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Crowds, leaders, and epidemic psychosis: The relationship between crowd psychology and elite theory and its contemporary relevance

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The influence of the authors of the so-called "crowd psychology" on the conventional interpretation of the "irrationality" of the masses in political life has been widely recognized. More recently, Ernesto Laclau has underlined the influence of this tradition on the liberal-democratic views on direct, mass democracy. This conventional interpretation may be reconstructed starting from different intellectual traditions: crowd psychology, properly speaking, its complementary, the "classical" elite theory, and the influence of the positivist analysis of the "criminal" and "psychopathological" behaviors of the masses. However, this influence, far from being confined to the liberal distaste for mass democracy, has been relevant not only for the fascist regimes of the 20th century but also for the contemporary right-wing populist interpretation of the role of the masses in political life, in spite of its purported antielitism.

KEYWORDS

history of political ideas, crowd psychology, elite theory, positivism, populism

Introduction

Crowds are a fact of human history. As Elias Canetti put it, "the crowd is neither good nor bad but simply *is*". He wrote this sentence in 1956, commenting on Machiavelli and developing a parallel between his own analysis of the crowd and Machiavelli's realist analysis of power (Canetti, 1998, p. 8). According to Canetti (1998, p. 9), while power "still is evil absolute", the crowd could be considered – in a sense – as a natural phenomenon and could be analyzed in an almost naturalistic fashion. However, Canetti distanced himself from the positivist tradition of the so called "crowd psychology". This analytical tradition – which begins with the works of authors such as the French Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, or the Italian Scipio Sighele – also explicitly considered the crowd as a "fact" of the social world. However, its approach was distinctively different. Moving from positivistic methodological presuppositions, the authors of the "crowd psychology" (most of whom were alienists, criminologists, or anthropologists) considered the crowd a social phenomenon that can be described in a purportedly scientific and objective way. At the same time, many of their descriptions of the irrational behavior of the crowds were too vehement to appear as detached as they pretended to be. Indeed, their work

flourished together with a vast literature that, from the second half of the 19th century, interpreted the crowd as the main social and political problem of the contemporary world. Thus, crowd psychology has been alimented by this literature and at the same time fueled more conservative and reactionary literature on this topic. It gave a scientific respectability to a conservative and reactionary interpretation of the role of the masses in history, providing the antidemocratic and the antisocialist movement with key concepts and a (pseudo)scientific background. This influence has been largely independent of the political ideas of these authors. Indeed, not all the scholars belonging to this tradition were conservative or reactionary. Le Bon certainly was an intellectual of conservative persuasion, while Tarde's views may be considered as that of a classical liberal. Many among the Italian alienists and criminologists who decisively influenced the study of the psychology of the crowd (or occasionally wrote on this topic) – like Cesare Lombroso, Guglielmo Ferrero, and Pasquale Rossi – were socialists (Nacci, 2019, pp. 191–192).

Nevertheless, as pointed out above, with their approach – mainly because of its strong scientific appearance – they provided a vocabulary and a theoretical material for a conservative or reactionary view of the role of the crowds in history, to the point of directly influencing the fascist culture (Sternhell et al., 1994). Crowds were seen, by them, as eminently emotional and irrational: a manifestation of "atavism," a regression to the prerational stage of the human being (Nacci, 2019, pp. 83–115). Consequently, their behavior was characteristically incoherent and unpredictable, particularly when they were not directed or organized by a leader or a leading minority. Often – if not always – their behavior was seen as dangerous. Crowds were considered "hysteric" – hence "feminine" (Le Bon, 1896, p. 21) – and their hysteria was interpreted as an epidemic one: if not arrested, the contagion would spread in a geometrical ratio and cause social unrest or – in the worst cases – either a revolution or a civil war. All these assumptions, long considered to be *loci communes* or *idées reçues* in politics, were finally seen, between the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the twentieth, as scientifically proven. Indeed, positivist science – and the most positivist of all sciences, sociology – seemed to dignify these views with a new scientific status, thus justifying the political necessity of new solutions for the prevention, the repression or the discipline of the crowd and its behaviors.

In his book *Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau notes that "the basic strategies" of the contemporary "anti-populist onslaught" are "inscribed" in the debate on crowd psychology. This debate, according to him, established "a matrix" out of which was organized the whole perspective on populism as an "aberrant" political phenomenon (Laclau, 2005, p. 20). In other words, Laclau seems to suggest that crowd psychology was crucial in naturalizing certain features of the mass phenomena and *at the same time* provided the contemporary political debate with conceptual tools that help in characterizing mass phenomena such as "populism" as aberrant ones. But how has this kind of phenomenon been naturalized and recognized as aberrant?

