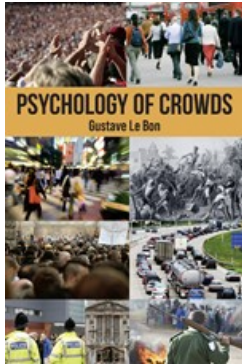


Psychology of Crowds



The ideas le Bon explores in this book are extremely relevant to today's society and were of pivotal importance in the early years of group psychology. Applications include financial market behaviour and political delusions.

By Gustave le Bon

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Gustave Le Bon was an eminent psychologist and sociologist. In *Psychology of Crowds*, he explores theories of national traits and behaviour as opposed to the behaviour of individuals.

Sigmund Freud's *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921; English translation *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1922) was based on Le Bon's work.

Gustave Le Bon was born in Nogent-le-Rotrou on 7th May, 1841. He died in Marnes-la-Coquette on 13th December 1931.

About the book

In this clear and vivid book, Gustave Le Bon throws light on the unconscious irrational workings of group thought and mass emotion as he places crowd ideology in opposition to free-thinking and independent minded individuals.

The ideas le Bon explores in this book are extremely relevant to today's society and were of pivotal importance in the early years of group psychology. Applications include financial market behaviour and political delusions.

The Sparkling Books edition has been annotated and edited based on the 1907 Alcan edition and previous translations.

Note to the Sparkling Books edition

La Psychologie des foules was first published in 1895 and translated anonymously into English, possibly by a group of students. A revised French edition, edited by Félix Alcan, was published in 1905 as *Psychologie des foules* by Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière & Cie. We have corrected some grammar errors and anomalies in the original translation by reference to the Alcan edition. We have shortened a few passages but maintained the original footnotes with some additional footnotes of our own. We have also used the full title *Psychology of Crowds* rather than the abbreviation *The*

Crowd used in earlier versions.

The Editors.

Excerpt

Dedication

To TH. RIBOT

Director of Revue philosophique

Professor of Psychology at the Collège de France

With my great respects.

Foreword by the author

The following work is devoted to an account of the characteristics of crowds.

The whole of the common characteristics with which heredity endows the individuals of a race constitute the genius of the race. When, however, a certain number of these individuals are gathered together in a crowd, for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, certain new psychological characteristics result. These characteristics are added to the racial characteristics and, at times, differ from them to a very considerable degree.

Organised crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples, but this has never been so true as at present. The substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age.

I have endeavoured to examine the difficult problem presented by crowds in a purely scientific manner - that is, by making an effort to proceed with method, and without being influenced by opinions, theories and doctrines. This, I believe, is the only way to arrive at the discovery of some few particles of truth, especially when dealing, as is the case here, with a question that is the subject of impassioned controversy. A man of science concerned with verifying a phenomenon is not called upon to trouble himself with the interests his verifications may hurt. In a recent publication an eminent thinker, M. Goblet d'Alviela, made the remark that, belonging to none of the contemporary schools, I am occasionally found in opposition to many of the conclusions of all of them. I hope this new work will merit a similar observation. To belong to a school is necessarily to espouse its prejudices and preconceived opinions.

Still I should explain to readers why they will find me drawing conclusions from my investigations which might be thought, at first sight, do not ring true. Why, for instance, after noting the extreme mental inferiority of crowds, elected assemblies included, I still affirm it would be dangerous to meddle with their organisation, notwithstanding this inferiority.

The reason is, that the most attentive observation of the facts of history has invariably demonstrated to me that social organisms, being every bit as complicated as those of all beings, should not be forced to undergo a sudden far-reaching transformation. Nature has recourse at times to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than the mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would only be useful were it possible to change instantaneously the genius of nations. This power, however, is only possessed by time.

People are ruled by ideas, sentiments, and customs - matters which are the essence of ourselves. Institutions and laws are the outward manifestation of our character: the expression of its needs. Given its outcome, institutions and laws cannot change this character. The study of social phenomena cannot be separated from that of the peoples among whom they have come into existence.

From the philosophical point of view, these phenomena may have an absolute value; in practice they have only a relative value. It is necessary, in consequence, when studying a social phenomenon, to consider it successively under two very different aspects. It will then be seen that the teachings of pure logic are very often contrary to those of practical reason. There are scarcely any data, even physical, to which this distinction is not applicable. From the point of view of absolute truth, a cube or a circle are invariable geometrical figures rigorously defined by certain formulae. From the point of view of the impression they make on our eye, these geometrical figures may assume very varied shapes. By perspective the cube may be transformed into a pyramid or a square, the circle into an ellipse or a straight line. Moreover, the consideration of these fictitious shapes is far more important than that of the real shapes, for it is they, and they alone, that we see and that can be reproduced by photography or in pictures. In certain cases, there is more truth in the unreal than in the real.

