

# Blind Spots in Crowds, Masses, and Multitudes

## Introductory Remarks

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**Abstract.** The brief historical overview comprises an account of classical crowd theories and their contemporary metamorphoses to contextualize the thematic section of the journal. Regarding the proverbial “age of the crowd” of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, a variety of attempts of conceptualization proved controversial but productive. Hyppolite Taine, Scipio Sighele, or Gustave Le Bon approached the phenomenon dominantly in psychological terms foregrounding the destructive elements of mass dynamics. In the interwar period, however, a first wave of differentiation might be detected, insofar as younger academic sub-disciplines, i.e., social statistics, seek to grasp the crowd as a structure with its intricate and partly paradoxical qualities. In recent scholarship, however, the diversification of the concept seems to have become even more complex: by shifting the focus from the “object crowd” to the “subject crowd”, descriptions of the multitude, the network, the swarm, or the assembly reflect the need to think of the crowd as an autonomous agency with emancipatory potentials.

**Keywords:** crowd theories, mass psychology, social engineering, conceptual history, historical semantics, metaphorology

The following thematic section features case studies mostly inspired by the activities of *The Crowd. Cultural Attributions of Meaning 1920/2020* research project conducted at the Department of Aesthetics at Eötvös Loránd University.<sup>1</sup> Based on the assumption that the notion of the crowd underwent a considerable modification through the twentieth century, the project members scrutinize the conceptual differentiations along with their metaphorical meanings. The research combines insights from Reinhart Koselleck’s historical semantics and Hans Blumenberg’s

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metaphorology<sup>2</sup> to analyse the representational techniques of the crowd in texts and images of Hungarian culture in the 1920s and our days. Furthermore, it endeavours to explore the transitional moments that led from the dominantly binary division between the crowd and the individual—implying the oppositions of irrationality and rationality, heterogeneity and homogeneity, heteronomy and autonomy, etc.—to the current theoretical approaches of the multitude, the assembly or the swarm, comprising both poles originally attributed to either the crowd or the individual.

### Default positions

From the 1870s onward, specifically from Gustave Le Bon's seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (*Psychologie des foules*, 1895), the phenomenon of the human crowd yielded numerous theoretical and analytical interpretations both in journalistic accounts and in scholarly disciplines. Prior to the "Le Bon Phenomenon",<sup>3</sup> the European discourse evolved around the morals of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, several workers' strikes and demonstrations, as well as the new social realities of the urban mass.<sup>4</sup> Bringing the negative developments in these historical events and sociological entities to the fore, the French philosopher, literary critic, and historian Hippolyte Taine and the Italian criminologist and anthropologist Scipio Sighele tended to label the revolting and urban crowd as the "mob", considering it insane, hostile, barbaric, and destructive. In his voluminous work on *The Origins of Contemporary France* (*Les Origines de la France Contemporaine*, 1875–1893), Taine sought for the roots of the revolution and found them in contemporaneous descriptions of the anarchically revolting and violent crowd. He argued that the mass of protesting people was "anonymous, irresponsible, without restraint"<sup>5</sup> and thus akin to regressive and irrational movements, or, as John S. McClelland summarized Taine's views, "[w]hen the mob is raised, it hurls itself headlong back towards man's anthropological and biological origins, taking the rest of civilization with it."<sup>6</sup> In *The Criminal Crowd: An Essay on Collective Psychology* (*La folla delinquente. Saggio di psicologia collettiva*, 1891), which was partly inspired by Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology, as well as by Giuseppe Sergi's, Enrico

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2 On the compatibility and productive applicability of both approaches, see Palti, "From Ideas to Concepts to Metaphors" and Lassen, "»Metaphorically Speaking« – Begriffsgeschichte and Hans Blumenberg's Metaphorologie".

3 McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob*, 151.

4 McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob*, 106–50.

5 Taine, *The French Revolution*; in more detail, see Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology, and Politics*, 20–51.

