Living in a Psychotic Age

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This paper describes the phenomenon of mass psychosis. It explains that human beings, when exposed to too much stress, act as the herd animals we are, and can become victim to strange psychological group reactions. Large numbers of people may lose touch with reality and descend into a delusionary state. These strange or 'delusionary' ideas—often focused on all that is wrong with society—are further reinforced by social pressure and the phenomenon of groupthink. It is pointed out that participants in this form of mass psychosis live in a world of conspiracies, in which primitive defense mechanisms like splitting and projection come to the fore.

This paper discusses some of the most disconcerting examples of mass psychosis, frequently relating to totalitarian, ideological experiments. It is highlighted that when mass delusions are in force, citizens of a country may be living in a permanent state of terror, seeing "enemies" everywhere, both internally and externally. The role of mass regression, hyper-individualism and narcissism are also explored in the context of mass psychosis.

It is further attested that when people within a society become estranged from each other they are vulnerable to a state of free-floating anxiety, which provides the ideal breeding ground for demagogue-like leaders to rise to the fore. Being in a position of power and authority, they have the opportunity to externalize their inner theatre, acting out and magnifying their strange ideas and thought processes on a public stage. The construction of these cult-like relationships between leaders and followers demonstrates how effective the use of mirroring and idealizing transference can be.

The final section of this paper explores and suggests how the spell of mass psychosis might be broken. This includes a review of various interventional techniques, such as engaging in emotional judo, getting rid of a demagogue-like leader, and effective management of the mass media. In particular, this paper stresses the important role of a civic culture, and a context in which education can prevent the dangerous cultivation of mass psychosis.

Keywords: Mass Psychosis; Psychic Epidemic; Groupthink; Social Pressure; Delusions; Conspiracies; Reality Testing; Primitive Defences; Regression; Demagogue Leaders; Totalitarian; Narcissism; Mirroring and Idealizing Transference; Mass Media; Civic Culture; Education

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The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim. An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.

—Gustave Le Bon

As I was walking down my street in Paris, at the corner of Place Saint Michel, I noticed an individual carrying a sign reading: "Behold, the End is Near." I must admit that I first found this statement to be naive. Reflecting on the current state of the world however, I saw there could be some truth in the words. It is plain for all to see that humanity isn't doing very well. In fact, on a global scale, ours is a world characterised by stress and strife. The horsemen of the apocalypse seem to be everywhere. And here the "horsemen" I refer to, materialize in the forms of war, terrorism, nuclear threats, global warming, starvation, migration (with the subsequent destructive identity politics), great income inequalities (contributing to social discord), Covid, and the repeated emergence on the world stage of toxic leaders—ours is a world haunted by fear and anxiety,

Psychic Epidemics

Stress can do strange things to us. It affects our minds, making us look at situations in extremely bizarre ways. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung once said that the greatest threat to civilization lies not with the forces of nature, nor with any physical disease, but with our

inability to deal with the forces of our own psyche. Or to quote him directly: "It is not famine, not earthquakes, not microbes, not cancer but man himself who is man's greatest danger to man, for the simple reason that there is no adequate protection against psychic epidemics, which are infinitely more devastating than the worst of natural catastrophes."[1] Homo sapiens are herd animals that, under great stress, can fall prey to strange psychic epidemics or forms of mass madness. As a result, large numbers of people may lose touch with reality, descending as a herd into a delusionary state. The consequences have the potential to be catastrophic.

Jung used the term "psychic epidemic" to describe this phenomenon, but other terms have been used in referring to these strange social events, for example, 'mass psychogenic disorder', 'epidemic hysteria', 'mass hysteria, 'mass delusion", 'collective obsessions', '*folie en masse*' (mass insanity) or 'mass psychosis'. These collective phenomena apply to a multitude of crazes, panics, and abnormal group beliefs. Unfortunately, many of the names given to these mass delusions aren't particularly specific. In fact, the breadth of phenomena that fall under Jung's description of 'psychic epidemic', suggests the term has become something of a catchall, applicable to anything with negative connotations involving the participation of large groups of people. Strange social forces seem to be at work that contribute to and encourage abnormal belief systems and behavioral patterns. In fact, if people from outer space were to look at any

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[1] Carl Jung (1977). *The Symbolic Life: Miscellaneous Writings* (The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 18) (Collected Works of C.G. Jung, 53), Routledge.

number of conspiratorial belief systems and pseudoscientific outlooks, they would declare its advocates to be delusional.

