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Totalitarianism and the Five Stages of Dehumanization

BY CHRISTIAAN W.J.M. ALTING VON GEUSAU NOVEMBER 17, 2021 HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY 30 MINUTE READ

Hannah Arendt's seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948) makes for sobering reading in the world we see developing around us in the year 2021. Indeed, we find ourselves in an impasse of epic proportions where the essence of what it means to be human is at stake.

“The totalitarian attempt at global conquest and total domination has been the destructive way out of all impasses. Its victory may coincide with the destruction of humanity; wherever it has ruled, it has begun to destroy the essence of man.” – Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, first published 1948

Although it is hard to claim that – at least in the West – we find ourselves once again under the yoke of totalitarian regimes comparable to those we know so well from the 20th century, there is no doubt that we are faced with a global paradigm that brings forth steadily expanding totalitarian tendencies, and these need not even be planned intentionally or maliciously.

As we will come to discuss later, the modern-day drivers of such totalitarian tendencies are for the most part convinced – with the support of the masses – that they are doing the right thing because they claim to know what is best for the people in a time of

existential crisis. Totalitarianism is a political ideology that can easily spread in society without much of the population at first noticing it and before it is too late. In her book, Hannah Arendt meticulously describes the genesis of the totalitarian movements that ultimately grew into the totalitarian regimes of 20th century Europe and Asia, and the unspeakable acts of genocide and crimes against humanity this ultimately resulted in.

As Arendt would certainly warn us against, we should not be misled by the fact that we do not see in the West today any of the atrocities that were the hallmark of the totalitarian regimes of Communism under Stalin or Mao and Nazism under Hitler. These events were all preceded by a gradually spreading mass ideology and subsequent state-imposed ideological campaigns and measures promoting apparently “justifiable” and “scientifically proven” control measures and actions aimed at permanent surveillance and ultimately a step-by-step exclusion of certain people from (parts of) society because they posed “a risk” to others or dared to think outside of what was considered acceptable thought.

In his book *The Demon in Democracy – Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, the Polish lawyer and Member of the European Parliament Ryszard Legutko leaves no doubt that there are worrying similarities between many of the dynamics in Communist totalitarian regimes and modern-day liberal democracies, when he observes:

“Communism and liberal democracy proved to be all-unifying entities compelling their followers how to think, what to do, how to evaluate events, what to dream, and what language to use.”

This is also the dynamics we see at work on many levels of globalized society today. Every reader, but especially politicians and journalists, interested in human freedom,

democracy and the rule of law, should carefully read Chapter 11 on “The Totalitarian Movement” in Hannah Arendt’s much-acclaimed book. She explains how long before totalitarian regimes take actual power and establish complete control, their architects and enablers have already been patiently preparing society – not necessarily in a coordinated way or with that end-goal in mind – for the takeover. The totalitarian movement itself is driven by the aggressive and at times violent promotion of a certain dominant ideology, through relentless propaganda, censorship, and groupthink. It also always includes major economic and financial interests. Such a process then results in an ever more omnipotent state, assisted by a host of unaccountable groups, (international) institutions and corporations, that claims to have a patent on truth and language and on knowing what is good for its citizens and society as a whole.

Although there is of course a vast difference between Communist totalitarian regimes of the 21st century that we see in China and North Korea, and Western liberal democracies with their growing totalitarian tendencies, what seems to be the unifying element between the two systems today is thought control and behavioral management of its populations. This development has been greatly enhanced through what was coined by Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff as “surveillance capitalism.” Surveillance capitalism, Zuboff writes, is “[a] movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty.” It is also – and here she does not mince her words – “[a]n expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people’s sovereignty.” The modern state and its allies, whether communist, liberal or otherwise, have – for the above and other reasons – an insatiable desire to collect massive amounts of data on citizens and customers and to use this data extensively for control and influence.

On the commercial side, we have all the aspects of tracking people's behavior and preferences online, brilliantly explained in the documentary [The Social Dilemma](#), confronting us with the reality that “Never before have a handful of tech designers had such control over the way billions of us think, act, and live our lives.” At the same time we see in operation the [“social credit” system](#) rolled out by the Chinese Communist Party that uses big data and permanent CCTV live footage to manage people's behavior in public areas through a system of awards and punishments.

