

Mattias Desmet: The West's Descent Into Totalitarianism

Mattias Desmet is a professor of psychology at the University of Ghent and the author of "The Psychology of Totalitarianism". Read the Substack of Prof. Desmet: <https://substack.com/@mattiasdesmet> The Psychology of Totalitarianism: <https://www.amazon.com/Psychology-Totalitarianism-Mattias-Desmet/dp/1645021726> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined today by Mathias Desmet, a professor of psychology at the University of Ghent, to discuss, among other things, his book on the psychology of totalitarianism. Well, you have argued yourself that Western societies are showing tendencies, at least, toward what can be associated with emerging totalitarianism. And so I think it's important to unpack this concept, what it actually means. So... yeah, thank you very much for coming on the program. Well, thank you for having me. So I've spoken to many leading experts who make the point that we are, you know, to discuss international politics, we kind of have left the realm of politics and we need psychology to understand.

And I guess that's where you come in, because it is interesting to look at the psychology of the masses now to understand politics. Especially the past decade, I think, has been very suffocating, for lack of a better word. That is, you know, we began with Russiagate in 2016, which continued for years, which was this evidence-free narrative, completely absurd in many ways. But it had to be believed, and there was this huge intolerance. Any dissent was essentially smeared. There was only one perspective. And then it seemed to be replaced by COVID, where everyone had to subscribe to the same essentially flawed logic. That is, we suddenly had a wonderful vaccine, which no one could question.

However, it didn't protect, and it was developed only in a few months instead of a decade. Again, no dissent. Then COVID was ended by and replaced with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and again it was full conformity around very absurd narratives. It was unprovoked, Russia was restoring the Soviet Union, NATO had nothing to do with any of this. And again, total conformity, dissent treated more or less as treason. It feels like society delved into this mass psychosis, and things aren't getting better. We have, of course, a massive war in the Middle East, we have in the West economic decline, a legitimacy crisis of the political elites. So again, I get back to the point.

The environment's quite suffocating. That is, we must all believe the exact same thing, no matter how ridiculous it is. There's no dissent, no addressing arguments. Anyone dissenting is essentially smeared and destroyed. And we see that politics tends to enter all realms of personal life as well. So... my question is that you make the point that modern totalitarianism doesn't emerge through brute force, but it's a psychological process and a social process. You refer to this as mass formation. I thought a good place to start would be if you could outline what mass formation is and how you explain totalitarianism in psychological terms?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, yes, that's maybe a good point to start. I can walk you through my theory if you want. You know, like, I think it's now maybe 12 or 13 years ago that I started to be fascinated by the topic of totalitarianism, just because first I got interested in mass psychology. At university, I noticed time and time again how completely blind highly intelligent or highly educated people can be when they are confronted with something that doesn't fit in their ideology or the narratives they believe in. So I made my PhD about research problems, methodological problems in contemporary academic research. And I noticed there, time and time again, when I tried to show my colleagues in academia how certain research methods that are widely used possibly can lead to valid results.

You know, I'm also a statistician by training. I'm a professor in clinical psychology, but I'm also a statistician. And so when I tried to show them how certain research methods actually possibly cannot lead to valid results, I noticed that most of my colleagues actually got angry at me. And I started to become fascinated by this strange phenomenon that highly educated people, and probably highly educated people in particular, can become completely blind to certain facts when these facts do not confirm or are in conflict with the ideology they believe in. And then I started to study mass psychology because I noticed that this strange expert blindness probably cannot be explained on the basis of individual psychology alone.

You need to understand how an individual is very often in the grip of a certain culture, subculture, a certain group it belongs to, or is in the grip of a certain narrative that organizes group life. And so I started to become interested in mass psychology. And then back in 2020, in the beginning, the corona crisis started. And at that moment, I was already very well aware, you know, as soon as I started to study mass psychology, I started to become aware of the fact that a phenomenon, which I use the term mass formation for, that a phenomenon of mass formation actually is responsible for the emergence of a completely new kind of state system in the 20th century, which we usually refer to now as a totalitarian state.

And from the beginning, I was interested in particular in two questions, like what is the difference between this totalitarian state and a classical dictatorship? That's the first question, which is very important. Most people believe that the Soviet Union and, let's say, Nazi Germany, which are the two most important examples, I think, or the most famous examples of totalitarian states at the

beginning of the 20th century, most people believe that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were classical dictatorships, that they were dictatorships. But actually, this is not true at all.

They were totalitarian states. They were the first totalitarian states in history. And then I wanted to understand, really understand, like what the difference is between a totalitarian state and a classical dictatorship. And the difference is huge. Actually, they are two completely different phenomena at the psychological level. And I think it's extremely important to understand psychologically what the difference is. Because now, in the beginning of the 21st century, we are confronted, I believe, with the emergence of a new totalitarianism.

