

Contemporary understanding of riots: classical crowd psychology, ideology and the social identity approach.

Abstract

This paper explores the origins and ideology of classical crowd psychology, a body of theory reflected in contemporary popularised understandings such as of the 2011 English 'riots'. The paper argues that during the 19th Century the crowd came to symbolise a fear of 'mass society' and that 'classical' crowd psychology was a product of these fears. Classical crowd psychology pathologised, reified and de-contextualised the crowd, offering the ruling elites a perceived opportunity to control it. We contend that classical theory misrepresents crowd psychology and survives in contemporary understanding because it is ideological. We conclude by discussing how classical theory has been supplanted in academic contexts by an identity-based crowd psychology that restores the meaning to crowd action, replaces it in its social context, and in so doing is transforming theoretical understanding of 'riots' and the nature of the self.

Popular Understandings of the 2011 English riots.

In August 2011 rioting broke out in Tottenham, London following a protest about the fatal police shooting of a young man called Mark Duggan. Across the next four days this 'rioting' spread throughout London and to other cities across England (Guardian/LSE, 2011). Media and political commentators were quick to provide explanations of the nature and underlying causes of the riots as unconnected to the shooting of Mr Duggan or other potentially 'legitimate' grievances and grounded instead in the psychology of the crowd or the individual making up the crowds involved (Reicher & Stott, 2011). In a television interview, Tottenham's MP David Lammy confidently asserted that the rioters were "*mindless people*" (ibid. p.6). Metropolitan Police Commander Adrian Hanstock described how an otherwise peaceful protest had been "*hijacked by mindless thugs*" (ibid. p.6). As the riots spread, newspaper headlines of 'mayhem', 'anarchy' and 'mob rule' conveyed an image of them as indiscriminate and irrational. Academic commentators confirmed such views of the riots' aetiology in irrationality and moral breakdown. One national newspaper interviewed Jack Levin, a Professor of Sociology and Criminology, who argued that crowds are a place where people "*abandon their sense of personal identity*" and that riots are caused by a "*rapid descent into mob mentality*" (ibid. p.14). John Brewer and Harold Wollman, then President and Vice Chair of the British Sociological Association, wrote about the riots arguing that crowds "*are irrational*" and that "*reason and motive disappear when crowds move unpredictably*"¹.

¹ For full text see <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/11/sociologists-offer-unravel-riots>

Such views of the aberrant, irrational and pathological crowd are important because they were also directly associated to particular forms of policing and policy response. At the policy level, the UK Government responded to the riots with the *'Troubled Families'* programme, a multi-million pound investment designed to address a form of moral breakdown among recalcitrant elements of otherwise civilised communities. Policing was also roundly and ubiquitously condemned for, as one national newspaper headline trumpeted, being *"too few, too slow, too timid"*. Given this widespread view of the crowd as 'mindless' the policy response was not to retreat from police use of force but to empower and applaud it. A national newspaper front page showing a picture of a police officer in 'riot gear' aiming a baton gun, powerfully announced the headline *"We'll Shoot the Looters"*. The only formal Government consultation that took place subsequent to the riots concerned whether or not the police should be given powers to impose curfew. Therefore, underpinning these policing and policy responses were a set of popularised understandings of crowd psychology. However, these are not new – understandings; they have been found whenever there is a riot, and their usage has been documented for well over a hundred years.

The nineteenth century origins of classical crowd psychology.

Reicher and Stott (2011) show how these popularised conceptualisations of crowd psychology as aberrant and pathological faithfully echo the scientific theories of the classical crowd psychology that originated in France at the end of the 19th century (Le Bon, 1895; Taine, 1876). French society throughout the 19th Century was very turbulent, and many social historians have argued that central

to these political changes were the actions of 'the crowd' (Lefebvre 1962, 1964; Rudé, 1964, 1967). Indeed, even a brief glimpse at the patterning in these crowds reveals much about them. *"They embodied resistance to the growth of a national market exercising priority over local needs and traditions. This was the pattern: the disturbances were clustered in areas torn between the needs of the local population and the demands of the national market"* (Tilly et al. 1975: 51).

