

Small Lives for Big Words: Individualism and State Power Reconsidered

Irving Louis Horowitz

Once upon a time, earlier in the twentieth century, individualism was a doctrine that could be readily dismissed as archaic, idiosyncratic, and simply out of phase with the modern fashion. Even those who wanted to make a place for the individual were compelled to speak apologetically about the “new individualism” as a kind of hybrid of social welfare economy in contradistinction to the old individualism. Henry Steele Commager reminded us in 1950 that “the phenomenon of socialization was a logical expression of the American temperament in the new century. It reflected that decline of the importance of individualism and that growing awareness of social responsibility that could be noted similarly in law, education, business, and legislation.”

With the triumph of America as a world empire after World War I and the rapid emergence of communism, fascism, and nazism as alternative empire systems thereafter, the banishment of the individual seemed complete. Everywhere in Western society good citizens shriveled at the charge of individualism, especially if it was prefaced with the word *bourgeois*. There seemed no place for the person to hide before the onslaught of the collective: the collective conscience, the collective will, the collective plan. Individualism came to be viewed as an impediment to responsible development, to social change itself. In one recent version of this theme, individualism has gone “too far”...“encouraging narcissism”...“is egocentric, often impulsive-ridden behavior”...“has run amok” (Peter Glick). To listen to most pundits of solidarism, individualism is one “ism” that seemed to violate the spirit of the century. The model of collective action toward predetermined ends was sanctioned by socialism, fascism, and welfarism.

But now that the twentieth century, for all ideological

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intents and organizational purposes, is behind us, it is rather these other “isms” that have become increasingly suspect. The old individualism failed because of the metaphysical presumptions behind Adam Smith’s notion of the “hidden hand.” Smith seemed to imply some kind of mystical ghost in the machine regulating the behavior of one and all alike to the greater good of society as a whole. But the new collectivism failed because of the “heavy boot”; the widespread recognition that mechanisms to regulate behavior, like machines without ghosts, also worked imperfectly. The human costs of achieving collectivist goals involved such stupendous numbers of lives that even the most obdurate servant of the GNP was compelled to wonder whether the “hidden hand” in its marketplace was not a trifle better than the heavy boot and the barbed wire.

It turned out that inherited doctrines of individualism and socialism were really not at stake. Rather, the ultimate showdown, when we stripped away all the “isms,” was between individuals and their right to self-definition vs. states and the authority vested in them by virtue of their monopoly of power, both presumed and real. At the end of the twentieth century the essential litmus test was not one of social systems but of personal survivals. More specifically, how people died became a measure of how societies lived. This is an essay on the subject of the continuities of living and dying, and the inalienable rights of individuals in that process. Inescapably, therefore, it is also an essay on how those inalienable rights were eroded and ultimately dismissed by the state and the powers vested in it—or, if not vested, then seized by it.

In a recent work Michel Foucault describes the disposition of the body of a condemned man, Damians the regicide. The Officer of the Watch left an account that Foucault recites. It provides a medieval horror story only two hundred years old. I ask your indulgence in its lengthy recitation, since it sets the background for the narrative that follows:

The sulphur was lit, but the flame was so poor that only the top skin of the hand was burnt, and that only slightly. Then the executioner, his sleeves rolled up, took the steel pincers, which had been especially made for the occasion, and which were about a foot and a half long, and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts. Though a strong, sturdy fellow, this executioner found it so difficult to tear away the pieces of flesh that he set about the same spot two or three times, twisting the pincers as he did so, and what he took away formed at each part a wound about the size of a six-pound crown piece.

