

A Review of “The Psychology of Totalitarianism”

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Belgian psychologist Mattias Desmet published his book [The Psychology of Totalitarianism](#) in June 2022. The book brings attention to the need to understand our own psychology in this time of global crisis. It outlines the process of mass formation by which the masses find themselves to be hypnotized members of a totalitarian state. It also provides ideas about the evolution of scientific thought and how that evolution has led to an over-estimation of certainty and an oversimplification of living systems.

Overall, Desmet’s book is an ambitious work that focuses initially on his assessment of the evolution of mankind’s “mechanistic worldview,” particularly since The Enlightenment. Basing his concepts on the work of others including philosopher Hannah Arendt and the social psychologist Gustav Le Bon, Desmet describes how it is this mechanistic worldview that sets the stage for a totalitarian state. This comes across as a call to step away from blind belief in scientific “fact” and toward a more harmonious resonating with a deeper understanding of the world.

Although Desmet’s larger thesis would benefit from more detailed support, the process of mass formation as described in the book rings true, particularly in terms of what people have experienced with the “coronavirus crisis.” The Covid crimes exposed the fact that many individuals in our society can be led to throw away everything they have always valued, including freedom and health, in order to gain security from an innocuous threat.

Studying the development of mass formation is therefore a very important component of understanding human psychology in our time.

Part I – Science and Its Psychological Effects

According to Desmet’s perspective, a mechanistic worldview brought society into a psychological condition that “degenerated into dogma and blind belief.” He notes that man

has always had a mechanistic worldview, citing that Greeks invented the word atom. But the Enlightenment caused this to become dominant as people moved away from religion and toward science, with its extensive use of numbers, to represent theories and facts.

Desmet describes how the use of measured values to represent scientific fact in fields such as chemistry and physics has not caused a lot of trouble psychologically. However, problems studied in psychology and medicine cannot be so easily reduced to a matter of simple numbers. That's because with all numbers there is an uncertainty that leaves an unexplained remainder. Desmet says that this remainder, the difference between the model and reality, is the living component of systems otherwise thought to be dead. When studying living systems, equating numbers with precise facts is wrong.

Arendt suggested that the difference or remainder that is left after describing living systems is vitally important. Without it, she says, humans are reduced to *atomized subjects*. In other words, we begin to see ourselves and each other as objects. Desmet says the remainder is "the essence of the object, its living component." The atomization of life leads to an inability to distinguish facts from fiction and ultimately to the problem of totalitarianism.

"The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exist." — Hannah Arendt

Objectifying involves simplifying and, as we simplify our concepts of other people and ourselves, we lose a lot of understanding. Desmet's text focuses on numbers but it seems clear that words are misunderstood in the same ways. Desmet notes that the use of symbols can lead to the same problems and it's evident that images should be included in the mix. These objects of our minds—numbers, words, symbols, and images—can be further oversimplified as we compare them and frame them in dualistic or binary ways.

According to Desmet's theory, we build a false worldview by using numbers to represent aspects of the human condition, like thoughts and feelings, physiological health, or group identity. This leads to an increase in the superficiality of our understanding of the world, and the opportunities for being dangerously wrong, that such a worldview allows. He writes,

"The almost irresistible illusion that numbers represent facts ensures that most people become increasingly convinced that their own fiction is reality."

Desmet further suggests that,

"Something in this narrative causes man to become isolated from his fellow man, and from nature. Something in it causes man to stop resonating with the world around him. Something in it turns human beings into atomized subjects. It is precisely this atomized subject that, according to Hannah Arendt, is the elementary building block of the totalitarian state."

Science has itself become objectified through simplification. In the last few years, we have seen an increasing number of people speaking of how "Science" tells them they are right in whatever position they hold despite the fact that they either don't know the actual science behind the subject or don't know much about science at all. Science has in many ways become a religion practiced by people who put all of their faith in a generalized, objectified view of what they believe science represents. Those who do not agree with their view of

science, whether it be “The Right,” or “anti-vaxxers,” or “super spreaders,” are the problem that needs to be solved. As we saw with the Covid crimes, the hypnotized are easily led to believe that wrong thinkers need to be controlled, by force if necessary.

