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BOOK REVIEW

Peter Bernholz, *Totalitarianism, Terrorism and Supreme Values. History and Theory Cham,* Springer, 2017, 160 pp.

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The book written by Peter Bernholz represents the culmination of a process, serving to refine his theory on the lexicographic preference for supreme values and its fundamental role in the ideologies of totalitarian regimes. As the author mentions in the preface, he developed his theory on ideocracies characterised by supreme values, and of totalitarianism and terrorism, over a number of works since 1988, when he first presented it.[1] While basing his own ideas on the classic works on totalitarianism, such as those of Hannah Arendt, Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, Bernholz seeks to go beyond what he describes as the "static nature" of totalitarianism theory, doing so in a manner somewhat similar to the important work on ideocracy authored by Piekalkiwicz and Penn. Indeed, it is mostly on this underresearched, but always important and increasingly visible concept of ideocracy that Bernholz anchors his effort. Thus, the existence of an ideology with supreme values and an ideological movement led by what one may define here as a charismatic epistemarch is considered a necessary precondition for the transformation of non-totalitarian systems

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[1] See Peter Bernholz, *Totalitarianism, Terrorism and Supreme Values. History and Theory* (Cham: Springer, 2017) p. v.

into totalitarian ones, which, in turn, may lead to a mature ideocracy.[2] And while the book itself has a number of shortcomings – one of the most important being the way in which the case studies are spread out and treated far too briefly – the overall ideas and results are often intriguing and certainly worth further investigation.

The introductory chapter establishes the path Bernholz intends to follow in uncovering the common traits uniting the goals of various movements, such as, for instance, National Socialism, Communism, and Islamic State. The author provides a table which includes the cases of what he identifies as undergoing the phases of totalitarian regimes or mature ideocracies (or both), ranging from the Mongolian Empire to the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran. By choosing to take such a broad perspective, which, among other cases, also includes the Inca and Aztec empires, the Taiping movement, the Khmer Rouge, and the early 20th century Tibet of the Dalai Lama, Bernholz is faced with the task of navigating the difficult waters of historical interpretation, a task which is developed further in the fourth chapter, but not always convincingly. The second chapter is focussed on providing evidence for 20th century National Socialism and Communism, as well as for Christian and Islamic ideologies, with the author arguing – by repeatedly making use of a mixture of direct quotes from primary sources – that all four cases exhibit supreme values and aims which are lexicographically preferred to everything else and that they sought (with varying degrees of intensity) to control the secular power of the state and, usually, to expand their supreme values. Bernholz continues into the very short third chapter with what is nonetheless one of the most valuable contributions of the book, namely, depicting the two basic forms of ideocracy, or, in other words, "political regimes based on ideologically oriented Supreme Values, which are considered to be absolutely true".[3] Moreover, the author rightly points to the fundamental importance of "charismatic innovators" who are at the forefront of the creation and spread of ideologies based on supreme values.[4] He then organises these according to the extent of the ideocratic polity's accomplishment of its ultimate aims after conquering state power

[2] See *Ibidem*, p. vii.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 23.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 24.

and according to the ideological tendency for expansion, ranging from "universal" to "restrictive".[5]

Chapter four is faced with the potential issues already identified in the author's selection of cases during the introductory chapter. For instance, by making use of Voegelin's and de Rachewiltz's analyses on the ideological vision of the Mongol Empire, Bernholz shows – essentially correctly – that its rulers saw themselves as legitimate in suppressing and annihilating any challenge to their cosmocratic ambitions.[6] At the same time, questions go unanswered regarding the feasibility of considering the polity of the Mongol Chinggisids as "totalitarian", even in the broadest sense and taking into account the use of massacres in order to ensure a quick submission of their rivals – and particularly when considering their famous tolerance policies which were in place during the first generations of the empire, thereby contributing to the implementation of the Pax Mongolia. Without beginning a larger discussion due to space limitations, one might be better served in such cases – and not only – by employing the arguably more useful term "totalist" instead of totalitarian, due to the latter's strict dependence on coercion tactics. By contrast, Bernholz is far more convincing in the case of the 16th century Münster Anabaptists, for, aside from a common focus on cosmocratic claims, the Anabaptist ideocratic experiment meant a far greater control over the personal lives of its subjects, bordering on total in some respects, and with any form of counterideological factors being harshly dealt with, rather than merely accepting neutral acquiescence.[7] The following chapter then deals with the cases of what Bernholz defines as the mature ideocracies of the Puritans of Massachusetts, the Jesuits of Paraguay, Tibet under the Dalai Lama, Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, with this chapter arguing once again for the importance of that critical combination of factors – an ideology built on supreme values, the existence of a crisis, and sole rule over secular and spiritual power.

