

Introduction

Saint Raphaël is a minor port on the French Côte d'Azur, halfway between Saint Tropez and Cannes. Off-season its quiet harbor, shady promenade, and tiny beach retain some of their charming character. A century ago Saint Raphaël had just been discovered by writers and artists seeking to flee the bustle of Paris. Guy de Maupassant, who had become increasingly ill and somber as he rose to fortune and fame, anchored his yacht here on a beautiful spring day in the late 1880s, and went ashore. Approaching the church in the center of town, he witnessed a newly wed couple coming out. Onlookers raising themselves on tiptoe to see, he felt forced to follow their example. Instead of feeling charmed by the scene however, he was overwhelmed by disgust: he had become “one of a crowd”!

“I at once experience a curious and unbearable feeling of discomfort, a horrible unnerving sensation, as though I were struggling with all my might against a mysterious and irresistible influence. And in truth, I struggle with the spirit of the mob, which strives to take possession of me,” he later wrote in his diary. “The same phenomenon, a surprising one, is produced each time a large number of men are together,” he continued. “All these persons, side by side, distinct from each other, of different minds, intelligences, passions, education, beliefs, and prejudices, become suddenly, by the sole fact of their being assembled together, a special being, endowed with a new soul, a new manner of thinking in common, which is the unanalysable resultant of the average of the individual opinions.”¹

1. *Afloat* (1889), entry of April 11, pp. 158 ff.

Guy de Maupassant was an individualist, but as such he was well-attuned to the spirit of his time, of his society, and of his class. His social group felt both fascinated and frightened by crowds. Mob scenes had become a recurrent theme in nineteenth-century European stories, novels, and plays. They figured prominently in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) by the British author Walter Scott, *I Promessi Sposi* (1825–27, 1840–42) by the Italian author Alessandro Manzoni, *Nôtre Dame de Paris* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862) by the French author Victor Hugo, *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë, *Jacob van Artevelde* (1849) by the Belgian author Hendrik Conscience, *Ange Pitou* (1851) by Alexandre Dumas, *Lucien Leuwen* (1855, 1894) by Stendhal, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) by Charles Dickens, *Salammbô* (1862) and *L'Éducation Sentimentale* (1869) by Gustave Flaubert, *Vojna i Mir* (War and Peace, 1865/69) by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy, *Felix Holt* (1866) by George Eliot, *Libertà* (1882) and *Mastro Don Gesualdo* (1888) by Giovanni Verga, *L'Horrible* (1884) by Guy de Maupassant, *Germinal* (1885) by Émile Zola, *Die Weber* (1893) by Gerhart Hauptmann, *Majesteit* (Majesty, 1893) and *Wereldvrede* (World Peace, 1895) by the Dutch author Louis Couperus, *Der grüne Kakadu* (1899) by the Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler, and several others by lesser known national writers. Most of these fictional accounts were dramatizations of historical events. They often included both implicit and explicit observations on crowd behavior, which preceded the emergence of crowd theories as such, and which I have analyzed elsewhere.²

The unconventional nature of crowd behavior had of course already been identified much earlier. The recorded history and accumulated literature of all great civilizations since ancient times contain references to mob events, and their potential threat to the established order. Revolutionary movements and postrevolutionary regimes often cultivated a positive image of crowds and masses for some time. But more often, after calm had been restored, a negative image recurred.

Of course the history and literature of past centuries were primarily written by and for the educated elite, whereas crowds and mobs were primarily associated with the popular masses. The former felt threatened by the intermittent eruptions of the latter, and it is not surprising that their judgment was tainted by fear. Furthermore, the members of

2. Rebellious mobs in nineteenth-century European fiction. See van Ginneken 1985c.

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the elite tended to perceive themselves as unique individuals, whereas they often perceived their inferiors as an amorphous aggregate. All the same, the quasi-unanimity of their verdict on “the crowd” through the ages is rather remarkable.

If crowd phenomena had played a role in all societies since the dawn of civilization, they became even more prominent in Europe during the hundred years between the revolutionary year 1789 and 1888, the year in which Guy de Maupassant published his diary, *Sur l'Eau* (translated as *Afloat*), quoted above. During that same century European society underwent some of the most radical transformations of its entire history. The population more than doubled, urbanization more than tripled, and the major capitals more than quadrupled in size. Steamships and railway services increased mobility; postal and telegraph services expanded communication. On this basis new information and organization patterns emerged: networks of voluntary associations, corporations, bureaucracies, and nation-states.

