

THE RISE OF THE CROWD - AN EPILEPTIC FIT OR A RITE?

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ABSTRACT

The crowd is a complex social structure, that absorbs individuals and denies their existence. During its revolt it is transformed into an uncontrollable force, which is comparable (at least on the metaphorical level) to the epileptic brain structure. The excitation that is spreading from the epileptic neuron, seizes the brain just the way the aggressiveness of the revolt inducers seizes the mass. Still the real function of the mass movements is very similar to the rite, for it implies no distant, disinterested observer, but only active, engaged participants.

THE TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION OF DIFFERENT MASS CATEGORIES

Throughout history the terms like "mass", "crowd", and "mob" have (contrary to the term "public") achieved many negative connotations (1). The mass has been defined by P. L. Harriman (1947) as a group of individuals, which is under the influence of common emotional excitement, primitive impulses, and unitary purpose, whereas H. C. Warren (1934) defined it as a group of individuals observed outside their social organization.

The same author defined the crowd as a temporary physical aggregation of individuals being present at the same place and reacting to certain objects of common interest in a similar way. Their reactions were supposed to be simple, exaggerated, and predominately emotional. Similar to this was H. Cantrill's (1941) definition of the crowd, for he denoted it as a gathered group of individuals who had temporarily identified themselves with certain common values and shared the same emotions.

The mob was defined by H. C. Warren (1934) as an aggregation, whose members acted violently and under extraordinary emotional circumstances. Usually they were striving for the control over the actions of those, who were opposed to them.

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The term "public" has not achieved any negative connotations. According to H. C. Warren (1934) the public is an aggregation of persons that share their interests and habits and are under the influence of the behaviour of one or more distinguished individuals or leaders. The face-to-face communication that is typical for the members of the crowd is replaced by the interaction without any physical contact.

In spite of the differences, that exist between the four social structures mentioned above, there are some logical and psychological connections among them and because of that one of the four mass-types can easily be transformed into the other one.

THE ELITISTIC COMPREHENSION OF MASSES - THE SUBJECT'S PREJUDICE OF HIS COGNITIVE SUPERIORITY?

"Even if every citizen of Athens was a Socrates, the athenian parliament would nevertheless be a mob."

Platon: The State

G. Le Bon (1895) (2) explains the rise of the crowd as a complex process consisting of three phases. The first is characterized by the directing of the individuals' feelings and ideas into the same direction, the second by the loss of their individual consciousness, and the third by the beginning of the mass's collective spirit. The latter forces them to feel, think, and act in a particular way, which differs from their usual psychophysical functioning completely.

No matter who the individuals that constitute the crowd are and what are their psychophysical and behavioural characteristics, their collective spirit makes them lose their individuality and transforms them into faceless members of the crowd. By this the subjects' intellectual capacities are reduced, their heterogeneity is replaced by their homogeneity, and their unconscious forces prevail over the conscious ones. In such situations, which often lead to erroneous and insufficient judgements and decisions, people are usually overwhelmed by certain fixed ideas and by convictions about their own centrality and indispensability. Because of that the decisions of the members of the crowd, even when these are distinguished thinkers or scientists, often do not differ significantly from the decisions that would be made by a group of imbeciles (3).

According to M. Zvonarević (1985) (4) there are five main factors that condition the transition of ordinary groups at masses:

1. the number of the present persons
2. the density of the mass
3. the emotional excitement
4. the directedness of the attention to a certain focus
5. common action.

The first two factors are connected very closely, for the mass density increases simultaneously with the rise of the participants' number. Both factors contribute to the gradual rising of the subject's feeling of anonymity, which coincides with his physical welding with other members of the group, the decline of his responsibility, and the prevalence of the unconscious impulses over the conscious control.

In the first phases of the mass formation the emotional excitement is caused by other social mechanisms, whereas later it starts to act independantly as a centripatal factor in the further development of the mass (5).

The directedness of the subject's attention into a certain critical point - an event, a person, a slogan, etc. - is caused by the subject's primordial tendency towards the centre, which often symbolizes the sacred place, the source of the immortality, and the only veritable reality (6).

The subject's concentration on a certain point coincides with his incapability to perceive the reality around it and this prevents him from understanding it objectively. The chosen perspective enables him to see only one of its facets, whereas the so called periphery (which can nevertheless be transformed into the centre of some other reality very quickly) remains unnoticed by him.

Because of the subject's selective perception of the objective reality and his inability to understand it thoroughly a single condensed sentence can cause large masses of people to move. Their concentration on a certain focus, which prevents them from seeing anything else, is namely similar to the hypnotic state.

All the previously mentioned characteristics of the implicit mass movements could also be regarded as the necessary condition for the activation of the mass's internal dynamics, which forces it to act as a whole. Besides, the common action of its members is considered to be necessary for the formation and consolidation of the "mass spirit". The activated mass is namely a dynamic force, which is contrary to the static one, whose members' positions are more or less fixed, exciting and fearful.

