

COVID Totalitarianism: The Deification of Error

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Belgian psychologist Dr. Mattias Desmet may be the most articulate voice on the most clear and present danger facing us: the mob-baiting now being pursued by formerly democratic governments.

The most significant obstacle to our developing the necessary capacity to fight back against what is engulfing us is an imaginative block preventing us conceiving of the possibility that what seems to be happening could actually be happening. These things could not be happening here, now, for the very simple reason that they are the kind of thing that used to happen far away, in different times, to people who were not as ‘intelligent’ or ‘educated’ or ‘advanced’ as we are.

Dr. Mattias Desmet begs to differ with such perilous smugness. He is a professor of Clinical Psychology at Ghent University in Belgium. He lectures on Individual psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and the psychology of the crowd. He holds a master’s degree and PhD in clinical psychology, and a master’s in statistics.

As the Covid subterfuge shifts from the manufacture of mass terror concerning a dubious virus — and a related indoctrination with spurious medical data — to the mass mobilisation of mesmerised populations in silencing voices threatening to expose these crimes, Dr Desmet has emerged as the clearest and most meticulous voice describing the dangers and intimating what we need to do to offset them. A selection of his remarkable video interviews can be found at the end of this article, which I have written by way of an introduction to his thoughts and interpretations, which I believe are among the most crucial things we might hear at this precise moment.

Dr. Desmet’s observations over the past 18 months have led him to conclude that the overwhelming majority of the world’s population has indeed fallen under *a kind of* spell. It is not literally a spell, he stresses, but a ‘mass formation’, a term first used by **Gustave Le Bon**, the French philosopher who 126 years ago in *The Psychology of Crowds*, was the first thinker systematically to outline how herd psychology differs from that of the individual. Le Bon it was who observed that the consciousness bestowed by membership of a crowd can be transformative, possessing individual members with ‘a sort of collective mind which

makes them feel, think and act in a manner quite differently from that in which each individual would feel, think and act were that person in a state of isolation.’ In such a ‘psychological crowd’, individual personality disappears, brain activity is replaced by reflex activity: a lowering of intelligence, provoking a complete transformation of sentiments, which collectively may manifest as better and worse than those of the crowd’s constituent members. A crowd may just as easily become heroic or criminal, but is generally disposed towards destruction.

‘The ascendancy of crowds,’ wrote Le Bon, ‘indicates the death throes of a civilisation.’ The upward climb to civilisation is an intellectual process driven by individuals; the descent is a herd in stampede. ‘Crowds are only useful for destruction.’

These symptoms are manifesting now, perhaps as never before, in our once free Western world, in a process substantively resembling mass hypnosis, as a collective psychological response to the unrelenting, single-focus campaign of fear to which we have all been subjected for a year and a half. Indeed, we may now have reached a stage in this process that even Le Bon did not anticipate, for now the mesmerisers have available to them tech and techniques he could scarcely have envisaged. Using electronic means, it is infinitely easier to convert the individual to the collective mindset than if he were a member of an actual physical crowd. The advent of social media has made the present situation not merely possible, but possibly inevitable.

In his own time, approaching the end of the nineteenth century, Le Bon perceived a shifting in the nature of human reflection and attention. In an odd way, his words read to us now as quasi-contemporaneous: They might have been uttered just a handful of years ago.

‘The present epoch is one of these critical moments in which the thought of mankind is undergoing a process of transformation. Two fundamental factors are at the base of this transformation. The first is the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilisation are rooted. The second is the creation of entirely new conditions of existence and thought as the result of modern scientific and industrial discoveries.’

What is called progress comes at a cost, sometimes a great cost, and that cost is rarely visible until considerably after the fact of its causation, which then becomes prone to the phenomena of historical disconnectedness and plausible deniability.

‘Nature has recourse at times to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than the mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would only be useful were it possible to change instantaneously the genius of nations.’

The effects of such changes, mediated via the psyches of human beings, may in time provoke consequences that not only were unforeseen to begin with but may perhaps undo and outweigh any beneficial aspects. Societies craving change for its own sake are especially vulnerable. A society in tumult is ripe for destruction. But the crowd always seek to justify that which it has been told is good, and demonise that which it has been warned to eschew.

‘The masses have never thirsted after truth,’ wrote Le Bon. ‘They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them.’

Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim. An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.'

Facts are as nothing to crowds, which function via a kind of collectivised imagination, operating off images and the slogans which evoke them.

'A crowd,' Le Bon elaborates, 'thinks in images, and the image itself calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first. . . . A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images invoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed facts.'

Le Bon's is one of the names most frequently dropped by Dr Mattias Desmet in the course of the interviews he has been giving in recent months, having spent some time reflecting on the situation facing the world in the light of what history and its sages has to tell it, and what he himself knows of the modern world. His interviews can be mixed in quality, but this is usually to do with the quality and interventions of interviewers, some of whom do not play to his remarkable strengths, which reside in exploring the granular nature of psychological processes as they play out in reality, and especially in collective reality. He is excellent on the way people's projection of their own free-floating personal anxieties, frustration and aggression on to the Covid/lockdown sagas enables the 'mass formation' process.

Mass formation, he explains, is a form of hypnosis imposed on a crowd, a factor which we have explored in previous articles here. He is in no doubt that we speak of a literal hypnosis, with all the potential effects and symptoms of same.

He explains many aspects of what we have been witnessing, including the strange phenomenon of people's apparent indifference to their own deprivations, hurts and incurred damage arising from the lockdowns of the past 18 months: loss of freedoms, loss of work, income, education, human contact, leisure *et cetera*. During mass formation, he describes, there is 'a narrowing of the field of attention', which allows the crowd's constituent members to close out everything but that which the hypnotist tells them is important, which results in insensitivity to personal losses, and a willingness to sacrifice everything — education, jobs, homes, romance, health — and to disregard the losses and griefs of others. By offering a strategy to deal with the anxieties imposed by the crisis, the would-be totalitarians are able to create a bogus solidarity in a society that has destroyed true solidarity.

He is remarkably open about his own history of engagement with the Covid 'pandemic', acknowledging his early doubts about some of his own pronouncements. In the very early days, he briefly bought into the idea of a pandemic, but his suspicions were soon aroused by the disproportionality he observed between the measures being introduced and what he understood about the visible levels of risk from the virus. In those early weeks of the crisis, he wrote a paper titled *The Fear of the Virus is More Dangerous than the Virus Itself*.

Occasionally, in the early weeks, (April/May 2020) he worried that he might have been wrong to publish this paper, but by the end of May was satisfied that his thesis was entirely correct. Looking at the data from a statistical perspective, he rapidly came to the conclusion that the danger was overestimated. He believed the psychological aspects were more threatening than any biological danger. Yet, he observes, 'the narrative continued as if the

initial models were correct.'

'From the beginning I was afraid of the societal dynamics that were going on,' he says, and this fear appears to have been the prime motivation for his recent interventions.

By August 2020, he had come to see that he could describe how this process occurred. 'We were dealing with a massive phenomenon of mass formation.'

He also, interestingly, speaks of how, in December 2019, some weeks before the crisis erupted in China, he had some kind of premonition of impending menace. He went to his bank and paid back his mortgage — because he felt 'the society was moving towards a tipping point.'

'I wanted to be as free as possible,' he says. He remembers telling the bank manager: 'All the negative parameters of society have started to rise exponentially.' He believed that a major catastrophe was on the way, but is not entirely sure why he knew this.

He says there are four conditions that need to be in place to enable mass formation to occur in a society. The first is the presence of large numbers of socially isolated, atomised, people. The social bonds between people need to have been weakened. This is the most important, and the other conditions follow from it. Secondly, there will be large numbers of people who experience lack of sense-making in their lives and work — people who feel that their jobs are senseless, meaningless. Thirdly, there requires to be 'a lot of free-floating anxiety' — i.e. anxiety that is not connected to a mental representation so that the sufferer doesn't know why he is anxious and afraid. And fourthly, there needs to be a lot of 'free-floating psychological discontent' — anger and frustration at, again, apparently nothing in particular.

And you also need mass media — without which mass formation would be impossible. Desmet does not explicitly say so, but of course it is also essential that these media be biddable and readily prone to corruption.

These conditions, he says, existed in Western societies long before the Covid crisis. There was, he says, 'an epidemic of burnout'. He says something between 40 and 70 per cent of people in modern societies experience their jobs as senseless. He points also to the escalating use of psycho-pharmaceutical medicines to treat anxiety and depression.

