Introduction: the crowd problem

The apogee and disappearance of a problem

The famous German sociologist Georg Simmel is often counted as one of the founding fathers of the sociological discipline. He has earned this honour not least as a result of his original conception of society, centred on notions such as sociation and reciprocal effects. But he has also achieved the name of a founding father because he pursued his distinctive sociological programme in stimulating analyses of virtually every social phenomenon one might think of (money, fashion, cities, art, individualism, meals, picture frames, etc.). In the light of the extraordinary variety of topics he analysed, it is interesting to observe that, in his seminal 1917 essay entitled 'Grundfragen der Soziologie' ['Fundamental Problems of Sociology'], Simmel asserted that '[i]t is one of the most revealing, purely sociological phenomena that the individual feels himself carried by the "mood" of the mass, as if by an external force' (1950a: 35, 1999e: 97–8). This observation echoed a widespread belief in the early twentieth century. At that time crowds and masses formed a central concern for a great number of sociologists, and this had been the case since the inception of crowd psychology in the 1890s. Indeed, countless working hours were poured into the attempt to understand the phenomenon of crowds and to arrive at still more refined conceptualizations of these collective eruptions.

The importance attributed to the phenomenon of crowds by Simmel and his contemporary colleagues is striking when compared to the neglect which has surrounded the crowd in sociological thinking since the 1970s. To give a rough idea of the rather marginal role played by the crowd today, one might look to the work of grand sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas or Niklas Luhmann, three significant figures in the sociological landscape since the late 1960s. Despite the fact that each of these prominent scholars was born around 1930, and therefore experienced the Second World War and its mass hysterias as adolescents, and even if each of these social scientists has scrutinized

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modern society in numerous books and articles, none of them places the problem of crowds centrally in their work. Certainly, none of them would subscribe to Simmel's assertion that the crowd experience embodies 'one of the most revealing, purely sociological phenomena'.

I am aware that the epochal rupture I am intimating here is – from crowds constituting a core sociological topic to becoming practically excluded from the span of sociological attention – exaggerated. It is certainly possible today to identify sociologists and social theorists who take crowd behaviour seriously. At the same time, it can hardly be disputed that something radical has happened in terms of the significance attributed to crowds and masses in sociological thinking. From forming a problem or topic that chief general sociologists were occupied with, the crowd has been relegated to a specialized sub-sub-field of analysis. It might be argued that this is a destiny shared by several subject matters that were central to the forming years of sociology, but this does not make the development of the notion of crowds any less baffling. This is why I am interested, in this book, in how this transformation came about. Why is it that crowds and masses constituted a crucial problem for sociologists and social theorists one century ago, but seem to sustain themselves in the margins of contemporary sociological thinking? Why has the crowd problem in effect been marginalized in sociology?

Two immediate answers lend themselves to these questions. To begin with, it might be argued that the contemporary disinterest in crowds – or more precisely, the exclusion of the crowd from the central domains of sociological analysis – is due to the disappearance of crowds and masses as actual or perceived social phenomena. If crowds do not make up a vital part of social life (any longer), then why include them as a key sociological occurrence? Another reason why present-day sociologists do not pay primary attention to crowds might be that the explanatory models associated with classical approaches to crowds are deemed obsolete today. The sophistication of contemporary thinking may simply have moved significantly beyond the theoretical and analytical understandings characteristic to former modes of study, thereby endowing these with a stuffy aura.

Neither of these lines of explanation can be wholly discarded, but at the same time, neither of them is fully satisfactory. For example, even today, the mass media recurrently report on new mass events, explicitly labelled thus, typically in the form of mass protests, mass disasters such as panic at large festivals, pilgrims who are trampled down, traders who are captured by crowd moods, etc. This illustrates that crowded events have *not* disappeared, although, to be sure, their expressions and modes of formation may differ from that of their earlier counterparts.

What the reference to the increasing sophistication of sociological theory concerns, it is true, is that sociologists often stand on the shoulders of previous scholars, something that allows for all sorts of corrections and modifications that might materialize in more refined approaches. But to the dismay of some, it would be premature to believe that the development of sociological theorizing is only driven by a move towards greater explanatory force and conceptual rigour. Such a view would ignore the political struggles that impinge on which directions sociological theory takes and what phenomena and problems it elevates to the level of key concerns.

