

## Book Review

### *Educational Leadership and Hannah Arendt*

Review by Richard Morehouse

*Educational Leadership and Hannah Arendt*  
 Helen M. Gunter  
 Routledge Press, 2014  
 Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
 160 pages  
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 \$145.00 U.S. Hardback

Perhaps the best way to encourage academics to read this book is to examine the following quote.

*Arendt asks humans to think about the relationship threads of what “I” and “we” are doing: the failure to recognize natality and pluralism, particularly evident in the mediocracy and ‘what works’ prescriptions. “I” and “we” cannot be spontaneous and do new things while “I” and “we” are filling in forms and working out how to handle the next inspection visit (105).*

While Gunter’s comments here and throughout the book are directed toward an internationalization of methods and processes in elementary and secondary schools, many in higher education can sympathize and emphasize with this sentiment. Before leaving my full time work in the University, I personally witnessed what appeared to me to be the dampening of the spontaneity and creativity that I grew to love as an intricate part of my teaching (and learning).

This work is both intellectually engaging and challenging. The pull of the book comes from Gunter’s deep understanding of the educational scene in the United Kingdom and beyond. This wide and deep knowledge-base was somewhat problematic for this reviewer as she uses acronyms and short-hand labels to identify the British and international organizations that initiate and monitor the vast network of inspections and recommendation frameworks that constitute today’s world of education. One of her main antagonist is the ELMA (educational leadership and management). This was a new concept to me, not in a general sense but as used here as a cohesive and iterated system. According to their website the MLESMA of British Education, leadership, management and administration association is:

*The British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) is an independent voice supporting quality education through effective leadership and management. Ideas and practice, and the relationship between them, are what interest us. Our members are a mixture of practitioners in schools, colleges and universities and working academics, encouraging a unique perspective which brings together the theoretical and the practical and encourages stimulating debate at our conferences and events (<https://www.belmas.org.uk/>).*

What concerns Gunter about groups like this is that while claiming to be improving education, in practice they take all the individual initiative and imagination out of teaching and by implication out of learning.

It is Hannah Arendt’s radical critique of this top down (Gunter would say totalitarian) shaping of education that is problematic. She further argues that it is difficult even to “problematize” the important issues of education as there is no

conceptual space for leisurely thinking about education in general or specific classrooms in particular. Gunter labels this approach the Transnational Leadership Package (vii).

Gunter's reading and application of Arendt is what makes her critique both challenging and intellectually exciting. Her use of Arendt to thematize problems in the management of education should open the mind of many a reader to the subtle ways in which education is shaped, in ways both seen and unseen, through hegemonic systems of administration that trickle all the way down to the individual classroom.

Given her expansive familiarity with educational policy, a familiarity she assumes many readers will share, means her work may prove demanding for many at times, but this does nothing to detract from the soundness of her critique. The criticisms she raises against the totalitarian tendencies of educational bureaucracies should be taken seriously; and this holds even if aspects of her account would benefit from a more inclusive approach that recognized not everyone who shares her concerns about the administrative monopolization of learning will also be knowledgeable about the ins and outs of how these institutions work.

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