The mandatory QR code first introduced in China in 2020 and subsequently in liberal democratic states around the world in 2021, to keep permanent track of people's health status and as a prerequisite for participating in society, is the latest and deeply troubling phenomenon of this same surveillance capitalism. Here the dividing line between mere technocracy and totalitarianism becomes almost extinct under the guise of “protecting public health.” The currently attempted colonization of the human body by the state and its commercial partners, claiming to have our best interests in mind, is part of this troubling dynamic. Where did the progressive mantra “My body, my choice” suddenly go?

So, what then, is totalitarianism? It is a system of government (a totalitarian regime), or a system of increasing control otherwise implemented (a totalitarian movement) – presenting itself in different forms and at different levels of society – that tolerates no individual freedom or independent thought and that ultimately seeks to totally subordinate and direct all aspects of the individual human life. In the [words](#) of Dreher, totalitarianism “is a state in which nothing can be permitted to exist that contradicts a society's ruling ideology.”

In modern society, where we see this dynamic very much at work, the use of science and technology play a decisive role in enabling totalitarian tendencies to take hold in ways that 20th century ideologues could only have dreamed of. Furthermore, accompanying totalitarianism in whatever stage, institutionalized dehumanization occurs and is the process by which the whole or part of the population is subjected to policies and practices that consistently violate the dignity and fundamental rights of the human being and that may ultimately lead to exclusion and social or, in the worst case, physical extermination.

In the following, we will look more closely at some of the basic tenets of the totalitarian movement as described by Hannah Arendt and how this enables the dynamics of institutionalized dehumanization that we observe today. In the conclusion, we will briefly look at what history and human experience can tell us about freeing society from the yoke of totalitarianism and its dehumanizing policies.

The reader must understand that I am in no way comparing or equating the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and their atrocities to what I see as the increasing totalitarian tendencies and resulting policies today. Instead, as is the role of a robust academic discourse, we will take a critical look at what we see happening in society today and analyze relevant historical and political phenomena that might instruct us on how we can deal better with the present course of events that, if not corrected, does not bode well for a future of freedom and the rule of law.

I. The workings of totalitarianism

When we speak about “totalitarianism,” the word is being used in this context to describe the whole of a political ideology that can present itself in different forms and

stages, but that always has the ultimate goal of total control over people and society. As described above, Hannah Arendt distinguishes within totalitarianism between the totalitarian movement and the totalitarian regime. I add to this categorizing what I believe to be an early stage of the totalitarian movement, called “totalitarian tendencies” by Legutko, and that I call ideological totalitarianism in relation to current developments. For totalitarianism to have a chance of succeeding, Hannah Arendt tells us, three main and closely intertwined phenomena are needed: the mass movement, the elite’s leading role in steering those masses and the employment of relentless propaganda.

The lonely masses

For its establishment and durability totalitarianism depends as a first step on mass support obtained through playing into a sense of permanent crisis and fear in society. This then feeds the urge of the masses to have those in charge constantly take “measures” and show leadership to ward off the threat that has been identified as endangering the whole of society. Those in charge can “remain in power only so long as they keep moving and set everything around them in motion.” The reason for this is that totalitarian movements build on the classical failure of societies throughout human history to create and uphold a sense of community and purpose, instead breeding isolated, self-centered human beings without a clear overarching purpose in life.

The masses following the totalitarian movement are lost themselves and as a result in search of a clear identity and a purpose in life that they do not find in their current circumstances: “Social atomization and extreme individualization preceded the mass

movement (..). The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships.”

How familiar this sounds to any person observing modern society. In an age where social media and whatever else is presented on screens set the tone above all else and where teenage girls fall into depression and increased suicide attempts because of the lack of “likes” on their Instagram account, we indeed see a disconcerting example of this lack of normal relationships that were instead meant to involve in-person encounters leading to profound exchanges. In Communist societies it is the Party that sets out to destroy religious, social and family ties to make place for a citizen that can be completely subjected by the State and the dictates of the Party, like we see happening in China and North Korea. In hedonistic and materialistic Western societies this same destruction happens through different means and under the neo-Marxist guise of unstoppable “progress,” where technology and a false definition of the purpose of science erodes the understanding of what it means to be human: “In fact,” writes Dreher, “this technology and the culture that has emerged from it is reproducing the atomization and radical loneliness that totalitarian communist governments used to impose on their captive peoples to make them easier to control.” Not only have the smartphone and social media drastically reduced genuine human interaction, as any teacher or parent of schoolchildren can attest to, but the social framework has in recent times further dramatically deteriorated through other major shifts in society.

