

# **THE CROWD: A STUDY OF THE POPULAR MIND**

(GUSTAVE LE BON)

July 15, 2021

For eighteen months, I have been infinitely puzzled that most responses to the Wuhan Plague have been irrational. Lack of rationality dominates the discourse and actions of the majority, from individuals to governments. This irrationality has innumerable manifestations, the most obvious being belief in plain fictions, recently the made-up threat of the new “Delta variant,” no doubt not the last in a very long list of fairy tales. The irrationality shows itself in many other ways, both secular ones such as the total rejection of cost-benefit analysis, and quasi-religious ones such as belief in strange new gods, saints, and rituals. I have racked my head trying to understand this very strange phenomenon, and made no progress.

Maybe, though, I was approaching it all wrong. Maybe there is no rationality to any of this, and my search for rationality is like the old joke about the drunk looking for his keys under the lamppost, because that’s where the light is. Perhaps the joke is on me, and what we see is merely the always-irrational behavior of crowds, for the first time in history manifesting itself on a global scale. Struck by this possibility, I turned to this classic 1895 book.

Gustave Le Bon, born in 1841, was a French genius, whose interests covered everything from anthropology to physics. Among other accomplishments, he posited mass-energy equivalence before Albert Einstein (and complained when Einstein got the credit). *The Crowd* was written at the end of a century of turmoil in France, in an attempt to examine and understand the fundamental nature of crowds. Though often criticized because its conclusions are not to the taste of those who would use crowds to advance their political goals, it has never been sidelined or superseded. To this day, this book is the gold standard of crowd analysis; you can tell this by attacks on Le Bon during last summer’s Floyd Riots, by those wanting to believe that the rioters were wise and coherent seekers after justice, rather than sub-rational masses fired by the basest of impulses.

Le Bon’s fundamental point is that the actions of crowds are not rational; they are a mass of uncoordinated and largely unconscious

behaviors from which what we today call emergent properties arise. But they are nonetheless complex organisms, capable of being analyzed. Unlike modern so-called social scientists, Le Bon did not conduct surveys or lard his work with pseudoscience. All his thoughts are based on observation of history. In his view, although crowds existed throughout history, they were the major problem for advanced Western societies. "The substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age."

Le Bon saw his time as a time of great change; the old verities, most of all sources of authority, which were individual and particular, were all falling by the wayside. He saw their replacement; "The age we are about to enter will in truth be the Era of Crowds." Not because of popular sovereignty, however; Le Bon, like Carl Schmitt, thought parliamentarianism and other structural attempts to manifest the general will a sham. Rather, because the masses, through crowd behavior, will now dictate the direction of nations. This is not precisely anarchy, but it is not an advance, because civilizations are "only created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction." He explicitly sees the dominance of crowds as barbarism and the likely end of Western civilization. That's not Le Bon's primary concern, though; he is trying to understand crowds. What to do with the information, he leaves for others.

The book begins by analyzing the thought processes that characterize crowds. A crowd is a "single being" and it has "mental unity." Not every grouping of people is a crowd, however; what matters is that the group be psychologically united, whether it be a handful of people or a whole nation. No matter the composition of the individuals in a crowd, their collective feelings, thoughts, and actions are very different than the feelings, thoughts, and actions of any one individual in the crowd. A crowd is a new thing, not the average of its members; if anything, it represents the lowest common denominator of its members. Le Bon emphasizes that although crowds always have certain characteristics in common, crowds composed of different types of people differ greatly. In this context, he refers often to different "races" and their "racial characteristics," which gives the book a spicy flavor, but what he means is culture, not race as that term is used today. Thus, he contrasts the

“Latin race” with the “Anglo-Saxon race,” taking examples from history to illustrate his points.

Mass media was only beginning to be influential in Le Bon's day; he notes the importance of mass circulation newspapers in creating crowds, and observes that crowds do not have to consist of people in physical proximity, though he focuses on people who are in the same place at the same time. He did not predict today's globally-interconnected world, where it is possible to psychologically unite hundreds of millions of people, all physically separated from each other, within a few hours, using propaganda dictated by our ruling class, amplified and broadcast by algorithmic social media, itself further manually curated for propaganda purposes. Thus, it is fair to say, a crowd comprising a good proportion of any nation can easily emerge at any time today, and a global crowd, or at least a crowd composed of people capable of easily being psychologically united, such as those living in the developed, Westernized world, is certainly feasible.

