Masses, class and the power of suggestion

Andrea Cavalletti

1. I will attempt here to reflect on three major themes, 'masses, class, suggestion', with the hope that, by doing so, I will also indirectly bring to light the relevance of Gabriel Tarde's thought today. One may wonder why my title does not include – perhaps in place of the term 'class', which is not central to Tarde's toolkit – the concept of 'public', which, as is well known, Tarde (in 'The Public and the Crowd' ['*Le public et la foule*'], 1901) distinguishes from that of the 'crowd', giving to the latter an opposite and by no means positive meaning. Yet it is precisely this distinction that leads us back to the range of relations that bind together 'masses, class and suggestion'. In turn, it is only in the light of this that such distinction becomes intelligible. Why, then, these three terms? What is the nature of the bond that unites them?

'Masses' – this word, as we will see, immediately clings to the last one: 'suggestion'. It clings to it by virtue of another term that we have not yet mentioned: that is, 'prestige' [in the French: *prestige*]. In fact, in Tarde's time, prestige defined the leader's force of attraction, and thus produced effects of mass suggestion. If my title does not feature 'prestige' but rather 'class', it is because class stands precisely there, between the masses and suggestion, as an element of articulation, a sort of hinge. And rightly so: indeed, as we shall see, one of the primary, fundamental meanings of the word 'class' correlates precisely to such a function.

However, one could insist: this word appears in place of the other thanks to an elision; 'class' surfaces and makes room for itself between 'masses' and 'suggestion' by replacing 'prestige'. Indeed, if understood in a sense that perhaps diverges from its primary meaning, class does not unite but separates 'masses' from 'suggestion', and it does so by covering up and eliminating prestige.

Where there is no prestige, and therefore no mass suggestion, there class is. Or at least, there 'class' takes on another and very different meaning, as I will endeavour to explain.

2. Why should the word 'masses' – as I said – cling to 'suggestion' by recalling immediately a third term, that is, 'prestige'? The question is at the very least legitimate and an answer can be found in Freud's famous 1921 essay *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* [*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*]. This is of course an answer in psychoanalytical terms to the first important texts of social psychology, mainly associated with the French school, among which the most renowned is certainly still Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* [*Psychologie des Foules*] (1895). At the beginning of the essay's fourth chapter, a quick overview of the key authors of mass psychology – or, we should rather say, crowd psychology, since the German *Masse* translates precisely the French *foule* – introduces Freud's critique of Hippolyte Bernheim and the so-called Nancy School. It is a decisive passage that marks (once again and in the clearest way) Freud's distance from the theorists of suggestion. It reads:

> what we are offered as an explanation by authorities upon Sociology and Group Psychology is always the same, even though it is given various names, and that is – the magic word 'suggestion'. Tarde [1890] calls it 'imitation'; but we cannot help agreeing with a writer who protests that imitation comes under the concept of suggestion, and it is in fact one of its results [R. Brugeilles, *L'essence du phénomene social: la suggestion* (1913)]. Le Bon traces back all the puzzling features of social phenomena to two factors: the mutual suggestion of individuals and the prestige of leaders. But prestige, again, is only recognisable by its

capacity for evoking suggestion.[1]

Whether masses form by imitation or contagion, suggestion always plays the decisive role, and, in Freud's reading, is in turn an effect of prestige. Freud's intention is to snatch this problem from the theory or wizardry of suggestion, so as to locate and solve it on the field of the analysis of the Ego.

Although here we are concerned not with Freud but Tarde, the same tenet is still valid. Tarde himself places 'prestige at the foundation and origins of society'.[2] Well before Max Weber read Rudolph Sohm and, drawing inspiration from the notion of *charis* in early Christianity, coined the concept of charismatic leadership, both Tarde and Le Bon had termed this suggestive force 'prestige'. The leader is first and foremost the subject gifted with prestige, and the hypnotic effects of power originate precisely from his (or her) prestige. When Tarde compares the social man to a sleepwalker, he clarifies that the magnetiser – *meneur* – has no need to terrorise in order to secure passive obedience: his prestige will suffice.

3. Tarde wrote these words in his 1884 essay, 'What is society?' [*Qu'est-ce qu'une sociéte?*], published in Théodol Ribot's *Revue philosophique*. Two years later, the same journal featured one of Henri Bergson's first works, entitled 'On Unconscious Simulation in States of Hypnosis' [*De la simulation incosciente dans l'état d'hypnotisme*], which was devoted not accidentally to the theme of hypnosis. This was by no means a unique case. Tarde himself quotes articles by Charles Féré, Richet and Bertrand, which were also published in the *Revue philosophique* at about the same time. As Pierre Janet later recalled, 'in those years, from 1880 to 1895, there was a lot of discussion about suggestion: all psychology and medicine books were filled with studies on this seductive topic, and the *Index medicus* published every year several thousand articles on hypnotism, suggestion and related problems.'[3]

Janet, Freud's great antagonist, pronounced these words in November 1926, during a conference at the Congress of Psychiatry in Zurich. A few months earlier, Thomas Mann had endured that 'tragic vacation experience' in Forte dei Marmi, Italy that would inspire soon after his famous novella *Mario and the Magician* (written in 1929 and published in 1930). Almost ten years later, in 1935, Hermann Broch started writing his novel,

The Spell (*Die Verzauberung*), that is, *The Spellbinder* (*Der Versucher*).

