

How to Escape From a Sick Society

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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, reflecting on the Soviet Union's descent into totalitarian rule in the mid-20th century, and all the things that could have been done to prevent it, wrote the following:

“If...if... We didn't love freedom enough. And even more – we had no awareness of the real situation. . .we hurried to submit. We submitted with pleasure! ... We purely and simply deserved everything that happened afterward.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

The 20th century clearly shows that totalitarianism is not a solution to any problem, but a social ill of the most horrific kind. More innocent men, women, and children were killed by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century than by natural disasters, pandemics or even the two world wars. If, therefore, we are unfortunate enough to be living in a world flirting with the sickness of totalitarianism, what can we do to escape? In this video, relying on the insights of those who

studied, and lived under totalitarian rule, we are going to explore what is called a forward escape from the control of the cruel and twisted minds of would-be totalitarians.

To understand what this form of escape entails we will contrast it with two other ways to escape from the hardships of living through an attempted totalitarian takeover – the backward escape and the physical escape. The backward escape, entails dulling one's awareness of the reality and precariousness of one's situation through the use of drugs and alcohol or by zoning out in front of screens for hours on end. The backward escape can provide short-term relief to feelings of anxiety, depression and boredom, but the more one relies on such activities the more one's mental health deteriorates. Furthermore, the backward escape does nothing to prevent the rise of totalitarianism as it promotes docility, passivity, and apathy, all traits that make people more manipulable and controllable, or Dr. Joost Meerloo wrote in his book on totalitarianism:

“The cult of passivity and so-called relaxation is one of most dangerous developments of our times. Essentially, it represents a camouflage pattern, the double wish not to see the dangers and challenges of life and not to be seen. . . . Silent, lonely relaxation with alcohol, sweets, [or] the television screen. . . . may soothe the mind into a passivity that may gradually make it vulnerable to the seductive ideology of some feared enemy. Denying the danger of totalitarianism through passivity, may gradually surrender to its blandishments those who were initially afraid of it.

Joost Meerloo, The Rape of the Mind

An alternative to backward escape, is the physical escape which is to relocate to a place that offers more freedom. This form of escape has many benefits, for given that

we have one chance at life, why not live somewhere absent the stifling control of corrupt and power-hungry politicians and bureaucrats? But there are problems with this form of escape. Firstly, for many people it is not practical to pack up and move to a new land. Furthermore, if we live at a time when the rise of tyranny is a global phenomenon the practicality of the physical escape diminishes further, as the sought after pockets of freedom are few and far between. What is more, if totalitarianism is permitted to proliferate the places that are free now, may not remain so for long. Running away, like escaping backward, is not the ideal solution to the rise of totalitarianism, instead the solution is to escape forward into a new and better reality.

What does the forward escape entail? To answer this question we need to dispel with the notion that totalitarianism can be defeated through compliance. Many people cede to the commands of would-be totalitarians because they believe that so doing is the quickest means to return to some semblance of normality. But this is a cowardly and ignorant way to act. For compliance only emboldens totalitarian regimes, a point emphasized by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

“. . .the most characteristic aspect of totalitarian terror [is that] it is let loose when all organized opposition has died down and the totalitarian ruler knows that he no longer need be afraid. . . Stalin started his gigantic purges not in 1928 when he conceded, “We have internal enemies,” . . .but in 1934 when all former opponents had “confessed their errors,” and Stalin himself, at the Seventeenth Party Congress . . .declared “. . .there is nothing more to prove and, it seems, no one to fight.””

Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

Compliance is the food that feeds totalitarians. Compliance is not, and never will be, the path back to some form of normality. Rather non-compliance and civil disobedience are essential to counter the rise of totalitarian rule. But in addition to resistance, a forward escape into a reality absent the sickness of totalitarian rule requires the construction of a parallel society. A parallel society serves two main purposes: it offers pockets of freedom to those rejected by the totalitarian system, or who refuse to participate in it, and it forms the foundation for a new society that can grow out of the ashes of the destruction wrought by the totalitarians. Or as Václav Havel, a dissident under the communist rule of Czechoslovakia, explains in his book *The Power of the Powerless*:

“When those who have decided to live within the truth have been denied any direct influence on the existing social structures, not to mention the opportunity to participate in them, and when these people begin to create what I have called the independent life of society, this independent life begins, of itself, to become structured in a certain way.

