

Andrea Mubi Brighenti

**Christian Borch, The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 338 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/38276)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2012

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 338 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/38276

In this authoritative, extremely learned and well organized book, Christian Borch, who is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Copenhagen Business School, traces the development of a specific ‘crowd semantics’ that cuts across the history of sociology since its inception. Interestingly, the cradle of the discipline of sociology can be located in the late-nineteenth century debate on crowds and imitative behavior, but sociology institutionalized itself by precisely shutting the crowds out of its jurisdiction. Indeed, while crowds were feared by most observers because of their unruliness, classical sociologists simultaneously introduced a principle of organization at the heart of all social formations that, in a way, neutralized the spirit of crowds. By doing so, a large part of the unsettling questions concerning the ‘phase transitions’ of social multiplicities – e.g., how and why at demonstrations, rallies etc. events ‘precipitate’? – was conventionally bypassed. In other words, the unruliness of crowds is not only a political, but also an epistemological problem – better, it is the point where epistemology and politics meet. Once framed in this way, it is evident that the question concerning this point of convergence cannot be dispensed and must be addressed again today.

In *The Politics of Crowds* Christian Borch makes a powerful argument that, despite their being increasingly marginalized or reconfigured, crowds have remained as sort of indelible residuum of all sociological theories and categories that form the backbone of twentieth-century sociological lexicon. Across the twentieth century, the study of collective behavior, research on revolutionary events and urban unrests, theories of authority and social influence, analyses of mass culture and the mass media – including propaganda, advertisement and public opinion – all bring the imprint of the haunting ghost of crowds. As the subtitle of the book suggests, to trace crowds thus amounts to draw ‘an alternative history of sociology’.

By explicitly defining his inquiry as a study in ‘crowd semantics’ – where semantics is understood, following Luhmann, as the ensemble of notions through which society’s self-description unfolds – Borch’s book presents itself as a cultural history of the twin notions of crowd and mass throughout the twentieth century, as they feature in the writing of a broad spectrum of social theorists. Adopting this framework, Borch explicitly eschews making any direct epistemological assertion concerning the actual nature of crowds themselves. Consequently his contribution should also be contextualized in a Foucauldian ‘history of discourses’ approach that aims at capturing the general *problématique* of the crowd and the multifarious theorizations that approached it as ‘the dark side of modern society’. One cannot but appreciate how the author sets a enlarged horizon for such inquiry: not confining himself to tackle the appearances and reappearances of the tag ‘crowd’ across a variety of works, Borch genealogically interrogates the politics of definition that is at play each time a certain given social multiplicity is labeled in a certain way, unearthing a number of ‘embedded normativities’ theories inevitably carry with them.

Thanks to the richness of sources and the breadth of exploration, the book provides an encompassing map to the metamorphoses of an ‘haunting question’ over the last century. As the study proceeds, the reader increasingly realizes how fundamental issues of social order, identity, and power, as well as the relation between the social and the political, are all inextricably ingrained in the crowds/masses nexus and the discourses constituting that nexus.

Beginning his exploration from the late nineteenth century onwards, the author systematically maps the copious analyses of crowds that have appeared in a number of crucial arenas: turn-of-the-century France, where, in critical dialogue with crowd psychology as epitomized by Le Bon (chapter 1) the Tarde/Durkheim debate led to the foundation of French sociology (chapter 2); Weimar Germany, where Geiger’s contribution led to a rationalized account of crowd mobilizations (chapter 3); early twentieth century USA, where the liberal and democratic attitudes towards urban crowds expressed by the Chicago School were counter-balanced by a new thread of reflections on the mass media and the power of propaganda (chapter 4); Europe in the 1930s-1950s, where the theories by authors as diverse as Ortega y Gasset, Mannheim, Gehlen, Reich, Broch, and Frankfurt School authors, provided a number of attempts to think the power of the elites in a mass society, as well as the relationship between totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and mass culture (chapter 5 and 6); 1960s-1960s European culmination (Canetti) and simultaneous American dissolution (Berk) of crowd theory, whereby, while the former author was forging an in-depth phenomenology of crowds with previously unknown terminology, the latter was attempting to reduce all forms of collective behavior to individual rational action (chapter 7); and finally, the 1970s-2000s global debate on the nemesis of crowds, ranging from Baudrillard’s ‘silent majorities’, through Maffesoli’s ‘neo-tribes’, to Hardt and Negri’s ‘multitudes’ (chapter 8).