A new totalitarianism which is not a fascist or a communist totalitarianism, but which is a technocratic totalitarianism, for which Hannah Arendt, probably the most important author and philosopher on totalitarian states, already warned us in 1953. She said, like, fascist totalitarianism in Germany collapsed, and we will probably soon witness the collapse of communist totalitarianism. But very soon, we will see the emergence of a new kind of totalitarianism — a totalitarianism which is no longer led by ringleaders such as Stalin or Hitler, but by dull bureaucrats and technocrats.

And so, the emergence of a totalitarian state, in this case, I believe, a globalist, technocratic totalitarian state — the emergence of a totalitarian state always leads to a certain group who doesn't want to participate, who doesn't fall prey to the psychological totalitarian processes, and who tries to do something, who tries to resist the emergent totalitarian state. And history has shown us that usually the resistance chooses the wrong strategy. They usually behave as if they are fighting, as if they are resisting a classical dictatorship. And that's just a fatal mistake when you're confronted with a totalitarian state. So that's why I believe it's important that we go into it, that we try to understand what happens in a totalitarian state. So let me, in a nutshell, try to tell something about the difference.

Like, a classical dictatorship at the psychological level is very primitive. It's simple. Like, there is a certain group of people who are experienced by the population as having a huge aggressive potential. And the population is so scared by this dictatorial regime that they just accept that this dictatorial regime unilaterally imposes its social contract on the population. That's, in a nutshell, a little bit simplistic, what happens in a classical dictatorship. And that means, of course, that if the population succeeds in destroying the dictatorial regime or a part of the dictatorial regime, there is a very good chance that the dictatorship will collapse. Now, compared to that, the emergence of a totalitarian state is completely different.

In a totalitarian state, the first thing that happens is the emergence of a very specific group formation in society, which I call mass formation. That means that in a totalitarian state, you can see how first a certain part of the population, usually around 20 to 30 percent, starts to believe fanatically in a certain ideology — for instance, the race theories of Hitler or historical materialism of Marx in the Soviet Union. So first, there is a mass formation. That means that a mass, a crowd of people, emerges which very fanatically believes in a certain narrative. And then, in a second step,

there are usually some gifted rhetorical speakers who use this mass, who put themselves at the head of the mass, and who use the mass to seize control of the state system.

And in that way, a new system emerges, a new state system, which has a much, much more suffocating impact on society. Because, as Hannah Arendt put it, it has a huge secret police at its disposal — namely, this part of the population, 20 to 30%, who so fanatically buy into the state narrative that they are willing to report everyone to the state who doesn't buy into the narrative, who doesn't conform to the narrative. So that emergence of a mass is the most crucial thing to understand — this mass formation. If you want to understand authoritarianism, mass formation is a kind of group formation which has a very specific impact on individuals.

In a mass, when an individual is in the grip of a mass formation, it will typically be completely incapable of taking a critical distance from what the group believes in. It will typically become willing to radically self-sacrifice. Very strange. It will be willing to lose everything in order to follow the state narrative. It will be willing to sacrifice its health, its wealth, the future of its children, everything, when the state system requires it, when the state ideology requires it. And the third characteristic, the third impact of a mass formation on individual psychology, is that individuals who are in the grip of a mass formation become radically intolerant of everyone who thinks differently and who speaks differently in particular.

So these three things lead to this very strange atmosphere when a totalitarian state emerges. People become completely blind, incapable of seeing the flaws and taking a critical distance from what the masses believe in. Secondly, they become radically willing to self-sacrifice. And thirdly, they become radically intolerant of everyone who thinks differently, to the extent that mothers will report their children to the state. There is this conversation of me on the internet with Shorafi Shtali, a woman who lived in Iran in 1978 and who was forced to witness how a mother who had reported her son to the state put the noose around the neck of her son when he was on the scaffold.

And when he was dead, she was very proud to receive a medal for heroism. So that's what happens in a totalitarian state. Children report their parents to the state. Parents report their children to the state. Everyone reports everyone because of this phenomenon of mass formation. So that's why I believe it's so crucial to understand what really happens there—what happens at the psychological level. Do we have time to walk through that as well, Glenn? Yes, please. Yeah, that's the most important thing, I believe. Like, you know, a mass formation emerges under specific conditions. Mass formations have existed as long as mankind exists. The Crusades were examples. There were several examples in history of emerging mass formation.

But something very specific happened throughout the last two centuries. Namely, the mass formations became stronger and stronger and stronger. And up until now, I don't know if there is anyone who really found an explanation, or at least tried to find an explanation, for why these mass formations became strong. And the reason was, I believe, that this phenomenon of the increasing strength of the mass formations was connected to another phenomenon that emerged in modernity

throughout the last few centuries, namely that more and more people started to feel lonely. More and more people started to feel isolated from everything around them and their fellow human beings, society, nature. People got atomized.

Our society got atomized, as Hegel said. It fell apart and isolated individuals—isolated and lonely individuals. And like just before the corona crisis, in 2017, up to somewhere between 40 and 70% of people reported feeling completely isolated and lonely. It was the result of a Gallup World Poll. And then, as soon as you start to understand how that's the basis of the increasing strength of the mass formations, you can very easily understand the entire mechanism. Like, once people feel lonely, once people feel disconnected in a lonely state, they will typically start to suffer from a lack of meaning-making in life. We could go into this. We better not do it. We don't have enough time to explain it in detail.

