

Europe's Mass-Psychosis Getting WORSE | Prof. Mattias Desmet

The most fragile moment in 500 years of Western imperial dominance is also its most dangerous. As power slips away, the masses are forming into a new and frightening way. And it all has to do with psychology. Kyoto University Symposium 2026: "Geopolitics in the Time of Monsters" Presentation 3: Prof. Mattias Desmet Why do even intelligent people fall for the most ridiculous narratives? At the Kyoto Symposium, Mattias Desmet presents his theory of mass formation, linking loneliness, anxiety and collective identification to propaganda and intolerance. He argues that sincere speech can rebuild human connections and resist destructive conformity. The discussion tests his account against history, modernity, class, racism and contemporary geopolitical conflict. Audience members challenge his assumptions and explore whether psychological explanations can complement structural analysis when diagnosing the dangers facing societies today. Mattias's Links: Official website: <https://mattiasdesmet.com/en/> Substack: <https://words.mattiasdesmet.org/> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Time Stamps 00:00 Introduction: diagnosing the patient 04:56 Intelligence, conformity and mass formation 08:31 Loneliness and the appeal of collective narratives 15:56 Intolerance, propaganda and conflict 19:39 Sincere speech and rebuilding human connections 24:10 Q&A: anxiety and propaganda 38:17 History, class and the limits of mass psychology 56:40 Belief, experience and the final audience questions

#Pascal

Matthias Desmet, you've been working for many years now upon mass psychology, and this will take us away from history, but I'm very keen on hearing your take on what's going on. Matthias, please.

#Mattias Desmet

Thank you. I'm not sure that my talk will take us away from history. We will see. So, Pascal, you suggested we first diagnose the patient and then propose a therapy. Who is the patient? Is the patient the geopolitical leader who manipulates the population into a nuclear conflict, for instance, with Russia? I think the geopolitical leader definitely is part of the problem. I do believe that modern democracy actually, from the beginning, was a state system where propaganda was the organizing principle. So that's a major part of the problem. But beyond that, I think there is at least a second patient. That's part of the population which blindly buys into propaganda, no matter how absurd it is. That's one of the most remarkable things, and that's what my work is all about: mass psychology.

How can you understand that intelligent people buy into the most absurd war propaganda, knowing that it might send their children to war? That's a more fascinating and more challenging psychological question, and also a diagnosis which is more challenging at the level of therapy. Well, let me tell something about the beginning of my academic career. I started to work in academia back in 2003, and I was supposed to do classical research in psychology, and I was supposed to study how certain personality traits related to depression. And my supervisor asked me to measure depressive symptoms in a certain sample, and then to also assess personality traits in that sample, and then to compute statistical correlations between the two. And I started to do that research, and I measured personality traits with three different personality measures.

And I repeated the measures for three consecutive days. And the correlation between the three series of personality measures was zero. So in psychology, when you measure a personality trait for three consecutive days—today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow—the correlation in the same sample, the correlation between the three series of measurements, might be zero, meaning that, by definition, it is impossible that the psychological test which pretends to measure personality actually measures personality, because personality exactly refers to the characteristics in a human being that are stable over time. Okay?

So, the strange thing is... I wrote my PhD about that because I switched the focus of my PhD from classical research in psychology to research into the quality of research in psychology. And I published my first book, *The Pursuit of Objectivity in Psychology*, and that book was banned from university. Couldn't use it anymore. And my last book was also banned, a book about the psychology of totalitarianism. I think I'm the only professor in Belgium who wrote three books, of which two were banned by his own university. The first book, it was all about this problem, like that actually, from a mathematical point of view, most psychological research is absolutely absurd.

It's absolutely absurd. And my first book was about that. And the most interesting thing to me was that while most of my colleagues are highly intelligent people, when they were confronted with that problem, they refused to see it, and they got very angry. And they never, they never proposed one argument against my theory. Instead, they were just angry and didn't want to talk with me anymore. Okay, so that was the first time I was confronted with that strange phenomenon that a culture of highly intelligent people can go along with the most absurd theories and absolutely refuse to see it. That was where I got interested in mass psychology. And then, when the corona crisis started, like from the first days of the corona crisis, I could see that the statistics were bullshit, that most statistics were bullshit.

That the mortality rate of the virus, for instance, was highly exaggerated. I published an opinion paper in Belgium, and from day one, I was public enemy number one in Belgium. And, like, even when, a few months later, even the people who constructed the initial mathematical models admitted that they had been overestimating the mortality rates of the virus by a factor of 10, even then, the narrative just continued in the media. And that was the moment when I tried to apply

what I learned about mass psychology to the corona crisis, and later on to many dynamics at the geopolitical level as well. So I will go into that strange phenomenon of what I call a mass formation, because I do believe that, in a certain way, it's extremely important to understand why populations, also the highly intelligent part of the population, actually go along with war propaganda.

War propaganda, which is at least as absurd in many respects as the corona narrative. Well, I do believe that if we want to understand how an entire culture can be organized through propaganda, we do not only have to take into account the fact that modern leaders, modern geopolitical leaders, have a huge machinery at their disposal, like the internet, to manipulate public opinion. That's one important aspect of propaganda. But there is a second one. You need a population who buys into it, and to do that, you need a lonely population. Jacques Ellul, whom I consider the most intelligent writer about propaganda, said exactly this. He said propaganda is only efficacious in a lonely and disconnected population.

