



Existenz

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In Lieu of the Author

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Abstract: This report describes the circumstances leading to the scheduling of an author meets critics session on Mattias Desmet's book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* (2022) and details a surprising turn of events. In lieu of the author's reply to the critiques, the program chair introduces and thanks the critics for upholding their commitment.

Keywords: Desmet, Mattias; *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*; politics; freedom of speech; science; action.

Earlier this year, the Karl Jaspers Society of North America (KJSNA) contacted Mattias Desmet in order to inquire about his availability for participating in an Author meets Critics virtual event concerning his forthcoming book, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*.¹ Professor Desmet agreed in a univocal manner to it and he asked KJSNA to select reviewers for him.

I have learned about his forthcoming book in numerous podcasts. The topic appeared to be timely; reliable information regarding the worldwide confusion concerning a respiratory virus was nowhere to be found, and the public had been bombarded with conflicting media accounts concerning its actual or perceived threats to humankind, both with regard to matters of health and with regard to matters of political interference in the interpretation of scientific research, and overall, with regard to restricting freedom of speech. Within a matter of weeks, societal tensions had been carefully nurtured in order to establish opposing narratives with neither side appearing to be prepared to engage with the other.

With regard to Desmet's book, KJSNA is in an excellent position to provide expert feedback on both themes that are at the heart of his argument, namely the psychology of mass formation and the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. We took it to be our responsibility to contribute to this debate very much in the spirit of unfettered academic discourse. Desmet's sudden change of mind was both unexpected and utterly puzzling to us. What triggered his sudden shift from "I hope we will have a stimulating academic debate"² to stonewalling all further correspondence once a panel of experts had been formed? A few months later, the answer transpired in the reviews that had been submitted. The reviewers learned of Desmet's cancellation only after having submitted their critiques. What a pity; the event took place in May; this means there would have been sufficient time for Desmet to correct the manuscript of his book.

The Psychology of Totalitarianism had already received much attention and it was heralded in some circles as a grim and accurate assessment of contemporary political reality, where in an

¹ Mattias Desmet, *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*, transl. Els Vanbrabant, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2022.

² Email correspondence dated 27 January 2022.

environment of, what Desmet coins, "mass-formation," the majority of humans allegedly surrender to a global-scale manipulative rhetoric without having the cognitive and emotional capacity to recognize its presumed sinister objectives.

In order to develop his narrative, Desmet heavily draws upon the work of psychologist Gustave Le Bon, and on the work of the philosopher Hannah Arendt. This combination brings the KJSNA into the conversation. Karl Jaspers himself was a practicing psychiatrist, roughly at the time when Le Bon published his book *The Crowd* in 1896; and Arendt was one of Jaspers' most successful students who then also became an accomplished philosopher in her own right. Furthermore, several members of the KJSNA have expertise in psychological theory and in Arendt's philosophy.

It was not the purpose of this book review session to assess whether there are indeed sinister plans in the context of a Great Reset or similar ghoulish plans that involve the world's financial markets and are being executed in an effort to establish a worldwide web of surveillance and population reduction. This kind of discussion is to be held, for example, by the members of the Wellcome Trust, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, or the Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum,³ or by the increasing number of institutions and distinguished scholars that actively challenge the dominant narrative, at times with paying a high price for engaging in public discourse regarding their concerns.⁴ Desmet is endorsed by many proponents of the counter-narrative. Yet, if one domino piece were to fall, this does not invalidate the efforts of the other proponents. Likewise, even if a high-ranking health official who shapes the main narrative were to fall, this would not invalidate the legitimate efforts of the official architects who are endowed with addressing a public health crisis.

³ For example, their meeting at the 50th meeting of the World Economic Forum, June 2020: <https://www.weforum.org/focus/the-great-reset>.

⁴ For example, physicians such as Peter A. McCullough or Vladimir Zelenko, or scientists such as Didier Raoult or Sucharit Bahkdi, or participants in pandemic-related litigation efforts, such as David E. Martin, or institutions such as the Children's Health Defense, or individuals some of which have publicly endorsed Desmet's book.

The purpose of the event was to engage in collegial academic discourse as to whether some arguments presented in Desmet's book, namely those that involve psychological theory in general and Arendt's philosophy in particular, are convincingly substantiated. The panelists include:

Leila Faghfour Azar is a lecturer and researcher in legal theory in the Department of Jurisprudence at the University of Amsterdam in The Netherlands. Her expertise includes critical legal theory, law and violence, law and inequality, theories of legal personhood, human rights theory, and international and European law. She has conducted extensive research on Hannah Arendt, including Arendt's essay "The Rights of Man: What are they?" that was published shortly after the 1948 adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Arendt's essay was republished as Chapter 9 in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the book that is central to Desmet's argument.

