

MOO !



by Armando Simón

A basic fact that Westerners are loath to admit: human beings are herd animals. Like cattle. Like wildebeest. Like bison. Like sheep. Americans may laugh at the Japanese “hive mentality” and sneer at their supposed inability to come up with an original idea, but at least they are more honest than we are by consciously emphasizing consensus in their decisions and craving anonymity within the herd (“The nail that sticks up the most gets hammered down the hardest”). And when people in charge of Western organizations urge their employees to “think outside the box,” instead of engaging in groupthink, they are actually referring to trying to think like an individual.

On the other hand, in today’s climate in universities, the reverse is true: absolute, unquestioning, conformity in thought, speech and behavior is mandated and persecution will result to those who think, talk, or act differently from the leftist Politically Correct [mob](#). If we take into account the

classic [Asch](#) conformity experiments, wherein persons adjusted their opinions/conclusions to conform to the group's, even though they knew the conclusions were mistaken, we can see that the PC fanatics are cloning themselves.

Look at films of people in LA traffic, or New Yorkers navigating the streets, and you cannot help but comparing those images to herds of herbivores.

And, yes, in movies, books, stageplays and television, we do, indeed, honor and glorify individualists who go against the current (in Britain, "eccentrics" are considered particularly wise), especially if they become successful in their careers (e.g., Craig Venter, Louis Pasteur, Salvador Dalí, Feynman, Garibaldi, Franklin, Solshenitzin, Rommel, Columbus, Galileo, Tesla, Yoani Sanchez, Steve Jobs, Billy Mitchell, Ralph Steinman), but the fact remains that human beings are herd animals. The whole of Western culture may glorify the hero, the nonconformist, but at the end of the day, we collectively go "Mooo!"

You may be amused or irritated by the above, but there is an element to this herd behavior that is disturbing. For example, psychologists and sociologists noticed long ago that the rate of suicides, or bomb threats, tended to increase after a well-publicized suicide or bombing (perhaps the earliest known example of imitative suicide occurred upon the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; many youths began to dress like the main character prior to carrying out suicides; it got so bad that, to prevent any instance of this imitative behavior, Napoleon Bonaparte forbade his soldiers from reading or carrying the book). And a few years back, a popular South Korean actress' suicide was overpublicized by the sensationalist media; in that month, the number of suicides rose by 66%. A recent study showed that teenagers' rate of suicide went up after [Netflix's](#) *13 Reasons Why*. It appears that some people may share a genetic link with lemmings.

I strongly suspect, although I have not yet come across any studies, that the same principle may apply to instances of child abductions and child molestations. Copycat crimes are also phenomenon that has been recognized for decades as existing. The terrorist acts in Western countries by terrorists proclaiming admiration for the ISIS psychotics are clearly instances of copycat crimes. Another instance of copycat [crimes](#) would be [some](#) cases where [false](#) accusations of [sexual](#) assault by famous people occur.

Many years ago, a [group](#) of social psychologists did a little experiment that illustrates this tendency to join and imitate a herd. A group of confederates would stand on a street corner and stare up at a building. The larger the number of confederates the larger the number of people who joined them. Although they did not employ the term “herd,” the behavior was nonetheless herd-like. In [another](#), famous, experiment, a group of subjects were asked to judge the length of lines projected on the wall. All but one were part of the experiment and they deliberately misjudged the length of one (longer) line. Three fourths of the real subjects went along with the group at declaring that all the bars were of equal size.

The urge to conform to the herd even when conscious that the action is wrong and that one is being “forced” to act because of the power of conformity was evident in The Great Toilet Paper Shortage of 2019 when people started hoarding toilet paper and food because a large section of the population was in the grip of a baseless panic. During the panic, I too found myself joining the herd at the supermarket, overloading my shopping cart with food and toilet paper, even though I knew that rationally, logically, the supply chain was intact and toilet paper had not vanished from the face of the earth. At present, I am ready for the zombie apocalypse.

This was followed by the wearing of facemasks even though it was evident [early](#) on that the danger of the covid virus had been greatly exaggerated and [masks](#) were useless were about as

useless as putting up barbed wire to keep out mosquitoes. Facemasks became a symbol of conformity, and, of enforced conformity (significantly, [what](#) is curious is [that](#) this conformity was proudly associated with a [person's](#) leftist politics). The [attacks](#), both [physical](#) and [verbal](#), on [people](#) who did not conform by voicing [doubts](#) or refusing to [wear](#) facemasks was [extreme](#). This included [physicians](#) who [gave](#) a [second](#) opinion [about](#) treatments or [masks](#).

One writer, George Orwell, noted this very same phenomenon which he related in his essay, "Shooting an Elephant," when the Burmese in a panic told him about a rogue elephant that had gone on a rampage. Orwell was followed by them. Coming upon the elephant he sees that the animal is tranquil, but he is expected to kill the animal, so he does.

