

EU in Grip of Deadly Mass-Formation | Prof. Mattias Desmet

It's not just the leaders of the EU who want to go to a suicidal war with Russia. The psychosis has long reached even the streets of Berlin, Brussels and Paris. Mass-Formation is the psychological phenomenon to understand why entire nations are suddenly willing to sacrifice EVERYTHING for a deadly ideology. Unfortunately, the EU is far down the road. Today I speak with Dr. Mattias Desmet, professor of clinical psychology in Belgium and author of *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, about mass formation, totalitarianism, propaganda, loneliness, free speech, war narratives, and the emotional pull of group belief. The discussion covers the difference between dictatorships and totalitarian states, the role of education and media, and sincerity as a way to resist mass hypnosis. Links: Mattias Desmet Substack: <https://words.mattiasdesmet.org/> The Psychology of Totalitarianism: <https://www.chelseagreen.com/product/the-psychology-of-totalitarianism/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:50 Mass formation and totalitarianism 00:10:02 Totalitarianism vs dictatorship 00:18:18 War narratives and media power 00:20:30 Education propaganda and democracy 00:32:18 Mechanics of mass formation 00:43:40 Breaking the spell with sincerity 00:50:40 Truth reality and the observer 00:57:42 Final thoughts and where to follow

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutralized Studies. I'm Pascal Lottaz, and I'm joined today by Dr. Matthias Desmet, a professor of clinical psychology at Ghent University in Belgium, a practicing psychotherapist, and one of the world's leading scholars on the theory of mass formation, as well as the author of the wonderful book **The Psychology of Totalitarianism**. Matthias, welcome.

#Mattias Desmet

Thank you for having me, Pascal.

#Pascal

It's great having you. You are one of the voices that was very, very important during the COVID-19 mass formation. You are the person who championed that kind of interpretation. And you wrote this very important book trying to make sense psychologically of some of the tendencies that we've been seeing going on in Europe, in society. Can we maybe talk a little bit about this? Can we start with the concept of mass formation and how it links up with totalitarianism?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, that's a good point to start. Well, you know, I started doing a PhD at Ghent University in Belgium back in 2003. And I was supposed to do classical research in psychology where I would investigate the associations between certain personality traits and depressive symptoms. You know, it might seem like a strange point to start going into the topic of totalitarianism, but you will see it is related. So I started to do classical research in psychology, and after a few months, I had a feeling that these research methods that I was supposed to use, where I would measure the psychological characteristics and then compute statistical correlations between them, actually could not possibly lead to valid results.

And because when I measured the same psychological characteristic, for instance, a personality trait, in three different ways, the results were often completely different. And I asked my PhD promoter whether, rather than doing this classical research in psychology, I could just investigate the validity of research methods in psychology. And I was granted permission to do so. And then, when I was investigating these research methods in psychology, after about two years, the replication crisis started in the sciences, which actually showed that the vast majority of published research papers are false. And there was this famous paper, of course, by John Ioannidis, which was titled "Why Most Published Research Findings Are False." So this problem I stumbled upon in psychology turned out to be quite widespread in the sciences.

Like, more than 85% of the papers cannot be reproduced, which means that they actually have no scientific validity at all. And the strange thing was, on the basis of the results of my PhD, I published my first book, a very small book. I don't have a copy with me here now, but it's a very small book titled **The Pursuit of Objectivity in Psychology**. And I made it clear, I think in a very clear way, in such a way that even a child maybe could understand, when it sees certain examples, that the research methods in psychology cannot possibly lead to valid conclusions.

And the strange thing was, at that moment, that every time I gave a presentation or a lecture about this phenomenon, where I really presented the audience with these very simple examples showing that, for instance, the measurement methods in psychology are not reliable and not valid, and that they contain too much measurement error to do meaningful statistical inference, every time I presented this, I could see the same thing. A few people in the audience, maybe a few percent, like two or three percent, were very enthusiastic and wanted to know more. But more than 90 percent, or at least many of them, got angry with me.

And when I asked them, like, OK, but tell me, why would I be wrong? Can you show me? You know, I have a PhD in psychology, but also a master's degree in statistics, so I'm a statistician as well. And every time I asked them, like, show me, where is my statistical mistake? Where is the mathematical mistake in my line of reasoning? Nobody ever gave me an answer, because I think it was clear that from a mathematical point of view, I was right. And at that moment, I just started to become

fascinated by something very strange — that under certain conditions, very intelligent people, because my colleagues at the university are very intelligent people...

They are highly intelligent people. But under certain conditions, highly intelligent people can buy into a narrative that is actually absurd. And no matter what you do, they will refuse to drop the narrative. They will continue to buy into it. So, somewhere around 2013 or so, I started to go into mass psychology because I started to become aware of the fact that this strange expert blindness, as I sometimes call it, this strange blindness of people under certain conditions, cannot be explained on the basis of individual psychology alone.