Against this background, furthermore, a fourfold revolution had taken place. An economic revolution had drastically reduced the power of feudalism and gradually brought the forces of capitalism into play. A technical revolution had increased agrarian revenue, but most of all provoked an industrial take-off. A social revolution was replacing the prime contradiction between landowners and peasants with one between bourgeois and proletarians. And the political revolutions had ended the sovereignty of absolute monarchs and transferred power to elected assemblies. Within this context both everyday interaction and crowd eruptions profoundly changed in both content and form.

Halfway through the nineteenth century the outline of the modern Western world slowly began to emerge. The United Kingdom and France had been nation-states for some time, but various wars around the 1860s (re)united Germany, Italy, and the United States as their main rivals. Industry, technology, and science continued to grow unabated during the 1870s, but one rather new element was the birth of psychology, sociology, and political science as empirical disciplines.³ In a sense the 1880s were the celebration of this new world, but also of the need for new methods of management and control. This clearly held for France and Italy, for instance, which shared a common heritage in spite of all their profound differences. They were the first

3. More on this subject in a Dutch book edited by myself and J. Jansz on *Psychologische Praktijken – Een Twintigste Eeuwse Geschiedenis*, ch. 1.

major countries where psychosocial monographs on the crowd were published during the 1890s.

Both had long remained Catholic countries, and the church still played a primordial role in ideological life. The political philosophy of the ruling strata had therefore long continued to invoke religion and the supernatural order of things. The social and national transformations of these decades, however, brought new groups and values to the fore. The political philosophy of the ruling strata increasingly invoked science and the natural order of things. Whereas the progressive liberalism of the first quarters of the nineteenth century had focused on “natural” equality and democratic reform, furthermore, conservative liberals throughout Europe gradually shifted ground during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The bourgeoisie often sought to repair some of its differences with the aristocracy and to restore a united front against the demands of a growing proletariat. Many contributions to the emerging sciences of man and society therefore tended to stress both the natural inequality of man and meritocratic principles. These ideas came to play a major role in early crowd psychology and elite sociology.⁴

In one major dictionary the first definition of the word crowd is “a large number of persons, especially when collected into a somewhat compact body without order,” and a second definition “the great body of the people.”⁵ Crowd theories have tended to focus on the apparent contrast between everyday behavior and exceptional occurrences such as riots and panics. Even today the scientific reflection on such phenomena is dispersed over various disciplines and approaches.

One psychological approach to crowds in a narrower sense, for instance, centers upon the supposed *deindividuation* taking place in crowds: “a complex hypothesized process in which a series of antecedent social conditions lead to changes in perception of self and others, and thereby to a lowered threshold of normally restrained behavior.”⁶

A major sociological approach to crowds in a somewhat wider sense, by contrast, centers on the sudden emergence of new *norms*, that is to say the sudden emergence of a new “common understanding

4. The conservative nature of early European sociology is analyzed by Bramson in *The Political Context of Sociology* and by Nisbet in *The Sociological Tradition*.

5. Webster's *New International Dictionary*, 1971, Vol. 1, p. 544.

6. Zimbardo, *The Human Choice*, p. 251.

as to what sort of behavior is expected in the situation.”⁷ Other proponents of the latter approach propose to define the field as the study of *collective dynamics*, dealing with “those patterns of social action that are spontaneous and unstructured inasmuch as they are not organized and not reducible to social structure.” That is to say, the patterns are not reducible to “a set of statuses defined by relatively stable relationships that people in various positions have with each other.”⁸

In a detailed study of the history of this *collective behavior* “paradigm,” however, the Dutch sociologist Boef pointed out a problem. Although both laymen and scientists seem to agree on the special nature of “typical” crowd phenomena, all definitions involve a value judgment as to what is to be considered abnormal, unexpected, unstructured, or unstable, Boef says.⁹ Thus the field is in a sense the product of an artificial separation of “normal” and “abnormal” collective behavior, in which the deviant aspects are singled out for special attention.

