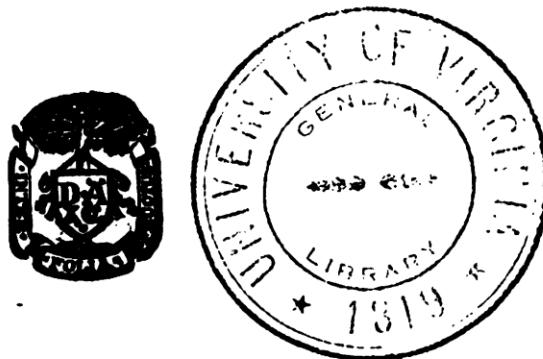


# AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY  
**CHARLES A. ELLWOOD, Ph.D.,**

PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI;  
AUTHOR OF "SOCIOLOGY IN ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS,"  
"SOCIOLOGY AND MODERN SOCIAL PROBLEMS," ETC.



**D. APPLETON AND COMPANY  
NEW YORK                    LONDON**

1922

HM  
251  
E48  
1922  
64830

COPYRIGHT, 1917, BY  
**D. APPLETON AND COMPANY**

Printed in the United States of America

**THE FORMATION AND FUNCTION OF PUBLIC OPINION.<sup>1</sup>** The highly dynamic societies of modern civilization control their social changes by what we call public opinion. To some extent, savage and barbarous societies did the same; only in these latter the opinion of the group was so bound by traditions and custom that public opinion, in the modern sense, could get no great development. By public opinion, we mean a more or less rational collective judgment formed by the action and reaction of many individual judgments. Such a collective conscious opinion is obviously formed to mediate and control some change in the policies or institutions of the group. It implies, not so much that uniformity of opinion has been reached by all members of the group, or even by a majority, as that a certain organization and co-ordination of the opinions and judgments of the individuals of the group has been reached. This is probably true even in those primitive groups which act only upon the principle of unanimity, and it is even more true in modern societies under the principle of majority rule. Of course, there is a certain core of agreement among the individuals of a group, or at least among a majority, but there is no absolute uniformity of judgment. As Professor Cooley says, public opinion is "an organization of separate individual judgments, a co-operative product of communication and reciprocal influence."<sup>2</sup> It does not represent, therefore, necessarily, as some social psychologists have claimed, the judgment of the lowest member of the group making the opinion, or even the mediocrity of its average individuals. It may well represent the matured judgment of leaders and specialists, after these have reacted with their public.

Whether control by public opinion will be control by the worst or the best minds in the group, however, will depend

---

<sup>1</sup> For collateral reading on public opinion, see Cooley: "Social Organization," Chap. XII.

<sup>2</sup> "Social Organization," p. 121.

upon the circumstances of its formation, and the opportunities given for leadership to men of the highest intelligence. It will depend upon the appreciation which the group has of the judgment of the expert or of the superior mind, and that in turn will depend much upon the traditions of the group. It will also depend upon whether the conditions under which the opinion of the group is formed are such as to favor the wisest and most rational judgments circulating freely among the members of the group. Freedom of intercommunication and the encouragement of freedom of thought are necessary conditions for the formation of a public opinion of the highest degree of rationality. Without free speech, a free press and free discussion the highest development of public opinion is impossible, since it is formed by the action and reactions of many separate private judgments. Professor Giddings has rightly insisted that the highest type of public opinion depends for its development upon such conditions. He perhaps goes too far, however, in saying that in those countries where free discussion and freedom of assemblage are interdicted, there can be no true public opinion.<sup>1</sup> In such countries, however, public opinion, while it develops, is usually of a very low order of rationality; and hence is either powerless to effect social changes, or, if it succeeds in effecting them, they are apt to be unwise. The proper functioning of public opinion in a social group demands, therefore, the fullest development of the mechanism of free intercommunication. Such free functioning of public opinion is, on the whole, one of the best safeguards which societies have against social catastrophes, since it represents the free collective judgment of the group as a whole, and the most rational attempt it is capable of making to control collective action.

If the importance of a high development of public opin-

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Principles of Sociology," p. 138.

ion in social life is such as we have just indicated, then it is equally important that the whole machinery of its formation be kept not only free, but also uncorrupted and alive, so to speak, to its social responsibility. Now, in the large, complex social groups of modern civilization, the formation and guidance of public opinion is becoming increasingly a function of the press. To the modern newspaper and magazine belongs especially the preponderant part in the guidance and formation of public opinion. If the press is commercial, if it is managed even to serve individual or class interests rather than to meet social needs, it will as surely fail to create the highest type of public opinion as if it were unfree. Means and methods yet remain to be devised by which the press can be kept free, and yet, at the same time, brought to realize in the highest degree its social responsibility as one of the most important parts of the machinery of our whole social life. Owing to sensationalism, to party and class bias, and to commercialism, it must be admitted that, even in the most advanced civilized societies of to-day, the press is still far from being the instrument of rational social readjustment which our social life demands.