Given the nature of these mass delusions, the term 'psychosis' may be more appropriate. Essentially, an individual experiencing a psychotic episode is no longer able to share the same consensual reality of those around them. Classic symptoms manifest in sensory hallucinations, fixed delusions, false beliefs, absolutist thinking, and paranoid ideation. People who suffer from psychosis may live in a very strange world, experiencing thought processes or perceptions of events that appear alien to others. In fact, due to their impaired sense of reality testing, they may struggle to differentiate between what is real and what is not. The psychotic may feel that the world they live in no longer makes any sense and often feel completely lost. As a means of coping, they create a parallel fantasy world that makes sense to them even though it appears bizarre to others.

Guiding Myths

It appears that these people have lost a sense of direction and guiding myths that they may previously have lived by. In fact, with the various aforementioned 'horsemen' in contemporary society, we *need* myths to live by. Human beings, as social creatures, have always sought collective unifying principles. Subscribing to unifying myths helps them to enforce their beliefs and justify their actions. These guiding myths help them to understand the notions of fate and destiny; they provide symbols, language, and expressive ways to cope with the hazards of life. In other words, as meaning-seeking creatures, people need stories to help them manage and overcome the unknown. They

are stories that provide guidance as to where they came from, where they are, and where they are going.

From a cultural-historical perspective, the history of human civilization has been built on various central guiding myths. For example, during the millenniums in the Western world, Christianity provided guidance for everyday existence. After the Renaissance, a central guiding myth became that of rationalism. In modernity, there developed a belief that technology could and would change the life of humans for the better. Presently, however, in our digital age, there seems to be a lack of fundamental guiding myths that orient the individual's sense-making efforts. This lack of general guidance and unity may be a contributor to the threat of psychotic-like behavior—in short, the psychotic behavior of the individual can turn into the psychotic-like behavior of the masses.

The Entry of Mass Psychosis

It is not a great stretch for delusionary thought at an individual level to become much larger in scale and reach, and in large groups of people distort their sense of reality. Similarly to the convoluted attempts of the psychotic to make sense of an incomprehensible world, the same can apply to groups of people. Overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, struggling for something to hold on to, people may turn to delusionary beliefs for guidance as a response to, what is for them, a terrifying environment. Very often, threats—real or imagined—facilitate these people's distraught mental state. In order to manage floods of negative emotion, the acceptance of bizarre ideas is a means of feeling sane in what they perceive to be an insane world. It can be seen as a convoluted attempt

to reorder their inner world and acquire a sense of inner security. In their attempts to give their life meaning, these people will grab at straws, any straws, even those that are nonsensical. Unfortunately, delusions can become a pathological response to what these individuals perceive as danger. But the delusions that offer an escape from negative emotions do so at the cost of reality.

Examples of mass psychosis are diverse: the strange Children's Crusade or the dancing mania of the Middle Ages, the Salem Witch trials in colonial Massachusetts, the strange tulip mania that occurred in Holland, the Tanganyika laughter epidemic in Tanzania or the Havana syndrome in Cuba. Bizarre obsessions, fashion fads and participation in raves can also be included amongst these unusual social phenomena. Frequently, the psychogenic triggers for the more disturbing historical examples of social madness tend to be natural disasters or events. For example, in the Middle Ages, a major one seemed to have been the black death (bubonic plague). Also, in many instances, outbreaks of social madness would take place within closely knit social groups that would be united by strong religious beliefs.

Amongst the most disconcerting examples of mass psychosis in the past two centuries have been totalitarian, ideological experiments. This kind of mass psychosis can be considered the greatest existent threat to humanity. All too often, centralizing state power comes at the cost of individual rights and can result in huge suffering. We only have to recall what happened in countries such as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, North Korea, China, or Cambodia for instances of where pathology and ideology have caused the

death of millions of people. What has been plain to see is how these dreadful examples are characterized by a collective detachment from reality, principally by people who have resorted to delusionary thinking, fear, and paranoia. And when mass psychosis is in force common human decency tends to fall by the wayside. The citizens of a country may be living in a permanent state of terror with perceived "enemies" everywhere, both internally and externally. Subsequently, people start "to eat" their own. They find ways to eliminate these non-believers.

