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Social Psychology: An Outline and Sourcebook (1908)

Edward Alsworth Ross

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Editor's Introduction

Patrick Parsons

Edward Alsworth Ross (1866–1951) was born in Illinois and received his AB (1886) from Coe College in Iowa. He studied in Germany, returning to the US to earn a PhD in political economy at Johns Hopkins University in 1891. He taught for several years at Stanford University but was fired because of his outspoken support of eugenics. After a few years at the University of Nebraska, he moved to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he spent the rest of his career as professor of sociology and founding chair of the department.

Despite his early political views, Ross was a leading US sociologist, the president of the American Sociological Association in 1914, and a prominent Progressive. In his theorizing, he was among the roster of early intellectual stars to come under the spell of French crowd theory. He authored *Social Psychology: An Outline and Sourcebook*, one of the two founding textbooks in the field, both published in 1908 (the other by William McDougall).

Ross was particularly concerned with the problem of social order in the transition to modernity and in the forms of control by which social stability was maintained in the process. His first book, *Social Control* (1901), dealt entirely with this problem. For Ross, social control could be coercive or non-coercive, and included law, religion, public opinion, custom, and even art.

Broadening his focus in *Social Psychology*, he engaged Tarde and Le Bon to consider the process and consequences of an array of forms of social interaction. The book was, for one commentator, "essentially a treatise on the suggestion-imitation theory of the social processes as made famous by Tarde and others" (Karpf 1932, 309). Along with Baldwin's *Mental Development*, the text was also important in introducing suggestion theory to US audiences.

The following excerpt from *Social Psychology* offers Ross's view of suggestion, which he finds to be inherent in human nature and the psychological foundation for social control. "Many a man thinks he makes up his mind, whereas, in truth, it is made up for him by some masterful associate or by the man who talked with him last." Following Baldwin, he also distinguishes suggestion, the "cause," from imitation, the "effect." He examines the importance of speaker "prestige" in crowd behavior and "the mass mind," and even delves into the power of mass media. "Space-annihilating devices," the telegraph, the mails, and the daily press are "able to assail the individual with a mass of suggestion almost as vivid as if he actually stood in the midst of an immense crowd"—and the results can be "rage, alarm, enthusiasm, or horror."

In stark contrast to mid-century articulations of a uniform effects "Magic Bullet" model of media impact, suggestion theory always included wide space for variability. That is, levels of suggestibility ranged across defined groups and individuals. Ross examines this, describing levels of susceptibility to suggestion based on, among other things, ethnicity, gender, and age. The analysis here is starkly misogynistic and racist, but not untypical for this period. Ross also anticipates the role of cognitive selectivity in the formation and manipulation of public opinion, with an acknowledgement of the important role of individual pre-existing beliefs in the process of attitude change.

Finally, it's important to note that while Ross was concerned with the irrational suggestibility of the public, as a Progressive he, like Sidis, placed great hope in the efficacy of education and educated leaders to help overcome its darker implications.

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> New York: Macmillan, pp. 11–47, 63–65, 346–48 [with elisions].

CHAPTER II: SUGGESTIBILITY

The older psychology was individualistic in its interpretations. The contents of the mind were looked upon as elaborations out of personal experience. It sought to show how from the primary sense perceptions are built up ideas, at first simple, then more and more complex—ideas of space, time, number, cause, etc. The upper stories of personality, framed on beliefs, standards, valuations, and ideals, were comparatively neglected. The psychologist failed to note that for these highly elaborated products we are more indebted to our fellow-men than to our individual experience, that they are wrought out, as it were, collectively, and not by each for himself.

The newer psychology in accounting for the contents of the mind gives great prominence to the social factor. It insists that without interaction with other minds the psychic development of the child would be arrested at a stage not far above idiocy. Such interaction arises necessarily from the suggestibility of human nature. A person cannot unswervingly follow the orbit prescribed by his heredity or his private experience. He does not sit serene at the centre of things and coolly decide which of the examples and ideas that present themselves he shall adopt. Much of what impinges on his consciousness comes with some force. It has momentum, and if he does not yield to it, it is because his mind resists with a greater force. The weak mind, like Sir James Brooke in "Middlemarch," "takes shape easily, but won't keep shape." Many a man thinks he makes up his mind, whereas, in truth, it is made up for him by some masterful associate or by the man who talked with him last.

