Occasional papers of URS *No: 2*

SRU *Miscellanea rhetorica Upsaliensia*

ON CROWD PSYCHOLOGY, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Elena Bovo, Alma Hallgren, Ellen Jonsson, Andreas Rovio and Mats Rosengren (ed)

On Crowd Psychology, yesterday and today
Editor: Mats Rosengren
Occasional papers of URS No: 2

Graphic design: Richard Lindmark
ISBN: 978-91-988139-3-7
ISSN: 1102-9714

Occasional papers of URS is a series of episodical publications, intended to keep up with current events in the rhetorical field.
Editor of the series: Mats Rosengren

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2024, whilst preparing a master course with the perhaps ominous title "Can we be democratic?", I had the great luck of finding a newly published work with the telling title *Mécaniques des Foules – Des mouvements hors de contrôle?* [Mechanics of Crowds – movements out of control?], by philosopher Elena Bovo. For some time, if not before then at least since the democratic debacles surrounding Brexit and the 2016 election of Trump, it has been obvious that the time of crowds and of masses did not pass with the introduction of internet. Rather, that crowds had conquered yet another possible scene, another public space, where to act and interact. As the authors Charles Duan and James Grimmelmann succinctly put it:

> On the Internet, platforms and crowds are defined by each other. What makes a platform a platform, and not just infrastructure, is that it brings users together and facilitates their interactions. What makes a crowd a crowd, and not just a collection of unrelated individuals, is their collective behaviour as an entity. Offline, crowds can assemble anywhere there is space for them, but on the Internet they typically come together on a platform – and a platform only becomes one when they do. Platforms make crowds, and crowds make platforms. (Dunne & Grimmlemann, eds, 2024, p. 13)

After this promising introduction, highlighting the interdependence between crowds and communication technologies, I was surprised to find that none of the authors in the anthology referred back to, or compared with, or made use of the thinkers and theorists from the next to last turn of the century, when crowds, mobs and their psychology was very much in focus. So much better then, and so timely, that I found Elena Bovo's book. In its very conclusion she asks the following pertinent question:

> [G]iven that crowd movements are a regular feature of our contemporary world, and that the explosion of social networks, far from making them disappear, is bringing them to life in a new dimension, how can we explain the persistence, usually implicit or unconscious, of the categories of crowd psychology in the interpretation of current phenomena? (Elena Bovo, *Mécaniques des foules. Des mouvements hors de contrôle*, p. 154. My translation.)

As Bovo points out, the influence from the mass psychology of the late 19th and early 20th century is palpable in topical attempts to talk about crowds and masses – as should be obvious from the above quotation. And yet, at the same time, this discipline was, as Bovo continues, "perhaps too hastily abandoned" and considered a pseudo-science.

In preparing my course, I read Bovo's book as an antidote against the kind of historical blindness that seem to condemn every other generation to repeat the same mistakes, and sometimes also to invent the same concepts and gadget, as are already there, in the books, debates and archives of those who came before us, and faced similar situations. I think that the plethora of comparisons that we see between the political situation today (spring 2025) and the

situation in Europe one hundred years ago should make us doubly sensitive:[1] First, we need to acknowledge that now is not then, that the political, social, technological and mental differences between today and a century ago are not negligible. Then we need emphasise that, despite these differences, we have much to learn from our forebears – from what they did as from what they did not do; from how they organised themselves and society at large, from their successes and from their failures. But most importantly, we need to acquaint ourselves with the conceptual worlds that were theirs, worlds that are still with us today, in our use of concepts and terms with histories that, as Bovo points out, often promote world orders and social hierarchisations that we are unaware of, and perhaps also would be willing, or unwilling, to condone, had we only known. Bovo's book is just what our time needs – a critical, well researched contemporary history that we need to remember today.

– – – – –

So, I invited Bovo to come to Uppsala in December 2024 to present her book at the Higher Seminar of Rhetoric. I also asked her if she would be prepared to spend a morning discussing her research with our PhD and master students. She generously agreed to all my suggestions, including to have her presentation transformed into a small text, and to publish it accompanied by reflections from the students who partook in the morning's discussions. The result is the text that you are currently reading.

I would like to thank Elena Bovo for her generosity in sharing both her knowledge and her time with us, as I would like to thank Ellen Jonsson, Alma Hallgren and Andreas Rovio for finding the time to convert their oral contributions to the morning discussion

into very interesting texts, commenting on Bovo's presentation. Finally, I would like to thank the research project *Democracy and Higer Education*, for very valuable support.

Mats Rosengren, editor, Uppsala, Mars 2025

NOTE

1 One example among many is of course Timothy Snyder's warning from 2017, *On Tyranny – 20 lessons from the 20th century* (New York: Tim Duggan books, 2017), that he has been constantly updating and nuancing online since then .

Elena Bovo

ON CROWD MECHANICS

THE ADVENT OF CROWDS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Crowd psychology is a social science stemming from a dialogue between French and Italian scholars at the end of the 19th century.

The starting point for this interest in crowds was 1789 and, above all, a number of historical accounts of the French Revolution throughout the 19th century. After Jules Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847–1853), in which the crowd appears in all its ambiguity as an entity that is sometimes heroic and sometimes cruel, Hippolyte Taine, in *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (1876–1894), truly established the crowd as the protagonist of the Revolution. But in Taine's work, which was a profound inspiration for crowd psychologists, the crowd is essentially seen as a destructive force: powerful and creative in its acts of cruelty. For Taine, the crowd is made up of an obtuse, suffering and starving people who, as soon as they are freed from a coercive structure, indulge in all their desires, are dominated by the imitation instinct and inexorably regress to earlier stages of evolutionary process.

France and Italy, despite their many differences, were facing a political and social model in crisis. It is true that Italy did not experience the phenomenon of *Boulangisme*, or the demonstrations by

nationalist and anti-Semitic crowds during the Dreyfus affair in the Third Republic.[1] But in France, as in Italy, there was a particularly high level of social class conflicts, taking the form of general strikes and demonstrations that often degenerated into violence and were violently put down by the army.

In this troubled context at the turn of the 19th century, what interested and worried Italian and French crowd psychologists was, on the one hand, what we might call the empirical people who took to the streets to express their anger and, on the other, thanks to the development of the press, what the jurist Gabriel Tarde in 1898 called "opinion publique", public opinion.

A FEW MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT CROWD PSYCHOLOGY

But before talking about the establishing of crowd psychology as a scientific discipline, I'd like to say a few words about the way in which crowd psychology was interpreted in the 20th century and is still often interpreted today.

Crowd psychology, as a scientific discipline, is often reduced to Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules*.[2] The former was seen as a French speciality, while the latter was and still is regarded as a political treatise on dominating and manipulating the emotions of crowds. Susanna Barrow's interesting essay *Distorting Mirrors. Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, exemplifies this interpretation. Barrow argues that Gustave Le Bon employed crowd psychology as an instrument to control the lower social classes, and that he believed that his work would reveal the 'rules of the game' to a new Napoleon or a new Boulanger.[3]

Indeed, from the mid-1950s onwards, Le Bon began to be regarded as a 'pre-fascist' thinker, and his name has long been associated with the great dictators of the first half of the 20th century, Mussolini and Hitler in particular, whom he is said to have influenced.