6 McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob*, 112.

Ferri's and Gabriel Tarde's criminological writings,<sup>7</sup> Sighele focused on the "collective psychology" of emotional contagion within huge groups of humans, whose behavioural structure required forensic, moral, psychological, and legal explanations in particular when one was confronted with delinquencies committed by a crowd and with questions of their culpability.<sup>8</sup> Since Sighele's conceptualization referred to "an unpredictable multitude that magnifies the conflicting, destabilizing drives latent in the individual psyche, and that emerges as something qualitatively different from a mere sum of self-contained singularities while, at the same time, not coterminous with the idea of society";<sup>9</sup> the crimes of the crowd could hardly be considered to be punished in the same way as those committed by individuals who were subject to institutionalized legal justice. It is exactly this blind spot, or in Taine's account, the pre-civilizational characteristic of the barbarian mass, that manifests itself in the difficulty of discursively grasping the dynamics and the behaviour of the crowd in general. The interpretative framework provided by studies of the psyche of the individual has been repeatedly proven inadequate when attempting to understand mass phenomena that extend beyond the scope of a person's behavioural patterns. An additional symptom of this unease is present in Sighele's argumentation, which, in a self-contradictory manner, combines the assertion that the crowd is heterogeneous and inorganic with its depiction as resembling a living, infected body.<sup>10</sup> While mobilizing analogies of epidemic disease and microbial infections,<sup>11</sup> common to similar accounts on the subject, Sighele ultimately acknowledges in his later essay *The Intelligence of the Crowd* (*L'intelligenza della folla*, 1903/1911) that "although the phenomena of collective psychology resemble chemical phenomena a great deal, for their unexpected *precipitates* [...], what is possible in chemistry is impossible in collective psychology, namely, to know the required dose of the various substances in order to obtain the new substance."<sup>12</sup> In general, Le Bon's claims largely reiterate the insights formulated by Sighele (no wonder that a long controversy began on Le Bon's plagiarism),<sup>13</sup> but owed their greater success to Le Bon's provocative habit as well as to the translations of his work into seventeen languages by the First World War. Although Le Bon, similarly to Sighele, acknowledges that crowds may act productively in certain cases, he mainly elaborates on their tendency to be negatively

7 For an overview of the developments in Italian psychology, see Cimino and Foschi, "Italy," esp. 311–5, 326–7; on Lombroso's disseminative activities, see Villa, "Lombroso and his school".

8 On Sighele's work with its complex context, see Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology and Politics*, 52–99.

9 Pireddu, "Introduction," xviii.

10 Sighele, "The Criminal Crowd," 12, 32.

11 Sighele, "The Criminal Crowd," 19–21.

12 Sighele, "The Intelligence of the Crowd," 254.

13 McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob*, 151–54; Nye, *Gustave LeBon* [sic], 87–88.

manipulated, emotionally influenced, to lack cognitive abilities, and follow unconscious impulses.<sup>14</sup>

These influential accounts of the crowd's psychodynamic characteristics, along with a great number of relevant late-nineteenth-century studies on the subject, attest to a wider field of criticism about the heritage of the Enlightenment and about modernity prior to the First World War. Following the impetus of the French Encyclopedists and Immanuel Kant's imperative of *Mündigkeit*, thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries considerably upgraded the status of the emancipated individual capable of autonomous and rational decisions and actions. As opposed to it, the crowd came to be regarded as the threatening reverse side of Enlightenment's "individualistic revolution",<sup>15</sup> as far as it seemed to withstand the logic of the individual's self-governing conduct. The duality which separated the enhancement of the discursively transparent individual from the aversion towards the intangible, heterogeneous crowd remained significant in the twentieth century, but it became more differentiated. The strengthening of the organized labour movement, the mass experience of the First World War, and the occasionally conflictual processes of political democratization were the main milestones that marked the direction for the shift in emphasis of the concept of the crowd and of mass psychology.<sup>16</sup>

