

Group Minds by Doris Lessing

PEOPLE LIVING IN THE WEST, in societies that we describe as Western, or as the free world, may be educated in many different ways, but they will all emerge with an idea about themselves that goes something like this: I am a citizen of a free society, and that means I am an individual, making individual choices. My mind is my own, my opinions are chosen by me, I am free to do as I will, and at the worst the pressures on me are economic, that is to say I may be too poor to do as I want.

This set of ideas may sound something like a caricature, but it is not so far off how we see ourselves. It is a portrait that may not have been acquired consciously, but is part of a general atmosphere or set of assumptions that influence our ideas about ourselves.

People in the West therefore may go through their entire lives never thinking to analyze this very flattering picture, and as a result are helpless against all kinds of pressures on them to conform in many kinds of ways.

The fact is that we all live our lives in groups-the family, work groups, social, religious and political groups. Very few people indeed are happy as solitaires, and they tend to be seen by their neighbours as peculiar or selfish or worse. Most people cannot stand being alone for long. They are always seeking groups to belong to, and if one group dissolves, they look for another. We are group animals still, and there is nothing wrong with that. But what is dangerous is not the belonging to a group, or groups, but not understanding the social laws that govern groups and govern us.

When we're in a group, we tend to think as that group does: we may even have joined the group to find "like-minded" people. But we also find our thinking changing because we belong to a group. It is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion, as a member of a group.

It seems to me that this is something we have all experienced-something we take for granted, may never have thought about. But a great deal of experiment has gone on among psychologists and sociologists on this very theme. If I describe an experiment or two, then anyone listening who may be a sociologist or psychologist will groan, oh God not again- for they will have heard of these classic experiments far too often. My guess is that the rest of the people will never have heard of these experiments, never have had these ideas presented to them. If my guess is true, then it aptly illustrates my general thesis, and the general idea behind these essays, that we (the human race) are now in possession of a great deal of hard information about ourselves, but we do not use it to improve our institutions and therefore our lives.

A typical test or experiment, on this theme goes like this. A group of people are taken into the researcher's confidence. A minority of one or two are left in the dark. Some situation demanding measurement or assessment is chosen. For instance, comparing lengths of wood that differ only a little from each other, but enough to be perceptible, or shapes that are almost the same size. The majority in the group-according to instruction-

will assert stubbornly that these two shapes or lengths are the same length, or size, while the solitary individual, or the couple, who have not been so instructed will assert that the pieces of wood or whatever are different. [But the majority will continue to insist-speaking metaphorically-that black is white, and after a period of exasperation, irritation, even anger, certainly incomprehension, the minority will fall into line. Not always, but nearly always.](#) There are indeed glorious individualists who stubbornly insist on telling the truth as they see it, but most give in to the majority opinion, obey the atmosphere.

When put as baldly, as unflatteringly, as this, reactions tend to be incredulous: "I certainly wouldn't give in, I speak my mind. ..." But would you? People who have experienced a lot of groups, who perhaps have observed their own behaviour, may agree that the hardest thing in the world is to stand out against one's group, a group of one's peers. Many agree that among our most shameful memories is this, how often we said black was white because other people were saying it.

In other words, we know that this is true of human behaviour, but how do we know it? It is one thing to admit it in a vague uncomfortable sort of way (which probably includes the hope that one will never again be in such a testing situation) but quite another to make that cool step into a kind of objectivity, where one may say, "Right, if that's what human beings are like, myself included, then let's admit it, examine and organize our attitudes accordingly."

This mechanism, of obedience to the group, does not only mean obedience or submission to a small group, or one that is sharply determined, like a religion or political party. [It means, too, conforming to those large, vague, ill-defined collections of people who may never think of themselves as having a collective mind because they are aware of differences of opinion-but which, to people from outside, from another culture, seem very minor. The underlying assumptions and assertions that govern the group are never discussed, never challenged, probably never noticed, the main one being precisely this: that it is a group mind, intensely resistant to change, equipped with sacred assumptions about which there can be no discussion.](#)

Since my field is literature, it is there I most easily find my examples. I live in London, and the literary community there would not think of itself as a collective mind, to put it mildly, but that is how I think of it. A few mechanisms are taken for granted enough to be quoted and expected. For instance, what is called "the ten-year rule," which is that usually when a writer dies, her or his work falls out of favour, or from notice, and then comes back again. It is one thing to think vaguely that this is likely to happen, but is it useful? Does it have to happen? Another very noticeable mechanism is the way a writer may fall out of favour for many years-while still alive, be hardly noticed-then suddenly be noticed and praised. An example is Jean Rhys, who lived for many years in the country. She was never mentioned, she might very well have been dead, and most people thought she was. She was in desperate need of friendship and help and did not get it for a long time. Then, due to the efforts of a perspicacious publisher, she finished *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and at once as it were became visible again. But-and this is my point-all her previous books, which had been unmentioned and unhonoured, were suddenly remembered and praised.

