

EVERYONE IS A FANATIC

A beleaguered human being easily falls prey to extreme group behaviour

BY DIRK JANSEN

Everyone is susceptible to group fanaticism. Certainly nowadays, when many of the old certainties are crumbling. How great a chance you have of succumbing to the spell of fanaticism becomes clear in the Fanaticism Awareness Tool: a self test.

At a time when many certainties have fallen away, the study of fanaticism is extremely topical. History teaches us that people who are uncertain and looking for something to hold onto are susceptible to fanatical views. And nowadays the certainties of our world are under wholesale pressure, due to the rise of other economies, religious violence and digital communications.

To begin with, we must determine that group fanaticism is present at all times. It becomes visible when a soccer supporter degenerates into a hooligan, when protest demonstrators blindly attack the police, or when people withdraw their savings *en masse* because of a rumour on the Internet that a bank is about to fail. A group casts a certain 'spell' to which practically every person is susceptible.

Just to be clear, the concept of fanaticism by no means must always have a negative connotation. This is evident from such vernacular expressions as 'he's really fanatic about his work', but also from the great respect commanded by top athletes or hard-working successful businessmen in society. This is a certain form

of 'one-dimensionality' that, when occurring within a group, can be called group fanaticism. There needn't be anything wrong with such behaviour. For, as Elias Canetti writes in his book *Crowds and Power* (1960), striving to be part of a group is a deeply human motive. Along with Hannah Arendt, Canetti has written much about the interaction between groups and individuals.

But when does healthy group behaviour turn into objectionable group fanaticism? This can happen when an individual so much wants to belong to a group that the group's ideas are less important for him than being a member of it. In other words, it becomes group fanaticism when an individual rejects notions that differ from the group's opinion (one dimensionality); when he or she carries out the group's mission and recruits new members; and finally, when the individual is prepared to use all means, including (verbal) violence, in order to realize group goals.

Canetti writes in *Crowds and Power* that a group has such great appeal to an individual because it offers security and identity. This works best when a person feels unsafe, insecure and/or unjustly treated. Contemporary researchers like Ervin Staub and Philip Zimbardo likewise describe this human mechanism. They point to the far-reaching influence that a 'total situation' can have on an individual and indicate how the feeling of being treated unjustly comes into the picture. In such situations, a distinct, often simple viewpoint is a powerful means of binding the group together and maintaining the solidity of the group.



The content of this viewpoint is of secondary importance. With group fanaticism, an external enemy is often created by condemning the characteristics or views of that enemy.

In short, you could describe group fanaticism as *the human trait of seeking the security of a group or a crowd, especially under uncertain or inflammatory conditions. The views prevailing in that group are less important than the wish to participate.*

The 'spell' of a group

A vibrant example of group fanaticism is given by Elias Canetti in his autobiography *The Torch in My Ear* (1980). He vividly describes the spell that can be casted by a group.

One morning in 1927, the chemistry student Canetti, known as an intelligent and serious young man, was having breakfast in Vienna. Outside, a commotion arose. Angry workers were advancing on the Palace of Justice to protest the acquittal of the murderer of their comrades. As it passed, the crowd swept the student along with them. It seemed as though the crowd temporarily had taken over his will.

Canetti writes: *'That was probably the scariest part: you saw and heard people making a strong gesture that supplanted everything else, and then these very people seem to disappear from the face of the earth. Everything gave way and invisible holes opened up everywhere. But the coherence of the whole was unbroken; even if you were suddenly alone somewhere, you felt how it pulled and*

tugged at you. That was because you heard something everywhere you went, there was something rhythmical in the air, a guileful music.'

Later in the afternoon, Canetti came to his senses. The mob had set fire to the Palace of Justice and the police had shot 90 workers.

Conditions for group fanaticism

If you are searching for conditions in history in which uncertain or inflammatory situations are described, it is interesting to look at revolutions. Take, for example, the French Revolution of 1789 and the German Revolution of 1919.

The French Revolution is an extreme example of a transitional situation. The old regime had been overthrown, the new was still seeking an identity. There no longer were any clear, broadly accepted standards and structures. On the one hand, this led to oceans of freedom, on the other, to a totalitarian reign of terror under Robespierre where no one's life was safe.

After the French revolution came an intermediate period, in which many changes were tried out, but in which there still were no new social views that could be shared as a matter of course by the majority of the population. There are many analogies to be found with our era, but actually the situation most resembles the revolts now occurring in North Africa. There, established elites have to step down after a long period in power and seldom it ►



(ILLUSTRATION: ARTUN ARASLI, 2011)

is clear what will come in their place. In general, such periods are restless, turbulent and, seen from the point of view of the citizenry, threatening times in which much injustice occurs.