The social hierarchies of aristocratic society were often legitimated through the idea of the powerful as the providers of food (Reddy 1977). The rise of the industrial capitalist economy during the 19th Century led to practices that ultimately came into conflict with this paternalist model of social legitimacy. For example, when the demands of the government and national market ensured that local needs for food would not be met, it was then that locals began to act collectively. But the actions of these crowds were not some irrational explosion of random and sporadic violence driven merely by hunger. They acted in terms of what E.P. Thompson (1971) refers to as a 'moral economy'. They *"followed a well defined routine in which the actors assumed the place of the authorities but melted away when the authorities took the approved action, even if people remained hungry. Each incident tended to display a kind of coherence and conscious intent, which fits ill with the word usually applied: riot"* (Tilly et al. 1975: 51).

As the 19th Century progressed the scale of industrialisation and the wealth and power of the bourgeois elite increased. Accompanying this industrialisation, came ever larger increases in urban populations. In many senses

industrialisation created an explosion in the scale of urban society; for the first time in history large urban populations emerged. No longer tied to the land, where employers and workers had previously lived and worked in close proximity, in the new cities rich and poor lived far apart. The traditional means of social control also evaporated. As industrialisation grew at pace, employers and workers who were previously often in daily contact became more and more separate physically, socially, economically and politically. Whilst industrial wealth fell into the hands of an ever shrinking but increasingly powerful capitalist elite, wages for their workers remained low. So despite dying on the barricades to create the political conditions for change, workers consistently found themselves isolated, poverty stricken and stuck in the lower echelons of the emerging class structure. With no franchise, the masses had no means of resisting the negative impacts of these transitions. It was therefore the crowd that was their only weapon of political resistance.

During this period, a series of developing political philosophies were also bringing into question the nature and legitimacy of this emerging social order. Of particular significance was Jean Jacques Rousseau's work on the social contract (Rousseau, 1762). Rousseau had argued forcefully for greater equality between the powerful and the powerless, claiming that the people should be sovereign. During the period of mass industrialisation and the emergence of the working class, Rousseau's ideas began to be increasingly reflected in the political ideologies of socialism. Such ideas were also developed by the emerging revolutionary political analyses of writers and activists such as Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Louis Blanc and Karl Marx (McClelland, 1970). This

politics was not only a basis among the urban poor for radicalisation but also for collective action in the form of the crowd. Thus as the industrial revolution progressed the crowd began to act in ways that posed a direct threat to the social arrangements necessary for successful capitalist expansion.

In February 1848, crowds took once again to the streets of Paris and toppled the Orléaniste regime. The new regime was short-lived and by June 1848 previously allied republican moderates and radicals were soon engaged in armed conflict on the streets of Paris. The 'June days' of 1848 marked a turning point in French, indeed in European, history that is crucial to understanding the conceptualisation of the crowd that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. For Karl Marx the June insurrection was a class war, a struggle between proletariat and bourgeois. As such future revolution would mean the overthrow of bourgeois society. The June revolt of 1848 represents one of the first major armed conflicts of class against class, an attempt not to change the form of government but to change the social order itself (Horne 1989).

Taking this together then, the early part of the 19th century must be understood not only in terms of a period of technological development. It must also be understood as a period of social transformation in which large-scale urban society was born. Along with this transformation came an alienated and disenfranchised urban proletariat increasingly polarised against a powerful bourgeois elite. Thus on the one hand there was a developing national state in France, expanding and imposing its interests. On the other there were outraged localised populations attempting to contest this. In other words, crowds of this

time must be understood in terms of inter-group conflicts linked to the struggles of an emerging national political economy. As the poor agitated, the bourgeois class allied themselves with them to overthrow the aristocracy. However, once in power, they turned to the reactionary arms of the conservative wings of the state to stabilise the economy, and in so doing acted against the interests of their former allies.