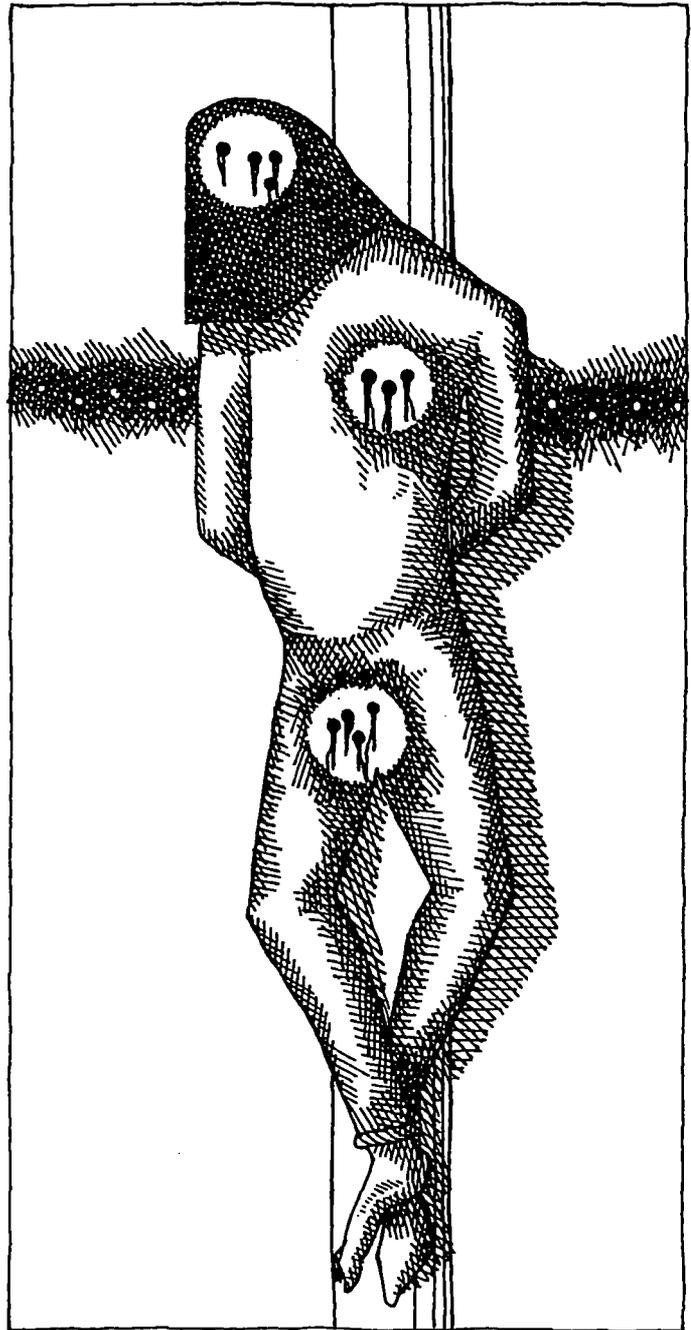
After these tearings with the pincers, Damiens, who cried out profusely, though without swearing, raised his head and looked at himself; the same executioner dipped an iron spoon in the pot containing the boiling potion, which he poured liberally over each wound. Then the ropes that were to be harnessed to the horses were attached with cords to the patient's body; the horses were then harnessed and placed alongside the arms and legs, one at each limb.

Monsieur Le Breton, the clerk of the court, went up to the patient several times and asked him if he had anything to say. He said he had not; at each torment, he cried out, as the damned in hell are supposed to cry out, "Pardon, my God! Pardon, Lord." Despite all this pain, he raised his head from time to time and looked at himself boldly. The cords had been tied so tightly by the men who pulled the ends that they caused him indescribable pain. Monsieur Le Breton went up to him again and asked him if he had anything to say; he said no. Several confessors went up to him and spoke to him at length; he willingly kissed the crucifix that was held out to him; he opened his lips and repeated: "Pardon, Lord."

The horses tugged hard, each pulling straight on a limb, each horse held by an executioner. After a quarter of an hour, the same ceremony was repeated and finally, after several attempts, the direction of the horses had to be changed, thus: those at the arms were made to pull towards the head, those at the thighs towards the arms, which broke the arms at the joints. This was repeated several times without success. He raised his head and looked at himself. Two more horses had to be added to those harnessed to the thighs, which made six horses in all. Without success.

Finally, the executioner, Samson, said to Monsieur Le Breton that there was no way or hope of succeeding, and told him to ask their Lordships if they wished him to have the prisoner cut into pieces. Monsieur Le Breton, who had come down from the town, ordered that renewed efforts be made, and this was done; but the horses gave up and one of those harnessed to the thighs fell to the ground. The confessors returned and spoke to him again. He said to them (I heard him): "Kiss me, gentlemen." The parish priest of St. Paul's did not dare to, so Monsieur de Marsilly slipped under the rope holding

the left arm and kissed him on the forehead. The executioners gathered around and Damiens told them not to swear, to carry out their task and that he did not think ill of them; he begged them to pray to God for him, and asked the parish priest of St. Paul's to pray for him at the first mass.



