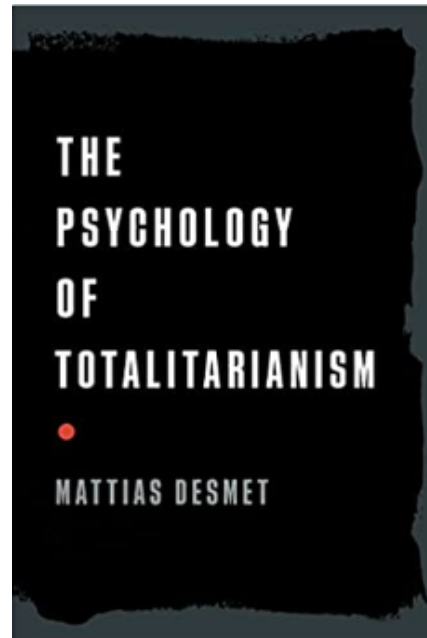

BOOK SUMMARY

"The Psychology of Totalitarianism" by Mattias Desmet

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People are now generally making comments like, "Things have changed on our planet", "It's not like it used to be" or asking things like "What is happening to our world?" and "Where are we headed?" and "What does it all mean?"

The book, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, has some poignant answers to these questions. The author is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at Ghent University in Belgium and he is also a practicing psychoanalytic psychotherapist. The book is well written and translated into easily readable English by Els Vanbrabant.

What is "totalitarianism"? Well, we all know what the end point looks like with labour, concentration, "education" and extermination camps, but it's the process of getting there that this book highlights and in that regard, it is a stand-out and a "must read". The process is well elaborated in its 231 pages.

Totalitarianism is different from dictatorships which are essentially based on instilling fear of physical aggression where the population is struck by such a degree of fear that the dictator or regime is able to impose their authority. The distinction in both dictatorships and totalitarianism is well outlined in the

book by Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she asserts the difference is really at a psychological level.

Totalitarianism, on the other hand, almost works from the bottom up where the totalitarian leader creates what is called "mass formation" which is described as a kind of group hypnosis or group-think that ultimately destroys individuals' ethical self-awareness and robs them of their ability to think critically or logically. Unnervingly, this process is insidious in nature and populations fall prey to it unsuspectingly because the shift to this state is gradual over time.

According to Desmet, totalitarianism is not a coincidence and forms from a set of unique circumstances. It arises from a collective "mass formation" that has followed a predictable script throughout history. Its formation gained strength and speed as technology advanced with each generation, from the Jacobins of the French Revolution to the Nazis, Stalinists, and Maoist Red Guard. Governments, mass media, and other Deep State forces use fear, loneliness, and isolation to demoralize populations and exert control, persuading large groups of people to act against their own interests, always with destructive results.

'Couldn't happen in our enlightened age' you might say. The author argues differently. He clearly illustrates how close we are to surrendering to totalitarian regimes. Censorships abounds, there is a loss of privacy, we have surrendered our freedoms and "emergency measures" with tight authoritarian rules have overcome our democracy.

There are **four conditions** in particular that have to be present in a society for large-scale mass formation to occur. These four conditions were present prior to the rise of Nazism and Stalinism and the author argues that they are present now.

What are these conditions?

- (1) **Generalised loneliness, social isolation and lack of social bonds** among the population; interestingly too, social media and communication technology has only contributed to this sense of aloneness.
- (2) **Lack of meaning in life** as evidenced by our mechanistic world producing "bullshit jobs"; a 2013 Gallup World Poll found only 13% of people worldwide were truly engaged in their job while 24% were actively disengaged where they were demoralised as well as demotivating their colleagues.

- (3) **Free-floating anxiety** and psychological unease which is widespread in the population; this factor is also related back to the first two conditions.
- (4) **Good deal of free-floating frustration and aggression** which is exacerbated by the first three conditions and is evidenced for example, by the sharp increase in racist and threatening language on social media over the last decade.

So, how do these four conditions lead to mass formation? The trigger for mass formation is a suggestion put out into the public sphere or arena. If, under the conditions mentioned above, a suggestive story is spread through the mass media that indicates **an object of anxiety** (eg., the aristocracy under Stalin, the Jews under Nazism, the COVID-19 virus, the anti-vaxxers through the covid crisis) while at the same time **a strategy** is offered to deal with that object of anxiety, then there is a very real chance the free-floating anxiety will attach itself to that object and there will be broad support for the implementation of the strategy to control that object of anxiety.

This process gives a psychological reward. It's a fix for a floundering society.

First, the generalised anxiety and unease is now linked to a specific cause and can be mentally controlled via the strategy put forward in the story. Second, through a common struggle with the "enemy", the fragmented society regains it's group coherence, it's energy and its meaning. Third, all the pent-up frustration and aggression is now directed towards the group that refuses to go along with the story and the mass formation. This of course, brings enormous release and satisfaction to the masses to which they won't let go.

Desmet indicated that this creates a kind of intoxication to go along with the mass-forming narrative. He states that "a society saturated with individualism and rationalism suddenly tilts toward the radically opposite condition, toward radically irrational collectivism" (p.97). In all mass formations, the main argument for joining is in solidarity with the collective.

Individuals are compelled to go along with the mass formation because the justification of the strategy is promoted by experts with fancy titles, government officials often on national television and often endorsed too by leading sports figures or film stars or similar making it seem like a given measure is generally accepted. For many people, this suffices as proof or correctness of the measure: "Surely the experts know what they're doing", "The experts can't be wrong". "Surely, they can't all be wrong", "They wouldn't say it if it wasn't

true". The intent is that you need to go along with the story, not examine the accuracy of the story.

