

# Gustave Le Bon

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Translated by Matthew Peters

Gustave Le Bon

*Psychologie des foules* [*The Crowd*]

Paris: PUF, 1971

“The crowd is always *intellectually* inferior to the isolated individual, but from the point of view of feelings and of the acts these feelings provoke, the crowd may, according to circumstances, be better or worse than the individual. Everything depends on the nature of the suggestion to which the crowd is exposed.”

This diagnosis was made by a man of imposing stature and an ironic and severe appearance, a slightly haughty face, an immense forehead, piercing eyes, and an old-fashioned beard evoking the gods of the Renaissance. He was named Gustave Le Bon. He was born in 1841 at Nogent-le-Rotrou.

Descended from a family of soldiers and magistrates, of Bourguignon and Breton ancestry, Gustave Le Bon was a friend of Théodule Ribot (*Les maladies de la personnalité* [*Diseases of Personality*]) and Henri Poincaré (*La science et l'hypothèse* [*Science and Hypothesis*]). His body of work, which is one of the most important in the last two centuries, is dominated by two titles: *Psychologie des foules* (*The Crowd*, 1895) and *L'évolution de la matière* (*The Evolution of Matter*, 1905).

An indefatigable traveler, it was his accounts of his first expeditions (to North Africa, India, and Nepal) that first attracted attention to him. “The point that has remained most clearly fixed in my mind,” he wrote in *Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (Félix Alcan, 1894), “is that each people possesses a mental constitution as fixed as its anatomical characteristics, a constitution which is the source of its sentiments, thoughts, institutions, beliefs, and arts.”

A forerunner of social psychology, he was interested as much in ethnography as in anthropology, sociology, the philosophy of history, physics, biology, the history of civilizations and political doctrines, cartography, and even the psychology of horses and horse riding!

A man of science, living alone in his laboratory, in 1878 he invented the first clock that could rewind itself through daily variations in temperature. Shortly after, he proved the existence of radioactivity. Long before Einstein, he demonstrated the falsity of the dogma of the indestructibility of matter by establishing that matter and energy are just one and the same thing under different aspects (*Mémoires de physique*, *L'évolution de la matière*, *La naissance et l'évanouissement de la matière*).

In 1902, he founded the famous Bibliothèque de philosophe scientifique (Library of Scientific Philosophy), an imprint still published today by Flammarion.

Dedicated to Théodule Ribot, *The Crowd* both established its author and all but gave rise to a new field of study. By 1929, the book was in its 37th printing. The central idea of *The Crowd* is that the individual becomes another person upon joining a crowd, a “cell” whose behavior ceases to be autonomous and who subordinates himself more or less fully to the group, whether permanent or temporary, of which he is one of the constituents.

### The “Mental Unity of Crowds”

In a largely uninteresting Preface, Otto Klineberg, a professor at the Sorbonne, recalls one of the essential principles of the psychology of the form (*Gestalttheorie*): the whole is *more* than the simple sum of its parts.

As with the theory of wholes, the crowd is therefore more than the mere addition of the individuals of which it consists. “It is for these reasons,” writes Le Bon, “that juries are seen to deliver verdicts of which each individual juror would disapprove, that parliamentary assemblies adopt laws and measures of which each of their members would disapprove in his own person. Taken separately, the men of the Convention were bourgeoisie of peaceful habits. United in a crowd, they did not hesitate, under the influence of some leaders, to send the most manifestly innocent people to the guillotine.”

Suggestion becomes exaggerated by being reciprocated. The criminal crowd that murdered de Launay, the governor of the Bastille, on July 14, 1789, consisted largely of idle onlookers, shopkeepers, and artisans. Likewise the butchers of Saint Bartholomew’s Day and the Wars of Religion, the “*tricoteuses*” of 1793, the Communards, etc.

The same excesses could also be observed on the other side: “The renunciation of all its privileges which the nobility voted for on the celebrated night of August 4, 1789, would have never been accepted by any of its members taken in isolation.”

One can therefore state a “law of the mental unity of crowds,” characterized by “the disappearance of conscious personality and the orientation of feelings and thoughts in the same direction.” “We have entered the era of crowds,” writes Le Bon, who emphasizes the consequences of the (legal) irruption of the masses into political life. With disturbing consequences—if it is true that “crowds having no power other than that for destruction, their domination always represents a period of disorder.”

Baron Motono, a former Japanese minister for foreign affairs who translated *The Crowd* into Japanese, wrote: “With the progress of civilization, the races, just like the individuals of each race, tend to become increasingly differentiated. It is therefore not towards equality that humanity advances, but rather towards a progressive inequality” (*L’œuvre de Gustave Le Bon*, Flammarion, 1914).

