

Social Avalanche

Individuality and collectivity are at the heart of sociological inquiry. Through a tour de force of cultural history, social theory, urban sociology and economic sociology, Christian Borch offers an innovative rethinking of these terms and their interconnections via the concept of the social avalanche. Drawing on classical sociology, he argues that while individuality embodies a tension between collective mimetic forces and anti-mimetic autonomy, certain situations, such as crowds and moments of collective behaviour, can subsume the individual entirely within the collective. These events, or social avalanches, produce an experience of being swept away suddenly and losing one's sense of self. Cities are often on the verge of social avalanches, their urban inhabitants torn between de-individualising external pressure and autonomous self presentation, and Borch explores the role of tensional individuality and social avalanches within them. Similarly, present-day financial markets, dominated by computerised trading, abound with social avalanches and the tensional interplay of mimesis and autonomous decision-making – although it is not humans but fully automated algorithms that avalanche there.

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Crowds, Cities and Financial Markets

Christian Borch

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For Albert and Martha

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Acknowledgements

The seeds of motivation for writing this book were planted in a previous research project that culminated with my book *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (2012b). In it, I analysed how crowd theory and notions of crowd behaviour were relegated to the periphery of sociological attention despite occupying a central place in sociological work at the end of the nineteenth century, when the discipline of sociology was born. That project was driven by an interest in the historical sociology of knowledge and the development of sociological theorising, unearthing theoretical developments without committing to their content. Along the way, I nonetheless developed a certain sympathy for particular types of late nineteenth-century social theory, which, to my mind, were often too quickly dismissed as irrelevant by twentieth-century sociologists. The present book is an attempt to revivify this *fin-de-siècle* crowd theory tradition. Certainly, my aim is not to resuscitate this tradition *en bloc*. It was not entirely without reason that subsequent sociologists turned away from it. Still, I believe that the classical crowd theory tradition has been underappreciated and that much can be learned from it that remains useful to present-day theorisation. I hope to be able to convince the reader about this claim. The book is also an attempt to bring together my research interests in crowd theory, urban sociology/architecture and economic sociology, especially the sociology of financial markets. While these domains are often treated separately, there is in fact much that unites them. Demonstrating this, and hopefully opening further research into such interconnections, is one of the main ambitions of the book.

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to present ideas from the book at several seminars and conferences over the past few years. I thank my colleagues and audiences at the Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon; Copenhagen Business School; New School for Social Research; New York University; Lund University; University of Copenhagen; University of Konstanz and the University of Tampere for helpful comments.

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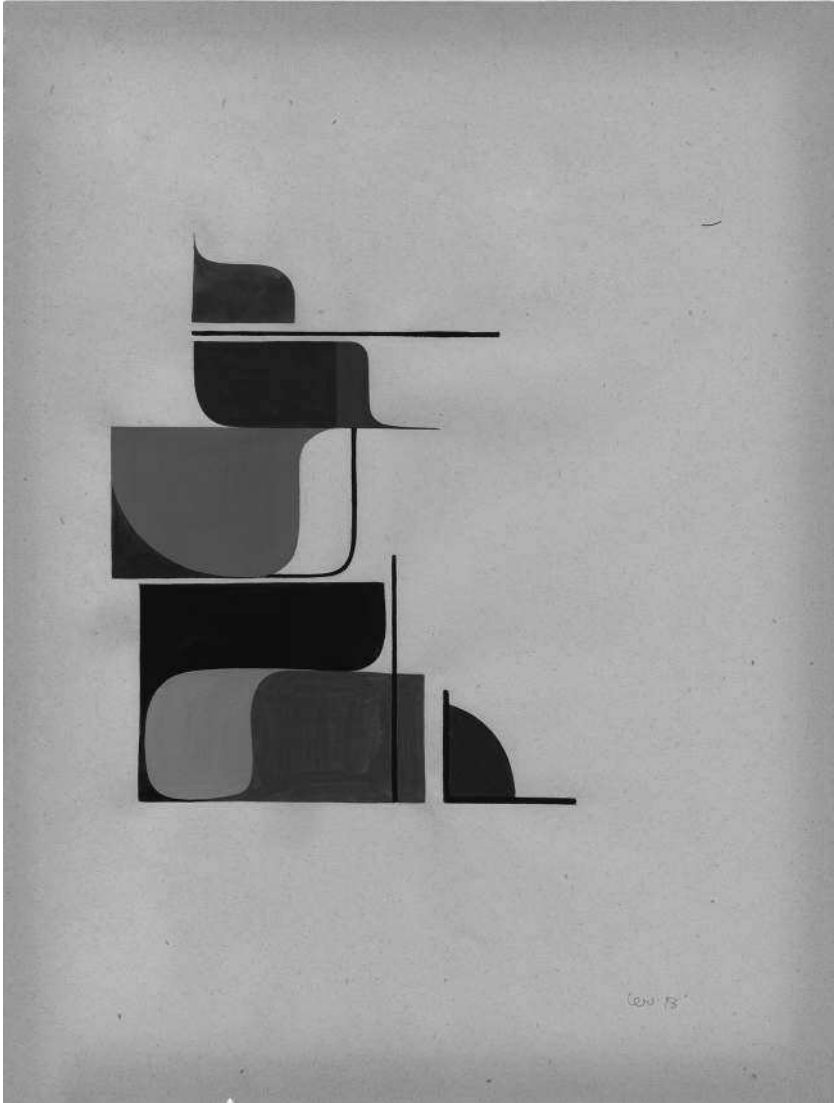
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Chapters 2 and 5 expand on ideas I have previously published in two journal articles: ‘Tensional individuality: a reassessment of Gabriel Tarde’s sociology’, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 18(2), 2017: 153–72; and ‘High-frequency trading, algorithmic finance and the Flash Crash: reflections on eventalization’, *Economy and Society* 45(3–4), 2016: 350–78. Content from these articles are reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com).



Clare E. Rojas, *Untitled*, 2017. Gouache on paper, 8 × 10 in.
Source: Courtesy Kavi Gupta gallery and Clare E. Rojas.