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# Norman Mailer and American Totalitarianism in the 1960s

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*This article investigates Norman Mailer's appropriation and Americanization of the concept of totalitarianism as an internal critique of US society and culture in the 1960s. Dominant understandings of totalitarianism from the 1930s to the 1950s focused on external threats and were wedded to notions of pervasive state control of all aspects of life. Mailer's crucial intervention offered an alternative theory which viewed totalitarianism as an internal threat to the United States and de-emphasized the centrality of the state. His theory of cultural totalitarianism focused on internal psychological manipulation rather than external political coercion. Mailer's focus on the United States was symptomatic of a broader intellectual trend towards the study of non-statist forms of totalitarianism which has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. This article thus illuminates new dimensions of the totalitarianism debate in American political thought and provides a fuller picture of Mailer's significance as a social critic.*

In his 1963 collection of political essays, *The Presidential Papers*, Norman Mailer wrote that there once had been “a time when simple totalitarianism could be found attached to Fascism, and perhaps to Bolshevism.” This totalitarianism “seemed synonymous with dictatorship”: “Oppression was inflicted upon a nation through its leaders ... A tension was still visible between the government as the oppressor and the people as the oppressed.” Mailer's assessment of US society in the 1960s led him to conclude that this “simpler” time had passed. A new, insidious, form of totalitarianism had “slipped into America,” into the “psyche” of American citizens, without altering the existing political structure or visibly oppressing Americans.<sup>1</sup>

The description of 1960s America as a totalitarian society cuts across most conventional understandings of the meaning of the term “totalitarian.” While “totalitarianism” has always been, and remains, a protean concept, it is associated with certain core characteristics. Totalitarianism has an inseparable connection to the ideological conflict of the Cold War. The term became shorthand for the argument that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union shared an essential nature and should be categorized together as equal threats to the survival of American democracy and indeed liberal democracy everywhere. In addition to its enlistment as a fighting term in the Cold War, the meaning of totalitarianism centered on fears of coercive state control extending to all areas of life. Totalitarianism was the nexus in a web of

<sup>1</sup>Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers*, Panther edn (St Albans, 1976), 191.

connections to fears of economic collectivism, ideology, surveillance, propaganda, the use of terror, concentration camps—all centering on the issue of state control. The way in which Mailer's use of the concept of totalitarianism in the 1960s relates to these dominant understandings is the subject of this article.

In his work in the 1960s, Mailer developed a theory of cultural totalitarianism which de-emphasized the coercive role of the state and instead found the root of totalitarianism in the cultural conformity that permeated American society.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, he transferred attention from the Soviet Union to the United States as the main focus of his theory of totalitarianism. This shift in emphasis from the statist or political totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to a more loosely defined cultural totalitarianism reflected Mailer's preoccupation with internal psychological manipulation rather than external political coercion. Moreover, Mailer's concentration on the United States was symptomatic of a broader intellectual trend towards the study of non-statist forms of totalitarianism which has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. Mailer was a crucial figure in this context, as he was instrumental in shifting the meaning and focus of totalitarianism in the 1960s. Encroaching totalitarianism in America was Mailer's main preoccupation during this period, and we fail to gain a full picture of his significance as a social critic without analyzing the meaning of this concept in his work. Finally, the 1960s have been generally overlooked by scholars of totalitarianism. This article extends the history of totalitarianism beyond the bounds of the well-researched 1940s–1950s period and examines the counterhegemonic use of totalitarianism as a justification strategy for radical politics.<sup>3</sup>

The flexibility of totalitarianism as a concept, its ambiguity and amorphousness, were important features contributing to its influence after the 1950s. Totalitarianism had been a highly fluid concept since its first widespread usage in the 1930s. The proliferation of theories of totalitarianism in the immediate aftermath of the war and in the 1950s, including the significant influence of the work of German émigrés in the

<sup>2</sup>Though Mailer did not use the term “cultural” to describe the totalitarianism he identified, I use this term to identify his distinctive version of this concept, which was focused on the cultural conformity which permeated American society. I do so to differentiate his use of the concept from the prevailing assumption that totalitarianism was a political or statist phenomenon. Other scholars have similarly referred to Mailer's “cultural” totalitarianism but have not considered in detail how his version was related to dominant understandings of the concept. See Maggie McKinley, *Understanding Norman Mailer* (Columbia, SC, 2017), 27; and Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, “Political Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature: The Left-Conservative Vision of Norman Mailer,” *Review of Politics* 69/4 (2007), 625–49, at 631–2.

<sup>3</sup>The most extensive study is Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995). Gleason dedicates just a few lines to alternative readings of totalitarianism among radicals in the 1960s. Other studies of the pre- and postwar period include Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s–1950s* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, “Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930's–1950's,” *American Historical Review* 75/4 (1970), 1046–64; Thomas R. Maddux, “Red Fascism, Brown Bolshevism: The American Image of Totalitarianism in the 1930s,” *Historian* 40/1 (1977), 85–103. For survey studies of totalitarianism that cover a longer period see Enzo Traverso, “Totalitarianism between History and Theory,” *History and Theory* 56/4 (2017), 97–118; Anson Rabinbach, “Totalitarianism Revisited,” *Dissent* 53/3 (2006), 77–84; and Rabinbach, “Public Intellectuals and Totalitarianism: A Century's Debate,” in Christian Fleck, Andreas Hess, and E. Stina Lyon, eds., *Intellectuals and Their Publics: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (Farnham, 2009), 107–40.

United States, did little to resolve debates surrounding its correct application. Rather than providing a definitive description of the historical phenomenon of totalitarianism, these theories opened new avenues and broadened the scope of the debate. The instability of the concept of totalitarianism and its protean nature facilitated its appropriation by radical intellectuals in the 1960s.

In the two decades following the end of World War II the American left underwent a period of transition, and Mailer occupied the locus of this shift. He can be viewed as a hinge figure in American intellectual life—he had connections to both the Old Left and the New, to the establishment, the beat generation and the counterculture. He was both a member of the intellectual elite and a popular celebrity. While numerous studies of Mailer mention his interest in totalitarianism, scholars have yet to connect his work to the longer history of this concept, despite its importance to his social criticism.<sup>4</sup>

To understand Mailer's intervention in the debate, it is essential to grasp how his work connected to dominant understandings of totalitarianism and how structural ambiguities in this concept allowed for alternative readings. The first half of this article explores the inherent flexibility of the concept and highlights aspects of the totalitarianism discourse that facilitated its appropriation by radical political actors. Prevailing theories of totalitarianism—particularly around the height of their influence in the 1950s—emphasized the centrality of the state. While totalitarianism was fundamentally connected to the Nazi and Soviet states, the way in which it was also understood as a type of disease or insidious infection facilitated a broader definition which transcended national boundaries. Equally important was the association of totalitarianism with invasive state control. The perceived ability of totalitarian societies to control thought and behavior was a defining characteristic. By the late 1960s, these prior theories of totalitarianism were in decline, and increasingly challenged by a trend towards US-focused models which de-emphasized the coercive role of the state. The emerging theories kept the emphasis on the psychological aspects of control while shifting the location of the causes. The second half of the article examines Mailer's development of the idea of cultural totalitarianism, which built on the ambiguity and rhetorical power of dominant understandings of totalitarianism to support his radical critique of American society. In doing so, Mailer helped open a discursive space in which alternative readings of totalitarianism were possible in the 1960s.

## Totalitarianism and the state

Mailer's counterhegemonic appropriation of totalitarianism necessitated shifts in conventional understandings of the term, because from the 1930s to the 1950s most Americans perceived totalitarianism as an external threat. Historian Abbott Gleason has noted, in the most extensive book-length study of this concept, that

<sup>4</sup>For other studies which consider Mailer's views on totalitarianism see, in particular, Joseph Wenke, *Mailer's America* (Hanover, 1987), 8–23. Mailer's use of totalitarianism is also addressed in Don Anderson, "Norman Mailer: Man against the Machine," in Don Anderson and Stephen Knight, eds., *Cunning Exiles: Studies of Modern Prose Writers* (Sydney, 1974), 165–97; and Jean Radford, *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study* (London, 1975), 43–75. Totalitarianism is mentioned frequently in J. Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York, 2013); and McKinley, *Understanding Norman Mailer*.

