Politikos —
Vom Element des Persönlichen in der Politik

Festschrift für Tilo Schabert
zum 65. Geburtstag

Herausgegeben von
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Duncker & Humblot · Berlin 2008
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The Dream Worlds of Tyrants¹:
The Teachings of Socrates’ Students

Manfred Henningsen

In Plato’s Republic, Socrates introduces the tyrant as the counter figure to the mode of being that he represents, the questioning philosopher. Though it was not a tyrant that terminated his life in Athens in 399 B.C. but a jury of the democratic polis, the tyrannical mentality was on display in the resentful persecution of the historical Socrates as well. The symbolically resurrected Socrates connects the “individual of tyrannical character” with the “democratic man” (571a).² He suggests that all humans are born with some “unnecessary pleasures and desires which are lawless and violent”. Still, “they are disciplined by law and a combination of reason and the better desires […]” (571b). In response to a question about the sort of these desires, he presents an interpretation that 2200 years later becomes one of the core tenet of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. He says: “The sort that wake while we sleep, when the reasonable and humane part of us is asleep and its control relaxed, and our fierce bestial nature, full of food and drink, rouses itself and has its fling and tries to secure its own kind of satisfaction. As you know, there’s nothing too bad for it and it’s completely lost to all sense and shame. It doesn’t shrink from attempting intercourse (as it supposes) with a mother or anyone else, man, beast or god, or from murder or eating forbidden food. There is, in fact, no folly nor shamelessness it will not commit” (571c–d). After getting sidetracked about the appropriate management of desires, he returns to the tyrannical disposition in all humans and says: “[...] that even in the outwardly most respectable of us there is a terribly bestial and immoral type of desire, which manifests itself particularly in dreams” (572b). What comes under attack in dreams may happen to a young man in life who was brought up under a democratic constitution. He becomes seduced by a “master passion”, and Socrates describes the consequences: “The other desires buzz round it,

¹ I want to thank Peter Manicas for his elaborate critical comments and Thomas Maretzki for his detailed editorial advice. Both are not responsible for my arguments.
loading it with incense and perfume, flowers and wine, and all the pleasures of a dissolute life, on which they feed and fatten it until at last they produce in it the sting of mania. Then the master passion runs wild and takes madness into its service; any opinions or desires with a decent reputation and any feelings of shame still left are killed or thrown out, until all discipline is swept away, and madness usurps its place” (573a–b). Desires of sexual lust and states of intoxication come together and the “mad man whose mind is unhinged imagines he can control gods and men and is quite ready to try”. The “tyrannical man is one who either by birth or habit or both, combines the characteristics of drunkenness, lust, and madness” (573c).

The transformation of the young man who was raised in a democratic environment takes a criminal turn when he has exhausted the inherited resources from his parents and needs new means to fund his pleasures. The traditional codes of conduct and behavior become replaced. “When he was still democratically minded and under the influence of the laws and his father”, Socrates tells his young friends, “they only appeared in his dreams; but under the tyranny of the master passion he becomes in his waking life what he was once only occasionally in his dreams, and there’s nothing, no taboo, no murder, however terrible, from which he will shrink. His passion tyrannizes over him, a despot without restraint or law, and drives him (as a tyrant drives a state) into any venture that will profit itself and its gang, a gang collected partly from the evil company he keeps and partly from impulses within himself which these same evil practices have freed from restraint” (574d–575a).