What these forms of mass psychosis evidence is that, even though we may *think* that we are in control of our own minds, this is not necessarily the case. We are very much influenced by what is happening around us and are constantly bombarded by outside forces without necessarily being conscious of them. This makes human beings both vulnerable and gullible, and, as has been pre-established, a natural enabler of mass delusion is societal stress. Strong feelings of fear and anxiety are an ideal breeding ground for outbreaks of unusual and uncharacteristic beliefs and behaviors. Interestingly, strange beliefs and behavioral patterns are, in many instances, associated with social issues and scientific matters that have become politicized, resulting in convoluted conspiracy theories. Clearly, in an age of uncertainty those 'horsemen' are more likely to distort our sense of reality and suspend our critical thinking.

Social Contagion

Generally speaking, a sense of alienation, disorientation and fear are ideal conditions in which for strange ideas to bloom. The Homo Sapiens' inherent fear of death and the

unknown, means life is a constant search for certainty and meaning. This has the potential to manifest in convoluted ways, including the creation of strange mental constructions, bizarre sets of ideas and crazy beliefs. Despite their absurdity, humans are social creatures who like to be connected; being alone in a given belief system would only exasperate feelings of alienation. Consequently, they like to share these ideas with others in various psychological ways later discussed. These ideas may become contagious and gradually mutate into mass psychosis.

Through interaction with others, these strange ideas—often focused on all that is wrong with society—reinforce processes of groupthink and social pressure. Groupthink will become all the more likely when persuasive, often charismatic leaders are present, inspiring people to agree with their opinion. Generally speaking, the more people that hold of similar beliefs, the more they will exert, consciously or unconsciously, social pressure on others to join their way of looking at things.

Following the Herd

Given the theatrics inspired by a group setting, the pressure to 'go with the flow' is harder to resist. Mass meetings particularly may instill a hypnotic effect on those present. Get-togethers of large numbers of people guided by a persuasive leader can be extremely intimidating, putting enormous pressure on the audience to think alike. Such dynamics harness a desire to fit in, and provide the ideal arena for people to abandon their own opinions and beliefs, even censoring in some cases their own thoughts. Without

conscious awareness, they may lose their sense of individuality, feed off one another's emotional reaction, causing an escalation of whatever their concerns may have been.

Clearly, if enough people accept delusionary ideas, large sections of society lose touch with reality and eventually share a psychotic-like world that has all of the qualities of pseudo-sanity. Ingeniously, these people will have constructed a parallel world that marries fact and fiction. In order to escape their fears, these people may reclassify their inner world to combine real events and imaginary ones. In reality, this is a pathological way of instating order in their lives and a means of explaining their bizarre beliefs and behavior. Even as these people may have found a way to escape their fears—albeit through ingenious mental acrobatics—it will be at the price of reality.

A World of Conspiracies

People, who fall under the spell of mass psychosis often live in a world full of conspiracies. If they're to be believed, there are many people out to get them. A pervasive atmosphere of terror is what characterizes life for these people. Enemies are ubiquitous and threatening. Although this will be a delusion, paranoid people can always find a measure of reality in their delusional thoughts, and moreover, as long as they hold them, they will have no idea that they're behaving in a bizarre manner. What becomes all the more disturbing—given their lack of self-awareness—is the possible, indeed probable, decline in moral values and civility. Gradually, they may become increasingly irrational, irresponsible, emotionally unstable, and unreliable. Such troubled mental states, may even lead to forms of violent action that they otherwise would have never dreamt of.

Unfortunately, such negative, destructive behavior will, in a mass-gathering scenario particularly, have a contagious quality. This is the ideal time for the demagogue leader to enter the scene. Encouraged to believe that "the enemy is in their midst," these people may begin to destroy each other.

In the US, former President Donald Trump is a recent example of this paranoid line of thought, seeing conspirators in every corner. Of course, given his disturbing antics, his perceptions have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies. Consequently, and contrary to all evidence, he is still asserting that the presidential election was stolen from him. Others in the country, goaded by his interest in pseudo-science, continue to believe that the Covid-19 vaccine was a governmental effort to obtain thought control, or that QAnon represents a reliable source of information. Unfortunately, as a political leader, he is not alone in propagating such notions. In many other countries, we see leaders of this nature, for example, Brazilian ex-President Bolsonaro also seems to live in his own conspiracy prone world. And given his position of influence, as has been the case with former President Trump, his surrealistic Weltanschauung appears to be contagious, despite or perhaps because of its delusional nature. Not only has he embraced the idea that the Covid-19 virus was manufactured in a laboratory, he promoted the not very original idea of a vast leftist conspiracy that stole the presidential election from him. Does that sound familiar?

