

## **Liberal Democracy versus Totalitarianism? Misleading Terms of the New Cold War**

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the conventional polarization of the terms “liberal democracy” and “totalitarianism”—a polarization that has shaped not only the contents but also the argumentative frame and thrust of many (Euro-American) discussions about contemporary global geopolitics. With reference to the writings of Roberto Esposito, the author traces the two terms’ philosophical affinity and historical implementation across modern and contemporary political regimes, with the suggestion that their continued antagonistic opposition is a misrecognition of dire portent.

**Keywords:** democracy, totalitarianism, cold war, Esposito, Foucault, biopolitics

Democracy that is founded on the primacy of abstract law and the equal rights of individuals who possess reason and will ended in the 1920s and 1930s and is no longer able to be rebuilt, much less exported elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

— Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political*

A preliminary version of this article was first presented remotely at the conference on the politics of precarity and East Asia hosted by *Situations* in Fall 2023. I began with a short video of an exchange between a British journalist and the Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani (a prolific scholar and geopolitical consultant, and a former president of the United Nations Security Council) at a forum on China in Singapore in late 2021.<sup>2</sup> The journalist asked pointed questions about the Chinese government's purported reliance on "repression" of human rights, in particular of people in Xinjiang Province, home to many Uighur Muslims. Mahbubani responded eloquently, citing evidence of historical happenings, China's recent economic progress, the contemporary Chinese population's freedom to travel abroad, and related global problems of environmental pollution, to which China has been, he says, contributing constructive solutions.<sup>3</sup>

Without immediately agreeing with the implicit or explicit arguments on either side, let us pause at the premises from which each speaker presents his questions and comments, for it is these premises—specifically, their polarization and irreconcilability—that deserve our attention as what I contend are the terms of the new cold war. On the one side is the classic premise of Euro-American post-Enlightenment discourse, whereby the supposedly rational principles of democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights are upheld as inviolable criteria for judging international events, criteria against which contemporary China is invariably found wanting.<sup>4</sup> On the other side is the postcolonial premise of not forgetting the historical inequities and injustices that undergirded the European Enlightenment—in particular, the pivotal event of the Industrial Revolution, led by a country such as England, that extracted and exploited the natural and human resources

around the world, leading to the massive and irreversible, cumulative pollution of the global atmosphere, the brunt of which is borne today by those who are the least responsible for it. If the British journalist gestures toward universal principles that are supposedly binding for all nations, Mahbubani's defense of China is rather explicitly anchored in a mode of critical reasoning based on historical realism—namely, the memory of actual happenings that left indelible material imprints on the planet and with them the uneven lives among peoples from different global cultures.

It was only a few centuries ago, in the peace treaties of Westphalia of 1648, when the concept of the nation-state as we know it today emerged as a political mechanism to manage the ongoing warfare among European states. By the Westphalian nation-state system, European politicians agreed to treat nations (no matter how small or large, weak or strong) as equal and to respect one another's territorial sovereignty. As Naoki Sakai writes, since then “a new phase in global history in which the Eurocentric spatial order of international law became dominant”: “a new geopolitical area called Europe came into existence and a new type of sovereignty—territorial state sovereignty—was first accepted as the legitimate form of government.”<sup>5</sup> This led to a new regime, *internationality*, that “became the rule of interstate diplomacy among these states in the area called Europe . . . [paving] the way for a new polity of the nation-state on the one hand and modern colonialism on the other.”<sup>6</sup> Sakai reminds us that, in the case of Northeast Asia before the nineteenth century, such interstate diplomacy based on formal equality and mutual recognition among states (however small, poor, or militarily weak) was never exercised, but the arrival of European imperialism meant that Asia, like the rest of the colonized world, had to accept what originated as a European way of conducting interstate relations with the goal of perpetual peace.<sup>7</sup>

John J. Mearsheimer offers a succinct account of the double standard evident in the post-Westphalian European perspective vis-à-vis the rest of the world:

Sovereignty means that states have the ultimate authority over

what happens inside their borders, and that foreign powers have no right to interfere in their politics. . . . The norm of sovereignty was designed to put an end to . . . armed interventions. . . . Sovereignty may have helped put an end to those deadly religious wars, but it did not stop the European states from engaging in balance of power politics, which led them to violate the norm whenever they thought their vital interests were at stake. Nor was the concept of sovereignty meant to apply outside Europe, an exception that left the European great powers free to build empires throughout the world. So sovereignty had little effect on the behavior of European states for roughly two hundred years after the Peace of Westphalia.<sup>8</sup>

