Sports spectatorship is a complex phenomenon that varies, within certain boundaries, from time to time and from place to place. It can be the solitary mediated experience of a single person quietly watching his or her television screen. It can also be the immediate collective experience of a hundred thousand shouting, screaming men and women—a sports crowd—packed into a domed stadium. Sports crowds sometimes gather on the spur of the moment, as they did when an American professor and his German students played a game of Sunday softball in a park in Tübingen, but sports crowds are more typically found in set places at set times, according to a schedule published well in advance of the event. In this sense, in situ sports spectators resemble people who subscribe to a series of monthly concerts or theatrical performances. A major difference is that in situ sports spectators are usually sports fans. They see themselves as active participants, inspiring the home team with their cheers, demoralizing the visiting team with their taunts. Sports crowds are partisan and almost always have been, which is why they are frequently disorderly and sometimes violent. Ancient moralists said that sports fans were intoxicated or insane; modern Italian slang calls them tifosi, that is, those who are stricken with typhoid fever.

An exception to this dour generalization about partisanship comes immediately to mind. Well-behaved Victorian and Edwardian sports spectators schooled themselves to express a nonpartisan admiration for athletic prowess. When Eton’s cricketers took to the field against a team from Harrow or Winchester, a good play
by one’s opponents deserved as much hearty applause as a good play by one’s own team. Historically, however, this code of behavior was an anomaly. Sociologically, it was class-specific. The internalization of the ethos of nonpartisan good sportsmanship was never as complete among working-class sports fans as among spectators from the middle and upper classes. Gender also made a difference. In Victorian and Edwardian sports crowds, female spectators—who have almost always in every era been outnumbered by male spectators—were usually less partisan (and much less prone to verbal or physical violence). Many contemporary observers who commented with disdain on the unruly behavior of working-class fans noted with admiration the exemplary behavior of the ladies at Wimbledon or at Lord’s. Some observers remarked on a less obvious phenomenon. Spectators who play the game they watch behave differently from those who have never tried their hand (or foot) at it. The niceties of strategy appeal to the aficionado while sensational action attracts those who don’t know the difference between the third-strike dropped-ball rule and the leg-before-wicket rule.

The nonpartisan Victorian code of good sportsmanship has more or less vanished (along with the class-bound amateur ethos with which it was closely related) and in situ spectators tend to behave today as they have through most of recorded history. As the anthropologist Christian Bromberger noted in his exemplary study of French and Italian soccer fans, “A passion for football cannot be nourished by the pleasure of pure contemplation.” Sports crowds identify emotionally with athletes whom they feel to be their representatives. And they let the world know it. There are many other things that now need to be said about sports crowds, but this chord—partisanship and disorder—will be the loudest.

---


Multitude

Although the word “multitude” has shifted in its history to refer more frequently to people (particularly in reference to the body politic), its definition has nonetheless remained fairly intact since its introduction into Middle English from Old French, which in turn derived from the Latin “multitudo,” a derivation of the Latin root “multus,” meaning “much, or many.” Since its early history, the emphasis contained within the word refers more to quantity than quality or character. It therefore lacks some of the implied pejorative meanings of similar words such as “crowd,” “masses,” or “mob.” In Middle English, “multitude,” generally followed by the preposition “of,” meant: “(a) a large number of persons or things . . . (b) a large amount, abundance, greatness; mass (c) a crowd, host, army, mob, flock; a great progeny; (d) a sum, size, total number (not necessarily large); plurality, multiplicity” (“Middle English Dictionary”).

The “Oxford English Dictionary” currently defines the word as:

“1. The character, quality, condition of being many; numerousness; great number. Also, number whether great or small. 2. A great number, a host, a ‘crowd’ (of persons or things) . . . 3. A large gathering of people; a mass of people collected in one place; a throng. 4. With the: ‘The many’, the populace, the common people.”

The “American Heritage Dictionary” more concisely defines the word as:

