If we are to grant credibility to the notion, advanced by Le Bon and other crowd psychology theorists of the turn of the twentieth century, that the notion “crowd” is profoundly historical, and that its historicity must be located in the period of high modernity, then it becomes germane to ask of this concept the question of its origins: if an assembly of individuals did not always have the characteristics of a crowd in the modern sense, what sorts of cultural practices might have led to the emergence of this specific mode of mass phenomenon? The thesis I would like to present here is that a powerful crucible for the transformation of generic assemblies into modern crowds is to be found in the audiences of early modern European playhouses. This is not to say that an equivalence is to be established between the terms audience and crowd. Indeed, I am in full agreement with Gabriel Tarde that an audience is not a crowd, that, to be more specific, essential characteristics of crowds as defined by the crowd psychology theorists are definitively absent from early modern theater audiences. Rather, what must be underscored is how the theatrical establishments of early modern Europe, in responding to distinct social and political anxieties provoked by the assemblage of large numbers of people in limited spaces, worked to bring about the very sort of
social formation that would spark contrary anxieties among political theorists in high Modernity. To put it in straightforward terms, if the early modern state, its functionaries, and its theoreticians were concerned with the chaotic potentials of individuals when they came together as masses, the primary concern of nineteenth- and twentieth-century political theorists is with the possibility of crowds acting non-chaotically, as a unified force. The danger implicit in the democratic diffusion of political power was, according to these theorists, precisely that the people would lose their ability to reason individually and act en masse. Needless to say, the very same fear emerged as a desideratum of political movements on both the left and the right who saw in that very people the source of their revolutionary strength. The irony is trenchant: fearing the “horizontal and vertical mobility” of a newly formed urban society, the early modern state co-opted its theatrical institutions to the end of “guiding” the theater going masses toward a more unified form of behavior via homogenized models of identification; by the late nineteenth century, the societies whose theoretical fabric is woven of the same homogenized models of identification are haunted by the specter of that very unified behavior the theater had sought to instill.

I begin the paper by sketching out what the assemblies of spectators at late medieval dramatic events might have been, if they were neither, as I will argue, audiences nor crowds in the modern sense. From there I go on to describe the emergence of early modern theatrical institutions and their apparatuses for the control and guidance of audiences, whose primary threat was that of being disorderly and of imposing through sheer number and volume cultural forms deriving from their own patent lack of taste. Underlying this concern with public disorder there emerges at the conceptual level a distillation of experientiae whose extremes can be located along the axis spanning the concepts of anonymity and intimacy. Precisely, in other words, as the rabble (vulgo) coalesce and are relegated to a certain negative collectivity, a distance is espoused between the realm of that collectivity (publicity) and an interiority whose depths are theorized as being both constructible and potentially infinite. If seventeenth-century texts evince an anxiety mixed with disdain for the disorderly nature of the crowd, and advance the theater as the ultimate institution for crowd control, eighteenth-century texts, and in the case of Spain most spectacularly the writings on public spectacle of Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, seem split between demonstrating an intensification of this anxiety and holding out the image of an ideal public as shaped by appropriate theater policy. The crowd as a unity of individuals, conformable to models of decorum and enlightened behavior, is deemed the ultimate goal of public administration. This progression can be seen as achieving its apogee in Mesonero Romanos’s descriptions of theater audiences in 1840s Madrid, assemblies operating as crowds in the strictest sense of a group of individuals responding harmoniously to shared affective situations, the same crowds, so congenial to bourgeois commerce, that
to the new Reformation England. In one scene, a man recounts the popular energy at a royal occasion, as he was “Among the crowd I’ th’ Abbey, where a finger/Could not be wedged in more.” (IV.i. 57) Queen Anne is the embodiment of new Reformation England, and the image of the crowd is at once one of procreation (“a finger/Could not be wedged in more and the great bellied women”) as well as sexual sublimation. Men cannot distinguish their wives in the crowd, as “all were woven/So strangely in one piece.”

This representation of multitude reflects England’s state of transformation and the emergence of the crowd as a phenomenon vacillating between two poles: energizing and fascinating as a physical union of a large group of people, a creative force, and on the other end a dangerous mass inciting anarchy and embodying instability.

Just as Horace saw “vulgus” and “greges” as threats to Roman state stability, describing Cleopatra “girt with her foul emasculate throng” (“contaminato cum grege turpium”) (Ode, I. 37), this classical notion of crowd as emasculating is appropriated into the English language at a time when Elizabeth I had to distinguish herself from classical figures such as Dido and Cleopatra - crowd women who embody the anxieties of a patriarchal state. Elizabeth would reconcile the threat of the crowd by associating her head with the state, and not her womanly body as she says to her people: “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too...” (Elizabeth’s Speech at Tilbury, 1588). Thus Elizabeth views her need to assert herself as a sovereign who balances the public and state in a new way, allowing the right kind of crowd without being subsumed by it. Her solution is to represent herself as a Virgin Queen that could ‘man’ the crowd by degendering the crowd phenomenon as an androgynous state. Thus in early Modern England one can see a kind of rhetoric of the crowd in the making, a rhetoric still in use today and whose purpose it to convince people how to view the crowd over one’s own experience of it.