To present objects with their exact geometrical forms would be to distort nature and render it unrecognisable. If we imagine a world whose inhabitants could only copy or photograph objects, but were unable to touch them, it would be very difficult for such persons to attain to an exact idea of their form. Moreover, the knowledge of this form, accessible only to a small number of learned people, would present a very minor interest.

Philosophers who study social phenomena should bear in mind that, side by side with their theoretical value, these phenomena possess a practical value and that this latter, so far as the evolution of civilisation is concerned, is alone of importance. The recognition of this fact should render very circumspect with regard to the conclusions that logic would seem at first to enforce upon them.

There are other motives that dictate to philosophers a like reserve. The complexity of social facts is such, that it is impossible to grasp them as a whole and to foresee the effects of their reciprocal influence. It seems, too, that at times behind visible facts, thousands of invisible causes are hidden. Visible social phenomena appear to be the result of an immense, unconscious working, that as a rule is beyond the reach of our analysis. Perceptible phenomena may be compared to waves, which are the expression on the surface of deep-lying disturbances in an ocean of which we know nothing. So far as the majority of their acts are considered, crowds display a singularly inferior mentality; yet there are other acts in which they appear to be guided by those mysterious forces which the ancients described as destiny, nature, or providence, which we call voices from beyond the grave, and whose power it is impossible to overlook, although we ignore their essence. It would seem, at times, as if there were latent forces in the inner being of nations which serve to guide them. What, for instance, can be more complicated, more logical, more marvellous than a language?

Yet, where can this admirably organised production have arisen from, except as the outcome of the unconscious genius of crowds? The most learned academics, the most esteemed grammarians can do no more than note down the laws that govern languages; they would be utterly incapable of creating them. Even with respect to the ideas of great people, are we certain that they are exclusively the creation of their brains? No doubt such ideas are always created by solitary minds, but is it not the genius of crowds that has furnished the thousands of grains of dust forming the soil in which they have sprung up?

Crowds, doubtless, are always unconscious, but this very unconsciousness is perhaps one of the

secrets of their strength. In the natural world, beings exclusively governed by instinct, accomplish acts whose marvellous complexity astounds us. Reason is an attribute of humanity of too recent date and still too imperfect to reveal to us the laws of the unconscious, and still more to take its place. The part played by the unconscious in all our acts is immense, and that played by reason very small. The unconscious acts like a force still unknown.

If we wish, then, to remain within the narrow but safe limits within which science can attain to knowledge, and not to wander in the domain of vague conjecture and vain hypothesis, all we must do is simply to take note of such phenomena as are accessible to us, and confine ourselves to their consideration. Every conclusion drawn from our observation is, as a rule, premature, for behind the phenomena which we see clearly are other phenomena that we see indistinctly, and perhaps behind these latter, yet others which we do not see at all.

INTRODUCTION: THE ERA OF CROWDS

The evolution of the present age.

The great changes in civilisation are the consequence of changes in national thought.

Modern belief in the power of crowds.

It transforms the traditional policy of the European states.

How the rise of the popular classes comes about, and the manner in which they exercise their power.

The necessary consequences of the power of crowds.

Crowds unable to play a part other than a destructive one.

The dissolution of worn-out civilisations is the work of crowds.

General ignorance of the psychology of crowds.

Importance of the study of crowds for legislators and statesmen.

The great upheavals which precede changes of civilisations such as the fall of the Roman Empire and the foundation of the Arabian Empire, seem at first sight determined more especially by political transformations, foreign invasion, or the overthrow of dynasties. But a more attentive study of these events shows that behind their apparent causes, the real cause is generally seen to be a profound modification in the ideas of the peoples. The true historical upheavals are not those which astonish us by their grandeur and violence. The only important changes from which the renewal of civilisations results affect ideas, concepts, and beliefs. The memorable events of history are the visible effects of the invisible changes of human thought.

The reason these great events are so rare is that there is nothing so stable in a race as the inherited groundwork of its thoughts. The present epoch is one of these critical moments in which the thought of humankind is undergoing a process of transformation.

Two fundamental factors are at the base of this transformation. The first is the destruction of those religious, political, and social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilisation are rooted. The second is the creation of entirely new conditions of existence and thought as the result of modern scientific and industrial discoveries.