The ever-growing Big-Tech and government policing of language, opinions, and scientific information in the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, accompanied by a level of censorship not seen since World War II, has greatly reduced and impoverished the

public discourse and seriously undermined trust in science, politics and the community.

In 2020 and 2021, mostly well-meant yet often ill-advised government-imposed Corona measures such as lockdowns, mask-mandates, entry-requirements to public facilities and Corona vaccine mandates have further massively limited the unimpeded human interaction that any society needs to retain and strengthen its social fabric. All these externally imposed developments contribute from different directions to human beings, especially the young, increasingly and ever more lastingly being deprived of those ‘normal social relationships’ Hannah Arendt speaks of. Seemingly lacking alternatives, this in turn leads large groups of the population – most of them not even realizing it – into the arms of totalitarian ideologies. These movements, however, in the words of Arendt, “demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member (..) [since] their organization will encompass, in due course, the entire human race.”

The final goal of totalitarianism, she explains, is the permanent domination of human beings from within, thus involving each and every aspect of life, whereby the masses have to be kept constantly in motion since “a political goal that would constitute the end of the movement simply does not exist.” Without in any way wishing to downplay the gravity and urgency of these issues in and of themselves, or the need as a society to devise ways to deal with existential threats arising from them, Corona political and media narratives are examples of such an ideological totalitarianism that wants to completely control how human beings think, speak and act in that area of life, whilst keeping them in perpetual anxiety through well-planned regular dramatic news updates (One tool being used for this successfully throughout the world is the constant well-

rehearsed press conferences by grave-looking ministers in suits behind Plexiglas and flanked by experts and state flags), instrumentalized heartbreaking stories and calls to immediate action (“measures”), dealing with (perceived or real) new threats to their person, to their cause and to society as a whole. Fear is the main driving force behind keeping this perpetual anxiety and activism going.

The role of the elite

Hannah Arendt then goes on to explain what is a disturbing phenomenon of totalitarian movements, it being the enormous attraction it exerts on the elites, the “terrifying roster of distinguished men whom totalitarianism can count amongst its sympathizers, fellow-travelers, and inscribed party members. This elite believes that what is required for solving the acute problems society is currently faced with is the total destruction, or at least the total redesign, of all that was considered common sense, logic and established wisdom until this point.

When it comes to the Corona crisis, the well-known capacity of the human body to build natural immunity against most viruses it has already encountered is no longer deemed relevant in any way by those imposing vaccination mandates, rejecting foundational principles of human biology and established medical wisdom.

To achieve this total overhaul for the sake of complete control, the elites are willing to work with any people or organization, including those people, called “the mob” by Arendt, whose features are “failure in professional and social life, perversion and disaster in private life.” A good example of this is the West’s dealings with the Chinese Communist Party. Although the flagrant corruption and human rights abuses –

including the genocidal campaign against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang – perpetrated by this institution of repression throughout history until today are well-documented, as is its role in covering up the 2019 outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Wuhan perhaps resulting from a lab leak, most countries in the world have become so dependent on China that they are willing to look the other way and cooperate with a regime that is willing to trample on all that liberal democracy stands for.

Hannah Arendt describes another disturbing element that is part of what she calls the “temporary alliance between the mob and the elite” and that is the willingness of these elites to lie their way into obtaining and retaining power through “the possibility that gigantic lies and monstrous falsehoods can eventually be established as unquestioned facts.” At this point it is not a proven fact that governments and their allies are lying about statistics and scientific data surrounding Covid-19; however, it is clear that there exist many serious inconsistencies that are not or not sufficiently being dealt with.

Throughout the history of totalitarian movements and regimes the offenders have been able to get away with much because they understood very well what is the primary concern of the simple man or woman going about their daily business of making life work for their families and other dependents, as masterfully expressed by Arendt: “He [Göring] proved his supreme ability for organizing the masses into total domination by assuming that most people are neither bohemians, fanatics, adventurers, sex maniacs, crackpots, nor social failures, but first and foremost job holders and good family men.” And: “[n]othing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives.”

