

A photograph of a shirtless man in the foreground, shouting with his mouth wide open and arms outstretched. He is surrounded by a crowd of people, many of whom are wearing red shirts. The scene is set at night, illuminated by streetlights and possibly event lighting. The background shows trees and a building.

Andrew Newton

Understanding
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Through my work as a hypnotist, I have always been fascinated by the behaviour of people in situations where the emotional response of the group has been manipulated and dictated by the leaders or organisers – and how normally sane independently minded individuals can become submerged in the larger organism of the group.

I think that to understand this behaviour, it will be necessary to first take a look at how and why groups bond together in the first place.

In 1895, Gustave Le Bon wrote in *Psychologie des Foules* that even if we come to understand the individual, we must recognise that he behaves differently when part of a group. However intelligent or culturally astute the individual may be, the collective consciousness of the group will take over, causing the individual to act and behave in a manner quite different from that normally be expected of him as an isolated individual.

The group will display certain special characteristics – it will have a sense of power and over time, its members will gradually lose all sense of individuality and responsibility, instead, taking on feelings and emotions that within the group are highly contagious as individual members of the group become highly suggestible.

Within groups, especially those groups whose activities, thoughts and attentions are guided by the leaders, the individual who is no longer an individual can quickly be persuaded to extremes – suspicions become certainties, and antipathy becomes hatred.

Members of these groups are liable to suspend any altruistic tendencies and become impressed by force – they demand strength from their leaders, distrust ideas that differ from their own and become either profoundly left or right wing. Those inside the group respect and assist each other whilst they distrust and often vilify outsiders.

This polarity of behaviour has been convincingly explained by Erich Fromm who says that the group's narcissism and self-worship is a direct result and directly proportional to its members lack of satisfaction with life outside the group.

Fromm points out that those who '*lead a life of unmitigated boredom*' will be more inclined toward fanaticism and find contentment and fulfilment in membership of a narcissistic group. Individuals who enjoy a variety of cultural activities and material wealth are far less likely to bend toward fanaticism. That's one very good reason for the establishment of a middle class – it reduces discontent and thus any inclination toward revolution.

In the group, any doubts an individual has about himself are negated and replaced with the security of 'belonging'. Fromm describes the results of this behaviour perfectly – '*The narcissistic image of one's own group is raised to its highest point, while the devaluation of the opposing group sinks to its lowest. One's own group becomes a defender of human dignity, decency, morality and right. Devilish qualities are ascribed to the other group; it is treacherous, ruthless and basically inhuman.*'

There are too many examples of this train of thought apparent in human history to list them all, but it is evident in the propaganda of every war ever fought, from the child-eating, blood-drinking French soldier of the Napoleonic Wars, to the nun-raping, murderous Hun of the First World War. It was exactly this sort of propaganda which preceded the first Gulf

War. Tales of Iraqi atrocities were served up to a western public eager for more on an almost daily basis. Stories of babies being thrown out of incubators by Iraqi troops on the loot turned out to be cruel falsehoods perpetrated by ruthless leaders of national groups. And then the media whipped up our jingoistic appetite for the macabre with stories of ill-equipped Iraqi conscripts, depressed by low morale and bad leadership, which coincidentally turned out to be the truth. But the propaganda value of such statements was huge.

Prior to the second Gulf War, we were literally brainwashed into thinking that the whole world was divided into two – on one side a madman with access to weapons of mass destruction, who had no regard whatever for democracy, who had filled all key government posts with corrupt but loyal lackeys, who would happily destabilise the whole of the Middle East and who was to boot a religious fanatic. On the other side was Saddam Hussain.

Behind all the cynical and hypocritical political rhetoric about freedom and democracy, Bush and the ever-grinning Tony Blair were playing this old game. Did we ever manage to find Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, or was the whole thing a con, perpetrated on behalf of already massively wealthy businessmen with friends in the White House? Either way, the power of suggestion was powerful enough to send the lads to a foreign country, only to return and be accused of war crimes.

In the United States, films of a violent nature, featuring flag-waving, jingoistic, even-an-idiot-could-understand-the-plot movies, serve to persuade American youths to join the U.S. military. American movies promulgate 'justice thru armed aggression', the myth that the good guys always win, and loyalty to the American flag. This encourages poor, uneducated, dead-end youths to join up in sufficient numbers so that America can wage war (sorry... be at the cutting edge of diplomacy) wherever and whenever it sees fit.