Given this glaring historical record and the model of (European) internationality it created, it is perhaps not surprising that a nonwhite nation-state such as contemporary China must continue, in the twenty-first century, to argue defensively for its own territorial and political sovereignty, on an international stage where it is regularly refused such recognition and denied the freedom of self-actualization as a sovereign entity. Whereas the established global corporate media typically bases its judgments on the “liberal” forms of rationality that take the guise of law, procedure, process, and regulation, China must, to all appearances, repeatedly fall back on the older, perhaps anachronistic, languages and ethics of the historical memory of past injuries, national unity and security, cultural survival and revival, and vigilant protection against foreign interference in its internal affairs.

In a recent article, I have used the phrase “the jargon of liberal democracy” to describe the type of political language adopted by the British journalist interrogating Mahbubani. I argue that, perhaps more so than the dominance of specific national and colonial languages such as English, French, or German, in the era of the internet the popular recycling of the lexicon of a certain political ideology, liberal democracy, deserves attention as a particular kind of monolingualism, even though this is a monolingualism that cannot be accounted for purely linguistically.<sup>9</sup> For instance, a person may speak, write, and

read different national languages fluently and still channel this kind of monolingualism. Indeed, if an idea or principle can acquire meaning only through circulation and translation, how should we evaluate the incessant recurrence of what may be called *ideoléxics*,<sup>10</sup> such as *freedom*, *democracy*, and *human rights* in the global mainstream media's reports on cultures such as the People's Republic of China, North Korea, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Syria, and Cuba, which are typically described in terms of "threat," "theft," "repression," "authoritarianism," "dictatorship," "stifling of dissent," "violation of freedom," and "abuse of human rights"?<sup>11</sup> This recurrence intimates, to use a well-known term from Antonio Gramsci, the hegemony of the liberal democratic ideals invoked, a hegemony that implicitly validates an indifference to the vicissitudes, the variant receptions of these Anglophone or Francophone stock expressions among other audiences with vastly different histories. As Mearsheimer puts it, "Liberalism, of course, is all about meddling in other countries' politics, whether the aim is protecting the rights of foreigners or seeking to spread liberal democracy."<sup>12</sup> One could go so far as to say that words such as freedom, democracy, and human rights have virtually been taken hostage by a global propaganda machinery led by the United States and unleashed as soft power whenever necessary against the West's adversaries, in the form of replayed sound bites.

These sound bites have largely been the result, since 1945, of an untenable ideological polarization between democracy and its supposed opposite, totalitarianism,<sup>13</sup> and a woeful negligence of their affiliated conceptual origins. It is such ideological polarization, what amounts to a knee-jerk reaction to certain countries, that lies at the core of today's global geopolitics. As David Gramling points out, for much of the postcolonial world, the problem is "the affective predicament of living daily amid Western discursive exportations."<sup>14</sup> Such exportations often amount to a kind of discursive imperialism, whereby the terrain under occupation is the very terms or logics under which public discourse is typically conducted or allowed to be conducted in the first place.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, it would help to remind ourselves of some of the known atrocities enmeshing these frequently

posited jargony terms, which routinely advance the default ideological positions of the United States and its allies through language. I will not replicate what I have already said elsewhere about terms such as *the right to vote*, *freedom of speech/expression*, and *personal liberties*,<sup>15</sup> but perhaps it would be worth repeating what I have noted about *democracy* and *human rights*.

*Democracy*: In its name the U.S. has been, since the Second World War, aerial-bombing non-U.S. territories, demolishing entire cultures' life worlds, killing uncountable numbers of innocent civilians, while driving millions into exile. Closer to our time, we can think of the Russian-Ukraine conflict that began in early 2022, in which Ukrainian civilians have had to flee their country and Ukrainian soldiers have had to do real physical combat, often losing their lives. Meanwhile Uncle Sam's companies are earning billions by selling fuel at exorbitant prices to the U.S.'s supposed allies in Europe (because Russian fuel supplies have been cut off)—this, in addition to the expensive military weapons the U.S. continues to export to Ukraine for profit. A look at the map of the hundreds of U.S. military bases around the world, supported by the globally peerless expenditures of the U.S. military-industrial complex, suffices to demonstrate how “liberal democracy” is simply the “bullshit” rhetorical device for managing the world through militarization and perpetual warfare, in which the entire globe remains, as it were, “Indian country.”<sup>16</sup> (Over 80% of all U.S. military interventions overseas since 1946 have occurred *after* 1989.<sup>17</sup>)

*Human rights*: Advocacy of this supposedly universal property is anything but universal: little is typically said (and reiterated) in the dominant news channels about human rights in cases of Palestinians being bombed by Israeli airstrikes, prisoners detained and tortured in Guantanamo without legal representation, Mexican refugee children removed from their families by force at the U.S.-Mexican border, and people in the majority of low-income countries around the world who had to wait their turns to receive the coronavirus vaccines. Within the U.S. itself, as the coronavirus pandemic death toll surpassed one million by the middle of 2022, it was hard not to wonder: shouldn't advocating human rights mean valuing and protecting human lives? (See Ed Yong

for a sobering analysis.)

No matter how frequently atrocities are committed and destructions unleashed, the jargon of liberal democracy typically obfuscates them with a double standard when the perpetrator happens to be the U.S. or one of its allies. Thus, for instance, we seldom read about the French government's brutal crackdown on protests by the *gilets jaunes* during the same period (mid- to late 2019) when we were regularly apprised of Beijing's "authoritarian" and "repressive" squelching of democracy in Hong Kong. In Israel's airstrikes against Palestinians in the spring of 2021 and since, including the current war on Gaza, we hardly ever hear denunciations of Israel's violation of Muslims' (Palestinians') human rights, the way we keep hearing about China's violation of Muslims' (Uighurs') human rights in the Chinese Province of Xinjiang. The capacity for transcendence means that such jargon, rather than being torn asunder, typically survives intact amid the bloodiest of contradictions. This description by John Wesley Young of totalitarian language seems to fit such liberal democratic jargon equally well: "with its ritualistic repetition of slogans and its frequent use of words as emotional stimulants rather than as carriers of information or tools of logical thinking, [this language] is intended to be an exercise in irrationality and a positive impediment to clarity of thought and expression."<sup>18</sup>

### **"Liberal democracy has never existed as such"**

In a recently published essay, the Canadian historian Henry Heller writes that the U.S.'s current "imperial ideology happens to be not fascism, but an all-encompassing and intolerant liberalism refitted for rationalizing military and political expansion."<sup>19</sup> Heller calls this liberalism, advocated and practiced by the U.S. as a superpower since the end of the Second World War, with a track record of ideological monopolism, military expansionism, punitive trade sanctions, and financial dominance, an "inverted totalitarianism," a phrase he borrows from the political theorist Sheldon Wolin.<sup>20</sup> Inverted, precisely because routinely undemocratic, illiberal, and totalitarian practices seem to be simply the flipside of the jargon messages of freedom, democracy, equality, and so forth.

This entanglement of the relationships among democracy, liberalism, and totalitarianism is taken up in an insightful analysis by the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, well-known in the English language for works such as *Bios, Immunitas*, and (most recently) *Common Immunity*. My focus here is on his relatively less discussed essay “Totalitarianism or Biopolitics? Toward a Philosophical Interpretation of the Twentieth Century,” which I believe foregrounds something crucial, though apparently inadmissible, about the polarized terms of political governance marking the new cold war era.

Esposito queries the commonly assumed opposition between democracy and totalitarianism by probing their shared conceptual roots and their political actualization in modern society. Pointing to the notable tendency among political philosophers and theorists (such as Hannah Arendt, Jacob Laib Talmon, and François Furet) to come to terms with totalitarianism by way of so-called “origins”—with connotations of causality and continuity understood from a primarily philosophical perspective—Esposito writes that these thinkers have, in doing so, skirted a logical gap and conundrum lying at the heart of their inquiry. Namely, how was it that the very divergent practices of Nazism and communism can be considered as logically and categorically comparable?<sup>21</sup> Referring to the interpretative model deployed by Arendt in her acclaimed but rather uneven discussion of totalitarianism, Esposito suggests that the key problem lies precisely

. . . in the difficulty of locating the roots of Soviet communism in the same degenerative drift, namely, from the crisis of the nation-state to colonial imperialism and the explosion of biological racism—that brought us to Nazism. How does one hold together, in a single categorical horizon, a hypernaturalistic conception, such as that of the Nazis, with the historicist paroxysm of communism? What does a theory of absolute equality, philosophically speaking, have to do with a theory, and a practice, of absolute difference such as Nazism?<sup>22</sup>