Now, while Mussolini in certain interviews claimed to admire the work of Le Bon[4] (but it should be pointed out that Le Bon was not the only intellectual or writer he admired; Machiavelli, for example, was one of his favourites), Hitler never quotes him in *Mein Kampf*. So, regarding Hitler, in the lack of any other evidence, the starting point for the belief that he would never have become the Führer he was without Le Bon seems to be an article by Alfred Stein, published in 1955, "Adolf Hitler und Gustave Le Bon. Der Meister der Massenbewegung und sein Lehrer" [Adolf Hitler and Gustave Le Bon. The master of the mass movement and his teacher]. Alfred Stein notes a similarity between certain theses in *Psychologie des foules* and the political-psychological theses set out in *Mein Kampf*, particularly those on the role of the leader, his techniques of persuasion, and on the religious, therefore dogmatic, nature of the beliefs of the masses. This was enough for Stein to deduce not only that "Le Bon had given him the basic principles for influencing the masses",[5] but also that "Hitler's rise was indissolubly linked to the consistent application of Le Bon's theses".[6] Yet the only proof he provides is the fact that, as early as 1908, there was a copy of the *Psychologie des foules* in the Viennese *Hofbibliothek* library, frequented by Hitler.[7]

From Stein's article onwards, the myth of a 'pre-fascist' Le Bon who inspired Hitler and Mussolini took hold, at least in France, and prevented anyone from seeing crowd psychology as anything other than an instrument of manipulation. Zeev Sternhell, in *La droite révolutionnaire 1885–1914* (1997), in turn influenced by Stein's article, wrote, without giving further proof, that the hostility shown by the University towards *Psychologie des foules* immediately after its author's death was certainly due to the fact that Le Bon had "made

an apology for Mussolini" and that "countless formulas in *Mein Kampf* seem to have been taken directly from Le Bon's books".[8] From then on, crowd psychology, assimilated to Le Bon's work, became part of the phenomenon that Sternhell called "the intellectual crisis of the nineties", which would have led to advocate a "cult of the unconscious",[9] to want to free the instincts and, finally, to praise an anti-rationalist and anti-democratic attitude.

But was this really the case?

It is undeniable that Le Bon's thinking on crowds has a racialist or even racist basis (since he considers that crowds are always determined by the hereditary morphological, physiological and psychological characteristics of the 'peoples', or 'races', from which they come). And, *Mein Kampf* undoubtedly contains a number of the theses popularised by Le Bon on the crowd as a feminine, instinctive, passionate, voluble, irrational and manipulable entity, but it is not possible to say, on the basis of these elements alone, that Le Bon was an inspiration to Hitler or even that Hitler ever read his book. For example, while it is true that Le Bon refers to the role of the leader, he always speaks of leaders in very unflattering terms: "they are not gifted with keen foresight, nor could they be, as this quality generally conduces to doubt and inactivity".[10] In the same way it is a misunderstanding to assert, as Zeev Sternhell does, that Le Bon advocates the emancipation of instincts against rationality, and that he professes a "cult of the unconscious". It is true that, in the wake of Taine, Le Bon asserted that reason, far from being an innate gift, is a "late acquisition" and a "fragile compound" compared to the power of the instincts that dominate our actions. But if Le Bon emphasises the role of the unconscious in understanding the behaviour of crowds, it is not to make a "cult" of it. On the contrary, for Le Bon crowds – being the expression of irrational instances and archaic behaviour – are a threat to the conscious, rational activity that is the basis of civilisation.

The truth is that the ideas conveyed by Le Bon about crowds (ideas which he did not invent, but rather popularised) – namely the alienating influence they exert, the amplifying power of emotions, the regressive, instinctive and above all 'feminine' character, which makes crowds easy for a leader to manipulate, and lastly the imitation instinct – were widely spread in Europe at the time. And even if Mussolini and Hitler were inspired by them, it was these very same ideas that, years later, inspired *Freud's Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* and Hannah Arendt's analyses of mass behaviour (which first appeared in the 20th century, in the troubled period following the First World War). She considers Le Bon to be one of those "eminent European scholars and statesmen" who had predicted, "from the early nineteenth century onward, the rise of the mass man and the coming of a mass age". Through his intuitions, he (and other scholars) "had prepared certain politically conscious and overconscious sections of the Western educated world for the emergence of demagogues, for gullibility, superstition, and brutality".[11]

But Hannah Arendt was unaware that the intuitions that Le Bon wanted to make his own and that she attributed to him, were in fact the result of a prior circulation of ideas on the crowd between several Italian and French thinkers who preceded Le Bon.

THE ITALIAN APPROACH TO CROWD PSYCHOLOGY

In *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921), Freud had already provided all the elements to call into question the principle that Le Bon had been the inventor of the crowd psychology. Freud wrote "everything that he says to the detriment and depreciation of the

manifestations of the group mind had already been said by others before him. [...] The two theses which comprise the most important of Le Bon's opinions, those touching upon the collective inhibition of intellectual functioning and the heightening of affectivity in groups, had been formulated shortly before by Sighele".[12] (Freud is referring to Sighele's *La folla delinquente*).[13]

Indeed, before the publication of Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules*, it was in Italy, in the wake of the works published by Taine and Tarde, that crowd psychology as a social science was formalised. The two key Italian authors were lawyers close to evolutionary socialism: Enrico Ferri, an emblematic representative of late 19th century socialism, and his disciple Scipio Sighele, who was also influenced by socialism, but never became a party member. This socialist matrix of the pioneers of crowd psychology in Italy is an essential element to take into account in order to understand the Italian path of crowd psychology.[14]

As jurists, Ferri and Sighele were increasingly confronted, as Sighele wrote in the foreword to the French translation of *La folla delinquente*, with "public uprisings [...] and the collective violence of the plebs", which broke out more and more often during workers' strikes and public demonstrations. But through these uprisings and violence, writes Sighele, it seems that the mob "wanted from time to time to relieve [...] all the resentments that the pain and injustices they had suffered had accumulated within them".[15] Once the motive of crowds had been taken into account, Ferri and Sighele also saw a need to consider the alienating factor produced by crowds. These are due to the effect of the mass, which estranges the conscious personality and produces, as Freud wrote (see just above) a 'collective inhibition of intellectual functioning and the heightening of affectivity in groups'.

Based on the laws of crowd psychology, Sighele sought to establish

as a legal principle the idea that an individual who commits a crime in a crowd should not be considered fully responsible for his actions, since his free will is altered and he cannot therefore be judged in the same way as a common criminal. The traces of Sighele's thinking are still present today in Italy. In the point n° 3 of the article 62 of the Criminal Code "Rocco", promulgated in 1930 and still effective after undergoing a number of amendments, a crowd is considered an extenuating circumstance, provided that the demonstration is not prohibited by law and that the perpetrator of the crime is not a "criminal".

The psychology of crowds as it developed in Italy must be understood from the point of view, on the one hand, of the desire to control and dominate the behaviour of individuals taking part in potentially dangerous collective demonstrations of protest and, on the other, of the desire to judge more appropriately and fairly an individual who, having taken part in a demonstration, had allowed himself to be led into committing acts of violence. Taking into account the social context in which an individual, under the influence of a crowd, commits criminal or violent acts, is certainly one of the essential differences between Ferri's and Sighele's conception of the crowd and that of Le Bon.

GABRIEL TARDE AND THE PUBLIC OPINION

We started by saying that interest in crowds in the 19th century began in 1789. However, for the judge Gabriel Tarde, what characterises 1789, "what had never been seen in the past," as he writes, is also "the proliferation of newspapers, eagerly read, which appeared at that time. [...] Each of these great and outrageous publicists, Marat, Desmoulins and Père Duchesne, had *his* own public and

these incendiary, looting, murderous, cannibalistic crowds, who wreaked havoc in France then, from north to south and from east to west, can be regarded as excrescences, malignant eruptions of these publics, to whom their evil cupbearers daily served the venomous alcohol of empty and violent words."[16] So, for Tarde, the "publics" and "publicists" represent the germ of destructive crowds. But his thinking goes even further: "[T]he psychology of crowds has been worked out; the psychology of the public remains to be worked out."[17]

Indeed, at the turn of the 19th century, it seemed to him that society was destined to become a society of newspaper-reading publics, and that the latter were the social groups of the future, the true products of the modernity born with the development of the press and made possible by technological revolutions such as the modernisation of printing, the railway and the telegraph. According to his analysis, the link between the crowd and the public is mental cohesion, made possible, once again, by the phenomenon of imitation and mental contagion. But the first group, the crowd, was in his view far more archaic and limited than the second. Archaic, because the individual is completely hypnotised by the leader's voice that he hears directly, as by his physical presence by which he is subjugated. Limited, because of the spatio-temporal constraints to which bodies are subjected: fatigue, cold, hunger and thirst condemn any crowd to scatter. In the second group, the public, currents of opinion were formed by solitary reading of newspapers. The suggestion suffered is probably less intense compared to that exerted by a leader, it can do without physical contact and is not subject to its limitations. The instantaneous transmission of thought and emotion crosses distances and even national borders. The influence that the publicist exerts on his audience is certainly less total than that of the leader

on the crowd, and it leaves the reader the choice of turning away and seeking information elsewhere, but it is much longer-lasting and more far-reaching than "the brief and fleeting" influence, in Tarde's words, "imprinted on the crowd by its leader."[18]

As we can see, the age of the public is troubled and difficult to define. If the circulation of different opinions makes them wiser than the crowds of the past, the exclusive relationship that can develop between a public and its newspaper is, as Tarde points out, the most dangerous thing for free thought: "the man of a single book is to be feared, it has been said; but what is that compared with the man of a single newspaper! And that man is basically each one of us, or very nearly so. That is the danger of the new age."[19] While resisting the temptation to prophesy a new era, as Le Bon had done, Tarde nevertheless recognized the primary danger of the media in society: the manipulation and deliberate incitement of the passions of large masses of dispersed individuals, as well as the tendency to draw their attention to a single aspect of reality – what is considered to be "news".

