

The Exclusion of the Crowd

The Destiny of a Sociological Figure of the Irrational

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Abstract

In the late 19th century, a comprehensive semantics of crowds emerged in European social theory, dominated in particular by Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde. This article extracts two essential, but widely neglected, sociological arguments from this semantics. First, the idea that irrationality is intrinsic to society and, second, the claim that individuality is plastic rather than constitutive. By following the destiny of this semantics in its American reception, the article demonstrates how American scholars soon transformed the conception of crowds. Most importantly, the theoretical cornerstone of the European semantics, the notion of suggestion, was severely challenged in the USA. It is argued that this rejection of the suggestion doctrine paved the way for a distinctive American approach to crowds and collective behaviour in which the early European emphasis on irrationality was ignored and crowds were analysed as rational entities. This may have relieved the discomfort of irrationality but it is also entirely disposed of what were in fact crucial sociological insights. The article recalls the semantics of crowds in order to evoke an early branch of social theory that still contains a provocative gesture.

Key words

■ Chicago School ■ individuality ■ Le Bon ■ rationality ■ social theory ■ Tarde

Introduction

‘Perhaps no historical phenomenon has been so thoroughly neglected by historians as the crowd’, states George Rudé (1981: 3) in the Introduction to his seminal study, *The Crowd in History*. According to Rudé, this ignorance is not to be found in psychology and sociology. Rudé’s observation is largely correct. By the end of the 19th century, the emerging sociological discipline was supplemented by a rapidly growing interest in mass phenomena, giving birth to a whole literature on the (social) psychology of crowds. This concern with the grouping

together of large collectivities of people was not merely academic. Rather the anxiety about crowds was a public affair, reflected, for instance, in a number of literary works of the period – not only in Europe but also in the USA, including novelists like Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Henry James and, later on, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch and, most notably perhaps, Elias Canetti (van Ginneken, 1992; Sandberg, 1997; Plotz, 2000; Esteve, 2003).

Despite the massive focus on crowd phenomena in late 19th-century social theory, the semantics of crowds lost much of its initial fascination and distinctiveness during the 20th century. While major sociologists (Gabriel Tarde, Robert E. Park, etc.) carefully examined the notion of the crowd one century ago, for example, today the crowd has been exiled to the outermost limits of sociology – and hardly any key thinkers of our time include the crowd as a crucial concept for understanding the social (Peter Sloterdijk, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Maffesoli may count as exceptions, which merely emphasizes the missing *mainstream* sociological prominence of the crowd). Contrary to Rudé's impression, therefore, social theory seems no longer to be interested in the crowd. Granted, this declining interest has not occurred overnight, but is rather the result of a long and complex series of events. The aim of this article is to follow this semantic trajectory and to trace parts of the reason for the dwindling attention which is presently devoted to crowds. No full explanation can be offered and, indeed, I leave aside major historical events (e.g., Nazi Germany, Italian fascism) which may account for much of the uneasiness that adheres to the notion of crowds.

This article contends that the indifference towards the crowd may be interpreted as the result of an attempt in social theory to dispose of a double discomfort that accompanies the crowd. First, according to 19th-century semantics, crowds are endowed with characteristics of suggestibility, femininity, immaturity, in short, irrationality. Second, and to some extent related to this, crowd semantics questions a basic assumption in many branches of sociology, that society is best analyzed by taking the individual and individuality as points of departure (all sorts of methodological individualism and recourse to a constitutive subjectivity included). In contrast to this, so the early semantics argues, the individual loses his/her individuality in the crowd and is, however temporarily, absorbed in a collective entity that levels all personal characteristics and suspends his/her reasoning. That is, the early notion of the crowd both queries the idea of a constitutive subjectivity and points to intrinsically irrational aspects of society. Hence the expulsion of crowds from social theory, I claim, and hence, alternatively, the re-description of crowd behaviour in rational terms, thereby obliterating almost every distinguishing trait that the crowd possessed according to 19th-century semantics.

The article begins with a presentation of some of the key aspects of the late 19th-century crowd semantics. Since this was, on a theoretical level at least, a primarily European issue, I mainly focus on the European – and more specifically, French – semantics. I then turn to the American reception and transformation of this semantics, in particular the Chicago School variant (Park, Blumer, etc.), as I take the American development to be most illustrative of the general

destiny of the crowd semantics. Even if the crowd was still attributed a dominant status in early 20th-century American sociology, its defining traits were slightly modified, paving the way for eventually conceptualizing it as a rational phenomenon, composed of rational individuals.

One of the most important reasons for the altered conception of crowds relates, I would claim, to the demise of the perhaps constitutive assumption of the semantics, the doctrine of suggestion. In the next section, I briefly examine the work of George Herbert Mead and Talcott Parsons, as they both formulated theoretical frameworks that undermined the previous dominance of the suggestion thesis. My contention is not that the idea of suggestion would not have been discredited anyway. Yet both Mead and Parsons contributed to this development and their theoretical alternatives may at least be seen as symptomatic of a general tendency within American sociology. The following section demonstrates the effects of the decline of the suggestion doctrine. Rather than explaining crowd behaviour in terms of hypnotic suggestion, a new orthodoxy emerged in American sociology according to which crowds were better conceived as normative entities composed of rational and deliberate individuals. This designates a complete transformation of 19th-century crowd semantics. What was initially a figure of irrationality and the difficulty of maintaining individuality had now lost its entire challenging and radical sociological gesture. The irrational had become rationalized, the abnormal normalized.¹

As is hopefully clear from this brief outline, the aim of the article is not merely to follow the crowd semantics' route from prominence to insignificance. It is just as much to question the quest for and emphasis on rationality and individuality in social theory. The semantics of the crowd was – and still could be – a useful reminder that social phenomena may not be fully grasped in rational and individualistic terms. Finally, I discuss the further potential and implications of bringing crowd semantics back into contemporary social theory.

