

We plead for an ethnically
improved and spiritually
perfect Hispanic supercaste.

Antonio Vallejo Nágera,
*Higiene de la Raza*ⁱ



FROM CROWD PSYCHOLOGY TO RACIAL HYGIENE: The Medicalization of Reaction and the New Spain

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In his entry on “Mass society” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Salvador Giner calls José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929) “the first fully-fledged interpretation of such phenomenon.”ⁱⁱ While Ortega’s priority in the definition of mass society is open to debate,ⁱⁱⁱ his importance as a theorist of the phenomenon “masses” is undeniable. Little in the book is original, yet by combining strands of nineteenth-century crowd psychology with his aristocratic view of history, he left an influential if ambiguous legacy to Spanish and Latin American politics.

The ambiguity begins with Ortega’s description of the phenomenon, which he sees, at first, under its quantitative aspect. His notion of the “mass” appears at the intersection between the prepolitical concept of the multitude (or the crowd) and the spatial one of agglomeration. But he moves immediately toward a qualitative definition, drawing a sharp distinction between the multitude and the civilization it uses without feeling responsible for it. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the multitude has sprung up, fed by the dislocation of people and groups who used to occupy

Gente

The word “gente” is defined as a “group or plurality of people” by the dictionary of the Real Academia Española. In contrast to other Spanish words that depict a crowd as a political agent, such as “pueblo” or “masa,” the contemporary usage of “gente” conveys an informal and relatively neutral description of a crowd. In certain colloquial expressions, such as “gente baja” or “lowly crowd”, a connotation of racial or socioeconomic difference suggests that “gente” may have been used differently in the past.

“Gente” derives from the archaic “yente,” in turn derived from the Latin “gens,” generally defined as race, nation or family. In the Spanish peninsula, the plural use of “yente” (“las yentes”) is found frequently in texts from the 8th to the 12th such as “Reyes Magos,” “Cronicón Villareense” and “El Cid.” “Gente” already appears in some of these texts, as a rare, alternate spelling of “yente” or “yentes,” which only becomes generalized in the XIVth and XVth century as indicated by the text of “Conde Lucanor” (1335), and Nebrija’s “Gramática.” At this time, the singular “gente” also becomes predominant over the plural “yentes” which is relegated to religious discourse.

Archaic colloquial expressions such as “gente fosca” (brown-skinned folk) and “gente non sancta”, suggest the distance of an observer that characterizes a group from the outside, yet “gente” also serves to describe a community to which the observer or narrator belongs. A verse from the medieval poem “Cantar de mio Cid,” for example, speaks of a group that mourns the fate of its hero, condemned to exile by the king: “Great sorrow the Christian people (“gentes”) felt” (“Grande duelo avien las yentas cristianas”). However, as Barcia and Corominas

each its own place. Topsy-turvy and turbulent, the crowd has become visible by taking up social space, and not just any space but the best places, those formerly reserved for the privileged few. It is this being-out-of-place that Ortega calls “the revolt of the masses,” whereby he stresses not the quantitative and visual aspect of the mass but its social and moral side.^{iv} If the masses now occupy the best places, then it follows that they have acceded to social power, that they are, in effect, the new paradigm setters. While admitting as much (*RM*, 11), Ortega disputes the masses’ legitimacy, nay, their ability to create a new principle of coexistence. ■

i Antonio Vallejo Nágera, *Higiene de la raza: La asexuación de los psicópatas* (Madrid: Ediciones “Medicina,” 1934), 5; hereafter abbreviated as *HR*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

ii Salvador Giner, “Mass Society: History of the Concept,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001) 14:9370.

iii Paul Reiwald, for instance, calls Theodor Geiger’s book, *Die Masse und ihre Aktion* (1926) “der erste durchgeführte Versuch einer Soziologie der Masse.” *Vom Geist der Massen. Handbuch der Massenpsychologie* (Zürich: Pan-Verlag Zürich, 1946), 306.

iv José Ortega y Gasset, *La rebelión de las masas*, in *Obras completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1957), 4:141–310. Translated anonymously as *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932), 13; hereafter abbreviated as *RM*.

suggest, in religious writing of the XVth and XVIth century “gente” as a descriptor of a Christian crowd appears rarely, perhaps due of its semantic and phonic connection with the terms “gentil” and “gentildad”. The derivative adjective “gentil” attached to specific subjects, often considered pagans or idolaters, as shown by a phrase in the opening scene of “El Abencerraje”: “And looking more attentively they saw, in the distance, a gentile moor riding a gray horse” (“Y mirando con más atención, vieron venir por dónde ellos iban un gentil moro en un caballo ruano”) or in the pejorative “gentecilla” used in the “Glosas Silenses.” A verse from Quevedo exemplifies this ambivalent use of “gente” as both an inclusive and exclusionary term: “left-handed people...are people (“gente”) that were made backwards, but they are people, without a doubt” (“los zurdos son gente hecha al reves y que sin duda son gentes”). A similar usage appears in the “Tesoro” by Sebastián de Covarrubias: “although we are black, we are people (“gente”) also” (aunque negros, gentes somos).