Having repressed the radicals in June 1848, moderate republicans again turned to a ruler who could best serve the interests of the bourgeoisie. Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew Louis promised security against social unrest and was elected president. With his term of office limited to four years and in the face of parliamentary opposition to any extension, Louis Napoleon and the army carried out a coup d'état. However, the bourgeoisie rallied to the new Empire in an attempt to ensure stability in the face of an increasing fear of mass action, much as their forefathers had turned to the Napoleon Bonaparte to put an end to the revolution. The greatest testimony to this fear is the architecture of Paris. To break the revolutionary potential of the crowd, Emperor Napoleon III commissioned Baron Haussmann to re-design the city. His aim was to break apart the habitual storm-centres of the radical working class areas in the city centre and destroy the narrow and easily barricaded streets. Haussmann pulled down twenty thousand houses, rebuilding central Paris with long, straight, open boulevards that afforded excellent fields of fire and opportunities not just to turn the flank of a barricade but to transport riot breakers quickly from one end of Paris to the other. In this sense, modern Paris is a monument to the growing fear of the revolutionary potential of the crowd. However, and ironically, the new

solidly proletarian suburbs created through 'Hausmannisation' would in 1871 pose an even greater revolutionary threat to the establishing European industrial order.

French workers of the Empire were denied the benefits of ever-increasing industrial expansion. It is estimated that by 1862 over half the population of Paris lived in poverty bordering on destitution (Horne, 1989). The rich got richer while the poor got poorer adequately summarises life under Louis Napoleon. The new class division between wealthy and worker, proprietor and proletariat, entrenched in French society during the Orléaniste monarchy, reinforced through the June days of 1848, became more and more acute under the Empire. A Republican journalist of the period wrote of the bourgeoisie that "*their privileges safe, they allow Napoleon III to plunder France, make her the vassal of Rome, dishonour her in Mexico, ruin her finances, vulgarise debauchery. All-powerful by their retainers and wealth, they do not risk a man, a dollar, for the sake of protesting*" (Lissagray 1876: 9).

1870 marked the rise of a new power in Europe. Prussia needed to cement the newly unified German Empire. In July 1870 the Germans manoeuvred politically over the ascent to the Spanish throne and on July 15th a politically isolated and militarily weak France declared war. The declaration of war initially reinforced the urban proletariat's resentment of the bourgeoisie, for they felt that war was avoidable. The French army was ill-prepared and its weaponry out-dated. By 6th August the rapidly mobilised German army equipped with modern Krupp artillery had the French on the defensive and on 1st September the French

capitulated. *La Débâcle* left nothing between the Prussian forces and Paris except distance (Zola, 1892).

In Paris news of the defeat brought a midnight session of the *Corps Legislatif* and an attack by the Republican opposition on supporters of the Empire. The crowd once again came to the fore as a vehicle of political change. The masses invaded the Chamber and the vigilant police state collapsed. A new Government of 'National Defence' had at their disposal an armed force of some 500,000 men. But the vast majority of this force was composed of the *Garde National*, the battalions of which were drawn primarily from Paris on an arrondissement basis. So the Hausmannisation of Paris backfired because it ensured that large sections of the *Garde* contained the alienated masses of the Parisian proletariat. By arming them, the Government essentially armed the revolutionary socialist movement of France. For the *Garde* this was no longer an Imperial war but an opportunity to defend their class interests.

By the 19th September the Prussians took the unprotected high plateau surrounding Paris at *Chateillon*, cutting her off from the rest of France. The siege of Paris had begun. During the siege, radical resistance remained strong. The radicals wasted no time in pushing to link a continued war effort with social reform. For the government the essential priority became defence against the forces of the revolutionary masses rather than defence against the Germans. So in January 1871, the government negotiated an armistice in order to enable national elections and free the country from its dependency on the increasingly radical Paris. The radicals saw this capitulation as the next act of treachery by

the bourgeoisie. In the elections, while capturing a majority within Paris, the radicals suffered a massive defeat nationally and a rural cleric-monarchical alliance formed a majority in the new Assembly. On the 26th February Adolphe Thiers signed a treaty with Bismark that was ratified by the Assembly. Under its terms France signed away the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, agreed to indemnity, and crucially had to reduce the states' regular forces to only one division.

Paris was not prepared to accept the authority of the Assembly. The proletariat-dominated *Garde* refused to disarm. Outside the Prussian army it was now the single largest military force in France. By March a Central Committee of the *Garde* proposed that Paris constitute itself as an independent socialist Republic. Realising the peril of their position, the Assembly evacuated the city to the Palace of Versailles and the *Garde's* Central Committee declared the 'Paris Commune'; Europe's first Socialist Republic was established and armed. Fearing the reverberation of the Commune in the wider European context, the victorious powers re-armed the forces of the Assembly. Soon after, these forces re-entered Paris and enacted *La Semaine sanglante*, so called because the Seine was said to have run red with the blood of the Communards. Once victorious, the forces of the Assembly sought to restore the 'natural' order by ridding the world of revolutionary terror. By the end of the 'trials' and executions, at least 20,000 Parisians, mostly workers, had been killed, seventy five per cent of which are said not to have been involved in the fighting (Horne 1989; Lissagray 1876).