The idea of the leader as magician, and of political suggestion or prestige, the idea of crowds following their figurehead as if in a state of trance, as Le Bon put it, has thus (if we are to use Walter Benjamin's terminology) a 'pre-history' and an 'after-history' – and, in this Tardian context, we may say a '*histoire future*' (a future history) also.

4. The after-history of this idea in the twentieth century, that is, the popularity of the concept of suggestion in the age of plebiscites, mass media and totalitarianisms, is well known: it is not related only to Freud, of course, but is inevitably affected by Freud.

Recall that Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* was published in 1933. In this famous study, the father of Freudian-Marxism challenged the socio-economic interpretation in favour of a sexual-economic one, revealing a close correspondence between social structure and the individual's psychological structure and thus identifying the generative moment of the totalitarian system in the repression of primary drives [*pulsioni*]. Equally famous is *Crowds and Power* [*Masse und Macht*], Elias Canetti's 'lifework', published in 1960 but first conceived in the early 1920s, when Canetti's long and rather intense dialogue with Le Bon and Freud began.

Canetti had in mind the monumental and incomplete project *Massenwahntheorie*, which his friend and contemporary Broch had committed himself to around 1942. Here, the nineteenth-century idea of the dangerous mob of sleepwalkers is moulded into a new philosophical, Husserlian and Scherlerian form. In 1914, Broch, while attending an event for the proclamation of the Republic in Vienna, felt horrified at the sight of 'the aggregate of mouths, noses and bellies that we call masses.'[4] Later, during his American exile, he studied the crowds of totalitarianism, kept in a sleepwalking state through the 'magic religion of enslavement', and glimpsed a possible escape route in the conversion (*Bekehrung*) to a kind of crepuscular wisdom (that is to a systematic devalorisation of the myths of victory, race, etc.) that would liberate the masses from their leader and, in turn, the individuals from the masses.

These are just some of the most famous works. I don't have space here to elaborate further on this brief

review, nor to dwell on Canetti's discussion of Le Bon's and Tarde's texts (especially the latter's *The Public and the Crowd* [*Le public et la foule*]), nor, earlier still, on Wilhelm Reich, Hermann Broch or, among others, Robert Ezra Park. I will however mention the primary advocate of philosophical anthropology Helmuth Plessner. In 1924, Plessner in his famous study *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism* offers an incisive and acute definition of 'prestige'. The reason why I single this out is because it links prestige to two other terms: security [*sicurezza*] and aura. Prestige, Plessner writes, is what gives power an auratic effect, endowing it with a certain halo, *ambiance* or *Nimbus*. ('*Sicherungweise des Nimbuseffekt ist das Prestige*', or, the nimbus effect is guaranteed by prestige,) But how is this halo or *Nimbus* to be defined? How can we explain, Plessner continues, something that is supposed to exist and be effective, without however being 'there' at all ('*etwas … das da sein und wirken soll, ohne "da" zu sein*').[5]

The term 'prestige', that magic word of mass psychology – and the term 'crowd' itself, as Tarde wrote in 1901, exudes a prestigious attraction – acquires then a precise meaning; it designates a peculiar displacement: it is by withdrawing into a strange 'not here' that something is capable of exerting its power here. A personality becomes prestigious by way of alluding to something elusive, by way of talking about something that is never completely here. It is thanks to such a withdrawal that we have a *Gewalt des Nimbus* (Violence of the Nimbus): that is, the power, authority, force or violence of the aura, or *ambiance*.[6]

5. Prestige: such is the name we give to our illusions, the attribute of what appears to be something that it is not. As Jean Fallot wrote in his critique of science (*Prestiges de la science*, 1960), 'the illusionist with his tricks will make appear a snake where there's only a rope. Certainly, there's something at work behind prestidigitation, only not what one thinks.'[7]

To understand the aura, secret and strength of political prestige, we have therefore to focus on the dark background from which it originates. To understand the currency of prestige and suggestion, we should consider their pre-history. In particular, we should investigate the specific biopolitical and security-obsessed origins of the modern concept of society.

Philosopher Maine de Biran, one of Gabriel Tarde's mentors, wrote in his *Journal* of 1817 (10-18 July): 'In society I am like a sleepwalker'.[8] We should bear in mind that at the time 'electricity', 'magnetism', 'somnambulism' and 'imitation' were all seen as near synonyms, and since the time of Anton Mesmer, with his theories of mesmerism or animal magnetism, these terms had defined a field of hardly distinguishable phenomena which, in the following century, would have been designated by expressions such as 'hypnosis' or 'suggestion'. In 1773, Holbach could say that: 'man in society is electrified'.[9] Earlier still, in 1756, Antonio Genovesi, a Neapolitan author, wrote in his *Economia Civile* that social man is an 'electric being' who acts by imitation and sympathy.[10]

