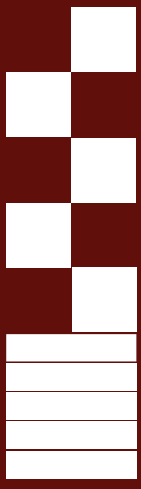
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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CHAPTER TEN

Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace (1917)

Wilfred Trotter

New York: MacMillan, pp. 29–40 [with elisions]

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

McDougall developed instinct theory and offered it to the community of social scientists. Wilfred Trotter (1872–1939) expanded both the breadth of the theory and the audience. Trotter examined the role of instinct in social behavior broadly writ, tying it to the nature of "the herd" and its biologically innate instincts. Moreover, his *Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace* was read with enthusiasm far beyond the scientific community, impressing social commentators and the general public.

Trotter was a surgeon by vocation. He studied medicine at the University of London's University College Hospital and worked both in private practice and as professor and then chair of surgery at University College Hospital. Such were his accomplishments in both practice and medical research that he was appointed honorary surgeon to King George from 1928 to 1932 and was elected president of Great Britain's Association of Surgeons. He gained greater public prominence, however, from his writings in social psychology, which popularized Le Bon's crowd theories across England.

For Trotter, the herd was more than just a metaphor for social behavior. Gregariousness was an instinct. As certain animals lived and survived in

herds, so did humans, and the explanation for all human behavior could be had through an understanding of the dynamics of the herd. Suggestion, or for Trotter "herd suggestion," was the product of the innate instinct toward submission (from McDougall). Recalling Le Bon's "crowd mind" and the manipulative power of the individual speaker, he held that people would, inherently, submit to the will or "the voice of the herd," or what he termed "the acme of the power of herd suggestion" (1917, 115).

He pushed back against proposals that suggestibility existed only as an occasional and abnormal state. It was "a normal quality of the mind." "Man," he declared, "is not, therefore, suggestible by fits and starts, not merely in panics and in mobs, under hypnosis and so forth, but always, everywhere, and under any circumstances."

Going even further, he rejected the arguments of Le Bon, Sidis, and others that suggestibility was variable according to an individual's gender, age, or circumstance. Such variations, insofar as they might exist, were the result of the "extent to which suggestions are identified with the voice of the herd."

He considered differences of opinion and conduct within the social system—specifically referencing class-based divisions—as manifestations of the influence of the smaller "herd within the herd," and in keeping with the underlying tenets of suggestion theory, argued that people were largely irrational. "Direct observation of man reveals at once the fact that a very considerable proportion of his beliefs are non-rational to a degree which is immediately obvious without any special examination and with no special resources other than common knowledge." Social conflict, therefore, was a product of the clash between the sub-herds, each with its own flawed assumptions about the nature of social reality "derived from herd suggestion." "What we need," he concluded hopefully, "is a technique for directing the emotional drive of the herd instinct in the path of rationality" (1917, 200).

A decade later, Edward Bernays, often called the father of modern public relations, would draw heavily on the work of Trotter, along with Le Bon, in both his writing and his practice: "Trotter and Le Bon concluded that the group mind does not *think* in the strict sense of the word. In place of thoughts, it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind, its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader" ([1928] 2005, 73; italics in the original), precepts Bernays used to help forge contemporary public relations and advertising.—*P.P.*

References

Bernays, Edward L. (1928) 2005. *Propaganda*. New York: H. Liveright. Reprint, Brooklyn, NY: IG Publishing. Citations refer to the IG Publishing edition.

Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace (1917)

General Characteristics of the Gregarious Animal.

The cardinal quality of the herd is homogeneity. It is clear that the great advantage of the social habit is to enable large numbers to act as one, whereby in the case of the hunting gregarious animal strength in pursuit and attack is at once increased to beyond that of the creatures preyed upon, and in protective socialism the sensitiveness of the new unit to alarms is greatly in excess of that of the individual member of the flock.

To secure these advantages of homogeneity, it is evident that the members of the herd must possess sensitiveness to the behaviour of their fellows. The individual isolated will be of no meaning, the individual as part of the herd will be capable of transmitting the most potent impulses. Each member of the flock tending to follow its neighbour and in turn to be followed, each is in some sense capable of leadership; but no lead will be followed that departs widely from normal behaviour. A lead will be followed only from its resemblance to the normal. If the leader go so far ahead as definitely to cease to be in the herd, he will necessarily be ignored.

The original in conduct, that is to say resistiveness to the voice of the herd, will be suppressed by natural selection; the wolf which does not follow the impulses of the herd will be starved; the sheep which does not respond to the flock will be eaten.

