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From Idea to Ideology: A Cautionary Tale of Radicalization

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Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between education, radicalization, and democracy. It examines the differentiation between education as a catalyst for radical social change and as a means of harmful radicalization. Using Vladimir Lenin's efforts in the USSR as a historical case study and a metaphor, the article analyzes how radical educational reforms aimed at societal transformation can undermine democratic principles when driven by rigid ideology. The authors identify elements that were damaging to democracy historically: the "Silver Bullet" mentality of seeking a singular, simplistic solution to complex societal challenges, the systematic rejection of pluralistic perspectives, and the disturbing willingness to treat human beings as expendable in pursuit of ideological objectives. Contrasting Lenin's radical educational model, the study introduces Hannah Arendt's philosophical framework as a counter-perspective that prioritizes human dignity and democratic pluralism.

Keywords

Lenin, radicalization, ideology, totalitarianism, indoctrination, Hannah Arendt, human dignity

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In educational scholarship and practice, many have advocated for education as a means of enacting deep change in the world, *radical* change—a break with practices and realities that are considered harmful, oppressive, and unjust. "Radicalization," as Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is a "process of liberation" that is "nourished by a critical spirit" (1970, p. 37) Radicalization in this sense was thus defined as a goal of education, particularly within the tradition of critical pedagogy. This approach has also been visible in feminist, anti-racist, environmental, and similar movements, all of which have recognized the transformative power of education in challenging and dismantling systems of oppression. Education, in this view, is a means of fundamentally transforming the world—for the better—of radically overthrowing oppressive structures, injustice, inequality, and exploitation.

In the description of the Freirean radical tradition, we can find radicalization considered as a necessary part of emancipation.

> This process of radicalization predisposes us to reevaluate constantly our lives, attitudes, behaviors, actions, decisions, and relationships in the world. It is through this dynamic process of change that conscientização develops and evolves, as we come to engage courageously the oppressive forces that impact our lives, intervening with greater confidence and strength. By confronting together the risks inherent in our radicalization, we stop surrendering our lives, our children, and our communities to the decisions of others. (Darder, 2015, p. 116)

As we have pointed out earlier (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023), scholars and educators have been arguing extensively that the crises of our times, such as growing economic inequality or environmental disasters, demand a radical rethinking of education and a reorientation of the core goals of learning—away from "toothless pedagogy," toward a pedagogy from which real change is expected. This *radical* education is not content with superficial reforms but seeks to engage with the root causes of societal issues. It challenges the status quo and demands that educational practices actively contribute to empowering individuals and mobilizing communities to take collective action toward transformative social change.

At the same time, the world is faced with the rise of terrorism, extremism, and other forms of radicalism that threaten social stability. In the face of these challenges, there is a growing demand for education that is not focused on radicalizing but rather on preventing radicalization. In this context, education is framed as a tool to combat radicalization, aiming to stem the tide of extremist ideologies and protect individuals from being drawn into violent or destructive paths. In this line of thinking, several European countries have adopted anti-radicalization policies that incorporate educational strategies as a central component of their efforts. We are witnessing the emergence of an anti-radicalization movement—a concerted effort by governments, educators, and civil society to safeguard our societies from the shift into violent extremism, social fragmentation, and the erosion of democratic values.

These debates around education and radicalization reflect two seemingly opposing perspectives. On one hand, there is a call for education to serve as a catalyst for radical change, challenging oppressive structures and empowering individuals to transform the world. On the other hand, there is a growing emphasis on education as a means of preventing radicalization, protecting individuals and societies from the dangers of extremism.

The aim of this article is to explore the crucial difference between what we might call "good" and "bad" radicalization. To address this question, we will use the historical example of Vladimir Lenin. This narrative will serve as a lens through which we can examine the parallels, implications, and "lessons learned" for the contemporary world. In order not to overstretch the patience of the reader, we foreshadow our conclusions: we will argue that the critical demarcation between *good* and *bad* radicalization lies in the authentic and sincere commitment to democracy and human dignity more generally.

