

## GROUPS TODAY

In 1921, in the aftermath of the First World War Freud wrote *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.<sup>1</sup> In the early chapters, he begins with a review of Le Bon's book on groups *Psychologie des Foules*, written in 1895. Freud is by and large in agreement with Le Bon's "*brilliantly executed picture of the group mind.*"<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately this picture of the group mind as exposed by Le Bon is not pleasant. Le Bon tells us that a group displays new characteristics which are a consequence of three factors.

Firstly, individuals in a group come to acquire "*a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint.*" Freud interprets this by saying that in a group an individual can "*throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses and the new manifestations of the group are in fact manifestations of this unconscious, in which all that is evil in the human mind is contained as a predisposition.*"<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, contagion is evident as a phenomenon in groups to the point that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest.

Thirdly, an individual in a group finds himself in "*a state of fascination*", similar to a hypnotised individual in the hands of a hypnotist. To quote Le Bon, "*The conscious, personality has entirely vanished; will and discernment are lost.*"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Freud. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. SE XVIII

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 81

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 74

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 76

Freud very much agrees with the above interpretations of Le Bon with regard to the group. Moreover Freud emphasises “*the condition of an individual in a group as being actually hypnotic*”, not merely similar to. Also Freud sees the notions of contagion and hypnosis within the group as separate entities. Contagion is the effect individual members of the group have on one another. Whereas the hypnotic influence within the group is from another source. In general, the actions of many groups correlate with the workings of the unconscious, the sense of invincibility and omnipotence. The group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty and goes directly to extremes. It has no interest in the truth. Furthermore Freud tells us: “*it is as intolerant as it is obedient to authority.*” He goes on to draw a parallel between the group mind and the mind of “primitive people”.

This picture of the uncivilised group, analogous to the mind of primitive people is reminiscent of today’s online groups which seek to break the rules and conspire against existing structures. In a recent newspaper article, journalist and author, Giuliano da Empoli, articulates this unholy alliance between techno-oligarchs and national-populist leaders.<sup>5</sup> The author suggests, figures like Trump and other populist leaders seem to have emerged from the past, and can be identified in the ancient writings of Roman historians such as Tacitus for example. These are characters who operate without limits, who draw strength from the unexpected, the unstable and the bellicose. However the key difference between ancient Roman times and now is that these struggles for power took place in the real world, in the public square and the customs or rules of each country determined its limits. Whereas now the public debate is an online jungle where there are no rules and limits and no boundaries imposed by language and the act of speaking. One of the most well-known lines of

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<sup>5</sup>G. da Empoli, “How tech lords and populists changed the rules of power”, Financial Times September 27, 2025.

Shakespeare's Henry VI play is uttered by Dick the Butcher: "*The first thing we do, Let's kill all the lawyers*". Well the digital moguls have done that quite successfully so far.

Are we now in an age where groups are chaotic and without limit or structure? An age at first glance quite unlike the time in which Freud wrote his book on *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud gives two formal examples of groups which were relevant in the post war era of the 1920s. The Church and the Army, two artificial groups, the members of whom are attached to the leader by way of the distribution of the libido. These are highly organised, long lasting groups in which, I quote, "*a certain external force is employed to prevent them from disintegrating and to check alterations in their structure.*"<sup>6</sup> In the Church, the Catholic Church for instance, and in the Army, *the same illusion holds good of there being a head – in the Catholic Church - Christ, in an army - its Commander in Chief – who loves all the individuals in the group with an equal love. Everything depends upon this illusion; if it were to be dropped, then both Church and Army would dissolve, a far as the external force permitted them to.*<sup>7</sup> The tie to the leader is the tie which links them to each other. Indeed even at the time of writing, in the early 1900s, Freud wrote of an undeniable weakening of religious feelings and the libidinal ties which depend upon them. Freud has isolated two types of ties, the first referred to by Le Bon as contagion between the members and the second hypnosis, the tie to the leader. While Freud's book is undeniably concerned with groups, it is also a book about the individual psychological structure and the relations between the ego and the ego ideal and the external object and the ego ideal.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 94.