As evidence of the presence of these conditions in Western society prior to the pandemic, he instances the consumption of anti-depressants in Belgium, his own country. There, a population of 11 million was using 300 million doses of anti-depressants *per annum*.

According to Desmet, the key root mechanism of mass formation, free-floating anxiety, is the most painful psychological phenomenon a human being can experience. It refers to anxieties that have no clear focus: The sufferer does not know why he feels anxious.

'Free-floating anxiety is very serious. It leads to panic. When a society is saturated with it, sufferers are desperate to connect it to a representation, and if someone presents a narrative in the mainstream media that offers an object of anxiety, and at the same time presents a strategy to deal with this anxiety, there is a good chance that all this free-floating anxiety in the society will connect to this object of anxiety indicated by this narrative presented by the mainstream media, and that there will be a huge willingness to go along with the strategy.'

The orchestrators of the mass formation are able to appropriate these variegated anxieties and direct them in their entirety at a single point of focus, in this case a virus. By then offering a strategy to deal with the virus crisis, the mass formation process also offers sufferers relief from their anxieties. The same happens with frustration and aggression, all of which were, in a sense, piled on to the Covid basket.

This is where the ‘narrowing of the field of attention’ enters in. The members of the hypnotised mass are enabled to close out everything but that which the hypnotist tells them is important. They acquire not just an indifference to the losses of others, but an insensitivity to losses of their own. They become willing to sacrifice everything under the attrition of the collective injunction — in this case, at least initially, the project of ‘saving lives’. People do not see the consequences of the lockdown, nor feel empathy for the victims. Their relief at being relieved of their free-floating anxieties is enough to have them cleave to the newly-formed mob. It’s similar, he says, to when a person is under hypnosis: It is possible to use the hypnosis as an anaesthetic to cut into the person’s flesh, having thus made the patient completely insensitive to pain.

In these circumstances, the mesmerised acquire meaning and purpose they previously lacked. In a society in which solidarity has already been destroyed, a new bogus solidarity is formed. Once the solution/strategy is offered, he says, ‘people start a collective and heroic battle with this object of anxiety.’ This results in what he calls a ‘mental intoxication’ and it is this that makes mass formation indistinguishable from hypnosis.

Arising from this combination of factors, people acquire an intense interest in believing the dominant narrative. ‘It doesn’t matter whether the narrative is wrong. It’s all about that they don’t want to go back to this painful state of free-floating anxiety.’

‘The more absurd a narrative is the better it functions as a ritual,’ says Desmet. ‘Whether the narrative is correct or incorrect doesn’t make any difference.’

As part of the same process, he says, politicians who may have lost their grip on the people, now have a way of becoming ‘true leaders’ again. There is, therefore, at this stage of the totalitarian process, a symbiosis of motivation between the leaders and the led; or, more correctly, the rulers and the ruled.

These circumstances combine to ensure that people don’t want to go back to the ‘old normal’. This is important: *Many among the mesmerised do not want their prior meaningless lives back.* ‘We need to avoid giving people the impression that we want them to go back to the old normal,’ cautions Desmet. We need instead to ‘show them there are other ways to change this “old normal”. We need to tell people that we don’t need a crisis like this to create a new social bond.’

In such a crucible of explosive feeling and foreboding, some unsettling dynamics soon become visible. People begin to regard each other as either friends or foes. The ‘friends’ are to be cherished and cleaved to; the foes are to be excoriated and, where possible or necessary, banished or destroyed.

There are, in situations of mass formation, says Desmet, three distinct groups that manifest themselves. Only 30 per cent, he says, are really hypnotised, and cannot be reached in any way. In addition, however, there are about 40 per cent who usually follow the crowd, and from the outset go along with that 30 per cent of total believers. There is another cohort of

about 30 per cent who are not hypnotised, who try to speak out and resist. This group, he says, is extremely heterogeneous and disunited. If these people could unite, he says, they could bring the whole thing quickly to an end, but this seldom proves possible.