. . . [these] parallel structures do not grow . . . out of a theoretical vision of systemic change (there are no political sects involved), but from the aims of life and the authentic needs of real people.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

There are innumerable ways to contribute to the construction of a parallel society. One can build technologies that promote freedom or agoristic economic institutions that further voluntary exchange. One can run a business that resists implementing unjust laws or mandates, or one can create media or educational institutions that counter the lies and propaganda of the state. Or one can create music, literature or artwork that

counters the staleness of totalitarian culture. The parallel society is a decentralized and voluntary alternative to the centralized and coercive control of the totalitarian society and as Havel explains:

“One of the most important tasks the ‘dissident movements’ have set themselves is to support and develop [parallel social structures]. . . What else are those initial attempts at social self organization than the efforts of a certain part of society to . . . rid itself of the self-sustaining aspects of totalitarianism and, thus, to extricate itself radically from its involvement in the [totalitarian] system?”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

And as he explains further:

“...it would be quite wrong to understand the parallel structures and the parallel [society] as a retreat into a ghetto and as an act of isolation, addressing itself only to the welfare of those who had decided on such a course...The ultimate phase of this process is the situation in which the official structures...simply begin withering away and dying off, to be replaced by new structures that have evolved from ‘below’ and are put together in a fundamentally different way.”

Václav Havel, Living in Truth

The construction of a parallel society, however, is not merely a long-term solution to totalitarian destruction, but also serves to counter the rise of totalitarian rule. For the act of building parallel social structures reveals that not everyone will just roll over and submit to total state control and as was noted by Hannah Arendt, this helps keep the would-be totalitarians in check. This process also counters the social atomization that comes

with totalitarian rule by promoting voluntary communal bonds between those who cherish freedom. And as an added benefit, for those who partake in this process, it can serve as a healthy vehicle to escape the day-to-day feelings of anxiety, boredom and depression that accompany living in a world teetering with a descent into totalitarianism. For if we pick a goal to help in the construction of the parallel society, and work towards it in a disciplined and focused manner, we give our life more meaning and we open up the possibility of attaining the peak experiential states of flow and Rausch.

Flow is an optimal state of consciousness *"in which attention is so narrowly focused on an activity that a sense of time fades, along with the troubles and concerns of day-to-day life."* (Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*) Rausch, on the other hand, is the word Nietzsche used for a peak cognitive state similar to flow.

"What is essential in Rausch is the feeling of increased strength and fullness."

Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols

Rausch is an emergent by-product of focused attempts to effectuate real-world change and when in Rausch, as in flow, we perform at our best, or as John Richardson explains in *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*:

"In Rausch the organism feels its capacities at a peak, and takes pleasure in this heightened potency. These capacities are drives to work on the world, and in Rausch one feels oneself "overfull" with them, bursting to change things to fit oneself."

John Richardson, Nietzsche's New Darwinism

Both flow and Rausch are healthy ways to escape from the day-

to-day miseries of living in a sick and corrupted society. Unlike the numbing experiential zones of the backward escape which weaken us in body and mind, flow and Rausch strengthen us and increase our feelings of power. The more people who experience flow and Rausch the harder it is for those in power to herd a populace into the chains of totalitarian servitude and as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn warned:

“No weapons, no matter how powerful, can help the West until it overcomes its loss of willpower.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, A World Split Apart

To attempt the forward escape by contributing to the creation of a parallel society and in the process attaining the states of flow and Rausch comes with risks, and success is not guaranteed, but it is a far better option than merely sitting passively by just hoping things will get better.

“Hope in reality is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man”

Nietzsche, Human all too Human

In place of mere hope, courageous action from as many people as possible is needed to prevent the rise of totalitarian rule. And the sooner people act in defiance of would-be totalitarians, the greater the chance of success. For the mistake that was made over and over again in the totalitarian countries of the 20th century was that people didn't act soon enough. Milton Mayer, in his book *They Thought They Were Free*, interviews an individual who lived through Hitler's rule and his words should serve as a warning for those who live in a world at risk of being engulfed by the life-destroying machinery of totalitarian rule:

“You wait for one great shocking occasion, thinking that

others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow... But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds or thousands will join with you, never comes. . . If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes, millions would have been sufficiently shocked ... But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between comes all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next... And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. . . and you see that everything – everything – has changed...Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed, no one is transformed..."

Milton Mayer, They Thought They Were Free

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