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Mass loneliness leads to the erosion of democracy

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Mass loneliness leads to the erosion of democracy

Bachelor Thesis

Readings in the History of Political Thought

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Introduction

Relevance

Loneliness, depression and burnout are worldwide phenomena affecting millions of people. Specifically, the WHO (2022) observed a 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide after COVID-19. Approximately 280 million people worldwide suffer from depression and over 700 thousand people die of suicide each year (WHO, 2023). Depression is also “the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide” (WHO, 2017b). Depression is a political phenomenon, since it has political consequences (Ojeda, 2015, p. 1226). As such, amongst other things, individuals with depression are less likely to participate in politics. Loneliness is also a substantial issue in nearly all European countries, with up to 34% of individuals experiencing it (Yang & Victor, 2011). It is furthermore associated with a range of significant negative health outcomes “and this compromises the ability to live independently in the community”, henceforth posing a potential threat to the functioning of democracies (p. 1369). Therefore, it is an increasingly pressing issue in our society.

In this regard, Freedom House notes that global freedom dramatically declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023 and that pluralism is severely under attack (2024, p. 1). This has been observed worldwide (p. 7). While freedom improved for 7% of the world’s population, it declined for 22% (p. 10). Additionally, the majority of the world lives in partly free (42%) or not free (38%) countries, while only 20% live in free countries (p. 10).

Research question & argument

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the question of whether depression leads to the erosion of democracy. This potential causal mechanism can also work invertedly, namely erosion of democracy leading to depression. In this paper I will argue that loneliness is both a prerequisite for and a result of totalitarianism. This topic will be looked upon from two literature perspectives: Firstly, the Arendtian literature and secondly, the (political) psychology literature. While the first perspective is over half a century old and philosophical, the second one is more contemporary and empirical. Because of these differences, putting the two literatures in tandem makes their contributions to each other apparent. As such, I will argue that psychology's granular view specifies the target group that is affected most by the mechanism of depression leading to erosion of democracy. Psychology can also help in rethinking the Arendtian concept of loneliness, which is outdated in that it implicitly encompasses other psychological disorders that require different treatment. Here, contemporary psychology is able to better differentiate between disorders and is thus better equipped to propose medical solutions, which would not be adequate if one were to rely solely on the Arendtian concept of loneliness. Moreover, Arendt adds to the psychological understanding of loneliness and depression via a broader, cross-temporal view. Here, Arendt explains how loneliness and modernity are deeply interlinked and that thus, societal preventative remedies are needed, not only psychobiological remedies, which cannot prevent the onset of these illnesses, but only ameliorate them upon onset. The discipline of psychology, because it relies on present data, is unable to trace back the origins and propose holistic remedies on its own.

Conceptualisation

Democracy & non-democracy

In this thesis, democracy will be looked at procedurally from the psychology account. From an empirical perspective, the Global State of Democracy Indices (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance ((IDEA), 2023, p. 10) conceptualize democracy as “popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality of respect and voice between citizens in the exercise of that control”. Extending this definition, the Institute draws on four categories and seventeen factors to measure democracy: representation, rights, rule of law, and participation (pp. 64-80).

Erosion of democracy in this thesis means the unfulfillment of multiple of the criteria above. A democratic system can evolve into many different political regimes, such as monarchy, dictatorship, totalitarianism and authoritarianism. In this thesis, the result of erosion of democracy will be labeled *non-democracy* in order to include all these different non-democratic regimes.

Arendt defines democracy as “the active participation of the people in decisions on public affairs, rather than just the protection of certain basic rights” (2017, pp. 7-12). This includes the elements of “the right for all people to participate in public affairs and to appear in the public realm and make themselves heard”.

Arendt places tyranny and totalitarianism in juxtaposition to democracy. Thereby, when Arendt connects loneliness to totalitarianism, I infer that she links loneliness to erosion of democracy. Tyranny is the “political combination of force and powerlessness”, while totalitarianism is the political combination of force and powerfulness, which completely

depoliticizes society and is both preceded and followed by mass loneliness (Arendt, 2018, p. 202; Kohn, 2022, p. 632).

Depression

In psychology, depression is a clinical psychiatric disorder, characterized by extreme feelings of unhappiness, pessimism and despondency, interfering with daily life (VandenBos, 2006, p. 298). Often, physical, cognitive and social changes co-occur, including lack of energy and motivation, difficulty concentrating and making decisions, and social withdrawal. Other symptoms of depression include suicidal ideation, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, helplessness and emptiness, excessive guilt, insomnia and loss of pleasure and interests (Kennedy, 2008; Pryce et al., 2011).

Furthermore, loneliness is also associated with depression (Kahlon et al., 2021, p. 617). Loneliness is “the perceived experience of social deprivation” and “a debilitating psychological condition characterized by a deep sense of emptiness, worthlessness, lack of control and personal threat” (Donovan et al., 2017, p. 564; Cacioppo, Hawkley, Thisted, 2010, p. 453). Similarly, according to Arendt, loneliness is “the experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody”, resulting in the loss of the company of others, of oneself, of the world and of the capacity for thought and experience (Arendt, 1968, pp. 475-477).

Additionally, depression and burnout are significantly positively correlated (Wurm et al., 2016, p. 2).

Due to the interrelatedness of these concepts, namely that burnout and loneliness are both intimately linked to depression, depression will be considered an overarching concept in this project, encompassing the other concepts.

