



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

The Totalitarian Experience

A Conversation with Tzvetan Todorov, CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research), Paris

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OCTOBER 6, 2011

OWENS: You grew up behind the Iron Curtain. How has this influenced your work?

TODOROV: Very strongly, but in different periods of my life, it influenced it in different ways. I was twenty-four when I left Bulgaria. This means that I had completed my university studies, I had the equivalent of a master's degree. Before that I spent five years at the University of Sofia studying Slavic philology, that is, Slavic languages and literatures—Bulgarian, Russian, and that of other Slavic countries. The study of literature in Bulgaria had to be conducted within a strict ideological framework. Literature was supposed to illustrate the major tenets of the communist ideology that we were living in, and so the interpretation of all writers was reduced in a way either to illustrating the communist idea, or to contradicting it, in which case they deserved a more or less severe criticism.

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My first reaction to this was to get interested in those aspects of literary works, of texts, which could escape from any ideological control. That's how I became a "formalist" in my youth - as a reaction to the obligation to refer constantly to ideology. I tried to grasp the meaning of the text by studying the grammatical structure of its sentences, the choice of words, the structure of narrative, of metaphor, of various literary devices, all things that could be described without any mention of ideological components. This was my professional profile at the time I was leaving Bulgaria, and it remained so for maybe ten more years. My original intention was to spend just one year in France, but this year became three years because I decided to take a doctorate, sort of a Ph.D.; after that I married and my life became a French life instead of a Bulgarian life, the way it is now.

In France I tried to learn more about the formal structure of literary works, but that wasn't easy. In fact I discovered that French literary studies—because this

was the larger framework of my interests—were not concerned with this formal perspective either, not any more than the Bulgarian. This was not for any ideological reasons, but because of the dominance in France of a sort of biographical and sociological approach to literature. The standard expression was “life and work,” when you were writing a thesis, you had to study all the events of the author’s life, everything that was written on him, all the versions of his works. This approach didn’t pay much attention to the internal interpretation of meaning, within the work itself. For a certain number of years, my orientation was an attempt to remedy to that lack.

My very first work was an anthology of the Russian formalists. The Russian formalists were a group of literary critics and scholars in the years just before and after the revolution, in a time of a relatively great political freedom. So, in a way, I felt similar to them, fifty years later. They were interested in the formal aspects of literary works, which allowed them in the years after the revolution to avoid any political engagement. I selected and translated their writings and the book was well received in France. At that time, there was an intellectual wave or a fashion of structuralism, and this analysis of literature appeared as an ingredient of a structuralist world view and way of approaching study in humanities or social sciences.

After ten or fifteen years living in France, my whole being was transformed, of course, because of the many differences in the two situations, and I realized one day that there was no reason why in confronting literary works I should exclude everything concerning values, ideas, and meaning. At that point I started changing my attitude, using what I had learned earlier as a tool, but no longer as an aim. I became interested in a certain number of topics which in different ways were still related to my Bulgarian identity, but again, in a rather indirect way.

One of them was the very fact that I was raised in one context—geographical, cultural, ideological—which was Eastern Europe, the Balkans, an earlier part of the Ottoman Empire, with cultural influences coming from that past, but also belonging to the Slavic tradition, with a major influence from Russian literature. And now I was living in France, in Paris, which was “the capital of arts and letters,” as it was perceived in Bulgaria, and the French had different idols, different gods that they were praying to. I experienced a split within myself that all immigrants know about: I became simultaneously Bulgarian and French, and was condemned to a permanent silent translation, not so much between two languages, but between two cultures. So one of the topics of my research became the tension between the unity of mankind and the variety of cultures in which we are all necessarily immersed.

The first work I did in this context was no longer about the Russian formalists, but about the conquest of America. This event, especially in its early stages, became an amazing encounter of two parts of humanity that had totally ignored each other, and the outcome were not only millions of victims but also some splendid documents—from the very beginning, at the end of the 15th and especially in the 16th century—in Spanish and in native tongues. It was a wonderful example for my topic! By that time I had been hired in the CNRS,

that marvelous French scientific institution devoted to pure research, which allowed me to choose freely the topics of my work. I immersed myself in this subject and spent three years working on it. I went to Mexico for a series of lectures on another subject, but managed to learn some Spanish, enough to read the documents, and had discussions with some specialists. The study of the conquest and the immediate aftermath of the conquest became for me something like a parable of the encounter of cultures. I wasn't talking about myself, I wasn't interested in autobiography, but in a way this biographical bias was behind the words, was what motivated my work.

