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The Architecture of Power

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À mes deux villes, Casablanca et Rome, qui ont abrité mes rêves.

À ma famille que j'aime et remercie.

À ma mère, qui m'a donné la force et la foi.

À mon père, qui m'a transmis l'art et la passion.

À mon frère, qui m'a appris la résilience et le courage.

À ma sœur jumelle, ma vie, qui est et sera toujours une partie de moi.

Abstract

This thesis, *The Architecture of Power*, explores how totalitarian regimes build and sustain control through ideology, propaganda, and fear.

The first part examines how rulers justify their power, using theories from Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Hannah Arendt. The second part focuses on propaganda—how tyrants create myths, define enemies, and manipulate information. The final section looks at fear as a tool of control, showing how regimes dehumanize groups and use biopolitics to regulate society.

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Introduction: Ideology – The Blueprint of Power

Power is everywhere. Power fascinates. Power corrupts. Think of *The Godfather*[1], *Scarface*[2], *Game of Thrones*[3], *Star Wars*[4] – stories of power, conquest, betrayal. Now step out of fiction. Walk through the most forsaken streets of your city. Watch who holds control and who bows their head. Turn on your television. Switch to the international news. Power is speaking. Power is deciding. Power is crushing.

It is true that power can take the shape of success—opening doors in politics, social relationships, and the workplace. But that is not the kind of power we are analyzing here. Leave your preconceptions at the door, adjust your glasses, take a deep breath, and stay focused. Understanding the architecture of power is the first step in preventing its abuse. Treat this as a manual, one that will help you recognize – long before it's too late – anyone who took Netflix's *How to Be a Tyrant*[5] a little too seriously.

This thesis focuses on the ideology of power, specifically within totalitarian regimes. For many families, even today, the 20th century is synonymous with trauma. The world wars claimed too many lives. They left deep scars on history, on science, on nearly every aspect of society. For those born after, such a world is unimaginable. For those who lived it, unspeakable Yet history warns us: He who does not know his past does not know his future.

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[1] Coppola, Francis Ford. *The Godfather*. (United States: Paramount Pictures. 1972).
[2] De Palma, Brian. *Scarface*. (United States: Universal Pictures. 1983).
[3] Reinhart, Matthew. *Game of Thrones*. (San Rafael: Insight Editions /HBO Entertainment, 2011-2019).
[4] *Star Wars Original Trilogy*. dir. Lucasfilm Ltd. 20th Century Fox (San Francisco: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1977-2019).
[5] Ginsberg, David. *How to be a Tyrant*. (United States: Netflix. 2021).

Even today, war, oppression, and authoritarianism persist. In some places, bombs still fall on villages where children have long stopped dreaming. Horror unfolds at every street corner. Families disappear overnight. Goodbyes are hurried. Starvation is an adventure. Life or survival?

Imagine a child who has never learned to smile because all he has ever been taught is to lower his gaze. To weigh every word. To measure every breath. Because a single wrong word, a misplaced glance, could make someone vanish. Him. Or worse—his mother.

Imagine cities reduced to ashes. Ghost trains rolling straight to slaughterhouses. Imagine the silence. Imagine a world where bearing a name was once a privilege.

When freedom dies, men do not always scream. Sometimes, they just get used to it. They learn to live without it. They adjust. And one day, without even realizing it, they forget things were ever different. Every dictatorship began with words. Words that justified hate. Words that made death acceptable, mechanical, inevitable.

We failed to understand power, and we paid the price in blood. Two world wars. Genocides. Continents torn apart. And yet, even today, the same mechanisms settle in the shadows. The faces of enemies change, but the method remains the same: divide, designate, exclude, condition.

Nothing is more crucial than understanding power and cultivating a critical mind. Without it, we are blind. Without it, we are defenseless. In a world that thrives on conformity, the ability to think independently is a necessity. Recognizing manipulation before it takes hold is the only way to resist, the only way to remain free.

But what exactly is power? How does it shape not only politics but also the way we think, speak and even remember? How do totalitarian regimes establish and maintain legitimacy? How do power structures manipulate narratives to maintain control? What role does fear play in consolidating authoritarian rule? And how do modern democracies use similar techniques, often in subtler ways?

This thesis, *The Architecture of Power*, examines how authoritarian and totalitarian systems construct, reinforce, and sustain power through ideology, propaganda, and fear. By dissecting historical and contemporary examples, it reveals the mechanisms by which power infiltrates the human mind, transforms perception, and ultimately dictates the boundaries of political and social reality. How do totalitarian regimes establish legitimacy and maintain control through ideology, propaganda, and fear?

The first chapter of this thesis explores the ideological foundations of power, examining how rulers construct legitimacy through belief systems. Max Weber's typology of authority provides a framework for understanding how different regimes justify their rule. Karl Marx, in contrast, highlights how ideology functions as a superstructure that justifies economic oppression. Hannah Arendt's concept of totalitarianism as a fictitious order further illuminates how these regimes rewrite history and redefine truth itself, ensuring that their version of reality becomes inescapable.

If ideology provides the foundation of power, propaganda is its chief architect. Chapter two of this thesis examines the marketing of authoritarianism, exploring how regimes craft

compelling narratives to sell their vision of the world. Every dictatorship needs a founding myth—a story that explains why the regime exists, why its authority is justified, and why its enemies must be destroyed. Carl Schmitt's theory of the enemy as the unifying force explains another key strategy of authoritarian regimes: the necessity of constructing an adversary. Propaganda is not just about messaging; it is about aesthetics. Walter Benjamin's analysis of fascist aesthetics in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* highlights how authoritarian regimes transform politics into mass spectacle. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* is a prime example.

While ideology and propaganda construct the scaffolding of power, fear is the cement that holds it together. Chapter three of this thesis explores ideology as a weapon of deshumanization analyze how totalitarian regimes, past and present, systematically dehumanize targeted groups to justify oppression, violence, and exclusion. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* lays out the blueprint for reducing enemies—particularly Jews—to subhuman status. Joseph Goebbels' propaganda machine relentlessly reinforced this narrative, using posters, films, and radio broadcasts to depict Jews as parasites, criminals, and existential threats. Michel Foucault's concept of biopower provides another perspective, illustrating how states regulate life itself, determining who is worthy of existence and who must be eliminated.

If power is the architecture of society, ideology is its foundation. Before examining how rulers manipulate narratives and enforce control, we must first understand the very nature of power itself. What makes a regime legitimate? Why do people obey? To answer

these questions, we turn to three thinkers whose theories on authority, ideology, and totalitarianism reveal the mechanisms that sustain domination—Weber, Marx, and Arendt.

Chapter 1: The DNA of Power

"*Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.*" Lord Aton[6]

This section explores how ideology functions as the foundation of totalitarian power. It includes definitions, theoretical perspectives, historical applications, and comparative analysis of different ideological frameworks.

1.1. Weber – How Legitimacy Sustains Power

"Power' (*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests."[7] The notion of power, in totalitarian regimes, is essential for understanding the dynamics structuring the state, the dominant ideology and the mechanisms of control exercised over society.

Max Weber distinguishes between domination (*Herrschaft*[8]) and power (*Macht*). The term domination describes the power that people who obey see as genuine. This difference is crucial because not all power involves legitimacy, but all domination does. Stability may be difficult for a government that depends on coercion without legitimacy. Indeed, a regime can achieve long-term control if it can successfully justify its reign. Therefore, totalitarian

[6] Christopher Lazarski. *Power Tends to Corrupt* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 76.
[7] Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 2009), 152.
[8] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 215.

governments create narratives that justify their authority and ingrain legitimacy into society.

Weber clarifies power further: he differentiates between power as authority and as coercion. His theory of domination (*Herrschaft*) investigates who is in charge and why people submit to it. In Weber's view, this is the belief in legitimacy (*Legitimitätsglaube*)[9], regardless of whether it comes from custom, government or the charisma of a leader. Resistance is socially and psychologically costly because, if citizens perceive their submission as a collective duty, they will stop believing in it and disobey.