Why were they not praised at all during that long period of neglect? Well, because the collective mind works like that-it is follow-my-leader, people all saying the same thing at the same time.

One can say of course that this is only "the way of the world." But does it have to be? If it does have to be, then at least we could expect it, understand it, and make allowances for it. Perhaps if it is a mechanism that is known to be one then it might be easier for reviewers to be braver and less like sheep in their pronouncements.

Do they have to be so afraid of peer group pressure? Do they really not see how they repeat what each other says?

One may watch how an idea or an opinion, even a phrase, springs up and is repeated in a hundred reviews, criticisms, conversations-and then vanishes. But meanwhile each individual who has bravely repeated this opinion or phrase has been the victim of a compulsion to be like everyone else, and that has never been analyzed, or not by themselves. Though people outside can easily see it.

This is of course the mechanism that journalists rely on when they visit a country. They know if they interview a small sample of a certain kind, or group, or class of people, these two or three citizens will represent all the others, since at any given time, all the people of any group or class or kind will be saying the same things, in the same words.

My experience as Jane Somers illustrates these and many other points. Unfortunately there isn't time here to tell the story properly. I wrote two books under another name, Jane Somers, which were submitted to publishers as if by an unknown author. I did this out of curiosity and to highlight certain aspects of the publishing machine. Also, the mechanisms that govern reviewing. The first, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, was turned down by my two main publishers. It was accepted by a third and also by three European publishers. The book was deliberately sent to all the people who regard themselves as experts of my work and they didn't recognize me. Eventually, it was reviewed, as most new novels are, briefly and often patronizingly, and would have vanished forever leaving behind a few fan letters. Because Jane Somers did get fan letters from Britain and the United States, the few people in on the secret were amazed that no one guessed. Then I wrote the second, called *If the Old Could*, and still no one guessed. Now people keep saying to me, "How is it possible that no one guessed? I would have guessed at once." Well, perhaps. And perhaps we're all more dependent on brand names and on packaging than we'd like to think. Just before I came clean, I was asked by an interviewer in the States what I thought would happen. I said that the British literary establishment would be angry and say the books were no good, but that everyone else would be delighted. And this is exactly what happened. I got lots of congratulatory letters from writers and from readers who had enjoyed the joke-and very sour and bitchy reviews. However, in France and in Scandinavia the books came out as *The Diaries of Jane Somers* by Doris Lessing. I have seldom had as good reviews as I did in France and in Scandinavia for the Jane Somers books. Of course, one could conclude that the

reviewers in France and Scandinavia have no taste but that the British reviewers have!

It has all been very entertaining but it has also left me feeling sad and embarrassed for my profession. Does everything always have to be so predictable? Do people really have to be such sheep?

Of course, there are original minds, people who do take their own line, who do not fall victim to the need to say, or do, what everyone else does. But they are few. Very few. On them depends the health, the vitality of all our institutions, not only literature, from which I have been drawing my examples.

It has been noticed that there is this 10 per cent of the population, who can be called natural leaders, who do follow their own minds into decisions and choices. It has been noted to the extent that this fact has been incorporated into instructions for people who run prisons, concentration camps, prisoner of war camps: remove the 10 per cent, and your prisoners will become spineless and conforming.

Of course, we are back here with the notion of elitism, which is so unfashionable, so unlikeable to the extent that in large areas of politics, even education, the idea that some people may be naturally better equipped than others is resisted. But I will return to the subject of elitism later. Meanwhile, we may note that we all rely on, and we respect, this idea of the lonesome individualist who overturns conformity. It is the recurrent subject of archetypal American films-Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, for instance. Take the way an attitude towards a certain writer or a book will be held by everyone, everyone saying the same things, whether for praise or for blame, until opinion shifts: this can be part of some wider social shift. Let us take the Women's Movement, as an example. There is a lively, courageous publishing house called Virago, run by women. A great many women writers who have been ignored or not taken seriously have been re-evaluated by them. But sometimes the shift is because one person stands out against the prevailing tide of opinion, and the others fall into line behind him, or her, and the new attitude then becomes general.

This mechanism is of course used all the time by publishers. When a new writer, a new novel, has to be launched, the publisher will look for an established writer to praise it. Because one "name" says it is good, the literary editors take notice and the book is launched. It is easy to see this bit of machinery at work in oneself: if someone one respects says such and such a thing is good, when you think it isn't, it is hard to differ. If several people say it is good, then it is correspondingly harder.