Even though their collective thought is of a very inferior level, the individuals in the crowd do not realize this explicitly, and they acquire new characteristics that mask this degradation. One is a feeling of power. Another is susceptibility to the contagion of ideas and sentiments, and to the acts of others in the crowd, regardless of individual interest. Le Bon ascribes this to a type of hypnotism; the individual who is part of a crowd “is no longer conscious of his acts.” He acts, and his acts are accelerated by a type of feedback loop, but he acts in ways he would not as an individual; he acts by instinct. The crowd is thus “always intellectually inferior to the isolated individual.” But that can mean its actions can be either criminal, or heroic, depending on other influences.

So what determines “the sentiments and morality of crowds”? Crowds are impulsive; an individual can control his reflexes, a crowd cannot. It can lurch from being executioner to being martyr. It cannot premeditate, and it sees nothing as either improbable, meaning rumor dominates, or even mass hallucination, or impossible, meaning stupid actions are likely. Crowds are highly suggestible, since the rational thought process of an individual is short-circuited. A crowd never doubts itself or lacks certainty; it exaggerates sentiments, though only simple and extreme ones. It is therefore both authoritative and intolerant; it rejects any

discussion and even more any contradiction. Authority impresses a crowd; weakness, or kindness, they despise.

No surprise, all these characteristics fit the reactions of the global crowd to the Wuhan Plague. Take mask wearing, for example, for which literally no actual material scientific evidence exists that it affects disease transmission rates, and vast amounts exist strongly showing the contrary. Yet great masses of people not only wear masks, they are eager to do so and focus their collective hate and fear onto those not wearing them. This maps onto Le Bon's frame; authority, in the form of institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control (itself a crowd), and of individuals such as the noxious Anthony Fauci, impresses the crowd, the internet-driven mass. Anecdotes, mostly false or utterly misleading, set loose by fearmongers, circulate to suggest quickly-adopted untruths. Thus, most people believe five or ten percent of their country's population has died of the Plague, rather than a very small percentage, most of whom would have died soon anyways. And far more than a majority of Democrats, and many Republicans, believe that most Plague patients are hospitalized, whereas very few are, and those are nearly all within clearly-defined risk categories, another fact many deny. Rumors also circulate widely, whether that's right-leaning rumors (Bill Gates is using 5G to control us with the vaccine!) or left-leaning (I heard a child with no risk factors died of the Plague!). Such examples could be multiplied, but my readers, at least, I suspect grasp this easily, because they have had many insane conversations with close friends who exhibit every single one of these characteristics, and simply refuse to believe, or even receive, any truth.

A crowd does not have ideas, but ideas influence the crowd. Only simple ideas can influence a crowd, however, those that are "absolute, uncompromising, and [of a] simple shape." There is no process of reasoning that takes place, even by analogy. Discussion is alien to crowds; as we have seen in the Plague, the very idea of discussing any precept handed down to us and that has been adopted by the global crowd is held as anathema by the crowd, even if that precept directly contradicts one issued yesterday. Le Bon would not be surprised; he says that ideas that mesmerize crowds are image-like, one succeeding the other, and can therefore be contradictory to each other without changing their effect, especially if presented in a theatrical manner. The crude mental

processes of the crowd allow those who influence crowds to engage in generalization, connecting things obviously unconnected to each other in the mind of the crowd. "It is not, then, the facts in themselves that strike the popular imagination, but the way in which they take place and are brought under notice." Again, this effect is greatly magnified at present, with video spread by social media having become a key influence.

Le Bon says that if a man, such as Napoleon, can capture the imagination of the crowd, he can do anything with it—as long as he does not resort to reasoning. Any skilled speaker can take advantage of the characteristics of crowds. He starts by ignoring rationality. "To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetitions, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings." It is said that both Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini studied what Le Bon had to say; that may simply be backwards projection, but it makes sense, and in practice they did indeed use these techniques. So does Fauci and the media enterprise built around him.

The result of these characteristics of the mind of crowds is that the beliefs of crowds assume a religious form. (Le Bon appears to have been an atheist or agnostic; although he is generally regarded as right-wing because he opposed the French Revolution and socialism.) Religion underlies all mass movements, for good and ill. "Certain historical events . . . are not to be understood unless one has attained to an appreciation of the religious form which the convictions of crowds always assume in the long run." "[T]he [French] Revolution was merely the establishment of a new religious belief in the minds of the masses." "Crowds will hear no more of the words divinity and religion, in whose name they were so long enslaved; but they have never possessed so many fetishes as in the last hundred years. . . . Those who in recent years have studied the popular movement known under the name of Boulangism have been able to see with what ease the religious instincts of crowds are ready to revive. . . . Great might have been his place in history had his character been at all on a level with his legendary reputation."