To begin this argument, we point to a definition of (bad) radicalization used by the Dutch intelligence services (AIVD). Radicalization may be understood as:

> the (active) pursuit of and/or support for far-reaching changes in society which may pose a danger to (the continued existence of) the democratic legal order, which may involve the use of undemocratic methods (means) that may harm the functioning of the democratic legal order (effect). … [This includes] a person's (growing) willingness to pursue and/or support such changes himself (in an undemocratic way or otherwise), or his encouraging others to do so. (As cited in Veldhuis & Staun, 2009, p. 5)

Next, we want to clarify what we mean by democracy in this context. Following John Dewey (1916), we envision democracy not just as a system of government but as a comprehensive way of living together—and, we would add, in necessary recognition of human dignity of everyone. Democracy extends beyond the mere functioning of political institutions; it represents a way of engaging in civic life where individuals are actively involved in shaping their communities and societies (see Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023, p. 168). Democracy, in this sense, involves participatory and deliberative processes whereby citizens are not passive observers but active participants. They engage in civic actions and dialogues, make decisions that impact their lives, and see themselves as co-creators of their social and political environment. This participatory and deliberative dimension means that democratic life is characterized by ongoing dialogue, mutual respect, and collective decision-making, all of which contribute to a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for the world(s) we live in.

So, the critical question becomes: Does education, in its goals, spirit, and methods, serve democracy, or does it, in the short or long run, undermine the principles and foundations of democratic society? This question remains complex and challenging to answer definitively. Through our historical example, we will identify elements that were damaging to democracy in the past. Naming and understanding these elements will help us critically assess contemporary educational practices, enabling us to name and recognize potential dangers and pathways that might lead to bad radicalization in

the present. Through this examination, we hope to clarify how radical education can truly support democratic values while avoiding the pitfalls that threaten democratic integrity.

The history of Lenin's educational efforts in the USSR is a useful illustration of how the core elements of democracy can be compromised, even as the mission—whether genuine or merely pretense—was to create a better world through radical change. We specifically examine Lenin's use of education as a means to address societal issues. Through this lens, we explore how his radical reforms were employed in the pursuit of revolutionary goals, and how these efforts intersected with, and at times undermined, democratic principles.

The story of Lenin is interesting not merely as a historical account but as a compelling illustration of how educational practices, when entwined with a singular and sacrosanct ideology, can become instrumental in fostering radicalization. For us, the story is also somewhat personal. Co-author Tetyana (Tanja) Hoggan-Kloubert grew up in Soviet Ukraine. Co-authors Chad Hoggan and Emry (Emmy) McKinney were raised in the United States. For all of us, our formative years occurred during the Cold War, where propaganda was ubiquitous, and those on the *other side* of the Iron Curtain were painted as misguided at best, and more often as evil. Chad and Emmy, like many Americans, were taught that Lenin and other leaders of the Soviet experiment were uniformly and even dangerously wrong. For Tanja, it was just the opposite: her society was forced to laud Lenin as a hero, unassailable, with all the right answers to mend society's ills. That is, until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, and her country sought to reinvent itself as a democracy. Tanja has spent her adult life reflecting on the society she grew up in, the challenges it faced when learning democracy, and the ways that the former exacerbated the latter. Together, we are concerned about the role of education, and especially the many forms of adult education, in preparing people to fully participate in democracy.

Lenin's Education: A Case Study

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their "Communist Manifesto," providing new concepts and understandings to explain the causes of human inequality, injustice, and suffering. Armed with this understanding of the mechanisms of social and economic reality, Vladimir Lenin joined the Marxist revolutionary movement, morphing Marxism into Bolshevism, and helping to establish and then lead the Soviet Union. The problems of the world could finally be solved because there was a scientific understanding of the social and economic mechanisms underpinning them all—or so the thinking went.

Throughout his career as activist and then politician, however, Lenin was constantly confronted with the refusal of people across the spectrum to become his definition of *true socialists*. On the one hand, there were "self-serving bourgeoisie" who simply wanted a return to the good old days when they were able to leach an existence off the hard work of the peasants and proletariat. On the other, the very laborers whom he was

trying to liberate were either too unteachable or stubborn to grasp the logic of the new order (Ryan, 2012). And of course, his Bolsheviks had to fight off other Marxist factions for ideological control, each with their own definitions and views of how things could and should be.

Lenin was (by the kindest of interpretations) idealistic, but he was certainly not naive. He saw clearly that the majority of people in society (whether soldiers, peasants, or working class) were consistently trampled underfoot by a minority (aristocracy, landowners, clergy, and bourgeoisie), who would be unwilling to simply relinquish their privileges. Thus, he concluded, this minority were enemies of the people and had to be treated accordingly: "It was necessary for a well-organized and armed Bolshevik minority representing the *true interests* of the majority (the urban and peasant poor), to avoid the forms of bourgeois democracy which had served in the past to perpetuate and maintain social and economic injustice" (Kingston-Mann, 1972, p. 575, emphasis ours).

