

Mass Psychosis

The Greatest Threat to Mankind?

Academy of Ideas

“All one’s neighbours are in the grip of some uncontrolled and uncontrollable fear. . . In lunatic asylums it is a well-known fact that patients are far more dangerous when suffering from fear than when moved by rage or hatred.” — *Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion*

According to the psychologist Carl Jung 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. We are our own worst enemies or as the Latin proverb puts it “Man is wolf to man”. In *Civilization in Transition* Jung states that this proverb “*is a sad yet eternal truism*” and our wolf-like tendencies come most prominently into play at those times of history when mental illness becomes the norm, rather than the exception in a society, a situation which Jung termed a psychic epidemic.

“Indeed, it is becoming ever more obvious” he writes “that 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.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

In this video we are going to explore the most dangerous of all psychic epidemics – the mass psychosis. A mass psychosis is an epidemic of madness and it occurs when a large portion of a society loses touch with reality and descends into delusions. Such a phenomenon is not a thing of fiction. Two examples of mass psychoses are the American and European witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries and the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century. During the witch hunts thousands of individuals, mostly women, were killed not for any crimes they committed but because they became the scapegoats of societies gone mad:

“In some Swiss villages, there were scarcely any women left alive after the frenzy had finally burned itself out.” — *Frances Hill, A Delusion of Satan*

The totalitarian experiments of the 20th century are a more recent, and a more deadly, example of a mass psychosis. In countries such as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, North Korea, China and Cambodia it was a collective detachment from reality and a descent into delusions and paranoia that permitted the rise of the all-powerful totalitarian governments that destroyed the lives of hundreds of millions:

“. . .the totalitarian systems of the 20th century represent a kind of collective psychosis. Whether gradually or suddenly, reason and common human decency are no longer possible in such a system: there is only a pervasive atmosphere of terror, and a projection of “the enemy,” imagined to be “in our midst.” Thus society turns on itself, urged on by the ruling authorities.” — *Joost Meerloo, The Rape of the Mind*

When a mass psychosis occurs the results are devastating. Jung studied this phenomenon thoroughly and wrote that the individuals who make up the infected society “become morally and spiritually inferior” they “sink unconsciously to an inferior...intellectual level” they become “more unreasonable, irresponsible, emotional, erratic, and unreliable;” worst of all:

“Crimes the individual alone could never stand are freely committed by the group [smitten by madness].” — *Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life*

What makes matters worse is that those suffering from a mass psychosis are unaware of what is occurring. For just as an individual gone mad cannot step out of his mind to observe the errors in his ways, so too there is no Archimedean point from which those living through a mass psychosis can observe their collective madness, or as Jung writes concerning the psychic epidemic that swept through Germany under Hitler’s rule:

“The phenomenon we have witnessed in Germany was nothing less than [an] outbreak of epidemic insanity. . . No one knew what was happening to him, least of all of the Germans, who allowed themselves to be driven to the slaughterhouse by their leading psychopaths like hypnotized sheep.” — *Carl Jung, After the Catastrophe*

But what gives rise to a mass psychosis? And what makes a society susceptible to this devastating phenomenon? For an answer we must begin at the basics. We must explain what is meant by a psychosis and what leads an individual into a state of madness. With this information we can then examine how this process plays out on a mass scale.

A psychosis can be defined as a detachment from reality or the loss of an adaptive relationship to reality. In place of thoughts and beliefs that conform to the facts of the world the psychotic becomes overrun by delusions which are false beliefs considered to be true despite the existence of evidence that proves the contrary.

Delusion, writes Joost Meerloo can be defined as,

“...the loss of an independent, verifiable reality, with the consequent relapse into a more primitive stage of awareness.” — *Joost Meerloo, The Rape of the Mind*

Delusions can take many forms. Some psychotics develop delusions of paranoia and believe they are constantly being followed, tracked and observed. Others, such as catatonic schizophrenics, develop delusions about their ability to alter the state of the universe merely with the movement of their body and so remain constricted in statue like poses. But while delusions are false in the sense of not conforming to the facts of the external world, they are considered true to the psychotic and so influence how they interact with the world and with other people, or as Jung writes:

“If a man imagined that I was his arch-enemy and killed me, I should be dead on account of mere imagination. Imaginary conditions do exist and they may be just as real and just as harmful or dangerous as physical conditions. I even believe that psychic disturbances are far more dangerous than epidemics [of physical disease] or earthquakes.”

Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion

While a descent into the delusions of a psychosis has many triggers such as an excessive use of drugs or alcohol, brain injuries and other illnesses, these physical causes will not concern us here. Our concern is with psychological, or what are called psychogenic triggers, as these are usually what lead to the mass psychosis. The most prevalent psychogenic cause of a psychosis is a flood of negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, that drives an individual into a state of panic. When in a state of panic one naturally seeks relief as it is too mentally and physically draining to subsist in this hyper-emotional state for a prolonged period of time. To escape the fear and anxiety of the panic state a positive or negative reaction can take place and the positive reaction takes the following form:

“A greater effort is called forth. The individual will show more strength and will-power and will try to overcome the obstacle or the cause of misery through physical, intellectual, and moral effort. . .If the strength of one individual is not sufficient he will seek the help of others. . .If such an ultimate attempt fails, or if an individual is too weak from the start to show fight, then a negative reaction takes place.”

Carl Jung, Psychology and National Problems

At the extreme, the negative reaction is a psychotic break. A psychotic break is not a descent into a state of greater disorder as many believe, but a re-ordering of one's experiential world which blends fact and fiction, or delusions and reality, in a way that helps end the feelings of panic. Silvano Arieti, one of the 20th century's foremost authorities on schizophrenia, explains the psychogenic steps that lead to madness: firstly there is

“...[the] phase of panic – when the patient starts to perceive things in a different way, is frightened on account of it, appears confused, and does not know how to explain “the strange things that are happening.” — *Silvano Arieti, Interpretation of Schizophrenia*

The next step is what Arieti calls a phase of psychotic insight, whereby an individual:

“...succeeds in “putting things together” [b]y devising a pathological way of seeing reality, [which allows him] to explain his abnormal experiences. The phenomenon is called “insight” because the patient finally sees meaning and relations in his experiences. . .”

But the insight is psychotic because it is based on delusions not on adaptive and life-promoting ways of relating to whatever threats precipitated the panic. The delusions, in other words, allow the panic-stricken individual to escape from the flood of negative emotions, but at the cost of losing touch with reality and for this reason Arieti says that a psychotic break can be viewed as “*an abnormal way of dealing with an extreme state of anxiety.* . .” The American psychologist Alexander Lowen echoes this sentiment:

“Two factors are important [in the dynamics of a psychotic break]:” he writes “one is an ego that is weak or insecure. . The other factor is a flood of feeling that cannot be integrated by the ego.” — *Alexander Lowen, The Voice of the Body*

When it is understood that a flood of negative emotions, in conjunction with a weak and insecure sense of self, can trigger a descent into madness it becomes clear how a mass psychosis can occur. A population first needs to be induced into a state of intense fear or anxiety by threats real, imagined, or fabricated and once in a state of panic the door is open for either the positive or negative reaction to unfold. If a society is composed of self-reliant,

resilient and inwardly strong individuals a positive reaction can take place, but if it is composed of mainly weak, insecure and helpless individuals a descent into the delusions of a mass psychosis becomes a real possibility. Great stress, in other words, can bring out the best in an individual or society at large, but it can also bring out the worst, or as the psychologist Anthony Storr writes about the potential for a mass psychosis:

“ . . . it is only if we accept the existence of a latent paranoid potential lurking in the recesses of the normal mind that we can explain the mass delusions which led to the persecution of witches and the Nazi slaughter of Jews. Vast numbers of ordinary men and women held beliefs about witches and Jews which, if they had been expressed by one or two individuals instead of by whole communities, would have been dismissed as paranoid delusions. There are extremely primitive, irrational mental forces at work in the minds of all of us which are usually overlaid and controlled by reason, but which find overt expression in the behaviour of those whom we call mentally ill, and which also manifest themselves in the behaviour of normal people when under threat or other forms of stress.”

Anthony Storr, Solitude: A Return to the Self

In the next video of the series we will explore how certain ideas, or what the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky called demons, can induce a societal-wide flood of negative emotions and therefore pave the way for a mass psychosis. Ideas, as we will learn, are so powerful that at times they can possess us, consume us or even destroy us. Those who control the flow of information in a society, and the ideas we accept as true or false, exert a great power over the course of civilization.

“It was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky, Demons

Or as Jung echoes:

“Once upon a time men were possessed by devils, now they are not less obsessed by ideas.”

Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion