THE INVENTION OF THE MASSES:
The Crowd in French Culture from the Revolution to the Commune

Stefan Jonsson  Researcher and Journalist, Stockholm, Sweden

They are many. The figures in Jacques-Louis David’s *The Tennis Court Oath (Le Serment du Jeu de Paume)* are spread out, lined up, piled on top of each other, cramped together, their bodies suggesting sheer quantity (fig. 2.1). The ones who wave and peek through the large windows high on the walls extend the assembly beyond the depicted hall. It is impossible to tell where this human aggregation begins or ends. The national assembly of France spills over the frame and flows out across the entire field of vision.

The additive force that expands the aggregation outward is countered by vectors pointing in the opposite direction, symbolized by the innumerable arms stretching toward the center. The central figure, the scientist Jean-Sylvain Bailly, slightly elevated above the others as he stands on a table in the middle, solemnly swears that those gathered will not separate until they have agreed upon a new constitution. After Bailly, all the others will pronounce the same oath in unison.

It is an event both dignified and rebellious; it is history in the making. The oath sworn by the National Assembly on June 20, 1789, marks the beginning of the
French Revolution. David recognized the gravity of the moment and the enthusiasm it released. Faces and bodies are frozen in an instant of emotional intensity. The persons are possessed by a common mission, which consists precisely in preserving their newly won unity.

The Tennis Court Oath is at once expansion and contraction, infinite numbers and complete accord. Language is at a loss, it appears, when trying to capture David’s visualization of unity in quantity. Yet is it not this peculiar synthesis of number and union that is invoked each time the masses are summoned to give history a push forward? I will return to that question and to David’s unfinished painting of the revolution.

This essay will sketch the French beginnings of the discourse on the masses. The invention of the mass as a sociological category is inseparably linked to the emergence of democracy, particularly to the conflicts about how the new democratic sovereign, the people, ought to be represented—not only politically, but also, and above all, ideologically and culturally. I will try to demonstrate how the discursive object in question—“the mass”—gradually congeals through a process of terminological clarification and ideological consolidation that contains four stages, each of which adds a new layer of meaning to the term. In the first phase, “the mass” appears as numbers. In the second phase, “the masses” are what Victor Hugo called *les Misérables*. In a third stage, “the masses” refer to the organized workers’ movements. Finally, “the mass” will come to express a certain political sickness, mass insanity, which is diagnosed in such a way that it envelops the majority of the population. In this fourth phase, “the masses” are literally the mad.

The word “mass” can be thought of as describing a potential. Simultaneous to the codification of “mass” in physics to indicate a measure of matter or substance in an object (1704) [1], “mass” was also being applied to human groups. In 1711 Swift wrote “The mass of the people have opened their eyes,” [2] as the adaptation of the word “mass” to describe mankind occurs late in its history, coinciding with the application of scientific theories to human populations in the 19th century. The idea of “mass” being connected to the idea of potential is revealed in an etymological study, but the degree of potentiality shifts with construction.

The notion of potentiality in mass exists to differing degrees. In its amorphous form, the word “mass” means “a large quantity, amount, or number (either of material or immaterial things).” [3] The correlation between “mass” and amount is present in all uses of the word, and even in its generality, a potential is present in the demarcation of a physical quantity. “Mass” is never a thing in itself but rather a gathering of something. In 1604 Shaks notes “I remember a masse of things, but nothing distinctly.” [4] “Mass” serves to direct the audience in a specific direction, for the physical presence of a mass embodied in the reference to size presupposes a determinant location. The word is not used to quantify so much as to establish a presence, which is achieved by this voluminous dimension. The idea of a concrete assemblage as opposed to a concept is further supported by the construction “mass of” which is present in most usages. “Mass” cannot exist without a
other defi nitions of “mass” further develop the notion of a potential. While the defi nition “a dense aggregate of objects apparently forming a continuous body” (5) only adds the idea of component consistency to the referent, it nonetheless brings us closer to a usability value of the named object. For example, F. Brook writes in 1660 “The Mosca or Temple is a masse of stones built around,” (6) where the collection of stones are performing an obvious function, and it is this commonality which is captured in the designation “mass”. Even though in this defi nition “mass” is not restricted to a particular type of object, potential is expressed by specifying a homogeneity of objects that together can be used for a purpose.

