their discretionary power to “anticipate opposition” to the government and “find a way to avoid it.” Turner’s account of Friedrich’s famous “rule of anticipated reactions” situates it in the larger context of the fundamental role Friedrich believed it played in protecting the state from, in particular, populist movements bent on investing power in a single authoritarian leader or a party that promises, as Joseph Schumpeter averred about Marxism in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, “a plan of salvation and an indication of an evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, must be saved.” In short, government by “this responsible elite” would provide the state with both “output legitimacy” and a mechanism for preempting mass movements before they turned against democratic institutions.

This intriguing sleight of hand (i.e., to maintain that the best defense of liberal democracy is vesting power in the hands of unelected officials) is encapsulated by Turner’s statement that for Friedrich, “rather than popular government serving as a counterweight to discretionary bureaucracy... the relation... would be the reverse: bureaucracy serving as an authority that could overcome the inescapable controversies of popular government.”

Turner correctly notes that “When Friedrich appeals to ‘community’ as the partner to which the bureaucracy relates through the concept of responsibility, as distinct from ‘those who won election,’ we have not merely extended the previous concept of democracy but replaced it.” Friedrich thus goes beyond what even the democratic realists of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Walter Lippmann, advocated. While Lippmann, in particular, in *Public Opinion*, offered social scientific-informed expertise as a curb on efforts by populist leaders to manufacture consent by exploiting “the pictures in [the public’s] heads,” Lippmann and his fellow realists never argued for a managerial state that moved decision-making from elected officials to civil servants. Even in his most excoriating dissection of liberal democracy’s flaws, *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann placed the public and their representatives at the center of the democratic enterprise (though, granted, the public’s role would be limited to saying, “Yes or No” to proposals crafted by political elites).

The article does not have many weaknesses, and those that it does have are found in many intellectual biographies. In particular, many such accounts of the evolution of a scholar’s thought understandably concentrate on what the thinker saw and reacted to instead of what was outside of the thinker’s line of sight. For example, the piece could have benefited from viewing Friedrich’s belief in the “the ultimate rationality of bureaucrats” against the backdrop of contrasting understandings of bureaucratic politics, such as that presented by Michel Crozier in *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*. Crozier argues that bureaucratic discretion often spawns power struggles that can subvert an organization’s efforts to achieve its goals. Was Friedrich aware of Crozier’s and others’ post-Weberian critiques of bureaucracy (e.g., James Q. Wilson’s argument in *Bureaucracy* that the firm goals that bureaucrats must achieve make them risk averse), critiques that held that managerial

governance is not undemocratic but perhaps too democratic in the sense that it creates spaces for a particularly sanguinary form of pluralistic politics? One suspects that if Friedrich were aware of this strain of critique of bureaucracy, it likely would not have changed his views. As Turner trenchantly concludes, Friedrich's true quest was to disguise his "hostility to liberalism and individualism." Rule by responsible experts is a comforting, if not completely comfortable, landing spot for the illiberal.