And, inevitably, we come to the *political* aspect of copycat "crimes." In countries which have dictatorships, be they run of the mill like Guinea, Egypt and Syria, or totalitarian like Iran, Cuba, Belorussia and North Korea, the authorities intuitively censor news and opinions which would result in the toppling of those regimes. However, as we saw during the so-called Arab Spring, and as [Yoani](#) Sánchez has pointed out, the widespread availability of electronic communication has, to a certain extent, neutralized an oppressive regime's censorship, resulting in imitative behavior.

The issue of *bona fide* copycat crimes is one that I approached a few years back from a unique angle. Earlier, I had noticed that [social fads](#) (like UFOs, Jaws, surfing) appeared to adhere to a particular pattern. Later, I applied this theory to the [Columbine](#) shootings and found that the same, exact, pattern of copycat crime behaviors applied as was the case with frivolous fads. This data-backed conclusion can be contrasted to the rampant speculation that took place right after the shootings, when "experts" lined up in front of cameras to blame the shootings to (choose one, or more): video games, bad parenting, bullying, Hitler, atheism, television (the U. S.

Secret Service was tasked with studying the school shootings after the Columbine massacre; after much fanfare, a publication was issued that essentially said nothing).

Now, obviously, not everyone takes part in a copycat crime, or a fad. The all-important question, then, remains as to what type of individual *does* participate in this imitative behavior (and imitative behavior is similar to Bandera's modeling)? What personality and/or environmental correlates differentiate a participant from the majority of nonparticipants? That is the question of paramount importance which merits further research—and no speculation.

Forensics aside, the question of herd behavior is very important in the economy of the stock markets. It is no accident that frantic, irrational, selling off of stocks is called a panic. Whereas there is a rational reason for selling off stocks when one has bought stocks on margin in order to minimize loss before the dreaded margin call, the selling off of valuable stocks at a price that has suddenly lowered, simply because everyone else is doing it, is something that needs to be studied more in economics. And yet, we see this phenomenon occurring every seven or eight years, as if the previous instances where the same thing has happened (namely the stocks rebounding back to their original high price—or higher—after bottoming out) had never happened. To my knowledge, the field of economics does not formally address herd behavior, not in a systematic manner.

Then, there is the aspect of herd behavior when we, as herd animals, turn against the “outsider,” the “misfit,” the “weirdo.” We have words like “geek,” “nerd,” and “egghead” for those who are significantly more intelligent than the average and we construct stereotypes that may not be true. The television shows *Sherlock* and *The Big Bang Theory* and movies like *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Imitation Game* are partly popular because they portray brilliant [men](#) as socially inept, supposedly unable to get dates, so the rest of us dullards do

not feel so bad. As [someone](#) observed, “The old adage about there being a fine line between genius and madness is popular mostly because it allows average people to accept being average. They may not be smart, but they are not wrestling with their sanity. The image of the mad scientist flatters average people, so it remains popular even in an age where most people need to believe they are the smartest person in the room.”

Additionally, in order to achieve this ostracism we make all sorts of jokes that make us feel good (remember all the “dumb blonde” jokes? As a rule, blonde women are considered to be more attractive than brunettes, so we make jokes that promote the idea that blonde women are stupid).

Curiously enough, sometimes this hostility towards the outsider may become ambivalent when someone steps out of the ordinary when it comes to fashion. All sorts of denigrating comments behind one’s back may issue forth if one does not dress according to herd behavior in corporations, universities, high schools, the counterculture, law firms, clubs, etc. (yet, if done right—and with a lot of confidence—some talented individuals are able to pull it off and are able to start a “fashion trend.” And we envy them. My wife is a genius at this). These are “[leaders](#).” In nonfrivolous situations, we often see a group that does not respond how it should respond, it does not eject/confront/fight an abusive individual or it does not render aid in a dangerous situation, or it does not stop a cringing embarrassing situation, or it does not stop shoplifting. However, once *one* individual steps forward to do what is required, the rest of the group will support him and even participate in action.

As a fledging psychology student, I volunteered time at a Red Cross Hotline in Wichita, Kansas. An angry high school student was about to commit suicide because of all the bullying that he was receiving as a result of the fact that he liked to

dress in the style of the 1950s; I was able to persuade him from doing so by the tactic of giving him grisly details of what it would be like if his act only resulted in his being crippled. Next semester, the highly popular *Happy Days* came on television, and he became the trendsetter.

A more amusing instance occurred at the same time, which was during the counterculture and the prevalence of the hippies. For those of us old enough to remember the times, the youth of the time were supposedly rebelling against what they called "conformity," and dressed in a more casual (if not sloppy) manner than had been previously the case. Those of us who were perceptive realized, however, that they expected their peers to conform to *their* standards of dress, of speech, of politics, of behavior, of drug usage (the best film to capture the times was *I Love You Alice B. Toklas*). Every once in a while (on a perverse whim), I would go to class or one of their meetings dressed in a suit and watch them almost have a nervous breakdown. It was fun.