The ideas of the past, although half destroyed, are still very powerful, and the ideas which will replace them are still in the process of formation. The modern age represents a period of transition and anarchy. It is not easy to say as yet what will one day evolve from this necessarily somewhat chaotic period. On what fundamental ideas will the societies which succeed our own be built on? At present, we do not know. Still, it is already clear that on whatever lines the societies of the future are organised, they will have to confront a new power, that of the last surviving sovereign force of modern times: the power of crowds. On the ruins of so many ideas formerly considered beyond discussion, and today decayed or decaying, of so many sources of authority that successive

revolutions have destroyed, this power, which alone has arisen in their stead, seems soon destined to absorb the others. While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of crowds is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase.

The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds.

Scarcely a century ago the traditional policy of European states and the rivalries of sovereigns were the principal factors that shaped events. The opinion of the masses scarcely counted and, most frequently indeed, did not count at all. Today it is the old traditions of politics, and the individual tendencies and rivalries of rulers which do not count; while, on the contrary, the voice of the masses has become preponderant.

It is this voice that dictates their conduct to rulers, whose endeavour is to take note of its utterances. The destinies of nations are elaborated at present in the heart of the masses, and no longer in the councils of princes. The entry of the popular classes into political life - that is to say, in reality, their progressive transformation into governing classes - is one of the most striking characteristics of our age of transition. The introduction of universal suffrage, which exercised for a long time but of little influence, is not, as might be thought, the distinguishing feature of this transference of political power.

The progressive growth of the power of the masses took place at first by the propagation of certain ideas, which have slowly implanted themselves in people's minds, and afterwards by the gradual association of individuals determined to bring about the realisation of theoretical concepts. It is by association that crowds have come to procure ideas, with respect to their interests, which are very clearly defined, if not particularly just, and have thus gained strength. The masses are founding syndicates before which the authorities capitulate one after the other; they are also founding labour unions, which in spite of all economic laws tend to regulate the conditions of labour and wages. They return to assemblies in which the Government is vested, with representatives utterly lacking initiative and independence, and reduced almost always to nothing other than the mouthpieces of the committees that have chosen them.

Today the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than the determination of utterly destroying society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilisation. Limitations of the hours of labour, the nationalisation of mines, railways, factories, and the soil, the equal distribution of all products, the elimination of all the upper classes for the benefit of the popular classes, etc., such are these claims.

Little adapted to reasoning, crowds, on the contrary, are quick to act. As the result of their present organisation, their strength has become immense. The dogmas whose birth we are witnessing will soon have the force of the old dogmas; that is to say, the tyrannical and sovereign force of being above discussion. The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings.

Writers who enjoy the favour of our middle classes, those who best represent their rather narrow ideas, their somewhat prescribed views, their rather superficial scepticism and, at times, their somewhat excessive egoism, display profound alarm at this new power which they see growing; and to combat the disorder in those people's minds they are addressing despairing appeals to those moral forces of the Church for which they formerly professed so much disdain. They talk to us of the bankruptcy of science, go back in penitence to Rome, and remind us of the teachings of revealed truth. These new converts forget that it is too late.

If they were true believers, they would not be concerned with the preoccupations which beset these recent adherents to religion. The masses repudiate today the gods which their critics repudiated yesterday and helped to destroy. There is no power, divine or human, that can oblige a stream to flow back to its source.

There has been no bankruptcy of science, and science has had no share in the present intellectual anarchy, nor in the making of the new power which is springing up in the midst of this anarchy. Science promised us truth, or at least a knowledge of such relations as our intelligence can seize: it never promised us peace or happiness. Sovereignly indifferent to our feelings, it is deaf to our lamentations. It is for us to endeavour to live with science since nothing can bring back the illusions it has destroyed.

Universal symptoms, visible in all nations, show us the rapid growth of the power of crowds, and do not admit of our supposing that it is destined to cease growing in the near future. Whatever fate it may reserve for us, we shall have to submit to it. All reasoning against it is a mere vain war of words. Certainly, it is possible that the advent to power of the masses marks one of the last stages of Western civilisation, a complete return to those periods of confused anarchy which seem always destined to precede the birth of every new society. But can this result be prevented?

Up to now these thoroughgoing destructions of a worn-out civilisation have constituted the most obvious task of the masses. It is not merely today that this can be traced.

