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THE AMBIGUOUS MULTIPLICITIES

Materials, Episteme and
Politics of Cluttered Social
Formations

Andrea Mubi Brighenti





The Ambiguous Multiplicities

Also by Andrea Mubi Brighenti

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Multiplicities:
Materials, Episteme
and Politics of
Cluttered Social
Formations**

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à mon Soleil, tâche infinie...

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1

Multiplicities Old and New

Abstract: *At the end of the nineteenth century, two famous predictions were advanced for the 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.*

Keywords: crowds; cultural history; publics; social multiplicities; social theory

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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 into 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 neo-liberalism 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 *oikouménē*) 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?’, that is, the question which concerns the spaces and the territories that social multiplicities can make together in order to meet and coexist in a liveable *oikouménē*. Phenomena like crowds, publics, assemblies, collectives, swarms, rabbles, legions, rallies and gatherings stretch from 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.

2

Urban Crowds, Mediated Publics and Global Masses

Abstract: *While crowds were regarded by many nineteenth-century authors as exceptional, unknown creatures attacking civilization from the outside, early twentieth-century sociologists increasingly focused on the more familiar yet, for some reasons, no less uncanny figure of the mass. Whereas the perceived problem with crowds was their aggressiveness, masses were mainly charged with passiveness, shapelessness and anonymity. Apparently, publics were more active producers of opinions, yet soon exposure, emotionality and cacophony and were attributed to them.*

Keywords: the average man; class conflict; civilisational conflict; crowd policing; crowds 2.0; ‘massification’; mass culture; urbanophobia/urbanophilia

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Since the late eighteenth century, and more clearly during the course of the nineteenth century, the most visible and most characteristic social multiplicity was the crowd – and, more specifically, the urban crowd. While public administrators, planners and the police discursively and practically attempted to configure the city as a pacified space for social interaction, exchange, commerce, production, distribution and consumption, urban space has in fact remarkably remained at the centre of all major social tensions and conflicts of that period. After major historical episodes of urban unrest in Europe – such as 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1871 – when cities turned into veritable battlefields, the intensification of ordinary urban rhythms resulting from new socio-technical, organisational and logistic patterns led observers and theorists to increasingly describe the city as the space that materially embodied the ‘shocks’ of modernity. Among such shocks, urban crowds obviously occupied a prominent role. As the best literature on this topic has shown (McClelland 1989, Van Ginneken 1991, Borch 2012), fear of an unruly subject of this type was recurrently expressed both practically and theoretically: crowds were irrational, destructive, criminal, delinquent and so on... that is, quintessentially uncontrollable. Even before the end of the *ancien régime*, as reported by Walter Benjamin (1983[1937–39]: 40), secret police agents in Paris described the densely populated inner-city quarters where the popular classes lived as ‘safe havens for criminals’. In similar formulations, the crowd clearly stood as an alias for the subaltern popular classes. While ordinary police forces sought to ‘extract’ single criminals or deviant subjects from the mass (of this enterprise police and judicial photography archives bear moving testimony), the mythical figure of the *flâneur*, to which Benjamin himself devoted so much hermeneutic energy, literally dove into the crowd, ‘set[ting] up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite’, with an ultimate mission of ‘becoming one flesh with the crowd’ (*ibid.* 9) – a technique which, as reminded by Frisby (2001), was also soon to be learnt by detectives and undercover agents.

The seemingly opposite observational experiences of ‘distancing from’ *versus* ‘immersing in’ the crowd relate to well-known ideas and prejudices about the crowd itself and its hypnotic–suggestive–contagious effect. Christian Borch (2012) has recently characterised these narratives as constituting a specific ‘crowd semantics’. Interestingly, a number of well-known theories elaborated at that time by anthropologists, criminologists, sociologists, psychiatrists and crowd psychologists still resurface in

our contemporary imagination. Late-nineteenth-century master narrative was pivoted around the opposition between the mature freestanding individual – that is, the educated bourgeois heterosexual adult male (the ‘empty sample,’ as Deleuze would later call it) – and the irrational (thus essentially ‘feminine’ and ‘infantile’) populace living at a lower degree of individualisation, incapable of controlling itself and its own thrusts, subject to mass suggestion and blind imitation of more or less episodic leaders (*meneurs*, demagogues etc.). The narrative of psychic epidemics, mass suggestion, blind imitation and mental contagion, allegedly bound to produce riotous mobs, barbarously destructive populace and maddening crowds, can be found reproduced with some variations in authors ranging from Cesare Lombroso to Scipio Sighele, from Hippolyte Adolphe Taine to Henri Fournial and of course, most (in-)famous of all, Gustave Le Bon – not to mention a Friedrich Nietzsche. In the following generation, scholars as diverse as Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, Ortega y Gasset, Boris Sidis, Edward Alsworth Ross and Everett Dean Martin (on the latter three, in particular, see Leach 1986) would echo similar concerns. The narrative must have been deeply grounded in the *Zeitgeist* considering that, in the mid-nineteenth century, it also featured in seminal writers of urban life such as Eugène Sue, Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, followed, at the turn of the century, by successful novelists like Guy de Maupassant and Bram Stoker. Not much later, in the early twentieth century, artistic circles such as the Italian Futurists could still capitalise on the binomial *folla-follia* (‘crowd as madness’) for their paintings and happenings (Poggi 2002), while the late Victorian and colonialist author Rudyard Kipling depicted Indian crowds as oriental, exotic and mysterious creatures. Over and over again, modern riotous urban crowds were described as the heirs, or the re-embodiment, of the barbarians who, at the end of the Ancient Age, had destroyed the Roman Empire.

One could summarise by saying that class conflict written large got translated into civilisation conflict. Hence, crowds were regarded through an exotic lens as the eruption of atavistic forces from either the margins of civilisation (e.g. in Southern European regions) or from the urban underbelly (especially in the Parisian depictions by Sue, Zola, Balzac and Hugo). The wretched, the child and the woman – each affected by their specific forms of deviance and pathology – are the figures standing at the polar opposite of the bourgeois adult male, obsessing him with their unruly conducts. Crowds are faceless, hard to discipline,

and exhibit a natural tendency to subtract themselves from education, work and responsibility. The encounter with primordial expressions in the urban underworld thus unraveled as a travel into a double 'heart of darkness'. On the one hand, there stood poor inner city populations, the *Lumpenproletariat* which formed the 'dangerous classes' (Chevalier 1958); on the other, the foreign populations encountered in the imperialist expansion, whether overseas or in the internal peripheral regions, such as mountain regions across Europe (e.g. brigands).

However, the variations on the theme are perhaps not meaningless. While for conservatives the destructive effect of crowds was the worst of all imaginable evils, to some positivist thinker such as Sighele, as well as to some vitalist philosopher like Simmel (and, interestingly, even Durkheim's discussion on the risks of 'ossification' of the collective conscience seem to echo a similar attitude), destruction of old institutional constellations appeared to be, to some extent at least, functional to the emergence of new civilisational forms. The barbarians, it was argued, were only able to tear down civilisations once they were thoroughly corrupted and decadent. Also, as Damiano Palano (2002) has remarked, there are differences in approach between Sighele, on the one hand, and Le Bon and other elitist conservative French authors, on the other. Politically speaking, Sighele was a liberal with sympathies for socialism (his mentor, Enrico Ferri, was indeed a socialist) and his theorisation represents an attempt to extend Ferri's call for a revision of Lombroso's atavistic model, according to which the criminal is, in essence, a *delinquente nato* ('born criminal'). Sighele's argument is not so much that crowds are *per se* criminal but rather that there are special conditions under which even a *plebe saldamente onesta* ('firmly honest plebs') can produce a *delinquente occasionale* ('occasional criminal') or even a *delinquente per passione* ('passionate criminal'). Although Sighele never dared to openly challenge Lombroso's overall framework, clearly his works contain a more sympathetic attitude towards the subaltern classes and, theoretically speaking, an important opening towards taking into consideration the role of the social-environmental factors that affect gatherings. The type of 'atmospheric' thinking that lurks in such considerations will be scrutinised more in depth in Chapter 4. Sighele (1897) also insisted on the sect as a peculiar site in the organisation and disorganisation of individual character. Both the crowd and the sect appeared as totalising entities; insofar as they reclaim for themselves the individual in its entirety, they tend to completely absorb it and even to trump it (Brighenti 2010a).

An important shift can likewise be detected, from the more or less stereotyped 'picture of the poor' to the development of social scientific methods for the measurement of the population, although there are a number of authors in which both methods can be found mixed together – such as, in England, Friedrich Engels' (1844) inquiry into the working class conditions, Henry Mayhew's (2010[1851]) portraits of the London poor, and Charles Booth's (1889–1903) survey into London life and labour (incidentally, it is perhaps worth recalling that as Booth was concluding his research, Jack London wrote his *The People of the Abyss* [1903]) and, in the US, Jacob Riis (1901[1890]). More generally, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the appraisal of crowd phenomena was conducted not only through anthropological, psychological, criminological, medical, statistical and sociological language, but also through electrical, chemical, biological and bacteriological categories. All these disciplines were faced with – and concerned by – the disruptive strength of urban crowds. And, unmistakably, scientists were casting upon these phenomena the regard of the mature, self-disciplined individual who felt threatened by the lack of control. Most authors were puzzled by the suddenness, precariousness and evanescence of the object 'crowd', deemed to be an unstable, temporary, episodic yet tyrannical creature, similar to the sudden burst of an instantaneous chemical reaction. It is not by chance that *agoraphobia* emerged as a named disorder in 1871 (Callard 2006), although its symptoms can be found in earlier descriptions (for instance, in the 1830s, in Alessandro Manzoni's diaries). Agoraphobia also features in association with mysophobia, the fear of contamination, and other obsessive psychic disturbances associated with the individual's response to social contacts with urban strangers. Later on, the agoraphobic hate and anxiety about urban crowds in open spaces were perfectly captured by Canetti in his portrait of the protagonist of his novel *The Tower of Babel* (Canetti 1947[1935]), the sinologist Peter Kien, who embodies the agoraphobic urbanophobe down to all the most minute and grotesque details. Incidentally, Canetti has been described by McClelland (1989) as one of the few authors who have attempted to re-value and celebrate crowds. In fact, there is a probably distinct thread of appreciation of crowds which is intertwined with urbanophilia and the celebration of modern democracy, as is especially evident in the American tradition which ranges from poets such as Walt Whitman (2002[1855]) to popular essayists such as Gerard Stanley Lee (1913).

Ultimately, however, the distinction between urbanophiles and urbanophobes is hardly a neat one: the fact is that, perhaps in a Freud-like or Bataille-like move, urbanophobes seem to be repelled by crowds yet also mysteriously attracted by them. The shunned crowd can thus be encountered under the most unusual conditions and in the most remote contexts. I would just like to recall the curious description made in 1889 by the British adventurer and explorer Warburton Pike before the majestic scenery of migrating caribou near MacKay Lake, in the wide open plains of the Canadian North:

La *foule* had really come, and during its passage of six days I was able to realise what an extraordinary number of these animals still roam in the Barren Ground. From the ridge we had a splendid view of the migration; all the south side of MacKay lake was alive with moving beasts, while the ice seemed to be dotted all over with black islands, and still away on the north shore, with the aid of glasses, we could see them coming like regiments on the march. In every direction we could hear the grunting noise that the caribou always make when travelling; the snow was broken into broad roads, and I found it useless to try to estimate the number that passed within a few miles of our encampment. (quoted in Sandlos 2007: 146)

Quite telling in this quote is Pike's use of the French term *foule*, which was at the time clearly in vogue in the heated debates about the modern urban lifestyle. Another important element that emerges here concerning crowd experience is the sentiment of the impossibility of counting the elements composing a crowd, a crucial characteristic to which we shall return below. But for the moment, it is interesting to continue observing the crowd 'from the outside' and notice how the issue of the boundaries of collective formations was addressed. It is an established fact that, in nineteenth-century Paris, the process of Haussmannisation amounted to a type of urban planning deployed as a tool for crowd control through the manipulation of the *cadre bâti* ('built environment') of the city, a pattern later to be followed by many other Western cities (Harvey 2006). Even today, urban upscaling processes often entail the demolition of buildings which come to stand as symbols of various forms of social disorder and decay, ranging from drug dealing to political subversion – a repertoire of forms regularly depicted as regressive and hampering the 'regenerated' new trend of a given neighbourhood.

Early modernist architectural and urban planning approaches explicitly sought to have a grip on the materiality of crowds, especially

according to a logic of containment. Building new architectures for the crowds inherently implied treating them as material objects occupying, more or less flexibly, a certain allotted space. The materiality of crowds is well known to civil engineers, who, for instance, calculate footbridges' rupture loadings on the basis of the so-called compact crowd state. In the social sciences, a similar approach was launched in the early nineteenth century by Adolphe Quételet in his essay of social physics: 'So, when we observe the masses – wrote Quételet (1835: 12) – moral phenomena are in some way brought back into the order of physical phenomena.' Even today, many technical studies on human crowds as fluids (see e.g. Henderson 1974; Hughes 2003; Helbing et al. 2005) adopt very similar premises. It is not by chance, I think, that in the highly specialised and mostly quantitative contemporary literature on physical crowds the units composing the crowd are technically referred to as 'pedestrians', the prototypical modern urban figure. Other architectural and infrastructural devices and technical tools for the containment, confinement and concentration of urban crowds include, for instance, sport stadia (Bale 1994) and barbed wire (Netz 2004) – the 'static violence' of the latter being actually thought for larger territories and even whole regions, but having also turned, during the course of the twentieth century, into the epitome of the application of military strategies to urban spaces.

The many forms of permanent or temporary manipulation of the built environment entail a type of control on crowds inscribed in that governmental form which Foucault (2004[1977]) called 'pastoral power', which he traced back to Judeo-Christian culture. Indeed, pastoral power is exercised by taking care of a human mass *qua* living mass grounded in a local materiality and existing in a given environment. More recently, Sloterdijk (2005) has dubbed 'explication of the atmosphere' the awareness that the materiality of the atmosphere is inevitably part of the political sphere. In a similar way, pastoral power is a type of power in which the biological phenomena of life become central to political coexistence (bio-politics). Also, when Foucault described such type of power as 'soft' or 'positive' power, he did not at all mean to imply that it was inoffensive. Certainly, the doctrine of non-lethality seems to have become a dominant frame for public order maintenance strategies in Western democracies. But, non-lethal management of crowds can be still extremely painful and afflictive. The range of practical techniques employed by the police include direct attacks on demonstrators' bodies. The official aim is to 'incapacitate' rioters rather than harm them, and

it is obtained thanks to weapons such as chemical irritants (sprays and tear gas), electroshock taser-like weapons, rubber bullets, stun grenades, water cannons, sound cannons and so on, all of which have been amply used in recent years. Of course, in this context, what counts as ‘harm’ is not merely a medical but a political issue. An earlier expression of such a dream of total yet non-lethal incapacitating power over crowds can be found in Rudyard Kipling’s (1912) science fiction story *As Easy as A.B.C.*, when the Board’s commissioners ‘extinguish’ the democratic revolt in the Northern-Illinois district:

We descended by the stairs, to find ourselves knee-deep in a grovelling crowd, some crying that they were blind, others beseeching us not to make any more noises, but the greater part writhing face downward, their hands or their caps before their eyes.

Non-lethal techniques also include forms of spatial containment through control tactics known such as ‘kettling’, or corralling, first introduced just after the J18 protest (18 June 1999) in the City of London, and more recently employed, for instance, at the student demonstrations in London in late 2010 (but also, simultaneously, in Lyon, France). Kettling is enforced by a cordon of police agents armed with shields who enclose the ‘livestock’ of protesters. Since kettling is indiscriminate (passers-by are often entrapped, too), it can be said to be a technique that creates a temporary open sky prison (also, what is meant by ‘temporary’ is unclear: admittedly, being caught up in a police kettle for hours without water and food can be an extremely distressing experience which is bound to leave long traumatic memories). Kettling has been subject to many criticisms and in the UK it has been judged illegal by the High Court of Justice in April 2011. In general, however, it is remarkable how the boundaries of the doctrine of non-lethality remain far from established: as the 2011 revolts in the Arab world and more recent episodes of urban unrest in Turkey and Ukraine, with their frightening load of casualties, have revealed, crowds can always be met with disproportionate, ferocious and indiscriminate repression. In this case, Foucault’s interpretive framework of pastoral power seems to work less well, while Canetti’s (1978[1960]) analysis of the survival mechanism as a basic social relation seems to be more relevant – but we shall come back to a more detailed discussion of these points below.