The Early Semantics of Crowds

Interest in crowds has been recorded for a long time. Yet it is only by the end of the 19th century that a more or less systematic and widespread scrutiny of crowd behaviour had emerged which takes place parallel to the rising sociological discipline. Some of the key figures in this flourishing engagement with crowds include the Italian Scipio Sighele and the Frenchmen Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde. While Le Bon is no doubt the most famous of the three, and almost synonymous with the early study of crowds, there is also little doubt that he exaggerated his own originality. Sighele, for example, repeatedly accused him of ripping off the Italian's previously published work in Le Bon's bestseller, *The Crowd* (published 1895).² Be this as it may, Le Bon's work remains interesting, as it provides an illustrative condensation of the crowd semantics of the time.

Le Bon observes the crowd both from a historical and a psychological perspective where the former provides the grounds for the latter. The historical

justification of engaging in the study of crowds is most lucidly stated in his renowned claim that 'The age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS' (Le Bon, 2002: x). So even if 'crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples' (2002: iii), their significance was seen as rapidly growing, threatening to produce a transformation of the entire society. Le Bon's account is by no means purely analytical but deeply marked by a conservative fear of the implications that he expected from the collapse of the old social order. According to Le Bon, for example, the coming era is 'tantamount to a barbarian phase' (2002: xiii) where the moral deeds of civilization are replaced by an anarchical, i.e. pre-societal, sink.³

A crowd, says Le Bon, is not a mere collection or gathering of individuals, but rather a distinctive psychological entity; a mental unity of people who may or may not be present at the same location but who, however ephemerally, constitute a collective mind. According to Le Bon, the crowd is characterized by three interrelated qualities. First, the crowd exerts an 'invincible power' over the individual crowd member 'which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint' (Le Bon, 2002: 6). For this reason, Le Bon argues, members of a crowd are not psychologically responsible for their actions (2002: 105). The second defining feature of the crowd is contagion. The contagious aspect – which is present in 'every sentiment and act' of the crowd (2002: 7) – contributes to the weakening of the individuality of the crowd members. In the crowd, 'their conscious personality vanishes' (2002: 2). Contagion is, finally, an effect of suggestibility. Le Bon himself likens this dimension to hypnotism. Being in the crowd the individual ceases to be governed by his or her will. In contrast, he or she is 'paralysed' by the 'magnetic influence given out by the crowd' and becomes as such an 'automaton', driven by suggestions and instincts rather than reason (2002: 7, 8). In sum, Le Bon's account of the crowd's general characteristics portrays a psychological entity that impels its individual members to act in opposition to what they would do consciously and on their own. Although Le Bon (2002: xiii, 9) acknowledges that the crowd might at times be heroic, the notions of instincts, contagion, etc. nevertheless point to its inherent irrationality. 'In crowds', he states, 'it is stupidity and not mother-wit that is accumulated', implying that 'the crowd is always intellectually inferior to the isolated individual' (2002: 6, 9).

As indicated above, Le Bon was not alone in attributing these characteristics to the crowd. In particular, Gabriel Tarde elaborated on crowd behaviour and did so by embedding his understanding of the crowd in a general theory of societal imitation. In his influential *Laws of Imitation* of 1890, Tarde asserts that '*Society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism*' (1962: 87). According to Tarde, then, the hypnotic state not only prevails in the crowd (as Le Bon suggests). Quite the contrary, he says, somnambulism is a constitutive feature of society. This notwithstanding, the crowd does have a particular relation to imitation and, hence, society: the crowd is one of two 'distinct germs of societies', the other one being the family (Tarde, 1968: 325).

It may be argued that Tarde, in his analyses of the crowd as a 'spontaneous

generation', characterized by instantaneous imitation (1968: 323), actually observes the crowd as the practically most perfect expression of sociality in modern society (McClelland, 1989: 184; Borch, 2005: 90–1). Still he shares with Le Bon a critical – if not fearful – attitude towards crowds, reflected, for instance, in his studies of criminal crowds. The social outburst of the crowd may simply be too extreme. Or to put it differently, the crowd seems to be on the edge of the social, threatening to turn the social eruption into irrational destruction. Also Tarde's description of the ratio of intelligence between the crowd and the individual crowd members to some extent squares with that of Le Bon. For example, Tarde claims that crowds demonstrate 'less intelligence than the individuals which compose them would do separately' (1903: 80). But what is more, Tarde makes it clear that by taking the idea of suggestion of imitation as the point of departure – whether in explaining crowd behaviour or in examining society in general – the analysis relinquishes any recourse to a constitutive individuality or an autonomous self. In the words of Ruth Leys:

By dissolving the boundaries between self and other, the theory of imitation-suggestion embodied a highly plastic notion of the human subject that radically called into question the unity and identity of the self. Put another way, it made the notion of individuality itself problematic. (1993: 281)