In this article, I will try, above all, to highlight the links between the literature on crowd psychology and conservative and reactionary thinking. To do this, I will identify three dimensions that are copresent in the early works of this tradition. First, a historiographical dimension, linked to reactionary or conservative literature on the French revolution; second, a politological dimension, stressing the role of leading elites in socio-political life; and third, a scientific-sociological dimension, essentially linked to the contemporary positivist literature.

From the historiographical dimension comes the idea of the crowd as a politically destructive element. This idea, in turn, strongly influenced the "elite theory", at least in its early, "classical" version, which can be seen as a theoretical complement of the crowd psychology. However, I would also like to suggest that the link between the "naturalization" of some features of the crowd and their interpretation as an "aberrant" phenomenon is also represented by an interpretation of the behavior of the crowds as "pathological" or "pathogenic". This interpretation is functional in establishing a parallelism between measures of "public order" and measures of "public hygiene". Crowds were seen – by a well-established, theoretical tradition – as the ideal breeding ground for hysterical and irrational behaviors: a social "pathology" formed through "epidemic" processes of "contagion," stimulated by the characteristic features of metropolitan life, just like others epidemic diseases such as cholera, typhus, or even the plague (Rossi, 1901, pp. 26–27).

I do not want to suggest, of course, that these three dimensions are the only possible ones, nor that their relevance has never been noticed. Some authors share some of them, some others: few share all these three theoretical positions. However, I would simply like to show how their combination created a mainstream interpretation of the political role of the masses, which not only strongly influenced – as repeatedly noted by Laclau – the liberal-conservative distrust toward mass political participation and deliberation, but which is also relevant for understanding the self-representation of the relationship between the mass and their leaders in contemporary, right-wing populist movements. Their exhibited antielitism, indeed, is perfectly coherent with an interpretation of the relationship between the masses and the leaders analogous to that given both by crowd psychology and – to a certain extent – by elite theory. Finally, I would like to suggest that the classical debate on crowd psychology and elitism, with its emphasis on the emotive nature of the mass – frequently seen as a homogeneous social phenomenon – exerts its influence, more than on contemporary strategies of "anti-populist onslaught", directly on contemporary populism and its vision of a direct relationship, essentially emotional in its nature, between the leader and the masses. Conversely, the classical liberal-democratic elitism of the 20th

century was mainly interpreted by its authors as an institutional solution for the purpose of avoiding a demagogic drift.

The revolutionary crowd: A prototype

Around the turn of the 19th century crowds acquired a new political dimension. They could have been occasional actors of history for centuries or millennia, but after the French Revolution they took center stage. During the 19th century, they gradually became the main actor of the political landscape and by the end of the century they imposed themselves as the protagonist of history. This process – unstoppable despite the efforts of the opponents of democracy, of both conservative and reactionary persuasions –was widely recognized as a side effect of industrialization. The industrial revolution pushed the masses to aggregate in factories and to agglomerate in cities, where they overflow from working class neighborhoods. They were not only part of a huge productive process, but in this same process they represented a quantifiable resource just like any other. If, in short, they were nothing more than a number, then by the strength of that number they could have made themselves heard. They would have gathered in marches, they would have declared strikes, they would have marked the daily life of the metropolis with riots and demonstrations. Then, they would have demanded the vote and they would have obtained it. They would have become active protagonists of change or passive instruments in the hands of demagogues. Given these premises, their behaviors became a major discussion topic. Simplifying somewhat, Laclau saw Gustave Le Bon's famous (or infamous) book as a watershed: "an extreme version of the way the 19th century addressed the new phenomena of mass psychology as belonging to the pathological realm," which at the same time "no longer considers such phenomena as contingent aberrations destined to disappear" but as "permanent features of modern society" (Laclau, 2005, p. 21).

Thus, it was impossible to see the crowd as "neither good nor bad". A crucial distinction needed to be made. In the era of "mass politics", there could be either political masses disciplined and organized by their leaders, or unstable, dangerous, and primitive crowds. As Laclau puts it, the "whole discussion" and the "wider debate" concerning "crowd psychology" can be described as "the *grande peur* of the nineteenth-century social sciences" (Laclau, 2005, p. 19). This theoretical distinction, then, needed to be transformed into a series of practical measures, aiming to achieve that level of social control which prevents the degeneration of human groups into potentially destructive crowds. In the "positivist" era, there was – among intellectuals and political actors – a growing belief in the application of scientific principles to a more efficient and rational social control. Since rationality was mainly seen as an individual disposition, and – consequently – every collective behavior was flawed by a characteristic decay of its level, collective actions should have always been disciplined and organized, possibly limiting the mass to the exclusively passive role of a docile instrument in the hands of the "exceptional man", the leader capable of leading by presenting himself as the reflection of a collective physiognomy, a reflection projected from top to bottom. Somewhat paradoxically, this leader was able to do so precisely because of his exceptionality, his non-typical character (Ferrero, 1897). The mass, on the other hand, could simply recognize his exceptionality, with an act of mere adhesion.

