

mastering the crowd

**collective behavior and mass
society in american social
thought, 1917-1939**

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In a free-swinging *Commentary* article of 1956, Daniel Bell attacked a style of thinking about the bourgeois urban-industrial world that he called “the theory of the mass society.” As Bell glossed it, this theory alleged that the acids of modernity—chiefly technological advances—had eaten away the social bonds, faiths and authorities that once unified lives and gave them meaning. Society became a vast impersonal marketplace, compelling individuals to become speculators in constantly fluctuating values and roles. “Because of all this,” wrote Bell, summarizing his antagonists’ position, “the individual loses a coherent sense of self. His anxieties increase. There issues a search for new faiths. The stage is thus set for the charismatic leader, the secular messiah, who, by bestowing upon each person the semblance of necessary grace . . . supplies a substitute for the older unifying belief that the mass society has destroyed.”¹ Bell called this “probably the most influential social theory in the Western world today.”

What the mass society theorists shared, in Bell’s view, was less a coherent analysis of bourgeois society than a grudge against a particular bourgeois society, that of the United States, born of ancient Old World resistances to the charms of the New. It cannot have been coincidental that Bell named among the mass society theorists only Europeans, barely acknowledging the work of David Riesman and altogether ignoring the writings of other homegrown critics. The distempers of Ortega y Gasset,

Mannheim, Arendt, *et. al.* descended, said Bell, from the horror of cultural and political leveling that had first seized European thinkers when the Bastille fell. The mass society theorists were only the most recent defenders of “an aristocratic cultural tradition . . . and a doubt that the large mass of mankind can ever become truly educated or acquire an appreciation of culture.”²

Bell met these alien Cassandras with a spirited apology for the mass society, and especially for its American variant. The pluralism and freedom that flourished in the mass society more than compensated for what it might have taken away from the fullness of human relationships, Bell argued. Mass participation in culture was the inevitable concomitant of democratic citizenship and rising standards of living, and none of these things entailed any necessary leveling of standards. But Bell moved beyond these predictable affirmations to assail the basic assumptions of the mass society critique. Citing the vigor of ethnic subcultures and voluntary associations in the United States, Bell questioned the very existence of the rootless mass that was said to have conquered the urban-industrial landscape. He concluded by invoking the Turner-Louis Hartz portrait of an American “born free” and defying European categories, “probably the first large society in history to have change and innovation ‘built into’ its culture.”³

Though Bell recounted the history of the ideas he rejected, he said nothing about the antecedents of his own ideas. Five years later one of his students, Leon Bramson, corrected Bell’s oversight in a book that identified a distinctively upbeat pattern of American notions about collective behavior that extended back to the turn of the century. According to Bramson European analyses of crowd pathology encountered American resistance long before Bell issued his patriotic counterattack. “Lacking a feudal tradition . . . and possessing from the beginning a liberal-democratic tradition, the United States does not provide fertile soil for the development of an anti-democratic social psychology of crowds.” Thus American sociologists who first examined collective behavior turned European disparagements upside down, discerning constructive potentials in crowds and masses.⁴

The first interpretations of the mass society in America were developed by psychologists and sociologists in the period between the World Wars. The crucial theoretical achievement of this generation was to evolve the concept of the mass, a dispersed and passive body of uprooted individuals, from the pre-World War I concept of the crowd, a physically united and active throng. Following Leon Bramson, I will argue that these writers perceived in collective behavior a principle of perpetual social renewal, virtually a sociological equivalent of Turner’s frontier. However it was no promise of revitalized democracy, but rather a vision of the mass *as* mass, that intrigued American writers during the 1920s and 1930s. The alleged qualities of the mass society that repelled European critics and Daniel Bell—its cultural vacuousness, its amorphousness, its restlessness—were the very qualities that recommended it to the interwar generation. In

America the mass was initially valued for creating a pliable social solidarity that could be painlessly mastered by progressive elites. Pioneering interpreters of the mass society approached it in much the same spirit that de Tocqueville received democracy, as a kind of society that “would not be stationary,” but whose wayward “impulses” could “be regulated and made progressive.”⁵

Early investigations of collective behavior grew out of conservative ideologues’ morbid fascination with revolutionary mobs at the end of the nineteenth century. The Italian criminologist Scipio Sighele, the French criminologist Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon, polymath prophet of Western decadence, were indebted to Hippolyte Taine’s *Origins of Contemporary France*, a bitterly anti-Jacobin work that stressed the role played by berserk street crowds at the critical moments of the French Revolution. These writers had lurid memories of the Paris Commune as well. From such materials, together with research demonstrating the irrationality of human motives, Le Bon, Tarde and Sighele devised a body of generalizations about collective behavior that took the name “crowd psychology.”⁶

The crowd psychologists held that physical gatherings generated an irresistible “contagion” of emotions, dissolving personalities into a suggestible and vicious “crowd mind.”⁷ It was chiefly crowds of unrespectables—the *sans culottes* of ’89, the spectators at the guillotine in ’93, the proletarian revolutionaries of ’48 and ’71—that worried the crowd psychologists. They denounced working-class mobs as the indispensable commandos of democracy and socialism in modern history.

