

Mass action and mundane reality:

An argument for putting crowd analysis at the centre of the social sciences

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Abstract

In this paper I challenge the view that crowd action derives from a loss of identity, that it is mindless and that crowd phenomena are asocial. I argue instead that psychological crowds are based on shared social identification, that crowd action is highly socially meaningful and that crowd phenomena are fundamental to the understanding and analysis of society. More specifically, I argue that crowds are important to social scientists in terms of (a) informing us about the social understandings of groups, especially marginalized groups, (b) understanding the processes by which cohesive and empowered groups are formed, (c) understanding the processes by which social change occurs, and (d) understanding core cognitive and emotional processes in social groups. I conclude that the study of crowds needs to become far more central in the social sciences.

Introduction

While I was in the midst of writing this paper, I was phoned by a Canadian journalist who was writing a seasonal piece entitled ‘why I want a cattle prod for Christmas’. Her complaint was with people who insist on standing at the entrances on crowded trolley buses and blocking people from getting on or off. From this beginning she had branched out into a more general piece on the annoying and irrational nature of crowds. So she had brushed up on Gustave Le Bon’s seminal nineteenth century text ‘The Psychology of Crowds’ (1895/1947). And now she was talking to me.

We spoke at some length. I explained the difference between ‘physical crowds’ – a set of people who are co-present in the same space at the same time – and ‘psychological crowds’ – a co-present set of people who see each other as belonging to the same social category (a crowd of Catholics, a crowd of anti-cuts protestors, a crowd of England fans or whatever). I illustrated the difference with the example of commuters squeezed into a train carriage, who start off as a physical crowd: substantial in number but each psychologically separate, each avoiding eye contact with others, each uncomfortable with the touch of others. Then the train breaks down, and in time there is a psychological shift from the physical crowd to a psychological crowd of aggrieved commuters. People begin to look at each other, they begin to talk. Sometimes they might share sandwiches as they wait. Even in Britain. I used this illustration to make the core theoretical point that people in psychological crowds do not act irrationally. Rather they act meaningfully in terms of shared social identities. They act on the basis of shared group norms. They act for the shared group interest and not for their specific individual interests. The upshot of this is that psychological crowds are particularly adept at organising themselves, in coordinating with others and in achieving optimal group outcomes. What is irrational – or, more properly, dysfunctional – is to act as a psychological individual in a collective setting. Then multiple actors competitively pursuing divergent individual interests may lead to sub-optimal outcomes such as clogging up the entrances so no-one can get in or out.

All these are points which I shall elaborate below. The journalist listened politely to what I had to say. Then, at the end, she asked if I had any particular example that summarised my view of crowds. I suggested perhaps those caught in tube trains

during the 7/7 attacks in London who supported and helped and aided each other in dire and dangerous circumstances. Or, perhaps, the demonstrators of December 1989 in Timsoara who opened their shirts to Ceaucescu's Securitate forces and challenged them 'shoot, for what value is life if Romania is not free'. She listened, and then in a tone which told me with certainty that my persuasive efforts had been in vain, she responded 'interesting, yes, but do you have anything a little more *light-hearted*'. My place was not to change the underlying story. It was to add some colour to an account that fits with the dominant representation of crowds as something noxious, something that is possibly dangerous, but ultimately as something that is an entertaining diversion and a distraction from the serious matters of everyday life – a representation that predominates both in academia and in the wider culture (see for instance, Carey, 1992; McPhail, 1991).

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. A number of years before, fed up with the number of times my words about crowds had been misused by journalists, I agreed to one further request for commentary but only on the grounds that I would write the piece myself and any changes would be agreed with me. So I wrote the strongest and clearest attack that I could on the idea that crowds act irrationally and asocially. However I forgot to agree one thing. I left it to a sub-editor to choose the headline. My piece was published under the banner 'Psychologist explains Mob Madness!'.

But even so, one carries on and one lives in hope. And perhaps there is real reason for hope when a prominent social science journal like this devotes a special issue to 'the crowd'. That in itself suggests some recognition that crowds are not just a bizarre aberration (I once referred to crowds as 'the elephant man of the social sciences') but might actually have important things to tell us about the nature of society and social processes in general. That has been my overarching aim in over 30 years of studying crowd phenomena. It is my specific aim in this paper. In the following sections I will argue, first, that crowds reveal to us the understandings and aspirations of social groups – particularly those generally without voice in our world; second, that crowds consolidate, cement and empower those groups; third, that crowds not only configure but also reconfigure the groups that structure the everyday workings of society; fourthly and finally, that the study of crowds reveals the processes which constitute us as social subjects who both make and are made in social relations.