In a recent study of urban events such as sport events, labour union demonstrations and large concerts, Dominique Boullier (2010; 2011) has

singled out three major general strategies for the management of social multiplicities. The first is the *sequencing of individuals* (which includes ID cards or badges, turnstiles and other individualising devices etc.); the second is *spatial segregation* (which includes quarantine, *cordons sanitaires*, kettling techniques etc.); the third is *temporal purification* and assimilation (which includes a set of devices such as queuing, aimed at increasing the similarity of elements over time, progressively narrowing the range of accepted deviance). Foucault's (2004[1977]) genealogical reconstruction of governmental rationalities also outlined similar strategies. Notably, the strategy of assimilation through time resembles what Foucault, following German historiography, had called the process of 'disciplination'. Boullier has also proposed to refrain from using the term 'crowd', in order to stress the inherent epistemic uncertainty concerning the social multiplicity that constitutes a gathering. Such a multiplicity may, at any moment, engender major *basculements*, that is, oscillations that determine veritable 'phase transitions'. Consequently, Boullier prefers to speak of 'quasi-crowds' and (in consideration of the fact that each gathering has been made possible by previous mediated communication at a distance) 'quasi-publics'. In order to better evaluate these two notions, however, first of all we need to trace another complex modern transformation, namely that of crowds into masses.

The paradox with most late-nineteenth century theories was that, in a certain sense, they regarded crowds as simultaneously the worst enemies of civilisation and the raw materials of every civilisation. The awareness of this paradox, which remained in the background of many authors from that period, made its way into a subsequent shift in emphasis from crowds to masses. As we move from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, the concern for *foules* or assembled crowds increasingly turns into the discourse of the masses. Etymologically, the terms are rather similar: *foule* comes from the Latin verb *folare*, to stir, specifically in the preparation of felt, or, according to a different etymology, is linked to the German root *fol-*, full (an image which captures well the 'blackening' of the dense crowd); mass comes from the Greek verb *masáomai*, to chew. Both terms, it seems, are originally connected to domestic activities involving dough baking, cake preparation, matting wool fibres together to make clothes and so on. However, the empirical usage of these terms seems to have gradually come to designate two different scales or territories of action. This outcome is best mirrored in the use of the phrase 'mass society', while no corresponding 'crowd society' is used. In his 1903

dissertation, Robert Park – following previous work by Georg Simmel and Gabriel Tarde – made an important step in this direction, describing the crowd as a specific type of social group, shaped by those elementary social facts he called ‘individual will attitudes.’ The proper object of sociological analysis was, for Park, the social group, of which the crowd represented only one possible type. The social group, Park argued, is not always the object of ‘direct perception’; in other words, it is not necessarily occurring in the here-and-now, as a crowd does, but may extend in space and time beyond immediate phenomenological observability. Attempting to bridge the phenomenon of the crowd to more general social structures, Park can be said to have inaugurated a trend towards the ‘normalisation’ of crowds, which brought that initially riotous object into the established domain of conventional sociology. Park’s move was made possible by two crucial requirements: first, following Tarde, Park stretched the extension of the social group in space and time beyond the limits of ‘direct perception’; the group is thus inherently conceived of as a virtual rather than actual assembly. Second, in opposition to Durkheim, Park firmly grounded the crowd, as any other social group, on an individualist base: a crowd is thus conceived of as anything but a sum of individuals who, at a certain point and for various reasons, become co-present to each other. Certainly, Durkheim had always distanced himself from crowd theorists. But one cannot fail to notice how much his latest work, the book on religious forms (Durkheim 1912), resonates with crowd descriptions and crowd effects. Albeit in the specific forms of ritual assemblies, crowds were for Durkheim a social *primum*, which could hardly be explained as outcome of individual deeds. As he had also already written in *L'éducation morale* (1934[1903]: IV), ‘everything we say about crowds and temporary gatherings can be applied, *a fortiori*, to societies as wholes, which are nothing else but permanent and organized crowds.’ Notably, from the crowd debate Durkheim drew the idea that human *density* leads to *intensity*, and that the intensive is a crucial moment of sociation.

Contrary to dominant late-nineteenth-century views, in the early twentieth century the idea increasingly gained ground that, even when the crowd dispersed, in a sense urbanites were still behaving like crowd members. Initially, the notion of *Masse* played a particularly important role in Germany, where Italian and French crowd psychology books were translated during the two first decades of the twentieth century and were more extensively debated during the Weimar Republic (Borch

2012). Invariably, the Italian term *folla* and the French *foule* were rendered as *Masse*: thus, Sighele's *La folla delinquente* (*The Criminal Crowd*) became *Psychologie des Auflaufs und der Massenverbrechen* (literally, *The Psychology of Assemblies and Mass Criminality*, published in 1897) and, even more predictably, Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* became *Psychologie des Massen*, published in 1908 (see also Palano 2010: 67–69). In the German cultural context, these works were accompanied by a thread of further reflections on collective psychology and suggestive issues, such as, to mention only a few of them, the work by the Leipzig-based philosopher Wilhelm Wundt (1892) on the states of consciousness, the Swiss ethnologist Otto Stoll (1904[1894]) on the psychology of the peoples, the short treatise by the Munich-based psychologist Theodor Lipps (1898) on the relation between hypnosis and contagion, and the research by the physician – and, later, Weimar politician – Willy Hugo Hellpach (1906) on mental epidemics. Clearly, the mass terminology enlarged the scope of the enquiry. Although originally more vague and mysterious than the notion of crowd, as several observers remarked, the idea of mass eventually appeared as more suitable to accommodate and account for a number of dimensions of contemporary social life that were related in particular to the issue of organisation. It was perhaps World War I which marked a deep transformation in the debate around ambiguous social multiplicities, and a definitive shift of emphasis towards the terminology of 'the masses'. Indeed one could say that, with World War I, an unprecedented experiment of large-scale organisation took place together with a massive movement of urbanisation of territories (e.g. the construction of transport infrastructures). Completely out of scale with respect to nineteenth-century social unrest, the war was a huge mass exercise, an exercise in 'massification', particularly in the massification of death.

It is through these tragic experiences that the prolegomena of a new overall societal scheme took shape, with a new class structure and new inter-class relations patterns – that was the inception of what would soon be known as mass society. It is not a chance, perhaps, that the following generation of German scholars in many cases served as soldiers during the war. It is the case of the socialist Theodor Geiger, who later interpreted mass action as an expression of the proletariat political movement (Geiger 1926). Geiger's notion of a 'latent phase' of the crowd attempted to explain the long work of preparation which precedes crowd actualisations. Geiger was also probably following up on considerations around the 'mass strike' debate that took place after the 1905 miners wild

strike in the Ruhr region. At that time Marxists such as the Czech Karl Kautsky – initially known as ‘the pope of Marxism’ but later disgraced by Lenin as a ‘renegade’ – were mainly concerned with understanding which role the party could play in organising the masses of workers. But while popular and socialist parties – as well as, subsequently, fascist parties – understood that the mass was an essential reservoir of energy and consent, most educated observers were mainly keen on stressing the mediocrity of the mass. Just as crowds’ formulary epithet had been ‘riotous’, the epithet for masses became ‘anomic’, a combination of lack of culture, passiveness and apathy. Soon later, in Spain, a conservative author such as Ortega y Gasset (1929) contemptuously described the increasing homogenisation of the masses and their tendency to invade all social spaces through the figure of the ‘average man’. On the other hand, in 1933 the Freudo-Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich claimed that the rise of Nazism could be explained only by investigating the ‘mass psychological structure’ of a nation (Reich 1946 [1933]), rather than by merely describing a series of political ruses. These arguments, it can be noticed, presuppose that large segments of the population share identical features. This is why the reflection on the masses tends to shift towards the psychological analysis of character.

In the United States, the reflections on the mass were initially developed in the context of collective behaviour studies. Herbert Blumer (1939), for instance, explained that a collective is more encompassing than a crowd because it also includes other scattered social multiplicities. Also, following the Tarde-Park lineage, Blumer intimately linked the mass to the existence of the media and a society in which communication is largely mediated communication. But characterological analysis gained prominence soon after World War II in the cultural atmosphere of McCarthyism that rewarded the model of the conformist ‘philistine’. In one of the sociological bestsellers of the 1950s, Riesman, Glazer and Denney (1950) outlined the character of the morally ‘other-directed’ personality who is in constant need of approval from ‘confirming others’. It was as if the members of this new modern urban society could never really quit the crowd even in the privacy and intimacy of their homes. The leftist elitist author – that is, theoretically elitist, but politically leftist – Wright Mills (1956: 309) sketched a whole vicious cycle whereby, through propaganda and the manipulation of communications, publics could be precipitated into crowds and soon later dissolved into masses:

In our time, as Chakhotin knew, the influence of autonomous collectivities within political life is in fact diminishing. Furthermore, such influence as they do have is guided; they must now be seen not as publics acting autonomously, but as masses manipulated at focal points into crowds of demonstrators. For as publics become masses, masses sometimes become crowds; and, in crowds, the psychical rape by the mass media is supplemented up-close by the harsh and sudden harangue. Then the people in the crowd disperse again – as atomized and submissive masses.

Along a similar trajectory, the Frankfurt School scholars decried the levelling of individuals in mass society, caused by the consumption of the standardised products of the cultural industry. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002[1947]) made this point in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, concluding that the whole rational project of modernity had failed, while Marcuse's (1991[1964]) *One-Dimensional Man* diagnosed the destruction of a private personal inner forum. In the 1950s and 1960s, the French Situationists depicted spectacle as the 'latest stage' of capitalism which isolated and paralysed viewers (Debord 1992[1967]). In practice, the shift from the notion of crowd to the notion of 'crowd mind' meant a shift from active crowds to passive masses, always under the aegis of irrationality, suggestibility and mere reactivity.

Whereas the crowd had been characterised mainly by its instability, the mass was chiefly characterised by its shapelessness. In this sense, the mass represents the first global social multiplicity, given that its shapelessness functions as a powerful dis-embedding factor capable of de-territorialising subjects from any specific socio-cultural context: the mass is a thoroughly scalable entity. Precisely these anomic, apolitical crowds, Emil Lederer (1940) and Hannah Arendt (2004[1951]) suggested, had been recruited and mobilised for the first time in history by 1920s and 1930s totalitarianisms. Arendt, in particular, attributed the support given by the masses to totalitarianism to the sad feelings of solitude that urban masses experienced in central Europe, specifically in Germany and Austria. These masses, formed by first generation urbanites, sons of rural immigrants mixed with the impoverished petty-bourgeois of the post-1929 economic crisis, gathered 'neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls' (Arendt 2004[1951]: 311). Disenfranchised from traditional parliamentary democracy, apathetic towards party politics, frowned upon, resentful, embittered and suffering from status frustration, these masses naturally

bred the 'mass man' as the key figure of social alienation, whose desperate need to believe turned into the most suitable victim of populist leaders and, ultimately, totalitarian propaganda. But also in post World War II America, the 'mass individual' appeared as the stereotypical petty-bourgeois obsessed by his own look, his public face, his respectability – once again, here comes Mr Philistine. At this time, mass culture was regarded by most observer as essentially defined by close-mindedness, conservatism and mediocrity. The existence of the 'average man' soon raised the question of existential void. Modern urbanites, like the clerk John Sims in King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), were leading a meaningless life of routine and repetition. As Albert Camus (1961: 265) wrote a few years later, the new American novel was:

describing men by their outside appearances, in their most casual actions reproducing, without comment everything they say down to their repetitions, and finally acting as if men were entirely defined by their daily automatisms. On this mechanical level men, in fact, seem exactly alike, which explains this peculiar universe in which all the characters appear interchangeable, even down to their physical peculiarities... This type of novel, purged of interior life, in which men seem to be observed behind a pane of glass, logically ends, with its emphasis on the pathological, by giving itself as its unique subject the supposedly average man.

Nineteenth-century anxieties about the incivility of crowds and twentieth-century invectives against the passivity of masses can be understood as a reaction to the feeling that something powerful yet elusive inheres within the composition of social multiplicities. In response to this feeling, the dominant nineteenth-century discursive production had been the nationalistic narrative of mastery focused on creating strong national myths. In the twentieth century, by contrast, the practical master narrative became mainly an organisational one. Indeed, in early-twentieth-century industrial production, the discourse about the organisation of the masses was moulded on the blueprint of the clearest available example of mass coordination, namely, the army. The image of the army lies at the root of both Weber's analysis of power and Freud's analysis of group psychology. In a sense, the dream of organised modernity was not simply to command action from a multiplicity but, most importantly, to *dispose individual dispositions toward action* within a specific multiplicity. In order to do so, one had to achieve 'disciplination', a condition where human action is turned *de facto* into *reaction* to a disposed framework,

diagram of action or environment. The device of command, which elicits 'prompt and instantaneous obedience', was seen as crucial to that aim (Brighenti 2006). Also noteworthy is a whole theodicy of impersonal power entailed by the modernist industrial discourse. Organisation, it was believed, could shift the balance of the relation between the *great leader* and *small men*. As Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911: 6–7) put it in the address to President Roosevelt opening his *Principles of Scientific Management*,

In the future it will be appreciated that our leaders must be trained right as well as born right, and that no great man can (with the old system of personal management) hope to compete with a number of ordinary men who have been properly organized so as efficiently to cooperate.

Engineering implicitly represented itself as the 'democratic' vindication of the power of the masses over the power of arbitrary *meneurs* and leaders – except for the fact that the engineer himself could easily turn into a new sort of leader: a technocrat. The 'average man', so runs the implicit argument, can hope to escape the shamefulness of his condition only if he is available to become a cooperative part of a larger design. Other disciplines besides engineering developed similar efforts. In twentieth-century politics – as theorised by Weber and later by Gramsci – the 'modern prince' took the name of 'party'. Regardless of its orientation – be it conservative, popular, reformist, socialist or revolutionary – the political party's core activity lies in *organising the masses*. To give them 'unity of direction' and a 'strictest discipline' is its *raison d'être*. On its part, twentieth-century rationalist architecture undertook a similar large-scale endeavour to *house the masses*. In this case, a peculiar scalar reasoning was applied: as Peter Sloterdijk (2005) has brilliantly reconstructed, the modern micro-architecture for separated and nearly-autistic individuals (e.g. flats) goes hand in hand with its symmetric counterpart, the mega-architecture for hosting crowds (e.g. stadia). The emergent configuration is thus a peculiar tension between concentration and dispersal of the social multiplicities at stake: if, on the one hand, modern society is endowed with an 'asynodic constitution', in the sense that most of the time its subjects live in a dispersed state, on the other hand,

the 'mass', the 'nation' or 'the people' can exist as a collective subject only to the extent that the physical assembly of its entities becomes the object of a

well-organised staging – from the mobilisation in view of the participation to the dissolution of the crowd going back home, under the surveillance of civil guards, through the grasping of the crowd's attention thanks to a fascinogenic spectacle. (Sloterdijk 2005: 548, my translation)

In the light of these considerations, it seems to me that Sloterdijk's phrase 'asynodic constitution' is actually an overstatement. What contradistinguishes the twentieth-century dominant social configuration is not the lack of synods, but the accurate alternation of periods of concentration and dispersal, thus, arguably, the *rhythmic succession of synods*, or, what we might call *synodic rhythmicality*. The existence of such synodic rhythm leads us back to a Durkheimian preoccupation – but we will get back to this point below. Now, to the extent that the specific character and the specific qualities of crowds and masses are concerned, it is interesting to observe how, not too paradoxically after all, it was precisely the belief in the irrationality of maddening crowds that opened the door to the development of twentieth-century mass propaganda techniques for their manipulation. The idea, best expressed by Le Bon concerning crowds, was that the same implacable logic and the same laws that applied to the behaviour of people at gatherings could be exploited and turned into a useful tool to effectively govern them at any needed time.