Couch has made an inventory of stereotypes about collective behavior, which often recur in these theories. They involve spontaneity and suggestibility, emotionality and irrationality, mental disturbance and lower class participation, and destruction rather than creation. But he concludes that none of these criteria really proves valid upon closer inspection. “Crowd behavior is distinctive, but to emphasize the ‘abnormal’ dimensions of crowd behavior appears to be fruitless,” he says. “The acting crowd . . . is a social system human beings adopt to take action with reference to other systems. As such it is no more and no less pathological or bizarre than other social systems they have developed.”¹⁰

The field of crowd, mass, or collective psychology, as it was variously called, emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century, primarily in Italy and France. It is true that there had been isolated studies on related subjects before, such as Hecker’s German monographs on “dancing manias” (1832), other epidemics, and their mental aspects; and Mackay’s British study on “money manias” and other “extraordinary delusions” of popular crowds (1841). Yet their emphasis was

7. Turner and Killian, *Collective Behavior*, p. 22.

8. Lang and Lang, *Collective Dynamics*, pp. 4, 6.

9. Boef, *Van Massapsychologie tot Collectief Gedrag*, p. 19.

10. Couch in Evans, ed., *Readings in Collective Behavior*, ch. 7.

more on description than on analysis, and they did not yet build on the new notions of modern psychology and sociology, which really emerged only around the 1880s.

Although dozens of minor fragments and smaller articles were devoted to crowd theories during subsequent years, only three authors are usually identified as having published the first larger papers or books on the subject. These are the Italian Sighele, whose book *La Folla Delinquente* (the criminal crowd) was published in 1891, the Frenchman Le Bon, whose book *Psychologie des Foules* (*The Crowd*) was published in 1895, and the Frenchman Tarde, who published two major articles in 1892–3 and two more in 1898–9. The first two were included in his book *Essais et Mélanges Sociologiques* (1895) and the latter three in his book *L'Opinion et la Foule* (1901). The successive chapters of this study will all focus on one of these texts, and detail their background and significance. But two more books are included here. I will also examine Taine's multivolume work on *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine*, published between 1875 and 1893, which was a major source of inspiration for all three authors and many of their colleagues. And I will deal with Fournial's long-neglected *Essai sur la Psychologie des Foules* (1892), which proves to be the principal missing link between the three other works.

From the moment I became acquainted with these authors, I felt intrigued by the fact that their books had appeared over such a short span of time, and within such a limited area. Especially intriguing was that they all seemed to have arrived independently at the same conclusion: that crowds are usually highly emotional and irrational, destructive rather than constructive, and in need of strong leadership. Thus I became interested in studying the contexts from which these theories originated, both in an intellectual and a social sense.

I began my research into the origins of the field during the first half of the 1970s, first as a junior lecturer at the Baschwitz Institute (then of mass psychology, public opinion, and propaganda) at the University of Amsterdam, and subsequently with a small research grant from the Dutch Ministry of Education. At the time, most texts on the history of crowd psychology were originally in German. One such text was written by Baschwitz himself, a German economist and journalist who had chosen Dutch exile before the Second World War, and who came to found the mass psychology and mass communications departments at the University of Amsterdam thereafter. His handbook *Du und die Masse* (1938, later translated into Dutch as *Denkend Mens en Menigte*,

“rational man and the crowd”) included a critical review of early theories, and called for a thorough reappraisal of their political implications. Another relevant text was the Swiss Reiwald’s remarkably complete overview of crowd theories in *Vom Geist der Massen*, published immediately after the war. A later, and somewhat more theoretical, appraisal was Fischer’s Swiss dissertation *Masse und Vermassung* (1961).

In the midseventies, however, two major English publications came out. One was Giner’s elegant historical overview, *Mass Society* (1976). Another was the book edition of Nye’s impressive dissertation, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology* (1975). It was a fairly complete analysis of the life and work of Gustave Le Bon, followed in subsequent years by related studies on his relations with Sorel, the elite sociology of Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, and still later by a book on early French criminology. This clearly set an example for a different approach to the history of the field. During the latter half of the seventies, therefore, when living in Paris but occasionally returning to Amsterdam to teach, I traced and visited descendants and archives of some main authors, and wrote a series of papers about them. Successive versions of these were circulated among students and colleagues in mimeographed form.¹¹

It was not until the academic year 1980–1, however, that I finally began to write a real manuscript for my dissertation. During the latter year, however, another excellent American study came out: Barrows’s *Distorting Mirrors – Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth Century France*. It covered much of the same ground I was working on, and included a number of similar findings. Looking back, this was not entirely surprising: There had been a revival of interest in crowd theories for some time, and if one followed the trail back from the “classical” authors, one was bound to identify some of the same backgrounds. Because Barrows’s book was difficult to surpass, I suspended my book project once again and settled for published papers and articles for some time; these covered the background of various early Italian, French, German, Austrian, and British crowd theorists. Meanwhile others, too, published major articles (Geiger 1977, Cochart

11. The 1974–5 mimeographed Dutch version covered some 450 pages and dealt with the emergence of crowd psychology in Italy, France, Austria, Germany, up to and including some present-day American approaches. A later mimeographed English version on Ferri, Sighele, Taine, Zola, Le Bon, Tarde, Nietzsche, and Michels had been reduced to about half that size. The half-completed 1980–1 typewritten Dutch manuscript covered part of the present Chapters 2 through 4.