Freud draws a parallel between the structure of the group and the structure of the neurotic. *“Neuroses are extraordinarily rich in content, for they embrace all possible relations between the ego and the object - both those in which the object is retained and others in which it is abandoned or erected inside the ego itself - and also the conflicting relations between the ego and its ego ideal”*.<sup>8</sup> The group replicates or perhaps accentuates these structures of the individual.

In these great artificial groups, the Church and the Army, the sexual aims of the individual are inhibited, Freud tells us there is no room for woman as a sexual object. There is an incompatibility between being in love and membership of a group, indeed being in love can have a disintegrating effect upon a group. He continues *“even in a person who has in other respects become absorbed in a group, the directly sexual impulses preserve a little of his individual activity.”* Neurosis has the same disintegrating effect upon the group as being in love. Freud tells us *“on the other hand it appears where a powerful impetus has been given to group formation neurosis may diminish and at all events temporarily, disappear”*. Freud alludes to the fact *“that attempts have been made to turn this antagonism between neurosis and group formation to therapeutic account”*. He comments *“ even those who do not regret the disappearance of religious illusions from the civilized world of today will admit that so long as they were in force, they offered those who were bound by them the most powerful protection against the danger of neurosis”*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 143

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 142

Thus groups can be configured in different ways, with different outcomes or consequences. Understanding the relationships between the object, the ego and the ego Ideal, are crucial to understanding the workings of a group.

In his diagram at the end of Chapter VIII, Freud outlines the libidinal constitution of a group that has a leader and has not been able by means of too much organisation to acquire secondarily the characteristics of an individual. He tells us *“a primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.”*<sup>10</sup>

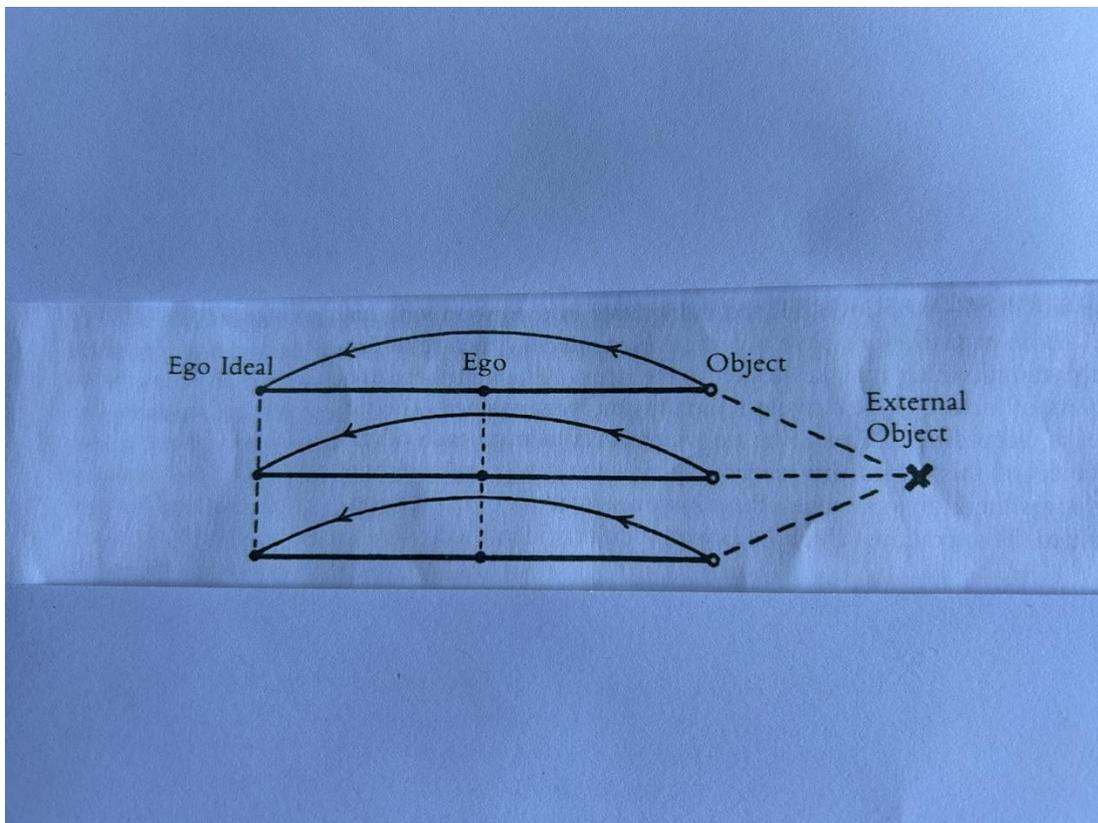


Diagram 1. Freud<sup>11</sup>

This representation of the distribution of the libido applies to the Church and the Army and other types of hierarchical organisations. The emphasis is on the attachment to the leader,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 116