The reason some people appear to be immune to the hypnoidal power of the mass formation, he says, has to do with underlying ideological outlook. In this present situation, he says, the ultimate destination-point of the totalitarianism is to effect the total acquiescence of the global population in a transhumanist project in which, in substance and effect, man will be absorbed into the world of the machine. He thinks that essentially the objectors are people with an aversion to this unnatural way of seeing the human person. This is an interesting theory, and may help to explain why so many religious-minded people are opposed to the lockdown, vaccines *et cetera*: Many of them, having had a deeper inculcation in fundamental anthropological understandings, instinctively or reasonably object to the unknowable and unnatural dimensions of what is proposed. Desmet may be on to something important here: that, although not yet explicit, the transhumanist agenda is already visible as the distant destination-point, with its meanings already saturating the playing area in the context of mandatory vaccines, biometric ID, social credit schemes and the accompanying surveillance regimes, restrictions, penalties, *et cetera*.

Intelligence, he says, is no guarantee of resistance to the hypnoidal attack. 'In mass formation, highly intelligent, highly educated people become exactly as intelligent as everybody else in the masses — everybody becomes equally intelligent, which usually means extremely stupid, in the masses.' At the start of the lockdown, many people said to him, 'Yes, it is terrible, but we can stop the rat-race for a while.' This was mainly the well-off, who had less concerns about the economic destruction threatened by the lockdowns. The anxiety of the educated become fixated on different things, perhaps on the possibility of 'populists' taking advantage of the crisis. This is how the ludicrous 'far right' trope, stoked by cynical media, gained ground.

He speaks, too, about the dynamics of totalitarianism and what makes the present episode different to, for example, the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. In this, and much else, he draws on the writings of the brilliant German philosopher **Hannah Arendt**, whose book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* remains the definitive deconstruction of the totalitarian process, which she characterises as an entirely new phenomenon of the twentieth century.

He reiterates Arendt's core point about the radical differences between totalitarianism and 'traditional' forms of dictatorship. Classical dictatorships are primitive and simple — a single dictator using uncomplicated fear. But in a totalitarian state, the psychological and societal basis of the tyranny is mass formation.

In a totalitarian state, a large part of the population believes in the narrative and is psychologically convinced that the proffered object of anxiety is the cause of all their concerns.

These beliefs, he says, are related to the penetrative effects of mass media but also the image of man as a machine — in part a consequence of industrialism, in part due to an 'obsession with science', another core theme of Arendt's, who emphasises also the key role of ideology as a nutrient of totalitarianism.

He is not convinced of the 'psychopathy' thesis of totalitarianism, with particular reference to the Covid despotisms. The people who organise and impose this tyranny, he says, 'often

do not believe in the things they say, but they do really believe in the ideology they promote, and they really believe that the best way to organise society is to treat people like cows on a large farm. They really do believe in this mechanistic, materialist, biological, reductionist ideology.'

Again, Desmet is citing Arendt, who did much to uncover and describe the ugly underbelly of Nazi machinations, in particular the propaganda and psychological elements. Totalitarianism, she believed, has specific characteristics that are constructed to appear random, arbitrary and senseless, when really they amount to a complex interworking of manipulations designed to break and isolate the human person, to lead him methodically out of his 'ordinary' life of hoping, working, thinking, loving, into a world where his every moment is dominated by the imposed irrationality that leads to a new, dehumanised existence for others and himself, and to a new, irrational form of 'sense-making'.

Arendt wrote:

'While the totalitarian regimes are thus resolutely and cynically emptying the world of the only thing that makes sense to the utilitarian expectations of common sense, they impose upon it at the same time a kind of supersense which the ideologies actually always meant when they pretended to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe. Over and above the senselessness of totalitarian society is enthroned the ridiculous supersense of its ideological superstition. Ideologies are harmless, uncritical, and arbitrary opinions only as long as they are not believed in seriously. Once their claim to total validity is taken literally they become the nuclei of logical systems in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted. The insanity of such systems lies not only in their first premise but in the very logicity with which they are constructed. The curious logicity of all isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality and factuality.'

Ideologies are always dangerous reductions of reality, in many instances comprising pseudo-science masquerading as the real thing, rendering them exceptionally well-adapted to totalitarian rule. For the sake of justifying and validating the 'supersense' — the final triumph of the ideology — Arendt declared, it is necessary for totalitarianism to completely destroy human dignity. This is because the recognition of their dignity implies an acceptance of our fellow men as co-builders of a world held in common on the basis of individual and consensual choice. This, to the totalitarian, is out of the question. An ideology which lays claim to interpreting all events of the past, and setting in train all events of the future, can have no place for the plans and choices of mere citizens. The danger lies in the very creativity of the human, which may seek to introduce something that is not foreseen in the ideology, and therefore likely to undermine it. Thus, totalitarianism requires the complete transformation of the individual and the collective, so as to align the minds of men with the perspectives and objectives set down in the ideology. Once the supersense is installed, men will think only what the ideology allows.