1982, McGuire 1984 a.f., Métraux 1983, among others) or chapters in books (such as those edited by Graumann and Moscovici in 1986). Furthermore, major studies came out on authors like Sighele (Garbari) and Tarde (Milet, Clark, Lubek).

Yet, some scholars continued to see Le Bon as the sole inventor of crowd psychology. This tendency was particularly marked in three Parisian publications of the 1980s. It began with a book by one of the most well-known French social psychologists of the day, Moscovici. His *L'Âge des Foules* (1981) was a passionate plea for a reconsideration of Le Bon's ideas on the crowd, along with some of those of Tarde and those of Freud. He definitely had a point, but tended to overstate it. In doing so he made a considerable number of mistakes, and quite a few of these remained uncorrected in the English translation, *The Age of the Crowd – A Historical Treatise on Mass Psychology*, which came out four years later (see the reviews by Thiec and Tréanton 1983, McGuire 1986b, among others).

A second Parisian study was a *thèse de troisième cycle* titled “Sociologie et Lecture de l'Histoire chez Gustave Le Bon” (1982) by Vlach, supervised by one of the most well-known French sociologists of that day, Aron, but reproduced only in mimeographed form. And the third study completing this trend was Rouvier's *Les Idées Politiques de Gustave Le Bon* (1986), for which she received a prize from her Parisian university. It was published by the prestigious Presses Universitaires de France. These two studies both claimed to give a reliable summary of all the ideas Le Bon had put forward in his thirty to forty books, suggested that he had invented crowd psychology and a host of other disciplines almost singlehandedly, but had been unjustly ostracized by subsequent generations of social scientists. They ignored or misrepresented many aspects of Le Bon's works that did not fit into their presentation of him as a lonely hero, and also ignored or misrepresented the work of many relevant predecessors, contemporaries, and even followers.¹² A few examples will illustrate this point.

All three books misrepresent the works of Le Bon's Italian predecessors in various ways.¹³ They completely ignore the major “missing

12. Van Ginneken, “De constructie van de mythe van de eenzame held – Het geval Le Bon,” *Psychologie & Maatschappij* No. 48 (1989): 253–65.

13. A considerable number of articles on the crowd had already been published in Italy (see Chapter 2). The authors unquestioningly adopt Le Bon's own claim that they considered the crowd in purely negative terms (Moscovici 1981, p. 109; Vlach, p. 252; Rouvier, p. 92). This

link” between the Italian and French authors, that is to say Fournial’s book on crowd psychology, *Psychologie des Foules*, which preceded Le Bon’s by more than three full years.¹⁴ They consistently garble the names of authors, the titles of books, and the years of publication of related texts in English¹⁵ and German.¹⁶ The later authors even copy such mistakes from earlier ones.¹⁷ Furthermore they exaggerate both the disregard of Le Bon at home and his recognition abroad to make their point.¹⁸ They tone down his extremist views to build him into a

is too simple: In fact they did hardly more so than Le Bon himself (in spite of his claims to the contrary). Moscovici also copies Le Bon’s claim that the Italian authors wrote about the crowd only in juridical terms (p. 77). This is again too simple: Almost every single psychological idea in Le Bon’s book can be traced to the works of previous authors, including those of the Italians. Rouvier predates Sighele’s *La Delinquenza Settaria* by twenty years (p. 85), consistently refers to Sieghele instead of Sighele, wrongly identifies him as a representative of the Right, and a future inspirator of fascism. The latter (rather common) mistake had previously been made by Vlach (p. 116). She also claimed that Le Bon inspired Mosca (p. 257). But their major works appeared in the same year, and she gives no evidence to back up that claim.