<sup>11</sup> Freud. SE XVIII, p.116

an unconscious attachment, whereby the members of the group introject the leader as a part-object into their ego ideals. Also, there is an identification between group members via the ego. This connection is not as strong as the unconscious identification with the leader as the connection between the group individuals is conscious. This arrangement maintains a hierarchical structure, one that does not allow for individual decisions. As Lacan tells us in his paper “English Psychiatry and the War,” published in 1947: *“It is indeed in Freud’s writings that for the first time in the scientific terms of the relationship of identification, the problem of command and the problem of morality is posed, that is to say all this incantation intended to completely absorb the anxieties and fears of each in a solidarity of the group to life and death, of which the practitioners of the military art had hitherto had the monopoly”*.<sup>12</sup>

In this paper Lacan writes of a group of men within the English army, who have been discharged from active service to a military hospital for treatment. Here two psychiatrists attempt to turn this antagonism between individual neurosis and groups to therapeutic effect. Bion and Rickman create a group where the problem of the neurosis of the individual becomes the problem of the group and the common aim of the group is to tackle the neurotic disability as displayed by individuals within the group. Thus a therapeutic group is created *“with almost entire freedom to each man to follow the bent of his own inclinations.”* Here is a group with ties to the leader but with independent decision making unlike the hierarchical groups described by Freud such as the Army and the Church. Lacan is impressed. He says: *“I find in it the impression of the miracle of the first Freudian approaches.”* How has such a group come about?

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<sup>12</sup> J. Lacan, English Psychiatry and the War, *L’Evolution Psychiatrique*, 1947, fascicule III, pp.293-312.

Bion and Rickman published their paper, entitled “Intra-group Tensions in Therapy, Their Study as the task of the Group”, in 1943 in The Lancet.<sup>13</sup> The authors explain how, firstly, discipline, in the form of a leader is necessary for the group and a common enemy, which unites the group in the face of a common threat. A leader is required who is experienced and has integrity and is not afraid of the hostility of the group nor of its goodwill. Lacan tells us *“the leader of this group has even more control over the group than the psychoanalyst over the individual, since in law at least and as a leader, he is part of the group. But this is precisely what the group does not realise. So Lacan tells us that the doctor will have to go through the feigned inertia of the psychoanalyst and rely on the only real hold he has, to keep the group within reach of his word.”*<sup>14</sup>

In this example of group therapy, Bion has organised the group in such a way as to force the group to become aware of its difficulties of existence as a group; individual neuroses are the common enemy of the group, but can this become transparent and understood by the group itself? Once this transparency emerges then each of the members can judge the progress of the whole. This is the aim of the group. Each time the intervention or authority of the doctor is called upon, Bion *“with the firm patience of a psychoanalyst returns the ball to the interested parties.”* Thus Lacan tells us *“a new esprit de corps maintained by the constant action of the animating doctor”* has been created. Lacan asks in this article *“how is the mobilizable part of the psychic effects of the group determined?”* It seems that Bion has created an almost leaderless group. One where there is no anarchy and no apparent

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<sup>13</sup> J. Rickman “Intra-Group Tensions In Therapy”, The Lancet, November 27, 1943, p 678-679.

<sup>14</sup> J. Lacan, English Psychiatry and the War, *L’Evolution Psychiatrique*, 1947, fascicule III, pp.293-312.

hierarchy. But how so? It seems the hypnotic effect of identification with the leader has been avoided.

Freud's schema of groups emphasises a narcissistic relation between the subject and the leader in the form of identification. Freud tells us that "*identification is the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person*".<sup>15</sup> The first form of identification for Freud is the love of the child for the father. Lacan tells us this is possibly even before he develops a true object cathexis towards his mother. There is a difference between wanting *to be* his father and wanting *to have* his mother. In Seminar IV, Lacan tells us there is a fundamental difference between "*standing on the side of the object and standing on the side of the subject*".<sup>16</sup> He elaborates further by saying should an object become the object of choice, it's not the same as becoming the support for the subject's identification.