The social function of public opinion, as we have already said, is to mediate in the transition from one type of social activity to another. It is a selective process, which has to do with the construction of new social habits and institutions. As our social life comes more and more under the sway of conscious and rational processes, custom, laws and institutions come more and more to rest upon public opinion. It is probably a mistake to trace the origin of these back to the public opinion of primitive groups, because, as we have already pointed out, customs and institutions very often have their origin in the lower stages of social evolution from instinctive reactions, or even in some cases from accidental adjustments on the part of primitive so-

## 158 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

ciety. But in the later stages of social development, especially in free society, the rational judgment of the group, which we call public opinion, comes in to modify profoundly customs and institutions. In these stages public opinion is often the decisive element in establishing a law or institution; and in this sense the laws and institutions of democratic society may be said to rest upon public opinion.

In democratic societies, public opinion is, then, a force lying back of the power of all regulative institutions. It is to be regarded, perhaps, as the chief instrument of social control in highly dynamic societies, inasmuch as the other institutions of control, especially government, very largely rest upon it. Moreover, it seems to be playing an increasing part in controlling all social adjustments. If it can be developed to the highest degree of rationality as well as of power, the social life of the future may evidently expect much from it; for the most important problems before our civilization are capable of solution through the development of rational public opinion.

**THE FUNCTION OF SOCIAL LEADERSHIP.** Animal societies show social leadership but very imperfectly developed. This is doubtless because they have no rapid, complex adjustments to make. Human societies, on the other hand, show a high development of social leadership; and leadership in the social life steadily increases in importance as we ascend from the savage stage to present civilization. On account of the difficulty of the adjustments which they have to make, human groups have to organize themselves about definite leaders, men who take the initiative in thought or in action. Without such leadership human groups would show no more capacity to make wise adjustments than their weakest members. It is by the coördination as we have already seen, of the thought and the activities of all the members of the group with the thinking and acting of some leader, who thinks ahead and sets an example, that human

## CHAPTER X

### IMITATION AND SUGGESTION IN THE SOCIAL LIFE

THERE remain three social mental processes of such great importance in the social life that they demand further and more specific consideration. These are, imitation, suggestion and sympathy. They are closely related processes, and are so intimately bound up with social life that whole social psychologies have been built upon the study of their action, without much regard to other elements in either the individual or the social mind. Following our usual method, we shall take up first the active, or motor, side of these processes, namely, imitation.

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF IMITATION.** The word "imitation" is often used for three very distinct kinds of psychic processes. First it is used as a name to cover the social method of developing the instincts. In such cases, imitation is a more or less unconscious copying of the instinctive behavior of one animal by another, usually of the same species. The perception of the instinctive activity excites a similar activity in the observing individual from a similar instinctive basis. We say, in such cases, that the instinctive response is excited sympathetically. This social method of developing the instincts is peculiar to the higher animals. In lower animal forms, instinctive reaction can be excited only through the appropriate stimuli in the environment; but in many of the higher animals, including man, the seeing of the activity going on in other individuals, usually of the same species, excites the impulse also. Thus among dogs, if two dogs are fighting, a third dog will usually join in also. The same

tendency undoubtedly exists among human beings. When we see people eating, we experience an impulse to eat also, whether we are hungry or not. Such a method of excitation of instinctive reactions implies, of course, developed intelligence, and that is why we do not find such imitation in the lower orders of animal life. Moreover, even this sort of imitation, if we may call it imitation at all, is found almost exclusively among animals that live in either small or large groups. It implies, therefore, a previous development of group life.

A second sort of imitation is seen in the tendency to conform, or to be like one's fellows. It is the passion to do as others do, and is usually more highly conscious than the type which we have just described, but is still largely without consciousness of the purpose of the imitative act. It also characterizes animals that live in groups and show a relatively high development of intelligence. It is certainly more than a mere neural tendency to do what we see others doing. Rather, it must probably be considered a specific manifestation, or differentiation, of the gregarious impulses. When we strive to conform our ways of action and even of thinking to those of our group, without specific reason for doing so, we are at once gregarious and imitative. The reinforcement of the general neural tendency to imitate by the gregarious impulses would undoubtedly produce such a result. This copying of others for the sake of being at one with one's group is, in human society, then, mainly an instinctive matter, as is shown by the fact that very few people could give intelligent reasons for so doing.<sup>1</sup> It is also manifestly one of the most important features of the social life of mankind. It is, moreover, imitation in its purest form.