“the idea of totalitarianism had been the special point of view of those who believed in the necessity of what became the Cold War.”<sup>5</sup> The influence of the concept of totalitarianism was most overt when considering its effects on US foreign policy. Guiding decision making during the years of the Cold War was the vision of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as a new kind of “insatiably aggressive and invasive state” which posed an “unparalleled threat” to the American and European democracies. The concept of totalitarianism provided a binary framework of understanding in which the coexistence of totalitarian and “free” states in the world was impossible and “the leaders of the free world would have to struggle (until victory was won) or perish.”<sup>6</sup> The threat of totalitarianism abroad also acted as a warning to the United States to avoid the path trodden by European nations—and the effect of notions of totalitarianism on US domestic politics was no less marked. Political scientist David Ciepley has argued that the American experience of European totalitarianism “led to a redefinition of the very ‘meaning’ of America [and] ... significantly altered the course of U.S. cultural and institutional development,” resulting in a “rupture in the American liberal tradition.”<sup>7</sup> According to Ciepley, fears of totalitarianism pushed American intellectual discourse in a libertarian direction in both cultural and economic terms, as liberalism was reframed as the polar opposite of totalitarianism, which represented “*state control of both body and mind*.”<sup>8</sup>

Both Gleason and Ciepley emphasize the importance of the state in definitions of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism was bound to the state—in both meanings of the state as an externally sovereign entity and the state as internal government. Ideas of totalitarianism when connected to the Nazi and Soviet states represented an *external* threat to the United States. As Benjamin Alpers has argued in his study of totalitarianism from the 1930s to the 1950s, in the late 1930s the focus on the “totalitarian state” was joined by new understandings of totalitarianism. From this point onwards totalitarianism referred to both an all-powerful state *and* a system of belief. The definition of totalitarianism as a style of thinking was more general and flexible and reflected popular fears of “-isms” and ideology. In this context, American politicians, the press, and the popular media sometimes presented totalitarianism as an “active force in the world”—an independent actor with a life of its own.<sup>9</sup> This tendency increased in the Cold War climate, bolstered by a broader culture of heightened fears of disease and infection which characterized Cold War discourse. Totalitarianism was frequently constructed as a type of disease which could infect individuals and nations and spread throughout the world. As Geoffrey S. Smith has observed, medical language was prevalent in the political culture of the Cold War, where the “spectre of ‘red Fascism’ or ‘brown Bolshevism’, whether defined as plague or epidemic, as virus or bacteria,” threatened the “‘Free World’ in ways more sinister than armies or advanced weaponry.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 129.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup>David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 1.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup>Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 148–9.

<sup>10</sup>Geoffrey S. Smith, “National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, and Disease in the Cold-War United States,” *International History Review* 14/2 (1992), 307–37, at 312.

Such language contributed to Americans' widely held perception of totalitarianism, particularly in its communist form, as insidious and deceptive. The work of Waldemar Gurian, a Catholic German émigré whose ideas, according to Udi Greenberg, helped to form the ideological foundations of the Cold War, exemplifies the prevalent view of the insidious nature of totalitarianism. Gurian was recognized as a leading scholar of totalitarianism and he emphasized its deceptive, insidious, and transformative qualities. His work captured and perpetuated fears that totalitarianism had the ability to creep unnoticed into the tissues of democratic society and to "consume [it] from within."<sup>11</sup> Yet the nature of the threat, even though it was complex, remained external to the United States. As Alpers comments, "Though totalitarianism could take hold in the United States, the virus had to be transplanted from without."<sup>12</sup> Max Eastman captured this sentiment in 1940, when he wrote, "The enemy of democracy and civilization is not any country, but the totalitarian state of mind. And that state of mind is most successfully introduced into the United States by the adherents of and fellow travelers of Stalin."<sup>13</sup> Even in this amorphous formulation, Eastman found totalitarianism to have external origins.

Totalitarianism thus reflected fears of the military and ideological threat that emanated from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union but also a more general and universal threat that transcended national borders. Mark Greif has found that fears of totalitarianism's ability to transform human nature occupied a central position in the minds of American intellectuals and writers in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Greif argues that American intellectuals "converged on a perception of danger" during these years, centered on the fear that the very nature of "man" was under attack. The attack on man "largely occurred at gunpoint, of Nazi, Soviet, or fascist arms, though intellectuals took the threat to be much more general."<sup>14</sup> The idea of the state as the carrier of totalitarianism—which remained a crucial aspect of its definition—thus existed in tension with fears of totalitarianism as a universal threat to human nature, as a disease, or an independent force in the world. Disease metaphors and the perception of totalitarianism as an autonomous actor were central to Mailer's development of an American version of totalitarianism in the 1960s.

### Totalitarianism and state control

From 1930s to the 1950s, American intellectuals established a fundamental connection between totalitarianism and the idea of state control. However, it is vital to note that understandings of state control centered not just on external coercion but also on the ability of the state to control behavior through internal, psychological means. As Gleason has suggested, a "core meaning" of totalitarianism was "the idea of a radically intrusive state run by people who do not merely control

<sup>11</sup>Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton, 2015), 159.

<sup>12</sup>Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 144.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 144.

<sup>14</sup>Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton, 2015), 3–4.

their citizens from the outside ... but also attempt to reach into the most intimate regions of their lives” and make them “constitutionally incapable of challenging the rule of the state.”<sup>15</sup> The internalized aspects of control became a central part of Mailer’s theory of American totalitarianism which de-emphasized the role of the state.

A crucial analysis of the “conceptual foundations” of totalitarianism, written by political scientist Benjamin R. Barber based on his comments at the 1967 American Political Science Association convention, illuminates the nature and status of dominant understandings of totalitarianism, as well as the prevalence of alternative US-focused constructions by the late 1960s. Barber’s essay surveyed the wide-ranging existing literature and highlighted the major fault lines and ambiguities inherent in the discourse on totalitarianism. He argued that differences of opinion centered on whether totalitarianism should be examined primarily as a political or a socioeconomic entity, whether totalitarianism was a matter of “degree” or “kind,” whether totalitarianism was a uniquely modern phenomenon or had existed in past forms, and whether it was “logically antithetical” to democracy or in some forms compatible with it.<sup>16</sup> Barber’s findings reflected the fracturing status of dominant understandings of totalitarianism by the 1960s. For Barber, “the major conclusion to be drawn from ... [the] discrepancies in usage and ambiguities in definition that surround the term is that totalitarianism is to modern political science what reason was to Luther: a conceptual harlot of uncertain parentage, belonging to no one but at the service of all.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite his emphasis on the near hopeless ambiguity of theories of totalitarianism and his wish that they would decline, Barber attempted in his essay to uncover the root meaning of totalitarianism. In doing so, he highlighted the prevalence of alternative constructions of totalitarianism and unraveled their connection to dominant understandings. He found that “almost all definitions ... share[d] a concern ... [with] the relationship between the public domain (the state) and the private realm.” In the broadest terms, all theories were concerned with what Barber identified as “totalism”—“an all-encompassing social and political holism that rejects boundaries and, hence, the fragmented public and private spheres that boundaries define.”<sup>18</sup> However, the focus on “statist” totalism inherent in most theories of totalitarianism obscured other forms of totalism which were achieved “by means other than repressive statism.”<sup>19</sup> Barber identified a noncoercive form of totalism—which he termed “involuntary totalism”—in which “public power, without increasing its scope or jeopardizing its legitimacy, seeps by default into a somnolent private sector under conditions of unconscious conformity that obviate the need for—indeed exclude the possibility of—coercion.” This totalism was evolutionary and involuntary in the sense of being unintentional—not revolutionary and deliberate like statist totalitarianism. To be free in such a society would “necessarily entail resistance

<sup>15</sup>Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 10.

<sup>16</sup>Benjamin R. Barber, “Conceptual Foundations of Totalitarianism,” in Carl J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis and Benjamin R. Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views* (London, 1969), 3–52, at 14–18.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

to internal psychological restraints and subliminal manipulation.”<sup>20</sup> In this understanding:

the Soviet Union approximates the statist pattern in which revolutionary coercion is used to extend the public sphere into areas previously considered private, while the United States conforms more to a seepage model in which the increasing irrelevance of formal constitutional boundaries coupled with a gradual and largely unperceived evaporation of the distinction between private and public have led to a blending of the two realms favorable to thought and behavior control of a far more subtle kind. The individual personality is submerged in both cases, but in a framework of repressive coercion on the one hand, and in one of consensus, conformity, and legitimacy on the other.<sup>21</sup>

In his study of totalitarianism as a concept in the late 1960s Barber thus found it appropriate to give extensive attention to ideas of totalitarianism that did not center on coercive state control—formulations in which the United States might be considered as totalitarian as the Soviet Union. In more recent histories of this concept this highly significant part of the debate over totalitarianism has been lost.

The proliferation of alternative theories of totalitarianism coincided with, and indeed was enabled by, the declining status of dominant understandings of totalitarianism. Two of the three discussions of totalitarianism contained in the same volume concluded with the hope that “the totalitarian construct [would] be overtaken ... by creeping desuetude” and the assertion that “it does not serve the cause of comparative political analysis or of political understanding to cling to the concept of totalitarianism.”<sup>22</sup> The legitimacy of the totalitarian conceptual model was declining in the social sciences in the 1960s, and the growing influence of social-scientific points of view meant that this decline was felt more broadly in public debate.<sup>23</sup> Liberalization in the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin in 1953 also challenged the notion of the fixed nature of totalitarian societies. At home, opposition to the Vietnam War raised broader questions about Cold War policy and thinking.<sup>24</sup> In this climate, US-focused constructions of totalitarianism flourished—although they never reached the status of the hegemonic theories of totalitarianism of the 1950s. In 1967 students at the University of Pennsylvania could take a course entitled “The United States as a Totalitarian Society.”<sup>25</sup> Even Carl J. Friedrich, coauthor of the paradigmatic study *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956), noted in 1969 that “totalitarian trends ... are not absent in constitutional democracies such as the United States.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 39; and Michael Curtis, “Retreat from Totalitarianism,” in Friedrich, Curtis and Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective*, 53–121, at 116.

