

# MASS PSYCHOSIS

## How an entire population becomes mentally ill

*"The masses have never thirsted after truth. 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."*

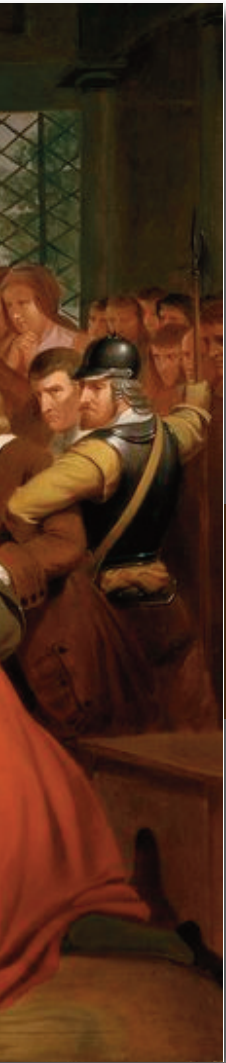
– Gustave Le Bon

According to the psychologist Carl Jung, the greatest threat to civilisation lies not with the forces of nature, nor with any physical disease, but with our inability to deal with the forces of our own psyche. We are our own worst enemies or as the Latin proverb puts it "Man is wolf to man". In *Civilization in Transition*, Jung states that this proverb "is a sad yet eternal truism", and our wolf-like tendencies come most

prominently into play at those times of history when mental illness becomes the norm, rather than the exception in a society, a situation which Jung termed a psychic epidemic. "Indeed, it is becoming ever more obvious" he writes:

"...that it is not famine, not earthquakes, not microbes, not cancer but man himself who is man's greatest danger to man, for the simple reason that there is no adequate protection against psychic epidemics, which are infinitely more devastating than the worst of natural catastrophes." (Carl Jung, *The Symbolic Life*)

A mass psychosis is an epidemic of madness, and it occurs when a large portion of a society loses touch with



reality and descends into delusions. Such a phenomenon is not a thing of fiction. Two examples of mass psychoses are the American and European witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century. During the witch hunts, thousands of individuals, mostly women, were killed, not for any crimes they committed but because they became the scapegoats of societies gone mad: "In some Swiss villages," writes Frances Hill "there were scarcely any women left alive after the frenzy had finally burned itself out." (Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan*)

When a mass psychosis occurs, the results are devastating. Jung studied this phenomenon and wrote that the individuals who make up the infected society, "become morally and spiritually inferior", they "sink unconsciously to an inferior... intellectual

hyper-emotional state. While escaping from the state of panic can be accomplished through adaptive means such as facing up to, and defeating the fear generating threat, another way to escape is to undergo a psychotic break. A psychotic break is not a descent into a state of greater disorder as many believe, but a reordering of one's experiential world which blends fact and fiction, or delusions and reality, in a way that helps end the feelings of panic.

Silvano Arieti, one of the 20th century's foremost authorities on schizophrenia, explains the psychogenic steps that lead to madness: firstly, there is:

"[the] phase of panic—when the patient starts to perceive things in a different way, is frightened on account of it, appears confused, and does not know how to explain 'the strange things that are happening'."

If a panic-triggering flood of negative emotions, in a weak and vulnerable individual, can trigger a psychotic

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level", they become "more unreasonable, irresponsible, emotional, erratic, and unreliable," and worst of all, "Crimes the individual alone could never stand, are freely committed by the group [smitten by madness]."

What makes matters worse is that those suffering from a mass psychosis are unaware of what is occurring. For just as an individual gone mad cannot step out of their mind to observe the errors in his ways, so too there is no Archimedean point from which those living

through a mass psychosis can observe their collective madness.

### What Causes a Mass Psychosis?

To answer this question, we must first explore what drives an individual mad. While there are many potential triggers of madness, such as an excessive use of drugs or alcohol, brain injuries and other illnesses, these physical causes will not concern us here. Our concern is with psychological, or what are called psychogenic triggers, as these are the most common culprits of the mass psychosis.