The role of the moderate and conservative historiography of the French Revolution in shaping the conventional view of the crowds later developed by Le Bon has been widely recognized. On the one hand, moderate authors such as Alphonse de Lamartine (with his *Histoire des Girondins*) sought to distinguish between a "reformist," bourgeois revolution, and the destructive, almost anarchical eruption of the crowds, efficaciously manipulated by the Jacobins. According to this historiography, events like the *massacres de septembre* of 1792 were interpreted as a turning point. On the other, the reactionary views about the function and the role of the masses influenced the reconstruction of the revolutionary events. Despite the obvious differences, a consonance may be found between the moderate historiography and the reactionary views on the revolution. From the viewpoint of the reactionary authors, the abolition of the monarchy and the regicide, detaching the plebs from their natural leaders, transformed the people into a shapeless mass of individuals. As de Maistre (1850, p. 17) imaginatively exemplified, resorting to the well-known metaphor of the beehive, once we take away the queen bee we can have as many bees as we wish, but we will never have a swarm. Thus, two main intuitions can be articulated into a single interpretation: the idea – of Machiavellian reminiscence (Machiavelli, 1995, p. 92) – that the multitude is incapable of action if not led, and the negative value judgment regarding the demagoguery of the Jacobin leaders, who used the revolutionary crowd as an instrument for achieving their goals. A crucial role in shaping and spreading this interpretation was played by Hyppolite Taine with his monumental work on the origins of contemporary France. As Laclau underlined, "throughout nineteenth-century discussions on mass psychology, there was a progressive internalization of those features concerning the 'crowd', which … in the work of Hyppolite Taine … were seen as an unassimilable excess" (Laclau, 2005, pp. x–xi). Thus, according to Laclau, the history of crowd psychology is the history of this "progressive internalization", from the historiography of the French Revolution, that saw the crowd "as an irrational, deviant phenomenon" (Laclau, 2005, p. xi).

Taine's reconstruction of the main events of the French Revolution was certainly instrumental in popularizing even more the idea that "modern" society always includes a persistent, mostly urban "multitude" which, like a perpetual threat, can activate itself in critical situations of weakness or absence of

authority. "In 1789, the bands are ready," Taine notices in his *L'ancien régime*: "[F]or, below the mass that suffers another suffers yet more, with which the insurrection is permanent, and which, repressed, persecuted, and obscure, only awaits an opportunity to issue from its hidingplace and ravage in the open daylight." The opportunity is now provided, according to Taine, precisely by the elimination of the "natural leaders" and their substitution with new, revolutionary leaders: "[A]n insurrectionary multitude rejecting its natural leaders must elect or submit to others." The revolutionary crowd "is like an army which, entering on a campaign, should depose its officers; the new grades are for the boldest, most violent, most oppressed, for those who, putting themselves ahead, cry out 'march'" (Taine, 1876, p. 380). The *topos* of the reactionary interpretation mentioned above is repeated here: the "anarchical" crowd, incapable of true, collective action, is freed from the control of its "natural leaders" and transforms itself into an efficacious instrument in the hands of revolutionary demagogues.

Taine's historiographical reconstruction strongly influenced both the authors of the so-called "elite theory" and the tradition of "crowd psychology". Interestingly, from Le Bon's viewpoint, the irrational nature of the crowd, so evident in its anarchical emergencies, was at the same time the explanation of the crucial role played by its leader, the *meneur des foules*. According to him, indeed, crowds are at the same time "little adapted to reasoning" and "quick to act" (Le Bon, 1896, p. xvii). "Left to themselves", they are "incapable" of conditions such as "fixed rules, discipline, a parring from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, an elevated degree of culture" (Le Bon, 1896, p. xix). Thus, "history tells us, that from the moment when the moral forces on which a civilisation rested have lost their strength, its final dissolution is brought about by … unconscious and brutal crowds". Crowds "are only powerful for destruction" and "their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase" (Le Bon, 1896, p. xix). But history, according to Le Bon, would teach us also two further things: firstly, that "civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy" (Le Bon, 1896, p. xix). Secondly, that "as soon as a certain number of living beings are gathered together, whether they be animals or men, they place themselves instinctively under the authority of a chief" (Le Bon, 1896, p. 118). Thus, *elitism* and *leaderism* are two consequences that follow almost automatically from the main premise that "crowds" (or even "groups" in general) are irrational and incapable of autonomous, rational action. This kind of leaders (the *meneurs de foules*) are clearly depicted by Le Bon in a famous chapter of his main work (Le Bon, 1896, pp. 117–146). They may be agitators, they generally exhibit a despotic attitude, but above all, they persuade through emotion. This is another obvious consequence of the main premise of the irrationality of the crowd. It also represents another direct link between crowd psychology and classical elite theory. To a certain extent, the *meneurs des foules* are "unconscious psychologists, possessed of an instinctive and often very sure knowledge of the character of crowds, and it is their accurate knowledge of this character that has enabled them to so easily establish their mastery" (Le Bon, 1896, p. xxi). Or, as Tarde efficaciously described, they are "magnetizers". We will come back *infra* to the parallelism between leader and hypnotizer. Now, we need to introduce the relationship between crowd psychology and classical elitism.

