

## Multiplicities old and new

Abstract: At the end of the nineteenth century, two famous predictions were advanced for the coming twentieth century: while Le Bon prophesied that the coming century would have been the age of crowds, Tarde replied that the new century would have been the age of publics. Even in retrospect, it is not easy to tell who was right, and which collective formation actually became predominant.

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At the end of the nineteenth century, in France two famous predictions were advanced for the twentieth century: the publicist in psychology and politically conservative Gustave Le Bon (1895), traumatised by the revolutionary events of the Paris Commune in 1871 and galvanised by General Georges Boulanger's charismatic leadership, prophesied that the coming century would have been *the age of crowds*, while the jurist and social theorist Gabriel Tarde (1901), apparently more worried by the Dreyfus affaire and the way in which it split the opinion of a whole nation in two, replied that, instead, the new century would have been *the age of publics*. Soon after, the American sociological founding figure Robert E. Park (1903) sided himself with Tarde. In a subsequent article Park (1940: 686) added a further item: 'Ours, it seems, is *an age of news*'.

Even in retrospect, it is not easy to tell who was right, and which collective formation actually became predominant. For his part, for instance, the Italian positivist scholar Scipio Sighele (1899) proclaimed in a Solomonic way that our age is *simultaneously* one of publics and of crowds.

Indeed, the first half of the twentieth century was marked by the scourge of totalitarianisms in Europe, the mobilisation of crowds, the perversion and implosion of their desires around the cult of the leader (the fetish-body of the leader), along with the paranoia of 'vital space' and the racist abjection which culminated in the extermination programme. Yet, while totalitarian regimes certainly thrived thanks to the 'taking of the street', the organisation of large rallies in sport stadia, the endless parades on newly built urban boulevards and so on, they would have not been possible without the power of the mass media and the development of propaganda techniques. In the second half of the century, however, domesticated and 'democratic' mass media, as sensitive captors of so called 'public opinion', intertwined with the creation and handling of 'public problems', played no minor role in shaping Western affluent society and its urban life (incidentally, the 1970s postmodernist current in

social theory can be regarded as a by-product of such crucial role played by mediated communication at the societal scale, where the media decide access of subjects and events to social visibility and, above all, many social theorists live safe middle-class lives in front of a TV-set): crowds are urban, publics suburban.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the two old – and by now apparently familiar – collectives, *the crowd* and *the public*, with their respective promises and threats – democratic debate and free exchange of opinions on the one hand, unruly action and passionate contagion of beliefs on the other – are once again at the forefront of our preoccupations. This comes in conjunction with the appearance of new mediation infrastructures and new configurations of political action. While the phrase ‘mass personalisation’ used to be an oxymoron in the twentieth century, at a time when the mass was regarded as an inherently de-individualising and de-personalising force, mass personalisation has in fact become not only a reality but a major business in the twenty-first century, thanks to the customisation and gadgetisation of ‘user-empowering’ (such is the mainstream representation in both academic talk and advertisement) information-technology products. Today, mass personalisation goes hand in hand with another seemingly paradoxical yet no less powerful phrase that captures our *Zeitgeist*, namely ‘networked individualism’. The classical notion of the freestanding individual maintained by the tradition of liberal political thought (John Locke and followers) was inherently grounded in the idea that the individual was a human reality – or, at least, a theoretical entity – that pre-existed the social group it would then join (*via* social contract). It is the image of the *homo clausus* Norbert Elias (2000[1969]) criticised in the long and important introduction to the second edition of *The Civilizing Process*. But today we directly experience the fact that we can become individuals only insofar as, and in the measure in which, we are connected, online, with access to wider territories of information and interaction. This fact opens a new scenery. On the one hand, it is certainly true that so-called ‘personal media’ provide us with dynamic representations of the ambient world and its relevant information, conveniently put from our own perspective (a relatively trivial experience using Google Maps and other similar applications); but, on the other, that very possibility hinges on the fact that our perspective is but a contingent actualisation of a much larger impersonal matrix of data provided to all users (or, more restrictively, to all authorised users). As we are (RSS-) ‘fed’ with information and, in turn, feed back information to others, ‘We, the users’ are thus turned into a complex social material entity and a new collective that – at times, confusingly – exhibit the traits of both a crowd and a public.