Again, not only will the individual be responsive to impulses coming from the herd, but he will treat the herd as his normal environment. The impulse to be in and always to remain with the herd will have the strongest instinctive weight. Anything which tends to separate him from his fellows, soon as it becomes perceptible as such, will be strongly resisted.

So far, we have regarded the gregarious animal objectively. We have seen that he behaves as if the herd were the only environment in which he can live, that he is especially sensitive to impulses coming from the herd, and quite differently affected by the behavior of animals not in the herd. Let us now try to estimate the mental aspects of these impulses. Suppose a species

in possession of precisely the instinctive endowments which we have been considering, to be also self-conscious, and let us ask what will be the forms under which these phenomena will present themselves in its mind. In the first place, it is quite evident that impulses derived from herd feeling will enter the mind with the value of instincts—they will present themselves as "*a priori* syntheses of the most perfect sort needing no proof but their own evidence." They will not, however, it is important to remember, necessarily always give this quality to the same specific acts but will show this great distinguishing characteristic that they may give to *any opinion, whatever* the characters of instinctive belief, making it into an "*a priori synthesis*"; so that we shall expect to find acts which it would be absurd to look upon as the results of specific instincts carried out with all the enthusiasm of instinct, and displaying all the marks of instinctive behaviour. The failure to recognize this appearance of herd impulse as a tendency, as a power which can confer instinctive sanctions on any part of the field of belief, or action, has prevented the social habit of man from attracting as much of the attention of psychologists as it might profitably have done.

In interpreting into mental terms the consequences of gregariousness, we may conveniently begin with the simplest. The conscious individual will feel an unanalysable primary sense of comfort in the actual presence of his fellows, and a similar sense of discomfort in their absence. It will be obvious truth to him that it is not good for the man to be alone. Loneliness will be a real terror, insurmountable by reason.

Again, certain conditions will become secondarily associated with presence with, or absence from, the herd. For example, take the sensations of heat and cold. The latter is prevented in gregarious animals by close crowding, and experienced in the reverse condition; hence it comes to be connected in the mind with separation, and so acquires altogether unreasonable associations of harmfulness. Similarly, the sensation of warmth is associated with feelings of the secure and salutary. It has taken medicine many thousands of years to begin to doubt the validity of the popular conception of the harmfulness of cold; yet to the psychologist such a doubt is immediately obvious.

Slightly more complex manifestations of the same tendency to homogeneity are seen in the desire for: identification with the herd in matters of opinion. Here we find the biological explanation: of the ineradicable impulse mankind has always displayed towards segregation into classes. Each one of us, in his opinions and his conduct, in matters of dress, amusement, religion, and politics, is compelled to obtain the support of a class, of a herd within

the herd. The most eccentric in opinion or conduct is, we may be sure, supported by the agreement of a class, the smallness of which accounts for his apparent eccentricity, and the preciousness of which accounts for his fortitude in defying general opinion. Again, anything which tends to emphasize difference from the herd is unpleasant. In the individual mind there will be an unanalysable dislike of the novel in action or thought. It will be "wrong," "wicked," "foolish," "undesirable," or as we say "bad form," according to varying circumstances which we can already to some extent define.

Manifestations relatively more simple are shown in the dislike of being conspicuous, in shyness and in stage fright. It is, however, sensitiveness to the behaviour of the herd which has the most important effects upon the structure of the mind of the gregarious animal. This sensitiveness is closely associated with the suggestibility of the gregarious animal, and therefore with that of man. The effect of it will clearly be to make acceptable those suggestions which come from the herd, and those only. It is of especial importance to note that this suggestibility is not general, and that it is only herd suggestions which are rendered acceptable by the action of instinct. Man is, for example, notoriously insensitive to the suggestions of experience. The history of what is rather grandiosely called human progress everywhere illustrates this. If we look back upon the development of some such thing as the steam-engine, we cannot fail to be struck by the extreme obviousness of each advance, and how obstinately it was refused assimilation until the machine almost invented itself.

Again, of two suggestions, that which the more perfectly embodies the voice of the herd is the more acceptable. The chances an affirmation has of being accepted could therefore be most satisfactorily expressed in terms of the bulk of the herd by which it is backed.

It follows from the foregoing that anything which dissociates a suggestion from the herd will tend to ensure such a suggestion being rejected. For example, an imperious command from an individual known to be without authority is necessarily disregarded, whereas the same person making the same suggestion in an indirect way so as to link it up with the voice of the herd will meet with success.