But the concerns of the crowd psychologists extended beyond the literal crowd to the social conditions that spawned it. Tarde and Le Bon held that the mob represented an inflammation of enduring qualities of modern urban-industrial populations: their uprootedness; the weakness of their allegiances to traditional institutions; their exposure to jangling barrages of sensual stimulations; their consequent excitability. The actual mob symbolized what Le Bon called “the advent to power of the masses.” This crowd-*society* was no less ignoble than the riotous crowds it sometimes spilled into the Paris streets. But it could not be wished away. Like it or not, Le Bon declared, in this “era of crowds” the masses constituted “the last surviving sovereign force.”⁸

The crowd-society commanded respect for another reason. If it could be cured of its susceptibility to revolutionary diseases, the crowd-society could perform a salutary purifying function. According to Le Bon, history assigned to the aroused masses the mission of destroying worn-out civilizations. By chastening egos and cancelling antiquated loyalties, the crowd was capable of releasing “latent forces in the inner being of nations.” Given the proper direction, crowds could rise to acts of heroism and patriotism that surpassed the spiritual resources of their individual members.⁹

The riotousness of mobs was deceptive, Le Bon suggested, because the modern masses were fundamentally conservative and craved strong leadership. The secret of taming the crowd-society lay in disrupting the

“contagion” of emotions and suggestions that bound crowd members to one another. If the attention of a crowd could be directed outward and fastened on responsible leaders, its energies could be harnessed. “A knowledge of the psychology of crowds,” wrote Le Bon, “is to-day the last resource of the statesman who wishes not to govern them—that is becoming a very difficult matter—but at any rate not to be too much governed by them.”¹⁰

In 1898 Gabriel Tarde offered further assurance to those who would master the masses. Modern means of communication were rapidly replacing “the more primitive congregation of crowds” with a new, more cerebral kind of collectivity, the public.¹¹ The public was unified less by subrational suggestions than by ideas conveyed by the press. What made it more rational and pacific than the crowd was the physical dispersion of its members, which prevented any infectious sharing of suggestions. In Tarde’s phrase the public displayed “contagion without contact”—enough interaction to unify its members, but not enough to inflame them. In effect Tarde’s “public” was a crowd purged of its social poisons, a crowd that was easily governable.

The United States bred an original crowd psychologist of its own. Boris Sidis, a Russian political refugee who earned a psychology doctorate under William James at Harvard, began in 1895 to expound a theory that stressed human suggestibility and the hypnotic origins of crowd behavior. By 1898, perhaps in an effort to one-up Le Bon and Tarde, Sidis was proclaiming that “society in general and democracy in particular” generate mob phenomena. Any restraints on personal freedom tended to generate “mental epidemics.” Applying his thesis to the United States, Sidis adduced as proof of the rising incidence of irrational collective behavior America’s mineral rushes, lynch mobs, protest movements, Wall Street panics and the crazes for bicycling and football.¹²

One of the scholars who retailed Sidis’ ideas was E. A. Ross, probably the most widely read social scientist of his day and among the first to ponder the social condition that would later be dubbed “the mass society.” Ross recoiled from the specter of the crowd in an article on “The Mob Mind” of 1897. Borrowing from Sidis, Ross described the insidious “mental contagion” of the street mob as a trait of most city-dwellers. Modern communications constantly stoked the nervous suggestibility that caused collective behavior. Diagnosing the resulting “mob mind” as a sort of psychosis, Ross prescribed a therapy of liberal education and “Self-Reliance”: “We must hold always to a sage Emersonian individualism, that . . . shall brace men to stand against the rush of the mass.”¹³

Yet in this same article Ross sketched the view of history that would lead him and later American commentators to think better of the crowd. For according to Ross “the mob mind” was only a repugnant side effect of the progress set in motion by the French Revolution. Once the masses had slavishly imitated their ancestors: now, more self-confident, they had turned to imitating one another. Seen in this light the crowd might be repellent, but at least it represented an improvement on ancestor-worship.

The decade of burgeoning immigration, progressive politics and explorations of the unconscious that followed 1897 drew Ross away from Emersonian maxims and Sidis' paranoia, to the more practical programs of Tarde and Le Bon. Ross' *Social Psychology* of 1908 repeated familiar dicta regarding the mental inferiority of the crowd. "Essentially atavistic and sterile," he wrote, "the crowd ranks as the lowest of the forms of human association." Now, however, Ross took comfort in the affirmations of crowd psychology. Echoing Le Bon, Ross noted that crowds had often been agents of progressive change. More tellingly, Ross gladly embraced Tarde's distinction between crowd and public. Ours is "the era of publics," he proclaimed, and the public was more a creature of reason, less subject to "accidental leaders," than the crowd. A public could be securely entrusted to guidance by an educated elite, "a handful of well-ballasted college men and women." In 1908 Ross recommended "prophylactics against the mob mind" merged American progressivism with French crowd psychology. The trick was to wrest influence over the masses away from "the fanatical and impassioned" and bestow it on "the intelligent."¹⁴