Lenin's critique of "bourgeois democracy" is understandable. Democracy is indeed not a panacea; entrenched power maintains the ability to use democratic institutions and processes to further its own ends. Overcoming the tyranny of the powerful minority is neither easy nor fast and, indeed, has yet to be fully realized in any place or time. Nevertheless, societies can either continue the fight for democratic principles or they can give up on the project of democracy. For Lenin, the principles of democracy and the messiness of opposing viewpoints, priorities, and methods were of minimal importance compared to the goals of the revolution (Ryan, 2011). This reflects a trade-off between the desire to achieve immediate revolutionary objectives and the deliberate, often slow, progress associated with democratic processes. For Lenin, the means, whatever they were, were justified by his utopian goal. Lenin's approach to education was similarly single-minded: propaganda was needed to mold people into true Soviets; any kind of liberal, developmental education was to him a childish waste of time and effort. The issue, also interesting in the context of education, lies in the contrasting priorities: whereas democracy and democratic education advocate for open dialogue, diverse viewpoints, and inclusive governance, by contrast, Lenin's revolutionary agenda emphasized a more authoritarian and singularly focused methodology. Lilge (1968) describes Lenin's view of the relationship between education and revolution:

> At a Shrovetide party of the Petersburg Marxist circle in 1894, … the conversation turned to the problem of illiteracy. Some in the group looked to education as a means of changing the social order. Lenin greeted their remarks with a cold little laugh that Krupskaia never forgot. "Well, if anyone wants to save the country through the Committee for Illiteracy," he said, "we won't hinder him." He was then only twenty-four years old but remarkably sure of his convictions and strategy. Political revolution must precede cultural development (emphasis ours). To reverse this order and to set one's hopes on the gradual reform of existing conditions was to indulge in childish fantasy. A decade later he restated this view, but this time as a party policy from which there was to be no deviation. (Lilge, 1968, p. 233)

As it worked out, political revolution was indeed put first. Cultural development—especially in terms of education through which adults learned to develop their capacities for critical thinking, independent reasoning, and debate—never occurred. In its place was a strong and consistent campaign of indoctrination into the singular Soviet ideology.

At a certain moment, every totalitarian regime turns toward education as the means of legitimizing power and creation of the desired type of consciousness, and through that consciousness, of the desired society itself (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1965). Be it Soviet Russia or the Junta Dictatorship in Chile, they all have an ideological foundation and an overarching promise: to build a fundamentally new society. For this vision, a new type of person, with new values and ways of thinking, is required; this serves as a justification for the building of a new institutional landscape—one where the institutions conform absolutely with the new ideology, under the total control of the regime, ideally encompassing everyone in the society. Nothing is left to chance; deviation is not tolerated, and the pursuit of the declared goal requires a precise following of the prescribed rules and procedures.

Marx envisioned that as a result of the revolution, the proletariat would change not only the world, but also the people themselves—giving birth to a *new personality*. However, the details of the rising (or "uprising") of this *new personality* were not provided by Marx. Lenin, over time, became more concrete about this "new personality"—in theory as well as in practice. "The state is strong through the consciousness of the masses. It is strong when the masses know everything, they can judge everything and do everything consciously" (Lenin, 1967/[1917], vol. 35, p. 21, translation ours). His aim was to *enlighten*, to educate every member of the society so that the noble goals of the economic systems of socialism and communism—notably not the social/political system of democracy—could be understood and carried out by everyone. This was an ambitious project of social transformation, enacted through "raising the consciousness of the masses."

The system of adult education in the Soviet Union had a wide range of different institutions covering and capturing every sphere of human life, including work, leisure, culture, media, and family activities. The total participation of all citizens in societal rituals and actions, such as "cleaning Saturdays," parades, and celebrations, was compulsory. Education (in all its facets, from organized settings to parades) was a tool and a venue for the social engineering efforts. As Domenach (1951) noted, it is "generally impossible to delimit precisely the field of propaganda. It is only one aspect of a total program of action which ranges from primary education to industrial and agricultural production, and which encompasses all literature, art and leisure. The entire life of the citizen becomes the object of propaganda" (p. 272). We would add that even in the domains of "literature, art, and leisure," this education was very pointed; not just any type of art, for instance, was promoted or even tolerated. Besides perhaps classic art, only the new social realism art style was allowed, as only it was deemed to promote the ideals of socialism. Thus, the ideology was both narrow and totalizing; every aspect of society was expected to follow the exact same path.