According to Tarde, crowds are intimately linked to urban cities. Combined with a historical argument that in modern society, the city has replaced nobility as the most important imitation-generating factor, Tarde seems to approach Le Bon's prophecy of the era of crowds. Yet in his subsequent writings, Tarde explicitly challenges Le Bon's historical claim with the counter-assessment that the present age 'is the era of the public or of publics' (1989: 38). Tarde's account of the public is a very original analysis of how communication in modern society has become spatially distanced – contrary to what he sees as the crowd's reliance upon physical contact (1989: 32). Most interesting in the present context, however, despite his endorsement of the public as the distinctively modern attribute, Tarde nevertheless continues to express a certain anxiety about crowds. More specifically, he warns that publics may get too excited and produce crowds, an occurrence which, even if 'fairly rare', he characterizes as 'extremely dangerous' (1989: 39).

Taking the writings of Le Bon and Tarde to be representative of the late 19th-century semantics of crowds, the following image emerges. First, the crowd is described as a distinct entity which, through contagious suggestion, brings about (mainly) destructive acts that the individual crowd members would hardly ever generate on their own. Second, the crowd is attributed less intelligence and rationality than the individuals composing it. These two points in combination imply, finally, that the crowd may pose a threat to the established social order – in particular to a hierarchical differentiation of society since the crowd levels for a moment all social differences. For this reason Leon Bramson, in his classic study, *The Political Context of Sociology* (1961), argues that analyses which subscribe to this semantics of crowds

are usually inspired by anti-democratic sentiments, and appear to be aimed at discrediting not only the lower orders, with their claims for increased political power through the general franchise, but also in some cases the whole liberal scheme of parliamentarianism. (1961: 53)

According to Bramson, therefore, the early European conception of crowds is marked by a clear conservative bias. Le Bon, Tarde, etc., so his analysis goes, all expose a fear of masses because the crowds seem to undermine the aristocratic status, privileges, etc. of late 19th-century France. The crowds make equal what is, in the eyes of conservatives, fundamentally different. While this conservative bias is not equally prominent among the various social theorists, as Bramson states,⁴ it nevertheless distinguishes the European crowd semantics from the 20th-century American variant. The latter is said to contain a much more liberal focus on the individual who is conceived of independently of class-based structures.

It may be argued that the sweeping distinction between European and American images of crowds necessarily veils internal divergences on both sides of the Atlantic. This is no doubt the case, but still the distinction does reveal certain apparent differences. More critical is what is ignored in Bramson's attempt to oppose a conservative European tradition to a liberal American line of thought. While he definitely has a point in stressing the conservative tenets of Le Bon, Tarde, etc., he entirely disregards the crucial sociological arguments that can be extracted from the European semantics of crowds. First, following Tarde, the crowd is not merely a threat to the social order. Much more, it is a fascinating figure that emphasizes, as a key sociological lesson, that society carries its own inherent traits and conditions of irrationality – an early deconstructive argument, one might say. In other words, the semantics of the crowd not merely points to parasitic and destructive dimensions of the social, but rather reminds us that sociality need not be interpreted as a manifestation of rationality, quite the contrary.

Second, in stressing the political context of the European crowd semantics, Bramson ignores the actually very *sociological* critique of the constitutive individual. Independent of the political agenda, the semantics of crowds entirely undermines the idea of ascribing the individual a pivotal role in social theory.⁵ It suggests instead that major social events may in fact take place by directly destabilizing, if not entirely emasculating, any feature of individuality. Merely labelling this critique conservative displaces the focus from its radical theoretical value (which carries no specific political bias).

The Chicago School

The European semantics of crowds received ample interest in the USA, in particular in the Chicago School of sociology. Yet, as Bramson demonstrates, in its American reception, the notion of crowds was soon ascribed a much more positive and creative potential as compared to the European image. This particular

American adaptation already appeared in the 1904 dissertation by Robert E. Park, one of the leading figures of the Chicago School. Although Park's German doctoral dissertation, *Masse und Publikum*, was not published in English translation (*The Crowd and the Public*) until 1972, its basic ideas soon spread. Most notably they laid the foundation of some of the crucial distinctions in Park's and Ernest W. Burgess' *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921) – the cornerstone textbook for generations of American sociologists.

In *The Crowd and the Public*, Park discusses a number of European accounts of the crowd, including those of Le Bon and Tarde. Upon examining this literature, he concludes that 'the suggestive influence exerted by people on each other constitutes the deciding characteristic of the crowd; and the social epidemic becomes the typical social phenomenon for collective psychology' (Park, 1972: 19). Interestingly, this statement is followed by a footnote in which Park quotes Boris Sidis' remarkable treatise on *The Psychology of Suggestion* (1898) – a very prominent volume where crowd psychology was discussed 'almost for the first time in English', as William James (1898: vii) notes in his Introduction to the book. Sidis' work contains several interesting observations. Most importantly in the present context, Sidis suggests the same figure of the inherent irrationality of the social which was recognized in Tarde above. According to Sidis, suggestion is an essential prerequisite for social life. Since crowds are also characterized by suggestibility it hardly surprises that '*Society and mental epidemics are intimately related*' (Sidis, 1898: 310). Indeed, he argues, '*Society by its nature, by its organization, tends to run riot in mobs, manias, crazes, and all kinds of mental epidemics*' (1898: 311, italics added). And, he asks, 'Laws and mobs, society and epidemics – are they not antagonistic? In point of fact they are intimately, vitally inter-related, *they are two sides of the same shield*' (1898: 312, italics added). Similar to Tarde, but without citing him, Sidis thus highlights that the very same irrationality, which is attributed to the crowd, is intrinsically linked to the organization of society as such.