I mentioned above Anton Mesmer. The arc of his life is well-known: the Parisian fame, the stratospheric ascendency and the rapid, at least apparent, fall. In 1784, the Royal Commission, comprising Bailly, Le Roy, Benjamin Franklin and Lavoisier, expressed its famous condemnation of mesmerism. In the proceedings, the scientists maintained that the universal magnetic fluid allegedly discovered by Mesmer in fact did not exist at all, but – they added – the effects of that phantom over the imagination and imitation were nonetheless real, highly contagious and socially harmful. The exercise or rather the monopoly of the forces of suggestion emerged thus as a crucial question, directly affecting the sovereignty and structure of the power system. After all, Mesmer was the first to recognise the role and strength of imagination: meticulously attentive to scenography, he staged his therapy sessions like an actual living theatre, while dedicating his intellectual efforts to the elaboration of a universal 'theory of imitation' [*théorie imitative*] well before Tarde. To understand the aura, secret and strength of prestige, we should therefore ask why and in which way does man 'in society' [*dans la société*] imitate and become electrified by entering into a field of suggestive energy.

6. It is in exactly this same period that the notion of *energy*, as pointed out by Michel Delon, enters the scene, taking on a crucial role in political theory (earlier than in science) and, remarkably, at the same time in art theory and aesthetics as well. Let's consider for instance the entry for 'Expression' in the *Encyclopedie*, which adds something essential to the seventeenth-century

Cartesian dogma of clarity: a good composition, it reads, can endow artistic expression with an 'aesthetic energy that affects understanding and strikes the mind'.[11]

This idea of an energy or electrical-social atmosphere in which art participates by virtue of its capacity to transmit, suggest or arouse feelings and ideas was widespread. Hence, the tendency to privilege both the initial and final stages of the work of art: the fragment or the sketch, namely, the cursory drawing that communicates a force and asks to be completed, awakening an image in the viewer; as well as the ruin, which brings the work of art back to its initial condition of simple outline. An energetic topology of the arts will be developed by Jean-Georg Sulzer: an artwork may surprise or enhance the representative faculty by communicating its own energy to the viewer's mind; another will instead transmit its energy to human passions and moral sentiments, turning feelings into action …

Always already immersed in an energy field, art is then not only useful to politics (as it has been over the centuries) but becomes the preferred testing ground and main paradigm for the exercise of power: in the visual arts and the dramatic arts, as well as in the '*architecture parlante*' [speaking architecture], social energy is in fact harnessed, strengthened and transformed into a flow that is truly capable of liberating actions by working on feelings.

In this respect, we may trace a precise genealogical line of the aesthetic-political notion of 'character'. According to the eighteenth-century definition, character is what ensures consistency between impulse and action. Those who understand character control the play of imagination: they can transmit certain forces to achieve the desired effects. In architecture – as Étienne-Louis Boullé, Le Camus de Mezières and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux teach us – the Ionic order or character, for instance, is congruent with the spirit of a theatre, while both the Corinthian and Ionic order would not be appropriate for the martial character of barracks or the severe austerity of the *barrière*, which require in its place the Tuscan order. It is

clear that such 'consistency' manifests already in itself a precise political tenor (the fact that barracks instill a feeling of reverential respect is of course the result of a long and severe *dressage* [training]).

7. In much the same way that 'from 1880 to 1895, there was a lot of discussion about suggestion', and that, in those same years, the leading eighteenth-century theme of animal magnetism, which had never completely disappeared, once again surged to prominence in the medical and social sciences, so neurologists returned to the problem of character, together with that of habit and automatism, through a perspective which was both original and faithful to the older Enlightenment inheritance.

For the doctor, neurologist or hypnotist, to define a patient's character meant to understand how s/he reacts, what s/he will be able or unable to do, which orders s/he will execute and how; it meant to recognise her/his resistances so to identify a coherent link between impulse and action. Or, in other words, to assert one own's agency and force over the other's inertia, so as to stir and guide her/his actions. Taking up in his own way a commonplace of the then current debate, Tarde described in a similar vein suggestion as the ability to grasp and arouse in the sleepwalker a potential power, which, albeit dormant, has not disappeared.

Right at the end of the century, hypnosis, like the eighteenth-century theories of energy and character, entered fully into the domain of aesthetics, for instance via Bergson in the first chapter of *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1888) and Paul Souriau in *L'hypnotisme et la suggestion dans l'art*, published in 1909 but conceived twenty years earlier. In the moment of suggestion's triumph, the artist's technique itself was seen as a technique of suggestion, an exercise of power whose primary aim is not so much to express feelings but, as Bergson writes, to impress them on us (and 'character' means indeed imprint).[12] Understood in such a way, perhaps the work of art neither opens a world, nor keeps 'the openness of the world open', but at least unlocks the doors of society to those who are fascinated by it. Like Tarde, Bergson was also an admirer of Maine de Biran.