While Ross labored to rationalize the regime of crowd and public, others rushed to capitalize on it. Walter Dill Scott, a pioneer of advertising psychology at Northwestern University, hailed the crowd as a bonanza for public speakers in a manual published in 1906. Following Sidis, Scott held that "our most important actions are performed and most sacred conceptions are reached by means of the merest suggestions." But Scott converted Sidis' apprehensions into a confident technology for oratorical mastery. Since the crowd intensifies suggestibility, Scott taught, it is the speaker's ideal audience. "The orator's influence is in direct proportion to the homogeneity of the audience. The orator who is able to weld his audience into a homogeneous crowd was already won his hardest fight. *The difficult task is not to convince and sway the crowd, but to create it.*"¹⁵ A young professor at the Baltimore School of Commerce, Dale Carnegie, put the same point even more forcefully. In a volume titled *The Art of Public Speaking*, co-authored with J. Berg Esenwein in 1915, Carnegie wrote, "Crowds have not changed . . . in a thousand years and the one law holds for the greatest preacher and the pettiest stump-speaker—you must fuse your audience or they will not warm to your message."¹⁶

Nothing acted more powerfully to "fuse audiences," Carnegie and Esenwein suggested, than patriotic passions. They cited as illustrations the musicals of George M. Cohan, "making psychology practical and profitable" by deftly deploying national symbols; and the French Army at the Marne, charging "as one man" with the Marseillaise on their lips.¹⁷ Two years later the arts of swaying anonymous bodies of auditors and readers became instruments of national policy. The Committee on Public Information (CPI), Wilson's war propaganda agency, conferred on the study of the crowd a legitimacy that went far beyond the catchpenny opportunism of Scott and Carnegie. The War campaigns to mobilize public opinion

taught lessons that analysts and manipulators of mass audiences were to honor for the next two decades.

The CPI aspired to do precisely what engineers of crowd-behavior advised, to monopolize the attention of its audiences. The agency not only pumped propaganda into every existing channel of communication but invented an array of new ones. Several CPI devices were calculated to bypass established social structures and thus to set up the direct rapport that was deemed vital to managing crowds. The National School Service, a biweekly pamphlet sent to every public school teacher in the nation, was designed to deliver “a message that went without fail into every home,” including homes that harbored anti-War opinions. The “Four Minute Men,” 75,000 amateur orators, were encouraged to take advantage of the special receptivity to persuasion that supposedly prevailed among movie audiences. A CPI official noted that “every night eight to ten million people of all classes . . . meet in the moving picture houses of this country, and among them are many of [the] silent ones who do not read or attend meetings but who must be reached.” The same enthusiasm moved CPI Chairman George Creel to endorse a scheme to install talking machines in thousands of public “speaking stations,” to which inspirational addresses would be sent from studios in New York. According to the promoter, “Every week some master Personality will speak directly to great masses of people on the momentous questions of this, the Greatest Crisis in the history of the human race.”¹⁸

Creel and his lieutenants dissociated the CPI from vigilante mob actions against German-Americans and dissidents. Yet in Creel’s account of the CPI published just after the War, he acknowledged that the agency had aspired to create “no mere surface unity, but a passionate belief in the justice of America’s cause that should weld the people of the United States into one white-hot mass instinct with fraternity, courage, and deathless determination.”¹⁹

A few voices wished a plague on both the spontaneous and the organized collectivities that took their sanction from the War effort. Boris Sidis, whose son was arrested for taking part in a “Red Flag” demonstration, denounced the War as the latest and bloodiest of “mental epidemics” in Western history, the product of a “social trance” induced by “brilliant parades, hypnotizing oratory, and by all the artifices of a militant chauvinist press.”²⁰ A new American essay in crowd psychology, published by the adult educator Everett Dean Martin in 1920, warned that “the habit of crowd-making is daily becoming a more serious menace to civilization.” Crossing Le Bon with Freud and Nietzsche, Martin described patriotic wardances, the Red Scare and the Klan as collective psychoses that dredged up repressed desires. “*In other words,*” wrote Martin, “*a crowd is a device for indulging ourselves in a kind of temporary insanity by all going crazy together.*” Martin saw no redeeming value in collective action. “I am sick of this oozing democracy,” Martin declared. “There must be something crystalline and insoluble left in democratic America. Somewhere there must be people with sharp edges that cut when they are

pressed too hard. . . . They are the hope of democracy, these infusible ones.’²¹

But there were few such spasms of revulsion. The English writer Wilfred Trotter taught principles that American analysts of collective behavior preferred to learn from the War experience. According to Trotter the suggestibility of people in mobs is merely an intensification of the “herd suggestibility” that is “a necessary quality of every normal mind.” Trotter’s emphasis on the propensity to conform to the “herd” severed conventional equations of suggestibility with disorder. Far from being the combustible stuff of riots and revolutions, Trotter held, the herd instinct is the essential mortar of standing institutions, the conservative motive that rules “the great class of normal, sensible, reliable middle age,” those who make up “the backbone of the States.” Trotter professed personal sympathy with “sensitive” individuals who bucked the herd. Yet he acknowledged that in war the herd instinct “gives smoothness of working, energy, and enterprise to the whole national machine,” building morale while minimizing egoist interferences.²²