After two or three attempts, the executioner Samson and he who had used the pincers each drew out a knife from his pocket and cut the body at the thighs instead of severing the legs at the joints; the four horses gave a tug and carried off the two thighs after them; namely, that of the right side first, the other following; then the same was done to the arms, the shoulders, the arm-pits and the four limbs; the flesh had to be cut almost to the bone, the horses pulling

hard carried off the right arm first and the other afterwards.

When the four limbs had been pulled away, the confessors came to speak to him; but his executioner told them that he was dead, though the truth was that I saw the man move, his lower jaw moving from side to side as if he were talking. One of the executioners even said shortly afterwards that when they had lifted the trunk to throw it on the stake, he was still alive. The four limbs were untied from the ropes and thrown on the stake set up in the enclosure in line with the scaffold, then the trunk and the rest were covered with logs and faggots, and fire was put to the straw mixed with this wood.

In accordance with the decree, the whole was reduced to ashes. The last piece to be found in the embers was still burning at half-past ten in the evening. The pieces of flesh and the trunk had taken about four hours to burn.

The point that Foucault makes is that in an earlier period the body of the condemned was specifically singled out as just retribution for a specific crime. As we moved into the utilitarian nineteenth century, forms of generalized punishment were enveloped by complete and austere institutions called prisons. Punishment was organized around the principle of incarceration; prison life created the framework of rationality and universality that no longer necessitated a direct assault on the body of the condemned. Docile bodies required no direct assault. But in an odd way, Foucault missed the point of his own illustrations. For it was not only the system of incarceration in total institutions that was at stake, but the erosion of an entire Judeo-Christian tradition of individual punishment for specific, individual crimes. As crimes became massified, punishment too became massified in the form of scientific imprisonment systems. But, at the same time, the possibility of heroic death was denied. The prison, as a negotiated order, created conditions for a contrite life. Survival through rehabilitation involved a tacit acceptance of the prison system as such. In this way the state did not simply move from a vicious to a benign system; through the science of human engineering, citizens subject to the penalties of total institutions were denied their distinctiveness and instead were offered universalist norms of rehabilitation that conveniently included a belief in their own guilt as a precondition to prison life.

However awful in the recounting, poor Damiens died a martyr's death. He was recalled and memorialized even by his executioners. If his life was a mixed bag, his death was an unfettered example of heroism. Two hundred years later the problem of death was not one of exact punishment for a well-defined wrongdoing, but an engineering problem: how many people could be eliminated in the shortest possible time with a minimal amount of resistance, retaliation, or public awareness. Even death had become collectivized. At the trial of Eichmann, Peter Bamm, a German army physician, recited the magical technology of genocidal death. The

following constitutes Hannah Arendt's summary of the impotence caused by this new technology:

They were collected by "the others" (as he calls the S.S. mobile killing units, to distinguish them from ordinary soldiers) and were put into a sealed-off part of the former G.P.U. prison that abutted on the officer's lodgings, where Bamm's own unit was quartered. They were then made to board a mobile gas van, in which they died after a few minutes, whereupon the driver transported the corpses outside the city and unloaded them into tank ditches. "We knew this. We did nothing. Anyone who had seriously protested or done anything against the killing unit would have been arrested within twenty-four hours and would have disappeared." It belongs among the refinements of totalitarian governments in our century that they don't permit their opponents to die a great, dramatic martyr's death for their convictions. A good many of us might have accepted such a death. The totalitarian state lets its opponents disappear in silent anonymity. It is certain that anyone who had dared to suffer death rather than silently tolerate the crime would have sacrificed his life in vain. This is not to say that such a sacrifice would have been morally meaningless. It would only have been practically useless. None of us had a conviction so deeply rooted that we could have taken upon ourselves a practically useless sacrifice for the sake of a higher moral meaning.