Stimuli welling up from within may be termed impulses, whereas those reaching us directly from without may be termed suggestions. The latter may be defined as "the abrupt entrance from without into consciousness of an idea or image which becomes a part of the stream of thought and tends to produce the muscular and volitional

effects which ordinarily follow upon its presence."[1] Examples of the working of suggestion are legion. Persons accustomed to being put under the influence of anaesthetics have "gone off" as soon as the familiar chloroform mask was laid on the face, but before any chloroform had been poured on it. [...]

Suggestions are true forces and enact themselves unless they meet resistance. The power to withstand, ignore, or throw off suggestions is one form of *inhibition, i.e.*, will power. Suggestion and imitation are merely two aspects of the same thing, the one being cause, the other effect.

Suggestibility varies according to,—

1. *Species*.—It appears to be more marked in gregarious than in solitary creatures. Not all simians are imitative, but the gregarious simians, the monkeys, are proverbially so. Sheep are so imitative that if a file of them be driven through a narrow passage and the leader be made to jump over a stick held across the passage, every one of the file will jump at that place, even if the stick be withdrawn. Only high suggestibility could produce the wonderful instantaneous concert of action seen in the herd of deer or buffalo, the band of wild horses or elephants.

2. *Race*. — Suggestibility is not a weakness produced by civilization [...]

The American Indian, far from being impassive, is an extremely susceptible type. The ghost-dance religion that spread among the Indians, 1889–1892, took possession of probably sixty thousand souls. Its central feature was a sacred dance, reënforced by hypnotizing operations by the medicine man upon dancers who began to show signs of ecstasy. Under the power of the emotion and of the passes employed by the medicine man, first one and then another would break from the ring, stagger, and fall down. "They kept up dancing until fully one hundred persons were lying unconscious. Then they stopped and seated themselves in a circle, and as each one recovered from his trance, he was brought to the centre of the ring to relate his experience."[2]

Among the civilized races the Celto-Slavs seem to be more suggestive than the English or the Scandinavians. The demonstrativeness of French and Italian audiences is in high contrast to the "phlegm" of English and German audiences. Nothing surpasses the fire and dash of a French cavalry charge. The English are at their best in individualistic fighting, such as defence or retreat. The French and Irish orators hold the palm, while it is the mobs of Frenchmen and of Russians that yield the best material for crowd psychology. Mesmerism and, later, hypnotism originated in France. Politeness and the refinements of intercourse are well-nigh spontaneous with the Irish and the French, owing to their quick susceptibility to slight indications of feeling in the other person. The rudeness so often complained of in the English seems due to an insensitiveness to certain ranges of suggestion.

3. *Age*.—Suggestibility is at its maximum in young children, and it is said that most children above the age of seven are hypnotizable.[3] Here is the secret of childhood's "plasticity." The adult may be progressive, *i.e.*, open to new ideas, but he ought not to be plastic, *i.e.*, shaped readily by whatever happens to impinge on him.

Juvenile testimony is very untrustworthy, seeing that by a series of skillful leading questions a child may be led to give almost any desired story on the witness-stand. It is the suggestibility of the young that prompts us to segregate youthful offenders, institute juvenile courts, keep vicious women off the street, penalize the dissemination of obscene literature, outlaw "treating," and eliminate the commercial motive from the sale of liquor.

4. *Temperament.*—Coe[4] finds those of the sanguine or the melancholic temperament decidedly more suggestible than the choleric. [...]

5. *Sex.*—Among the Indian ghost-dancers, "young women are usually the first to be affected, then older women, and lastly men." Coe finds that among those who definitely seek for a striking religious transformation, the proportion of those whose expectation is completely satisfied is decidedly greater among the women. Starbuck's figures,[5] showing six times as many women as men converted at the regular church services, indicates the greater response of women to external suggestion. In conversion "men display more friction against surroundings, more difficulty with points of belief, more doubt arising from educational influences, more readiness to question traditional beliefs and customs, more pronounced tendency to resist conviction, to pray, to call on God, to lose sleep and appetite." For them the period of doubt and struggle is longer than for women. Ellis[6] points out that women are more hypnotizable than men. […]