You need to understand how people—and people's identity, people's cognitive functioning—is in the grip of psychological processes at the level of the group to which they belong. So that's where I got interested. And after a few years, maybe, I started to become aware that—so I started to read about mass psychology. And after a while, after a few years, I started to become aware of the fact that actually this phenomenon, for which I coined the term "mass formation"—the term was used by Gustave Le Bon as well, a few times, and Sigmund Freud as well, I think, used it a few times—but then I used it as the major term to indicate the strange phenomenon of group formation, which has this very strange effect at the level of individual psychological functioning.

So, like mass formation—when people are in the grip of a mass formation, they will typically be incapable of taking a critical distance from everything the group believes in. And when the group believes in the most absurd things, people will buy into it, no matter how intelligent they are. They will become willing to radically self-sacrifice. That's another very strange characteristic of mass formation: people in the grip of a mass formation are willing to radically self-sacrifice. And then the most dangerous thing, of course, is that they will typically become radically intolerant of dissonant voices, of everyone who thinks differently.

And like this strange phenomenon, I started to become aware of the fact that actually this phenomenon of mass formation is the basis of totalitarianism. The phenomenon of mass formation is what makes totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, which are, of course, the most famous examples. So the phenomenon of mass formation is what makes totalitarian states completely different from classical dictatorships. And most people mix up the two. Most people think that Nazi Germany was a dictatorship. Not at all. Or that the Soviet Union was a classical dictatorship. That's not true at all. It's completely different. And the difference is that in a totalitarian state, a totalitarian state at the psychological level is based on a mass formation, and a classical dictatorship isn't.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this can happen anytime again. So please consider subscribing not only here, but to my mailing list on Substack. That's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And

now back to the video. So you're viewing then the totalitarian state as something that goes psychologically much, much deeper than just the power structures, right, of the political power structures that are built. They essentially include this fanatic belief by a large number of the group into the core tenets of the group that exist. That's about it, right? And it's not just that the guy on the top has all the weapons and then is able to coerce everybody into submission.

#Mattias Desmet

No, no, exactly. That would be a classical dictatorship. Like in a classical dictatorship, there is this dictatorial regime which indeed, as you said, has all the weapons, and people are scared of the aggressive potential of the regime. And so they just accept that the dictatorial regime unilaterally imposes its social contract on them. That's a classical dictatorship. But a totalitarian state is something much, much, much, much more powerful at the psychological level. In a totalitarian state, a totalitarian state usually starts in the population. That means that a part of the population starts to believe fanatically in a certain ideology.

For instance, the race theories, which were popular before the rise of Hitler in Nazi Germany, or historical materialism, Marxism, which became very popular in the Soviet Union, in Russia, by the end of the 19th century. So first, the beginning of a totalitarian state is a process, a psychological process, where a certain part of the population, usually not much more than 20 to 30%—so it's not everyone, definitely not—like 20 to 30% of the population starts to believe fanatically in a certain ideology. And because of the emotional function this ideology has in this part of the population, a mass formation can emerge where people so fanatically believe in the ideology that they are incapable of seeing everything in reality which is in contrast or in conflict with that ideology.

And where they start to believe so fanatically in it that they are willing to self-sacrifice, to sacrifice their lives for it. And where they start to feel very aggressive against everyone who doesn't buy into the ideology. So that's what's happening in a totalitarian state. And once this process of mass formation emerges in society, there is a chance that there are certain rhetorically gifted people who use it to seize control of the state apparatus. So they present themselves as Hitler did, as Lenin did. They present themselves as those who incarnate all the virtues of this ideology, and they use the masses to seize control. And then a state system emerges which, as Hannah Arendt very eloquently said in her **Origins of Totalitarianism**, has a huge secret police.

Namely, this part of the population which blindly, fanatically buys into the state ideology and who are willing to report everyone to the state who doesn't buy fanatically into this ideology. So that's what happens. Like 20 to 30% of the people fanatically believe in the ideology, and they are willing to report their fathers, their mothers, their children, everyone to the state who doesn't follow the narrative. So that means that almost in every sleeping room, every kitchen, every house, there is someone who actually reports every one of their family members to the state if they are not loyal

enough to the state narrative. That's what happened in Iran, for instance, in the 1978 revolution. I know a woman who lived there, and she witnessed it. She was the daughter of a mayor of one of the major cities of Iran.

And she witnessed how a mother who reported her son to the state put the noose around his neck when he was on the scaffold. And when he was dead, she was very proud to accept a medal for her manmanship. So that was back in 1978. But there are so many examples like that, and every one of them shows the process of mass formation. People, after a while, become very strange. Like in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, 20 to 30% of the people belonged to the secret police. Literally. Literally. They joined the secret police. And after the collapse of Eastern Germany, when people went to the archives and tried to find out who reported them to the state, almost everyone was reported by a family member.