At a time when one set of attitudes is in the process of changing to another, it is easy to see the hedging-your-bets mechanism. A reviewer will write a piece nicely balanced between one possibility and another. A light, knowing, urbane tone often goes with this. This particular tone is used a great deal on radio and television, when doubtful subjects are under discussion. For example, when it was believed that it was impossible for us to put men on the moon, which is what the Astronomer Royal said a few years before it was done. This light, mocking, dismissive tone divorces the speaker from the subject:

he or she addresses the listener, the viewer, as if it were over the head of the stupid people who believe that we could put men on the moon, or that there may be monsters in Loch Ness or Lake Champlain, or that....but fill in your own pet possibility .

Once we have learned to see this mechanism in operation, it can be seen how little of life is free of it. Nearly all the pressures from outside are in terms of group beliefs, group needs, national needs, patriotism and the demands of local loyalties, such as to your city and local groups of all kinds. But more subtle and more demanding-more dangerous-are the pressures from inside, which demand that you should conform, and it is these that are the hardest to watch and to control.

Many years ago I visited the Soviet Union, during one of their periods of particularly severe literary censorship. The groups of writers we met was saying that there was no need for their works to be censored, because they had developed what they called "inner censorship." That they said this with pride shocked us Westerners. What was shocking was that they were so naive about it, cut off as they are from information about psychological and sociological development. This "inner censorship" is what the psychologists call internalizing an exterior pressure-such as a parent-and what happens is that a previously resisted and disliked attitude becomes your own. This happens all the time, and it is often not easy for the victims themselves to know it.

There are other experiments done by psychologists and sociologists that underline that body of experience to which we give the folk name 'human nature.' They are recent; that is to say, done in the last twenty or thirty years. There have been some pioneering and key experiments that have given birth to many others along the same lines-as I said before, over-familiar to the professionals, unfamiliar to most people.

One is known as the [Milgram experiment](#). I have chosen it precisely because it was and is controversial, because it was so much debated, because all the professionals in the field probably groan at the very sound of it. Yet, most ordinary people have never heard of it. If they did know about it, were familiar with the ideas behind it, then indeed we'd be getting somewhere. The Milgram experiment was prompted by curiosity into how it is that ordinary decent, kindly people, like you and me, will do abominable things when ordered to do them-like the innumerable officials under the Nazis who claimed as an excuse that they were "only obeying orders."

The researcher put into one room people chosen at random who were told that they were taking part in an experiment. A screen divided the room in such a way that they could hear but not see into the other part. In this second part volunteers sat apparently wired up to a machine that administered electric shocks of increasing severity up to the point of death, like the electric chair. This machine indicated to them how they had to respond to the shocks-with grunts, then groans, then screams, then pleas that the experiment should terminate. The person in the first half of the room believed the person in the second half was in fact connected to the machine. He was told that his or her job was to administer increasingly severe shocks according to the instructions of the experimenter and to ignore the cries of pain and pleas from the other side of the screen. Sixty-two percent of the

people tested continued to administer shocks up to the 450 volts level. At the 285 volt level the guinea pig had given an agonized scream and become silent. The people administering what they believed were at the best extremely painful doses of electricity were under great stress, but went on doing it. Afterwards most couldn't believe they were capable of such behaviour. Some said, "Well I was only carrying out instructions."

This experiment, like the many others along the same lines, offers us the information that a majority of people, regardless of whether they are black or white, male or female, old or young, rich or poor, will carry out orders, no matter how savage and brutal the orders are. This obedience to authority, in short, is not a property of the Germans under the Nazis, but a part of general human behaviour. People who have been in a political movement at times of extreme tension, people who remember how they were at school, will know this anyway. ..but it is one thing carrying a burden of knowledge around, half conscious of it, perhaps ashamed of it, hoping it will go away if you don't look too hard, and another saying openly and calmly and sensibly, "Right. This is what we must expect under this and that set of conditions."

Can we imagine this being taught in school, imagine it being taught to children. "If you are in this or that type of situation, you will find yourself, if you are not careful, behaving like a brute and a savage if you are ordered to do it. Watch out for these situations. You must be on your guard against your own most primitive reactions and instincts."

Another range of experiments is concerned with how children learn best in school. Some results go flat against some of most cherished current assumptions such as, for instance, that they learn best not when "interested" or "stimulated" but when they are bored. But putting that aside-it is known that children learn best from teachers who expect them to learn well. And most will do badly if not much is expected of them. Now, we know that in classes of mixed boys and girls, most teachers will-quite unconsciously-spend more time on the boys than on the girls, expect much more in scope from the boys, will consistently underestimate the girls. In mixed classes, white teachers will-again quite unconsciously-denigrate the non-white children, expect less from them, spend less time on them. These facts are known-but where are they incorporated, where are they used in schools? In what town is it said to teachers something like this, "As teachers you must become aware of this, that attention is one of your most powerful teaching aids. Attention-the word we give to a certain quality of respect, an alert and heedful interest in a person-is what will feed and nourish your pupils." (To which of course I can already hear the response: "But what would you do if you had thirty children in your class, how much attention could you give to each?") Yes I know, but if these are the facts, if attention is so important, then at some point the people who allot the money for schools and for training programmes must, quite simply, put it to themselves like this: children flourish if they are given attention-and their teachers' expectations are that they will succeed. Therefore we must payout enough money to the educators so that enough attention may be provided.