Before Hitler and Stalin, wrote Arendt, such things were not imagined. Ideology is, literally, 'the logic of an idea', a schema of pseudo-thinking that creates a web of delusion. 'Its subject matter is history, to which the "idea" is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that is, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same

“law” as the logical exposition of its “idea”. Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process — the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future — because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas.

‘Ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being. They are historical, concerned with becoming and perishing, with the rise and fall of cultures, even if they try to explain history by some “law of nature”.’

As **Václav Havel** has elaborated, ideology is an instrument for presenting time and history as immutable successions of events and ‘progressions’, indifferent to human longing or wishes.

The question at the heart of our exploration of the nature and meaning of totalitarianism, wrote Arendt, is: ‘[W]hat kind of basic experience in the living-together of men permeates a form of government whose essence is terror and whose principle of action is the logicity of ideological thinking?’

This is the most chilling aspect: that totalitarianism finds its roots in some dislocated aspect of the human that is still human, that arises from actual human wants and needs — for peace, for serenity, for love.

‘That such a combination was never used before in the varied forms of political domination is obvious,’ she added. ‘Still, the basic experience on which it rests must be human and known to men, insofar as even this most original of all political bodies has been devised by, and is somehow answering the needs of, men.’

Totalitarianism in its full-blown form, then, is something that comes *after*, but ‘after’ what? It comes after a lengthy ‘preparation’, not necessarily planned with malign intent, in which human beings become isolated, atomised, alienated and lonely — conditions for which the totalitarian has ready solutions in the promulgation of bogus community and imagined bonds of mutual hatreds. The negative undertones of these processes suggests some form of prior error, and this may well have been present, perhaps in the pursuit of greed or exploitation, but this is not any longer admissible. Totalitarianism is like a secondary condition that descends on a society that has first of all been subjected to certain processes of modernity: technologisation, industrialisation, individualisation, atomisation. It is, in a sense, like the lung cancer that ensues from a lifetime of smoking, or the type 2 diabetes that results from an excessively sweet tooth. But it is not ‘secondary’ in the sense suggesting ‘lesser’ or ‘minor’ or ‘subordinate’: When it arrives, totalitarianism announces itself as the actual purpose and destination-point of the entire historical process, the discovery of the actual meaning of history. It follows, but is not collateral to, the events which preceded it. Indeed, its arrival announces a coherence to those previous events that had not hitherto been perceived: It ‘makes sense’ of the drifts and apparent randomness of the past, and in doing so turns common sense on its head and compels man to admit his prior errors of understanding and accept that the true direction of history has now been revealed.

The totalitarian leader, unlike the classical kind, who becomes more benign as opposition falls away, becomes more vicious when unopposed, stoking up the masses to carry out atrocities, long after he has suppressed all dissent. This is why every voice of dissent is so vital: to delay the moment when the totalitarian has a free rein.

There is a distinction, Desmet emphasises, between ‘totalitarian thinking’ and ‘totalitarian regime’. Totalitarian thinking, he says, is characterised by absurd argumentation and illogic, which seems extremely persuasive and ‘drives a society across all ethical boundaries.’ Eventually, by traversing the wastes of senselessness, the society evolves a totalitarian regime that uses totalitarian thinking to rule. Right now, he believes, we are at an advanced stage in totalitarian thinking. ‘They consider the human being to be a biological organism who should be manipulated and controlled through biological means. That’s the ideology by which institutions like the WHO and individuals like Bill Gates start. It’s tempting to say that these people are sociopaths or even psychopaths, but I don’t think it is right. They are people who are ideologically blind. That is their main characteristic.’ Gustave Le Bon, he points out, said that ‘the hypnosis is even deeper in the leaders of the masses than in the masses themselves. They are more convinced of the ideology than the population. They have the feeling that in the end when they have reshaped society according to their ideal image, they will end up in a technological transhumanistic paradise, almost without human suffering, and that is why they feel it is justified to inflict a lot of damage and a lot of suffering, because in the end the result of this revolution will be so marvellous that it justifies everything they do now.’