Structure

In order to answer the research question, this thesis will firstly conduct a psychology literature review. Here, the effect of multiple factors on the mechanism of loneliness leading to erosion of democracy will be reviewed, namely: physical and mental resources, social embeddedness, trust, depression's developmental effects, the political cycle of depression, self-efficacy and learned helplessness. Thereafter, the phenomenon of political depression will be examined, which supports the causal mechanism of non-democracy leading to depression. Secondly, the Arendtian view on the research question will be reviewed, specifically through mass atomization and thoughtlessness, with the subsections of the evil and totalitarian ideology. Thirdly, the discussion will illustrate the benefits of placing the Arendtian and the psychology literature in tandem.

Literature review

Followingly, the existing literature of (political) psychology academia on the causal bidirectional linkage between depression and erosion of democracy will be reviewed.

Firstly, literature arguing for and explaining the causality of depression leading to erosion of democracy will be reviewed. In this regard, depression reduces physical and mental resources, which are important predictors of political participation (Brady, Verba &

Schlozman, 1995). Furthermore, loneliness reduces the perceived embeddedness in society, therefore decreasing political participation through the factors of social resources, social norms and partisan attachments (Langenkamp, 2021, p. 1242; Smets & van Ham, 2013; Blais & Achen, 2019; Ojeda, 2015). Additionally, depression reduces citizen's trust in political processes via social embeddedness, cognitive distortions and negative thought schemata, thereby leading to non-participation and erosion of democracy (Bernardi & Gotlib, 2022; Rnic, Dozois & Martin, 2016, p. 357; Wessa, Domke-Wolf & Jungmann, 2023; Spithoven, Bijttebier & Goossens, 2017). Thereafter, depression in childhood and adolescence can have negative effects on political participation in adulthood, independent of depressive symptoms experienced in the latter (Glied & Pine, 2002). As such, depression's developmental effects in particular fuel the erosion of democracy through habitual voting and impaired educational attainment (Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Glied & Pine, 2002). Moreover, the political cycle of depression denotes that the depression-participation gap most severely impacts disadvantaged and minority groups, reinforcing their disadvantage and exclusion, and thereby also depression (Ojeda, 2015). This is partly because of barriers in treatment and the evolutive attunement of psychobiological mechanisms to social status and the genetic heritability of depression (Ojeda, 2015; Schulz & Mullings, 2006; Gilbert & Allan, 1998; Jang, Livesley, Taylor, Stein & Moon, 2004). Lastly, social cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory and helplessness theory of depression denote that depression reduces self-efficacy and increases learned helplessness, resulting in less political participation and therefore erosion of democracy (Bandura, 2001; Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954).

Secondly, literature arguing for and explaining the causality of the inverted thesis claim will be reviewed, namely that erosion of democracy leads to depression. This is often called political depression (Simchon et al, 2020). Here, social cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory and helplessness theory of depression are relevant again, because they also postulate

that non-democratic political systems can trigger feelings of low political efficacy and high helplessness, resulting in depression (Blais, 2000). Non-democracies also often leave a traumagenic effect on the mass public through state violence and terrorism (D'Orsi, 2015; Këllezi, Wakefield, Bowe & Jones, 2024; Hernández de Lara, 2023). Trauma triggered by state violence also impacts future generations through intergenerational trauma, often leading to depression (Middleton, Moreno & Leal, 2021; Kucharska, 2017).

Therefore, this literature review supports the causal mechanisms of depression leading to erosion of democracy, and vice versa.

The psychology literature can contribute to Arendt's conception of loneliness by differentiating between different psychological disorders, via modern scientific research. The Arendtian concept of loneliness is somewhat outdated in that it implicitly encompasses other psychological disorders that need different treatment. Here, contemporary psychology is better equipped to propose medical solutions, which would not be adequate if one were to rely solely on the Arendtian concept of loneliness. Additionally, psychology's granular view of the political cycle of depression specifies the target group that is affected most by the mechanism of depression leading to erosion of democracy. Thereby, the effectiveness of solutions to the problem can be maximized.

Physical and mental resources

Physical and mental resources are important predictors of political participation (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). Depression starkly reduces these resources, leading to reduced political participation and, in extension, erosion of democracy (Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021; Muñoz et al., 2005).

The physical resources hypothesis, drawing on the resource model of participation, postulates that political participation requires physical exertion alongside the traditionally researched resources of money, time and civic skills (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995; Ojeda, 2015, p. 1229; Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021). Since depression and burnout reduce the somatic capacity of individuals, it also reduces the resources needed for political participation (Chakraborty, Avasthi, Kumar & Grover, 2012; Muñoz et al., 2005; Vaccarino, Sills, Evans & Kalali, 2008).

Additionally to physical resources, mental and cognitive resources are also limited for depressed individuals, making their political participation less likely. Landwehr and Ojeda (2021) note that even in subclinical cases, depressive symptoms shift the individual's focus to more immediate everyday problems of private life, resulting in a loss of interest and lack of energy and capacity for more abstract and remote issues of political life (Smith & Greenberg, 1981).

Social embeddedness

Loneliness reducing the perceived connection to society is another pathway through which political participation is threatened, leading to erosion of democracy (Langenkamp, 2021, p. 1242). This relates to three factors, namely resources, social norms and partisan attachments (Smets & van Ham, 2013; Blais & Achen, 2019; Ojeda, 2015).