The evocation of mass movements is usually provided by some critical event or by a series of such events. The specific type of the mass behaviour that is evoked by the social crises, i.e. revolts, revolutions, and wars is usually very important for the theoretical thinking, as well. The critical situation, which means a serious threat to human existence, causes the break-through of many social forces, that cannot be perceived in ordinary life situations. The latter are usually kept under the surface of a certain social structure and covered by a network of coordinated interpersonal relations.

According to D. E. Wenger (1978) (7) the appearance of a crisis in a certain social system coincides with the neutralization, or even distortion of its institutional, traditional structure, which is no longer defined as a suitable guidance of its members' behaviour. Before the appearance of a crisis in a certain society there appears the state of emergency, which is usually caused by a collective stress - the perception of a direct or a relatively near threat to one's own existence.

The state of emergency causes the activation of the redressing machinery forces. The rupture in the system namely has to be patched up very quickly, otherwise the emergency is turned into a crisis.

THE CRISIS OF A SOCIAL SYSTEM AND THE BEHAVIOUR OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN IT

There is no sharp distinction between the emergency and the crisis in a certain social system for every crisis implies emergency, as well. No matter what the reasons for the appearance of a crisis in a certain society are, and how the community is organized, the phase of the collective stress results in the spontaneous formation of certain social defence mechanisms, which are usually denoted as "social reflexes" (8).

Social reflexes are (as well as the individual ones) characterized by the velocity and automatism of reactions. The affected community namely creates certain forms of social organization immediately upon the outbreak of the crisis. These are supposed to assure the continuity of the society's elementary physical existence. Its in-

capability of reflexive organization during the crisis or the insuitability of the reflexive social mechanisms (which coincide with the redressing machinery forces in form and meaning) results in the degeneration of the community.

The collective spirit of the affected society causes a series of spontaneous reactions and organizations for the elimination of the critical influences, which are supposed to assure its social existence not taking into consideration the individual and material damages. For according to the collectivistic point of view individuals may perish but the community has to survive.

THE REVOLT OF THE CROWD

The rise of the collective spirit in the crowd provides the possibility for the theoretical consideration of the society as a whole in which the individual is nothing but one of its constitutive elements. The knowledge of his individual qualities namely does not significantly contribute to the understanding of the mass movements. Therefore the crowd is regarded as a representational system (9) and its analysis is based on the analogy between it and the brain.

The brain is namely understood as a complex representational system consisting of many neuronal networks that extend in its internal space. This morphology could be applied to different social structures, as well. It namely implies the organic process of the nucleus's growth, the expansion of the cellular tissue, and its gradual conquering of space, which is comparable to the growth of social structures (10).

Because of the dynamic that is observable in nature and in the individual and social life of human beings, the representational systems have to be regarded as active, flexible, and dynamic structures, that imply the possibility for further development. Still, the latter is often the result of tensions caused by antagonistic processes going on inside the system and providing the possibility for its transformation into a new quality on a certain critical point.

The frictions among different substructures of a certain social system and the steady condensation of its formations coincide with the transition of common social groups to the crowds. The process is followed by the rise of the emotional excitement and can bring about some structural changes, i.e. pathological deformations in social groups. Under the influence of certain critical factors, which evoke the crisis of the representational system, the latter is pushed into the state characterized by disorganized activity, which coincides with the revolt of the crowd.

The pathological reaction to some specific external stimuli, which is caused by the subject's concentration on a certain focus of tension and prevents him from perceiving other aspects of the objective reality, is comparable to the epileptic fit that can be evoked artificially, as well. The main reasons for such a reaction can be found in the pathophysiology of the neuron (11).

The epileptic neuron's excitatory potential is namely extremely high and so is the frequency of the potentials that arrive into its axon. Because of the exceeding of the stimulus's physiological limits the inhibitory regulative mechanism falls off and the excitaiton is spread to other healthy brain neurons without hindrance (12).

The propagation of the epileptogenic neuron may be restricted to a certain brain system, which results in the focal epileptic fit, whereas in other cases the latter is generalized. The epileptic clearing takes over the grey substance of both hemispheres and is usually followed by the loss of consciousness. The convulsions are generalized or at least bilaterally more or less symmetrical.

The involuntary movements that characterize the epileptic fit, are typical for mass movements, as well. For in spite of its being spread from a certain focus (or more foci) the excitement is easily expanded in the crowd. The subject's concentration on a certain - magic and mystic point - prevents him from interpreting the situation appropriately, paralyses his conscious will and blocks his inhibitory mechanisms. The participation in the revolt is unavoidable and the individual is carried away by the crowd.

NOTES

1. The definitions of the four main forms of masses, i.e. of the crowd, mob and public, have been taken from the books cited below:

Cantrill, H. (1961). *The psychology of social movements*. New York.

Harriman, P. L. (1947). *Psychological encyclopedia*, New York.

Tarde, G. (1963). *The laws of imitations*. Glouchester, Mass, Peter Smith.

Warren, H. C. (1934). *Psychological dictionary*, New York.

Zvonarević, M. (1985). *Socialna psihologija*. (Social psychology). Zagreb, Školska knjiga.

2. The paragraph is the condensed version of Le Bon's comprehension of masses (G. Le Bon (1952). *The Crowd*. London, New York.).