But loneliness typically leads to a feeling that life has no purpose or meaning. And also, we can see very easily, like at the level of the jobs people do, up to 60% of people consider their own job to be a so-called bullshit job. That means that they believe the work they do actually has no meaning or purpose at all, which is typical, of course, for bureaucratic systems. And once people are in this state—lonely, disconnected, struggling with a profound lack of meaning-making, a profound lack of purpose in life—something very specific will happen at the emotional level. They will typically be confronted with a very specific kind of frustration, aggression, and anxiety.

A kind of frustration, aggression, and anxiety which I coined the term for: free-floating frustration, aggression, and anxiety. That means a kind of frustration, aggression, and anxiety which people cannot connect to a mental representation, or in plain words, people feel lonely, people feel frustrated, aggressive, and anxious without knowing what they feel frustrated, aggressive, and anxious for. And that's a very painful state. It's a very aversive state for a human being because we feel completely out of control. It's the most painful state a human being can be in—feeling anxious, for instance, without knowing what you feel anxious for.

Feeling anxious without being able to protect, to resist that which you feel anxious for. Now, when many people are in this state in a society, something very specific might happen. When someone under these conditions, intentionally or not, distributes or disseminates a narrative through the mass media indicating an object of anxiety—for instance, the coronavirus—and a strategy to deal with that object of anxiety—for instance, the lockdowns—there is a very good chance that many people at the same time will buy into the narrative, that they will associate all their anxiety with this object of anxiety in the narrative, and that they will be willing to participate in the strategy to deal with that object of anxiety, no matter how absurd that narrative is. That's a strange thing: when people feel anxious enough and are not capable of associating their anxiety with a certain object, they will be willing to associate it with no matter what, even when they know somewhere in the back of their head that this object of anxiety is actually not very dangerous. That's what happens at the individual level all the time when people develop phobias or compulsive symptoms—they know somewhere that this snake doesn't live in the country they live in, or that these spiders are not so dangerous.

But they will want to believe that it is dangerous, because in that way, they can control their anxiety a little bit just by avoiding the spider. So that's what happens in a mass formation. But in that case, it doesn't happen at the individual level. It happens at the collective level, meaning that many people at the same time all buy into the same narrative, all associate their anxiety with the same object. And in the first place, this leads to an experience of being more in control than before, being more able to control your anxiety. And in the second place, more importantly, because so many people at the same time buy into the narrative, they feel connected again.

It is of this they escape their loneliness, because they fight this heroic collective battle, this collective war with the object of anxiety—the virus, the Jews, the aristocracy, or the bourgeoisie in the Soviet Union. So that's the first step of the mass formation. Many people at the same time associate their anxiety with an object of anxiety, and then they all blindly buy into the strategy to deal with that object of anxiety. And then, of course, the second step is extremely important. It seems as if people escape the most fundamental problematic condition of a human being: anxiety and isolation.

I said, it seems as if they escape it, because in reality, they are more lonely than ever before. And that has to do with this very particular characteristic of a mass formation. A mass is a group that emerges not because individuals connect to each other, not because individuals start to love each other and start to form a group. No, a mass is a group that emerges because all the individuals separately connect to a collective ideal—the battle, the mask-wearing, or vaccination—which are all like a kind of ritual, psychologically having the function of a ritual that makes you belong to the mass.

So, meaning that a mass is a group that is formed because each individual gets connected to a collective ideal, meaning that after a while, the connection between the individual and the collective ideal gets much stronger than even the strongest connection between individuals—for instance, the connection between a mother and her child. And that's the reason why, after a while, mothers start to report their children to the state when they feel that their child is not loyal enough to the collective ideal. So that's the dramatic thing, that's what happens in mass formation. It was clear that this happened in the corona crisis. Like, even if you do believe that the coronavirus was, to a certain extent, dangerous—I believe it was—the mortality rate was much, much, much lower than they said in the beginning.

That's clear. And that's beyond a shadow of a doubt. But even if you believe that it had a certain dangerousness, well, even then you cannot ignore that we could see this very strange phenomenon, like that people suddenly started to be willing to report their neighbors to the state or even their children. And people suddenly, everyone was talking about solidarity, but strangely enough, we accepted, or most people accepted, that the elderly, the old people, had to die lonely somewhere in a hospital or in an institution where they would not even be allowed to be visited by their children. People certainly accepted, for instance, that when someone got in an accident on the street, we were no longer allowed to help that person. So that's a very strange kind of solidarity.