1. Crowds and the nature of social categories

It is no coincidence that my Canadian contact was reading Le Bon. His crowd text (1895/1947) has been characterised as the most influential psychology book of all time – something that not only analysed but helped form the mass politics of the ensuing century and more (Moscovici, 1981). In a nutshell, Le Bon contends that people become ‘submerged’ in crowds and lose their individual identity and gain a sense of invincible power. As a consequence, they lose their ability to make principled judgements and decisions and become subject to contagion – the inability to resist any passing idea or emotion. In particular they succumb to suggestions which come from the collective unconscious. Because this is an atavistic substrate (in effect, what remains below when our ‘thin veneer of civilization’ is stripped away), so the power of crowds is yoked to primitive and barbaric impulses.

To cite one infamous passage from Le Bon’s book, which sums up his politics as well as his psychology: “it will be remarked that among the special characteristics of crowds there are several – such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgement and others besides – which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution – in women, children and savages, for instance (1895/1947, pp35-36). Psychology has often been accused of sexism, of ageism and of racism. It takes a truly great psychologist to achieve all three in a single sentence.

There are many grounds, both analytic and normative, on which to contest Le Bon’s account. But perhaps the most fundamental is that it gives a profoundly misleading picture of what crowds do. It is simply wrong to suggest that crowd action is generically *mindless* and *meaningless*. Indeed those who have taken care to look at what people do conclude precisely the opposite. Crowd action is remarkable for just how *meaningful* its patterns turn out to be.

Consider food riots. If one were looking for atavistic action, surely this would be a prime contender. Surely people go hungry, get desperate, storm the food stores and make off with what they can get. Yet, as E.P. Thompson makes clear in his study of

several hundred English food riots in the 18th century, this is *not* what happens (Thompson, 1971). Riots did not usually occur at times of greatest dearth. They happened when food stocks were rising again. Moreover, they tended to happen around specific events, notably the transport of grain out of a locality. And when they did happen, people did not simply run off with produce. Rather, they tended to seize the grain, to sell it at a popular price, to hand the money and often even the grain sacks back to the merchants.

These, then, were highly patterned events. Moreover, the patterns reflected shared understandings of proper social practice. Thompson points out that the riots occurred at a time of transition from feudal to capitalist social relations, and that each vision of political economy was associated with its own notions of how social relations should be conducted. For the merchants, a market economy dictated that commodities be taken and sold where they command the best price. But they confronted a population who subscribed instead to a 'moral economy' based on locality. From this perspective, life might involve hardship, but local produce was there to serve local needs. These two economies conflicted precisely at the point where grain was being transported out of the locality to the market. The food riot – both in when it occurred and the forms it took – was in fact a way in which people enforced their vision of a just society.

Thompson goes further. He argues that these shared notions of rights and customs underlay “almost every eighteenth century crowd action” (1971, p. 78) – and since his seminal work, a whole host of historical studies have shown that this conclusion need not be limited either in space to England or in time to the eighteenth century (e.g. Davis, 1978; Feagin & Hahn, 1973; Reicher, 1984; Smith, 1980). Take, as one example, Reddy’s study of textile crowds in Rouen over two centuries. He concludes that “the targets of these crowds glitter in the eye of history as signs of the labourers’ conception of the nature of society” (p.84). Putting all the examples together, we can abstract a more general message: the targets of crowds glitter in the eye of history as signs of the participants’ conception of the nature of society.

The inability of Le Bon’s approach to account for, or even acknowledge, the socially meaningfully patterning of crowd events reflects a fundamental individualism in his core constructs. Le Bon considers a sovereign individual self to be the sole basis of

reasoned action. The loss of the individual self in the crowd therefore leads to the supposition that crowd action is necessarily uncontrolled. By contrast, the last thirty years of psychological research on group processes has been dominated by the notion that the self is not uni-dimensional but is rather a complex system that encompasses different levels of abstraction (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010). Thus we can and often do think of ourselves in terms of what makes us unique as individuals compared to other individuals (personal identity). But we can equally think of ourselves in terms of what makes us unique, as members of one social category, compared to other social categories (social identity). Moreover, when we act in terms of any given social identity, our behaviour is not dominated by idiosyncratic beliefs and values but rather in terms of the beliefs and values associated with the relevant category. In other words, social identity is the psychological mechanism through which social meaning systems come to structure the psychological field of the individual.