So that's what happens. And that's what makes a totalitarian state so extremely suffocating and powerful at a psychological level. And that's why it is so extremely important to understand what happens at a psychological level in a mass formation. I'll add one more thing to it, if I may. You know, from the moment I started to investigate the phenomenon of totalitarianism, I had two questions. Like, what makes it different from a classical dictatorship? And the second question was, like, why did totalitarianism emerge for the first time in the 20th century?

Because before the 20th century, there were no totalitarian states. And the answer to both questions, after a while I found out, was just that—the phenomenon of mass formation. Like, it's mass formation which makes totalitarianism different from classical dictatorships. And the reason why totalitarian states emerged for the first time in the 20th century is that the phenomenon of mass formation, for certain reasons—which I go into in my book—the phenomenon of mass formation has always existed, has always existed, but it became stronger throughout the last centuries.

It became stronger and stronger and stronger, just as a consequence of another process, namely the fact that society is atomizing. It's falling apart. More and more people feel lonely, isolated. And that's why mass formations become strong. As we see it now, like, for instance, the way in which what happens at the geopolitical level now, like, so many people just buy into all these narratives which are used now to go to war, while everyone who would think for one moment seriously could see that most of these narratives—well, I won't say that they are complete lies, but a lot of it is inaccurate and more propaganda than truth. Yeah.

#Pascal

This is my main concern, you know. This is why I think your theory is so absolutely important in order to understand what's happening to Europe at the moment. Because the question we need to answer is, how is it that so many very intelligent people—extremely intelligent people—and people who are in the same circles as we are, buy into the war narratives? Why is Europe marching toward

a war with Russia? And it is utterly clear, especially if you're looking at what is happening in Germany, how the Europeans are gearing up. They're saying so. They're not even hiding it—for a war with Russia, which is a suicidal endeavor. And we've seen before—I mean, you were one of the main critics, of course, of the way that COVID was approached, with measures that were really extremely harmful, and so on.

And I mean, the mass formation issue then tries, if I understand it correctly, you're trying to understand how, on the level of the group, the level of the group interacts with the individual psychology of each person, right? And how certain things then start overriding even rational thinking. So one more question here: is it also the availability of the medium? You know, the fact that for the first time in the 20th century, we have mass media, right? We have TV and radio and this ability of large groups to hear the same narratives at the same time. And that, apart from the atomization of society, you suddenly have the possibility of talking to millions or tens of millions of people. Does that flow into it as well? And where do you think the current state is now, with the ability on social media of a whole new level of mass communication?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes. Let me first go, for one minute, into something you said in the beginning, namely that you could see how highly intelligent people just buy into the war narratives in Europe. Exactly, exactly. And the strangest thing is that, or one of the very remarkable things in the phenomenon of mass formation, is that the higher the level of education is, the more vulnerable people become to mass formation. So this is a very strange thing. Usually, you would think that highly educated people would be resilient, that they have this skilled critical thinking ability, which is not true.

Like Gustave Le Bon in the 19th century already wrote in his book **The Psychology of the Crowd**, he said the higher the level of education, the more people will fall prey to mass formation. Something that was echoed by Jacques Ellul in his book **Propaganda**, the best book about propaganda that has ever been written, I think. He said exactly the same. He said the longer people go to school, the more easily they will fall prey to propaganda.

#Pascal

So just because...

#Mattias Desmet

He said, like Jacques Ellul said, that this had to do with the fact that education—and our school system actually—is a kind of indoctrination. Unconsciously, it's not that teachers know consciously that they are indoctrinating children. No, it's just that the educational system teaches people not to think for themselves. It teaches them to think all in the same way, which means it teaches them to think according to the mainstream view on man and the world. And in this way, education becomes

a psychological preparation that makes people vulnerable to the propaganda that will be used later on in their lives.

So that's one thing. So the higher the level of education, the more easily they fall prey to it. And you can see it indeed in the example of the war in Ukraine, the war with Russia. It's an excellent example. I wrote two articles about it. I published them on my Substack page. One article where I go into the structure of Putin's Russia, which—exactly—Putin is not a saint. We know that. We know he's not a saint. I mean, and there are many problems in Russia, also at the level of free speech. But if you look from the other perspective, like what NATO did, then... one thing for sure, NATO is also not a saint.

And they have this expansionist politics which actually goes so far that I think, in my humble opinion, there is no other choice for Putin and Russia than to go to war. Because if they don't, they will lose their... they won't be a superpower anymore. It's so strange that an entire population really believes that Putin is this devil who has to be destroyed or who threatens to destroy Europe, without ever being able to take the other perspective and see what happened in Ukraine, to see how American companies purchased like 30% of the whole country, and so on and so on. So that's what mass formation does.