Plato’s portrayal of the tyrannical man in his Republic competes with the image of the tyrant in Xenophon’s Hiero or Tyrannicus which Leo Strauss published immediately after World War II as a reminder that earlier generations had intellectually confronted with the experience of tyranny. Strauss wrote in 1948: “Tyranny is a danger coeval with political life. The analysis of tyranny is therefore as old as political science itself. The analysis of tyranny that was made by the first political scientists was so clear, so comprehensive, and so unforgettable expressed that it was remembered and understood by generations which did not have any direct experiences of actual tyranny. On the other hand, when we were brought face to face with tyranny - with a kind of tyranny that surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past – our political science failed to recognize it.” Xenophon’s Hiero is a tyrant who is willing to respond to the questions of the poet Simonides about the positive and negative impact tyranny has had on his life since he became a ruler. For Hiero everything that the poet considers to be beneficial is negative. He cannot trust anyone, not even those he loves: “To the private man it is immediately a sign that the beloved grants favor from love when he renders some service, because the private man knows his beloved serves under no compulsion. But it is never possible for the tyrant to trust that he is loved. For we know as a matter of course that those who serve through fear try by every means in their power to make themselves appear to be like friends by the services of friends. And what is more, plots against tyrants spring from none more than from those who prefer to love them most.” Instead of having true friends around, he is surrounded by slaves. He lives in constant fear of being ambushed but also of becoming attacked by those who protect him. Why Strauss considered Xenophon’s dialogue helpful in the understanding of modern totalitarian regimes doesn’t become clear. Unlike Plato’s tyrannical character, Xenophon’s Hiero never connects with the madness of the totalitarian vision of tyrants in the 20th century.

 Strauss’ On Tyranny became reissued in 1963 with the review by Alexandre Kojève and Strauss’ response to Kojève and a review by Eric Voegelin of the original text by Strauss who both disagreed with his analytical conclusions about the timeless and universal application of Xenophon’s reflections. This volume has become a contemporary classic. Strauss suggests in his hermeneutic reading of Xenophon’s dialogue that this work on the mindset of tyrants covers the whole range of tyranny from antiquity to modernity. Strauss may certainly be right with regard to the range of tyrannical regimes in ancient Greece. James F. McGlew, for example, summarizes in his overview of tyrannical tendencies in Greek political culture the pathology as follows: “The fifth- and fourth-century laws exhibit the fear of a tyranny that emerges not only from the extraordinary acts of extraordinary individuals; instead tyranny is seen as a potential danger that may lurk undetected in seemingly innocent citizens and everyday political actions.” However, contrary to Strauss and his many followers, I claim that Plato’s reflections in The Republic do what Xenophon fails to accomplish. Both were students of Socrates, yet only Plato succeeds in making us see that tyrants become consumed by their dreams because they begin to inhabit them and, in addition, force their subjects to live in them too.

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4 Ibid., p. 7 f.

5 Ibid., p. 13.

I. The Legacy of Ancient Tyrants

Was Aristotle’s most famous student, Alexander, the paradigmatic candidate for Plato’s notion of the mad tyrant “whose mind is unhinged” and who “imagines he can control gods and men and is quite ready to try”? According to his biographer, Peter Green, Alexander fits that profile because, as a result of the education by his “ethnocentric” teacher Aristotle who considered the enslavement of non-Greeks natural, he engaged in a “policy of racial fusion”. Both Aristotle and Alexander are seen by Green as anticipating Hitler’s race-based extermination policies and his vision of empire. In Green’s hostile and ideological characterization of Greek political philosophy and its impact on Alexander there is no place for any distinction. The libidinous dimension of Alexander’s reach for ecumenic hegemony and his hedonistic inclinations are undeniable. Having read Green’s reductionist approach, the comments of the Marxist philosopher Alexandre Kojève come as intellectual relief when he writes in his review of Strauss’ *On Tyranny* about Alexander as a “student of Aristotle, who had been a student of Plato, a student of Socrates.” This student of Greek philosophy envisioned that all “men can become citizens of one and the same State (= Empire) because they have the same ‘essence’. And in the last analysis this single ‘essence’ common to all men is ‘Logos’ [...]”, that is to say what nowadays we call [...] ‘civilization’ or ‘culture’. The Empire Alexander had projected is not the political expression of a ‘people or a caste. It is the material actualization of a ‘logical’ entity, universal and one, just as the *Logos* itself is universal and one.”