These notions are directly applicable to crowd settings. For, as research into a variety of crowd settings from urban riots to student protests to celebratory crowds to football fans has shown, the defining moment in the formation of a psychological crowd is the emergence of a shared social identity amongst participants (see Reicher, 2001 for a review). Contra Le Bon, people do not *lose* identity and *lose* control in the crowd. Rather, they *shift* identity and shift the basis of control.

This is not to suggest that crowd behaviour is automatic and pre-ordained. What makes crowds distinct from other groups is precisely the lack of routinisation. Crowds lack formal membership or formal structures. They often face novel and ambiguous situations. It is therefore necessary to interpret the implications of general categorical understandings for appropriate action in context: what do we do now as socialists, as anti-fascists, as Catholics – or whatever the relevant category happens to be. As emergent norm theorists have pointed out (Turner & Killian, 1987), the role of informal leadership (or ‘keynoters’ as ENT terms them) is very important. But, such leaders do not have free rein to suggest what they will. Their influence depends upon their ability to translate ‘who we are’ into ‘what we should do’. As we have put it

elsewhere, they need to be skilled ‘entrepreneurs of identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2010).

So, while crowd behaviour emerges out of an active and contested process of interpretation, and while there may, in consequence, be some variability in the actions of crowds, these actions still occur within strict limits which derive from the contours of social identity. It is this which ensures that crowd actions trace out in the world the conceptual frameworks of social groups. Or rather, it is this which instigates people to act in terms of their social belief systems. But of course, the instigation to act and the ability to accomplish action are very different things. In many situations, group members may wish to act in terms of their social identities but will desist from doing so for fear of disapproval or punishment from powerful outgroups (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995; Klein, Spears & Reicher, 2008). However in crowds, shared social identity amongst many people empowers them to do things that they might shy away from in everyday life. Thus, for instance, in my first ever study of a crowd event – the St. Pauls Riot of April 1980 (Reicher, 1984) – a young man explained to me that, as a black person, he had always wanted to strike back at the police and now he was finally able to do so. So, while we may have finally reached a point where there is agreement with Le Bon – concerning the experience of power in crowds – my conclusions concerning the social implications of this are the polar opposite to his. Power does not abet mindlessness. Power abets the full expression of social identities.

In one sense, I am getting ahead of myself here. The feeling of empowerment in crowds is not something simply to be asserted. It is something to be explained. That is the focus of my next section. For now the point I want to underline is that perhaps uniquely in crowds one can gain access to the understanding of those groups who tend not to leave written records but rather speak eloquently in the language of the street. In his great study of the revolutionary crowds of 1789, the historian Georges Lefebvre writes that “in the crowd, the individual, escaping from the pressures of little social groups which form his everyday life, becomes more sensitive to the ideas and emotions which stem from larger social categories to which he also belongs” (1954, p. 277, translation by the author). In short, perhaps it is only in crowds that we become the subjects of history. For any social scientist who wants to understand social ideas

the crowd is a precious resource. We should not allow pathologising theories to dress down the crowd as mere dross and encourage us to discard its significance.

2. Crowds and the consolidation of social categories

The power of crowds does not derive from size alone. After all, if people fail to align their actions and act in pursuance of different – even incompatible – goals, then individual efforts are less likely to be additive than to cancel each other out (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). In short, collective empowerment is a function of the number and the coordination of participants. How, then, does shared social identification bring this about?

At this point, we need to distinguish between two subtly but importantly different senses of ‘shared social identification’ which feed into different but complementary antecedents of collective coordination. On the one hand identity is shared in the sense that a set of people define *themselves* in terms of the same category membership. This engenders a *cognitive* shift whereby crowd members adopt a common perspective on which to base thought and judgement. We can term this the *representational* sense of shared identity.

On the other hand, identity is shared in the sense that a set of people believe *each other* to define themselves in terms of the same category membership. This engenders a *relational* shift whereby crowd members cease to view fellow participants as other and hence orient to them as intimates. We can term this the *meta-representational* sense of shared identity.