Desmet goes on to describe how the mechanistic worldview has proven insufficient for understanding our world, citing examples from Chaos Theory and Quantum Mechanics. He makes the point that patterns arise from physical and mathematical phenomena that are not seen or predicted in our simplified views of them. As a statistician, Desmet should know this well.

He describes the Lorenz strange attractor in which the rate of change of three variables related to a moving water wheel are graphed over time, revealing a pattern that has been used to demonstrate sensitive dependence on initial conditions (i.e. the butterfly effect).

“We cannot predict the specific behaviors of the waterwheel (at least not in its chaotic phase), but we can learn the principles by which it behaves and learn to sense the sublime aesthetic figures hidden beneath the chaotic surface of those behaviors. Hence, there is no rational predictability, but there is a certain degree of intuitive predictability.”

Part II – Mass Formation and Totalitarianism

Desmet did not invent the term mass formation, which was used by Freud and others long before him. His main contributions to the subject are in providing:

- a more thorough description of mass formation as mass hypnosis
- his distinction between dictatorships, which are driven by fear, and totalitarian states, which are driven by the mass formation process
- his application of the mass formation process to the coronavirus crisis

As stated above, the book describes the “insidious process” of mass formation by starting with the evolution of mankind’s mechanistic worldview. Desmet couples with that a description of how we learn words and numbers as children.

Desmet states that we learn words and numbers to understand, and gain the approval of, The Other (e.g. our mother). Over time we learn that words and numbers cannot have definite meaning. This apparently is an early indication to us that mechanistic thinking is not sufficient for full understanding of our world. This learning either leads to isolation and anxiety through the fear of being left behind, or an appreciation for our own creativity and new ways to develop.

More commonly isolation and anxiety develop, initiating to the process of mass formation, the five primary states of which are as follows.

1. Isolation and loneliness
2. A lack of meaning in life
3. Free-floating anxiety, which is not image bound. At this stage a person doesn’t know what they are anxious about.
4. Free-floating frustration and aggression
5. The appearance of a suggestive story, provided by “Leaders,” that establishes an object or image on which the anxiety can be focused

Desmet does not describe the exact cause and effect between each of these states, and certainly not the mechanism of action between each. But humans are social creatures and therefore it makes sense that removing social interactions (isolation and loneliness) leads to a lack of meaning in life and to anxiety. It also makes sense that long term anxiety leads to frustration and aggression that can be exploited.

Complicating this scenario is the fact that we cannot know our exact thoughts and feelings or the reasons for many of our decisions. This is because, as Timothy D. Wilson describes in his book [*Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*](#), due to the inaccessibility of the unconscious mind we have a very limited understanding of our own personalities, thoughts, and feelings and therefore also a limited understanding of our decision making. We understand things unconsciously as well as consciously, and our unconscious drives a lot of our decision making, which could explain how we can go through the multi-stage process of mass formation without being aware of it.

Nonetheless, Desmet emphasizes several important aspects of mass formation and of individuals affected by it. He states that mass formation is like hypnosis but the hypnotist (the Leader) may also be hypnotized. This, Desmet says, is an example of the banality of evil.

Those individuals who are hypnotized by mass formation exhibit the following otherwise inexplicable tendencies.

- They believe in the Leader's story not because it's true but because it creates a new social bond. This bond is not between individuals but between the individual and the collective.
- They act as if the rest of reality, apart from the story that relieves their anxiety, no longer exists.
- They must at all times show that they submit to the interest of the collective by performing self-destructive, symbolic (ritualistic) behaviors
- They have radical intolerance of dissenting voices
- Destroying dissenters becomes critical to them
- They lose interest in everything they value without noticing it, and are thereby willing to give up everything they value
- The most educated are the most vulnerable to mass formation

Readers will likely remember the experiments of Stanley Milgram, documented in his fine book [*Obedience to Authority*](#). Milgram found that a majority of people from all walks of life, men and women, can be made to obey authority figures against their own better judgment and values, even to the extent of causing great psychological and physical harm to others. As Milgram summarized,

“Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moral factors can be shunted aside with relative ease by a calculated restructuring of the informational and social field.”