It's a solidarity with a collective ideal and a complete lack of solidarity with your fellow human being. So that's mass formation. It's the basis of all totalitarianism. It's extremely dangerous. And you can see now how after the corona crisis, we had the mass formation of the corona crisis. And then suddenly, somewhere in 2021, it was replaced like this by the Ukraine narrative, which is very typical. Once a new narrative is disseminated, which offers a new object of anxiety, which is maybe even more dangerous—the dangerous monster Putin—then there is a good chance that suddenly this complex, dynamical phenomenon of mass formation chooses a new object, leaves the first, chooses a new object, and a new transformation emerges.

Which, of course, doesn't mean—I wrote several articles about the war in Ukraine. I'm not someone who believes that Putin is a saint. Not at all. And I'm not someone who believes that the way in which Putin rose to power, and what Putin did in Chechnya, or no matter what, means that Putin is a saint. Not at all. I just mean that we are blindly projecting all our problems, anxiety, and so on, onto an external object, onto Putin, and that we are just not capable anymore of seeing that there are a lot of problems on our side, that NATO did a lot of things which actually forced Russia to react more, and so on and so on. So, well, that's my little introduction about mass formation and totalitarianism.

#Glenn

It is interesting, though. Well, first, I just want to make a comment on the anger part. That's something I realized as well as an academic, because I'm a professor in political science focusing on security studies. And in security studies, like all theories kind of recognize that the reason why states are in conflict is what they refer to as international anarchy, that all states compete for security. So there's kind of consensus in the literature: if we want peace, we have to first reduce the security competition. You have to recognize the security concerns of your opponents, such as was done towards the end of the Cold War, and you reduce mutual threats, and then you can have peace. I thought I was following the common recipe, but I realized as soon as I argued with this war, for example, that we have to recognize the Russian security concerns, it was just pushback with massive anger.

It was not even rational arguments. It's just, well, that means you're repeating their views. You are now part of them. And it wasn't just the Russians. It was the Iranians, the Chinese. I mean, people just want to essentially have conformity around the same slogans—how evil Putin is, the mullahs, the Chinese communists. And, yeah, it was... There's no—all facts are kind of dismissed. They simply said, well, that's a talking point, you know, a panda hugger, a Kremlin talking point, apologist for mullahs. And I even had colleagues who suggested, oh, you should write some books on Russian imperial history so people know you're one of us, you know, like—even when you went to debates about the war in the Middle East, you always have to condemn Hamas.

They always ask you, do you condemn Russia? It's always forcing you into a position as some kind of activist on behalf of the state. You can't be an analyst and take yourself out of the situation. You have to participate in the moral outrage. If not, condemnation is now obligatory. You see it from

regular people, and I even had a strange experience last year because I noticed that in my country, every single—well, when the Russians first invaded Ukraine, we had a prime minister who said, well, we can't send weapons because that makes us a participant, and we never did this. And now every single member of parliament is for sending weapons. Not a single one is arguing we should talk to the other side. And so I thought, OK, I'll run for parliament, I thought.

And it was quite insane. That is, every media outlet essentially said it: well, this is pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian. And you had people tearing down political posters. And when they were asked to comment on this vandalism, they actually compared it to liberating Norway from Hitler during World War II. So all this self-righteousness, it was overwhelming, and the moral superiority, you know, and it was all this strong tribal activity. You know, they were all fighting for freedom, and essentially my arguments for, instead of sending weapons, we should restore diplomacy, were just evidence of being in the hands of Putin, and it's, you know, it's a fascist agent, and... You had politicians arguing that they should look into whether or not the Kremlin was financing me.

At the end, even the defense minister came out and criticized the media for having spoken to me. The defense minister, that is the state power, saying that, well, they wouldn't ask why. What has he done? That's pro-Russian propaganda. Well, he blamed NATO for the war. So it doesn't matter what your arguments are, your facts. You can point to expert opinions from leading American politicians. Nothing matters. It's just conform to the narrative or we essentially destroy you. It doesn't feel like democracy to me, though. But... but how do you see this linked into democracies?

Because often, you know, people have been told essentially that, you know, we don't have propaganda. Propaganda is something we have in authoritarian states. But, you know, when you focus on the, what do you say, the atomization of the individual, the individual standing all alone, I don't know if people appreciate how powerful this is. Because whether it's a study of sociology, political studies, or psychology, the key focus is often this duality of human beings — that we're rational individuals, as the Enlightenment will tell us. However, the duality is that we're also a group animal.

We organize in groups for security and meaning, as we've done for thousands of years, and the individual does have to adjust to the group, though. So we have, on one hand, the rational individual, but also we have this third instinct almost, where we adapt to the group. So is this manipulated, or how is this channeled? Because on one hand we become more atomized, more... And again, this is a trait of modernity. As you said before, modernity is often defined by these two variables: rationality and individualism. But if we aren't only individuals, that is, and we aren't only rational, what does this mean for how society is impacted?

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, well, to start with the question, are we still in a democracy? I don't really think so. Many people believe that a democracy is a state system where a majority who is elected rules the country. But

that's not true, of course. As Tocqueville said in the 19th century, he said, no, democracy is a state system where an elected majority rules the country with respect for the fundamental rights of minorities. And that's, of course, what lacks in a totalitarian system. In a totalitarian system, it's also the majority that rules the country, but it has no respect whatsoever for the fundamental rights of minorities. And that's very clearly what happened in the corona crisis.