We all long for security and predictability and hence a crisis makes us look for ways to obtain or retain security and safety, and when necessary, most are willing to pay a high price for this, including relinquishing their freedoms and living with the notion that they might not be told the whole truth about the crisis at hand. It should be no surprise then that considering the potential lethal effect the Coronavirus can have on human beings, our very human fear of death has led most of us to part without much of a fight with the rights and freedoms that our fathers and grandfathers fought so hard for.

Also, as vaccine mandates are introduced around the globe for workers in many industries and settings, the majority is complying not because they themselves necessarily believe they need the Corona vaccine, but only because they want to reclaim their freedoms and keep their jobs so they can feed their families. The political elites imposing these mandates know this of course and make smart use of it, often even with the best of intentions believing that this is necessary to deal with the crisis at hand.

Totalitarian propaganda

The most important and ultimate tool used by totalitarian movements in the non-totalitarian society is to establish real control of the masses by winning them over through the use of propaganda: “Only the mob and the elite can be attracted by the momentum of totalitarianism itself; the masses have to be won by propaganda.” As Hannah Arendt explains, both fear and science are extensively used to oil the propaganda machine. Fear is always propagated as directed towards somebody or something external that poses a real or perceived threat to society or the individual. But there is another even more sinister element that totalitarian propaganda historically

uses to cajole the masses into following its lead through fear and that is “the use of indirect, veiled, and menacing hints against all who will not heed its teachings (..)”, all the while claiming the strictly scientific and public benefit nature of its argument that those measures are needed. Both the deliberate instrumentalization of fear and the constant referral to “follow the science” by political actors and the mass media in the Corona crisis has been extremely successful as a propaganda tool.

Hannah Arendt freely admits that the use of science as an effective tool of politics in general has been widespread and not necessarily always in a bad sense. This is of course also the case where it concerns the Corona crisis. Even so, she continues, the obsession with science has increasingly characterized the Western world since the 16th century. She sees the totalitarian weaponization of science, quoting the German philosopher Eric Voegelin, as the final stage in a societal process where “science [has become] an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man.”

Science is employed to provide the arguments for the justification of societal fear and for the reasonableness of the far-reaching measures imposed to “confront” and “exterminate” the external danger. Arendt: “The scientificity of totalitarian propaganda is characterized by its almost exclusive insistence on scientific prophecy (..)”

How many such prophecies have we not heard since the beginning of 2020 and that have not come to pass? It is not at all relevant, Arendt continues, whether these “prophecies” would be based on good science or bad science, since the leaders of the masses make it their primary focus to fit reality to their own interpretations and, where

deemed necessary, lies, whereby their propaganda is “marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such.”

They do not believe in anything that is related to personal experience or what is visible, but only in what they imagine, what their own statistical models say, and the ideologically consistent system they have built around it. Organization and single-mindedness of purpose is what the totalitarian movement aims at for obtaining full control, whereby the content of the propaganda (whether fact or fiction, or both) becomes an untouchable element of the movement and where objective reason or let alone public discourse no longer play any role.

Until now, respectful public debate and a robust scientific discourse have not been possible when it comes to the best way to respond to the Corona pandemic. The elites are keenly aware of this and use it to the advantage of forwarding their agenda, that instead it is radical consistency that the masses long for in times of existential crisis, as it (initially) gives them a sense of security and predictability. Yet this is also where the great weakness of totalitarian propaganda lies, since ultimately “(..) it cannot fulfill this longing of the masses for a completely consistent, comprehensible, and predictable world without seriously conflicting with common sense.”

Today we see this exacerbated, as I already mentioned above, through a fundamentally flawed understanding and use of science by the powers that be. Former Harvard Medical School professor Martin Kulldorff, a well-known epidemiologist and biostatistician specializing in infectious disease outbreaks and vaccine safety, [notes](#) what is the correct application of science and how this is lacking in the current

narrative: “Science is about rational disagreement, the questioning and testing of orthodoxy and the constant search for truth.”

We are now very far removed from this concept in a public climate where science has been politicized into a truth factory that tolerates no dissent, even if the alternative viewpoint merely outlines the numerous inconsistencies and falsehoods that are part of the political and media narrative. The moment however, Arendt points out, this system error becomes clear to the participants in the totalitarian movement and its defeat is imminent, they will at once cease to believe in its future, from one day to the other giving up on that for which they were willing to give all the day before.