And in a strange way, together with the emergence of propaganda techniques in modern democracy, together with the emergence of these propaganda techniques, we could also see how loneliness increased in the population. Like Hegel, the German philosopher Hegel, mentions in the beginning of the 19th century already, society is atomizing, it's falling apart. So there's all kinds of reasons for this atomization of society at the social level: the industrialization of society, also the fact that our society becomes more narcissistic. Narcissism isolates people from each other. And this narcissism started to increase with the beginning of the Enlightenment culture. So there's all kinds of reasons why the population got lonelier.

#Pascal

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#Mattias Desmet

And in the beginning of the 21st century, there is, like, the problem is huge. Like Theresa May, I believe, in Great Britain, appointed a minister of loneliness because she recognized how many people felt lonely. And the U.S. Surgeon General, around the same time, said that there was a loneliness epidemic. So many people feel lonely, feel extremely— a lot of people feel lonely to the extent that up to 60%, I believe, of the people mention that they do not have one meaningful relationship to another human being. It's huge. And at the same time, with the problem of loneliness, as soon as loneliness increases in a population, you see a second problem at the level of the psychology of the population.

You will see that the more people feel lonely, the more people mention that they struggle with lack of meaning-making in life, lack of purpose in life. And when these two conditions are fulfilled at the

psychological level—many people feel lonely, many people struggle with lack of meaning-making—you will see some dramatic changes at the level of emotional functioning. You will see how people start to struggle with what I call free-floating anxiety, frustration, and aggression. That means, like, a kind of anxiety, frustration, and aggression people cannot connect to a mental representation. People have always been anxious.

But modern anxiety is different in this respect, that it is not connected to a mental representation. It's freely floating in the air, in the social air. It's under these conditions that propaganda gets extremely efficacious. If, under these conditions, someone distributes a narrative which indicates an object of anxiety—for instance, a coronavirus or Putin invading Ukraine—there is a very good chance. It's not 100%, of course, but it's very high. The probability is very high. There's a very good chance that all this free-floating anxiety will suddenly connect to the object of anxiety in the narrative that is disseminated through the mass media.

So something very strange happens at that moment, something very important. All this free-floating anxiety at once connects to the object of anxiety. All the frustration, aggression, anxiety connects to the object of anxiety. And the field of people's attention, the field of attention in the population, narrows down until it only sees that one object of anxiety, which seems to be responsible for all the troubles in the world and consequently which has to be destroyed. So that's the first step of a transformation: the connection of all the free-floating emotions to one object of anxiety, frustration, and aggression. Then a second step happens, which is even more important.

Because so many people at the same time connect their anxiety to the same object, it seems as if all these people escape their loneliness. It seems as if they are connected again, as if they fight this heroic battle with the object of anxiety, the coronavirus, or the Russians, okay? So this object of anxiety creates a new social bond. It saves people from loneliness and disconnectedness. It seems as if it frees people from their loneliness. But it doesn't really do so. That's extremely important. Because a mass, when a mass emerges, a mass is a group that is different from all other groups. In a normal group of people, the group is formed, the group emerges, because individuals connect to each other. They create a social bond to other members of the group. A mass is a group that emerges in a different way.

A mass emerges not because people connect to another individual. A mass emerges because all people separately connect to the same collective ideal. The battle with the Russians, the battle with the virus, doesn't matter. So they all have one collective ideal. That's how a mass emerges. Meaning that, when a mass emerges, after a while, it sucks away all the psychological energy and all the love from the bonds between individuals, between people, and it injects all this energy in the bond between the individual and the collective. That's why in totalitarian states, you see this strange phenomenon that people are willing to report everyone—their neighbors, their friends, their wives, and their children—to the state, even when they know that they will be tortured and killed. It's just because of the mass formation.

There is no love anymore in the bonds between the individuals. It's all injected in the bond with the collective ideal. So that's how a mass emerges. And that explains why, while a mass formation seems to take away loneliness and create a new social bond, it does exactly the opposite. In reality, it leads to more loneliness, meaning that after a first mass formation, there almost inevitably follows a second one, which is worse. And that's what you could see, I think, in the corona crisis and the Ukraine war. The corona narrative was dominant at the psychological level, in Western culture and culture in general, and then suddenly, the war in Ukraine started, and almost overnight you could see how the corona narrative lost its power at the beginning of 2022. Almost overnight.

And how the Ukraine narrative, which in many respects I do believe was as absurd as the corona narrative, replaced that function. People found a new object of anxiety, and all the anxiety, frustration, aggression switched from the coronavirus to Putin, let's say. And then, in the same way, it had exactly this same characteristic. In the same strange way, we could see that first people were willing to self-sacrifice to fight the coronavirus, and then, in the same strange way, they were willing to self-sacrifice to fight Putin. Because that's one of the major psychological characteristics of a mass formation.

Mass formation has at least three very important effects at the level of individual psychological functioning. Like, first, it makes people completely unable to take a critical distance from what they believe in. That's just because their field of attention, all their emotions, are attached to one small aspect of reality, and the rest has no psychological impact anymore, meaning that it's impossible to make them critically think about what they believe in. The second characteristic is always that they are radically willing to self-sacrifice. In a strange way, mass formation makes people willing to self-sacrifice.