It is important to note that persuasion methods were simultaneously combined with coercion and restraint. Those who did not support the Soviet ideology were sent to prison and even put to death. Lenin once famously remarked (or at least is attributed as saying), "One cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs." The coercion was supposedly justified and legitimized by the noble goals of socialism/communism, which Lenin's followers reasoned must be built, otherwise the destruction of humankind was inevitable. The regime's actions were framed through propaganda as being the realization of the people's highest ideals. In such a society, people become conditioned to following the leader's doctrine without questioning it; and any opposition would be considered hopeless (Cassinelli, 1960).

It should also be mentioned that this totalitarian education and propaganda worked fairly effectively, and the enthusiasm of a relatively large part of society was genuine. The illusory promise of a happy future successfully hid the present violence and coercion. However, this plan for socialism and communism was based on the premise that it could be built only if all citizens were proponents of the soviet ideology; it could not withstand a plurality of views. To become socialist, one needed to go through the established system of education and instruction—and no citizen would ever be free of this system; it was a lifelong process of influence.

Even if Lenin started hesitantly to implement terror, the mechanism of violence against those who disagreed rapidly became routine. As early as November 22, 1917, the Council of People's Commissars of Russia issued a decree "On the Court," according to which workers' and peasants' revolutionary tribunals were established "to combat counter-revolutionary forces" (Council of People's Commissars, 1917). On December 7, 1917, an extraordinary commission to combat counterrevolution and sabotage (VNK—All-Russian Emergency Commission) was set up and endowed with broad rights: to make arrests and confiscations, to evict criminal elements, to deprive them of food stamps, to publish lists of enemies of the people, and so forth. From there, killing those who disagreed quickly became yet another routine. On September 5, 1918, the Council of People's Commissars adopted a resolution "On Red Terror," which determined the need to "secure the Soviet Republic from class enemies by isolating them in concentration camps" (Council of People's Commissars, 1918). On November 8 of the same year, during a public speech, Lenin declared that "There is no other way to liberate the masses than to suppress the exploiters by violence" (1967/[1917], vol. 37, p. 174, translation ours). The estimated number of victims of the Red Terror is around 1 million; the later "Stalinist terror" was only a continuation of Lenin's work.

Our aim with this recap is not to convey the whole of history nor to debate whether Lenin was a committed idealist or a political opportunist. The emphasis that we put is on the conversion of a promising human idea into an ideology, which is promulgated through indoctrination, thereby creating what is more aptly described as radicalization than education. We want to highlight three aspects of the story of Lenin that are particularly relevant to the topic of radicalization: a) the insistence on a single ideology as a "silver bullet" that can answer all complex problems, b) the inability to accommodate a plurality of views, and c) the willingness to sacrifice human dignity and

human lives as acceptable collateral damage. The following sections explore these three aspects in more detail.

The Silver Bullet

As in the time of Marx and Lenin, the world is still filled with inequity and suffering. Marx's and Lenin's insights into the causes of social ills did not eradicate them; arguably, if anything, Lenin's approach exacerbated them within his sphere of influence. The problem is not in agreeing that there are real, concrete problems in the world that cause human suffering. The challenge is coming to common understandings about which problems need to be addressed and how to best address them. The differing opinions about these things come from different people's unique perspectives and experiences that are impossible for any one person to fully encompass or understand. Therefore, there will always be differences of opinion of how to solve important problems or indeed which problems even should be solved.

The promise of a new order that will solve all the problems is often tied to the idea that once external threats are gone, life will get better, creating a false sense of hope. When faced with challenges or setbacks, leaders often attribute the problems to external factors, such as "capitalist encirclement" (in the case of Lenin) (Cassinelli, 1960).