I would also like to draw attention to one aspect of Tarde's analysis, because it alone expresses the modernity of the concept of the public: contrary to what we might think at first, the relationship between the journalist and the readers is not unilateral. The latter are far from passive, and there is a "mutual adaptation" between the public and the journalist, a relationship that is always reversible. While it may be true that journalists guide their audiences and flatter them by always giving them the vision of reality they want to see, it is no less true that readers choose one newspaper over another when it reinforces and legitimises their prejudices and inclinations. But their excitement and fervour for a subject, if initially suggested or amplified by the journalist, can escape the latter's control, become radicalised and end

up influencing, in return, a certain editorial line, by the simple threat of no longer reading the newspaper and unsubscribing.

This is what Tarde calls "the power of opinion".[20] It is in no way inferior to the power of the crowd; on the contrary, its force is less impulsive, its violence more calculated and more targeted. The cruelty of the public, thirsting for hatred and blood, is even less excusable than that of the mob, Tarde emphasised at the height of the Dreyfus affair. It lasted for months, for years. The readers were no longer in the street, mingling with one another, exposed to the cold or the heat, but reading comfortably at home, without exposing themselves to the slightest risk, witnessing the persecution of the designated victim, his exposure to public shame, his pillorying, condemned without appeal by the courts of the newspapers.

CONCLUSION

Tarde undeniably contributed an essential innovative element to the development of crowd psychology and to our understanding of the internal dynamics of crowds. By following his intuition, we can conceive of publics in a relationship, not of rupture, but of continuity, with crowds. While sharing many of the same theoretical presuppositions as Taine and Le Bon, he did not see crowds as a mere symptom of the ills from which modernity suffers, or as those responsible for the collapse of civilisation, but as social groups whose actions and manifestations change according to the desires that drive them, and above all, which transform themselves and follow the evolution of societies.

This allows him to conceive not only of crowds in the flesh, but also of 'spiritual', virtual crowds, in which each of us can melt away to the point of losing ourselves, while remaining comfortably at home, because the cohesion of these crowds is entirely mental. This intuition already foreshadows the future of media crowds and 'echo chambers', which have taken over from newspaper audiences with the advent of the new media.

I would like to end with a final thought. Tarde does not limit crowds to groups of hatred and destruction. If Sighele, but also Le Bon, had already emphasised the courage of crowds, capable of performing heroic acts that an individual alone would never accomplish, he asserts that there are also "crowds of love":[21] the crowd of celebration, of joy, the crowd that experiences pleasure by the simple fact of gathering at a popular festival, for example. It's true that he doesn't say much about them, but he does maintain that the variety of "crowds of love" is "the most widespread" and that these crowds play "a most necessary and salutary social role" in a society.[22] They are a real social cement, increasing social 'peace' and 'union'.

NOTES

1 "Boulangism was the movement that failed to put in power the charismatic but empty-headed French general Georges-Ernest-Jean-Marie Boulanger (1837–1891)."Boulangism" Encyclopedia of Modern Europe: Europe 1789–1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire, Encyclopedia.com, last visited February 19, 2025, https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/boulangism For a more extensive presentation, please see Bertrand Joly, *Aux origines du populisme. Histoire du boulangisme (1886–1891)* (Paris: CNRS, 2022).

2 Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Alcan, 1895). English translation: Gustave Le Bon, *The crowd. A study of the popular mind* (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1896). Swedish translation: Gustave Le Bon, *Massans Psykologi* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1912). For the quotations we will follow the English edition.

3 Susanna Barrows, *Distorting mirrors. Visions of the crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1981). (Cfr., Chapter, "Gustave Le Bon and the Popularity of an Idea").

4 In particular the interview Mussolini gave to the correspondent of *La Science et la Vie* in 1926 in which he called the *Psychologie des foules* "a capital work". (The interview is reported in Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, *Benito Mussolini. Opera Omnia*, vol. XXII (Florence: La Fenice, 1957), pp. 155–6). Also Antonio Gramsci refers to an interview, this time not with Mussolini but with Le Bon himself, and writes: "the head of the government is a great admirer of Le Bon" Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, (Notebook 9, 1932), Volume Two, *Critical Edition of the Gramsci Institute*, edited by Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), p. 1146. The interview Gramsci quotes is Frédéric Lefèvre's, "La philosophie scientifique. Une heure avec le Dr. Gustave Le Bon", published in the journal *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 27 September 1930, No. 415.

5 Alfred Stein, "Adolf Hitler und Gustave Le Bon. Der Meister der Massenbewegung und sein Lehrer", in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 6, (1955) p. 366. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

6 *Ibid.,* p. 368.

7 Cfr., p. 363.

8 Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire (1885–1914)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 182.

9 *Ibid.*.

10 Le Bon, *The crowd, op. cit.,* p. 118.

11 Hannah Arendt, "Totalitarianism", in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), p. 316.

12 Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego* [*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921)] (London: The Hogarth Press Ldt, 1949), p. 24. (For the quotations we will follow the English edition).

13 Scipio Sighele, *La folla delinquente* (Torino: Bocca, 1891).

14 It should be pointed out that Italian socialism at the end of the nineteenth century was still largely alien to Marxism, and was influenced by scientific positivism and evolutionism. It was characterised both by progressive demands, and by a desire for social control; by a desire to help the most vulnerable social classes and by a mixed feeling of superiority and paternalism towards them.

15 Scipio Sighele, *La foule criminelle,* translation by Paul Vigny (Paris: Alcan, 1892), p. VI.

16 Gabriel Tarde, "Le public et la foule", *in L'opinion et la foule*, (1901) (Paris: Dunod), 2024, p. 38, emphasis in original.

17 *Ibid.,* p. 31.

18 *Ibid.,* p. 42.

19 *Ibid.,* p. 44.

20 *Ibid,* p. 69.

21 *Ibid.,* p. 67.

22 *Ibid. loc cit*

Ellen Jonsson

SWEDISH EXAMPLES OF CROWD PSYCHOLOGY

Gadelius, Norström and the time-bounded, timeless concept of the mass

The idea that something changes in the human mind when an individual joins a group is not modern. At least it can be traced back to the Roman Empire and a Latin maxim which said that Roman senators could be good citizens but that the Senate as an assembly was a diabolic beast.[1] Already here we find the dichotomy between the individual and the collective, and the idea that the thinking and behaviour of the group is different and perhaps more dangerous than the thinking and behaviour of the individual. These ideas about the individual and the group seem timeless or at least old, however, the specific concept of the crowd or mass is more recent. It is a concept with a close connection to the major economic, technological and sociological changes Western European society underwent in the 19th century; a development that paved the way for political changes and the emergence of modern democracy.