The most prevalent psychogenic cause of a psychosis is a flood of negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, that drives an individual into a state of panic. When in a state of panic, an individual will naturally seek relief, as it is too mentally and physically draining to subsist in this

break, then a mass psychosis can result when a population of weak and vulnerable individuals is driven into a state of panic by threats real, imagined, or fabricated.

Delusions and madness can manifest in countless ways, so the specific manner in which a mass psychosis unfolds will differ based on the historical and cultural context of the infected society.

### Totalitarianism and the Use of Mass Psychosis

But in the modern era it is the mass psychosis of totalitarianism that appears to be the greatest threat: "Totalitarianism" writes Arthur Versluis, "is the modern phenomenon of total centralized state power coupled with the obliteration of individual human rights: in the totalized state, there are those in power, and there are the objectified masses, the victims." (Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions*)

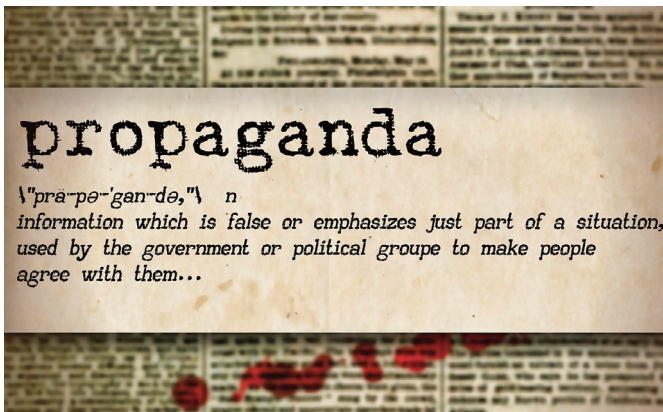
In a totalitarian society the population is divided into two groups, the rulers and the ruled, and both groups undergo a pathological transformation. The rulers are elevated to an almost god-like status which is diametrically opposed to our nature as imperfect beings who are easily corrupted by power. The masses, on the other hand, are transformed into the dependent subjects of these pathological rulers and take on a psychologically regressed and childlike status. Hannah Arendt, one of the 20th century's pre-eminent scholars of this form of rule, called totalitarianism an attempted transformation of



"human nature itself".

But this attempted transformation only turns sound minds into sick minds, for as the Dutch medical doctor who studied the mental effects of living under totalitarianism wrote:

"... there is in fact much that is comparable between the strange reactions of the citizens of [totalitarianism] and their culture as a whole on the one hand, and the reactions of the...sick schizophrenic on the other." (Joost A.M. Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind*)



The social transformation that unfolds under totalitarianism is built upon, and sustained by, delusions. For only deluded men and women regress to the childlike status of obedient and submissive subjects and hand over complete control of their lives to politicians and bureaucrats. Only a deluded ruling class will believe that they possess the knowledge, wisdom, and acumen to completely control society in a top-down manner. And only when under the spell of delusions would anyone believe that a society composed of power-hungry rulers, on the one hand, and a psychologically regressed population, on the other, will lead to anything other than mass suffering and social ruin. The mass psychosis of totalitarianism has been induced many times throughout history, and as Meerloo explains: "It is simply a question of reorganizing and manipulating collective feelings in the proper way."

### **Menticide: The Killing of the Mind**

The general method by which the members of a ruling elite can accomplish this end is called menticide, with the etymology of this word being "a killing of the mind", and as Meerloo further explains:

"Menticide is an old crime against the human mind and spirit but systematized anew. It is an organized system of psychological intervention and judicial perversion through which a [ruling class] can imprint [their] own opportunistic thoughts upon the minds of those [they] plan to use and destroy." (*The Rape of the Mind*)

Priming a population for the crime of menticide begins

with the sowing of fear so as to place a population into the state of panic that primes them for a descent into the delusionary beliefs of a psychosis.