This is a perfect example of manipulation using the attractiveness of being a member of an elite group – in this case, the Marines. One does not have to delve too deeply below the seemingly serene surface of suburban right-wing Christian America to uncover exactly the sort of attitudes Fromm illustrates.

It's easy too, to see the correlation between the psychological theory and Islamic State (IS). The theory has historical parallels in the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazi Party and the Bolsheviks. In the Second World War, Stalin fought the Germans – not to save Russia from Hitler, but to save Bolshevism.

If you can understand the great monsters, it's easier to understand the little monsters – both breeds understand the enormous power of suggestion and there are countless examples from vastly different cultures where we can observe not only parallels, but the processes taking place – the mass suicides of the religious cults – Jim Jones, David Koresh, Shoko Asahara, the Japanese cult leader responsible for the nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway. They all used exactly the same techniques to manipulate suggestible minds.

There were many in Germany who opposed Hitler and many in the Soviet Union who opposed Stalin and even more in China who opposed Mao. There are people in our own society we find morally repugnant, but we have to tolerate them because we are democratic by nature – democracy is the reward of nations achieve when they grown up.

We have all come across someone in our lives who we know to be an arse, someone who is literally 'pissed with power'. I have met several such individuals and I always use the same benchmark to categorise them, which is – how would this individual behave if they

achieved a position of authority? Then, for the sake of my own sanity and dignity, I distance myself from them and their self-appointed power group.

Members of groups tend to look and dress alike. For example, a particular football team's shirts are always a telltale sign. Military historian Richard Holmes points out that the short hairstyle of the US Military cuts across any racial or cultural divides and also produces a uniformity of appearance which submerges the recruit's individual identity. Certain hairstyles can be indicative of the sort of music people are fond of, or can even be an outward sign that a particular peer group eat a lot of lentils and brown rice.

In the case of the military, the psychological shock associated with the shearing of the recruit's carefully cultivated locks is a significant part of his induction. Then follows the endless shouting, ceaseless drilling and continual repetition which completes the breaking-down process, carefully designed to increase the effectiveness of the troops performance on the battlefield and also infuse a spirit of loyalty to their fellows. One disadvantage with this sort of training is that it leaves the rank and file utterly clueless as to what to do next in the absence of orders.

So just like the church. The never ending repetition of phrases such as '*Lord I am not worthy...*' produces conditioned responses and reflex actions in the same way as the repeated orders and actions of military service. Frederick the Great is reputed to have noted, with a certain air of cynicism no doubt, that if his soldiers began to think, not one of them would remain to stand and fight. But soldiers are trained *not* to think. So are members of religious groups. Identically clad members of groups of football fans are incapable of thinking for themselves in the first place. Their god is a aper-human being called David Beckham.

Translate this into the more benign atmosphere of the hypnotic session and one begins to see more clearly the connection between repetition and conditioned responses. Hypnosis handled skilfully is just a more gentle way of modifying behaviour and the individual's inherent habitual instincts.

More than for any other reason, groups survive and flourish because they satisfy the need for safety and security and the need to belong, the need for self-esteem and for status and recognition.

Psychiatrist Dr. Peter Bourne made a study of the behaviour of American soldiers during the Vietnam War, and his conclusions sum up the essence of group behaviour: '*Basic training has evolved in the guise of a masculine initiation rite that often has particular appeal to the late adolescent struggling to establish a masculine identity for himself in society.*'

Writing about the First World War in *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, Wilfred Trotter said that Man is '*more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence... he is subject to the passions of the pack in his mob violence and the passions of the herd in his panics... His relations with his fellows are dependent upon the recognition of him as a member of the herd.*'

Wilfred Trotter's theory holds true to this day, as anyone who has even cursorily observed the behaviour of football fans will testify. The state is produced in groups from all walks of life, and is most evident when members of the group have undertaken some initiation ceremony or rite of passage – especially when that rite of passage is designed to ensure a particular member's loyalty. Initiation rituals often produce an [unconscious] sense of immunity from harm.

Trotter points out that in threatening situations, [soldiers] despite their training, unconsciously bunch together on the battlefield when under fire. *'The physical proximity of his fellows... dispels feelings of loneliness.'* Dense formations on the battlefield are actively discouraged and much of military training is designed to stop this happening – death loves a crowd!