Shared identity in the representational and meta-representational senses do not necessarily correlate with each other as the ongoing work of Fergus Neville shows (Neville, 2010). It is perfectly possible to participate in a crowd as a member of a given category and not recognise others as fellow category members – or even to stop recognising oneself as a category member if these others are what the category is in practice. For instance, people might turn up at a protest against a far-right group, all of them seeing themselves as anti-racists. However some might feel that those who *don't* confront the racists are not true anti-racists, while others might feel that those who *do*

confront the racists are not true anti-racists. Both may thereby become disillusioned with the anti-racist category which they previously embraced.

The sense of 'we are in this together' is far from automatic. It is an accomplishment – and how it is accomplished through effective leadership, inclusive chants, shared practices and so on demands further study. Yet when it is accomplished it has profound consequences.

There is a growing literature on the various aspects of intimacy which flow from thinking of oneself and others in terms of the same category membership (for reviews, see Haslam & Reicher, 2007; Reicher & Haslam, 2009). Amongst other things, people are more likely to trust and respect people they see as 'one of us'. They are more likely to see their decisions as just and less likely to experience their decisions as coercive. They are more likely to help others and also more likely to expect help from others.

Even at the most basic, embodied and visceral levels, the sense of sharing identity with others impacts on social relations so as to facilitate co-action. It is hard to pull together with others if you can't stand being near them. And there is much literature to show how people seem to have a clear need for 'personal space' and can be quite literally nauseated when it is violated. But in recent work, we have shown that people seek greater physical proximity with others when they are ingroup members (Novelli, Drury & Reicher, 2010). In a set of ongoing but as yet unpublished studies, we also have evidence that people find the touch and stench of other human bodies less disgusting when they are the bodies of ingroup members. This fits with much observational evidence that people will easily grasp, hug, even embrace others in the pursuit (or celebration) of group goals when ordinarily one might recoil from them.

In passing, it is worth noting that this account has profound implications for a relatively new and growing field which seeks to model the behaviour of crowds in both mundane settings (pedestrian flow in buildings and streets) and mass emergencies (e.g., Helbing, Farkas, & Vicsek, 2000). There are, by now, a variety of such models (Challenger, Clegg, & Robinson, 2009) based on somewhat different underlying mathematical algorithms. But the problem lies less in the mathematics

than in the underlying psychological assumptions. There has been a tendency to treat people as individual units each of whom has a fixed set of spatial preferences and goals.

Recently, there has at least been a recognition of the need to factor group memberships and relationships into such models (e.g., Moussaïd, Perozo, Garnier, Helbing, & Theraulaz, 2010; Singh et al., 2009). But while the analysts may be willing, the analysis remains weak. For these analysts, the group is a set of people bound together by previous existing interpersonal ties. This leads to the idea that crowds are made up of multiple small groups of intimates. There is no recognition that a crowd can be formed of strangers who are united by the salience of their common category membership. Equally, there is no recognition that the nature of the psychological groups in a crowd event (and hence of the preferences and goals of crowd members) is not fixed, but rather may vary as a function of who else is present, of the way events unfold and of the social meaning and significance of particular sites and spaces.

The irony is that, far from acting as distinct individuals, or in terms of pre-existing ties, emergencies are contexts par excellence in which people come together as group members and act in support of fellow group members. A number of years ago, John Drury and I started a research project with the hope of showing that people are better at dealing with emergencies when they act in terms of social rather than individual identity. While we had some success when using virtual reality simulations of emergencies (Drury et al., 2009), a problem arose when we looked at actual emergencies. We found it remarkably hard to find instances of people acting as individuals and trampling over others (either metaphorically or literally) in their attempts to save themselves. Even where prior social identities did not exist, the shared experience of something as overwhelming as a life-threatening disaster created a powerful sense of shared group membership and this was accompanied by powerful examples of the types of intimacy that have been discussed above. People helped and supported others even at considerable risk to themselves. They were far more likely to sacrifice themselves for other people than trample over them (Drury, Cocking & Reicher, 2009 a,b). The notion of panic, then, is largely a myth. It may be commonplace in the narrative of Hollywood disaster films. But in real life, disasters

serve as prime examples of the type of the 'shift to intimacy' which occurs in psychological crowds.

Here we encounter a critical question: is the intimacy, the solidarity and the cohesion of crowds a fleeting thing which evaporates as soon as the event is over? Or are these more long-lasting things and do crowds play a part in creating the everyday solidarities which allow social categories to achieve cohesion? Even if the former were true, it would still mean that crowds would have much to contribute to our understanding of the processes by which social solidarity can be produced. That is to say, by observing the emergence of solidarity in unstructured collectivities we can isolate and examine the basic conditions of effective human co-action. Already, from my brief sketch above, it should be clear that these include elements which have been generally ignored both within and beyond psychology – notably the importance of embodied factors and the role of shared identity in breaking down the barriers to us being together and doing things together.