And, needless to say, that this same hostility may at times apply (not always!) in regards to ethnicity—by all ethnic groups. It may not be fashionable to state the following, and goes against the herd dogma, but some blacks can be just as racist as some whites (Blasphemy!) and some [Jews](#) may discriminate as much as some Gentiles. (Gasp! Heresy! Heresy!) And Muslims? (Hoo, boy!)

Here are other very specific instances of herd behavior in humans:

You are in another country, like Australia, or Britain, or Ireland, and after a couple of weeks you realize that, without intending to, or trying to, you are now speaking with the local accent.

You have just sat through what you thought was a mediocre performance, but you nevertheless applaud at the end . . .

because everyone else is applauding. When a lot of people stand up while applauding, you do likewise.

You drive down the road towards your work in the morning and at a certain intersection there are two out of three lanes where you can turn left. The line of cars in the middle lane, where you can either go straight or turn, is short, whereas the left lane is twice as long with waiting cars.

You are sitting in a large room with others present; one of those persons begins to giggle for no apparent reason and before too long it is so infectious that others, including yourself, start to either smile, or laugh. Later, at home, while watching a sitcom on the TV you become aware of the “canned laughter” on the show and are vaguely aware that it somehow makes the show seem funnier.

In another large room two individuals become angry at one another, shouting and gesticulating and you notice that you have become very tense.

Another day, you find yourself sitting in a room waiting for your appointment to come up. Somebody yawns a couple of times and you yawn too, even though you are not sleepy.

You are in an auditorium where a small fire has unexpectedly started; the screaming crowd rushes towards the two small doors where a frantic bottleneck has formed; instead of staying in your seat until the chaos diminishes you are impelled to join the panicked herd—even though you know ahead of time that you may be trampled to death.

You are a policeman responding to a small riot and several other law enforcement personnel are there; one of them fires his gun and you instantly do the same, at which point you remember the words “contagion gunfire.”

You are a journalist working either at a television network like CBS or the BBC, or a newspaper like the *The New York*

Times, or *Washington Post*, or a national magazine such as *Time* or *Newsweek* or *The Atlantic* and after a while you notice that certain opinions are never, ever, voiced and in fact are disapproved of, in spite of an official encouragement for “a diversity of views.” You also notice that news stories reflecting those disliked views are never aired and are, in fact, resoundingly spiked. A “media hivemind” seems to be in place.

You are a Senator/Congressman in the U.S. Congress after the 9/11 tragedy and a bill has been introduced, called the Patriot Act, to be voted on immediately and you vote for it even though you have not read it and do not have the slightest idea what it is really all about. A year later, the U.S. President, on a personal vendetta, decides to unilaterally invade a foreign country for no rational reason, yet you voice no objection, no question on the Senate floor—simply because no one else will.

You are a CEO of a major corporation based in New York City. The traffic is a nightmare. The pedestrian traffic is like wading through a tub of molasses. The taxes are crippling. The crime rate is frightening. The salaries are through the roof. Rental property for your employees is a sick joke. The cost of living is so high that your employees are grossly overpaid by the standards of other parts of the country. The financial upkeep of the infrastructure is a drain. Yet, despite all this, you are loath to relocate the company to Lexington, Wichita, Bangor, Omaha, Boise, Savannah, Laramie, Fargo, Montpelier, or Boulder for no rational reason that you can come up with.

You were a teenager, either driving or walking along, when you heard loud sounds coming from your age group interacting in a seemingly friendly fashion and all of a sudden you had a deep yearning to join them, certain that they were having a wonderful time and that you were an outsider.

You are a mature woman and you remember way back when women were not supposed to enjoy sex at all but had to put up with it in order to replenish the human race, so you had sex with your husband always in the dark, under the covers and never saw him naked. Then, many years later, women were supposed to enjoy sex, just like men, so you started enjoying sex and the lights came on and the covers came off.

Earlier, in the Fifties, you were all agog about the surfing fad propagated primarily by the Beach Boys, so you bought a surfboard—in Arizona.

You are a woman and you feel that a pleasant male coworker whom has worked with for some time is unremarkable. Later, however, you have seen that he has a number of dates with beautiful women, and other women state how attractive and charming he is and, even though he has not changed his demeanor towards you, you are now attracted to him.

In the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and even in the early 1980s, the overwhelming majority of white women did not find black men attractive and would not have been caught dead dating one. After a constant portrayal in television and movies of white women dating, marrying, or having sex with black men, white women began to do so.

As a teacher in any school, at any level, you are aware of the term “peer pressure” among your students, whether it’s about drugs, sex, drinking, hobbies, and you realize that it is not just an empty term but a very real phenomenon.

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The purpose of this essay has been to bring awareness of this

herd impulse in human beings, so that the reader can assess events or behaviors around one that may not make much sense. Including your own.

So, until next time:

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