8. What is then society? Modern society, as Foucault taught us, is constituted as a biopolitical apparatus for the control of human life and for the continuous division of such a life between what appears as normal or pathological, safe or dangerous, from the point of view of the state and the government. Biopower ensures, takes responsibility for and takes hold of the living conditions of the population. In taking charge of the population, as Italian authors such as Genovesi, Cesare Beccaria and Jacopo Ortes observe, biopower marks the difference between a 'right population' or 'true population' and a 'false or apparent population', the latter of which will gradually be excluded from the beneficial effects of power so that ultimately its life, to use Foucault's expression, is 'disallow[ed] to the point of death'.[13] 'Right population' designates here a certain standard of living, a certain proportion between number of inhabitants and territory (i.e. the wealth, food provisions and assets available in that territory). Therefore, it is not a fixed group (since these resources may alter, in the same way as climatic conditions, markets or the value of currency also change), but rather a sort of primary density or positive intensity that certainly affects the arrangement of the state while depending on it and being always connected to governmental techniques, balances of power and their constant variation.

To govern [*governare*] means then to engender a certain condition, to induce a certain desirable and safe behaviour by projecting relative fears and insecurity. As the story of mesmerism illustrates, it is clear that the role of imagination and imitation becomes essential to this aim. To govern, as Genovesi argued, does not mean to educate the population by eliminating false myths and errors, but on the contrary to educate them by selecting or even inventing and nurturing useful prejudices, without which 'the beautiful principle of energy would languish' and 'people, families and civil bodies would waste away.'[14]

To govern [*governare*] is thus a truth game that makes the figure of the 'right population' appear by animating the threatening spectre of the 'false or apparent population'. In other words, the primacy of the governmental function lies with the negative polarity: it is poverty that defines wealth, fear that defines security, the false that determines truth; it is pain, as both Genovesi and Verri said, that is the 'mainspring', the 'triggering principle' and 'first motor' of the art of government. If it is true that the government must take responsibility for the living

conditions of the population – as Joseph von Sonnenfels said, resolving a theoretical impasse which had marked the birth of cameralism [*Scienze camerali*] – this does not mean that it must first of all ensure its well-being, but on the contrary that it must work such that the population will desire this. But how to do so? Precisely by exercising the pressure of threat, pain and fear. To govern means to foster a behaviour or form of life congruent with the power of the state under the continuous pressure of a more or less latent threat that of course the state must nurture and control (the monopoly of the government over states of alertness is pivotal to such a system). Such is the principle of the modern security state, which has changed over the centuries, has been updated and refined, so that it still rules us today – as we know first-hand.

If we examine closely eighteenth-century texts, we discover that by conceiving society as an field of energy that develops between the opposites of pleasure and pain or suffering, it was possible to define a 'true', 'right' population – precisely consistent with the government's own aims – and so to draw a division between the right or true population, on the one side, and the false population, on the other. Biopolitical society includes the broad spectrum of the population's ways of life, running the gamut of pleasure and pain, from comfortable to less pleasant conditions. To govern this society means to guide the individual's conduct within a space of freedom defined by the polarity of fear and desire: that is, to ensure that a certain fear arouses a certain desire, and that a desire reveals a definite anxiety, so that, from both the former and the latter, clear tendencies, consistent with the government's own ends, arise. Not only has the happy condition of the state, as is obvious, nothing to do with a general chimerical happiness, but it coincides with a precise and useful individual un-happiness (or in-security) which is constantly nurtured and needs therefore to be carefully defined.

At the risk of going off topic, I stress once again the novelty of this system: whereas, in Hobbes's rigorous theory, the sovereign is the one who offers to his subjects security (which does not exist outside the state), and were he to fail he would cease to be a sovereign, the modern biopolitical system is instead a security-obsessed order – which is interested in the (right) population's conditions of life, and therefore organises schools, builds hospitals, treats newborns, sets urban hygiene regulations, etc. –

and is based on insecurity itself, according to a paradox that is merely apparent. The subject is now inscribed in a relation of sovereignty on the basis of the fear that internally animates his or her security, making the latter unequivocally desirable. As I will attempt to clarify later on, the sovereign in this system will not cease to be such if he fails or is unwilling to ensure the peace and tranquility of his subjects. On the contrary, as is clearly evident today, he may even announce a future of terror (while blatantly arranging the conditions for this prophecy to come true). The war, which Hobbes had placed outside the state, coincides for us with the civic condition itself. We have become so used to applying or enduring such war against civilians that the real fight between soldiers seems a mere pretext or disguise.

9. Let us return to our main theme: to govern is an exercise that develops between the poles of security and insecurity through the control of suggestive drives [*spinte suggestive*]. However, the spectres of pleasure and pain are not themselves imaginary but palpable, imprinted on the same human multitude. Not only will each member of such a multitude – of this field of energy – shift his or her behaviour from one pole to the other, possibly fleeing pain and desiring pleasure, but they will also be electrified in a negative or positive sense (that is, their living conditions will be desirable for some, fearsome for others).

In society, thus, each individual becomes electrified: s/he acquires a certain electrical charge that conditions or leads her or his actions, exerts or suffers a certain attraction, can reject or be rejected. Each individual will be, at the same time, actor in and spectator of a show that features her or his own social galvanising. Simultaneously both magnetiser and magnetised, no one can escape this all-encompassing game or show, not even the rulers. Here – where each subject becomes, in both senses of the word, public – spectacular (or theatrical) and social demeanour [*tenore*], aesthetic and political demeanour cannot be separated.