And, irrespective of whether Marx's and Engel's ideas had the potential to alleviate global suffering, the use of indoctrination as a method to instill those ideas ensured that it could never produce citizens with the necessary capacities for effective self-governance in a pluralistic, democratic society. The problem that thwarted Lenin and that still haunts us today is assuming that one knows the one silver bullet that will solve all the world's problems. If we aspire to be a free and democratic society, then a "silver bullet" approach, although tempting, bears the seeds of its own demise. It promotes an authoritarian mindset, where those in power believe they possess an exclusive truth that must be enforced upon the people. As Bergevin (1967) explains:

> Some of us believe that if everyone were exposed to the "truths" revealed in the view of education or religion or politics we hold, the problems of society would be solved. We often try to press upon others the ideas we … believe we understand. But if we were to broaden our knowledge, we might give some credence to the views and customs of other persons. … History is filled with examples of persons in power who display a single minded devotion to some cult, and who are restless until they convert or "liberate" those who do not understand them or disagree with them. … Systems developed by human beings inevitably contain some of the deficiencies of their developers. (pp. 11–12)

However valuable they might potentially be, Marx and Engel's writings do not provide the only valid or helpful approach to the analysis of society's ills. As Youngman (2000) articulated, "The value of (Marx and Engel's) writings is that they provide a source of research problems, concepts and methods for the analysis of society, not a set of fixed truths" (p. 10). And, referring to the contemporary democracies, to use

a "silver bullet" solution to address the complexities within a democratic society has the potential to jeopardize the very principles upon which democracy stands. The rule of the people includes *all* people, even those with whom one disagrees. Therefore, democracy abhors a silver bullet, totalitarian approach.

Despite the absence of a miraculous solution, democratic citizens have many options at their disposal. Democracy distinguishes itself from totalitarian regimes by its openness to criticism and acknowledgment of inherent imperfections and opportunities for improvement. Instead of propagating a facade of perfection and omnipotence, democracy thrives on the awareness of its limitations. This acknowledgment allows for a continuous process of critical self-reflection. Totalitarian systems, on the other hand, perpetuate the belief in a mythical silver bullet that simulates perfection and precludes any admission of failure. In such regimes, external enemies become convenient scapegoats for any shortcomings. The ability of democracy to confront its flaws through critiques and a commitment to improvement distinguishes it from rigid and dogmatic systems.

Inability to Accommodate a Plurality of Views

A direct result of the "silver bullet" mentality is the inability to accommodate divergent views. The Soviet system as established by Lenin and developed by his followers sought to forge a unified, conformist society where dissent and diversity were perceived as threats to the established order. The totalitarian nature of the system necessitated indoctrination, that people be molded into a homogeneous mass, subservient to the state's ideology. Pluralism of perspectives exemplified an inherent danger to the regime, and homogeneity became a tool for maintaining control. This homogeneity encompassed even the cultural landscape which, certainly during the era of Stalin (Lenin's successor), was characterized by an absolute dominance of Russian language and culture, marginalizing the myriad other traditions, languages, and customs in this vast multinational empire as mere elements of amusing folklore. This intentional push for homogeneity was evident in the notion of unification, wherein human beings were expected to willingly subordinate themselves to the overarching "Russian" identity.

The Soviet Union, in its quest for artificial homogeneity, ruthlessly pursued strategies to eradicate elements that contributed to diverse cultural and national identities, as exemplified by the tragic events of the Holodomor in Ukraine—the human-made famine. This deliberate starvation of approximately 5,000,000 Ukrainians between 1932 and 1933 served as a weapon to quash the independent peasantry, who were viewed as the repository of Ukraine's traditions, folklore, language, and national spirit (Applebaum, 2017). This atrocity exemplifies the extent to which the Soviet Union was willing to go to impose an artificial homogeneity, sacrificing millions of lives to erase diversity.

The Soviet Union's pursuit of artificial homogeneity reached into every aspect of life. It did not limit its influence to the political or economic spheres alone; it extended the pursuit of ideology to culture, education, social interactions, and personal beliefs.

Indoctrination into the Communist ideology became a pervasive force in the general education of every Soviet person. This ideological apparatus aimed not only to shape political allegiance but also to mold an entirely new human being—a "socialist type of personality." The totalitarian state utilized all its powers, employing coercion, violence, and mass persuasion techniques to shape this "new type" of "Soviet man" (Kaganovsky, 2008). Thus, the Soviet Union's quest for uniformity delved into the very psyche of its citizens.

Indoctrination is perhaps the logical educational choice for a dictatorial and especially totalitarian state, but it is unjustifiable for a society striving for democracy. Inherent in its very purpose, any functioning democracy must be able to accommodate a plurality of views. If education is to support democracy, it must focus on helping learners deal with complexity, multiple perspectives, and ambiguity. Ideas offered must be capable of engaging with a plurality of views.