It's very clear that the rights of the minorities were extremely violated. So I believe at least that we are in danger of ending up in a completely anti-democratic system. That's the first thing to start with. And as you said, it's actually connected very much to this more fundamental question, like what about the nature of the human being? Is the human being a rational being? Since modernity, since the so-called scientific revolution in the 17th century, we started to believe, or at least the mainstream, the dominant mainstream view on man and the world, or the dominant view on man, was that the human being is a rational being.

It's capable of rational thinking and making choices on the basis of rational argumentation. Okay, you can clearly see when the first modern democracy emerged, in 1779, 1778 in America with the American Revolution, you could clearly see when you read the texts of the founding fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, that they started from the idea that the citizens, the human beings who were the members of the states, would be able to think rationally and choose a good candidate in a democratic way. So that was the starting point. And you know, after five or ten years, the founding fathers of modern democracy already knew that they had made a fatal mistake and had been believing in illusions, for all kinds of reasons.

We could go into that in all kinds of directions, like the fact that Thomas Jefferson actually started from the idea that a democracy can only function as a democracy when the majority of the people in the democracy are small landowners who live a self-sufficient life, who can take care of themselves on their own plot of land. That's what he believed. And he had very good reasons to believe so. He said, like, only when an individual is able to see all the facts, the entire reality that matters for his own life, only then can an individual choose a candidate and evaluate, by his own rationality, by his own rational thinking, whether this political candidate that they elected was a good or a bad candidate. So Thomas Jefferson started from this idea: the majority of the people have to be small landowners who can live a self-sufficient life.

So, of course, very soon it turned out, because the world industrialized more and more, that this local life was an illusion. More and more people started to be dependent on industries that were invisible to them, which they couldn't observe themselves, meaning that very soon modern democracy needed a new institution — the media and the press — who made all the invisible facts visible for the people, who told the people about the world that mattered to them. And in the next step, after ten years, they already knew that it was almost impossible to build a media system that would be objective. For all kinds of reasons, it was impossible.

For instance, because they could see that it was impossible to have enough eyewitnesses who could describe every significant event that happened and allow journalists to report in an objective way. And even when there were eyewitnesses, all these eyewitnesses contradicted each other. So, after ten years, they knew that an objective press was an illusion. And they also noticed that the population didn't want to pay for good journalism. They didn't. They didn't want to pay for it. And in ten years, journalism was dependent on the large industrial and monetary players who wanted to finance journalism because they knew that they could manipulate the population in this way.

So in a very short span of time, journalism became necessary and became very close to propaganda. That's the point. And what they noticed was that the first propagandists were probably the Marxists. From 1850 onwards, the telegraph was invented, and modern photography was invented, and for the first time in history, a kind of propaganda system emerged which was much more sophisticated than all the propaganda that preceded it. And so, probably the Crimean War was the first heavily propagandized war.

1853, we are talking about the Crimean War of the 19th century, which was, by the way, ideologically speaking, exactly the same as the war in Ukraine we have now. But the first highly propagandized war was the Crimean War. Then, in the second half of the 19th century, Marxism emerged, and Marxism probably for the first time developed a very coherent and extensive propaganda system. And by the time the First World War happened, propaganda was already fully developed. And very interestingly, it started from exactly the opposite idea of what the mainstream or the worldview of modernity actually believed. The dominant view of man in the world believes that the human being is a rational being. Well, propaganda started from exactly the opposite position.

Namely, the human being is an emotional being. And when you control the emotions of the human being, you can do no matter what you want with it. You can... when you spread narratives which are completely irrational, but when you repeat these narratives time and time again, people will start to buy into them. So that was what propaganda actually was — the return of something that was repressed in the beginning of modernity, namely that the human being is not a rational being, it's an emotional being. And the human being, of course, is capable of rational thinking, but that requires, in the first place, that it has a certain control of its emotions. And without that certain control, it will become completely irrational. So, when you're asking me, like, are we living in a democracy?

No, I don't think so, because we are living in a society in which the fundamental, the most important organizing principle is propaganda, which means a society where people are incapable of choosing a democratic candidate in a more or less lucid or rational way, meaning that we fundamentally, I believe, live in what people like Marcuse called a velvet glove, a totalitarian system. Up until now, it's a velvet glove, but it could very soon take off its velvet gloves and become very aggressive and use terror.

#Glenn

Well, what you mentioned about repetition is quite important, because that's how narratives are formed. That is, it's in human nature that we confuse the familiar with the real. So if you hear something over and over again, then it seems more real. But it's also interesting that a lot of the original literature on propaganda, be it from people like Edward Bernays or Walter Lippmann, they all recognized that liberal democracies are more reliant on propaganda than others, simply because if sovereignty is transferred to the people, it's more important what they believe. But somehow we propagandized what propaganda means, because now it's assumed that it's something that others do, authoritarians do, which is kind of fascinating to me.