<sup>23</sup>Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 132–7.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>25</sup>Barber, “Conceptual Foundations,” 43 n. 24.

<sup>26</sup>Carl J. Friedrich, “The Evolving Theory and Practice of Totalitarian Regimes,” in Friedrich, Curtis and Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective*, 123–64, at 153. This was a development from Friedrich’s earlier views. In 1956 he emphasized that the features of totalitarianism together form a “syndrome” and should



Norman Mailer was an important influence over the shift towards alternative readings of totalitarianism focused on the United States. He contributed towards fracturing the dominant discourse by widely—even indiscriminately—using the concept of totalitarianism outside its Cold War conceptual framework. In doing so, he helped open a discursive space in which alternative constructions of totalitarianism were possible. Mailer offered his own version of the concept which focused on the cultural, non-statist form of totalitarianism existing in America, rather than the political, statist version associated with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This use of totalitarianism separated him from the Old Left and marked him as an influence over a new generation of radicals. His significance was captured in a statement made in 1968 by Irving Howe, a public intellectual and social critic associated with the New York intellectual circle. Howe lamented the prevalence among New Leftists of what he regarded as the irresponsible “notion that we live in a society that can be described as ‘liberal fascism’.” For inspiring such talk, Howe continued, “men like Norman Mailer must bear a heavy responsibility, insofar as they have recklessly employed the term ‘totalitarian’ as a descriptive for present-day American society.”<sup>27</sup> Mailer’s influence was apparent in the work of Eldridge Cleaver, who later became a leading member of the Black Panther Party. Mailer briefly corresponded with Cleaver in 1966 while the latter was in prison and sent him a copy of his latest work. In his best-selling memoir, *Soul on Ice* (1968), Cleaver wrote that he became “a student of Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro*, which seemed to me both prophetic and penetrating.”<sup>28</sup> Cleaver adopted Mailer’s view of the United States as totalitarian to reinforce his criticisms of American society.<sup>29</sup>

The decline in status of dominant theories of totalitarianism goes some way towards explaining the rise of alternative theories in the 1960s. However, this begs the question: why did American intellectuals like Mailer not abandon the concept of totalitarianism altogether? An answer can be found in aspects of the discourse on totalitarianism from the previous decades that made it particularly appropriate for use as a critique of American society. The connection between theories of mass society and totalitarianism, the image of European totalitarianism as a warning to the United States, and the focus on the psychological effects of terror in totalitarian societies were all aspects of the debate which facilitated the argument that totalitarianism had taken root in the United States.

One major point of crossover between dominant and US-focused constructions of totalitarianism was the theory of “mass society” which Daniel Bell, in *The End of Ideology* (1960), identified as “probably the most influential social theory in the

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“not be considered in isolation or be made the focal point of comparison,” whereas in 1969 he wrote that “the most important change” to the concept “is the realization that totalitarian dictatorship ... is a relative rather than absolute category” and that “it is quite meaningful to speak of totalitarian features in terms of more and less, and that it is meaningful also to speak of totalitarian trends.” Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York, 1962; first published 1956), 9; and Friedrich, “The Evolving Theory,” 153.

<sup>27</sup>Irving Howe, “The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and A Critique,” *Commentary*, Oct. 1968, at [www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-new-york-intellectuals-a-chronicle-a-critique](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-new-york-intellectuals-a-chronicle-a-critique).

<sup>28</sup>Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (London, 1969), 98.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 75, 106.



Western world today” aside from Marxism.<sup>30</sup> Much like their use of the concept of totalitarianism, intellectuals freely employed the theory of mass society but its exact meaning remained ambiguous; attempts to apply it analytically were hampered by its “slippery” nature.<sup>31</sup> From the 1930s, theorists of diverse political stripes, including members of the Frankfurt school on the left as well as cultural conservatives on the right, had offered differing and at times contradictory formulations of mass society. Broadly speaking, these theories were united by the concern that, in the modern era, people had been brought into closer contact and were more interdependent, but “[d]espite this greater interdependence ... individuals ha[d] grown more estranged from one another.”<sup>32</sup> Versions of this theory were advanced by Hannah Arendt, C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, and Paul Goodman. Dwight Macdonald, associated with the New York intellectual circle and a close friend of Norman Mailer, focused his magazine, *politics*, on a rejection of “all the forces of modern life that were contributing to the process of dehumanization, alienation, ‘thingification’.”<sup>33</sup> In particular, Macdonald was troubled by the effects of modern warfare, which reduced soldiers to cogs “in one hell of a big machine,” and modern mass culture, which he saw as exerting a form of control over the mind.<sup>34</sup>

Theories of mass society and dominant understandings of totalitarianism were closely related but crucially separate. For most theorists, mass society was a stepping stone on the road to totalitarianism, or else a prerequisite for its full emergence. In *The Power Elite* (1956), C. Wright Mills wrote that the United States had “moved a considerable distance along the road to the mass society. At the end of that road there [was] totalitarianism, as in Nazi Germany or in Communist Russia,” but America was “not yet at that end.”<sup>35</sup> Many agreed that the United States was or could become a mass society, and this made it dangerously susceptible to totalitarian influence. Bell observed that “in the light of Communist successes, the argument has been advanced that the mass society ... is particularly vulnerable to Communist penetration.”<sup>36</sup> At the same time, however, the general conviction followed Hannah Arendt’s argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that America had a natural resistance to totalitarianism, and had “escaped the extreme effects of having become a mass society.”<sup>37</sup> Crucially, though, the theory of mass society established a way of thinking that identified similar problems in the West and the East which cut across the Cold War bipolar division between totalitarianism and democracy. Mailer built on the connection between mass society and totalitarianism to make his case for the existence of totalitarianism in the United States.

<sup>30</sup>Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, with a new essay by the author, “The Resumption of History in the New Century” (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 21.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>33</sup>Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York, 1994), 132.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Dwight Macdonald, “The Responsibility of Peoples,” reprinted in Macdonald, *Politics Past: Essays in Political Criticism* (New York, 1970), 33–72, at 51.

<sup>35</sup>C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, new edn with a new foreword by Alan Wolfe (Oxford, 2000), 304.

<sup>36</sup>Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 31.

<sup>37</sup>Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago, 2015), 119.

The image of totalitarianism abroad had acted as a warning of what might happen in America should it fail to deal with the same problems which had plagued European societies since the 1930s. During that decade, understandings of the rise of European totalitarianism centred on the role of economic hardship and the psychological effects of modernity, exacerbated by the impact of the mass media.<sup>38</sup> While widespread economic hardship was an issue linked to the years of the Great Depression, similar fears centering on psychology and concerning US susceptibility to totalitarianism existed in the 1950s and early 1960s. These were manifested in a compulsion to develop systematic tests and experiments that would gauge and quantify the possibility of totalitarianism taking hold in America, with the hope of finding the means of resistance. Theodor W. Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), which took on the "task of diagnosing potential fascism" in the United States by exploring ways to identify "potentially fascistic individuals," was an example of this type of research.<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer* (1951) sought a psychological explanation for the phenomenon of mass movements by seeking to trace the "genesis" and outline the "nature" of the fanatical "true believers" who made up their ranks.<sup>40</sup> The drive to understand the psychological root of totalitarian movements was no less present in the 1960s, when the widely reported 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann captured the attention of Americans. In the same year, Stanley Milgram's experiments at Yale University on the subject of obedience to authority sought to answer the question of how so many "ordinary" people could have been complicit in the monstrous crimes of the Holocaust. Many studies that warned of the potential for totalitarianism in the United States looked for its causes not in the expansion of state control, but in the psychology of individuals.<sup>41</sup>

Psychology was key to understanding both the causes and the effects of totalitarianism. One of the most influential early analyses of totalitarianism in its most extreme form—the concentration camp—was Bruno Bettelheim's "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations" (1942).<sup>42</sup> Bettelheim was interested not in the use of terror itself but its psychological impact—the "process of disintegration" of autonomous personality which produced a childlike and submissive prisoner.<sup>43</sup> This focus on psychology could be translated into a very different context—one which eliminated the physical elements of terror altogether. The influence of Bettelheim's work was evident in feminist scholar Betty Friedan's comparison of American suburban homes to "comfortable concentration camps," on the basis of what she analyzed as their infantilizing and dehumanizing effect on women, in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>44</sup> Kirsten Fermaglich positions this

<sup>38</sup> Alpers, *Dictators*, *Democracy*, 94–128.

<sup>39</sup> T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950), 1, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thought on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York, 1951), xii.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the intersection of psychoanalysis and totalitarianism see Matt fytche and Daniel Pick, eds., *Psychoanalysis in the Age of Totalitarianism* (London, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Although now widely discredited, Bettelheim's work was highly influential around mid-century.

<sup>43</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38/4 (1943), 417–52, at 452.