Connotations of racial and religious difference can also be seen in the first chronicles of Indies. Christopher Columbus uses “gente” repeatedly when describing the indigenous communities of the Caribbean in his travel journals. The entry corresponding to the 11-12th of October, 1492, as transcribed by Bartolomé de las Casas, states: “At two hours after midnight the land appeared (...) soon they saw naked people (“gente”), and the Admiral went ashore” (“a los dos oras despues de media noche apareció la tierra (...) luego vieron gente desnuda y el almirante salió a tierra”). Crowds of cyclops and cannibals as the “gente” of the islands also figure in the diary: Columbus notes that it will be difficult to travel to scout for copper in the island of Carib, for example, “because [the] people (“gente”) [there] eat human flesh” (“puesto que sera dificultoso en carib por q aqll gente diz que come Carne humana”).

In the texts of the first chroniclers, “gente” also refers to the indigenous troops that served within the Spanish armies. This is in fact a term for troop commonly used in Spain during the XVth to the XVIIth century, but as it is transferred to America, and as the process of conquest and colonization advances, “hueste” replaces the term “gente” in America, during the first decades of the XVIth century. As opposed to the more loosely organized troops known as “gente,” “hueste” entails a hierarchical military structure, echoing the organization of the battalions that fought during the wars of Reconquista.



TESTIMONY

Take It

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At thirteen, Roger and I married under a tree in the front yard of his parents’ three-bedroom bungalow. “Quakers can marry people,” Roger had told me. He was a Quaker, so naturally we decided to do it.

One of us must have boasted about the blessed event. My parents, Roger’s parents, and some school functionary ordered the newlyweds to attend an emergency meeting. “What exactly does this marriage entail?” my father asked Roger. Roger was an innocent. I understood exactly what my father wanted to know. The whole procedure disgusted me. My parents’ relationship hadn’t indoctrinated me into the concept of legal matrimony as serious business. Weren’t we allowed to play, too?

Later that year, Roger and I attended a rock concert. Marriage first. Rock concert later. We had committed ourselves to reversing the natural order of things.

I wore a white Mexican wedding dress sans bra or underwear. Patches of teen-pink flesh showed through the lacey cotton. And I had shortened the dress. A lot.

We moved along with the throng of long-haired and peasant-topped ticket holders toward one of the concert arena’s arched entryways. I squinched my eyes so that the streaming panorama before me tipped and I saw it as a two-dimensional canvas—an enormous Brueghel painting come alive. Then I stepped into the scene. This was my way of intensifying the immediacy of experience: put everything on a single plane and have it all at once.

This crowd intensification technology, however, played only a supporting role. The real drama emerged from my own interior narration of the Story of Ann and the Crowd.

THE STORY OF ANN AND THE CROWD

Ann glides through an ocean of bodies, sound, and color. She is sensitive, able to detect and precisely narrate the shifting patterns of human expression. At a glance, she can discern secret alliances, undeveloped potentials, and future calamities. Employing sophisticated bioperceptual terrorist weapons, Ann can metamorphose you into a hallucinatory, Jackson Pollock blob; a visiting alien secretly trolling the planet for genetic material; or, perversely, the boring nine-to-five adult you are actually destined to become.

Similar changes take place on the religious front. The naked folk or “gente desnuda” that Columbus had considered as ideal targets of conversion become a Christian “pueblo” (from the Latin “populus,” a group of citizens) in accounts by missionaries in the XVIth century. Here, in a manner comparable to the organization of the “huestes,” the emergence of the term “pueblo” seems to reflect the refashioning of a social collective into an institutionally regulated and stratified structure. Three centuries later, in his “Carta de Jamaica”, Simon Bolivar would praise the Dutch jurist Grotius for developing a doctrine law which establishes that equal principles of law must apply to all “gentes,” even to infidels and barbarians, yet the term “gente” is entirely absent from Bolivar’s vocabulary, where the concept of “pueblo,” instead, predominates.