#Pascal

And no number of counterarguments will ever help. You know, the first person I interviewed on my channel four years ago was Jack Matlock, the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, and he kept saying, like, this is our mistake, we should never have done that. And he's just one in a long line of people who said, like, we must not push this war on the Russians. It was pushed, and it became a war, and it has been a war for four years. And even though all of these revelations came out, including the way in which the CIA had been infiltrating, you know, according to The New York Times—not some conspiracy theorist—The New York Times—how the CIA, after 2014, had been infiltrating Ukraine and had been starting to build up Ukraine as a bastion against the Russians and their forward capabilities.

How it was the UK and the United States that sabotaged the Istanbul agreement. All of this is out, confirmed from several sites. Yet, if you bring it up, the people who are under the grip of mass formation will get angry. Can you explain to me why it is that anger is the reaction the individual produces instead of a rational conversation?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, that's why it's so important, I think, to understand what happens in a mass formation at the emotional level. You know, there's something very interesting. And I will just first take a helicopter view, zoom out a little bit. Like somewhere in the, let's say, 17th century or something, there was a huge, what I call, metaphysical revolution. Before the 17th century, the dominant view on man and

the world was the religious worldview. And then, like in the 17th century, that changed. The religious worldview was replaced slowly, step by step, by a rationalist, materialist worldview, which started to believe that the real world is the world you can see with your eyes and understand with your brain.

And from then on, well, I think that's what you have to understand. From then on, we started to believe that the human being, in the first place, is a rational being. And also that we should be rational beings. Like, when you wake up in the morning, the first thing you should wonder about is, like, how will I be as smart as possible today? That's what the rationalist worldview believes. It's no longer like when people before the 17th century woke up, they used to think, or at least that was what they were expected to do by the dominant worldview, like, how can I live a good life today?

So good and bad were the most important things. The first question you should ask was an ethical question, an ethical question, not a rational question. And so, from the 17th century onwards, we started to believe that the human being should live its life starting from the question, like, how can we be as smart as possible, how can we live a life that is as rational as possible? And the major goal of life in this respect is to be the smartest and the strongest in the struggle to survive, something like that.

And the strange thing was, like, if you look at modern democracy, how it started somewhere back in the 18th century, after the American Revolution, you could say that the founding fathers, for instance, of American democracy, they all really believed that the human being is a rational being. They believed that people, when they were free, would think rationally and choose politicians who were rational, from a rational point of view, the best leaders. That was people like Thomas Jefferson and stuff. If you read their works, they all believed that. They believed, like, and even all the Enlightenment thinkers really believed that the human being is a rational being.

Now, the strange thing was, like, after a few decades, I think by the beginning of the 19th century, 1810 or something, like 20 or 30 years after the American Revolution, all the founding fathers of modern democracy already knew that they had made a fatal mistake. They already knew that the human being is not a rational being. Not at all. And that was the beginning. Like, almost at the same time, the phenomenon of modern propaganda emerged. Modern propaganda, which means a kind of practice. Like, you know, propaganda is the most important organizing principle of modern democracy. If you read the works from the beginning of democracy, if you read all these people who witnessed the problems of early democracy, they all said, we have no other option than manipulating the population.

If you read, there is no other option. Without manipulation, it's impossible to organize society. And because by that time, after 20 or 30 years, they already knew that citizens and the people absolutely wouldn't behave rationally. So modern propaganda is like the return of something that was repressed in the beginning of modern democracy. Modern democracy started from the belief that the human being is a rational being. And propaganda starts from exactly the opposite. You can make

people believe the most irrational things, no matter what, when you just confront them time and time again with irrational, emotional messages. So that's the point. You have these two things: on the one hand, the belief, so typical for Enlightenment culture, that human beings are rational beings.

And then, on the other hand, exactly the opposite — like, human beings are completely irrational, and with propaganda, which always goes to the emotions of people, which manipulates the emotions — with propaganda, you can make them believe everything you want. So that's the point. Modern democracy actually is, essentially, exactly the opposite of what it pretends to be. It pretends to be a system where people are free and can choose rationally what is good for them. But essentially, everyone who really studies modern democracy in an open-minded way will conclude that it is a system where people are fooled every day by propaganda, and where the population starts to believe the most absurd and irrational things because propaganda manipulates them.

#Pascal

Or they can. They can start believing the most absurd things, right? It's not necessary that they do, but it is possible, which is why the question, "Oh, how do democracies produce totalitarian states?" is kind of the wrong question. It's more like, how is it that some democratic systems do not fall prey to totalitarianism and mass formation, whereas others do? What is it that then informs this mass formation phenomenon, though? You know, that sometimes you have this movement. And I don't recall if it was a metaphor that came to mind when I was listening to one of your podcasts or somebody else's.

