



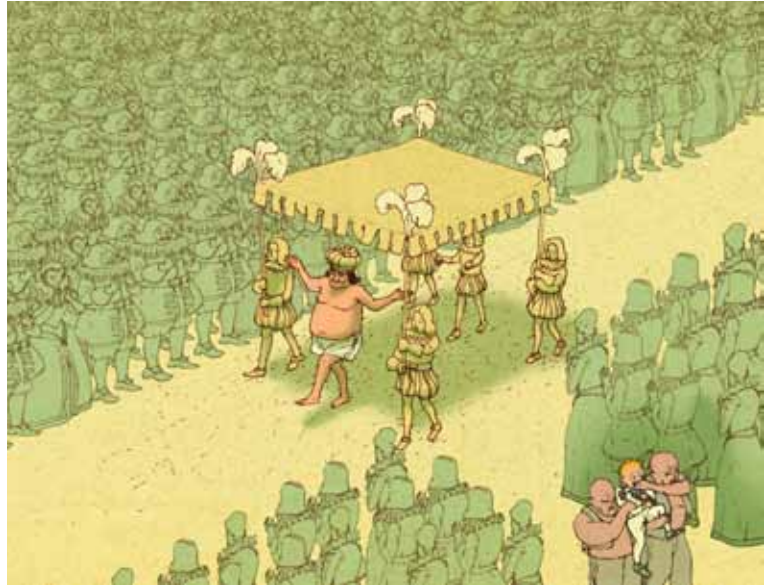
# Dictators and Diehards

Pluralistic ignorance and the last best hope on earth

In Tyler Hamilton's 2012 book *The Secret Race* (written with Daniel Coyle), the cyclist exposes the most sophisticated doping program in the history of sports, orchestrated by Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France winner now stripped of his titles after a thorough investigation by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. Hamilton shows how such an elaborate system was maintained through the "omertà rule"—the code of silence that leads one to believe everyone else believes doping is the norm—and reinforced by the threat of punishment for speaking out or not complying.

The broader psychological principle at work here is "pluralistic ignorance," in which individual members of a group do not believe something but mistakenly believe everyone else in the group believes it. When no one speaks up, it produces a "spiral of silence" that can lead to everything from binge drinking and hooking up to witch hunts and deadly ideologies. A 1998 study by Christine M. Schroeder and Deborah A. Prentice, for example, found that "the majority of students believe that their peers are uniformly more comfortable with campus alcohol practices than they are." Another study in 1993 by Prentice and Dale T. Miller found a gender difference in drinking attitudes in which "male students shifted their attitudes over time in the direction of what they mistakenly believed to be the norm, whereas female students showed no such attitude change." Women, however, were not immune to pluralistic ignorance when it comes to hooking up, as shown in a 2003 study by Tracy A. Lambert and her colleagues, who found "both women and men rated their peers as being more comfortable engaging in these behaviors than they rated themselves."

When you add an element of punishment for those who challenge the norm, pluralistic ignorance can transmogrify into purges, pogroms and repressive political regimes. European witch hunts, like their Soviet counterparts centuries later, degenerated into preemptive accusations of guilt, lest one be thought guilty first. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described a party conference in which Joseph Stalin was given a standing ovation that went on for 11 minutes, until a factory director finally sat down to the relief of everyone. The man was arrested later that night and sent to the gulag for a decade. A 2009 study by Michael Macy and his colleagues confirmed the effect: "People enforce unpopular norms to show that they have complied out of genuine conviction and not because of social pressure."



Bigotry is ripe for the effects of pluralistic ignorance, as evidenced in a 1975 study by Hubert J. O'Gorman, which indicated that "in 1968 most white American adults grossly exaggerated the support among other whites for racial segregation," especially among those leading segregated lives, which reinforces the spiral of silence.

Fortunately, there is a way to break this spiral of ignorance: knowledge and communication. Tyler's confession led to the admission of doping by others, thereby breaking the code of silence and leading to openness about cleaning up the sport. In the Schroeder and Prentice study on college binge drinking, they found that exposing incoming freshmen to a peer-directed discussion that included an explanation of pluralistic ignorance and its effects significantly reduced subsequent student alcoholic intake. Moreover, Macy and his colleagues found that when skeptics are scattered among true believers in a computer simulation of a society in which there is ample opportunity for interaction and communication, social connectedness acted as a prophylactic against unpopular norms taking over.

This is why totalitarian and theocratic regimes restrict speech, press, trade and travel and why the route to breaking the bonds of such repressive governments and ideologies is the spread of liberal democracy and open borders. This is why even here in the U.S.—the land of the free—we must openly endorse the rights of gays and atheists to be treated equally under the law and why "coming out" helps to break the spiral of silence. Knowledge and communication, especially when generated by science and technology, offer our last best hope on earth. **SM**

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