On crowds and their masters

The origins of classical elitism may be traced back to the "simple, almost obvious, observation that all organized societies consist of a vast majority without any political power and a small minority of powerholders" (Hirschman, 1991, p. 52). We may recapitulate their main tenets following Gaetano Mosca's masterwork, *The Ruling Class*. According to Mosca, "among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is patent to the most casual eye": "[I]n all societies … two classes of people appear: a class that rules and a class that is ruled." The first class "is always the less numerous" and "performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings." The second class is "the more numerous" and is "directed and controlled by the first" in a manner "that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent." Moreover, the second, more numerous class "supplies the first … with material means of subsistence and with the instrumentalities that are essential to the vitality of the political organism" (Mosca, 1939, p. 50). Masses, with their discontent, with their "passions", may exert a certain pressure and "a certain amount of influence on the policies of the ruling, the political, class." They may even "succeed in deposing a ruling class"; however, also in this case and "inevitably", "there would have to be another organized minority within the masses themselves to discharge the functions of a ruling class" (Mosca, 1939, p. 51).

The superiority of the ruling minority relies essentially on two factors. The first one is organizational: "[T]he minority", Mosca says, "is organized for the very reason that it is a minority": relatively few individuals acting "uniformly in concert, with a common understanding". From this observation follows, according to Mosca, that "the larger the political community, the smaller will the proportion of the governing minority to the governed majority be, and the more difficult will it be for the majority to organize for reaction against the minority". The second is in some respect less evident: "[I]n addition to the great advantage accruing to them from the fact of being organized, ruling minorities are usually so constituted that the individuals who make them up are distinguished from the mass of the governed by qualities that give them a certain material, intellectual or even moral superiority; or else they are the heirs of individuals who possessed such qualities." In other words, according to Mosca, "members of a ruling minority

regularly have some attribute, real or apparent, which is highly esteemed and very influential in the society in which they live" (Mosca, 1939, p. 53). This attribute may involve the display of (physical or economic) power, but it also relies on something more subtle. Gabriel Tarde would have call it "prestige" (Tarde, 1884, p. 502), and it is something that depends on the capacity of the ruling class to influence the masses, acting on an irrational or prerational level. In order to understand this point, however, Pareto's approach may be better suited.

Vilfredo Pareto, founding father, together with Gaetano Mosca, of the elite theory, discussed, on many occasions, the works of the scholars of the "crowd psychology". From this viewpoint, even if he also quoted and often criticized, in his texts, authors such as Tarde, Sighele, or Pasquale Rossi, his main reference was clearly Le Bon. Pareto's attitude toward this research field was, to say the least, ambivalent. He praised some intuitions of Le Bon, Tarde, and Sighele, but at the same time he was often caustic in his critique of the use they made of certain sociological concepts and categories. For instance, he thought that their frequent use of concepts such as "imitation" or "suggestion" was so generic that it would be essentially useless. They also committed the error – unforgivable, from his viewpoint – to use "void" expressions such as "collective soul" or "the soul of the crowds", thus associating a knowable subject (the crowd) to a totally unknowable attribute (the soul). Le Bon's attempt to explain everything resorting to the "soul of the nations", Pareto mockingly notes, calls to mind that "clear explanation" according to which "the water rises in a pump because nature abhors vacuum" (Pareto, 1984a, p. 178).

Nevertheless, there was much in the "crowd psychology" that was in consonance with Pareto's "elitist" theory. In particular, the idea that the "crowd" was incapable of organized action without the leadership of a *meneur de foules* is consistent with the fundamental division of any society between ruling minorities and the mass of the ruled. From this viewpoint, it is important to notice how Pareto defended Herbert Spencer from Sighele's criticism. According to Sighele, Spencer failed to understand that the crowd cannot be regarded as a mere sum of individuals whose characteristics remains unchanged. Rather, he believed that the crowd is something qualitatively different, something new. This point was crucial, from his perspective, for explaining the "decay" of the intellectual capacity of a collective body. No matter how clever and educated may be the members of a parliament, of a jury, or of any group whatsoever, the result is always the subtraction – not the sum – of their intellectual qualities. The main reason – according to Sighele – is that the contagion that spreads through crowds and collective bodies affects the non-rational or prerational part – the emotional one – of the human mind, negatively influencing our rational abilities. Even when the crowds are capable of altruistic behavior, they are driven by emotions (Sighele, 1895; see also Le Bon, 1896, p. 8).