Still another sort of imitation is rational imitation, or the

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare the argument in Trotter: "Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War," pp. 18-32.

## **226 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

copying of the action of another, not merely for the sake of social conformity, nor yet because it satisfies some primitive impulse, but because it is in accord with some rational purpose to do so. Thus, the imitation we see in fashions is largely of the second sort, it expresses a mere instinctive desire to conform; on the other hand, when we adopt some improved tool to accomplish something, the imitation is of this third sort. Such rational imitation doubtless in part grows out of the preceding sorts of imitation, but it is quite different from them on account of its large rational and purposive element. It is no longer pure imitation, but a rational response which is imitative in form, just as the first sort of imitation was an instinctive response, merely imitative in its form. Rational imitation is, however, like the other two preceding sorts, closely connected with the social life of man. It has been a chief factor in his cultural evolution.

Probably we should not apply the term "imitation" at all to psychic or neural processes which do not involve any one of the three above types of response. Some psychologists, however, have spoken of a "biological imitation" which underlies all forms of psychic imitation. By this they mean the type of reaction through which the stimulation which has produced the movement is repeated.<sup>1</sup> This had better be called the habit-forming tendency of neural processes. Imitation must be regarded as essentially a mental and social, rather than a biological, phenomenon, even though there may be interesting analogies to it in the organic world. This is the consensus of most psychologists, at the present time.

**THE CONNECTIONS OF IMITATION WITH SUGGESTION AND OTHER MENTAL PROCESSES.** To be rightly understood, imitation must be correlated by the student with other mental

---

<sup>1</sup> See Baldwin: "Mental Development in the Child and the Race," Chap. IX.

processes. Imitation is but one of the types of interstimulation and response. It is an outcome of instinct and habit and is mediatory of both of those fundamental aspects of the mental and social life. Not only are instinctive reactions in man developed and modified by imitation, but the same statement is of course true of our acquired habits. Without imitation to mediate the expressions of instinct, habit and adaptation in human social groups, anything like harmonious social life would be impossible. For imitation in the broad sense in which we have just used the term, is nothing less than that type of mental interstimulation and response which results in uniformity of activity in the interacting individuals. It is closely connected, therefore, with other processes, which tend toward mental uniformity in a group. It is especially closely related to suggestion, which is a process tending toward *intellectual* uniformity in a group, and to sympathy, which in a broad sense is any process which tends toward *feeling* uniformity in a group. We might define these various terms very simply, indeed, respectively as socially induced activity, cognition and feeling. Imitation, suggestion and sympathy are therefore, all closely related processes. This does not mean that wherever we find one, we must necessarily find the others also; but it does mean that these three processes are continually associated in actual social life, and may perhaps be regarded as the motor, affective and cognitive aspects of one socio-psychic process which for the want of a better name, we may call "mental induction."<sup>1</sup> In discussing these factors in our social life, therefore, we should be careful not only to see that they are related, but to bring them together in our actual descriptions of social activity. This is usually done in the case of imitation and suggestion, imitation being regarded as the active side of the total suggestion-imitation

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare the statements in Ellwood: "Sociology in Its Psychological Aspects," p. 293.

## **228 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

process; but sympathy is not less the affective side of the same process.

An illustration may perhaps serve to make this point clear. A crowd of men in a panic, for example, shows all three of the processes we are discussing working together as a unit. Some would say that the panic is the result of one individual imitating another; others would say that it was the outcome of sympathy, the emotion of fear being sympathetically shared by all; still others might say that the panic was the result of mass-suggestion. All three answers are manifestly partly right, for in a panic there is always the suggestion of danger, the sympathetic communication of the emotion of fear, and the imitation of the actions of one or more leading individuals by the crowd as a whole. Here, then, we see the three processes working together as three sides of what is practically one process.

Imitation is also always closely connected with certain other mental elements. This is obvious from the fact that individuals are more apt to imitate other individuals of their set, class or nationality than outside of such groups. "The consciousness of kind," of class, of nationality, therefore, usually exercises control over the imitative process. It is very seldom that we find imitation at all of one species by another species. Again, the imitation in human society is very largely that of certain leaders or authorities. It would be difficult to explain this fact of the social inferior so uniformly imitating the social superior, if we did not remember that man is an animal that has an inherent propensity to follow leaders, not merely when there is rational ground for doing so, but even when there is no rational ground. The student can easily multiply illustrations of the control of imitation by other inherent tendencies of human nature, such as the sexual instinct, the parental instinct, acquisitiveness, combativeness and the self-exhibiting impulse. In the adult, the tendency to imitate is, of course, also con-

trolled by numerous acquired habits, some of which have been formed entirely without the aid of imitation. Again, in educated and mature persons, the imitative tendency is guided and held in check by the reason. Thus we see that the whole imitative process in human society is guided and controlled by many other elements, some in human nature, some in the circumstances of environment; and that one could only get a very unilateral view of the social life by viewing it too exclusively from the standpoint of imitation.