S. Nassir Ghaemi is Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine and Lecturer on Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He also is the Director of the Psychopharmacology Consultation Clinic at Tufts Medical Center. Beside the MD degree, and psychiatry residency, he holds a M. A. degree in philosophy from Tufts, and a M.P.H. degree in clinical effectiveness from the Harvard School of Public Health. He has published over 300 scientific articles, has edited two books, and has written six other books, including a text on statistics (published by Cambridge University Press). His textbook of psychopharmacology (published by Oxford University Press) received the 2020 PROSE Award from the Association of American Publishers for Excellence in Biological and Life Sciences. His expertise includes Karl Jaspers' work on psychopathology and Jaspers' subsequent philosophical output, including Hannah Arendt. His three-decade long activity in clinical research and his familiarity with statistics provides an additional angle by which to assess the statistical claims presented in Desmet's book.

Vicky Iakovou is a faculty member at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of the Aegean, in Mytilene, Greece. Dr. Iakovou received her PhD in Political Science from the University of Paris 7—Denis Diderot in 2001 with a dissertation on Arendt and Critical Theory, and she continued to research and publish about Arendt's political theory ever since. Her publications are in

Greek language, French, and English language are on a variety of topics, including the Frankfurt school, contemporary political and social philosophy, Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, and Arendt, Arendt, Arendt. In addition, she has translated books by Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Ranciere, Miguel Abensour, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, and several other distinguished philosophers. Dr. Iakovou offers unrivaled expertise on the subject matter of totalitarianism with regard to Hannah Arendt.

Edward Mendelowitz is a faculty member at Saybrook University in Los Angeles, California. He also lectures in the department of psychiatry at Tufts School of Medicine in Boston, Massachusetts. Dr. Mendelowitz sees clients for individual therapy focusing, especially, on existential-humanistic themes. He serves on the Board of Editors for the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and is Associate Editor of *The Humanistic Psychologist*, published by the Society for Humanistic Psychology, APA Division 32. In 2016, he received the Rollo May Award. He is one of the world's foremost contemporary practitioners of existentially-oriented psychotherapy. He has written on a variety of humanistic themes, related to the arts, film, music, literature, philosophy, religion, and the broader humanities, and has authored a column for years on psychology and the broader humanities and arts called *Humanitas*.

Michael Schwartz, Joint Professor of Psychiatry and Humanities in Medicine (retired) at the Texas A&M College of Medicine in Round Rock. Dr. Schwartz is board certified in psychiatry, and he is a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He is also co-founding editor of the journal *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*. Author of nearly 200 peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, monographs and edited volumes, he has served as founding president of the Association for the Advancement of Philosophy and Psychiatry and,

since its inception, he is associate editor of the journal *Philosophy, Psychiatry, Psychology*. His expertise includes person- and people-centered approaches to psychiatric assessment, care, and treatment, which adds a valuable perspective with regard to claims about crowd- or mass-formation.

Independently and without knowing of the other reviewers' critiques, each one of the five reviewers identified serious flaws in Desmet's argumentation on a wide range of topics, including misrepresentation of Arendt's philosophy, quotation of alleged psychiatric evidence out of context, misrepresentation of data, and display of lack of related historical, literary, and philosophical knowledge with regard to the human condition. Some reviewers were motivated to help Desmet in addressing these weaknesses, others closed the book.

There is a consensus that this is a popular book without sufficient scholarship or substance, even if granted that there exists an important kernel of truth at its core. This would have been the place for the anticipated and desired "stimulating academic debate" of the author with his critics. In lieu of this, I thank the critics for sharing their valuable and inspiring perspectives. These conjoined insights bring to light that learned critique is not an instance of hypnotized mass formation. Rather, it is a living example of the limitations of presumed privileged viewpoints claiming to guide or awaken the masses. The progenitors of such viewpoints are reminded in these thoughtful rejoinders of ever-present oppositional and qualifying forces that come to life in time-honored literary works, mythologies, folklores, philosophies, and the broader arts no less than science. The intuitive messaging of these multiple channels of communication catalyzes both the instincts and skill sets of the so-called masses in order to enhance understanding in accordance with their collective wisdom.