The questions that engaged the crowd psychological thinking of Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde in France and Enrico Ferri and Scipio Sighele in Italy were then under discussion in many countries with some retardations in time.[2] In Sweden for example the psychiatrist Bror Gadelius 1907 published a book called "The Life of the Soul of the Masses and mental contagion" (*Massornas själsliv*

och andlig smitta).[3] Based on the references at the end of the book, Gadelius had read Le Bon as well as Tarde and Sieghele in French. The influence of crowd psychology can also be seen in Gadelius's text. Here we find the idea, recognisable from Le Bon and Tarde, about the crowd's tendency to imitate and the understanding of the crowd as incapable of critical judgements. The crowd is also linked to another concept of the time, "the public opinion", which, according to Gadelius, could never be taken intellectually seriously.[4] The crowd has to be suggested rather than persuaded, because of its lack of taste for clear facts and balanced argumentation.[5] Gadelius's text also reflects the growing commercialisation and widespread newspaper reading he was surrounded by. In his argumentation about the suggestive power of repetition, he exemplifies with the psychological effect advertisement for unnecessary products has on the newspaper reading public.[6] As a psychiatrist, Gadelius is interested in the impact of collective life on the human mind. From crowd psychology, he also picks up the idea of mental contagion. According to Gadelius, epidemics of imitation are not only linked to the modernisation of society but are also a consequence of a universal human tendency to copy, which is even to be found in the animal kingdom. His example is the infectious "sickness of dance" that should have been spread in medieval Europe. In villages and towns masses of people danced to the tunes of clarinets and pipes and everyone who saw it had to start dancing, whether they felt like it or not.[7] In conformity with the theory presented in the work of Le Bon, the mass suggestion is connected to strong emotions. It is something that takes place beyond reflecting and consciousness. Some people are also supposed to be more sensitive to this type of mental influence, not least children and women.[8] In parts of the text, Gadelius also comes close to a kind of racial stereotype that underlies some of the crowd psychological

thinking. He writes for example that people living at a more primitive stage of culture are more similar to each other, giving them a greater tendency to flock together like animals.[9]

In Swedish the word *massa*, is used both to refer to the theories associated with Le Bon and Tarde, what in English is known as crowd psychology; and as a first element in words related to the condition of the modern, capitalistic society, such as mass fabrication and mass culture. The merge on the linguistic level highlights a conceptual or ideological overlap that furthermore is linked to an overlap in time. Both crowd psychology and criticism of the mass culture could be understood as a reaction to modernisation. If Gadelius takes a medical approach to the mass or the crowd, one of his Swedish contemporaries, the philosopher Vitalis Norström, has a more cultural view. While Gadelius is close to and explicitly refers to the crowd psychology of Le Bon, Tarde and Sieghele, Norström in his book "Mass Culture" (*Masskultur*) argues more broadly about the spirit of the time and the development of the society.[10] In the modern, increasingly mechanised society Norström sees a shift from individuality to collectivism and from quality to quantity. Paradoxically, the collectivistic era Norström imagines is characterised not by unity but by disintegration. The changeover to quantity is then connected with a deep sense of loss: loss of wholeness, meaning and coherent worldview.[11] The valued moral concept of community has, in the eyes of Norström, been replaced by the lesser mass moral. This modern, soulless mass culture is, according to Norström, also synonymous with a modernistic labour culture and with the factory worker as an incarnation of the man of the time.[12] While the discussion is mostly on a more general and higher philosophical level, in some parts of the book, Norström becomes more directly political. One symptom of the turn to quantity, according to Norström, is the

rise of socialism. In contrast to liberalism, socialism puts equality and organisation above personal initiative; unlike conservatives, socialists want to replace the organic structure of society, i.e. families and national peoples, with class and labour organisations.[13] Here again, Norström points out how collectivism has spread at the expense of individual reason and how quantity has been allowed to take precedence over qualitative human and social values. Despite his negative attitude to the socialistic movement, Norström believes that it will not make an impact in the long term. By comparison with liberalism and conservatism, the two main ideological lines that run through history, socialism is not more than an intense but temporary twitch.[14]

As reflected not least in the books of Gadelius and Norström, crowd psychology and ideas about mass culture sprung from the specific circumstances of the late 19th and early 20th, a historical period with its particular questions, challenges and prejudices. In historical writing, the concept of the mass has also become connected to the interwar period. The historian of ideas Stefan Jonsson, in his book about the idea and image of the mass in the epoch of the Weimar Republic, writes that:

> In all surveys and histories of the eventful years from the revolutionary uprisings in November 1918 to the Nazi takeover in 1933 there is a chapter or section devoted to them. They are usually discussed as revolutionary crowds or as fascist mobs or as urban multitudes engaged by the new phenomenon of "mass culture" or as the rising anonymous middle classes or, again, as an object of anxiety pervading the zeitgeist.[15]

In this respect, the concept of the mass or the crowd functions as a mirror of specific historical periods but also as a sponge that absorbs and preserves the beliefs of different times. They are places where old myths can grow and flourish, fuelled by a new time's fears and dilemmas.

The concept of the mass captures and builds on several contradictory concepts that have recurred in human thinking throughout history. The most obvious pair of opposites here is the individual versus the group. In the same conceptual sphere as the crowd or the mass, there is also the tension between the citizen and the mob, rather often followed by another constantly reproduced dichotomy between reason and emotion. Following Le Bon, Gadelius writes about the emotional masses in contrast to the reflective and conscious individual. Furthermore, the ideas of the primitiveness of the crowd and the varying degree of cultural maturity between different ethnic groups, repeated in Gadelius, go back to the old dichotomy between nature and culture. It is an antithesis that is in turn closely linked to the more moralistic one between barbarism and civilisation and the political opposition between democracy and dictatorship. In his critique of contemporary mass culture, Norström draws on the contradiction between nature and culture but turns the moral order usually associated with it on its head by warning against over-civilisation and contrasting culture with a good, healthy society.[16] He argues that the victory of culture over nature was originally something good. In contrast to the hard, physical life of hunters and collectors, urban life comes with safety and comfort. People who do not have to fight against nature for survival have a surplus of energy that can be used for "spiritual production".[17] The problem with modern society is, from Norström's view, that the mass fabrication and quantification of products, techniques, works and even education has resulted in too much culture. It has led to a situation of over-civilisation with no place for spirituality.[18]

For intellectuals like Le Bon and Tarde, or Swedish followers like Gadelius and Norström, the concept of the crowd or the mass functions as an explanatory framework to understand both the development of their time and man as a social being. In addition to this explanatory value, "the crowd" or "mass" also has a highly rhetorical function and has been used for various political and ideological purposes. Coupled with the idea of primitiveness, the interconnection with racial biology stands out as clear. It is also easy to see how the imagination and conceptual contradiction that the idea of the crowd carries can build a ground for class contempt and scepticism toward universal suffrage and extended political rights. However, the picture is not unambiguously dark. The distinctions between the individual and the crowd, reason and emotion, barbarism and civilisation have also been used to defend a liberal democratic order. In the years around the Second World War, for example, Swedish politicians claimed that the emancipation of the individual citizen was a protection against mass dictatorship and a way to prevent undemocratic demagogues from gaining influence. Here, the hierarchical, moralistic dichotomy between the crowd and the individual citizen was the same as in the late 19th century but was used in defence rather than in hindrance of democratic development.[19]

If the crowd and the mass seem to be at once timeless and time-bounded, the question is if the crowd psychology still has some relevance. Can the ideas of Le Bon and Tarde be useful for the analysis of today's media, society and political situation? Maybe the question could be answered on two levels. On one level, crowd psychology is relevant according to its historical influence. In other words, it is important as part of a history of thought and ideas. The value of crowd psychology is, from that perspective, foremost historical but even analytical because of our need for the past to

understand the present. On another, more direct analytical level, the answer is perhaps more complicated. The problems that crowd psychology addresses are on the one hand highly topical, and the late 19th and early 20th century show many similarities with the contemporary situation. Then, as now, technological developments were very rapid and a new type of public debate emerged as the media landscape changed. Then like now the condition for democracy and political representation was under debate. To take a more specific example, the crowd psychological arguments about suggestion and imitation are also quite close to today's discussion about social media and its effect on users' mental health. So to speak, TikTok trends seem to be the "sickness of dance" of our time. When Gadelius point to children as a particularly sensitive group to be affected by "mental contagion", today's debate about social media and mental unhealthy is highly focused on children and youngsters. Further, the old fear of the aggressive, uncontrolled crowd could be recognised in the ongoing discussion about what hate storms on social media do with the public debate and in the longer time with the democratic society. Even Tarde's theory of positively charged crowds, what he calls "crowds of love", could be actualised concerning current debates and news events.[20] When Syrians in exile, for example, took to the streets to celebrate the fall of the Assad regime, the reaction that followed from parts of the political right was a reminder that even the happy crowd could be framed as a threat.