Leaders of groups emerge because they most embody the cultural aspirations and values of the group. In *The Human Group*, G.C. Homans offers us some superb observations of groups and leadership. In his brilliant book, Homans says of the leader, *'...he is in a sense more controlled by it [the group] than others are since it is a condition of his leadership that his actions and decisions shall conform more closely than those of others to an abstract norm.'* In other words, they control the group, but their authority only extends to the wishes of the of the group.

Leaders are comparatively (comparatively is the key word here) more erudite than the rank and file of the group. They usually possess greater charisma, an inborn intuition for what the rest of the group wants to hear, and a greater cunning and ruthlessness than the average member. These personalities naturally rise to leadership, yet they often realise the hypocrisy and limitations of their own mendacious code. They recognise weakness in others, both inside and outside the group, and are always ready and willing to exploit any vulnerability to their own advantage. Leaders of groups and subgroups have parallels in every section of society, from the school playground, to the football match, to the military, to the wine club, to the operatic society.

Politics and intrigue have been part of the human survival strategy since the birth of humanity itself. No other species is as adept at exploiting the internal machinations of the group as Man.

Hitler capitalised on this lamentable human characteristic by abolishing the comparatively impersonal oath of allegiance to the Weimar Republic and replacing it with one where the individual soldier swore personal allegiance to the Führer himself. This rather deft strategy created a handy obstacle to any future opposition to Hitler from the Wehrmacht officer corps. Such is the power of ritual, symbolism and imagery to impose moral authority.

Many soldiers from other cultures feel that taking an oath is enough to absolve them from any immoral actions which they may take part in during the course of conflict. In Professor Richard Holmes' book *Acts of War* a black GI is quoted as saying *'the officer told us to step right foot forward, raise our right hand and take the oath. It was all over in about a minute. I felt trapped.'*

There are parallels here too, with some stage hypnosis shows, especially where subjects are suddenly and unexpectedly asked to perform in ways they did not expect when they volunteered. The unconscious agreement between the individual and the hypnotist – that actions will be limited to a bit of harmless fun – takes on an altogether different meaning when out of the blue a subject is asked to empty a tin of baked beans down the front of his trousers.

Many years ago, when I still lived in the centre of Manchester, I took the tram to visit some friends of mine who lived out of town. It was a dark winter's night, but only about 8.00pm. There were other passengers on the tram but plenty of spare seats. Close to the city centre, a group of about a dozen or so people got on – the sort of group that immediately puts you on your guard. As the tram pulled away from the station, their self-proclaimed leader went through an utterly pointless exercise of counting heads, as if there was any possibility that one of these grown adults might be left behind. He then proceeded to

engage in some meaningless infantile banter which the rest of the party found hysterically funny. He then marched up and down the centre of the carriage shouting '*City's right, United's shite!*' at the top of his voice, much to the general dismay of the other passengers.

No one dared to challenge this overgrown retard for fear of being assaulted, especially me, so I sat there and pretended not to notice, resigned that this unacceptable behaviour is now part and parcel of living in a large city in Britain. After the job's second length of the carriage, it was an elderly lady who finally stopped him in his tracks with the words '*young man, you may think you are being clever, but you're not. I know it and so do your friends, so why don't you pipe down and give the rest of us some peace.*'

I was filled with admiration for this lady, a frail old woman who with a few simple, well-chosen words – and a considerable degree of courage – had brought down a giant, and made me feel quite ashamed of my own impotence.

The point of this story is not that these groups can be terrifying, but that when the tram disgorged its passengers at St. Peters Square, the subgroup had changed allegiance and this former leader of men had not only been demoted, but his continued membership of the group was clearly in doubt. He had failed to live up to the expectations of his peers and his own membership was now precarious. The group would in all likelihood choose another leader in due course, and this would happen without any conscious decision making process by its members.

Maybe that process is true democracy in action, but the tale serves to illustrate one of the facts of life – not even the leader can threaten the continued existence of the group. Once off the tram, they would continue their noisy, aggressive expedition to whichever hostelry they had decided to get pissed in.

There is also a cultural aspect to this story. A one punch knock-out blow delivered to a male passenger would have been celebrated as an act of one-upmanship, but assaulting an old lady would have been a serious breach of convention. These jobs live by their own set of rules, and these include a rule that hitting a woman is a cowardly act. Women are not to be assaulted, although in the same culture, women are increasingly more likely to commit assault, especially when they themselves form sub-groups, or hen-parties as they are sometimes known.

So cultural conventions can affect behaviour – unwritten, unconsciously obeyed customs are understood by members of any group.