We could see in Belgium, like, the major politicians, they all announced that their children are willing to go to war, to fight Russia. And they're highly intelligent people. Then a third characteristic, which is the most dangerous one, is that mass formation makes people radically intolerant of everyone who thinks differently. Because the mass formation seems to free them from their anxiety, their loneliness, their lack of purpose, and so on and so on. Nobody can think differently. So in the masses, there is always a huge intolerance for dissonant voices. So that's what we could see, I believe, in 2022. We could see how the corona narrative had created even more lonely people, even more frustration, even more aggression.

And then, when the Ukraine narrative replaced the corona narrative, it was more violent. People were even more willing to participate in violent and aggressive actions. So, Pascal, you also asked: is there a therapy for such a thing? I do believe so. Like, it's not an easy one, but I do believe there is a therapy. Like, from the beginning of modern mass psychology, I believe that Gustave Le Bon was the first scholar who wrote an important work about mass formation. It was called *The Psychology of the Crowd*. And he remarked something very important. He said, like, when a mass formation emerges, there is always a group of people, usually small, which is resilient to it, which doesn't fall prey to the mass formation.

There are always three groups. You have one group who is really in a hypnotic state, who is hypnotized by the mass formation. That's like about 30%, usually. That's the really totalitarian group. That's the group who really believes, who really blindly buys into the narrative. Then there is a very large second group, 50, 60% of the people, who know that there is something wrong with the narrative, but who will remain silent because they want to choose the easy way. And then there is a very small group of people, in between 1% and 10%, who see that there is something wrong with the mainstream narrative and who choose to speak out, who refuse to remain silent.

So that group of people, Gustave Le Bon said that that small group of people who tries to speak out and who tries to wake up the masses usually will be very disappointed because they will see that the people don't want to wake up, and that the people want to continue to buy into the narrative, and that they even become very aggressive against the people who speak out. So, Gustave Le Bon mentioned that already in his seminal work, *The Psychology of the Crowd*. But he also mentions that this group of people, which doesn't succeed in waking up the masses, nevertheless has a very important effect. When these people continue to speak out, the mass formation usually will not go deeper, and it will not go to the last stage where the masses start to destroy everyone who doesn't go along with them.

So when this group chooses to continue to speak out, no matter whether the masses wake up or not, the mass formation usually won't go to the ultimate and destructive phase. So I do believe we could go into that from many different angles, because it's clear that it is what I call sincere speech that is the real remedy for the loneliness of the population. Like, the people—people got more lonely. The Western populations got more lonely in the first place, I do believe, because our materialist worldview alienated us from sincerity and truth speech. So that's clear. Like someone like Alexander also remarked that in his famous speech in 1978, he said, like, in Western culture and its materialist worldview, there is no reason whatsoever, whatsoever, to sacrifice something for the truth. So that's a deeper problem, I think. That's a deeper problem. That's the reason when people do not speak sincerely anymore, their words and their speech also have no connecting effect anymore. And they got, after a while, they got completely alienated from each other.

So that's a deeper problem. And that's also the real and the deeper remedy, the real therapy for our culture, which is in the grip of mass formation to the extent that they will be willing to fight in a nuclear war, or that it will run the risk of fighting in a nuclear war. So there is a therapy, I think, for the problem we are dealing with, but it's a tough one, and it requires a certain group of people. It doesn't have to be that big, but a group of people who is very determined, like, "We will not shut up. We will continue to speak out, no matter what that means to us." Okay, so I had 30 minutes? That's okay. That's good. Okay, five more minutes. What could I say? Tell about that.

In these five minutes, I can tell a lot, of course, but maybe we can go into this psychology of narcissism, I think. I do believe that the current geopolitical crisis we find ourselves in now has its roots. So we are not only dealing with a crisis at the level of a geopolitical elite or only with a crisis

at the level of our social function. We are actually dealing, I do believe, with what Michel Houellebecq called a metaphysical crisis. We are dealing with a crisis at the level of our relationship to truth. That's the most fundamental crisis we are struggling with in our culture today. And beyond that, if we do not consider our relationship to truth, there will be no solution to the problems we are dealing with.

It's there, and at that level, that every one of us has to think about how we can become more truthful and more sincere human beings. I do believe that our culture, our Enlightenment culture, which is very much a culture of the eye, our Enlightenment culture believes that the real world is the world we see with our eyes. I do believe it's this Enlightenment culture that made people more narcissistic. They started to believe that they, in one way or another, are identical to their outer appearance, and that's what makes the function of the ego stronger. When our attention is focused completely at the level of our outward appearance, what we can see in the mirror, that part of ourselves that we can see in the mirror, that's what isolates us from each other.

Because at that moment, we stop resonating with the other because we focus all our attention on the outer visible part of ourselves. And truth speech, sincerity from a psychological point of view, is exactly a kind of speech which penetrates through that veil of appearances. Truth speech is a way of speaking in which you show something from yourself in a vulnerable way that you usually hide behind the veil of appearances, behind the outward appearance. So it's in the courage to vulnerably show and share certain opinions, certain things that do not match the social norm and the social ideal. It's that courage that we need to speak sincerely and to contribute to a solution to the problems we find ourselves in. I do believe. Thank you very much.