The student should at all times be careful to bear in mind that there is no general instinct of imitation; that imitation is a method of expressing many instincts, and especially of expressing gregarious impulses; that it is also a method of expressing habit, and even the very highest forms of rational adaptation. *It is simply a name for one of the types of interaction between individuals, which may be either on an instinctive, habitual or rational plane.*

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUGGESTION. By suggestion, we mean the process of communicating an idea from one individual to another, which idea is accepted uncritically without rational ground for its acceptance. The state of mind which is necessary in order that a suggestion may work is called suggestibility. It is the tendency to believe without proof and to act without sufficient reason. It is a state in which an idea or image, particularly one that is associated with some original tendency of human nature, becomes more or less isolated in the mind from inhibiting or controlling processes and tends to work itself out automatically. Hypnotism is an extreme example of the working of suggestion and suggestibility. The normal individual in every day social life is, however, more or less suggestible. The critical faculties are rarely fully awake. Indeed, suggestibility is a normal and necessary accompaniment of gregarious, or group, life. The social animal must be ready at all times

to respond to the ideas communicated to him by the fellow members of his group, and he usually does so more or less uncritically. We can scarcely agree with Boris Sidis that man is "social because he is suggestible";<sup>1</sup> but we must admit that no high development of group life is possible without suggestibility. It represents the receptive, plastic side of consciousness with reference to the rest of the group. It is evidently the cognitive side of the same process which manifests itself actively as imitation. The psychology of suggestion is, therefore, essentially the same as that of imitation. Suggestibility manifests itself particularly in connection with all of the great subconscious tendencies of original or acquired human nature. It particularly manifests itself, therefore, in connection with the instinct-emotions and deeply established habits. It is a form of interstimulation between individuals which makes for the intellectual unity of the group. It thus tends toward uniformity in activity, and while, like imitation, it has its pathological manifestations, it must be regarded as a normal and necessary quality of the socialized individual. It is so uniformly present in all forms of imitation as the receptive, or cognitive, side of the process, that usually it will not be necessary for us to discuss it as a separate process.

THE SUGGESTION-IMITATION THEORY OF SOCIETY. Since Bagehot published his "Physics and Politics," in 1869, sociologists and social psychologists have put forth suggestion-imitation theories of the social life. Bagehot himself said: "The main force which molds and fashions men in society as we now see it is unconscious imitation. . . . The more acknowledged causes, such as change of climate, alteration of political institutions, progress of science, act principally through this cause."<sup>2</sup> In 1890, Gabriel Tarde, an eminent French sociologist, put forth, in his "Laws of Imitation,"

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Psychology of Suggestion," p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> "Physics and Politics," p. 97.

the theory that human social life must be interpreted fundamentally in terms of the suggestion-imitation process. Tarde believed that the influence of one mind upon another was entirely through the suggestion-imitation process. Inasmuch as he accepted the psychological view of society, he proclaimed that imitation is "the elementary social phenomenon." "the fundamental social fact."<sup>1</sup> He even went so far as to say that imitation is the criterion of the social, and that "society is imitation."<sup>2</sup> Social unity, according to Tarde, is therefore wholly the result of the suggestion-imitation process. It is not due to organic heredity, but rather to "the effect of that suggestion-imitation process, which, starting from one primitive creature possessed of a single idea or act, passed this copy on to one of its neighbors, then to another, and so on."<sup>3</sup> While Tarde left a place in his social psychology for conflict, or opposition, and invention, yet he found the essential elements of these in the suggestion-imitation process. He believed that the laws of imitation are to sociology "what the laws of habit and heredity are to biology, the laws of gravitation to astronomy, and the laws of vibration to physics."<sup>4</sup>

In 1895, Professor J. M. Baldwin, an eminent American psychologist, put forth independently a similar theory of the social life. Like Tarde, Baldwin found imitation to be fundamental in both the mental and social life, but he guarded himself against Tarde's extreme formulas and maintained only that imitation was the method of social organization and development. The individual develops intellectually and morally by imitating the mental attitudes and the actions of those about him, Baldwin said, while society changes through the imitation of the thought or activity of some

<sup>1</sup> "Social Laws," p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> "Laws of Imitation" (translation by Mrs. Parsons), p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> "Social Laws," pp. 38, 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

individual who is accepted as a social leader.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Tarde, Baldwin found that the content, or the matter, of the social life, in distinction from its method, is thoughts.<sup>2</sup> Thus in Baldwin, the imitation theory is combined with an intellectualistic view of social life. His theory may be briefly summarized as follows: (1) the matter of social organization, or the content of the social life, is thoughts; (2) the method of their organization is imitation; (3) these thoughts originate with the individual; (4) certain of these thoughts are imitated and thus generalized by society.<sup>3</sup>