From a global perspective, and given ownership of a vast nuclear arsenal, the most dangerous conspiracy monger of modern times remains Vladimir Putin of Russia. Listening to his ideas, we can only imagine him to be existing in a parallel world. Like

many other world leaders, he perceives the world to be full of conspiracies, effectively circulating amongst his citizens the certainty that the West wants to obliterate Russia. He also claims that the Western world has abandoned religion and embraced satanism— bizarre ideas that have been shared with and seemingly believed by many of his citizens. In their newly-paranoid view, it is no wonder that he is making threats about the possibility of nuclear strikes. Unfortunately, the very nature of conspiracy theories is that they are nearly impossible to disprove. Whatever is done to present evidence to the contrary, all those adopting the same paranoid outlook tend to make sure that this new evidence will be incorporated into their conspiracy theories.

Hyper-individualism

As examined previously, we can look at the development of paranoid thinking as a search for certainty in a highly uncertain, anxiety-provoking world. It is peoples' delusional way of acquiring the guiding myths that provide meaning. We can go as far as to reframe the phenomenon as a sane response to an insane society. In reality, these feelings are the result of people feeling disconnected; people who experience a lack of community. After all, in previous ages, people tended to live in smaller communities. Consequently, they would be more likely to develop closer personal relationships, a strong sense of common identity, and shared values and norms.

Amongst such communities it is likely there would have been a greater prevalence of faith, with religion providing those guiding principles that make people feel more secure. In our digital age, these pillars of security have all but disappeared, and, more than ever,

Individualism and technological infrastructure have allowed isolation to prevail, to the extent that people have more limited physical interaction with their fellow citizens. The recent pandemic has only encouraged this by forcing people to move all activity into the safety of private isolation. With everyone instructed to isolate themselves, public involvement and communal attachment has fallen further by the wayside. Instead, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter, and selfies have prevailed and, in many cases, replaced, or at least reduced, previous forms of physical social interaction. Despite the worst effects of the pandemic having passed, many people still live in disturbing isolation. Subsequently, individualism has become the main construct in the narrative of Western society. Hyper-individualism has eclipsed communities, family, religion, or citizenship as the main reference in society. Unfortunately, such an outlook nurtures highly narcissistic behavior.

These socio-cultural, narcissistic developments have granted to the opinion of amateurs the authority typically attributed to the judgement of experts. Many leaders have gained in superficial popularity contests. Consequently, expertise has devalued as a currency, both in the political arena and in society at large. Given the absence of local, personal forms of fellowship and solidarity explains why people are more likely to be attracted to cults of personality, and identity politics. Expertise and knowledge are no longer barriers to political success and these populist movements have the power to undermine institutional authority and rationality. In fact, these social developments are an invitation for amateurs to take precedence in place of expertise. Nowadays, public popularity and

showmanship can masquerade as administrative competence. At the same time, however, and ironically, these advances of individualism have contributed to conformism, submission, and mind control.

The Rise of the Demagogue

These populist movements, driven by power-hungry, demagogue-like leaders represent the greatest mortal threat to liberal democracies. All too often, when such leaders attain control—given their position of power and authority—what may have been their conspiracy-prone outlook to life, becomes externalized and acted out on a public stage. And having done so, these leaders may very well find a willing audience. When feeling isolated and anxious, people tend to be more susceptible to bizarre thought patterns. Isolation has always been an ideal breeding ground for paranoid thinking. When stress becomes toxic enough to harm overall well-being, not just at an individual but collective level, a psychic epidemic results.

Invariably the first to suffer from mass psychosis will be the most vulnerable people, and a look at the cult-like followers of Trump is quite self-explanatory. Times of great uncertainty have always offered great opportunities for autocrats and despots. In fact, fear has consistently and repeatedly been the ideal petri dish for demagogues. When people feel helpless and fearful, they become more impressionable. Under such conditions, regressive behavior will be more likely, and demagogues may recognise this as an opportunity for their skilled and seductive campaign. They know how to take advantage of people's vulnerable mental state.