But you also see that propaganda was more utilized when they expanded voting rights, because now there was more need to, I guess, manage the masses. And also, when societies industrialized and became more complex, the more complex the world is, it isn't realistic for people to understand everything that's happening now — you know, agriculture from Brazil to great power politics in Russia. So you simplify everything down to very simple heuristics and stereotypes. And then this is a good way of managing. And I think, yeah, then you don't need this brute force, as you described, a dictatorship, because this is also what Walter Lippmann made the point about, since he worked in propaganda for the US government in the First World War.

He made the point that individuals, human beings, have a basic understanding of the world. If you challenge those basic assumptions they have, you don't need to manipulate them. They experience great discomfort when how they see the world is being challenged, and they will essentially reject it, no matter what the information is. And so essentially, propaganda doesn't mean you have to tell people what to believe or appeal to their rationality. All you have to do is, I guess, appeal to the truth of building up those fundamental ideas of who's good and who's bad, which is why in every war, you know, us, we're a liberal democracy, we're fighting imperial Russia, we're fighting, you know, Muslim extremists, terrorists. If you just make people buy into the premise that this is good and bad, all reality kind of goes away.

Well, that's why I think psychology is an important aspect, because it was Sigmund Freud who brought in this concept of group psychology — that yeah, we're all nice, rational individuals, but you have group psychology. We are group animals, we adjust to the group, and this will overwhelm the rational individual. And you know, his nephew Edward Bernays, he essentially took that material, and this became the foundation of literature on propaganda. It is: how do you manipulate group psychology? In other words, how do you appeal to the non-rational aspect of human nature to overwhelm the rational individual? And again, here we are. But I was curious though, because you mentioned the fascists and the communists — they had that 20th-century version of propaganda. But now we're moving into the technocratic thinking, technocratic elites, which you described as dull and boring. I can't help but find that the perfect description of the EU at times. But what is it that makes the technocrats, I guess, a key conveyor or pusher of this kind of totalitarianism? What is it about them?

#Mattias Desmet

That's a good question. That's a good question. I always wondered, like, how could Hannah Arendt know back in 1953 that the next big totalitarian system would be a technocratic system led by dull bureaucrats and technocrats? I'm not sure, but I think it has to do with the fact that meanwhile, since the middle of the 20th century, our worldview became more and more rationalistic, and our society became more and more bureaucratic. Like, the number of rules exploded. You could see how, if I'm not mistaken—I'm not quite sure about the figures anymore—but I think in the beginning of the 19th century only 10 percent of the people had an administrative or bureaucratic job, and now the totality of bureaucratic work and tasks is up to 70 percent, I think.

So, I mean, the bureaucratic system or our society became more and more bureaucratic, meaning, of course, that it selects the people who by nature have a talent for or are attracted to bureaucracy — the elites at the political level, which of course is only a very small and probably almost insignificant part of the elite at the level of our globalist society. But I believe that the fact that our society became more and more bureaucratic also means that the public leaders of this new totalitarianism also become more and more bureaucratic and technocratic. That would be my two-cent opinion. No, but it's a very good question, like why — as to why — like I also think, you know.

#Mattias Desmet

The dominant worldview starting from the 17th century onwards became more and more materialist and rationalist in nature, so we started to believe more and more that the human being is like a biological machine, which is one of the big problems. Of course, it's not a biological machine if you ask me, but anyway, we started to believe that. We started to consider the human being as a machine, and this machine metaphor got more and more grip on society, until we arrive now at ideologies such as the one of Yuval Noah Harari — the one which Yuval Noah Harari articulated in his mega-bestseller **Homo Deus** — where he just says, like, of course, well, we are a machine.

We have no soul, even no real consciousness. If you open up the skull of a human being, you will only find biological electrical wires there. And so we can optimize this biological machinery of the human being just by merging the human being with all kinds of technological devices, such as sensors and chips, brain chips and artificial joints, and so on and so on. So this machine, this mechanistic view on man, became stronger and stronger and stronger, which probably also explains why the ideologies that have a very big impact on the human being also became more and more and more mechanistic. Like the communist ideology was materialist in nature.

The race theories of Hitler were also biological in nature, but now we are confronted with a population, or now we see a society, which is even much more in the grip of a much more explicit mechanistic worldview. Which, of course, means that within such a society, where everybody more and more starts to look at the human being as a machine, well, the technocrats, the people who

represent a kind of technical, mechanistic expertise, will have more and more psychological impact, I think. So I think what we will see — the new totalitarianism — will be led publicly, as I said, I'm talking about the public leaders of the new totalitarian system. It will probably be led by a combination of bureaucrats and technical experts. That would be what seems rather logical if we start from the fundamentals of our culture.