The mob susceptibilities in woman cause many strongly to oppose granting women more power in our social or political organization. But women are more than a sex. They are, in a sense, a social class shut out from many of the bracing and individualizing experiences that come to men. "Nowhere in the world," declares Professor Thomas,[7] "do women as a class lead a perfectly free intellectual life in common with the men of the group unless it be in restricted and artificial groups like the modern revolutionary party in Russia." Hence *woman* is by no means synonymous with *human female*. Almost everywhere propriety and conventionality press more mercilessly on woman than on man, thereby lessening her freedom and range of choice and dwarfing her will. Individuality develops through practice in choosing. If women are mobbish, it is largely for the same reason that monks, soldiers, peasants, *moujiks*, and other rigidly regulated types are mobbish. Much of woman's exaggerated impressionability disappears once she enjoys equal access with men to such individualizing influences as higher education, travel, self-direction, professional pursuits, participation in intellectual and public life.

6. *Mental Condition.*—In the normal mental state indirect distraction, *i.e.*, absence of mind, is favorable to the uncritical acceptance of suggestion. The mind must be "caught napping," as it were, in order that an uncongenial suggestion may find lodgment. [...]

By one in the normal state, then, slantwise suggestion is far more likely to be accepted than direct suggestion, on the principle that a flank movement succeeds when a frontal attack fails. [...]

7. *Source of Suggestion.*—One is most susceptible to suggestions from certain quarters or from certain people—from those clothed with *prestige.* Prestige is that which excites such wonder or admiration as to paralyze the critical faculty. It is not the same at all stages. The boy, trying constantly to do things, admires most those who can do things better than he can or things he cannot do at all. Says Cooley: "His father sitting at his desk probably seems an inert and unattractive phenomenon, but the man who can make shavings or dig a deep hole is a hero; and the seemingly perverse admiration which children at a later age show for circus men and for the pirates and desperadoes they read about, is to be explained in a similar manner. What they want is *evident* power."[8] [...]

The born leader is one whose superiority seems boundless. If it is only relative, if we can measure it, if we can fathom the secret of it and can see how we can finally attain to it ourselves, he is no longer our hero. In every crisis he must appear to be master of the situation, not perplexed, dubious, or vacillating. His faith in himself and in his undertaking must appear tremorless. He must bear up when others despair, remain serene when they are agitated. His intelligence must overarch and reach beyond that of his followers. Not unbroken success, not measurable excellence, but the gift of striking and stirring the imagination of others is, perhaps, the essential thing in natural leadership. Cooley[9] remarks: "A sense of power in others seems to involve a sense of their inscrutability; and, on the other hand, so soon as a person becomes plain he ceases to stimulate the imagination; we have seen all around him, so that he no longer appears an open door to new life." "The power of mere inscrutability arises from the fact that it gives a vague stimulus to thought and then leaves it to work out the details to suit itself."[...]

8. *Duration of Suggestion.*—Reiteration of the same idea in various forms is essential to the production of an effect upon people in a normal state of mind. It takes time for the orator to weave his spell. It is in the closing weeks of the legislative session that the tireless lobbyist registers his triumph over the scruples of the legislators. Advertising, to bring in returns, must be persevered in; it may be months after heavy advertising is begun before the sales swell noticeably. The insurance solicitor knows the efficacy of "follow up" letters and conversations. The reiterated phrases of a church liturgy gradually inspire in the hearer the mood of worship. It is a trick of balladists to call up a certain emotional tone by a recurring phrase at the close of each stanza. [...]

9. *Volume of Suggestion.*—What strikes us from all directions at almost the same instant has a tremendous effect. […]

Men who easily throw off the thousand successive suggestions of everyday life are carried off their feet by the volume of suggestion that emanates from great numbers. This is the secret of the power of public opinion. [...]

CHAPTER III: THE CROWD

THE strength of multiplied suggestion is at its maximum when the individual is in the midst of a throng, helpless to control his position or movements. The same pressure on the body that prevents voluntary

movement conveys promptly to him all the electrifying swayings and tremors that betray the emotions of the mass. This squeeze of the crowd tends to depress the self-sense. […]

An excited throng easily turns mob because excitement weakens the reasoning power and predisposes to suggestions in line with the master emotion. Thus, frightened persons are peculiarly susceptible to warnings, angry persons to denunciations, expectant persons to promises, anxious persons to rumors. An agitated gathering is tinder, and the throngs that form in times of public tension are very liable to become mobs.