#Pascal

I will take questions, but the first one I want to ask myself. Because you were talking about the connection between anxiety and propaganda, and it just seems to me that these two are a self-reinforcing feedback loop. So if we have a couple of examples, and maybe also if you could give an example that is outside, you know, of Corona and Russia, like if one comes to mind, whether you see the French Revolution, for instance, as such a moment or not, and about that feedback, Luis.

#Mattias Desmet

Okay. Yes, there is a certain circular causality between anxiety and propaganda, of course. But I do believe you need an initial level of anxiety to make propaganda efficacious. And then propaganda can fuel the anxiety, which it usually does, of course.

#Pascal

Do you have any other examples of, like, for me, it's like, be good.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, of course, like the mass formations that led to the emergence of Soviet Russia, the mass formations that led to the emergence of Nazi Germany. So there's a very important psychological difference between classical dictatorships and totalitarian states. Classical dictatorships are very easy at the level of psychological functioning. In a classical dictatorship, people are just scared of a small group of people, the dictatorial regime. And that's why they just accept that this dictatorial regime unilaterally imposes its social contract on the population. In a totalitarian state, something completely different happens. In a totalitarian state, you first have a mass formation.

You first have a group of people, a part of the population, which fanatically gets in the grip of a certain narrative, a certain ideology, and then the totalitarian leader seizes control of society, supported by this group of people in the population who fanatically believe in the ideology he articulates. So that's the totalitarian state, which is much more suffocating than a classical dictatorship just because the totalitarian state disposes of a huge secret police, as Hannah Arendt said, namely this part of the population that blindly follows the narrative and that is willing to report everyone to the state. So there are other examples of major mass formations, like the mass formations in Soviet Russia, in Nazi Germany, and then there are all kinds of small mass formations which happen every day, which are not, historically speaking, very important. But I do believe that the corona crisis might have been the first global mass formation.

#Speaker 1

Yeah, look, great talk, Marius. For my sins, I spent some years of my early life inside the belly of the beast and was trained to be a pollster and an election campaigner in Australia, and through exchange programs with political operatives in the United States, where I was immersed in the arts of polling, behavioral psychology, and the manipulation of people. And what you said really resonated because one of the things that we learned in that process is that the surest way of mobilizing votes—and in the United States, the first challenge in mobilizing votes is to get out the vote, right? Voluntary voting. In Australia, we don't have that problem. Everyone has to vote. But getting out the vote is actually the biggest challenge.

And the best way of doing that is to generate within your cohort, your crowd, a deep sense of anxiety. Channel that in an incredibly negative, hate-driven way towards the other. Because we don't need you to vote for us. We need you to vote against them. So that was, I guess, it really rammed home to me something that's deeply baked into the institutional muscle memory of the way that the apparatuses and the functionings of America's state actually operate. They actually deeply understand these things. But that's not the question. That just sort of really resonated. I guess I want to raise, Pascal, you mentioned other examples, and I think that there are a couple of others.

The China shock, I think, is the classic one right now. The United States' living standards have been declining now for the best part of 20, 25 years, if not more, for ordinary working people. We see

that in real wage data, housing affordability data, and every other indicator of living standards. And we need to, speaking as if I was a member of the political and economic elite, find a way of explaining why that exists without blaming ourselves. And the distraction functions of being able to cultivate an obvious other to blame, I think, seems to be a feature of this China shock discourse, what has become China shock discourse.

The risk is that something that operates in large part at a fundamentally economic level is constantly on the edge of spilling over into something more. And I'm just wondering whether you could say something about the extent to which a population can be sustained at a certain level of anxiety that doesn't spill over, but it's almost like they're on a drip feed, just kept at the right level of anxiety without people ultimately realizing, without that breakthrough moment, without them starting to think that, hey, maybe that one to ten percent is actually saying something that goes towards explaining my plight.

#Mattias Desmet

You know, first, a short remark about something you said in the beginning. I think there are a lot of precursors of mass formation. Like the example you mentioned about China probably is a precursor of mass formation, which is sometimes called massification, which is not a real mass formation yet. The characteristic of real mass formation is that it destroys all previously existing social bonds, even the social bond between married people, the social bond in families, the social bond in groups of friends, and so on. So a real mass formation is energetically so powerful that it reorganizes the entire human living together.

So the example you give, I don't think the example you give is that powerful. There are many massifications, but there are not so many real mass formations, I do believe. And then, is it possible to keep the level of anxiety at exactly a certain specific level, which is very useful to manipulate the population? I don't think so, to be honest. Like, the people who make the propaganda usually are much less in control than they would wish. They usually, they try, like... We have seen all kinds of attempts to create a mass formation, but it usually doesn't work.

So you need very high initial levels of anxiety. If there are no high initial levels of anxiety, I think propaganda will never work. And I also—I think it's very difficult to control anxiety. Like psychological processes in particular, dynamics of anxiety are complex dynamical systems. They are complex dynamical systems which have this very specific characteristic of sensitivity to initial conditions, which means that even quantities of change that cannot be measured, that are so small that they cannot be measured, can change the entire system. So psychology is very hard to control.