Although Park does quote Sidis, he does not pay any attention to this radical argument. Quite the contrary, Park institutes a perspective on crowds that plays down the significance of irrationality and focuses instead on the constructive and transformative potentials of crowds. To be sure, while drawing on the Tardean distinction between the crowd and public, Park does describe the former in terms of 'anarchy', and the latter in terms of 'prudence and rational reflection' (1972: 80–1). But he also argues that the crowd and public

[both] serve to bring individuals out of old ties and into new ones. . . . Wherever a new interest asserts itself amid those already existing, a crowd or a public simultaneously develops; and through this union of groups, or certain individuals from among them, a new social form for the new interests is created. (Park, 1972: 79)

Rather than posing an irrational threat to society, then, the crowd is here conceived as an entity in social evolution through which individuals generate new social relations. To put it differently, in Park's account, the crowd does not evoke an image of societal disorganization, but rather of social reorganization. In the

same vein, Park and Burgess, in their discussion of collective behaviour, defined for the first time in *The Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, suggest that social unrest – the germ of crowd behaviour – may pave the way for ‘*a new social order*’ (Park and Burgess, 1921: 867, italics added; cf. Bramson, 1961: 62–4).

Park’s approach to the crowd as an impulsive and, on the level of social evolution, not necessarily irrational phenomenon inaugurated a distinctive American tradition of research on crowds, soon subordinated to the study of the broader and less discomforting category of collective behaviour. The first follower of Park’s line of reasoning was Herbert Blumer. Similar to Park, Blumer oscillates between stressing the crowd’s irrational facets and its creative potentials. On the one hand, for example, social contagion – an important mechanism of collective behaviour – is described as ‘nonrational’, and the crowd is portrayed as ‘fickle, suggestible, and irresponsible’, obeying ‘atavistic’ impulses rather than critical judgement (Blumer, 1951: 176, 180, 181). In the same vein, Blumer is careful to emphasize that mass behaviour signifies ‘the absence of society’ (1935: 122). On the other hand, Blumer stresses the link between crowd behaviour and the emergence of a new social order much more ardently than Park does. In fact, the whole study of collective behaviour is, Blumer believes, an investigation into ‘the ways by which the social order arises’ (1951: 169). This new social order may provide new forms of living for the individual. Indeed, compared to the old social order, it may have a liberating effect on the individual. It is precisely this argument which, according to Bramson (1961: 68), endows Blumer’s theory with a ‘liberal ethos’.

Blumer’s work itself initiated a number of subsequent studies which were to further play down the irrational character of crowds and which, as such, continued along the line initially formulated by Robert Park. The content of some of these studies will be examined later in this article. First, however, I shall focus briefly on George Herbert Mead and Talcott Parsons who, each in their own way, formulated theoretical frameworks that challenged the main assumption in the European crowd semantics: the doctrine of suggestion (to use the apposite phrase of Asch, 1952: 387 ff.). As a result, I claim, the alternative avenues developed by Mead and Parsons provided significant blows to the early semantics of crowds, paving the way for ever more diluted and normalized conceptions of crowd behaviour in American sociology.

Alternatives to Suggestion

In the early European crowd semantics the doctrine of suggestion formed the theoretical background against which the sociological analyses of crowds were accomplished. In a fascinating analysis, Ruth Leys argues that although great American interest in the imitation-suggestion theory arose at the beginning of the 20th century, its analytical status was soon contested. This was particularly significant in the work of George Herbert Mead. According to Leys:

we cannot understand Mead's thought unless we grasp that what is mobilizing and impelling it from beginning to end is the resolve to defeat Tarde's theory of imitation-suggestion as that theory had been represented and also deflected in the work of Baldwin, Royce, Cooley, and others . . . Mead's whole project would be undermined if imitation-suggestion proved to be internal to the production of the subject rather than an auxiliary process. (1993: 287)

No full account of Leys' analysis can be given here. Briefly put, she demonstrates how Mead, on the one hand, presents his theory of the social personality – the idea that the self is constituted in its relation to other selves – as somehow congenial to that of Tarde. On the other hand, however, Mead is very cautious to stress that this is not to be understood in terms of a more or less hypnotic situation in which the self unconsciously imitates the other. The self is not an effect of imitation-suggestion. Rather, Mead argues, imitation itself requires that the self is conscious of other selves. In order to imitate, in order to put oneself in another's place, therefore, 'the self-identical ego or *subject* is silently presupposed. Which is to say that Mead's attempt to derive the subject from the social will be compromised from the outset' (Leys, 1993: 292).

Mead was familiar with the work of both Le Bon and Tarde (Mead, 1899, 1934: 53), and he occasionally refers to the phenomenon of crowds. In these discussions, Leys asserts, it is clear that Mead affirms what was already claimed by the European crowd semantics, that in the crowd, the very difference between conscious selves is nonexistent. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that Mead opposes a critical image of the imitation of the crowd – the kind of (hypnotic) imitation-suggestion he aims to vanquish – with a positive image of the non-crowd situations in which differences subsist between subjects, and conscious deliberation may therefore take place (Leys, 1993: 299–300).