It is not necessary to criticize in detail this theory of society. As a theory it unduly simplifies the social life by overlooking, or slighting, the working of other factors than imitation and suggestion. There is no evidence to show, important as imitation and suggestion are in the social life, that they are more important than many other factors in the individual and in the environment. Habits are not wholly acquired by imitation, nor is it true that the learning process is fundamentally an imitative process.<sup>4</sup> Recent psychologists have tended to minimize the importance of imitation in the process of learning, or of acquiring new habits. The student also must not forget that psychology shows that the imitative tendency is constantly modified and controlled by a great number of other elements in human nature and in the environment. We cannot interpret society in terms of one of its very general aspects or processes, apart from all the rest of the processes of collective living. If we should do so, we would get a very abstract and one-sided view of the social life, one which is separated in particular from the great forces of organic and social evolution, which have

---

<sup>1</sup> "Social and Ethical Interpretations in Mental Development," Fourth Edition, Chaps. II, III, XII, XIII.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 504-524.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465-484.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Thorndike: "Educational Psychology," Vol. ii, "The Psychology of Learning."

made even imitation itself ; for man is social, not because he is imitative, but because his whole nature has been evolved under conditions of group life. Hence he is imitative because he is social, rather than social because he is imitative.

THE FUNCTION OF IMITATION IN SOCIETY. Imitation is, then, not the foundation of the social life, but an instrument which the social life has developed to perfect its coördinations. It is, as we have already said, and as Baldwin has insisted, the chief means of propagating the *acquired* uniformities in human society. It is this because it is the type of interaction between individuals which results in uniformity of activity. It is, therefore, the great and indispensable means of bringing about unity in groups when uniform, concerted action above the purely instinctive level is necessary or desirable. Imitation makes for social uniformity, and so makes for social unity, except in those cases where unity rests upon difference rather than upon similarity of activity.<sup>1</sup>

It is manifest that imitation must come in to assist in building up most social habits, or social adaptations. As human culture, and so the distinctive features of human social life, rest upon the accumulation and transmission of acquired habits, the function of imitation in human society becomes very important, indeed. Through it habits useful to the race have been handed down through countless generations. It is a short cut by which the individual profits not only from the acquirements of the past but also from the inventions of the present. A new tool, idea or standard originated by one member of the group has only to be copied by the others in order that the whole group may participate

---

<sup>1</sup> In connection with the theory of imitation and of social assimilation it would be well to study the immigration problem in the United States. The assimilation of the immigrants to the American type must be manifestly through facilitating the process of imitation. See Chapter VI above and Chapter X of "Sociology and Modern Social Problems."

## **234 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

in the benefits of the new invention. Whenever and wherever a model is furnished, imitation makes easy development in that direction. It thus secures social adjustments with greater quickness and ease, and greater uniformity of thought and action throughout the group, than would otherwise be possible.

But imitation has its limitations as a developer of culture and a promoter of social unity. It becomes less and less an adequate basis for civilized social life as social evolution advances. It is extremely useful in the lower and middle phases of culture, but in the highest civilization, imitation becomes relatively less important, because in the higher phases of the social life unlikeness of activity becomes of greater social importance. Unlikeness of activity favors the division of labor in society, and when not carried too far, favors social interdependence, or solidarity, even more than uniformity of activity. Hence the higher phases of civilization are not so dominated by the imitation process as the middle and lower phases. A people may become civilized, for example, by imitating another civilized people, but in such a case its social life will not show the strength and cohesion that it would show if there were more originality and self-development. Again, a people may progress socially by the imitation of a social élite, but their social life would show more virility, if, even among the masses, individuals would "think for themselves" and show independent judgment. The cultivation of rationality in society means something far more, therefore, than the cultivation of mere rational imitation.

Neither is imitation the basis of the social life. The association of animals shows us clearly enough that something more fundamental than imitation is involved in the origin of associational forms. Coöordinated activities, collective life, social relationships exist far below the level of imitation. Imitation, therefore, cannot even be claimed to be the exclu-

sive method of carrying on the social life. It is only one of a number of simple, primary forms of coadaptation between individuals. It is, however, a fundamental type of social interaction to be found nearly universally among all animal groups that have developed to the point in which *acquired* uniformity of activity becomes important. We must admit, therefore, that it is one of the basic things in the development of all the higher types of social life, and especially of human social life. It is thus one of the very greatest instruments in the carrying on of the social life. It is not something which we may possibly outgrow, but rather something which is to be controlled and directed by the higher factors in the social life. For its main foundations, as we have seen, are instinctive rather than rational; and hence in its lowest manifestations it is childlike and even animal-like, rather than human in the fullest degree.

