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Perspective of post-totalitarianism: Meticulousness as method in Hong Kong

Hui Po-Chu



(Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rearvision/tracing-the-history-of-hong-kong%E2%80%99s-umbrella-movement/5848312>)

Perhaps, as power and resistance go hand in hand, realizing each other, a fine and tough civil society that is able and always ready to nourish its people can only be risen from the ashes. If the number of choices somehow correlates with the degree of freedom, it is totally understandable that people are satisfied with the freedom enjoyed as there are apparently numerous choices available around the corner in today's world. However, this kind of freedom is not at all genuine and liberal, for it is only allowed when it does no harm to the state and existing social order. It is especially difficult for Hong Kong people to stay alert from this kind of freedom which is granted by the independent bureaucracy, separation of powers and the well-established financial system long since the colonial time and continued by the promise of the Basic Law remaining unchanged for 50 years. Generally speaking, during the Umbrella Movement, some of the people witnessed the violence of the police and the government, and finally realized those valuable pillars are so vulnerable without democracy. With the veil brutally uncovered, some turned a blind eye to the situation while some took part in the occupation pushing the government to repeal 8.31 decision. The Movement did not bring Hong Kong people universal suffrage, but other changes.

In this essay, I would like to look into the ideas of totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism illustrated by Hannah Arendt and Vaclav Havel respectively, followed by a short review on the changes of Hong Kong since the Umbrella Movement and a reflection on the attitude and principle in social movement.

With the original manuscript of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* finished in 1949, Arendt was able to publish the first edition of the book in 1951. It is this postwar period which she described as “the first appropriate moment to look upon contemporary events with the backward-directed glance of the historian and the analytical zeal of the political scientist hence, with a tendency to lament, but no longer in speechless outrage and impotent horror It was, at any rate, the first possible moment to articulate and to elaborate the questions with which my generation had been forced to live for the better part of its adult life: What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?”¹. Arendt did not give a clear definition of totalitarianism. Instead, she paid special attention to the features and mechanism of totalitarianism with regard to the Nazi Germany and Stalin Soviet Union. She spent a chapter on a classless society. Unlike some traditional doctrines trying to address issues related to specific class, totalitarianism went beyond class by creating a new classless mass which included largely the politically indifferent people in the democratic regime. To make the world a “better” place, it is desirable to transcend as many boundaries as we can, among class, gender, race, discipline, industry, region, living and non-living things. Ideally speaking, the more we connect, the more powerful we would be and the better we could coordinate in this highly interdependent age. To improve his/her own situation, an underprivileged worker can ask for maximum working hours with minimum wage. We all know thing does not go so easily. Yet, the difficulty goes down with increasing number of workers in the factory united. The joining of workers from other factories and industries along the production line may work as catalyst.

¹ Arendt, H. (1966). *The origins of totalitarianism* (New ed., p. xxiii). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

What is more, if the workers not only have supports from those related and influential, but also the seemingly irrelevant others, the progress would probably be sped up. This is relevant to all the relevant and the irrelevant, in a sense that we never bow to and conspire with the evils, and let the weak on their own. However, the classless mass created by totalitarianism was not a group of people coming closer, but numerous highly-atomized individuals sharing no common economic, social and political interests and with no care on each other. From groups of people categorized into different classes to individuals isolated from each other, self-abandonment into the mass was encouraged and prominent. People would selflessly participate in the mass movement. With dissolution of class system, party system corresponding to interests from the respect class became impossible and was replaced by “one great unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals”².

With sophisticated manipulation of propaganda and adoption of existing ideologies, totalitarianism was able to isolate the mass from the reality by covering up the contradiction with countless lies. Facts were constantly fabricated in accordance with the way the power desired. The success of totalitarianism was attributed by the concrete organizational power instead of unprecedented ideology. However, owing to this very nature, totalitarianism would lose its auras when it is in power. When it comes to formation of a ruling state, totalitarianism would find it difficult to fill up the emptiness in various aspects without contradiction. It probably functions better in mass movement than in running a state, which should probably be emerged from a totalitarian movement and would be self-destructed at the end. Referring to Arendt’s sense of totalitarianism, both as historical event and political theory, I would say the true effect of totalitarianism could only be seen in Nazi Germany and Stalin Soviet Union in that very specific social and historic context. In Hong Kong, recent issues such as political persecution of activists, lawsuits disqualifying pro- democracy legislative councilors and interpretation of Basic Law

² Arendt, H. (1966). *The origins of totalitarianism* (New ed., p. 315). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

by Beijing government have further taken away people's confidence on the independent juridical system, which are said to be the last pillar safeguarding our rights. Hence, it is more prevalent to hear that Hong Kong government is going authoritarian or totalitarian now, than when the time that violence of police in the Umbrella Movement was so visible. During the Umbrella Movement, groups of anti-occupy protestors were mobilized to oppose the occupation, and supported the government and police. Some of them were so worried that the occupation and resistance against the Beijing government would bring down the reputation, stability and economy of Hong Kong. Daily inter-departmental press conferences were held by the government to give updates on the different impacts brought by the Movement with a hidden agenda to spread a negative impression of it in the community with those seemingly neutral numbers and information. Though quite a number of the evidence were proved incorrect, exaggerated and reversed, by dominating most of the mass media, the government was able to establish scaremonger while the fact-check of it by the pro-democrats did not widespread and could reach the general public.