A particularly effective technique to accomplish this end is to use waves of terror. Under this technique the sowing of fear is staggered with periods of calm, but each of these periods of calm is followed by the manufacturing of an even more intense spell of fear, and on and on the process goes, or as Meerloo writes:

"Each wave of terrorizing... creates its effects more easily—after a breathing spell—than the one that preceded it because people are still disturbed by their previous experience. Morality becomes lower and lower, and the psychological effects of each new propaganda campaign become stronger; it reaches a public already softened up."

While fear primes a population for menticide, the use of propaganda to spread misinformation and to promote confusion with respect to the source of the threats, and the nature of the crisis, helps to break down the minds of the masses. Government officials, and their lackies in the media, can use contradictory reports, nonsensical information and even blatant lies, as the more they confuse, the less capable will a population be to cope with the crisis, and diminish their fear, in a rational and adaptive manner. Confusion, in other words, heightens the susceptibility of a descent into the delusions of totalitarianism, or as Meerloo explains:

"Logic can be met with logic, while illogic cannot—it confuses those who think straight. The Big Lie and monotonously repeated nonsense have more emotional appeal... than logic and reason. While the [people are] still searching for a reasonable counter-argument to the first lie, the totalitarians can assault [them] with another." (*The Rape of the Mind*)

### **Propaganda and the Rise of Social Media**

Never before in history have such effective means existed to manipulate a society into the psychosis of totalitarianism. Smart phones and social media, television and the internet, all in conjunction with bots that spread propaganda and algorithms that quickly censor the flow of unwanted information, allow those in power to easily assault the minds of the masses.

What is more, the addictive nature of these technologies means that many people voluntarily subject themselves to the ruling elite's propaganda with a remarkable frequency: "Modern technology" explains Meerloo, "teaches man to take for granted the world he is looking at; he takes no time to retreat and reflect. Technology lures him on, dropping him into its wheels and movements. No rest, no meditation, no reflection, no conversation—the senses are continually overloaded with stimuli. [Man] doesn't learn to question his world anymore; the screen offers him answers-ready-made." (*The Rape of the Mind*)

But there is a further step the would-be totalitarian rulers can take to increase the chance of a totalitarian psychosis, and this is to isolate the victims and to disrupt normal social interactions.

When alone and lacking normal interactions with friends, family and co-workers, an individual becomes far more susceptible to delusions for several reasons: Firstly, they lose contact with the corrective force of the positive example. For not everyone is tricked by the machinations of the ruling elite, and the individuals who see through the propaganda can help free others from the menticidal assault. If, however, isolation is enforced, the power of these positive examples greatly diminishes.

But another reason that isolation increases the efficacy of menticide is because like many other species, human beings are more easily conditioned into new patterns of thought and behaviour when isolated, or as Meerloo explains with regards to the physiologist Ivan Pavlov's work on behavioural conditioning:

"Pavlov made another significant discovery: the conditioned reflex could be developed most easily in a quiet laboratory with a minimum of disturbing stimuli. Every trainer of animals knows this from his own experience; isolation and the patient repetition of stimuli are required to tame wild animals... The totalitarians have followed this rule. They know that they can condition their political victims most quickly if they are kept in isolation." (*The Rape of the Mind*)

### Freedom of Thought is Eliminated

Alone, confused and battered by waves of terror, a population under an attack of menticide descends into a hopeless and vulnerable state. The never-ending stream of propaganda turns minds once capable of rational thought into playhouses of irrational forces and with chaos swirling around them, and within them, the masses crave a return to a more ordered world. The would-be totalitarians can now take the decisive step, they can offer a way out and a return to order in a world that seems to be moving rapidly in the opposite direction.

But all this comes at a price: The masses must give up their freedom and cede control of all aspects of life to the ruling elite. They must relinquish their capacity to be self-reliant individuals who are responsible for their own lives, and become submissive and obedient subjects. The masses, in other words, must descend into the delusions of the totalitarian psychosis. "...[T]he totalitarian systems of the 20th century represent a kind of collective psychosis," writes Meerloo.

