



The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind

Gustave Le Bon (1841 - 1931)

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The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind, written by Gustave Le Bon and published in 1895, is considered a seminal work in the field of crowd psychology. While it was not the first work on the subject, it was the first to propose that a crowd is itself a distinct entity that emerges from an assemblage of persons that possesses a “collective unconsciousness” and a “magnetic influence” that changes the behavior of its constituents until it becomes governed by a “group mind”. This influence robs each of its individual members of their opinions, values and beliefs in the process. Le Bon states: “An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will”. Le Bon posits three key processes at play: anonymity, contagion, and suggestibility. Anonymity

imparts a sense of invincibility and a loss of personal responsibility that causes a devolution of the individual to the primitive, emotional, and unreasoning instinctual drives. Contagion enables the rapid spread of ideas and behaviors in the group and the sacrifice of personal interests to the collective interest. Suggestibility is the mechanism of the contagion, used by the strong voices to impart ideas that guide the contagion of behavior. Such leaders Le Bon describes as “usually men of action rather than of words. They are not gifted with keen foresight... They are especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous excitable half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness.” The book became an instant bestseller upon publication and was translated in nineteen languages within a year. Its message is especially intriguing today in light of the phenomena observed in virtual groups that emerge on social media.

Gustave Le Bon (May 7, 1841 – December 13, 1931) was a French polymath noted for his contributions to the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, medicine, and physics. He was born in the Loire valley and raised there and in Paris. He earned a medical doctorate at the University of Paris but did not practice medicine, authoring several papers on physiological topics instead. He joined the French army as a medical officer during the Franco-Prussian War and witnessed the Paris Commune of 1871. He became a student of the emerging discipline of anthropology and traveled extensively in the Middle East, Asia, and India, publishing books on cultures and civilizations and inventing a portable cephalometer to aid in the measurement of physical characteristics of remote populations. A near fatal riding accident prompted him to study the behavior of horses and to write a book, which became a respected cavalry manual. That stimulated an interest in psychology, which led to books on the psychology of the evolution of peoples, the psychology of socialism, the psychology of education, and his best known work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. He pursued an interest in physics in a home laboratory to the degree that he anticipated the mass-energy equivalence and theory of relativity, earning a nomination for the Nobel Prize in 1913. His work is cited as a major influence on world leaders from Theodore Roosevelt to Lenin and on the notion of propaganda propounded by Edward Bernays.