### More of systematizing

One of the most significant additions to the binary model of the crowd proved the separation of the organized aggregates of humans from the unorganized ones. First, mostly inspired by developments in the battle zones, some military-strategic accounts drew upon a conjunction of late-nineteenth-century mass psychology and the results of military science. The latter highlighted the need to better understand the dynamic relationship both between the leader and his troops and within the troops themselves, specifically when dangerous, panicky situations occur. In this respect, traditional mass psychological concepts of the nineteenth century, such as suggestion, hypnosis and the focus on the leader's function, were revived and set in the specific context of how group dynamics can be organized in a highly hierarchical structure, such as that of an army.<sup>17</sup> Second, a comparable trajectory of inquiry might be detected in contributions discussing the organizational principles of political mass movements, first and foremost those of workers' trade unions. Here

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14 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, passim.

15 Penna, "Nineteenth-Century Crowd Psychology," 7.

16 Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 223–25.

17 Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 18–9, 46–8; Köhne, "Militärpsychiatrie und Kriegspsychologie."

again, the morals of the Great War served as a vehicle for developing earlier concepts of the labour movement's structure in order to improve its efficiency. Since the workers' movement aimed at increasing its mass support and ensuring its operation through representational principles, large-scale mobilization was necessary along with strictly hierarchical structuring. Several series of related booklets, manuals, and guides elaborated on practices of agitating and unifying a great number of individual workers in smaller and increasingly larger groups that could ultimately build a huge advocacy network, both in terms of left-wing and right-wing politics, as well as in that of religious denominations or diverse professional sectors.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, attempts to address the crowd in a more comprehensive and differential manner were palpable in the relatively young academic field of sociological statistics, though with a different focus.<sup>19</sup> The quantitative and qualitative exploration of diverse areas of social life, including the measurement of public opinion, necessitated discussions of how data on the population were to be collected in order to ensure representativeness on the one hand, and on the other, how the collected data could be verified and translated into discursive patterns, such as those of visual signs. An outstanding example of the way the dilemmas of this young sociological subdiscipline were addressed is the internationally influential semi-academic oeuvre of the Austrian social scientist and pedagogue Otto Neurath, a representative of empirical sociology.<sup>20</sup> His steadily improved model of the Isotype method sought to articulate and demonstrate quantitative data related to the present and the past of the society in an appealing manner insofar as it offered a combination of statistical findings and their aesthetically elaborated presentation with a critical stance regarding society as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Being actively engaged in Red Vienna's social democratic educational and sociopolitical projects, Neurath stood for informing a wide range of the population via mass education, while maintaining a firm ideological stance.<sup>22</sup>

The highlighted three fields of inquiry—military science, institutional-organizational discussions within the labor movement, and social statistics—may have paved the way, along with other subdisciplines, for what we today call 'social engineering'<sup>23</sup> by means of the "scientization of the social".<sup>24</sup> In the belief that the totality

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18 For a paradigmatic example of discussing organizational principles in interwar Germany, see Meyer, *Lern- und Arbeitsbuch deutsche Arbeiterbewegung*.

19 Donnelly, "From Political Arithmetic to Social Statistics."

20 Freudenthal, "Otto Neurath."

21 Neurath, *From Hieroglyphics to Isotypes*.

22 Groß, *Die Bildpädagogik Otto Neuraths*.

23 On the variety of concepts that can be summarized under the umbrella term 'social engineering', see Etzemüller, "Social engineering."