When, you know, you have this physical phenomenon that if you're on a bridge that is wobbly and a lot of people walk over that thing, then people naturally have to start walking in lockstep because they try to counteract the swinging of the bridge. And that itself then makes the swinging of the bridge worse, to the point where a bridge can collapse. That starts wobbling, right? And it's mass formation, in a sense — that kind of phenomenon where each individual is kind of forced to react to the movements of the other one. And that then causes lockstep and, in the end, a totalitarian state.

#Mattias Desmet

To a certain extent, it is. You know, maybe it would be good to go into the mechanism of mass formation. Like, in a few minutes we can walk through it. I think, in my opinion, one of the major questions when you're studying the phenomenon of mass psychology or mass formation always is, why did it get stronger? Like, okay, there were always mass formations. There were the Crusades, there were the witch hunts in the 17th century, and so on and so on. There were always mass formations. But the strange thing is that this phenomenon became stronger and stronger throughout the last few centuries.

And, you know, I believe that the reason why it became stronger in the first place was that the level of loneliness emerged. Like, I... I studied the phenomenon of mass formation for a few years, and in

my opinion, the starting point is always loneliness. So many scholars have remarked that something like propaganda cannot work in a population with good social bonds. You need disconnected, lonely people for propaganda to be very efficacious. So what happened in the first place was this: like our rationalist, materialist view of man and the world, for many reasons—I describe them in my book—disconnected people. It made them feel lonely. And it made more and more people feel lonely.

And that's the first step. That's the first very important step at the psychological level: loneliness. Hegel, the German philosopher, was the first who used the term "atomization" in the beginning of the 19th century to refer to the fact that in modern societies, more and more people started to feel lonely. And then if you look now in the 20th century, 21st century, I think it's up to 40% to 60% of people who report feeling lonely. Like, Theresa May in Great Britain appointed a Minister of Loneliness just because of how many lonely people there were. And in the States, the U.S. Surgeon General in 2017, I think, said that there was a loneliness epidemic.

So, so many people feel lonely, disconnected. That's the first step. And then once people feel lonely, they will typically start to struggle with a lack of meaning-making. Like, an isolated human being to an isolated human being—it always seems that life is without purpose, without meaning, just because human beings have a spontaneous feeling of purpose and meaning in life when they feel that their existence has an effect on other human beings. So lonely people don't have that anymore, and they will typically be confronted with a lack of meaning-making. Like, it's unbelievable—almost 50 percent of the world population believes that his or her job is without purpose, and it is a so-called bullshit job. So the percentages are staggering. And then something extremely important happens at the emotional level. Once people feel lonely, disconnected, isolated, and struggle with a lack of meaning-making, something very typical will happen at the emotional, at the affective level.

And that's what, in my theory, is just quintessential to understand mass formation. Like, once people feel isolated and struggle with a lack of meaning-making, they will be confronted at the emotional level with what I call free-floating frustration, aggression, and anxiety. That means a kind of frustration, aggression, and anxiety which people cannot connect to an object. So, meaning in plain words, that they feel frustrated, aggressive, and anxious without knowing what they feel frustrated, aggressive, and anxious for. And that's an extremely painful fate. It is extremely—like, when you feel anxious but you think that you know why you feel anxious, you feel a little bit in control. If you feel anxious about a dog, you know you can run from the dog.

But if you feel anxious without knowing what you feel anxious for, at a psychological level it's an extremely painful mental state. And when people, when many people are in this state—which was definitely the case, for instance, before the Corona crisis—when many people in a population are in this state, when there are very high levels of free-floating anxiety, something very typical might happen. If under these conditions someone distributes a narrative through the mass media indicating an object of anxiety, for instance a virus, and at the same time provides a strategy to deal with that object of anxiety, for instance the lockdowns, something very typical might happen.

All that free-floating anxiety might at once connect to the object of anxiety, and people might be willing to buy into the strategy to deal with the object of anxiety. No matter how absurd it is, because the reason why they buy into the narrative is not because they believe that it's a rational, effective strategy to deal with the object of anxiety. No, it's just psychological. It's because the strategy to deal with the object of anxiety functions as a kind of ritual that allows them to have control over their anxiety. That's the first step. That's the first step. It's like a collective symptom. Something like that happens all the time at the individual level.

Like when people have a phobia or another compulsive symptom, exactly the same process happens. But in a mass formation, it happens at the collective level. So all these people buy into the narrative because it makes them feel in control again. And then, in a second step, something even much more important happens. Because so many people at the same time participate in the strategy to deal with the object of anxiety, it makes them feel connected again. They have the feeling that they fight a collective battle with the object of anxiety. It makes them feel connected again. The strategy to deal with the object of anxiety—the mask-wearing, the lockdowns—functions as a collective ritual, which makes them feel united again, which makes them feel as if they can escape the most painful situation.