Another range of experiments was carried out extensively in the United States, and for all I know, in Canada too. For instance, a team of doctors cause themselves to be admitted as

patients into a mental hospital, unknown to the staff. At once they start exhibiting the symptoms expected of mentally ill people, and start behaving within the range of behaviour described as typical of mentally ill people. The hospital doctors all, without exception, say they are ill, and classify them in various ways according to the symptoms described by them. It is not the psychiatrists or the nurses who see that these so-called ill people are quite normal; it is the other patients who see it. They aren't taken in; it is they who can see the truth. It is only with great difficulty that these well people convince the staff that they are well, and obtain their release from hospital.

Again: a group of ordinary citizens, researchers, cause themselves to be taken into prison, some as if they were ordinary prisoners, a few in the position of warders. Immediately both groups start behaving appropriately: those as warders begin behaving as if they were real warders, with authority, badly treating the prisoners, who for their part, show typical prison behaviour, become paranoid, suspicious, and so forth. Those in the role of warders confessed afterwards they could not prevent themselves enjoying the position of power, enjoying the sensation of controlling the weak. The so-called prisoners could not believe, once they were out, that they had in fact behaved as they had done.

But suppose this kind of thing were taught in schools? Let us just suppose it, for a moment.....But at once the nub of the problem is laid bare.

Imagine us saying to children: "In the last fifty or so years, the human race has become aware of a great deal of information about its mechanisms; how it behaves, how it must behave under certain circumstances. If this is to be useful, you must learn to contemplate these roles calmly, dispassionately, disinterestedly, without emotion. It is information that will set people free from blind loyalties, obedience to slogans, rhetoric, leaders, group emotions." Well, there it is.

What government, anywhere in the world, will happily envisage its subjects learning to free themselves from governmental and state rhetoric and pressures? Passionate loyalty and subjection to group pressure is what every state relies on. Some, of course, more than others. Khomeini's Iran, and the extreme Islamic sects, the Communist countries, are at one end of the scale. Countries like Norway, whose national day is celebrated by groups of children in fancy dress carrying flowers, singing and dancing, with not a tank or a gun in sight, are at the other. It is interesting to speculate: what country, what nation, when, and where, would have undertaken a programme to teach its children to be people to resist rhetoric, to examine the mechanisms that govern them? I can think of only one—America in that heady period of the Gettysburg Address. And that time could not have survived the Civil War, for when war starts, countries cannot afford disinterested examination of their behaviour. When a war starts, nations go mad—and have to go mad, in order to survive. When I look back at the Second World War, I see something I didn't more than dimly suspect at the time. It was that everyone was crazy. Even people not in the immediate arena of war. I am not talking of the aptitudes for killing, for destruction, which soldiers are taught as part of their training, but a kind of atmosphere, the invisible poison, which spreads everywhere. And then people everywhere begin behaving as they never could in peace-time. Afterwards we look back, amazed. Did I really do that?

Believe that? Fall for that bit of propaganda? Think that all our enemies were evil? That all our own nation's acts were good? How could I have tolerated that state of mind, day after day, month after month-perpetually stimulated, perpetually whipped up into emotions that my mind was meanwhile quietly and desperately protesting against?

No, I cannot imagine any nation-or not for long-teaching its citizens to become individuals able to resist group pressures.

And no political party, either. I know a lot of people who are Socialists of various kinds, and I try this subject out on them, saying: all governments these days use social psychologists, experts on crowd behaviour, and mob behaviour, to advise them. Elections are stage-managed, public issues presented according to the rules of mass psychology. The military uses this information. Interrogators, secret services and the police use it. Yet these issues are never even discussed, as far as I am aware, by those parties and groups who claim to represent the people.

On one hand there are governments who manipulate, using expert knowledge and skills, on the other hand people who talk about democracy, freedom, liberty and all the rest of it, as if these values are created and maintained by simply talking about them, by repeating them often enough. How is it that so-called democratic movements don't make a point of instructing their members in the laws of crowd psychology, group psychology?

When I ask this, the response is always an uncomfortable, squeamish reluctance, as if the whole subject is really in very bad taste, unpleasant, irrelevant. As if it will all just go away if it is ignored.

So at the moment, if we look around the world, the paradox is that we may see this new information being eagerly studied by governments, the possessors and users of power-studied and put into effect. But the people who say they oppose tyranny literally don't want to know.