But, albeit still preliminary and limited, there is evidence to suggest that collective intimacies may survive the moment of assembly, and so the crowd may not only contribute analytically to our understanding of solidarity but may also contribute substantively to enduring social solidarities in society. Studies of extended social movements suggest that the expectation of social support that derives from previous actions feeds into people's willingness and confidence to take part in (or even initiate) future actions (Cocking & Drury, 2004; Drury & Reicher, 2005). Studies of mass pilgrimage suggest that participation in the religious event increases commitment to faith groups, to religious practice and to seeing society in general as organised in sympathy with the values of one's faith (Cassidy et al., 2007; Prayag Magh Mela Research Group, 2007).

In addition, there is some suggestion from our ongoing studies of St. Patrick's Day and Easter Sunday Parades in the North and South of Ireland, that collective participation may impact upon social solidarities in other more indirect and unexpected ways. Notably, crowd events seem to serve as important agents of socialisation whereby young people are bound into key social categories such as the nation. Parents take their children along to events in order to teach the next generation

‘their history’ and, through the excitement and pageant of the spectacle, to make them enthusiastic and proud of their national identity (O’Donnell & Muldoon, 2011). What is more, in the act of bringing different generations together in the same event – either actually (as grandparents, parents and children stand together) or in the imagination (‘your grandfather stood here long ago, just as you are standing here now, and in the future your grandchildren will stand here too’) – so crowd events can help bind families together as a tight group that extends across time (Reicher, 2008). This interweaving of category, family and socialisation is perfectly expressed in the words of the Protestant Orange Order’s emblematic song, *The Sash*. The last two lines of the chorus run: “My father wore it as a youth in bygone days of yore/And on the Twelfth I love to wear the sash my father wore.”.

These ideas are clearly in need of further investigation, but they point to the many ways in which crowds impact beyond the crowd itself. Yet, for all this richness, there is still a severe limitation in what has been presented thus far. All the studies refer to the impact of crowds on crowd participants. Yet, even in the most mobilised of communities, only a small percentage of people actually join crowds. Many more watch on. And so we now encounter a further critical question: do crowd events only impact on actual participants, or can they also affect observers as well?

In answer to this question, I will again draw upon historical evidence. But first, it is necessary to make a general claim about the relationship of crowds to broad social categories. Benedict Anderson famously described the nation as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983). His point was that we can never actually get all the people as a country together and see them as a material entity. Rather, we have to imagine ourselves as part of a nation by imagining others like us behaving and thinking in the same way at the same time. For instance as we open our morning paper and read of some great national tragedy we imagine others reading the same news and sharing our sorrow – or else sharing our joy at news of some great national triumph. Well, for present purposes, it is possible to extend Anderson’s argument in two important ways. First, Anderson’s logic does not only apply to nations but to any large scale social category: one cannot assemble all the Catholics in the world in one place, or all the women, or all the black people, or all the socialists or even all the Manchester United or Liverpool or Tottenham Hotspur fans. Many, perhaps most of

the categories which concern us are 'imagined communities'. Second, there may be many ways through which we are able to imagine ourselves as a community and through which we infer the nature of our community.

I want to suggest that crowds play a critical role in this regard. In effect, *crowds are the imagined community made manifest*. Just as psychological crowds consist of people who see themselves in terms of their category membership, and just as crowd members recognise each other in terms of their shared category membership, so they are recognised by onlookers as a manifestation of a category to which they too may belong. England fans watch England fans watching a game of football at the World Cup; Catholics watch Catholics watching the Pope in St. Peter's Square. And what those crowds do, and how those crowds are treated by others tells the onlookers as well as the participants much about who they are, what they are prepared to do and how they stand in society.

For instance, it is arguable that the US urban uprisings of the 60's and 70's in the US and of the 80's in the UK were critical in creating self-conscious and empowered black communities (Benyon, 1984; Feagin & Hahn, 1973; Kettle & Hodges, 1982). Recent UK student protests against Government cutbacks (and, more specifically, against a resultant rise in University student fees) seem to have galvanised wider action by demonstrating that there is a critical mass of people who are angry enough at what is happening and willing enough to act together as to make a broad and effective anti-cuts coalition a viable proposition. Obviously, since these are ongoing processes, this is largely speculation, but we can look backwards to see similar processes in action.