**FASHION IN THE SOCIAL LIFE.** The work of imitation in the social life is perhaps best illustrated by fashion, for, as we have already said, fashion is imitation at its purest.<sup>1</sup> Fashion is copying the members of one's group, not for the sake of utility, but for the sake of conformity. Fashion may be accompanied by utility, but its real motive is the advantage of conformity. It is perhaps best seen in clothing, but it affects all the methods, or "styles," of living and thinking. There are fashions, for example, in houses, in furniture, in behavior, in morality, in values and even in ideas. Because all of these things press upon the individual with the weight of mass-suggestion, it is very difficult to avoid conformity to them. And yet they may have very little inherent utility, value or truth in themselves.

It is a mistake to set fashion in opposition to tradition or custom. In small isolated communities the only fashions which obtain are usually the customs of generations. They

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ross: "Social Psychology," Chap. VI.

## 236 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

are none the less fashions, however, because they are clearly imitations on the basis of social conformity. In larger communities, more or less in contact with the whole civilized world, fashion becomes chiefly an imitation of contemporaries, rather than of the past. In such communities, owing to emancipation from tradition and custom, to the accumulation of an economic surplus, and to competition in social self-exhibition, fashions change often with great rapidity. As soon as a fashion or style has become generalized in the mass of the group, those who maintain their social prestige by "conspicuous consumption" and other means of attracting attention to themselves, feel that they must change their style of dress, of behavior, or even of general living, in order that they may assert their superiority to the mass. Here evidently the instinct of self-assertion comes in to modify the tendency toward social conformity. The élite, to whom the masses have come to look for standards along some given line, change the fashion in order to assert their superiority, or perhaps to gain some economic advantage. The masses of the group, with their habitual tendencies to follow their leaders, imitate the élite. Again the élite change the style, and again modes of living in the group change. Under the conditions of modern civilization, while this results in great variety in the social life, it also results in much economic and vital waste, and not infrequently in social confusion. How to control fashion imitation along all lines by the reason has accordingly become one of the great problems of Western civilization. The mere fact that such a problem exists, however, shows the relative independence and the great power of the imitation process in human society.

It must be admitted that fashion imitation has good as well as bad sides. New ideas of great social value, superior social standards, and even superior modes of general living may be spread to a large extent by fashion imitation; that

is, they may become accepted by the masses because they are imitated as fashions from social superiors, rather than because their utility, or value, is rationally perceived. As a matter of historic fact, superior religions, moral codes, artistic productions and even mechanical inventions, have often been thus diffused, largely through the power of fashion imitation. As a rule, such things have to become "fashions" before they can become embodied as a part of the social tradition. Fashion imitation here shades, of course, imperceptibly into the broader "conventionality imitation," that is, any imitation of contemporaries, of which fashion imitation is manifestly a part, and which we have already discussed as a factor in social change.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CROWD. Another good illustration of the influence of suggestion-imitation in the social life is in the psychology of crowds, or mobs. In the socio-psychological sense, we have a crowd only when we have some unity in the activity of a large group of individuals gathered together in one place.<sup>1</sup> This unity of activity usually comes through some stimulation, which excites the whole mass of individuals in the group. This stimulation at the same time serves to fix the attention of all the members of the group upon one object, or in a given direction. Under such conditions, a group of human beings usually becomes highly suggestible. The fixation of attention and the excitement which characterize the psychological crowd serve to inhibit the free working of those habits, ideas and standards, which normally guide the individual in ordinary social life. Moreover, the mere presence of a great number of individuals in close proximity increases nervous excitement, emotion, and so suggestibility. A group of individuals in such a condition are very manifestly apt to behave

---

<sup>1</sup> The best collateral reading on the crowd for the beginner in social psychology, in spite of the voluminous literature on the subject, remains Ross: "Social Psychology," Chaps. III-V.