Viewing Human Beings as Acceptable Collateral Damage

Perhaps the most important of the three aspects listed here is the willingness to sacrifice other human beings in the name of one's cause. Adherence to a rigid ideology, no matter how nobly it may have originally been conceived, often means placing the superiority of a particular thought system above the intrinsic value of a human being. In the context of the Soviet Union, those who failed to be sufficiently "enlightened" about the righteousness of Lenin's ideas faced dire consequences. Lenin and his associates perceived themselves as surrounded by a multitude of adversaries—saboteurs, capitalists, bourgeoisie, large landowners (kulaks), anarchists, Tsarists; they all were threats to the revolutionary cause. The narrative of a threat became a powerful tool to rationalize killings and deportation in the name of the "big ideal," that of the utopian communist future.

It was Lenin who initiated the creation of the first concentration camps for those who were incapable of embracing his Truth. The justification was that no sacrifice, not even that of human lives, was too much in the pursuit of utopian ideals. The ideological narrative formed the notion that individual lives, when standing in the way of progress, were acceptable collateral damage. This inherent danger in radical thinking lies in its readiness to subjugate humans for the sake of an idea. Lenin's mantra was: "Everything that contributes to the building of a Communist society is moral; everything that hinders this is immoral and amoral" (Ross, 1960, p. 543).

The impact of this way of thinking is not limited to physical violence, and indeed its more common expression is in disrespecting an individual's right to decide for themselves what to think and believe—a core element of human dignity (Daly & May, 2018). In education, and especially in the education of adults, there is a fine balance that must be negotiated between teaching based on one's expertise and using one's position of authority to impose one's views onto learners (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023). Totalitarian regimes have a longstanding tradition of stripping individuals of their inherent worth, and this is manifest in their indoctrinatory educational practices

(Kloubert, 2020). Building resilience against radicalization involves fostering an environment where every individual is recognized as having inherent worth and human dignity. And, if we are to recognize that worth, we are obliged to honor each person's right to decide for themselves what to think and believe.

Discussion: Hannah Arendt as a Counter Perspective

The discussion of radicalization and its connection to ideology can benefit from an understanding of totalitarianism, particularly as offered by Arendt (1958). Arendt delved into the origins and causes of totalitarianism deeply, seeking to understand and develop strategies to counteract its dangers. The ever-present threat of new totalitarian regimes remains a central concern in Arendt's work.

Totalitarianism, in Arendt's conceptualization, is the ultimate manifestation of the ideological mindset, where ideology and terror become intertwined. Arendt (1958) defines ideologies as "isms which … can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing [them] from a single premise" (p. 468). For Arendt, ideologies are superstitions that reject alternate conceptions and are rooted in the rigid and unresponsive nature of radicalized mindsets. Under totalitarian regimes, life is entirely shaped by ideology. The process of radicalization involves the transformation of an idea from just one position within a diverse spectrum into an exclusive Truth with which everything is explained. For totalitarian movements, ideology is not a mere set of opinions but becomes "as real and untouchable an element in their lives as the rules of arithmetic" (Arendt, 1958, p. 363). Arendt identified several critical ways in which totalitarian conditions undermine democratic values and individual freedoms. Under totalitarian rule, the capacity to think independently is systematically undermined (p. 472) and transforms human plurality into an oppressive sameness (p. 466). In this sense, totalitarianism is not solely characterized by mass violence; it also involves the gradual erosion of freedoms as a cornerstone of democracy and of the human dignity through both overt and covert means. The ultimate, radical goal is to mold individuals and societies according to a specific ideological vision.

Arendt's approach to combating totalitarianism was rooted in the idea of expanding the spaces where people could come together for dialogue and action. Reflecting on the U.S. and French revolutions, Arendt (1963) asked what makes such radical changes truly successful. Her answer was clear: a revolution is successful if it expands the possibilities for exercising freedom, particularly by establishing new spaces for political engagement—what she referred to as agoras, or participatory venues (p. 13–52). Arendt argued that the essence of a revolution (as opposed to a mere revolt) lies not merely in the overthrow of an old regime but in its capacity to create lasting participatory venues that allow for genuine political interaction.