Pareto would accept this conclusion but starting from somewhat different and more general premises. For Pareto, the predominance of behaviors moved by feelings is, to some extent, physiological in every human being, even when he or she acts in an isolated environment, and particularly in certain contexts, such as the political one. Despite the gradual, quantitative increasing of the field of "logical behavior" – Pareto claims – "many human actions, even today among the most civilized peoples, are performed instinctively, mechanically, in pursuance of habit" (Pareto, 1935, §157). Thus, "human beings are persuaded in the main by sentiments" (which he calls "residues" in his characteristic, idiosyncratic terminology; Pareto, 1935, §1397). These "residues" find a way to express themselves through pseudo-rational verbalizations that Pareto calls "derivations" (Pareto, 1935, §1747). Indeed, according to him, "[people] feel a certain need for logic, but readily satisfy it with pseudo-logical propositions" (Pareto, 1935, §2086).

Thus, from Pareto's viewpoint, Spencer is not wrong in saying that the "group" is the sum of the characteristics of its members, since from this obvious observation it does not follow that the "group's" characteristics are identical to those of its members. It simply follows that something of these characteristics must be present also in the group (Pareto, 1984b). Paraphrasing Pareto, we may say that the fact that the group may amplify – from the viewpoint of an observer – the non-logical behaviors of its members does not mean that this non-logical dimension is less relevant when the members are considered from the viewpoint of their individual actions. Pareto's approach to mass behavior may be considered, in some way, even more radical in its consequences than that of Sighele. Indeed, a direct consequence of his premises is that the relationship between the masses and their leader is based not only on the expression of collective interests, but first of all on that of collective emotions. Pareto, once again, accepts Taine's reconstruction of the prerevolutionary events and directly links it to his contemporary reality and to the relationship between the liberal elite and the industrial proletariat. For Taine, as we already mentioned above, the absence of leaders is tantamount to the absence of organization: "a multitude being simply a herd". Pareto could not agree more. But he also found in Taine's historiographical account the elements for a diagnosis of the failure of the liberal elites between 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1789, the mistrust of the Parisian multitude "of its natural leaders, of the great, of the wealthy, of persons in office and clothed with authority" was, according to Taine, "inveterate and incurable" (Taine, 1876, p. 379); so was the mistrust of the urban, industrial proletariat of the late 19th century. The multitude of the industrial metropolises of late 19th century had "no faith" in the "humanity or disinterestedness" of their liberal elites, just like the multitude in revolutionary France lost its faith in the monarchical institute. In both cases, the elites bear the responsibility for such a situation. As Pareto noticed in his *Les systems socialistes*, the liberals had lost also because they had thought they could "direct the masses through reason alone", whereas people can be spurred to action only "by

engaging with their feelings and with their interests" (Pareto, 1902, pp. 66–67).

Despite the differences between the authors, elite theory and crowd psychology share some relevant main assumptions: the idea that a crowd without a leader typically exhibits irrational, erratic, and ultimately instable behaviors and that the relationship between the crowd and its leader is mainly of an emotional nature. From Pareto's viewpoint, the latter assumption directly follows from the relevance of emotional behavior in human beings, while for Sighele and other authors belonging to the tradition of "crowd psychology" it is also due to the decay of the average rationality of the individuals when involved in collective actions. The authors of the psychology of the crowds typically related this process to phenomena such as hypnotism and imitation and, ultimately, linked all these phenomena to the dynamic of "epidemic contagion", building a bridge between two recent fields of research: psychology and epidemiology.

Epidemic psychosis

Coming back to the metaphor of the swarm, used by de Maistre, more than the orderly, hierarchical, and industrious swarm of bees, the crowds seem to mirror a destructive and headless swarm of locusts, that suddenly gathers multitudes of individuals hitherto isolated and transforms them into a predatory and inexorable force. From the viewpoint of the sociologists and the alienists of the late 19th century, it was crucial to understand how such a metamorphosis can take place. For this reason, new analytical tools were needed. These tools, obeying the unified methodological approach of positivism, had to be obtained from a study of social phenomena that followed the methods of natural sciences. Two rapidly developing medical disciplines, psychology and epidemiology, provided two cases in point: hypnosis and contagion.