The essence of the modern death system is a deprivation of both individual accountability and individual transcendence in death. In a remarkable new commentary on the reprinting of Horace Bleackley's minor classic on *State Executions*, John Lofland provides a clinical framework for Foucault's type of narrative. He points out the essential distinction between "the open and concealed dramaturgy of state executions." Open executions are characterized by long death waits and death trips; public death places; professional executioners with personal contact with the condemned; death techniques punctuated by noisy, painful, mutilating, struggle-inducing, odor-causing, and highly visible activities; corpse disposal is public and prolonged; finally, death is announced by the suspension of institutional activities. Concealed executions are characterized by short death waits and death trips; private and enclosed death places; part-time executioners with impersonal and limited contact with the condemned; death techniques that are reliable, fast-acting, quiet, painless, nonmutilating, odorless, and concealed; corpse disposal is quick and anonymous; finally, death involves no suspension of institutional activities. To Lofland's credit he appreciates that, however "raucous or crude historic executions may have been, they did provide the condemned with opportunity for dying with a display of courage and dignity utterly denied in modern executions."

The issue of alternative death systems represents considerably more than a trade-off in humanistic styles.

The depersonalization of death is hardly a random event, or even a matter of simple strategic options. At its core the modern death system is linked to the emergence of genocide as a centerpiece of state power and the display of its monopoly of power. Orwell quite properly pointed out that one cannot have a worthy picture of the future unless an understanding of the losses occasioned by Christianity are accounted for. Socialism only postpones consideration of the role of the individual by urging a solution to basic material needs. The modern state may be a useful technique to overcome the anarchy of the marketplace, but, unlike individualism, it is scarcely a statement of personal moral obligation or commitment. As Orwell wrote:

Western civilization, unlike some oriental civilizations, was founded partly on the belief in individual immortality. If one looks at the Christian religion from the outside, this belief appears far more important than the belief in God. The western conception of good and evil is very difficult to separate from it. There is little doubt that the modern cult of power worship is bound up with the modern man's feeling that life here and now is the only life there is. If death ends everything, it becomes much harder to believe that you can be in the right even if you are defeated. Statesmen, nations, theories, causes are judged almost inevitably by the test of material success. Supposing that one can separate the two phenomena, the decay of the belief in personal immortality has been as important as the rise of machine civilization. Machine civilization has terrible possibilities, but the other thing has terrible possibilities too, and it cannot be said that the Socialist movement has given much thought to them.

Twentieth-century totalitarianisms brought pioneering innovations in the deprivation of meaning to death no less than to life. One's guilt is collectivized and accrues to a class, race, or religion as a whole. Once this process is successfully concluded, the problem of innocence is also easily collectivized. Both guilt and innocence are no longer matters of individual conscience, but in a sense accrue to a master race, the historically sanctioned party, or the purified faith. Death, of course, is its ontological opposite: It accrues to the degenerate religion, the backward race, and the oppressive class. It is indeed the essence of twentieth-century ideology to collectivize the spirit of guilt and innocence; therein lies the banality of evil.

In some measure this collectivization process was ordained by the breakdown of the distinction between deviance and marginality, between social outcasts and political radicals. The notion developed that the common danger stemmed from those who would be different; hence the moral significance of their transgression vanished. As a result, whatever the nature of the crime, it too became generalized and universalized. The point I made a decade ago in an essay on "Social Deviance and Political Marginality" is only

partially confirmed by time and events. The blend of criminality and politicality, although it defines the essential quality of the collective spirit of the age, does not quite explain the moral superiority of a life of politics over that of crime. I wrote then:

The line between the social deviant and the political marginal is fading. It is rapidly becoming an obsolete distinction. As this happens, political dissent by deviant means will become subject to the types of repression that have been a traditional response to social deviance. This development compels social scientists to reconsider their definition of the entire range of social phenomena—from deviance to politics.

The distinction between the social and pathological on one side, and the political and ideological on the other, persists in part because the criminal phenomenon accepts, almost unqualifiedly, the collective judgment of the society. It internalizes its sense of guilt and believes in its wrongdoing, and hence is reduced to working the system. In *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn describes this distinction between the common criminal and the political prisoner, the "suckers" who retained their sense of personal worth:

The criminal prisoners had their own "original code" and their own original concept of honor. But it was not a question of their being patriots, as our bureaucrats and writers would have liked to have it, but of their being absolutely consistent materialists and consistent pirates. And even though the dictatorship of the proletariat was so assiduous in courting them, they did not respect it even for one minute; they do not recognize the earthly institution of private property, and in this respect they really are hostile to the bourgeoisie and to those Communists who have dachas and automobiles. Everything they come across on life's path they take as their own (if it is not too dangerous). Even when they have a surfeit of everything, they reach out to grab what belongs to others because any unstolen article makes a thief sick at heart.