It is not hard to find situations and phenomena in today's public debate that seem to recall the issue and concepts of crowd psychology. However, this does not alter the fact that crowd psychology on the other hand can be seen as both antiquated and irrelevant. One good reason for leaving the crowd psychology and the mass concept behind is the racial and misogynistic tendencies underlying parts

of the theory-building, parts not so outdated as one might wish. In addition, there is another technologically orientated argument for why the old crowd psychology does not respond to the situation we have to deal with in 2025. What could Le Bon or Tarde tell us about crowds that are not made up of real people but of faked robot accounts? And what about the emotional and behavioural influence that comes not from a strong leader or the power of the collective but from impersonal and commercially driven algorithms? While our era bears similarities to the turn of the century, it also has its own specific, hard-to-solve dilemmas. Le Bon's mass psychology may not have clear answers to the big challenges of today's society, but it can still help us ask the questions. Placed in its historically specific context, and with all of its racist, misogynistic and class-patronising undertones exposed and questioned, mass psychology can act as a dialogue partner, helping us to both illuminate and understand the great dilemmas of our own time. In this way, crowd psychology could perhaps stimulate the kind of individual thinking that both Gadelius and Norström wanted to praise.

NOTES

1 This example is taken from Micael Björk, "Demokratisk kultur. Om massornas psykologi i Sverige under 1920-talet", in *I sitt sammanhang. Essäer om kultur och politik tillägnade Rolf Törnqvist*, eds. Michael Björk & Marita Flisbäck (Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings förlag Symposion, 2005), p. 13.

2 For a discussion of the development of the crowd psychology in France and Italy see Elena Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics: The advent of crowds in the 19th century", in *On crowd psychology, yesterday and today. Occasional papers of URS/SRU Miscellanea rhetorica Upsaliensia* no. 2 (2025).

3 Bror Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta* (Uppsala, 1907).

4 Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta*, p. 17.

5 Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta*, p. 16.

6 Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta*, p. 16.

7 Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta*, p. 6–7.

8 Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta*, p. 8–10; 34–37.

9 Gadelius, *Massornas själsliv och andlig smitta*, p. 9.

10 Vitalis Norström, *Masskultur* (Stockholm: Hierta, 1910).

11 Norström, *Masskultur*, p. 178–180.

12 Norström, *Masskultur*, p. 21.

13 Norström, *Masskultur*, p. 74–75.

14 Norström, *Masskultur*, p. 71.

15 Stefan Jonsson, *Crowds and democracy: the idea and image of the masses from revolution to fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. xv.

16 Norström, *Masskultur*, in particular p. 11–13, 68–69.

17 Norström, *Masskultur*, p. 4.

18 Norström, *Masskultur*, Chapter 1. "Masskultur". As an example, Norström mention what he sees as an overproduction of scientific research and a mass-writing. See p. 17.

19 This double use of the antithesis between masses and citizens is also discussed in Stefan Jonsson, *A brief history of the masses: three revolutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

20 See Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics" about Tarde´s conception of the "crowds of love".

Alma Hallgren

GILETS JAUNES IN THE VIEW OF CROWD PSYCHOLOGY

During my stay in Paris in the pre-covid year of 2019, I encountered a manifestation march. It was no other than the *gilets jaunes*. I remember how I pressed myself against the wall of the wide street to make myself invisible while the people in yellow vests passed by, thinking of all the rumours of how these manifestations could get violent. First, the great crowd with their bright uniforms walked in silence with serious faces. But then, for one moment, I caught the eye of one middle aged white woman. She passed me and right thereafter lifted fist and started shouting something in French I could not understand at the time. The people around her joined her chant as they continued walking.

The *gilets jaunes* has over the years been internationally discussed and something most people have in one way or another encountered. The British newspaper *The Guardian* writes: "[…] what began as a fuel tax protest has now morphed into a wider anti-government movement."[1] Moreover, still according to The Guardian, many protesters within the *gilets jaunes* often come from low socio-economic backgrounds and the movement is against what they view as an unfair tax system, among other things.[2] In other words, the movement of *gilets jaunes* has sparked a discourse of who they are and what

they represent – perhaps the people? Further, questions regarding the identity of this people brought light to differences between different socio-economic groups and the ubiquitous relevance of digital platforms.

Placing these questions in a new light, I would like to analyse the *gilets jaunes* in the view of crowd psychology. The point of departure is Elena Bovo's presentation of end of the 19th century crowd psychology, understood in its historical context, and with reflections about how and when crowd psychology could be relevant in relation to society today. In this text, crowd psychology will be used as a form of theory to analyse the movement, what characteristics the *gilets jaunes* have and what ultimately defines them.

Crowd psychology is considered a controversial topic within the scientific community and often associated with pre-fascist thinking. Given its history and the main persona usually associated with the term, Gustave Le Bon, it is quite understandable why that is. The book *Psychologie des Foules* (1895) by Gustave Le Bon is, for instance, firmly based in outdated misogyny and racial thinking and, as such, is something that belongs in the past.

However, to focus on its origins constrains the possibility of seeing its relevance today. This is something Elena Bovo wants to investigate and discuss, i.e., crowd psychology as a possible scientific discipline that stretches beyond Le Bon, which she examines in her work *Mécaniques des foules* (2024). The idea is to approach crowd psychology as a theory that could be used for analysis.

Before continuing the discussion about *gilets jaunes*, I will briefly mention what the *idea* of the crowd is, which I will describe in accordance with Le Bon. Gustave Le Bon writes in his book that the crowd is a group of individuals together where the consciousness has been obliterated and their thoughts and feelings are targeted towards the same goal.[3] He writes that a collective soul emerges, and the soul makes the crowd submitted to a mental uniformity.[4] In other words, the crowd forms under a unified idea that almost possess all its members. In this text, when the idea of the crowd is mentioned, this is what I refer to. The mental state and beliefs of a crowd, the idea that possesses the crowd.

The *gilets jaunes* emerged from digital platforms and petitions as a response to the increasing prices on petrol in France which affected people of different socio-economic groups. The success of the petitions led to the beginning of the manifestations on the 17th of November 2018.[5] Even though the petitions were started by individuals, they themselves rejected the proposition of being the leaders of the movement.[6] This makes the *gilets jaunes* a movement without clearly stated leaders.

This is particularly interesting, since Gustave Le Bon argues that a crowd (in the sense of crowd psychology) needs to be led by a leader that reinforces the opinions and identity that the crowd should have.[7] However, he further claims that the leader also is already "possessed" by the idea existing within the crowd, and earlier on have been subjugated under another leader; the leader in this sense is not a tool of thought but rather a tool of action.[8] In other terms, the leaders are not the ones creating the idea or the crowd. They are equally much part of the crowd as the collective crowd in itself.

Sigmund Freud on the other hand argues that there are crowds who are not led by a leader, and that they are formed under something more artificial, such as Christianity for instance.[9] The leader in Christianity would be Christ himself, but for the non-Christians, Christ would rather be a symbolic artificial figure that reinforces the idea and the identity of the Christians.[10] Meaning, the Christians are not led by the leader with an idea, but they are led by the idea itself.

Considering this, it is a possibility that the *gilets jaunes* is a movement led solely by a collective idea, since they do not have a clearly stated leader but are shaped by some kind of cause. Does this however define the *gilets jaunes* as a crowd? Not necessarily. We need to ask ourselves, what is it that creates a crowd: Is it the idea that creates the crowd – in this case, if it was the end goal to form a group that resulted in the *gilets jaunes* which then chose the petrol price as its main concern, or if it is the crowd that (maybe unconsciously) creates the idea – in this case, that a large number of already angry (for different reasons) internet users found a common focus in the petrol prices, and thus created the *gilets jaunes*?

The idea and the crowd seem to coexist and mutually create one another at the same time. For example, the issue regarding petrol was clearly an already existing dilemma. But the issue also was brought even more attention because of the movement. But still, how are we to define the *gilets jaunes*? Are they a crowd, and if so, are they a result of algorithms (since they emerged from digital platforms), or are they the people speaking for its rights and truths?

The definition of the movement seems to correlate with the voice of the people. An identity that is not easy to define because of the question regarding what and who are the people. Could the people be a crowd, or are they two separate things? In the article "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes: une approche psychosociale" by Thomás Zicman de Barros, it is mentioned how the *gilets jaunes* represents the people in opposition to the elites – the elites being aristocrats and politicians.[11] According to this, the people are the ones who are not aristocrats or politicians.