Desmet emphasizes several characteristics of Leaders involved in a mass formation process and, in doing so, leaves the reader confused. He writes that Leaders who “convey the story are usually in the grip of the story as well.” He says that the reason Leaders can be so fooled by their own story is that they possess a “morbid ideological drive.” In other words,

Leaders believe in the ideology but not the discourse. This point of the book needs to be clarified and better supported. Do the Leaders bring forth the story? Are they also hypnotized by the story but simultaneously they don't believe the discourse? This appears to be a contradiction.

This contradiction grows larger in Chapter 8, with a discussion of conspiracy. In this chapter, Desmet somewhat ironically atomizes subjects who consider the possibility of conspiracy, reducing them to "confused spectators" who engage in "conspiracy thinking."

He writes that mass formation "should be understood in terms of mass psychology rather than malicious, intentional deception (i.e., a conspiracy)." He gives a few very simplified examples of conspiracy thinking including the fictitious Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the highly dubious QAnon diversion, and suspicions of Russian control of U.S. elections.

The common definition of a conspiracy is "a secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful." Desmet adds that there must be a conscious intent on the part of the conspirators. In an argument we might see in a "fact-checking" article, he further claims that interpretation of phenomena in terms of a conspiracy is something of a coping mechanism that,

"reduces the enormous complexity of the phenomenon to a simple frame of reference: All anxiety is linked to one object (a group of people who intentionally deceives, the supposed 'elite') and thereby becomes mentally manageable... As such, in a certain sense, conspiracy thinking—the thinking that reduces all world events to one big conspiracy—fulfills the same function as mass formation. As with mass formation, conspiracy theorizing fills humans with a kind of enthusiasm."

Of course, many people have found the opposite to be true. Suggesting that phenomena like the Covid crimes are the result of a conspiracy among rich, powerful people to achieve extraordinary gains at the expense of others is quite reasonable. That's because the behavior and history of the rich and powerful people involved has exhibited a similar pattern throughout their lives and the results have brought them extraordinary gains. A conspiracy of the powerful is also the simplest explanation although in reality it instills greater fear instead of enthusiasm.

However, if we get past the atomization of complex phenomena like "conspiracy thinkers" and conspiracies we see the enormous complexity of those phenomena and the very reasonable response to the reality of something like the coronavirus crisis. With the coronavirus crisis, it is obvious that the stages of mass formation were intentionally brought upon the masses by the Leaders—and it was intentional.

- Isolation and loneliness were intentionally created through lockdowns, masking, and nonsensical mandates. This was a process of dehumanization, causing anxiety.
- Anxiety was stoked through the continuous reporting of deaths and "cases" of infection. The deaths were highly exaggerated through misuse of assignment of death, as Desmet concedes, and the "cases" were also highly exaggerated through false positive testing and mis-assignment of patients' primary condition.
- Frustration and aggression toward those who would not comply with mandates was driven by propaganda. Those who were not willing to submit to "the interest of the collective" were ostracized, demonized, and censored.

In the minds of many dissenters all of this was clearly part of a design implemented by those who control politicians and corporate media as well as transnational entities like the WEF and WHO. Although these Leaders might well be hypnotized by ideology, as Desmet suggests, they have also clearly been engaging in a conspiracy that has resulted in the greatest transfer of wealth in history as well as the greatest opportunity for a small few to control the global population indefinitely. Interestingly, the one reason why the Covid crimes do not meet the definition of a conspiracy is that they have largely not been secret. Through published plans, exercises, and interviews of the Leaders involved, the agenda of which the coronavirus crisis is a part has been transparent.

Desmet's treatment of conspiracy reminds us of a similar approach taken by Naomi Klein in her otherwise excellent book, [The Shock Doctrine](#). After going to great lengths to describe what can only be called a long-term conspiracy to economically exploit (and torture) a string of entire nations, Klein adds a small disclaimer section near the end of the book, saying, "No conspiracies required." It's a bit like reading the Bible and struggling through a new section at the end claiming, "No deities required." Both Klein and Desmet may be experiencing psychological dissonance when it comes to the idea of conspiracy, or it could be that they were asked to include such disclaimers as a condition for publication.