In sum, while Mead does to some extent form part of the (Tardean) tradition of imitation theory, he is at great pains to reject its hypnotic and irrational elements and to replace it with a much more rational image. This may be marred by a certain over-compensation, as Mead in fact ends up assuming the existence of a pre-social subject. Most important in the present context, however, it is from the perspective of social psychology – where the suggestion doctrine had its most prominent career – that Mead presents his dramatic theoretical reorientation. Mead challenges the doctrine on its own ground, so to speak. It is my claim that Mead's critique is symptomatic of a growing American destabilization of the suggestion doctrine. This obviously also had implications for crowd semantics since this was based essentially on the idea of suggestion. In other words, Mead may be seen as formulating a significant contribution to subverting the very foundation of the early European conception of irrational crowds, constituted by hypnotized individuals.⁶

While Mead presents a social-psychological critique of the suggestion doctrine, a distinctively sociological alternative to the Tardean tradition is found in the work of Talcott Parsons. It is not the aim here to flesh out Parsons' vast and complex contribution to social theory. Much more modestly the idea is to indicate, first, how the architecture of his theory of action was based on a

European sociological tradition that opposed the semantics of irrational crowds; and, second, why its great success in American sociology (peaking in the 1960s) thus accounts for part of the reason why the sociology of crowds lost ground. Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) is the landmark book which inaugurated a whole new tradition of American thinking. According to Morris Janowitz, for example, this volume not only symbolized the 'intellectual crisis' of the Chicago School; the book announced that 'a new intellectual format imposed itself on American sociology' (Janowitz, 1970: x; cf. Abbott, 1999: 9).

Although not explicitly defined as such, *The Structure of Social Action* is from the outset an attempt to undermine the key propositions of crowd semantics. This is reflected in the concrete analyses as well as in the selection of European writers that Parsons bases his work upon. Let me give just three indications of this. First, Parsons works out his theory of social action not by looking to scholars such as Le Bon or Tarde, but rather by interpreting the work of Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.⁷ Although Pareto's work on the circulations of elites may be seen as somewhat related to crowd semantics, and even if Durkheim may be said to formulate a 'rudimentary crowd psychology' in his sociology of religion (Lukes, 1985: 163, n. 22), there is no doubt that this selection of European scholars presents a clear alternative to Le Bon, Tarde, etc. It is well known, for example, that in particular Durkheim and Tarde fought an intense theoretical dispute and were, in many ways, opposites: Contrary to Durkheim's attempt to make sociology a science of social facts, Tarde conceived of his general sociology within a cosmological theory of universal repetition; he saw sociology and social psychology as closely related and was for the same reason – incorrectly, but effectively – accused by Durkheim of merely outlining a psychologism (on the debates between Durkheim and Tarde, see Lukes, 1985: 302 ff.; Lepenies, 1988).

Second, the whole idea of Parsons' book is to formulate a voluntaristic theory of action in which 'the means-end schema' – together with its 'subjective reference' to an ego or self – is considered the 'the central framework for the causal explanation of action' (Parsons, 1937: 750, 47). This is clearly different from the semantics of crowds where social action is explained in terms of hypnotic suggestion, thereby undermining the whole idea of a distinctive self. Finally, and hardly surprising, therefore, with one exception there are no discussions of crowds in *The Structure of Social Action*. The lone exception occurs in Parsons' discussion of Durkheim's sociology of religion. While Lukes (1985: 462–3) argues that this part of Durkheim's work contains a positive account of crowds, where crowd behaviour is said to potentially pave the way for new religious ideas, Parsons is at great pains to defend Durkheim against any accusation of, however slightly, affirming crowd semantics. Thus, Parsons stresses, 'Durkheim's theory of ritual is not anti-intellectual crowd psychology – in fact it is not psychology in any sense' (1937: 437).

In sum, Parsons defined a new theoretical agenda in American sociology. Similar to Robert Park, he constructed his programme on recent European sociology, but the inspiration he searched for was no less than perpendicular to the

(Tardean) tradition of suggestion which was a defining feature of the crowd semantics. Parsons was not at all interested in crowds, and his theory of social action was, in its voluntaristic focus, clearly an alternative to theories that place somnambulism at the centre of attention. It is not my intention to suggest that the notion of crowds was immediately excluded from sociology due to the work of Mead and Parsons. Sociological deliberations on crowds did occur, just as the crowd semantics actually flourished in more popular studies. Yet the theoretical atmosphere had definitely changed, discrediting the potentially significant sociological contributions of the semantics ever more in the American context. The effects of this become obvious when looking at the principal discussions of crowds since the 1950s.⁸

Rational Approaches to Crowd Behaviour

In the 1950s and 1960s the literature on collective behaviour increased greatly. While not necessarily an explicit continuation of Mead and Parsons, this body of research no doubt reflected the changing theoretical climate: the study of crowds and collective behaviour became increasingly associated not with hypnotic suggestion but rather with normative restraints on individual actors or, in more radical accounts, with explaining collective phenomena by reference to rational subjects. As will be stated in the discussion of the most significant contributions below, this entirely altered the connotations and implications of the concept of crowds.