He also believes that we ought not to presume that every apparent phenomenon and effect of the tyrannical circumstances we endure are necessarily the outcome of a strategy or plan of the perpetrators. Totalitarianism metastasises. ‘I think that once a society is grasped by one narrative, and once this mass formation emerges, I think that, more or less in a spontaneous way, it organises the entire dynamic of a society — very often without people being grasped by it, being aware that they actually reinforce and contribute to the dynamics. Things that seem to be intentional are often spontaneous outcomes of the processes.’

Now we may be at or approaching the most difficult phase of the totalitarian thinking process: when the mob, like an attack dog, awaits the instruction to go for its designated enemy. Dr. Desmet again cites Gustave le Bon: ‘The masses only exist if they have an enemy.’ In the beginning, the ‘enemy’ was the virus; now it is those who are not in thrall to or in fear of the virus, who question its severity and challenge the legitimacy of the official global response — those who refuse to go along with the official narrative. This causes the majority to bond together in a new way against the new object of anxiety, having formed a new ‘social bond’ against the dissenting group, providing itself with a new meaning in life. This, says Desmet, gives rise to a ‘mental intoxication’, providing a ‘new deeply fundamental type of satisfaction for a human being’.

Under mass formation, people become ‘radically intolerant of dissonant voices’, while at the same time being ‘radically tolerant’ of their lying leaders.

Again, he cites Hannah Arendt on the ‘atomised subjects’ who have no connection with the larger whole — now, in fighting the new object of anxiety, their negative state becomes positive. Social isolation is replaced by an experience of a strong social bond, ‘which is the reason why people are continuing to believe in the mainstream narrative — even when it is blatantly wrong and utterly absurd. . . . They do not believe in the narrative because it is correct, but because it leads to this new solidarity, to this new kind of social bond, to this mental intoxication of feeling.’

‘Usually this only stops after a lot of destruction,’ he warns. Crowds are always ‘intrinsically self-destructive,’ as Le Bon repeatedly stated. ‘The only positive way this

comes to an end is if people can discover the real reasons for their dissatisfaction and [find] a new meaning. But once a mass emerges, it's hard to get people to search for the real reasons for their anxiety.'

Society, he says, was being prepared for such a narrative for a long time. For centuries, the dominant view of man has been a mechanistic-materialist view: Man is a machine, a little part of the larger machine of the universe — 'that is the ideology that has prepared the world for mass formation, and for connecting all our anxiety to a mechanistic-materialist organism such as a virus.'

The chief characteristics of modern masses, according to Hannah Arendt, is that they 'do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they don't trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. Repetition, somewhat overrated in importance because of the common belief in the masses' inferior capacity to grasp and remember, is important only because it convinces them of consistency in time.'

Imagination, again, is the key — the process of engaging with reality through a gauze of fantasy. It is important that we grasp this: In the average victim of Covid propaganda, we are not dealing with the same person in the way we have known him or her hitherto. We encounter someone who has been fed with, and swallowed, a grotesquely distorted view of reality. She does not see what we see, or know what we know. And, on detecting this dissonance, she becomes, as she has been programmed to become, highly alert and intensely suspicious. Our disbelief in the things she cleaves to is connected in her mind with a danger to herself. We ought not to underestimate the dangers of this, or its potential for leading rapidly to confrontation and even violence. We are not dealing with people in control of themselves; we are not dealing even with people who remain themselves. The word 'hypnosis' must here be treated with the utmost respect and literalism.

We deal with extraordinarily powerful and largely unbridled forces. We ought not to approach our fellows in this condition with the mindset that we might change their minds. That is folly indeed. Instead, we must wait, watch, choose our moments, and strike delicately and precisely.

The most important thing, Desmet says, is to continue speaking out, to keep saying that we do not agree with the mainstream narrative, to interrupt the constant flow of lies (propaganda) with the truth. This unsettles the hypnosis, causing the mesmerised to turn in their sleep.

Desmet says we have to continue to share rational counter-arguments, in the hope of breaking the link of free-floating anxiety to the virus, which he describes as a kind of welded joint created at the highest level of anxiety. Warning people of the dangers of a totalitarian state — itself a possible new object of anxiety — might cause this joint to be broken and a new one formed.