Firstly, social embeddedness and social capital theory denote that social relationships provide individuals with resources, such as information, social support and enforcement of social norms (Smets & van Ham, 2013). These resources lead to an increased likelihood of political participation. For example, information can provide motivation (Harder & Krosnick,

2008; Bond et al., 2012). Social support diminishes practical obstacles to participation. Thus, social relationships fuel political participation. Consequently, when these social relationships are impaired, as in the case of loneliness, political participation is likely to decline.

Secondly, a strong predictor for voter turnout is the perceived sense of duty and moral obligation to vote, which stems from feelings of attachment to the community (Blais & Achen, 2019). Social norms reinforce political and voting attitudes through social desirability (Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Bond et al., 2012). Henceforth, it can be hypothesized that loneliness leads to a (perceived) disconnection from society, leading to a diminished sense of duty to vote, ultimately resulting in lower voter turnouts (Langenkamp, 2021, p. 1242).

Thirdly, party identification is positively correlated with political participation. Yet, depressed individuals, lacking a sense of belongingness, have weaker partisan attachments and are hereby less likely to participate politically (Ojeda, 2015, pp. 1229-1230).

Conclusively, civil society and democratic institutions require citizens to perceive themselves as an integral part of society in order to function (Langenkamp, 2023, p. 2298). Therefore, loneliness and depression threaten the functioning of democratic institutions, amongst others via reduced political participation, leading to erosion of democracy.

Trust

Depression reduces citizen's trust in political processes, resulting in non-participation and thereby erosion of democracy (Bernardi & Gotlib, 2022). Trust is a crucial component of rule of law, which is central for the functioning of democracy, since trust is needed for

legitimacy, citizens' policy compliance and civic morality (McKay, 2015, p. xvi; Letki, 2006; Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020).

Firstly, decreased social embeddedness is associated with decreased trust in other members of society, political actors and institutions (Bernardi & Gotlib, 2022).

Secondly, cognitive distortions and negative cognitive schemata related to depression lead to negative interpretations of politics and therefore lower trust (Rnic, Dozois & Martin, 2016, p. 357; Wessa, Domke-Wolf & Jungmann, 2023; Spithoven, Bijttebier & Goossens, 2017). Cognitive theory hypothesizes that cognitive distortions are automatic negative thoughts related to depression, resulting in negative interpretation bias in the form of negative cognitive schemata. Here, when resolving ambiguous situations, systematic selections of negative and threatening interpretations are at play (Wessa, Domke-Wolf & Jungmann, 2023, p. 2). As such, psychology research shows that depression leads to a lower perceived responsiveness of the political system, lower satisfaction with government performance and henceforth lower trust in government (Bernardi & Gotlib, 2022, p. 432).

Political trust is significantly positively associated with voting, so less trust means less voting (Kim, 2014, p. 695). Erosion of trust is therefore a decisive factor in the mechanism of depression leading to erosion of democracy, via the pathways of social embeddedness, cognitive distortions and negative thought schemata.

Depression's developmental effects

Depression in childhood and adolescence can have negative effects on political participation in adulthood, independent of depressive symptoms experienced in the latter (Glied & Pine, 2002). Therefore, childhood and adolescence depression can have particularly

long-lasting detrimental effects on voting and can substantially fuel the erosion of democracy. Two pathways play into this mechanism: habitual voting and impaired educational attainment (Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Glied & Pine, 2002).

Firstly, according to the habitual voting theory, citizens learn the habit of either voting or non-voting in the early stages of their (adult) life and past behavior predicts future behavior (Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Dinas, 2012). Hereby, a depressed adolescent who does not vote when they are first eligible to vote will likely also not vote during adulthood, even if not depressed anymore.

Secondly, adolescent depression has been shown to impair educational attainment and performance (Glied & Pine, 2002). Education increases political participation by furthering the development of civic skills, critical thinking, understanding democratic processes, self-efficacy and political knowledge (Rindermann, 2008; Hillygus, 2005).

The political cycle of depression

As established by now, depression has consistent negative effects on voter turnout, political motivation and physically demanding participatory acts, also called the depression-participation gap, which applies across electoral contexts and across racial, age and gender groups (Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021; Ojeda & Pacheco, 2017; Ojeda & Slaughter, 2019). Ojeda (2015, p. 1240) argues that this depression-participation gap most severely impacts disadvantaged and minority groups, because of the political cycle of depression, in which the political non-participation of depressed individuals from disadvantaged groups reinforces their disadvantage and exclusion, and thereby also depression. Further, disadvantaged individuals suffer disproportionately from depression because of barriers in

treatment and the evolutive attunement of psychobiological mechanisms to social status (Ojeda, 2015; Schulz & Mullings, 2006; Gilbert & Allan, 1998). Depression is also genetically heritable, reinforcing this disequilibrium (Jang, Livesley, Taylor, Stein & Moon, 2004).

Firstly, individuals with depression are unlikely to participate in the political process. Secondly, this lack of participation leads to underrepresentation and a lack of policies benefiting depressed people. Thirdly, this lack of beneficial policy perpetuates the experience of depression. Policies targeting mental health have been found to be able to both perpetuate and mitigate the prevalence of mental health issues (Ojeda, 2015, p. 1240; Klick & Markowitz, 2006). According to Ojeda (2015, p. 1240), “this cycle interlocks and reinforces other challenges to democracy, such as the income-participation gap” and the underrepresentation of already disadvantaged groups like women, racial minorities, those with a lower socioeconomic status, poor and disabled people, even excluding them from political processes (Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021).

