


Chapter 8

Arendt and Fichte on Totalitarianism: Connections to Franco's Spain and Today's Rising Nationalism

Halil Bilecen

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5641-4912>

Independent Researcher, Turkey

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines Johann. G. Fichte's nationalism and Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism to analyze the ideological roots of Francoist Spain and modern nationalist movements. While Fichte shaped German national identity, his ideas have been linked to authoritarianism. Arendt provides a framework for understanding totalitarian regimes, especially fascism and communism. By placing both thinkers in broader historical contexts, the study explores how nationalist discourse can lead to totalitarianism. It highlights the evolving, contested nature of totalitarianism beyond classic cases like Nazi Germany or Stalinist USSR, offering insights into current debates on nationalism and authoritarianism.

INTRODUCTION

By establishing a link between Fichte's thoughts on German nationalism and Arendt's thoughts on totalitarianism, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of Franco's Spain and today's rising nationalist movements. The concept of totalitarianism has been discussed extensively by many scholars in the field (e.g. Friedrich et al. 1965; Lefort 1986; Ernest 1972; Tormey 1995; Avineri 2010), especially from the first quarter of the twentieth century until today—with the inevitable

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effect of some extreme ideologies such as communism and fascism. In recent years, some studies on totalitarianism and nationalism have tried to explain the relationship between the two and when nationalism can be dangerous (Lvovich 2019; Dukalskis 2020; Delanty 2021; Tudor 2021; Lapidus 2017). Lvovich (2019) discusses the relationship of authoritarian regimes in Latin America with nationalism, fascism, and national security doctrine. In particular, he analyses the ideological structures of military regimes. Dukalskis (2020) examines how everyday nationalism and authoritarian rule are intertwined in North Korea. He analyses the regime's influence on the population and its ideological control mechanisms. Delanty (2021) analyses the recent waves of neo-nationalism across Europe. Tudor (2021) discusses the extent to which nationalist movements in South and Southeast Asia interacted with authoritarian regimes. Lapidus (2017) explains how totalitarianism and nationalism can combine to make democratic transitions difficult. There is no common definition of totalitarianism agreed upon by the authors in this field. The concept is generally defined according to the context of the issue it addresses. Although there is uncertainty among academics on its exact definition, the terms despotism, absolutism, and tyranny have been used to describe totalitarianism because they are pertinent to its traits.

Among scholars of the history of political thought, Hannah Arendt was one of the most prominent German American philosophers in the 20th century. In fact, Arendt deserves a prominent place with regard to the concept of totalitarianism, even though she is considered by many thinkers to be a utopian philosopher, since she addresses totalitarianism only through fascism and communism. Such criticism stems from her conceptualization of totalitarianism, where she addresses the concept at its extreme levels. Therefore, critics argue that she keeps the concept away from real-world practices—except for Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy. Despite these criticisms, there is no doubt that she pioneered the concept of totalitarianism with her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

In the 1960s, there were some other scholars, such as Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965), who used totalitarianism as a concept relevant not only to fascism and/or communism, but also to other phenomena such as dictatorship and authoritarianism. The main element in these definitions is that the concept can be shaped according to the regimes considered. For example, in a study analyzing Franco's Spain, the concept of totalitarianism may be associated with authoritarianism, while in another country it may be directly associated with dictatorship.

At this point, the questions of what totalitarianism is and what kind of regimes can be labelled as totalitarian emerge. It is undeniably important to analyze some important historical figures in political philosophy, such as J. G. Fichte and Hannah Arendt, in order to understand the content of this concept. Fichte was a pioneer in the formation of German national consciousness against Napoleon and even inspired

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