Breen (2010) points to a specific mobilisation which he identifies as critical to the history of the American revolution. In early September 1774, a rumour arose that British troops had attacked the New England population, killing a number of inhabitants and even "cannonading the town of Boston, and massacring the inhabitants without distinction of age or sex" (cited in Breen, 2010, p. 138). This led to a widespread mobilisation of American insurgents led by an aging general, Israel Putnam. Putnam and his peers discovered that the rumours were false before they reached Boston, and they then quietly returned home. One might think that this could

have proved a debacle, demonstrating the poor judgment of Putnam himself and the delusions of those who opposed the crown. However the actual consequences were quite the opposite. The size of the mobilization became a source of success, the very fact that large numbers of people were prepared to mobilize against English outrages gave people a sense of group solidarity. Each small community that took action saw that they were united with other communities and that they had strength as a broad American insurgency. As Breen himself puts it: “It was in these adventitious circumstances that the insurgents of America initially became conscious of their membership in larger communities built upon shared identities. Crisis encouraged political imagination on the group... (and) helped weave local experiences into a larger and much more compelling narrative of a united cause” (p. 151). And when, eight months later, British troops did actually kill ‘fellow Americans’ at Lexington, Putnam rode again, the populace mobilised with him and the war of independence began.

Translating this account into the conceptual terms provided above, we can see how, first, the collective event creates shared social identity amongst different participants, allowing them to see previously disparate groups as one and leading to both the experience and the expectation of mutual support and coordinated action. But we can also see how this critical mass had a sufficient gravitational pull as to draw others into its ambit, making them feel empowered and effective as category members.

If this is so and if it reflects a general phenomenon then it speaks to the iconic importance of crowds in creating and binding together the groups that create social reality. It is not just that individuals become subjects of history in the crowd but that crowd events are key moments in creating social formations. Once again, we ignore crowds, or else treat them as exceptions to normal social process at our peril and at considerable explanatory cost.

3. Crowds and the creation of social categories

Thus far, I have emphasised the way in which crowd events serve to consolidate already existing social categories. But even in advancing that case, I couldn’t help but stray into addressing how such events serve to create categories – in the sense of

bringing into being categories which did not previously exist; in the sense of changing the meaning of existing categories; and also in the sense of leading people to recategorise themselves in such a way as to make notional (or marginal) categories real and socially significant.

Breen, for instance, contends that the mobilizations of insurgents in New England in 1774 didn't just bind Americans together and empower them, they also led insurgents to see themselves *as* Americans against British troops and the British crown (whereas previously they had protested specific measures as patriots). This was critical in the transition of a protest movement into a secessionist movement. As Archer (2010) puts it in his analysis of the British occupation of Boston a few years previously, before there could be a political revolution there had to be a *revolution of identity*.

It is not incidental that the consolidation and the creation of identity, even if analytically separable, should be so intertwined in reality. If we accept that social categories are only possible to define in their relations to other categories (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) – then necessarily group empowerment and the changed relations to other groups that this entails will change the nature of the group itself.

I referred above to a young man in the St. Pauls riots who, as part of the crowd, was able to enact his prior hostility to the police. Crowd members were able to do this and more. The police were driven out of the area for several hours. People took control of the area and decided who came in and who did not. They also decided which institutions belonged to the community and which oppressed it – the latter coming under prolonged and concerted attack which left a bank, a post office and several large showrooms in ruins (Reicher, 1984). The impact of these acts was clear the next day. St Pauls identity, defined largely in relation to black experience, had previously been characterised in terms of subordination and repression. Now it was defined in terms of agency, of strength and of self-assertion – and this was clear in the acts and even to assertive postures of the locals as police pairs nervously walked by on patrol.

But intergroup relations are not just an outcome of the change process, they are at the heart of the process by which change is produced. For the action of outgroups can

bring people into relations in new ways, give rise to unprecedented forms of social power and hence create identities that had not previously been imagined. To use the St. Pauls case for one final time, what instigated the riot was when the police raided the Black and White Café. The significance of this was that, in contrast to the targets of previous raids, the Café was used by all sections of the local population and seen as both a symbol of and a resource for the existence of an effective community. All saw it as an attack on them and responded together. Together they had the power to impose themselves over the police and to redefine their place in the world.