The book masterfully shows how disciplinary boundaries are not as important as are the visible and invisible *circulations* of ideas and discourses, the alternative appreciations and deprecations of crowds and masses that have been expressed in not only sociology, but also psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, criminology, philosophy, history, literary essays, cultural and media studies, social movement studies, urban studies etc. Since when Gustave Le Bon first prophesized a coming age of crowds in 1895, the image of the collective social subject has been continuously transcribed, reworked and reformulated into a number of accompanying *doppelgängers*, including publics, audiences, classes, masses, social movements etc., each endowed with its specific virtues, excesses and aberrations. So, during the course of the twentieth century, at least up until the 1970s, increasingly mediated crowds turned into, on the one hand, publics, seen as indefatigable producers of opinion, and, on the other, masses, seen as a sort of passive pole produced by the crisis of traditional class experience and the quantitative expansion of the so-called ‘middle’ middle classes employed in large bureaucratic – and bureaucratized – organizations.

Two axes, in particular, may help in the task of following the ramifications these ideas assumed: on the one hand, the axis ‘inside *vs* outside the individual’, on the other, the axis ‘self- *vs* other-organized multiplicities’. As concerns the first axis, crowds intuitively appear at first sight as social entities that surround the individual from the outside.

But, as late-nineteenth-century authors began to zoom into the social, physical and psychological dynamics and processes that are inherent in them, they increasingly came to utilize a lexicon of contagion, hypnotism, somnambulism and imitation. This view found a culminating point in Freud's assertion that 'the masses are the unconscious'. When the many began to be seen as located not only around the one but also inside it, the image of the mass assumed upon itself the role of explaining modern anomia, loneliness and even repression, as in Reich's notion of mass psychological structure. Adorno and the other critical theorists at the Frankfurt School then specialized in merciless analyses of the hollowing out of the individual carried out by mass cultural industry. In turn, such shapelessness of the masses culminates in postmodern interpretations that dissolve and resolve them into pure simulacra and discursive effects, as in Baudrillard – thus inherently neutralizing the political significance of the many. On the other hand, hyper-rationalizing approaches to collective behavior, such as Berk's game theory application, transformed the tension between the two poles 'inside vs. outside the individual' by radically eliminating both of them and placing a mono-dimensional model of rational individual as the only explanatory variable of social action.

The second axis is significantly related to the first one. Earlier observers described crowds as utterly lacking discipline. Clearly, such unruliness of crowds was employed as a call for a stronger leadership. French conservative historians such as Taine feared crowds as revolutionary actors, but, not much later, crowd psychologists established that crowd were in fact deeply conservative – provided that they had a chance to be given a suitable *meneur*. The strength of crowds was identified in their being passionate, but passions were said to lead at most to riots, not veritable revolutions. Yet it was in order to take advantage of the power of passionate crowds that mass political parties – first those of socialist and popular persuasion, then those subscribing to the totalitarian credo – set for themselves the task of organizing the disorganized masses. And the task was crucially pursued through not only party politics, but also movement politics, as highlighted by Arendt. *Mobilization* became the key term, as Sorel's theory of the revolutionary *myth* already revealed. This way propaganda came to represent an essential political resource and a veritable weapon in the war of opinions, as well as, inevitably, that other war of facts that was WWII. In post-totalitarian times, the hetero-normativity of masses was described by Riesman as corresponding to the personality type of modern times, but in the meantime the new horizon for settling the issue of the passivity and gullibility of the masses turned out to be a-political consumerism, epitomized by Debord's notion of consumption of pure spectacles. Side by side with these views, however, an alternative hypothesis persisted, one that continued to reclaim the auto-normativity of crowds. The self-normative view is perhaps best embodied by Canetti, who theorized a crowd without leaders. Such a crowd, he claimed, was the figure which embodied no less than the experience of human equality. The idea of a self-organizing capacity that is present in the many partly resonates with social movements studies from the 1960s onwards and is still echoed, for instance, by today's Occupy movements' theorists.

As *The Politics of Crowds* usefully reveals the persistent and hidden presence of crowd in social theory and the tensions that are intrinsic in such uncomfortable presence, one cannot but concur with its author in his final call: 'let the spectre of crowds

*Brighenti*

once again haunt sociological thought!'. In short, this almost amounts to a renewal of sociology's own program.

*Andrea Mubi Brighenti*  
University of Trento