The proven potency of CPI methods for molding opinion combined with growing confidence in new communications media to give fresh appeal to the ideas of Le Bon, Tarde and Trotter. During the 1920s American theorists redefined as virtues crowd attributes that had been commonly treated as scourges a decade earlier. Now the crowd’s primitivism, its lack of culture and stable structure became a promise of its manageability; now the crowd’s volatility was reinterpreted as its capacity for rapid adaptation to new environments.

The reconstruction of crowd concepts advanced along two broad fronts, both of which had been reconnoitered by pre-War writers. Taking Le Bon as his master, Robert Ezra Park conceived of crowd phenomena as the essential crucibles of modern social progress. Meanwhile Floyd Allport and others were elaborating Gabriel Tarde’s proposition that the crowd was giving way to aggregates that lacked the crowd’s menace but retained its dynamism.

Park was an unlikely disciple of Le Bon. The French writer was racist and reactionary: Park served for seven years as secretary to Booker T. Washington and held generally progressive political views. Yet in a doctoral dissertation titled “The Crowd and the Public” that Park submitted to the University of Heidelberg in 1904, he deviated in only peripheral ways from the characterization of the crowd offered by Le Bon.²³ In 1921 Park reaffirmed his dependence on Le Bon in the landmark textbook that he co-authored with Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. The section on collective behavior in that text included two long excerpts from Le Bon and preserved intact all of his emphases on the crowd’s irrationality, its primitivism and its “mental unity.”²⁴ As late as 1941 Park paid tribute to Le Bon for having given “sociological speculation and research . . . a new orientation.”²⁵

Le Bon’s crucial insight, for Park, was his identification of the crowd as the historical instrument that razed decayed regimes to clear the ground for

new ones. But Le Bon's crowds were the wrecking crews of history, the destructive agents in the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. Park gave a distinctively progressive twist to Le Bon's thesis. In his *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* Park characterized the crowd as a middle phase in "the order of institutional evolution," the phase that converted "social unrest" into mass movements and eventually into new institutions. Park's definition of collective behavior plainly announced the bent of his ideas: social unrest, crowds and other such phenomena had to be understood as "the processes by which societies are disintegrated into their constituent elements and the processes by which these elements are brought back together again into new relations to form new organizations and new societies."²⁶

Precisely how ephemeral crowds give birth to creative social movements Park left to others to explain.²⁷ He shied away from the ready Le Bonian answer, that mesmerizing leadership effects the transition. But the very vagueness of his formulations helped Park to sustain his positive-mindedness. The disorderliness of "psychic epidemics" had to be viewed, he insisted, as the price of progress; "social unrest may be, therefore, a symptom of health."²⁸ The emotional contagion that was the hallmark of the crowd signified a providential engine of change. Even the anomic qualities of the crowd-member proclaimed his release from traditional loyalties, guaranteeing his responsiveness to new experience.

While Park and his students were rehabilitating the crowd with selective doses of Le Bon, psychologists were beginning to distinguish between crowds and the bodies of dispersed individuals who made up the audiences of the mass media. Floyd Allport took a long step toward establishing this critical distinction in his *Social Psychology* of 1924, a text that helped to reorder its field in the same way that Park's reordered sociology. Dismissing all notions of a collective "crowd-consciousness," Allport sought to explain collective behavior in terms of individual psychology.²⁹ What caused collective behavior, in Allport's view, was no irrational suggestibility, but rather the "impression of universality," a property of belief. The crowd-member behaves as he does because he believes that others share his feelings and convictions. But because belief and imagination are the mainsprings of collective action, Allport held, literal congregation is not necessary to produce the conformity associated with crowds. The impression of universality can cause even widely separated individuals to act in concert. "Psychologically speaking," Allport concluded, "'the public' means to an individual an imagined crowd in which (as he believes) certain opinions, feelings, and overt reactions are universal."³⁰ Later what Allport called "public" would be renamed "mass" and understood as a body whose cardinal characteristic was the separateness of its members.

Wartime regimentation, the Red Scare and post-War strikes disturbed Allport, who praised Martin's despairing book on crowds. The crowd was primitive, Allport agreed, because it masked destructive drives that civilization normally held in check. But Allport's emphasis on the impres-

sion of universality led him to conclude that contemporary furies of collective behavior were neither inevitable nor likely to continue. For crowds were more ephemeral than publics; and since the public was an "impression" dwelling in individual minds, rather than a product of ricocheting emotions, it could be more readily controlled and educated. The impression of universality that today fed crowd abuses could tomorrow be applied to the ends of "true socialization."³¹ The public appeared all the more virtuously manageable to Allport because of the way it contrasted with the crowd. Lacking the crowd's inwardness and contagion, incapable of organizing itself, the public owed its unity to objects of attention lying outside itself. In short the public—Allport's term for the mass—was ordinarily inert, but it was safely movable by those who could touch its latent desires.