The notion of potential associated with “mass” is different from that meaning “existing in possibility.” (7) To understand the form of potential contained in “mass”, one can look at the defi nition connected with the oldest usage in the “Oxford English Dictionary.” It reads, “a coherent body of plastic or fusible matter that is not yet molded or fashioned into defi nite shape.” (8) The referent’s potential has not yet been realized, but there is no uncertainty of whether it can be. This is further underwritten by the fact that the nature of the referent is contained in the defi nition: “plastic of fusible matter.” If we think of “mass” as the ingredients of a formula, by defi ning the referent we know the ingredients and what they can produce. The outcome is certain, but as of yet unrealized. Other variations of “mass” explicitly contain referents that range from chemical compounds (9) to animal fi lds (10) to the created universe (11). The trend is to assign materials involved in scientifi c processes as referents, and as such the word “mass” most often occurred in scientifi c writings, as when, for example, C. Lucas writes in 1756 “The best method is to wash the whole mass carefully.” (12)

Understanding “mass” as a potential is consistent with the word’s Latin and Greek roots. The French “masse” from the 11th century A.D. was adapted from the Latin “massa” which was in turn adopted from the Greek “maxa” meaning barley-cake. Furthermore, the OED suggests that this may be cognate with the Greek “massein” meaning to knead. (13) This may seem obscure until placed within a historical context: bread (“maxa”) was the staple

TESTIMONY

Ceremony

Miches Serres  Member of the Académie Française; French and Italian, Stanford

It had been a long time since I had been present at a ceremony. Now that burials are not followed by funeral processions, now that we try to escape the boredom of offi cial receptions, who enjoys such occasions? But yesterday, the French Academy gave a last homage to Léopold Sédar Senghor, who died in Normandy and was in terred in Dakar; since my election to the Academy, I had known him, we had conversed, I had liked him. Beneath the nave of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the cardinal offi ciated before the President and the Prime Minister of France, accompanied by their wives, all four seated at the balustrade of the chancel. I had been unable to convince myself to put on, like my colleagues, the green costume of the Academy.

As a Christian, a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure, and a Latinist, the deceased had asked for a Gregorian mass; as a Senegalese, he had a right to be remembered with Wolof chants and the tam-tam of his village; as a member of the Academy, a poet, and a statesman, he was treated to the obligatory morsels of literary and political elegance, probably heard by his departed soul. The church being full, the sidewalks were overrun with rubbernecks.

ORIGIN

Catholic pageantry often carries on rituals which come from ancient Rome. Thus yesterday, the Euro-African space rebuilt in music was hollowed out by a temporal pocket that Senghor himself had sewn by claiming—was he right?—that plainchant came from the recitative chant of “Négritude.” But neither white Rome nor the Christianity of black Africa can pride itself on having invented the idea or the word “ceremony.” Of Etruscan invention and thus stolen by the Latin armies that assassinated this people—a people whose genius taught the Mediterranean the delicacy of art, an original approach to death, and the color of a piety which the people of neighboring cultures inherited—“ceremony” was taken up everywhere without anyone’s really remembering what it had signifi ed for those who first practiced it.

What lost sense does this atemporal music express, from what somber unspecifi ed grave does it spring? Do those who know understand as little as the ignorant, and those who believe, as little as the impious?
food of the Greeks. In terms of a potential, “massein” meant to mix the ingredients in order to make the bread. That bread was very important to the Greeks is seen in Jesus’s claim to divinity “I am the bread of life” [14] and emphasis on the spiritual “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God.” [15] In referring to bread as the essential element of survival, the word “massein” invariably had very positive connotations, for it describes the process by which man could sustain himself. The Greek root seems to have begun with the transformative process; modern adoptions have shifted the emphasis to the ingredients, or object-potential. The positivity associated with the potentiality of the Greek root furthermore perhaps explains the early appropriation of the word “mass” to material objects of technical value.