Of course too, central in all this is **the role of mass media and social media**. Totalitarian systems have always been maintained by systematic indoctrination and propaganda injected on a daily basis. On the one hand, the population is systematically exposed to the voice of the totalitarian leaders while on the other hand, every alternative voice is eliminated. The first thing totalitarian leaders do is to make sure their voices are the only ones left. There is no discussion or debate in the public market-place. No dialogue to discuss options or consequences of particular actions.

Today, there are several signs that a new kind of technocratic totalitarianism is emerging and quickly, especially since covid; an exponential increase in the number of intrusive actions by security agencies (eg., opening mail, searching IT systems, installing eavesdropping devices, tapping telephones) the advance of surveillance and cameras, the right to privacy being challenged, the increase in citizens snitching on each other through government-organised channels, the increasing censorships and suppression of alternative voices especially during the covid crisis, loss of support for basic democratic principles and the introduction of an experimental vaccination program and QR code as a condition for having access to public spaces and so on. What's more, this emergence of a new totalitarian system is being led not by "ring leaders" like Stalin and Hitler, but by "dull bureaucrats and technocrats" (p.91).

These dynamics and trends slowly give rise to the emergence of totalitarian parties and leaders who gradually institutionalise a particular "logic" and impose it on society. Typically, what characterises these totalitarian leaders is not greed, power or money, but **their morbid ideological drive**. Reality must be adjusted to the ideological fiction. The leader blindly believes in the ideology, but not in the discourse they use to promote it. They believe so fanatically in the ideology that they consider it justified to manipulate, to lie, and deceive in order to achieve the ideology. Mankind (or part of it) is on its way to the best of all worlds and therefore everything is permissible.

What ideological drive could be driving events now?

Desmet argues that it is about a vision of an ideal society based on a mechanistic universe where science reigns. Not surprisingly, we need only turn to see the rise of various institutions specifically created to make plans for what a future society should look like, and how the ideal future society should

respond to crisis situations. For example, Operation Lockstep for the Rockefeller Foundation, Event 201 for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University and the Rockefeller Foundation), the Great Re-set by Klaus Schwab and the World Economic Forum. In short, they consider that the world needs to move toward a "digiosm", a "society' in which human life is conducted mainly on-line.

This gives rise to "transhumanism".

In other words, this mechanistic ideology asserts that it is desirable, even necessary, that future humans merge physically and mentally with machines. To this end, our bodies need to be saturated with microchips and be monitored via a powerful internet. Once this is achieved, it will be possible for instance, to not only fight crime and sexual harassment more effectively than ever before, but also possible to carry out genetic correction and preventative medicine through the collection of biometric data and replacing the body's natural resilience with vaccine generated artificial immunity.

However, to continue to bring about a totalitarian state, the leaders must identify new objects of anxiety because if the system cannot link anxiety to an object, it loses its raison d'etre and it ceases to exist. Hence, the directives and decrees are constantly changing because it is imperative to create new responses to new threats.

In recent decades, we have seen the emergence of many objects of anxiety in our society which has served to limit, more and more, our civil liberties. For example, terrorism especially after 9/11, the coronavirus and now climate change.

All this sounds foreboding as if we are going head-long into a totalitarian state were many may not wish to go. How do we push-back against mass formation? How do we slow down the masses? Physical violence doesn't work; it only incites the masses and convinces them of their righteousness and their sacred duty to persecute and destroy the minority.

It's important to also understand that there are **always three groups present in mass formation.**

- (1) The group that is in the grip of mass formation and "believes" the story (about 30%).
- (2) A group that does not believe the story, but remains quiet and goes along with the masses (about 40-60%).

(3) Group that does not believe in the mass-forming story and also speaks out against it (about 10-30%).

It is this third group who need to let their voices be heard so as to not let the resonance of the dominant, hypnotic voice become absolute. Although the dissident group is always banned from the mass and social media, there are other avenues to speak out and doing so always has an effect on the other two groups.

For the first group, Gustave Le Bon (1895) is cited as offering sound advice. Speaking up by the third group (the dissidents) does not break through the hypnosis of group one, but it does reduce the depth of the hypnosis and does help to prevent it committing atrocities. Further, the leaders are sensitive to the dissident voices as well. However, the speaking up needs to be calm and respectful with a sensitivity to the irritation and anger that speaking out might generate, but also needs to be determined and persistent. If the dissidents are silent though, the totalitarian system can become a monster.

With the second group, they are more responsive to the quality of rational argument. It is about refuting the indoctrination and propaganda of the totalitarian narrative in the clearest and more substantiated way. Hence, it is a matter of persistently and repeatedly piercing the web of appearances and showing as much as possible, the false image which is being created. Desmet suggests that counterarguments should be formulated in a disciplined and organised manner, through a specially created structure of working groups which as a side benefit, works against the totalitarian thrust to break social bonds.

Finally, group three needs to speak for itself. Needless to say, this group becomes an object of frustration for the masses in group one, and it is typically dehumanised and they are seen as inferior human beings. Regardless, silence is not an option and speaking out also leads to a sense of meaning as individuals seek to speak truth honestly and sincerely.

As a side note, Desmet also asserts that the absurdity of the story and narrative of the masses (group one) also plays to their detriment. In other words, the totalitarian system is intrinsically self-destructive and always destroys itself in the long run. The totalitarian system doesn't have to be overcome so much as one must somehow survive until it destroys itself.

There is no doubt that reading this book will help one combat the march toward totalitarianism. In short, this is an excellent book on the current global

situation regarding the “Covid pandemic”, the Great Reset, and the seemingly psychotic state of a large portion of the world’s population.

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