The conservative idea that the crowd badly needed a *meneur* or leader was linked, it should be remarked, to the fundamental place assigned to imitation and suggestion in synodic phenomena. What nineteenth-century psychology named 'suggestion' was later reformulated by twentieth-century social psychologists in the perhaps blander and certainly more acceptable language of 'social influence'. However, there are clear traces of how such mutation came about: in his psychology of suggestion, for instance, Boris Sidis (1898) argued that 'blind obedience is the essence of influence'. From this perspective, control could be ingrained into the very process of imitation: in turn, both imitation and influence were based, as noted above, on the militarist paradigm embodied in the 'command–obedience' couple. In a different context, and certainly with a much higher level of theoretical subtlety, a similar idea can be found in Max Weber's definition of power. It is not by chance that, as recalled above, the model of the army attracted the attention of social theorists as diverse as Weber and Freud. One suspects that the crucial governmental insight was the following one: in order to effectively control the crowd, it is sufficient to occupy the place of the model to be imitated. The

dream of managing the crowd through such type of ‘fascinogenic’ – or ‘imitogenic’ – leadership proved successful in the totalitarian experiments in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Patrick Baehr (2008) has traced the historical relationship between caesarism and crowds. Traditional republican hate of the tyrant goes hand in hand with a view of crowds and masses as basically passive and ignorant, whose role was simply to ratify leadership through plebiscite and acclamation. This view is best expressed by elite theorists. However, there is no a-priori guarantee that multiplicities can always be so easily controlled. The atmosphere of an assembly or gathering is not the result of a purely mechanical process. Attempts to extinguish and quell an escalating situation can easily end up by actually stirring and inflaming it further. Suffice to consider the perverse escalation of violence unleashed by the crescendo of provocations and misunderstandings between the police and demonstrators, whereby peaceful demonstrations turn into riots. Likewise, it is not easy to motivate, mobilise and set the general feeling of an assembly. Indeed, today’s show business industry has built a whole expertise on creating such emotional ‘events’ – but again, as we know from flops and fiascos, not always successfully. As we shall see below, dispersed publics pose even more complex issues than assembled multiplicities. These cautions notwithstanding, early advertisement psychologists like Walter Dill Scott (1903) and Edward L. Bernays (1961[1923]) (Freud’s nephew), as well as social psychologists like Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport (1935), were all convinced that the media could actively shape and activate a crowd mind even in a dispersed public, audience or mass, functioning as a sort of amplification, or better prolongation, of the *meneur*’s original imitogenic act. The media were thus framed as suggestion extended and amplified by other means.

Yet, from manipulating bodies to manipulating opinions there seems to be a wide gulf. The transition from assembled crowds to dispersed publics thus raises the issue of the materials that constitute social multiplicities *qua* simultaneous assemblies of bodies *and* connections of spirits. Tarde’s (1901) distinction between publics and crowds was based on the idea that the latter were more primitive and material, while the former more evolved, civilised and exquisitely spiritual. Echoing Tarde, Sighele (1999[1903]) characterised the crowd as ‘barbaric and atavistic’ as opposed to ‘civil and modern’ publics. This distinction, as we know today, does not hold. First of all, it relies heavily on a social evolutionist view – and, of course, an evolutionary tale which is racist, classist and

sexist. In the second place, publics too are material entities. Publics need material underpinnings, as a mere glance at the construction of connecting infrastructures and the organisation of dispatch logistics reveals. What is nonetheless remarkable is how such a shift from the – at least theoretical – prominence of crowds to the supremacy of publics was in practice accompanied by a new business. Communications were already tied to the techniques for persuading or plagiarising the masses. But the rise of a large-scale ‘extractive industry’ of the public opinion made of surveys, polls, telephone interviews and so on was going to flourish and prosper in the second half of the twentieth century. The cleavage between the ‘mute’, ‘dumb’ masses, the ‘silent majorities’, on the one hand, and the vociferous, speaking publics, on the other, was one upon which deliberative theorists *à la* Habermas would later place much hope on. Through a range of technologies of elicitation, the public could be interpreted and represented in the guise of an engaged discussant. Whether as ‘well informed’ citizens, or as special interest groups or stakeholders, the public appeared as much more structured and determined than both crowds and masses. It was not without irony that Bourdieu noticed how public opinion research is invariably premised on the axiom that ‘everybody can have an opinion’.

Publics appeared to observers as communicative and articulate entities. But what are the veritable constituent elements of publics? During the course of the twentieth century, the myth of the madding crowd has turned, on the one hand, into the myth of the passive mass, yet also, on the other, into the myth of the (*ça va sans dire*, free-riding) rational actor. Classical doctrines in collective psychology, as we have observed, were pivoted around the process of ‘de-individuation’, whereby individuals were supposed to ‘melt’ in the crowd, losing control of their cognitive processes and moral inhibitions, with the consequence of mindlessly complying with the suggestions of charismatic leaders. In reaction to this view, since the 1960s a set of hyper-rationalist and individualist theories has sought to demonstrate that crowds are made of nothing else and nothing more than individual purposive actors who accidentally or purposefully get to be located in each other’s proximity. In particular, social movement scholars have criticised the classical tenets of social psychology and its original crowd psychology heritage. During the 1960s, psychological approaches were accused of depoliticising protest events and mobilisations, systematically discrediting mobilisations as mere rioting mobs, ultimately legitimising their violent repression. American scholars

like Clark McPhail (1991), Neil J. Smelser (1963) and Charles Tilly (1978) undertook historical and empirical studies of crowds to prove that the latter were always purposive assemblies of freestanding individuals. In the terms employed so far, their attempt can be summarised as the idea that mobilised crowds are nothing else than re-assembled publics. Such a rational-individualistic approach was brought to its extreme by Richard Berk's (1974) game-theoretical approach to crowd behaviour. Grounding the study of crowds in rational choice theory, Berk systematically denied the existence of any emergent collective subject in synodic phenomena. In this view, the only emergent thing is, if ever, a set of disembodied 'properties'. The current application of multi-agent systems to the social sciences runs along the same presuppositions (e.g. Batty 2001).

However, these critiques seem to have overlooked two important historical and epistemological points. First of all, historically, as we have seen, not all crowds theorists were conservative or uniquely focused on delegitimising crowds. Second, epistemologically, the rationality of social multiplicities cannot be inductively proved. The rationalist neo-individualist theoretical programme is thus valuable to the extent that it has revealed a wide variability of social multiplicities on the ground, but its exclusive focus on rationality inherently hampers its *pars construens*. Even when we move back to that sort of 'counter-image of the crowd' represented by the dispersed public, we may observe that, to the extent that communication becomes denser and denser, publics may become increasingly garrulous and fragmented into a cacophony of languages. On various occasions, even those apparently rational special interest minority groups have behaved tyrannically, intractably and even fanatically. At this point, major similarities between structured publics on the one hand and old, irrational crowds on the other may return to the forefront. This fact is crucially related to the issue of the *architecture of connection* of social multiplicities – be it spontaneously emergent or designed. In turn, social multiplicities may either support or transform and even challenge any specific contingent architecture of connection.

In the past 20 years or so, with the spread of networked digital information technologies and the new media, we seem to be faced with a veritable *return of crowds*. These are 'crowds 2.0' of Big Data age, upon which a new crowd science is being laid out. For instance, so-called Distributed Collective Practices (DCP) include a series of mediated cooperative activities. These activities create collectives which may exist despite being scattered across space and time. Through DCPs, heterogeneous

perspectives and experiences can be brought into a shared resource frame (Cragin and Shankar 2006). Since the outset, active cooperation is inscribed into this diagram. In participatory online platforms the quality of collected knowledge is measured by counting the number of contributors. It is assumed that some contributors will not only act as information feeders but will also check for other contributors' mistakes (just think about Wikipedia). In other words, the more the better. Advances in geospatial technologies have likewise enabled people with no formal training in geography to participate in the production of geographic data, a method known as Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI) (Batty *et al.* 2010). Certainly, in all these instances, the invisible infrastructure of connection is hardly irrelevant, as remembered by Bowker and Star 1999 (in the case of Wikipedia, see Niederer and van Dijck 2010). Yet, the overall expectation is that new, technologically empowered crowds are capable of positive self-organisation.

Similarly, 'crowdsourcing' entails using online 'crowds' as substitutes of firm employees. This idea is perhaps an excellent banner for the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), although it should be said that something similar can already be found in for instance in Gerard Stanley Lee's (1913) visionary-moralistic five-book portrait of American life, where crowds are placed at the root of modern business. What interests us most here is to observe how, in fact, crowds old and new occupy an inherently ambiguous location that falls *between a material, poly-articulated object* (a composition whose architecture may change in time) and *a unified, meaning-making subject capable of action* (the alignment of determinations within a synod or gathering that springs a capacity to act). Crowds are thus a reminder of the problematic 'thingness' of the social composition. Durkheim (1895) employed the term 'thingness' to refer to how social institutions act cogently upon the individual from the outside. The thingness of society, he suggested, makes it 'like God to the individual'. The attempt to take such a radical state of indetermination seriously is probably why Boullier (2011) has resorted to the phrases 'quasi-crowd' and 'quasi-public', carefully avoiding the slippery slope of 'thingness'. But the cultural, historic and conceptual reconnaissance we are proposing here also reveals that the various theorisations of these cluttered assemblies have always been troubled by the indelible under-determination of social multiplicities. It is all but easy to draw the boundaries between crowds, publics and masses because, ultimately, they are all made of the same 'emotive human material'.

3

Population, ‘the People’ and the Multitude

Abstract: *A recent attempt to reappraise crowds as self-organising social formations has been provided by the elaborations around the notion of multitude. But in legal and political theory, it is ‘the people’ that has been classically conceptualised as the carrier of sovereignty and self-determination. Population has emerged as its inevitable material and biological counterpart, that is, as the object of governance.*

Keywords: bio-politics; emotive human material; homogeneity/heterogeneity; *nebulae*; self-organisation

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The trinity of dangerous crowds, idealised publics and passive masses (Butsch 2008) provided three figures through which the social subject could be thought. But these figures are far from exhausting the *problématique* of social multiplicities. At least further three crucial figures should be taken into consideration. The population, the people ('We, the people') and the multitude will be now scrutinised.

The recent reflections and contributions around the latter figure, the multitude, partly in connection with the debate on the commons and 'commoning' practices, will make it a useful point of departure for our discussion. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term 'multitude' has been occasionally employed by conservative thinkers, such as Le Bon and Ortega Y Gasset, to discuss crowds and masses. More recently, however, borrowing the usage that can be found in Spinoza, the Italian post-Autonomist philosopher Antonio Negri (2002) has employed the term 'multitude' in order to accomplish two theoretical tasks: first, to set the concept of 'the people' free from the transcendence that is inevitably conjured up by social-contract theories; second, to enlarge the dimension of production that underlies the traditional Marxist concept of 'class', while keeping the notion of exploitation as a defining feature of class relationships. The multitude, Negri argues, is a class concept but is different from the traditional Marxist concept of class. In a series of co-authored works (Hardt and Negri 2000; 2004; 2009), the multitude is recurrently identified as the political subject of radical democracy. While not defined in strict terms, it is suggestively described as an open network of singularities linked by common production, a non-totalising ensemble of differences, and as 'the living alternative that grows within Empire' (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiii). How is the multitude positioned vis-à-vis crowds and masses? In a crucial passage, Hardt and Negri (2004: 100) explain:

The components of the masses, the mob, and the crowd are not singularities – and this is obvious from the fact that their differences so easily collapse into the indifference of the whole. Moreover, these social subjects are fundamentally passive in the sense that they cannot act by themselves but rather must be led. The crowd or the mob or the rabble can have social effects – often horribly destructive effects – but cannot act of their own accord. That is why they are so susceptible to external manipulation. The multitude designates an active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common.

In sum, crowds are described as passive and disorganised, the people as organised but from the outside (hetero-organised), while only the multitude is regarded to be a truly self-organised formation. Such a view has attracted criticism. For Borch (2006: 14), for instance, Hardt and Negri repeat the crucial mistake that in the 1920s Theodor Geiger had already charged Le Bon with: the two post-Autonomist authors identify the crowd with the *active* crowd alone, and ignore the existence of a *latent* phase of the crowd, in which values and visions begins to spread and become shared in view of crowd actualisation. Borch's critique is poignant, but it somehow overlooks a fact that is never made explicit in Hardt and Negri yet can be spotted in a number of occasions: more than an alias for the crowd or the mass, their notion of multitude is in the first place an alias for the *social movement*. From this point of view, Hardt and Negri's idea of multitude is closer to community than to crowd, at least if the contradistinguishing characters of crowd are anonymity, openness and heterogeneity. As the quote above illustrates, Hardt and Negri stick to the old elitist contempt for crowds and masses, deemed to be passive and merely reactive entities, and they also subscribe to the typical nineteenth-century view considered above that depicted crowds as destructive and unruly. Insofar as it is connected through networked, horizontal communication, Hardt and Negri's multitude resembles more to a mature public. Indeed, the multitude is described as capable of self-determination without falling into any form of supra-ordinate transcendence, in opposition to what supposedly happens with 'the people'. The multitude advocated by these authors is designed to bypass the act of 'giving oneself a name', which classically contradistinguishes the coming together and unity of the people as a political subject. The avoidance of a name is due to the fact that a single name would inevitably subsume and erase the differences between the singularities that compose the multitude. In this sense, Negri's view also shares resemblances with the notion of 'revolution without a face' sponsored in Italy by the avant-garde group Luther Blissett during the late 1990s, who rejected conventional notions of authorial identity embracing the late-1980s practice of 'multiple names' launched by the English Neoist avant-garde (Home 1988).

Other leftist authors have criticised the notion of multitude precisely for its incapacity to explicitly take a name for itself. For instance, Simon Critchley (2007) has insisted that giving oneself a name is the fundamental constituent move of all political activity. Critchley's position on this point follows Jacques Rancière (1995) and his conceptualisation of

'the people' as the crucial political category and the real political subject. Drawing from Castoriadis (who, incidentally, is also one of Negri's sources), Rancière has sought to show that 'the people' remains the real figure of instituting power. By 'instituting power' it is meant a power that exceeds the structural and organisational dimension of political parties and institutions; only instituting power, radical theorists stress, can activate a real process of political subjectivation. Rancière also claims to be a realist, clarifying that, in social life, equality can be only an 'unfounded artifice'. Nonetheless, politics proceeds by precisely putting such an artifice on stage, developing through all the conflicts and the ambiguities that such an artificial *mise en scène* generates in real and practical terms. In a critical discussion on the notion of multitude, Rancière (2002) has criticised the radical democratic theory of Hardt and Negri, accusing it of utopianism. As a realist, Rancière aims to uncover the necessarily *thin* foundations of democracy. In his opinion, Hardt and Negri are not enough conflictualist, or not truly conflictualist – which, for radical theorists is in general no good news. In fact, Rancière concludes that the notion of multitude 'substantialises the egalitarian presupposition', which on the actual political scene can never be taken for granted and must always be proved anew.

Just to illuminate such an apparently abstract and perhaps a bit obscure discussion, one could think about the recent events represented by 2011 major democratic movements of political collective action in various countries of the Arab world. In most cases, admittedly, the 2011 'revolutions' have been phrased and carried out in the name of 'the people'. In these contexts, the classical European lexicon of 'the right to self-determination' has been heard loudly enough. From this point of view, the Arab movements seem to give reason to Rancière *contra* Hardt and Negri. Certainly, the revolutionary outcome of the 'Arab Spring' has cut through various national borders, and we need to turn attention to the dynamics of imitation and contagion rationalist scholars have so vehemently rejected. But, far from melting boundaries, and considering that all these countries speak the same language and have strong cultural resonance with each other, the political assertions of these movements have been carried on within markedly national communities frameworks. So, the notion of self-determination of the Peoples has been strongly asserted by these revolutionary movements, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, the countries where popular uprisings first began. Here, we are once again led back to the complex, almost alchemic, passage inherent

in sovereignty. The crowd outside the palace of power is nothing more than a stock of unruly bodies, perhaps even a rough crowd; yet, simultaneously, at the high point of the revolt, this crowd turns into something else. A new political subject appears, namely 'the people', who assert their capacity to decide about their own destiny – and, in fact, the destiny of a much larger, dispersed social multiplicity: the population? The public?

I would also like to remark that, with his theorisation of multitudes, Negri has not made any substantive step forward from the typical paradox of avant-gardism, be it left-wing or right-wing. This trope entails a relation between the intellectual and social–historical actors which can be made explicit with the following axiom: 'There is an actor who is the Hegelian agent of history, the inherently liberating agent; most of the people do not act and, even when they do act, they do not think (they are the crowds, the masses...); eventually, they will align themselves when the real agent acts and sets history on the move; the intellectual is the voice of such historic avant-garde actor and thus the one in charge of indicating what should be done at this particular time.' This line of reasoning is always strategically immunised from criticism. If, for example, a multitude goes 'astray' – for example, it turns into a reactionary multitude – a radical leftist theorist like Negri could easily reply that what we were facing was not an actual multitude in the first place, but rather a formation characterised by hetero-organisation. On the contrary, if the pursued agenda proves to be the 'right' one – that is, the one the intellectual regards as progressive enough – then it means that true, free self-organisation has triumphed. Once we unravel this syllogistic strategy, we realise it hides the simple truth that self-organisation and heterogeneity do not always sit comfortably together. There is a whole array of social phenomena which exist between an anonymous crowd flowing in a street, a demonstration and a military parade. True, the anonymous crowd in a street is the least organised entity. Probably, the military parade is the most organised one, but certainly it is organised from the outside, 'transcendentally' rather than 'immanently'. The organisational effect, in other words, is produced thanks to a prolonged training of bodies, which in turn requires command, obedience etc. On the other hand, the people gathered at a demonstration offer the best example of self-organised multiplicity. But, from the point of view of the degree of heterogeneity, the anonymous crowd in the street definitely remains much more heterogeneous than both an army parade and a protest demonstration. Thus, even the *lack* of organisation (and not *dis*-organisation,

as defective or bad organisation) may actually play an important role in the constitution of social multiplicities – an insight which gets completely lost in Hardt and Negri's theorisation of multitudes.