Adding to the burden of the political cycle of depression is the fact that disadvantaged groups, such as noted above, suffer disproportionately from depression (Ojeda, 2015; Schulz & Mullings, 2006). As the World Health Organization (2017a) notes, although depression can affect everyone, the risk of becoming depressed is increased by poverty, unemployment, traumatic life events, physical illness and alcohol and drug use. These disadvantaged groups are subject to fewer diagnoses of existing illnesses, inadequate treatment after diagnosis and less preventive care (Geiger, 2006). Therefore, individuals from politically underrepresented groups disproportionately suffer from depression partly because of barriers in treatment which are partially rooted in politics (Ojeda, 2015, p. 1227). “Depression then facilitates and reinforces existing political inequalities along gender, race and class lines” (p. 1227).

Therefore, “depression, as is true of many other diseases and illnesses, is most common among society’s most disadvantaged” (Ojeda & Slaughter, 2019, p. 480).

Moreover, depression is genetically heritable, therefore disadvantaged groups suffer even more disproportionately from it (Jang, Livesley, Taylor, Stein & Moon, 2004). Depression also has a high recurrence rate and substantial chronicity, meaning that people who already suffered from depression are more likely to suffer from it again (Monroe & Harkness, 2005; González et al., 2010).

The social rank theory of psychopathology and depression suggests that through the evolution of social hierarchies, various psychobiological mechanisms became attuned to success or failure in conflict situations (Gilbert & Allan, 1998, p. 585). Specifically, those of lower status are evolutionarily more attuned to failure, experiencing entrapment and defeat, and are therefore at greater risk of pathology and depression than those of higher status. This mechanism, again, reinforces the political cycle of depression.

Ojeda (2015, p. 1240) summarizes the political cycle of depression by saying “political inequality is compounded if the conditions that lead to a reduced political voice (i.e., poverty, gender, race) also give rise to depression and all of its burdens”.

Self-efficacy and learned helplessness

Depression negatively affects voter turnout and political participation (Johnson, 2017). Social cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory and helplessness theory of depression postulate that depressed individuals are less likely to perform civic duties, to stay informed and to politically engage, because they lack the belief that their actions can impact political processes, resulting in erosion of democracy (Bandura, 2001; Campbell, Gurin & Miller,

1954, p. 187). Vice versa, non-democratic political systems can trigger feelings of low political efficacy, resulting in depression (Blais, 2000). Therefore, the research question of a bidirectional causal link between depression and erosion of democracy is confirmed.

Social cognitive theory postulates that people choose what challenges to accept, how much effort to spend in the attempt, whether failures are motivating or demoralizing and how long to persist in the face of obstacles and failures partly on the basis of personal efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2001; Pichon-Prelorcentzos et al., 2018). Self-efficacy can be understood as people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired outcomes and effects by their own actions (Bandura, 2001; Pichon-Prelorcentzos et al., 2018; Ojeda, 2015, p. 1228). Connectedly, political self-efficacy is the feeling that political action can or does have an impact upon political processes, therefore making the performance of civic duties, such as staying informed, voting and engaging politically, worthwhile (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954, p. 187). The opposite of self-efficacy is learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972). Learned helplessness results in reduced motivation, difficulty in identifying the association between actions and outcomes and therefore behavioral disengagement (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1972; Trindade, Mendes, Ferreira, 2020). Depression and self-efficacy or learned helplessness stand in a bidirectional relationship (Tak, Brunwasser, Lichtwarck-Aschoff & Engels, 2017, p. 745). As such, depression is characterized by low self-efficacy/ learned helplessness and low self-efficacy/ learned helplessness can trigger depression. Therefore, depressed individuals are less likely to politically engage. This mechanism has been shown to be a motivator of voter turnout across a variety of electoral contexts (Blais, 2000).

Vice versa, the helplessness theory of depression hypothesizes that learned helplessness results from the repeated experience of aversive situations that are perceived to

be unavoidable, such as non-democratic political processes, leading to feelings of uncontrollability of outcomes (Trindade, Mendes, Ferreira, 2020, p. 68). This can prompt depression (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1972). Similarly, external political efficacy can be expected to be low in non-democracies, leading to more depression. Henceforth, erosion of democracy can also lead to depression, confirming this thesis's research question of a bidirectional causal link between depression and erosion of democracy.

Political depression

Invertedly, politics and non-democratic regimes can also cause depression, termed *political depression* (Simchon et al, 2020). This corresponds to the inverted thesis claim of erosion of democracy leading to depression. That being so, elections have been found to sometimes lead to “truly psychologically traumatizing event[s] - and as such being potentially depressionogenic” (Tashjian & Galván, 2018; Simchon et al, 2020, p. 2155). After the Trump presidential election in 2016, many liberal US-Americans suffered a long-lasting decrease in their well-being, with reduced happiness levels that lasted for at least 6 months post-election, coined *election-related distress* (Simchon et al, 2020, pp. 2154-2155). Here, the American Psychological Association (2016) reported that 52% of US-American adults felt that the 2016 election was a considerable source of stress. This causal mechanism is again tied to self-efficacy theory, as explained above, which hypothesizes that “when the outcome of one’s political agency is undesirable, the more efficacious individuals should experience greater psychological distress” (Pitcho-Prelorentzos et al., 2018, p. 2). And yet again, those individuals who experienced most distress were those identifying with historically marginalized groups, for example women, African Americans, Homosexuals and Muslims

(Tashjian & Galván, 2018, p. 2887). Therefore, erosion of democracy can lead to depression, especially for disadvantaged and minority groups.