Park and Allport domesticated the phenomena of collective behavior by confining them in theoretical abstractions. But their method was faithful to the substance of their views: crowds and masses were conceived as forces that turned societies back into their primary elements, cancelling concrete structures that stood in the way of renewal. Gone from the discussions of Park and Allport were the images of violence and leveling that had colored most pre-War treatments of the crowd. In their place appeared implications of splendid indeterminacy and potential.

Among observers of the crowd the ebullient E. L. Bernays stood at a far remove from these academics. In a cloud of puffery that included two books published during the 1920s, Bernays embraced the mass as the precondition of public relations, the new trade that he toiled to make into a profession. Bernays' pretensions moved him to search for the theoretical premises of publicity work in the writings of Trotter, Martin, Walter Lippmann and others. What resulted was a serviceable "philosophy" of the mass society that connected academic theory with the hustling arts of mass communications.

Bernays laid down the axiom that "The crowd is a state of mind which permeates society and its individuals at almost all times."³² "Crowd psychology and herd reaction" accounted for the great majority of judgments on topics that lay beyond the immediate ken of modern citizens, and it was this fact that "gives the public relations counselor the opportunity for his most important work."³³ It is important to note that Bernays used the word "crowd" to denote what Tarde and Allport labeled the "public," what would later be termed the "mass." For it was crucial to Bernays' conception of the prevalent "crowd-mind" that it referred to the malleability and passivity of the mass, in contrast to the activism of the literal crowd.

According to Bernays the condition of the mass generated an appetite for symbols and stereotypes that permitted "the average mind to possess a much larger number of impressions than would be possible without them." Instead of consuming the individual, the mass society made his loyalties more labile and distributed them more freely. It was the

inconsistency of the average man's mental, social, and psychological commitments which makes possible the gradual change from one state of affairs or from one state of mind to another. . . . This is one of the most powerful forces making for progress in society because it makes for receptivity and open-mindedness.

Bernays surmised that only emergencies forged the total allegiances of mobs. In unpressured peacetime the mass "state of mind" paradoxically made for tolerance and educability by dividing people into a variety of groups, no one of which monopolized its members' attention. Bernays concluded that the receptivity "which results from the inconstancy of individual commitments may be accelerated and directed by conscious effort."³⁴

In a book titled simply *Propaganda* that appeared in 1928, Bernays unabashedly acknowledged implications of crowd psychology that academic analysts either denied or ducked. Left to themselves, Bernays wrote, the masses would be paralyzed by the blizzards of suggestions generated by advertisers, broadcasters and other special pleaders. Only an "invisible government" could "sift the data and high-spot the outstanding issues," providing the "organization and focusing [that] are necessary to orderly life." Now adding Le Bon to a list of authorities that included Trotter and Lippmann, Bernays wondered whether, "If we understand the mechanisms and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?"³⁵

But understanding the group mind was not enough. "Invisible government" would require powerful implements—implements that had been providentially supplied, Bernays pointed out, by the new electric media. "As civilization has become more complex and as the need for invisible government has been increasingly demonstrated, the technical means have been invented and developed by which opinion may be regimented." Tarde had described newspapers as the central nervous system of the public. By the 1920s radio had enormously expanded the means by which "ideas can be spread rapidly and even instantaneously over the whole of America."³⁶ The unique capacities of radio provided new grounds for believing that the mass society could be safely mastered.

Through the early 1930s studies of radio's effects were limited to primitive measurements of audience sizes and advertising success. Social scientists seemed to lack both the data-gathering capacity and the curiosity to inquire into the larger social consequences of broadcasting. Finally in 1935 Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, social psychologists with good entrée into the radio industry, made the first attempt to "map out . . . the mental world created by radio." They surmised that radio, reaching audiences "of a size hitherto undreamed of," would play havoc "with the traditional theories of crowd formation and of group thinking."³⁷ Actually Cantril and Allport's findings tended to confirm earlier speculation regarding the manageability of masses.

Following Floyd Allport, Gordon's brother, Cantril and Allport considered the "impression of universality" the psychological glue of large

collectivities. Because of its capacity to make the individual listener believe “that others are thinking as he thinks and are sharing his emotions,” radio “more than any other medium of communication, is capable of forming a crowd mind among individuals who are physically separated from one another.” Cantril and Allport ascribed the spellbinding success of Roosevelt, Long and Coughlin to their skill in creating a vivid impression of universality among millions who had little more in common than receivers tuned to the same frequencies. Coughlin’s accomplishments seemed especially significant because unlike Long and European demagogues, who had built bases of support before they took to the air, the radio priest had created “exclusively on the basis of radio appeal an immensely significant political crowd.” This achievement indicated that “the fostering of the mob spirit must be counted as one of the by-products of radio.”³⁸