Although crowding, fixation of attention, and excitement exalt suggestibility, all members of the crowd do not experience this in the same degree. There are at least two descriptions of people who, in the give-and-take of the throng, are more likely to impose suggestions than to accept them. The *intelligent* are able to criticise and appraise the suggestions that impinge upon them. They are quick to react if a suggestion clashes with their interests or their convictions, whereas the ignorant are at the mercy of the leader or the claque, and may be stampeded into a course of action quite at variance with their real desires. The *fanatical and impassioned* are little responsive to impressions from without, because of their inner tension. Being determined from within, they emit powerful suggestions, but are hard to influence. There is thus a tendency for the warped and inflamed members to impart their passion to the rest and to sweep along with them the neutral and indifferent. This is why, as the crowd comes under the hypnotic spell, the extremists gain the upper hand of the moderates.

Feelings, having more means of vivid expression, run through the crowd more readily than ideas. Masked by their anonymity, people feel free to give rein to the expression of their feelings. To be heard, one does not speak; one shouts. To be seen, one does not simply show one’s self; one gesticulates. Boisterous laughter, frenzied objurgations, frantic cheers, are needed to express the merriment or wrath or enthusiasm of the crowd. Such exaggerated signs of emotion cannot but produce in suggestible beholders exaggerated states of mind. The mental temperature rises, so that what seemed hot now seems lukewarm, what felt tepid now feels cold. The intensifying of the feelings in consequence of reciprocal suggestion will be most rapid when the crowd meets under agitating circumstances. In this case the unbridled manifestation of feeling prevails from the first, and the psychic fermentation proceeds at a great rate.

To the degree that feeling is intensified, reason is paralyzed. In general, strong emotion inhibits the intellectual processes. In a sudden crisis we expect the sane act from the man who is “cool,” who has not “lost his head.” Now, the very hurly-burly of the crowd tends to distraction. Then, the high pitch of feeling to which the crowd gradually works up checks thinking and results in a temporary imbecility. There is no question that, taken herdwise, people are less sane and sensible than they are dispersed.

In a real deliberative assembly there is a possibility that the best thought, the soundest opinion, the shrewdest plan advanced from any quarter will prevail. Where there is cool discussion and leisurely reflection, ideas struggle with one another, and the fittest are accepted by all. In the fugitive, structureless crowd, however, there can be no fruitful debate. Under a wise leader the crowd may act sagaciously. But there is no guarantee that the

master of the crowd shall be wiser than his followers. The man of biggest voice or wildest language, the aggressive person who first leaps upon a table, raises aloft a symbol, or utters a catching phrase, is likely to become the bell-wether. [...]

CHAPTER IV: MOB MIND

PRESENCE is not essential to mass suggestion. Mental touch is no longer bound up with physical proximity. With the telegraph to collect and transmit the expressions and signs of the ruling mood, and the fast mail to hurry to the eager clutch of waiting thousands the still damp sheets of the morning daily, remote people are brought, as it were, into one another's presence. Through its organs the excited public is able to assail the individual with a mass of suggestion almost as vivid as if he actually stood in the midst of an immense crowd.

Formerly, within a day, a shock might throw into a fever all within a hundred miles. The next day it might agitate the zone beyond, but meanwhile the first body of people would have cooled down and become ready to listen to reason. And so, while a wave of excitement passed slowly over the country, the entire folk was at no moment in a state of agitation. Now, however, our space-annihilating devices make a shock well-nigh simultaneous. A vast public shares the same rage, alarm, enthusiasm, or horror. Then, as each part of the mass becomes acquainted with the sentiment of all the rest, the feeling is generalized and intensified. In the end the public swallows up the individuality of the ordinary man in much the same way the crowd swallows up the individuality of its members.

Nevertheless, public and crowd are not identical in their characteristics. If by the aid of a telephonic news service—as in Budapest—people were brought into immediate touch, there would still be lacking certain conditions of the mob state. The hurly-burly, the press and heave of the crowd are avoided when contact is purely mental. As we have seen, in the throng the means of expressing feeling are much more effective than the facilities for expressing thought. But in a dispersed group feeling enjoys no such advantage. Both are confined to the same vehicle the printed word and so ideas and opinions run as rapidly through the public as emotions.