He identifies three ideal types: rational-legal, traditional and charismatic authority. [10]

The first one, which he calls rational-legal authority, could be defined as 'bureaucratic[11]'. The authority derives here from the "impersonal order itself[12]" and rests on codified systems. The concept of responsibility is closely connected to this idea, especially applied in constitutional frameworks. For instance, Article 90 of the Italian Constitution establishes a form of legal immunity for the President of the Republic, stating: "*The President of the Republic is not responsible for acts carried out in the exercise of presidential duties, except in cases of high treason or violation of the Constitution.*" [13]

The second one, the traditional authority, rests on heritage and long-lasting customs. Monarchies, tribal rule, and sometimes religious institutions operate under this model.

[9] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 338.
[10] Ibid., 58.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Constitution of the Italian Republic, *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 1948, art. 90.

"The system of order is treated as having always existed and been binding.[14]" The order of such a system could be defined by three key elements. First, there are the concrete traditional rules that apply to the authority as much as to others. Then, there is the authority of people higher in the hierarchy or in other areas, such as a king who exercises judicial power. Finally, as long as it does not contradict these limits, the holder of the position has a margin of freedom where he can act without precise rules. Decisions can be taken on the basis of utility, *raison d'état*, ethical principles of justice, or even one's own whim.

Finally, there is what he defines as charismatic authority, arguably the most relevant to totalitarian regimes. In charismatic authority, the leader is obeyed because of the personal trust he inspires, as long as others simply believe in his charisma. He has qualities considered as heroic or exceptional, they seem almost like superpowers. The concept of 'charisma' ('the gift of grace') is taken from the vocabulary of early Christianity.[15] In their prime times, figures like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin captivated with their charismatic personality.[16] Their authority is based on emotion, conveyed through fiery speeches, mythical images, grandiose rituals, …

Yet charisma, as Weber perceptively observed, is a fragile currency[17]. If a charismatic leader loses proof of his special qualities for too long, he may believe his divine or heroic powers have left him. If he repeatedly fails—especially if his leadership cannot benefit his followers any longer—his authority is likely to fade. This reflects the true

[14] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 60.
[15] Ibid., 359.
[16] Ibid., 85.
[17] Ibid., 66.

meaning of the "gift of grace" in charisma. Rational-legal authority and traditional authority regulate everyday life through established rules. In contrast, charismatic authority is mainly recognized through the personal charisma of the leader. Its legitimacy depends on the recognition of this charisma and its ability to convince and satisfy its followers. However, it is important to note that this authority only lasts, as long as the belief in his charismatic power persists.

For charismatic power to be sustainable, it must adjust to economic restrictions and establish a fiscal regime. According to Weber, a major obstacle to charismatic authority is the need for it to be institutionalised.[18] This is called the 'routinisation of charisma' (Veralltäglichung des Charismas)[19], occurring when a leader's personal charm can no longer ensure stability. To survive, charismatic regimes have two choices: to set up bureaucratic structures and involve their sympathisers in state institutions, or to introduce dynastic succession arrangements.[20]

For example, following Lenin's death, Stalin strengthened his authority by incorporating it into the structure of the Communist Party. This converts revolutionary enthusiasm into a system of institutional control.[21] Similarly, the Nazi regime tried to perpetuate Hitler's charisma by integrating the leader's image into state institutions.[22] However, the more the charisma is bureaucratised, the more it risks losing its initial

[18] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 364.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 383.
[21] Hingley, R.F. "Joseph Stalin." Encyclopedia Britannica.
[22] " *Führerprinzip*". *Wikipedia*, The Free Encyclopedia.

emotional appeal.[23] It could create deep tensions between original supporters and emerging elites. This is similar to religious movements where followers become clergy (e.g. the Catholic Church[24]) or to states where supporters of the leader become civil servants (e.g. the Roman Empire[25]). The transition from charisma to a stable structure is often a source of conflict. Early followers find it difficult to tolerate the bureaucratisation of power. To maintain stability, it is therefore essential to legitimise the elites and secure the economic benefits of those close to the ruler.[26] The transmission of power is important: some leaders choose their own heir (like the co-emperors in Rome), others are appointed by their supporters (e-g. papal election[27]), or power is transmitted hereditarily (e.g. castes in India[28]).

In the end, sustainable organization is more efficient and stable than personal charisma. Totalitarian regimes, aware of this volatility, fuse the personality of the leader with the ideology itself. For example, Hitler's claim to authority was based on his positioning as the Aryan saviour, destined to fulfil a historic mission. Charisma and ideology thus form a symbiotic loop: one supports the other in a never-ending cycle of affirmation.

The domination, for Weber, is the establishment of a social order in which obedience becomes natural.[29] In totalitarian regimes, this is achieved through a combination of coercion and indoctrination. Individuals end up integrating and adopting

[23] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 364.
[24] Ibid., 334.
[25] Ibid., 357.
[26] Ginsberg, David. *How to be a Tyrant*. United States: Netflix. 2021.
[27] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 349.
[28] Ibid., 366.
[29] Ibid., 275.

the values of the regime. This is where ideology becomes most harmful because the domination is now justified and has a moral legitimacy.

Weber's insights into charismatic authority and ideological domination resonate with the lived realities of totalitarian regimes. The charisma of totalitarian leaders is used as a weapon to align individual aspirations with the objectives of the regime. In Nazi Germany, propaganda about racial purity and national renewal gave to citizens kind of a sense of mission that transcended politics. Similarly, Stalin, presented himself as the architect of the proletarian revolution, anchoring his authority in the collective mind. Weber clearly shows how this domination seemed inevitable, even legitimate, to those who suffered it[30]. Yet, his analysis would benefit from a better integration of the forms of resistance that trouble these systems.

Legitimacy is never a given. Even in totalitarian regimes, it can be eroded by economic crises, defeats or internal struggles. When a charismatic leader loses credibility, disillusionment sets in. Nazi Germany and the USSR masked these weaknesses with propaganda. The regime's failures ultimately exposed their illusory promises. Therefore, legitimacy depends also on the conditions that lead to resistance.

While Weber explains how legitimacy sustains power, Karl Marx shifts our focus to ideology as a tool of domination. For him, power is about how ideas shape economic and political structures. Used well, ideology ensuring that oppression appears natural.

[30] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 324.

1.2. Marx – How Ideology Justifies Domination

Marx's concept of ideology is a structural analysis of how social and economic conditions shape human thought. In *The German Ideology* (1846), he states that "the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas"[31], highlighting how ideology is deeply rooted in the material structures of power. Ideology could reconstruct the entire worldview of a population, making exploitation appear natural and unquestionable. As Franck Fischbach argues, Marx's theory of ideology is inseparable from his materialist conception of consciousness.[32] People do not generate ideas autonomously but develop them within the constraints of their social reality.

To understand how ideology justifies domination, it is necessary to examine three key mechanisms rooted in the Marxist perspective: the naturalization of inequality, the concealment of exploitation, and the internalization of subjugation. These processes ensure that the dominant class secure domination by shaping the very way people interpret their existence. By applying them, the dominant class doesn't even need to use brute force to subordinate the society to their rules.

If ideology is powerful, it is because of its ability to present social inequalities as natural.[33] Marx's base-structure model explains this process.[34] The economic base – which

[31] Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, [1845] 1970), 64.
[32] Fischbach, F. « L'idéologie chez Marx : de la « vie étriquée » aux représentations 'imaginaires' » *Actuel Marx,* n° 43(1), (2008), 12-28.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

determines who owns and controls production – shapes the superstructure (of institutions, laws, culture, and beliefs), which in turn serve to justify and reinforce the base. Here, dominant economic interests are reflected in political ideologies, legal-systems, and even moral frameworks.

This process can be seen in how capitalism presents private property as a fundamental right for example. The idea that wealth is earned through merit and hard work legitimizes extreme social inequalities. It frames them as natural outcomes of an individual effort. The dominant class imposes its worldview – with values like competition, self-reliance, or meritocracy – as universal truths. Alternative systems, like collectivism or wealth redistribution, are dismissed because judged impractical or even dangerous.

Fischbach argues that ideology creates a structural gap between how people experience their lives and how they interpret them.[35] This means that even those who suffer under an economic system may still accept its fundamental premises as they believe that inequality is a natural phenomenon. Ideology, in this sense, prevents the emergence of revolutionary consciousness by ensuring that social hierarchies appear necessary.