The German Revolution of 1919 took place after the First World War. For the Germans, the loss of the war was unexpected and incomprehensible. The returning soldiers felt badly treated and considered the peace treaty deeply humiliating. The revolution of 1919 by Leftist factions was knocked down by the leadership of the Socialist party with the help of the army. Then followed a period of political unrest and impotence in the form of the Weimar Republic. It was a period in which there was little agreement on social views. Sebastian Haffner, a journalist from that time, described the Weimar period as an era of spiritual emptiness, which was filled with spectacular, adrenaline-pumping events, such as the Berlin Olympic Games. In addition, youth culture predominated. Little value was placed on experience and acquired insights. Parties, loose sexual morals and living life to the hilt were the most important social ingredients. The state took an increasingly repressive stance: confidentiality of the mail was abolished, freedom of expression limited, telephones tapped. And finally: political establishment tried to hedge populist movements in the democratic system by making them politically co-responsible.

Reading this, you might be reminded of our own time. Of course the two pictures differ in terms of concrete expression. But the social climate of the Weimar Republic also exposes surprising similarities in our current Western society.

The spirit of our time

Revolution is taking place in our own, globalizing age now that forces outside the Western world are attacking the West's economic and cultural position of power. Some are doing this through violence, others through economic measures. One of the effects is the erosion of our certainties. Our shared confidence in the necessity of growth, in the shaping of nature, in the levelling effect of markets, is disappearing. These changes are clearing the way for new ideas, other ways of thinking and solutions. They also evoke uncertainty, the fear of imminent upheavals and the need for security and certitude.

The weak spirit of this day and age

Our daily actions are to a large extent guided by things we take for granted. Without having to think about it, we choose a certain view or solution because it is already rooted within us, as something we accept without questioning. Yet our age is characterized by a scarcity of such certitudes.

We are coming out of a period of when things were relatively clear-cut, left versus right, belief in the future, in the making of society and nature. That strong sense of clarity is gone. Now there is mainly uncertainty. There is an anguish because so many choices have to be made: 'Qual der Wahl', agony of choice. The present period offers fertile ground for group fanaticism.

In such an interim period, civilians seek certainty and security in a group situation, in a movement. Or for instance, in the safely detached solidarity of Facebook or other Internet communicaties.

Group fanaticism means losing control

Unrest and uncertainty will continue for a while with very little grip on these processes. Therefore it makes more sense to look at why an individual succumbs to group fanaticism. Often, people who participate in group fanaticism regret having done so later on. After a while, they get the feeling that things have happened without being consulted. As if they temporarily had no control over their own lives. Canetti describes this feeling as a form of being under a spell that cunningly gains mastery over you.

You could also say that forces of which you are not directly conscious have got the upper hand over conscious, rational forces. Group fanaticism turns out to have huge unconscious or half-conscious components. We feel a growing embarrassment that we had lost control of our powers of reasoning. For we prefer to say of ourselves that we go through life as clear-thinking, rationally-behaving people.

From this perspective, it is indeed disturbing to learn that scientist Ap Dijksterhuis indicates that only a fraction of our actions take place on the basis of conscious decisions. Evidently, it's all about the relation between the influence of unconscious forces on our actions and the influence of conscious forces. A stronger awareness of the things that relate to group fanaticism could help in strengthening our rational powers. An awareness of your own inclinations helps you to minimize your own vulnerability.

With this conviction in mind, the Stefan Zweig Genootschap collaborated with Castrum Peregrini to design the Fanaticism Awareness Tool (FAT). The starting point in developing the FAT was that unconscious and half-conscious motivations play a large role in the allure of group fanaticism. Your individual resistance increases when you see the chance of dealing with it more rationally. You can find the FAT online at www.fanatismo.eu.

Dirk Jansen (Amsterdam, 1945) is a sociologist and founder of the *Stefan Zweig Genootschap Nederland*, which concerns itself with fanaticism, European cultural solidarity and contemporary forms of humanism.

For further reading on this subject, please see:

Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler: A Memoir* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002)

Anton Zijderfeld/Peter Berger, *In Praise of Doubt:*

How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic (Harper Collins, 2009)

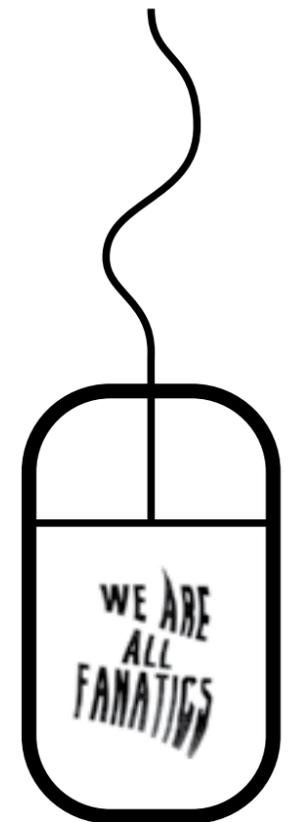
Ap Dijksterhuis, *Het slimme Onbewuste*, Bert Bakker 2007

Philipp Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (Basic Books, 2010)

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1962

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