History tells us that from the moment when the moral forces, on which a civilisation rests, have lost their strength, its final dissolution is brought about by those unconscious and brutal crowds known, justifiably enough, as barbarians. Civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, and an elevated degree of culture - all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown are incapable of realising. In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power, crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of a civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall. It is at such a juncture that their chief mission is plainly visible and that, for a while, the philosophy of numbers seems the only philosophy of history.

Is the same fate in store for our civilisation? There are grounds to fear that this is the case, but we are not as yet in a position to be certain of it.

However this may be, we are bound to resign ourselves to the reign of the masses, since want of foresight has in succession overthrown all the barriers that might have kept the crowd in check. We have a very slight knowledge of these crowds which are beginning to be the object of so much discussion. Professional students of psychology, having lived far from them, have always ignored them, and when, as of late, they have turned their attention in this direction, it has only been to consider the crimes crowds are capable of committing. Without a doubt criminal crowds exist, but virtuous and heroic crowds, and crowds of many other kinds, are also to be met with. The crimes of crowds only constitute a particular phase of their psychology. The mental constitution of crowds is not to be learnt merely by a study of their crimes any more than that of individuals by a mere description of their vices.

However, in point of fact, all the world's masters, all the founders of religions or empires, the apostles of all beliefs, eminent politicians, and, in a more modest sphere, the mere chiefs of small groups of people have always been unconscious psychologists, possessed with an instinctive and

often very sure knowledge of the character of crowds, and it is their accurate knowledge of this character that has enabled them to so easily establish their mastery. Napoleon had a marvellous insight into the psychology of the masses of the country over which he reigned but he, at times, completely misunderstood the psychology of crowds belonging to other races; [1] and it is because he misunderstood it that he engaged in conflicts in Spain, and notably in Russia, in which his power received blows which were destined within a brief space of time to ruin it. A knowledge of the psychology of crowds is today the last resource of the politician who wishes, not to govern them, but, at any rate, not to be too much governed by them. The latter is becoming a very difficult matter indeed.

It is only by obtaining some sort of insight into the psychology of crowds that it can be understood how slight is the action upon them of laws and institutions, how powerless they are to hold any opinions other than those which are imposed upon them, and that it is not with rules based on theories of pure equity that they are to be led, but by seeking what produces an impression on them and what seduces them. For instance, should a legislator, wishing to impose a new tax, choose that which would be theoretically the most just? By no means. In practice, the most unjust option may be the best for the masses. At the same time, if it is the least obvious and, apparently, the least burdensome, it will be the most easily tolerated. It is for this reason that an indirect tax, however exorbitant it may be, will always be accepted by the crowd, because, being paid daily in fractions of a penny on objects of consumption, it will not interfere with the habits of the crowd and will pass unperceived. Replace it by a proportional tax on wages or income of any other kind, to be paid in a lump sum and, were this new imposition theoretically ten times less burdensome than the other, it would give rise to unanimous protest. This arises from the fact that a relatively high sum, which will appear immense, and will in consequence strike the imagination, has been substituted for the unperceived fractions of a farthing. The new tax would only appear light had it been saved farthing by farthing, but this economic method involves an amount of foresight of which the masses are incapable.

The preceding example is simple. Its appositeness will be easily perceived. It did not escape the attention of such a psychologist as Napoleon, but our modern legislators, ignorant as they are of the characteristics of crowds, are unable to appreciate it. Experience has not taught them as yet to a sufficient degree that people never shape their conduct upon the teaching of pure reason.

Many other practical applications might be made of the psychology of crowds. A knowledge of this science throws the most vivid light on a great number of historical and economic phenomena totally incomprehensible without it. I shall have occasion to show that the reason why the most remarkable of modern historians, Taine, has at times so imperfectly understood the events of the great French Revolution is that it never occurred to him to study the genius of crowds. He took as his guide, in the study of this complicated period, the descriptive method resorted to by naturalists; but the moral forces are almost absent in the case of the phenomena which naturalists have to study. Yet it is precisely these forces that constitute the true mainsprings of history.

In consequence, merely looked at from its practical side, the study of the psychology of crowds deserved to be attempted. Were its interest that of resulting from pure curiosity alone, it would still merit attention. It is as interesting to decipher the motives of the actions of individuals as to determine the characteristics of a mineral or a plant. Our study of the genius of crowds can merely be a brief synthesis, a simple summary of our investigations. Nothing more must be demanded of it than a few suggestive views. Others will work the ground more thoroughly. Today, we only touch the surface of a still almost virgin soil. [2]

For footnotes please consult the published book

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