

Abstract

Totalitarianism is probably the most ambivalent political idea of the 20th century: it stands for the most negative experience with politics, it was used as polemical weapon within the major political conflicts of the epoch, and it attracted as many ingenious political thinkers in order to clarify totalitarianism as a scientific concept. The essay is only a sketch and tries to reconstruct the variations of the concept throughout five stages: its origins in Mussolini's Italy, the pluralistic formation in the 1930/40s, the canonization during the cold war, its diminuation in the 1960/70s, and the comeback after 1989. The author argues that it is exactly the multiplicity or even then controversial character of the concept which makes it so significant for the ruptured history of the 20th century.