Transferential Processes

Clearly, demagogue-like leaders know how to hypnotize and seduce their audience. They are skilled in the creation of symbiotic-like relationships in more than one way. Psychoanalysts would interpret this strange psychological interface as idealizing and mirroring transference processes gone haywire. What they are referring to is the unconscious alignment of peoples' emotions, attitudes or desires that originate in childhood. Or to be more specific, feelings or desires related to important figures in a person's life are redirected to someone who is not that person.

In the context of leadership dynamics, these mirroring and idealizing transferential processes become quite important. Mirroring and idealizing—that is, taking cues and behaviors from the others—will always be an aspect of social interactions with other people. For example, "mirror-hungry" people, due to a lack of recognition by their caretakers during childhood, may suffer from inner feelings of worthlessness. They may suffer from profound insecurities and are searching for confirmation and recognition of their worth, that they count for something. People with this form of disposition may feel compelled to be in the limelight. In contrast, the "ideal-hungry" personality—again, psychoanalysts may attribute this to experiences of disillusionment in childhood—seeks to fill an internal void by trying to merge with idealized figures. For them, this idealizing process becomes their particular way of coping with feelings of helplessness. To this end, they idealize people of importance to them, beginning with their original caretakers. They

hope that, in supporting the same beliefs as the people they most admire, they will acquire some of their power and worth.[2]

This mirroring/idealizing dynamic between leader and followers can develop into a collusive relationship. Leaders, hungry for adulation may project a grandiose image, while their followers, rendered needy by societal stress or developmental injury, yearn for a parental figure to take care of them. They are looking for protection. As a result, the "great leader" becomes a figure of fascination, deified by followers who are prepared to see what they like to see. In other words, a mass delusion. As a result, they may regress to a childlike, dependency state. On their part, leaders in this strange psychological interplay, will find the affirmation of followers hard to resist, rewarding their dependent childlike state with a sense of power and security.

This interplay creates a mutual admiration society—a symbiotic bond—that encourages leaders to take actions that shore up their image rather than serve the needs of their constituency. This kind of interdependency is an open invitation to power-drunk leaders. Assisted by transferential behavioral patterns, leaders and followers gradually may stop responding to the reality of the situation, allowing past hopes and fantasies to govern their interactions. Unfortunately, this symbiosis can turn into an almost cult-like relationship with all the dangers of descending into mass psychosis.

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[2] Heinz Kohut (1971). *The Analysis of the Self*. New York, International Universities Press.

A Sense of Victimhood

When psychologically challenged individuals assume positions of power, their extreme intolerance of any realities that do not fit their distorted view of the world may turn psychotic. Furthermore, its contagious quality may arouse a similar pathology among their followers. By way of mass gullibility alone, these leaders have gained complete control over the followers' lives. Of course, this is the nature of support that such leaders intend to cultivate—an obedient and submissive following. It is far easier to lead an ignorant audience that feels disenfranchised. Needless to say, the combination of deified leadership and dependency-prone population is not a prescription for a progressive society. Regression will be a more likely outcome. Activities may take place that under normal circumstances would be unimaginable.

Also, in these situations, the very primitive defense mechanisms splitting, and projection will become the order of the day. Leaders of this ilk will separate their unbearable feelings from the more acceptable ones and project them, typically towards other individuals and groups. In fact, such leaders will be master manipulators in directing feelings of injury, anger, and hatred to what they perceive to be the "non-believers." They will make very clear that people are for or against them. Finding a middle ground is not part of the game. And to be a member of the in-group implies having to share these leaders' projections, be they positive or negative. People who are unwilling to accept their point of view will be vilified and even persecuted. They might even be imprisoned or killed. Of course, these kinds of actions will contribute to a pervasive climate of fear and anxiety, a great way to maintain these leaders' powerbase.

Given the position and authority of demagogue-like leaders, their distorted perspectives of the world spread easily through a population, heightening existing pathologies and inducing delusions and paranoia in what have been previously rational individuals. But, like members of a cult, the followers of these leaders are unable to see the harm being done. They don't realize that their blind loyalty may end up in suffering and even social ruin.