A striking example of such an overnight abandonment of a totalitarian system is the way in which most apparatchiks in Eastern and Central Europe between 1989 and 1991 turned from hardline career Communists into enthusiastic liberal democrats. They simply abandoned the system they were so faithfully part of for many years and found an alternative system that circumstances allowed them to now embrace. Therefore, as we know from the rubble heaps of history, every effort at totalitarianism has an expiry date. The current version will also fail.

II. Dehumanization at work

During my over 30 years of studying and teaching European history and the sources of law and justice, a pattern has emerged about which I already published in 2014 under the title “Human rights, history and anthropology: reorienting the debate.” In this article I described the process of “dehumanization in 5 steps” and how these human rights’ violations are not generally being perpetrated by ‘monsters,’ but for a large part by ordinary men and women – helped by the passive ideologized masses – who are

convinced that what they are doing or participating in is good and necessary, or at least justifiable.

Since March 2020 we have been witnessing the global unfolding of a serious health crisis leading to unprecedented government, media and societal pressure being exerted on whole populations to acquiesce in far-reaching and mostly unconstitutional measures limiting people's freedoms and in many cases through threats and undue pressure violating their bodily integrity. During this time, it has become increasingly clear that there are certain tendencies to be seen today that show some similarities to the sort of dehumanizing measures employed as a rule by totalitarian movements and regimes.

Endless lockdowns, police-enforced quarantines, travel restrictions, vaccine mandates, the suppression of scientific data and debate, large-scale censorship, and the relentless deplatforming and public shaming of critical voices are all examples of dehumanizing measures that should have no place in a system of democracy and the rule of law. We also see the process of increasingly relegating a certain part of the population to the peripheries whilst singling them out as irresponsible and undesired because of the "risk" they pose to others, leading to society gradually excluding them. The President of the United States expressed pointedly what this means in a major live-televised policy speech:

"We've been patient, but our patience is wearing thin. And your refusal has cost all of us. So, please, do the right thing. But just don't take it from me; listen to the voices of unvaccinated Americans who are lying in hospital beds, taking their final breaths, saying, "If only I

had gotten vaccinated.” “If only.”” – President Joe Biden September 9, 2021

The five steps

Those peddling political rhetoric today that sets up the “vaccinated” against the “unvaccinated, or vice versa, are going down a very dangerous road of demagoguery that has never ended well in history. Slavenka Drakulic, in her analysis of what led to the 1991-1999 Yugoslav ethnic conflict, observes:” (..) in time those ‘Others’ are stripped of all their individual characteristics. They are no longer acquaintances or professionals with particular names, habits, appearances and characters; instead they are members of the enemy group. When a person is reduced to an abstraction in such a way, one is free to hate him because the moral obstacle has already been abolished.”

Looking at the history of totalitarian movements eventually leading to totalitarian regimes and their campaigns of state-controlled persecution and segregation, this is what happens.

The first step of dehumanization is the creation and political instrumentalization of fear and the resulting permanent anxiety amongst the population: fear for one’s own life and fear for a specific group in society that is considered to be a threat is constantly being fed.

Fear for one’s own life is of course an understandable and entirely justifiable response to a potentially dangerous new virus. Nobody would like to get sick or die

unnecessarily. We don't want to catch a nasty virus if it can be avoided. Yet once this fear is being instrumentalized by (state) institutions and media outlets to help them achieve certain objectives, such as for example the Austrian government has had to admit to doing in March 2020 when it wanted to convince the population of the need for a lockdown, fear becomes a potent weapon.

Again, Hannah Arendt brings in her sharp analysis when she observes: "Totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within."

In his 9 September 2021 speech President Biden instrumentalizes for political purposes the normal human fear for the potentially fatal virus and goes on to expand it with fear for 'unvaccinated people,' by suggesting that they are per definition responsible not only for their own deaths but potentially for yours too because they are "unnecessarily using" ICU hospital beds. In this way there has been established a new suspicion and anxiety around a specific group of people in society for what they might do to you and your group.