...Their commune, more precisely their world, was a separate world within our world, and the strict laws which for centuries had existed in it for strengthening that world did not in any degree depend on our "suckers" legislation or even on the Party Congresses. They had their own laws of seniority, by which their ringleaders were not elected at all, yet when they entered a cell or a camp compound already wore their crown of power and were immediately recognized as chiefs. These ringleaders might have strong intellectual capacities, and always had a clear comprehension of the thieves' philosophy, as well as a sufficient number of murders and robberies behind them....And what did their word *frayer-sky*—"of the suckers"—mean? It meant what was universally human, what pertained to all normal people. And it was precisely this universally human world, our world, with its morals, customs, and mutual relationships, which was most hateful to the

thieves, most subject to their ridicule, counterposed most sharply to their own anti-social, anti-public *kubla*—or clan.

Political prisoners were not simply morally superior to the common thieves, but rather they had not understood the twentieth century nearly as well. They had not understood the role of the collective in mass society, or, put another way, they understood it all too well and refused to go along with that program. What was that program that so collectivized the Archipelago? It was, again to simply paraphrase Solzhenitsyn, comprised of ten points: constant fear, servitude, secrecy and mistrust, universal ignorance, squealing, betrayal as a form of existence, corruption—the lie as a form of existence—and cruelty, generalized cruelty. And, finally, there was the slave psychology—the assumption that the executioner was right because he held the monopoly of power to execute. These propositions so characterize the collective spirit, and do so with such little regard to social system, place, or geography, that we must begin to take seriously the dangers of collectivism as a whole. The need is for some kind of return to an individual framework as a base of all moral and political decision-making.

In his essays on the social situation of inmates entitled, appropriately enough, *Asylums*, Erving Goffman makes important points: that the relationship between the totalitarian institution and democratic society may be far closer than one initially anticipates or expects, and that our model forms of democracy have their own way of cruel intimidation.

If the institution has a militant mission, as do some religious, military, and political units, then a partial reversal on the inside of external status arrangements can act as a constant reminder of the difference and enmity between the institution and its environing society. It should be noted that in thus suppressing externally valid differences, the harshest total institution may be the most democratic; and, in fact, the inmate's assurance of being treated no worse than any other of his fellows can be a source of support as well as of deprivation.

What this means, whether we are talking about concentration camps in Germany, slave labor camps of the Soviet Union, or mental asylums in America, is a system that presents itself under various labels but ultimately reduces itself to a struggle between individuals and the state. Goffman shrewdly points out that to get out of an asylum involves a negotiation of the system and accommodation with its own social order. To leave an asylum means to surrender, to presume your own guilt or sickness, your own weaknesses, your own need for rehabilitation. It is only when that need is felt enough that one can be "free" in the collective sense. This, of course, is also the basis of Orwell's *1984*. Here too, freedom means perfect slavery. This is not simply a literary juxtaposition but is the necessary assumption: To have even a modest amount of freedom in the collective society is to assume a therapeutic position. And that

entails manipulating the system rather than changing it. There must be something wrong with the individual in order for a person to be cured. In such a system, resistance, even questioning of authority—whether that authority be psychiatric, legal, medical, or political—becomes the main danger to state power. What has to be extirpated, uprooted, is not a particular kind of individual resistance but the very idea of resistance.

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David Erdal is a teacher of English who spent the last several years in China. Writing in *Worldview* (November, 1977), he underscores the elimination of resistance through the annihilation of the individual as a meaningful category. Beneath his heavyhanded sarcasm is the feeling that the anarchic individual comes upon the behemoth, and that with the new collectivism we are once again in a Hobbesian world, but one that is technologically far more proficient than anything known in seventeenth-century England.

All these things helped me finally see the connection: The freedom to have opinions, that is a Bourgeois freedom. And likewise the freedom to have information. The important freedom for a Socialist is the freedom to have correct opinions; that is, the freedom to repeat the Party Line. In other words, people who have opinions are class enemies. Throughout China

now the system of "Socialist Courtyards" is in force. This brings Party leadership right to your door. Every three or four families has one person appointed to report to the local Party committee. On everything. The Chang boy is playing truant. The Wangs seem to quarrel a lot. Young Chen is sometimes out late at night. If the appointee doesn't make these reports, that is conspiracy. Counterrevolution. This is perhaps why China is so ardently against the Helsinki agreements. Nowhere in that document is there any mention of the essential human right: the right to Party leadership.

