

## **Totalitarianism: The Inversion of Politics**

by Jerome Kohn, Director, Hannah Arendt Center, New School University

When Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, World War II had ended and Hitler was dead, but Stalin lived and ruled. Arendt wanted to give her readers a sense of the phenomenal reality of totalitarianism, of its appearance in the world as a terrifying and completely new form of government. In the first two parts of the book she excavated hidden elements in modern anti-Semitism and European imperialism that coalesced in totalitarian movements; in the third part she explored the organization of those movements, dissected the structure of Nazism and Stalinist Bolshevism in power, and scrutinized the "double claim" of those regimes "to total domination and global rule." Her focus, to be sure, is mainly on Nazism, not only because more information concerning it was available at the time, but also because Arendt was more familiar with Germany and hence with the origins of totalitarianism there than in Russia. She knew, of course, that those origins differed substantially in the two countries and later, in different writings, would undertake to right the imbalance in her earlier discussion (see "Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism").

The enormous complexity of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* arises from its interweaving of an understanding of the concept of totalitarianism with the description of its emergence and embodiment in Nazism and Stalinism. The scope of Arendt's conceptual objectives may be glimpsed in the plan she drew up for six lectures on the nature of totalitarianism delivered at the New School for Social Research in March and April of 1953 (see "The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism"). The first lecture dealt with totalitarianism's "explosion" of our traditional "categories of thought and standards of judgment," thus at the outset stating the difficulty of understanding totalitarianism at all. In the second lecture she considered the different kinds of government as they were first formulated by Plato and then jumped many centuries to Montesquieu's crucial discovery of each kind of government's principle of action and the human experience in which that principle is embedded. In the third lecture she explicated three important distinctions: first, between governments of law and arbitrary power; secondly, between the traditional notion of humanly established laws and the new totalitarian concept of laws that govern the evolution of nature and direct the movement of history; and, thirdly, between "traditional sources of authority" that stabilize "legal institutions," thereby accommodating human action, and totalitarian laws of motion whose function is, on the contrary, to stabilize human beings so that the predetermined courses of nature and history can run freely through them. The fourth lecture addressed the totalitarian "transformation" of an ideological system of belief into a deductive principle of action. In the fifth lecture the basic experience of human loneliness in totalitarianism was contrasted with that of impotence in tyranny and differentiated from the experiences of isolation and solitude, which are essential to the activities of making and thinking but "marginal phenomena in political life." In the final lecture Arendt distinguished "the political reality of freedom" from both its "philosophical idea" and the "inherent 'materialism'" of Western political thought.

In addition to its complexity the stylistic richness of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* lies in its admixture of erudition and imagination, which is nowhere more manifest than in the particular examples by which Arendt brought to light the elements of totalitarianism. These examples include her devastating portrait of Disraeli and her tragic account of the "great" and "bitter" life of T. E. Lawrence; other exemplary figures are drawn from works of literature by

authors such as Kipling and Conrad (see *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, chapter 7). A single, striking instance of the latter is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which Arendt called "the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa," her emphasis clearly falling on the word "experience." Engaged in "the merry dance of death and trade," Conrad's imperialistic adventurers were in quest of ivory and entertained few scruples over slaughtering the indigenous inhabitants of "the phantom world of the dark continent" in order to obtain it. The subject of Conrad's work, in which the story told by the always ambiguous Marlow is recounted by an unnamed narrator, is the encounter of Africans with "superfluous" Europeans "spat out" of their societies. As the author of the whole tale as well as the tale within the tale, Conrad was intent *not* "to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters."<sup>1</sup> Marlow, a character twice removed from the reader, is aware that the "conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing." It is in the person of the "remarkable" and "eloquent" Mr. Kurtz that Marlow seeks the "idea" that alone can offer redemption: "An idea at the back of [the conquest], not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea."