In terms of the Leaders intent, some of Desmet's misunderstanding and contradictions on this point can be resolved through a better understanding of history. For example, a long-term conspiracy to terrorize the population of Europe was designed and implemented in Desmet's own country of Belgium. [Operation Gladio](#) is but one example of many throughout history in which secret, intentional plans to cause harm and deceive the public have been planned or carried out by Leaders. Desmet cites an example himself when he writes of the Holocaust:

"At a certain level there was also an intentional plan" behind the Nazi crimes. "There were approximately five people who neatly and systematically prepared the entire Holocaust destruction apparatus and they managed to make all the rest of the system cooperate with it in total blindness for a long time."

Therefore, it is difficult to see the development of mass formation in the context of the coronavirus crisis as being without intent. And we must let authors like Desmet and Klein find their own way in correcting contradictions and reaching a better understanding.

Part III – Beyond the Mechanistic Worldview

In the book's final section, Desmet returns to Chaos Theory and to an assessment of how science and spirituality (or religion) can coexist as part of a less atomized way of moving forward.

He states that Quantum Mechanics and Chaos Theory "initiate the reverse momentum necessary to move away from the dead mechanistic worldview and (back) toward vitalism." Citing physicist Max Planck, he writes, "Science eventually arrives where religion once started, in a personal contact with the Unnameable."

This reference, as well as other parts of Desmet's book, is reflective of the ancient wisdom found in Lao Tzu's [Tao Te Ching](#). The mechanistic worldview is described there in the first chapter where it says, "name is the mother of the ten thousand things." Although this naming is natural, we are later warned, "when names proliferate, it's time to stop. If you

know when to stop, you're in no danger." The inability to stop naming (i.e. objectifying) leads to anxiety driven by oversimplification and false comparisons, the atomization and targeting of people, and a general misunderstanding of the world within and around us. Moreover, excessive objectifying is an insult to the basic truth that "being and non-being arise together" perpetually.

In terms of the cure, referring to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, Desmet proposes that we must develop "a science that does not allow itself to be blinded by mechanistic ideology but which pushes the rational analysis of reality to the maximum, to the absolute limit of the rationally knowable, to the point where reason transcends itself."

Desmet further writes that,

"The antidote to totalitarianism lies in an attitude to life that is not blinded by a rational understanding of superficial manifestations of life and that seeks to be connected with the principles and figures that are hidden beneath those manifestations." He calls for humanity to "vibrate in resonance with ultimate knowledge."

These recommendations are, by nature of the problem, a bit ethereal and a follow-up volume that describes practical ways to correct the mechanistic worldview is needed. Perhaps a closer study of the *Tao Te Ching* would be helpful in this regard. It recommends to "abide in the kernel not the husk, in the fruit not the flower."

In interviews, Desmet has called for dissenters to keep speaking out and he promotes non-violent resistance. He proposes that a parallel structure can be developed to oppose the state, although again without providing detail on how that might occur.

In summary, it is essential that people begin learning more about their own psychology and *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* is an important contribution to that effort. Considering our limited access to the unconscious, and the fact that many of us will obey authority to devastating ends, understanding the psychological processes that lead to totalitarianism is a vital need.

In this important book, Desmet describes the problem of a mechanistic worldview and how that leads to misunderstandings and superficiality in human thought. He also describes the process of mass formation and how this process is reflected in the ongoing coronavirus crisis. The processes Desmet describes may not be entirely fleshed out but discussion of them is likely to lead to a more truthful representation of psychological risks that continue to be exploited.

Understanding our own psychology is crucial at this time because it is being used against us in many ways. Through an extraordinary rise in propaganda and deception, and an extraordinary rise in self-deception, people are being manipulated toward ends that are entirely against their own interests. Anticipating that the evolution of manipulative powers has not reached its peak, it becomes imperative that humanity learn about its own psychology as quickly as possible.

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