The only thing we know is that the higher the levels of anxiety, the higher the chance that propaganda will work. You know, I do believe that propaganda can increase the levels of anxiety a little bit. It can. But what usually happens is that propaganda is successful at this level. It reorganizes the landscape of anxiety. It can connect all the free-floating anxiety to an object. But I'm

not so sure whether it is very successful in creating really new anxiety. That's something else, I think. The levels of anxiety were extremely high, for instance, before the corona crisis. Like, I think that up to 20% of the world population was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, up to 20%.

#Speaker 2

Matthias, thank you so much for this. This is very refreshing. I'm a realist by my day work, but my dissertation was in political philosophy, and I did meaninglessness and crisis of modernity. And I think what you really... Can we go again?

#Mattias Desmet

Crisis of modernity and meaninglessness. Crisis of modernity, yeah, very interesting.

#Speaker 2

Yeah. So I worked on meaninglessness and crisis of belonging as a problem, and then I tried to apply it in geopolitics, effectively. And I think what really resonates with me is the connection that you make between, you know, we talk about propaganda as a modern phenomenon because it is, in a way, an offspring of modernity. Modern anxieties are necessary preconditions for that sort of level. And in regards to sort of mass formation versus massification, which massification brings or comes with modernity, but mass formation doesn't necessarily. But the mass formation events, I was wondering if you have actually followed the Iranian question, because countries like Iran had this crisis with modernity, whether or not they belong with the West or they don't.

And that propagated the first mass formation with the Iranian Revolution, the first. But now, with the Israeli-American influence and propaganda networks, what they have been able to tap into is this new mass formation that happened, as Iranian opposition groups have all the hallmarks of everything we saw throughout COVID and Russia and Europe, but even worse, because it's made in a certain way to completely create a sense of oneness and identity between the opposition group, between the individual and the opposition itself, creating the one-time enemy, the ideal enemy, being the Islamic Republic. And so, therefore, all your problems in the modern world, which is really nothing we're talking about in different parts of the world, are all, for the Iranian mind, the diaspora specifically, resolved by the removal of the Islamic Republic.

But that dynamic, the only luck is that the person that's supposed to ultimately activate the mass formation, the charismatic leadership, is just utterly uncharismatic. But the potential exists for this group to then be mass-formed into a different type. So this kind of being stuck in a loop of mass formation, it's something that I wanted to see your thoughts on. I was struck by it because, in a way, for 47 years, you can't get out of the mass formation psychosis. And that's why the opposition to the Islamic Republic very much actually reflects the original Islamic Republic psychology of the revolution. So revolutionism, in a way, doesn't go away.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, there is definitely a historical association between modernity and mass formation. It's very interesting to see that before modernity, let's say before the 19th century, there were also mass formations. They have always existed. But for a certain reason, they got stronger and stronger and stronger throughout modernity, which of course, the reason is that modernity, I believe, is the elementary worldview of modernity, which is a mechanistic worldview which creates loneliness and so on. But it's very remarkable that before the 19th century, there were also mass formations, but they didn't last very long and they were absolutely not strong enough to become the basis of a state system.

So that happened for the first time in the 20th century. Before the 20th century, there were no totalitarian states. There were none. There were classical dictatorships, but there were no totalitarian states. We needed these very long and stable mass formations, which can only be created when there are media, when there is technology, and when there is a lot of loneliness in the population. So that's what we needed for totalitarian states to emerge. You refer to Iran, the example of Iran, the revolution of Iran of 1978, 1979, I think, of course, a very nice example of a mass formation.

#Speaker 2

The worrying part is that you're not... In a way, once you get into the mass formation, it's very hard to escape. So, for 47 years, you're seeing the other side of saying, you know, the identity of one was in fusion with the revolution, and now it's opposition to the other.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, that's the point. Once a population enters mass formation, it usually enters a cycle of mass formations, exactly because of the problem I just mentioned, I just described, that mass formation is based on loneliness, but it creates even more loneliness, meaning that it increases the probability that a new mass formation will follow. Okay. That's the problem, of course. Yes.

#Speaker 3

Yeah, just, I'm still a little unclear exactly what you're trying to explain, because, so to you, the two most important examples you use were coronavirus and the Ukraine war. Now, if, in the case of the Ukraine war, for example, you're trying to say that everybody suddenly got focused on Putin and were willing to die to defeat him, I don't see that at all. In Europe, there is no consent to go and

fight. There is a deep dissatisfaction, a deep opposition to the war in Ukraine, which is why the leaderships that want to continue this war are disconnected from the mass of the ordinary people who don't want this war. So I hope that you can explain that. At least, as I say, I couldn't understand exactly what was being explained.

#Mattias Desmet

Shall we go into this one?

#Speaker 3

Sorry?

#Mattias Desmet

Shall we first go into your first question?

#Speaker 3

Yeah, I just want a quick, small second question, and then I'll shut up. You spoke about Gustave Le Bon. I haven't thought about this guy since I took a graduate course on the social and political thought from the siècle period. Gosh, in the 1980s. He was a racist. And his entire way of explaining so-called crowd psychology was part of the general formation of elite social and political thought, which was really founded on the fear of the self-organization of the masses, which was happening at that time. Working people in Europe were beginning to organize in the form of mass—the historic parties of the working class, which were with us, which are still with us, at least in a kind of a hollow form, were being formed at that time. And so perhaps you can comment on that.