When, beginning in the 1700s, “mass” is applied to a group of humans, the goal is that of classification, or the application of scientific studies to human groups. Mankind has been substituted as the referent in the earlier definition “a dense aggregate of objects apparently forming a continuous body” [16] by way of the variant “a multitude of persons mentally viewed as forming an aggregate in which individuality is lost.” [17] The idea of classification is consistent with the usage structure; in 1874 Green records “The unconquered Britons had sunk into a mass of savage herdsman.” [18] The structure “mass of” requires a referent; “mass” carries with it size and physical proximity. While the loss of individuality may seem to indicate a loss of potentiality on the part of the group, it is not so. In losing their individual identities, the people as a mass acquire new potentials—the potential for revolution, for the reversal of power, for exploitation, as labor, and as voting power. This transformation is subsequently captured in the adoption of “mass” to mean “the greater part or majority of” [19] as applied to humans. Manipulating potential is equated with controlling the majority, or the mass.

The expression “in mass” implies the realization of a group’s potential. In other words, using “in mass” to describe an action presupposes that the mass is beginning to actively work, or realize some of its potential. For example, S. Rogers writes in 1820 “We condemn millions in the mass as vindictive.” [20] Vindictiveness arises while people form a mass. Anna Sewind offers a clearer illustration in 22 years prior when she writes “Our nation has almost risen in mass.”

**FACE TO FACE**

Those present gather in memory of the deceased. There, all confront a ghost. Do they kneel before the God in whom Senghor believed, in order to pray to Him? All, here, in His presence? Does this single or double absence unite this crowd? On the contrary, does it divide into two parts, so that the majority can ogle the masters? The passers-by peep at—ah!—the President and the Prime Minister, the chasubles and the green robes. Or is it split into three parts, so that those in the middle, decorated or noted writers, can be admired by the low who see them exhibited in the company of the high?

In the first hypothesis, transcendence assures the cohesion of the assembled collective. Sociology shows, in the second, what ceremonies serve for: coherence results from exchanged gazes. More dynamic, the third hypothesis describes preference: the anonymous are assured that such a democracy opens passages by which they could, possibly, make a name for themselves.

In the three cases considered above, someone or several someones, absent or present, unique, rare, or numerous, turn to face the crowd. We are accustomed to these about-faces. The officiant prays, his face toward us. The reader leaves the assembly, ascends to the podium, and reads the Gospel, which we hear leave his lips. The perpetual Secretary, and then the President, evoke, before the people, the memory of the deceased. We know these heads; we often give them a name. Except that transcendence, unnamable, does not show its face. We live together by confronting these bodies, turned toward these entreaties. Collective equals face to face.

**THE SOLE CEREMONY**

But we have changed all that, which dates back to the beginnings of human cultures and which ethn- and anthropologists can attest to at all latitudes. For from now on, in the sanctuary, braving archaic interdictions, a handful of operators, whose faces no one notices although they too turn toward us, sport television cameras and headsets, hi-fidelity microphones, booms with dazzling lights, on their shoulders, in their hands, or on their heads, dragging cables in whose loops, knots, and twists officials, like everyone else, entangle their feet. Tomorrow, on the screens of the region, the nation, or the world, depending on the importance of the ceremony, tens of thousands or millions of spectators will watch the same rite, retransmitted. From that moment, not only do those in the middle have less interest in being seen by the anonymous, whose numbers are unimpressive although they are crammed all along the street; but even the high try to show themselves to the lens of these machines which, facing everyone, make it so that everyone, high, middle, and low, will no longer exist together except in front of them.
The action generates from a directed movement of the people, and this massive movement is specifically encoded in the accompanying definition “bodily, all at once.”

The collective movement of the people is the sign of a transformation taking place. The extreme of a productively active “mass” is the disordered “mass” of people, which, not yet distilled to a usable medium, has been loosely termed “the massses.” “Mass” in this sense designates the generality of mankind, but has more frequently been used to describe the populace or “lower orders.”

In either case, the emphasis is on their undifferentiability, and as such their lack of utility. Whitney writes in 1875 “The language of the mass goes on unchecked” and W. Phillips in 1803 “The masses are governed more by impulse than conviction.”