In the following years, there was another change. I talk about it in this little booklet, *The Totalitarian Experience*. The contrast between my two worlds, the Bulgarian and the French, was not only cultural, it was also political. This brought me to another major topic; I became more and more interested in totalitarianism—the world in which I was raised and which was also a part of myself in ways that I wasn't sure to know well. The fall of the Berlin Wall acted as a kind of liberation for me. Maybe the regime had to stop existing in the real world so that I could deal with it clearly enough in my mind. While it was alive, it was hard for me to step outside of it, although I had lived already for twenty-five years in France. In a way its existence inhibited me.

As soon as the Wall fell, I felt I could deal freely with this subject of totalitarianism and thus with its opposite, democracy. The first book I wrote in this context was called *Facing the Extreme*, an analysis of what happened to morality in the concentration camp. I only know about these experiences from the writings of other witnesses, but there is a continuity between the life in and out of the camps, the camp was like a magnifying glass for the rest of the totalitarian world. Now, I was convinced that morality didn't disappear there, as it was frequently said, that it was not a purely Hobbesian world of man becoming a wolf to other men, or of war of all against all. If one read carefully the testimony that came from the concentration camp, one could find transformations of morality, rather than its disappearance. So that in a way, this time again, but in a more positive way, I was still dealing with what I experienced in the first twenty-four years of my life.

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That was a long answer to your short question.

OWENS: It actually provides a nice segue for another question I wanted to ask. At the core of all political theory and theology is a conception of human nature, or here moral anthropology. I wonder if you could say a bit about your own understanding of moral anthropology and how it influences your political theory today.

TODOROV: I feel strongly opposed to a kind of nihilistic attitude towards human nature, morality, and basic human instincts. It isn't the only view present in contemporary debate, but it is extremely strong, maybe in France more so than in the United States. It takes two forms: one is the refusal of taking into account our biological nature ("nature" and "natural" have become dirty words), the other is the conviction that we are purely selfish and aggressive animals. Compared to these points of view, I appear as a kind of old-fashioned defender of the moral nature of human beings. And I find some support in the recent work of various anthropologists, ethologists and paleontologists who observe that what actually distinguishes the human species from other animal species is a greater capacity for empathy, interaction and cooperation.

One book that struck me, for instance, in that direction was Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *Mothers and Others*. Hrdy is a major anthropologist that taught at Berkeley; by collecting evidence from very diverse and distant fields, she shows that cooperation is what enabled the human species to survive. The human infant is much more vulnerable than the infant of other species, its dependence lasts for a comparatively longer period of time. If the mother is the only person to protect it, the human species would have disappeared. This means that there were a larger number of people cooperating. The apes' specialist Frans de Waal brings other relevant observations.

These insights confirmed me in my conviction that our dependence on others is a major characteristic of our species. We are born weak and vulnerable, and without this contact with other human beings next to us, we cannot survive or for that matter really become

human. The same is true on another level, not merely on our physical survival but on our mental construction: we are totally dependent on our parents' gaze on us, their interaction with us, which is responsible for the birth of consciousness, to say nothing of language, or of all the skills. This implies that we are totally

engrained, constructed by human interaction and continuously engaged in this interaction. In a way, this is my conception of, not the immortal soul, but something which would be a lay equivalent to it. That is, we are only a link within a chain because of all the impacts that we have absorbed and transformed within us, and all the impact that we give outside of us, to our children of course, but also to our neighbors and to the people whom we encounter. There is a sort of immortality contained in human interaction.

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OWENS: Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* offers a compelling view from this perspective as well as one that highlights dependence as a core human feature.

In your work on totalitarianism, you focus on the will to perfection, or the perfectionist impulse, and a rejection of our fallibility, as the core of what you call messianism. Could you elaborate on that?

TODOROV: I pretty much agree on this point with MacIntyre, but this view can be found also in earlier authors, such as, paradoxically, Rousseau. Yet, MacIntyre's insistence on our basic vulnerability and disability is indeed helpful.

I do perceive this dream of perfectionism. To try to be more perfect than one was the day before is in itself a positive dream, and a deeply human one as well. It is a powerful drive for improvement, what Rousseau used to call perfectibility. But the utopian or millenarian vision of constructing paradise on earth and extracting evil forever seems to me a dangerous endeavor. That's why I think one of the sentences I quoted in my talk from this White House pamphlet issued in advance of the invasion of Iraq—to “further freedom's triumph over all its foes,” to eradicate evil definitely—indicates dangerous inclinations. Because in a way, this is what totalitarianism was supposed to do: to posit this ideal of the radiant future of communism, when there will be no conflicts, no private property, no “your” and “mine,” no reason to worry. Everything will be shared in common and we'll be smiling and happy all along the line! I think this is a nightmarish dream in fact, because its realization implies, rather than the learning to live with human beings such as they are, an enormous amount of violence on them and the invention of a new species.