#Mattias Desmet

Yeah, of course I can. I mean, I believe that back in the 19th century, most people were racists, at least in academia. And you're right, as I'm very familiar with the work of Gustave Le Bon, indeed, of course, he was in a certain way a very racist thinker. That, of course, doesn't disqualify his entire theory on mass formation. His entire theory on mass formation was brilliant. Up until today, it has never been really improved. So it's not because he was a racist that his theory of mass formation was wrong, I think. That's one thing. Then about the war in Russia, I can guarantee you, in Belgium, that it is very strange how much support there is. And I can guarantee you that when you stand up and you talk, you try to say one positive thing about Putin, everyone will consider you a friend of Putin and a traitor. I can guarantee you, I can challenge everyone to try to come to Belgium and to say that the anti-Russia propaganda is not entirely accurate. I tried it several times. And the—yes?

#Speaker 2

I was just going to follow up on that just now, that I think another way to put it—

#Speaker 2

Is that the public so far has not broken with the standard narrative that Putin is evil, Putin is a threat, all that kind of thing. What they are rejecting, too, is the declining living standards. They have not yet made the connection, or not fully made the connection, between the one and the other. When that happens, when they make that connection, that's when you want to see a much more generalized opposition to the recent policy. In other words, one can say, "I hate Putin, he's a threat, he'll kill us," that sort of thing.

At the same time, I'm very upset by the declining living standards, but have not yet understood that the war in Ukraine is one of the major causes of the declining living standards, that connection. In other words, I'm defending what you're saying here, trying to give an explanation for that. There's the two incompatible ideas: the opposition to declining living standards on the one hand, and the support, at least for the moment, of the war in Ukraine on the other hand. They're psychologically separate issues in the minds of people.

#Mattias Desmet

I agree. I completely agree. And I think that's the most important problem in mass formation, is that people don't see the real object of anxiety and replace it by a false object. At least if that's what you want to say. I'm not sure. Yes. Yes.

#Pascal

Ivan, then Ulrich.

#Speaker 4

Thanks so much for the engaging and informative talk. You began by saying that propaganda is a defining principle of a modern democracy. And it made me think of—I don't know if I'm retelling the joke well—but it made me think of a joke from the Cold War where an American and a Soviet are talking about their lives, and the American asks, "How is your propaganda?" And the Soviet says, "It's pretty good. How is yours?" And the American says, "We don't have any propaganda. What are you talking about?" "Yours is even better. Yours is even better."

So just sort of in this, you know, in the hope that we also provide some therapy, you know, prescriptions here, what does that look like? And David gave us some excellent examples from the New York Times, you know, really having this pro-war, pro-military agenda for so long. What are

some hopes we can have in this world of social media, independent podcasts like Pascal's, and so on? Where do you see kind of the role in which we can try to intervene, even with the, I would say, awareness in quote-unquote modern democracies that we are being propagandized?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes. I like the joke, by the way. And I really do believe, like, if you study the emergence of modern democracy from the American Revolution onwards, you can see very well, like, someone like Thomas Jefferson, he really started from a very sincere idea of a society that would be based on rationality and truth and so on and so on. But within a few years, he realized that it was impossible to organize modern democracy without manipulating public opinion.

#Mattias Desmet

And he was right to a certain extent.

#Mattias Desmet

He was right. So, okay, what can we do? That was the last question you asked. And of course, like what Pascal does with his podcast, it's extremely important. It's making sure that there is a different opinion. There is a different voice to be heard in public space. It's extremely important. Propaganda actually works in the same way as hypnosis. So it really hypnotizes people. Mass formation is mass hypnosis. It's exactly the same. Like in hypnosis, all the attention is focused on one point, and the rest of reality disappears from awareness. So if there is a different voice, someone with a different opinion, the hypnosis will never go to the extreme point.

It will never go too deep because a dissident voice always disturbs the hypnosis. So that's actually what happens when someone continues to speak out and to go against the narrative that leads to mass formation. This dissident voice constantly disturbs the mass formation a little bit. So, but podcasts are important, of course. But also, in your private life, also someone who speaks sincerely in his private life, in the kitchen, in the shop, in the supermarket, doesn't matter where, everyone who speaks sincerely at that moment creates a social bond and disturbs propaganda. Propaganda always tries to make an enemy of the other human being. Everyone who speaks sincerely creates a social bond and actually goes against propaganda.

And the effect of one single act of sincere speech at one specific point in society will and can have an impact on the entire society, because the psychological system of society is a complex dynamical system where the change in one detail, in one point, has an impact on the entire system. So everyone who is brave enough, who finds the courage to speak sincerely, has an impact on the entire system. And in the end, it's very hard to know who has the largest impact. There's one

woman in the street who decides to speak in a connecting way to someone, even when she disagrees with the other person, or someone who has a huge following on YouTube. I think both are important.

#Pascal

We only have 10 minutes left, so Ricky, you put the microphone, and then we go behind.

