

The Madness Of Crowds

Why we humans are so susceptible to losing our minds

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Image credit: History.com

For the last several months, dispassionate observers (of whom there are sadly very few) have witnessed the entire globe being whipped into a frenzy of fear by sensationalist media reportage and the consequent follies perpetrated by politicians anxious to appear to be “doing something” in order to appease panicking voters.

It is impossible not to be struck forcefully by the similarities of this current

outbreak of “the madness of crowds” to previous such outbreaks. The defining features are:

- *Fear of some new and supposedly existential threat*
- *Enormous exaggeration of the threat by media and official sources*
- *Rapid coalescing of popular opinion around a single simplistic narrative*
- *Exclusion of all data and logical reasoning that contradicts the single narrative*
- *Hysterical demands by citizens to be “saved”*
- *Willingness to overturn previous norms in the belief that extreme actions are necessary to “save” lives*
- *Eager embrace of superficial actions that are claimed to offer “protection” against the supposedly existential threat*
- *Resolute avoidance of examining the enormous costs of the panic-induced actions*
- *Anger against and condemnation of those not participating in the group hysteria*

We’ve been here many times before.

Europe and North America from the 16th to the 18th century experienced regular outbreaks of mass hysteria during which various mythical beings (witches, werewolves, succubae, etc.) were supposed to be threatening the lives of ordinary people. These outbreaks of panic invariably led to innocent people, sometimes suffering from obvious mental illnesses, being tortured and killed, very often along with anyone unfortunate enough to be related to them.

Everyone "knew" how dangerous these people were, and how they had to be exterminated in order that everyone else should be "saved." Various chants, totemic items such as amulets, bracelets, necklaces, etc. were promoted as having the power to stave off the threat posed by the witches, werewolves, etc. and these items were eagerly embraced by ordinary people desperate to "save" themselves from the "danger" everyone agreed was real and overwhelming. After all, if government officials were taking it seriously then it had to be true!

Today, in the West, we can look back and shake our heads at all of this, wondering how people could be so gullible, so simple-minded, and so self-harming given that there was never actually any real threat at all. And yet witchcraft trials persisted into the 18th century, and in many parts of the developing world today people still fervently believe in magic, witches, possession, demons, and all manner of other nonsense. As a result, albino children are still being kidnapped and dismembered in places like Tanzania so their "magical" body-parts can be used for incantations and spells. Most people around the world continue to believe in invisible magical creatures. Nearly half of US citizens agree with the absurd statement "angels walk among us."

So we haven't actually come very far at all. We're still for the most part mindless savages, unable to discern the difference between childish fantasy and complex reality.

Jumping forward several hundred years, we come to another classic example of mindless hysteria emerging in North America the 1950s and persisting for several decades: fear of communism. The USA whipped itself into such a frenzy of fear over this supposedly existential threat to "the American way of life" (e.g. mass consumerism, blatant racism, astonishing economic disparities) that it intentionally trashed many of its supposedly cherished laws and principles. All in the name of "saving" the nation.

The McCarthy trials were in reality merely a latter-day replay of the old

witch trials and bore a striking similarity to Stalin's show trials of the 1930s by means of which the Soviet dictator disposed of his enemies and rivals and established a reign of terror that would end only with his death in 1953. Evidence was not required (and indeed, was actively suppressed). Assertion was all that counted. Incredibly stupid slogans like "better dead than red" were enthusiastically received by a terrified populace.

The general population eagerly embraced the actions of McCarthy and other "red hunters" because ordinary people were under the delusion that they were facing an existential risk to their very lives. The mass media was happy to repeat and amplify this simple-minded narrative. Everyone knew it must be true. Anyone unwise enough to point out the many absurdities of anti-communism was dealt with very harshly. No one wanted to hear a reality-based commentary; everyone was convinced by the fantasy. Pointing out the obvious flaws was "unpatriotic."