Furthermore, what is at stake is not a question regarding partisan politics, but rather, as Zicman de Barros writes, a question of ethical nature.[12] The *gilets jaunes* rejects the proposition of being a political representation of some sort, and instead claim being the people and wanting to invite the elites to listen and include them.[13]

In relation to this, let us briefly consider the Italian approach to crowd psychology. As Bovo writes in her paper, the Italians formalized "[…] crowd psychology as a social science […]".[14] This was before the book of Le Bon. The Italian path to crowd psychology has an element of socialism to take into consideration, due to the Italian authors who were connected to the socialist movement.[15] The Italian approach to crowds can be concluded as a form of response to some kind of oppression. As Bovo writes:

> Based on the laws of crowd psychology, Sighele sought to establish as a legal principle the idea that an individual who commits a crime in a crowd should not be considered fully responsible for his actions, since his free will is altered and he cannot therefore be judged in the same way as a common criminal. […] The psychology of crowds as it developed in Italy must be understood from the point of view, on the one hand, of the desire to control and dominate the behaviour of individuals taking part in potentially dangerous collective demonstrations of protest and, on the other, of the desire to judge more appropriately and fairly an individual who, having taken part in a demonstration, had allowed himself to be led into committing acts of violence. Taking into account the social context in which an individual, under the influence of a crowd, commits criminal or violent acts, is certainly one of the essential differences between Ferri's and Sighele's conception of the crowd and that of Le Bon, who never takes this into account.[16]

The Italian approach is something to consider when discussing and defining *gilets jaunes* because of the similarities between the Italian path to crowd psychology and the *gilets jaunes*-movement. To give

an example, in Zicman de Barros' article, he interviews several individuals who has participated in the *gilets jaunes* manifestations. In one of the interviews, it is mentioned how the movement do not know where they are headed, but that something needs to change with how things are run.[17] The *gilets jaunes* is a response to something they find unfair and unjust. In particular, from the beginning, the prices regarding petrol. As we mentioned earlier in this text, they view themselves as being the people, and moreover the people in opposition to the elites.

Furthermore, it is known that violence has occurred during the manifestations. But it should be noted that of the 75 000 protesters in the afternoon on the 1st of December 2018, it was estimated that 3000 of them participated in violent acts of different sort, while the remaining 72 000 demonstrated peacefully.[18]

In his article, Zicman de Barros also talks about crowds in terms of masses, when he briefly discusses Freud and how according to Freud the masses are blindly following the same idea, homogenously.[19] But Zicman de Barros also writes, based on his interviews, that the masses of *gilets jaunes* are not homogenous, e.g. because of the diverse ideologies that exist within the movement.[20]

Even considering individual differences within the group, I would argue that in an interview with an individual, one will of course find individuality and diversity. But following Le Bon, it is the idea of something that bring these individuals together, regardless of their background, and creates the crowd.[21] The idea, as he writes, could be a sudden strong interest in a person or a teaching or maybe even a cause.[22]

In the same way as the individuals within the *gilets jaunes* are diverse and differ ideologically, the movement also is diverse – but still there is this collective idea that they are following, and maybe even being led by. That is, they see themselves as the people asking for change. Meaning, the collective idea of the movement is change, whatever that change may be.

To conclude, I will not claim anything specific about whether the *gilets jaunes* are a crowd or not. However, when it comes to using crowd psychology as a theory or a tool for analysis and discourse, some of the characteristics in accordance with Le Bon, Freud and the Italian approach points us in that direction. Or at least it gives us a broader sense of being able to define them more nuanced.

Given that there is a felt lack of explicit tools or theories for analysis of masses in the modern society, we may perhaps use crowd psychology, in the sense it has been used in this text, as an analytical tool that can help us broaden the perspective on other groups, publics or people in our society as well. This perspective includes to not view crowds as necessarily solely negative, nor necessarily solely positive. Finally, we should include a variety of different thinkers on the subject, beyond just Le Bon, as Elena Bovo is trying to elucidate.

NOTES

1 "Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want?", *The Guardian*, 3 December, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want

2 "Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want?", *The Guardian*.

3 Gustave Le Bon, *Massans psykologi* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1912), p. 11.

4 Le Bon, *Massans psykologi*, p. 12.

5 Thomás Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", *Nouvelles perspectives en sciences sociales* 19, no 1 (2023): 243, https://doi.org/10.7202/1110058ar

6 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 245.

7 Le Bon, *Massans psykologi*, p. 104-105.
8 Le Bon, *Massans psykologi*, p. 105.
9 Sigmund Freud, *Valda skrifter Bortom lustprincipen; samt Masspsykologi och jaganalys; Jaget och detet; Hämning, symtom och ångest*, transl. O. Andersson. 2 ed., (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1995), p. 108.
10 Sigmund Freud, *Valda skrifter Bortom lustprincipen; samt Masspsykologi och jaganalys; Jaget och detet; Hämning, symtom och ångest*, p. 109.
11 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 246.
12 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 269.
13 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 268.
14 Elena Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics", in *On crowd psychology, yesterday and today. Occasional papers of URS/SRU Miscellanea rhetorica Upsaliensia* no. 2 (2025), p. 16.
15 Elena Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics, p. 16.
16 Elena Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics, p. 16–17.
17 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 267.
18 "Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want?", *The Guardian*.
19 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 269.
20 Zicman de Barros, "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes : une approche psychosociale", p. 269.
21 Le Bon, *Massans psykologi*, p. 11.
22 Le Bon, *Massans psykologi*, p. 48.

Andreas Rovio

INFRASTRUCTURES OF AUDIENCE FORMATION

Reconceptualizing Gabriel Tarde's "The Public and the Crowd"

> [T]he invention of printing has caused a very different type of public to appear, one which never ceases to grow and whose indefinite extension is one of the most clearly marked traits of our period. There is a psychology of crowds; there remains to be developed a psychology of the public, understood in this other sense as a purely spiritual collectivity, a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental.[1]

In her paper, Elena Bovo points out that, for Gabriel Tarde, "the link between the crowd and the public is mental cohesion, made possible [...] by the phenomenon of imitation and mental contagion."[2] While the exact nature of the relation between crowds and publics in Tarde's thinking is ambivalent,[3] the idea that mental cohesion is a central element in the formation of both raises the question of how these different groups emerge. I want to propose that Tarde – in arguing that the public, or publics, are formed by the way printing, railroad, and the telegraph give rise to "the formidable power of the press" – describes an *infrastructure of audience formation*.[4] Reconceptualizing Tarde's ideas, I will go on to suggest that it is not only the formation of publics, but also the formation of crowds that rest

upon certain infrastructures. By situating audience formation in the dimensions of time and space, and reinterpreting the idea of mental cohesion as a two-tiered structure – of feelings of shared attention and shared ideas – I will locate Tarde's conceptions of the crowd and the public as two types of audiences, and then consider what we might say about them in the contemporary media landscape.

1

Let me begin with some brief comments on the English translations of Tarde's essay "Le Public et la Foule", followed by an outline of his basic ideas about the public. "Le Public et la Foule" was originally published in the magazine *Le Revue de Paris* 1898, subsequently included in Tarde's *L'Opinion et la foule* (1901), and partially translated into English by Terry N. Clark in 1969, with the title "The Public and the Crowd".[5] That translation comprises only the first half of the original essay, and it was not until 2013 that the second half was translated, by Dana Milstein, and given the title "Conviction and the Crowd".[6]

In "The Public and the Crowd", Tarde's conception of the public is directly tied to the innovation of printing: "Was there a public in the Middle Ages? No […]. The public could begin to arise only after the first great development in the invention of printing, in the sixteenth century."[7] It might seem strange that Tarde denies the existence of a public before the printing press, but it is his understanding of what constitutes the mental cohesion of a group which seems to decide the matter, as can be understood from the following: "[S]o long as they read only notices and practical information relevant to their private affairs, even the habitual readers of a newspaper do not form a public […]. It is from the moment when the readers of a newspaper are seized by the idea or the passion which provoked it that they truly become a public."[8] In another passage, Tarde writes: "This bond [between readers of the same newspaper] lies in their simultaneous conviction or passion and in their awareness of sharing at the same time an idea or a wish with a great number of other men."[9]