Kojève’s understanding of Alexander’s imperial project may be overly indebted to his reading of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and the role of the exceptional world historical personalities as agents of the meaning of world history. Yet he makes clear that there is a difference between the realization of a vision of unifying meaning and the indulgence of desires and the pursuit of a reductionist *idée fixe*. The contrast will become obvious when discussing the careers of modern tyrants. But even in ancient times there is no doubt about the difference when contrasting the history of Alexander’s life with that of Roman emperors, for example, Nero. Nero may actually be the best ancient illustration of Plato’s image of the tyrant with an unhinged mind.

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8 *Strauss*, On Tyranny, p. 59.
9 Ibid., p. 171.
13 Ibid., p. 228.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 234.
Nero’s physical desires became transfigured in the staging of tragedies in which, as Fuhrmann writes, “the poetic world of the gods and the ongoing at the court were moving towards each other and melting into one”.16 Seneca, whom had written some of the tragedies was without illusions, though he provided the emperor with the plays he asked for. His Stoic comment about the affairs of the empire was: “Life is as in the barracks of gladiators [...] an association of beasts”.17 One of the main themes in Seneca’s tragedies was the self righteous tyrant and the counter figure of the moderate king. “The tyrant is”, as Fuhrmann sums up Seneca’s position, “the prisoner of his action, he cannot go back; he has to protect his crimes with crimes”.18 Nero’s theatrical inclinations were not satisfied with ordering people like Seneca to write them. He insisted on playing leading roles himself.19

The culminating experience of Nero’s imperial dream life was certainly the great fire of Rome in July 64 A.D. when desire, imagination and destruction formed a unity. Whether he actually set the fire was irrelevant for his contemporaries who believed that he was capable of everything.20 For Suetonius the evidence was clear. He demonstrates how the imaginary became reality through Nero’s actions: “Once, in the course of a general conversation, someone quoted the line:

*When I am dead, may fire consume the earth,*

but Nero said that the first part of the line should read: ‘While I yet live’, and soon converted his fancy into fact. Pretending to be disgusted by the drab old buildings and narrow, winding streets of Rome, he brazenly set fire to the city; and though a group of ex-consuls caught his attendants, armed with torches and blazing torches, trespassing on their property, they dared not to interfere [...] This terror lasted for six days and seven nights, causing many people to take shelter in monuments and tombs”.21 He captures the unhinged mind of the emperor in a memorable way: “Nero watched the conflagration from the Tower of Maecenas, enraptured by what he called ‘the beauty of the flames’ then put on the his tragedian’s costume and sang *The Sack of Ilium* from beginning to end. He offered to remove corpses and rubble free of charge, but allowed nobody to search among the ruins even on his own mansion; he wanted to collect as much loot and spoils as possible himself”. In order to deflect the rumors of having set the fire, he opened, as Suetonius remarks, a relief fund, “which bled the provincials white and practically beggared all private citizens”22 More importantly, he used the Christian community in Rome as scapegoats. “They were”, as Fuhrmann reports, “sewn into animal hides and torn apart by dogs or nailed to the cross and lit as torches after sunset”.23 He rightly suggests that both Peter and Paul who were prisoners at that time in Rome could have been among these fire scapegoats.24 The Stoic philosopher Seneca remained a silent witness throughout the violence, orgies and massacres. Fuhrmann writes: “He remained silent out of principle; he considered it meaningless to deal with the misery of the time”. In the end, he became implicated in a conspiracy against Nero and was forced to commit suicide.25

II. Modern Eros and Power

Is Nero’s life comparable to the lives of modern tyrants, tyrants like Stalin, Hitler, Mao or Pol Pot or should he be seen as a kind of ancient anticipation of the Marquis de Sade? De Sade has gained extraordinary attention over the last 50 years. His public notoriety has a lot to do with the availability of his writings and the sympathetic literature about him as the most extravagant libertine philosopher of the enlightenment era. Plato’s analysis of the tyrannical character as the unhinged mind of a maniacal person reveals features that Nero exemplified as a ruler. In addition to sordid affairs in his private life, de Sade imagined reality primarily as a writer of fiction. Do de Sade’s writings indicate that the unhinged mind is beginning to take over and is defining a new moral code of conduct? De Sade’s biographer, Laurence Bongie, cannot completely make up his mind whether the “fictional monsters” his subject has created remain literature or point into the frightening future of the 20th century when monsters of this kind began to run societies. Bongie speaks about de Sade’s fiction when he remarks: “This absence of boundaries, impediments and limits of any kind becomes in fact the defining attribute of the Sadean novel whose monster characters are entirely creatures of action and physical excess, who can do everything to their victims that can be conceived. It is the equation of real-life *conceiving* and fictional *doing* that forms the nexus of Sadean life and literature”.26 This fictional landscape “without boundaries, impediments and limits of