The unchecked and impulsive natures of the masses oppose assemblage for a productive purpose. Potentiality is at a minimum; it exists in the amount of people, not in their separation as a group for a specific use. Hence, they are “the masses” in general as opposed to a “mass of voters” or other categorization. The minimum of potentiality and the tendency for disorder connected with this usage have given the word a negative connotation. This drastic shift from the positive associations ascribed to the Greek “massein” may reflect man’s cynicism with his inability to knead humanity into something useful.

The etymology does not end here. In the twentieth century “mass” has piggy-backed other words to indicate the participation of a massive amount of people. Agnes Clarke writes in 1903 “The universality of an apparent mass-attraction was a great fact.”

This usage expresses the consumptive capability of an enormous audience. People are not a potential so much as for what they can do but rather as a collective buying or otherwise consumptive power. Potentiality has been co-opted by the economy.

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GLORY

These machines make the real ceremony virtual. The flat image replaces, they say, corporeal presence. But, as far as I know, ceremony itself has always produced the virtual: the Etruscans probably invented it for this purpose. The exchange of gazes is already a passing of images. Certain pedants sometimes prefer the word symbolic, and for good reason, since the symbol originally united two pieces of baked earth previously severed by two mutual visitors, in order to remind them of their reciprocal debt of hospitality: yes, the collective was split in order to be better unified, the low enjoying contemplating the high—before killing them sometimes—and the high enjoying showing themselves to the low in their ephemeral glory.

This exchange of images confers glory on the parts of the symbol. If the participants dispute it or share it, they remain in the immanent glue of the social; if, on the contrary, it is given to God alone, transcendence unites the pious. Informational, negentropic, virtual, or symbolic, this vanity-glue can be transubstantiated one day into forces on the entropic scale, devastating, destroying lives and villages in passing, but it appears for a long time potential, anodyne, and inoffensive. But above all: we did not know who withholds, who gives, who will receive—God, our masters, you, me . . . ?—this illustriousness, this renown, this celebrity, this fame . . . blind in any event, to how long this light will remain virtual and to when it will be transubstantiated into a terrifying cyclone.

We have changed all that. We have constructed tools out of real glass and plastic materials, made for fashioning that virtual: society-making machines which with-
Entry by Michelle Ruvolo

There is now only one ceremony: the one produced by these machines, showing everywhere, replaces all the others. There is now only a single officiant in the chancel: the hole that we call the lens (“l’objectif”), probably by antiphasis, since it has only subjective and collective functions. This is why, once again, we were lacking other occasions: we are now only watching one ceremony, but this one every day.

**RELIGION**

At the mass yesterday in memory of Léopold Sédar Senghor and his faith, believers gathered together in front of the mystery of the Eucharist. In the sanctuary stood the priests, facing us and leaning, eyes closed, over that transcendental transubstantiation. In the same sanctuary, cameras produced a series of those immanent transubstantiations, dazzling us with lights.

Are we changing religions? There is only one, television: universal, it kills all the others. It has a monopoly on ceremonies. At noon and in the evening, we turn on the set to make our prayer to the presenter, whose face is turned toward us as we are virtually assembled. Catholic pageantry was succeeded by the Protestant service, where the pastor allows some of those present to speak, one by one; this rite serves as a model for all the talk shows. It is certainly a question of ceremony—and of a religious one: the cardinal and the officiants bear witness, here, at Saint-Germain-des-Prés, to the absence of God; the television operators bear witness to the absence of all. Each one of them, present, represents the absence of the two all-powerful. Are these two priests in the same chancel opposed to each other? Should we choose between the absent transcendence to which all glory is given: “Gloria in excelsis Deo…” and the groaning of the world given over to violence to make that glory, acquire it, and keep it? We bow either before the merciful impotence of the former or before our own omnipotence without forgiveness.

Even better: because the two pastors are corporally distinguishable, before our eyes, in the sanctuary and by the objects that they manipulate, we can no longer mistake social religion for belief in God. Finally, here is a great day: because no one is deceiving us, we can no longer deceive ourselves. Yesterday, we celebrated hold, draw in, and distribute—images, certainly, but also, by their intermediary, glory. Glory dazzles us with the light that the operators lit yesterday, at their whim, facing us in the chancel. Their machines transubstantiate a virtual social of three hundred people into another of thirty million; they have the power, immense and new, of changing scale and thus of transforming virtual symbols into gargantuan energies. If a man, already powerful, speaks in them, with them, and through them, he ignites the world.
together, once more, the great separation of the Church and politics, of divine mysticism and collective rites: the end of the sociologies of religions.