The first American textbook on collective behaviour, Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian's *Collective Behavior* (1957), partly draws upon and partly revises the Le Bon/Tarde and Park/Blumer traditions. Turner and Killian share with Tarde the idea that collective behaviour is an emergent phenomenon. But whereas Tarde was careful only to stress the emergent property as such – 'incoherence becomes cohesion' and 'noise becomes voice' (Tarde, 1968: 323) – Turner and Killian assert that what arises in collective behaviour is a normative order. The notion of emergent norms explicitly emphasizes what is the distinguishing feature of Turner and Killian's theoretical reorientation: they normalize what was intrinsically irrational in the early European semantics. What was initially seen as a social outburst, based solely on suggestion, is now reinterpreted within a normative framework. In other words, the acts of crowds are no longer seen as essentially irrational and impulsive, but rather as being governed normatively.

The dissociation from the notion of irrationality is deliberate. Turner and Killian assert that it is impossible to maintain a meaningful difference between rational and irrational action with regard to collective behaviour. But they nonetheless describe crowd behaviour as fundamentally rational, thereby continuing along the path of non-irrationality that characterizes a great part of the American sociological tradition. This is illustrated by their discussion of suggestibility in crowds. They acknowledge that individual crowd members display

[a] heightened suggestibility, but this suggestibility is not of an unfocused, indiscriminate nature. It amounts to a tendency to respond uncritically to suggestions that are consistent with the mood, imagery, and conception of appropriate action that have developed and assumed a normative character. (Turner and Killian, 1957: 84)

That is, what is really important to crowd members is conforming to the norms of the group. Despite Turner and Killian's attempt to play down the focus on rationality/irrationality, this emphasis on norm-conforming behaviour silently introduces an aspect of rationality: crowd members follow the norms of the group not because of contagious suggestion, but because of an extensive pressure towards conformity.⁹

A somewhat different effort to study the influence of norms upon individual crowd members is provided by Neil J. Smelser in his *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962). Drawing upon the 'logic and substance' of Parsons' work, Smelser sets out to examine, among other dimensions of social action, 'the conditions under which new norms arise and become established through a norm-oriented movement' (1962: 23, 27). Smelser's theory is an explicit attempt to move beyond the legacy of Le Bon, Tarde, etc. whose work he dismisses as plainly psychological. This move implies, he says, that concepts such as imitation, contagion and suggestion must be excluded or at least subsumed under 'the sociological approach' that asks: 'Under what social conditions do these psychological variables come into play as parts of collective behavior?' (1962: 21, cf. also 152–3).¹⁰ It is evident from this that Smelser does not recognize any sociological value of the early European crowd semantics. More than anything, this replicates the Durkheimian repression of an alternative sociological tradition.

More sympathetic to the existing tradition is Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang's book on *Collective Dynamics* (1961) in which the Langs generally follow the path of Park and Blumer. But the book also adds a new dimension to the study of crowds. Thus, while on the one hand following the early semantics of psychic epidemics, contagion, loss of self-consciousness, etc., the Langs simultaneously introduce an element of rationality in their examination of the formation of crowds. According to the Langs:

The crowd situation offers (1) positive *rewards* which temporarily outweigh any realistic assessment of consequences, (2) as well as a strategy for *guilt evasion*. Even though it may lead to his arrest, the fan who throws the bottle at the umpire enjoys his notoriety more or less consciously. (1961: 121)

We need not investigate the implications of this striking association of contagion and rational deliberation. Suffice it to say that the emphasis on strategic considerations runs counter to the idea of an intrinsic irrationality in crowds. While the Langs attempt to reconcile crucial aspects of the early European semantics with a fundamentally rational perspective, others entirely settle with the former and argue that crowd behaviour may well be explained in rational terms. This is suggested most significantly by Richard E. Berck whose work has even been labelled 'superrationalistic' (Killian, 1980: 282–3).

As an alternative to the body of literature (Le Bon, Blumer, etc.) that emphasizes contagion, suggestion, irrationality, etc. – and which is deemed ‘outdated’ (Berck, 1974a: 20 ff.) – Berck applies game theory to the study of crowds. According to this approach, ‘crowd participants (1) exercise a substantial degree of rational decision-making and (2) are not defined a priori as less rational than in other contexts’ (Berck, 1974b: 356). Rather than being spontaneously absorbed in the crowd, then, ‘the gathering of a crowd is viewed as an *opportunity* in which individuals can experience certain rewards and certain costs’ (1974a: 67). Clearly the whole idea of the gaming approach is to place the individual actor and his/her rational decisions at the centre of the theory. This assumes the existence of exactly those qualities that were questioned by the suggestion doctrine.

In a way Berck’s account is the culmination of a long American tradition of rationalizing and individualizing what was, in its initial European formulation, an idea of irrationality and a destabilization of the notion of individuality. All the distinguishing and radical features of the early crowd semantics have disappeared. Still Berck is explicitly concerned with crowds and does, as such, take part in the project of examining crowd behaviour, however different his perspective is from that of the social psychology of crowds. This separates his work from that of other American scholars who also apply rational approaches to the study of collective phenomena. Mancur Olson, for example, in his seminal book, *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965), more than anyone else inaugurated a route that differed significantly from previous analyses of collective behaviour. Despite a brief reference to theories of mass movements (1965: 161–2), Olson’s theory is concerned with altogether different questions than were the theories previously engaged with, on the surface, like issues.

