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Postmodern Anti-Science Ideology: The Real Source of Totalitarianism

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Abstract: In this review essay I take issue with the author's understanding and role of science as presented in the book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*. I argue that his postmodern point of departure leads him into a direction from which he is fostering rather than opposing totalitarian aims.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; LeBon, Gustave; Desmet, Mattias; science; COVID-19; vaccine efficacy; postmodernism; Enlightenment; totalitarianism, Nazism.

In my estimation, Mattias Desmet's book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* is an example of unconscious postmodernist extremism, producing an anti-science attitude that is dressed up in pretensions to humanism that in reality are anti-humanistic.¹ The author of this book declares that

science can, in essence, be defined as open-mindedness. [PT 13]

This is not so as mere open-mindedness is eclecticism, which always has been present when science was absent. Instead, science is about testing hypotheses in experiments or via observations, and about the willingness to refute as well as confirm hypotheses. It is not about having any kind of belief one wants to uphold. The postmodernist attitude consists in a relativism about truth, including science, which is interpreted simplistically (equating it with the positivistic assumptions of the nineteenth century).

¹ Mattias Desmet, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, transl. Els Vanbrabant, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2022. [Henceforth cited as PT]

The author never mentions Karl Popper or Charles Sanders Peirce in regard to refuting hypotheses or in regard to establishing the ground rules of accepting them. The author then observes that science

cultivated doubt and considered uncertainty a virtue. [PT 13]

Yes, this is true, but this is not its only virtue. His assumption that science lets "the facts speak for themselves" misses the mark entirely, since this is merely positivism, which the author falsely equates to modern science.

The author reduces science to a belief in "mechanistic thinking" (PT 149). This comprehension of science might correspond to the one of proponents of positivism of the nineteenth century, but it is not descriptive of the science of the twenty-first century. Next the author elaborates on scientific fraud, which makes it sound as if all science were fraudulent. On these grounds, one should refuse to buy anything in a store, since there are businesses that have engaged in fraud. Generalizations of this kind are inadequate for understanding science.

The author of this book cites a paper by John Ioannidis, "Why most published research findings are false" (PT 19), along with additional papers on this topic in order to substantiate his remark that

no less than 85% of medical studies come to questionable conclusions due to errors, sloppiness, and fraud. [PT 31]

Building his narrative on the references cited, the author refers to the scandals and legal challenges that surrounded thalidomide, and diethylstilbestrol (DES) in an effort to support his claim concerning the fraudulent nature of all science. On these grounds, his logical conclusion should be that one should refuse penicillin for a cut finger, and die of sepsis. The author neglects to mention that Thalidomide and DES were introduced before randomized clinical trials were required for FDA approval of drugs in the early 1960s, and that they have nothing to do with Ioannidis' paper, which was about confounding bias and higher error in observational studies compared to randomized studies. The author never mentions randomization even once in his extensive discussion of clinical research. Ioannidis' point is that most research is observational, and thus liable to confounding factors that influence outcomes, and hence often wrong; that's a straightforward point. The other point Ioannidis was making is that researchers should use more randomized data, which yields more valid results because confounding factors no longer affect results; examples would include the huge randomized trials of COVID-19 vaccines, proving efficacy in preventing deaths and hospitalizations.

Presented in a nutshell, the author argues that academic researchers admit to biased presentation, that there is imprecision of measurement, and that the peer review system of publication is not really blind. Given this backdrop, he argues that all science is fraudulent. Clearly, the conclusion does not follow from the premises. He defines science in its nineteenth century positivistic mechanistic version, and claims that it ignores the human being and subjective experience. What is true for nineteenth century science is assumed to represent today's science. This assumption also is false.

Using her work on totalitarianism as pillar for his presentation, Hannah Arendt is cited by the author of this book in order to say that

totalitarianism is ultimately the logical extension of a generalized obsession with science...: "Science [has

become] an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man." [PT 48]²

Here again one is confronted with a misrepresentation of a quoted author. The reality is that Arendt held the view of her mentor, Karl Jaspers, that science was perfectly legitimate within its scope. It is a matter of scope, not an absolute rejection of science.