Social psychologists and social movements scholars have produced important empirical work about the networks of recruitment and the patterns of mobilisation during contentious politics (Berk 1974; Tilly 1978; McPhail 1991). They have shown the existence of heterogeneous paths of gathering, crowd formation and dispersal. From this point of view, as recalled in the previous chapter, rationalising interpretations of crowds have had the historical merit of dissipating the false impression that social multiplicities like crowds and masses are flat and homogeneous. But hyper-rationalist explanations also tend to reduce the phenomenon of crowd to formal diagrams of action and reaction as they occur between individual members. By doing so, I argue, they ultimately fail to grasp the integral extent of the phenomenon of social multiplicities, and turn into a different form of reductionism. While classical holism is certainly badly equipped to truly understand social multiplicities, the logic of crowds can hardly be successfully reduced to either classic or neo-rational models based on the mere summation of individual actors' choices. It is certainly necessary to dispel the belief in the uniformity of the crowd, as well as the idea that a superior social multiplicity (such as Negri's multitude) requires a certain specific type of organisation. But, to that aim, we do not necessarily have to resort to game-theoretical approaches. A solitary and often misunderstood social theorist, Elias Canetti (1978[1960]), had already stressed the diversity and variety of crowds. Even today, his insights can illuminate some peculiarities of crowd-states (for a more thorough reconstruction, see Brighenti 2010a; 2011). Well before social psychologists and social movements scholars, Canetti had already described how crowd events are based on heterogeneous assemblies that unfold in time. Even better, crowds institute a temporality of their own. People join the crowd not only alone but in small bands, which Canetti called 'packs'. Also, some of these packs have specific qualities which qualify them as 'crowd crystals' (this is the way Canetti reinterprets the notion of sect). These packs and crystals possess different motivations, different persuasions, different emotional register, diverse capacities of affect, different ways of acting and different vocabularies of action. As reminded by McClelland (1989: 305), in Canetti 'the empty single-mindedness of the crowd gives way to many crowds with many minds' in each of them. Canetti's notions of packs and crowd crystals

put the crowd in the perspective of an unfolding dynamic event: the heterogeneity of components is only a part of the whole process, for a crowd-state is a thriving state of differences that *come to* de-differentiate themselves into a single, complex wave-like movement, which is not simply one of flattening or wiping differences away. The coming into existence of a crowd is not produced by the mere coexistence of gathered people in a shared space, nor simply by a holistic 'shared sentiment'. Rather, Canetti points out the existence of a peculiar moment and experience he calls 'the discharge'. The discharge is a tipping point intimately related to the bodily dimension of human existence, the experience of proximity and immediate physical contact with others. The discharge is an event within the event, which transforms the whole temporality of crowd. By doing so, Canetti also acknowledges a dimension of social multiplicities which rationalist theorists fail to account for, that is, the emotive human material that forms the ground of all social multiplicities.

From this perspective, the crowd is better imagined, not as a stock of individual bodies joined together, which can be accidentally either static or in motion, but rather as a transformational event, which inherently involves movement. Not confining ourselves to the sheer attempt to capture the movement of the crowd, as physicalist scholars do, we should try to capture crowd *as* movement properly. Canetti's rich typology of crowds captures the rhythms and intensities of such crowd-movements. The diversity of crowds is richly depicted by Canetti who, far from confining himself to classical destructive crowds, also examines joyous crowds, waiting crowds, slow crowds, double crowds etc. In each case, distance management emerges as an essential dimension of a crowd formation and crowd event. Distance cannot be reduced to the mere spacing between individuals, nor to a vacuum, a passive space. As Simmel (2009[1908]) acutely noticed, the space between two people in interaction becomes 'animated'. It is, in fact, a connective distance: space is itself a medium, it entails active mediation. And, as soon as we ask how far such a connective distance stretches, and what it is made of, the issue of *mediated* multiplicities re-appears, together with Tarde's (1901) notion of the public as a territorially dispersed yet emotionally synchronised multiplicity. Canetti (1978[1960]: §I) observes that the powerful surround themselves with increasing distances in order to be isolated from crowds. When we become part of publics and dispersed masses, we experience precisely such an isolation: we are 'out there', an un-reachable entity, a safe individual whose individual boundaries are secured, stable

and unthreatened. But when we walk down the street and accept more or less ephemeral contacts with unknown others, the situation is reversed and we rehearse all the faculties that enable crowd formation.

In the next section we shall delve into the core nexus between the thingness and subjectivity of social multiplicities. But, before moving to that stage, we have to consider another crucial configuration of social multiplicity, in which materiality assumes a precise significance: the notion of population. Rancière explicitly opposes ‘the people’ not only to multitudes, but also to what he describes as the ‘techniques of population counting’. The statistical techniques for population counting are one of the essential tools developed by the modern state and its gaze (Scott 1998). It is the old theme of the *notitia rerum*. The case of civil engineering recalled above is but one among many instances that fall under the heading of the ‘administrative’ or ‘governmental’ domain. In his late 1970s seminars, Foucault (1997; 2004[1977]) explored precisely such a coupling between governance tools and subjects. His guiding idea is the notion of ‘positive power’: in the modern age, in order to live, one needs to remain in touch with power. In other words, the priority of positive power is not so much getting rid of deviant subjects, but rather, taking care of them. Besides individual surveillance and training, a pivotal activity of modern power concerns taking care of aggregates, disposing humans and things in a material space of events. Through a range of tools which Foucault called the *dispositifs de sécurité* (‘devices of security’), the population is treated as an undivided whole, characterised as a living, biological material. Thus, it is subject to an aggregate, statistical, ‘normalised’ management of biological processes such as circulation, nutrition, health and so on. Whereas discipline prescribes training for individual bodies (‘behave yourself!’), the devices of security are applied to the global mass of a whole population which is not interpellated: discipline individualises, Foucault famously summarised, bio-politics ‘massifies’. Bio-politics is a politics of life, but not of individual lives. It addresses ‘the multiplicity of humans as a global mass that is affected by overall processes that characterize its life’ (Foucault 1997: 216).

The ‘bio-’ prefix in bio-politics should not generate confusion: a population is not a natural phenomenon; it is not simply the number of people living or dwelling in an area. In fact, its existence is made possible only by a series of specialised professional *savoirs*, including certainly biology, but more generally encompassing a range of disciplines from the medical to the administrative sciences. Originally the ‘science of police’ was

the general header for these undertakings. The technical *savoirs* made it possible to create a pattern of value distributions within a grid of dimensions and variables, which include essentially 'impersonal' events such as birth, death, production, reproduction, illness and infection rates. The social physics elaborated by the Belgian demographer Adolphe Quetelet (1835), for instance, was based on the notion of the 'average man' as a sample (*étalon*) or a 'mean' extracted from a distribution curve. Thus, as a *quadrillée* ('gridded'), statistical mass, the population is the outcome of the taking in charge of living entities on the part of power (Desrosières 1993). In opposition to the multitude and the people, the population possesses no will. It merely shows inner, spontaneous tendencies, propensities and trends that must be normalised. Foucault opposed such 'normalisation' to the 'normation', or regulation through norms that characterised discipline. Normalisation does not entail any attempt to impose conducts, but is a way of *posing* the thresholds that define the field of acceptable oscillations within a multiplicity (e.g. 'normal' criminal rates, death rates, infection rates etc.).

A few sketchy examples may help illustrating the task inherent in the bio-political care of a population. Consider, to begin with, how professional party organisers and event planners calculate the average alcoholic rate of those attending their parties. They know, for instance, that to shut down the event will require a certain amount of time, which cannot be compressed or accelerated beyond certain thresholds, and that the average rate of drunkenness of the population of party-goers will lead to a given probability of accidents. There are certain margins of manoeuvre. Pushing things beyond those margins will become hard, if not impossible: the event possesses its own dynamics, its own propensity, and must be *carefully accompanied* towards its end. Another, certainly more serious, case concerns the issue of radiation exposure which, after the 2011 Fukushima power plant accident, has re-gained a certain tragic momentum. In this case, public authorities face the crucial task of determining the *thresholds* of acceptable levels of radiation, not only in absolute values, but with differentiated value ranges for different population groups or profiles (infants, debilitated people etc.). A third example concerns urban hygiene. Hygienism is certainly a powerful ideological discourse, which during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been functional to the exercise of bourgeois social control over the popular classes. But cultural critics who have revealed the symbolism of urban hygiene have sometimes overlooked the fact that the dirt in the

street is anything but a mere symbol. The material dimension of urban maintenance must be attentively planned for population to survive. In a classic essay in urban hygiene from the 1920s, the French demographer Paul Juillerat, who, between 1894 and 1904, had conducted an extensive research on insalubrious habitats in Paris, explained:

In the cities houses are pressed one against each other; the inhabitants, stacked in small quarters, breath air pollution; the decomposition of all the wastes from organic life constantly diffuses in the atmosphere nefarious gasses and volatile products whose action on human organisms is often dangerous, always harmful. The sun, the killer [of microbes] par excellence, can only act ephemerally in the narrow streets, bordered by high buildings, into the little courtyards which are veritable wells, completely insufficient to ensure to the rooms facing them the indispensable air and light. Finally, the constant promiscuity in which urbanites live facilitates the quick propagation of contagious disease. (Juillerat 1921: 6–7, my translation)

A whole bio-political imagery is at play in similar considerations. It interweaves with preoccupations for the quality of the built environment and the health of resident population. In Juillerat's description, the *forest of houses* pressed one against the other turns into a veritable crowd which mirrors the other urban crowd in the streets. But these crowds can now be regarded as a population from the perspective of governance. As Foucault put it, the stake of governance is the organisation and disposition of humans and things in the most convenient way in relation to certain overall aims of wealth, increase and optimisation of resources. Thus bio-political governance emerges when the *nebula* of a social multiplicity is subjected to a strategic calculation.

4

What Is the Building Block of the Social? Episteme of the One and the Many

► **Abstract:** *Late nineteenth-century authors were not so wrong in their claim that crowds are the ‘raw matter of all civilisations’. Indeed, crowds place us before that undefined, floating, unstructured and unorganised nature that characterises our primary emotive human materials. However, contrary to what Le Bon and the other crowd theorists argued, such a floating entity is far from possessing any uniform determination, nor does it represent any alleged substantive ‘human nature’.*

Keywords: the generic/the specific; minimal beings; ‘the raw materials of all civilisations’; thriving states

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I am tempted to say that, despite all the heavy theoretical limitations, shortcomings and biases considered in Chapter 2, late-nineteenth-century authors were not so wrong in their claim that crowds are the 'raw materials of all civilisations'. Indeed, crowds place us before that undefined, floating, unstructured and unorganised nature that characterises our primary *emotive human materials* in the nebula of its constitutive, unfolding composition. Yet, contrary to what authors like Le Bon and other crowds theorists argued, such a floating entity is far from possessing any uniform determination, nor does it represent any alleged substantive 'human nature'. In its polymorphism and pliability lies precisely its capacity to be precipitated (if we may still provisionally retain this metaphor from chemistry) in different directions. Sometimes, the precipitate forms slowly, for it requires accurate and specific training which dilutes suspension – and resistances – in time. On other occasions, though, the precipitate forms very quickly, because affective intensities 'heat' interaction inside certain territorialised spaces. The crowd is not the solid collective which Durkheim described as a new exceptional creature emerging out of the ritual. Nor is it a social group with a shared affiliation or a specific positioning vis-à-vis other groups, which structuralist theorists elected as their topic of choice. As we have hinted at, the crowd should be better conceptualised as an *event*, a nebula-like composition which takes shape at different scales of action and which shapes different territories of interaction – or better, action–reaction complexes. The most visible scale at which this event occurs is the scenery where urban crowds, mediated publics and global masses – as well as those other peculiar entities which are populations, multitudes and peoples – make their appearance. But similar events would be impossible without the existence of a multiplicity of other, smaller-scale formations such as packs, gangs, sects, associations, parties and so on which provide a plurality of intermediary crystallisation forms.

Here, 'large scale' and 'small scale' are only tentative indications, for all these phenomena have ambiguous scalar edges, and the question actually concerns the degree of specificity we can hope to attain in the knowledge of such entities. As Gregory Bateson (1979: §II, 1) aptly put it, in this sense, 'the generic we can know, but the specific eludes us'. The much sought-for specificity in our apprehension of social multiplicities cannot be reduced to a quantitative matter, which could be ensured, for instance, by better counting systems, or by an extensive application of quantification procedures to social multiplicities. Recently, Bruno Latour

(2009) seems to have turned into an advocate of a ‘quantitative social ontology’. One premise in this quantitative turn from a prominent social theorist should be made explicit, though: counting makes sense only if the individual can be assumed as a self-evident and indisputable unit of such computations. In reality, however, we have seen so far, *individuation* is only *one of the techniques* employed in the management of social multiplicities – a technique which can always be put in question and practically challenged. More precisely, what I am trying to describe here is not a process whereby, under certain circumstances, the individual might de-individualise him/herself, as earlier crowd psychologists described and as, for instance, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo (2007) reiterated in the famous 1971 Stanford prison experiment.

Rather, my point is that individuation is, since its inception, a technique. One can always try to apply this technique, but its success can be jeopardised. Individuation can be applied only to a certain extent, within certain limits and with varying degrees of success. The individual, it might be said, is the theoretical and technical tool of a specific cultural, economic and political project, or, of a set of such projects. Conversely, the degree of specificity attainable in our knowledge of social multiplicities is – as all other real epistemological problems – an eminently practical one. Suffice to recall the issue of individual identifiability or recognition, especially in the late-nineteenth-century urban contexts. Thanks to anthropometry, it was the ‘apprehension’ of the body which turned into the guarantee of the apprehension of the individual. Identifiability is based on the conceptual rupture between different orders of observation. From Cesare Lombroso’s (1876) craniometry to Alphonse Bertillon’s (1893) fingerprinting system, an attempt was made at instituting the individual as an isolated order of existence. Arguably, it was the successful applicability of such individuation and identification techniques which marked the birth of a number of new social theories at the end of the nineteenth century: thus, Sighele dubbed his own approach ‘collective psychology’, Tarde ‘inter-psychology’ and Durkheim ‘sociology’. (He also took care to specify that collective psychology in its entirety should be resolved into sociology.)

These were not only terminological skirmishes. The core of the matter revolved around the most suitable episteme for understanding how the clutter and the nebula of the one and the many was positioned vis-à-vis the individual. Durkheim mounted a powerful argument that society could not be explained taking the individual as a founding element.

Indeed, an earlier step in this direction had been taken by Quetelet (1835), who was puzzling about the right scale at which social phenomena should be observed, described and explained. Quetelet stated that, if we observe these phenomena too closely, we perceive only irregularities and accidents. Regularities only begin to appear at a more general, aggregated level. More than half a century later, Durkheim impressed into this scalar issue a specific *moral* connotation: collective representations and collective conscience (which is of religious and moral type, symbolised by the law), he contended, exercise a direct influence upon single individuals. This means they are not mere quantities, but veritable forces. Perhaps, Durkheim was also echoing Alfred Fouillée's (1880) notion of *idée-force*. Individuals, he claimed in any case, do experience the existence of a superior and external power that cogently acts upon them, although they are in most cases unaware of its real nature. This kind of 'God', Durkheim held, is in fact nothing else but society as a whole or, better, society as a single cohesive social group forged through unifying rituals. With reference to our previous discussion on gathered multiplicities, it is the alternation of periods of concentration and dispersal, the rhythmic succession of synods, that creates that ultimately lasting and unified creature, the social group. Irreducible to individuals, the group subsumes the individuals and presents to them as a monolithic, unchangeable entity – hence, Durkheim's insistence on the 'factuality' of the social. Tarde's dictum 'every thing is a society' makes sense, in this respect, as a reaction against holism and as an invitation to look back towards the heterogeneous components of what, *prima facie*, may appear as a single 'thing'. Those associated components, Tarde (1898) stressed, are never fully subsumed by the operation of unification, never irreversibly merged by that unification. The ensuing theoretical stance is, in Tarde, an operationalism that draws attention to the chains of on-going repetitions, oppositions and adaptations determining the contingent arrangements that are taking place within each social multiplicity.

