

# CEPaLS 14: Totalitarian Tendencies

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This text was original posted on my Tumblr Blog on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2017. The blog is now deleted and so I am posting this text as a CEPaLS paper.

It seems that thinking with Hannah Arendt has become an important way of trying to bring understandings to the world that we now find ourselves in. Two major pieces in the newspapers and a Radio 4 programme (see below) have brought her ideas into the public domain in order to think about our current 'dark times'.

My own reading and thinking with Arendt has enabled me to engage with how the Holocaust means that everything is possible. We should never ever consider notions such as: "surely s/he wont do that?"; "It wont be as bad as you think it will be" or "its going to be okay". We have to remember that tyranny is when enemies are got rid of, and totalitarianism is when innocents are got rid of, not least by people surrendering themselves as the enemy. To be rendered disposable is where danger lies. It seems that we are living at a time when the show trial of confession and denunciation is through social media.

Consequently we need to focus on the ordinariness of a totalitarian experience, as totalitarianism is not just what those in leader roles require of us, it is what ordinary people in ordinary lives think, say and do in every practice. This is what I raised when thinking with Arendt to examine school leaders, leading and leadership (see below), particularly her argument that the conditions for totalitarianism are with us all the time. The crystallisation of those conditions is not inevitable, it is possible to develop and live within a different kind of polity, but through practice in everyday situations we may do totalitarianism.

Arendt identified the conditions as:

**Ideology** – how we live in a fictitious world, and how fabrications eliminate the spaces for political debates and dissent. So we need to challenge the lies and the embedded lying in the media, workplaces, and wider society.

**Total Terror** – how the lying means that we are unable to think or act as if there is any alternative – to think otherwise is preposterous. So we need to name the lies and generate alternatives to how the world is.

**Destruction of human bonds** – fear and isolation within a mass movement of rapid change means that the fiction of being powerful is created but there is no space for discussion or understanding about yourself or others. We do violence to ourselves as well as to others. So we need to build and rebuild vital human bonds.

**Movement** – the dynamics of the fabrications move within and through front organisations, where life outside of what is normal is unthinkable, where there is a form of integrated isolationism – you belong but you are alone. So we need to see through the fabrications, and build relationality with our fellow humans.

So while our focus may be on individual post holders at the top of hierarchies, who are directly elected and/or members of elected parliaments, I would argue that we need to think about what we are reading every day in the media, what we are doing at work, and how we are thinking about our colleagues and neighbours as we shop in the supermarket. The ordinariness of totalitarian trends has been brought into schools in England, and no doubt in other parts of our lives. So how might we think and act differently in order to be actively involved in political discussions? How might we create and protect the spaces where we can do politics?

If you wish to reference this paper:

Gunter, H.M. (2017) *CEPaLS 14: Totalitarian Tendencies*. Manchester: University of Manchester.

Follow up links:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/17/how-hannah-arendts-classic-work/?hpid=hp\\_hp-cards\\_hp-card-politics%3Ahomepage%2Fcard&utm\\_term=.49b82200cc49](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/17/how-hannah-arendts-classic-work/?hpid=hp_hp-cards_hp-card-politics%3Ahomepage%2Fcard&utm_term=.49b82200cc49)

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/01/totalitarianism-in-age-donald-trump-lessons-from-hannah-arendt-protests>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08c2ljg>

<https://www.routledge.com/Educational-Leadership-and-Hannah-Arendt/Gunter/p/book/9781138926646>