The creation of fear towards that specific group then turns them into easily identifiable scapegoats for the specific problem that society is facing now, regardless of the facts. An ideology of publicly justified discrimination based on an emotion present in individual human beings in society has been born. This is exactly how the totalitarian movements which turned into totalitarian regimes in recent European history started. Even though it is not comparable to the levels of violence and exclusion of 20th century

totalitarian regimes, we are today seeing active fear-based government and media propaganda justifying the exclusion of people. First the “asymptomatic,” then the “unmasked” and now the “unvaccinated” are being presented and treated as a danger and a burden to the rest of society. How often have we not heard from political leaders during the past months that we are living through the “pandemic of the unvaccinated” and that the hospitals are full of them:

“That’s nearly 80 million Americans not vaccinated. And in a country as large as ours, that’s 25 percent minority. That 25 percent can cause a lot of damage — and they are. The unvaccinated overcrowd our hospitals, are overrunning the emergency rooms and intensive care units, leaving no room for someone with a heart attack, or pancreatitis, or cancer.” – President Joe Biden, [September 9, 2021](#)

The second step of dehumanization is soft exclusion: the group turned into scapegoats is excluded from certain – though not all – parts of society. They are still considered part of that society, but their status has been downgraded. They are merely being tolerated whilst at the same time being berated in public for them being or acting differently. Systems are also put in place that enable the authorities, and thus the public at large, to easily identify who these ‘others’ are. Enter the “Green Pass” or QR code. In many Western countries this finger-pointing is happening now, especially towards those not vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, regardless of the constitutionally protected considerations or medical reasons why individuals may decide against receiving this specific jab.

For example, on November 5, 2021, Austria was the first country in Europe to introduce highly discriminatory restrictions for the “unvaccinated.” These citizens have been barred from participating in societal life and can only go to work, grocery shopping, church, have a walk or attend to clearly defined “emergencies”. New Zealand and Australia have similar limitations. Examples are manifold around the world where without proof of Corona vaccination people are losing their jobs and being barred entry into a host of establishments, shops and even churches. There are also an increasing number of countries barring people from boarding planes without a vaccination certificate, or even forbidding them explicitly to have friends over for dinner at home, like in Australia:

“The message is if you want to be able to have a meal with friends and welcome people in your home, you have to get vaccinated.” – State premier Gladys Berejiklian of New South Wales, Australia, 27 September 2021

The third step of dehumanization, mostly occurring in parallel with the second step, is executed through documented justification of the exclusion: academic research, expert opinions and scientific studies widely disseminated through vast media coverage are used to underpin the propaganda of fear and the subsequent exclusion of a specific group; to ‘explain’ or ‘provide evidence’ why the exclusion is necessary for the ‘good of society’ and for everybody to ‘stay safe.’ Hannah Arendt observes that “[t]he strong emphasis of totalitarian propaganda on the “scientific” nature of its assertions has been compared to certain advertising techniques which also address

themselves to masses. (..) Science in the instances of both business publicity and totalitarian propaganda is obviously only a surrogate for power. The obsession of totalitarian movements with “scientific” proofs ceases once they are in power.”

The interesting caveat here is that the science is of course often being used in a biased way, only presenting those studies that fit the official narrative and not the at least equal number of studies, no matter how renowned its authors, that provide alternative insights and conclusions that might contribute to a constructive debate and better solutions. As mentioned before, here science becomes politicized as a tool for promoting what the leaders of the totalitarian movement have decided should be the truth and the measures and actions based on that version of the truth. Alternative viewpoints are simply censored, as we see the likes of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook engage in on an unprecedented scale.

Not since the end of the Second World War have so many renowned and acclaimed academics, scientists and medical doctors, including Nobel Prize recipients and nominees, been silenced, deplatformed and fired from their positions only because they do not support the official or ‘correct’ line. They simply desire for a robust public discourse on the question of how best to deal with the issue at hand and thus engage in a common search for truth. This is the point where we know from history that the ideology of the day has now been formally enshrined and has become mainstream.

The fourth step of dehumanization is hard exclusion: the group that is now ‘proven’ to be the cause of society’s problems and current impasse is subsequently excluded from civil society as a whole and becomes rightless. They no longer have a voice in society because they are deemed not to be part of it anymore. In the extreme version of

this, they are no longer entitled to the protection of their fundamental rights. When it comes to Corona measures imposed by governments worldwide and to varying degrees, in some places we are already seeing developments leaning to this fourth stage.

