Dictatorship:

The Career of a Concept from Robespierre to Lenin and Beyond

In retrospect, the “great dictators” of the twentieth century – Lenin, Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler – have become negative moral and political templates: paragons of political evil. Nor have dictatorship’s ills been confined to the European theatre. According to recent estimates, Chairman Mao was responsible for some 40 million deaths. His disciple, Pol Pot (aka, Saloth Sar or “Brother Number 1”) managed, in three short years, to do away with 15% of the Cambodia’s indigenous population.

Yet, the contemporary moral aversion to dictatorial rule is the exception. Dictatorship was a hallowed Roman political institution in times of emergency, until its “abuse” by Sulla and Caesar. Philosophes like Voltaire and Diderot, who were otherwise champions of “toleration,” also favored the idea of “enlightened despotism.” The historical verdict on the Jacobin dictatorship is still out; to this day, there is a Paris metro station named after Robespierre, the “Incorruptible.” And as is well known, Marx recommended a transitional period of working class rule he denominated the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Marx’s Russian disciples, Lenin and Stalin, took this prescription all-too literally. Dictatorship became the cornerstone of Bolshevik rule from October 1917 until Stalin’s death in 1953. (Alluding to Kant, the philosopher Ernst Bloch famously described the Bolshevik Revolution as “The Categorical Imperative with revolver in hand.”)

Of course, historically speaking, when it comes to dictatorship, the left has no monopoly. In the nineteenth century, apostles of Counterrevolution, inspired by the Inquisition and the age of Absolutism, dreamed of a right-wing dictatorship that would surpass anything the left could dream up. They held that dictatorship alone could put an end to the “godless secularism” represented by the rising tide of socialism and anarchism. This ideal found its consummate literary embodiment in the “Grand Inquisitor” parable of Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov.

Undoubtedly, the greatest twentieth-century theorist of dictatorship was Carl Schmitt, whose pathbreaking study, Dictatorship, appeared in 1921. Schmitt lauded Mussolini’s 1922 March on Rome as a emblematic of a (in his view) propitious political trend: the abandonment of political liberalism (which, for Schmitt, represented a type of anti-politics) and a turn toward a strong conception of sovereignty based on the “state of exception.” As Schmitt asserts in Political Theology (1922): “Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.”

In many respects, an understanding of dictatorship represents an indispensable key to comprehending the political history of the last two centuries.
Booklist (Primary Texts)

Rousseau, *Social Contract*
Zizek, ed., Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*
Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire Louis Bonaparte*
Marx, The Civil War in France
Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor”
Lenin, What is to Be Done?
Schmitt, Dictatorship (1921)
Schmitt, Political Theology (1922)
Schmitt, The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy (1923)
Schmitt, The Concept of the Political (1927)
Zizek, ed., Mao Zedong, On Contradiction and On Practice
Pol Pot Plans the Future
Badiou, The Communist Hypothesis