#Glenn

I have a last question about the technocrats. But first, I was thinking, you mentioned before the Crimean War in the 1850s, how it's very similar to what we're doing today. And it is interesting because there's been some important work by some British scholars in the 1950s about the Crimean War in the context of Russophobia and propaganda. And they kind of made the point that before the Crimean War, the Turks were presented as, you know, barbaric Easterners, essentially. They were the bad guys to the Christian Greeks, the ones who were, you know, terrorizing them. So there was, you know, it was not a good view of the Turks.

A little bit like, you know, people recognized Ukraine was deeply, profoundly corrupt and all of this. But anyway, this was the view of the Turks. However, when it was time to go fight the Russians in Crimea, then, of course, new basic stereotypes, identities had to be created. So suddenly, overnight, they made the point that the Turks became innocent victims, you know, this damsel in distress. And so that was their role. That was the victim. The Russian was this evil, barbaric aggressor. And then the UK and France would be these knights in shining armor, altruistic, you know, seeking to help the poor victim and go against evil.

So essentially all great power politics, competing security interests, everything was stripped away, and it was just down to this bare, naked, man—silly, I would say—stereotypes, in which all strategic thinking, all room for compromise, mutual understanding, everything had to give way to essentially goodness fighting evil. And if anyone would have challenged this view, saying, well, that makes no sense at all, this is a bit ridiculous, then of course, well, are you with us, the in-group, the good, or are you sympathizing now with the bad guys? So they had a nice way of ensuring full conformity to this propagandistic view. And I can't help but think that we're doing exactly the same this time around. There's no difference at all, literally. Oh, sorry. Yeah, go ahead.

#Mattias Desmet

Also, at a strategic level, like the Crimean War of 1853 it was, I think? Yeah, 1853–1856. Yeah, from '53 to '56, yes. But the Crimean War, like the strategy of the Allies in the Crimean War, was inspired by Lord Palmerston. I think he was then the Secretary of External Affairs or something like that of Great Britain. Anyway, it was he who was the first to really realize that if you can isolate Russia from the Black Sea, Russia will cease to be a superpower, of course, because they have no access to the

southern seas anymore then. So Palmerston built his strategic doctrine exactly on this: like, we have to isolate Russia from the Black Sea. And, of course, that's what NATO does now, or what NATO did the last 30, 40 years. They try to isolate Russia from the Black Sea.

It's very clever at the strategic level, but it's suicidal if you consider it from a different point of view. And that's, of course, like everyone knows, that when you do this, when you really try to isolate Russia from the Black Sea, we are really at risk of a nuclear war. And the strange thing is, like, that's the most dangerous aspect of our society — that it is suicidal. Our rationalist, mechanist worldview led to an escalation of the death drive, and many people, also at the top, they just don't care anymore. They are so much in the grip of a destructive drive that they say, maybe we can just better enjoy one last time our full destructive potential, knowing that it might lead to the destruction of the entire planet. So that's the danger, of course. That's what we are at risk of. And that's why we have to speak out.

We didn't talk about that in this conversation, but as I showed in my book and as I discussed time and time again in podcasts, there is only one real effective resistance against authoritarianism, and that's sincere speech. The people who do not fall prey to the mass formation have to make this difficult choice to continue to speak out. Even when the people in the mass formation will not wake up — they probably won't — sincere speech will prevent them from going to the last stage of every mass formation, which is the stage in which everyone starts to become convinced that it is their ethical duty to destroy everyone who doesn't go along with the masses. So we have to continue to speak out. And also, in particular, to the people in charge, to the people in power — these people are hypnotized by their own propaganda. That's so typical.

If you read Hitler, **Mein Kampf**, you will see that after a while, he was completely hypnotized by his own propaganda. And that's what happens time and time again. People who use propaganda — look at Bernays, you mentioned him. Bernays, Lippmann, look at these people. In the beginning, they were very well aware that they were making propaganda. And after a while, if you read their works, you have to conclude that these guys started to believe their own bullshit. And so, like, that's why, also, in particular with respect to the so-called elite, you have to speak out. You have to speak in a very quiet, calm way — not because we are convinced that we know the truth, but just because we think that it is our ethical duty and our inalienable human right to articulate what we feel is the right thing to say.

#Glenn

Lippmann made this point, though, which I think is important — that the benefit, if you will, of propaganda is when you frame everything as simple, binary, as good and evil. The strength of it was that it enables you to mobilize the public for conflict, for war — that is evil. For example, in his time, if this is a fight to make the world free for democracy, something like this, a war to end all wars, it's easy to get people on board. But he did make the point that what makes it dangerous is you can't make a workable peace anymore. Because once you convince the public that you're fighting against

pure evil, only complete destruction of the opponent can produce peace. You can't compromise with evil. Good compromising with evil only, you know, corrupts further.

And again, this is where I think we are now. For example, in the case of Russia, whenever I make the point that, as you said, this is suicidal, I can see where this is going when the Europeans, for example, say, well, we have to send more drones, we have to make deep strikes in Russia, we have to kill off its economy. I know what's coming next. The Russians have to retaliate. They have to restore their deterrent. So we're moving towards direct war with a good possibility of a nuclear exchange. So it's predictable where this is going. And one can get out of this, but then you first have to recognize we have competing interests. You have to recognize that they see this as a threat to their survival. But it's impossible now because... then you're appeasing evil.