It is unfortunate that in discussing these facts it has been necessary to use the word "suggestibility," which has so thorough an implication of the abnormal. If the biological explanation of suggestibility here set forth be accepted, the latter must necessarily be a normal quality of the human mind. To believe must be an ineradicable natural bias of man, or in other words

an affirmation, positive or negative, is more readily accepted than rejected, unless its source is definitely dissociated from the herd. Man is not, therefore, suggestible by fits and starts, not merely in panics and in mobs, under hypnosis, and so forth, but always, everywhere, and under any circumstances. The capricious way in which man reacts to different suggestions has been attributed to variations in his suggestibility. This in the opinion of the present writer is an incorrect interpretation of the facts which are more satisfactorily explained by regarding the variations as due to the differing extent to which suggestions are identified with the voice of the herd.

Man's resistiveness to certain suggestions, and especially to experience, as is seen so well in his attitude to the new, becomes therefore but another evidence of his suggestibility, since the new has ways to encounter the opposition of herd tradition.

The apparent diminution in direct suggestibility with advancing years, such as was demonstrated in children by Binet, is in the case of the adult familiar to all, and is there usually regarded as evidence of a gradually advancing organic change in the brain. It can be regarded, at least plausibly, as being due to the fact that increase of years must bring an increase in the accumulations of herd suggestion, and so tend progressively to fix opinion.

In the early days of the human race, the appearance of the faculty of speech must have led to an immediate increase in the extent to which the decrees of the herd could be promulgated, and the field to which they applied. Now the desire for certitude is one of profound depth in the human mind, and possibly a necessary property of any mind, and it is very plausible to suppose that it led in these early days to the whole field of life being covered by pronouncements backed by the instinctive sanction of the herd. The life of the individual would be completely surrounded by sanctions of the most tremendous kind. He would know what he might and might not do, and what would happen if he disobeyed. It would be immaterial if experience confirmed these beliefs or not, because it would have incomparably less weight than the voice of the herd. Such a period is the only trace perceptible by the biologist of the Golden Age fabled by the poet, when things happened as they ought, and hard facts had not begun to vex the soul of man. In some such condition we still find the Central Australian native. His whole life, to its minutest detail, is ordained for him by the voice of the herd, and he must not, under the most dreadful sanctions, step outside its elaborate order. It does not matter to him that an infringement of the code under his very eyes is not followed by judgment, for with tribal suggestion so compactly

organized, such cases are in fact no difficulty, and do not trouble his belief, just as in more civilized countries apparent instances of malignity in the reigning deity are not found to be inconsistent with his benevolence.

Such must everywhere have been primitive human conditions, and upon them reason intrudes as an alien and hostile power, disturbing the perfection of life, and causing an unending series of conflicts.

Experience, as is shown by the whole history of man, is met by resistance because it invariably encounters decisions based upon instinctive belief, and nowhere is this fact more dearly to be seen than in the way in which the progress of science has been made.

In matters that really interest him: man cannot support the suspense of judgment which science so often has to enjoin. He is too anxious to feel certain to have time to know.

So that we see of the sciences, mathematics appearing first, then astronomy, then physics, then chemistry, then biology, then psychology, then sociology—but always the new field was grudged to the new method, and we still have the denial to sociology of the name of science. Nowadays, matters of national defence, of politics, of religion, are still too important for knowledge, and remain subjects for certitude; that is to say, in them we still prefer the comfort of instinctive belief, because we have not learnt adequately to value the capacity to foretell.

Direct observation of man reveals at once the fact that a very considerable proportion of his beliefs are non-rational to a degree which is immediately obvious without any special examination and with no special resources other than common knowledge.

If we examine the mental furniture of the average man, we shall find it made up of a vast number of judgments of a very precise kind upon subjects of very great variety, complexity, and difficulty. He will have fairly settled views upon the origin and nature of the universe, and upon what he will probably call its meaning; he will have conclusions as to what is to happen to him at death and after, as to what is and what should be the basis of conduct. He will know how the country should be governed, and why it is going to the dogs, why this piece of legislation is good and that bad. He will have strong views upon military and naval strategy, the principles of taxation, the use of alcohol and vaccination, the treatment of influenza, the prevention of hydrophobia, upon municipal trading, the teaching of Greek, upon what is permissible in art, satisfactory in literature, and hopeful in science.

The bulk of such opinions must necessarily be without rational basis, since many of them are concerned with problems admitted by the expert to be still unsolved, while as to the rest it is clear that the training and experience of no average man can qualify him to have any opinion upon them at all. The rational method adequately used would have told him that on the great majority of these questions there could be for him but one attitude—that of suspended judgment.