17 Ibid., p. 209.
18 Ibid., p. 212.
19 Ibid., p. 308.
20 Ibid., p. 312.
22 Ibid., p. 236.
23 *Fuhrmann*, Seneca, p. 312.
24 Ibid., p. 314.
25 Ibid., p. 318.
any kind" is exactly the world that the tyrants of the 20th century created in order to execute their ideological dreams that became the nightmares of terror for their victims. De Sade himself made a symbolic excursion into revolutionary politics when he inserted in his La Philosophie dans le boudoir (1795) the pamphlet, "Frenchmen! A further effort is needed if you would become republicans!" His excursion was not very successful because the revolutionaries which had freed him from the Bastille in 1789 (where he had been imprisoned in somewhat aristocratic luxury since 1784) arrested and imprisoned him again a few times until he became committed under Napoleon's reign to the mental asylum at Charenton where he died in 1814. Obviously, there were still some boundaries, impediments and limits of some kind left at that time. Among the many recommendations, he endorsed in his pamphlet and which troubled his contemporaries, was the decriminalization of murder because "[...] death is hence no more than a change of form, an imperceptible passage from one existence to another [...]" 27 Albert Camus knew all about the consequences when he wrote his indictment of modern philosophy, L'homme revolte (1952), and said about de Sade: "License to destroy supposes that you yourself can be destroyed. Therefore you must struggle and dominate. The law of this world is nothing but the law of force; its driving force, the will to power."

The libido dominandi Camus is talking about manifests itself on the left and right of the ideological spectrum. These manifestations cover the whole range of Plato's political dream analysis as it became confirmed in antiquity by the life of Nero. Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot demonstrated in their lives that sex was part of their lust for power. Hitler's disconnection from his sexuality - whatever the clinical physical or psychological reasons may have been - does not change the perimeters Plato established in The Republic very much. The dream life of the tyrants was not dependent on sexuality but went beyond it. Nero's life may have presented the full picture of the madness of power. Hitler's life lacked in this regard (and, in addition, he was a vegetarian teetotaler). But whatever these features may mean in terms of his unhinged mind, in comparison to Stalin, Mao or Pol Pot he did not become less of a monster but was their equal and may actually be considered the epitome of a monstrous tyrant. Hitler's desire abstinence may help us to restore Plato's perspective on tyranny. After all, Plato did not reduce tyranny to drunkenness and sexual prowess. They enhanced and contributed to the state of madness that makes tyrants believe they can, in his words, "control gods and men", meaning that they can remake the world.


None of the modern tyrants showed sexual tendencies that were on the level of Nero's performance. In recent biographies of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, to name the three most prominent cases, the sex life of the tyrants receives thorough scrutiny. The biographical findings, which are based on letters, journals, interviews and personal accounts, suggest that the tyrants with the exception of Mao, do not have greater sexual desires than some American and French presidents or members of European royal families in the same time period. One of the most extravagant stories in the biographical literature on Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot one finds in Philip Short's biography of Pol Pot. Short describes visits the young boy male rode to the royal Cambodian palace to see his sister who belonged to the harem of the elderly and sickly king. Sar, Pol Pot's original name, was at fifteen still regarded, as Short describes Pol Pot's delicate erotic awakening, a child, young enough to be allowed into the women's quarters. Two retired palace women told Philip Short in Paris how he "used to come to visit them wearing his school uniform, a loose, white shirt with baggy trousers and wooden shoes. The young women would gather around, teasing him, they remembered. Then they would loosen his waistband and fondle his genitals, msturbating him to a climax. He was never allowed to have intercourse with them". 29 As fond as Pol Pot's memories were of his palatial visits according to Short, they did little to humanize him or turn him into a sexual predator when in power. And he didn't seem to have emulated the sexual behavior of traditional Cambodian kings either. His later marriages were as ordinary as they could be. Like Hitler Pol Pot did not display the sexual habits of Nero.