Esposito’s approach to this blind spot in the extant studies of

totalitarianism, which he further describes as “the enormous logical, categorical, and linguistic caesurae that cut modern history with a complexity that cannot be contained by the mesh grating that encloses the totalitarian paradigm,” is worth our attention.<sup>23</sup> This is not least because he refuses the seemingly commonsensical (cold war) premise that totalitarianism is fundamentally distinct from democracy and, instead, reminds us of their genealogical affinities. Let me cite a passage at length to show the perceptive turns of his argumentation (as he summarizes the logic of philosophers such as Talmon, Furet, Gauchet, and Lefort in their various investigations of communism):

Actually, the totalitarian regime arises not from a defect in but, if anything, from an excess or a surplus of democracy—a democracy that is as radical, extreme, and absolute as it is full of egalitarian substance, so much that it shatters its own formal limits and implodes into its opposite. Communism, according to Gauchet’s thesis, is instituted through a perverse overturning of the democratic model that fancifully distorts democracy’s characteristics without altering its presupposition. *Communism is both the dream and the nightmare of democracy. . . . If communism is not merely situated within the conceptual horizon of democracy that sprung forth from the French Revolution but in a certain sense carries it to completion and, in so doing, to dissolution—if communism is bound to democracy in its genesis and its egalitarian excess, how can we still maintain a fundamental distinction between totalitarianism and democracy?*<sup>24</sup>

If democracy is conceptually rooted in the idea and ideal of egalitarianism, Esposito suggests, in the twentieth century it is totalitarian society that has taken this idea and ideal to the utmost horizon. He is, obviously, referring to such society’s insistence that all citizens must literally be regarded as having equal socio-ontological status, down to the details of their dress codes, earnings, aspirations, work ethic, and manners of interacting socially with others (The appellation of “comrade” in former and current communist regimes,

replacing all hierarchical modes of interpersonal address, was/is exemplary of such democratic egalitarianism.<sup>25</sup>) For this reason, it would make sense to think of totalitarianism not as the ideological opposite of democracy; rather, we should recognize that totalitarianism was derived from the same revolutionary underpinnings as democracy's and partakes of democracy's radical utopian aspirations.

Instead of replicating the terms of the familiar yet misleading opposition between the two political forms, therefore, Esposito introduces the Foucauldian notion of *biopolitics* to divert—and break up—the chronological linearity of various philosophical interrogations of totalitarianism, a category that he ultimately regards as “historically and theoretically useless.”<sup>26</sup> As he asks provocatively in *Bios*:

What was twentieth-century totalitarianism with respect to the society that preceded it? Was it a limit point, a tear, a surplus in which the mechanism of biopower broke free, got out of hand, or, on the contrary, was it society's sole and natural outcome? Did it interrupt or did it fulfill it?<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, going beyond Heller's aforementioned assertion of an inverted totalitarianism, Esposito does not preoccupy himself with the sheer hypocrisy of a liberal and neoliberal façade (as intimated by the adjective “inverted”). Nor does he approach the matter spiritually, in the form of Adorno's analysis of a secular transcendence by means of jargon.<sup>29</sup> Instead, in keeping with Michel Foucault's discussion of race in the last part of *The History of Sexuality*, volume one and in the Collège de France lectures titled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Esposito makes the unsettling move of genealogically repositioning the catastrophic event of Nazism by asking: “does Nazism (but also true [*reale*] communism) stand on the outside or inside vis-à-vis it [the preceding sovereign paradigm]? Do they mark the end or the return? Do they reveal the most intimate linking or the ultimate disjunction between sovereignty and biopolitics?”<sup>30</sup> His response to these questions takes the form of realigning—and rearticulating—Nazism to the Western philosophical tradition itself by way of a strategic rupture—what he refers to as the

“bare biological sphere”:

