

## Group Minds

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PEOPLE LIVING IN THE WEST, in societies that we describe as Western, or as the free world, may be educated in many different ways, but they will all emerge with an idea about themselves that goes something like this: I am a citizen of a free society, and that means I am an individual, making individual choices. My mind is my own, my opinions are chosen by me, I am free to do as I will, and at the worst the pressures on me are economic, that is to say I may be too poor to do as I want.

This set of ideas may sound something like a caricature, but it is not so far off how we see ourselves. It is a portrait that may not have been acquired consciously, but is part of a general atmosphere or set of assumptions that influence our ideas about ourselves.

People in the West therefore may go through their entire lives never thinking to analyze this very flattering picture, and as a result are helpless against all kinds of pressures on them to conform in many kinds of ways.

The fact is that we all live our lives in groups—the family, work groups, social, religious and political groups. Very few people indeed are happy as sol-



itaries, and they tend to be seen by their neighbours as peculiar or selfish or worse. Most people cannot stand being alone for long. They are always seeking groups to belong to, and if one group dissolves, they look for another. We are group animals still, and there is nothing wrong with that. But what is dangerous is not the belonging to a group, or groups, but not understanding the social laws that govern groups and govern us.

When we're in a group, we tend to think as that group does: we may even have joined the group to find "like-minded" people. But we also find our thinking changing because we belong to a group. It is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion, as a member of a group.

It seems to me that this is something we have all experienced—something we take for granted, may never have thought about. But a great deal of experiment has gone on among psychologists and sociologists on this very theme. If I describe an experiment or two, then anyone listening who may be a sociologist or psychologist will groan, oh God not *again*—for they will have heard of these classic experiments far too often. My guess is that the rest of the people will never have heard of these experiments, never have had these ideas presented to them. If my guess is true, then it aptly illustrates my general thesis, and the general idea behind these essays, that we (the human race) are now in possession of a great deal of hard information about ourselves, but we do not use it to improve our institutions and therefore our lives.

—A typical test, or experiment, on this theme goes like this. A group of people are taken into the re-



searcher's confidence. A minority of one or two are left in the dark. Some situation demanding measurement or assessment is chosen. For instance, comparing lengths of wood that differ only a little from each other, but enough to be perceptible, or shapes that are almost the same size. The majority in the group—according to instruction—will assert stubbornly that these two shapes or lengths are the same length, or size, while the solitary individual, or the couple, who have not been so instructed will assert that the pieces of wood or whatever are different. But the majority will continue to insist—speaking metaphorically—that black is white, and after a period of exasperation, irritation, even anger, certainly incomprehension, the minority will fall into line. Not always, but nearly always. There are indeed glorious individualists who stubbornly insist on telling the truth as they see it, but most give in to the majority opinion, obey the atmosphere. —

When put as baldly, as unflatteringly, as this, reactions tend to be incredulous: "I certainly wouldn't give in, I speak my mind. . . ." But would you?

People who have experienced a lot of groups, who perhaps have observed their own behaviour, may agree that the hardest thing in the world is to stand out against one's group, a group of one's peers. Many agree that among our most shameful memories is this, how often we said black was white because other people were saying it.

In other words, we know that this is true of human behaviour, but how do we know it? It is one thing to admit it in a vague uncomfortable sort of way (which probably includes the hope that one will



No, I cannot imagine any nation—or not for long—teaching its citizens to become individuals able to resist group pressures.

And no political party, either. I know a lot of people who are Socialists of various kinds, and I try this subject out on them, saying: all governments these days use social psychologists, experts on crowd behaviour, and mob behaviour, to advise them. Elections are stage managed, public issues presented according to the rules of mass psychology. The military uses this information. Interrogators, secret services and the police use it. Yet these issues are never even discussed, as far as I am aware, by those parties and groups who claim to represent the people.

On one hand there are governments who manipulate, using expert knowledge and skills, on the other hand people who talk about democracy, freedom, liberty and all the rest of it, as if these values are created and maintained by simply talking about them, by repeating them often enough. How is it that so-called democratic movements don't make a point of instructing their members in the laws of crowd psychology, group psychology?

When I ask this, the response is always an uncomfortable, squeamish reluctance, as if the whole subject is really in very bad taste, unpleasant, irrelevant. As if it will all just go away if it is ignored.

So at the moment, if we look around the world, the paradox is that we may see this new information being eagerly studied by governments, the possessors and users of power—studied and put into effect. But the people who say they oppose tyranny literally don't want to know.



# Laboratories of Social Change

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SOMETIMES IT IS HARD TO SEE anything good and hopeful in a world that seems increasingly horrific. To listen to the news is enough to make you think you are living in a lunatic asylum.

But wait . . . we all know the news is presented to us for maximum effect, that bad news seems, at least, to be more effective in arousing us than good news—which in itself is an interesting comment on the human condition. We are all regularly presented, day after day, with bad news, the worst, and I think our minds are more and more set into attitudes of foreboding and depression. But is it possible that all the bad things going on—and I don't have to list them, for we all know what they are—are a reaction, a dragging undertow, to a forward movement in the human social evolution that we can't easily see? Perhaps, looking back, let's say in a century or two centuries, is it possible people will say, "That was a time when extremes battled for supremacy. The human mind was developing very fast in the direction of self-knowledge, self-command, and as always happens, as always *has* to happen, this thrust forwards aroused its opposite, the forces of stupidity, brutality, mob thinking"? I think it is possible. I think that this is what is happening.