The uncanny twin notions of mass personalisation and networked individualism present us with a situation in which technical and moral agency is still imagined as tied to some sort of individual basis – and where, consequently, the individual is conceived of as the major ‘building block’ of the social – but where simultaneously the power of action is recognised as resting in substantial measure on networks, connections and the relative positions

generated within those networks: it is only by joining such media spaces that we can hope to connect to others and begin to interact with them. Such mediated social multiplicities might look rather different from classical twentieth-century publics, though. Yes, we are mature publics bearers of opinions; but we are also hyperactive handlers of information who 'receive it and pass it on', often creating curious traces shaped like cascades, chain reactions and loops. In online social platforms, crowds seem to reappear, albeit in a new guise – namely as 'crowdsourcing' entities. Mass personalisation, network individualism and crowdsourcing deserve attention not simply as contemporary cultural phenomena (the ideology of *late* late capitalism, the latest ideology of capitalism, the ideology of neoliberalism just before or well deep into its crisis), but also and especially, I would argue, as phenomena that question our *episteme*, our capacity to describe, appreciate and understand the formation and transformations of social multiplicities, these *nebulosae* that, in fact, form the basic human material.

Therefore, the fact that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, questions about the nature of collective social formations, their morphology and their 'circulations', are once again amply debated in social theory – just as they were in the late nineteenth century, at the time of Tarde, Durkheim and Simmel: a period Wagner (2001) has described as 'the first crisis of modernity' – can be taken as a sign that some major transformations are currently under way (counting with Wagner, a third crisis of modernity, after the second crisis of the 1960s?). The on-going transformation of urban spaces through the spreading of information and communication technologies constituting a permanent infrastructural layer that supports, selects and sorts different types of mobility, coupled with the emergence of new forms of administration and governance of social phenomena at different scales of action, seem to call for new conceptualisations of how displacements, gatherings and assemblies take place and what kind of socio-spatial (better, I submit, *territorial*) phenomena they are. Indeed, the changing political, economic and cultural importance of social multiplicities entails multiple stakes, which I would like to outline in the following reflection.

In the first place, politically, there is the issue of the new articulation of the two dimensions of *the public* and *the common*, which includes the question of how to re-imagine various practices of 'taking care of'. Formal-rational bureaucratic *administration* represented the classical modern answer to such a need-want-requirement (which Weber called *Bedürfnis*). The ways in which we (might) take care of each other through the constitution of new forms of mutuality, as well as the ways in which we (might) take care of the environment and the atmosphere we live in (the *oikouméne*) are some of our current most urgent *Bedürfnisse*. Second, economically, there is the issue of the new forms of production, circulation, distribution and valorisation of our assets, which includes, for instance, the configuration of affective economies of attention, in which values are created by certain alignment of visibilities and the focusing – the territorialisation – of scattered attentions upon certain places or items (along with the concurrent processes of invisibilisation of diverging paths and patterns). Third, culturally, there is the issue of how the new forms of sociation are imagined, shaped, discussed and experimented – a process which involves not simply the 'thrown-togetherness' of urban life, but also the more

subtle and plural paths towards aggregation, and the ways in which the thresholds of togetherness are activated, crossed or postponed.

To make social theory, that is, to venture into the epistemological puzzle of society and sociation, is also necessarily to make cultural histories. In other words, because our epistemological enquiry into the social is an enquiry 'from within', one cannot proceed towards it without concurrently considering how, in given social and historical contexts, this same *problématique* of the social has been posed, discussed and translated into operative knowledge. Consequently, the following exploration does not content itself to be a cultural history of certain key notions, but also aims to intersect the epistemic and political layers. The questions we are facing are pressing and difficult. In its most evident form, there is the question of 'Who are we?'. Notably, this question is different from the classical question of political philosophy concerning the sources of political power, for such 'Who are we?' may in fact also be phrased as 'What are we?' – the latter way of putting the matter evoking issues of governmentality and ecology, that is, of the gathered *materials* that compose the heterogeneous ecology of social collections. The ambiguous multiplicities, as they have been scientifically and culturally appraised, are attempts to answer the question 'Who are we? What sorts of social compositions or social configurations do we form together?'

Besides that, I also wish to suggest that the double question of 'Who' and 'What' we are cannot be fruitfully tackled unless we also connect it to a third one, namely 'Where are we?', i.e. the question which concerns the spaces and the territories that social multiplicities can make together in order to meet and coexist in a liveable *oikoumène*. Phenomena like crowds, publics, assemblies, collectives, swarms, rabbles, legions, rallies, and gatherings stretch form the most immediate materiality of bodies (bodies as complex and faceted materials), through their spatial, technological and mediating arrangements, to the creation of a world in common and the institution of a polity, *via* the affective intensifications (*nebulae*) of interaction in a plurality of encounter situations. Rather than with the classical political question of the formation of a collective will out of a plurality of biologically separated individuals, today we are faced with a question that is *socio-technical* and *bio-political* at the same time: essentially, it is the question about the ways in which social multiplicities may territorialise themselves within certain spaces and inside certain material environments, upon certain layers and certain architectures of interaction and affection. I beg the reader's patience if my social-theoretical exploration might at first look like as 'merely' a cultural history. Hopefully, my reasons will become clearer before the end.