The record changes somewhat when looking at the relationships of Stalin and Mao with women. In the case of Stalin, we don't find any erotic flamboyance that would have titillated the curiosity of de Sade. In both cases, we find men who were once attached to very intelligent, emotional and attractive women and married them. Stalin had a close relationship with Nadezhda Alliluyeva who is described by most contemporaries as an attractive and intelligent, though orthodox communist, woman who shot herself in November 1932 leaving Stalin and their three young children behind. Unlike Nero who had ordered the murder of close relatives and was delighted, according to Suetonius, in seeing their bodies, Stalin was in shock. According to his biographer Simon Sebag Montefiore, Stalin "[...] asked his sister-in-law Zhenya Alliluyeva 'what was missing in him'. The family were (sic) shocked when he threatened suicide [...] He grieved in his room for days [...] He could not understand why it had happened, raging what it did mean?" 30 Stalin's melodramatic response to the suicide couldn't hide the.
fact that his wife had known or suspected him of having affairs. Montefiore writes: "His body guard Vlasik confirmed to his daughter that Stalin was so besieged with offers that he could not resist everyone: 'he was a man after all', behaving with the seigneurial sensuality of a traditional Georgian husband." 31 Nothing changed in this regard after her death.

Mao had been forced by his father into an arranged marriage when he was fourteen and his wife was eighteen. She died a year after the wedding. His second wife found out that her husband was a serial womanizer and accepted it. 32 He never changed his sexual behavior. Mao’s position of power attracted young women, and he used his power position for sexual purposes until the end of his life. His personal physician, Li Zhisui, describes the selection process for Mao’s transient harem: “To be brought into the service of Mao was, for the young women who were chosen, an incomparable honor, beyond their most extravagant dreams. Many women refused his advances, but they were usually older and relatively well educated [...]. Those who agreed were elated by the opportunity. Everyone who worked for Mao was carefully screened, and the young women were no exception. Careful screening guaranteed that the young women would be filled with awe, admiration, and wonder for the Chairman. All were the offspring of impoverished peasants, from families who owed their lives to the Communist party, for whom Mao was their messiah and savior.” 33 The exploitative relationship between Mao and the young women is recognized by the doctor: “They never loved Mao in the conventional sense. They loved him rather as their great leader [...]. They were all very young when they began serving Mao in their late teens or early twenties – and usually unmarried. When Mao tired of them and the honor was over, they married young, uneducated men with peasant pasts”. If some married without his permission before he had terminated the relationship, they were called back to continue their sexual service. 34

Dr. Li Zhisui adds some intriguing comments about Mao’s sexual prowess and ancient sex-enhancing techniques that de Sade probably would have included in his novels: “At sixty-seven, Mao was past his original projection for the age at which sexual activity stops but, curiously, only then did his complaints of impotence cease altogether. It was then that he became an adherent of Daoist sexual practices, which gave him an excuse to pursue sex not only for pleasure but to extend life. He was happiest and most satisfied with several young women simultaneously sharing his bed. He encouraged his sexual partners to introduce him to others for shared orgies, allegedly in the interest of his longevity and strength”. 35 It seems that Mao’s appetite became bisexual and wasn’t limited to women anymore. The observing physician writes: “The young males who served as attendants were invariably handsome and strong, and one of their responsibilities was to administer a nightly massage as an additional aid so sleep”. He frequently observed Mao’s active behavior: “Later, in 1964, I witnessed a similar incident on Mao’s train. As his guard was preparing him for sleep, Mao grabbed the young man and began fondling him, trying to pull the man into bed with him. For a while I took such behavior as evidence of a homosexual strain, but later I concluded that it was simply an insatiable appetite for any form of sex.” 36