Instead of understanding the gradual dissolution of crowd theory on the basis of a narrative of either scientific progress or changing social realities, this book proposes a different take: I am interested in understanding the evolution of sociological crowd thinking as a history of internal disciplinary endeavours (the relentless efforts to arrive at more precise and adequate conceptions of crowds and masses, the shifting theoretical and analytical emphases as well as the politico-theoretical struggles to define the proper demarcations of the sociological discipline), but with a view to the broader social and political transformations that are pertinent to the evolution of sociological thinking. As I will flesh out in more detail below, I describe this as *a history of sociological crowd semantics*, which refers to the concepts, explanatory models, political preferences, etc. that are part of the sociological discussions of crowds.

Writing semantic history

Even though the crowding together of people can be identified at all times and in every culture, it was only with the advent of modern society that genuinely theoretical approaches were developed which tried to explicate in systematic form the emergence, constitution and implications of crowds and masses. More specifically, the crowd surfaced as a theoretical concept at the end of the nineteenth century, i.e. more or less at the same time as sociology, the discipline devoted to the study of modern society, gained footing. The intimate connection between crowds and modernity has been accurately described by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews in their introduction to a collection of crowd essays. 'In some deep and essential sense', they write, 'crowds *are* modernity. Modern times are crowded times. Modern man is the man of the crowd' (2006: x, italics in original). This is no fortuitous observation. As Schnapp and Tiews go on to argue, '[t]he era of popular sovereignty, industrialization, and urbanization saw the rise of a constellation of new

forms of mass assembly and collective social action' (2006: x–xi), which triggered a scholarly interest in the new social and political multitudes. Although the concern with these multitudes rumbled throughout the nineteenth century, it was only at the turn of the century that a distinctive scientific programme was instituted under the heading of crowd psychology. Contrary to previous academic and non-academic engagements with multitudes, crowd psychology was not content with mere descriptions of collective behaviour; it aimed more ambitiously to *explain* these collective spectacles.

In the present book, I take this crowd psychology as my starting point. More specifically, I wish to trace the evolution of sociological crowd semantics from the inception of crowd psychology in the late nineteenth century to the present day. To this end, the book rests on an analytical approach which hybridizes inspirations from Michel Foucault, Niklas Luhmann and Robert K. Merton, and which, methodologically as well as in terms of its contributions, presents a piece of historical sociology of knowledge and science.

Different disciplines offer different notions of semantics. In this book, the notion of semantics is adopted from Luhmann who inherited it from the conceptual historians Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and especially Reinhart Koselleck. In his historical work, developed alongside his more abstract theorizing on the nature of modern society, Luhmann studied the relations between societal structure and specific semantic histories. Luhmann basically asserted that semantics, defined as the concepts or vocabulary with which society describes itself, or more formally as the 'forms of meaning that communication treats as worth preserving' (1995: 282), always develops in close interaction with society's fundamental set up, its societal structure. According to Luhmann, this structural edifice is constituted by society's so-called primary mode of differentiation. In his historical studies, he focused particularly on the semantic effects induced by the transition from a pre-modern, hierarchical mode of differentiation to a modern society, defined by a functional differentiation of operationally autonomous subsystems of politics, economy, religion, science, law, etc. (see also Borch 2011). For example, Luhmann demonstrated, the semantics of individuality underwent a profound transformation in the transition from traditional to modern society. As an effect of this structural change, an individual's individuality was no longer defined by the affiliation to a specific societal strata (social class), but rather conceived as something to be shaped and maintained independently of former class ties (Luhmann 1989). Somewhat similarly, the present book purports, modernity instigated a new way of conceptualizing the relation between the one and the many,

which amounts to saying that crowd semantics emerged as a distinctively modern semantics, arguably even as *the* semantics of modernity.