To secure the dependence of their followers, these leaders will play on their sense of perceived victimhood. They will emphasize repeatedly how outgroups (the "enemies") have been taking advantage of them; that life hasn't been fair to them. Over and over again, they will tell them that they have been wronged. These demagogue-leaders know that playing the victimhood card is a highly effective way of assaulting their followers' minds. Of course, the magnitude of these leaders' deceptions will conspire with their own psychological protection against pain and disappointment. It is their means of preventing their followers from seeing the truth. Unfortunately, these followers will be unaware of their descent into collective madness.

The Role of Mass Media

These toxic leaders, will be able to retain control of their following through controlled media coverage that spreads misinformation and distorts existing threats and crises. As part of this negative propaganda, they resort to fake news or, more often, they are experts

in blending fact and fiction. Confusing their population is a way of keeping them off-guard and will aid their efforts to maintain a regressed populace.

Furthermore, these demagogue leaders recognize the value of constant repetition. A lie repeated many times becomes more believable and indeed takes on a hypnotic power. After all, it is the sad truth that regularly repeated nonsense will have a greater impact than logical thinking. Just think of such slogans used by former President Donald Trump as "Stop the steal," or "Lock her up." With the help of today's information technology, it has become much easier to induce mass psychosis. With the power of the social media, it doesn't take much to overrule rational thinking in its audience, and to infect peoples' minds. In fact, these leaders' talents in manipulating collective emotion, is exactly what makes them so dangerous.

Of course, in countries such as North Korea, Myanmar, Iran, or even Russia, it is the isolation of a population that proves the most powerful tool, encouraging the disintegration of normal social interaction whilst restricting access to information will also foster mass psychosis. People can more easily accept abnormal thought patterns when isolated. In fact, isolation can be instrumental in turning people into obedient and submissive subjects. It explains why these leaders will go a long way to block normal social interactions. They will do anything to prevent helping their constituency to take a more reflective stand.

Breaking the Spell

Kipling famously pointed out how extremely challenging it is to maintain one's sanity or 'own head' when all about are losing theirs. Resisting a mass psychosis will be, when all else are under its spell isn't easy. Not participating in a mass psychosis, when everybody else seems to be under its spell, may be difficult, and for some impossible. All too easily, people are swayed and follow the leader; all too easily, mass contagion will give demagogue-like leaders an opportunity to rise to power and all too easily, these developments can end up in autocratic or even despotic rule. Given the susceptibility of a populace to psychological contagion explains why democracy will always be a brittle creation. Psychotic-like mass movements created by power hungry or ideologically blinded leaders easily destroy people's liberty, and with devastating consequences. When a population is under such persuasive and totalitarian regimes, the spontaneity and creativity that drives a society forward will fall by the wayside and more likely result in stagnation, destruction, and death.

When such leaders are in power, people will easily lose their sense of self. When autocracy or despotism is the order of the day, people can be rapidly embroiled in regressive thought processes that rob them of their dignity. When such leaders rule, the Latin proverb, "*homo homini lupus*"—"man is wolf to man"—will become all too true. People will become predatory, cruel, and inhuman. They will start to behave more like animals than as civilized human beings. In addition, mass psychosis incites primitive, even criminal thinking to become mainstream. Enthralled by a demagogue-like leader, bizarre, ideological thoughts tend to triumph over rationality. Logical thinking will no longer

prevail. On the contrary, people who harbour delusional narratives tend to bulldoze over reality in their attempts to deny that their own narrative may be false. Given the likelihood that, under this kind of leadership, pathological behavior will come to the surface, prevention will be key. Actions need to be taken to prevent the rise of mass psychosis.

The Need for 'Emotional Judo'

To immunize people against mass seduction will always be an uphill struggle. For too many, it is far easier to remain in a socially vegetative state. It is more convenient to let other people do the thinking. What people fail to realize, however, is that they become like members of a cult or victims of abuse. As is the case with these people, they become emotionally bonded to the cult leader or abuser, unable to see the harm that's being done to them. Sadly enough, when people are controlled by the abuser, encouraging them to address reality is no longer a matter of presenting facts or appealing to logic. Facts alone become insufficient to dislodge these people from their beliefs. Without dealing with the underlying emotions, opinions, facts and counterarguments will only serve to strengthen these people's beliefs.