But the burden of Cantril and Allport’s research was to distinguish the docility of radio audiences, which were mass forms, from the waywardness of crowds. Because “the contagion of personal contact” played no part in the collectivities gathered by radio broadcasts, the situation of the radio listener differed fundamentally from that of the listener in a meeting or street throng. In fact Cantril and Allport implied that broadcasting actually diminished the incidence of literal crowds and replaced them with mass phenomena. In other words, by dispersing audiences, and by permitting communicators to monopolize their attention, radio created the conditions that would come to be known as the mass society. Physically removed from the speaker, separated from one another, radio auditors became “less emotional and more critical, less crowdish and more individualistic.” For this reason, Cantril and Allport observed, radio is “ill-adapted for producing unpremeditated crowd behavior,” and rather poorly suited to the ends of dictators.³⁹

Compared with face-to-face communication, broadcasting “*seems to have a slightly dulling effect upon higher mental processes.*” But Cantril and Allport noted that this numbing had its uses. In words that recalled Trotter’s remarks on the stabilizing effects of herd instinct, Cantril and Allport called radio “perhaps our chief potential bulwark of social solidarity,” a “standardizing influence” that tends “to counteract disintegrative forces.” In effect “the new mental world” limned by Cantril and Allport was another cheerful assessment of the mass society, a detoxified crowd that could be bent to the purposes of enlightened leaders.⁴⁰

The nascent American theory of the mass society also drew indirect support from the work of market researchers and opinion pollsters. Important links between this work and academic social science were forged by Paul Lazarsfeld, who fled the Nazis to settle in the United States in 1934.⁴¹ Abandoning the study of community structures that had until then preoccupied empirical sociology in both Europe and America, Lazarsfeld devoted his career to dissecting the “action” of individual consumers and voters by sampling techniques. Setting aside curiosity about cultural determinants of behavior, Lazarsfeld sought to analyze actions into discrete “phases” that persuaders could influence. In practice this focus on

dissecting individual choices led Lazarsfeld to portray modern citizens as people on the loose, released from traditional social constraints and receptive to the mass media. This orientation was highly congenial to advertisers, for whom Lazarsfeld performed dozens of market studies. In 1934 Lazarsfeld argued that “the formal analysis of the act of purchase” yielded results “which were interesting for the theoretical psychologist and worth money to the business man.”⁴² Three years later Lazarsfeld joined Hadley Cantril and Frank Stanton in setting up the Office of Radio Research, a pioneering center of mass communications studies.⁴³

In 1939 Herbert Blumer, a pupil of Robert Park, published a systematic statement of the progressive consensus on crowd and mass that had evolved since the First World War. With a bow to Le Bon’s “classic work,” Blumer reaffirmed all of Park’s emphases on the cleansing and liberating functions of the crowd. “With the breakdown of his previous personal organization,” Blumer wrote, the man of the crowd

is in a position to develop new forms of conduct and crystallize a new personal organization along new and different lines. In this sense, crowd behavior is a means by which the breakup of the social organization and personality structure is brought about, and at the same time is a potential device for the emergence of new forms of conduct and personality.⁴⁴

The “milling” of crowd-members, the “contagion” of their emotions, were described by Blumer as processes that were in themselves asocial, but that prepared the ground for political and religious reformations.

Blumer’s account of the “mass” represented the first attempt to define the dispersed crowd since Tarde introduced his conception of the “public” in 1898. In effect, Blumer’s notion of the mass gathered together all the speculative strands by which earlier American writers had sought to rationalize the atomizing results of urban-industrial change. According to Blumer the mass was heterogeneous and anonymous, an aggregation that like the crowd was “devoid of the features of a society or community.” It was a heap of separated individuals. But unlike the crowd, the mass lacked “interaction or exchange of experience” among its members, and thus lacked the crowd’s unity. Therein lay the advantages of the mass. For mass-members were “detached and alienated individuals who face objects or areas of life which are interesting, but which are also puzzling and not easy to understand and order.” Yet in contrast to crowd-members, who were drawn inward to contemplate their own conduct, mass-members were left unhomogenized, in possession of themselves and looking outward. Emptied of traditional parochial identities, mass-members were prone to turn, in Blumer’s words, “toward a wider universe, toward expectations,” to influences beyond “local cultures and groups.” In short the mass as Blumer sketched it resembled nothing so much as an ideal market, a sea of consumers wanting to be sold, or a patient electorate, waiting to be polled.⁴⁵

But in 1939 Blumer was articulating a consensus about the benign

potentials of collective behavior that was fast unraveling. The fondness of European authoritarians for Le Bonian precepts forced American writers to reexamine the implications of crowd psychology. Scholars studied with horrified admiration the rallies at Nuremberg, Goebbels' use of radio propaganda and the demagogic virtuosity of Father Coughlin. The psychologist Ellis Freeman identified Hitler as the modern master of crowd-making techniques. Hadley Cantril analyzed the role of crowd behavior in generating such malignant movements as Naziism or such feckless ones as the vogues of Townsend and Father Divine. Cantril and other psychologists joined the board of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, founded in 1937 to combat anti-democratic demagoguery.⁴⁶