A point of comparison between the dissimilar projects of evangelization, military organization and national independence, with regards to the word “gente,” is the desire to crystallize the energy of a crowd into manageable units, both in terms of actual organization and symbolic power. Terms such as “pueblo,” “hueste” or “masa” become prevalent then, and “gente” seems to acquire the informal, at times mildly pejorative, sense that it carries today, as various colloquial expressions and greetings demonstrate.

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Entry by Jeronimo Ernesto

My bohemian parents hadn’t taught me much about the sanctity of marriage, but they had taught me how to inhabit the position of the flâneur.

I remember the moment I stepped into the concert hall’s steeply banked and darkened interior. The people who, outside, had presented the young flâneur with opportunities for enacting individualized extreme makeovers, now formed a single, undulating mass: a shape-shifting labyrinth of human form from which single faces appeared and then winked out as they passed through columns of light issuing from spots hanging high overhead.

Roger and I plunged in. We had seat assignments on one of the higher levels. The Real Mission, of course, was to reach the starred and jeweled stage pulsing at one end of the oval concert floor far below.

The warm-up band pounded out a massively loud rockabilly beat. Like mute, programmed corpuscles, we pressed on through the concert body’s ever-constricting arteries. The band acted as a pumping system, sending rushes of vibratory sound to speed us toward our One True Goal.

A guard stopped our progress at a waist-high corrugated wall that divided the risers from the concert floor. He asked to see our tickets. A discussion ensued.

During this exchange, the rockabilly band exited. The lights came up as the stage crew prepared for the next performer. Now we could hear the conversational hum of the crowd and see the littered concrete floor. It all seemed so ordinary. I registered my own disappointment as an arena-wide drop in energy. Roger and I slunk off, following the divider toward what we hoped would be some less well-guarded spot.

The lights dimmed again. The music kicked in. Roger and I held our position. I want to be able to tell you something about that set. I want to remember the songs or special moments. We loved Joe Cocker, but now, all I can recall is a single, frozen-in-time long shot of Cocker’s spastic body jerking in the spotlight.

We were only thirteen. Perhaps that explains it. We thought the concert was finished when Cocker played his encore and left the stage. But shortly, after we’d noticed that no one else was leaving, another rockabilly, bluesy beat hit the house in its midsection. This time, I barely looked up. My only concern was to get to the stage. Just to get there. This was, after all, The Story of Ann Gets To The Stage.

I tugged Roger’s arm and straddled the wall. A guard stuck his hand up my dress and caught a fistful of flesh. This didn’t slow me down. Not at all. I landed on the concert floor and kept going, pushing through the dark, vibrating labyrinth.

A woman had been singing.

Nah na na na na na.

My head stayed down in battle formation. As we got closer to the stage, thousands of bodies pressed forward. My robust adolescent self-absorption was short-circuited by the psychokinetic frenzy beginning to build up around me. Only two or three people separated us from the front stage bulwark. I could no longer move.

Now nuh now nuh now nuh now.

I lost all awareness of Roger. Instead of looking up at the stage, I turned to face the crowd. Shoulders strained against shoulders, faces against faces—a wall of faces angling for position in all directions. I flashed on one of my favorite photos from a book in my parents' library: Weegee's edge-to-edge image of a crush of girls at a Sinatra concert in New York in the 1940s. Most of the faces here were male, and they were saturated with desire.

I'd seen male desire and registered it as a fascinating-frightening state of inebriation. This was different. This was desire-amazement. Or desire-innocence. Or desire-trauma. I couldn't describe it. I was overcome by surprise. The flâneur disarmed, all interpretive weapons deactivated.

I looked up at the screaming woman on stage.

Hear me when I cruh-ai-ai-ai!

She was sweating hard. As she belted out the song, her face crumbled like my childhood friend Katie O'Brien's face crumbled when her dad got drunk and yelled. Her hair hung wild and long over her face. She doubled over the mike, her fist buried in the crease of her thigh. She was ugly, or so I thought. And she was screaming. Real screaming. Real pain.

Each time I tell myself that I can't stand the pain, you hold me in your arms, and I'm singing once again!

I asked a guy next to me who the singer was. He told me a name I didn't recognize.

So won't you just come on . . . come on . . .

I looked at her. I looked at the crowd. I didn't get it. A wild woman screaming. The faces of desire. But I felt it. It's what I remember most about that concert. The true pain and joy of that sound and the crazy, open intensity on the faces of boys.

Come on! Come on!

Now, take it! ■