

*The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* by Gustave Le Bon. London: The Gresham Press, 1914. 239 pp. Hardcopy. English, the 9<sup>th</sup> edition.

Since its first publication in French language in 1895, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (French: *Psychologie des Foules*; literally: *Psychology of Crowds*) has offered a penetrating, profound study of an important being or phenomenon of the present age, the crowd, and thus been one of the most influential small books in the world today. Even when we read it today, more than a century after its first publication, Le Bon's book addresses readers and problems of our epoch as it did to readers and problems century ago. In our age of democracy, activities of crowds are playing more and more important roles, particularly when we extend the concept of crowd to cover not only political crowd, but also religious, ethnic, racial, or even gender crowds. In our time, "organized crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples" as it did a century ago (p.5). In our time, "the destinies of nations of nations are elaborated at present in the heart of the masses, and no longer in the councils of princes."(p.15). Meanwhile, in our time, "the substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individual is one of the principle characteristic of the present age", as it was a century ago (p.5). Of course, the crowd phenomenon is not only characteristic of a totalitarian regimes. It is also characteristic of any democratic societies, including those most matured ones in North America and Europe.

Accordingly, studies of the so-called popular mind of the crowd becomes more and more important for studies democracy today. The word "so-called" is deliberately used here to underscore one important feature of the popular mind which Le Bon has explored: it is marked by its being conscious. Thus, the popular mind of a crowd is an interesting paradox: as a mind it is consciousness; meanwhile, it is a consciousness made mainly of the unconscious. At any rate, to study democracy should include studies of peoples who make democracies. A crucial part of studying peoples who make democracies is to study the crowds in peoples. And to study the crowd should start by studying the mind of the crowd, just as to study a person should start, first of all, from studying this person's mind.

What is a crowd? As Le Bon sees it, a crowd is not merely "a gathering of individuals of whatever nationality, profession, or sex, and whatever the chances that have brought them together be." (p.25). It is not merely an aggregation of people. Instead, a crowd is a crowd importantly because it is an organized aggregation of individuals from the

psychological point of view. Thus, a gathering of individuals becomes a crowd only when it is also psychologically organized. A gathering of individuals becomes a crowd only when “the sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes.” (p.26). A gathering of individuals become a crowd only when “a collective mind is formed” and thus, the gathering becomes “a psychological crowd.” (Ibid). A gathering of individuals becomes a crowd only when “the disappearance of conscious personality and the turning of feelings and thoughts in one direction” occur (Ibid). Becoming a psychological crowd, a gathering of individuals “forms a single being, and is subject to the law of the mental unity of the crowd.” (Ibid). A crowd is a psychological collectivity wherein no trace of individual autonomy in feeling and thinking is found, and individual feelings and thinking are ironed into a collective mind.

“While a psychological crowd is a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements”, the most striking peculiarity of such a crowd is that all individuals that compose a crowd are turned to think and feel in one direction, and with one mind (p.30). Transformation of individual persons into a crowd “puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation.”(pp.29-30). This should not be a surprise. As modern psychology reveals, “unconscious phenomenon plays an altogether preponderating part, not only in organic life, but also in the operations of the intelligence (pp.30-31). Meanwhile, “in the collective mind, the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals, and consequence their individuality are weakened. The heterogeneous is swamped by the homogeneous, and the unconscious qualities obtain the upper hand” (p.32).

That individuals are ironed into a collectively unreflective crowd is caused by various factor. First, in “a crowd being anonymous, and in consequence irresponsible, the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely.” (p.33). The crowd is a being wherein the sentiment of responsibility vanishes. Second, it is contagion. “In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest.” (pp.33-34). A crowd is a being wherein all individuals are contaminated by abnormal feelings, ideas and thinking. The third is suggestibility of which contagion is merely an effect (p.34). Suggestibility is a unique ability of a crowd. In a crowd, an individual is brought to such a

condition in which “having entirely lost his conscious personality, he obeys all the suggestions of the operator who deprived him of it, and commits acts in utter contradiction with his character and habits.”(p.34). Therefore, “we see, then, that the disappearance of conscious personality, the predominance of unconscious personality, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts; these we see, are principal characteristics of the individual forming part of a crowd. He is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.” (Pp.35-36).

The sentiment of the crowd is always impulsive, mobile, and irritable (p.39). The crowd “is guided almost exclusively by unconscious motives” (p.4). Thus, it is always sentimentally impulsive. Reflective constraint is not its dish. “The varying impulses which crowds obey may be...generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they will always be so imperious that the interest of individual, even interest of self-preservation, will not dominate them.”(41). The crowd is the slave of its impulsiveness. That being said, meanwhile, the morality of the crowd shows qualities of “abnegation, self-sacrifice, disinterestedness, devotion, and the need of equality.”(p.63). To be sure, it is not that the crowd is more moral than an isolated individual. It is that the crowd has its unique characteristics that have moral bearing. The ideas of the crowd may be simultaneously contradictory (p.67). That is to say, the crowds subscribe to ideas without thinking over whether these ideas are consistent with one another. “Crowds are not to be influenced by reasoning.” (Ibid). Reasoning is not a department of the crowd. Moreover, the power of mind of the crowd is imagination, not reason or understanding. “crowds think in images, and these images succeed each other without any connecting link.” (Ibid.).

As a result of the above, “the crowd is always intellectual inferior to the isolated individual.” (p.37). Of course, this does not mean the crowd is always psychologically inferior to isolated individuals. But in feelings, thoughts, and actions, the crowd is less conscious and reflective. This Le Bon’s conclusion is astonishing, but vouched by the historical Hitler’s German crowd, and Mao’s Red Guard crowd in China’s so-called Great Cultural Revolution. In the example of Mao’s Red Guard, that the disappearance of conscious personality and the predominance of unconscious personality were strikingly exhibited in such a fact that men and women even dress the same, thinking red color and green color are the only proper color and revolutionary ones. And “doubtless a crowd is often criminal, but also it is often heroic. It is crowds rather than isolated individuals that

may be induced to run the risk of death to secure the triumph of a creed or an idea that may be fired with enthusiasm for glory and honor.” (p.37).

In summary, Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* presents us a unique kind of being that existed in his time, but also in our time. Such a being is not a religious, political or cultural collectivity in traditional sense, but a contingent collectivity that is bonded psychologically and bonded by a collective mind in feeling, thinking, and action. And such a collective has become the elephant in room for democracy today!

Barbara Entl, MD. Emai: [Galanin22@aol.com](mailto:Galanin22@aol.com).