Entry by Marisa Galvez

will haunt the manifestos, barricades, and theater halls of the late nineteenth century. The key, it will be shown, to understanding the power of the crowd lies in this historical analysis of intimacy and anonymity: for in the modernity that opens at the crux of the opposition between these concepts, the crowd is that entity that precipitates in the zone of their very indistinction.

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iv See the analysis of Baltasar Gracián’s work below.

v I am grateful to Rebecca Haidt for this insight. Unpublished lecture, University at Buffalo, February 2003.
TESTIMONY

Crowds

T. J. Clark  History of Art, UC Berkeley

It may be true that when a mass of people is put in a dangerous situation, or just senses the power that comes from numbers, the gathering can take on an identity of its own, and that the caution, or inhibition, or even decency of some of its individual members may be overtaken by the dynamic of a body on the move. But my memories of crowds in the late 1960s—which is the only time in my life when some form of radical disobedience by the many seemed on the agenda—make me doubtful about how far such dissolution goes. Even in a moment of pervasive social uncertainty (it does not matter, in my view, if we end up calling the moment in question “revolutionary,” since the decades of misrepresentation that have followed are testimony enough to the moment’s unacceptable, inescapable force) crowds are class-divided, and the motor of resentment that may partly drive them is impeded, all the time, at every point of potential conflict or freeing of energies, by the brake of anxiety, unpreparedness, and ordinary (profound) bourgeois awkwardness with the body in action.

I remember the poet Edward Dorn saying to me in 1968, at the height of an occupation of the university I was teaching in at the time (he said it kindly, and I did not take the advice, then or later, as condescending, even though I knew that the “they” he referred to included myself) that I ought not to hope for too much from what was happening all round me, or from the panoply of ’68 worldwide. “Never forget these are middle-class children. They will not be able to do what they dream of.” A friend said to me after the clashes in Grosvenor Square later the same year that he had glimpsed me only once in the mêlée, running backward from a line of policemen but still facing them—and laughing maniacally. I was in two minds, two bodies. I was laughing at the cops, at the dumb choreography of the “demonstration,” and most of all at my own inability to strike.

Of course what I am reminiscing about is a conflict that lacked—or had too rarely and ambivalently—the “nothing to lose” support of a proletariat. This was Dorn’s archaizing point. And how much, at the time, middle-class children appeared to fear that “nothing to lose,” as if sensing that the mere shadow of it in the space they occupied would mean the game was up. How endless the hours of gloomy anticipation of provocateurs before each march began, and how insistently public (and private) discussion of what to do in advance turned on “the question of the violent fringe.” Almost to the exclusion of any other kind of tactical thinking, it seems to me in retrospect. As if there could have been, or should have been, a way
of dissociating ourselves from those to whom society had done most harm! As if
there were not more urgent things to discuss—ways to make use of the space-
time opened by the action of the crowd—which actually lay, for a moment, within
the purview of the middle-class possible.

Crowds in the 1960s were class-divided, and also politically at odds with them-
selves. This last was a hopeful thing. Naturally they had their quota of armbands
and megaphones and Nuremberg chanting of “Ho Chi Min.” But I remember also
the insubordination of the mass: the counterchant of “Ho Ho Ho Chi Min” which
modulated into a Disney dwarf staccato of “Ho ho, Ho ho, ho ho ho ho . . .”; the
great banner in Oxford Street proposing that we “Storm the Reality Studios” rather
than the American Embassy; the graffiti replying to Trotskyist pieties with frag-
ments from Donne and MacDiarmid and Randolph Bourne; the gales of laughter
each time Vanessa Redgrave or Tariq Ali rose to speak. Crowds are insolent and
unserious. They give license to the disrespectful. If we accept, as I think we must,
that when crowds next fill the streets of the late-capitalist world with insurgency
in mind, they are even less likely than thirty years ago to be powered by proletarian
revenge or exultation, then perhaps we would do well to look again at the distinc-
tive feature of politics in the 1960s—its controlled unseriousness, the constant
cackle within it of laughter in retreat—somewhat more closely, more hopefully.

Our world is still a manifold of murders, suppressions, hungers, terror raining from
thirty thousand feet. But it is also, necessarily, a texture of images put in place of
that real. Its citizens are more and more expected to sign on to—a pathetic virtual life. That dim visuality is the state’s Achilles
heel. Middle-class children may not be able to do what they dream of. But what
they deride and disbelieve in (if they manage to go on improvising adequate forms
for the depth of their derision) may someday lose its will—a brutal, expansive, so
far unstoppable determination—to cover the world with lies.