Identification is the more primal and fundamental function. Identification entails an object choice but this is complicated by accounting for narcissism. The chapter on love and hypnosis is not easy to decipher. In fact, Lacan does provide a summary of the twists and turns and then says that we are left in a pickle.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in the chapter on being in love, Freud, describes identification as a situation where the ego has enriched itself with the qualities of the object or it has introjected the object into itself. Conversely, being in love, is where the ego has become poorer and it has abandoned itself to the object, setting the object in place of its own most important constituent. To complicate things further, Freud takes us on another turn by saying that an extreme case of being in love or infatuation *Verliebtheit* could be described as a situation where the ego has introjected the object into

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<sup>15</sup> S. Freud. Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. SE XVIII, p105.

<sup>16</sup> J. Lacan, The Object Relation and Freudian Structures, Book IV, Ed Jacques-Alain Miller. 1956 p 163

<sup>17</sup> J. Lacan, The Object Relation and Freudian Structures, Book IV, Ed Jacques-Alain Miller. 1956 p 165

itself. He continues in the case of identification the object has been lost or given up; it is then set up again inside the ego and the ego makes a partial alteration in itself after the model of the lost object. Whereas in the case of *Verliebtheit* or infatuation, the object is preserved and is as such hyper-catheted at the expense of the ego. Here too Freud adds yet another caveat asking can there be no identification where the object is preserved?<sup>18</sup>

In the final say, the crux of the matter for Freud is the question of whether the object is set in the place of the ego or the ego ideal.

An understanding of the bond between introjection and identification is the first step in approaching the object. Lacan tells us symbolic structuration and possible introjection is the most characteristic form of primal identification. This occurs at the level of the mother and the child and the breast, the breast as both a real object of satisfaction and an object at the symbolic level. Lacan says it in the second temporal phase that *Verliebtheit* (love infatuation) occurs. I quote, "*this Verliebtheit is absolutely inconceivable , it cannot be articulated anywhere, except in the register of the narcissistic relationship, in other words in the specular relationship.*"<sup>19</sup> It is only after this second phase of imaginary specular identification with the body image as such, which lies at the origin of the ego and which provides its matrix, that the child, the subject, can gain access to what the mother lacks. He can propose himself as the object that will fill this lack.

So going back to the diagram and to quote Lacan in his explanation of the diagram:

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<sup>18</sup> S. Freud. Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. SE XVIII, p 114

<sup>19</sup> J. Lacan, The Object Relation and Freudian structures, Book IV, Ed Jacques-Alain Miller. 1956 p 168

*“On the central vertical axis are the egos of different subjects. It is a matter of knowing why different subjects are in communion with the same ideal. Freud explains there is an identification between the Ego-ideal and all these objects that are supposed to be the same. Yet he also links these three objects, which may be supposed to be the same, to an external object that lies behind them. Lacan tells us the Ichideal is not merely a matter of an object but of something that lies beyond the object and which comes to be reflected not purely and simply in the ego – which doubtless feels something of this and comes to be impoverished by it – but rather in something that lies in the ego’s very footings, in its first requirements and upon the first veil that is projected in the form of the Ego-ideal.”<sup>20</sup>*

Lacan tells us there is a single stroke, an einziger Zug or unary trait as a consequence of identification. The function of the unary trait as the support of the ego ideal is essential to understanding Lacan’s interpretation of Freud’s diagram of group structure. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the *objet a*.

The difference between Lacan’s version of the diagram and Freud’s relates to the status of the object. There is an essential difference between the object defined as narcissistic and *i(a)*, and the function of the *a*. Freud’s version relates to primary identification which gives rise to the narcissistic introjection of the image of the other, where the other is the leader.