As Marlow's steamer penetrates "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" in search of Kurtz's remote trading station, Africa becomes increasingly "impenetrable to human thought." In a passage cited by Arendt, Marlow observes the Africans on the shore:

The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us--who could tell? We . . . glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be, before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of the first ages, of those ages that are gone leaving hardly a sign--and no memories. . . . The earth seemed unearthly . . . and the men were . . . No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leapt and spun and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.

The next sentence spoken by Marlow consists of one word, "Ugly," and that word leads directly to his discovery of Kurtz, the object of his fascination. He reads a report that Kurtz, who exemplifies the European imperialist ("All Europe contributed to [his] making"), has written to the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs." It is a report in the name of progress, of "good practically unbounded," and it gives Marlow a sense "of an exotic Immensity ruled by an August Benevolence." But at the bottom of the report's last page, "luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky," Kurtz has scrawled "Exterminate all the brutes!" Thus racism is revealed as the "idea" of the mad Kurtz and the darkness of his heart becomes the counterpart of the not inhuman but "uncivilized" darkness of Africa. The horrific details follow, the decapitated heads of Africans stuck on poles, facing inward toward Kurtz's dwelling. Marlow rationalizes Kurtz's "lack of restraint": "the wilderness . . . had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know," a whisper that "echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core." It is questionable whether Marlow is less hollow when, at the end of the work, he attempts in "fright" to lie about Kurtz's last words, "The horror! The horror!" The experience of race is now complete; even the shadowy narrator of Marlow's story is left before "the heart of an immense darkness" in which the image of Kurtz's racism looms in the consciousness of Conrad's readers and of the world.

Arendt, however, is not saying that racism or any other element of totalitarianism *caused* the regimes of Hitler or Stalin, but rather that those elements, which include anti-Semitism, the decline of the nation-state, expansionism for its own sake, and the alliance between capital and mob, *crystallized* in the movements from which those regimes arose. Reflecting on her book in 1958 Arendt said that her intentions "presented themselves" to her "in the form of an ever recurring image: I felt as though I dealt with a crystallized structure which I had to break up into its constituent elements in order to destroy it." This presented a problem because she saw that it was an "impossible task to write history, not in order to save and conserve and render fit for remembrance, but, on the contrary, in order to destroy." Thus despite her historical analyses it "dawned" on her that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was not "a historical . . . but a political book, in which whatever there was of past history not only was seen from the vantage point of the present, but would not have become visible at all without the light which the event, the emergence of totalitarianism, shed on it." The origins are not causes, in fact "they only became origins- antecedents--after the event had taken place." While analyzing, literally "breaking up," a crystal into its "constituent elements" destroys the crystal, it does not destroy the elements. This is among the fundamental points that Arendt made in the chapter written in 1953 and added to all subsequent editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (see "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government"):

If it is true that the elements of totalitarianism can be found by retracing the history and analyzing the political implications of what we usually call the crisis of our century, then the conclusion is unavoidable that this crisis is no mere threat from the outside, no mere result of some aggressive foreign policy of either Germany or Russia, and that it will no more disappear with the death of Stalin than it disappeared with the fall of Nazi Germany. It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form--though not necessarily the cruelest--only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.

According to Arendt the "disturbing relevance of totalitarian regimes . . . is that the true problems of our time cannot be understood, let alone solved, without the acknowledgment that totalitarianism became this century's curse only because it so terrifyingly took care of its problems" (see "Concluding Remarks" in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*). The rejection of the totalitarian answer to the question of race, for instance, does not solve but reveals the problem that arises when race is viewed as the origin of human diversity. Totalitarianism's destruction of naturally determined "inferior" races or historically determined "dying" classes leaves us on an overcrowded planet with the great and unsolved political perplexity of how human plurality *can* be conceived, of how historically and culturally different groups of human beings *can* live together and share their earthly home.