Comprehensively, non-democratic political regimes tend to negatively impact the mental health of its citizens, leading to distress, loneliness and depression, even in future generations (Elsayed, 2011, p. 130). Psychological and physical violence and tormentation, mass human rights violations, disappearances of citizens, war and fear are common themes of non-democracies, which are systematically applied in order to control the citizenry, also called state terrorism (D’Orsi, 2015; Këllezi, Wakefield, Bowe & Jones, 2024; Hernández de Lara, 2023). This leaves a traumagenic effect on the mass public, even long term so, through intergenerational trauma (Middleton, Moreno & Leal, 2021). Intergenerational trauma denotes trauma experienced by past generations that is genetically transmitted to younger generations, who did not experience those traumatic events themselves but are still clinically traumatized. Trauma and depression are significantly interlinked, the former often leading to the latter (Kucharska, 2017). Therefore, erosion of democracy can lead to depression, notably also long-lasting depressive tendencies in the wider population.

Body

The literature review above has shown that depression can lead to the erosion of democracy via reduced political participation, decreased social embeddedness, reduced trust in political institutions and actors, and in fellow citizens, increased support for political violence and anti-democratic policies and political polarization, amongst other things. Specifically affected by depression are disadvantaged and minority groups, reinforcing

political inequality. All in all, this cycle is self-reinforcing and can therefore significantly harm democracies worldwide.

In the subsequent section, Hannah Arendt's philosophy will be analyzed. Arendt can considerably contribute to the psychological account by providing a cross-temporal view of the sources of mass loneliness. Loneliness is deeply interlinked with modern society and is a result of modernity. Psychology can therefore only diagnose that we are nowadays confronted with the problem of mass loneliness and depression, without being able to diagnose the roots of these conditions. While the discipline of psychology thinks that depression is an illness that can be remedied through clinical diagnosis and treatment, Arendt broadens this scope. Only by addressing the origins of the problem, with the help of Arendt, is it possible to find long-lasting holistic solutions. Therefore, Arendt contributes a deeper understanding of the problem of mass loneliness, which can be eliminated only through social systemic change.

In Arendtian thought, loneliness and totalitarianism are deeply interlinked. Therefore, loneliness leads to totalitarianism, while totalitarianism also leads to loneliness. As such, loneliness is "the most basic and fundamental condition for the possibility of totalitarian domination" (Weisman, 2013, p. 65). Loneliness is also "the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government (Arendt, 1968, p. 475). Indeed, "politics steeped in loneliness is not properly politics; it signals the end of politics" (Weisman, 2013, p. 67). In order to illustrate further how loneliness leads to erosion of democracy, the following section will firstly delve into mass atomization and secondly into the loss of the capacity for thought, which enables both evil and the susceptibility of totalitarian ideology and propaganda.

Mass atomization

Loneliness leads to erosion of democracy via facilitating the atomization of society. Mass atomization describes the erosion of social and familial structures and relationships, reducing individuals to mere isolated atoms (Arendt, 1968, p. 323). In mass loneliness, people are not together with each other, eroding the social bonds that are essential for the functioning of civil society, therefore being connected to the erosion of democracy (1968, pp. 475-476; 3018, p. 212; IIDEA, 2023, pp. 79-80). When individuals feel abandoned by all others, cut off from meaningful relationships, they become more susceptible to the allure of totalitarian movements (Canovan, 2000, p. 27). Totalitarian movements not only thrive on, but “depend [...] on the specific conditions of an atomized [...] mass”, a state which is facilitated by loneliness (Arendt, 1968, p. 318).

An individual becomes atomized through loneliness: in loneliness, one “lacks first of all the company of oneself” (Arendt, 2018, pp. 76, 212). ”In losing myself [...] , I also lose others” (Shuster, 2012, p. 483). Therefore, loneliness is characterized by the destruction of the relationships between and among people (Weisman, 2013, p. 25). These consequences of loneliness are also consequences of modernity, since the modern emergence of the social sphere is accompanied by the decline, if not destruction, of the public realm and therefore the decline of social relationships (2018, pp. 50, 59). By destroying the fabric of society, social support and trust cease to exist (Arendt, 1968, p. 323). People feel thrown into a wild world, forced to make it on their own. Here, totalitarian movements come in and invite one to not just belong to something bigger than themselves, but to become part of history (Canovan, 2000, p. 27).

Henceforth, in the stead of social support and trust, the “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member” towards the totalitarian

movement can be established (Arendt, 1968, p. 323). This loyalty forms the psychological basis for complete domination.

Therefore, loneliness leads to erosion of democracy via facilitating the atomization of society. Totalitarianism also leads to loneliness by depriving individuals of their social reality.

Loss of capacity for thought

Loneliness leads to the loss of the capacity for thought, leading to totalitarianism via enabling evil and the stark susceptibility to totalitarian ideology and propaganda. Evil leads to monstrous deeds, which are non-democratic in nature, since they go against human rights (Canovan, 2000; Arendt, 2017, pp. 7-8; IIDEA, 2023, p. 10). Totalitarian ideological propaganda is interlinked with the erosion of democracy. As such, it manipulates truth and undermines the democratic principle of informed citizenry, it eliminates plurality by promoting a monolithic ideology and restricting the freedom of expression and critical thinking.

