

The strange epidemic of “mass formation hypnosis”

A critical reading of the book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* by Mattias Desmet.¹

Thierry Simonelli (July 2022)

After the uprising of the 17th of June
The Secretary of the Writers' Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?
(Berthold Brecht. The Solution.)

Among the many surprising psychological and social phenomena we witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an often radical polarization of public opinion and discourse. The big divide was casted in a simplistic opposition between real scientists, ‘progressives’ and supporters of government policies on the one hand, pseudoscientists, populists, conspiracists and impostors on the other hand (see Stiegler, 2021).

Whereas some sociologists, philosophers, political scientists and even legal scholars have drawn the attention to the deleterious effects of this divide, psychiatrists and psychologists seemed to have been less vocal. The most

¹ All page numbers refer to the electronic version of the book.

widely spread and, for the time being the most influential psychological reading of the crisis stems from Dr. Mattias Desmet, professor for clinical psychology at the University of Ghent, Belgium. Mattias Desmet has become very famous on social media for his radical views on the social psychology of the pandemic. According to this Belgian scientist, most of us have turned 'mad' through what he describes as "mass formation", "mass formation hypnosis" and in some of his interviews even as "mass formation psychosis". Since during his innumerable interviews, his view seemed to be somewhat changing and evolving, it was thus worthwhile waiting for his book. In June 2022, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* finally got published.

Prof. Desmet has a universal solution to the massive problem at hand: a return to the "living universe" where "man is able to receive [ultimate knowledge], by tuning his vibrations, like a string, to the frequency of things" (Desmet 2022, p. 184).

The totalitarianism of the world

"It is quite obvious that mass support for totalitarianism comes neither from ignorance nor from brainwashing."
(Arendt, 1991, p. XXIII)

One fine morning in November 2017, Mattias Desmet, staying at a friend's cottage in the Ardennes, was seized with a sudden intuition: "[...] I was gripped by the palpable and acute awareness of a new totalitarianism that had left its seed and made the fabric of society stiffen" (Desmet, 2022, p. 1).

Mattias Desmet, co-author of a hundred articles on depression, alexithymia and the evaluation of psychotherapies, realized that it "could no longer be denied" that governments were depriving us of our freedom, that "alternative voices" were no longer tolerated, that "security forces" were increasing dramatically, "and more" (Desmet, 2022, p. 1-2, 90). According to Desmet these are the most obvious signs of a world plunged into "totalitarianism".

In his analysis, Desmet refers to the "dystopian vision" (*sic*) of the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt but criticizes her for not clearly understanding in her "vision" the profound difference between traditional dictatorships and totalitarianism. This is an odd claim given that, according to

Arendt herself, the focus of her 900 page study of *The Origins of Totalitarianism's* is precisely an elaboration of the radical historical novelty of the Nazi and Soviet regimes: "This book is about the origins and elements of total domination, as we have known it as a new 'form of state,' I believe, in the Third Reich and in the Bolshevik regime" (Arendt, 1991, p. 16). Not so for Desmet.

In any case, it seems surprising to establish a diagnosis or even an analysis of totalitarianism with the sole work of Hannah Arendt in 2022. On the one hand, the notion of totalitarianism has obviously been discussed, developed and critically debated in political philosophy, sociology, political science and history since Arendt's original analysis. (See Losurdo, 2004) On the other hand, Arendt's essentialist conception of totalitarianism is based on three constitutive elements: the constitution of depoliticised masses following the First World War, the duplication of state institutions supporting constant mobilisation through the use of propaganda for the purposes of the movement, and terror as the 'essence' of totalitarianism, which finds its model in the construction of concentration camps.

Yet, if one could indeed discuss the question of the masses in the liberal democracies of the 21st century, one would find neither a fascist, Nazi or socialist totalitarian movement, nor the terror of the concentration camps or Gulags in Western Europe today. If the psychology of totalitarianism proposes itself not only as a reading of historical totalitarianism, but of the supposed totalitarianism of today (2017 and beyond), it is difficult to see what Desmet could be referring to.

Totalitarianism as psychology

For Mattias Desmet, Arendt did not grasp the true nature of totalitarianism. He surprisingly argues that what political philosophy, political science, sociology, and history have gotten wrong until now is nothing less than the true distinction between traditional dictatorships and totalitarianism: it's psychological, and not its political or sociological differences. Thus, only psychology allows us to understand the intimate mechanisms of totalitarianism. (*sic*, Desmet, 2022, p. 2)

According to Desmet, classical dictatorships are based on "primitive psychological mechanisms", like the "climate of fear" (*ibid.*, p. 2). But

“totalitarized populations” (*sic*), that sacrifice their personal interest for the community, are subject to an insidious “*mass formation*”. To Desmet only this new psychology of “mass formation” allows us to distinguish totalitarianism from dictatorship.

