Twitter Thread by John Hayward

John Hayward
@Doc_0

Time once again to emphasize the differences between totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and fascism. They're often used as synonyms but they are different, although they do tend to lead to each other. Order one, and the other two are usually delivered soon enough.

Totalitarianism is best understood as the politicization of everything. Every facet of life is infused with political meaning... and subjected to political control. There is little room for privacy or individualism. Every word and deed is seen as a political action.

Totalitarianism does *not* require authoritarian government, although it usually leads to such. You can be totalitarian without having any real government power at all, enforcing your political will through mob actions and corporate power. Examples from recent history abound.

Totalitarianism is the easiest of the three deadly "isms" to slide into, because it can easily be disguised with claims of its good intentions. Totalitarians usually claim to be motivated by the Greater Good. They claim to represent the interests of sympathetic victims.

Totalitarians claim that society is unjust and must be corrected by force. Before they gain the power to become authoritarians, they often assert the right to use force outside of the law because the government is corrupt or serves the interests of their ideological enemies.

A perfect example of the difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism is the slogan "your silence is violence." The people who said this were not generally agents of the government, i.e. authoritarians, but they succinctly distilled the essence of totalitarianism.

Totalitarian ideology paves the way for authoritarian rule - not always by an individual strongman, but often by an all-powerful political party and its clique of high-level insiders. It is a common delusion that democracy is a perfect vaccine against authoritarianism.

"They can't be tyrants if we can vote them out of office!" Oh, yes, they can. Much of the past century can be understood as a worldwide effort to impose authoritarian rule while preserving the illusion of democracy - sanctifying authoritarian power with the sacred vote.

You will notice that almost every bona fide authoritarian ruler makes a point of holding "elections" and announcing he won a huge majority of the votes. They understand the power of the foolish belief in democracy as a magic talisman against authoritarianism.

Even without getting into outright ballot box stuffing, intimidating the opposition, etc., authoritarianism can flourish under democracy because the authoritarians have such incredible amounts of money and power to buy off enough of the electorate to retain their offices.

Modern authoritarians also have a knack for hiding much of their power in bureaucratic structures that are not subject to the disapproval of voters. The bureaucracy can become powerful enough to fight back against - and defeat - anyone the people actually do get to vote for.

The strongman model of authoritarianism is primitive and vulnerable to revolution. It's just too obvious that One Big Guy is an iron-fisted tyrant, and the system grows rickety in his absence, especially if he leaves power to his spoiled, arrogant children.

Totalitarianism paves the way for authoritarianism. You can get people in a totalitarian society to DEMAND authoritarianism. Once they accept the premise that everything is political, why not support a cadre of brilliant, selfless government officials to impose what is "right?"

Once enough people accept the premise that dissenting from "the consensus" about a myriad of subjects is "wrong," why not take the next step and make it illegal? Why allow "special interests" and "selfish, short-sighted" individuals to "sabotage" the consensus with disobedience?

And once enough people accept the notion that the "consensus" (the slick new term for the somewhat outmoded and sinister "Will of the People") should be imposed with government power, why should anyone be allowed to vote against that noble crusade?

Building support for authoritarianism in a democracy is not difficult, if you can sell the notion of stupid, selfish, short-sighted, unruly voters who need a wise and powerful elite to make the Big Decisions for them... and the power to impose their judgments on the unwilling.

And when the amount of power necessary to compel obedience becomes so great that authoritarianism begins to lose its camouflage, when the system threatens to become obvious tyranny that could spark a revolution... that's when you need fascism.

Arguments about the precise definition of fascism have raged for a century, but the key element is the absolute political domination of private capital. The State and its ideology control private resources without actually *owning* them.

That's the "unity" of purpose inherent in the term "fascism." Every bit of power is marshaled in the service of the State ideology - but the State doesn't own, is not responsible for, every instrument of power that it controls. Private resources become instruments of force.

Fascists tend to be totalitarians and authoritarians, because their ideology is the final logical evolution of the other two - the perfect fusion of the politicization of everything and the worship of centralized authority. But each of the elements is distinct unto itself.

Free people should forever be on guard against all three, understanding how they flow together... and how one of those "isms" might be peddled to a people who are too focused upon the dangers of another. They are all seductive in different ways. /end