According to Arendt, the essence of totalitarianism is isolation and loneliness (1968, p. 407; Weisman, 2013, p. 65). Arendt defines loneliness as being distinct from isolation and solitude (Arendt, 1968, p. 474). Solitude is temporarily being alone with oneself in introspection in order to think independently, and being able to reemerge into the public sphere for the confirmation of thoughts (2018, pp. 76, 280). By entering the public sphere, people can appear, meaning that they are being seen and heard by others and by themselves, which ultimately constitutes reality (p. 50). Solitary individuals are never altogether without company, and therefore are not lonely. Solitude is crucial for thought processes. In loneliness and totalitarianism, even the slim chance of loneliness transforming into solitude is

obliterated (1968, p. 478). This poses a considerable problem for thinking and thus facilitates the erosion of democracy.

Isolation in the political sphere, is loneliness in the social sphere (Arendt, 1968, p. 474). Isolation is similar to loneliness in that individuals are unable to enter the political sphere, the realm in which action is possible, which is destroyed (1968, p. 474). It is different from loneliness because it is not characterized by worldlessness and it retains productivity, one remains in contact with the world and can add to the human artifact (p. 475). While tyranny is based solely on isolation, totalitarianism presupposes both isolation and loneliness.

The erosion of the public sphere leads to totalitarianism, as it is related to the erosion of thinking capabilities. In the public sphere, “men not merely live, but act, together”, which is the essence of plurality and which is crucial for cultivating social connections to others and to the common world, therefore being crucial to the functioning of democracy (2018, pp. 28, 212). In it, common sense is created and maintained through speaking to others. The public sphere also corresponds to the political sphere, creating a purpose for people and political capabilities. In the case of mass loneliness, “togetherness has none of the distinctive marks of true plurality”, because “living with others and for others must remain essentially without testimony”, as established in the section above (Arendt, 2018, pp. 76, 212). Therefore, loneliness is connected to the loss of action, “the destruction of [...] the inner capacity to begin and the space of movement between human beings”, and therefore to the radical impairment of the public sphere, which exists only when men can act in concert. Hereby, loneliness “forms the other side of political belonging” arising when human beings are deprived of their political existence, since they then belong to a world with others unable to “bring the fullness of their humanity into relief” (Gaffney, 2016, p. 5). The erosion of the public sphere leads to totalitarianism in so far as it impedes thinking. Thinking needs both the

company of oneself and the presence of others, made impossible by loneliness (Arendt, 1968, p. 476). Here, loneliness and modernity are equated again, since modernity is also characterized by the destruction of the public sphere (2018, p. 50).

Lacking the company of oneself, a characteristic of loneliness, can be understood as the inability to think. This is because in loneliness, one is unable to enter into dialogue with oneself in thought, and “all thinking [...] is a dialogue between me and myself” (Arendt, 1968, p. 476). Here, Arendt’s concept of “two-in-one” corresponds to this dialogue (p. 476). Thinking “requires not only the ability to make myself as other”, to divide myself into “me and myself”, into two entities, but also to eventually unite “me and myself” into one entity, to make myself “whole” again (Shuster, 2012, p. 483; Arendt, 1968, p. 476). For this condition to be fulfilled, the presence of another person is needed for the confirmation of thoughts and of my identity, and ultimately, to establish certainty (Shuster, 2012, p. 483; Arendt, 1968, p. 476). These requirements for thinking are not given within loneliness, firstly because lonely individuals are abandoned by themselves, unable to enter into the “me and myself” entities in order to think (Arendt, 2018, pp. 76, 212). Secondly, the presence of others for confirmation is not given. As such, “one cannot think (not even in a dialogue with oneself) unless there are structures that allow respect for and exchange of opinion with others” (Waldron, 2000, p. 215). Henceforth, in loneliness, the capacity for thought is lost, resulting in the loss of common sense, of “the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity” and of the surrounding world (Arendt, 1968, p. 477; Arendt, 2018, p. 208).

The loss of the capacity for thought has several detrimental consequences for democracy. Individuals become susceptible, firstly, to totalitarian ideology and, secondly, to evil and are unable to make moral and political judgments (Villa, 2000, pp. 15-16). The following sections will explore these consequences.

Thoughtlessness and evil

Arendt wrote extensively about the “interconnectedness of non-thought and evil” (1981, p. 179). She explains that the activity of thinking produces conscience as a by-product, enabling moral judgments and deciding what is right and wrong (Passerin D’entrèves, 2000, p. 249). Without this, “it becomes all too easy to succumb to evil” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 285). If thoughtlessness becomes pervasive on the mass society level, totalitarian movements are likely to emerge, leading to the erosion of democracy.

Arendt’s prime example to illustrate how non-thought leads to evil is Eichmann, one of the main organizers of the Holocaust. “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think” (1963, p. 49). Eichmann, Arendt says, was safeguarded against “the presence of others, and hence against reality as such”, making communicating with him impossible (p. 49). Therefore, from the Arendtian perspective, Eichmann can be described as lonely. Hitler, according to Arendt, was also able to be *banally evil*, because he was lonely and therefore unable to think and to judge right from wrong (p. 153).

Therefore, “in separating individuals from themselves and the truth of their experience, loneliness shields human beings from the reality of their deeds, enabling them, in turn, to step blindly into the mechanism of terror” (Gaffney, 2016, p. 5).

Thoughtlessness and totalitarian ideology

Loneliness also makes humans susceptible to totalitarian ideology and propaganda. Ideology plays an important role in totalitarian domination and can be defined as an ism which “can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise”,

therefore simplifying complexities (Arendt, 1968, p. 468). Ideologies can also be considered “pseudo-scientific theories purporting to give insight into history” by giving believers “the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future” (Canovan, 2000, pp. 27-28; Arendt, 1968, pp. 469–470). Propaganda draws on ideology and is the consistent and total substitution of factual truth with lies (1968, pp. 467-469). According to Arendt, upon submitting one’s mind to the logicity of tyranny, one “surrenders his inner freedom” (p. 473).