Marx goes beyond the idea that ideology simply distorts reality. He argues that it inverts it. With Engels, he describes ideology as a camera obscura, an old optical device that projects an inverted image of the real world. [36]This is particularly evident in his concept

[35] Fischbach, Franck. "L'idéologie chez Marx : de la 'vie étriquée' aux représentations 'imaginaires'." *Actuel Marx* 43, no. 1 (2008): 12–28.
[36] Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, [1845] 1970), 47.

of commodity fetishism, developed in *Capital* (1867).[37] Under capitalism, social relations between people are masked by relations between objects – products appear to have intrinsic value, obscuring the fact that their value comes from exploited labor. A worker, for example, would see his labor as a simple exchange of time for wages, not as source of profit extracted by their employer. The wage form of payment hides the fact that workers generate far more value than they receive in return. As long as workers see their employment as a fair trade, they will not challenge the system that keeps them subordinate.

One might be willing to extend this notion of concealment of exploitation to the economy in a more general context. For Emmanuel Renauld, contemporary ideology has evolved from an active justification to passive description.[38] This means that modern ideology present capitalism as inherently good and even as the only credible alternative. If inequality, precarity, and economic stability are facts of life, then resistance can only become unimaginable. This shift eliminates the need for direct ideological defence. By concealing exploitation and making capitalism in this light, ideology neutralizes opposition before it even emerges.

Domination is effective when it's internalized by the dominated class itself. For Marx, this is the ultimate function of ideology. No need of a domination imposed through violence. This concept is central to his idea of false consciousness[39]. The working class

[37] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, [1867] 1976), 164–65.
[38] Renault, Emmanuel. "L'idéologie comme légitimation et comme description." *Actuel Marx*, n° 43(1), 80-95.
[39] Eyerman, Ron. "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory." *Acta Sociologica* 24, no. 1/2 (1981): 43–56.

didn't perceive itself as an exploited collective because the mechanism was invisible. Infused with the value of meritocracy, individuals considered themselves competing one against the another, for success within the system. This is evident in the widespread belief that personal failure is due to individual reasons. For the state, it is our fault if we found ourselves in a difficult situation. Poverty is seen as a result of laziness or poor choices. The American Dream is an interesting illustration of this: it makes people believe that anyone can succeed through hard work, even when structural barriers make it nearly unattainable. As a result, instead of uniting to change unfair conditions, people blame themselves for their struggles. A France Culture podcast[40] discuss that even those who see themselves as independent thinkers are still shaped by the ruling class's worldview. Intellectuals may believe they are resisting dominant ideology, yet they often operate within the very conceptual frameworks that reinforce it. This raises a troubling question: can anyone truly escape ideology, or is it only possible through a compete transformation of society?

A state can suppress dissent through force, but isn't it far more effective to ensure that dissent never arises in the first place? This internalization of subjugation, of submission, is what makes ideology so powerful. Schools, religion, media, and law all contribute to this process, reinforcing ideas that keep the existing system intact. By shaping people's fundamental beliefs, ideology eliminates the possibility of revolutionary consciousness.

[40] Géraldine Muhlmann, France Culture, Avec Philosophie, Karl Marx, aujourd'hui ? *Épisode 2/4 : Le concept d'"idéologie", hier et aujourd'hui*, 30 janvier 2024, Isabelle Garo, Guillaume Fondu.

To sum up, Marx's theory of ideology reveals that domination is maintained fundamentally through the shaping of consciousness itself. [41] The ruling class has imposed its ideas in the society and do not need to constantly justify its power. Those ideas become common sense, which makes them harder to escape. Therefore, ideology functions through three mechanisms in the Marxist view. Firstly, ideology naturalizes inequality, making social hierarchies appear self-evident. Secondly, it masks exploitation, making it invisible, ensuring that economic relations are seen as voluntary. Finally, it prevents resistance by making individuals believe that their social position is a result of personal merit or failure. For Renault, ideology today no longer need relies on explicit justification.[42] In his critique of ideology, he discusses that it's more the elimination of alternatives. Using ideology, one can assert that capitalism is just, making it inevitable. If ideology shapes all consciousness, can we ever truly escape it? This question remains at the heart of any critical reflection on ideology today.

Marx's analysis of ideology lays the foundations for understanding how ideology justify domination. Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, goes further. In totalitarian regimes, ideology has become a force that completely replaces reality. Arendt's ideas reveal how totalitarian systems redefine truth, isolate individuals and erase the past in order to secure absolute power.

[41] Fischbach, Franck. "L'idéologie chez Marx : de la 'vie étriquée' aux représentations 'imaginaires'." *Actuel Marx* 43, no. 1 (2008): 12–28.
[42] Renault, Emmanuel. "L'idéologie comme légitimation et comme description." *Actuel Marx* 43, no. 1 (2008): 80–95.

1.3. Arendt – How Totalitarianism Redefines Reality

Hannah Arendt is one of the most brilliant and provocative political thinkers of the 20th century. Even if this section focuses primarily on her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951),[43] she furthers explores notions such as totalitarianism, power and authority in her other works. *The Human Condition* (1958)[44] and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) [45]investigate other horizons not addressed in this thesis relevant to power and its consequences. Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism examine the way in which power takes hold of the perception of reality. When conventional tyranny operates within the limits of reality, totalitarianism construct an ideological world so absolute, that facts, logic, spontaneity cease to exist independently of it.[46] For Arendt, totalitarianism is epistemologically transformative, and its real weapon is ideology. Ideology dissolves reality, replacing it with an autonomous and coherent system that governs one's actions and thoughts.

But how totalitarianism enforces power? How totalitarianism redefines reality? We will answer those key questions through three mechanisms: isolating individuals, replacing reality with ideology and merging ideology with terror. Power in totalitarian regimes therefore dissolves alternative sources of meaning, creates a closed system that dictates its own truth and makes violence a natural outcome of belief.

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[43] Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951)
[44] Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1958)
[45] Arendt, H. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (New York: Viking Press. 1963)
[46] Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 460–475.

For ideology to become total, individuals must be stripped of affiliations, histories and social structures that might anchor them in an alternative reality. This is why totalitarian movements do not rule over a class society but a mass.[47] No individuality, just a compact group of people, shapeless, without identity, a population with no internal distinctions other than those dictated by the regime. Arendt considers this to be one of the first radical actions of totalitarianism: "Totalitarian government always transformed classes into masses, supplanted the party system, not by one-party dictatorships, but by a mass movement."[48]

A class is rooted in material reality; a mass is an abstract and fluid entity, politically malleable and infinitely interchangeable. The destruction of social structures creates passive subjects. Totalitarianism cannot tolerate any independent source of reality. Institutions - whether political parties, trade unions or religious organisations - are alternative lenses through which people interpret the world. Their destruction means that the ideology is not in competition with other belief systems but is the only one left.

Thus, the first stage in the creation of totalitarian reality is the creation of an amorphous mass, without identity, which belongs to a single, totalising setting where ideology alone dictates reality.

The system established within a totalitarian regime is total, complete. It's a machine of pure logic that erases any need for empirical reality. In many ways, totalitarian ideology

[47] Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1951). 308.
[48] Ibid.

operates in a totally independent way of any external verification. [49]Arendt explains that "ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas."[50] This is where totalitarianism fundamentally redefines reality: it makes truth so irrelevant that it disappeared. Reality is no longer a set of facts, but a series of necessary steps dictated by the internal logic of the ideology.

Totalitarian ideologies present violence as inevitable. The Nazi ideology presents Jews as biologically destructive, meaning that their elimination is necessary. It's not an act of violence, it is only the way the things should be. If history is a racial struggle, extermination is a law of nature. [51]In Stalinist views, class struggle defines history, so that the elimination of 'class enemies', the execution of members of a 'dying class' is inevitable. In both cases, violence is neither discussed nor justified; it is seen as the natural order of things. This is what Arendt means when she states: "Whoever agreed that there are such things as 'dying classes' and did not draw the consequence of killing their members, or that the right to live had something to do with race and did not draw the consequence of killing 'unfit races,' was plainly either stupid or a coward."[52] Ideology is a framework that determines what is true and what must occur next in totalitarian regimes; it is not optional. It states that reality must follow it and makes no attempt to convince or persuade. Therefore, ideology takes the role of empirical reality with a system of logical

[49] Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1951). 460–470.
[50] Ibid., 470.
[51] Ibid., 438–440.
[52] Ibid., 438.

inevitabilities, which is the second major transition of totalitarianism. The truth is that which aligns with the internal coherence of the ideology; facts do not exist outside of it.