Condition: a human being can be in complete isolation. It feels that they can escape their isolation and their loneliness and that they can form a community again. It seems as if they are connected again, but they are not really connected. That's what makes mass formation so dramatic and so destructive. Because when people form a mass, with a mass formation—mass formation is a kind of group formation which has a very specific characteristic. Like in a healthy group formation, individuals connect to each other, and the group is based on connections between individuals. But in a mass formation, something completely different happens.

Like in a mass formation, a mass is a group that emerges not because individuals connect with each other, but because they all connect to the same collective ideal. Meaning after a while, all the energy, all the love between people is sucked away, and it's all injected into the bond between the individual and the collective. Meaning that after a while, people love the collective ideal, as it is usually incarnated in one or another leader, like Stalin or Hitler, for instance. People love the collective ideal much more than other individuals. And that explains, of course, why after a while in a mass formation, mothers start to report their children to the state when they think their children are not loyal enough to the state.

So that's what happens in a mass formation. It's an extremely destructive, powerful mechanism where people seem to escape loneliness, where they seem to find a way to take out their frustrated aggression on a scapegoat, where they seem to be in control of their anxiety, but where in reality they feel more and more anxious, frustrated, and aggressive, and feel more and more lonely, and in this way become even more vulnerable to a new transformation. So that was what happened when the corona narrative ended. Immediately, almost day by day, after the corona narrative lost its grip on society, the Ukraine narrative emerged.

#Pascal

Corona was not ended by any kind of lockdown mechanism. Corona was ended by Ukraine. Because you could needlessly shift into the next one, and you could even reuse the same kind of jargon. Well, how do we break through that? And I buy into what you're saying, and I do think you got the analysis of how this works right. What do we do against it? How do we break the grip of mass formation? And like... on the realistic level and the unrealistic level. I mean, like unrealistically, just like ideologically, ideally, I've had a talk with Dr. Neil McLaren, who wrote about, you know, narcissism and the connection to fascism.

And he pitched the idea just in passing, you know, because the system is such that these narcissists necessarily end up on top. What we would need is a mechanism to prevent that. So let's say 50% of parliament should be not elected by people, but purely randomly decided. Pure randomness—50% go to parliament—and that would be a countermechanism. That's, of course, unrealistic, but on the level of such things, and in the realm of realistic things that can be done, what are things that work against this mass formation in which we actually are? And in Europe, we are walking toward a war with Russia if we do not break it.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, that's the most important question, of course. And from my analysis, you can very easily say what the solution might be and what the solution won't be. And to understand that, I think we need to go one level deeper and wonder what the psychological reasons are for this loneliness that got stronger and stronger. You know, there are a hundred reasons why people in modernity, during the Enlightenment culture, got more and more lonely. There are a hundred reasons, but there is one more very fundamental reason, which is the most important one, and which is always forgotten. I know nobody who really focused on what I believe to be the most important, the most fundamental, the root cause of loneliness. The root cause of loneliness, I think, is the fact that in modernity and during the Enlightenment culture, people lost touch with truth.

Very strange. Very strange. Like when the Enlightenment tradition started, when the rationalist and materialist view of man and the world started. People started to believe that the entire universe is a kind of machine, and that the human being is a small machine, a cog in the big machine of the universe, and that the human being is a purely biological being, and that the ultimate goal of life is biological survival, or enjoying as much as possible, or avoiding pain—it doesn't matter—but the ultimate goal of life has to be understood in materialist terms according to this new materialist worldview. And from there on, something very strange happened. During the Enlightenment culture, humanity believed to have found the royal road, the highway to truth.

Like, people started to believe that we can find truth just by observing the world with our eyes and then determining the exact ratio between all the facts that are observed with our eyes. So that was

how we believed we could find the truth in Enlightenment culture. And strangely enough, while we believed to be on the highway to truth, in a strange way, we completely lost touch with it. And I believe that's because of the following reason. Even ancient Greek culture knew already, all the old traditions knew it, that speaking the truth is always dangerous. Because speaking the truth, by definition, means articulating words that destroy illusions. And everyone who tries to find their stability in all kinds of common sense, socially shared illusions, and in the world of appearances, will get angry when someone speaks the truth.

So, you know, everyone could feel that speaking the truth is always risky. And when you really look at life as a game in which the ultimate goal is to be the strongest, to survive, speaking the truth is extremely stupid just because it puts you at risk. When you really look at the world from a materialist point of view, you have to manipulate other people and definitely not try to speak the truth. Because truth speech is always dangerous. It's always risky. It makes you weaker in the world of appearances. You know, I can recommend everyone who's watching this podcast to watch the 1978 speech of Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard, because that's exactly what he's saying there. I watched it for the first time like one week ago.