Hypnosis seems to represent the dynamics of imitation. First, it can be used as an analogy: the crowd can be seen as a great or collective hypnotized. This analogy seems to clearly show the relevant loss of individual consciousness experienced by every human being – no matter the level of their education or morality – when entering the crowd. Furthermore, it is an analogy that suits the political case particularly well because it includes the figure of the demagogue, the hypnotist of crowds. Gabriel Tarde developed the parallelism between leader and hypnotizer (or leader and "magnetizer") probably better than any other author of crowd psychology. The function of the leader as a magnetizer is to be found, according to him, at the very origins of political authority. "In the beginning of every old society", Tarde affirms, "there must have been, a fortiori, a great display of authority exercised by certain supremely imperious and positive individuals". However, the alleged explanation that these individuals ruled "through terror and imposture" was, from Tarde's viewpoint, "obviously inadequate". Indeed, "they ruled through their prestige". It is at this point that Tarde resorts to the example of the magnetizer, who "alone can make us realize the profound meaning" of the word "prestige" in this context. According to Tarde, "the magnetizer does not need to lie or terrorize to secure the blind belief and the passive obedience of his magnetized subject". He does not even need "to speak in order to be believed and obeyed" (Tarde, 1903, p. 78). Thanks to his "prestige", and acting on a prerational level, he acquires a role of dominance: "[L]et us observe that the magnetized subjects imitate the magnetizer, but that the latter does not imitate the former" (Tarde, 1903, p. 79).

Tarde went so far as to say that society itself is imitation: "The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action." Indeed, "both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous" (Tarde, 1903, p. 7). Thus, "society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism". This does not necessarily imply, Tarde warns, that "submission to some ascendency" *always* means "following the example of the person whom we trust and obey". However, Tarde asks, "does not belief in anyone always mean belief in that which he believes or seems to believe? Does not obedience to someone mean that we will that which he wills or seems to will?" Consequently, "to be credulous and docile, and to be so as pre-eminently as the somnambulist and the social man, is to be, primarily, imitative". By contrast, "to innovate, to discover, to awake for an instant from his dream of home and country, the individual must escape, for the time being, from his social surroundings". This "unusual audacity" makes this individual "super-social rather than social" (Tarde, 1903, pp. 87–88).

Like a social hypnotizer, the leader who rules through prestige is, thus, a "super-social" individual, and his relationship with the crowd is built upon a dynamic of imitation. This reconstruction, however, seems to miss something deeper. As we noticed above, even if in an erratic and instable way, the crowd may also have a spontaneous existence, independent by the direction imposed by a leader. The origin of the crowd often seems to come from something endogenous, rather than from an external impulse. It is something invisible and initially unnoticeable, perhaps arising from the behavior of a single individual and then extending to two others and from these two to four others and so on, increasing exponentially. Here, a second analogy seems to be even more clarifying: crowds are the result of a contagion. As Laclau noticed, "for Le Bon, contagion can only be a form of pathological transmission" and "its explanation is to be found in the general phenomenon of "suggestibility" (Laclau, 2005, p. 28). Suggestibility, indeed, does not necessarily need a main agent: it may be interpreted as a mutual influence between all the members of a certain group.

Being intuitive, the analogy between collective behavior and epidemic can be found in different authors of different

intellectual traditions. However, positivist anthropologists and sociologists began to view the epidemic not only as an analogy but as a reality and began to use the concept of "epidemic psychosis". In 1889, Giuseppe Sergi, then one of the leading Italian anthropologists, published in the *Rivista di filosofia scientifica* ("Journal of Scientific Philosophy", almost an "house organ" of Italian positivism) an article titled "Psicosi epidemica" ("Epidemic psychosis"). Sergi claimed to have observed in "contemporary events" the emergence of a "collective mental illness" which "behaves, in its spread, like any other epidemic". It was thus necessary to study it like any other contagious illness, also because it is necessary, in order to understand pathological phenomena, to grasp their appearance in the normal conditions that precede the onset of the disease. Besides, this study could be instrumental for the adoption of the necessary surveillance measures: in short, public order and public hygiene may, to a certain extent, overlap. The article then continued to touch on all the themes that would soon become commonplaces in the literature on the psychology of crowds.

To this main premise, Sergi added other general observations. According to him, the psyche is always and above all a collective phenomenon, and only in the second order an individual phenomenon. Consequently, the individual should not be studied as an isolated entity, but always starting from the psychology of the group to which he or she belongs. For this reason, Sergi introduces the concept of "ethnic psyche". As for the mutual relations between the members of the group, Sergi's position is clearly linked to the other tradition of crowd psychology. The "sympathetic communications between individuals" are described by him as phenomena of "psychic suggestion", which is also a "hypnotic" suggestion (Sergi, 1889).

Being a pathological state, epidemic psychosis has the same characteristics as any other contagious outbreak. An individual can infect another through speech, and the morbid state can be aggravated by the repetition of the message (a matter of "viral load", in short). Not everyone is infected in the same way and some individual conditions aggravate or alleviate the symptoms: "[It] spreads like the epidemic among the people, leaving some completely immune, others taken with great violence, others in a milder form." Some individuals are super-spreaders: the most suggestible, for example, can also be the most suggestive.