This reflects a recurrent pattern of change which we have found since across a range of studies using a range of different crowds and which we have come to describe and analyse as the Elaborated Social Identity Model of crowd action, or ESIM (e.g. Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2000, 2009; Reicher, 1996; Stott & Drury, 2000, Stott, Drury & Hutchison, 2001; Stott & Reicher, 1998). The pattern has four phases:

first, there is a heterogeneous crowd (by which we mean a single physical assembly in which there are a variety of different psychological groups, some more radical than others, but generally with the majority seeing themselves as ‘respectable citizens’ with respect for the police and the law)

second, an initially powerful outgroup (often the police) see the crowd as a whole as being dangerous and act so as to impose their own control over the crowd – in the process depriving crowd members of what they consider to be their legitimate rights

third, the crowd become united through an experience of common fate and a common sense of grievance. This makes even those who were previously moderate open to voices counselling radical action. It also empowers crowd members to challenge the restrictions placed upon them by the (police) outgroup

fourth, this action confirms the original outgroup sense of crowd danger and fuels on ongoing process of escalation.

John Drury’s extended study of an anti-roads building campaign in the East End of London (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005 2009; Drury, Reicher & Stott, 2003) provides a striking example of these processes. The campaign was initially divided between more moderate local protestors and more radical environmental activists who came to

the area. But in time this distinction was erased as the police were seen to treat everyone equally as dangerous and to deny them their rights of protest (and also to protect them against dangerous acts by the contractors). This set in motion a whole series of changes, especially for the locals.

They initially positioned themselves as liberal-democratic subjects exercising their democratic rights but, having been positioned as ‘oppositional’ and ‘anti-state’ by the police they began to see the world in oppositional terms and accept their own positioning as being opposed to (and repressed by) the state. As a consequence they began to redefine their own values and aims in life. They began to see other oppositional groupings such as striking miners and the Ogoni tribe in Nigeria – to whom previously they had felt no connection – as part of a common category. They even began to redefine the point of their protest and what constituted success. Whereas previously they simply wanted to preserve their local community and village green, now they wanted to challenge the entire government roads building programme and its imposition on the population. Hence whereas success previously meant stopping their green being concreted over, now, even after that happened, the campaign could still be counted as success if it mobilised people against the government and exposed the illegitimacy of their policies.

It is important to stress here that we are not suggesting that crowds always, or even often, lead to social change. Many crowds are relatively routinised. In most crowds, outgroups do not ‘misrecognise’ crowd members but rather acknowledge and even affirm their self-definitions. For change to occur there must be a relatively rare combination of an asymmetry between the way crowd members define themselves and the way they are defined by the outgroup, the willingness and the ability of the outgroup to impose their definition upon the crowd, and sufficient empowerment of the crowd to allow them to challenge the acts of the outgroup.

The point, then, is that the study of the crowd is useful not only in showing us that change does occur (and hence warning us against the essentialization of social categories). It also helps us to understand how change occurs, the conditions under which it occurs and also the interconnections amongst the various dimensions along

which change occurs. At the risk of sounding repetitive, here is yet more evidence that the study of crowds needs to be taken seriously.

4. Crowds and social processes

In the brief space I have left, I now want to use the foregoing account of the social phenomena involved in crowd events to address some basic matters concerning the processes underlying those phenomena – and I will consider issues relating to both how we represent our world and how we feel about our world (in more conventional psychological language, both cognition and emotion).

We can start by asking what sort of concepts of self and social reality are necessary in order to make sense of how these can be changed through crowd events. There are two parts to the answer. The first has to do with self and is already implicit in the argument that group identities change through a change in ones social relations and the implications of these relations for how the group acts: if, for instance, the authorities are on ones side then they can be reasoned with (and one can be reasonable). If, however, they are an antagonistic foe, then they have to be fought against (and one has to be a fighter). Put more generally, identity needs to be seen as a representation of ones position in a set of social relations along with the proper and possible actions that flow from that position (see Drury & Reicher, 2009; Reicher, 2001). What are often abstracted as traits or norms of a group should rather be conceptualised as ways of manoeuvring through the world as one sees and experiences it.