Propaganda can be effective especially under the condition of mass loneliness. As such, Arendt states “the effectiveness of [...] propaganda” is due to the “chief characteristics of modern masses” (p. 351). Here, Arendt often intimately interlinks, if not equates, modernity with loneliness, saying that the modern masses “do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations”, which is also the case for lonely individuals (p. 351). These imaginations “may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent with itself”, that is, totalitarian ideology and propaganda (p. 351). Ideology also “insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things, appealing to those individuals who are lonely and have therefore lost their rootedness in reality (pp. 470-471). Totalitarian propaganda “can outrageously insult common sense only where common sense has lost its validity”, so in the case of loneliness (p. 352). The only factors capable of hindering ideology are “new experiences and new beginnings”, just as “the freedom of man” inevitably slows down totalitarian movements (pp. 466, 473). These factors are not realizable in the context of mass loneliness, therefore under these conditions, totalitarianism cannot be stopped.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that loneliness sets the basis for totalitarian domination by depriving individuals of the public sphere, in which they can be confirmed of

their identity, of certainty and of reality by others, and by eliminating the capacity for thought. Under these conditions, individuals can easily be swept away by totalitarian ideology and propaganda. As such, Arendt states that when confronted with accepting either the consequences of losing oneself, others and the world, “or bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology, the masses probably will always choose the latter [...] because this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect” (p. 352). The lonely person accepts totalitarian domination, because “man knows he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of the first premise from which the whole process is being started”, so totalitarianism “appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon” (p. 478). Thereby, totalitarianism offers the masses exactly what they need: “to escape from reality because in their essential homelessness they can no longer bear its accidental, incomprehensible aspects” (p. 352). Loneliness as such is “unbearable for any length of time”, therefore lonely masses are inclined to submit themselves to anything that promises them the relief of this unbearableness, which is totalitarianism (2018, p. 76). Totalitarian movements are so very futile in contexts of mass loneliness because they “conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself” (1968, p. 352).

Summarizing, Arendt (p. 474) aptly states that “the preparation [for totalitarianism] has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity for both experience and thought” (p. 474). Thereby (p. 474):

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality

of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought), no longer exist.

Loneliness as a result of totalitarianism

Vice versa, totalitarianism can also lead to loneliness. As such, political contacts between men are severely restricted in both tyranny as well as totalitarianism, reducing, and eliminating, in turn the capacity for action, speech and thought (Arendt, 1968, pp. 467, 474). Additionally, totalitarian logic destroys man's capacity for experience and thought. Terror, characteristic of totalitarianism, also has to eliminate freedom in order to function (p. 466). "Loneliness becomes the norm rather than the exception under totalitarian regimes" and "in totalitarianism, loneliness becomes structural" (Lucas, 2019, p. 711). Shuster (2021, p. 475) adds that "loneliness is not solely an outcome of, but also a precursor to totalitarianism (and therefore the latter cannot be used solely to explain the former)". Furthermore, since non-democracies are often characterized by force and violence, they are pre-political, in the Arendtian sense (Arendt, 2018, pp. 26, 32). More than that, "absolute, uncontested rule and a political realm properly speaking were mutually exclusive" (p. 28). When humans cannot be political beings, they are not using their full human, natural potential. Consequently, the inverse causal relationship is also at play, thereby erosion of democracy leads to mass loneliness. In conclusion, loneliness is also a result of the erosion of democracy.

Discussion

In conclusion, the research question of whether depression leads to the erosion of democracy, was supported by both the Arendtian literature and the psychology literature. Loneliness is indeed a prerequisite for the erosion of democracy. Vice versa, the erosion of democracy also leads to depression, showing how intricate and deep-rooted the problem is. The contemporary rise of depression is of large political significance, and a further rise “could critically affect the functioning of institutions that depend on political participation” (Landwehr & Ojeda, 2021, p. 330).

Going back to the Arendtian and the empirical definition of democracy, one can conclude that under conditions of widespread depression and loneliness, the conditions for democratic systems are not fulfilled. As such, “the right for all people to participate in public affairs and to appear in the public realm and make themselves heard” is not fulfilled, since depressed people, especially so of minority and disadvantaged groups, are less likely to politically participate than non-depressed and non-lonely people (Arendt, 2017, pp. 7-8; Ojeda, 2015). Therefore, a system has developed in which not every citizen is participating equally, resulting in non-representative politics and political power distributed by socioeconomic position. The same is also the case with the empirical definition of democracy, where “citizens should have equal and universal passive and active voting rights” (IIDEA, 2023, pp. 64-67). Connectedly, the condition of political equality, denoting “the extent to which political and social equality between social groups and genders is realized”, is also not satisfied, since, according to the political cycle of depression, specific social groups and women are disadvantaged (IIDEA, 2023, pp. 68-74). Consequently, the condition of electoral participation is also not realized (IIDEA, 2023, pp. 79-80).

The condition of basic welfare, meaning that healthcare is available to every citizen, is not realized (IIDEA, 2023, p. 10). Those of lower socio-economic status are subject to fewer diagnoses and inadequate treatment, compared to those of higher socioeconomic status (Geiger, 2006).