Defying classification in terms of a single academic discipline such as history, sociology, political science, or philosophy, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* presents a startling interpretation of modern European intellectual currents and political events. Still difficult to grasp in its entirety, the book's climactic delineation of the living dead, of those "inanimate" beings who experienced the full force of totalitarian terror in concentration camps, cut more deeply into the consciousness of some of Arendt's readers than the most shocking photographs of the distorted bodies of the already dead. Such readers realized that there are torments worse than death, which Arendt described in terms of the longing for death by those who in former times were thought to have been condemned to the eternal punishments of hell. She meant this vision of hell to be taken literally and not allegorically, for although throughout the long centuries of Christian belief men had proved themselves incapable of

realizing the city of God as a dwelling place for human beings, they now showed that it was indeed possible to establish hell on earth rather than in an afterlife.

Arendt added totalitarianism to the list of kinds of government drawn up in antiquity and hardly altered since then: monarchy (the rule of one) and its perversion in tyranny; aristocracy (the rule of the best) and its corruption in oligarchy or the rule of cliques; and democracy (the rule of many) and its distortion in ochlocracy or mob rule. The hallmark of totalitarianism, a form of rule supported by "superfluous" masses who sought a new reality in which they would be recognized in public, was the appearance in the world of what Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, called *radical* and *absolute* evil. Totalitarian regimes are not the "opposite" of anything: the absence of their opposite may be the surest way of seeing totalitarianism as the crisis of our times.

Totalitarianism has been identified by many writers as a ruthless, brutal, and, thanks to modern technology, potent form of political tyranny whose ambitions for world domination are unlimited. Disseminating propaganda derived from an ideology through the media of mass communication, totalitarianism relies on mass support. It crushes whoever and whatever stands in its way by means of terror and proceeds to a total reconstruction of the society it displaces. Thus a largely rural and feudal Russian Empire, under the absolutist rule of czars stretching back to the fifteenth century, was transformed first by Lenin after the October Revolution of 1917 and then by Stalin into an industrialized Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; a Germany broken after its defeat in World War I was mobilized and became the conqueror of most of Europe in the early 1940s less than a decade after Hitler's assumption of power; and in China the People's Republic, by taking the Great Leap Forward in 1958 followed by the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966 and ending with Mao Zedong's death in 1976, expunged much of what remained of a culture that had survived for more than three thousand years.

Such achievements require total one-party governmental control and tremendous human sacrifice; the elimination of free choice and individuality; the politicization of the private sphere, including that of the family; and the denial of any notion of the universality of human rights. In diverse areas of the world where political freedom and open societies have been virtually unknown or untried, totalitarian methods have been seen to exert an ongoing attraction for local elites, warlords, and rebels. Such well-known phenomena as "brain washing," "killing fields," "ethnic cleansing," "mass graves," and "genocide," accounting for millions of victims and arising from a variety of tribal, nationalist, ethnic, religious, and economic conditions, have been deemed totalitarian in nature. Totalitarianism, moreover, is frequently employed as an abstract, vaguely defined term of general opprobrium, whose historical roots are traced to the political thought of Marx or in some instances to Rousseau and as far back as Plato. But because of what has been called its "inefficiency," which Arendt attributes to its "contempt for utilitarian motives," totalitarianism rarely occurs in the political analyses of those who consider the function of politics in terms of "utilitarian expectations." Recently, however, prominent political theorists such as Margaret Canovan in England and Claude Lefort in France have seen in the decline of communism and the diminished intensity of left and right ideological debates an opportunity for an impartial and rigorous reassessment of the concept of totalitarianism. Although Arendt may have experienced a similar need to understand Nazism after its defeat in World War II, for her impartiality was the condition of judging the irreversible catastrophe of totalitarianism as "the central event of our world."