That's exactly what he is saying there. He said, like, you know, everyone expected Solzhenitsyn to be very critical of communism at Harvard. And, of course, he was very critical of communism. But in that speech, he was, in the first place, very critical of Western society. He said Western society lost touch with truth because, he said, they start from a materialist worldview. He almost said literally what I mentioned in my book. And I never heard that speech before, so I definitely didn't hear it when I wrote my book. But along the same lines, he says, like, Western culture is lost just because in Western philosophy and in Western materialism, there is no reason whatsoever to be found to speak the truth. Because speaking the truth always makes you lose something.

So anyway, speaking the truth, when in a society, a materialist society, people lose touch with truth and people find no reason anymore to speak sincerely, something very strange happens. Connection gets lost. Because speaking the truth is what makes people feel connected. Speaking the truth — you speak the truth when you articulate something that you usually hide behind our narcissistic ideal image. People constantly keep up an ideal image, a narcissistic image, and that's what isolates them from other people. And the act of sincere speech, of truth speech, is what destroys these narcissistic ideal images and connects people again with each other. So a society in which there is less and less free speech is doomed to end in isolation and disconnectedness.

#Pascal

Yes, please. One question here, because the other very typical rationalist thing to assume is, of course, truth and reality that actually metaphysically exist, and that they are part of an observer-independent reality. And this idea of an observer-independent reality, to me, is probably one of the

most damaging ones. I don't think it is. Even within physics, we've learned that the observer actually is crucial in order to determine the reality of the quantum world. And I view that as well, like also within the psychological frameworks of people, right?

Truth is observer-dependent. That's why, you know, the evilness of Vladimir Putin is an absolute truth within the framework of this group of people. And the relational reality of the Russian political system, where things move each other and then react to things that were imposed externally, that is part of the truth of people maybe like you and I. But it is observer-dependent. How do you and your framework account for that? Or can it be discounted, the observer question?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, well, the example of quantum mechanics is, of course, a very good example. And I'm writing two books at the moment, and one of them goes into the history of science over the last five centuries and the way in which science actually constantly stumbled upon this strange phenomenon of consciousness, even the strange phenomenon of the soul, but constantly also walked away from it again.

#Pascal

That's religious. We're going to go away.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, yes, exactly. Yes. The seminal scientists, the founding fathers of science, none of them was a materialist. And I even, like last year, I visited CERN for one week because one of the physicists there had read my book **The Psychology of Totalitarianism**, and he was very fond of it. And he said, like, look, maybe you would be happy to be here for a week and to see all these experiments, to observe them. And so I went there. I even once wrote an article, which is also on my Substack, about the mathematical basis of Bell's theorem. So I really, I'm into it, and I was always fascinated by what you mentioned, of course, that even at the level of our material reality there is an observer effect — like there is no such thing as an observation which is not influenced or even constructed by the observing entity, by the human being that observes it. So that's true. But I'm not quite sure that I agree with you when you say that there is no truth independent of the observer.

At least I think you said that. But, you know... Well, as you know, I believe that—I would rather say reality is always constructed by the observer. And you can see that very easily at the level of elementary particles. Like before a particle, an elementary particle, is observed—so it's a sea of potentialities. It's a wave, a probability wave, they say, in physics. Of course, they don't know what they say there. Nobody really knows what a particle is before it is observed. Like from a physical perspective, okay, it's probably something like a probability wave, which is situated in a Hilbert space in mathematical terms.

So... and at the moment of the observation, suddenly this probability wave collapses and a particle appears that is located somewhere in space and time and that has certain physical characteristics, which are like a very small part of all these potentialities, all these characteristics it possessed before the observation. So, like, the moment we observe, we create reality — a reality which is like one minor aspect of a material reality, which is like one very small part of everything that constituted this reality before the observation. So, but I think, like, I think that we create reality. There is no reality independent of us as an observer. But in my opinion, that doesn't mean that there is no truth independent of the observer.

#Pascal

In that case, truth must be shared reality — the realities of different individuals that accept the same reality — and that is then truth.

#Mattias Desmet

Sorry, we're going into a very abstract... No, no, no. Yes, exactly. No, for me... when we are talking about quantum mechanics, truth would be the probability wave, which we don't really know, which is so much more—so much more than we can observe. But it is out there to a certain extent. It is out there. And at the moment of observation, we reduce truth to this small thing we see with our eyes and understand with our brain. So that's more or less how I think at this moment about it. There is truth, but we can never fully articulate it, know it.

#Pascal

Yeah, it lands us in the problem that truth is actually the cat being dead and alive at the same time. And that's a problem.

#Mattias Desmet

I mean, Schrödinger hated that.

#Pascal

That's why he dictated Merriman. But in that case, truth will be reduced to this kind of dissatisfactory state. It's got them both. Which took us very far away from the original question. Can you think of things to do against mass formation? Because we really need to get out of it in Europe, otherwise there are going to be millions of people who will die.