But the Chinese, whether as a result of ethnic homogeneity or a refined sense of internal history, are uniquely not involved in genocidal solutions to socio-economic problems. Still, their very ability to create a society free of individualism raises the serious possibility of a society free of moral responsibility as well.

These remarks are not intended as a contribution to ongoing discussions on the merits or demerits of capital punishment. That issue has received ample if inconclusive coverage in nearly every advanced industrial nation—the same nations that turn strangely myopic when it comes to collective punishment. The genocidal practices of contemporary Uganda or Cambodia seem to be of little interest in the United Nations among the very nations that agonize breathlessly over capital punishment. The Caryl Chessmans and Gary Gilmores, however different their crimes from each other, or from those committed by Damians, share in common a strong sense of individuation, of being punished for an exact crime or series of crimes. In this peculiar sense they illustrate the healthier agonies of a society. In demanding the State of Utah to carry out its capital punishment clause, Gilmore confronted the society with its legal system and the limits of its own moral foundations. In contrast, the essence of modern genocidal systems is that collective death makes it possible to avoid such issues.

The technological devices that permit collective death are also at work in creating a profound sense of total distance between the victims and the victimizers. The modern state, with its bureaucratic orientation, converts the problem of choice by making death a nonproblem of necessity. People must die because they represent symbolic evil: Jews in Poland, peasants in the Ukraine, Catholics in Northern Ireland, Indians in Uganda, blacks in South Africa. As a result, in the absence of moral choice, the state exempts or at least suspends judgment for the executioners. Killing becomes a matter of policymaking rather than ethical decision. Thus the individual is reduced to the status of nonperson; not simply as victim but, with equal profundity, as victimizer. In this way the breakdown of individual responsibility opened the pathway toward collective guilt and punishment.

This assertion, that the breakdown of individual responsibility opens wide the gates to collective repression, should not be construed as a defense of capitalism

or a critique of socialism.⁴ True enough, advocates of the former system of economy use a rhetoric of free enterprise and individual initiative, while devotees of socialism celebrate the virtues of social ownership of the means of production. But in point of fact the character of the economy would appear relatively indifferent to the issue of genocide. There are as many societies presumably following capitalist models of development that practice such mass annihilation as those following socialist models of development (Horowitz, 1976). Even if we ignore the obvious fact that the issue of capitalism and socialism has become more a problem of measuring the size and character of the public and private sectors and less a critical cutting point for measuring social systems, Brazil handles the problem of minority groups with at least as much vicious vigor as the Soviet Union handled the problems of its unwanted Aryan minorities, or as the United States solved its Indian problem. Those that cannot be entirely eliminated are reduced to enclave status. Such people are permitted a bare cultural survival without structural components for autonomy. In short, the collective will of state power, rather than the presumed needs of economic growth, dictates the character of punishment. In this way the battle is joined at its purest levels, between individuals and the small communities in which they huddle, and the state and its machinery of repression. Economic systems may account for levels of production or rates of growth, but these appear in history as strategic decisions a state takes. Beyond strategy is the omnipotence of the state as such and the impulse to nullify the individual as sovereign entity.

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When, for example, a society comes upon an issue so pervasive and yet personal as abortion, advocacy of socialism or capitalism hardly helps matters at decision-making levels. Whether abortion is a matter of a woman's right to her body or a medically sanctioned form of contraception; whether abortion is even a matter of life or death, given the special status of the fetus; whether poor people should have special access to federal funds for abortion purposes—these are issues disguising basic extensions of state power. What the state does is render moral determinations meaningless by providing a fait accompli. The state can argue that all fetuses are the property of the state and that therefore decisions about abortion are in the domain of federal or local directives. Or, alternatively, the state can place at the

disposal of communities a massive network of sponsored clinics that permit abortions to take place in an atmosphere free of guilt, but also free of moral responsibility.

The key issue, therefore, is not the disposition of laws governing abortions but the absolution from moral responsibility that federal intervention into personal morality so often represents. To pose the issue in terms of sanctioning abortions by untrained midwives brandishing coathangers *vs.* abortions on demand by sophisticated medics brandishing scalpels is to fudge the issue. Such a series of false antinomies disguises the collectivization of decisionmaking within most advanced industrial systems. Both sides in the abortion debate, assuming that it can be resolved by law, take for granted the main danger: state power over personal morality.