#Speaker 5

Yes, thanks for an excellent presentation. I only have two things. The first goes here to David, this bond or the tie between sort of the war and the social downgrading. I think in Germany it's the trade unions, because the trade unions have signed up for war industry. And it's clear because the whole automobile industry in Germany is shifting to war industry. And so the trade unions are defending the employees of whatever BMW and VW, which is firing 100,000 people. So the moment the system is basically catching the trade unions and the churches and so on, there is a money reason to go for the war. So I think that's why people are not capturing war, the relationship between the social downturn and the war propaganda.

I just wanted to say that the war industry in Germany is very, very heavy these days. But my real question is the narcissistic sort of thing here, because I'm wondering, honestly, why in a society—basically, say the European societies are more or less, whatever, somewhere between Christianity and socialism for hundreds of years. Yeah, because... and the first mirror was the Mirror Hall in Versailles. You know, I mean, Narcissus is the guy who looks into a lake. Mirrors were not a thing which was usual. I come from Northern Westphalia, Rhineland, and basically still my grandma would always say, "The mirror is devil."

There is something in Christianity that the mirror is the devil. It's vanity, and vanity is a sin, one of the seven sins. So you are not vain when you are Catholic. And socialism was basically based on women, female power, and the socialist women cut their hair. They wouldn't make themselves beautiful for the men. So there is two strong traditions, the labor tradition and the Christian, more conservative tradition, that vanity is evil. Yeah. And even I remember the '70s and the '80s, where we were without all these elevators, and the elevators are totally in mirrors. And then you go to the U.S. and you have mirrors where you walk in. I mean, everything is mirrors.

And even if today we look in the Zoom, now we're in a conference and I sit here without seeing myself. It's very ungainly, you know. So when I'm in a Zoom, I see myself and I'm constantly like, "Oh, am I so old?" And is this Zoom thing old-washing me? Because obviously there are these filters and I look not 62 but 42. What is about this narcissistic tendency in a culture when we had Franz von Assisi, when we had Antoine de Saint-Exupéry telling us, "You only look nice with your heart"? We had the story of Beauty and the Beast. So all our stories and fairy tales and so on are filled with that vanity is not it. How could we collapse within two or three decades into mirrors?

#Mattias Desmet

That's a very good question. I do believe that, you know, Enlightenment itself was defined by the belief that, for instance, not God has to be at the center of life, but the human being itself. So the Enlightenment culture was almost, by definition, an egocentric culture. It put the human being in the middle of its own existence, which was good in a certain way, of course. But something in this Enlightenment culture, in particular where the Enlightenment culture became a materialist culture, where it started to believe that the real world is the world you can see with your eyes, something in this Enlightenment culture, something in this materialist culture, exactly led people or made people invest more in the narcissistic structure of themselves.

I think in a certain way it's logical. As soon as you start to believe, as our culture did after the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, as soon as you start to believe that the real world is the material world, you will also usually conclude that who you really are is what you can see of yourself in the mirror. So we replaced, or we put the center of our own existence in the material part of ourselves and in the visible part of ourselves, the part that we can see in the mirror. I think it's somewhere at that level that I would try to explain how our culture became a narcissistic culture during the Enlightenment. There is much, much, much, much more to say about that than just what I mentioned now.

And it's a very complicated problem, the question as to how or why our culture became more narcissistic. But I think it is the case, and I think that's the root cause of this atomization of society, of the fact that more and more people started to feel lonely. I think it's the root cause. Of course, Karl Marx also mentioned such things as the industrialization of the world, the mechanization of labor, which contributes to the alienation of people. That's also true, but I think the most fundamental reason why people feel more lonely is this narcissism. Like, even when people talk to each other and all their attention is focused on their own ego, they do not really connect.

Young children, before they have an ego, connect 100%. When a young child, younger than six months, is interacting with someone, it will constantly imitate the body language of the other. You can really see it. It will constantly imitate with its body the body of the other. And that's why it feels what the other feels. It feels it becomes the other by imitating him. When you're focused on yourself, on your own ego, you do not imitate the other anymore. And there is not this spontaneous emergence of empathy anymore. And consequently, you feel disconnected and lonely without knowing why, of course, without knowing why.

#Speaker 6

Thank you. I just wanted to say I think it's important to differentiate with propaganda between the level of passion and the level of belief. With things like Corona and Trump in America, there's a huge amount of passion for these issues and possible mass formation on them because they're immediate, and the effects are felt directly, and they're constant. But when you look at geopolitical issues like

Russia, I don't think there's the same level of passion. There's a widespread level of belief. When I go back to Ireland, and maybe the same in Belgium, people accept the narratives very easily. They believe them, but they don't feel as deeply strongly as they did about Corona. They're not as quick to break off friendships and other things. Often the passion for those issues spikes with things like the Douma chemical attack in Syria, or Salisbury, the Novichok, or the campaign to highlight sexual violence in Ukraine.

There's spikes of passion, and usually that's before some political push to introduce some sort of change. But I don't think there's the same level of constant passion, and I think that affects how the propaganda is used. When they mention—I think David mentioned—the costs of the Russia war, it's going to come back to people. People will start to realize this is having a direct effect, but that's not necessarily going to push them against the war. How they react, whether anti-war or supporting the war even more, will depend on the propaganda that's used when those costs begin to become apparent to people. And so I think it's important, the level of passion and the level of widespread belief. What do you mean by belief and passion?