Let us look at something that is extraordinarily encouraging. In the last twenty or so years quite a few countries that were dictatorships, tyrannies, have opted to become democracies. Among them are Greece, Portugal, Spain, Brazil and Argentina. Some of these are precarious—democracy is always precarious, and must be fought for. But countries that were in the grip of single-minded, simple-minded, stultifying systems of thought have chosen to attempt the more complicated, many-choiced balances of democracy.

In the balance against this hopeful fact, we must put a sad one, which is that large numbers of young people, when they reach the age of political activity, adopt a stance or an attitude that is very much part of our times. It is that democracy is only a cheat and a sham, only the mask for exploitation, and that they will have none of it. We have almost reached a point where if one values democracy, one is denounced as reactionary. I think that this will be one of the attitudes that will be found most fascinating to historians of the future. For one thing, the young people who cultivate this attitude towards democracy are usually those who have never experienced its opposite: people who've lived under tyranny value democracy.

It is not that I don't understand it—I understand it only too well, having lived through the process myself. Democracy, liberty, fair play, and so forth—these have been stuffed down one's throat, and suddenly you see the most appalling injustices all around you, and shout: "Hypocrite!" In my case, it was Southern Rhodesia, where democracy was for the white minority, and the black majority had no rights



of any kind. But when people are in that state of mind, what is forgotten is that a democracy, no matter how imperfect, offers the possibility of reform, change. It offers freedom of choice. It is this freedom to choose that is the new idea, historically speaking. I think we tend to forget how new these ideas are, that an individual should have rights, that a citizen should be able to criticize the government.

How new is it? When was this concept born into the human community for the first time? At this point, there are people who start muttering about ancient Greece, forgetting that it was a slave state that allowed certain minimal freedoms to a male minority. For argument's sake, it would be safe to say that our concepts of liberty, of the rights of the individual, were born in the English Revolution, in the French Revolution, and in the American Revolution. Very young ideas indeed. Very frail. Very precarious.

That an individual should be entitled to the rule of the law—why, three or four centuries ago, they wouldn't have known what you meant by it. Now it is an idea so powerful that strong and ruthless governments are brought down by it.

An idea seems to have taken root that there is such a thing as civilized government, even that there is a general consensus what civilized government is. How otherwise could the citizens of Argentina have agreed that they wanted to sue their deposed government for wicked and cruel behaviour? For improper behaviour? This seems to me the most extraordinary and encouraging thing—that it could be happening at all, proving to us all that in the world mind there is an idea of what government ought to be. Has there



ever been an example before, of citizens wanting to sue a government for improper behaviour? I am no historian, but it does seem to me that this is a new thing in the world.

Yet I think we may very well see countries that take it for granted they are democracies losing sight of democracy, for we are living in a time when the great over-simplifiers are very powerful—Communism, fundamentalist Islam. Poor economies breed tyrannies.

But good ideas don't get lost, though they may be submerged for a time.

An example. I have been talking about what we call the "soft sciences," social psychology, and social anthropology and the rest, and their contribution to understanding ourselves as social animals, and how these young sciences are denigrated, patronized, put down. As everybody knows, public money is getting very short in Britain, university departments are closing, all kinds of studies are being cut. This type of science has been badly affected, is often the first to be cut—yet I have just read that in various universities, departments studying social psychology, social science and so forth have been reprieved, because of their usefulness to industry. In other words, they are proving their value where it counts.

There is another hopefulness, not now but for the future. Because Communism has turned out so badly, proved itself not only one of the bloodiest tyrannies ever, but also so inefficient that any type of régime, no matter how bad, is preferred to it, we forget that Communism was born out of the ancient dream of justice for everybody. It is a very powerful



dream, a powerful engine for social change. Because Communism is at this present time equated with barbarism, inefficiency and tyranny, that doesn't mean that the idea of real justice will not be reborn.

Meanwhile there is no country in the world whose structure is not of a privileged class and a poor class. There is always a power élite with the mass of the people excluded from wealth and from any sort of political power.

In my more gloomy moments, I do brood about the fact that it took the Communists' Soviet Union only a couple of generations to develop a power élite as rich and as privileged as any in the world. Communist China is reported to be going the same way and so are some of the new African states. But if this is some kind of an inevitable process, for this time at least, that all types of society produce privileged élites, then at least we should acknowledge it and work for as much flexibility as possible inside the structure.

There is no group or party setting itself up against this state of affairs that does not see itself as an élite, whether it be the dictatorship of the proletariat, headed by the Communist party, or terrorist groups, or the political parties of the democracies, which by definition know what is best for everyone else.

Élites, privileged classes, groups better educated than others . . . this seems to be the stage at which the world is now, or at least, nothing else seems to be visible anywhere.

There are all kinds of élites, some retrograde and useless that only act as brakes on social change, while others, I believe, are productive. If I say that I think