## 238 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

differently from what they would in ordinary social life. Acquired habits and the control of reflective thought drop away, and individuals are left with only their emotions and instincts to guide them. Moreover, one instinct-emotion excited under such circumstances exerts a strong inhibiting influence upon all of the rest. It is no wonder, therefore, that civilized men act like savages in crowds. The whole crowd becomes, as it were, a mere creature of impulse, liable to follow any extreme suggestion in the line of the emotion which has already been excited. Crowds become thus capable of performing the basest deeds, though at the same time they may often appear to act heroically. Social and moral conduct on a high scale, however, is impossible for the crowd, because its actions are simply the result of a suggestion-imitation process acting upon the level of instinct-emotion. That civilized men are capable of such behavior is again a forceful illustration of the power of suggestion and imitation in human society under certain conditions. It is also a proof that the forms and conditions of association are of themselves powerful influences upon social conduct. No writer has summed up this phase of crowd psychology better than Professor Ross, when he says:

“It is safe to conclude that amorphous, heterogeneous assemblages are morally and intellectually below the average of their members. This manner of coming together spells deterioration. The crowd may generate moral fervor, but it never sheds light. If at times it has furthered progress, it is because the mob, with its immense physical and emotional force, serves as an ice-breaker to open a channel for pent-up humanity, as a battering ram to raze some moldering, bat-infested institution and clear the ground for something better. This better will be the creation of gifted individuals, of deliberative bodies, never of anonymous crowds. It is easier for masses to agree on a Nay than on a Yea. This is why crowds have destroyed despotisms, but

have never built free states; have abolished evils, but have never instituted works of beneficence. Essentially atavistic and sterile, the crowd ranks as the lowest of the forms of human association."<sup>1</sup>

**IMITATION AS A FACTOR IN SOCIAL ORDER.** Both conventionality imitation and custom imitation are powerful factors in furthering social order. The imitation of one's contemporaries brings about a great deal of the unity and order which we find in human groups. This is especially true where the social intercourse of the members of the group is close and intimate. Social classes, professions, communities, groups of all sorts, under such circumstances, readily fall into similarities of activity and of habit, which they pick up from one another. This serves greatly to aid in keeping the life of the whole group harmonious at any given time.

But it is chiefly custom imitation which acts as a conservative factor favoring social order in human groups. The social importance of folkways, of custom, of usages and of traditions in preserving social continuity has already been pointed out, and the importance of these factors is, of course, the importance of imitation. The spiritual possessions of the race are thus handed down from one generation to another mainly through the imitative process. Children get the bulk of their habits, ideas and standards from association with their elders, and, as we have seen, especially from their family circles. From a very early age the child absorbs imitatively the examples in the way of behavior and character furnished by his intimate group of associates. Language, moral standards, religion, esthetic tastes and political traditions are thus acquired by the child. In many cases these imitative absorptions from early environment remain the dominant elements in the mental and moral

---

<sup>1</sup> Ross: "Foundations of Sociology," p. 126.

character of the individual throughout life. Thus are to be explained, without any doubt, in the main the peculiar local traits which we find in nearly all human groups. National peculiarities, for example, are very largely acquired by the participation of each individual in the customs and traditions of his country. The whole content of cultural development, indeed, because it is made up of acquired habits is passed along from generation to generation very largely by imitative methods. Even in the industrial and technological realm, where utility is supposed to reign supreme, custom, usage and tradition are found not less than in the other phases of social life, only more under the control of other factors.

Social order and organization, therefore, are very largely conserved through imitative processes. Nearly all of the forms of the social life are handed down from one generation to another through imitation. Only the simpler forms may be supposed to spring directly from human needs, or from mere habituation to physical environment. In all other cases, practically, imitation acts as a mediating process by which social and cultural forms are preserved. The harmony and order of human social groups are, therefore, very largely a product of conventionality and custom imitation.

IMITATION AS A FACTOR IN SOCIAL PROGRESS. Conventionality imitation is one of the main methods, as we have already seen, by which changes are brought about in human societies.<sup>1</sup> This imitation may be of two sorts, either of its own leaders by a group, or of one group by another group. This latter sort of imitation, the imitation which results from the contact of groups, especially of dissimilar cultures, has been one of the most powerful influences in human history. Civilization has been spread very largely through the imitation of one group by another. No civiliza-

---

<sup>1</sup> As collateral reading on conventionality imitation, read Ross: "Social Psychology," Chaps. VIII-XI.

tion, so far as we know, has been developed by a people without borrowings from other people. In the history of existing modern nations these borrowings have been so extensive that no nation can be said to have developed its own civilization. Even Western civilization, so-called, has borrowed extensively from the civilizations of the Orient; and we now know that every existing culture in the world has borrowed to a greater or less degree from every other culture.

As Tarde and Ward have shown, the mutual imitation resulting from the contact of dissimilar cultures is favorable to social progress. Such contact and mutual imitation favor the development of social plasticity in customs and institutions, and of rational social selection. Under such circumstances, many new social adaptations are made, and if the general intellectual and moral conditions of the group are favorable, these adaptations are usually of a higher type; that is, progressive. The mutual borrowings of the various peoples of the earth have, therefore, been exceedingly influential not only in bringing about many social changes, but also in furthering social progress.

