Toward the end of Defying Hitler, his extraordinary memoir of the rise of Nazism in Germany, Sebastian Haffner describes how the Nazis had “made all Germans everywhere into comrades.” This, he argued, had been a moral catastrophe. This emphatically was not because comradeship was never a good thing. To the contrary, as Haffner was at pains to insist, it was a great and necessary comfort and help for people who had to live under unbearable, inhuman conditions, above all in war. But Haffner was equally adamant that, in normal times, in ordinary civilian life, comradeship became a vice, for it relieved people of “responsibility for their actions, before themselves, before God, before their consciences. ... Their comrades are their conscience and give absolution for everything, provided they do what everyone else does.” Anyone who was ever bullied in a schoolyard, or, more to the point, anyone who ever joined in the bullying or just stood by while it was going on, knows full well where that feeling that no blame attaches to you if you are doing what everyone else is can lead. You end up doing, or at least condoning, things that you would never do solo, and that you have a hard time justifying once the crowd disperses and you are on your own again.

Recapturing these scruples—at once the burden and the blessing of individual consciousness—does not mean moving from the utter conformity of the crowd to its polar opposite, an absolute nonconformity. To be a true nonconformist is rare, which is probably just as well, since absolute nonconformity would mean rebelling not just against some particular convention, but rather against all convention, and, by extension, all continuity with the past. Taken to this extreme, nonconformity becomes the moral equivalent of economic autarky—self-sufficiency taken to the point of nihilism, and few travel down that road (our modern pose of nonconformity is another matter).

In contrast, the fall into something approaching absolute conformity seems to be an ever-present possibility for almost all of us. The experiments of Stanley Milgram at Yale in the 1950s, which appeared to show that people would all too readily obey authority figures and commit acts that (though faked by the experimenters) appeared to contravene people’s deepest moral values, are widely remembered. But the so-called Asch Paradigm, which derives from a series of experiments conducted at Swarthmore College during the same period by the social psychologist, Solomon Asch, is at least arguably even more troubling.

Asch gave two groups of subjects a standard vision test together—e.g. as a group. In the control group, the test was straightforward. The researchers simply administered the test and noted the results, making no effort to influence the responses. Each subject replied in turn, with all being allowed to hear their fellow subjects' responses. On the rare occasions when an incorrect answer was given to a given question, there was no evidence that any others in the group changed their own answers as a result. In contrast, in the other group, the researchers planted subjects who were instructed to give some false answers to the questions in the test. When at least three people gave such answers, a significant percentage of the group—up to 75 percent, depending on where in the order of those responding they were placed and how many of them there were—followed suit, providing not just an incorrect response but the same incorrect response.
But the problem of this “unwisdom” of crowds goes far beyond a simple dichotomy between the true and the erroneous, with its over-optimistic implication that if the incorrectness of an answer can be established, as in Asch’s experiment, then the spell of groupthink can be broken. In the context of a crowd, what one believes can actually be of secondary importance.

Haffner, describing the popular mood at the very beginning of Nazi rule, notes that anti-Semitism had not yet taken root. “But ‘we’ were not prepared to make an issue of it,” he writes, noting that this “we” was “a collective entity, and with all the intellectual cowardice and dishonesty of a collective being we instinctively ignored or belittled anything that could disturb our collective self-satisfaction.”

With apologies to Nietzsche, this will to self-satisfaction is what lies at the heart of the dynamic of the crowd. Think of the behavior of the political crowds of the present moment. It is one exercise after another in radical simplification, actively decomposing, in Haffner’s apt phrase, “all the elements of individuality and civilization.” Whether it is urban left-wing activists demonstrating to the slogan of “No Justice, No Peace” (among its other charms, the assertion is false on its face since not all good things go together and often the choice that confronts us actually is justice or peace), or the Tea Party activists, with their tricorn hats and “Don’t Tread on Me” flags, our political crowds are studies in lowest-common-denominator subordination of the individual to the collective and of the thought to the slogan: in short, complexity to simplicity.

Of course, none of this is new. As a teenager during the late 1960s, I spent a great deal of time demonstrating against the war in Vietnam. I have changed my mind about a great many things in my life, but I remain as opposed to that war at 57 as I was at 17. Yet I remember vividly my profound discomfort before joining every protest rally I ever participated in, and my equally profound sense of relief when I could finally detach myself from the crowd. The former seemed like losing oneself in the maw of collective self-satisfaction about which Haffner writes so eloquently, the latter like recapturing one’s identity, complete with all the dissatisfactions that are the mark of our individual humanity. In a crowd, one can only say, “Yes, we can.” But it takes an individual to say, “No, we can’t.”

I do not mean to say all crowds are malign. The great German-language writer, Elias Canetti, wrote of the illusion of equality that the crowd confers on every one who becomes a part of it. That equality is not always an illusion. I have been spending a fair bit of time in Buenos Aires lately. Some of the great pleasures of the Argentine capital are its milongas, its late-night tango halls. It is a cliché (and more of a rarity than most of us are comfortable acknowledging) to speak of places that attract people “from all walks of life.” But these milongas do just that, and I have been wondering why my allergy to and fear of crowds never seems to kick in as I watch the dancing, as it does not just at a political rally but at a football game or a pop music concert, even if I admire the band or follow the team? The only answer I have been able to come up with is that, although the dancers look like members of a crowd, each couple, as they dance, has a distinct identity different from every other couple, no matter how many are on the floor at a given time.
Individuality, like civilization itself, is such a hard-won, fragile thing. It is for this reason that war, even just war (and I absolutely believe there are just and necessary wars), is the enemy of civilization. For to fight a war effectively means, of necessity, subsuming your own individual identity in that of the group. This is what basic training is all about—the creation of group loyalty, or, to use the military term of art, unit cohesion. The drill sergeant breaks down the recruit’s identity and initiates that recruit into a collective one. How else could soldiers who, off duty, may bitterly dislike each other, keep faith with a creed that demands of them that they be willing to die for one another?

But the crowd does not see war as a tragedy. To the contrary, time and time again, we have seen crowds gleefully demanding that their countries go to war, forgetting as a collectivity what certainly almost all of them know as individuals, which is how horrible war really is. It is not that all individuals are level-headed, or reflective, or kind, or merciful. It is that level-headedness, or introspection, or kindness, or mercy are only possible for individuals. Crowds can be joyful or they can be murderous; they can celebrate or they can protest; but what is beyond their reach is sobriety—and it is sobriety that ultimately separates civilization from barbarism. Perhaps this is why Einstein once said that, “He who joyfully marches to music in rank and file has already earned my contempt. He has been given a large brain by mistake, since for him the spinal cord would surely suffice.”

The lesson, whether about geopolitics or daily life, should be clear: If what you are thinking could just as easily be expressed in a slogan, and shouted out or held aloft on a banner by a crowd, then you are probably not thinking at all. And in troubled times such as our own, times of the most enormous moral, social, cultural, and technological dislocation, that is immensely dangerous.

*David Rieff is the author of eight books including* A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis. *This column first appeared in slightly different form on Big Questions Online, the Templeton Foundation’s online magazine.*