Considering Plato’s notion of the unhinged mind of the tyrannical person in light of the sexual details in the biographies of Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot, they do neither explain the nature nor the extent of the terror these tyrants perpetrated on their respective societies. However one may read the ‘Sadistic’ quality in some of these relations and add to them the exploitative and predatory environment of the power circles in Russia, Germany, China and Cambodia. As Ian Kershaw comments on the impact of Hitler’s response to Geli Raubal’s suicide in September 1931, it may be characteristic for all four cases. Kershaw describes Hitler’s reaction to the suicide of his niece who had been the only woman he had been emotionally attached to when he writes: “Hitler appears to have been near-hysterical, then fallen into an intense depression. Those close to him had never seen him in such a state. He seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.” 37 Kershaw concludes his summary of the affair this way: “In a personal sense, Geli was indeed irreplaceable (though Hitler soon enough had Eva Braun in tow). But it was a purely selfish dependency on Hitler’s part. Geli had been allowed to no existence of her own [...]. In human terms, it was a self-destructive relationship. Politically, apart from the short-lived scandal, it was of no significance. It is difficult to imagine Geli turning Hitler away from his deeper, less personal obsession with power. Nor was his embittered thirst for vengeance and destruction altered by her death. History would have been no different had Geli Raubal survived.” 38

31 Ibid., p. 16.
34 Ibid., p. 357.
36 Ibid., p. 359.
38 Ibid., p. 355.
III. The Control of Gods and Men

The tyrannical regimes of terror that Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot created in the 20th century were dependent on the leaders but did not exhaust themselves in a de Sade-like satisfaction of desires. This satisfaction of desires was the banal dimension of tyrannical evil and reproduces itself in all kinds of other violent regimes in many parts of the contemporary world. What distinguishes the major characters from the minor figures in the theater of tyranny in the modern world is exactly the centrality of vision and the relative indifference toward personal interests. If the madness of Nero’s world was identical with the vicious satisfaction of his own desires, then the tyrannical dream worlds of modernity go always beyond the desires of the tyrants. The indifference towards suffering that the four major modern tyrants displayed confirms this point. Nero got immense satisfaction from the violence he personally practiced against people. Whether Stalin, Hitler, Mao or Pol Pot enjoyed the killing of others in the same way is possible, yet not at the center of their terror. They didn’t hesitate to have close associates and/or their wives killed as the biographers document again and again. Montefiore quotes Krushchev on Stalin by saying that “he became interested in other men’s wives for the unnatural reason that they were possible spies rather than mistresses”. Yet the indifference towards suffering was a direct consequence of the most important feature of their tyrannical make-up, namely that they were in charge of remaking the world or, as Plato defined the core of the tyrant’s madness, “he can control gods and men and is quite ready to try”. All four of them qualify for this Platonic job description and it is irrelevant to establish a ranking order of them based on the number of victims they and their respective regimes succeeded in eliminations. Montefiore, for example, summarizes Stalin’s role: “Stalin was the mastermind but he was far from alone. Indeed, it is neither accurate nor helpful to blame the terror on one man because systematic murder started soon after Lenin took power in 1917 and never stopped until Stalin’s death [...] The Terror was not just a consequence of Stalin’s monstrosity but it was certainly formed, expanded and accelerated by his uniquely overpowering character, reflecting his malice and vindictiveness. ‘The greatest delight’, he told Kamenev, ‘is to mark one’s enemy, prepare everything, avenge oneself thoroughly, and then go to sleep’. It would not have happened without Stalin.”