This doesn't mean that no attempt should be made to reason with these people. However, to have these people change their mind requires a form of "emotional judo", and the creation of doubt as to the validity of their beliefs. To create these doubts requires an exploration of the consequences of their behavior. They need to become aware what will happen to them if they continue to follow the path that they're on. Whatever counterarguments are made, these need to be introduced very subtly. Direct

disagreement with their opinions will be quite futile. In fact, pointing out the error of their ways will only raise their defenses. Instead, when interacting with them, realistic information—contrary to the false information that has been given to them—should be included in the discussion innocuously. Doing so, will be a more ingenious means of weakening their resistance. In many instances, humor can be a highly effective tool in counterbalancing whatever propaganda has been given to them. Of course, while making these efforts, it is important that the people who try to change the believers' minds, maintain their own bearing. They should be able to safeguard their own mental health, given what they're up against.

The Exit of the Leader

Naturally, an important step in offsetting mass psychosis will be to remove these demagogue leaders from their position of power and influence. In fact, their exit will be a form of healing by itself. When the original instigators of demagoguery are taken out, it will a start to break the spell of the mass psychosis. Often, however, to take such a step by itself will not be sufficient. Most likely, a re-education of those under the demagogue-leaders' spells will be in order. After all, the acceptance of the deceptions is a consequence of their own psychological defence against pain and disappointment. It has been a result of their personal need to falsify reality. Thus, to obtain greater clarity of mind, more needs to be done in order to avoid the possibility that another pathological figure might rise to the occasion, and entice them with yet another false "quick fix" solution to their problems. Thus, persuasion alone shouldn't be the only goal. What's most relevant is to change the circumstances that led to their faulty beliefs in the first place.

Removing the Hurts

In trying to break the spell cast by these leaders, it is important to recognize that their followers' sense of being wronged could have its roots in reality. The feeling of being disenfranchised is what gets them hooked. Clearly, if people are hurting—financially, or otherwise, such as losing a job, having difficulties keeping their house, having trouble feeding themselves—then they're more likely to listen to the siren's song of demagogues. As established, bizarre ideologies and conspiracy theories become more attractive to those in distress. What is required is a change of the circumstances that contributed to their faulty belief systems. Reducing inequality of any nature—be it economic, racial or gender-related—will be of great help in preventing mass psychotic ideas to come to the fore.

Media Management

As it stands, the social media business model is driven by excessive controversy, fear, negativity, divisiveness, and disinformation. For the owners of these media businesses, however, it is their way of boosting their revenues. They rely on algorithms designed to attract extremists, offering the road to excitement as a means of ensuring their support. Or to be more specific, algorithms have been designed to prioritize "engagement"—which has often meant pushing inflammatory, tribalizing or conspiratorial content. Sadly enough, due to our mental programming—given imprinted threat responses—through crisis and misery we will pay attention. Thus, the algorithms pertaining to the media are designed in such a way as to trigger our dopamine neural circuits, having neurons squirt out a

chemical messenger called dopamine to provide waves of satisfaction. And it is this neurological process that gets us hooked on this kind of news. In fact, the same neurotransmitters drive any form of addictive behavior, whether it concerns drugs, gambling, food, or sex.

Of course, discovering and unleashing new and powerful technologies is, in a sense, quite laudable, even social media can be seen as a sign of technological progress. Unfortunately, studying the contemporary political scene, the social media business model has just as easily become an instrument of mass destruction and a tool to induce mass psychosis. Given the danger it presents, there is clearly a need for the regulation of social media. Naturally, whatever measures are taken should be done so without endangering freedom of speech. But while taking this important aspect into consideration, steps need to be taken to turn the tide on harmful online practices (including censorship). The spread of mass psychosis through exciting but false information needs to be stopped. Essentially, something needs to be done to prevent the inducement of fear and anxiety; to prevent elaborate conspiracy theories coming to the fore. In particular, measures need to be taken to prevent the most vulnerable users of the media—those experiencing loneliness, isolation, and despair—from taking on false belief systems. Essentially, norms and values should be put into place that help foster social harmony instead of conflict. Governments need to foster a societal civic culture that can resist mass psychosis.

Creating a "Good-Enough" Society

But what makes for a civic culture? What needs to be done to create a civic society? What "good-enough" steps need to be taken to prevent mass psychosis from coming to the fore? How to ensure that people will act as responsible citizens?