Terror. This is the ultimate tool of control in totalitarian regimes. Once ideology has redefined reality, regimes use terror to impose its beliefs. Violence is now logical, an organic necessity. Totalitarian terror does not punish crimes, it punishes existence.[53] You are not executed for what you have done, but for what you are. The SS not suppressed Jews not for what they did, but because the ideology saw them as a biological threat. The NKVD did not execute kulaks for their opposition to the regime, but because history had already condemned their class to extinction. In this system, guilt and innocence are meaningless concepts. If the ideology dictates that a person must be eliminated, then they will be. Death is not an injustice in totalitarian regimes, it's the only possible outcome, it's only the next step in the logical progression of ideology. Therefore, terror is the achievement of totalitarian ideology.

Perhaps the most devastating consequence of totalitarianism is when there is no more distinction between fact and fiction. Arendt writes: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exist."[54] Once ideology has completely rewritten reality, people no longer recognize contradictions. They

[53] Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1951). 460-70.
[54] Ibid., 474.

haven't been brainwashed, but how could they prove that they were witness of an event, if the radio and everything around them portrayed it differently? Totalitarianism is a total system which dissolves the conditions of independent reality itself. This, the ability of making ideology the conceivable world, is a lesson of power in itself. If totalitarianism teaches us something, it is that whoever controls the framework of reality controls everything.

But what next? We understood legitimacy, ideological domination and the reconstruction of reality. However, power is not sustained by coercion alone, it must be sold to the masses. Once a regime establishes legitimacy and embeds ideology in social economic structures, it must ensure that people obey and believe. This is where propaganda comes into play. If ideology provides the foundation of power, propaganda constructs its façade. Chapter 2 explores how authoritarian leaders build myths, craft enemies, and manipulate narratives to manufacture consent.

Chapter 2: Marketing 101 for Tyrants

"*Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.*" [55]

Abraham Lincoln

This section explores how totalitarian regimes construct and promote compelling ideological narratives to legitimize their rule. It includes theoretical frameworks, historical examples, and comparative analysis of different propaganda strategies.

2.1 Step 1: Build Your Myth

Every regime needs a story. The story of power. To succeed in the establishment of a strong and authoritarian regime, a tyrant should first learn how to sell the dream. A grand narrative justifying power, defining enemies and a promising, seductive vision of the future. From ancient emperors claiming divine descent to modern dictators casting themselves as saviors of the nation, history proves that mythmaking is a prerequisite for absolute rule. Myths are psychological anchors: they shape how entire societies interpret history, morality, national identity and so on. The Aryan supremacy of Nazi Germany or the class struggle of Soviet communism, founding myth are important in their ability to

[55] Abraham Lincoln, *Ouest France*, « Citation du Jour ».

impose power. They shape policies, mobilize population, justify repression. For a tyrant, a myth is the original story that unify people under a common belief system.

In his book *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson makes the case that a nation is a social construct held together by narratives. [56]"Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined," he explains. People's belief in nations is the reason they exist. They believe they share a common identity. A nation, according to Anderson, is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." [57]According to his idea, people's trust in shared identities is the reason why they are prepared to sacrifice their lives for countries have never even seen.

In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm counterbalances those ideas, arguing that these national narratives are rarely authentic inheritances.[58] They are only constructed to serve the needs of modern states. Monarchies, republics, and totalitarian regimes alike have invented traditions to create continuity with an often-mythical past. For Anderson and Hobsbawm, myths are purposefully created to support hierarchies of power. They create the illusion that political communities are a natural mechanism.

For Roland Barthes, myths serve to "depoliticize history". In *Mythologies* (1972), he exposes the fabrication of national myths by examining the way in which myths functions

[56] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.
[57] Ibid., 7.
[58] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-2.

as instruments of ideological control.[59] Myths take contingent, human-made structures and present them as natural and eternal. This process is a political mystification: "Myth is depoliticized speech". By transforming ideology into common sense, myths render their power invisible. The historical and ideological context behind ideas is removed, destroyed. Myths, however, do not completely eradicate politics; instead, they serve to reinforce established power systems while obscuring the political roots of some beliefs. From Napoleon's carefully curated iconography to Stalin's omnipresent portraits, the leader is mythologized as an almost superhuman figure whose authority is justified not through governance but through a perceived destiny. Barthes' insight is that such myths obscure the mechanisms of power.[60]

When it comes to reinforcing political myths, no medium has been more powerful than the cinema. Cinema is the only medium that can blend perfectly reality with fiction, transforming ideology into spectacle. One of the most convincing examples of the creation of myth through film is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a documentary that mythologizes Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime.[61] The film is meticulously constructed to portray Hitler as a messianic figure descending from the skies, despite being supposedly a report on the Nuremberg Rally. To construct a visual mythology, Riefenstahl employed gigantic compositions, meticulously orchestrated masses, and aerial viewpoints. A pseudo-

[59] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 142.
[60] Ibid., 143
[61] Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*, film (Germany: Reichsparteitag-Film, 1935).

religious spectacle was set up by the marching soldiers' accuracy, the glorification of the young, blonde SS leaders, and the deification of Hitler.

Similarly, Soviet socialist realism in film served as a vehicle for political myth. Joseph Stalin commissioned *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) by Sergei Eisenstein.[62] Ivan IV became a figure of divine right thanks to Eisenstein's use of strong lighting, heightened close-ups, and almost religious imagery, which subtly validated Stalin's own rule. Stalin's eventual disapproval of the film's second half, which focused on Ivan's despotism and paranoia, highlights the perils of mythmaking. When the story deviates from its original path, it threatens the very power it was meant to uphold.

Nazi Germany exploited the illusion of Aryan supremacy, one of the most damaging founding myths in history, to defend its racial policy, territorial expansion, and slaughter. This myth was an artificial ideology, not an organic tradition, created to promote social cohesiveness and defend exclusion. In order to convey the false impression of Aryan supremacy, the Nazis turned to cultural mythology, historical revisionism, and pseudo-scientific racial theories. Hobsbawm's concept of invented traditions applies directly here.[63]The Nazis borrowed selectively from the European history to create the illusion of a continuous Aryan lineage, stretching back to ancient civilizations. Germanic and Norse symbols, like the swastika, were reinterpreted to conjure an unbroken tradition of cultural and racial supremacy.

[62] Sergei Eisenstein, *Ivan the Terrible, Part I*, film (USSR: Mosfilm, 1944).
[63] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 5.

Nazi propaganda and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925) presented Jews, Slavs, and other marginalized groups as existential threats and portrayed the Aryan race as a biological and moral ideal.[64] This racial mythology became legally codified by the Nuremberg Laws (1935), which made exclusion a state policy.[65] A compelling myth creates a sense of purpose and belonging. However, a myth alone is not enough. Every successful regime also needs a villain—an external or internal enemy to rally the people against. Fear sharpens loyalty, justifies repression, and transforms ideological beliefs into action. This next section examines how authoritarian regimes carefully construct their enemies to reinforce their hold on power.

[64] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 325.
[65] The Nuremberg Laws, "Reich Citizenship Law," enacted September 15, 1935, in *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Vol. IV*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 1-2.

2.2 Step 2: Choose Your Villain

A great story needs a great villain. A revolution needs its counter-revolutionaries. A dictatorship needs its traitors. A crusade needs its heretics. We are taught from an early age that the conflict is what makes a story meaningful; without an opponent, there would be no journey, no fight, and hence no victory. Creating an enemy, real or fabricated, has long been a means for rulers to tighten their grip on power, especially in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The existence of an internal or foreign danger serves a number of political purposes, including promoting social cohesiveness under a common, if coercive, national or ideological identity, legitimizing the concentration of power, and justifying repression.

Authoritarian leaders frequently cast political dissidents, opposition figures, and marginalized communities as existential dangers to national unity or ideological purity. Branding them as traitors, counter-revolutionaries, or saboteurs allows regimes to justify censorship, surveillance, and outright suppression of dissent.