The disappearing context of classical crowd psychology.

The brief overview above has sought to demonstrate that the actions of the crowds throughout the 19th Century were tied to the emerging politics of industrial society. In this sense, the crowd can only be adequately understood in terms of agency and meaningful social actions embedded in a series of struggles between groups emerging from and tied to a developing social and political context. While violence was integral to that struggle, it was often the state and not the crowd that was its primary initiator.

But during 1871 a respected French academic Hippolyte Taine was giving a series of lectures at Oxford. As a measure of his international prestige, he was awarded a Doctorate in Civil Law by the University during his visit. It was during his stay that the Paris Commune ran its course. Already dismayed by the war, Taine was deeply shaken as he followed the events through English newspapers. Taine, born in 1828, was among a tradition of French right-wing thinkers who were critical of the Enlightenment and the Revolution of 1789, including Joseph De Maistre, Edouard Drumont, and George Sorel (McClelland 1970). As such, Taine was profoundly anti-Jacobin and felt that the Commune would see a repeat of the June days of 1848, or worse still, its Committees would repeat the Terrors of the 1790s. In this time of crisis he saw it as his duty to devote himself to his nation and was inspired to write a voluminous social history to help repair the maladies of contemporary France. The book eventually ran to eleven volumes and was called the *Origins of Contemporary France*, the first volume of which, *L'Ancien Régime*, appeared in 1876.

It was Taine's intention that the *Origins* would explain why France was so troubled by revolutionary instability. His work would analyse the nation's history using scientific objectivity in order to distil historical truth and instruct his fellow citizens in the art of proper government (Barrows 1981). Yet rather than turning to an analysis of the social and psychological impacts of industrialisation Taine sought to build a sustained assault on the social theories of the Enlightenment. Relying heavily on medical metaphors, Taine argued that these philosophies and theoretical arguments had instilled a poison into French society. As such, the Enlightenment had led to a fatal misunderstanding of mass psychology. In so doing, a highly evolved French society had laid itself open to the atavistic barbarity and irrationality of the crowd; revolution, or, as Taine saw it, dissolution, and the erratic history of the nation after 1789, was the inevitable result.

Taine drew heavily on Hobbesian and Darwinian ideas. He saw hierarchical social order as a triumph of evolution, as the Leviathan through which civilisation escapes from the primal barbarism and inhumanity inherent in the primitive masses. In this sense Taine's *Origins* portrayed the aristocracy, prior to 1789, to be a highly evolved elite that had gained its position of authority by forcing hierarchy, and consequently order, on the lower orders of society. Through military force, civilisation's last word, the aristocracy had lifted society out of its atavistic origins. For Taine the elites deserved their position of power, because they were the institutions that imposed civilisation on a substratum of barbarity. The masses could not constrain their primitive barbarities and, if let free, could only create chaos. Consequently, the state was required to act as a

dyke to resist the torrent of these brute forces; “*despotic if need be against their despotism*” (Taine, 1888: 242). For Taine the Enlightenment was toxic because it tried to implant reason in the brains of the lower orders, whose minds were incapable of dealing with such complexity. The “*glowing expressions of Rousseau and his successors...blaze up like burning coals discharging clouds of smoke and intoxicating vapour*” (Taine, 1888: 326). The poison had broken down the psychological and political structures that maintained civilised behaviour, “*men began to live again like beasts*” (Taine, 1876: 208; see Barrows 1981; McClelland, 1989).