A similar sensibility towards the dynamic aspect of social aggregations can also be found, in a different context, in Simmel, who specifically focused on issues of interchangeability and reciprocity in social relations. In his *Philosophy of Money*, in particular, Simmel (1900) singled out the loss of individual qualitative differences between objects, a loss which he regarded as intrinsically brought about by monetary economy. Later, in a number of passages from his major sociological treaty, Simmel (2009[1908]) described social life as created by the huge 'sum and sublimation' of a

countless number of small singular contributions (*unzähliger Einzelbeiträge*). The echo of crowds can be distinctively heard here. In the theoretical book on money, he had stressed that money economy leads to a status of ‘un-differentiation’ where the qualitative distinctiveness of the single items is lost. Thus, ‘hollowing out the core of things’, money radically breaks with isolation and incommensurability of both places, objects and subjects. In short, money acts as a powerful, if ruthless, slantwise vector against social isolation. We shall return to the nature of this act of ‘setting in motion.’ Indeed, circulation is going to have a crucial importance for our discussion. For the moment, let’s simply notice how Simmel’s reflections about money and mutual action (*Wechselwirkung*) are intimately linked to urban life and modernity. In the nineteenth-century, the urban/rural dichotomy certainly corresponded to the dichotomy between concentration and dispersal: the city was the site of human concentration as opposed to the countryside as a space of dispersed, low-density dwelling. But it also highlighted another aspect that most theorists attributed to modernity. In a famous passage from *Le 18 Brumaire*, for instance, Marx (1852) contemptuously referred to the ‘idiocy of rural life’, which he saw best proved by the small windows of peasant houses (!). The largest part of the population in mid-nineteenth-century France, Marx observed, were still living in rural areas. For how much he was painfully aware of the misery of overcrowded lodging conditions of the urban proletariat, denounced by his comrade Engels and directly experienced by himself for many long years in his London life, still, as a faithful urbanophile, Marx thought that the density of urban life enabled and enhanced exchange and circulation of fresh ideas. On the contrary, under rural living conditions, the population was composed by the ‘mere addition of identical elements’. Such an additive series of juxtaposed items Durkheim would have later dubbed ‘mechanical solidarity’ (*solidarité mécanique*). The assumption implicit in much of Marx’s reasoning was that dispersed rural populations could never hope to form any real crowd, insofar as they utterly lacked internal differentiation and stimulating interaction. A sort of paradox follows, whereby both an enhancement in individuality and un-differentiation (which later social-psychological role theorists would have called precisely ‘de-individualisation’) were implicitly regarded as products of urban life. On the one hand, one must be urban in order to become a fully entitled individual, participating in intellectual debates and the monetary economy; yet, at the same time, urban proximities also

cause the formation of crowds, whose alleged unanimous irrationality and tyrannical disposition towards the individual we have reconstructed above.

The appreciation by early social scientists of the existence of a whole nebula between the one and the many constitutes a sort of permanent gloss about and around – as well as above and below – the individual. A few decades later, the philosopher of life sciences Georges Canguilhem (1952) made a crucial point:

On n'a peut-être pas assez remarqué que l'étymologie du mot fait du concept d'individu une négation. L'individu est un être à la limite du non-être, étant ce qui ne peut plus être fragmenté sans perdre ses caractères propres. C'est un minimum d'être. Mais aucun être en soi n'est un minimum. L'individu suppose nécessairement en soi une relation à un être plus vaste, il appelle, il exige... un fond de continuité sur lequel sa discontinuité se détache.

[Perhaps, it has not been sufficiently remarked that the etymology of the term 'individual' founds this concept on a negation. The individual is a being on the verge of non-being, because it is that which cannot be fragmented without losing its proper characteristics. It is a minimum of being. But no being is in itself a minimum. So, the individual necessarily presupposes in itself a relation to a larger being, it calls for, it requires... a background of continuity upon which its own discontinuity stands out.] (Canguilhem 1989[1952]: 71, my translation)

The individual is an entity that stands upon a minimal threshold. The threshold severs the foreground from the background. Hence, the individual is said to be minimal: everything that is capable of attaining a minimal discontinuity and, accordingly, a degree of consistence within a range, can function as an individualising device. The being so created is minimal, however, for as soon as its minimum of coexistence gets lost, it does not survive. But in practice, Canguilhem continues, the individual is not at all severed from a background with which it continues to entertain intense commerce. This is, precisely, life. Strictly speaking, life is not an individual phenomenon. Rather, it is this commerce between an individual foreground and a non-individual background. Another way of understanding Canguilhem's claim that the individual is a minimal being is to regard the individual as the lower threshold of some *holding together* of certain qualities and certain properties. Qualities are like mobile coalescences that transit through each encounter. An encounter

is needed, for qualities can appear only at the interface between different bodies. Qualities, one might also say, are surface effects; they belong to the domain of visibility. On the other hand, properties are names, or signposts. A property is the claiming of a certain consistency, which determines the cohesiveness of a cluster of features and characters. Properties are owned, but qualities can only be expressed. For instance, most efforts in a discipline like ecology are devoted to the reconstruction of the *qualities* of certain interactions between organisms endowed with certain properties and their environment, as well as amongst different organisms in the environment. Quantitative equations do play a role in ecology, but they only make sense once we are able to apply them to qualities and their encounters – for example, some organism's competitive or colonisation ability.

If we attempt to translate these reflections into our present social-theoretical puzzle, we may recognise that any quantitative determination of an individual entity cannot be but the outcome of the application of some techniques to probe thresholds of consistence. These are, essentially, techniques of visibilisation, elicitation or even interrogation aimed to highlight the minimal threshold which would make an individual exist. We could venture to say: *the individual does not exist*, it only *emerges* as something we progressively approach, probe and circumscribe with a variety of means. Drawing on Canguilhem's insight that the individual is a minimal being, an entity which cannot be disaggregated without losing some of its constitutive properties, Simondon (2007[1958]) argued that the *process of individuation* can be meaningfully predicated also of entities that are not necessarily individual bodies. According to Simondon, the social operation works on the limit between in-group and out-group, rather than that between the individual and the group. This is how collective individuations can happen. Simondon's idea brings us back to the issue of how limits, thresholds and boundaries appear or are marked in the social-associational process. In other words, our problem is that, if we want to understand social multiplicities, we must at least avoid two types of reification. On the one hand, we must avoid reifying units – a mistake that the contemporary incarnations of methodological individualism, such as rational choice theory, routinely commit, employing indiscriminately the notion of individual as the building-block of every social phenomenon. By doing so, they overlook the many perils and failures of the process of individuation highlighted above. On the other hand, we should avoid reifying the in-between units – a mistake

that characterises for instance Dawkins' (1976) and followers' theory of memes, including Sperber's (1996) epidemiology of representations. In this case, representations are described as 'abstract objects' which represent the minimal unit of both cultural transmission and individual psychology. This mistake is specular to the first one.

More precisely, I do not contend that methodological individualism and memetics are erroneous, but rather that they are limited. To meaningfully approach social multiplicities, I suggest, we should develop a capacity to apply simultaneously at least three different perspectives. Let us try to rank them here according to an increasing degree of subtlety and insightfulness. *From the first perspective*, social multiplicities are human materials that interact on the basis of physical extension and reciprocally external surfaces. At this level, a multiplicity is actually made of a number of individuals heaped together, a sum of parts that are and remain external to each other. They may touch each other but not melt into each other: one body, one individual. This is the level of theoretical individualism. *From the second perspective*, however, social multiplicities are not sums of parts, but rather the ensemble of relations that define the organisational diagrams inherent in a given multiplicity. These constitutive relations form the dimensions of *the event* that effectuates a social multiplicity and expresses its qualities. *From the third perspective*, social multiplicities are singular compositions, their expressed qualities are now owned, and they correspond to an agency, a power to act, a mode of existence, a way of life, a degree of experiential intensity. At this third level, multiplicities have names. This name may sound trivial as a collective tag, but it in fact exists only insofar as it is capable of containing, owning and appropriating the traits and dimensions that determine its smaller or larger action and passion power.

Ultimately, in my view, the theoretically major point rests less with deciding for the unity or disunity of a given social multiplicity, than with understanding the processes of coalescence and evanescence that take place within its nebula. It is these processes which eventually determine its transformation and its precipitation. Thus, the three perspectives outlined above may help us understand that there is an inherently qualitative dimension to every multiplicity. If we think back to crowds from this perspective, we can better appreciate the fact that, far from being a summation of individuals, *crowds entail a specific qualitative state of the social*: a thriving state that resists and affects individualisation. Recall Pike's feeling before the impossibility of counting the migrating crowd

of caribou in the Canadian North. Here lies the intimate connection between crowds and visibility. How would a 'crowd gaze' look like? Does this notion make any sense at all? Are crowds capable of looking, or being looked at? What kind of gaze would be needed to that aim, or generated in that experience? At the margins of the visible, the exercise of individuation is not (yet) settled. These margins are always in a thriving state – literally, there are crowds out there.

5

Across and Within: Issues of Virality, Imitation and Reactivity

► **Abstract:** *What flows between humans when they associate? Since the late eighteenth century, the ancient term mimesis has been flanked by an array of surrounding terms signifying imitation and contagion. Imitation has been sometimes conceptualised as more active than contagion, while a number of other phenomena including enthusiasm, possession, mesmerism, somnambulism, hypnosis, suggestion, fascination, repetition, compassion, influence and depersonalisation have been filling the gulf between active imitation and passive contagion, making their distinction problematic.*

Keywords: contagion; density/intensity; distance management; fascination; germ/ground; the reactive paradigm; resistance; suggestion; social styles; totalitarianism; ‘transdividuality’

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The inner constitution of each social multiplicity is intimately tied to the experience of intensity. Canetti (1978[1960]), for instance, singled out the inception of the crowd as a moment he called ‘the discharge’. It is the moment when distances and social differences imposed from the outside are suddenly abolished and people begin *accepting being touched by unknown others*. The discharge is the crowd-event, the crowd as event. One could object that such a discharge is mostly a speculative moment, impossible to be empirically observed. The objection would require an entire discussion. But the analytical insight here is clear: distances, in the widest possible sense of the word, correlate not simply with density, but with intensity. Even when distances are not thoroughly abolished, distance management is of utmost importance in most social experiences and contexts. The management of distances relates to the creation or, on the contrary, prevention, of social intensities. Bluntly, we make pressure upon each other in all conceivable ways.

In this chapter we focus on the existence of a zone of indeterminacy where such a reciprocal ‘pressure’ can be indifferently imagined as physical or mental. In the case of mental or inter-psychic connections, it is precisely this notion of pressure that has been employed to describe an important feature of modern communication, namely public opinion. In a famous passage from *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville (1840: I, §II) reflected on the tremendous power of opinion, which he glossed as the *pression immense de l’esprit de tous sur l’intelligence de chacun* (‘the immense pression of the spirit of all on the intelligence of each’). This fact that ‘all’ (of them?) exercise an immense pressure on ‘each’ (of us?) would later re-surface as a pivotal preoccupation in both Durkheim’s description of the *forces à la fois impérieuses et secourables* (‘simultaneously imperious and helpful forces’) that animate the ritual, and Simmel’s acknowledgement of the *praktische Macht* (‘concrete power’) attained by the masses vis-à-vis the individual interests in modern society. But while for Simmel – just as, in a different context, for Tarde – this phenomenon can be studied by articulating the network of connections and reciprocal actions which bind the members of each association, a stark dualism between ‘all’ and ‘each’ is the very signature of the Durkheimian foundation of sociology. In this chapter, our theoretical necessity is precisely to question the visible opposition of all and each, of all to each, of them to us. Even better, what we actually need is to retrieve the dynamic that lies at the origin of this opposition. And here origin should be read as *Ursprung*, a type of origin which, following Walter Benjamin (1977[1925]),

is not to be found at the beginning, rather, *right in the middle of things*. In other words, the question is, ‘what flows within a multiplicity?’ Once again, the original image of the crowd which, through the *agglomeration of bodies*, produces ‘colour’ and ‘heat’ – in Italian, *colore* and *calore*, or, if one wishes, customs and emotions – provides a perfect locus and a suitable illustration to appreciate such problems concerning social flows and their relation to the domain of the intensive.

Since the late eighteenth century, the ancient term *mimesis* – around which art theories inspired by Platonism incessantly revolved – has been flanked by an array of surrounding terms signifying imitation and contagion. Imitation has been sometimes conceptualised as more active than contagion, while a number of phenomena including epidemics, possession, enthusiasm, hallucination, effervescence, fermentation, fusion, somnambulism, hypnosis, suggestion, fascination, repetition, mimicry, mocking, compassion, influence and depersonalisation have been described from time to time as occupying an intermediate location between the two. Specifically, as we shall see below, Tarde held that imitation is more active than contagion because it always entails a degree of resistance on the part of the *imitans*: in order to effectively imitate a single model, he argued, one has at least to simultaneously resist the influxes from all the others. Similarly, a few decades before Tarde – and, probably, a source of inspiration for Tarde himself – the physician Paul Jolly (1877) had distinguished between instinctive, or passive, imitation, and intellective, or active, imitation. However, in many other nineteenth-century conceptualisations the distinction remained blurred. Besides Tarde, partisans of the notion of imitation included, for instance, authors such as the social Darwinist Walter Bagehot (1872), the pragmatist philosopher William James (1891) and the developmental psychologist James Mark Baldwin (1895), all crucial founding figures of social psychology (see Jahoda 2002). The notion of ‘looking-glass self’ by Charles Horton Cooley (1902), as well as George Herbert Mead’s (1934) ‘me’ and Lacan’s (1949) ‘mirror stage’ of the ego can be added to the list of these more or less conscious and more or less active processes of imitation. In the context of our present discussion, however, it is contagion that might provide a stronger entry point than imitation, for reasons which, I hope, will soon become apparent.

The propagation of pestilential epidemics is, as we all know, amongst the most dreadful and worrying phenomena in human history, quantitatively speaking one amongst if not the single most important factor of

human mortality. That the spread of an infection is determined by the transmission of a pathogen agent is a simple idea, commonsensical to us. Yet, interestingly, in the medical field itself the notion of contagion has long been indissoluble from the idea of *invisible* actors. In fact, since the earliest formulation of germ theory by the Veronese physician Girolamo Fracastoro, in 1546, the existence of such vectors of contagion, which Fracastoro called *seminaria*, remained mostly a matter of speculation, if not a sheer act of faith. Only during the late nineteenth century could a suitably technologically equipped science of bacteriology provide infection theory with a sounder grounding (Paillard 1998). Indeed, the first such germs to be clearly detected were the bacilli of anthrax and tuberculosis, discovered respectively by Louis Pasteur, between 1877 and 1879 and Robert Koch in 1882 (McNeill 1976: 236). Before that date, the most famous classical medical theories of epidemics could still contend for validity. They included the astrological explanation of epidemics, based on cosmic schemes of correspondences between macro and micro worlds, and the Hippocratic miasma theory formalised by Galen of Pergamon (whose authority however had already been challenged by Paracelsus in the early sixteenth century), based on the notion of ‘corrupted air’ (Carlin 2005). After its crucial flaws had been abundantly revealed, the miasma theory has been sufficiently ridiculed during the course of the twentieth century. Nowadays, miasma is sometimes quoted as a magic and superstitious, if not ridiculous, contrivance. But, as a matter of fact, claiming that the cause of contagion consists of invisible *semina* present in the air (mostly, on surrounding objects, but touched objects are almost everywhere, like air), as opposed to plagued air itself, might not be that different unless some efficient strategy to make those *semina* visible in order to trace their movements is envisaged.

This is not simply a technological question concerning microscopes, but a profoundly techno–anthropological one. The larger theoretical point I would like to raise is, in this respect, that the difference between *an object* and *an environment* can be established only on a *threshold of visibility*. The environment cannot but be invisible. It inherently resists reduction to object; it escapes objectification. Incidentally, camouflage strategies in the natural world capitalise on precisely this point: camouflaging animals ‘environmentalise’ their own body thanks to a variety of procedures, such as counter-shading and disruptive coloration, in order to become invisible to either predators or preys. The environment cannot be objectified simply because we cannot stand in front of it. We can

be enveloped only in and by it. As Tim Ingold (2000) brilliantly put it, the environment is not something that we see, but a *medium in which* we see, and which is constituted as a field of material engagements, currents and pressure gradients. The environment is always *out there*. The word contagion derives from the Latin verb *tangere*, to touch. Thus, the notion discards *smell* (bad air) in favour of *touch* (direct transfer of germs through contact). By shifting the crucial perceptual sense from smell to touch, medical theory squarely placed itself within a thoroughly materialistic framework. With this shift, it seemingly positioned itself at the polar opposite of the semi-scientific discourses of sympathies, humour equilibrium, occult properties and action at a distance. However, upon reflection, for germ theory too the air, this invisible environment, remains a crucial medium between two bodies, one of which (the carrier of pathogen germs) is already affected and the other (the new ground) is soon going to be affected. The locus of contagion is, properly speaking, the *combination of germs and ground*, of germs on a given ground. Ecologically, although perhaps not in a strict medical sense, this locus can be equated with the relation between parasite and host, or parasite and producer (Serres 1980). The diffusion of an epidemic disease within a population always follows the *lines of least resistance* to infection or, in other words, the lines of *more fertile grounds* for germs to replicate. The discipline of epidemiology is certainly connected to medical theory. As a demographic discipline, however, it essentially focuses on those abstract (statistical) objects that are the *rates* of infection within a population. The task of epidemiology is to calculate those rates as precisely as possible, in order to make it possible to control the environmental variables that determine epidemic diffusion itself.