<sup>44</sup> Kirsten Lise Fermaglich, "'The Comfortable Concentration Camp': The Significance of Nazi Imagery in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)," *American Jewish History* 92/2 (2003), 205–32, at 209.

analogy in the context of a wider trend “in the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s ... when some American Jewish thinkers ... emphasized the evils of Nazi concentration camps ... as a means of expressing prevalent intellectual concerns with bureaucracy, alienation, and conformity and criticizing American society from a liberal perspective.”<sup>45</sup> The emphasis on psychology in Bettelheim’s work facilitated a comparison of the “psychological *and* physical destruction” of the concentration camp with the “psychological devastation” of the suburban home.<sup>46</sup> Attention to the internal psychological causes and effects of totalitarianism, over the external coercions of the state, was central to Mailer’s application of this concept to an American context in the 1960s.

One of the most significant absences in US-focused theories of totalitarianism was the idea of terror. For Arendt, in her seminal *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, terror was the “essence of totalitarian domination.”<sup>47</sup> Studies of American totalitarianism rejected the centrality of terror in favor of an emphasis on noncoercive psychological manipulation. One of the most significant examples of this type of theory was Herbert Marcuse’s 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*. A German émigré associated with the Frankfurt school, Marcuse’s work in the 1960s was a significant influence on the American New Left. He argued that totalitarianism was “not only a *terroristic political* coordination of society, but also a *non-terroristic economic-technical* coordination which operates through manipulation of needs by vested interests,” which then “preclude[d] the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole.”<sup>48</sup> *One-Dimensional Man* can be viewed as a “convergence” model of totalitarianism—theories which argued that all modern industrial societies were becoming alike and equally oppressive.<sup>49</sup> This idea was not new to the 1960s. James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), which predicted the rise of a new ruling class of “managers” around the world, although not strictly a theory of totalitarianism, can be considered in this vein. Like Mailer, Marcuse used the idea of totalitarianism to argue against the Cold War and rejected dominant theories of totalitarianism that focused on external threats. For Marcuse, the genuine causes of the threat to humanity inherent in “contemporary industrial society” remained “unidentified, unexposed, unattacked by the public because they recede [d] before the all too obvious threat from without—to the West from the East, to the East from the West.”<sup>50</sup>

Émigré intellectuals, like Marcuse and Arendt, as well as Bettelheim, Adorno, Friedrich, and Gurian, profoundly shaped the discourse on totalitarianism in the United States. Recent scholarship has reflected the significance of émigré intellectuals to shaping Cold War discourse.<sup>51</sup> However, the prominence of émigrés in the

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 207.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 206, my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn with added prefaces (Orlando, 1973; first published 1951), 464.

<sup>48</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd edn (London, 2002), 5, my emphasis.

<sup>49</sup>Barber, “Conceptual Foundations,” 12.

<sup>50</sup>Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xxxix.

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, Greenberg, *The Weimar Century*; and Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca, 2018).

debate over totalitarianism provides all the more reason to study Mailer's central contribution to the Americanization of a concept which had always maintained a "whiff of foreignness."<sup>52</sup> Mailer built on the structural ambiguities of dominant theories of totalitarianism, its association with contagion, its links to mass society, previous warnings of the potentiality for totalitarianism in America, and the focus on psychological understandings of the nature of control, to develop a theory of cultural totalitarianism that was distinctively American. Regarding himself first and foremost as an American writer and cultural critic, Mailer moved beyond a comparative approach and shifted the primary focus of interest and study to the United States.

### **Norman Mailer, conformism, and totalitarianism in the 1950s**

As Benjamin R. Barber's survey of totalitarianism from 1967 revealed, counterhegemonic conceptions of this concept which de-emphasized the role of state control were a fixture of the discourse by the mid- to late 1960s. Mailer, however, had been incorporating an analysis of US society as totalitarian into his work as far back as the late 1940s.<sup>53</sup> His contribution to the discourse on totalitarianism is thus vital to understanding how the concept was reconfigured and, as a result, became open to appropriation by other radical political actors. The conception of totalitarianism developed by Mailer which focused on a type of totalitarianism already existing in American society in the form of cultural conformity was sharply distinguished from earlier uses of this concept, even those which warned of the potential for totalitarianism spreading to America. As literary critic Diana Trilling commented in 1962, "Even before the height of McCarthyism, as far back as his first novels, Mailer had arrived at th[e] conviction that fascism is not merely a potential in America as in any modern capitalism but, what is quite another order of political hypothesis, that it is the most coherent and dominant force in American society."<sup>54</sup>

Totalitarianism was a crucial concern for Mailer from the time he rose to fame with the success of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), and continued to shape his thoughts throughout his writing career. His engagement with the concept was at a peak in the 1960s, a period which saw his departure from a focus on writing novels to a foray into political essays. From the beginning of his career as a writer and public intellectual, Mailer's political views did not conform to the dominant Cold War anticommunist consensus. In the late 1940s, he leaned towards a revolutionary anti-Stalinist position guided by his friend and mentor Jean Malaquais, a Marxist writer and philosopher. Malaquais's influence was evident in Mailer's statement at the 1949 Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf Hotel in New York. Here, Mailer argued that "both Russia and America [were] moving radically towards state capitalism ... and

<sup>52</sup>Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 144.

<sup>53</sup>Another early proponent of the idea that America had become totalitarian was Dwight Macdonald; see Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (London, 1966), 324.

<sup>54</sup>Diana Trilling, "The Radical Moralism of Norman Mailer," reprinted in Leo Braudy, ed., *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1972), 42–65, at 47. Though Trilling used the term "fascism" she was referring to the same arguments articulated by Mailer considered here.

that ... there [was] no future in fighting for one side or the other.”<sup>55</sup> The critique of state capitalism was a position held by some factions of the anti-Stalinist left, and Mailer’s emphasis on the growing similarities between the United States and the Soviet Union was also in line with the “convergence theories” identified above. Although Mailer’s position went against the grain of the dominant Cold War discourse, his views at the conference won him support among American left-wing intellectuals like Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, and Irving Howe.<sup>56</sup>

State capitalism and the similar forms of oppressive bureaucracy in the United States and Soviet Union were also central concerns in Mailer’s second published novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951).<sup>57</sup> This novel saw Mailer engaging with dominant understandings of totalitarianism to make a counterhegemonic comparison between the opposing sides in the Cold War. *Barbary Shore* investigated the overreaching of the state in America: “herald[ing] the emergence of an American version of the police state,” it ends with “an image of internal state terror which compares with the practices of Stalin’s secret police.”<sup>58</sup> The novel also sought to unsettle Americans’ confidence in their culture and values. For Norman Podhoretz, Mailer’s point in *Barbary Shore* was “precisely that our society is *not* what it seems to be. It seems to be prosperous, vigorous, sure of itself, and purposeful, whereas in fact it is apathetic, confused, inept, empty, and in the grip of invisible forces that it neither recognizes nor controls.”<sup>59</sup> During the 1950s, at the height of the anticommunist hysteria in the United States, totalitarianism was a crucial element of the explanatory narrative of the Cold War, which put a premium on conformity and repressed fundamental criticisms of the status quo, justified by the necessity of protecting American democracy from totalitarian expansion.<sup>60</sup> Mailer challenged the accepted connection between the threat of totalitarianism and the necessity of conformity in America, arguing that suppressing criticism of America in the name of preserving US dominance in the Cold War could lead to the very situation it sought to avoid—the introduction of totalitarianism in America. His increasing interest in cultural conformity reflected the beginning of his reformulation of a theory of totalitarianism to suit an American context.

Mailer’s response to a 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium on “Our Country and Our Culture” reflected his negative reaction to the trend towards conformity and the uncritical celebration of American democracy. The *Partisan Review* editors wrote that this was a period in which “many writers and intellectuals ... [felt] closer to their country and its culture” due to the recognition that American democracy had “an intrinsic and positive value” and needed to be “defended against Russian

<sup>55</sup>Quoted in Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 116.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>57</sup>Nigel Leigh, “Marxisms on Trial: *Barbary Shore*,” in Harold Bloom, ed., *Norman Mailer* (Philadelphia, 2003), 83–108, at 85–7.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 87, 91.

<sup>59</sup>Norman Podhoretz, “Norman Mailer: The Embattled Vision,” *Partisan Review* 26/3 (1959), 371–91, at 378–9, emphasis in original.

<sup>60</sup>While I maintain that the imperatives of the Cold War and the threat of totalitarianism put a premium on conformity, I do not intend to suggest that no dissent was possible during these years. See Jennifer A. Delton, *Rethinking the 1950s: How Anticommunism and the Cold War Made America Liberal* (Cambridge, 2013).

totalitarianism.”<sup>61</sup> Mailer resolutely refused to accept this intellectual trend. His disagreement with the editors concerned, in part, the meaning of totalitarianism and the implications this had for the relationship of intellectuals to American culture. In response to the editors’ opening statement, Mailer countered that he was “in almost total disagreement with the assumptions of [the] symposium.”<sup>62</sup> While he accepted that many writers had come to champion the “American Century,” he argued that this had stunted their ability to produce material of any worth. Intellectuals who found themselves “in the American grain” failed to discuss what Mailer identified as the real crisis: that the needs of modern “total war and the total war economy predicate[d] a total regimentation of thought,” “that the prosperity of America depend[ed] upon the production of the means of destruction, and it [was] not only the Soviet Union which [was] driven toward war as an answer to insoluble problems.”<sup>63</sup> Mailer thus rejected the argument that Soviet totalitarianism represented the greatest threat to American democracy and pointed to similar problems in both systems.