The presence of alternative voices also serves to curb the viciousness of the rulers and constrains the mob in its excesses. 'Alternative voices, as Le Bon said, do not succeed in waking up the masses, but if the same group continues to talk and utter a different story, and ensure there is a different voice in the public space, then the masses might not become

very cruel.

'We have to aim to keep a path for the small group that doesn't want to conform to the mainstream narrative. We have to continue to talk and to establish a parallel society that produces its own foods, its own clinics and hospitals and that can provide the means of surviving outside mainstream society.'

'Mass formation gets deeper as the narrative is repeated and as other narratives disappear. The only way to prevent it becoming deeper and more intense is to make sure there is another narrative that leads to a certain cognitive dissonance that at least means that people will be a little confused while following the mainstream narrative.'

And, yes, he agrees, the short-to-medium-term outlook is bleak. When a society reaches the point of transgressing all ethical limits, there are no longer any guarantees. We must not be in any doubt as to the suggestibility of our neighbours. If we doubt that it could go much further, he warns, we should consider how far it has gone already. He ironically asks of people who are prepared to vaccinate children, to force pregnant women to wear face masks, to allow old people die alone, 'Why don't we move to the next step and build concentration camps for people who test positive for Covid?' Their answer? — 'Why not?'

When he asks people how far they think the tyranny should go, they reply: 'Until the end of the [Covid] danger'.

'Do not believe that we could not end up with the same kind of measures that Hitler considered necessary to create his pure race. To be honest, I think it will be difficult to avoid ending up in some kind of new totalitarianism. But it will be a *new* totalitarianism. It will be, on the one hand, the same as the totalitarianism of the first half of the twentieth century, but it will also be radically different, because it will be a worldwide totalitarian system. It won't have external enemies; it will only have internal enemies, and it will treat these internal enemies in a different way — as the external enemies were treated. This is something that is essential for the logic of totalitarian systems — totalitarian systems *need* an enemy; without an enemy they collapse. So I think there is a good chance that the new totalitarian systems will tolerate the existence of the enemies, but it will marginalise them, push them outside of mainstream society.'

Which, up to a point, will suit the dissenters, who have never wanted much more than simply that they be let alone.

His dark prognostications notwithstanding, he is a little optimistic. We should remember, he says, that 'totalitarianism and mass formation always ends up destroying itself.' All we have to do is to make sure that our story survives and that we survive outside the system 'for a few years'.

How might it happen?

'If the masses wake up, they start to realise what has happened.'

Then what?

'Then they kill their leaders.'

'You will see that the small group will survive and, in one way or another, after the

collapse, it will play an important role in the rebuilding of a society according to more human and more ethical principles.'

We may have some distance to travel, he says, but he believes this model of totalitarianism will destroy itself much more quickly than those of the twentieth century, because none of those systems intruded on the personal lives of the people to the extent that this one has 'in such a systematic and straightforward way'. He cites vaccines as a cardinal example of this form of intrusion and expresses the belief that the vaccination campaign may end up as 'the most spectacular disaster we've ever seen.'

There is, although it may not be obvious, something of an anomaly here in the phenomenon of a clinical psychologist offering a critique of materialist-mechanistic society, in the sense that the discipline of psychology is itself part of the mechanisation of man, part of the apparatus that seeks to break human behaviour and responses into a set of instrumental principles and patterns which, although they can often appear to have individual application, have not, in general produced overall beneficial results. Indeed, as I've pointed out elsewhere, the discipline of psychology has all but destroyed the art of fiction. The reduction of understandings of the human to manmade scientific polarities has destroyed the mysteriousness that was once the *forte* of the novel and short story. In the realm of modern literature, the once revered novelist — the source of so much of our understandings of the human — has been demoted by psychology to the role of bumbling amateur who, to be taken 'seriously', has to immerse him/herself in Freud and adhere religiously to what he appeared to be saying.