Mao expressed the core of the Platonic description best when he answered, as a twenty four year old the revolutionary question “How do we change China?” His answer was clear: “[...] the country must be destroyed and re-formed”. He did not limit the creative destruction to his native China: “This applies to the country, to the nation, and to mankind [...] The destruction of the universe is the same [...] People like me long for destruction, because when the old universe is destroyed, a new universe will be formed”. Mao meant this concretely. In March 1927 he indulged in almost Neronic excitement when he wrote in a report about a visit to Hunan that he felt “a kind of ecstasy never experienced before”. His description of the brutality oozed excitement [...]” Chang and Halliday write: “Mao was told that people had been beaten to death. When asked what to do [...] he said: ‘One or two beaten to death, no big deal.’” This casual attitude toward death extended to millions of people who had to pay with their lives for the policies Mao imposed after the revolution in 1949 on China.

Mao’s revolutionary self-understanding also had a Sinic dimension. He compared himself and the revolutionary transformation of China with the founding of the first empire by the Ch’in emperor in 221 B.C. At the VIII Congress of the Communist Party of China in May 1958 he declared: “What does the first emperor of Ch’in mean anyway? He buried only 460 Confucian sages alive, we have buried 46,000. Have we not, during the ‘Repression of Reaction’, made some counterrevolutionary intellectuals a head shorter? [...] We have surpassed the first emperor of Ch’in hundred times. If you insult us as first emperor of Ch’in, as dictator, we completely admit it but you haven’t emphasized that enough”. This grandstanding took place eight years before the Cultural Revolution was launched by Mao leading in the first year (1966) to the suicide of an officially estimated 100,000 intellectuals.

The dream worlds of Stalin and Mao were driven by class-centered ideological projects, which justified the killing of millions of people by execution, mass starvation and, mostly, the incarceration in labor camps under terminal working and living conditions. They certainly controlled the reshaping of major parts of Europe and Asia and had no regrets. Both Stalin and Mao lived in a world that the Russian novelists in the 19th century had depicted as a space in which a new revolutionary species could act without being bound by traditional codes of conduct and behavior. Stalin admired Dostoievsky’s Crime and Punishment, whose characters, as Richard Overy sums it up in his comparison of Stalin and Hitler in his book The Dictators: “[...] explored the idea that world historical figures could act as they

39 Montefiore, Stalin, p. 316.
40 Ibid., p. 230.
pleased, regardless of the prevailing moral or ideological restraints. Stalin is remembered for the very un-theoretical remark, ‘the people need a tsar’ [...]. The British playwright Tom Stoppard may have grasped the ideological core of the mind of the tyrants much more convincingly in his dramatic trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia* (2002) where he shows how their superhuman self-identity was crafted by German philosophers in the early 19th century. Stoppard updates in a way Camus’ analysis from 1952 with a specific focus on German philosophers in the education of the supermen. He lets one of his Russian protagonists say, in the presence of Bakunin: “Idealism – the self – the autonomous will – is the mark of God’s faith in his creation. Well, who’d have thought that God’s chosen people would turn out to be German?”

This mega maniacal superhuman self is present at the creation of Pol Pot’s and Hitler’s dream worlds as well. The class-centered remaking of the world that the Russian and Chinese revolutionaries executed became broadened by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge through ethnic cleansing projects against the Cham, the Chinese, the Vietnamese and all other people who did not meet the racial qualifications for inclusion in the new Angkor body polity. Ben Kiernan has clearly outlined the ethnically-fascist dimension of the Cambodian killing regime stating in his book, “[...] the dangers of not only an unbridled lust for power, but also the threat of racism, to those allegedly being protected by racist ideology as well as to foreigners and ethnic minorities”.