From his position as a wealthy and outraged onlooker, Taine appears blind to the aggression of the state. He saw only inherent regression, barbarity and savagery in the actions of the crowd. For him and many others in his class, the crowd itself was the mechanism through which such pathology was released. But *Origins* was important because it provided the first ‘scientific’ account of the mechanisms of this release: ‘*vibration of the nervous mechanism*’ (Taine 1876: 221), ‘*contagion*’ (Taine, 1876: 36-37), and ‘*feverishness*’ (Taine 1876: 52). The result was a deranged mind among the lower orders, prey to hallucination and ‘delirium’ who accustomed “*to the open air, to the exercise of his limbs, his attention flags if he stands for a quarter of an hour; generalised expressions find their way into his mind only as sound... He becomes drowsy unless a powerful vibrating voice contagiously arouses in him the instincts of flesh and blood, the personal cravings, the secret enmities which, restrained by outward discipline, are always ready to be set free*” (Taine, 1888: 240).

The politics of classic crowd psychology.

For Taine the crowd was a mob, which began as a leaderless hoard arising from the primitive mass. The complex social history of the industrial revolution, the intergroup struggles between the national state and local people, the patterning of crowd action, the moral economy and the notions of legitimacy all disappeared. In its place was a pathological regression into primitive barbarism. The crowd was understood in terms of unconscious, instinctual behaviours, arising endogenously rather than as an outcome of particular social and historical processes. In this way Taine's crowd psychology was ideological; the complex history, the role of the state, the complex ideas and philosophies, indeed the meaningful nature of crowd action itself could all be flagrantly dismissed. From Taine onwards the pathology of the mass and of its agent of change, the crowd, was not in question – it was a 'scientific' fact.

During the period when Taine's work was appearing, the crowd, the mass, and revolution were becoming ever-increasing theoretical and political concerns among the establishment. It was hoped that the emerging social sciences would not simply provide a valid understanding of the problems of industrial society but also a technological solution. If Brunel could use technology to build bridges over vast chasms, railways across continents, and tunnels under great rivers, then the new positivist sciences should also be able to help conquer the central problem of social disorder in industrial society. A central figure in popularizing this project was Gustave Le Bon whose classic *The Crowd* (Le Bon, 1895; trans 1926) stands as a testament to the late 19th century attempt to turn 'crowd science' into a positivist inspired technology of social control.

Le Bon, like Taine, stands in a long line of French right-wing racist and anti-Semitic intellectuals (McClelland 1970). By 1860 he was living in Paris training to become a doctor of medicine, but, on qualifying, established himself through a career in publishing. He plagiarised the findings of the closed societies of science and disseminated them to a public eager to understand their new positivist world. In this he was extremely successful. By 1870 he was living a wealthy life solely on the profits of his books. Le Bon remained in Paris during both the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune. The experience of this reinforced in him a rejection of the tenets of 1789. But more importantly it led him to understand the crowd as being central to France's malaise.

Le Bon was an ardent supporter of social hierarchy and committed himself to an attack on all forms of egalitarianism, not only socialism but also democracy (Barrows 1981; Nye 1975). Like Taine, he believed that rigid and hierarchical social order was an evolutionary triumph. Like Taine, he also saw the Commune as an attempt by the masses to destroy society and throw it back down the ladder of evolution. In 1894 Le Bon published a synthesis of work that drew heavily on the perspectives of the masses set out in Taine's *Origins. Les Lois Psychologiques de l'Evolution des Peuples* (1894), established the ideological background into which his most influential work, *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895), would fit as a key piece in a jigsaw of 19th century social theory (McClelland 1989).

Le Bon argued that civilisation was a fragile structure, the keystone of which was the ruling elite who, with their superiority, held back the inherent despotism of the masses. Since Le Bon was writing at a point where the ruling elites were fearful and the masses were agitating, his work found immediate resonance. McClelland puts it concisely when he states “*when Le Bon's The Crowd appeared, the psychology of the crowd was a recognised intellectual genre. [It] was scientific, even technical, in all the appropriate senses: it had its own special vocabulary; it might be able to provide a technique of crowd control and manipulation. [It] was a great publishing success because it was able to summarise what had been worrying the savants within the academic world of social science at a time when the literate public were themselves worrying about much the same things. The secret of Le Bon's success was to use science to frighten the public, and then to claim that what science could understand, it could also control.* (McClelland 1989: 196).