This is not the place to trace the heritage of Olson. Nor shall I examine the many studies of social movements or other collective phenomena by, say, John Lofland, Charles Tilly and Clark McPhail which, in the latter’s terms, also moved beyond the myth of the madding (that is, irrational) crowd (McPhail, 1991). The bottom line is that whereas the crowd played a prominent role in early 20th-century American sociology, today it is virtually non-existent or at any rate a very exotic subject. And when crowds occasionally do crop up in social theory, the irrational traits are dismissed and reinterpreted as in fact rational.

Crowd Semantics and Current Social Theory

Where does this historical exposition of crowd semantics leave us? What are the current sociological implications? In a discussion of the possible resurgence of the crowd, Helmut König distinguishes sharply between the legacy of the crowd’s thematic horizon and the rehabilitation of the crowd as semantics. While he believes that a number of the thematic issues addressed by the old semantics may still be important to study – for example, the relations between sociology and psychology, symbols and politics, etc. – he dismisses the semantics itself as

currently irrelevant (König, 1999: 35–6). While I agree that the initial crowd semantics' conceptual and analytical rigour remains too sketchy to be re-launched *en bloc*, I do believe that the semantics has more to offer than merely highlighting interesting topics. It also provides important suggestions. In this section I shall discuss four areas in which crowd semantics may inform and advance contemporary social theory. While this discussion must necessarily be very brief, it is nonetheless my hope that it suffices as an outline of what place crowd semantics could occupy in the current theoretical landscape and what contributions it may convey.

First, the classical semantics of crowds suggests a research agenda in which a range of social phenomena – e.g. protests, turmoil, hooliganism and panic, but possibly also religious practices, financial speculation, fashion, consumption patterns, etc. – are analysed independently of the structure–agency dichotomy. Focusing on imitation-suggestion initiates an examination of social processes which gives primary attention neither to deliberate individual actors (as in Berck's rational choice account) nor to how these may be governed by social structures (or normatively as Turner and Killian suggest). It observes rather how sociality emerges spontaneously and how social structures and subjectivities may be formed and altered in such processes. In other words, the semantics explains collective processes by reference to internal dynamics rather than external incentives.

Second, this implicit rejection of more or less mechanical approaches to the study of social life associates crowd semantics with what is presently discussed under the headline of a new vitalism.¹¹ The vitalist perspective is characterized by several features. These include focusing on self-organization and non-linearity and paying attention to becoming rather than being. Furthermore, it is based on an ontology of difference, just as it questions and transgresses the usually enforced disciplinary boundaries (see Fraser et al., 2005; Lash, 2005). Vitalism, as it is discussed today, builds upon the work of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze and counts among its classical sociological exponents Simmel and in particular Tarde (Lazzarato, 1999; Lash, 2005). The early European semantics of crowds proposes a theoretical programme which demonstrates in many ways affinities with the vitalist approach (although this is no doubt more the case for Tarde than, say, Le Bon). For example, it emphasizes the self-organizing character of crowd processes. Thus, Tarde describes the crowd as 'a spontaneous generation' through which life emerges (1968: 323). Granted, this life may be the life of 'a wild beast' (1968: 323), but it is life nonetheless, generated by the non-linear quality of the imitation-suggestion's contagious nature. Furthermore, crowd semantics portrays the crowd as a micro-cosmos of becoming. Not only is social life becoming in the crowd. Also identities, which are usually considered fixed and stable, are reformed and reprocessed in the crowd. Finally, crowd semantics queries the attempt (by, for example, Durkheim) to distinguish sharply between sociology and other disciplines and argues instead for a close relation between social and psychological phenomena (more on this below). Against this background it may be claimed that crowd semantics could provide a valuable starting point for promoting the vitalist perspective and taking it in new directions.

Third, as has been demonstrated in this article, classical crowd semantics emphasizes the irrational character of collective social life. It even claims that modern society has a dark irrational and destructive side that it cannot escape. This has three important implications for contemporary social theory. First, it suggests that modernity must remain an unfinished project in the sense that the rationality of the Enlightenment will always co-exist with the irrational, a part that cannot be rationalized. Second, and more importantly, the semantics may caution against ideologically acclaiming any political mobilization. This is precisely Slavoj Žižek's point against Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000) celebration of the multitude as a form of resistance against the Empire. This celebration is too one-sided, Žižek believes. His argument is based upon Spinoza rather than Le Bon and Tarde, yet it stresses the very same ambiguity – sociality *and* irrationality – of the crowd that was observed in the late 19th-century crowd semantics:

This 'undecidability' of the crowd goes all the way down: 'crowd' designates a certain mechanism that engenders social links, and *this very same* mechanism that supports, say, the enthusiastic formation of social solidarity also supports the explosive spread of racist violence. (Žižek 2004: 35)

In crowd semantics, third, the focus on the irrational is closely linked to questions of affect, passion, emotion, etc. The semantics may not offer an in-depth analysis of these concepts. However, it stresses their social importance and provides the vocabulary of imitation-suggestion to account for their impact and expansion.