This conclusion runs counter to the reductionist argument that Philip Short introduces in the prologue to his otherwise informative biography of the Khmer leader and wants to extend to all the killing regimes in the 20th century: “The explanation does not lie in some chromosomal abnormality, some genetic pre-disposition to violence, a neuropathic ‘Bell curve’ on the part of the nations concerned. Cambodians, or for that matter Rwandans, are not biologically more prone to cruelty than Americans or Western Europeans. The causes are rooted in history – which creates the conditions for nations to seek extreme remedies to perceived ills; in geography – which generates the pressures that seem to justify them (lebensraum, (sic) said Hitler; ‘national survival’, said Pol Pot); in culture – which erects or fails to erect moral and intellectual prohibitions against them; and in the political and social system – which affords or denies the individual right, to act according to his own lights”. Short admits “in Old Testament terms, man alone is evil. When we contemplate what happened in Cambodia, we are looking not at some exotic horror story but into darkness, into the foul places of our own soul”. Yet I do not think that the regimes of terror emerged from the “foul places of our own soul”. They were imaginary political projects and not rooted in history, culture or geography. These regimes that have disgraced the 20th century were created by figures that Plato called tyrants, and Hitler was one of the most contemptuous representatives of this sub-species of humanity.

In his reconstruction of the origins of the ‘final solution’, Christopher Browning grants Hitler a prominent role in the execution of the Holocaust. He writes: “As the ultimate embodiment of Nazi ideology as well as the constant inciter and mobilizer of the party faithful, Hitler certainly legitimized and prodded the ongoing search for final solutions. His obsession with the Jewish question ensured that the Nazi commitment would not slacken; that the search for a solution one way or another to this self-imposed problem would not fade away into obscurity or be indefinitely postponed. No leading Nazi could prosper who did not appear to take the Jewish question as seriously as Hitler did himself. Thus Hitler, simply by his existence, exerted a continuing pressure on the political system, which rendered competition among the faithful and ambitious to advance even more timid proposals to carry out Jewish policy in an ever more brutal and comprehensive manner”.

Browning’s language is revealing in one important respect. Even though he emphasizes the importance of Hitler, he can not bring himself to admit that without Hitler there would have been no Third Reich and therefore no Final Solution. He has difficulties accepting him as the master architect. Browning is not obsessed with Goldhagen’s assertion about a deeply anti-Semitic German culture that made all Germans willing executioners of Nazi policies against Jews. Yet he can not live with the notion of the tyrant as creator of a dream world based on destruction either.

Browning’s difficulties with Hitler as the mega-maniacal tyrant are shared by Kershaw, the author of the most recent Hitler biography. At the end of the life story of his subject, he describes the dictate on April 29, 1945, of his “Political” and “Private Testament” to his personal secretary Traudl Junge. The description of the dictate resurfaced in 2003 when Junge gave a long TV interview and, shortly before her death, published the impressions she had noted down in 1947. Her memoirs became the basis for Bernd Eichinger’s movie *Der Untergang* (Downfall, 2004), which

47 Short, Pol Pot, p. 13.
presents the life in the Führer-Bunker during the last 10 days of Hitler’s life. Kershaw who did not have access to Junge’s book when he was writing his Hitler biography, quotes recorded statements by her. He did have access to both the “Political” and the “Private Testament” that Hitler dictated to Junge immediately after the bunker ceremony following the wedding with Eva Braun. The “Political Testament” is important because it illustrates the “unhinged mind” of Hitler on the last day of his life. Eichinger’s movie reconstructs the underground atmosphere while the Red Army is zeroing in on the center of Nazi power above ground. Hitler’s Reich becomes conquered and destroyed by the enemy, while he continues the denial of reality until the end. The dream world of the tyrant succumbs to the legalization of his affair with Eva Braun as civil marriage, yet he refuses to recognize what is coming to an end above ground. In his “Political Testament” he engages in his usual self-aggrandizement and accusations against traitors like Göring and Himmler. Still, the major ideological narrative of his life has not changed. The last sentence of his “Political Testament” affirms the consistency of the dream he had lived for most of his adult life: “I especially commit the leadership of the nation and their followers to a strict enforcement of the race laws and a reckless resistance against the global poisoner of all people, the international Jewry.”\(^50\) Hitler never left the dream world he created for himself after World War I. The experiences of primary reality had no impact on him. When his world began to fall apart, his response was to commit suicide. The movie Downfall reconstructs the atmosphere of disconnection between the collapse of the dream world above the ground and the descent of the world below the ground into drunken stupor.

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