If the application of the main features of collective behavior to the epidemic dynamics seems illuminating, it is also possible to do the reverse. Starting from the study of epidemic diseases, one can broaden the scope and include any collective dynamic, whether it has to do with the economy or with consumption, with politics or with any other collective human phenomenon. In 1916, Ronald Ross, British medical officer and pioneer of the application of statistics to the study of contagious diseases, published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* an article on the application of probability theory to epidemics and called this application "*a priori* pathometry". The article accompanied his work on the prevention of malaria, a true cornerstone of epidemiology, for which he was awarded, in 1902, the Nobel Prize in medicine. Ross outlined the program, set out in the last paragraph, of a "theory of happenings" that would treat all "contagious" collective phenomena with the same statistical-mathematical approach. Having the necessary data available, it would therefore be possible to trace the contagion curves of any mass dynamics, thus allowing, possibly, to take the necessary preventive measures.

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the twentieth, sociologists, anthropologists, and alienists spread the concept of "epidemic psychosis" or "psychic epidemics", which became almost common sense. In 1898, the Italian sociologists Pasquale Rossi published a book titled *L'animo della folla* ("The soul of the crowd"), in which he included an entire section devoted to the analysis of "psychic epidemics".[1] Later, in 1901, he published a book exclusively devoted to the study of the "morbid collective psychology" (Rossi, 1901). Combined with the interpretation of the crowd as an irrational actor, easily transformed into an instrument for its leaders or its leading minorities, this view strongly shaped a conventional interpretation of the political role of the masses, still influential today (Gargiulo, 2022). In a way, alongside with repression, also the direct relation between the charismatic leader and the mass can be interpreted as an alternative to the pathologic outcome of the headless crowd.

Conclusion

The conventional account on the combined influence of elite theory and crowd psychology on contemporary politics highlights its antipopular, antidemocratic dimension (Sternhell et al., 1994, pp. 31–32, 252). On the other hand, populism is frequently portrayed as antielitist in its essence, to the point of being understood as an ideology of emancipation of the masses from the domination imposed on them by an oppressive oligarchy. This interpretation, far from being limited to the antiestablishment rhetoric typical of right-wing populist propaganda, also influenced the rearticulation of a left-wing version of the populist discourse, a rearticulation made possible by a preliminary reinterpretation of populism as a political attitude irrespective of its ideological content. As discussed above, Laclau's book on *Populist Reason* is one of the best examples of this theoretical move.

However, the main ideas concerning power relations between mass and elites introduced by the sociological literature

1 This book and its author have also been the object of Pareto's sarcasm. In a brief review, he highlights how Rossi – a socialist by political persuasion – included, among "psychic epidemics", socialism and spiritism. Then, he immediately comments: "We do not regret seeing the two things brought together in the same class by a socialist writer. He has more reason than he thinks" (Pareto, 1980, p. 157).

which flourished by the end of the 19th century have flowed into contemporary right-wing populism by way of the traditional right-wing, antiliberal thinking of the 20th century. The crucial influence of both elite theory and crowd psychology – combined – on the right-wing, antiliberal, and fascist thinking of the 20th century has been frequently highlighted (Sternhell et al., 1994). Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* was a true *livre de chevet* for Benito Mussolini, since it seemed to confirm the intuition about the direct relationship between the "prince" and the "multitude" which Mussolini thought he could also find in Machiavelli. Authors like Le Bon or Pareto were used with the aim of translating the intuition of a charismatic, direct relationship between the leader and the masses – a conventional reading of *The Prince* in fascist Italy (Oxilia, 1932) – into a sociological phraseology, confirmed by the positivists' studies on "epidemic" psychosis. This "use" may also have been an "abuse", based on partial and selective readings of the texts. Thus, it reinforced, from a theoretical viewpoint, the translation of the old liberal-conservative belief in the necessity of disciplining (and repressing) the masses through adequate public order measures into a new strategy of transforming the masses into a useful instrument in the hands of the dictator. This account is all too well known to merit further discussion. However, as far as contemporary populism is concerned, some final observations may be necessary.

Despite the exhibited antielitism of the populist *weltanschauung*, the coherence and even the direct influence of elitist thinking on right-wing populism has been recently noted (Caiani and Della Porta, 2011; Becher, 2022). As we discussed above, the general assumptions – shared by both elitist thinkers and the authors of crowd psychology – about the characteristics of the irrational or prerational relationship between the crowd, or the mass, and its leader and about the inevitability of a leading minority that rules and organizes the political majorities are perfectly compatible with the interpretation of the populist leader as the "authentic" leader of the people (Mudde, 2004). Moreover, the political necessity of an organized crowd led by its "natural" chiefs is much more in keeping with the idea of an original bond between the leader and his people than with the bureaucratic structure of the political parties of the liberal-democratic era. Through a direct, emotional relationship with "the people", the leader can bypass the corrupt elite of the political parties and reestablish a "true" representation and a "unanimous" social body (Rosanvallon, 2020, pp. 45, 53).