Thus Desmet, via his “palpable and acute awareness” of the world”, can sweep away 70 years of political, sociological, historical and philosophical research on the concepts and the facts of “totalitarianism. In the same way, he can ignore Hannah Arendt’s radical criticism of the psychologization of totalitarianism, – to her, it seemed absurd to explain totalitarianism by a hypnotic fascination or some kind of “magical spell” on the masses.²

The concept of “mass formation” thus seems fundamental to Desmet’s analysis of totalitarianism. Unfortunately, the reader will have to wait in vain for a real definition of this seemingly original analysis in *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*.³ Searching for Desmet’s new psychological concept in the relevant international scientific databases such as *PubMed*, *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *ScienceDirect*, or even *Google Scholar* yields no results. “Mass formation” and even more so “mass formation hypnosis” seem to be original creations of Prof. Desmet. But as we shall see, the mystery of “mass formation” can easily be dispelled, when we follow the sole “scientific” reference in the book.

In lieu of a definition, the professor of clinical psychology explains: “mass formation” is in fact “mass hypnosis” which constitutes “a kind of group hypnosis that destroys individual’s ethical self-awareness and robs them of their ability to think critically” (*ibid.*, p. 2-3). Instead of one concept without a solid definition, we end up having three.

² In her nuanced discussion of Hitler’s “magic spell” and fascination, for example, Arendt is very explicitly opposed to the psychologization of totalitarianism: “To believe that Hitler’s successes rested on his ‘force of fascination’ is quite absurd; with it alone he would have gone no further than a social lion.” (Arendt, 1991, p. 658) Desmet seems to completely ignore Arendt’s discussions of the nature and functions of the “masses” in Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism.

³ This is probably because for Mattias Desmet, “mass formation” and “totalitarianism” are two different names for the same intuitive reality.

Obviously, as this “process is insidious in nature” and “populations fall prey to it unsuspectingly”, nobody will have noticed it. This would mean that we all fell prey to a hypnosis which in fact is a psychosis, but without noticing neither our hypnosis, nor our psychosis.

By thermodynamic analogy, Desmet explains that “mass formation” represents a “a complex and dynamic phenomenon that can be compared to the way convection patterns arise in water or gas when they are heated up” (Desmet, 2022, p. 93)⁴. Thus, “mass formation would bring individuals into a new psychological ‘state of motion’” (*ibid.*) where, let us not forget, collective hypnosis “destroys individuals’ ethical self-awareness and robs them of their ability to think critically.” (*ibid.*, p. 2).

The unexpected return of Gustave Le Bon

In the “kind of hypnosis” that Desmet describes, the reader will easily recognize Gustave Le Bon’s crowd psychology from 1895. For behind the new term “mass formation” we find the old “crowd formation” (mentioned only once in Le Bon’s work) and its result: Le Bon’s “crowd soul” or “collective soul”, which Desmet dubs “group soul” (*ibid.*, p. 91-92, 124-125). Contrary to most social psychologists or sociologists, Desmet does not care to differentiate between groups, mobs, social movements, disaster behavior, mass hysteria, moral panics or any other types of crowds or crowd behavior. For Desmet’s “psychology of totalitarianism”, there’s only one type of crowd: the crowd of the totalitarized masses.

Unsurprisingly, Gustave le Bon is also the only ‘scientific’ source), in terms of social psychology. (Le Bon himself was a medical doctor, and a right-wing political activist turned amateur psychologist. Unsurprisingly, Desmet’s “mass

⁴ Gustave Le Bon used an organic metaphor to express this same emergent property: “The psychological crowd is a provisional being, composed of heterogeneous elements for an instant welded together, absolutely as the cells of a living body form by their reunion a new being manifesting characters quite different from those which each of these cells possesses.” (Le Bon, 2013, p. 11)

formation” recapitulates the most stereotypical features of Le Bon’s “crowd soul”.