When Arendt noted that causality, the explanation of an event as being determined by another event or chain of events which leads up to it, "is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences," she meant that no historical event is ever predictable. Although with hindsight it is possible to discern a sequence of events, there is always a "grotesque disparity" between that sequence and a particular event's significance. What the principle of causality ignores or denies is the contingency of human affairs, i.e., the human capacity to begin something *new*, and therefore the meaning and "the very existence" of what it seeks to explain (see "The Difficulties of Understanding" and "On the Nature of Totalitarianism"). It is not the "objectivity" of the historical scientist but the impartiality of the judge who perceives the existence and discerns the meaning of events, of which the antecedents can then be told in stories whose beginnings are never causes and whose conclusions are never predetermined.<sup>2</sup> The rejection of causality in history and the insistence on the contingency, unpredictability, and meaning of events brought about not by nature but by human agency inform Arendt's judgment of the incomprehensible and unforgivable crimes of totalitarianism. In regard to such crimes the old saying "*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*" (to understand everything is to forgive everything)--as if to understand an offense, say by its psychological motive, were to excuse it--is a double "misrepresentation" of the fact that understanding seeks reconciliation. What may be possible is reconciliation to the world in which the crimes of totalitarianism were committed (see "The Difficulties of Understanding"), and a great part of Arendt's work on totalitarianism and thereafter is an effort to understand that world. But it should be noted that the outrage that pervades her judgment is not a subjective emotional reaction foisted on a purportedly "value free" scientific analysis.<sup>3</sup> Her anger is impartial in her judgment of a form of government that defaced the world and "objectively" belongs to that world on whose behalf she judged totalitarianism for what it was and what it meant.

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2. The concept of history derives from the Greek verb *historein*, to inquire, but Arendt found "the origin of this verb" in the Homeric *histor*, the first "historian," who was a judge (see *Thinking*, "Postscriptum"; cf. *Illiad* XVIII, 501).

3. Such a view, as Arendt points out, accurately describes many historical accounts of anti-Semitism, none more so than D. J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

Even before she wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt spoke of the desperate need to tell the "real story of the Nazi-constructed hell":

Not only because these facts have changed and poisoned the very air we breathe, not only because they now inhabit our dreams at night and permeate our thoughts during the day -- but also because they have become the basic experience and the basic misery of our times. Only from this foundation, on which a new knowledge of man will rest, can our new insights, our new memories, our new deeds, take their point of departure. (See "The Image of Hell.")

The beginning called for here, if there were to be one, will arise from individual acts of judgment by men and women who know the nature of totalitarianism and agree that, for the sake of the world, it *must* not occur again--not only in the forms in which it has already occurred, which may be unlikely, but in any form whatsoever.

The significance of the story Arendt went on to tell and retell lies entirely in the present, and she was fully aware that her "method," a subject which she was always loath to discuss, went

against the grain not only of political and social scientists but also, more importantly to her, of those reporters, historians, and poets who in distinct ways seek to preserve, in or out of time, what they record, narrate, and imagine. Reflecting later on the moment in 1943 when she first learned about Auschwitz, Arendt said: "*This ought not to have happened.*" That is no purely moral "ought" based in ethical precepts, the voice of conscience, or immutable natural law, but rather as strong as possible a statement that there was something irremissibly wrong with the human world in which Auschwitz could and did happen.

Reconciliation to that world requires understanding only when totalitarianism is *judged*, not by subsuming it under traditional moral, legal, or political categories but by recognizing it as something unprecedented, odious, and to be fought against. Such judgment is possible for beings "whose essence is beginning" (see "The Difficulties of Understanding") and makes reconciliation possible because it strikes new roots in the world. Judgment is "the other side of action" and as such the opposite of resignation. It does not erase totalitarianism, for then, thrown backward into the past, the historical processes that did not cause but led to totalitarianism would be repeated and "the burden of our time" reaccumulated; or, projected forward into the future, a never-never land ignorant of its own conditions, the human mind would "wander in obscurity."<sup>4</sup> A quotation from Karl Jaspers that struck Arendt "right in the heart" and which she chose as the epigraph for *The Origins of Totalitarianism* stresses that what matters is not to give oneself over to the despair of the past or the utopian hope of the future, but "to remain wholly in the present." Totalitarianism is the crisis of our times insofar as its demise becomes a turning point for the present world, presenting us with an entirely new opportunity to realize a common world, a world that Arendt called a "human artifice," a place fit for habitation by all human beings.