The "imitation sociologists" have rightly emphasized the important part which the imitation of new inventions by the mass of individuals plays in social change and social progress. There can scarcely be any doubt that this is the method by which the most striking advances have been made in civilized human societies. The imitation of gifted leaders has been a factor of supreme importance, as we have already seen, in the social uplift of all civilized communities. The rise and spread of Christianity affords an excellent illustration of the part which the imitation of ideas and standards of conduct has played in human progress. There can be no doubt that Christianity, as a set of moral and social ideals, spread over Western Europe almost wholly through the force of imitation. Such ideals, however, failed

## 242 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

to spread in Africa and in Asia to any extent, possibly because imitation was limited by certain racial traits, but more probably because it was limited by certain cultural conditions. The acceptance of Christianity by Western civilization, however, has been effective for social progress, not in proportion as its ideas and standards have been blindly imitated, but in proportion as there has been intelligent assimilation and understanding of the ideas and ideals of Christianity, and intelligent adaptation of them to the social life. Imitation evidently must coöperate with the other factors in adaptation if it is to work successfully in the direction of true progress. In practically all progressive social movements imitation is present, but it usually works, if it results in better social adaptation, in combination with critical intelligence. In other words, it is not pure imitation, but *rational* imitation which is effective for social progress.

The study of social origins illustrates, in a very striking and conclusive way, both the importance and the limitations of imitation as a factor in social evolution. There is no reason to believe from the evidence of cultural anthropology that all human civilization has been diffused from a single center,<sup>1</sup> or that civilization in general has been the mere copying of some primitive models, furnished by the distant past, as certain theorists of the present have claimed. Early civilizations started not simply in one primitive center, but apparently in many centers. Thus we have no reason to suppose that the bow and arrow was invented as a weapon but once, and then spread to all of the rest of the world by imitation from a single center. On the contrary, such a weapon as the bow and arrow seems to have been invented several times independently by different peoples. Again, if

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the theory of the German ethnographer, Graebner, and is also apparently indorsed by Professor Elliott Smith in his work, "The Migrations of Early Culture." Anthropological opinion in general, however, is as stated above.

we take the cultures of the numerous primitive peoples existing in the two Americas before the discovery by Europeans, we find apparently not one center of culture but several independent centers very remotely, if at all, connected.

This is shown not only by the divergence among these cultures, but also by their similarities; for these similarities can usually be more rationally explained as adaptations to a similar environment than by the supposition of borrowing. The similarities of the cultures of the peoples inhabiting the arid plateaus of North and South America, for example, are to be explained not as due to borrowing, of which there is no evidence, but as adaptations to similar physical environment. Again, many of the common traits of the various Amerindian groups were simply due to the lack of animals suitable for domestication on the American continent. Finally, positive similarities in the social organization, religion and technologies of the various Amerindian groups are to be explained quite as much through the general traits of human nature and the general level of their cultural evolution as through imitation of one group by another group.

"Ethnographic parallels" illustrate this point still more clearly.<sup>1</sup> Peoples widely distant in space, of different culture and of different race, are often found to have developed closely similar customs and institutions. In some of these cases, evidence of cultural contact and of borrowing, or imitation, have been established; but in many other cases there is no such evidence. Thus, there is no evidence to show that the wide-spread custom of deforming the skull has spread from some single center. The more reasonable supposition is that with similar instincts, intellectual capacities and desires, human nature has worked out similar ideas and practices, especially in approximately the same stages of cultural evolution.

---

<sup>1</sup> See the work of Andree: "Ethnographische Parallele und Vergleiche."

**244 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Neither borrowing nor originality, imitation nor invention, must be overstressed, accordingly, in interpreting social evolution. Both have played a part in social development, and it is a psychological mistake to derive one from the other; for originality and invention are rooted ultimately in organic variation. It is equally a mistake to regard imitation as a quite subordinate factor in social development, which may be safely ignored; for while heredity, environment, acquired habit and rationality continually condition the working of imitation in human society, yet within the limits imposed by these it is a relatively independent factor. Imitation is only a method, an instrument, for bringing about social adaptation, as we have said; but because it is in humanity one of the most important methods of social adaptation, human history and the social life about us cannot be understood apart from it.

**SELECT REFERENCES**

- ROSS. Social Psychology, Chaps. III–XI  
BALDWIN. Mental Development in the Child and the Race, Chaps. IX–XII; Social and Ethical Interpretations, Chaps. XI–XIII  
DAVIS. Psychological Interpretations of Society, Chaps. VI–X  
LE BON. The Crowd, Book I  
McDOUGALL. Introduction to Social Psychology, Chap. XV  
SIDIS. The Psychology of Suggestion, Part III  
TARDE. Social Laws; The Laws of Imitation.  
WALLAS. The Great Society, Chap. VIII