Moreover, the rule of law element of democracies, which includes trust, is not effectuated (IIDEA, 2023, pp. 75-78; Letki, 2006). As illustrated before, the Arendtian and psychological literature agree that lower social embeddedness results from loneliness and depression, leading to lower trust. Depression and lower trust are also negatively interrelated independently of social embeddedness (Newton & Zmerli, 2011; Bernardi & Gotlib, 2022, p. 432).

Furthermore, in this thesis, both the psychology literature's and the Arendtian literature's account of how loneliness and depression lead to the erosion of democracy have been reviewed. Thereby, it has become apparent that both literatures can learn something from each other and thereby significantly contribute to the debate.

As such, psychology shows that marginalized persons are both most heavily affected by depression and most vulnerable to fall into the mechanism of depression leading to the erosion of democracy (Ojeda, 2015). Psychology offers this granular view, while Arendt's scope is much bigger: she looks at humanity as a whole, at the "human condition" and does not distinguish between different sub-groups. Psychology's granular account is valuable for the finding of solutions for this deep-rooted and intricate problem, because it specifies the target group that needs these solutions most. Thereby, the effectiveness of these solutions can be maximized.

Furthermore, the Arendtian concept of loneliness should be revised. As such, Arendt's definition of loneliness arguably encompasses other psychological disorders, such as

depression. Factors of this definition that, according to psychology, do not relate to loneliness but rather to other illnesses include the incapability of thought. Psychology does not consider lonely individuals as incapable of thought, in fact it does not even link depression to thoughtlessness. While cognitive thought processes are surely affected by loneliness and depression, they do not cease to operate, but simply operate differently. While all these mental disorders are interlinked, as established by psychology literature, differentiating between those conditions is essential in adequately treating them. Loneliness needs other solutions and treatments than depression does. Of course, when Arendt wrote “The Human Condition” in 1958 or “Origins of Totalitarianism” in 1951, the psychology academia was not well established yet. Additionally, Arendt was also a philosopher, or a political theorist, as she preferred being seen. Therefore, Arendt did not have the means to better differentiate between these mental conditions. Psychology goes beyond what Arendt ever understood and could have understood. Accordingly, placing the Arendtian and the psychology literature in tandem yields considerable benefits, like making one rethink the Arendtian concept of loneliness.

Moreover, Arendt adds to the psychological understanding of loneliness via a broader, cross-temporal view. As such, Arendt deeply interlinks, if not equates, loneliness and modernity. According to Arendt, since society has transformed into a “society of laborers” and a “consumer society” in modernity, loneliness “has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century” (1968, pp. 475, 478; 2018, pp. 4-5, 126). From the social Arendtian perspective, depression is a consequence of systemic barriers to the well-being and functioning of individuals in society, which can only be eliminated through system change (Ojeda, 2015). Since depression can arise out of life circumstances and disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately from it, the origins can be traced to their sociopolitical origins (p. 1239).

In contrast, the discipline of psychology relies on present data and gained momentum only well after these modern developments, as displayed by Arendt, had already started. As such, from the psychobiological perspective, depression is an illness that can be remedied through clinical diagnosis and treatment. Psychology can therefore only diagnose that we are nowadays confronted with the problem of mass loneliness and depression, without being able to diagnose the roots of these conditions. Here, Arendt can add a deeper understanding, giving a detailed account of how the modern ills of society facilitate loneliness. Thereby, while psychology promotes the need for health care reforms to remedy problems that already exist, Arendt promotes the need for societal change, which would serve as a solution able to prevent these phenomena. In fact, whether the origins of depression and loneliness are perceived to be biological or social in nature has great consequences (Ojeda, 2015, p. 1239). I would argue that both types are at play. Notably (Ojeda, 2015, p. 1239):

However helpful any (psychomedical) treatment may be, it is still not a panacea: it can only address depression after an individual has become depressed. It cannot prevent the onset of depression or change the social circumstances that give rise to and perpetuate the experience of depression. It is therefore worthwhile to theorize about depression in terms of the social model.

Hereby, social-Arendtian remedies can serve as preventative measures, while psychomedical remedies serve mainly as a short-lived patch to the wider trouble of mass depression. In my opinion, both remedies have to be operationalized in tandem. Systemic change can not be implemented immediately, needing a long time to happen. Legislation, in turn, can be changed considerably faster. Therefore, we need to start adjusting legislation to the mass phenomena of depression, considering its detrimental consequences for democracy.

As such, legislators should focus on rectifying the political cycle of depression, for example by ensuring health care for all. This is for example needed in the case of Germany, where the healthcare system is divided between those privately insured and those publicly insured (Wenzel, 2022). The former's fee for such is significantly higher than the latter, meaning that those of lower socioeconomic status can likely only afford the latter. Even though theoretically, those publicly insured have the right to seek psychotherapy, this is practically not the case, since only few psychotherapists take them as clients and since the waiting times are very long. Also, only few psychotherapists are licensed by the German state to treat publicly insured people. Psychotherapy needs to be more accessible to everyone. On another positive note, the German government has just introduced a program for the prevention of suicide and depression, recognizing the gravity of the problem and implementing solutions for it (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2024). These solutions include the de-stigmatization and breaking of taboos about suicide, a national call center, counseling centers and more specialized education for healthcare professionals.

Future research should take into account the gravity of the consequences of loneliness, burnout and depression and work together with legislators in drafting solutions. Additionally, future research should be conducted in a country-specific manner. Even though the processes described are global in nature, each country is in need of solutions that fit the country's cultural, social, political and economic context. Lastly, research should investigate the exact extent of this problem, since the dark figure of depressed individuals is presumably very high, because of the healthcare system shortcomings.

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