Arendt's papers provide many interesting opportunities to study the development of her thought. For instance, in "The Difficulties of Understanding," written in the early 1950s, judgment is conjoined with understanding. As late as 1972, in impromptu remarks delivered at a conference devoted to her work, she associated it with the activity of thinking. But Arendt was working her way toward distinguishing judgment as an independent and autonomous mental faculty, "the most political of man's mental abilities" (see "Thinking and Moral Considerations"). Although the activities of understanding and thinking reveal an unending stream of meanings and under specific circumstances may liberate the faculty of judgment, the act of judging particular and contingent events differs from them in that it preserves freedom by exercising it in the realm of human affairs. That distinction is critical for her view of history in general and totalitarianism in particular and has been adhered to in this introduction.

Arendt's judgment of totalitarianism must first and foremost be distinguished from its common identification as an insidious form of tyranny. Tyranny is an ancient, originally Greek form of government which, as the tragedy of *Oedipous Tyrannos* and the historical examples of Peisistratus of Athens and Periandros of Corinth demonstrate, was by no means necessarily against the private interests and initiatives of its people. As a form of government tyranny stands against the *appearance in public* of the plurality of the people, the condition, according to Arendt, in which political life and political freedom--"public happiness," as the founders of the American republic named it--become possible and without which they do not.

In a tyrannical political realm, which can hardly be called public, the tyrant exists in isolation from the people. Due to the lack of rapport or legal communication between the people and

the tyrant, all action in a tyranny manifests a "moving principle" of mutual fear: the tyrant's fear of the people, on one side, and the people's fear of the tyrant, or, as Arendt put it, their "despair over the impossibility" of joining together to act at all, on the other. It is in this sense that tyranny is a contradictory and futile form of government, one that generates not power but impotence. Hence, according to Montesquieu, whose acute observations Arendt drew on in these matters, tyranny (which he does not even bother to distinguish from despotism, malevolent by definition, since he is concerned with public rather than private freedom) is a form of government that, unlike constitutional republics or monarchies, corrupts itself, cultivating within itself the seeds of its own destruction (see "On the Nature of Totalitarianism"). Therefore, the essential impotence of a tyrannically ruled state, however flamboyant and spectacular its dying throes, and whether or not it is despotic, and regardless of the cruelty and suffering it may inflict on its people, presents no menace of destruction to the world at large.

In their early revolutionary stages of development, to be sure, and whenever and wherever they meet opposition, totalitarian movements employ tyrannical measures of force and violence, but their nature differs from that of tyrannies precisely in the enormity of their threat of world destruction. That threat has often been thought possible and explained as the total politicalization of all phases of life. Arendt saw it, and this is crucial, as exactly the opposite: a phenomenon of total depoliticalization (in German *Entpolitisierung* [see "*Freiheit und Politik*"]) that appeared for the first time in the regimes of Stalin after 1929 and Hitler after 1938. Totalitarianism's radical atomization of the whole of society differs from the political isolation, the political "desert," as Arendt termed it, of tyranny. It eliminates not only free action, which is political by definition, but also the element of action, that is, of initiation, of beginning anything at all, from every human activity. Individual spontaneity--in thinking, in any aspiration, or in any creative undertaking--that sustains and renews the human world is obliterated in totalitarianism. Totalitarianism destroys everything that politics, even the circumscribed political realm of a tyranny, makes possible.