The final link and contribution to contemporary social theory that I shall suggest here follows from what has been mentioned above and concerns the disciplinary divide between sociology and (social) psychology. 19th-century crowd semantics was indeed a social psychology of crowds and no sharp distinctions were drawn between sociological and psychological insights. For this reason Gabriel Tarde (1903) even defined his sociology as an inter-psychology. Through its emphasis on affect, emotions, suggestion, etc., crowd semantics not only follows the line of disciplinary transgression which is currently suggested by the revival of both vitalism and Tarde's work. It offers in addition a case in point that highlights the analytical importance of studying concrete social phenomena from a most open theoretical horizon where disciplinary boundaries are not taken for granted.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was not to 're-place crowd psychology at the center of social scientific and sociological thought', as Stephen Reicher wants to do (2004: 252). Nor was it the intention to question or underrate the many original contributions which are no doubt found in the American literature that has been reviewed in this article. The aim was rather to suggest that the American sociological tradition has gradually devaluated what seems to be important sociological arguments in the early European semantics of crowds. Even if this semantics

does not hold a privileged position in current social theory, it may in fact contribute to present debates. Rather than merely suggesting an analytical framework to understand a relatively limited domain of social phenomena, for example, the semantics defines the contours of an alternative sociology. It does not present a sweeping replacement of existing sociological traditions, but it does propose a supplement to such traditions and invites us to rethink parts of what is usually taken for granted. In particular, the emphasis on irrationality and plastic subjectivities is original and still important to recall. To be sure, the semantics may not be revitalized *en bloc* just as its various exponents may not be equally interesting today (Tarde's work, for example, is much more subtle than Le Bon's). Still the early European crowd semantics may nonetheless add new dimensions to contemporary debates and it may do so in a unique and refreshingly old-fashioned way.

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Notes

- 1 Evidently, the semantic history of the crowd presented in this article must be very selective. It is my hope, though, that the various positions discussed will nonetheless prove to be illustrative of the sociological destiny of the crowd. I should stress in this context that the focus on the American reception is not meant to suggest that 20th-century European social thought followed an altogether different trajectory from that of the USA.
- 2 Sighele's accusations as well as the historical context of the various early crowd theories are examined in van Ginneken (1992).
- 3 The evolutionary retrogression of the crowd is also clear from the following assessment:

It will be remarked that among the special characteristics of crowds there are several – such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgement and of critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides – which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution – in women, savages, and children, for instance. (Le Bon, 2002: 10–11)
- 4 Indeed, there is a good deal of ambiguity to be identified in both Le Bon and Tarde. For example, Tarde (1962: 225) praises the democratic impulses of the modern city. Thanks to Gilles Deleuze's (1994) celebration of Tarde, the progressive, non-conservative dimensions of his work and its emphasis on difference are increasingly being recognized today. On Deleuze's Tardean legacy, see Alliez (2004).
- 5 In this context the question of a potential leader of the crowd must be ignored. Such a leader may display the various features which are usually associated with the idea of a constitutive individuality. The role of the leader in Le Bon's (and Freud's) crowd psychology is examined in Borch-Jacobsen (1988).

- 6 Also from a social psychological perspective, Floyd H. Allport formulated a different, but equally influential, critique of the European crowd semantics. Allport's main critique was directed against the 'the group fallacy' that assumes the existence of collective minds. According to Allport, 'There is no psychology of groups [including crowds, CB] which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals' (1924: 4). Allport thus developed a psychological approach to crowds which focused solely on the individual level. On Allport's dismissal of the idea of irrational suggestibility, see Leach (1986: 106–7).
- 7 In *The Structure of Social Action* there is no mention at all of Le Bon (or of Park or Blumer, for that matter), and Tarde is – as Leys notes – only cited once, in a discussion of Durkheim (Parsons, 1937: 385, n. 1; Leys, 1993: 281).
- 8 After the First World War a distinctive discussion of mass society emerged in the USA, reaching its zenith in the 1950s – and including scholars like David Riesman, William Kornhauser but also exiled Frankfurt School associates. The critical analysis of mass society was influenced by the semantics of crowds, and the diagnosis proposed was to a large extent a projection of specific crowd features onto the entire contemporary society. Thus, in American mass society, this semantics stated, a majority of people had been absorbed in an indifferent middle class in which individual excellence had been replaced by simply following the ideas, opinions, etc. of others. According to the critics of mass society, this development had threatening implications for democracy, moral standards, etc. Despite the similarities between the semantics of crowds and that of mass society – including their view of the individual as deprived of his/her intellectual faculties – it is beyond the scope of the present article to more than merely state this connection. Critical examinations of the semantics of mass society may be found in Bramson (1961), Giner (1976), Leach (1986, 1999) and Wagner (1990). Cf. also Sloterdijk (2000) who may be seen as a recent European representative of this semantics.
- 9 Equally interesting in the light of the previous discussion, in their appraisal of what is seen as a distinctive second-generation Chicago School of collective behaviour – including, among others, Turner, Killian, Tamotsu Shibutani and Kurt and Gladys Lang, and characterized by a 'shift away' from assumptions of 'irrational actors' – Snow and Davis stress that the notion of emergence, which is crucial to Turner and Killian, carries a clear Meadean legacy (Snow and Davis, 1995: 194–5, 208).
- 10 The conceptual exclusion also covers the notion of irrationality:
- The definition we have presented does not, by itself, involve any assumptions that the persons involved in an episode are irrational, that they lose their critical faculties, that they experience psychological regression, that they revert to some animal state, or whatever. (Smelser, 1962: 11)
- 11 In recent years this link has been suggested most emphatically by Maffesoli (1996) in his vitalist conception of postmodern crowds.

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