Although there was in principle nothing in Luhmann's conception of semantics and societal structure that prevented him from examining semantic trajectories *within* (and beyond) modern society, his actual studies were preoccupied with understanding the, admittedly important, semantic implications of the transition from pre-modern to modern society. The reason for this self-imposed limitation was that, for Luhmann, the fundamental structure of modern society, its functional differentiation, has not (yet) been replaced by a new primary mode of differentiation. Consequently, no radical semantic changes were likely to have been brought about within modern society. Accepting that view would make the current enterprise of understanding the history of sociological crowd semantics a fairly easy venture: if nothing significant has happened since the coming of modern society and its crowd semantics, then this semantics is likely to have lived a quiet, steady life. Things turn out to be more complex, however, and this is why, for present purposes, Luhmann's analytical approach is relevant merely as a general framework that emphasizes that semantics is not independent and free-floating, but carries some link to broader societal structures.

Given the inability to pursue the objectives of the present book fully on grounds of Luhmann's approach, and in order especially to account in more detail for semantic transformations within modern society, I supplement the Luhmannian framework with insights provided by Robert K. Merton's seminal contributions to the sociology of knowledge and science. Faithful to this sociological tradition Merton was aware that knowledge, not least of a sociological bent, does not evolve autonomously; directly or indirectly, it retains a relation to its social and cultural context. In contrast to what he saw as a tendency in previous studies to give credit only to how science affects society (and not the other way round), Merton approached the science–society intertwinement by stressing 'the *reciprocal* relations between science, as an ongoing intellectual activity, and the environing social and cultural structure' (1970: xi, italics in original).

The present investigation does not pretend to be able to perform a reciprocal analysis where sociological crowd semantics is studied in terms of how social and cultural events impinge on its development *and* vice versa. I follow Merton in the sense that I pay attention to internal as well as external dynamics, i.e. to how sociological crowd semantics has developed as an internal continuous engagement with previous semantics (including a variety of disciplinary and institutional aspects pertaining to this) and to how this semantic development has

been related to an external socio-political environment. But more modestly than what Merton called for, my primary interests lie in the internal dimension and in how the semantic developments are (also) responses to and influenced by broader social contexts, whereas there will be no systematic examination of how crowd semantics has fed back onto external social, cultural and political developments. Moreover, I admit, for reasons I shall come back to below, the historical contextualization will figure centrally mainly in the first four chapters, whereas it will play a less prominent role in the remainder of the book.

As is probably clear from this, there are many aspects of Merton's approach to the study of scientific knowledge that find no equivalent in the present investigation. To mention just one in addition to what has already been alluded to, this book is informed by a purely qualitative methodology, whereas Merton argued for the active use of statistical data to test qualitative conclusions. In his retrospective 1970 preface to his seminal 1938 study *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*, Merton stated that:

The quantitative orientation [of Merton's book] is designed, so far as possible, to put interpretative ideas on trial by facing them with suitable compilations of statistical data, rather than relying wholly on selected bits and scraps of evidence that too often catch the scholar's eye simply because they are consistent with his ideas. (1970: xv)

I do not deny the gains of this dual methodological approach, nor do I disagree with the need for coping with the problem Merton identifies in this quote, the resolution to which he found statistical data befitting. However, accumulating quantitative data is not a universal tool that suits any analysis of semantic trajectories. To be sure, one might trace the destiny of the notion of crowds by counting how many articles on the topic are published in leading journals. Yet while quantitative data might shed some light on the ebbs and flows of sociological interests, their nature does not permit a doorway to understanding qualitative semantic changes, which is what I hope to furnish with this book. Needless to say, abandoning a statistical supplement to the qualitative profile of this inquiry does not amount to saying that I believe one to have fallen into the trap of making biased selections that merely confirm my hypotheses (nor does it mean, it must be added, that quantitative data are a bulletproof means of steering clear of this always-present challenge). But rather than using statistical data to handle this potential problem, I have attempted to avoid the trap by compiling a comprehensive archive of sociological and social–theoretical literature on crowds – and not merely some random 'bits and scraps'. I will flesh out in more detail how this archive

is constructed in a moment, but first I wish to say a few words on the final key inspiration guiding my approach, namely the work of Michel Foucault.