In view of the considerations that have been discussed above, this wholesale acceptance of non-rational belief must be looked upon as normal. The mechanism by which it is effected demands some examination, since it cannot be denied that the facts conflict noticeably with popularly current views as to the part taken by reason in the formation of opinion.

It is clear at the outset that these beliefs are invariably regarded by the holder as rational, and defended as such, while the position of one who holds contrary views is held to be obviously unreasonable. The religious man accuses the atheist of being shallow and irrational, and is met by a similar reply; to the Conservative, the amazing thing about the Liberal is his incapacity to see reason and accept the only possible solution of public problems. Examination reveals the fact that the differences are not due to the commission of the mere mechanical fallacies of logic, since these are easily avoided, even by the politician, and since there is no reason to suppose that one party in such controversies is less logical than the other. The difference is due rather to the fundamental assumptions of the antagonists being hostile, and these assumptions are derived from herd suggestion; to the Liberal, certain basal conceptions have acquired the quality of instinctive truth, have become "*a priori* syntheses," because of the accumulated suggestions to which he has been exposed, and a similar explanation applies to the atheist, the Christian, and the Conservative. Each, it is important to remember, finds in consequence the rationality of his position flawless, and is quite incapable of detecting in it the fallacies which are obvious to his opponent, to whom that particular series of assumptions has not been rendered acceptable by herd suggestion.

To continue further the analysis of non-rational opinion, it should be observed that the mind rarely leaves uncriticized the assumptions which are forced on it by herd suggestion, the tendency being for it to find more or less elaborately rationalized justifications of them. This is in accordance with the enormously exaggerated weight which is always ascribed to reason in the formation of opinion and conduct, as is very well seen, for example,

in the explanation of the existence of altruism as being due to man seeing that it "pays."

It is of cardinal importance to recognize that in this process of the rationalization of instinctive belief, it is the belief which is the primary thing, while the explanation, although masquerading as the cause of the belief, as the chain of rational evidence on which the belief is founded, is entirely secondary, and but for the belief would never have been thought of. Such rationalizations are often, in the case of intelligent people, of extreme ingenuity, and may be very misleading unless the true instinctive basis of the given opinion or action is thoroughly understood. [...]

The process of rationalization which has just been illustrated by some of its simpler varieties is best seen on the largest scale, and in the most elaborate form, in the pseudosciences of political economy and ethics. Both of these are occupied in deriving from eternal principles justifications for masses of non-rational belief which are assumed to be permanent merely because they exist. Hence the notorious acrobatic feats of both in the face of any considerable variation in herd belief.

It would seem that the obstacles to rational thought which have been pointed out in the foregoing discussion have received much less attention than should have been directed towards them. To maintain an attitude of mind which could be called scientific in any complete sense, it is of cardinal importance to recognize that belief of affirmations sanctioned by, the herd is a normal mechanism of the human mind, and goes on however much such affirmations may be opposed by evidence, that reason cannot enforce belief against herd suggestion, and finally that totally false opinions may appear to the holder of them to possess all the characters of rationally verifiable truth, and may be justified by secondary processes of rationalization which it may be impossible directly to combat by argument.

It should be noticed, however, that verifiable truths may acquire the potency of herd suggestion, so that the suggestibility of man does not necessarily or always act against the advancement of knowledge. For example, to the student of biology the principles of Darwinism may acquire the force of herd suggestion through being held by the class which he most respects, is most in contact with and the class which has therefore acquired suggestionizing power with him. Propositions consistent with these principles will now necessarily be more acceptable to him, whatever the evidence by which they are supported, than they would be to one who had not been exposed to the same influences. The opinion, in fact, may be hazarded that

the acceptance of any proposition is invariably the resultant of suggestive influences, whether the proposition be true or false, and that the balance of suggestion is usually on the side of the false, because, education being what it is, the scientific method—the method, that is to say, of experience—has so little chance of acquiring suggestionizing force.

Thus far sensitiveness to the herd has been discussed in relation to its effect upon intellectual processes. Equally important effects are traceable in feeling.

It is obvious that when free communication is possible by speech, the expressed approval or disapproval of the herd will acquire the qualities of identity or dissociation from the herd respectively. To know that he is doing what would arouse the disapproval of the herd will bring to the individual the same profound sense of discomfort which would accompany actual physical separation, while to know that he is doing what the herd would approve will give him the sense of rightness, of gusto, and of stimulus which would accompany physical presence in the herd and response to its mandates. In both cases it is clear that no actual expression by the herd is necessary to arouse the appropriate feelings, which would come from within and have, in fact, the qualities which are recognized in the dictates of conscience. Conscience, then, and the feelings of guilt and of duty are the peculiar possessions of the gregarious animal.