The importance of the press for Tarde is that it, in the 19th century, could "give all publics the indefinite extension of which they are capable and which contrasts them so sharply with crowds."[10] This is why Tarde views the public as the social group of the future, and the crowd as the social group of the past – the latter cannot extend beyond the area where the speaker can be heard.[11] But while the public is dispersed in space, there is a simultaneity in time which seems to be required in order for it to constitute a public. This is why it is not just printing, but also the railroad and the telegraph, which are necessary innovations in order for the public to properly exist – they permit rapid communication such that readers in different parts of a country (France for Tarde) can read the same news at the same time.[12]

2

I here want to propose that we can read Tarde as a thinker of infrastructures, and their social effects. This is informed by John Durham Peters' infrastructural perspective on media, especially their *logistical* function:

> Logistical media have the job of ordering fundamental terms and units. They add to the leverage exerted by recording media that compress time, and by transmitting media that compress space. The job of logistical media is to organize and orient, to arrange people and property, often

into grids. They both coordinate and subordinate, arranging relationships among people and things.[13]

We have already seen how Tarde thinks of the printing press, the telegraph, and the railroad as necessary in order for the newspaper to function as a force which can give rise to publics. And in the essay "Opinion and Conversation" from 1898 (also included in *L'Opinion et la foule*) Tarde clearly links the formation of the public with a host of different infrastructures:

> The development of the mails by multiplying first public then private correspondence, the development of highways by multiplying new contacts between people, the development of permanent armies by making soldiers from all provinces fraternize with each other, and finally the development of courts by drawing the aristocratic elite from all corners of the earth to the monarchical center of the nation – all had the effect of gradually developing the public mind (*l'esprit public*). But it remained for the printing press to extend this great work to the fullest [in the form of the newspaper].[14]

Tarde gives great importance to infrastructures in the way they make the formation of the public possible, but he does not write as much about the importance of infrastructures when it comes to the crowd. In order to amend this, I would suggest that we take Tarde's concepts of 'the crowd' and 'the public' and reconceptualize them according to what kind of group a certain infrastructure of audience formation enables. What I call an infrastructure of audience formation is anything which arranges people in such a way as to clear the ground for a group to become an audience. The town square is one such infrastructure, since it allows a large group of people to gather together. This gathering does not in itself create an audience, but provides the basis upon which it can be formed. Oratory as an event aligns people into a grid where the roles of 'speaker' and 'audience' are taken up – possibly constituting a kind of Tardean crowd on the basis of the mental cohesion that arises in attending to the speech.[15] Only 'possibly' since mental cohesion, in Tarde's sense, requires a common faith or goal – we will see later how this question can be dealt with. The newspaper, as has already been mentioned, is an infrastructure of audience formation because it provides the opportunity for 'readers' to become a group with a bond, and thus give rise to a public.

3

In mapping out the different types of audiences that an infrastructure makes possible, we need to consider two dimensions: Space and time.[16] Added onto this is the question of mental cohesion, which I will reformulate into a two-tiered structure: A feeling of shared attention and a feeling of shared ideas/passions.

Let us imagine an audience. In space it can be either *congregated*, gathered in one and the same place as a contiguous group, or *dispersed*, existing in different places where individuals are not in close proximity to other members of the audience. In the dimension of time, the audience is *simultaneous* if everyone takes part of the message at the same time, or *non-simultaneous*, when people experience the message at different points in time. The chart below shows the audience position in time (simultaneous/non-simultaneous) and space (congregated/dispersed), with each intersecting field giving examples of what type of media activity that can give rise to an audience of that type.

Space / Time	*Congregated*	*Dispersed*
Simultaneous	Listening to oratory in a town square	Watching linear TV
Non-simultaneous	Visiting a monument	Reading a book

As can be seen, a group of people listening to a speech in a town square is a congregated audience which exists simultaneously in time. All the viewers of a certain TV show broadcasted on linear TV would make up an audience which is dispersed in space (each sitting in their own home) but simultaneous in time (19:00–20:00 at Tuesday evenings). If we take all the readers of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* throughout history, we have an example of a dispersed audience (all over the globe, albeit with uneven distribution geographically), that experiences the work non-simultaneously (one person read it last month, another last year, and a third a hundred years ago). Finally, a monument can have a massive audience if measured over the span of decades or centuries, but at each point in time there might be only a single individual there. The audience is congregated because each one, although visiting at different times, comes to the same place.

The example of the monument provides a good opportunity for clarification: Some infrastructures of audience formation provide opportunity for several, or mixed, audience types. At the monument we may have a group of five, ten or fifty people at the same time, making up a simultaneous congregated audience, which are then a part of the larger, non-simultaneous congregated audience of all the people who have ever visited. A sports event can have a congregated simultaneous audience that watches the event at the arena, and a dispersed simultaneous audience that watches it on TV at home at the same time.

Where does Tarde's concepts of crowds and publics fit in? A group of people which would constitute a crowd must be congregated and simultaneous. But for Tarde, that in itself does not suffice to constitute a crowd, there also needs to be mental cohesion: "Passers-by in the streets, each one going about his own business, peasants assembled at a fairground, people out walking, may form a dense mass, but they are merely a throng until they have a common faith or a common goal that moves them, and moves them as one group."[17] A large number of people in the same place do not necessarily constitute a crowd – a common goal or faith is required. Something similar is true of publics, but here, as we have seen, Tarde describes the bond as: (1) A simultaneous conviction or passion, and (2) an awareness of sharing this conviction and passion with a great number of other people at the same moment in time.

Since Tarde considers the public as a type of crowd, but at the same time also differentiates the two, it becomes uncertain to what degree these two statements above, on the bond that constitutes the crowd and the public, is the same. I will therefore deviate from Tarde's conception of mental cohesion, and instead propose a two-tiered structure, where the first step is a feeling of shared attention and the second is a feeling of shared ideas/passions. In each type of audience formation, there is an element of shared attention. But an individual in that group may or may not feel as though they are part of a group of people who have in common that they all attend to the same thing. This feeling can be present, or absent, in every kind of audience: I might be listening to a speech in the town square, but feel as if the speaker is addressing me as an individual only (even though

I know that there are other people present). Conversely, I might visit a monument alone, but feel aware of how I am now part of a group of people which, throughout time, has directed shared attention at this monument. This is to me the basics of group feeling – a feeling that I am part of an audience.[18] In addition to this feeling there can be another, that of an idea or a passion shared between me and the rest of the audience. Here, *pace* Tarde, I do not consider simultaneity to be necessary for this feeling. In reading a book, I might be struck by it and feel myself bonded to the other members of an audience which is dispersed in both space *and* time. By reshaping Tarde's idea of mental cohesion, my hope is that it might become more applicable to different types of audiences, and also account for how different attitudes among the members of the audience affects the degree to which the group perceives itself as sharing a common goal or passion.

4

What then, is to be said about the crowd and the public today? Bovo writes, in relation to Tarde's thinking about the late 19th century, that "the age of the public is troubled and difficult to define. If the circulation of different opinions makes them wiser than the crowds of the past, the exclusive relationship that can develop between a public and its newspaper is, as Tarde points out, the most dangerous thing for free thought: 'the man of a single book is to be feared, it has been said; but what is that compared with the man of a single newspaper!'"[19] As can be seen, the idea of a fragmented media landscape is clearly present in Tarde's reflections, and Bovo notes how his idea of the public "foreshadows the future of media crowds and 'echo chambers', which have taken over from newspaper audiences with the advent of the new media."[20]

I will here end with two brief reflections on audience formation in the current media landscape: (1) Media that permit live interaction between participants – the largest of which is based upon computer technology and the connectivity of the internet – might mean a return for the crowd over the public. Although not bodily co-present, such phenomena as chatting in comments during a live event, or updating and following social media in real-time, can be thought of as being virtually co-present. This would mean that a lot of social media are infrastructures of audience formation which give rise to both publics and crowds – the higher the degree of live, simultaneous, interaction between participants, the more crowd-like is the nature of the group formation.