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OWENS: But if it's the drive for uniformity that's so violent in the totalitarian dream, how do you distinguish between it and the democratic messianism you describe—the use of violence to spread, or at least ostensibly spread, democracy and human rights? It seems to be a pluralist impulse in some form, although uniformity is a goal, in some sense, of a global liberal society. Is it fair to consider the current wave of messianism as connected to the prior totalitarianism of the French revolutionary movement and Stalinist and fascist movements?

TODOROV: I think they all belong to the same family, and at the same time they are quite different in impact and also in their nature. Even between what I call the first and the second wave, the Napoleonic and colonial wars on the one hand, the expansion of totalitarianism on the other, there is an important difference. During the first wave there was no project of producing a new man, nor of

necessarily eliminating a significant part of the population, whereas this became the distinctive feature of the second wave. In all of the variant and sometimes opposed forms of totalitarian utopianism, there was always, almost as a starting point, the elimination of those who really don't fit in the picture, whereas the earlier revolutionary and colonial wave was rather a wave of education, of assimilation, of transformation. Even the worst colonial powers didn't mean to exterminate all the brutes, as Kurtz would put it in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Except during the process of conquest itself, when the others' life didn't count for much, the story was that the Europeans were bringing to these people a better understanding of the world, so that the latter will be educated and become as good as we are. This same distinction could be found during the conquest of America. Some of the conquistadors were just interested in getting rid of the local population as soon as possible in order to collect all the silver and gold that could be found. Whereas Las Casas, the Dominicans and the Franciscans who accompanied the conquistadors had a very different point of view: they wanted to improve the condition of the natives and bring them to the right faith. They wanted to convert them to the Christian religion because on the one hand they thought that all men belonged to the same race and on the other because they were convinced that the Christian religion was the greatest good that could be offered to this population, and that by this token it will become as good as they were. For them, it was an assimilationist project, not at all an exterminationist project.

Concerning the present wave, I think it may be too early to make final generalizations, because we only have a few examples. It does not coincide with the earlier colonial project:

none of these current expeditions is supposed to conquer the land in order to establish colonies there. The new form of control of these countries is, first, a military occupation, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, and second, an indirect control over the government, assuring us that it will be of a friendly disposition, favorable to the West. It has

something paradoxical about it. In order to help the triumph of freedom and equality we declare that these other populations are unable to see for themselves where their good lies, and we bring it to them by force. In other words, we consider them as unequal and undeserving to be free. The pluralistic ideal is defeated by the unitary action used in order to impose it. Behind this decision looms the maybe unconscious hope that the world can be brought to perfection, an aim so attractive that all means are acceptable if only they give us victory. From this point of view, all three waves of messianism are akin to the teachings of Pelagius, who didn't really believe in original sin, and opposed to Augustine's doctrine.

Our humanitarian wars are conducted in the name of our democratic values, freedom and equality, but the very idea of imposing these values on others by violent means contradicts them.

Sometimes the current attitudes are directly related to earlier ones. Concerning Libya, to take the last example, I think that France and Britain, the two major colonial powers in the past, had a stronger engagement in the conflict than any other country because they wanted to make a demonstration of military might and at the same time exercise a certain degree of control over the most important resources in oil and gas of the African continent.

OWENS: Clearly, this more traditional attitude—*it's in my interest to do it*—is always present. But it doesn't work well, it's not a good public argument. We have to give to our public actions a kind of legitimation that makes them acceptable, and that's where human rights, fear of genocide, democratic values, etc. come in. Of course, we are all against genocide, so if someone claims that he prevented a genocide, everybody applauds.

OWENS: But just to be clear: you reject the argument that ideology or humanitarianism are mere covers for economic interests, right? And you agree that ideas have real influence in the world?

TODOROV: I have the impression that I believe more strongly in the power of ideas than in those who decide to impose them by the force of arms. The simple idea of democracy has encouraged the evolution of Middle East countries more than the occupation of Iraq, which was supposed to bring democracy to this part of the world. When a regime is overthrown by forces that come from within it, they usually are much less powerful, in terms of military equipment, than the ruling group, they win by the force of their ideas. I share the humanitarian and democratic ideal but believe that we are doing it bad service by promoting it with our jets and missiles.

OWENS: Thank you very much for talking with me.

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