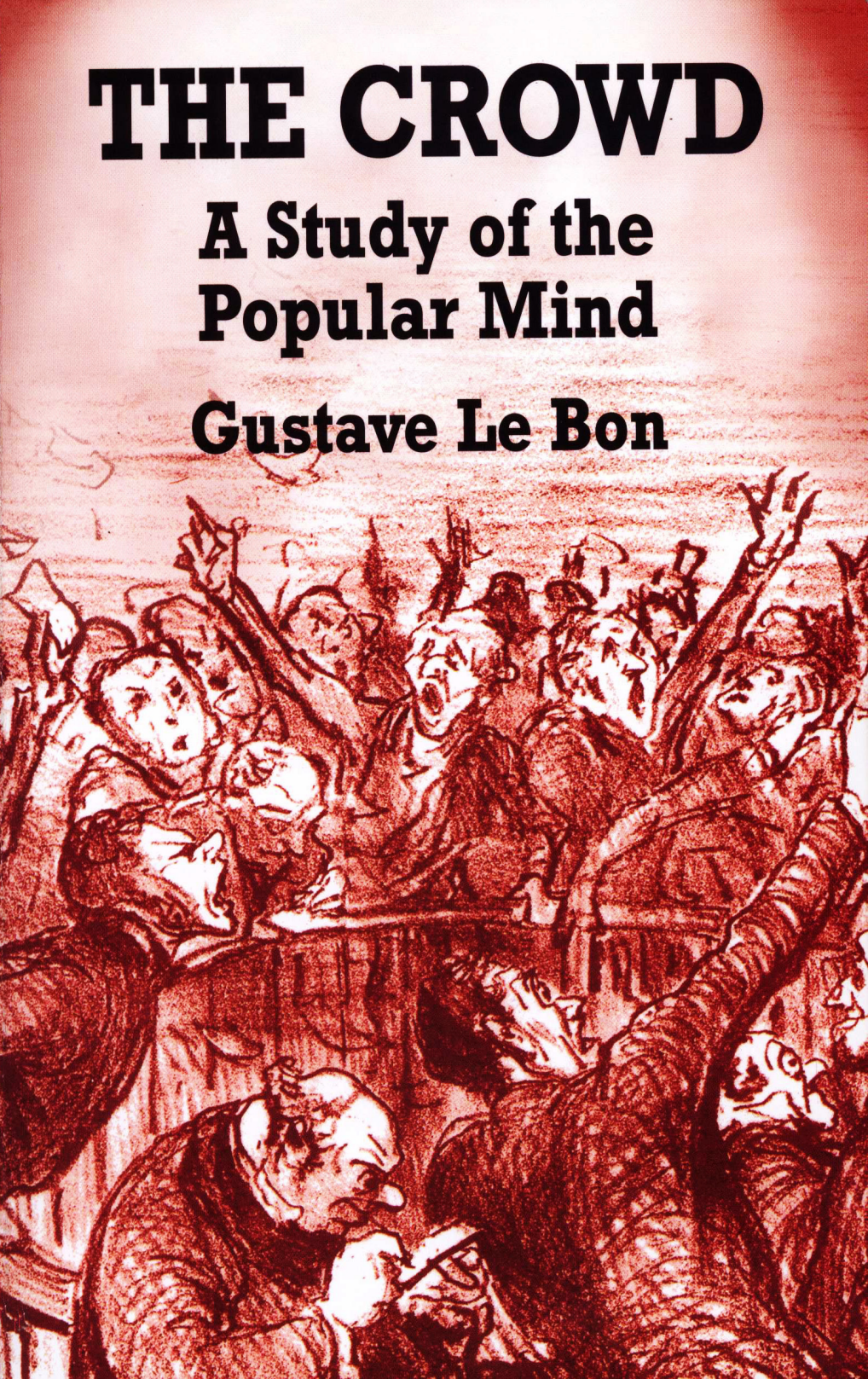
THE CROWD

A Study of the Popular Mind

Gustave Le Bon



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A Study of the Popular Mind

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One of the most influential works of social psychology in history, *The Crowd* was highly instrumental in creating this field of study by analyzing, in detail, mass behavior. The book had a profound impact not only on Freud but also on such 20th-century masters of crowd control as Hitler and Mussolini—both of whom may have used its observations as a guide to stirring up popular passions. In the author's words, "The masses have never thirsted after truth. . . . Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim."

Although the volume focuses on crowd psychology, it is also brilliantly instructive on the effects of the generally accepted beliefs of a nation's citizenry on the processes of history. Among the topics covered here are general characteristics and mental unity of the crowd; the crowd's sentiments and morality; its ideas, reasoning power, and imagination; opinions and beliefs of crowds and the means used by leaders to persuade; classification of crowds, including criminal and electoral assemblages, as well as the functioning of criminal juries and parliamentary assemblies.

A must-read volume for students of history, sociology, law, and psychology, *The Crowd* will also be invaluable to politicians, statesmen, investors, and marketing managers. ". . . any study of crowd behavior, popular psychology, fascism, etc. would do well to begin with Le Bon's work."—Anson Rabinbach, Professor of History, Princeton University.

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Publisher's Note: Some of the opinions presented in this book reflect attitudes that were common among some writers on social issues during the final years of the nineteenth century, in Europe and the United States, but no longer are common.

Bibliographical Note

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Preface

The following work is devoted to an account of the characteristics of crowds.