Usually, the term civic culture is used to identify the characteristics of a political culture that make for a well-functioning society.[3] Generally speaking, in such societies, people live according to a number of principles that include free speech, civil discourse, and the rule of law. However to put these principles in place is easier said than done. A strong civic culture will always be a balancing act between multiple contradictory forces: a need to respect the rights of the individual and a concern for the public good. Whatever the outcome will be of this balancing act between various stakeholders, however, having a civic society implies being responsive to the interests of its citizens. It explains why its citizens will have a great deal of pride in their public institutions.

All in all, in societies with a civic culture, fair process will also be the name of the game. There is the expectation that those who govern will treat everyone fairly. Thus, in countries with a civic culture, its citizens will pay attention to the way in which public institutions conduct their public affairs, how they manage public resources, and how they manage public opinion. It also implies that the country's government delivers on the promise of human rights, be it civil, cultural, economic, political, or social (including how the people in leadership positions mediate differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what's in the best interests for all).

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[3] Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verda (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton: Princeton Universities Press.

In addition, the citizens of a society with a civic culture, are able to talk freely about all political subjects. They're actively engaged in local government activities, political parties, and in civic institutions (including membership of political associations). Such a culture also implies a tolerance vis-à-vis opposition parties, meaning that great efforts are made to prevent polarization. Good governance will always be top of the agenda, meaning that the decision-makers in the government, the private sector and civil society organizations will be accountable to the public as well as to its institutional stakeholders.

Fundamentally, in a society with a civic culture, citizens don't experience the need to distort or deny experiences. On the contrary, they know how to interpret experiences accurately whilst remaining open to new ones. In other words, they don't have a rigid outlook on life. Furthermore, they strongly believe in the values of self-determination, freedom, and self-actualization. As liberty is one of a civic society's key values, people will have a sense of ownership of their own lives. They're able to retain their own sense of self without being swept away by mass psychotic, negative thinking. In fact, they believe in the basic goodness of people. They understand that only in this way will they be able to resist the darkness of mass psychosis.

However laudable, maintaining such a positive outlook life will not be an easy task. The threat of mass psychosis induced by demagogue-like leaders is always around the corner. It is far too easy to fall into the rabbit hole of delusionary thinking. Consequently, civic cultures remain very delicate constructions. And this is especially true in this day

and age, given the potentially destructive role of social media. All too often, to be the recipient of reality-based information will be an uphill struggle.

The Critical Role of Education

Given the developments in today's society, it will be up to a country's citizens to critically assess the information that's provided. This implies an objective analysis and evaluation of whatever issues may arise in order to form a balanced judgement. However to be able to do so implies that people need to be well-educated. As the Greek philosopher Pythagoras once said, "the beginning of every government starts with the education of our youth*."* He realized the fundamental importance of education in creating and sustaining a democratic society. Clearly, the cornerstone of developing and maintaining a civic culture is a country's educational system. Therefore it is up to a country's policy makers to put in place the kind of educational systems that emphasize a civic culture; these must include well-designed social studies and civics curricula with a view to fostering responsible citizens. As has been shown repeatedly, people who receive high-quality civic education from early on, are more likely to become engaged citizens throughout their lives. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that critical thinking and media literacy will be part of a society's educational curriculum.

Education may well provide a source of meaning and purpose in life. Through education, we will be better prepared to engage in reflective thinking and pursue self-knowledge.[4] Such points of rational evaluation will enhance our ability to persist in spite of life's

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[4] Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2021). *Quo Vadis: The Existential Challenges of Leaders.* Palgrave MacMillan.

challenges. In other words, a solid civic education will counteract excessive narcissistic behavior, and prevent the societal regression that is mass psychosis. However, such a civic education can only start with a willingness to review the self critically and with greater clarity; to take responsibility for one's own life with reason and decency. This mindset reminds me of an old American Indian story, in which a wise Indian is teaching his grandson about life:

"A fight is going on inside us," the old Indian said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight. It is a fight between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

The old Indian continued, "The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Indian replied, "The one you feed."

With this story in mind, it remains my hope that people will keep their head despite the narcotic pull of mass psychosis, and instead insist on facing reality as it is. If they are able

to do so, it will be far less likely that I will encounter other individuals standing on Place

Saint Michel in Paris carrying the sign, "Behold the End is Near!"