3. Such opinions were particularly often expressed by G. Le Bon (*The Crowd*.), who is considered to be one of the most important representatives of the so called elitistic, i.e. aristocratic approach to the analysis of masses. The same opinion was expressed by some other important theorists, such as W. McDougall ((1920). *The group mind*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.) or E. D. Martin ((1935). *Farewell to revolution*.).

4. M. Zvonarević (1985). *Socialna psihologija*. (Social psychology). Zagreb, Školska knjiga, 399-400.

5. The emotional excitement could metaphorically be denoted as a means of contraction, for it serves as a magnet that attracts people to the centre, in which the magnetic forces may be detected. Because of the magnetic capacity of a certain focus or the centre of the crowd the latter is getting denser and denser and people are carried by its emotional force that evokes a special psychophysical state, similar to trance, in them.

6. This tendency is the result of the subject's egocentrism, which is particularly strongly expressed in primitive societies. Is is namely caused by the subject's lower stage of his cognitive differentiation or his regression to a lower level of cognition. The latter coincides with the increase of affective (or even instinctive) influences on cognition and their interwinement in human psychic activity.

7. D. E. Wenger (1978). *Community response to disaster*. Disaster. London.

8. This formulation is based on the analogy between the social reflex and the individual psychophysical one. The most often cited example is the pupilar reflex, which protects the eye from the harmful influences of the outer world better than any other learned reaction.

9. Hofstadter and Dennett (D. R. Hofstadter, D. C. Dennett (1981). *The mind's I*. Fantasies and reflections of self and soul. New York, Basic Books, Inc., 199.) define the representational system as an active self-involved and self-fulfilling complex of structures, which reflects the world during its own development.

The proces of representation consists of two types of reactions: the reactions to external stimuli and the reactions to the internal state of the representational system.

The intertwinement of both of them, the quality of which is determined by the structure-specific rules of the system's activity, enables the latter to reflect the reality, i.e. to transform it in a manner that depends upon its own structural characteristics.

10. The role of the individual in a certain social formation is comparable to the role of a single neuron in the brain structure. The latter is one of the constitutive parts of the whole, but in spite of that its function can be taken over by other neurons. This characteristic is observable in the structure of social formations, as well. The subject is namely not indispensable, his individual particularities are not particularly important for the functioning of the group and his functions can be taken over by the others.

11. The central nervous system consists of two basic types of neurons, i.e. the excitatory and the inhibitory ones. The influence of the inhibitory neurons grows simultaneously with the rise of the excitation. This characteristic of the brain is necessary for the restriction of the formation of the excitatory circle, which would cause the excitation to spread over the whole brain or only over one of its parts. Both phenomena are observable in the case of epilepsy, as well.

12. Such spreading of the excitation is usually denoted as propagation.

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Predlani je minilo dvajset let od njegove smrti, letos pa je preteklo stodeset let, kar se je rodil Cyril Burt, britanski psiholog, čigar ime je eno zloglasnejših v zgodovini svetovne psihologije. V zelo dolgi in ustvarjalni znanstveni karieri si je ustvaril izreden strokovni ugled, ki so mu ga kritiki izničili v vsega nekaj letih. V drugi polovici sedemdesetih let tega stoletja je strokovno in tudi laično javnost "pre-tresel" val obtožb na Burtov račun, češ da je ponaredil podatke (zbrane na enojajčnih dvojčkih, ki so odraščali ločeno, v različnih okoljih), ki so podpirali njegovo teorijo o pretežnem vplivu dednosti na inteligentnost in nekatere druge osebnostne lastnosti.

Leta 1980, ko sem sam začel študirati psihologijo, je bila afera Burt še sveža. Vendar so bili v tem času v naših predavalnicah (in tudi v domačih delih, izdanih po letu 1979) Burt, njegove študije inteligentnosti pri dvojčkih v primerjavi z drugimi sorodniki ter njegove teorije o vplivu dednosti na človekovo vedenje le še snov, ki je služila za prikaz primera raziskovalca v psihologiji, ki so ga zalotili pri nepoštenem znanstvenem delu. Iz kritik njegovega dela je bilo v tistem času med drugim razbrati: v psihološkem raziskovanju se varuj rezultatov, ki bi se preveč približali idealnim - v smeri potrditve postavljene hipoteze - kajti to bo pomenilo, da si jih najbrž malo "popravi"! Tudi v psiholoških učbenikih in priročnikih, napisanih v svetu po letu 1979, ko je izšla njegova biografija izpod peresa britanskega zgodovinarja psihologije Lesleya Hearnshawa, se je Burt takoj presečil iz poglavij o razlagah različnih psiholoških teorij v poglavja o etiki psihološkega raziskovanja.

Popolnoma normalno je, da se v znanosti okrog ključnih, nikoli do konca dokazljivih teorij, vzporedno z natančnim raziskovalnim delom, ki "hrani" teorije z empiričnimi podatki, neprestano razraščajo polemike o tem, kdo ima bolj prav, kdo je kje v teoriji ali v raziskavi napravil napako itd. Takratni napad na Burtu pa je bil tako silovit in tako lojalno podprt v medijih, da je zapri usta tudi najbolj vnetim pris-