The whole of the common characteristics with which heredity endows the individuals of a race constitute the genius of the race. When, however, a certain number of these individuals are gathered together in a crowd for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, there result certain new psychological characteristics, which are added to the racial characteristics and differ from them at times to a very considerable degree.

Organised crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples, but this part has never been of such moment as at present. The substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age.

I have endeavoured to examine the difficult problem presented by crowds in a purely scientific manner—that is, by making an effort to proceed with method, and without being influenced by opinions, theories, and doctrines. This, I believe, is the only mode of arriving at the discovery of some few particles of truth, especially when dealing, as is the case here, with a question that is the subject of impassioned controversy. A man of science bent on verifying a phenomenon is not called upon to concern himself with the interests his verifications may hurt. In a recent publication an eminent thinker, M. Goblet d'Alviela, made the remark that, belonging to none of the contemporary schools, I am occasionally found in opposition of sundry of the conclusions of all of them. I hope this new work will merit a similar observation. To belong to a school is necessarily to espouse its prejudices and preconceived opinions.

Still I should explain to the reader why he will find me draw conclusions from my investigations which it might be thought at first sight they do not bear; why, for instance, after noting the extreme mental inferiority of crowds, picked assemblies included, I yet affirm it would be dangerous to meddle with their organisation, notwithstanding this inferiority.

The reason is, that the most attentive observation of the facts of history has invariably demonstrated to me that social organisms being every whit as complicated as those of all beings, it is in no wise in our power to force them to undergo on a sudden far-reaching transformations. Nature has recourse at times to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than the mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would only be useful were it possible to change instantaneously the genius of nations. This power, however, is only possessed by time. Men are ruled by ideas, sentiments, and customs—matters which are of the essence of ourselves. Institutions and laws are the outward manifestation of our character, the expression of its needs. Being its outcome, institutions and laws cannot change this character.

The study of social phenomena cannot be separated from that of the peoples among whom they have come into existence. From the philosophic point of view these phenomena may have an absolute value; in practice they have only a relative value.

It is necessary, in consequence, when studying a social phenomenon, to consider it successively under two very different aspects. It will then be seen that the teachings of pure reason are very often contrary to those of practical reason. There are scarcely any data, even physical, to which this distinction is not applicable. From the point of view of absolute truth a cube or a circle are invariable geometrical figures, rigorously defined by certain formulas. From the point of view of the impression they make on our eye these geometrical figures may assume very varied shapes. By perspective the cube may be transformed into a pyramid or a square, the circle into an ellipse or a straight line. Moreover, the consideration of these fictitious shapes is far more important than that of the real shapes, for it is they and

they alone that we see and that can be reproduced by photography or in pictures. In certain cases there is more truth in the unreal than in the real. To present objects with their exact geometrical forms would be to distort nature and render it unrecognisable. If we imagine a world whose inhabitants could only copy or photograph objects, but were unable to touch them, it would be very difficult for such persons to attain to an exact idea of their form. Moreover, the knowledge of this form, accessible only to a small number of learned men, would present but a very minor interest.

The philosopher who studies social phenomena should bear in mind that side by side with their theoretical value they possess a practical value, and that this latter, so far as the evolution of civilisation is concerned, is alone of importance. The recognition of this fact should render him very circumspect with regard to the conclusions that logic would seem at first to enforce upon him.

There are other motives that dictate to him a like reserve. The complexity of social facts is such, that it is impossible to grasp them as a whole and to foresee the effects of their reciprocal influence. It seems, too, that behind the visible facts are hidden at times thousands of invisible causes. Visible social phenomena appear to be the result of an immense, unconscious working, that as a rule is beyond the reach of our analysis. Perceptible phenomena may be compared to the waves, which are the expression on the surface of the ocean of deep-lying disturbances of which we know nothing. So far as the majority of their acts are considered, crowds display a singularly inferior mentality; yet there are other acts in which they appear to be guided by those mysterious forces which the ancients denominated destiny, nature, or providence, which we call the voices of the dead, and whose power it is impossible to overlook, although we ignore their essence. It would seem, at times, as if there were latent forces in the inner being of nations which serve to guide them. What, for instance, can be more complicated, more logical, more marvellous than a language? Yet whence can this admirably organised production have arisen, except it be the outcome of the unconscious genius of crowds? The most

learned academics, the most esteemed grammarians can do no more than note down the laws that govern languages; they would be utterly incapable of creating them. Even with respect to the ideas of great men are we certain that they are exclusively the offspring of their brains? No doubt such ideas are always created by solitary minds, but is it not the genius of crowds that has furnished the thousands of grains of dust forming the soil in which they have sprung up?

Crowds, doubtless, are always unconscious, but this very unconsciousness is perhaps one of the secrets of their strength. In the natural world beings exclusively governed by instinct accomplish acts whose marvellous complexity astounds us. Reason is an attribute of humanity of too recent date and still too imperfect to reveal to us the laws of the unconscious, and still more to take its place. The part played by the unconscious in all our acts is immense, and that played by reason very small. The unconscious acts like a force still unknown.

If we wish, then, to remain within the narrow but safe limits within which science can attain to knowledge, and not to wander in the domain of vague conjecture and vain hypothesis, all we must do is simply to take note of such phenomena as are accessible to us, and confine ourselves to their consideration. Every conclusion drawn from our observation is, as a rule, premature, for behind the phenomena which we see clearly are other phenomena that we see indistinctly, and perhaps behind these latter, yet others which we do not see at all.

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