It is in this fully public dimension, in this electrified atmosphere, that the halo of prestige shines through the ages, from Mesmer to Le Bon. Its effect is powerful and violent, since it is congruent with the action of the security apparatus, with the control and regulation of behaviour, with the brutal partition between right and

false population, between normal and abnormal, with practices of disciplining, exclusion or reclusion of those who are deemed dangerous. This is the violence of the aura or, to use Plessner's expression, the *Gewalt des Nimbus* Plessner's definition is illuminating: the suggestive or electrical-social force derives from a certain lack, from the happiness we do not have but nonetheless believe in under the pressure of our current malaise, from the insecurity which defines security as such, in other words from what is 'not here', from the potential fears that make us accept the current situation, from the evident threat and possible evil that make a living condition appear comfortable. 'Here', then, spontaneous ideas and actions do not exist, but only, in Tarde's own words, suggested ideas and actions.

10. The eighteen-century theory of characters, as we saw, was meant to establish a coherence between impulse and action: it turned buildings into speaking architecture, so that a church or courthouse would not provoke hilarity or derision. However, when centres of suggestion [*centri di suggestione*] multiplied and disseminated amongst the population itself, the definition of character became a never-ending task, whose peculiar difficulties would remain for a long time puzzling, unanswered even in the following age by the luminaries of a new science or in the pages of the *Revue philosophique*. Meanwhile society tendentially transformed itself into an utterly messy field of suggestive effects, in which everyone is subject to an indefinite number of attractions and repulsions: a simple aggregate of strangers and rivals that risks encroaching upon the domain of the 'right' population. The contagious power of imitation and the pervasive force of imagination therefore had to, once again, be brought back to order. The elemental partitions of pleasure/pain, normal/abnormal, true/false population remained an active paradigm but required a second model to back it up. To master the game of power, it was necessary to identify its regulatory postulate, its principle of intelligibility. Class division is the principle of intelligibility of biopower as a suggestive and electrifying power.

Let us focus on the term 'class' and its modern history. Introduced by so-called economists or physiocrats such as Mirabeau and Quesnay in the dictionary of the art of government in the 1760s and 1770s, it played a precise and indispensable function in their system. It

is thanks to this concept that the phenomenon of 'population' could be grasped as a 'natural' element in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, that is, in Foucault's words, as 'accessible to agents and techniques of transformation … [that] are at once enlightened, reflected, analytical, calculated and calculating.'[15] Any governmental venture, as well as any political economy, could then fashion and refashion itself precisely on the basis of such an effect of naturalness.

Marie-France Piguet has traced the physiocratic origin of the concept of *class*, which Joseph A. Schumpeter had already pointed to in his *History of Economic Analysis* (1954).[16] One should only add to this that the innovation introduced by the *économistes* was combined with a dynamism, an instability to which we are now fully accustomed. The government of such a class society and the achievement of its perfect balance involve a constant and gradual process of adjustment. The new concept of class is thus flanked by the idea of *civilisation*, another concept coined in the physiocratic forge. Regarding the concept of civilisation, as we know, a glorious tradition of studies exists: from the first essays by Joachim Moras, Lucien Febvre, Marcel Mauss, Émile Tonnelat, Alfredo Niceforo, Louis Weber (1930), to the equally famous contribution by Émile Benveniste (1954) and the opening chapter of Jean Starobinski's book *Blessings in Disguise, or, the Morality of Evil* [*Le remède dans le mal*].[17] What is important for the purpose of our discussion is the fact that the word *civilisation* – whose suffix -*isation* (as demonstrated by Benveniste) expresses the idea of movement, the slow advance of education and progress – conjures up the division of society into classes: indeed, the two are mutually embroiled.

Merged into an indistinguishable hendiadys, civilisation (or education) and classification provide thus the ordering principle for the play of imagination. The biopolitical system for partitioning (into true and false, normal and abnormal) and classifying the population can thus be defined, using Carl Schmitt's expression, as an immense psychotechnical apparatus of mass suggestion. The most cogent articulation of such a deceptive, spectacular and theatrical aspect can be found in Marx, when he explains how in a class society men and things become character masks (*Charaktermasken*) of power relations.

11. The object of the art of government is now the 'right' population as divided and orderly. It is a historical-natural being provided with an internal dynamic – the antagonism, the class struggle that, as Marx learned from Guizot, animates civilisation – endowed with a principle that turns it from a lifeless entity into a living being, into shimmering, excitable movement, able to react to certain prods, which can be corrected or balanced over time. What happens then to the 'false' or 'apparent' population? In the context of a conventional society organised into classes, and of the process of civilisation, what is properly abnormal or pathological?

What is considered socially abnormal – or 'false', 'apparent' – is that phenomenon or being that upsets and interrupts the regular progress of educational time, that muddles any partition or class division: a being whose appearance coincides with the instantaneous and violent suspension of the normal time of civilisation.