One is member of but one crowd at a time, but by reading a number of newspapers, one can belong to several publics with, perhaps, different planes of vibration. So far as these various unanimities cross and neutralize one another, the suction of the public will be weakened. The crowd may be stampeded into folly or crime by accidental leaders. The public can receive suggestions only through the columns of its journal, the editor of which is like the chairman of a mass-meeting, for no one can be heard without his recognition. For all these reasons the psychology of the public, though similar to that of the crowd, is more normal.

Ours is not the era of hereditary rulers, oligarchies, era of publics hierarchies, or close corporations. But neither is it, as some insist, "the era of crowds." It is, in fact, *the era of publics*. Those who perceive that to-day under the influence of universal discussion the old fixed groupings which held their members so tenaciously—sects, parties, castes, and the like—are liquefying, that allegiances sit lightly, and that men are endlessly passing into

new combinations, seek to stigmatize these loose associations as “crowds.” The true crowd is, however, in a declining rôle. Universal contact by means of print ushers in “the rule of public opinion,” which is a totally different thing from “government by the mob.”

The principal manifestations of mob mind in vast bodies of dispersed individuals are the craze and the fad. These may be defined as *that irrational unanimity of mob mind interest, feeling, opinion, or deed in a body of communicating individuals, which results from suggestion and imitation.* In the chorus of execration over a sensational crime, in the clamor for the blood of an assassin, in waves of national feeling, in political “landslides,” in passionate “sympathetic” strikes, in cholera scares, in popular delusions, in religious crazes, in migration manias, in “booms” and panics, in agitations and insurrections, we witness contagion on a gigantic scale, favored in some cases by popular hysteria. […]

CHAPTER XXII: PUBLIC OPINION

A DISCUSSION that attracts general attention finds its natural issue in a state of *public (or social) opinion.* The formation of this may best be observed during a discussion that must close at a certain date, i.e., a campaign. A campaign is a social deliberation. This does not necessarily mean general individual irresolution. If nobody had made up his mind, there could be no conflict whatever in the social mind. [...]

In a campaign the public is like a more or less inert substance placed between two chambers containing different active acids. The acid that eats into and assimilates this substance the more rapidly is the propaganda of the winning party. Sometimes there is a simple acid acting on a homogeneous substance—the communion cup agitation in a certain church, or the policy of withdrawal from the state militia mooted in a labor organization. Usually, however, the substance is heterogeneous, and each acid has a number of ingredients,—arguments, appeals, proposals, planks, each of which is presumed to be effective with some section of the public. The acid must be complex when, as in a political campaign, the entire public is being acted upon.

The affinities individuals develop are by no means determined simply by the rational balancing of opposing considerations. There is first the factor of prepossession and prejudice. Says Bryce[10]: “Every one is, of course, predisposed to see things in some one particular light by his previous education, habits of mind, accepted dogmas, religious or social affinities, notions of his own personal interest. No event, no speech or article ever falls upon a perfectly virgin soil; the reader or listener is always more or less biased already. When some important event happens, which calls for the formation of a view, these preëxisting habits, dogmas, affinities, help to determine the impression which each man experiences, and so are factors in the view he forms.”

This original impression is soon overlaid by a variety of influences of social origin. Nearly every man looks for guidance to certain quarters, bows to the example of trusted leaders, of persons of influence or authority. Every editor, politician, banker, capitalist, railroad president, employer, clergyman, or judge has a following with whom his opinion has weight. He, in turn, is likely to have his authorities. The anatomy of collective opinion shows it to be organized from centres and subcentres, forming a kind of intellectual feudal system. The average

man responds to several such centres of influence, and when they are in accord on a particular question he is almost sure to acquiesce. But when his authorities disagree, there results either confusion or else independence of judgment.

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Footnotes

1. Baldwin, “Handbook of Psychology,” II, 297. ↩
2. Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 917. ↩
3. Binet, “La Suggestibilite,” sets forth investigations showing a marked normal suggestibility in school children. ↩
4. “The Spiritual Life,” 120. ↩
5. *American Journal of Psychology*, VIII, 271. ↩
6. “Man and Woman,” ch. XII. ↩
7. "Sex and Society," 311. ↩
8. "Human Nature and the Social Order," 290–293. ↩
9. “Human Nature and the Social Order,” 313–315. ↩
10. “The American Commonwealth,“ II, ch. LXXVI. ↩

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