Even though in scope and severity such measures cannot be compared to those imposed by totalitarian regimes of the past and the present, they do clearly show worrisome totalitarian tendencies that, when unchecked, could eventually grow into something far worse. In Melbourne, Australia, for example, a euphemistically called “Center for National Resilience” will soon be completed (as one of various such centers) that will act as a permanent facility where people are to be forcibly locked up in quarantine, for example when returning from foreign travel. The rules and regulations for life in such an already existing internment facility in Australia’s Northern Territory state make for chilling Orwellian reading:

“Chief Health Officer Direction 52 of 2021 sets out what a person must do when in quarantine at the Centre for National Resilience and at Alice Springs Quarantine Facility. This direction is law – every person in quarantine must do what the Direction says. If a person does not follow the Direction, the Northern Territory Police may issue an Infringement Notice with a financial penalty.”

The fifth and final step of dehumanization is extermination, social or physical. The excluded group is forcefully ejected from society, either by any participation in society

being made impossible, or their banishment into camps, ghettos, prisons and medical facilities. In the most extreme forms of totalitarian regimes that we have seen under Communism and Nazism, but also the ethnic nationalism during the wars in the former Yugoslavia 1991-1999; this then leads to those people being physically exterminated or at least treated as those that are “no longer human.” This becomes easily possible because nobody speaks for them anymore, invisible as they have become. They have lost their place in political society and with it any chance to claim their rights as human beings. They have stopped being part of humanity as far as the totalitarians are concerned.

In the West we have thankfully not reached this final stage of totalitarianism and resulting dehumanization. However, Hannah Arendt gives a stark warning that we should not count on democracy alone being enough of a bulwark against reaching this fifth stage:

“A conception of law which identifies what is right with the notion of what is good for – for the individual, or the family, or the people, or the largest number – becomes inevitable once the absolute and transcendent measurements of religion or the law of nature have lost their authority. And this predicament is by no means solved if the unit to which the ‘good for’ applies is as large as mankind itself. For it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite democratically – namely by majority decision – that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof.”

III Conclusion: how do we liberate ourselves?

History gives us powerful guidance on how we can throw off the yoke of totalitarianism in whatever stage or form it presents itself; also the current ideological form that most do not even realize is happening. We can actually stop the retreat of freedom and the onset of dehumanization. In the words of George Orwell “[f]reedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.” We live in times where exactly this freedom is under grave threat as a result of ideological totalitarianism, something I have tried to illustrate with how Western societies deal with the Corona crisis, where facts too often seem not to matter in favor of enshrining the latest systemic ideological orthodoxy. The best example of how freedom can be recovered is how the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe ended the totalitarian reign of Communism in their countries starting in 1989.

It was their long process of rediscovery of human dignity and their nonviolent yet insistent civil disobedience that brought down the regimes of the Communist elite and their allies of the mob, exposing the untruthfulness of their propaganda and the injustice of their policies. They knew that truth is a goal to attain, not an object to claim and thus requires humility and respectful dialogue. They understood that a society can only be free, healthy and prosperous when no human being is excluded and when there is always the genuine willingness and openness for a robust public discourse, to hear and understand the other, no matter how different his or her opinion or attitude to life.

They finally retook full responsibility for their own lives and for those around them by overcoming their fear, passivity and victimhood, by learning once again to think for

themselves and by standing up to a state assisted by its enablers, that had forgotten its only purpose: to serve and protect each and every one of its citizens, and not just those it chooses.

All totalitarian efforts always end on the dustheap of history. This one will be no exception.

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Christiaan Alting von Geusau holds law degrees from the University of Leiden (Netherlands) and the University of Heidelberg (Germany). He obtained with distinction his doctorate in philosophy of law from the University of Vienna (Austria), writing his dissertation on “Human Dignity and the Law in post-War Europe”, which was published internationally in 2013. He is President and Rector of ITI Catholic University in Austria where he also serves as a Professor of Law and Education. He holds an honorary professorship at the Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola in Lima, Peru and is President of the International Catholic Legislators Network (ICLN). The opinions expressed in this essay are not necessarily those of the organizations he represents and have thus been written on personal title.

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