Just as I included Merton to add specificity to Luhmann's overall framework, so I turn to Foucault to continue further down the funnel of analytical accuracy. Thus, inspired by Foucault, the main semantic lines I aim to explore are those which revolve around a *problematization* of crowds and masses. The notion of problematization was coined by Foucault to describe a particular way of examining the history of thought (see Foucault 1989, 1992, 1997, 2001). He developed the notion in his final years to capture, in retrospect, the analytical intentions behind much of his previous work and to establish the common methodological thread running through his various studies. In Foucault's own words:

What I tried to do from the beginning was to analyze the process of 'problematization' – which means: how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a *problem*. Why, for example, certain forms of behavior were characterized and classified as 'madness' while other similar forms were completely neglected at a given historical moment; the same thing for crime and delinquency, the same question of problematization for sexuality. (2001: 171, italics in original)

Problematizations do not emerge out of the blue, entirely disconnected from their historical configuration. Quite the contrary, Foucault stressed, a problematization should be seen an 'an "answer" to a concrete situation which is real' (2001: 172). That said, one cannot infer from a specific historical situation to a particular problematization (Foucault 2001: 173). There is never just one possible problematization of a given historical context, although the latter may render some problematizations, some answers/responses, more probable than others. Following Luhmann's definition of contingency as that which is 'neither necessary nor impossible' (1989: 45), problematizations can therefore be said to assume a contingent (rather than arbitrary) relation to the historical configuration.

Another aspect of problematization must be highlighted. In an excellent reconstruction of Foucault's notion of problematization, Marius Gudmand-Høyer notes that a problematization analysis should not only attend to how and why certain phenomena become a problem, but also to the 'embedded normativity' of any problematization (2009: 7). In making this point, Gudmand-Høyer refers to Foucault's opening lecture in the 1978 course *Security, Territory, Population*, where Foucault posited that there is hardly 'any theoretical or analytical discourse which is not

permeated or underpinned in one way or another by something like an imperative discourse' (2007: 3). Extrapolating this to problematizations, this amounts to saying that there is no problematization which does not in some way or other contain an imperative dimension. The problem-atization of something (e.g. crowds) typically entails an implicit or explicit articulation of a favoured solution to the observed problem, for example, in the form of suggestions for how to deal with the problem in practice.

Against this background, the history of sociological crowd semantics to be studied in this book might now be rephrased as an investigation of the destiny of the crowd as a sociological problem. That is, I wish to study sociological crowd semantics by exploring how crowds and masses have been problematized within sociology. This generates the following questions to be examined in the book: how did the crowd emerge as a problem for sociological analysis, and under what (social, political, scholarly/disciplinary) conditions? How has the problematization of crowds changed since the late nineteenth century, and in response to which historical contexts? What embedded normativities characterize the problematization of crowds? Which alternative semantics have been introduced in the light of the altering problematizations of crowds? Finally, and relatedly, why did the crowd cease to form a key problem in sociology, and what forms do present-day problematizations of crowds adopt?

I mentioned above that the investigation of these questions is based on a comprehensive archive, the composition of which I will now describe in more detail. To begin with, I should note that, even though I am com-mitted to examining more than just a few 'bits and scraps of evidence', I make no pretensions to having obtained a full coverage of the literature on crowds and masses; nor is the ambition of the investigation to arrive at a complete inclusion, though. A full coverage must be abandoned if only for pragmatic reasons. Due to the central role that the problem of crowds occupied in early sociological thinking, it is virtually impossible to map out every account and discussion of crowds. Of course, a great number of books and articles make explicit reference to crowds and masses (along with all sorts of derived and neighbouring notions) in their titles, rendering them easily traceable, but very often sociological discussions of the crowd topic appear in contexts which provide no surface indication that this or that text actually contributes to the semantics of crowds. To give but one example, Robert Michels' *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Dem-ocracy* does not immediately stage itself as playing a part in the history of sociological crowd semantics (1959). Yet in this book Michels actually

adopted a classical problematization of crowds in order to illuminate a phenomenon not previously examined, namely the tendency of political parties to succumb to elite rule. The existence of vast amounts of similar material, which seems to be at most secondarily concerned with crowds and masses, but which nevertheless contains central contributions to the history of sociological crowd semantics, poses great challenges to the methodological design of the present study. Put very simply, the question is what to include and what not, and how to search for relevant material?