So the environment, this invisible and ungraspable element by definition – air – is not at all eliminated by the modern sanitary theories based on direct contact. We should, in fact, ask ourselves what the conceptual difference is between *contact* and *proximity*. With reference to the notes on distance with which we opened this chapter, contact and proximity turn out to be quintessential *social* events. Because the environment creates relations of interiority, ambient air inherently establishes a medium of proximity, wherein distance becomes operative and meaningful. In other words, *being-in* is always *being-in-with*. Epidemics, as said above, make social fellowship problematic, highlighting how distances can be dangerous and why they require special attention. We return to our central issue: something flows among us which remains essentially

invisible to us. Indeed, pathogen germs are not units; they are and cannot be but colonies, crowds, masses. Germs have their social multiplicities, too. One germ does not mean anything, since it is only as ‘invisible crowds’ (Canetti’s terminology) that germs act and make themselves felt. Still nowadays, well into the era of the electronic microscope, everyday experience accepts the existence of viruses and bacteria as purely and simply *the invisible*. A harsh critic of the idea of progress, in a 1962 radio conversation with Theodor W. Adorno, Elias Canetti (1996[1962]) remarked how we, the moderns, who are ready to laugh about our predecessors’ belief in angels, are, on our turn, eager to believe in the invisible crowds of bacteria and viruses. To these invisible crowds we should turn in order to understand why distance-management practices during epidemics certainly predated, but also followed the affirmation of germ theory. Arguably, distance-management is at the origin of all prophylaxis, that is, preventive medicine. In the late-medieval European city, the Lazzaretto for the plagued was conceived as a *space of immunity*, located just outside the city walls. Similarly, the institution of the quarantine (originally lasting only 30 days, to be spent in a separate section of the port) was introduced by the Republic of Venice in the late fourteenth century to safeguard the coastal city of Dubrovnik in Dalmatia from the pestilential strikes of the Black Death. Subsequently, modernity has entertained an even deeper concern for immunity, to the point that, as noticed by Esposito (2002), today the virus has turned into the general metaphor of all our nightmares. Even beyond the strict medical domain, the modern bio-political imperative calls for asserting the sternest control over spatial circulations of invisible actors.

The conceptualisation of transmission phenomena in medical knowledge, then, is not disjointed from the experience of those same phenomena in social life at large. Such a remark is not intended as a reductionist assertion, whereby the medical episteme could be reduced to merely historical and contextual terms. Rather, my invitation is to question more deeply the nature, the status and the workings of flows within social multiplicities. As we move to consider those ‘crepuscular’ phenomena of transmission which are ambiguously located between the physical and the psychic, the issue becomes palpable. For instance, the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century tradition of animal magnetism – including most notably Franz Anton Mesmer, José Custódio de Faria and Joseph-Philippe-François Deleuze – theorised the existence of a special *fluid* which would act as a medium in medical–patient

interaction, most evident in the hypnotic experience (Gallini 2013[1983]). Such flows share resemblances with what, in a different context, Taussig (2009: 40) has called ‘polymorphous magical substance’: the categorically un-stabilised, trans-morphic experience of colour. At first sight, one might be tempted to say that the literal and the metaphorical notions of contagion are so thoroughly different from each other, so heterogeneous that, by using a single term to designate them, we are just generating a confusing case of homonymy. But upon closer scrutiny, the range of transmission phenomena where the two dimensions are mixed together turns out to be so wide and varied that it cannot be simply dismissed *tout court*. True, the ethnologist James Frazer (1920[1890]: vol. I, ch. III, §I) first attributed the principle of contagion to magical thinking. It is the famous ‘Law of Contact’ according to which, he wrote, ‘things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed’. But let us not forget that, in early modern medical theory, sentiments and feelings too have been counted amongst transmissible diseases. Just to mention an example, in his *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love* (1484), Marsilio Ficino analysed lovesickness as caused by *ocular poisoning* through the *fascinatio* of eyebeams. The term ‘fascination’ comes from a Latin verb meaning ‘to tie’, ‘to bind’. Affecting blood vapours, the *fascinatio* eventually led to the mutual intoxication of lovers. To our late modern sensibility, the idea that love is a form of intoxicating contagion might sound even more curious than the idea that love is imitative behaviour. Yet it is out of question that Marsilio Ficino was a serious humanist scholar. And the diffusion of many other types of feelings and beliefs has long been interpreted within a similar framework. For instance, in a 1733 treaty, written as a polemic against the theological explanations of ecstasies and ecstatic visionaries, the French physician Philippe Hecquet described the religious enthusiasm of female ecstatic visionaries and possessed maidens as a natural phenomenon. He called this type of disease *épidémie convulsionnaire*. Interpersonal contagion of religious passions was conceived by Hecquet as caused by the law of *personal atmospheres*:

C’est une transpiration ou une émanation continuelle & abondante de corpuscules imperceptibles, qui s’échappent [*sic*] sans interruption sous la forme de vapeur par les pores de la peau en chaque individu. C’est donc une *atmosphère* que se forme autour de soi chaque corps d’hommes ou de femmes...

Mais ces atmosphères venant à se mêler à raison de leur proximité, l'air qui entre dans les paumons, y entraîne ces corpuscules travaillés ou façonnés à l'usage du corps où il ont servi. Mais portant avec eux dans le corps voisin la propriété [sic] qu'il s'étoient faite dont ils sont sortis, ils communiquent les mêmes propriétés au corps dans lequel ils entrent.

[It is a continuous and abundant transpiration or an emanation of imperceptible corpuscles, which escape without interruption as a vapour from the pores of the skin of each individual. Thus, around each body of man and woman there forms an atmosphere...But when, due to proximity, atmospheres mix, the air that gets into the lungs also brings the corpuscles shaped by the body that they have served. But bringing with them into the neighbouring body the property that they acquired from their origin, they transmit those same properties to the body in which they enter.] (Hecquet 1733: 28–29, my translation)

The idea here is that when two individuals approach each other and breathe their reciprocal atmospheres, their characters also mix. Incidentally, such a consideration served to Hecquet as a backup for his moralist view that young men should stay away from maidens in order not to mollify (*amollir*) themselves. More interestingly, however, in Hecquet's theory we find a sort of middle stage between miasma and germ theory, precisely thanks to the notion of personal atmosphere. Indeed, here appears *in nuce* an idea that will remain as a sort of counterpoint and even counterbalance to the nineteenth-century liberal individualist view of the *homo clausus*. It is the idea that the individual does not end at the boundaries of his or her body. The true individual boundary is not the skin, but an atmosphere-like surrounding which extends around the body. How far does it stretch? The answer is difficult for this extension is invisible *per se*, albeit full of consequences. On the other hand, upon scrutiny, one could also conclude that such a notion is culturally quite modern. Indeed, it responds to a specific preoccupation with the personal sphere and its territorialities. In this sense, for instance, both Simmel's (2009[1908]) description of honour and Goffman's (1969) analysis of face-work will follow this line of reasoning.

Another domain where contagion-like phenomena have made recurrent appearance and have been anxiously recorded is economic behaviour. Financial crises, for instance, are linked to sudden bursts of panic that lead to phenomena economists usually call 'run on the bank', whereby even false rumours can easily lead to real breakdowns. Because

a bank is structurally based on investment of deposits, if all depositors want to simultaneously withdraw their deposits, the institution is doomed to collapse instantaneously. After the 1929 financial crisis in Wall Street, central regulations were introduced to insure banks from this type of breakdown. But, beginning from the late 1970s through the 2000s a veritable 'shadow banking system' has been growing enormously outside any regulation frameworks (Krugman 2008: 158). It is a whole sector essentially exposed to the same type of collapse through contagious panic that characterised the fall of 1929. While the causes of the 2007 financial crisis are certainly wide and articulate, it seems undeniable that a hypertrophied investment sector made of high-risk-high-payoff financial schemes – such as for instance the so-called auction-rate securities – has played no minor role in it. But what is most interesting to us is that economic regulations are simply external limitations to the inner logic of price formation in the capitalist economy, while the inner logic of formation has a lot to do with the swift spreading of perceptions and beliefs. Many observers have employed the lexicon of contagion and contamination to describe how the current full-blown economic crisis has expanded both geographically and across different economic sectors and countries. In this context, contagion essentially means the psychological realisation by economic actors of the fragility of their own economic interdependence, with a subsequent clumsy attempt at severing unwanted interdependences, especially by cashing their credits as soon as possible.

An earlier description of the propagation of such moods in economy was provided by Tarde (1902) in his book *Psychologie économique*. Here, Tarde put to fruition his pivotal notion of imitation, which he regarded as the basic and most common social relation. In a chapter on hypnotism in his earlier treaty *Philosophie pénale*, already recalled above, Tarde (1890: §IV, III) had distinguished imitation from hypnosis, noting that the *imitativité complète* ('complete imitativeness') of the social actor entails his or her resistance against the power of a single example which, on the contrary, dominates the hypnotised subject. From this perspective, imitation requires activity on the part of the imitating subject, who is thereby also invested with a degree of responsibility superior to the hypnotised subject. However, the first volume of *Psychologie économique* opens with the description of society as a texture of inter-spiritual or inter-mental actions, where the social bond is essentially granted by the replication of ideas and an ensuing mental communion. There is a clear

emphasis on the notion of ‘unison’ which is also echoed in Tarde’s (1901) writings on publics. Tarde (1902: vol. 2, §II, IV) defines credit and money as ‘acts of faith’, because every price is determined by a *convergence* of sellers’ and buyer’s desires and judgements. Conversation as an instance of inter-mental contact is given here a central function in creating expectations about the ‘just price’ of any single good or service. From this perspective, a crisis is thus essentially a tragedy of disequilibrium. Tarde also distinguishes two types of crisis, which he dubs ‘crises-war’ and ‘crises-fall’. The former type is determined by a conflict of wills, whereas the second type by an ‘enhanced fever of imitation’. In other words, the recurrent over-production *cum* under-consumption crises that, following a Marxian terminology, afflict the capitalist economy can be described as ‘illnesses of imitation’. The medical register is noticeable here. What are the effects of such an illness? Crises are systematically caused by an abrupt contraction of trust in the public. The ensuing unrestrained rise of prices hampers exchanges and generates further panic. It is the all-too-famous dynamics known as ‘boom-bust’.

Mimesis seems thus to be linked to some capacity to *set in motion* someone or something – or something through someone, and vice versa. This mysterious human power to set others in motion has been amply glossed since antiquity, but I would like to simply draw attention to a few key modern thinkers who addressed this phenomenon. The late Nietzsche (1888a), whose production some dismiss as containing incipient symptoms of folly, discusses Wagner as a ‘revealer’ of the modern condition. This view makes sense in the context of Wagner’s project of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total artwork’). Wagner aimed at the creation of a music drama that would literally flood the senses. To Nietzsche, Wagner represents above all theatricality: as a *eingeweihteren Führer* (‘consecrated leader’) and a *beredteren Seelenkündiger* (‘persuasive specialist of the [modern] soul’), Wagner is a *Schauspieler*, more of an actor than a composer. He is a *Verführer* (‘debaucher’ or ‘seducer’) who has ultimately transformed music into a *Kunst zu lügen*, an art of lying (see Lawtoo 2008). Nietzsche openly praises the earlier resistance against Richard Wagner shown by Germans: ‘People guarded themselves against him as against an illness – not with arguments – it is impossible to refute an illness’ (Nietzsche 1888a: 36). Here, Wagner’s ideas are again compared to a form of illness. Consequently, resistance against the Wagner-illness cannot be but a physiological process of self-immunisation. Unfortunately, Nietzsche concludes, Wagner’s weapons have proved extraordinarily effective.

His capacity to present ‘something suitably distorted and falsified for the mob’, his skilfulness in ‘convinc[ing] the uncertain without making them conscious of why they have been convinced’ were successful. Just as an epidemic illness, Wagner’s seduction of the masses worked essentially by contagion. Likewise, in the ‘Skirmishes of an untimely man’ from *Götzen-Dämmerung* (Nietzsche 1888b), art at large is described as a manifestation of an original *Rausch* (‘frenzy’ or ‘inebriation’) that spreads around.

According to Nietzsche, Wagner possessed and effectively exercised a power to move and set in motion his audience. The verb *bewegen* is laden with resonances, as is, of course, the phrase about Wagner as a ‘consecrated *Führer*’. A few decades later, totalitarianisms in Europe will reveal the tragedy of this expertise in the ‘mobilization’ of the masses. It is at about this time that the notion of movement was specifically conceptualised as a political and juridical category. Notably, the early Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt (1933) placed the notion of *Bewegung* at the centre of his discussion concerning the new articulation of the national-socialist state. Schmitt regarded the *Staat*, the state, as the crucial political entity vis-à-vis the *Volk*, the people, an essentially un-political element (a role Hegel had previously assigned to civil society). But the state suffers from being a static element. What was needed was, accordingly, a *political and dynamic* element, a veritable *movement* capable of embracing the people and constituting the new unity of the people and the state. Such dynamic element was, in Schmitt’s view, precisely the national-socialist party. In his view, the party represented much more than a simple organisation. Rather, it was a *politische Körper*, a ‘political body’ and a *Führungskörper*, a ‘directive body’ capable of both shaping the people and sustaining the state. Thus, one can appreciate how the capacity to move and set in motion Nietzsche first attributed to Wagner became functional, and actually coessential, to the articulation of command.

Understood as a political notion, the *Bewegung* provided to Schmitt and the Nazis the missing link between passions and institutions. Indeed, Schmitt insisted on the postulate of *Artgleichheit* (‘equality of kind’) between the *Führer* and his followers. Pushing perhaps slightly the vocabulary – yet, arguably, not the concept – it could be said that leader and followers are each other’s mirror. And the meeting point of the two sides of the mirror is the stage. It is, as Nietzsche had foreseen, a theatrical situation, a spectacle. For the spectacle is fundamentally an imitogenic arena. A few decades later left-wing authors such as Frankfurt School theorists (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002[1947]) and,

even more pronouncedly, the Situationist Guy Debord (1992[1967]) would regard spectacle as an anaesthetising enterprise, where the audience is led into inaction and isolation. But these authors overlooked the specific passionate involvement that is often sought for and attained, which is probably also the reason why people want to be audiences. As Benjamin (2008[1936]) remarked, the public is anything but passive. On the contrary, its attitude is 'experimental'. Precisely in a discussion of Benjamin's views on the visual media, Buck-Morss (1992: 39) has more recently recalled the interesting pictures of Hitler rehearsing for his public speeches:

in 1932 (under the direction of the opera singer Paul Devrient) Hitler practiced his facial expressions in front of a mirror, in order to have what he believed was the proper effect. There is reason to believe that this effect was not expressive, but reflective, giving back to the man-in-the-crowd his own image...

Comparing the pictures of Hitler with those contained in Darwin's (1872) *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Buck-Morss concludes that the dictator's facial traits conveyed feelings of fear and weeping, rather than, as might be expected, aggression and rage. This, in practice, is what *moving* is mostly about. Hitler aptly decided to play on the register, not of terror, but pathos. With no small political success. Also, on the basis of the elements introduced in our discussion, the initial difference posited between active and passive imitation becomes increasingly difficult to be traced sharply. Tarde himself likened imitation to adaptation. When we look at social interaction in terms of 'adaptation' of the interlocutors to each other, we can appreciate it as an oftentimes unconscious mutual process that aims at producing synchronisation. This is the way in which a reciprocal 'attunement' of 'interactants' is produced that stabilises the course of interaction within a given situation. Once an encounter occurs and a shared space is created what needs to be produced is, in the first place, synchronicity. Synchronisation means an effective co-presence in a shared time. Mirroring each other's gestures is a powerful tool to that aim. To this we should add that man is but a late addition to the history of imitation, as the many forms of imitation present in the rest of the natural world testify. Rather than discontinuity, there seem to be continuity across the various forms of mirroring that range from pathogenic contagion to conscious deliberate imitation. Certainly, viral infection is a worrying fact to most of us. But precisely

for this reason we should also be able to recognise that something like virality constitutes an integral part of sociality at large. Incidentally, the oeuvre of an author such as William Burroughs is a long, often grotesque meditation about human social life as intrinsically viral. In short, both phenomena of contagion and imitation point to the basic condition of *exposure to others*, with all its promises and threats.