(2) As we have seen above, mental cohesion is central to Tarde's conception of the crowd and the public. This sharing of a conviction and passion, and awareness of simultaneously sharing it with a large group of others, might be understood in relation to contemporary research on affective publics.[21] Take, for example, Zizi Papacharissi's definition: "Affective publics are networked publics that come together, are identified, and disband through *shared sentiment*. […] [W]hat unites, identifies, and potentially divides these publics is *the sentiment that drives them* and the stories that they come together to tell" [my emphasis].[22] This definition seems to clearly resonate with some of Tarde's thinking, and when Papacharissi connects affective publics and populism, drawing upon Ernesto Laclau, we might ask: How does infrastructures of audience formation play a part in creating different types of groups which make up the political landscape?

Elena Bovo writes about Tarde: "By following his intuition, we can conceive of publics in a relationship, not of rupture, but of continuity, with crowds."[23] While I have tried to identify crowds and publics as two different audience formations, this relationship of

continuity holds great importance. It opposes the idea of an idealised public sphere, and instead urges us to ask: How does our infrastructures affect the possibilities for different audiences to form? Who holds infrastructural power; who decides the shape of, and access to, different infrastructures? And how can people (re)shape those infrastructures, in order to provide spaces for new formations to arise?

NOTES

1 Gabriel Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", in *Gabriel Tarde On Communication and Social Influence. Selected Papers*, Terry N. Clark (ed.) (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969a), p. 277.

2 Elena Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics: The advent of crowds in the 19th centry", in *On crowd psychology, yesterday and today. Occasional papers of URS/SRU Miscellanea rhetorica Upsaliensia* no. 2 (2025), p. 18.

3 Abe Walker, "'What can a crowd do?': revisiting Tarde after the demise of the public", *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 14, no 2 (2013), p. 227–231.

4 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 281.

5 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd".

6 Gabriel Tarde, "Conviction and the crowd", Dana Milstein (transl.), *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 14, no. 2 (2013), p. 232–239.

7 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 279.

8 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 288.

9 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 278.

10 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 280–281.

11 Here one might inquire into what the technologies of sound amplification and live transmission of video to screens placed in near proximity to the centre of an event might do to extend the possible size of a crowd in physical space.

12 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 280–281. Paul Starr thinks of Tarde as having formulated some of the central insights that Benedict Anderson later wrote about under the name 'imagined communities', see: Paul Starr, "The Relational Public", *Sociological Theory*, 39, no.2 (2021), p. 64.

13 John Durham Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 37.

14 Gabriel Tarde, "Opinion and Conversation", in *Gabriel Tarde on Communication and Social Influence. Selected Papers*, Terry N. Clark (ed.) (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969b), p. 303–304.

15 Here I differ from those who would use the term 'crowd' as a way to label a group which does not meet certain criteria for what constitutes an audience. See: Sharon E. Jarvis, "Audience: An overview", in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, Thomas O. Sloane (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 60.

16 The inspiration for thinking about audiences along the axes of space and time – and the idea that a monument has an audience which can be viewed in a diachronic perspective – comes from John Durham Peters, "Audience: Mass audiences", in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, Thomas O. Sloane (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 68–72.

17 Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd", p. 288.

18 Jarvis, "Audience: An overview", p. 60.

19 Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics", p. 19.

20 Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics", p. 21.

21 Here 'public' is used in a wider sense than Tarde's.

22 Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics. Solidarity and Distance", in *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology*, Deana A. Rohlinger & Sarah Sobieraj (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 68.

23 Bovo, "On Crowd Mechanics", p. 20.

REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973.

Barrows, Susanna. *Distorting mirrors. Visions of the crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France.* New Haven and London: Yale University, 1981.

Björk, Micael. "Demokratisk kultur. Om massornas psykologi i Sverige under 1920-talet". In *I sitt sammanhang. Essäer om kultur och politik tillägnade Rolf Törnqvist*, edited by Micael Björk & Marita Flisbäck. Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings förlag Symposion, 2005, p. 13–40.

Bovo, Elena. *Mécaniques des foules. Des mouvements hors de contrôle?*. Malakoff: Armand Colin, 2024.

Bovo, Elena. "On Crowd Mechanics: The advent of crowds in the 19th centry". In *On crowd psychology, yesterday and today. Occasional papers of URS/SRU Miscellanea rhetorica Upsaliensia no. 2* (2025).

Duan, Charles & Grimmelmann, James, eds. *The Barons and the Mob– Essays on Centralized Platforms and Decentralized Crowds.* 2024.

Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego* [*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921)]. London: The Hogarth Press Ldt, 1949.

Freud, Sigmund. *Valda skrifter Bortom lustprincipen; samt Masspsykologi och jaganalys; Jaget och detet; Hämning, symtom och ångest*, transl. O. Andersson. 2 ed. Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1995.

Gadelius, Bror. *Massornas* själsliv *och andlig smitta*. Uppsala, 1907.
Gramsci, Antonio. *Quaderni del carcere*, (Notebook 9, 1932), Volume Two, Critical Edition of the Gramsci Institute, ed. Valentino Gerratana. Turin: Einaudi, 2007.
Jarvis, Sharon E. "Audience: An overview". In *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, edited by Thomas O. Sloane. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 59–68.
Joly, Bertrand, *Aux origines du populisme. Histoire du boulangisme (1886–1891).* Paris: CNRS, 2022.
Jonsson, Stefan. *A brief history of* the *masses: three revolutions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
Jonsson, Stefan. *Crowds and democracy: the idea and image of the masses from revolution to fascism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
Le Bon, Gustave. *Psychologie des foules.* Paris: Alcan, 1895.
Le Bon, Gustave. *The crowd. A study of the popular mind.* New York: The Macmillan Co, 1896.
Le Bon, Gustave. *Massans psykologi*. Stockholm: Bonnier, 1912.
Lefèvre, Frédéric. "La philosophie scientifique. Une heure avec le Dr. Gustave Le Bon". *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, no. 415 (27 September 1930).
Norström, Vitalis. *Masskultur*. Stockholm: Hierta, 1910.
Papacharissi, Zizi. "Affective Publics. Solidarity and Distance", in *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology*, edited by Deana A. Rohlinger & Sarah Sobieraj. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 61–75.
Peters, John Durham. "Audience: Mass audiences". In *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, edited by Thomas O. Sloane. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 68–72.
Peters, John Durham. *The Marvellous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
Sighele, Scipio. *La folla delinquente*. Torino: Bocca, 1891.
Sighele, Scipio. *La foule criminelle.* Translation by Paul Vigny. Paris: Alcan, 1892.
Starr, Paul. "The Relational Public", *Sociological Theory*, 39, no. 2 (2021), p. 57–80.
Stein, Alfred. "Adolf Hitler und Gustave Le Bon. Der Meister der Massenbewegung und sein Lehrer". *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht,* 6, (1955).
Sternhell, Zeev. *La droite révolutionnaire (1885-1914).* Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
Susmel, Edoardo & Duilio, *Benito Mussolini. Opera Omnia*, vol. XXII. Florence: La Fenice, 1957.
Snyder, Timothy. *On tyranny – 20 lessons from the 20th century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017.
Tarde, Gabriel. "The Public and the Crowd". In *Gabriel Tarde On Communication and Social Influence. Selected Papers*, edited by Terry N. Clark. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969a, p. 277–294.
Tarde, Gabriel. "Opinion and Conversation". In *Gabriel Tarde on Communication and Social Influence. Selected Papers*, edited by Terry N. Clark. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969b, p. 297–318.
Tarde, Gabriel. "Conviction and the crowd", Dana Milstein (transl.), *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 14, no. 2 (2013), p. 232–239.
Tarde, Gabriel. "Le public et la foule". In *L'opinion et la foule*, (1901). Paris: Dunod, 2024.
Zicman de Barros, Thomás. "Les différents populismes des Gilets jaunes: une approche psychosociale". *Nouvelles Perspectives en Sciences Sociales* 19, no 1 (2023), p. 239–277. https://doi.org/10.7202/1110058ar
Walker, Abe. "What can a crowd do?': revisiting Tarde after the demise of the public". *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 14, no. 2 (2013), p. 227–231.

ON-LINE REFERENCES

Encyclopedia.com, "Boulangism" Encyclopedia of Modern Europe: Europe 1789-1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire, last visited February 19, 2025, https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/boulangism

The Guardian. "Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want?". 3 december, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want