As a first demarcation, the archive focuses on academic texts, i.e. written contributions, since my interest is in the development of scholarly (sociological) crowd semantics.[1] Narrowing the study to scholarly texts obviously only marks a first small step forward when it comes to constructing an archive for the inquiry. More specifically, therefore, I have concentrated on texts that are generally canonized as key contributions to sociological crowd semantics. This applies, for instance, to Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd*, Robert E. Park's *The Crowd and the Public* and Theodor Geiger's *Die Masse und ihre Aktion*, to mention but a few; but also canonized texts are included whose *sociological* status might be contested, such as Sigmund Freud's *Ego Analysis and Group Psychology* and Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*. In addition to such landmark texts the archive comprises a plethora of 'minor' contributions, many of which subscribe to, reflect on, modify or criticize the canonized milestones. Texts belonging to this latter category have typically been identified through library keyword searches or via cross-referencing in other texts. Quantitatively, the 'minor' texts constitute the bulk of the archive, and much has been included here to ensure an extensive picture of the history of sociological crowd semantics. However, and this is critical to set in stone, I am not interested in every enunciation on crowds and masses, but rather in the main lines of problematization that the history of sociological crowd semantics exhibits. So although detours might (and will) appear, it is and remains the grand semantic trajectories – or plateaus, as I shall call them below – that constitute my central concern in this book.

When it comes to grasping the historical contexts of sociological crowd semantics, I rely on secondary sources in the form of books and

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[1] Obviously, one would have to consult other sources as well if one were to understand the broader social and political role of crowds in modern history. For example, Jeffrey Schnapp has demonstrated the creative ways in which crowds have served as a socio-political imaginary on political posters (2005). Similarly, work by Lesley Brill and Michael Tratner has explored the significant status of crowds in twentieth-century movies (Brill 2006; Tratner 2008). Given the present purposes, I will leave out such material.

articles written by historians. However, at times I also have recourse to literature (typically, novels) when accounting for the interrelatedness between scholarly semantics and its socio-political environment. The reason for this is that academic conceptions and literary representations of crowds display close links historically (see in particular Esteve 2003; Plotz 2000; Schettler 2006). Especially during the nineteenth century, literary representations served as inspiration for subsequent crowd theory. But the influence also ran in the opposite direction, as literary representations did much to popularize the negative, frightening images of irrational crowds that characterized a lot of early crowd semantics. The intimate connection between literature and scholarly crowd semantics is further manifested in the fact that some key crowd scholars had literary backgrounds, including Hermann Broch and most notably Canetti, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1981.

Crowds in history

There is a long and weighty tradition of dealing historically with the problem of crowds. In the following I shall discuss some of the most eminent contributions to this rich body of literature, partly in order to position the present investigation vis-à-vis existing studies, and partly to set the basis for explicating the main arguments of the book.

   Let me begin by noting one of the crucial analytical implications of my approach. Even if crowd semantics is embedded in specific historical situations, the focus on problematization makes evident that the present book is not about real crowds and their actual behaviour (see also Foucault 1992: 11). The investigation does not intend to map the various forms and expressions that crowded behaviour has assumed in modern society, nor is the objective to explain the dynamics underpinning these modes of actions. This sets the present book radically apart from one of the most renowned lines of inquiry that takes a historical interest in crowds, and which emanates from the work of Georges Lefebvre. In a seminal article from the early 1930s, entitled 'Revolutionary Crowds' (1965), Lefebvre critically interrogated the image of crowds, which had been put forward by nineteenth-century thinkers such as Hippolyte Taine and especially Gustave Le Bon (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 1). Lefebvre's point was that, when confronted with historical evidence, several of Le Bon's and Taine's fundamental ideas could not be sustained. In particular, Lefebvre questioned if the French Revolution, often referred to as the emblematic outburst of crowd action, could be adequately described as the behaviour of hypnotized, hence involuntary, crowds such as Le Bon assumed. Contrary to this