Arendt emphasized that the foundation of new forms of participation, expanding the centers of power and decision-making, rather than merely the limitation of power, is crucial for understanding the difference between freedom and tyranny, and we would add, between the *bad* radicalization and a *good* radical education. A revolution,

according to Arendt, is only worthy of the name if it creates and sustains participatory frameworks where individuals can come together, form bonds, and engage in collective action based on reciprocity and mutual respect (pp. 27–29). Thus, the true measure of radical change lies in its success in establishing a robust democratic framework. According to Arendt, the ultimate goal of every human being, the core of the "human condition" is to be engaged. She goes so far to say that a person cannot be happy without participation in political life—and "those who belong are self-chosen, those who do not belong are self-excluded" (1963, p. 284). This means to actively participate in the polis—in the agoras—through dialogue and persuasion, rather than through force and violence (which would be radicalism). She believed that the public realm should be a space for vigorous debate and individual distinction, where people can showcase their unique contributions (which contradicts the whole notion of homogenization). This is founded in the basic fact that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world," and this is for Arendt "the condition—not only the conditio sine qua non, but the conditio per quam–of all political life" (Arendt, 1998, p. 7).

Arendt's vision of an inclusive political realm stands in stark opposition to one ruling overarching ideology. The essence of a democratic society, she argued, lies in its capacity to embrace diverse perspectives and resist the monolithic tendencies that seek to impose a singular narrative. Applying these insights to contemporary challenges, it becomes clear that efforts to promote democracy must avoid the dangers of totalitarian methods and remain firmly grounded in authentic democratic principles—in pluralism, in commitment to dialogue and engagement, in critical thinking and joint acting. By expanding the capacity and opportunities for civic and political participation, we, alongside Arendt, hope to reduce the number of individuals drawn into radicalization and increase the number of those actively working against it. Arendt believed in the power of thinking individuals who choose to engage in politics; she envisioned these individuals as those who have the courage to dismantle ideologies and begin anew.

So, even if it sounds simplistic, the best antidote against harmful radicalization is to cultivate the capacity and opportunities for people to think critically, to deliberate, and to act together while embracing plurality within unity, rather than retreating into isolationism. The old recipe holds true here: thinking is a powerful cure for radicalization. Arendt underscores this when she asserts, "it is easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think" (1998, p. 324), emphasizing that genuine thought, which involves questioning and self-reflection, is crucial for any movement toward a desired democratic social improvement (radical or not).

Arendt advocates for action, but she also warns that action alone, devoid of critical thought, can easily mutate into dangerous, thoughtless deeds. This act of continuous questioning and rethinking is essential in preventing the descent into radicalization that relies on simplistic, dogmatic views. In this light, education—especially adult education—plays a pivotal role in preparing individuals not just to participate in democracy but to safeguard it from the dangers of totalitarianism and radicalization. The commitment to thinking critically and acting meaningful with each with other is

what ultimately distinguishes beneficial transformative education from dangerous forms of radicalization.

And, to add, as Arendt poignantly observed, "It requires courage even to leave the protective security of our four walls and enter the public realm… Courage liberates men from their worry about life for the freedom of the world. Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake" (Arendt, 1993, p. 169). This courage to participate is essential in the fight against radicalization, as it allows individuals to contribute to and protect the democratic world in which they live.

Conclusion

The example of Lenin serves as a case study of a totalitarian approach to education that promotes radicalization. It highlights three distinct dimensions: the conversion of an idea into an ideology (a "silver bullet"), an aversion to a plurality of views, and the acceptance of anti-human methods as collateral damage. These are warning signs of radicalization because all three lead away from independent, critical thinking toward limited, rigid, and dogmatic acquiescence.

There is both a great comfort and a profound danger in thinking that a single idea will right the world's wrongs. However, no single idea can explain the world in all its complexity. The conversion of an idea from a useful analytic tool to understand some aspect of the world to an ideology through which all phenomena are seen and understood serves to limit rather than expand one's perspectives. And, for this reason, it ultimately leads to radicalization. This mindset was vividly apparent in the calculated brutality of events like the Holodomor, where the regime, driven by an overarching pursuit of homogeneity, utilized deliberate starvation as a weapon against unapproved ways of thinking and living.

Returning to the question of what distinguishes *good* and *bad* radicalization, the key criterion is not how extreme the deviation is from the norm, but rather the direction of those extreme beliefs. In radicalization, beliefs move *away* from independent, critical thinking and toward limitation, simplicity, and dogmatism. This directional pull is important to consider as it enables us not only to evaluate the pedagogical efforts of fringe or extremist groups but also to scrutinize our own thinking and educational practices, assessing the extent to which they could be promoting radicalization.