There are numerous passages in the book that will not hold the test of veracity. For example,

science has continued to struggle with an epidemic of errors, sloppiness, forced conclusions, and fraud. The coronavirus crisis was...just a continuation of this crisis. [PT 52]

As if all of science was nothing but the above. Anyone who believes this statement delegitimizes their own scientific research. The author goes on to claim that 95% of COVID-19 deaths had one or more underlying medical conditions, and thus did not occur due to COVID-19. This statement demonstrates medical ignorance of the highest degree, as if long-standing hypertension would suddenly kill someone within a few weeks' time via a pulmonary cytokine storm. Consider a scenario where someone is standing upright, and I aim to shoot this person between the eyes, whereas if that person had been sitting, the shot would have gone above the head; the author would then conclude that the cause of death was due to being in a standing position.

Referring to a 2021 Belgian newspaper article composed by the journalist Jeroen Bossaert who claims that hospitals increased the numbers of COVID-19 deaths and hospitalizations for financial gain, the author of this book seizes the opportunity to express his view that generating profits is the primary purpose of these COVID-19 hospitalizations. However, most hospitals in the US suffered major economic losses because of COVID-19, which is very well proven. In my own hospital, many people lost their jobs and a part of the hospital has been closed down permanently because of the economic harm of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Chapter 6, the author of this book provides a summary of his overall critique of science: He claims that science switched from open-mindedness to dogma and blind conviction (chapter 1), that its utopian pursuit of an artificially and rationally controllable universe equates to the destruction of the essence of life (chapter 3),

² A detailed analysis of this passage is in this current issue of *Existenz* by Vicky Iakovou, "On the Misuse of the Concept of Totalitarianism," pp. 83-7, here p. 85.

and that its belief in objectivity and measurability of the world leads to absurd arbitrariness and subjectivity (chapter 4). Further he claims (chapter 4) that there was

a pseudoscientific discourse of numbers, data, and statistics that completely blurred the line between scientific facts and fiction. [PT 91]

He completely ignores an alternative view, where the issue of uncertainty of measurability does not translate into these absolutist rejections of measurement. The field of statistics has developed specifically to improve the uncertainty of measurement and interpretation.

In chapter 5, he holds that science leads to anomie and concludes that

epidemic fear and uncertainty made the population yearn for absolute authority (PT 91),

such as Hitler and Stalin. This is his rationale about why science leads to totalitarianism. My view is the opposite: the author's anti-science leads to totalitarianism, as further explained below.

The author of this book bases much of his claim for the idea of "mass formation" – which is a term invented by him and his anti-COVID postmodernist allies – on the nineteenth century French writer Gustave LeBon:

The essence of mass formation amounts to the following: A society saturated with individualism and rationalism suddenly tilts towards the radically opposite condition, towards radically irrational collectivism...*The masses believe in the story not because it's accurate but because it creates a new social bond.* [PT 97]

For this line of argumentation LeBon's work is cited mainly. However, the term "mass formation" is nowhere to be found in LeBon's work. The term "mass formation" is an anti-COVID neologism – with unclear meaning in English and no meaning at all scientifically – that has no roots anywhere in the psychiatric literature and none in the social psychology literature either. The author merely stipulates it and then associates it with LeBon, yet he never describes how this terminology is not found in LeBon's work. Despite this glaring omission, the term "mass formation" has been quickly popularized by podcast celebrities and activists. Presumably the term is meant to relate to prior metaphors such as "mass hysteria" or "mass psychosis," which can be found in the psychological and sociological literature. Those terms are metaphors, though, not scientifically precise terms, nor, despite their use of scientific lingo,

are they proven in any way scientifically as being valid.

The author of this book cites conformity experiments as one basis for this concept of abnormal mass formation, but apparently, he has not yet come to appreciate that conformism is part of normal psychology; it is even an attribute of normal mental health. This topic has been discussed in my own work and by others, such as, for example, Roy Grinker's work on homoclitics, or Robert Jay Lifton and Erich Fromm on pathological normality.