During the 1940s empirical researchers' "rediscovery of the primary group" further eroded the progressive conceptions of crowd and mass. Fresh studies of mass communications effects indicated that the media were less sovereign, and their audiences less passive and atomized, than had been previously supposed. Paul Lazarsfeld reported in 1942 that broadcasting was most effective when it supplemented the activities of independent groups like farm bureaus or listening circles. A study by Lazarsfeld of the 1940 presidential race, published in 1944 as *The People's Choice*, showed that local, personal influences weighed more heavily than radio and newspaper campaigns in determining voting decisions. Blumer continued to insist that voting, shopping and attending movies were "mass actions"; but by 1948 even Blumer was implicitly questioning the accuracy of the mass society thesis when he criticized opinion pollsters for presuming society to be "only an aggregation of separate individuals." Five years later Eliot Freidson summarized the case against Blumer's 1939 definition of the mass. Recent findings, said Freidson, implied that "the member of the mass audience selects his mass communications content under a good deal of pressure and guidance from his experience as a member of social groups . . . and that mass communications have been absorbed into the social life of the local groups."⁴⁷

The moral of the new evidence, however, was not that the mass audience could not be managed, but rather that its management required tactical subtleties that had been glimpsed by only the shrewdest of earlier writers. One of these was E. L. Bernays, who as early as 1923 had cited the necessity of enlisting local opinion leaders in publicity campaigns.⁴⁸ According to Bernays it was the solidarity of local groups that made mass opinion easily manipulable, for once one persuaded a group's leaders, the group "automatically" fell into line.⁴⁹ Paul Lazarsfeld repeated Bernays' insight when twenty years later he conjectured that the success of Father Coughlin reflected "the network of local organizations which provided the necessary face-to-face complement or sounding-board for his radio speeches."⁵⁰ This line of implicit advice for mass communicators culminated in *Personal Influence*, a study published by Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz that showed how media messages flowed in two "steps," requiring local leaders to relay them to the millions. All these studies suggested that

persisting subcultures and local loyalties buffered media influence in salutary ways, but also helped to convey it.⁵¹

Daniel Bell seized on “the rediscovery of the primary group” to rebut allegations that a massified American society was doomed either to stagnation or to disintegration. He held that unhomogenized group life served to stabilize social progress, by providing citizens with psychological anchorages. “Social and cultural change,” wrote Bell, “is probably greater and more rapid today in the United States than in any other country, but the assumption that social disorder and anomie inevitably attend such change is not borne out in this case.”⁵² Thus Bell inverted the judgment of the interwar consensus: the mass society flourishes only to the degree that it does *not* separate or atomize its members.

But Bell had objectives quite removed from revising the mass society theory in light of the latest communications research. During the 1940s and '50s anti-communist intellectuals took up the task, begun before the war by anti-fascists, of stigmatizing the mass as a culture dish for the bacteria of totalitarianism. Bell was one of many who labored to clarify the distinction between the American mass and the mobilized European crowds that had succumbed to Naziism and Stalinism. Bell’s “The Theory of Mass Society: A Critique” was first read at an international conference in Milan sponsored by the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom. For that matter some of the new research in mass communications had been supported by the USIA.⁵³ By the 1950s studies of the mass society had left behind the vague visions of perpetual fluidity cherished by pre-War progressives. The project of mastering the crowd had passed under the discipline not just of empirical research, but of Cold War politics.

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notes

1. “The Theory of Mass Society: A Critique,” *Commentary*, 22 (July, 1956), 75.
2. *Ibid.*, 78.
3. *Ibid.*, 82.
4. Leon Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1961), 57.
5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York, 1945), Volume 1, 10.
6. Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth Century France* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1981); Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London, 1975), Chapter 4; Fred H. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal, 1977), 50-55.
7. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London, 1926), 25-31.
8. *Ibid.*, 18, 14.
9. *Ibid.*, 8-9, 64-66.
10. *Ibid.*, 61-63, 136-138, 21.
11. Barrows, 182; Matthews, 55.
12. Boris Sidis, “A Study of the Mob,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, (February, 1895), 188-195; Boris Sidis, “A Study of Mental Epidemics,” *The Century Magazine*, (October, 1896), 849-853; Boris Sidis, *The Psychology of Suggestion: A Research Into the Subconscious Nature of Man and Society*, with an Introduction by William James (New York, 1898).
13. E. A. Ross, “The Mob Mind,” *The Popular Science Monthly*, (July, 1897), 397.
14. E. A. Ross, *Social Psychology: An Outline and Source Book* (New York, 1908), 57, 79, 56, 63-65, 84.
15. Walter Dill Scott, *The Psychology of Public Speaking* (Philadelphia, 1906), 155-156, 185.
16. (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1915), 311. Carnegie did not change the spelling of his name until a later date.