Half a century separates Guizot's *General History of Civilisation in Europe* from Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Half a century had to pass before the biopolitical theory of class divisions and civilisation developed its particular counterpart in the visions of Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde or Scipio Sighele: that is, the theory of the dangerous and criminal crowd, of the collective and irresistible suggestion, of the heterogeneous – that is, unclassifiable – crowd that forms and spreads at once by a simple contagion, which is as powerful as it is sudden. A much older figure, the dissolved multitude that Hobbes excluded from the state, now seems to reappear within society wreaking havoc on the orderly process and design of *civilisation*.

However, we should clarify that the crowd – this primary, feral, heterogenous, instinctive entity – is both the *enemy and specific product* of the same apparatus of classification of the social body. The suggestive drives [*tensioni suggestice*], in fact, prove to be irreducible because precisely the classification of individuals, which should limit them, produces their peculiar effects: material effects, to be sure, and therefore, in turn, suggestive. There is then a continuous excess of suggestion, which, sooner or later, will result in a dangerous eruption, a convulsive mass crisis.

It follows from this that to govern, at a deeper level, means also to stir up the masses, to provoke them at the right time, to trigger riots before their uncontrollable outbreak, or, better still, if possible, to keep the crowds in a state of vulnerability and frightened paralysis. In short, it is a matter of promptness and good timing; a technique of infiltration and a management of fears and worries, which, however, does not avoid but rather promotes the spread of terror. Constitutively unable to exclude the latter, biopower must necessarily attest to a phenomenon of hallucinatory paroxysm. Yet, it is certain that this new exercise will in turn spin out of control and that the development of biopolitical rule or civilisation will wrap itself into an endless spiral.

As Hermann Broch clarified, it is a question of directing the madness of the crowds, that is, of stabilising it, however tragically paradoxical this task may seem. It's a question of building a State on the 'movement' (*Bewegung*) of the crowd, by perpetuating – in the form of a mandatory rally [*adunata obbligatoria*] – that crucial moment when the crowd comes to life. In other words, the structure of government has to be adjusted on the basis of such an elusive object, so as to maintain class divisions in spite of everything.

Although its signs have long been evident, this epochal shift can only be as sudden, instinctive and violent as the crowd itself. Le Bon's book becomes thus the guiding text, while the figure of the ruler comes to coincide with that of the star or leader of a multitude of passive followers [*una moltitudine gregaria*]. With the advent of totalitarian regimes, the abrupt leap from the eighteenth-century prehistory to the post-history of suggestion takes place, and, I would add, this post-history is not confined only to the twentieth century.

12. In order not to remain at the level of suggested opinion, however, it is necessary to openly ask the question: is this figure still relevant today? Or, more pessimistically, we could ask: did we ever come out of this end of century nightmare? Did we rid ourselves of the appeal of the twentieth century?

One may observe that even the way out of a nightmare can be in fact just a stage of the dream. It should be clear by now that the appearance of the crowd is internal to biopower's spectacle of suggestion. This means that the crowd appears first of all to itself, its criminal sneer and frightened wince, as belonging to the same face; the expression 'fear of the crowd' should be read in both the two senses of the genitive as the fear that the crowd feels towards itself. Such a 'product', therefore, stands at the centre of the system endowed with a constitutive power: that is, the image of the 'right' population – namely, the non-pathological incarnation of a mass with diametrically opposed, positive and desirable attributes – is produced by a specific and positive projection of the crowd.

Gabriel Tarde himself, who had stared intently at the face of the stupid and dangerous multitude, unified through immediate contact and lacking the ability to invent, would envision (in 'The Public and the Crowd') the image of a spiritualised mass, that is, of a *public* that instead communicates at a distance and is therefore, unlike the *foule*, intelligent and capable of invention. In a host of popular, lowbrow publications by minor authors issued at the start of the twentieth century, the nightmare could tip over into a mirage: 'Goodness is a crowd-process', one could read for instance in a sociologically-inspired best-seller released in the United States in 1913. It is well known that the idea of the democratic and inventive power of the multitude is a long-lasting myth. Indeed, it would be straightforward even to interpret the great spectacular and psychotechnical apparatus put in place in the twentieth century and never so much developed as in our day – the apparatus that invests and controls the entire social dimension – as a set of devices able to put us in contact and keep us in touch, each time connecting the Tardian figure of the public to that of the crowd at the precise moment in which it pretends or at least promises, according to a specular dynamic, to turn the crowd into a public.

Thus, the true question is: can we overcome the biopolitical magic of prestige? That is: are we able to disarticulate and block the apparatus of suggestive classifications?

13. The (right, true) population was a 'natural' element for the physiocratic authors. The crowd, on the other hand, 'really is a spectacle of nature [*Naturspiel*] – if one may apply the term to social conditions.'[18] These words by Walter Benjamin can be found in his 1938 essay 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire'. In a famous letter, written two years earlier on the 18th of March 1936, Theodor W. Adorno presented a number of rather harsh critiques concerning Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility'. Yet, Adorno added: 'I cannot conclude, however, without telling you that your few sentences about the disintegration (*Desintegration*) of the proletariat as "masses" ("*Masse*") through revolution are among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory that I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*.'[19] It is in these sentences written by Benjamin (in fact a long footnote), and so admired by Adorno, that we can discover that second, new meaning of the term 'class' at which I hinted at the start.