**TWO CRITIQUES OF PURE RELIGION**

Beginning in the era of the Enlightenment, experimental science progressively but completely removed from religion all the geneeses of the stars, the earth, and living beings. Celestial mechanics, astrophysics, geology, chemistry, natural history and biology . . . these all took over the explanation of the world from religion. What is more, there were machines attached to these sciences whose effectiveness was an improvement on the recipes or rare miracles alleged in these traditions. This decisive critique, which almost killed them, resulted however in a reprieve: faith no longer has any relation to the predictions and causes described in its great narratives. Interpreters still attached to the letter of these texts are losing their time, their credit, and the match: the others pray to God without worrying about scientific rationality; sometimes they even practice it.

The second critique came from the human sciences, which cheerfully reduced the religious and its rites to collective functions: the gods unite the city, their myths form the human soul. More devastating than the first critique, this even succeeded in converting many pastors to the point that they became psychologists or sociologists at the risk of their faith.

But had I ever really noted the existence and the function of these new, informational machines that maintain the same relation with the social sciences as the tools functioning on the entropic scale have with the hard sciences? Do we understand that certain technologies function as “society-making machines”? A winch at work supports weight; the energy of a motor can carry men beyond the horizon; the tools of communication fashion the collective, its numbers and its own energies.

Thus television, as I have said, sucks in all ceremonies. The virtual union of everyone is accomplished facing the presenter, who is not present. Everything that proceeded or resulted from the social, that represented it, actualized it, heated it, transformed it, even studied it: religion, sport, theater, cinema, books, teaching, judicial trials, political assemblies, meetings of all sorts . . . now passes through television, no longer exists except by television, is recycled through television . . . which transubstantiates everything from someones into everyone. It appropriates “everything that concerns everyone and, first of all, existence in the presence of everyone” which, for many, comes down to the same as existence itself, as well as “the very existence of everyone.” Socially speaking nothing exists without it, not even, finally, society itself. It does not reflect the opinions of society so much as create them: it does not mirror society so much as model it. It becomes society. As the latter has most often only virtual existence, even at the risk of actualizing it
from time to time, by violence, warlike or other, these virtuality machines fashion it on all sides.

Whence the implacable hatred that they arouse in intellectuals educated in the social sciences: the machines take their area of specialization, multiplying it to a grandiose aura. They become an indefinitely resounding sociology in action. They give a portion of it to everyone.

Thus if someone or some thing remains, independent of these new machines, and can exist without them, then that thing or that person clearly takes on a function other than social. “They truly leave society.” Solitary meditation and detailed comprehension of a difficult question; the hard and rare work of language; the secret passing of the cultural torch; a private gesture where justice and humanity overabound; the climbing of a wall by a party of friends . . . Can we, for a moment, suppose that television would show the hours of research of a mathematician concentrating for a long time; the silent day, spent in prayer, of a Trappist monk; the interminable promenade along the Loire of lovers alone in the world?

Everything that applies to ceremony in general is shown on television. We can no longer be mistaken: the rest cannot pass for ceremony.

Whence the second reprieve: these machines thus filter the religious from the collective and make a nonsocializable residue appear. Consequently a transcendence appears which from now on no one can suspect of having a decisive role in groups and their unanimity. Next to the booms bathing the spectators with light, the priest officiates. For whom? The headsets and cameras officiate for everyone. And the priest for whom, other than everyone? For those most rare people who, outside of this union of solid interest, suffer from the absence of the Other and pray to him.

Thanks to their critique, the hard sciences relieve religions of their responsibility to explain the world; the new virtual symbol machines relieve them of the social weight with which the human sciences overwhelm them in order to critique them. These two filters purify religion.

What does it show? A direct experience that no mystic has described as irrational.

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*Translated from the French by Matthew TIEWS*