Thus, despite Laclau's account, the influence of the conventional interpretation of the nature, characteristics, and political role of the crowd – shaped between the 19th and 20th centuries in the debate about crowd psychology, elite theory, and "crowd pathology" – is far from being confined to the liberal-conservative distaste for mass democracy. It may also be regarded as a key ingredient in the contemporary right-wing populist viewpoint on the role of the masses in political life or even for the populist *weltanschauung* in general. If, on the one hand, this literature "naturalized", as Laclau would say, the idea of the "irrational" behavior of the masses, by interpreting it as an "aberrant" state, it is also true that this interpretation served to further highlight the essentially emotional, pre-rational dimension of the political relationship between the masses themselves and their leaders – a crucial element from the populist standpoint (Rosanvallon, 2020, pp. 68–81). Because of this essentially emotive nature, little room remains for the project of a consciously reflected participation of the masses in political life. Hence, their passionate, irrational force needs to be channeled – through a direct relationship with the charismatic leader and his actions, a representation based on immediate identification – in order to avoid "pathological" outcomes.

For these reasons, the liberal-conservative skepticism toward mass politics – which we can find in authors such as Le Bon, Pareto, and also Mosca, at least in the first part of his intellectual career – should not be conflated with the liberal-democratic tradition of the so-called "democratic elitism", represented in its early stage by authors such as Gaetano Salvemini, Hans Kelsen, and Joseph Schumpeter.[2] As a matter of fact, liberal-democratic elitism brought the organized mass party back to the center of its institutional model, which was designed as a political, competitive framework ultimately able to facilitate the circulation of the elites, opening them to external elements. According to this model, political parties and their elites were entrusted with the task of transforming shapeless instances into political programs, available on the electoral market. Even when this "transformation" was intended essentially as a top-down process, it nonetheless represented an institutionalized form of political participation. Through this filter, in other terms, the masses could participate in political life not simply by virtue of a purely emotional adhesion or of a mere acclamation of the leader and his actions, but through the selection (through election) of concurring elites with concurring political programs. Moreover, to the extent that it is internally divided into competing elites, the same mass party allows for a similar participation of the electorate. This pluralist model represented, for this reason, an alternative to the fiction of a homogeneous mass in direct relationship with its leader.

In other terms, the literature on "crowd psychology", together with the early version of elite theory, seems much more in consonance not only with contemporary right-wing populism, but with the populist tradition in general, rather than with the liberal-democratic tradition with its alleged

2 On the Italian historian Gaetano Salvemini, who seldom appears among the classics of liberal-democratic elitism, see Bermeo (1992). On Kelsen, who, just like Salvemini, is usually not included in the pantheon of democratic elitism, I refer to the chapter on "The Selection of Leaders" (chapter 8) in Kelsen's *The Essence and Value of Democracy* (Kelsen, 2013, pp. 87–96). Finally, for a liberal-democratic interpretation of Schumpeter's realist approach, I refer here to the convincing interpretation of JanaLee Cherneski (Cherneski, 2017).

distrust toward the participation of the masses in political life. Moreover, if, on the one hand, we may recognize that elite theory – even in its early, classical version – not only provided a powerful analytical tool but also gave birth to its liberal-democratic version, on the other hand, the literature on crowd psychology, with its insistence on the irrational nature of the crowd, contributed to the charismatic, leaderist reading of the original intuition about the division of the social or political body between a minority of rulers and a majority of ruled. The idea of a direct and immediate relationship between the leader and the masses, in this interpretive tradition, is, indeed, articulated through an eminently emotional dimension, which crowd psychologists justified in terms of the decay of the level of rationality of the human beings when acting collectively.

On a different level, the contemporary populist tradition presents itself as an alternative to the institutional mediation of the traditional, bureaucratic political party that is at the center of the analytical framework of democratic elitism. The latter, instead of being interpreted – as in the liberal-democratic tradition – as an instrument for an institutionalized participation of the masses in political life, is thus basically seen as an – at least potential – usurper of the popular will, an obstacle between the mass and its "natural" leaders. For the plurality of the political elites of organized parties, which give birth to the "oligarchy" of the "establishment", populism replaces the direct relationship with the leader capable of translating the heterogeneity of interests into a unity of action (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 53). This unity is ultimately assured by the emotive bonds established both in the horizontal (between the members of the mass) and in the vertical (between the mass and the leader) dimensions (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 72). Thus, *mutatis mutandis*, the populist leader seems to have more characteristics in common with the *meneur de foules* model of crowd psychology than with the bureaucratic elite of the twentieth-century mass parties.

If some sort of organized, indirect participation in the collective formation of a political will, or, at least, some sort of institutionalized selection of concurring political elites is interpreted as nothing more than smokescreens behind which lies the usurpation of the *true* will of the *true* people by an arrogant oligarchy, then there are no alternatives to, on the one hand, the direct, immediate, and charismatic relationship between the crowds and their leaders, or, on the other hand, epidemic psychosis: the destructive, pathological, erratic behavior of a crowd left without a master.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

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