In contrast to the Western philosophical tradition, which despite its internal differences is unified by a common reference to a universal, transcendent type, Nazism elaborates a radically different conception that no longer needs to legitimate itself in an idea, whatever it may be, because it finds its crucial foundation in its basic material strength. This . . . is not the necessary and contingent product of a history that defines the relationship between men on the basis of their free decisions, or even, as communism claims, based on their social conditions, but instead based on an absolutely natural given that concerns the bare [*nuda*] biological sphere.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, in the essay “Toward a Philosophy of the Impersonal,” Esposito describes this “basic material strength” as a matter of “reduc[ing] rational man to corporeal man.”<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, this “immediately bio- and therefore thanatopolitical element of Nazism . . . rendered the category of totalitarianism historically and theoretically useless”<sup>33</sup>—precisely because (in accordance with Esposito’s logic) totalitarianism, like democracy, is teleologically oriented toward the *idealist* goals of egalitarianism. Although at the end of the Second World War Nazism was definitively defeated at the military and political level, Esposito argues, it was not exactly extinguished at the cultural and linguistic level. Rather, “the centrality of *bios* as the object and subject of politics is confirmed, even if it is *altered in a liberal key*”<sup>34</sup>: instead of the state, it is henceforth the individual who is deemed the owner of himself. Esposito traces this historical shift to the core of modern Western philosophy’s (Lockean) conception of the individual subject—property ownership:

If for Nazism man *is* his own body and only this, for liberalism beginning with Locke, man *has*, or possesses, his own body, and therefore he can use, transform, and sell it as an inner slave. In this sense, liberalism . . . overturns the Nazi perspective, *transferring the ownership of the body from the state to the individual, but within*

*the same biopolitical lexicon. It is this biopolitical characterization of liberalism that separates it from democracy.* To hazard a not entirely unjustified exaggeration, we might say that, after all of the so-called totalitarianisms, the reason it is not possible to return to liberal democracy lies in the fact that liberal democracy has never existed as such.<sup>35</sup>

These remarkable passages from Esposito's brief essay shed important light on the question why, even as the number of so-called democratic societies (that is, countries where political leadership is believed to be the outcome of a participatory electorate) seems steadily on the rise, the world has not seen any concrete realization of the long-held promises of egalitarianism for all. Instead, with biopolitics functioning as the hegemonic mode of population management and governance, individuals' proprietary relationship to their bodies and material wellbeing remains sacrosanct in "advanced" liberal democracies such as the U.S., the U.K., and their political allies. When every aspect of social life, from birth and death to family relations, education planning, professional choice, sexual orientation, housing options, healthcare, dietary preferences, insurance permutations, end-of-life practices, and inheritance laws is firmly anchored in the concept and legalities of property ownership, which in turn become generative of ever-more-nuanced definitions and claims of rights, egalitarianism can only be an ever-receding, elusive social horizon.

To put it closer to Esposito's philosophical lexicon, we can say that existing democratic societies today tend to be undergirded by a notion of egalitarianism that is itself based transcendentally in *disincarnated subjectivity*. As he writes, "Democracy always addresses a group of subjects who are made equal precisely because they are separated from their own bodies insofar as they are understood as pure logical atoms endowed with rational wills."<sup>36</sup> Hence communism, paradoxically, can be seen as democracy's complete and nightmarish fulfillment. In liberal and neoliberal society, meanwhile, this disincarnated form of egalitarianism tends to run up against fraught issues of corporeality and property ownership—that is to say, issues having to do with the individual

body and how—and by whom—it should be governed, maintained, safeguarded, cared for, and disposed of. For, as he puts it, “[the] subject, be it a subject of knowledge, will, or action as modern philosophy commonly understands it, is never separated from the living roots from which it originates in the form of a splitting between the somatic and psychic levels in which the first is never decided [*risolve*] in favor of the second.”<sup>37</sup> Insofar as liberal and neoliberal society is bound by such knotty questions of biopolitical (self-) management and the irresolvable conflicts (what Foucault would have regarded as modern *race wars*) that proliferate around them, it can never become truly democratic. Esposito describes this predicament as “a deep laceration within the democratic horizon itself, which comes into view as soon as we shift our gaze from the plane of form to that of content, to the ‘material’ of the current political regime.”<sup>38</sup> This deep laceration—rather than the misleading opposition between liberal democracy and totalitarianism—is, I contend, where the new cold war is being fought around the globe today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitic*, trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 108.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of Mahbubani's scholarship, see Kishore Mahbubani, *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> For the full video that went viral in 2022, see "Kishore Mahbubani Q&A 02: Uyghur Repression and Environmental Destruction," *YouTube*, January 12, 2022, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BO5CZgP-eE>.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Cho, "Western Media Incite Anti-Asian Racism When They Join in Cold War Against China," *FAIR*, April 8, 2021, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://fair.org/home/western-media-incite-anti-asian-racism-when-they-join-in-cold-war-against-china/>. See also Cho's "Chinese 'Disinformation' and U.S. Propaganda," *FAIR*, October 6, 2021, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://fair.org/home/chinese-disinformation-and-us-propaganda/>.