To be explicit, LeBon never used the phrase "mass formation" in his 1895 book *The Crowd*, in his 1899 book *The Psychology of Socialism*, or in his 1913 book *The Psychology of Revolution*. He saw crowds as functioning at the level of subconsciousness, and as being temporarily destructive or revolutionary, yet at root being conservative and conformist, seeking a leader to guide them. This type of behavior is said to be akin to hypnosis. More importantly, this is merely stated by LeBon, not proven.

Sigmund Freud has built on LeBon, and he is mentioned in passing only and in a different context. Other contributors in the social psychology literature go unmentioned: for example, Jose Ortega y Gasset or Gabriel Marcel's mass man, Wilfred Bion's psychology of the group unconscious, and David Riesman's lonely crowd. These perspectives give nuances that are neither present in LeBon nor in Desmet's text.

Furthermore, in social psychology in general, LeBon's work is simply not accepted as being true or authoritative, as the author does. LeBon provides almost no citations or studies or references in his writings. His work is purely conceptual, primarily a summary of his observations and opinions. There is no research basis for it, which does not seem to trouble the author of this book.

None of the social psychology literature of the past century is mentioned at all, including the work of prominent scholars such as Stephen Reicher, who has spent a lifetime studying the psychology of crowds empirically.³ Reicher has produced a different analysis of crowds, namely the social identity model, according to which crowds are not simply irrational unconscious masses that are the opposite of individuals, as LeBon

³ For example, Stephen Reicher, "La beauté est dans la rue": Four Reasons (or Perhaps Five) to Study Crowds," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 20/5 (September 2017), 593-605.

claims, but rather have a group identity, analogous to but not identical with individual or personal identity. This social identity has its own rationale: it can be violent, but it also can be nonviolent; it can be impulsive, but it also can be very disciplined. The behavior of a crowd depends on its identity; it is not just one thing, an irrational blob, as LeBon claims. Unlike the author of this book and LeBon, whose claims are purely speculative and not provided with any empirical data, Reicher's theory has been tested in empirical studies of crowd events.

Both, in psychology and psychiatry, mass psychosis and mass hysteria, terms used in the past instead of "mass formation," have not been proven; they have merely been claimed. As noted, mass formation has never even been mentioned in scholarly discourse. To the extent that this or similar concepts make sense, one could argue that they are not necessarily abnormal but can be related to conformism, which could be seen as the statistical norm of mental health. If this perspective is true, then one need not stipulate mass psychosis or some unusual "mass formation," but rather simply conformism, which would be seen as quite common. This perspective is what was meant by Arendt in her notion of the "banality of evil" as applied to Nazism. Her letters to Jaspers on this topic make it clear that they both saw such false but common opinions, leading to evil action, as part of normal human existence; Jaspers referred to them as "life-sustaining lies."⁴ Since the 1960s, an environment of postmodernist rejection of any absolute claims to truth, including science, has prepared the way for lies to be repeated and believed as being true. This was Jaspers' interpretation of Nazism, and I believe Arendt agreed with him. Conformity was also integral to George Orwell's theory of totalitarianism; mass formation, whatever its precise meaning is, has nothing to do with it.

Such false but common opinions also are present in large parts of society that reject science and hold anti-COVID-19 public health ideas, as does the author of this book. These false ideas then are propagated as lies that are repeated, just as German National Socialists and Russian Stalinists did, and then are believed to be

true. This process is how the author's postmodernist anti-science attitude links to totalitarianism; it reflects exactly what happened with Nazism, when science was attacked as being relative and was seen in terms of "Jewish science" as opposed to "German science," and where a propaganda ministry was created for the first time specifically to lie to the public explicitly and repeatedly, because reliable sources of truth, such as science, were rejected. This process led to the genocide of the mentally ill, based on false science, propagated by the state, as it repressed psychiatrists and scientists, such as Karl Jaspers, who refused to accept the postmodernist imposition of truth based on what one group wants to believe. The author's anti-science ideology is part and parcel of totalitarianism, not a protection against the latter. The author paraphrases Arendt to say that

Totalitarianism is not about monstrous people – it is about normal people who stick to a morbid, dehumanizing way of thinking or "logic." [PT 106]

This is not correct; Arendt's view here represents conformism as part of normal mental health. She and Jaspers applied this reality to the German population conforming to Nazism. It can be applied to public life when elected leaders belie the trust of the population, either for political gain or for misconceived leadership.