By the early 1950s Mailer’s position constituted a rejection of official antitotalitarianism. He reappropriated dominant understandings of totalitarianism to make a counterhegemonic argument against the Cold War and highlighted similarities on both sides of the Cold War divide. He also displayed an interest in metaphors of disease that permeated Cold War discourse. In the *Partisan Review* symposium, he wrote that it was a period of “health manifestos. Everywhere the American writer is being dunned to become healthy, to grow up, to accept the American reality, to integrate himself, to eschew disease.”<sup>64</sup> These metaphors pervaded his own work in the 1950s and captured the insidious nature of the problems he sought to expose. In the *Village Voice*, Mailer wrote of “the hopeless conformity which plagues us” and the “anti-human plague of our time.”<sup>65</sup>

Another major source of interest for Mailer was psychology—or more specifically the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis—evident in his unpublished “Lipton’s Journal.” Written while he was struggling to publish his third novel, *The Deer Park*, in the winter and spring of 1954–5, “Lipton’s Journal” documented Mailer’s experimentation with marijuana and attempts to psychoanalyse himself. In addition to his personal thoughts and observations, major themes in the journal include a critique of psychoanalysis, particularly the theories of Sigmund Freud, an extended discussion of the relationship between society and the individual, and the importance of sexual liberation and revolution. Written at speed in a stream-of-consciousness style, the journal is revealing of the problems that were at the forefront of Mailer’s mind in the mid-1950s. The influence of the theory of mass society is readily apparent in the journal entries, particularly in Mailer’s negative attitude towards the mass media. He mused that “[a]dvertising and television and radio and newspaper and movies, but especially advertising are society’s war

<sup>61</sup>Editorial statement, “Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium,” *Partisan Review* 19/3 (1952), 282–6, at 282, 284.

<sup>62</sup>Norman Mailer, contribution to “Our Country and Our Culture,” *Partisan Review*, 19/3 (1952), 298–301, at 298.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>65</sup>Norman Mailer in *Village Voice*, 20 March 1956, 5; Mailer in *Village Voice*, 18 April 1956, 5.



upon each individual. It is the place where advertising reaches deep into each man's soul and converts a piece of it to society."<sup>66</sup> The journal entries show that Mailer was fixated on the damaging effects of contemporary society on the individual.

Mailer experimented with putting together his interest in mass society and Freud in *Advertisements for Myself*, a collection of essays and fiction published in 1959. By rewriting a section from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Mailer sought to apply Freud's theories to society rather than the individual—so Freud's "psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams" became Mailer's "psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret the unconscious undercurrents of society."<sup>67</sup> His experimentation with theories of psychoanalysis reflected his growing dissatisfaction with the ability of Marxist theories to solve the problems of modern society—particularly the effects of consumer culture and the manipulations of the mass media. In "From Surplus Value to the Mass-Media," which he saw as one of the most important short essays in *Advertisements*, Mailer explored the limitations of Marxism and argued that the future of radicalism could "come only from a new revolutionary vision of society." The new theory would not "explore nearly so far into that jungle of political economy which Marx charted ... but rather will engage with the empty words, dead themes, and sentimental voids of [the] mass-media."<sup>68</sup> Mailer's critiques of Marxism paralleled the limitations he found in dominant theories of totalitarianism, which focused on political and economic (physical), rather than psychological, domination. The foremost problem in Mailer's mind was the "psychic" manipulations of the mass media, which, in America, outweighed the issue of the "forcibl[e]" subjection of the working class.<sup>69</sup>

"Lipton's Journal" was also a space for Mailer to work out his position on totalitarianism. Perhaps the most significant entry is a passage which asserted that the twentieth century was a period in which the "interrelation between man and society was broken. Society went its way, and man (those who had souls) retreated, or gave themselves up to being the machines of society. And the revolution never took place. And its only substitute, its echo, its polarity, was totalitarianism."<sup>70</sup> Mailer's reference to "man" as a collective was in keeping with fears characteristic of the era that totalitarianism represented a universal threat to the nature of humankind. Totalitarianism featured in Mailer's work not as a localized threat that had emanated from the Nazi and Soviet regimes, but rather as a description of the generalized condition of humanity in the twentieth century. Like earlier

<sup>66</sup>Norman Mailer, "Lipton's Journal," entry for 17 Dec. 1954, Norman Mailer Papers, Container 1014.1-3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>67</sup>Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (London, 1961), 375-6.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>70</sup>Mailer, "Lipton's Journal," 17 Dec. 1954. The revolution Mailer was referring to here is ambiguous. It could have been the Russian Revolution, which he was suggesting degenerated into totalitarianism. However, other references to revolution in the journal refer to the cultural transformation Mailer wanted to bring about in Western society. He believed this should be a sexual revolution which would bring about fundamental change in society. The figure of the hipster, later to emerge in "The White Negro," would lead the way: "the hipster is the underground proletariat of the future, eating away at the husk of society." "Lipton's Journal," 17 Dec. 1954.



theorists, Mailer viewed totalitarianism as a mobile concept with universal implications.

### Totalitarianism in “The White Negro”

These ideas were developed in his landmark 1957 essay “The White Negro.” Here, Mailer articulated his theory that hipsterism represented the best chance of escaping the postwar “years of conformity and depression.” Mailer defined the “hipster” as an “American existentialist”: one who was “divorce[d] ... from society” and “without roots.” Hipsters embraced the “rebellious imperatives of the self” and “existe[d] in the present.”<sup>71</sup> Hipsterism was Mailer’s answer to the limitations of Marxism—a theory that dealt with the psychological dislocations of society and responded to the problems of what he came to identify as cultural totalitarianism. In “The White Negro,” Mailer built on earlier theories which saw totalitarianism as a universal phenomenon which had escaped the boundaries of the state—and developed the view of totalitarianism as a collective phenomenon, or as a condition of the twentieth century, which had implications for the whole of humanity. This essay, which achieved widespread attention and influence, represented a crucial pivot in Mailer’s theory of a distinctively American form of totalitarianism. It also cemented Mailer’s status as an intermediary between the intellectual establishment, known as the “Family,” and the less conventional beat generation.<sup>72</sup> Finally, it positioned Mailer as an influence over the rising radicalism of the New Left.<sup>73</sup>

Although the essay has been widely discussed, the relationship between the “hipster” and Mailer’s view of American totalitarianism requires further consideration.<sup>74</sup> In the opening lines Mailer merged the implications of “the concentration camps and the atom bomb,” a link which in itself subverted the moral divide imposed between democratic and totalitarian states. The universal psychological consequences of the crimes of World War II were emphasized in Mailer’s assertion that “we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years.”<sup>75</sup> It is worth repeating the often-quoted opening

<sup>71</sup>Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” reprinted in Mailer, *Advertisements*, 281–302, at 283.

<sup>72</sup>Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 224.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>74</sup>For examples of contemporary responses to “The White Negro” see James Baldwin’s critique of this essay in “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” reprinted in Braudy, *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 66–81; and Ned Polsky, “Reflections on Hip,” in Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, 309–13. For more recent scholarly consideration see Andrea Levine, “‘The (Jewish) White Negro’: Norman Mailer’s Racial Bodies,” *MELUS* 28/2 (2003) 59–81; Alan Petigny, “Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro,’ and New Conceptions of the Self in Postwar America,” *Mailer Review* 1/1 (2007) 184–93; Douglas Taylor, “Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 52/1 (2010) 70–101; Tracy Dahlby, “‘The White Negro’ Revisited: The Demise of the Indispensable Hipster,” *Mailer Review* 5/1 (2011) 218–30; Jonathan W. Gray, *Civil Rights in the White Literary Imagination: Innocence by Association* (Jackson, 2013), 44–71.

<sup>75</sup>Mailer, “The White Negro,” 282.

paragraphs of this essay, which reinforce the idea of collective guilt and are revealing of Mailer's engagement with the concept of totalitarianism:

The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation (at least his collective creation from the past) and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?

Worse. One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an elite by being a radical were forever gone. A man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life which could be called in any year of overt crisis. No wonder then that these have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve.<sup>76</sup>

These paragraphs are crucial as, here, Mailer moved subtly from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany to postwar America, linking and implicitly equating the features of totalitarianism in its dominant understanding with the conformity of American society. In viewing totalitarianism as a universal phenomenon, Mailer suggested that the psychological effects of the concentration camps extended across national borders, that the very fact of the existence of concentration camps in Europe was enough to ensure conformity in America. Mailer continued that it was "on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that ... our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l'univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled."<sup>77</sup> Mailer thus conjured up parallels between the effects of the concentration camps and the effects of conformity in America—going beyond an analysis of the similarity in terms of psychological control to argue that each resulted in death. Although this analogy seems overblown, intentionally provocative, and insulting, it was in keeping with the work of several other Jewish intellectuals, including Stanley M. Elkins, Betty Friedan, Stanley Milgram, and Robert Jay Lifton, who in the late 1950s and early 1960s used imagery from the concentration camps to illuminate problems in American society and culture.<sup>78</sup> It also revealed Mailer's determination to emphasize that the worst effects of totalitarianism could be felt without state coercion or violence.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 282–3.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 283.