Much of the rebellion against authoritarianism is also an assertion that individuals can manage their own affairs best; funds should be left in the hands of wage earners and taxpayers and kept away from the coffers of a federal or state treasury. Viewed in this way, demands for federal abortion clinics seem as wide of the mark as demands that abortions be prohibited as a violation of Providential guidelines. The collectivization of responsibility is the problem, not the "right to life" or "abortion on demand." Only when moral issues are restored to individuals for decision can concrete specific issues be meaningfully resolved in a civilized manner. Otherwise we face an endless series of false alternatives: issues fought without principles enunciated; equities gained while liberties are lost.

There is a continuity between the way people live and die and the way that social systems conduct their affairs. It becomes especially instructive to examine the social processing of officially sanctioned death because in this area of universally shared agony we have presumed that we represent a higher level of civilization than all past societies. But in the technical proficiencies in distancing killers and those killed we stand exposed as the least civilized. We recoil in horror at medieval torture systems, at diabolical inventions that were supposed to symbolize fit punishment for thieves, plunderers, murderers, and assorted others. But their very individuation, their continued existence as figures in history, gives them a standing denied to the collective martyrdom of the twentieth century. Engineering as an ideology is no match for religion; or, put another way, it is no moral match. On the other hand religion as an ideology is no match for engineering as a system insuring mass death without personal sentiment.

As a general equation within a finite social system, more state authority means less individual capacity to survive; a higher individual capacity for surviving means less state authority. This point should not be obscured by the claim that this represents simply a return to old-fashioned individualism or conservatism. Such ideological eyewash should no longer be tolerated. Too much suffering has been inflicted, too many norms have been transgressed to warrant a belief in the state as benefactor.

The state produces not simply its élites but also its masses. The state not only provides decisionmaking by

experts at the top but generates mass mobilization at the bottom. Such statements, which appear as polarized expressions of social life, are in fact a part of the same monolithic entity. Hence, the task of individual survival, indeed of individualism as such, is to ferret out not simply one polar expression of this established evil but to appreciate the dialectic of state power—its mass as well as élite components—the carrots it offers below, disguising the stick it holds above. Only in this way can the opium of the twentieth century be fought in meaningful battle. The outcome may not be clear, but at least the lines of struggle have become clarified.

One should be cautious about stretching this duality between individuals and the state into a Manichaean doctrine of contending principles in which goodness is identified with the person and evil with the state. One must also be careful of the more likely prospect of identifying liberty with individual caprice. In strategic terms, demands for extending human rights, covenants intended to limit national excesses, and legislation stipulating root factors entering into deliberations of rights—these most often proceed through demands for state support. As a result, the state becomes both root problem and the core of any solution. Paradoxically, there seems to be an intellectual consensus that in the long run the state is culprit and culpable; but there is also a short-run belief that the state must aid in fostering human rights and even extending human potentials. Rather than attempt a surgical resolution of this evident dilemma, it should suffice for social science purposes to carefully disentangle the web of confusion surrounding such dramatic issues as individual liberties, human rights, and state powers. Demands for improvements must come to rest on a careful delineation of inconsistencies and inequities in present arrangements of structures. If this is a modest proposal for gigantic issues, so too is the foundation of this article: the social processing of death as a measure of the life-giving potentials of any given society.

There is a growing realization that the real new politics is not just another rhetorical form but a politics based on individuals in contrast to parties, officials, and leaderships. It is a Chilean living in exile in the United States, Orlando Letelier; it is a Brazilian journalist named Vladimir Herzog and a Russian physicist named Andrei Sakharov who become the focus of attention by Amnesty International. Human rights as a movement is of, by, and for individuals; the body is a willing hostage to free expression. The ideology of that movement is that every individual counts as one—no more and no less. Hence, the death or torture or maltreatment of every body is important, and not just part of a state's calculation of the necessary human costs for the achievement of abstractly predetermined levels of economic production. Exaggerations, even mistakes of judgment, will be made by such a new politics of human rights; that goes without saying. But the very existence of such a movement indicates that individualism has found a new source of energy. That source of energy is predicated on the universal right to live rather than the sovereign requirements of state power.