14. This is all the more curious because he was mentioned in Tarde’s first essay on the crowd, and in the monographs by Nye and Barrows.
15. A sampler limited to Anglo-American psychosociology and social psychology. Rouvier gives Park’s German dissertation a French title in an American edition, and has it published seventeen years too early (p. 272). She makes Barnes’s famous book *From Lore to Science* into one titled *From Lobe to Science* (sic). Moscovici rebaptizes the famous social psychologist Ross Ron (p. 82). Vlach calls the famous social psychologist McDougall “a convinced democrat” (p. 248), which is ignoring his later American works. They garble the name of Burgess into Brugess, Cantril into Cantrill, Hobsbawm into Hobbawm, Katz into Kats, Mosse into Mossé, Smelser into Smelner, etc.
16. A sampler limited to Austro-German depth psychology. Rouvier claims that Le Bon acknowledged the work of Freud in 1895 and 1912. This is unlikely, and she gives no evidence to back this claim (pp. 64, 99). Moscovici garbles the name of the Jungian Reiwald into Rewald and Reinwald, no less than five lines apart (p. 96). Rouvier has Reich’s *Massenpsychologie* published in Munich in 1933, which is absurd for a number of reasons. Moscovici makes the Austrian Broch a German. Rouvier makes his book on *Der Massenwahn Theorie* into one on *Der Massenmann Theorie* (sic), and so on.
17. Rouvier, for one, copies the misspelling of Grunenber, Reiwald, and others from Moscovici, and also some of the false claims referred to before (e.g., those on the Italians).
18. At one point Rouvier acknowledges that Le Bon’s book was reprinted eighteen times before 1910, but at another she maintains that he became only “truly successful” between that year and 1930 (pp. 17, 86). Vlach even says that Le Bon was virtually ignored until after his death (p. 90). Moscovici claims that French publications during the fifty years after his death “never” mentioned his extraordinary influence on the social sciences (p. 73), which is a gross exaggeration. He goes on to claim that apart from Tocqueville and Sorel no single Frenchman exerted such an influence abroad. He refers back to Nye’s authoritative monograph on *Le Bon and The Crisis of Mass Democracy* to back up this claim. It supposedly said that his success was so great, that “no single other social thinker could rival with him” (p. 79). But he left out two important qualifications: “perhaps” and “in this period” (compare Nye 1975, p. 3). Rouvier had this same study deal with “the crisis of man democracy”

humanist and liberal visionary.¹⁹ In his laudatory preface to Rouvier's book, former prime minister Faure even acclaims his hero as "relativist, inclined to modesty, open to tolerance," which is nearly the exact opposite of what we know about his personality from contemporaries and documents.²⁰

To my relief, then, there was apparently still room for yet another monograph on the true origins of crowd psychology.²¹ What this study sets out to do, then, is to correct some of the mistakes that have gradually crept into some standard accounts, and have since been repeated again and again. Three sources of bias stand out in particular: an undue emphasis on the contributions from one major language area, on those of a few well-known figures, and on a monodisciplinary perspective.

The first source of bias is an undue emphasis on the French role – though I have not entirely escaped this tendency myself. It is of course true that French was (and remains today) much more of an international language than Italian. This implies that French authors tended to exert greater influence, and also that foreign specialists today find it easier to understand them in their original context. Furthermore, most of the early Italian authors belonged to a school that became discredited for both scientific and ideological reasons. Yet this should not lead us to a consistent minimization or misrepresentation of their contributions. Thus many of the articles or books on the origins of crowd psychology get wrong at least one of the central facts concerning

(sic, p. 270). She invokes Schumpeter's famous book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, which supposedly said that Le Bon had been if not the "founder," then at least the "first theoretician" of crowd psychology (p. 26). But he wrote in fact that Le Bon was "the first effective exponent" – that is to say, the first who had effect, who made an impact. Schumpeter also adds qualifications on the limitations of the factual basis for Le Bon's conclusions, and on his one-sided emphasis on certain negative aspects of aggregation, which Rouvier is careful to omit (compare Schumpeter 1973–75, p. 257).

19. Chapters 4 and 5 will show that, on the contrary, he was a self-proclaimed antihumanist and antiliberal, but most of the relevant fragments (illustrating his racism and antisemitism, for instance) have been conveniently overlooked by the authors.
20. This does not mean, of course, that he did not have a circle of admirers willing to pay him such compliments.
21. After this manuscript was completed and first presented, J. S. McClelland published his study *The Crowd and the Mob – From Plato to Canetti* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). As the subtitle indicates, the author covers a much larger period. The three chapters on Taine, Sighele, Tarde, and Le Bon (Fournial is mentioned only in passing) focus on their ideas, deal with some of the relevant background, but cannot delve into them very extensively. After some hesitation, I have decided to refrain from adding a discussion of our points of agreement and disagreement here.