The Stalinist purges of 1936-1938, also known as the Yezhovshchina,[66] are a striking example. It was aimed at consolidating Joseph Stalin's power over the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and suppressing Leon Trotsky's residual influence within the Soviet Union.[67] The notorious allegations of counter-revolutionary activities led to mass

[66] "Great Purge", *Wikipedia,* The Free Encyclopedia.
[67] Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

executions and many forced confessions. Throughout the purge, the NKVD sought to reinforce control over civilians through fear, and frequently resorted to imprisonment, torture, violent interrogations and executions in the course of its mass operations.[68]

Believing that the current Communist leadership was leading the party, and China itself, in the wrong direction, Mao called on the nation's youth to purge the 'impure' elements from Chinese society and rekindle the revolutionary spirit that had led to victory in the civil war 20 years earlier and the formation of the People's Republic of China[69]. The use of informers and surveillance of citizens, as in the Stasi system in East Germany, has normalised suspicion and self-censorship.[70] Headed by a fervent Stalinist, Erich Mielke, the organisation recruited people with a history of communist activities. Some even had a dark past, having been members of the Dirlewanger Brigade of the Nazi SS. [71]

By fostering an atmosphere of fear, regimes keep opposition disorganized and politically unviable, strengthening the perception that stability is possible only under their rule. A frequent strategy of such regimes is the designation of an external enemy, rallying the population around nationalist or militaristic ideals. By depicting the nation as perpetually in danger, leaders can legitimize power consolidation, military expansion, and the repression of domestic dissent under the guise of safeguarding national security.

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[68] "Great Purge" *Wikipedia,* The Free Encyclopedia.
[69] "Cultural Revolution", *History.com*
[70] Jack Boulter, *First Class Comrades: The Stasi in the Cold War 1945-1961* (London: Times Books, 2025).
[71] Ibid.

By positioning themselves as the defenders of an external threat, authoritarian leaders can demand the loyalty of their people while accusing any internal dissent of treason and collaboration with the enemy. Nazi Germany portrayed Jewish people as an international cult orchestrating the downfall of the nation enabled not only anti-Semitic policies.[72] During the Cold War, propaganda was a central tool for both blocs. In the United States, fear of Communist infiltration led to aggressive policies such as McCarthyism, while the Soviet Union denounced Western imperialism to justify its own actions. From then on, Senator McCarthy became a tireless crusader against communism in the early 1950s, a period commonly referred to as the 'Red Scare'.[73]

In some cases, regimes use abstract threats like corruption, moral decline, or cultural degradation to consolidate power in lieu of an actual enemy. Leaders can use these narratives to justify continuous emergency measures, ongoing ideological policing, and an unending state of national vigilance. By defining enemies in vague and shifting terms, authoritarian rulers maintain indefinite justifications for political repression and social control.

For instance, theocratic regimes could use religious morality as a means of controlling social behaviors. The Islamic Republic's regime has been the main embodiment of the Iranian ideology for the last forty years. Its own vision, beliefs, and standards are dominated by a clerical hierarchy influenced by Iranian national identity and Shiite Islamic customs. [74]Western cultural influences are therefore portrayed as existential threats to

[72] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Nazi Propaganda," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*,
[73] "Red Scare," *History.com*.
[74] Marine Corps University Press. "An Iranian Worldview: The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic." *MCU Journal.*

national identity. Authoritarian populists often campaign against *decadence* and *elitism*, positioning themselves as protectors of traditional values. At the Tucker Carlson Summit in Dubai, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán addressed the issues of immigration, sovereignty and Hungary's place in a changing world order. By utilizing the fears of mass migration to justify illiberal policies he depicts refugees as an amorphous existential threat to Hungarian identity. [75]

The formation of ideological unity within a political community is often based on the identification of a common enemy. Carl Schmitt, a German legal and political theorist, argues that the principle of political cohesion is fundamentally built on the friend-enemy distinction. According to this viewpoint, which was introduced in *The Concept of Politics* (1932), existential conflicts that compel communities to unite against a perceived enemy are what define politics. [76]

The first lesson we can learn from Schmitt is that a political identity is defined by an enemy. He sees the enemy as an existential threat, a scourge that must be eliminated at all costs. For a political entity, such as a tyrant, to survive, it has to publicly oppose it. Schmitt makes a distinction, however: political unity does not derive solely from shared values; it is essential that it differentiates itself from the 'other'. [77]

[75] About Hungary. "PM Orbán: We Were an Island of Difference in a Liberal Ocean." *About Hungary*.
[76] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26–27.
[77] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 30.

In *Political Theology* (1922), Carl Schmitt writes "sovereign is he who decides on the exception". [78]A true political authority would thus have the capacity to modify the normal legal order in times of crisis. In a state of emergency, any action is legitimised, because in the face of a threat, any action is permissible. [79]To reign, it is essential to be the one who confronts the enemy, labels it, combats it and eliminates it. Whether real or invented, crises reinforce the leader's authority by convincing society to rally behind decisive action. Conflict is therefore an integral part of governance. To assert himself in a society as an indisputable leader, a tyrant needs strong governance and the ability to define and confront existential threats.

Schmitt states that political communities require homogeneity in order to function cohesively. Indeed, the identification of an enemy strengthens internal solidarity even more. [80]The purpose of this process is to determine who does and who does not belong to the group, to society. Excluding perceived adversaries - be they internal dissidents, external enemies, immigrants, ideological opponents, or abstract social threats - solidifies national and ideological bonds for a compact, more homogeneous society.[81]

Therefore, to conclude, the construction of political enemies is the fundamental strategy for running a powerful authoritarian regime. It doesn't really matter who these enemies are. They can be real or invented, internal to the country or external, abstract or material; to have a common enemy is to have a social glue. By manipulating fear, leaders

[78] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.
[79] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 6–7.
[80] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 46.
[81] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 51.

solidify their power, justify extreme measures and suppress dissent. For Carl Schmitt, a political entity is forged by conflict. Regimes that rely on manufactured crises use this dynamic to maintain their power. [82]

After defining its enemy, a regime needs to make sure that this narrative is not contested. Rewriting history, controlling the media, and inundating public life with ideologies are all essential approaches for influencing public opinion. The world created by propaganda is one in which the regime's interpretation of reality is the only one that exists. This section looks at how totalitarian governments use repetition, aesthetics, and emotional appeal to make their interpretation of reality unavoidable.

[82] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12.

2.3 Step 3: Control the Narratives

" A lie told once remains a lie, but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth."

Joseph Goebbels

Propaganda: "dissemination of information-facts, arguments, rumours, half-truths, or lies- to influence public opinion". [83]This Britannica definition gives us the first glimpse into the step 3: control the narratives. Propaganda in totalitarian regimes completely changes people's perception of reality by embedding ideology in their minds. What is propaganda? How does it work? Why is it a truly destructive weapon?

In his book *Propaganda: The Formation of Mens Attitudes* (1973), Jacques Ellul explains that propaganda is a tool used by totalitarian regimes.[84] It is an inherent aspect of mass societies as a whole. He suggests that propaganda does not simply change people's opinions in the short term, but rather constantly influences public perceptions. It gradually shapes people's views over time. Propaganda is generally seen as specific and targeted messages, as is the case in our society today. Ellul adds that its power lies in its pervasive presence in various aspects of society, whether in education, the media or cultural norms. It permeates our everyday lives, it is omnipresent. Propaganda encourages conformity and limits our perception of reality to a single plausible interpretation. This means that it controls what is true, rewrites it and delivers it on whatever terms it wants. It's as if truth were a factory product somehow.

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[83] Britannica, s.v. "Propaganda".
[84] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 6–7.

In his book *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2008), Walter Benjamin warned against the danger of turning politics into an aesthetic spectacle that appeals to the senses and emotions rather than inspiring genuine political commitment.[85] Instead of encouraging genuine political engagement, fascist aesthetics replaces genuine participation by the population with a mere performance. This gives the masses the illusion that they are an integral part of political life, while keeping them powerless.

Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which has already been mentioned, was a formidable propaganda tool.[86] By filming the events of Nuremberg, the history of the regime was completely changed in the eyes of both supporters and political opponents. People saw grandeur and power, and wanted to take part. Everything seemed grandiose. The beginning of the film presents Hitler almost as a messiah, a divine figure. At the other end of the camera, he is a revered leader with qualities that stand both among and above the crowd. The formations of people, the large banners and the low-angle shots all help to project an image of order and unity and convey a sense of unquestionable authority. This visual representation establishes a language that leaves no room for uncertainty and commands unshakeable belief.

[85] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 20–22.
[86] Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* (Berlin: Reichsparteitag-Film, 1935).

On the USSR side, propaganda was just as important, but it adopted a different strategy. Instead of focusing on a single leader, as the Nazis did, Stalin's propaganda emphasised the united power of the people. [87]It presented workers, soldiers and farmers as actors in the progress of society. Socialist realism, the style in vogue in the Soviet Union at the time, presented communism as an idea, an inevitable path for the future. The emblematic wartime poster "*The Motherland Calls*" from 1941 illustrates this perspective by depicting a figure filled with anger rather than despair. The nation is calling on its citizens to act, to assume their historic civic responsibilities. Unlike the depiction of Hitler as a leader, artworks from this period often placed Stalin among the common people to emphasise his role as a guide rather than a dictator. In both cases, aesthetics played a role in reinforcing ideological beliefs and shaping a narrative in which government power was perceived as absolute and unchallenged.

Benjamin compares fascism and communism. He draws a critical distinction between fascism, which "aestheticizes politics," and communism, which "politicizes art."[88] Ultimately, authoritarian regimes have several techniques at their disposal for using aesthetics to shape public perception. The fascist regime emphasised display to mythologise politics, while communism integrated ideology into artistic works to promote the principles of the state. The use of aesthetics aims to display authority and thus influence the way people perceive it.

[87] Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 45.
[88] Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 25.

Totalitarian governments go beyond using symbolic visuals to shape narratives. They aim for total control over mass communication channels as well. During Goebbels' time heading the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Germany before 1939 ensured that no conflicting versions of reality could surface by molding newspapers and radio broadcasts to align with the states ideologies. [89]It was that by 1939 in Germany more than 80% of newspapers were under direct state influence and radios were strategically distributed to limit public access, to only government endorsed content. Goebbels famously compared the media to "an instrument that allows the government to influence public opinion " reflecting his belief that information should not act as a constraint, on authority but rather as a tool to amplify it. [90]

Ellul emphasises on the influence of propaganda in creating an environment where ideological messages are omnipresent. [91]Repetitive exposure plays a role in this mechanism. The power of propaganda is to render particular narratives indisputable. The message is not so important if its assertion is solid. This is why totalitarian propaganda functions through cultural production, education and even language itself, as well as through official statements. By saturating the public sphere with its aesthetic and ideological vision, the regime ensures that dissenting perspectives are suppressed and thus rendered unthinkable. Gobbels understood that control is most powerful when it bypasses rational analysis and appeals directly to feelings. [92]To instil an instinctive belief in the

[89] David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.
[90] Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 54.
[91] Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 17.
[92] Goebbels quoted in David Welch, *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations* (London: Routledge, 2001), 38.

regime, direct appeal to the emotions is therefore more effective than logical reasoning and factual debate.

It is important to note that the defeat of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union does not mean that propaganda has disappeared. In today's societies, it takes a different form. Campaigns and social networks, the mass media continue to influence public opinion. In How Propaganda Works, Jason Stanley shows that propaganda is anchored in the functioning of all political systems, including democracies.[93] Indeed, democracies frequently use 'propaganda undermining' tactics that hijack conversations while giving the impression of open discussion.

He points out that contemporary political visuals function like totalitarian symbolism, by employing meticulously crafted appearances and emotionally charged discourse to effectively shape public opinion. [94] In fact, today's political landscape is dominated by viral spectacles where media representation and digital publishing determine which stories get attention. Social networks play an increasingly large role in shaping ideological beliefs. Algorithm-based content curation techniques are put in place, favouring specific perspectives while systematically discarding others.[95] Modern propaganda no longer imposes a singular vision of the world, as governments did in the past. Instead, it fosters an atmosphere in which specific narratives gain prominence while others are marginalised and forgotten.

[93] Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 112.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 134.

The danger of propaganda for Ellul is its invisibility.[96] If we pay attention, we don't really realise the mechanisms of social media. No matter how much we use them every day, the content that reaches us is controlled without our objection or even questioning. Contemporary propaganda focuses on directing the flow of information to support ideological positions. [97]In the 20th century, information was censored; in the 21st century, it is flooded with information, making it impossible to fully analyse. While the methods have evolved over time, the basic principle remains constant. Aesthetics serve as a means of influence by shaping people's beliefs and shaping their perception of what is achievable.

Propaganda is a destruction weapon. Use it well and your regime will be even more powerful. Propaganda influences political beliefs and shapes our perception of reality. Through repetition and emotional triggers, totalitarian regimes create another world, another truth[98]. Propaganda ensures that opposing viewpoints are silenced. The manipulation of aesthetics has played a major role in consolidating ideological domination within totalitarian regimes, without the public really being aware of it.

Propaganda prepares the ground, but fear seals the deal. Beyond controlling narratives, authoritarian regimes must create a climate where resistance feels impossible. The next chapter delves into how fear is weaponized—how language, institutions, and policies systematically dehumanize groups, paving the way for violence and repression.

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[96] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 17.
[97] Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 22.
[98] David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.

From Nazi rhetoric to biopolitical control, we explore how regimes manufacture monsters to justify atrocities.

Chapter 3: Manufacturing Monsters

This section will analyze how totalitarian regimes, past and present, systematically dehumanize targeted groups to justify oppression, violence, and exclusion. Dehumanization transforms ideological opponents or minority groups into existential threats, creating a climate where persecution is actively encouraged.

3.1 The Nazi Rhetoric Playbook

There is no such thing as power without trying to understand and analyse the most dangerous book in the world and in the 20th century. Banned from Germany for almost 70 years, it made its appearance again in December 2015. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1943) was released with prefaces and academic commentaries, in an attempt to make its reading, still painful for some, more tolerable. Nevertheless, the book's critics are almost unanimous: the text is fundamentally badly written, boring, unoriginal, uninteresting and even described as ridiculous by some scholars. But how did the unreadable Mein Kampf manage to become an icon, a historical bestseller?

Adolf Hitler is in prison after the failed Beer Hall Putsh attempt when he begins his autobiography. For Albrecht Koschorke, the effectiveness of his manifesto lay in its message on two levels. Indeed, in his *On Hitler's Mein Kampf: The Poetics of National Socialis*m (2018), he wrote that, for the masses, Mein Kampf fuelled social hatred and provided a scapegoat, and that for insiders, it served as a manual for gaining power through

propaganda[99]. Hitler's main aim was to appeal to supporters interested in the *Machart von Macht*, in other words, the way in which power is constituted. For the smallest circle of his supporters, he provided a manual. This ties in with Hannah Arendt's observation that totalitarian regimes are organised on the model of secret societies and operate according to a system characterised by subtle gradations of participation.

"All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to. Consequently, the greater the mass it is intended to reach, the lower its purely intellectual level will have to be. […] The more modest its intellectual ballast, the most exclusively it takes into consideration the emotions of the masses, the best proof of the soundness of a propaganda campaign, and not success in pleasing a few scholars or young aesthetes."[100]

It clearly states the thesis that propaganda is a means to the end. Hitler's denigration of the masses is yet another proof of his hatred. Propaganda is meant to convince "*everyone that the fact is real"*; consequently, it precludes debate about the merits of the matter - or lack of them. The *"precondition' of propaganda*, according to Hitler, is a *'fundamentally subjective and one-sided attitude... towards every question it deals with."*[101]

The struggle referred to in the book's title was in fact directed against multiple enemies: Judaism, Marxism, the press and parliamentary democracy. In the end, Hitler's anti-Semitic purpose was strictly in line with his principle that "*the art of all true leaders*

[99] Albrecht Koschorke, *On Hitler's Mein Kampf: The Poetics of National Socialism*, trans. Erik Butler (New York: Zone Books, 2018), 45.
[100] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 180-181.
[101] Ibid. 180.

of the people of all times consists above all in concentrating the people's attention on a single adversary, not allowing it to be dispersed" [102]. He even goes so far as to write "*the energetic cosmopolitan that I had been until then became a fanatical anti-Semite"*[103] but also "*I ended up hating them"* [104] in *Mein Kampf*.