In totalitarian society freedom, private as well as public, is nothing but an illusion. As such it is no longer the source of fear that in tyranny manifests itself not as an emotion but as the principle of the tyrant's action and the people's non-action. Whereas tyranny, pitting the ruler and his subjects against each other, is ultimately impotent, totalitarianism generates immense power, a new sort of power that not only exceeds but is different in kind from coercive force. The dynamism of totalitarianism negates the fundamental conditions of human existence. In the name of ideological necessity totalitarian terror mocks the appearance and also the disappearance, both the lives and the deaths, of distinct and potentially free men and women. It mocks the world that only a plurality of such individuals can continuously create, hold in common, and share. It mocks even the earth insofar as it is their natural home. The profound paradox that lies between the totalitarian belief that the eradication of every sign of humanity, of human freedom, of all spontaneity and beginning, is *necessary*, and the fact that its *possibility* is itself something new brought into the world by human beings is the core of what Arendt strove to comprehend.

According to Arendt the nature of totalitarianism is the "combination" of "its essence of terror and its principle of logicity" (see "On the Nature of Totalitarianism"). As "essence" terror must be total, more than a means of suppressing opposition, more than an extreme or insane vindictiveness. Total terror is, in its own way, rational: it replaces, literally takes the place of, the role played by positive laws in constitutional governments. But the result is neither

lawless anarchy, the war of all against all, nor the tyrannical abrogation of law. Arendt pointed out that just as a government of laws would become "perfect" in the absence of transgressions, so terror "rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way" (see *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, chapter 12). Just as positive laws in a constitutional government seek to "translate and realize" higher transcendent laws, such as God's commandments or natural law, so totalitarian terror "is designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature," not in a limited body politic, but throughout mankind.

If totalitarianism were perfected, if the entire plurality of human beings were to become *one* with the sole aim of accelerating "the movement of nature or history," then its essence of terror would suffice as its principle of motion (see *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, chapter 13). So long as totalitarianism exists in a non-totalitarian world, however, it needs the processes of logical or dialectical deduction to coerce the human mind into "imitating" and becoming "integrated" into the "suprahuman" forces of nature and history. In other words, the logic of the idea of an ideology forces the mind to move as inevitably as natural and historical processes themselves move, and against this movement "nothing stands but the great capacity of men" to interrupt those processes by starting "something new." It is not the political isolation that always prevents action, however, but the loneliness of socially uprooted, "superfluous" human beings, their loss of common sense, the sense of community and communication, which attracts them to logical explanations of all that has happened, is happening, and ever will happen. Thereby relieved of any responsibility for the course of the world, world-alienated masses are unwittingly, beneath the crust of their lives, prepared for totalitarian organization and, ultimately, domination.

Arendt concluded that Hitler and Stalin discovered that the eradication of the unpredictability of human affairs, of human freedom, and of human nature itself is possible in "the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power," the concentration camp. In concentration camps the combination of the practice of terror with the principle of logicity, which is the nature of totalitarianism, "resolves" the conflict in constitutional governments between legality and justice by ridding human beings of individual consciences and making them embodiments of the laws governing the motion of nature and history. On the one hand, in the world view of totalitarianism the freedom of human beings is inconsequential to "the undeniable automatism" of natural and historical processes, or at most an impediment to *their* freedom. On the other, when "the iron band of terror" destroys human plurality, so totally dominating human beings that they cease to be individuals and become a mere mass of identical, interchangeable specimens "of the animal-species man," that terror provides the movement of nature and history with "an incomparable instrument" of acceleration. Terror and logicity welded together equip totalitarian regimes with unprecedented power to dominate human beings. How totalitarian systems accomplish their inversion of political life, above all how they set about destroying human conscience and the plurality of unique human individuals, staggers the imagination and confounds the faculty of understanding.

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4. *The Burden of Our Time* is the title of the first British edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, 1951). Arendt frequently cited Tocqueville's remark in the last chapter of *Democracy In America*: "As the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity" (see "Philosophy and



Politics: The Problem of Action after the French Revolution" and *Between Past and Future*, "Preface").

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1. As Chinua Achebe says he ought to have done (C. Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd ed. [New York, 1998], 256).