This ridiculous hysteria led directly to related absurdities such as pretending that hiding under a flimsy wooden desk would protect someone against thermonuclear blast. Hence the totally mindless but very successful campaigns extolling the virtues of "duck and cover" drills. Countless US families were duped into buying backyard shelters that would "protect" them from the perils of nuclear war. People painted their windows white because they genuinely believed this would insulate them against the effects of atomic detonations.

And why not? They'd been told to do so by "experts."

Today we're living through another example of mass hysteria. Only this time, thanks to the marvels of modern communications technologies, it's global. But the symptoms are exactly the same as they always are. Unfortunately the self-harm is on a massively greater scale.

But today, just as in the past, few question the accepted narrative. The media, obedient as always to the Rule Of Public Opinion, continues to echo

and amplify a narrative that bears little resemblance to what the data actually shows us. Ordinary people continue to believe whatever they're told by supposed authority figures. We've cast aside many of the hard-won benefits of civilization under the illusion that we're "saving" lives.

Inevitably, we'll learn nothing from this episode of mass hysteria, just as we learned nothing from those that preceded it. And, besides, this is nothing whatsoever like the witch trials of long ago, or the McCarthy anti-communism of the twentieth century. No, this is different (really!). SARS-COV-2 really is an existential threat, despite the fact that data shows at least 99% of the population has nothing whatsoever to fear from it. Anyone questioning this narrative is bad, wrong, and, well, trying to confuse us with facts.

The only real difference between today and the repeated witchcraft hysterics of the 17th century is that today we're using facemasks and "social distancing" instead of herb sachets, magic amulets, and incantations.

Just like people four hundred years ago, we're convinced that these totemic items will "protect" us and we're angry at people who refuse to ward off the evil eye because we imagine they are endangering us by their refusal to go along with our comfortable delusions. The media, of course, repeats and amplifies this adorable facet of human nature.

The question is, obviously: ***why do we behave in this way?***

What selection pressures existed throughout our evolutionary history that led to our propensity to become mindless cogs in a hysterical crowd?

Let's wander back 70,000 years or so and consider how we lived then. Each group (tribe, clan, etc.) comprised fewer than 200 people and was in perpetual low-level competition with surrounding groups for territory and resources. Every once in a while, one group would launch an attack on a

neighboring group.

Clearly, both groups in this scenario needed to bring everyone of fighting age to bear. If three people are attacked by thirty, it's clear which side is going to triumph. But how can a group quickly be formed and be ready to act as one if many of the individuals in the group are behaving rationally, each with a distinct viewpoint? It's so much easier if those individuals become subsumed into a group mindset. Or, to put it another way, if they get caught up in "the madness of crowds."

This is largely enabled by the fact that we're hardwired to shut down the brain's frontal cortex (where conscious reasoning is attempted) whenever we're fearful. And it's easy to make us afraid. At that point, we simply do whatever we're told by whoever seems to be in a position of authority. Our limited ability to think ceases entirely and we become little more than automata.

This is very useful when fleeing from danger, and when it's necessary for group survival.

And so we can see, from this necessarily brief and simplified sketch, that losing our ability to think when confronted with danger was a highly adaptive trait for most of our evolutionary history. It's why we train our modern-day armies in such a way as to encourage "band of brothers" type group conformity.

And it's why we will always react to supposed threats by losing our ability to think coherently and instead merge into whatever group norms are being promoted at the time. It's why we'll fail to spot the obvious flaws in what we're being told and instead earnestly believe in the One True Path To Salvation.

It's also why we'll resolutely ignore the terrible costs that such hardwired behaviors have in our modern technological globally-interconnected world.

The N95 mask has a filtration device able to stop 95% of 0.3 micrometre (0.0003 millimetre) particles. The coronavirus is estimated to be about 0.07 to 0.09 micrometres. Contrast this with cloth fibres, of the type you might use for a homemade mask. The gap between most cloth fibres found in the home depends on weave thickness and can be 1,000 times bigger compared with the N95 mask – around 1 to 0.1 millimetres.

So remember to wear your face mask wherever you go. It will keep you safe. Really.