17. *Ibid.*, 318-320.
18. George Creel, *How We Advertised America* (New York, 1920), 111; James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, *Words That Won the War: The Story of the Committee on Public Information, 1917-1919* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1939) 130; Guy Golterman to Carl Byoir, March 30, 1918, CPI Files, Box 42, Folder 5, National Archives.
19. Creel, 5.
20. Boris Sidis, "The Source and Aim of Human Progress (A Study in Social Psychology and Social Pathology)," *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 14 (April-June, 1919), 113.
21. Everett Dean Martin, *The Behavior of Crowds: A Psychological Study* (New York, 1920), vii, 37, 286-287. Emphasis in the original.
22. William Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* (London, 1916), 28, 33, 53-54, 7.
23. Robert E. Park, *The Crowd and the Public*, ed. Henry Elsnor, Jr. (Chicago, 1972); Matthews, 50.
24. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1924), Chapter 13.
25. Robert E. Park, *Society: Collective Behavior, News, and Opinion*, ed. Everett C. Hughes (Glencoe, Illinois, 1955), 133.
26. Park and Burgess, 924-925.
27. See Park's preface to E. T. Hiller, *The Strike* (1928), in Park, *Society*, 31-32.
28. Park and Burgess, 926.
29. Floyd Henry Allport, *Social Psychology* (Boston, 1924), 4-6.
30. *Ibid.*, 308.
31. *Ibid.* 377-379.
32. Edward L. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York, 1929), 104-105. First published in 1923.
33. *Ibid.*, 214, 159.
34. *Ibid.*, 162, 146-147.
35. Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, 1928), 11-12, 47-48.
36. *Ibid.*, 12.
37. Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York, 1941; first published by Harper & Brothers, 1935), vii, 4.
38. *Ibid.*, 8-9, 21.
39. *Ibid.*, 13, 140, 22.
40. *Ibid.*, 157-158, 24. H. L. Hollingworth presented conclusions similar to those of Cantril and Allport. He noted that the mass media had helped to revolutionize modern audiences by making them more discriminating, less accessible to the antic appeals of old-fashioned orators. "Never before in history were audiences so intelligent and well informed, so competent and willing to follow a logical discourse." *The Psychology of the Audience* (New York, 1935), 111.
41. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *The Varied Sociology of Paul F. Lazarsfeld*, ed. Patricia L. Kendall (New York, 1982), Introduction and "An Episode in the History of Social Research: A Memoir"; Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1982), 127-129.
42. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The Psychological Aspect of Market Research," *Harvard Business Review*, 23 (October, 1934), 54, 71.
43. Lazarsfeld, "An Episode," in *The Varied Sociology*, 40-45.
44. Herbert Blumer, "Outline of Collective Behavior," in *Readings in Collective Behavior*, Robert R. Evans, ed. (Chicago, 1969), 77. First published in Robert E. Park, ed., *An Outline of the Principles of Sociology* (1939).
45. *Ibid.*, 77-79. For analysis of an earlier statement on the mass audience by Blumer, see Bramson, 64-70.
46. Symposium on "Pressure Groups and Propaganda," *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science*, 179 (May, 1935); Thornton Sinclair, "The Nazi Party Rally at Nuremberg," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2 (October, 1938), 570-583; O. W. Riegel, *Mobilizing for Chaos: The Story of the New Propaganda* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1934); Ellis Freeman, *Conquering the Man in the Street* (New York, 1940), 176-191; Hadley Cantril, *The Psychology of Social Movements* (New York, 1941).
47. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The Effects of Radio on Public Opinion," in *Print, Radio, and Film in a Democracy*, Douglas Waples, ed. (Chicago, 1942), 73; Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Helen Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York, 1948); Herbert Blumer, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review*, 2 (October, 1948), 542-549; Eliot Freidson, "Communications and the Concept of the Mass," in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, Wilbur Schramm, ed. (Urbana, Illinois, 1955), 183-184. On new research indicating that primary groups retained vitality in modern society, see Edward Shils, "The Discovery of the Primary Group," in *The Policy Sciences*, Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell, eds. (Stanford, 1951), 44-60. On the course of mass communications research in the period, see summaries by Czitrom, 134-136, and Bramson, 99-107.
48. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, 159. See also Bernays, *Propaganda*, 27, 53-54, 59.
49. Bernays, *Propaganda*, 49.
50. Lazarsfeld, "The Effects of Radio on Public Opinion," 73-74. In a 1949 survey Joseph T.

Klapper also noted the apparent effectiveness of supplementing broadcasting with face-to-face groups. *The Effects of Mass Media* (New York, 1949), II:22, 25; IV:52-54.

51. Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1955).

52. Bell, "The Theory of Mass Society," 82.

53. On CIA support for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the impact of the Cold War on the work of Daniel Bell and other prominent American sociologists in the 1950s, see Job L. Dittberner, *The End of Ideology and American Social Thought: 1930-1960* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), 103-145, 185-187, 325-327. Wilbur Schramm's 1955 anthology on mass communications "originated in the United States Information Agency's need for a book of background materials." *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, "Foreword."