A common proverb claims that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." One might similarly say that the road to radicalization is (in some cases) paved with good ideas; or rather, it is paved with a single good idea, which through overuse becomes an ideology. Instead of multiple ideas being taught and explored in education, this single idea is treated as sacrosanct and promulgated as the Truth. No further searching for truth is necessary because the ideology already contains all the Truth necessary. Therefore, instead of expanding students' perspectives, education becomes a transfer of the singular Truth from teacher to student. In short—indoctrination. Hence, we see a relationship between ideology, indoctrination, and radicalization: an ideology promulgated through indoctrination leads to radicalization.

The process of radicalization often involves various stages, with indoctrination being a significant element in the progression (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). Ideological indoctrination serves as a crucial factor in transforming individuals dissatisfied with existing social and political conditions into radicals. This process often contributes to their acceptance of violence to bring about political change and fosters the development of a culture of violence. The transformation of an idea into an ideology plays a central role in the conversion of education into indoctrination, and thereby also into the process of radicalization.

It is important to recognize the parallels. Both radicalization and indoctrination place more importance on an ideology over human beings, leading to the shaping of individuals and societies according to a particular worldview, the rejection of plurality, and the suppression of ideological dissent. Lenin's emphasis on a utopian future and the necessity of sacrifices for the greater good mirrors the inclination toward dehumanization present in radicalization efforts.

Learning from this historical example allows us to analyze a potential danger inherent in any society, even a democratic one. When dissenting voices are marginalized, suppressed, intimidated, or "canceled," it suppresses diversity of thought. And while there are necessary limits to what is acceptable, democracy requires that those limits are very carefully considered (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023). When there are polarizing tendencies within a society and people encounter only those who are like-minded, it leads to an entrenchment of extreme or even radicalized views. It is crucial to recognize that a free society must learn to thrive on plurality, as only within such a society is it possible to identify and rectify the errors inherent in any single system of thought.

We can consider the extent to which our efforts are educatory or indoctrinatory, and the three warning signs described above can help us in this self-examination. Do we teach as if one particular idea is the "silver bullet" that can solve all the world's problems? Are the ideas we espouse incapable of accommodating a plurality of views? Do we consider the idea(s) we teach as being more important than the dignity of each human being? Of the many purposes of education, we need to be careful that we do not narrow it to the promotion of a singular ideology. Because with any ideology, no matter how good the underlying ideas or how useful the principles to solve problems of the world, if education serves solely to promote that ideology, then it is more properly called propaganda, indoctrination, and radicalization—and, as such, can never support the aims of a democratic society.

Epilogue From Tanja

Lenin held the most prominent place in the classrooms of my early school years, watching us all as we sat in neat rows for our instruction, with that stern yet mild (at least on the picture) gaze. Once, a teacher—who had to sit beneath Lenin's watchful eye and teach us in his spirit—wrote a line from a poem on the blackboard. It was a verse by the Ukrainian poet Vasyl Symonenko (1935–1963). Symonenko was one of the

so-called "Shistdesiatnyky," a generation of artists and poets who, during Khrushchev's Thaw (1953–1964), when restrictions on speech were briefly loosened, dared to bring their words and ideas into the open. In those fleeting years of semi-freedom, a remarkable blossoming of Ukrainian literature, music, and art took place. But once the Thaw ended, most of these creators either had to emigrate, were imprisoned in Gulags, or were killed. Free thinking, writing, and singing were simply too dangerous for the Lenin-inspired regime.

The line which Symonenko wrote and that my teacher put on the blackboard was:

Do you know that you are human?
Do you know that or not?
That your smile is unique,
your suffering one of a kind,
and so too your gaze.

No one had ever told me that in school before—that I, as a human, was unique and valuable. Instead, they told me I had to be broken—for the sake of the great omelet. That I was just a cog in a machine. That is how totalitarian systems speak. They cannot stand it when, one day, you start to believe that you are a human being—an irreplaceable, valuable individuum. Totalitarian systems kill thinkers like Symonenko, who want to give you back your dignity as a human. And for me, for us, that is the true radicalization—the dehumanization of the individual, the belief that humans are replaceable, that they can be reduced to tools for some greater end.

But holding onto and spreading the idea—"Do you know that YOU are human?"—a human being with dignity that no one has the right to take away—that is for us the antidote to totalitarian and radical thinking. So, we hope that more Symonenkos and fewer Lenins will be heard.

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