The sixth chapter then looks at two questions. The first deals with the development of totalitarian regimes if their supreme values cannot be realised, with Bernholz identifying four possible outcomes, such as military

[5] See *Ibidem*, pp. 25-26.
[6] See *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.
[7] See *Ibidem*, pp. 35-36.

defeat, postponing the realisation of the aims, reinterpretation of supreme values, or the erosion of ideological values.[8] By contrast, if such a regime survives and is able to somehow realise its ultimate aims – which implies that no expansionary goal remains internally or externally – it will then turn into "a rather stable, peaceful and mature ideocracy, if allowed by the outside world."[9] This makes a natural transition to the following chapter, which analyses the "constitution of totalitarianism" and, once again, insisting on the importance of an ideological system of supreme values for this aspect. Moreover, Bernholz acknowledges the variables involved in such an undertaking: "Even if the whole legal system, including the constitution, belonged to the totalitarian domain in a supreme value society, and even if no separation of powers were to exist, the substantive contents of supreme values could be such that no totalitarian regime would result. For if these substantive contents were not malevolent, in the sense that they did not ask for the sacrifice of the lives of members of the community, the persecution and/or killing of nonmembers or heretics, the conquest of foreign countries or the conversion by force of nonbelievers, then not all the characteristics usually used to define totalitarianism would be present."[10]

The eighth chapter then concentrates on the use of terrorism as a strategy to gain or recover secular power – with supreme values playing a decisive role – including an economic model of "ideologically based terrorism". The potential economic and political problems facing ideocracies are looked at in chapter nine, briefly considering the various effects which supreme values may have on the economy, internal politics, or external politics. Chapter ten stands out through its section on the destruction and prohibition of works which are deemed as contradictory to the supreme values of the ideocracy.[11] Chapter eleven functions as a return to the analysis of totalitarianism theories, including a number of economic models for interacting with crucial concepts for the author's argument, such as "converts", or "in-convertibles". In recognising that "economists seem to have a hard time to accept that ideologies can be the very aim of totalitarian regimes"[12], Bernholz focuses

[8] See *Ibidem*, p. 48.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 49.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 60.
[11] See Ibidem, pp. 97-104.
[12] Ibidem, p. 118.

on the manner in which ideocracies are willing to spend resources on winning new "believers" and, under certain conditions, "removing in-convertibles". The concluding summary is, like a number of otherwise intriguing sections of the book, far too brief.

With regard to the work itself, Bernholz's style and method of selecting his historical examples, will likely be polarising. Thus, certain specialists will appreciate his undertaking in integrating – even if very briefly – premodern societies into his general theory, while others will find his broad strokes superficial and insufficiently augmented by the latest developments in their own respective fields. Such a potential moment is found already in the preface, when, in a footnote, Bernholz mentions Soden's 1954 text, stating, in his own translation, that "the Assyrians were convinced that the rule of the world belonged to their god Assur. And because of this they had not only the right but even the duty to force other nations with all available means to recognize this fact of world domination. Revolting against it meant a violation of God-set legal order."[13] The reality was perhaps somewhat more complex than this depiction of a people defined by what amounts to pursuit of holy war, as more recent works in the field of Assyriology can attest, yet one may still identify in this generalisation a likely correct depiction of some of the basic features of premodern, cosmocratic, ideocratic polities. Indeed, such themes formed powerful arguments in the sustained claims to world-monarchies far into the Early Modern period, with the 16th century cases of the Ottomans and Habsburgs being some of the most well-known.

At the same time, the book could have focussed far more on the important idea of a "monopoly of interpretation", which would have served both the overall argument and the specific historical examples provided by the author. This would have been necessary for two reasons. Firstly, because the monopoly of interpretation itself was implemented very differently across the centuries and the many cultures discussed. Secondly, despite the author's argument that the lack of a monopoly of interpretation can typically lead to a weakening or spitting of the movement, even the existence of a *claim* to a monopoly of interpretation by the leadership is not in itself sufficient. Thus, on occasion, even the most revered charismatic epistemarchs were intensely contested from within and had to prove their

[13] Ibidem, p. vii.

staying power by force often enough, including in modern contexts. In other words, even charismatic, totalist movements are not immune to crises based on interpretation disputes.

Overall, despite some questionable choices in approaching some of the case studies, the book will stand as a useful reference in the literature making use of the concept of ideocracy, while also pointing to the existence of totalistic features and ultimate aims in their ideological architecture. As a result, it deserves to be read as a contribution to contemporary research on ideocracies, as well as to the importance of totalist systems and their possible evolutions in different societies, concepts whose great analytical potential will certainly be profitable for future research.