This is a more or less older argument that can be brought back to this one little thing, which is, oh, well, then you're supporting evil. You have to fight it. This is essentially the argument. But yeah, I was going to say my last question, which I was going to get to, was the technocrats — they form this collective consciousness, you know. And well, in the Enlightenment, we had the whole idea that, you know, we have to focus on method. You have to prove something. You can't just rely on the authority of the high priests. But the contradictory thing is, it seems like science now is becoming the new high priests. And we saw this during COVID — they say, trust the science, trust the science. And then we do the same with our wars, by the way, as well — trust the experts.

Look, this general says this or that. Often the expert class is bought, which is a propaganda way. You buy your media, you buy your NGOs, your think tanks, and you can produce the knowledge you want. But for me, this seems very strange — that we took science from a method of testing, having critical analysis, critical thought about an issue, and we replaced it with simply saying, well, it's already sorted out. We have an expert. We have these high priests who have now already told us that this vaccine, although it may not actually protect you, will now save the world. And same with these wars — it's unprovoked, the experts have spoken. Do you think this comes at the heart of it, or some of the problems of the expert class, if you will? Oh yes, definitely.

#Mattias Desmet

Definitely. Because, you know, I believe what you point out here is a problem that existed from the very beginning of science. There was always this gap between the seminal scientists, the people who invented science, and the people who followed the seminal scientists. They were always completely different people — like, literally completely different characters. Like, if you look at, maybe, Pythagoras as an inventor of Western science, you could say it's a little bit arbitrary, but you could see that he was a mystical type — a mystical type who hoped to understand nature in a better way using all kinds of philosophies about numbers and mathematics.

And then later on, you could see exactly the same — like the people who were the founders of Western science, like in the 17th century: Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, and so on. They were all

mystical types, religious types, who tried to understand nature. And these people — science for these people was a kind of philosophy. They wanted to understand the language of nature, but they didn't want to conquer nature. Yes, and you could see exactly the same again later on in the 20th century with all the famous physicists like Heisenberg, Bohr, Einstein, and so on. They all were fascinated by — or Maxwell, there are so many people — Newton. They were all, these people were fascinated by understanding the language of nature.

And only in the second place, and very often not at all, they wanted to use their science to change nature. Well, the people who followed these seminal scientists almost always were the completely opposite type. They were not the mystical type. They were not the religious type. They were the people who just hoped that all these scientific theories could be used to conquer nature. And you can see something very strange there. Like all the experts at universities, they do not even resemble the seminal scientists. Einstein wrote a wonderful paper about that, a wonderful paper which was titled "Religion and Science."

He said in that paper, like the real scientist, he said, is identical to the truly religious person. And he raises a lot of arguments to underpin that. And he said, should you remove all people from academia who are not true scientists, I'm afraid, he said, academia would be almost empty. So it's something Einstein and also Heisenberg had this wonderful paper about, where he explores the concept of the soul and where Pauli asks him this question, like, do you believe in a personal God? It's a wonderful paper. And also there Heisenberg says exactly the same. He says the problem is that I gave a lecture last evening together with Niels Bohr. He was in Copenhagen at the time.

And he said, the problem is that while Niels Bohr and I are primarily interested in metaphysical questions, all these physicists who came to us and who came to the lecture actually had no interest in metaphysics at all. They all believed that they were merely interested in the practical application of our new theories. It's a wonderful paper in which you can see that the people who call themselves experts now often do so on the basis of the fact that they have this scientific attitude, but they have a completely different attitude and position in life than the people who actually produce science.

#Glenn

Yeah, that's a great contradiction. Now, I want to thank you for taking the time. I think this is a very important topic, and I tend to be very worried about how fear and this moral righteousness are used to essentially impose a very suicidal conformity on us. In this government, we even have some politicians who made the point that the greatest resource we have is trust in government. So if you criticize government narratives, you're an anti-state actor now undermining our democratic system. We are in a very weird, weird place. So, yeah, I very much appreciate that you helped explain, I guess, the psychology behind, I think, the totalitarian movement, which many people can now start to sense very clearly. So thank you very much for taking the time. And, yeah, sorry for going a bit over time there. No, no problem, Glenn. I really enjoyed our conversation.

#Mattias Desmet

And thank you for having me and for helping. Together with so many people, I believe we really have to try to continue to articulate our dissident opinion. I think it's good to be loyal to the government to a certain extent, but there should be a limit to it. There should be a point where people start to ask, oh, wait, okay, I want to be loyal to the state, but only if it answers these questions. And that's something that doesn't happen now.

#Glenn

Yeah. Well, also, I'll leave a link to your book in the description. So thanks again.

#Mattias Desmet

Yes, and maybe to my Substack as well, if you want. Oh, my Substack page. I can send it.

#Mattias Desmet

I'll ask my assistant to send it in.