The second has to do with social reality and is already implicit in the argument that the process of change is initiated through being repositioned by outgroup action. People begin to define themselves as oppositional because, in reality, they find themselves in opposition. But that reality is constituted by the understandings and actions of the outgroup which then confront crowd members in material guise: lines of riot police and police vehicles, who prevent them from going where they wish; police horseback charges which force them to disperse. What is distinctively clear in crowds is that representation and reality are not separate orders but rather are different temporal moments in an unfolding process. The representations of one group form

their actions and then constitute the context in which the other group forms its representations, act and constitutes a context for the first group to act again. This process may be more obscured in mundane reality where we often find the actions of others sedimented into institutions where human agency is obscured, where the products of that agency confront us as natural phenomena and where social change is taken off the agenda. If we want to put the possibility of change back on the agenda, then crowd research suggests that we need to adopt a historical and interactive approach to social phenomena.

One issue now remains – and it is a big issue. I have dealt at considerable length with representations and norms and how these relate to crowd action. I have done this to challenge the classic idea that crowds are irrational, to show how they are meaningful and that they create as well as reflect social meaning systems. Yet all this is very cold. It runs the danger of missing something fundamental about crowds, which is stressed in the classic theories and which helps explain their continuing hold. Crowds are emotional affairs. Crowd members are passionate about their groups, which is why they can kill or even die for them. Any approach which ignores this is clearly inadequate and even risks failing to explain how crowds can make history. What is more, the passion of crowds can serve as a more general basis for understanding of investment in groups as Freud (1921) himself clearly understood. And, it might be added, understanding of group investment is one of the main things that other social scientists want from psychology (why do people cling to groups when all the structural and cultural analysis might suggest they should do otherwise?) but on which psychology fails to deliver.

The classic approach sees passion as resulting from the loss of self, the loss of reason and the loss of conscious agency – in such circumstances primitive enthusiasms can run rampant. Our work suggests otherwise. When asked, what makes people so excited about crowd action is that, for one of the few times in their lives, they feel empowered to enact their identities. Within the event itself they can live according to their own values and act according to their own beliefs - what we term ‘collective self-objectification’ (Drury & Reicher, 2009). Through the event, they are able to shape the wider world in their own terms. For once, they don’t have to live in a world made by others, they make the world for themselves. In other words, in crowds,

people become the *subjects* of history. The crowd (that is, the social category united and in action) constitutes them as effective social beings. And that, I suggest, is why people invest so heavily in the crowd. It explains the conditions under which people invest in groups more generally. And it also explains why crowds are such passionate affairs.

Conclusion

This paper is possibly the longer response to a journalist's throwaway comment in history – or at least in *my* history. While I doubt that my Canadian contact will ever read it, at least I hope to have convinced those who have read this far that crowds are weighty phenomena that deserve sustained analysis. Yet still, the more I think about it, the less satisfied I am with my response. For if crowds raise profound issues, that is not to deny that they can equally be light-hearted and fun. Indeed one of the things that makes crowds compelling for participants and analysts alike is that they are frequently combine high politics and hilarity, seriousness and subversive humour, at one and the same time. It is fun to walk down a street, singing, banging drums and improvising ribald chants. Riots are generally riotous. The street carnival is generally political and street politics is often most effective when it is most carnivalesque (Kenney, 2002; Thompson (1991). Often, then, the richest crowd phenomena have the aspect of frivolity.

Had I not been so thrown by her request for a light-hearted example, I might have told that journalist a story of the one time I ever went to the Wimbledon tennis championships. It was at the end of a rainy first week, so they let the general public onto the show courts that are normally reserved for a select audience. These more refined folk were concentrated at one end of the court, their blazers and panama hats (it was quite a while ago) contrasting with the jeans and t-shirts of the rest of us. I can't recall exactly who was playing, but I do remember that, at one stage, the proceedings became very tedious. So, to entertain itself, members of the crowd began a Mexican wave. The wave flowed round three sides of the court, but those at the select end declined to join in such a vulgar spectacle. The rest of the crowd made jocular remarks called on them to participate. Though, at first, these calls failed, the wave continued round the court, each time pausing for the exact time it would have

taken to pass through the inactive end. After a while the popular calls got louder, the elite began to falter. Then finally, to a massive cheer and much laughter from all around, they joined in whole-heartedly.

The incident said much about class in contemporary Britain, about the clash between 'low' and 'high' culture, about the pressure upon the elite to conform (on the surface at least) to popular democracy and about how the apparent victory of the masses can leave privilege intact. But equally the whole affair was a laugh and it was expressed through laughter. Even (or perhaps particularly) when crowds are light-hearted they have so much to teach the student of society. This paper is a plea to take note.

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