<sup>78</sup>See Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957–1965* (Waltham, MA, 2007).

The link between conformity and the identification of American society as totalitarian was made explicit as Mailer outlined his thesis, that “[o]ne is Hip or one is Square ... one is a rebel ... or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed.”<sup>79</sup> The hipster was both a product of the “bleak scene” of the postwar world and an answer to it. Mailer indirectly acknowledged that there were differences between the forms of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and in postwar America, although, as he did in later works, he contended that “partial” totalitarianism in America may have had a more damaging effect on the psyche of citizens. The implications of Mailer’s emphasis on the psychological effects, over the physical violence, of totalitarian regimes was evident in his argument that a “totalitarian society makes enormous demands on the courage of men, and a partially totalitarian society makes even greater demands for the general anxiety is greater.”<sup>80</sup> Mailer’s reference to “partial totalitarianism” suggests that, in the late 1950s, he was still working with dominant theories of totalitarianism in mind and that America was missing certain crucial elements.

The limits of Mailer’s focus on cultural conformity were revealed in the interaction between ideas of race and totalitarianism in “The White Negro.” Though not an activist, Mailer was generally supportive of the struggle for civil rights and later the black power movement. Race was also a recurring theme in his work—“The White Negro” and two sympathetic articles on black power from the late 1960s stand out as his most direct comments on issues of race.<sup>81</sup> However, Mailer’s emphasis on the psychological effects of the traumatic events of World War II and the climate of conformity in postwar America led him to minimize the reality of state-sponsored violence and political oppression experienced by African Americans. Mailer’s shift away from defining totalitarianism as a political, statist, coercive phenomenon towards a focus on the psychological manipulations of American culture—a shift which crystallised in his later work—was already apparent in “The White Negro.”

Mailer’s arguments connect to the dialogue between domestic race relations and Cold War politics—a subject which has been surveyed in the rich literature on African American internationalism in the twentieth century.<sup>82</sup> Mary L. Dudziak has shown how the Cold War climate could both advance and constrain civil rights reform. On the one hand, civil rights discourse was limited by the constricting

<sup>79</sup> Mailer, “The White Negro,” 284.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>81</sup> See Norman Mailer, “Black Power: A Discussion,” *Partisan Review* 35/2 (1968), 218–21; and Mailer, “Looking for the Meat and Potatoes: Thoughts on Black Power,” reprinted in Mailer, *Existential Errands* (Boston, 1972), 287–304.

<sup>82</sup> See Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany, 1986); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, 1997); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2011); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, 1996); and Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956–1974* (Cambridge, 2012). Most relevant to the debate over totalitarianism is Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the Black Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

framework of Cold War anticommunism, which took precedence. At the same time, however, domestic racial discrimination had the potential to weaken the position of the United States in its global contest with the Soviet Union, by tarnishing the image of American democracy. This, in turn, spurred limited federal action in the 1950s to protect civil rights at home.<sup>83</sup> Significantly, the concept of totalitarianism could be manipulated to point out the hypocrisy of claims concerning the superiority of American democracy. As Leerom Medovoi has suggested, “how could the United States claim to defend human freedom against its totalitarian enemies abroad while it waged a totalitarian race war at home every time it terrorized its own black (and other minority) populations?”<sup>84</sup> David Ciepley has shown how comparisons between the racial policies of Nazi Germany and the American South encouraged the US Supreme Court to make the elimination of southern totalitarianism a priority by the late 1930s.<sup>85</sup> Historian Thomas Borstelmann has also made a connection between the “political totalitarianism” of the Soviet Union and the “racial totalitarianism” of the American South during the Cold War.<sup>86</sup> Mailer, however, did not use the concept of totalitarianism to make direct criticisms of racism in American society.

Instead, Mailer identified black culture, “the source of Hip,” as an antidote to cultural totalitarianism in the United States.<sup>87</sup> For Mailer, the exclusion of African Americans from the “securities” available to “the average white,” and their daily experience of violence and danger, imbued black Americans with “a potential superiority”—a resistance to the conformity which plagued society.<sup>88</sup> On this basis, he suggested that it was white America that suffered most from the effects of totalitarianism, while black Americans were spared the worst effects. Significantly, then, Mailer did not identify American racism as a form of totalitarian domination. This reasoning followed from his preoccupation with cultural conformity, rather than political coercion and violence, as the form totalitarianism had taken in America. Conversely, violence was presented as a means of liberation from such conformity—as the “catharsis which prepares growth.” Mailer premised this argument on a distinction between “individual acts of violence,” which could be constructive, and the “collective violence of the state.”<sup>89</sup> For Mailer, totalitarian “state” violence did not exist in the United States—it was an “ugly consequence of the past.”<sup>90</sup> Mailer’s hope was that greater equality for African Americans, and the emergence of “hip” in American culture, would put an end to the time of mass conformity. As Jean Malaquais commented, Mailer “bestow[ed]” upon

<sup>83</sup>Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 11–13.

<sup>84</sup>Leerom Medovoi, “The Race War Within: Biopolitics of the Long Cold War,” in Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam, eds., *American Literature and Culture in the Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* (Iowa City, 2012), 163–86, at 177.

<sup>85</sup>Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*, 244.

<sup>86</sup>Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 4.

<sup>87</sup>Mailer, “The White Negro,” 284.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 285, 300.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, 299. For more on the role of violence in Mailer’s work see Maggie McKinley, *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950–75* (New York, 2015), 67–90.

<sup>90</sup>Mailer, “The White Negro,” 299. He also warned that it was possible that totalitarian state violence would emerge in America. Without the “catharsis” of individual violence the injustice of American society could become “turned into the cold murderous liquidations of the totalitarian state.” *Ibid.*, 301.

African Americans “a Messianic mission” to rescue (white) America from cultural totalitarianism.<sup>91</sup>

As much as Mailer shared with other theorists the view that totalitarianism had implications for all of humanity, his definition tended to address the afflictions he saw affecting his own white, middle-class milieu. Mailer’s characterization of African Americans also perpetuated racist stereotypes of black masculinity, famously criticized by James Baldwin in his 1961 essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy.” The limitations of cultural totalitarianism were captured best by Mailer himself, in a comment made in a different context to the Japanese translator of his work, Eiichi Yamanishi: “I was thinking of the generation which I think is most interested in my work, some of the younger American’s [*sic*] of my own class. To a Negro activist, my ideas would seem a luxury.”<sup>92</sup> Dominant understandings of totalitarianism, with their emphasis on political oppression and violence, were more applicable than Mailer’s focus on conformity and the mass media to structural racism in American society.

### Defining totalitarianism in *The Presidential Papers*

One of Mailer’s foremost concerns in the opening years of the 1960s was cultural totalitarianism. Mailer’s understanding of this concept, and its relationship to its statist Nazi and Soviet forms, had remained relatively fluid in the 1950s. His early views conformed to comparative and convergence models which suggested the potential for totalitarianism in America without fundamentally reconfiguring the definition of totalitarianism to fit this context. With his shift from fiction to political essays, however, cultural totalitarianism became a more defined presence in Mailer’s work. This was evident in Mailer’s contributions to *Commentary* and *Esquire* in the early 1960s, including his widely read report on John F. Kennedy and the 1960 Democratic convention, which were collected and published in 1963 as *The Presidential Papers*. This volume consisted of Mailer’s most sustained effort to provide a definition of the new form of totalitarianism he identified.

Mailer’s identification of cultural totalitarianism in America explicitly built on the structural ambiguities inherent in dominant theories of this concept. He suggested that the indefinable and amorphous nature of totalitarianism was its essential and defining characteristic. It was “a shapeless form, an obdurate emptiness, an annihilation of possibilities.” Totalitarianism had “haunted the twentieth century, haunted the efforts of intellectuals to define it, of politicians to withstand it, and of rebels to find a field of war where it could be given battle.”<sup>93</sup> Equally, the idea of totalitarianism as a type of contagion reinforced Mailer’s argument that totalitarianism was the collective condition of the twentieth century to which the Western world was as susceptible as the East. Mailer charts the evolution of totalitarianism in the following paragraph:

<sup>91</sup>Jean Malaquais, “Reflections on Hip,” in Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, 303–6, at 304.

<sup>92</sup>Mailer interviewed by Eiichi Yamanishi, N/D c1967, Norman Mailer Papers, Container 577.2, Harry Ransom Center. Mailer was responding to a question about an answer he gave in “An Impolite Interview” with Paul Krassner published in *The Realist* in December 1962.

<sup>93</sup>Mailer, *The Presidential Papers*, 198.