Le Bon himself also believed that “the racial factor must be placed above all others, for on its own it is much more important than all the others in determining the ideas and beliefs of crowds.”

This explains why the traits of character manifested by crowds, being ruled by the unconscious, are “possessed by the majority of the normal individuals of a race in much the same degree.” The “psychological crowd” thus acts to reveal the *collective soul*, in the sense of Jung: “The

heterogeneous is swamped by the homogeneous, and the unconscious qualities predominate.”

Which goes to explain the short-range quality of mass action: “The decisions of a general nature made by an assembly of distinguished men, but of different specialties, are not sensibly superior to the decisions that would be made by a meeting of imbeciles. They can only assemble, in fact, those mediocre qualities that everyone possesses. Crowds accumulate, not intelligence, but mediocrity.”

Traditions guide the people. Only the exterior *forms* of traditions are modified, which gives the illusion of societies breaking with their past. “A Latin crowd,” notes Le Bon, “however revolutionary or however conservative it be supposed, will invariably appeal to the state to realize its demands. It is always distinguished by a marked tendency towards centralization and by a leaning, more or less pronounced, in favor of a dictatorship. An English or an American crowd, on the contrary, sets no store on the state, and appeals only to private initiative. A French crowd lays particular weight on equality and an English crowd on liberty. These differences of race explain how it is that there are almost as many different kinds of crowds as there are nations.”

Le Bon adds: “The ensemble of common characteristics imposed by environment and heredity on all the individuals of a people constitute the *soul* of this people.”

Crowds are also intolerant and “feminine” (“but the most feminine of all,” says Le Bon, “are Latin crowds”). Among them, instinct almost always prevails over reason. Inclined towards simple-mindedness, to excessive judgments, they do not tolerate contradictions. “Always ready to rise up against a weak authority, they bow down with servility before a strong authority.”

### **Men of Action**

To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know the art of governing them. “It is always the marvelous and legendary side of events that most especially strikes crowds. Moreover, all the great statesmen of every age and every country, including the most absolute despots, have regarded the popular imagination as the basis of their power.”

Napoleon said to the Council of State: “It was by becoming a Catholic that I ended the Vendéan War; by becoming a Muslim that I established myself in Egypt; by becoming an Ultramontane that I won over the priests in Italy.”

“Man can generally do more than he believes, but he does not always know what he can do” (*Hier et demain*). The leaders of crowds reveal this to him. The leaders of crowds are not men of thought, but men of *action*. They have more energy than pure intelligence. Their ascendancy takes the form of a grand design that catalyzes wills and orients instincts.

Simple ideas make the conquests of crowds easier, above all ideas that are rich in *promises*, among which Le Bon cites “the Christian ideas of the Middle Ages, the democratic ideas of the last century, the socialist ideas of today.”

Georges Sorel, the author of *Réflexions sur la violence* [*Reflections on Violence*], wrote: “If psychology someday succeeds, among us, in being annexed to the domain of knowledge that a man must possess to have the right to call himself truly cultivated, we will owe the result to the

persevering efforts of Gustave Le Bon.”

*The Crowd* has been translated into a dozen languages, including Russian, Turkish, Japanese, and Arabic. Heralding the great revolutionary convulsions of the present century, indeed the most recent developments of psychological warfare, it was in the 1920s the bedside reading of officers of the École supérieure de guerre, and among them, in 1922, the young Captain de Gaulle. Durkheimian obscurantism, which has since oppressed French sociology, has been unable to conceal its importance.

The book is 82 years old. It has not aged a day.

**Note:**

The only book on Gustave Le Bon published since the Second World War is that of Robert Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage Publications, 1975). Although it is almost exclusively focused on the political aspect of Le Bon’s work, it contains a significant number of hitherto unknown details. Its author, a history professor at the University of Oklahoma, gives us more than a study of Le Bon, for he has also investigated the individuals who knew Le Bon during his lifetime.

In 1976, a Society of the Friends of Gustave Le Bon (Société des amis de Gustave Le Bon) was founded on the initiative of Pierre Duverger (34 rue Gabrielle, 75018 Paris). Chaired by Jacques Benoist-Méchin, it proposes to reprint four books by Le Bon: *Psychologie de socialisme*, *Les lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples*, *Les opinions et les croyances*, and *Psychologie de l’éducation*.

Source: Alain de Benoist, *Vu de droite: anthologie critique des idées contemporaines* (Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 2001 [1977]), pp. 282–284.