In the soul of crowds, Le Bon believed, “conscious personality vanishes” (Le Bon, 2013, p. 9), individuality fades away (*ibid.* p. 12), and is absorbed by “the mental unity of the crowds” (*ibid.* , p. 11), eventually resembling a “meeting of imbeciles” (*ibid.* , p. 12), capable of the “most bloodthirsty acts” (*ibid.* , pp. 14, 18, 42).

Similarly, we read in Desmet’s *Psychology of Totalitarianism*: “The masses are inclined to commit atrocities against those who resist them and typically execute them as if it were an ethical, sacred duty.” (Desmet, pp. 103-104) One cannot help but think of the Italian judge Scipio Sighele’s 1868 work *The Criminal Crowd*, that profoundly inspired Le Bon himself.

Yet Desmet adds a ‘spiritual’ dimension to this classical 19th century *locus communis* which, as we shall see, is no mere accessory in his thinking: “Crowds and their rulers are blindly dragged into a maelstrom of destruction, until they are confronted with the ultimate consequence of the rationale that has monopolized their mind: the mechanistic logic of a dead, soulless universe.” (*sic, ibid.*, p. 119-120)

Crowd psychology without crowds

Whatever the proximity of “mass formation” to the “crowd soul”, Desmet dispenses, as we have seen, with any differentiation as to crowds. While Le Bon proposes a classification of crowds into heterogeneous crowds - anonymous and non-anonymous crowds - and homogeneous crowds - sects, castes and classes - each of which manifests its own structures and dynamics, and while even Arendt makes a moralistic distinction between tribes, rabble, masses, impoverished crowds and population, Desmet is happy with his unique “mass formation” covering the historical world psychology of totalitarianism.

Another originality that Desmet introduces into his original paraphrase of Le Bon is his idiosyncratic definition of the crowd. For Le Bon, and all social psychologists to this day, crowds are always ephemeral phenomena of people physically gathered in one place at one time. This is what F. E. H. Wijermans reminds us of in her doctoral thesis at the University of Groningen: whatever the psychological definitions of the crowd may be, they “all share the notion of

a number of people in the same place at the same time, i.e. a gathering” (Wijermans, p. 12). Unsurprisingly, the Oxford English Dictionary defines crowds as a “large number of persons gathered so closely together as to press upon or impede each other; a throng, a dense multitude”.

This is no longer required for Desmet. Unlike the psychological crowds of social psychology, the crowds of “mass formation” – Desmet’s pun on crowds/masses is easy to detect – may start out as ephemeral, but end up being durable. Similarly, unity of place and time is no longer required: individuals in “mass formation” can be isolated, locked down in their apartments for months and years and still manifest all the phenomena of deindividuation, irrationality, hypnosis, and psychosis that arise from the supposed “dissolution” into the mass. And if all this were not enough, Desmet explains, the phenomenon of “mass formation” has a long history: even before the pandemic, it has been imposed upon the unknowing populations of the earth in an increasingly regular and persistent way since the Enlightenment (Desmet, 2022, p. 92).

Beyond the reality principle

The question that keeps coming up for the reader of *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* is: what is Desmet talking about? Where are these crowds under permanent hypnosis that are inclined to commit atrocities? Where can we find these “psychotic” masses, how can we recognize them? And what do we mean by “mass hypnosis” or “mass psychosis”? Also, if the world has become totalitarian and the world population psychotic, how could the Belgian professor escape? We will probably never find out.

One might also wonder why Desmet, a teacher of psychoanalytic psychotherapy and a researcher in psychoanalytic psychotherapy processes⁵, makes no mention of the psychoanalytic contributions to issues of crowd psychology. Without even mentioning Freud’s crowd psychology, critical of Le Bon, and W. Reich’s famous *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, from which Desmet obviously borrows his title, there actually is a psychoanalytic literature on these issues and that could have contributed to the discussion. Of course, just like

⁵ See the mentally *project* CV page: <http://mentally-project.eu/partners/team/matthias-desmet->

social psychology research, these approaches would soon have called into question the heritage of hypnosis, suggestibility, contagion and irrationality of the crowds, which is required for Desmet's imaginary psychology of totalitarianism.

Thus, Desmet moves from political-fiction to psychology-fiction – since 1895, Le Bon's original insights into the soul of crowds have been falsified again and again in their entirety (see Van Ness & Summers-Effler, 2016, Borch, 2013) – to a history-fiction. Desmet ends up with an interpretation of the world as a whole, even developing a similarly unusual solution to all of our political, cultural, and sanitary problems.