In the work of Le Bon, the base instincts of the crowd began to be conceptualised in a pragmatic manner. For Le Bon the crowd was inevitable in industrial society and times of social change society would collapse into a primordial quagmire of the mass. Consequently, the question was how the forces of the crowd could be harnessed in order for a new social order to emerge. Le Bon proposed his theoretical vision as the toolbox through which this could be achieved. This allowed him to portray the crowd as a source of energy, which, if properly harnessed, could be used to revitalise rather than threaten the nation. By 1910 his ideological vision had culminated in *La Psychologie Politique et la Defense Sociale* where he was to deal more precisely with the crowd's utility in the defence of his vision of the 'new order' (Le Bon, 1910). In this way Le Bon hoped

that his crowd psychology could be used by 'great men' in defence of nationalism, turning the crowd against that which he saw as society's enemy – revolutionary socialism. Little wonder then that both Hitler and Mussolini cite Le Bon as sources of political inspiration (Reicher, 1996a).

Le Bon, like all of the classic theorists of mass psychology, turns to the internal functioning of the crowd in order to build his explanation. For him there were three central mechanisms of crowd's psychology: submergence, contagion, and suggestibility. The first refers to a loss of self through anonymity in the crowd. The second refers to the uncritical social influence process that allows any idea or sentiment to spread unheeded through the crowd. The third is the 'hypnotic' state that allows this contagion to occur. Through these mechanisms, Le Bon proposed that when an individual enters the crowd the 'law of mental unity' governs behaviour. That is, in the crowd, the individual self or personality disappears, to be replaced by the 'racial unconscious' or 'group mind' – characterized by reduced intelligence, atavistic impulses and emotionality. This would explain why the civilised lone individual descends "*several rungs of civilisation*" and in the crowd "*is a barbarian*" (1895: trans 1926: 32). In this fashion Le Bon followed Taine by ignoring the complex history of crowd events and the contexts that gave crowd behaviours their meaning. Instead he produced a de-contextualised crowd based upon reductionist assumptions of its irrationality. In other words, he reified the outcome of particular historical circumstances by treating them as if they were fixed and universal characteristics of the crowd.

Tied up with this ideological vision of the crowd was also the legitimisation of reactionary policing. If the crowd is irrational, there was no point in reasoning with it; all that was required was the use of coercion and violence to protect civilisation from its inherent pathology (McClelland 1989). Thus, in Le Bonian terms, any violence of the mass was not understood in terms of a particular group evoking meaningful resistance to others. Instead violence was seen as a natural expression of fixed and pathological tendencies. By constructing the crowd in this way, he was able to present the forces of law and order as a means of protecting civilisation from that inherent pathology. Classical crowd psychology therefore undermined democratic and socialist agitation by presenting it as a pathological intrusion while simultaneously legitimising its coercive repression. So while *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895) stands as the culmination of classical 'crowd science', this was not in any sense because it was valid. Classical theory took root because these ideas served a useful political and ideological purpose for the powerful - a purpose that has ensured that the picture painted of the pathology of the crowd remains deeply entrenched in 'common sense' understanding of the science that find an echo in modern popular representation of crowd action in the 21st Century.

From classical crowd science to a social identity approach to crowd psychology.

From the perspective of modern social science, Le Bon's classical work on the crowd appears not only antiquated but also impressionistic and wanting in empirical evidence. However, from the middle of the 20th century classical crowd science was reinvigorated and reinforced through American social psychology in the form of 'de-individuation' theory where the anonymity of the crowd is

understood to preclude the normal functioning of the self (Festinger, Pepitone & Newcombe, 1959; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers 1989; Zimbardo 1970). However it is experimental social psychology itself, which has ultimately served to expose de-individuation theory as flawed by showing that there are no generic behavioral effects of anonymity (Postmes & Spears 1998). Moreover, across the social sciences different researchers in multiple disciplines began highlighting the inadequacy and limitations of classical theory and the need to analyse the perspective of crowd members in their historical context (Barrows, 1981; Nye, 1975; Rudé, 1959, 1964; Reicher, 1982; Turner et al, 1987). Rather than simply looking from the outside in, and trying to abstract crowd behaviour from its context, it was increasingly recognised that crowd behaviour could only be properly understood by examining the perceptions and meanings held by crowd participants.