'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility', as is well known, concerns the decline of aura (or *nimbus*). In this essay, Benjamin, in order to define the revolutionary class, does not refer in the first place to the domain of Marxist studies but, in what may seem a curious move, to the authors of nineteenth-century social psychology. He explains that the model of this crowd described by mass psychology is the multitude of customers randomly gathered by the market: a simple aggregate of individuals, namely consumers, who have nothing in common but the fact of all being animated by their own private interests. It is precisely these heterogenous, unruly masses that the totalitarian state forges into a 'people's community' [*Volksgemeinschaft*], by offering each individual a way to rationalise in terms of race, blood and soil the disturbing randomness that brings them together, and at the same time providing them with a reliable leader, a spellbinder to follow. The specific 'performance' (*Leistung*) of such a political leader, as Benjamin elaborates, is the same as that of a movie star: both must feel comfortable before a camera, remain there to be admired by others, win over the crowds by

steering the suggestive drives [*le spinte suggestive*] in a precise direction.

For this reason, a revolutionary politics – that is, a specifically non-fascist politics – for Benjamin, consists in an opposite technique, capable of destroying the aura of the leader by loosening the bonds of suggestion. Revolutionary is she who succeeds in not being a leader, not pulling along the crowd, even if again and again she loses herself in the masses. Alien both to the cult of the star and its correlate, the cult of the masses, revolutionary politics is thus an anti-suggestive technique. Once again, as logic suggests, the arts, that is, cinema and earlier still theatre, will be the battlefield and field of experimentation of such a technique. Brecht's epic theatre, as is widely known, was central to Benjamin's thought in this period.

What is then the revolutionary class? It is an *Auflockerung*, Benjamin says, a loosening up of the tensions that excite the crowd, made possible by solidarity. The best definition of this loosening up (and thus of solidarity) can be found in his writings on Brecht's theatre.

As Benjamin explains, when the director of epic drama stages a renowned story, he *loosens* its links, its internal and customary connections, just like the dance teacher loosens the dancers' joints to make them perform unimaginable pirouettes. Where spectators of classical theatre – who follow the unfolding of events on stage in an almost hypnotic state – would expect a plot twist, there epic drama interrupts the representation, exposing the story to detached examination and discussion. By loosening and dissolving with the aid of critique dramatic suspense, epic drama shows how nothing is predetermined and how everything could have gone otherwise. Even the theatre audience, then, changes, or rather loosens itself in turn; it is transformed from a reactive crowd in thrall to the actor into a plurality, both relaxed and active, of collaborators aware of their social situation: that is, it becomes class. This is the new meaning of the word that, as I said earlier, can slip into the space between 'masses' and 'suggestion': a meaning which is no longer biopolitical and which emerges where the aura and prestige of the star is dissolved.

As Benjamin taught us, politics is a technique: modelled after the example of Brechtian theatre, it becomes capable of a revolutionary operation (*Leistung*), by virtue of which the masses neither recognise nor follow any leader. In fact, there can be no leader, magician, or spellbinder with the act of loosening up: no psychosomatic subject is allowed to fashion itself as the centre of attraction.

14. Still caught under the spell of 'prestige', Tarde may surely appear very distant from this perspective. But one must be fair to Tarde. At the start, I quoted Freud and, I think, it was precisely Freud who understood the key aspect of Tarde's thought when he compared the author of *The Laws of Imitation* to Hippolyte Bernheim, as the one who had converted and developed into a political and social key the theory of suggestion.

It is well known that the birth of psychotherapy was marked by the controversy, about a decade long, between the Paris school, or school of the Salpêtrière, and the Nancy school; that is, between the theory of suggestion and the theory of hypnotism, between the method of Bernheim and that of Jean-Martin Charcot. The latter had built his scientific paradigm on the neat partition between wake and sleep, or – to put it in classical, Aristotelian terms – between activity and passivity; so that, at the Salpêtrière, the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria were articulated, consistently, on the hierarchical division of roles: the doctor's role (healthy, male) who acts (awake) and commands, and the patient's role (hysterical and, therefore, female) who takes orders (passively, that is, in a state of sleep).

Bernheim's hypothesis unsettled this system. In Nancy, suggestion served as an explanation for everything, while hypnosis was considered only a special case of a relationship that existed even during the waking state. Any partition between activity and passivity had to falter, while the relationship between doctor and patient was revealed to be a mutual and complex game of suggestion and counter-suggestion.

These two positions were so diametrically opposed and conflictual that a fierce battle (fought with no holds barred, especially by Charcot's clique) was inevitable. This battle was long indeed, and would become even harsher after the publication in 1886 (again in the *Revue philosophique*) of Joseph Delboeuf's essay 'De l'influence

de l'imitation et de l'éducation dans le somnambulisme provoqué' [On the influence of imitation and education in induced somnambulism]. This is a dispassionate but all the more merciless analysis of Charcot's laboratory, which appears here, in some ways, very similar to that of a sideshow hypnotist. In Delboeuf's eyes, the Salpêtrière was after all only a theatre where hysteria was staged according to a technique very close to that used, for instance, by the magnetiser Donato: a suggestive technique, based on imitation (the young patients witnessed the crisis of their older peers) that produced the canon of hysteria by projecting onto the scene the masks of the doctor and the patient, the healthy man and sick woman.