This is something I learned very early on in my career as a hypnotist – by practical experience and the example of the very shrewd owner of the Royal Court Theatre in Liverpool. When we first put on the Late Night Shows in 1985 – shows that were packed to the rafters week after week – one of the major issues that concerned us was the possibility of unacceptable behaviour of 1,500 Scousers at eleven-o'clock at night... and how they were to be controlled.

Nightclubs have bouncers who are usually well-built men with close-shaved heads wearing dinner jackets deliberately bought one size too small to enhance the impression of muscle and who look as if they know their business and would not shrink from physical force should it become necessary. At the Royal Court however, we adopted a much more subtle and reliable method of policing – we employed teenage girls in yellow sweat-shirts – on the doors and at strategic points in the auditorium. The result of this enlightened strategy was that there was never any trouble, not even when the show came out at two- o'clock in the morning.

Knowing how to manipulate and control groups is something that governments have become more adept at, especially in the last half-century. The prevalence of CCTV cameras have helped improve crowd control and identification of criminals, but the lessons of the past are not wasted on the powers that be in today's complex and increasingly disorderly society.

In Britain, most labour under the delusion that the purpose of the police is to solve crime and arrest criminals, but this is not the case and never has been. The primary purpose of the police is to keep public order. They are better trained to do this than the army (third world countries take note). Using the police to look after law and order frees up the army for more important activities – not so much the defence of the realm as you may have imagined, but principally to defend the country's interests and assets abroad.

The fatal shooting of suspected gangster Mark Duggan by police in Tottenham, London, in August 2011, sparked riots that went on for five days, between August 6th and 11th. The destruction quickly spread to neighbouring areas and also spread to other cities, including Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Leicester and Bristol. Five people died, property suffered damage estimated at £200 million, and police made more than 3,000 arrests.

Observers were surprised at the euphoria and perverse sense of 'community spirit' that emerged during the looting, violence and destruction that was part of the unrest. Bitter gang turf-war rivalries evaporated as street gangs joined forces to form a 'band of brothers' pitted against a common enemy – the police.

An investigation led by Dr John Dury of the University of Sussex into the early phase of the rioting in the London districts of Tottenham, Hale and Haringey, discovered that traditional post-code rivalries melted away, to be replaced with the emergence of a new, shared identity.

The police have always assumed they understood gang mentality, but Dr Dury believes that in times of heightened emotion and excitement, a new sense of community will override existing loyalties. More than that, the riots represented a textbook example of disparate people coming together to combat a common enemy.

The team looked at YouTube videos and Google Street View images, they examined police reports and arrest records, and they interviewed 41 rioters.

Initially, people talked about experiencing feelings of danger – not from the police, but from each other. A lot of people in the rioting talked in the interviews about the fear of being stabbed, but they also talked about coming together to form this new group for the first time, of forming a new identity, a new collective sense of self.

When circumstances conspire to unite people for the first time, it also generates a sense of empowerment. When everyone starts to feel the same way and they discover others feel the same way, they expect to be supported – that gives them the confidence to take action, no matter how anti-social or destructive.

Some people might describe the experience as being 'caught up in the moment' or 'being carried along with the crowd.' The same or similar feelings are present in large groups of football hooligans or protest marches that turn violent, where individuals again become submerged in the larger organism of the group. After the event, they often question why they acted as they did, but where there is a common enemy, those feelings are more focussed.

During the Tottenham riots, a turning point came when the police chose not to respond to one of their cars being set on fire. That perceived 'victory' created a sense of confidence and a suspicion that the police were weak. This belief encouraged the rioters to move onto other targets including a solicitor's office (Oh, the irony!) and several shops.

Another key element in the mix was a shared sense of grievance over heavy-handed police tactics such as 'stop-and-search', which had already created a mind-set for revenge.

Charged emotions changed from anger to euphoria – seeing the police were defeated led to expressions of celebration. Then... while young men were engaged in the thick of the fighting, young women busied themselves looting shops.

After the riots ended, the team discovered hard evidence that the rivalry between gangs in the different districts was not as great as it used to be. One rioter said *'I saw the community coming together... usually it's post-code gangs and that lot, like Hornsey, they have differences with Wood Green. But then again, when the riots came, I saw Wood Green and Hornsey people just walking past each other like it was nothing. Now, it's like I don't see a problem with any kind of area.'*

To be honest, I'm struggling to see this as a positive, but if the result is less street-violence in the future, I suppose it must be.

The findings were reported at the *British Science Festival* at the University of Brighton.

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