Sigmund Freud was undoubtedly a genius — an artist, in fact, in his own right, who took us on epic journeys within our own minds. His ruminations on, for example, conscience and (though reductionist) happiness, have given us much food for self-scrutiny. But Freudianism, the pseudo-science that grew out of this remarkable corpus, has done untold damage, being absorbed into the societal machines of Western societies to impose itself on actually breathing humans as a form of Holy Writ. In the wrong hands, it can be lethal to human happiness, functioning and freedom. Psychoanalysis, too, has rendered instrumental everything about the human person, reducing the possibilities concerning human action to comprehensible, even simplistic pathologies and crypto-mechanical processes. This enabled the elevation of psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychologists to the status of engineers of human souls, capable of diagnosing patterns of behaviour in a stranger in much the way an old-style mechanic would detect the source of a rattle in the gearbox of a 1984 Volkswagen Mk2 GTI. Perhaps more than anything — yes, even more than the notion of chemical imbalances in the human brain — these developments caused the human person to think of himself as a sort of, well, Volkswagen.

So there is, as I say, this anomaly (even a *dangerous* anomaly) in people like Mattias Desmet (and, to give another example, Jordan Peterson) voyaging forth to diagnose the condition of the human person in these opening decades of the third millennium. A human person seeking self-understanding could, as quickly as becoming enlightened, feel hit over the head with Dr. Peterson's 25,000 hours of clinical practice. If anything, the problem with the modern world is a surfeit of experts telling us not just what is good for us, but what we are actually doing and thinking wrongly, and why — and what we supposedly need to do.

But there is also an upside. One could also note that all these practitioners have, in the era of YouTube, started to stray outside their disciplines, to commentate on macro, collective trends in human psychology, and this may actually be where they redeem themselves and

their role. There is a *lacuna* in the conversation of modern society in relation to the actions and ‘thought-processes’ of mobs. Most of the more interesting reflections on this aspect of human coexistence occurred in the last century or towards the end of the one before. For the past half-century, there have emerged no substantial practitioners in the precise area of crowd behaviour, perhaps because there are no ‘patients’ and few enough potential clients with a monied interest in exploring these matters. And it is hard to avoid thinking that there is nowadays something of an *omertà* concerning the differences and interactions between individual responses and those of the crowd. YouTube — probably unwittingly — has provided a generation of psychologists with a platform to begin filling in this *lacuna*.

In general, the new trend we perceive involves clinical psychologists co-opting the work of thinkers like Le Bon and Arendt, and merging it with their own clinical experience in the individual context. This is not without value, but it is also beset by the contradiction already mentioned: that the interpretations of *engineers* of human souls must be taken with a soupcon of axle grease when it comes to arriving at any definitive understandings of flesh-and-blood beings. This discussion remains preliminary and tentative. There is a huge gap between the condition of (approximately) the first half of the twentieth century — dominated by Gustave Le Bon, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Ellul and Joost Meerloo — and the present, a span of time in which nothing radically innovative was added to our understanding of what we shall but loosely call collective psychology and its seemingly osmotic inclination towards totalitarian patterns — and this during a time of the most rapid growth in the promulgation of technologies lending themselves to the manipulation of collective psychology as never before. The great masters — Le Bon, Arendt, Ellul, Meerloo — are all gone and have had no significant successors to update or revise their thoughts in the light of an avalanche of tech diversion, tech addiction, tech toxicity, cyber-censorship, mass baiting and herding, and sundry other pathologies of this ‘most modern’ moment. It is to the end of updating these understandings, rather than the application of more elaborate or dubious schemas to the condition of the individual, that clinical psychology might today make itself most useful.

Desmet, Peterson and others — the British psychologist Richard Grannon, for example — are with us, have read their Le Bon and Arendt, and are capable of hypothesising us into some form of (albeit restricted) collective reflection on our plight. Desmet has so far emerged as the most interesting voice on the Covid totalitarian play, discoursing brilliantly on mass psychology and how it might be manipulated. Peterson has adhered to the continuing Combine-enforced *omertà*.

And none of these figures shows signs of having yet read their Jacques Ellul — another serious lacuna. For this and other reasons, I propose to devote Part II of this article/essay to the mid-twentieth century reflections of that remarkable Frenchman on the emergence and consequences of the ‘*technique* society’ – (something more, and more ominous, than mere technology).

Here is a short selection of recent interviews with Dr. Mattias Desmet. Some are better than others and I have placed them in order of quality of content. The first is the best; the other two get better as they go along (skip the first half hour of each!). There are other interviews, and more are now being added with every passing week.

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