24 Ziemann et al., "Introduction," 2.

of social life—including mass behavior—can be rationally described, explained, and controlled, lies a series of criteria emblematic of modernity, as developed by Reinhart Koselleck and his colleagues, among others: the basis of the modern world is formed by a collection of intelligible phenomena and distinguishable individuals, which can be grasped through exclusive and inclusive patterns of systematization resulting in “asymmetric counterconcepts.”<sup>25</sup> The relevant binary separations prove to be the basis of a scientific and purportedly objective “*Ordnungsdenken*” (ordering thinking) including power asymmetries,<sup>26</sup> which equally applies to another classic figure of mass psychology, Sigmund Freud. In one of his most frequently cited studies, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (Massenpsychologie [!] und Ich-Analyse*, 1921), Freud thoroughly examines Le Bon’s findings and mostly agrees with them, yet he also corrects his predecessor. According to Le Bon, in the crowd, the individual consciousness is completely lost, and the unconscious begins to dominate, but the transformation goes far beyond the dissolution of individual traits, or being merely “swamped by the homogeneous.”<sup>27</sup> Freud perceptively recognized at this point that Le Bon’s argument about the “creation of new characteristics”<sup>28</sup> within the crowd encounters an inexplicable blind spot, or, as Le Bon himself put it, a “sphinx”;<sup>29</sup> insofar as it lacks further explanation. This is what Freud ultimately resolved by identifying the human behaviour in the crowd with the psychological mechanisms stemming from his theory of instincts, particularly the principle of libido, and could explain how the emergence of the crowd’s internal cohesion and, at the same time, the idealization of the leader could take place.<sup>30</sup> From this perspective, Freud’s correction makes it clear once again that the conceptualization of the unknown prevailing in the crowd requires discursive procedures that, on the one hand, emerge from the individuals and their phylogenetic psychology, and on the other hand, presuppose an external, ostensibly objective argumentative position, thus perpetuating the conceptual distinctions of the individual–general, above–below, and inside–outside.<sup>31</sup> From this perspective—and naturally considering the socio-political and economic developments preceding the Second World War—it becomes more understandable why the tradition of nineteenth-century mass theories found fertile ground in conservative-elitist thinking throughout these decades.<sup>32</sup>

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25 Koselleck, “Einleitung,” XVI–XVIII; Koselleck, “The Historical-Political Semantics.”

26 Marklund, “Begriffsgeschichte and Übergrißgeschichte,” 199–200.

27 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 6.

28 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 6.

29 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 61.

30 Freud, “Group Psychology,” 125–26.

31 Pireddu, “Introduction,” xxvi–xxvii.

32 McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob*, 111; Moscovici, *The Age of the Crowd*, 29–30; Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology, and Politics*, 185–86.

What may also become clear on a meta-level is what Catherine Malabou rightly observed in her interpretation of Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (*Masse und Macht*, 1960): "The mass is not representable."<sup>33</sup> Annette Graczyk reached a similar conclusion when interpreting selected prose works of interwar German-language literature, identifying the crowd as a "problem of narration."<sup>34</sup> Applying a broader scope and referring to the theoretical literature, Michael Gamper claimed that "the 'mass' is an imaginary construct whose analysis reveals central problematic areas of modern Western civilization and bourgeois society. It becomes readable as a habitualized metaphor that indicates features of the shapeless and qualityless and, over the course of the history of the concept, has been able to integrate numerous related themes."<sup>35</sup> All of these scholars articulate the insight that the "unknown" of the crowd proves to be a continuous provocation and a disquieting phenomenon for thinkers in the scientific and artistic fields, but, due to its very elusiveness, the crowd almost automatically offers itself to be filled with arbitrary content. Thus, no wonder that the fluidity of the crowd, which Canetti depicted particularly vividly in his best-seller, re-emerged as a focal point of theoretical interest, especially after the negative experiences of the Second World War and the subsequent rise of populisms.