<sup>5</sup> Naoki Sakai, *The End of Pax Americana: The Loss of Empire and Hikikomori Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 12–35 for a detailed discussion of these historical changes and their implications for subsequent geopolitical relations between Northeast Asia, in particular Japan, and Euro America.

<sup>8</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 159–60. Mearsheimer's book is about the relationships among liberalism, nationalism, and realism in post-Second World War international politics, when the United States enjoys the superior status of what he calls the liberal hegemon.

<sup>9</sup> Rey Chow, "The Jargon of Liberal Democracy," *PMLA* 137, no. 5 (2022): 935–41. A few passages from this article have been modified and adapted for the current essay.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow this term from Jorge Majfud, "Cuba and the U.S.: The Difference between Dictatorship and Tyranny," *Common Dreams*, July 20, 2021, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2021/07/20/cuba-and-us-difference-between-dictatorship-and-tyranny>. Majfud's article discusses Washington D.C.'s and the mainstream media's habitually deceptive representation of Cuba.

<sup>11</sup> In the case of African countries, the tendency is to portray stereotypes of disasters, tragic suffering, and endless despair. For an informed critical account on the global media's handling of "Africa" (in blanket terms) during the COVID-19 pandemic, see Mohutsiwa's description of *The New York Times*'s poorly researched reports in Siyanda Mohutsiwa, "NYT's Africa: A Place of Failure and No Leadership," *FAIR*, June 12, 2021, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://fair.org/home/nyts-africa-a-place-of-failure-and-no-leadership/>.

<sup>12</sup> Mearsheimer, 160.

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of totalitarianism in terms of vacuous uses of language as a political device, see Ed Yong, “How Did This Many Deaths Become Normal?” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2022, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2022/03/covid-us-death-rate/626972/>.

<sup>14</sup> David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 136.

<sup>15</sup> Chow, 935–41.

<sup>16</sup> Reviewing Samuel Moyn’s book *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War*, Jackson Lears echoes Moyn’s description of the consequences of America’s default way of war, “ranging from the extermination of Native American tribes to the torching of Vietnamese villages. During the Pax Americana following World War II the whole world, in effect, became ‘Indian country’ (as many GIs referred to Vietnam).” Jackson Lears, “The Forgotten Crime of War Itself,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 21, 2022, 40.

<sup>17</sup> See the disturbing numbers mentioned in Lears’s discussion, 42.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley Young, *Totalitarian Language: Orwell’s Newspeak and Its Nazi and Communist Antecedents* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 31.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Heller, “Liberalism and the Spectre of Inverted Totalitarianism,” *Portside*, June 5, 2023, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://portside.org/2023-06-05/liberalism-and-spectre-inverted-totalitarianism>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Young offers a good example of this tendency to compare Nazism and communism by drawing on George Orwell’s *Newspeak* in *1984* as his premise for understanding totalitarianism’s lingual and rhetorical features.

<sup>22</sup> Esposito, *Terms*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 104–05, emphases added.

<sup>25</sup> Carl Schmitt states it in this extreme fashion: “Democracy requires . . . first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.” See Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Esposito, *Terms*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42.

<sup>29</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, 42–43. For Esposito’s nuanced engagement with Foucault’s concept, see “Chapter One: The Enigma of Biopolitics,” 13–44. This statement from that chapter is noteworthy: “[C]ontrary to the underlying presupposition of Anglo-Saxon *biopolitics*, something like a definable and identifiable human nature doesn’t exist as

such, independent from the meanings that culture and therefore history have, over the course of time, imprinted on it.” *Ibid.*, 29. Rather than being a scientific concept, the emergence of “life” for Esposito, as it is for Foucault, is an epistemological indicator of which the classifying, delimiting, and other functions had an effect on scientific discussions. *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Esposito, *Terms*, 106.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–08, emphases added.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 108, first two emphases Esposito’s, last emphasis added. For discussions of Nazism in relation to numerous European philosophers from Spinoza to Hannah Arendt, Gilbert Simondon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and George Canguilhem, see also Esposito’s “Chapter Five: The Philosophy of Bios,” *Bios*, 146–94.

<sup>36</sup> Esposito, *Terms*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> Esposito, *Terms*, 109.

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