Here Le Bon refers to Georges Boulanger, who might have ruled France, but, much like Donald Trump, lacked discipline and flinched. That's a topic for another day, perhaps, but many have noted the similar religious character of believers in the cult of the Wuhan Plague. They worship a laughable idol they call "science"; they pray to saints; they

believe they can be redeemed by becoming vaccinated; they suffer the purgatory of fictional “Long Covid”; they trust that maskless unbelievers will die and be cast into the pit, any day now, despite the failure of all such previous prophecies, in Texas, Florida, Sweden, and every other place predicted.

This concludes the first part, on the “mind of crowds,” or the inherent, timeless qualities of crowds. Next Le Bon turns to specifically how crowds form their opinions and beliefs. What opinions and beliefs a crowd adopts is not random, even if it appears sudden and is, certainly, unreasoned. Le Bon divides the impellers of crowd belief into “remote factors” and “immediate factors.” In the former group are long-term actors such as culture, institutions, and education, along with the simple passage of time. Le Bon also, prefiguring Peter Turchin, mentions elite over-production, and perhaps tied to that problem, for purposes of our current study, we can add as a remote factor the scientism that has overwhelmed our elite institutions, well-analyzed in recent pieces by philosopher Matthew B. Crawford. That scientism has had many effects, but its existence prepared the global crowd for how it would react to the emergence of the Wuhan Plague. Remote factors prepare crowds to receive immediate factors, which act directly, rather than indirectly, upon the opinions of crowds.

Immediate factors evoke images, the primary driver of crowd behavior, as Le Bon returns to in this section. Words that are vague and capable of having malleable meanings poured into them are called for to influence crowds; those tied to reason or those that are clearly defined are worthless with respect to influencing crowds. Meaningless words such as “democracy” and “liberty” evoke “grandiose and vague images” with “supernatural power,” although those images differ among times and cultures, and those desiring to influence the opinion of a crowd must grasp what those images are. Immediate factors are, in sum, illusions, bearing no relation to reason. “To bring home conviction to crowds it is necessary first of all to thoroughly comprehend the sentiments by which they are animated, to pretend to share these sentiments, then to endeavour to modify them by calling up, by means of rudimentary associations, certain eminently suggestive notions, to be capable, if need be, of going back to the point of view from which a start was

made, and, above all, to divine from instant to instant the sentiments to which one's discourse is giving birth."

Knowing the mental processes of crowds, and how they may be influenced, how and by whom can crowds be directed? All crowds instinctively seek a leader, but he is usually someone who exemplifies the irrationality of the crowd, a strong-willed person who represents in the most extreme form the opinion of the crowd, not someone manipulating the crowd from outside. He can amplify the faith of the crowd—even if what he says is incoherent, as was nearly all of what Maximilien Robespierre said to the crowds. Most such leaders are flashes in the pan, who when removed from the immediate presence of the crowd fade; a few, Saint Paul or Muhammad, have enduring strength of will and consequently infinitely greater impact.

Again, leaders direct crowds through affirmation and repetition. Enough affirmation and repetition produces contagion, not just within one crowd, but across times and places, which leads to imitation, as everyone wants to follow what the crowd is doing, rather than think for himself. Le Bon gives the example, for this, of the revolutions of 1848. Contagion and imitation even override compelling personal interests, which is why the upper classes have often adopted lower class doctrines designed as a threat to themselves (though those doctrines, of course, originated with a subset of the upper classes; here Le Bon primarily means socialism, but also the actions taken by the Convention in the French Revolution). Contagion and imitation lend prestige to the most irrational of ideas. "The special characteristic of prestige is to prevent us seeing things as they are and to entirely paralyze our judgment. Crowds always, and individuals as a rule, stand in need of ready-made opinions on all subjects. The popularity of those opinions is independent of the measure of truth or error they contain, and is solely regulated by their prestige." All this is very evident in our global crowd's reaction to the Plague.

The beliefs that result from this process are frequently transitory, rapidly being replaced, often by their opposite; Le Bon gives the example of France from 1790 to 1820 (and says newspapers have accelerated this process). Every so often they may become deeply implanted, as in the formation of religions, becoming a "general belief," but mostly not. (Le Bon fears that socialism, promising a utopian substitution for the old

general belief of Christianity, is one such.) “[I]t must not be forgotten that, given the power possessed at present by crowds, were a single opinion to acquire sufficient prestige to enforce its general acceptance, it would soon be endowed with so tyrannical a strength that everything would have to bend before it, and the era of free discussion would be closed for a long time.”