Clear falsehoods abound in this book. One irrefutable falsehood of fact is found in the author's interpretation of a 2007 study that was published in the *Lancet*. I reviewed the cited paper, "Brain of a white-collar worker" (PT 165). The paper describes a 44-year-old man with hydrocephalus since age six. He was a married civil servant, with reported normal social functioning, but his IQ was 75, which is in the borderline mental retardation range. However, in the lead-up to this case presentation, the author states that the man had an IQ above 130, which is in the genius range. The author's presentation of the case is factually false.

Such anti-science falsehood is consistent with the author's praise of the classic postmodernist extreme anti-psychiatry philosopher Michel Foucault, whom the author calls upon with regard to the subject matter of truth-telling as being

necessary to overcome the tendency towards totalitarianism inherent in the Enlightenment tradition. [PT 187]

Foucault's work is a classic postmodernist attack on

⁴ Karl Jaspers, "Letter to Hannah Arendt, November 16, 1963," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company 1992, pp. 530-3 here pp. 531-2.

science, and it reveals a core tenet of the ideology of the author of this book. Jaspers and Arendt clearly and repeatedly opposed this rejection of the Enlightenment tradition in favor of accepting the absolute truths of science, within their scope. Jaspers and Arendt also held that this anti-postmodernist acceptance of the Enlightenment tradition was needed to defend liberal democracy and to reject totalitarianism. In contrast, the postmodern anti-science attitude was held by Martin Heidegger, Foucault's hero, who collaborated with the Third Reich. Standing with Jaspers and Arendt, I uphold that it is postmodernism that leads to totalitarianism, in its rejection of science and truth. Its proclaimed absolute open-mindedness reflects an extreme relativism about truth, and translates to accepting lies as truth, since there is no real truth. Anything is possible; nothing is forbidden; and therefore, you can accept the lies of the propaganda of postmodern political leaders. When nothing is true, anything can be claimed. That was Jaspers' view and Arendt's too, and by the way, that also was the perspective of George Orwell and others who saw that totalitarianism triumphed where relativism replaced truth, not just in politics but also in science. This is the exact opposite of the author's claim. I hold that Jaspers and Arendt and Orwell were right, and the author's view is exactly the opposite of the truth.

The author totally misunderstands totalitarianism. It is not an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, as he claims, but rather it is an outgrowth of the postmodernist ideology, developed in the nineteenth century and expanded in the twentieth century, which rejects the eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition. Nazism is a postmodernist ideology, and thus it is

not surprising that the author's anti-science ideology, which is based on postmodernist assumptions, will have an affinity with Nazism. It is the author's attitudes, not those he criticizes, that leads to totalitarianism. One of the postmodern lies of the Nazis was that they claimed that their eugenics research was science. Their attempt to wrap a lie in science fooled many doctors and even many scientists, but not all of them, as had been documented by Robert Jay Lifton. The most distinguished psychiatrists in Germany, such as Karl Bonhoeffer and Ernst Kretschmer, rejected Hitler on purely scientific grounds. The author of this book joins authors such as Foucault and the postmodernists who revel in showing when science has been misused or abused, and then pretend that this is the nature of science.

The core thesis of *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, namely, that Enlightenment and science lead to totalitarianism, is false as argued above. The truth is exactly the reverse. The Enlightenment commitment to science led to liberal democracy. Real world examples provide evidence for this fact: Heidegger, Foucault's hero, and the philosopher of postmodernism and critic of science, accepted Nazism and was rewarded for it, while Jaspers, who was committed to the Enlightenment and science, rejected Nazism and suffered for it.

Postmodernist relativism regarding truth and rejection of science leads to totalitarianism. The Enlightenment tradition's acceptance of science as truth is the strongest bulwark against totalitarianism. To repeat, this clearly was Jaspers' view, Arendt's view, and Orwell's view. I stand with them.