This is the formula for both hypnosis and collective fascination. Such collective fascination is as much a phenomenon in these times as it was in Freud’s time. Lacan adds, that the *objet a* may be identical with the gaze. Freud tells us with regard to hypnosis: *“there is a great deal*

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<sup>20</sup> J. Lacan, *The Object Relation and Freudian Structures*, Book IV, Ed Jacques-Alain Miller. 1956 p 170

*in it which we must recognise as unexplained and mysterious. It contains an additional element of paralysis derived from the relation between someone with superior power and someone who is without power and helpless.*"<sup>21</sup> The nodal point of hypnosis is the gaze of the hypnotizer.

Lacan tells us in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, *the identification is not specular, immediate identification. It is its support. It supports the perspective chosen by the subject in the field of the Autre from which specular identification may be seen in a satisfactory light.* He continues *"the point of the ego ideal is that from which the subject will see himself, as one says, as others see him- which will enable him to support himself in a dual situation that is satisfactory for him from the point of view of love."*<sup>22</sup>

It was by distinguishing itself from hypnosis that analysis became established. To quote Lacan *" the fundamental mainspring of the analytic operation is the maintenance of the distance between the I (ego ideal) of identification and the objet a.* He continues: *if the transference is that which separates demand from the drive, the analyst's desire is that which brings it back. And in this way, it isolates objet a, places it at the greatest possible distance from the I that he, the analyst is called upon by the subject to embody. It is from this idealisation that the analyst has to fall in order to be the support of the separating a, in so far as his desire allows him, in an upside down hypnosis, to embody the hypnotised patient.*"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> S. Freud. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. SE XVIII, p 115

<sup>22</sup> J. Lacan. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Karnac 1973 p. 268.

<sup>23</sup> J. Lacan. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Karnac 1973 p. 273.

So, there is a beyond of identification, which Lacan articulates in his version of the diagram. Instead of the i(a) narcissistic introjection of the image of the other (the image in the guise of leader of the group), the objet a is identified at the level of the ego ideal. To quote Lacan *“There is a beyond to identification and this beyond is defined by the relation and the distance of the objet petit a to the idealising capital I of identification”*.<sup>24</sup>

This *objet a* or the gaze, which Lacan tells us is *“the most characteristic term for apprehending the proper function of the objet a. This a is presented precisely, in the field of the mirage of the narcissistic function of desire, as an object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier. It is at this point of lack that the subject has to recognise himself.”*<sup>25</sup>

Is this what Bion managed to do for the group?

In his description of his group approach, initially, Bion couldn't get any work done due to interruptions from the patients with demands. Lacan tells us that transference operates in the direction of bringing demand back to identification. Bion reorganised the group so that the demands directed towards him became aligned with the drive of the group. The men were organised into groups, each of which was defined by an object of occupation. The groups were then entirely handed over to the initiative of the men with one limitation that any new group does not duplicate the work of another existing group. The demand and the drive were aligned and focused on the work of the group, the work of each group was chosen by the men themselves. *Objet a* is thus isolated and as far as possible from the I,

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<sup>24</sup> J. Lacan. Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Karnac 1973 p. 271.

<sup>25</sup> J. Lacan. Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Karnac 1973 p. 270.

ideal ego. Bion is not a leader who is the focus of the identification by the members.

However Bion manages to keep the group within reach of his word, as Lacan tells us things are maintained by the constant action of the animated doctor. Each time there is an appeal for intervention Bion returns the ball to the interested parties.

In the beyond of identification, the subject has to recognise himself, recognise himself in a way akin to the imposition of the Name of the Father which creates a distance from the mother to allow the child's own subjectivity to develop.

Groups today are falling beyond reach of the word. We are trapped in the narcissism of the image, it seems, with no need for desire or demand, as Dr Melman tells us. Helen Sheehan recently gave us an introduction to Dr Melman's writings about The New Psychical Economy. In these essays he expresses a concern that *"with this New Psychical Economy, the singularity of the subject disappears and melts into the anonymity of the collective."*<sup>26</sup> To continue *"in other words the object which gives satisfaction appears readily in the field of reality. There is no need for demand or desire here."* Melman tells us *"we are turning away from an economy of the signifier to that of the sign"*, one where the image tries to substitute for the word. Our collective fascination is more ubiquitous than ever. Is a beyond of identification at all possible if we have slipped beyond the reach of the word, of the signifier?

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<sup>26</sup> H. Sheehan, An Introduction to Dr Melman's New Psychical Economy, oral presentation, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2025.