According to Adolf Hitler, *"the essential condition for the formation and maintenance of a state is that there should be a feeling of solidarity on the basis of an identity of character and race*"[105]. This concept justifies hatred of the Jew, since it is the offspring of a foreign people. He distinguishes between two races*: "Always [a state] was [founded] by the self-preservation instinct of the race, whether this expressed itself in the realm of heroism or in that of cunning and intrigue; in the first case, the result is Aryan states of work and culture, in the other, parasitic Jewish colonies."*[106]

Hitler established a hierarchy of races. First came the Aryan race, which was seen as the purest, most superior and noble human race. Next come the races 'to be educated', including the Latins, the Japanese, and so on. Hitler then placed in third place the races 'to be reduced to servitude', i.e. Slavs, Asians and Blacks. Finally, the races 'to be exterminated', including Jews and Gypsies. Mein Kampf draws on the theory of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, a French aristocrat, and his book *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*[107]. Gobineau argued that humanity consists of three races: yellow, black and

[102] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 122.
[103] Ibid. 71.
[104] Ibid, 69.
[105] Ibid. 152-153.
[106] Ibid. 155.
[107] Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915).

white.[108] Of these three, only the white race, because of its 'Aryan' elements, possessed the capacity for high culture.

To evoke the Jews, Hilter sometimes uses plague-related metaphors ("*It was a plague, a moral plague, worse than the ancient black plague*"[109], *"The bacillus dissolving humanity, Jews and more Jews"*[110]), and animal vocabulary ("*troop of rats*"[111]; "*copycat monkey*"[112]; "*these black-haired parasites*"[113]). Hitler resorts to the most banal clichés, presenting the Jew as a devious being who wields the art of lies and perfidious dialectic: *"The means he uses to try to break such bold but upright souls is not a fair fight, but lies and slander"*.

In his book, Hitler presents himself as a hero, the saviour of the nation. It is not uncommon for political figures to write their biographies or autobiographies either before or during their careers. The aim would be to show themselves in the best light and to create a credible basis for managing their duties in the most effective way. Hitler wrote: '*He who wishes to be the leader bears, with supreme authority, and without limits, the heavy burden of total responsibility. [...] Only a hero can assume this function. Human progress and civilisation are not the product of the majority, but rest solely on the genius and activity of the individual*[114]*.'*

[108] Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915). 155.
[109] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 64.
[110] Ibid. 126.
[111] Ibid. 302.
[112] Ibid. 310.
[113] Ibid. 558.
[114] Ibid, 344.

In a letter to Karl Jaspers dated 1946, Hannah Arendt complained that the crimes of the Nazis were unprecedented and so far from the ordinary human categories of sin, guilt and responsibility that they "*explode the limits of law; the guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems"*. [115]The final chapter of Mein Kampf, devoted to the right of self-defence, reveals even more violence and already hints at an embryonic idea of the Final Solution:

'If, at the beginning and in the course of the war, only once had twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrews corrupters of the people been held under the poison gas which hundreds of thousands of our best German workers of all origins and professions had had to endure at the front, the sacrifice of a million men would not have been in vain[116].'

The Nazi regime's rhetoric turned entire populations into existential threats, making their destruction appear necessary. However, dehumanization is not just a product of speech—it is embedded in institutions, policies, and even science. Michel Foucault's theory of biopower provides a framework for understanding how modern states regulate life itself, determining who is worthy of existence and who is expendable.

[115] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 344.
[116] Ibid. 677-678.

3.2 Biopower in Action – Controlling Population

How do states manage populations through discourse? Let's introduce the notion biopower. Michel Foucault develops the theory of biopower in *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1* (1978). [117]For Foucault, dehumanization is embedded in institutional discourse and state regulation. His theory of biopower represents a significant shift in the forms of power that operate within societies. Sovereign power, the ability to give life or take it, gives way to biopower which targets the administration and enhancement of life.

According to Foucault, biopower is a "*power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations* ." [118]With biopower, we transition from a repressive power, which forces submission through punishment, to have a productive power that builds and regulates life. Earlier models of governance that relied on coercion no longer apply since biopower weaves control into daily existence and makes regulation seem both natural and self-imposed.

Biopower functions at two levels: the discipline of individual bodies (*anatomo-politics*) and the regulation of populations (*biopolitics*). [119]The former regulates individual conformity to societal norms through schools, prisons, hospitals etc., while the latter

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[117] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 136.
[118] Ibid., 139.
[119] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 242.

manages the health, demographics and security of populations through public health measures, demographic analysis, and economic planning. [120]This dual structure corresponds with the development of modern states and capitalism, where power is exercised not only through prohibition but also through the incitement and regulation of behaviours. As populations expanded and industrialization demanded greater efficiency, systems became more sophisticated to monitor and improve life so that they could reorder the social structure to conform to economic and political objectives.

The emergence of the biopower according to Foucault takes place in the historical context. [121]From the medieval period, when sovereign power was defined by the king's right to take life, power began to shift from taking life to controlling it. With the Protestant Reformation and the development of the modern state, rulers took control of the population. Statistical norms and bureaucratic regulations replaced the moral authority of the Church (*raison d'État*). [122]The state took on the responsibility for both the discipline of individual and the welfare of the collective and shaped norms around health, productivity, and reproduction. The advent of statistics and the practice of census-taking also helped to institutionalize this shift as states gained the ability to precisely categorize and manage their populations.

This transformation did not eliminate sovereign power but rather incorporated it into new technologies of governance. As Foucault states, "*deduction has tended to be no longer the*

[120] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 243.
[121] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 141.
[122] Ibid., 145.

major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it". [123]Therefore, contemporary governance is based on both juridico-discursive tradition of law and punishment, but also on the biopolitical approaches that aim to enhance the population's vitality. Surveillance plays a crucial role in biopolitical regimes and ensures compliance through the awareness of being watched rather than through overt force. [124]

An extreme form of the biopower can be seen in eugenics policies of Nazi Germany. [125]The Nazi racial hygiene policies attempted to carry out biopolitical principles through the use of forced sterilization and euthanasia on those considered genetically or socially unsuitable. *The Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring* that was enacted in 1933, required compulsory sterilization which led to the forced sterilization of over 400,000 people.[126] Biopower in Nazi Germany took the form of eugenics which, combined with ideological extremism, produced a terrifying potential when applied to a racially pure and healthy national body. Pseudo-scientific claims of genetic superiority and the necessity of racial hygiene were used to justify these policies which showed how biopolitical techniques can be used to support exclusionary and violent practices.[127] The Nazi eugenics program went further than sterilization. Under the *Aktion T4 program*, which started in 1939, the state murdered people with disabilities in the name of improving

[123] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 246.
[124] Ibid., 250.
[125] Robert N. Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 110.
[126] Ibid., 122.
[127] Sheila Faith Weiss, *The Nazi Symbiosis: Human Genetics and Politics in the Third Reich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 76.

the genetic health of the nation.[128] This program served as a precursor to the broader genocidal policies of the Holocaust, in which entire populations were subjected to biopolitical calculations of their right to life on the basis of racial and genetic criteria. Nazi ideology used racial categorization to enhance the Aryan race while eliminating those considered threatening to its purity.

Nazi biopower functioned as a mechanism for both social control and mass extermination and thus serves as a prime example of how biopolitical rationality can lead to *thanatopolitics* – the governance of death. [129]

The intellectual foundations of the Nazi eugenics policies were not peculiar to Germany. The earlier eugenics movements in the United States and Britain also influenced Germans and supported coercive sterilization to enhance national health. German scientists attended U.S. eugenics conferences and read American eugenics literature that included sterilization laws.[130] The *Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics,* which received partial funding from American philanthropic organizations, became a central institution in the development of Nazi eugenics policies. [131]

[128] Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance: 'Euthanasia' in Germany c. 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 150.
[129] Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederick Trump (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 53.
[130] Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47.
[131] Sheila Faith Weiss, *The Nazi Symbiosis: Human Genetics and Politics in the Third Reich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 112.