### Coming to new terms

The reactions to this negativity, however, outline a completely opposite trend compared to the nineteenth-century discourse. From the 1980s onwards, when liberal and left-wing social critical theorists repeatedly attempted to conceptualize the crowd, they no longer focus on its unpredictable, frightening, violent aspects, nor do they primarily mobilize sociological and psychological tools. Instead, they seek to explore the emancipatory, democratic aspects of the crowd philosophically and politically. Accordingly, they clearly distance themselves from the historically corrupted concepts of the "crowd" and especially the "mass", replacing them with terms like "multitude", "swarms", and "networks". Without delving into the extensive literature on the subject, the tendency shows that the emphasis has shifted from the crowd as an elusive but controllable object to the crowd as a subject with its own logic, capable of self-governance and, due to its collective intelligence, surpassing the limitations of individual intelligence and capacities, much like animal swarms.<sup>36</sup> In Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's concept of the multitude, for instance, the crowd is held together by common experience and cooperative behaviour,<sup>37</sup> which,

33 Malabou: "The Crowd", 26.

34 Graczyk, *Die Masse als Erzählproblem*.

35 Gamper, *Masse lesen, Masse schreiben*, 27.

36 Thacker, "Networks, Swarms, Multitudes."

37 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, esp. xi–xviii; 99–102, 189–219, 328–40.



according to William Mazzarella, is suitable for maintaining productive diversity and avoiding patterns of centralized power, but only when seen beyond the coercions of institutionalization.<sup>38</sup> Judith Butler also engages with similar foundational ideas but extends the phenomenon of the multitude towards political agency.<sup>39</sup> By using the concept of the assembly, she explores the physical reality of the crowd organized in the manner of a multitude and the possibilities of its political representation. Contemporary writings on mass theory seem to aim at avoiding any essentializing argumentation, and consequently attempt to approach the phenomenon of the mass in a more ambiguous way than their nineteenth-century predecessors. Thus, it can be said that they are rather a continuation of a clandestine set of earlier texts on the crowd: Judith Paltin has coined the term “modernism’s agile crowd” foreshadowing “a heterogeneous assemblage of political multitudes that must negotiate and struggle over the terms and intersectional conditions of their existence”.<sup>40</sup>

### Briefly about the case studies

The following insightful case studies approach the question of blind spots in the history of the crowd and its theorization in many ways. Béla Rásky scrutinizes political mass performances in interwar Vienna that reached back to the Habsburg baroque tradition and, independently of their ideological stance, proved to be overlapping in their choreography. Similarly to these marches and festivities, disparate layers of society found their common denominator in the notion of the crowd, which was flexibly applied in *Die Bühne*, a trend-setting Viennese illustrated magazine, too, as Marie-Noëlle Yazdanpanah shows in her paper. The difficulties faced by left-wing emigre intellectuals in Prague after 1933 when seeking to account for the interrelation of mass psychology and Marxist social criticism are explored by Florian Ruttner, who points to a much-debated insufficiency in psychoanalytical studies regarding social and economic conditions. A historical event, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, is the basis for two analyses: Éva Ständeisky approaches the mass scenes in the capital and in the countryside by bringing archival materials to the fore, and demonstrates various forms of violent and non-violent protests during those memorable days. Anna Kenderesy, in turn, scrutinizes notable chapters in Péter Nádas’s 2005 *Parallel Stories* that depict diverse crowd dynamics of 1956 and sensitively stage the crowd perception both from external and internal perspectives. In Nádas’s novel, one of the figures that play a crucial role is the swarm, which, in its theoretical tradition, might be related to the multitude and the “virtual crowd” in Dorka Keresztury’s paper. With a critical view of these notions, Keresztury shows in László Garaczi’s

38 Mazzarella, “The Myth of the Multitude.”

39 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

40 Paltin, *Modernism and the Idea of the Crowd*, 3.



2022 novel about the recent pandemic how the metaphorical and literal appearance of contagion, implying and inducing collective fears, is revived and how mass communication affects both individual and collective strategies of survival.

The case studies point exactly to some of the blind spots in crowd theories and, by discussing them, offer new points of departure for further analyses. Future paths of investigations might relate, for instance, to the rarely addressed issue of a gendered view of the crowd, as well as to the historic modifications of the crowd's appearance in visual and acoustic culture.

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