That first huge wave of totalitarianism was like a tide which moved in two directions at once. It broke upon the incompatible military force of Russia and of America. But it was an ocean of plague. It contaminated all that it touched. If Russia had been racing into totalitarianism before the war, it was pervasively totalitarian after the war, in the last half-mad years of Stalin's court. And America was altered from a nation of venture, exploitation, bigotry, initiative, strife, social justice and social injustice, into a vast central swamp of tasteless toneless authority ... The creative mind gave way to the authoritative [*sic*] mind.<sup>94</sup>

In this reading, World War II, a cataclysmic event, had spread the disease of totalitarianism and led to its introduction in America. Despite the specificities of America's cultural totalitarianism, then, it was nonetheless a manifestation of the same affliction. Framing totalitarianism in this way masked a potential weakness in Mailer's theory—the question of causation. Building on earlier conceptions of totalitarianism as a force in itself, capable of spreading independently, Mailer evaded a detailed exposition of the factors that had led to totalitarianism in America. A similar ambiguity marked Barber's assessment of "involuntary [or unintentional] totalism" which, he suggested, seeped "*by default*" into society. Dominant theories of totalitarianism were also ambiguous on this subject—despite the plethora of attempted answers a consensus had, and has, not been reached. Most significantly, Arendt's argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* remained fundamentally ambiguous about the precise nature of causation. As historian Richard H. King suggests, Arendt's "purpose was to analyse the component parts of totalitarianism without arriving at any grand, overarching conclusions about causal priority."<sup>95</sup> The relationship between these parts, covered in the three sections of the book, "Antisemitism," "Imperialism," and "Totalitarianism," was left open to interpretation. Cultural conformity was at the heart of Mailer's diagnosis of American totalitarianism—though it is unclear whether he viewed this primarily as cause or as symptom.

Mailer relied on disease metaphors not just to explain *how* totalitarianism had reached America, but also to give substance to his definition of *what* it was in its American form. He argued that "[t]otalitarianism ha[d] come to America with no concentration camps and no need for them, no political parties and no desire for new parties, no, totalitarianism ha[d] *slipped into the body cells and psyche of each of us*."<sup>96</sup> This was Mailer's crucial distinction, explaining how conformity in American society related to forms of oppression in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. He suggested that totalitarianism had "appeared first in Nazi Germany as a political juggernaut, and in the Soviet Union as a psychotization of ideology," but "totalitarianism ha[d] slipped into America with no specific political face."<sup>97</sup> Comparing Mailer's description with one of the most authoritative hegemonic definitions of totalitarianism—offered by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 199.

<sup>95</sup>Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals: 1940–1970* (Washington, DC, 2004), 100.

<sup>96</sup>Mailer, *The Presidential Papers*, 200, my emphasis.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 200.



*Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956)—helps to reveal how far Mailer had shifted the discourse. For Friedrich and Brzezinski, there were six “basic features” of totalitarian dictatorships: “an ideology, a single party typically led by one man, a terroristic police, a communications monopoly [in the hands of the party], a weapons monopoly [in the same hands], and a centrally directed economy.”<sup>98</sup> Mailer rejected the significance of the first and second features, disassociating totalitarianism from political parties and arguing that totalitarianism was “better understood if it is regarded as a plague rather than examined as a style of ideology,” which fundamentally altered the overall meaning.<sup>99</sup> The nature of control he identified was not “centrally directed” from the state or party, operating externally on citizens, but existed internally, in the minds of Americans. Mailer also used metaphors of disease to suggest that totalitarianism was more insidious, and therefore worse, in the United States. The shift from external and statist to internal and psychological forms of oppression was crucial—hence his distinction between the “simple” totalitarianism attached to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and the insidious cultural totalitarianism in America.

The theory of mass society was used to similar effect. In particular, Mailer’s fear of the effect of mass media and his distaste for new technologies were subjects to which he frequently returned in his writing. Relatedly, criticism of corporate capitalism—a refrain common by the 1950s—was likewise a theme in Mailer’s work. Historian Kevin M. Schultz has shown how corporate capitalism was a crucial target in Mailer’s broader attack on the mid-century liberal establishment, and an enemy he had in common with friend and political sparring partner William F. Buckley Jr.<sup>100</sup> Mailer wrote that the “twentieth century may yet be seen as that era when civilized man and underprivileged man were melted together into mass man, the iron and steel of the nineteenth century giving way to electronic circuits which communicated their messages into men, the unmistakable tendency of the new century seeming to be the creation of men as interchangeable as commodities.” This paralleled many other theories of mass society. Yet, he continued, “Nowhere, as in America ... was this fall from individual man to mass man felt so acutely, for America was at once the first and most prolific creator of mass communications, and the most rootless of countries.”<sup>101</sup> The concept of “rootlessness” seems to have been lifted from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, yet Mailer’s argument is in conflict with Arendt’s assertion that the United States could resist the worst effects of mass society and avoid turning totalitarian. Mailer thus used and adapted the idea of mass society to support his argument that a new form of cultural totalitarianism already existed in America.

<sup>98</sup>Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York, 1962; first published 1956), 9.

<sup>99</sup>Mailer, *The Presidential Papers*, 191.

<sup>100</sup>Kevin M. Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer: The Difficult Friendship That Shaped the Sixties* (New York, 2016), 46–8.

<sup>101</sup>Mailer, *The Presidential Papers*, 51–2.



## Cultural totalitarianism and the Cold War

Much of Mailer's criticism in the 1950s and 1960s was directed at the effects of the Cold War at home, although he did also comment directly on the foreign policy of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. When projected into the international arena, the analytical power of Mailer's theory of cultural totalitarianism was limited. The excesses of Mailer's equation of the effects of statist and cultural totalitarianism were revealed when they came into contact with the practical implications of the Cold War, as he was forced to admit the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1960 Mailer penned an "Open Letter to Fidel Castro," not published until the following year, in which he urged the Cuban leader not to align himself with the Soviet Union. Mailer wrote that the difference between "my country," and the "other country" is that "my country ... allow[s] me to speak my mind in a way I never could in the other country."<sup>102</sup> Thus Cuba could not be left "alone with Russia, lost to what we can offer."<sup>103</sup> Despite Mailer's assertion that US citizens were subject to cultural totalitarianism, when engaging with the realities of Cold War diplomacy he was forced to admit this crucial difference between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Mailer found the concept of cultural totalitarianism most useful when he turned his attention to the domestic effects of fighting the Cold War. It was this consideration which informed most of his arguments about foreign policy. Mailer's attempts to influence the direction of US policy abroad constituted his most direct reversal of the totalitarian paradigm to make a counterhegemonic argument against the Cold War. In *The Presidential Papers* Mailer cautioned against the view of communism as an "absolute evil," because to "insist communism [was] a simple phenomenon [would] only brutalize the minds of the American people."<sup>104</sup> The practice of fighting the Cold War threatened "[a]rt, free inquiry and the liberty to speak" in America, the very elements which were the "only cure against the plague" of totalitarianism that threatened society. Thus the crucial question for Mailer was, "Do we become totalitarian or do we end the cold war?"<sup>105</sup>

The escalation of the Vietnam War increased Mailer's certainty of the reality of this dilemma. In 1964 he wrote to Eiichi Yamanishi to emphasize that "the thing I feel the most is that America, engaged in world-wide adventures for which she has no tradition and no natural aptitude, will become rotted through and through as she is three-quarters rotted already by a totalitarian spirit which, if it ever succeeded here, could win the complete and final destruction of the earth."<sup>106</sup> He also developed a corollary to this argument, which suggested that withdrawing from Vietnam would not only save America, it would also ultimately condemn the Soviet Union to self-destruction. In a 1965 *Partisan Review* symposium "On Vietnam" he worried that increasing the number of troops would "shift the moral center of America" and that the war might be "the first open expression of a totalitarian Leviathan

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 92.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 186.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 188.

<sup>106</sup>Norman Mailer to Eiichi Yamanishi, 24 Nov. 1964, Norman Mailer Papers, Container 553.6, Harry Ransom Center.

which will yet dominate everything still not nailed down in American life: art, civil rights, student rebellions, public criticism in mass media.”<sup>107</sup> He argued that Stalin had caused communist ideology to become ossified to the point where it could not “change remotely so fast as reality and so [had to] be insulated from reality by war. War [was] the health of Communist ideology whereas peace and the abrupt *strifeless* acquisition of backward countries [was] a nightmare to ideology.”<sup>108</sup> Thus communism left to spread unchecked would soon destroy itself.

Mailer also intervened directly in foreign-policy discussions through his nonfiction novel *The Armies of the Night*, a highly influential account of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War which helped turn public opinion against the conflict.<sup>109</sup> Jerry Rubin, co-organizer of the March and a founding member of the “Youth International Party,” stated, “*The Armies of the Night* became the bible of the Movement.”<sup>110</sup> In *Armies*, Mailer again used disease metaphors to convey his vision of American totalitarianism. After describing his own arrest during the march following his deliberate crossing of a police line, Mailer recounted a conversation with the federal marshal guarding him who believed that “the evil was without, America was threatened by a foreign disease.” In contrast, the marshal “was threatened to the core of his sanity by any one of the first fifty of Mailer’s ideas which would insist that the evil was within.”<sup>111</sup> This scene captured the difference between dominant understandings of totalitarianism as an external enemy and Mailer’s contention that totalitarianism existed internally, within America’s borders and in the minds of Americans. Mailer’s opposition to the Vietnam War intersected with his views on totalitarianism. US policy in Vietnam became a symptom of the American disease, a manifestation of America’s totalitarian tendencies.<sup>112</sup> Thus Mailer found that “the war in Vietnam offered ... the grim pleasure of confirming his ideas” about American totalitarianism, as the “disease he had written about existed now in open air.”<sup>113</sup>

Mailer’s views were a direct inversion of the official Cold War policy which sought to protect American democracy from totalitarianism through intervention. In each case, the underlying motivation was the same: to protect America, and by extension the entire world, from totalitarian domination. In Mailer’s view, it was the United States that was now the chief incubator of the totalitarian disease, and the continuation of the Cold War would cause America to succumb and spread this disease abroad. Mailer’s views were formed and articulated with little consideration of the consequences for the populations of countries subject to US intervention (also suggested by Mailer’s dismissive reference to “backward countries”), but rather focused on the potential dangers to America.