A similar use of biopower emerged in the Soviet Union during the use of psychiatry as a means of political suppression. During the mid-20th century, Soviet psychiatry became a tool for political repression. Mental illnesses like "sluggish schizophrenia" were used to silence political dissidents.[132] Soviet psychiatrist Andrei Snezhnevsky promoted the diagnosis which enabled the institutionalization of people who were primarily challenging to the state. While the Nazi eugenics program aimed to eliminate population through biological eugenics, the Soviet Union employed biopower through the approach of making dissent a mental disease. The psychiatric hospitals, known as *psikhushkas,* operated as *de facto* prisons that forced dissidents to take medication and undergo electroshock therapy, among other forms of torture, to subdue them. The Soviet state used medical framing of political opposition to justify the imprisonment of many people in the name of public health. [133]This practice shows how biopolitical mechanisms can be used in various political contexts to control populations and discipline individuals.

The logic of Nazi biopolitics reached its peak when people were classified as *Lebensunwertes Leben* (life not worth living). [134]The programs of forced sterilization, euthanasia and eventually genocide were presented as the need to protect the nation's health. This application of the biopower shows how governance of life can lead to mass elimination. According to Foucault, "*if genocide is indeed the dream of modern power, this is not because of the recent return to the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated*

[132] Benjamin Zajicek, *Soviet Psychiatry and the Politics of Mental Illness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 189.
[133] Ibid., 193.
[134] Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 40.

and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of the population". [135]The policies of the Nazi government demonstrated this dynamic as they used scientific rhetoric combined with state violence to pursue their objectives.

Foucault's analysis and his theory of biopower is revelant to understand how state can control population through ideology. Biopower organizes and produces form of life, it repress the population in an almost invisible and secrative way. States and institutions, along with scientific discourses, shape human behaviour and social norms. The recognition of biopower's existence enables the possibility of resistance which Foucault calls counter-conducts through which people and groups contest dominant norms and practices to change the very way life is governed.

Through ideology, propaganda, and fear, regimes construct a system of control so complete that reality itself is rewritten. The case studies examined in this thesis reveal that authoritarianism is not just about force—it is about shaping perception, manufacturing consent, and ensuring that power appears both natural and inevitable. But history warns us: power is never absolute. Legitimacy erodes, propaganda fails, and fear eventually turns on its masters. The final section of this thesis reflects on the lessons history offers us and the ongoing relevance of these mechanisms in today's world.

[135] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 256.

Conclusion

The study of power is an ongoing discipline. What seemed to be a historical analysis of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century has turned out to be a deeper question: has power really changed in nature, or has it simply adapted to new environments? Far from being relegated to the archives of history, the strategies of subjugation analysed in this thesis - propaganda, terror, control of resources and the engineering of consent - continue to structure contemporary relations of domination. The legacy of totalitarianism ultimately did not disappear with the collapse of the Third Reich or the USSR. It has been recomposed in forms of power that are more diffuse, more insidious and therefore more effective.

While the regimes studied in this thesis were based on a centralised bureaucratic infrastructure and a command economy, the new systems of domination are based on decentralised networks and an information economy. Michel Foucault anticipated this with his concept of biopower: modern forms of governance produce behaviour, desires and norms. The centre of power is no longer necessarily the state, but digital platforms. They modulate public discourse, control access to information and transform opinion into a malleable product. Where totalitarian propaganda used the printing press, radio and cinema to forge a collective imagination, social network algorithms have taken over, replacing crude censorship with an invisible hierarchy of content. Walter Lippmann spoke of the

manufacture of consent in modern democracies; today, consent is calculated and programmed.This automation of ideological control is unprecedented. Unlike the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, where the state had to actively repress dissent, digital systems can make dissent technically marginal. Non-conforming discourse is rendered invisible, information bubbles become cognitively fragmented, and public space is saturated by dominant narratives. The issue is to make it impossible for an alternative to emerge, and not just to prohibit it.

Karl Marx's and Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of capital - whether economic, cultural or symbolic - have a contemporary application here. If Marx explained that relations of production structure ideologies, then whoever controls digital infrastructures and data flows controls forms of thought. The Silicon Valley has become an organ of supranational power, reorganising economic and political dynamics on a global scale.

Under Nazism and Stalinism, the state monopolised production, directed industries and organised the exploitation of resources in an autarkic and militarised logic. Today, the major technology platforms exercise equivalent control, but without state constraint. They write the rules without being the guarantors, and influence governance without ever being elected. They own the communication infrastructures, the databases on individuals and the systems for monetising attention. By utilizing these levers, they exercise structural and asymmetrical power, establishing a system where dependency is the standard and state sovereignty is supplanted by algorithmic sovereignty.

Thomas Hobbes suggested that people are willing to give up some of their freedoms in exchange for security. Meanwhile, Hannah Arendt demonstrated that totalitarian regimes use fear to manipulate and control individuals. But this dynamic did not end with the fall of the historical totalitarian regimes. The war on terror has generated an unprecedented architecture of control, in which the state of emergency has become a permanent mode of governance. From mass surveillance justified by the fight against radicalisation to the criminalisation of dissident discourse on the pretext of national cohesion, the control logics of the twentieth century have been integrated into modern democratic structures.

The security infrastructure of the 21st century no longer relies solely on the police and the army, but on sensors, databases and predictive programmes. If Orwell envisioned a society where Big Brother surveilled each individual, the current situation is even more sinister. We ourselves monitor our behaviour, aware that our digital tracks are recorded, analysed and exploited. This is no longer coercive power, but anticipatory power, where fear of surveillance produces self-censorship even before repression is necessary.

While this thesis has shown that modern power is more sophisticated, more ubiquitous and more elusive than its past incarnations, it should not lead to fatalism. Because if the history of totalitarianism teaches us the persistence of the mechanisms of domination, it also reveals the infinite ingenuity of resistance. Faced with the monopolisation of information resources by private companies, technological counter-powers are emerging: cryptography, decentralised networks, open-source initiatives. Faced with the capture of public debate by algorithms, alternative ways of disseminating information are now developing.The totalitarian societies of the past sought to wipe out

dissent, but never succeeded in doing so completely. Even today, resistance requires a mastery of cognitive tools, the ability to analyse control mechanisms and to formulate viable political alternatives.

Power never dies. It changes form, migrates from one system to another, adopts the language of its time and the tools of its modernity. It knows when to show itself and when to hide. It doesn't need to be violent if it can be accepted. It doesn't need to be seen if it can be believed. History has shown that no ideology, no structure of control, no repressive force is eternal. Yet power itself remains. It is neither a man, nor a party, nor a state, but a fluid network that reconfigures itself whenever an old model breaks down. It adapts, perfects itself, becomes less crude, more rational, more subtle - and it is precisely in this subtlety that it finds its effectiveness.

Yesterday, propaganda was a hammer, today it is an undercurrent, a silent algorithm, a binary choice presented as self-evident. Yesterday, repression was a roundup; today it is an invisible ban, a social note, an exclusion from digital space. Yesterday, power was an authority, today it is a prism - the one through which we perceive the world without even realising that it distorts our view.But here's the flaw: power, however intelligent, always forgets one thing - the unexpected. History doesn't move in a straight line, it's made up of ruptures, unexpected shocks, sudden fractures. The Roman Empire thought it would last a thousand years, but fell in a generation. The Berlin Wall seemed indestructible, but collapsed overnight. Power calculates, anticipates, controls; but it can never fully foresee the moment when an individual, a group, a people decides to stop playing the game.

Every system has its flaws, and every form of domination is eventually challenged. Sometimes all it takes is a question that wasn't meant to be asked. An individual who refuses to remain silent. A simple refusal that, when repeated, becomes a movement. The illusion of total power is just that: an illusion. It can structure, it can impose, but it cannot extinguish everything. So what's left to do? See. Understand. Deconstruct. Never forget that every edifice of domination is based on shared beliefs - and that these beliefs can be overturned. Power knows how to adapt. But history proves that human intelligence is also capable of breaching the most imposing fortresses.

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