#Mattias Desmet

You mean by belief, you mean like a cognitive, mental phenomenon, like I logically, rationally believe this narrative?

#Speaker 6

In terms of Corona, well, not everybody, but the majority perhaps, they believed the scientific, the government policies, but they also felt, like, almost irrational fear for themselves, for their elderly parents. And because of that fear, they broke off relationships. They cut themselves away from—they acted upon it. But from my perspective, when I go back to Ireland, there's a widespread belief that Russia is terrible and that we should— but people don't have the same willingness to act upon it, I think. I'm afraid in Belgium they slowly start to be willing to act upon it.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes. Like, maybe we don't have to go too deep into that now. But I see the same irrationality. In Belgium, almost everyone believed that the Russians were spying on us through drones. It was completely absurd and impossible. But for weeks, the mainstream media were telling us that the Russians were spying on our national airport, for instance, with drones. It was so stupid and so impossible. I said, they repeated it five times and people believed it. They really believed it. And I think maybe it's a local phenomenon, but people, many of my friends, start to consider or start to be prepared to send their children to war. And they also will.

#Pascal

Believe me, they will. Can you both just ask your questions one after the other? Or then we have to wind it up.

#Speaker 7

Okay. I'm interested if you have any thoughts on the nocebo effect. So within medicine, everybody's familiar with the placebo effect, where you take an inert substance and it makes you better. It has a real effect. Nocebo effect's the opposite. So there was a university student in the '80s, I believe. He took part in some drug trials for a bit of extra cash. They didn't realize that he was suicidal, so he took all of the medicine in one go, collapsed, went to hospital, had his stomach pumped. Little did he know he was in the control group and he'd actually taken the placebo. And the consequences of this for Corona, the Corona thing, are quite immense, I think.

So you scare the population to death, and then people catch the virus and some people die from it. Now, to what extent that was a nocebo effect, nobody measures that, nobody wants to measure it, but it has quite a potentially huge effect. So medicine, it's interesting enough, but... More generally, the ideas that you hold, regardless of whether they're true or not, can have real positive or negative physiological effects on the individual level or the social level. And if these effects are desirable from a government point of view, does it matter whether or not the actual ideas are true or not? Anyway, I just think this is a fascinating area. I haven't really organized my thoughts, but I'd be interested to know.

#Mattias Desmet

It's very similar. It's very similar to mass formation, of course, because placebo and nocebo effects are actually identical to hypnosis and mass formation also. Mass formation is mass hypnosis. Placebo and nocebo effects are, to a high extent, local individual examples of hypnosis. They are all examples of psychological processes where a mental representation becomes extremely strong, invested with a lot of psychological energy, and hence consequently also changes the body.

#Speaker 7

So that, in a sense, they are by definition true because they have a real effect.

#Mattias Desmet

They have a real effect. That doesn't mean I think that they are true. But that leads us to a very important philosophical and epistemological question: When is an idea true? That's a very difficult and philosophical question.

#Speaker 8

Hi. Yeah, so I was working at the Taipei Times during the coronavirus pandemic, and I was a copy editor. And so there were about six copy editors in the office every night, and we all took turns each night picking wire stories for the international page. And so it was up to us which stories we picked. And of course, the general tendency was to pick the most sensational stories. And it was just a human instinct. You know, it wasn't like personal bias or anything, like, oh, I want to push this. It was just people going, oh, well, this has some good pictures to go with it. And so I remember one night when I was picking international stories, there was a gigantic demonstration in Germany against the pandemic policies, and hundreds of thousands of people turned out.

Now, the wire story said this was organized by the far right. It was a far-right demonstration. And I just took out "far right." I just said there was a demonstration. But I could see that there was this narrative being pushed that it was a far-right demonstration. And so I made some edits on that that my colleagues probably wouldn't have done, and they probably wouldn't have seen much difference, because I thought it doesn't matter if it's far right or not, it's a huge demonstration. But then when I went to pick photos for the story, most of the photos were of police. Police, you know, grabbing people or cordoning off areas, or the flashing lights, the red and blue and all that. And so it looked really dramatic. It looked like it was this protest where the police were there clubbing people over and arresting people.

But really, it was a peaceful protest with maybe isolated incidents of police activity. But the protest itself didn't make for dramatic photos. It was the police that... And my instinct, too, was just looking at these photos, going like, yeah, maybe I should pick this one because this one's a dramatic photo. And I had to sort of overcome my own instinct and go like, no, no, no, just show a picture of the people gathering. And that's what I did. But I think that in the creation of these narratives, a lot of times it's not conscious. It's just the human instinct because they just say, this tells a better story. But I think that's the problem with the news media, is that they're looking to tell us a dramatic story rather than just tell facts. Anyway. You don't have to respond if you don't want, but anyway.

#Mattias Desmet

We don't have much time left. It's very interesting what you say, because many people think that almost all journalists are in the conspiracy because they all do the same things and all work in the same direction, which, of course, is not true. It's a huge, complex, dynamic process which is organized, which creates patterns without anybody having control over the full pattern, I think. So, well, yes.

#Pascal

So, yeah, and we do have to go for lunch, and I think we do need lunch. But thank you so much, Matthias.