In this posture, one will have recognized the figure of the universal expert, so dear to Le Bon who, starting from his contempt of the revolutionary crowds, offered a psychology for the use of the cultural and political elite. If Le Bon's psychology has ended up deeply marking popular psychology to this day (see Rubio, 2008), we easily forget the fact that his psychological analyses also had a clearly declared and assumed political intention.

Le Bon was no friend of the crowds. On the contrary, he believed that “civilizations have been created and guided [...] by a small intellectual aristocracy” (Le Bon, 2013, p. 4), never by the crowds. This was shown by the French Revolution or the Paris Commune. The crowds destroy the rational order and establish the reign of the irrational: “From the moment the Revolution descended from the bourgeoisie into the popular strata, it ceased to be a domination of the rational over the instinctive and became instead the effort of the instinctive to dominate the rational.” (Le Bon, 2021, p. 56) And when Le Bon writes “crowds”, he is always thinking of social movements, “popular classes” and even dangerous socialists.

The politics of psychological totalitarianism

Crowd psychology and its new name, “mass formation”, bear the mark of conservative elitism. But in Le Bon, crowd psychology is addressed to the Statesman who will no longer be able to govern the “primitive barbarism” (Le Bon, 2021, p. 64) of the popular classes, but who equipped with the new psychological knowledge will at least be able “not to be too completely governed by them.” (Le Bon, 2013, p. 5)

Desmet reverses this perspective in part: crowds are indeed hypnotized, irrational, and psychotic, but it is up to experts to free them from their political and historical bonds. The psychology of “mass formation” attempts to save the psychotic masses from totalitarianism.

The negative freedom Desmet envisions is thus easy to conceive: it is the freedom from totalitarianism imposed by “security agencies”, by the “general advance of the surveillance society” by the “increasing pressure on the right to privacy” and the increase in citizen-to-citizen denunciation, the “loss of support for basic democratic principles” and by “the introduction of an experimental vaccination program” (Desmet, 2022, p. 90-91).

But it is the positive freedom, not the freedom *from*, but freedom *to*, that distinguishes Desmet's surprising psychological politics. For what Desmet claims is no less than a spiritual revolution on a global scale, meant to free us from the “mechanistic ideology” (sic, *ibid.*, p. 37, 44, 46, 46, 50, 63 ...) of the Enlightenment.

The spiritualism of the living universe as salvation

How then, asks Desmet, can we transcend the dead mechanics of the Enlightenment? For the ideology of the Enlightenment sees the universe as a “mechanistic interaction between dead elementary particles” (Desmet, 2022, p. 148 and 162). In fact, this ideology already existed in 400 BC with Leucippus and Democritus, but never mind chronology. Let us not bother with historical details any more than with psychological, scientific, or political trifles. The big picture counts.

Now, what “Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Louis de Broglie, Planck, Bohr, Wolfgang Pauli, Sir Arthur Eddington, Sir James Jean” have shown in their “contemplative works” (sic, *ibid.*, p. 180), is that the human being must “transcend rationality” in order to realize his full potentiality (*ibid.*, p. 90-91). The “ultimate knowledge [...] vibrates in all things” (*ibid.* p. 16, 184) of the living Universe.

So let us conclude with Desmet: “The awareness that no logic is absolute is the prerequisite for mental freedom. The gap in the logic literally opens up a space for our own style and for the desire to create. [...] Perhaps, it might also work against viruses?” (Desmet, p. 188).

Under the cobblestones of the elementary particles of the dead universe of the Enlightenment, the beach of the living universal consciousness determining the elementary particles (*ibid.*, p. 162) in a “circular causality” (*ibid.*, p. 164) going from the spirit to the matter and back.

It is now up to the true experts of the living universe to show the dazed people the way out of their hypnotic totalitarianism: the expert of the universal vital vibrations will enable the people to transcend rationality, to overcome the separation of matter and spirit, to wake up from their hypnosis, to cure from their psychosis, to heal themselves from any physical and mental illnesses (*ibid.*, p. 168), and to develop an unimaginable physical strength (*ibid.*, p. 166). The last one might indeed be useful when the psychiatric ambulance care team is out to get you.

Unquestionably, Desmet shows us the way beyond rationality and the effect of our “own style and desire to create” (*ibid.*, p. 188), far away from the reality of the “dead universe” and of false experts. Let us wish Prof Desmet's spiritual revolution good luck. But until the real world will follow in the footsteps of the spiritual consciousness of the living universe, we might be better served by less fancy and more matter.

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