So let’s examine the Wuhan Plague, or rather the reactions to the Plague, through this lens of origin of beliefs and their direction. The usual reaction by someone puzzled as to why rationality is absent from essentially all actions taken with respect to the Plague, by individuals and government, is to try to figure out where lies hidden rationality. Of course, if any given individual chose to behave rationally, he could do a variety of things. He could weigh costs and benefits of a particular action, say the wearing of masks, for himself. He could decline to do this, and rely on the opinions of those whose judgment he trusts—but if he did that, he would need to at least be open to evidence that their judgment was lacking. But instead the vast majority of people, ranging from individuals through groups to governments, instead behave objectively irrationally. Oh, they talk about rationality, but so do crowds. How they behave shows they are irrational.

It is easy to throw out suggestions as to how hidden rationality, or quasi-rationality, really underlies our current widespread insanity. Perhaps it is the collective desire of governments and the ruling class to tighten their failing grip on us—a simple exercise in control, a test run for even more extreme clampdowns on freedom. Perhaps it is all about money; large merchants and drug companies. Perhaps it is safetyism and hyper-feminization. Yes, all these things are true, at some level. But none are the core reason, I think, why the crowds of today behave irrationally with respect to the Plague. It is simpler than that; the crowd merely, as Le Bon analyzes, takes the inputs proffered by those with rational and semi-rational motives, processes them, and spews out as reified crazy.

That this is true is partially hidden by that, unlike in Le Bon’s day, it is hard to precisely define, at any given moment, who and what today’s crowd is, because most members of it are hidden entirely from the public gaze, sitting in the glow of their screens and, as a result, plummeting in rationality, mere recipients of the influences of others in the crowd, with no external sign of their degradation. They are psychologically



united, in a kaleidoscopic, ever-shifting fashion, but there is no way to see that except by the irrationality emitting from them, and there is no way to find their leaders, because there are no real leaders. The crowd thinks in images; those are everywhere today. What image is most common? Death and hysteria. Thus, what we get are those images, lit by strobe, thrown out in a continuous stream by all our different forms of technologically-mediated media. It's golem ochlocracy, not a pretty sight.

This, to some extent, explains why governments in the developed world, even those few that are otherwise sensible and not ideologically self-hobbled, almost uniformly take actions in response to the Plague that are unnecessary and self-defeating, most notably Hungary. Some combination, opaque to the outsider, of absorption into the crowd of the members of government and a realization by those still rational within the government that they cannot oppose the crowd, seems to lead them to have their country adopt the same crazy beliefs and actions as everyone else. Why has Sweden resisted this, extremely successfully? I just don't know, and it's not helped by that it's impossible to get hard information about Sweden, and has been for eighteen months, because the English-language media complex has decided to deliberately and continuously lie and conceal. Some members of the crowd appear to retain enough rationality to conceal, to keep themselves from being humiliated by hard facts.

Out there, however, exist many who are not absorbed into this global crowd. It is impossible, yet, to create a truly global crowd. How many are not absorbed is hard to tell; massive censorship prevents the dissemination of views contrary to the crowd in the Western world, and similarly, we are deliberately given nearly zero information about public opinion and action in non-Western parts of the globe (and nothing but curated information about the effects there of the Plague itself). What is really happening in Africa? India (where the Plague appears to have simply shot up and then back down, as plagues naturally do)? China? Japan? Who knows? Maybe other forms of crowds exist in those places, or maybe not, or maybe they are just not as dominant. Maybe it's that some places and people are not susceptible to the crowd contagion of technological media, while others are, due to culture, levels of technology, or some other factor. We were promised this would be the age of information, and it is, just terrible information.

That's not our immediate concern, though. Our immediate concern is Le Bon's, greatly amplified and expanded, that ours is the true Era of Crowds, and those crowds have far too great power. If there is ever a real crisis, performance of our crowds doesn't suggest they'll be heroic or martyrs, whatever Le Bon may say about that possibility. No, with the substrate of virtue destroyed, they'll just be a malignant, desperate, headless, flailing snake. On the plus side, maybe that'll bring the whole show down, and offer some opportunity. Just keep your head low while the snake goes through its death throes.