#Mattias Desmet

Yeah, exactly. Yes. And of course, the problem started when modernity got alienated from the act of sincere speech, meaning that as human beings, we are constantly confronted with a choice. Like, will we take the easy way and buy into all these narratives that everyone shares? Will we take the easy way and buy into all these social illusions and shared narratives, or will we take the difficult road and say, like, look, okay, this doesn't feel good to me, and I will try to articulate why I feel this, why this isn't right? So the act of sincere speech at all levels, from the lowest to the highest level, always boils down to this. It means that you decide to articulate words that go against certain ideal images that are projected onto us. Most people never even realize that they buy into all these social norms and ideal images.

They just constantly do. They never think for themselves. They always think as others want them to think. They speak the words that other people want them to speak, and they never speak their own words. That's what happens in a mass formation. Suddenly the mass emerges. There is this huge pressure to conform, to go into it. And then there are a few percent of the people who decide to say that they do not agree. And Gustave Le Bon in the 19th century already mentioned, he said, like, every time a mass formation emerges, you have three groups. First, 20% to 30% of the people who buy into the mass formation, they just are completely hypnotized, literally hypnotized. It's hypnosis. Mass formation is mass hypnosis.

And then you have a large group, 60%, maybe 65%, who knows that there is something wrong but chooses to remain silent because they feel the tremendous pressure of the mass formation. And then there are a few percent of the people, sometimes up to 10%, sometimes even 20%, who don't go along with it and who decide to speak out, to try to say, like, look, there is something wrong with this narrative here of the Ukraine war, of the corona crisis, and so on. And Gustave Le Bon, in the 19th century, already observed, like he said, this small group of dissident people, when they speak out, they will almost always be very disappointed because they will feel that the people in the masses refuse to wake up.

Because once someone is in a mass formation, is hypnotized, no matter what you say, no matter how clear your arguments are against the narrative, they will have no psychological impact because they refer to a part of reality to which no emotions are attached anymore. Meaning that at the psychological level, all these arguments have not the least, no impact at all. And Gustave Le Bon said already, like, okay, so when these dissident people speak out, they were very disappointed because they see that the masses refuse to wake up. But he said, and that's crucial, he said, like, but that doesn't mean that their words have no impact. When there are people who continue to speak out in a quiet and sincere way, not claiming that they know everything, but just saying, like, look, I do not agree.

There is something wrong, according to me. When these people continue to speak out, they will not be able to wake up the masses, but usually they will prevent the masses from going to the last stage of the mass formation, where they typically will try to destroy everyone who doesn't go along with

the masses. So, and that's what we need, when the masses do not go to the last stage. They will destroy themselves before they destroy everyone who doesn't go along with them. And to the contrary, when the people who do not fall prey to the mass formation choose to remain silent, the masses will first destroy the people who do not go along with the masses, and then they will destroy themselves, as happened in the Soviet Union, for instance. It doesn't matter. We could give a lot of historical examples.

#Pascal

It's a very good point. So the act of resistance is actually also the act of helping the masses, actually of preventing it at work, just through resistance and through saying, like, no, no, there's something wrong here. Even if you don't go along with it, I want it to be registered. Okay.

#Mattias Desmet

Um, exactly. You know, the only cure—I could analyze this from 20 perspectives and you would see it's always the same conclusion. The only cure, the only remedy for a society sick of lies and manipulation, sick of propaganda, is sincerity. That's the only cure. We have to rediscover the psychological value of truth for a human being. Truth is fundamental for a human being. It's fundamental. It's fundamental for every human being, every individual, and it's fundamental for human living together. There can be no society, truly humane, which is alienated from the act of sincere speech.

#Pascal

I like that one—sincerity, the idea of sincerity and that it registers. Because it's very, I mean, yeah, once you then get the emotional reaction of the other one, that's when you know that you've touched something, right? That they would prefer not to be touched. And that's probably where to go. Matthias, people who want to read more about your analysis and your insights, there's, of course, your books. But you've said there's also a Substack. Where else should people find you?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, there is my book, which is translated now, I think, into 25 languages. So it's also in Japanese, it's in Chinese, and in most major languages. And there's my Substack, my Substack page, where I publish short essays from time to time. Sometimes I don't publish anything for two or three months because I only write when I feel that there are certain things that want to be articulated; otherwise, I don't write. Yeah, so my Substack page and my book are the two most important things, I think. I also publish from time to time something on social media, but not too much, because I think on Substack you can publish these longer essays, which I prefer. So that's probably the most important way to learn about my work.

#Pascal

Okay. I will link to both, to your book as well as to your Substack, in the description box below. And then I hope to talk to you soon again in order to continue this conversation and also the ways of getting out of the mess we've maneuvered ourselves into. Matthias Desmet, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you very much, Pascal.