Since the 1960s, there has been a blossoming in what has been called history from below. Since history is first written by those who are (a) literate and (b) powerful, a historiography of popular culture, which is often closer to the reality experienced by the masses, has been late to develop. The moral economy of the 18th century food riot (Thompson, 1971) is a case in point. From the point of view of Le Bon, the food riot, presumably prompted by hunger, should have taken the form of a smash and grab raid on grain stores, with participants primarily satisfying their hunger and stopping when physically satiated. Of course, the rioters themselves wrote almost nothing down about their subjective experiences. However an inspection of what the rioters actually did reveals distinct patterns to their behaviour – patterns that reflect historically and

culturally determined definitions of legitimacy. Thus, the rioters' principal concern was not hunger but injustice; they threatened violence against only those who sought to substitute the paternalistic principles of need with market principles of profit. They acted collectively only in so far as they needed to in order to restore those older values. For example, while they seized the millers' sacks of grains, instead of eating the contents they sold them in local markets at a price the rioters judged to be fair, even returning the empty sacks neatly folded.

The evidence of this historiography further highlights the inadequacy of classic theories of the crowd; crowd behaviour in 19th Century France was not random and meaningless but limited and normatively patterned (Tilly et al, 1975). Additionally, it begins to provide the basic elements of a more adequate psychology of the crowd: the idea that these limits were a function of definitions of legitimate conduct which in turn were shaped by historically and socially determined world-views or ideologies. Thus Thompson (1971) refers to 'legitimizing notions' shared by rioters. Moreover, if crowd behaviour was controlled, meaningful, and conscious, then this meant that an adequate crowd psychology required a theory of the self or identity. The fundamental flaw of Le Bon and those who followed him was that crowd behaviour was interpreted as the absence of the self when it was apparent that crowd behaviour was only explicable in terms of the salience of a socially determined collective sense of self or social identity.

Tajfel (1978: 63) defined social identity as *"that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or*

groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". However, one of the key aspects of this approach is that identity is understood to be fundamentally linked to material social structures created by social categories which exist in relationships defined in terms of power, status and legitimacy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The theory proposes that in order to relate to the world behaviourally we must have the psychological capacity to identify with those categories such that we can accurately define ourselves to reproduce or challenge those social structures accordingly. Correspondingly, the theory was developed to propose a dynamic self, which varies in abstraction and ranges from our personal to a range of social identities. Thus, rather than a single self which is either present or absent in the crowd we each have multiple selves, each of which can become salient, or self relevant, in different social contexts (Turner, Oakes, Hogg, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty 1994).

While these identities come to define individuals, they are at the same time a fundamentally social product. To define oneself as a male may be something deeply personal but at the same time the defining dimensions of gender are socially and historically constructed and therefore exist above and well beyond anyone's individuality. Once salient or self-relevant within specific social contexts, a social identity comes to define one's position in a set of material social relationships, allowing us to respond meaningfully and collectively to our situation. Our identities proscribe behaviour, defining the appropriate nature of our response given that position. In so doing, social identities both define relationships between people but also act as the basis for transforming social

relations through acting as the psychological basis for collective action (Turner, et al 1987; 1994).

The concept of social identity has been particularly useful to the analysis of crowd behaviour where the central analytic question is how is it that people are able to act spontaneously and coherently without formal leadership or decision-making structures? The social identity approach suggests that, when acting on the basis of a social identity, psychologically we become interchangeable exemplars of the relevant social category. We therefore can infer appropriate conduct and are able to influence and coordinate behaviour to the extent that such action is consistent with the identity in question (Turner et al, 1987). These processes were first illustrated through Reicher's (1984; 1987) study of the St Pauls riot, one of the many inner city disturbances in the UK during the early 1980s. While even those politically sympathetic to the actions of these urban rioters characterised their violence as a 'primitive outburst', Reicher argued that their behaviour was in fact sophisticated and even creative. While it was violent, that violence was found to reflect and to be limited by the definition of social identity shared by the rioters.

This social identity of the St Pauls rioters had three key features: the geographical locality of the St Pauls neighbourhood, a history of antagonism with the police, and a desire for freedom, which was seen to be in conflict with the high unemployment, poverty and exploitation by businesses run by 'outsiders'. The pattern of the rioting reflected these defining parameters. In the first phase, once the police had been driven from the district of St Paul's, the rioters

remained within St Paul's itself despite its close proximity to shops in the city centre that could have been looted. The key targets for the violence were the police themselves, and there were no collective attacks on passers by or other groups. The subsequent attacks on property in the second phase of the riot were not sporadic acts of wanton destruction but had a certain pattern: the benefits office, post office, and banks were damaged, as were outsider-owned businesses, while locally owned shops and local houses were actively protected; the former not simply symbolic but instrumental in their role as agents of the rioters' oppression.

