

**THE
PSYCHOLOGY
OF
TOTALITARIANISM**



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Chelsea Green Publishing
White River Junction, Vermont
London, UK

The leader is, so to speak, just the apex of the pyramid of the mass movement, and if he is eliminated, he will be replaced without the system destabilizing.

Violence as a reaction against mass formation and totalitarianism is, of course, effective when carried out by external enemies of a totalitarian system—for example, the war of the Allies against Nazi Germany—but it offers few prospects for internal resistance and is generally counter-productive. When the opposition uses violence, the crowd merely sees justification and a “get-out-of-jail-free” card to unleash its already enormous potential of frustration and aggression and take it out on those it views as the enemy (those who do not go along with the New Solidarity).

Arendt noted that nonviolent resistance, on the other hand, is remarkably successful against totalitarianism.²⁵ She comes to that conclusion on the basis of historical observations—for example, the effectiveness of the resolute refusal of the Danish government and population to participate in the anti-Semitic measures that the Nazis tried to impose, but she fails to offer a psychological explanation. We can do that to some extent on the basis of the psychological description we have provided thus far. Furthermore, we can also describe the idea of “nonviolent resistance” in a more refined way.

Both the masses and their leaders are gripped by an ideologically colored narrative, the masses are hypnotized, the leaders are under a form of self-hypnosis. Both, so to speak, are in the grip of a *voice* (see the importance of indoctrination and mass media propaganda described in chapter 6). Mass formation, as a form of hypnosis, is a phenomenon where individuals are in the grip of the resonance of a voice—the voice of the leader of the crowd. However, not all of the population falls prey to this process. In chapter 6, we identified three groups that form when a mass rises: the masses themselves, who truly go along with the story and are “hypnotized” (usually about 30 percent); a group that is not hypnotized but chooses to not go against the grain (usually about 40 to 60 percent); a group that is not hypnotized and actively resists the masses (ranging from 10 to 30 percent).

↓ The first and foremost guideline for members of this third group is that they should let their voices be heard and in as sincere a way as

possible so as to not let the resonance of the dominant, hypnotic voice become absolute. The way in which this can happen varies throughout the process of totalitarianism (the dissident voice is progressively more censored and banned from mass media and from the public sphere), but there always remain opportunities. The assertion of a different voice always has an effect on the other two groups. As Gustave Le Bon described in the nineteenth century, dissonant voices (i.e., the voices of the third group) usually do not succeed in breaking through the hypnosis of the first group, but it does reduce the depth of the hypnosis and prevent the masses from committing atrocities. Also, the leaders prove sensitive to the dissonant voices, which is what we described in the previous chapter where we referred to the “waking up” of the Nazi leaders who were deployed to Denmark and Bulgaria. Asserting one’s voice should typically be done in the calmest and most respectful way possible, never in an intrusive way and always with sensitivity to the irritation and anger it may generate but with determination and persistence. Although the dissident voice typically provokes rejection, and under certain circumstances also aggression, it is worth realizing that the masses also need this in order to not fall prey to themselves. We described this in chapter 7: If the opposition is silent, the totalitarian system becomes a monster that devours its own children. For this reason, it is an illusion to think that silence is the safest option, from whomever concerned.

↓ The dissident voice also has an effect on the second group, the group that is compliant but not hypnotized. In contrast to the first group, this group is responsive to the quality of rational argument. Therefore, it is important that the dissident voice analyzes and refutes the indoctrination and propaganda of the totalitarian narrative in the clearest and most substantiated way possible. In a sense, this isn’t difficult since the totalitarian discourse, especially its typical excessive use of numbers and statistics, is usually simply absurd. For the opposition, it is a matter of repeatedly and persistently, through the (limited) channels available for that purpose, piercing the web of appearances and showing, insofar as possible, the way in which a false image is being created. It is important to note that the counterargument should never aim at reversing the

process of mass formation and a return to the prior prevailing state (“the old normal”) because this is precisely the environment from which mass formation arose—from a profound psychological unease and suffering, which I described in chapter 6 (the four psychological conditions for mass formation). Attempting to convince people to return to this is completely nonsensical and will provoke the opposite effect: Those who are in the grip of the mass formation will cling even more stubbornly to their narrative. In general, counterarguments should be formulated in a disciplined and organized manner, through a specially created structure of working groups, specialized in certain themes and topics. The formation of such groups, in itself, also provides an antidote to one of the most pernicious effects of totalitarianism: the destruction of every social bond and structure.

Finally, the third group speaks for itself. This group usually becomes, to a greater or lesser extent, the object of the frustration and aggression of the masses (see chapter 6). It is typically dehumanized, presented as creatures of inferior humanity. If this group ceases to assert its voice, it confirms the stigma. Speaking and rational reasoning is what distinguishes humans from animals; to stop speaking out paves the way for dehumanization. This in itself shows the importance of continuing to speak out as calmly and wisely as possible. But there is another important reason to do so. Speaking leads to experiences of meaning and existence, at least if the one who speaks tries to express his subjective truth as honestly and sincerely as possible. Dissident speech doesn’t have to be primarily tactical or rhetorical in nature, but it should be authentic and honest (see chapter 7). Even if speaking out has no effect on the Other, it will still do something for oneself. Eventually, it is in this act of truth-telling that the absurdity of totalitarianism becomes meaningful: Those who do not join in the collective madness and quietly and sincerely continue to assert their opposing voice are, by doing so, steadily elevated in their humanity. Read, for instance, Solzhenitsyn’s poignant testimony on the effects on himself that speaking out and writing had during his eight-year stay in the gulags.²⁶

The first and foremost task is to keep speaking out. Everything stands or falls with the act of speaking out. It is in the interest of all parties. The