<sup>107</sup> Mailer, contribution to “On Vietnam” symposium, *Partisan Review* 32/4 (1965), 638–46, at 639, 641–2.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 642, emphasis in original.

<sup>109</sup> Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 387.

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times* (New York, 1985), 461.

<sup>111</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (London, 1968), 145.

<sup>112</sup> Mailer made a similar argument by analogy in his 1967 novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (New York, 2017; first published 1967), which addressed through metaphor the political and cultural problems in America responsible for the US presence in Vietnam.

<sup>113</sup> Mailer, *Armies of the Night*, 188.

### An “American” totalitarianism?

In 1967–8, when counterhegemonic theories of totalitarianism were at their peak, Mailer could justifiably claim to have been “going on for years” about America’s “oncoming totalitarianism.”<sup>114</sup> His work from the late 1940s to the early 1960s provides a crucial resource which reveals how totalitarianism came to be mobilized in the service of those who opposed the dominant Cold War consensus. Mailer’s writing from this period shows how the flexibility of totalitarianism as a concept lent itself to appropriation by radical political actors. He built on widespread fears of totalitarianism as a universal threat that transcended national boundaries, its association with contagion, its connection with the theory of mass society, and popular interest in the psychological dimensions of control. In doing so, Mailer crucially shifted the definition of totalitarianism from a political, statist, coercive phenomenon to a version that highlighted psychological manipulation and cultural conformity. Mailer was not alone in identifying a non-statist form of totalitarianism existing in America, though he had advanced this analysis earlier than many other intellectuals. As such, he should be credited as a source of influence over new models of non-statist totalitarianism—as Eldridge Cleaver’s adoption of Mailer’s ideas illustrates—though his sway over the ideas of the New Left was perhaps not as distinctive as that of Herbert Marcuse’s theory of totalitarianism in *One-Dimensional Man*.

Mailer’s significance lies not just in his relationship to this broader trend but also in his idiosyncrasy. He stretched the concept of totalitarianism further than any other writer or intellectual. Many felt that Mailer’s frequent use of totalitarianism was outrageous and provocative, or entirely irresponsible.<sup>115</sup> Occasionally, Mailer’s use of totalitarianism threatened to degenerate into an epithet directed at anything he disliked. At times, he used the term “totalitarian” so indiscriminately that it retained little meaning, as in the following quote from a literary symposium in 1960: “I am terrified of a creeping totalitarianism of thought, which weakens, adulterates, vitiates ... [a] dictatorship of a vast monotony and boredom ... You can’t turn off the Muzak. Your architecture is dreadful. Television is horrible. Smog ... In fact, anything is totalitarian that makes us empty and depressed.”<sup>116</sup> As Irving Howe commented in the same year, “Mailer [was] in danger of being carried away by the fertility and brilliance of his own metaphors.”<sup>117</sup> Yet this determined overuse had political purpose. It likely contributed to the fracturing of dominant understandings of totalitarianism by the 1960s, opening a new discursive space in which alternative constructions of totalitarianism flourished.

A core of inherent rebellion was contained in Mailer’s counterhegemonic use of totalitarianism at the same time that this concept was the ideological backbone of the Cold War. While some remained unconvinced by Mailer’s indiscriminate use of

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>115</sup>In a typical criticism, Christopher Lasch wrote that Mailer had “steadily enlarged [the meaning of totalitarianism]—as he ha[d] enlarged so many things, the length of his sentences, the heat of his indignation, the scope of his literary ambitions—until it includes everything he finds in the slightest degree distasteful.” Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, 334.

<sup>116</sup>Mailer quoted in Rus Arnold, “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” *Writer’s Digest* 40/3 (1960), 20.

<sup>117</sup>Irving Howe, “A Quest for Peril,” *Partisan Review* 27/1 (1960), 143–8, at 147.

the term, for example a British reviewer who observed that “‘Totalitarianism’ [was] a blanket-word that Mailer use[d] ... to cover everything he hates,” Mailer’s description of the totalitarian plague infecting America resonated with others.<sup>118</sup> For Richard Kluger, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1963, “What Norman Mailer [was] doing, and doing more prolifically and more provocatively and occasionally more preposterously than any other literary figure we have, [was] to tell what life is like now in America.” He was a “volcanic despoiler of the stifling orthodoxy that America ... [represented] to him.”<sup>119</sup> Mailer’s ultimate contribution to the discourse on totalitarianism can be seen in his Americanization of the concept for a US audience. Midge Decter echoed the sentiment of Kluger’s review in her own, stating,

Mailer’s daring has to do with something not, I think, sufficiently taken into account about him, and for which *The Presidential Papers* brings massive evidence. And that is how *American* he is. By “American” I do not mean anything literary–metaphysical. I mean quite simply that he owns America. He unquestioningly and unambiguously belongs here ... no one is currently telling us more about the United States of America.<sup>120</sup>

Mailer felt a “deep love” for “the promise and the dream” of America even while presenting criticisms of US society in the 1960s.<sup>121</sup> His interpretation of totalitarianism facilitated the coexistence of this love with his radical attack on many areas of American life. Despite his Americanization of totalitarianism, this term would always keep its association with foreign contagion. The idea of totalitarianism as a disease enabled Mailer to formulate a fundamental critique of American society but at the same time to locate the origins of the infection outside the American state. If totalitarianism had taken root in America, and America had proved to be fertile ground for its growth, it could still be conceived as a foreign infection from which the United States could return to full health.

The lingering foreignness of totalitarianism is suggestive of the way in which this concept never completely lost its connection to dominant understandings associated with the Cold War. By the 1970s, Mailer presented his fixation on totalitarianism in a less novel form, one which emphasized the role of the state and the secret police. At a party for his fiftieth birthday in 1973 Mailer announced to his five hundred guests that he was forming “The Fifth Estate,” a “democratic secret police to keep tabs on Washington’s secret police,” as it was time to “face up to the possibility that the country may be sliding toward totalitarianism.”<sup>122</sup> Mailer’s biographer characterized this announcement, and the party itself, as an “embarrassing failure” as his guests soon lost interest and were quick to ridicule Mailer’s speech.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, Mailer ramped up his efforts to inform the American public about totalitarianism in the early 1970s. The revelations of the

<sup>118</sup>John Daniel, “Hints for a Hero,” *The Guardian*, 1 May 1964, 10.

<sup>119</sup>Richard Kluger, “To Dig, Get off the Middleground,” *Book Week*, 10 Nov. 1963, 4.

<sup>120</sup>Midge Decter, quoted in McKinley, *Understanding Norman Mailer*, 34, emphasis in original.

<sup>121</sup>Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer*, 4.

<sup>122</sup>“Mailer Forms ‘the Fifth Estate,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 Feb. 1973.

<sup>123</sup>Lennon, *Norman Mailer*, 461.

Watergate scandal encouraged Mailer's renewed focus on the state and drove him to translate his birthday announcement into a new organization which became "The Organizing Committee for a Fifth Estate." The organization's newsletter, *Counter-spy*, mobilized imagery associated with the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and proclaimed that George Orwell's vision was becoming a reality in America, again suggesting Mailer's return to more hegemonic constructions of totalitarianism. Mailer's public standing as a social critic was declining by the 1970s, and the Fifth Estate was a short-lived organization.

The 1960s constituted a distinct moment in which radical and alternative readings of totalitarianism were possible. By the 1980s, the concept of totalitarianism had been mostly reclaimed by neoconservatives such as Jeane Kirkpatrick and Irving Kristol, and would underpin the early years of Reagan's foreign policy. However, the 1960s had fractured the status of dominant Cold War theories of totalitarianism with lasting effects. The centrality of state control to conceptions of totalitarianism was challenged by a new focus on cultural conformity. The attachment of totalitarianism to foes external to the United States was undermined by the idea that totalitarianism had taken root within America. Totalitarianism remained a flexible concept which has been used, up to the present day, by different and opposing political actors for vastly disparate purposes. Echoes of Mailer's identification of a form of noncoercive cultural totalitarianism in American society could be found in the work of Noam Chomsky in the 1980s, and in the early 2000s work of political scientist Sheldon Wolin.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, in the current political moment public commentators are once again turning totalitarianism inwards to analyse trends in domestic US politics. A consideration of Mailer's work from the 1960s contributes towards an understanding of the potentialities, and the limitations, of the use of totalitarianism as means of critiquing American society.

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<sup>124</sup>See Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (London, 1988); Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London, 1989); and Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, 2008).