Delboeuf was close to Bernheim, and Tarde was Delboeuf's friend. But what was Tarde's position exactly? Certainly, he was not a partisan; but his position was not ambiguous either, and over the years it became clearer and more explicit. In 1890, in a footnote to *The Laws of Imitation*, he claimed for instance to have introduced six years earlier 'the idea of a universal social suggestion, an idea which has since been so strongly emphasised by Bernheim and others'.[20] In 1893, in the pages of *Monadology and Sociology*, once again raising the question 'What is a society?' that he had already asked in 1884, Tarde replied that it is 'each individual's reciprocal possession … of every other'.[21] Even though the first fascination, which establishes a relationship with the 'vital element', is unilateral, this later develops and is socially diluted into universal possession or reciprocal imitation. This means that the centre of attraction of imitation (what Tarde calls 'genius'), despite appearances, can never be reduced to the circumscribed identity of a psychosomatic individual. Since society encompasses everything, this very identity is already caught in the game of imitations and differences.

In the context of universal suggestion, 'to exist is to differ', or, to use a lesser-known formula (drawn from the notes for '*Essentiel pour les bases du système*']), in society 'at all times I differ from myself and I will never be again the self that I am right now'.[22] This entails that prestige, in Tarde's use of the term, exceeds the Ego's individuality, and is not consistent with the definition of the subject (through character) but rather with the radical removal of the subject from any stability. In this sense, prestige is not a magic trick that exchanges the 'here' with the 'not-here' through the action of the latter on the former,

because everything differs and nothing and nobody is here any longer.

The critique of biopower (which is, I would say, the true critique of the crowd) is a critique of the principles of the art of government – such as the partition between right and false population, and divisions into classes – which are principles of intelligibility (or truth), stabilisation models, control systems, at times violent, with imponderable and even more pernicious effects. We should recognise that this critique involves the destruction (or loosening) of the subject's unity or identity,[23] and therefore can only move forward along the path of universal imitation and reciprocal possession, following the sign laid out by Tarde, Delbouef and Berhheim: everything is suggestion.

Translated by Elisa Adami

Andrea Cavalletti is Professor of Aesthetics and Contemporary Literature at the IUAV University of Venice. He is the author of Class *(Seagull Books, 2019), as well as of* Suggestione *(2011) and* La città biopolitica *(2005).*

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1945), 34.

2. Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie Clews Parsons (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903), 79.

3. Pierre Janet, 'Rapport sur la suggestion (présenté au Congrès de psychiatrie de Zurich le 27 novembre 1926)', in *Archives Suisses de Neurologie et de Psychiatrie* (Archiv für Neurologie und Psychiatrie) 20:5 (1927), 5.

4. Hermann Broch, *Die Straße* (December 1918), in *Briefe 1913-1938*, KW 13/1, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankftur a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), 31.

5. Helmuth Plessner, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. Andrew Wallace (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), 135.

6. I will not expand on the internal displacement of the expression *Dasein* in Plessner's text, nor on the implicit deductions that we could draw from it with regards to the relationship between the *Nimbuseffekt* and Husserl's concept of *Erlebnis* or Heidegger's idea of *Faktizität*.

7. Jean Fallot, *Prestiges de la science* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1960), 11.

8. Maine de Biran, *Journal, II, 1er 1817- 17 mai 1819*, ed. Henri Gouhier (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1955), 55.

9. Paul Heinrich Thiry (Baron) d'Holbach, *Système social, ou, principes naturels de la morale et de la politique*, tome premier (London: 1773), 204.

10. Antonio Genovesi, *Lezioni di commercio o sia d'economia civile*, I (Napoli: Fratelli Simone, 1765), chap. 2 & 6, 41.

11. Michel Delon, *L'idée d'énergie au tournant des Lumières (1770-1820)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 109.

12. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 51.

13. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 138.

14. Genovesi, *Lezioni di commercio o sia d'economia civile*, I, Chap. 2 & 10, 44

15. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977–78*, trans. G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 71.

16. Marie-France Piguet, *Classe: Histoire du mot et genèse du concept des Physiocrates aux Historiens de la Restauration* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1996); Joseph A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

17. Émile Benveniste, 'Civilisation: A Contribution to the History of the Word', in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971); Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise, or, the Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

18. Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', trans. Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 36.

19. Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 126.

20. Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 76.

21. Gabriel Tarde, *Monadology and Sociology*, trans. Theo Lorenc (Melbourne: re.press, 2012), 51.

22. '*Je différe à chaque instant de moi-même. Je n'ai été, ni ne serai jamais le moi que je suis en ce moment*', in Gabriel Tarde, *Essentiel pour les bases du système* (1873-79), Juillet 1878, ed. Filippo Domenicali, *I castelli di Yale* I:2 (2013), 351.

23. Benjamin introduced the concept of a 'loosening of the self (*Lockerung des Ich*)' in his 1929 essay on Surrealism. See Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings and G. Smith (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 207–221.