Situational attunement is but the modern sociological terminology for a very old phenomenon, namely *sympathy*. The ancient theory of sympathy had already been imported into the modern discourse in the eighteenth century. Thanks to Scottish moral philosophers, in particular, sympathy was installed in the formulations of classical economic theory. Conceptualised as either 'empathy' or *Einfühlung*, it can be found in the social theory of Adam Smith, as well as in Theodor Lipps's aesthetic theory, through which it then arrives to Max Weber and Sigmund Freud. In the early-twentieth century, this same theory of sympathy is interestingly twisted and pushed to an extreme by George Bataille (1939). Such a deformation is a very original and deliberate one. Indeed, Bataille's outspoken aim was to 'introduce, into the usual perspectives, a maximum of disorder'. Such a disorderly enterprise probably derives in part from the French author's attempt to draw inspiration from a number of heterogeneous sources, such as Nietzsche and Durkheim, while strictly avoiding any philology of the sources. In particular, in the context of the collective project of the *Collège de sociologie*, Bataille pointed out a basic human feature underpinning episodes of unbounded imitation, such as laughter and tears. Incidentally, Bataille's interest for extreme states like raving and swooning made him partially neglect less spectacular but no less interesting forms of imitations, like yawns and verbatim repetitions of words. In any case, he referred to these empathic moments as the 'permeability' (*perméabilité*) of humans. The repeated occurrence of more or less impressive phenomena of imitation at every crucial stage of human development led Bataille to the assertion that the root of the sociality of human beings lies in the fact that they are *painfully* open to other human fellows: 'I propose to admit, as a law, that human beings are only united with each other through rents (*déchirures*) or wounds (*blessures*)' (Bataille 1939: 808). The unity of beings is what makes society possible as a form of communication, of community. But such community can be achieved only at the price of violently opening up individual beings. The immediate emotional contact we can find, for instance, in 'laughter, tears and in the tumult of festivities' is one operator of such openings. From

this perspective, squandering and transgression provide the archetype of communication. A clear echo of Durkheim's description of religious rituals can be heard here. But Bataille also deliberately accentuates the element of disorder, thereby placing imitative contagion at the very root of subjectivity at large (Lawtoo 2011). Whether it is the individual who strives to radically open himself to others or whether, on the contrary, the boundaries of the individual are assaulted from the outside, there is no doubt that, in Bataille's view, the experience of mimesis is a painful one. Nidesh Lawtoo rightly emphasises that Bataille's subjectivity is integrally a contagious subjectivity. And if we consider that in literary studies and psychoanalysis the category of 'subjectivity' has been the social-theoretical counterpart of 'collectivity', that is, of the lived experience of ambiguous social multiplicities qua social *nebulae*, we are once again led back to our enquiry into the 'across and within'. Extremely helpful, in this context, is Bataille's remark that what flows from one subject to another is 'life' itself.

But, what kind of 'life' is social life? What sort of 'vitality' is it endowed with? In the same span of years as Bataille was involved in the intellectual experiment of the *Collège*, Walter Benjamin (1979[1933]) was puzzling about the specific human *mimetische Vermögen* ('mimetic faculty'). This faculty is evoked in the context of the perception and production of *Ähnlichkeit* ('similarity'). For Benjamin, humans possess an instinctive capacity to both perceive and produce similarities. Benjamin saw this 'mimetic animal' in action both ontogenetically, in the sense that each of us rehearses this faculty in the process of individual growth, and phylogenetically, that is, at the scale of the species. Ontogenetically, children's games entail a persistent mimetic faculty to be kept in exercise. Phylogenetically, magical thinking, with its Law of Contact we have evoked above, corresponds to a stage in the evolution of the mimetic faculty of the humankind. Magical thinking and clairvoyance, noticed Benjamin, are definitely fading in the modern world, although other practices like the horoscope are not. Thus, the short addendum to the 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen' ('Doctrine of the Similar') reads as follows:

The gift which we possess of seeing similarity is nothing but a weak rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically. And the forgotten faculty of becoming similar extended far beyond the narrow confines of the perceived world in which we are still capable of seeing similarities. (Benjamin 1979[1933]: 65)

The most remarkable consequence, observes Benjamin, is that, in a sense, it is magic that made language possible. Language wholly derives from a trained mimetic faculty, for language is ultimately the medium that has incorporated the faculty to perceive similarities between objects. And language has been such a successful medium to the effect that today objects themselves, in order to enter into relationship, must pass through it. Yet Benjamin wants us to remember that such a power of language does not at all derive from the usual character that is attributed to it, namely symbolism. Rather, that power is still fundamentally supported by the mimetic faculty (in Peirce's semiotic terminology, we could perhaps speak of *iconicity*). Whether directly inspired or not, half a century later Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 97) will argue that language is not about meaning, but in the first place about transmission, about receiving and passing it on. Language, for Deleuze and Guattari, does not proceed from a first one who has seen to a second one who has not seen, but from a second one who has not seen to a third one who had not seen either. Reference and representation are secondary illusions. Language is, literally, hearsay, and hearsay is repetition, imitation, mimesis. If not the originator of this theory, Benjamin certainly put it in very clear and powerful terms. One important aspect in his text on the mimetic faculty is the relationship that exists between perceiving the similar and becoming similar. Benjamin speaks of *compulsion*. But, with respect to such compulsion, language seems to introduce, not a *gap*, rather a *delay* in the imitative process. Language slows down the immediate connection between perceiving and becoming. As such, it enables speakers to create a double distance: a distance between themselves, and a distance between perception and action.

Perhaps at this point it will not sound too strange to submit a hypothesis like the following one: language is a technique for managing distances – eminently, social distances. However, since language is not the specific focus of the present enquiry, I beg the reader to allow me leaving the previous assertion at that hypothetical stage and turn to further non-linguistic mimetic phenomena. In particular, I would like to consider other forms of non-verbal knowledge transmission. Here again we find that any clear dividing line between active imitation and passive contagion is extremely difficult to draw. This impossibility is due not to sheer empirical reasons, but to a conceptual one. In this context, Mauss' (1935) essay on the *techniques of the body* represents much more than a simple *locus classicus* to cite. Mauss' problem, albeit perhaps not the solution he gave, is still our own problem. Mauss deemed his own

notion of *techniques du corps* ('bodily techniques') capable of unifying a series of phenomena and scattered ethnographic observations that were previously tagged as 'residual activities'. The notion was thus meant to give consistence and visibility to a social phenomenon that was, so to speak, already in the air yet not quite present. Bodily techniques are often mundane styles of doing things and performing acts. They are unreflective and mostly unobserved activities. The notion can also be stretched to all types of technical action. As Mauss observed, the body is the first and most immediate technical object. Indeed, before grasping and handling the first technical tool, the hand must be trained to be able to assume the suitable grasping position. As social habitudes, that is, as *habitus*, such techniques are more than personal performances. They can be transmitted and are actually transmitted, although their transmission system is unclear.

A subtle observer, Mauss was struck, for instance, by walking and marching styles. He noticed that, after World War I, young girls in Paris were walking like the nurses he had seen at an American hospital. After exploring various possibilities, he inferred that the medium for the transmission of that specific walking style had been American cinema. The process can be called imitative, but we might as well recognise the by-now familiar traits of contagion. In fact, presumably most of the affected girls were not even conscious about their imitative behaviour, least capable of describing the specific features of walking *à la américaine*. We could even venture to say that such a walking *à la américaine* is something that probably does not even exist in the U.S. And yet it might exist in France. In short, the difference is one of specificity and visibility. What type of observer, we might ask, is needed to perceive these *habitus*? And, strictly related, what is the substance of an *habitus*? Certainly, a technique of the body designates a specific level of social existence that is located at neither an individual nor a group level. Mauss called it an *idiosyncrasie sociale* ('social idiosyncrasy') and described it as the accomplishment of some 'practical reason'. He obviously recognised that imitation played a role in this, but he was particularly keen on stressing that bodily techniques are taught and learnt: they are forms of *trained* imitation. Consequently, he tied transmission to tradition, and placed special emphasis on describing how the imitative process is formed by a stratification of specific forms of education and training. In short, while taking a somewhat similar point of departure – or departing from a similar intuition – Mauss' insight ultimately goes in the opposite direction to

Bataille and Benjamin. Implicit in Mauss' conceptualisation of habitus is the opposition of untrained imitation and learnt training. Needless to say, a superior strength is assigned to the latter. Interestingly, though, not all of the examples Mauss provided in his essay – and certainly not the example of French girls walking *à la américaine* – can be led back of any formal, or even merely conscious, form of training. There is a sort of singularity to these social styles that in some way makes them recognisable, but it might be very difficult or even straightforwardly impossible to give a *formal recipe* to reproduce them correctly, or even in a merely recognisable way.

A bodily technique, understood as a style of doing, manifests itself immanently in the gestures that compose an action. Simultaneously, however, it constantly eludes those gestures. In each specific concrete instance, it is extremely hard to describe the existence of such a style of doing, because style has the tendency to – so to speak – flow through the gestures rather than merely being performed by them. If the skilfulness of a literary writer is called for to capture such styles, it is probably because literature is, on its turn, similarly *elusive*. In general, my hypothesis is that, when Mauss linked transmission to tradition, he was expressing a sort of confidence in the possibility of fixating and replicating social idiosyncrasies such as bodily techniques in a set of more or less explicit prescriptions for training people. Such a confidence had been certainly inspired to him by Durkheim, who had devoted important reflections to the topic of education. However, the power of knowledge and training based on the type of information contained in textbooks has been amply questioned since. It was Michel Polanyi (1958) who probably best highlighted how the process of imitation inherent in learning a skill can never be thoroughly formalised. 'To learn by example, is to submit to authority' wrote Polanyi (1958: 53). The commonsensical, 'enlightened' idea is that learning should always follow from an act of independent critique ('think with your own head!'). But this idea is easily trumped. For instance, in a craftsman workshop, the relation between master and apprentice concerns the transmission of an art which cannot be made explicit in all details. It is not the fact that the master does not want to disclose his secrets to the apprentice.

In practice, the master *does not know* those secrets. He does not possess them as a type of knowledge that can be made explicit and formalised. It is rather a matter of attitude, familiarity and *savoir-faire* inscribed in the flesh. Neither the rules of the art nor the tricks of the trade are

ever available as simple if-then-else checklists. All the master knows is *how to do the job*, and that is all he needs to know. Ultimately, the same holds for the apprentice. To learn how to proficiently handle a cutter, to successfully cut and suitably sew the leather, there is no other way than imitate the master's gestures, to stay in the workshop until the day one has developed a masterful gesture on one's own: one's style. Here is the *gesto magistrale*, the gesture possessed by the *maestro d'arte*. In order to attain that level, one must have reached a degree of familiarity and intimacy with a whole world, the universe of the sewing atelier. In other words, it takes years – potentially, a life. To describe this peculiar dynamic of knowledge transmission, Polanyi (1966) also employed the notion of *tacit knowledge*. Rather than a specific type of knowledge, he observed, tacit knowledge can be better appreciated as a corollary of every type of knowledge, for the sheer reason that 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polanyi 1966: 4). In the same span of years, the French paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1964) called 'operative memory' these various forms of practical knowledge. He also reckoned that they can be transmitted only by 'full immersion', through a prolonged imitative relation that cannot be specifically circumscribed to single acts or situations.

Both contagion and imitation – if we still want to formally retain a distinction that the above discussion should have sufficiently relativised – concern crowd states in which, at a given moment and for some reasons, an individual being – or individual pole within a multiplicity – emerges. Let us then go back to that 'minimal being' which is the individual, and especially to Simondon's conceptualisation of the individual as the outcome of a process of *individuation*, which we have considered in Chapter 4. If we take Bataille's and Benjamin's contributions seriously, then we should also be ready to acknowledge that the process of so-called individuation is always and necessarily an incomplete one. In other words, individuation always entails non-stable dynamics. By forcefully making this claim, Simondon employed the term *meta-stability* to describe the dynamic equilibrium that characterises the individual. Ultimately, the fact that the individual is not a definite, least definitive, product also accounts for the fact that it always contains in itself a pre-individual or non-individual component. This non-individual part of the individual cuts it across or flows through it. We might call it a *residuum* – in terms of the elements that survive to the individuation process – as well as a *germ* – in terms of the elements that enable further

individuation processes. In both cases, rather than assuming either the individual or the group as social building blocks, facts or substances – as, respectively, methodological individualists and holists do – Simondon suggests to consider the various processes of individuation as they take place at both the individual and the collective levels. In these processes, a transindividual (or, perhaps, straightforwardly *transdividual*) dimension is revealed.

The transdividual flows not only between individuals, but also through each of them. The individual as a biological entity is far from being an ultimate product, a destiny or *télos*. On the contrary, biological individuation does not exhaust the tensions that originally generated it. Within each biologically identified individual there remains a preserve of pre-individual charge – as Simondon writes, *une charge de réalité encore non-individuée*. Such a charge or preserve is the unfinished dimension of the individual. The individual is constitutively incomplete. Precisely such an incompleteness makes it possible for the individual to remain *open* towards others, like an *ápeiron* that ultimately makes it possible for several biological individuals to join a larger unity, a social multiplicity. The ensuing collective, Simondon specifies, is not a mere sum of entities or bodies external to the individual one, nor is it an environment-container capable of hosting a group of such heterogeneous individuals. Rather, it is a second order of individuation, a continuation of the same process of individuation without any qualitative difference or leap. There is a ‘moment of entry’ into the individual, a moment in which the convergence of a series of non-individual components marks the coming into existence of an individual being. From this point of view, the individual appears as an actual conquest. But, just as there is a moment of entry into the individual, there is also a moment of entry into the collective, a transdividual reality which is *not* outside and around the individual but enlarges and continues the process of individuation.

A bodily technique, a style of doing in Mauss’ sense, may well constitute one such transdividual realities. On the other hand, it will not be surprising to Bataille’s readers that Simondon connects the coming about of transdividual realities to emotion. Critics will probably suspect that the idea of the group as individual is a dangerous one. In other words, one might fear that Simondon’s description of collective individuation contains all the perils of organicism. After the twentieth-century totalitarian wound, one fears that organicism ultimately legitimates the destruction of individual in the name of the nation, the race and

so on. If, in other words, we represent ‘the collective’ as a new, superior individual, such an individual could silence the voices of its component members. But, I think, Simondon’s idea about the process of individuation can be best understood as a critique of the notion of individual as *homo clausus* rather than an eulogy of group cohesion. Regardless of the level at which we examine it, the process of individuation is not a biological or organic process. Indeed, Simondon’s theory is almost the opposite of an organicist one. The trans-individual dimension designates a situation that is quite different from the supra-individual dimension invoked by those social and political theories compromised with totalitarianism. From this perspective, indeed, Durkheim could be more exposed to the allegation of totalitarian sympathies than Simondon. On the contrary, it could be interesting to highlight the remarkable similarities between Simondon’s reflection on the process of individuation and Canetti’s exploration of crowds. In essence, both authors recognise the existence of a non-individual dimension within the individual itself. For Canetti (1978[1960]), in particular, the individual is what remains when the ebb of the crowd retreats. The intense nostalgia for crowd experiences – often remembered as dream-like experiences – can be linked now to the existence of a non-individual dimension that persists throughout the process of individuation. But Canetti is also attentive to the plurality and diversity of crowds; he is definitely a more sensible phenomenologist of crowds than Simondon, who refrains from analysing concrete instances of transindividual processes. This diversity between Simondon and Canetti is not merely anecdotal. It may help us elaborate a whole new vocabulary – in terms of notions, categories and analytical dimensions – necessary to understand the ambiguous multiplicities beyond the traditional individualist versus holist alternative. Canetti and Simondon certainly concur on the idea that multiplicities are neither additions of individual elements nor macro-organisms. Movements, circulations, affections and emotions are crucial coordinates inherent in social multiplicities, which significantly side-step and conspicuously redefine the standard approach to the conceptualisation and description of social *nebulosae*.

Just as multiplicities cannot be grasped in terms of summation of discrete elements, circulations cannot be successfully explained in terms of exchanges. Deleuze and Guattari (1972) made a critique of the theory of the social based on exchange activities, as it had been formalised by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949). Rather, they posited that the real fulcrum of


social circulations is the *encounter*. Marking and inscription are two such forms of encounter among the *socii*. The first mnemonic device, Deleuze and Guattari remark, is the human body. There is a writing of the body that is a writing of the land, the writing of the body-as-land – a territorialisation of the *socius*. If in *Anti-œdipus* Deleuze and Guattari reject the notion of circulation it is because they regard it as a way to smuggle equilibrium into the social composition. The presupposition of symmetry, they suggest, is flawed. In the subsequent philosophy of Deleuze, especially thanks to his interest for Spinoza's (1677) *Ethics*, it will become apparent where the radicalness of the encounter comes from: there is no way to know *a priori* how the encounter will transform the parts that enter it. It is a radical experimentalism, a 'transcendental empiricism', and every social multiplicity is in a state of becoming. To anticipate a point form the conclusion, circulations are, in fact, transitions.