The social identity approach not only provides a theory of collective action as a symbolic representation of participants' understanding of self and surrounding social relations, it has also begun to enrich our understanding of the very nature of the self. Indeed, as Reicher (1996b), has argued, the crowd is actually a privileged arena for studying social and psychological processes. One reason is that during crowd events social relations that might have appeared as fixed and given can and do change. In other words, as we have seen from our analysis of French social history, while not all crowds are associated with social change, social change very often appears to involve crowds (Alford & Friedland, 1985).

This means understanding the self, or identity, not just as a reflection of social reality but also as the psychological basis for its formation. Grasping this duality of identity – socially created as well as creative – has meant advancing our meta-theoretical understanding of the relationship between identity and context. In this approach to crowds, identity and context are understood not as different

orders of reality but as two moments in an historical and interactive process. Studies of students rioting during a protest against the removal of grants (Reicher 1996c), demonstrators rioting during a protest against the implementation of a tax (e.g. Stott & Drury 2000), a series of protests around the extension of the M11 motorway in London (Drury & Reicher 2000), and rioting among football fans (Stott & Reicher 1998; Stott et al, 2001, 2007) each revealed a similar pattern of interaction. This pattern demonstrated the necessity of a specific theoretical approach to the conceptualisation of identity and context.

The first condition common to each was a contrast of representations between the social groups involved – particularly over definitions of appropriate conduct. The second condition was that the police – the out-group to the crowd during these events – had the power to put their definitions into practice. More specifically, police use of coercive force (e.g. baton charges) against a crowd who saw themselves as posing little, if any, threat to ‘public order’ corresponded with increases in the number of people in the crowd viewing the police as an illegitimate force. Such experiences of illegitimacy corresponded with a change in the crowds’ social identities along two critically important dimensions. On the one hand, increasing numbers of people within the crowd came to see conflict against the police as acceptable. On the other, a redefined sense of unity against the police emerged that subsequently empowered those seeking confrontation (Stott & Drury 2000). In other words, the development of widespread rioting was not simply an inevitable product of the inherent pathology of mass psychology; nor was it simply the acting out of a prior, given social identity. Rather these norms emerged as a meaningful response to the particular patterns

and material realities of group interactions that occurred during the events themselves.

In this account, the crowd is the subject of history, sometimes, despite the intentions of its participants. The most moderate conscious intentions sometimes become transformed into radicalism because these intentions are enacted in a context in which others define them differently. Those others, if they have power, act to reshape the context for participants, which in turn transform the psychological basis for collective actions in the crowd. Put more simply, acting upon context, changes that context and changes the self that derives its meaning from that context.

Conclusions

Through looking back at nineteenth century France we can begin to revisit and question the popular conceptualisation of the crowds witnessed during the 2011 English riots. By contextualising the emergence of crowd 'science' we can see the ideological foundations of these assumptions of the crowd as an amorphous, monolithic and pathological entity. We suggest that the social identity approach provides the basis for a properly scientific understanding of crowd action during those riots (Reicher & Stott, 2011). The social identity approach rejects the pathological and decontextualized analysis that was so rapidly popularised. Instead it points toward the pressing need to interpret those crowd actions as a meaningful and symbolic reaction to the subjective and material realities of the participants' social context. As such, it forces us to consider the centrality and determining role of structural relations and policing in the aetiology of the riots

(Guardian/LSE, 2011; Newburn et al, 2015). In rejecting the classic model of the crowd, the social identity project has in turn begun to transform social psychological understanding of the self, recognising that crowd action is not just a meaningful reflection of the social world but also a meaningful project of its creation.

Taken together our arguments raises important and powerful questions. Given that classical crowd theory lacks explanatory power why is it that it remains so salient in contemporary popular representation of riot? Moreover, in the context of riots like those experienced in 2011, is it that theory capable of explaining such phenomena are so easily swept aside in favour of assertion of the classical account?

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