As I strongly think what Arendt mentioned is so specific to Nazi Germany and Stalin Soviet Union in the 20th century, I have reservation about saying Hong Kong is under a totalitarian system. However, from the anti-occupy mobilization and overwhelming fake information in the Umbrella Movement, we do see some hints of totalitarianism. In light of the current situation, Havel provides us with the perspective of post-totalitarianism. Soon after the brutal crackdown of the Prague Spring by the Soviet Union, people returned to normal daily life swiftly. Havel witnessed and realized the subtle changes, in terms of people's way of living and the form of oppression from the state before and after the Prague Spring in 1968. In *The Power of the Powerless*, which was written in 1978, Havel not only provided an analytical study on the changes, but also the overarching principle, "live within the truth" as the possible way out. From totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism, Havel said, "I do not wish to imply by the prefix 'post'- that the system is no longer totalitarian; on the contrary, I mean that it is totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships, different from totalitarianism as we usually

understand it.”³ He used the example of a greengrocer putting a slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!”⁴ in window. He had a profound analysis towards this simple act. He pointed out that probably the greengrocers and customers did not believe and were indifferent to the slogan. They might not even notice the existence of the slogan. But what is important is he did put up the slogan, “Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system.”⁵ Power is rather dispersed and omnipresent than centered. Every one of us is inevitably captured by the network of power with ideology acting in between. At the same time, by following and repeating, and getting used to the “social norm” in ritual-like manner, we reproduce and reinforce the power system. Havel said, to break through, we must not live in lies but live in truth. Not to be easily fooled and manipulated, doing fact-check with attention to details is obviously essential, as well as stick to what you really need and want and be good to the community and nature. It is so important that we should be reflexive and not resort to adopt the same logic of mobilization in totalitarianism.

The Occupy Central with Love and Peace⁶ (「讓愛與和平佔領中環」；「和平佔中」 and the OCLP in short form), which was further simplified as the Occupy Central (佔中), was first advocated by Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, Prof. Benny Tai Yiu-ting, Prof. Chan Kin-man early in 2013; while the “Umbrella Movement”⁷, named by

³ Havel, V., & Keane, J. (c1985). *The Power of the Powerless* (p. 23). Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

⁴ Havel, V., & Keane, J. (c1985). *The Power of the Powerless* (p. 27). Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

⁵ Havel, V., & Keane, J. (c1985). *The Power of the Powerless* (p. 31). Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

⁶ *Occupy Central with Love and Peace - Manifesto*. (2013). OCLP. Retrieved 27 October 2017, from http://oclp.hk/index.php?route=occupy/book_detail&book_id=11

⁷ *How the umbrella became a symbol of the Hong Kong democracy protests*. (2014). *the Guardian*. Retrieved 27 October 2017, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/umbrella-symbol-hong-kong-democracy->

the foreign media depicting the scene that thousands of protestors holding umbrellas to shield themselves from pepper spray and teargas fired by the police, came later. Though quite a number of people alternate between the terms, the OCLP and the Umbrella Movement, it is more common to use the OCLP in Hong Kong, I found a significant difference between these two terms. Elements such as attention to civil awakening, idea of civil disobedience, advocate of dialogue and deliberation and action plan with schedule and rehearsal introduced by the OCLP brought Hong Kong people new perspective of social movement. The Umbrella Movement, ignited by the arrest of students in reclaiming the Civic Square, an originally public area in the government headquarter, and intensified by the 87 teargases, broke out before the OCLP would have happened. While the OCLP was clearly a campaign concerning universal suffrage, the Umbrella Movement was rather complex. Instead of fighting for universal suffrage, a majority of people filled the streets out of a sudden to call for release and protection of students. Hence, neither were the OCLP and the Umbrella Movement identical, nor replaceable to one another. The Umbrella Movement continued with and emerged from the nutrients of the OCLP, and thrived in a new form of social movement with the active involvement of the participants. It is not uncommon to see mobilization in anger and terror, in mass movement throughout human history. I am not saying that people should not step out simply because of the desire to protect students, nor I intend to devalue this genuine sympathy. What I would like to bring in is the power of “living in truth”, not only as wars between right and wrong, fact and fiction, but also the ability of having unadulterated understanding towards the self. Taking my experience as an example, I heard about the OCLP and 8.31 decision but paid no attention to the details before student’s strike. Before I sorted these out during my participation in the strike, the Umbrella Movement had kicked off. As soon as gathered in the street, I could feel my passion and determination to be with the people and all the puzzles and hesitation were gone with the wind. I actively joined the Movement and then met the people who had had no idea about universal

protests

suffrage or 8.31 decision said that they joined the OCLP to protect and support the students. I would say complex as the Umbrella Movement in terms of social movement, it provided a groundbreaking and experimental social space, allowing and cultivating different alternatives, dramatically mingling and evolving propose of the protestors to reaffirm what they believe in and change their minds after coming across with different views from people or becoming despaired of the situation.

Havel provided us with “living in truth” and “between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization, in short, toward the fulfilment of its own freedom”⁸ as the intellectual resistance against the power machine. To live in truth, moving towards plurality, diversity, independent self-construction and self-organization, it is not just about speaking the truth and coming up with various social projects connecting people, but most importantly, in meticulous way. Being meticulous to the use of language, the overwhelming information, as well as our sentiment, way of thinking and action, then, in no way we would adopt the same logic of post-totalitarianism to fool and to be fooled.

⁸ Havel, V., & Keane, J. (c1985). *The Power of the Powerless* (p. 29). Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.