"Whether gradually or suddenly, reason and common human decency are no longer possible in such a system: there is only a pervasive atmosphere of terror, and a projection of 'the enemy', imagined to be 'in our midst'. Thus society turns on itself, urged on by the ruling authorities."

But the order of a totalitarian world is a pathological

order. By enforcing a strict conformity, and requiring a blind obedience from the citizenry, totalitarianism rids the world of the spontaneity that produces many of life's joys and the creativity that drives society forward. The total control of this form of rule, no matter under what name it is branded, and be it rule by scientists and doctors, politicians and bureaucrats, or a dictator, breeds stagnation, destruction and death on a mass scale.

### Preventing Totalitarianism

And so perhaps the most important question facing the world is how can totalitarianism be prevented? And if a society has been induced into the early stages of this mass psychosis, can the effects be reversed? While one can never be sure of the prognosis of a collective madness, there are steps that can be taken to help effectuate a cure. This task, however, necessitates many different approaches, from many different people. For just as the menticidal attack is multi-pronged, so too must be the counterattack. According to Carl Jung, for those of us who wish to help return sanity to an insane world, the first step is to bring order to our own minds, and to live in a way that provides inspiration for others to follow:

"It is not for nothing that our age cries out for the redeemer personality, for the one who can emancipate himself from the grip of the collective [psychosis] and save at least his own soul, who lights a beacon of hope for others, proclaiming that here is at least one man who has succeeded in extricating himself from the fatal identity with the group psyche." (*The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 10*)

But assuming one is living in a manner free of the grip of the psychosis there are further steps that can be taken:



Firstly, information that counters the propaganda should be spread as far, and as wide, as possible. For the truth is more powerful than the fiction and falsities peddled by the would-be totalitarian rulers and so their success is in part contingent on their ability to censor the free flow of

information. Another tactic is to use humour and ridicule to delegitimise the ruling elite or as Meerloo explains:

"We must learn to treat the demagogue and aspirant dictators in our midst...with the weapon of ridicule. The demagogue himself is almost incapable of humor of any sort, and if we treat him with humor, he will begin to collapse."

A tactic recommended by Václav Havel, a political dissident under Soviet communist rule who later became president of Czechoslovakia, is the construction of what are called "parallel structures". A parallel structure is any form of organisation, business, institution, technology, or creative pursuit that exists physically within a totalitarian society, yet morally outside of it.

In communist Czechoslovakia, Havel noted that these parallel structures were more effective at combatting totalitarianism than political action.

Furthermore, when enough parallel structures are created, a "second culture" or "parallel society" spontaneously forms and functions as an enclave of freedom and sanity within a totalitarian world. Or as Havel explains in his book, *The Power of the Powerless*:

"...what else are parallel structures than an area where a different life can be lived, a life that is in harmony with its own aims and which in turn structures itself in harmony with those aims?... What

else are those initial attempts at social self-organization than the efforts of a certain part of society...to rid itself of the self-sustaining aspects of totalitarianism and, thus, to extricate itself radically from its involvement in the...totalitarian system?"

But above all else, what is required to prevent a full descent into the madness of totalitarianism is action by as many people as possible. For just as the ruling elite do not sit around passively, but instead take deliberate steps to increase their power, so too an active and concerted effort must be made to move the world back in the direction of freedom. This can be an immense challenge in a world falling prey to the delusions of totalitarianism, but as Thomas Paine noted: "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph." (Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*)

#### **Editor's Note:**

This article is an edited transcript of the documentary film, *Mass Psychosis: How an Entire Population Becomes Mentally Ill* (2021). A collaboration of After Skool and Academy of Ideas, the video can be found at <https://youtu.be/09maaUaRT4M>. To contact After Skool, visit [www.AfterSkool.net](http://www.AfterSkool.net) and for Academy of Ideas, go to [www.AcademyOfIdeas.net](http://www.AcademyOfIdeas.net).