In Chapter 1, we argued that today the nature and the morphology of social formations are being debated anew. Technologies like the contemporary networked media of communication define a pattern of user *reactivity*, whereby action is triggered by a sort of transdividual activation. The new media reactive paradigm is most visible in the case of so-called social media. In the architecture of the social media, there is, strictly speaking, no coercion – yet, the classical liberal notion of freedom does not explain much of what is going on. Neither voluntarist nor coercive, social media use is based on simple, mundane practices such as receiving and forwarding information, receiving and passing on, checking out who checked out about what and so on. The ensuing social multiplicity is largely formed by chain reaction. Not by chance, the lexicon of virality is revived in the field of new media visibilities. Videos are going 'viral', gadgets are 'virally merchandised', and so on. Even those practices which at first may look like dyadic practices – such as, for instance, 'being invited to become friend with', choose to 'follow' someone – cannot be successfully modelled upon a conversational scheme. Any attempt to constitute or reconstitute symmetry is systematically broken. The social formation at stake is intrinsically based on cascading actions and imitative chains: *circulations beyond exchanges*. However, to study circulations in the form of contagion or imitation does not equate to say that flows are unconstrained. This is an important remark. While the paradigm of suggestion became extremely powerful towards the end of the nineteenth century, most observers in the social and psychological science realised that the process was not unbounded.

Tarde (1890), as we have seen, included resistance in the very process of imitation. Sighele (1891) would then attribute the existence of limits to crowd suggestion to the ‘anthropological constitution’ of the crowd itself. But already the physicians Hyppolite Bernheim (1884) and Pierre Janet (1889), whose names are commonly associated with suggestion and automatism, clarified that there existed various ‘degrees of suggestibility’ and ‘cerebral docility’, corresponding to different thresholds of resistance against the enhancement of excitability. As known, Janet even declared that the term ‘suggestion’ should have been reserved to circumscribed pathological states since every suggestion is, at the bottom, hallucinatory. And, of course, the work of ‘resistances’ will play a crucial role in psychoanalysis as an intrinsic part of the therapy.

Today, all sorts of boundaries and barriers are constantly set up in order to control and sort circulations. Basically all flows meet resistance, and that is why the development of a logistics and a topology of virality, imitation and reactivity would be most needed. As I have argued elsewhere (Brighenti 2010a), between the fleeting gathering of a crowd and the homogeneous nature and cohesiveness of crowd crystals there lies a complex territory of variations and intensities, a whole range of varying territorial compositions, a field of affects and escapes. It could be the task of a renewed social theory to explore at large the topologies of circulations that inhere in the contemporary manifestations of the ambiguous social multiplicities.

Conclusions: Visible Multiplicities and Layered Individuals



Abstract: *The reassuring image of the individual as a 'building block' entering various social compositions does not hold. Crowd states systematically make individuals invisible. This does not mean that individuals do not matter at all. Rather, individuals are materially and emotionally composed inside a thriving ensemble with shifting and evolving boundaries. This is the reason the commonsensical distinction of micro and macro levels does not apply to crowds and other cluttered social multiplicities. To better understand the intensive and distensive moments of social impersonal life associated with those multiplicities, one may turn to Simondon's 'human energetics' and to Portmann's 'seeing eye'. These insights might also provide a key towards a renewed conception of the individual.*

Keywords: agency; engram; human energetics; individual multiplicity; latitude; longitude; organicism; perception; seeing eye; surfaces; three layers; vitalism

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Perhaps, the great social–theoretical metaphor of the nineteenth century has been organicism. It was aimed at understanding social life as the life of a special biological creature. However, when it came to explain the ambiguous multiplicities that populated the territories, marched in the streets and read the newspapers, the organic metaphor proved largely insufficient. Today, any attempt to restate or refine an organicist sociology would simply be hopeless. *Ça va sans dire*. Yet, the question of *life* remains central to contemporary social theorising: is what we – for lack of better words – call *the social* a living thing? And, if so, what sort of life is social life? In this context, the importance of vitalism, as it expressed itself especially at the turn of the nineteenth century, is connected to the idea of *non-organic* life. Such a realisation, originally coming from the life sciences, lurks in pivotal theorists such as Tarde, Durkheim and Simmel, although in many passages Durkheim certainly sounds more keen on organicism. Then, in the early twentieth-century, while vitalism was being expelled from biology, sociology turned to a sophisticated version of organicism, namely, organisation. But by the end of the twentieth century the organisational paradigm has, on its turn, revealed its inadequacy – as became increasingly clear after the end of organised capitalism (see e.g. Wagner 2001). The ambiguous multiplicities are once again on the fringe of history. May this realisation provide a venue for the launch of a new vitalism in social theory?

If we accept the idea – outlined in Chapter 4, borrowing in particular form Canguilhem – that life is the non-individual ‘commerce’ between an individual foreground and a non-individual background, then we are also pushed towards a further insight. In its essence, life *is* simultaneously social *and* non-individual. After Canguilhem, Simondon (2007[1958]) proposed a whole new science he dubbed *human energetics*. A human energetics would be devoted to study the impersonal life of the social, as it emerges from its intensive and distensive moments. Simondon’s central methodological claim about the requirements for this human science to come reads as follows:

A human science cannot be based on morphology alone but must also add to it a ‘human energetics’, that is, a study of how energies enact processes of shape-taking [*prise de forme*] through the action of a ‘structural germ’ [*germe structurel*]. (Simondon 2007[1958]: 64, my translation)

The three perspectives on social multiplicities, or three ways of understanding them, which we have discussed at the end of Chapter 4, might

help us to sketch a framework to unravel the plural territorialisations of the human emotive materials. Simondon's human energetics can thus be linked – and, perhaps developed in – to an enlarged exploration of such emotive human materials.

As we have seen throughout this short book, the cluttered *nebulae* of the emotive human materials make themselves visible through phases and phase transitions. All the forms of circulation we have explored in the previous chapter, with their thresholds and limits, are anything but phase transitions. And the threshold between the visible and invisible is, ultimately, the threshold between object and environment: when we cannot yet (or can no longer) 'visibilise' an object, it means that it has 'environmentalised' itself: it no longer stands before us ('ob-') but rather envelops us ('env-'). This is why crowd states are associated with peculiar, problematic regimes of visibility. Whenever we deal with crowds, both objects and environments change. Their relationship is in transition. So, even if we choose to begin from the reassuring image of the individual as the alleged building block of crowd compositions, we cannot fail to notice the systematic extent to which crowd states invisibilise individuals. Again, this does not mean that individuals cease to count or that they melt in the crowd. Rather, it means that they are materially and emotionally 'composed within' a thriving ensemble. The ongoing circulations within the ensemble put the boundaries of the multiplicity in a state of transition. The distinction between micro- and macro-scale does not apply to crowds, for these cluttered, ambiguous multiplicities contain the same oscillations that can be found in individuals (criminal or heroic crowds?), with a status that is inherently unstable: determinations may come about and quickly escalate (virality issue).

That a multiplicity 'precipitates' means that certain encounters or combinations are going on within it. In contrast to the slowness of organisations and institutions, the ambiguous multiplicities of crowds, publics, masses and packs are essentially quick: they act as catalyst devices. Just as, in the nineteenth century, crowds precipitated urban unrest in the streets of the capitals of Europe and, in the twentieth century, masses precipitated the sudden rise of totalitarianisms as well as the machine of Fordist capitalism, in the early twenty-first century the clutters of new media users are precipitating a new way of bestowing social value – essentially through indexed visibility (Brighenti 2012). When we say 'the individual being', we tend to imagine it as a univocal, self-explanatory entity. However, the notion of the individual must be thoroughly de-familiarised and reworked upon

to make sense of cluttered social formations. Our previous discussion leads us to suspect that, in fact, such a familiar notion covers a variety of qualitatively different and distinct phenomena. From this point of view, the individual could be better conceived of as a sub-field in the anthropological range, a sub-field defined by a series of coordinates. We should consider at least two such coordinates: latitude and longitude.

Latitude corresponds to a horizontal range, which spans the infra- and the inter-individual. The range of the individual is not dissimilar from what in physics is referred to as the 'spectrum of the visible' – in Italian, a nice house-building metaphor is used: *the window of the visible* ('la finestra del visibile'). Beneath and beyond those visibility thresholds, we no longer deal with a register of individuation and move into one of crowding. The latitude of the individual is thus a dimension that belongs precisely to that part of the spectrum located within given visibility thresholds, right in the middle of the individual – *in the heart of it*, so to speak.

As far as longitude is concerned, three essentially distinct but simultaneous and coexisting layers or levels seem to be entailed. At the first level, the individual is a matter of physical, chemical electrical and magnetic connections. In this domain, a number of fundamental phenomena concerning individual life takes place: from the physical point of view, the individual appears as a body, the point of application of momentums, a lever – the classical Cartesian body-machine. Incidentally, the practical side of the liberal paradigm in law and politics is grounded upon such an 'apprehensible', graspable body. Yet, chemically and electrically, the body is defined by its organs and their metabolism. The body as an organism. While chemical stimulations and reactions take place at a smaller scale than that of the visible body – the macromolecular scale of organelles, observed for the first time only in the early twentieth century – their outcomes inevitably affect the individual as a totality. Intoxications, poisonings, drugs and viral diseases are cases in point. They illustrate how the first level of individuality can easily affect the whole longitudinal span of the individual. From a physical and chemical point of view, the individual is a thermodynamic and metabolic system subject to stimulations which elicit reactions. The first level of individuality is thus essentially a tactile one. It functions by immediate contact and the 'grip' of extensive physical parts, components and reagents. But it is also defined by a precise grammar, a double diagram explored by system biologists. On the one hand, the living thing is thermodynamically open

to the environment, it constantly exchanges matter and energy, it feeds on environmental negentropy. As Erwin Schrödinger (1946: 73) once put it, ‘the device by which an organism maintains itself stationary at a fairly high level of orderliness (= fairly low level of entropy) really consists in continually sucking orderliness from its environment’. On the other hand, simultaneously, the continuation of life requires the closure of the organisational cycle of metabolism – a closure without which the organism literally perishes. Perhaps, it is precisely such an organisational closure which provided an intuitive ground for the *homo clausus* metaphor.

At the second level, the individual is a matter of perception and action. As the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann (1990) made clear – Simmel and the other social theorists of the surfaces would have certainly agreed – this is the level at which the ‘mystery of the appearances’ unfolds. The individual presents itself in its entirety to the world. S/he becomes one through this affordance to perception. His/her outermost boundaries, far from being a simple thermodynamic membrane, constitute an additional organ. The plumage, the feathers, the hair, the scales and the skin, with all their specific visual clues, are uniquely made to be perceived. The outer visible appearances of the individual form an additional organ: an organ for display and perception. An organ to be seen. ‘The feathers, hair, and scales of vertebrate animals, together with their nerves and muscles are, in their colour and form, visual apparatuses which are specialised in surprising ways to serve viewing eyes’ Portmann (1990: 27) wrote. Display and perception are also related to the capacity to perform *action*. For action is not a mere physical–chemical–electrical–magnetic reaction. Action requires a process of individualisation capable of coalescing an agent. Indeed, agency presupposes that a gulf between inaction and action exists, and that this gulf comes to be filled under certain conditions and at a certain moment in time. The traditional notions of freedom, free will, self-determination and inner deliberation have been deployed to explain this process. But Portmann reminds us that the ‘inwardness’ of the living individual is not located in some inaccessible obscure location somewhere in the invisible depths of his/her body. There is no pineal point. And, in any case, Portmann wants to avoid psychological notions of interiority. Rather, the inwardness he speaks about is located at the surface: it is morphology-as-presentation, skin-as-appearance. We might also call it *social life*. Rather than as ‘one additional organ’ of the living individual, appearance can be more accurately defined as ‘the ultimate organ’: it is not a localised organ, but *the*

individual itself as organ. This is why Portmann calls the individual animal's inwardness a 'non-dimensional' reality, stressing the fact that, precisely through its appearances, the individual turns into something more than an apparatus of functionally coordinated organs. Indeed, what emerges here is the co-creation of the medium and the subject. The individual is a medium that is intrinsically open to others who, thanks to perception and action, are involved in a single process of individuation *qua* subjectification.

The self-presentation of the individual to others within a shared environment marks the stark distinction of the second layer of individuality from the first one. Display as self-presentation – even in the absence of actual looking eyes – is the domain of perception and the domain of relationships – in short, the social domain at large. By introducing a distance between the *percipiens* and the *perceptum*, the second level breaks with the tactile dimension that characterised the physical–chemical–electrical–magnetic level of individuality. Necessarily, the extent to which such a break is achieved can be questioned at each moment. In fact, it is never a stable possession. Whenever the margins of manoeuvre are shrunk and, accordingly, whenever perception turns into a tool of power, the visual always re-incorporates a tactile dimension into itself. The space of flight is deleted and the domain of perception proper is curbed. However, all these constant accidents and short-circuits that happen between the first and the second layers do not detract from the distinctiveness of the second layer itself. For such a layer brings to the individual the promise of a different type of life: it is no less than the experience of *recognition* and *identity*. The living being is never an isolated individual, but always more-than-an-individual (as understood by observing it at the first layer). One can now appreciate that the individual is a communion, or a communication within a multiplicity of *socii* who, creating communality, recognise each other. It is important also to stress that, contrary to a theorisation such as the one by Axel Honneth (1995), here 'recognition' bears no trace of axiological appreciation; it is not a moral, rather a perceptual and cognitive fact (upon which the moral domain can ultimately be founded, though). Also, each *socius* possesses an inwardness that corresponds to the distinctiveness – literally, the 'individability' – of its own proper body and its capacity to fill the gap between inaction and action. Such an 'activation' of the individual creature has been called by Portmann the 'mood' of the animal. With a more humanistic inflexion, we might call it its 'choice'. To avoid

misunderstandings, the term ‘mood’ can be usefully employed in the technical sense encompassing all happenings that lead to the threshold of activation of the individual. Whenever a swarm of small uncoordinated perceptions coalesces into a focal point that releases action, we have a single and determinate instance or course: an *act*. This also reveals that, for the individual, action is not so much a matter of freedom as it is one of *composing a mood out* of an almost infinite number of nebula-like (i.e. crowded) small uncoordinated perceptions.

At the third level, individuality is the peculiar domain of passion and expression. This is where vitalism strikes back. Priority of ‘patience’ over agency. Pathos is a necessary consequence of the second level as we have just described it: every encounter the living individual makes leaves specific marks – sometimes, as we know, scars – which ultimately amount to what we usually refer to as *memory*. In the early twentieth century, Richard Semon (1922[1909]) named these marks *engrams*, arguing that every individual history corresponds to the idiosyncratic latency and subsequent anamnesis of them. Such engrams – which later have been variously labelled, in sociological and perhaps more familiar theories, *hexeis* and *habitus* – are corporeally inscribed, written in one’s flesh and, via this medium, also in one’s own ‘proper body’. This is the reason the third layer differs from the second one. It no longer concerns organs, rather the whole body. Engrams are the writings of an original *pathos* through which the living individual begins to exist. Such a non-localised ‘cry of life’ is perhaps akin to what Deleuze and Guattari (1980), following Artaud, called the *body-without-organs*. From the point of view of the second layer of individuality, the third layer appears as a kind of unknown force that cuts across the individual, flowing through it from part to part. ‘The vital spark’, as it was known since the old times. The spark contradistinguishes the individual as a singular entity, it turns it into a degree of intensity that can be attained and experienced. This is why this layer corresponds to a capacity to feel and express. At this point, it is no longer action *per se* that matters, but rather the specifically *expressive* dimension of action. Such an expression is but the intensive dimension that each individual life in its encounters can hope to attain, or fail to.

Ultimately, the cluttered social formations we have discussed in this book provide us with a conceptual space where we might begin to truly observe nothing less than *the individual* in its entirety, that is to say, the process of individuation which unfolds along the two coordinates and at the three interlocked layers we have described. If we must admit that

the *homo clausus*, the classical individual of modern liberal political and economic philosophy, does not exist, it is not merely to deny it, but to enlarge it. We need a much more complete, rounded view of individuality that does no longer oppose the individual to multiplicities, the one to the many, but, on the contrary, understands the event of individuation as it unfolds through a set of coordinates that are inherently present in a populated yet invisible environment. At that point, perhaps, ‘individual multiplicity’ would no longer be a conceptual *adynaton*.

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