“1. the condition of being numerous 2. a very great number 3. The masses, the populace.” These three sources work more to quantify “multitude” than characterize it.
In Middle and Renaissance English, “multitude” was frequently used to refer to abstract or uncountable objects or feelings. Some attempts seem to have been made to add a level of precision to the term. John Lydgate’s “Serpent of Division” (1422) somewhat confusingly measures the multitude of a cohort: “To declare þe number and þe multitude of a Cohorte... þer be two maner Cohortes, þe more and þe lasse, & þe more... conteynyth fyve hunderid”; and judging by Lambarde’s note in “Eiren” (1581) on “Three or more in one companie (which the law properly calleth a multitude),” the word may have played a part in legal vocabulary. In general, however, “multitude” seems most applicable to the abstract. The phrase “multitude of synnes” originates in the Bible and appears throughout (primarily theological) writing of the Middle Ages. 1 Peter 4:8 of the Wycliffe Bible (Early version c. 1384) reads “Charite couerith the multitude of synnes.” This phrase is repeated in Book to a Mother, (1400) “In charite, pat heleþ, as Seynt Ieme seyþ, multitude of synnes,” and still enjoyed currency a century later, as seen in this passage from Alain Chartier’s “Le Quadrilogue Invectif” (1500): “But and ther be enythinge pat putth you undir them it is nothinge ellis but the multude of your synnys.” “Multitude” also measured emotion or abstract quality. The Bible acts as the source for the employment of “multitude” to refer to sorrow, a usage that repeats throughout the Middle Ages. The Wycliffe Bible reads, “Of þe multitude of sorewe & of my moornynge, I hafe spokyn.” (1 Kings 1:16). The Twelve Profits of Tribulation (1500) echoes the Bible: “After the multitude of the sorrowes in myn herte, thi comfortis hane gladdid my soule.” In contrast to its use in conjunction with sin and sorrow, multitude is also used to measure positive abstract nouns. The Wycliffe Bible refers to both “þe multitude of þi mercy” (Psalms 5:8) and “þe multitude of þe gretnesse of hym.” This type of use is also found, amongst other writings which discuss peace, in “The Imitation of Christ’s” (1500) reference to “multitude of pes.”

Throughout its history, the term “multitude” has referred to crowds of various characters. Middle English Bibles uses the word to describe heavenly or religious crowds (those holding “pees”), as well as menacing crowds (such as “þe multitude of oure enymes” in the Prose version of the New Testament, c. 1400, and the stone-wielding multitude of the Wycliffe translation of Ezekial 16:40). Outside early religious literature, the term retains this semantic elasticity. The frequency with which

---

**TESTIMONY**

**Rolling Stones Play Free Concert at Altamont Speedway, 6 December 1969**

Greil Marcus  writer, Berkeley

I had seen the naked woman perhaps a dozen times during the day. Again and again she would run toward a man and rub her body against his. The man would offer some version of “Let’s fuck” and the woman would begin to scream and run blindly back into the crowd. After a few minutes she would start all over again.

But now, in the dark, behind the stage, with only a little yellow light filtering through to where I was standing, waiting for the Rolling Stones to begin their first song, the woman looked different. As she passed by, her head on her chest, I realized her body was covered with dried blood. Her face was almost black with it. Someone had given her a blanket; she held it as if she’d simply forgotten to throw it away, and it dragged behind her as she walked.

Then I saw the fat man. Hours before—it seemed like days—he had leaped to his feet to dance naked to Santana, the first band of the day. Those sitting near the stage, as I was, noticed that he used the excuse of the music to stomp and trample the people around him. A squad of Hell’s Angels, whom the Rolling Stones had hired for crowd control, came off the stage swinging weighted pool cues and beat the fat man to the ground. People pushed back against each other to get out of the way, then stopped and made peace signs. The fat man didn’t understand what was happening. Again and again he got up and was beaten down. Finally the Angels dragged him behind the stage.

The fat man too was now dark with blood. His teeth had been knocked out, and his mouth still bled. He wandered around the enclosure, waiting, like me, for the music.

As the Rolling Stones began to play, the mood tensed and the half-light took on a lurid cast. The stage was jammed with technicians, bikers, writers, hangers-on. Teenagers began to climb the enormous sound trucks that winged the back of the stage, and men threw them off. Some fell fifteen feet to the ground; others landed on smaller trucks. I climbed to the top of a VW bus, where I had a slight view of the band. Several other people clambered up with me, waving tape-recorder mikes. Every few minutes, it seemed, the music was broken up by waves of terrified screams: wild ululations that went on for thirty, forty seconds at a
the word was used in religious literature lent it an appropriate ring of spirituality in similar contexts. For example, Christopher Wordsworth’s hymn “Hark the sound of holy voices” (1862) includes the line, “Multitude, which none can number, Like the stars, in glory stands.” Negative meanings often associated with crowds also proliferate in the use of the word, as in Shaftesbury’s command in “Character” (1708) “To affect a superiority over the Vulgar, and to despise the Multitude,” and Cowper’s observation, “Books are . . . spells, By which the magic art of shrewder wits Holds an unthinking multitude enthral’d.” (1784) At other times, the term remains strictly neutral; Oliver Goldsmith writes in “Natural History” (1776), “Our horses would scarcely, in this manner . . . continue their speed, without a rider, through the midst of a multitude.”

The most significant change in the word’s development is the usage of “the multitude” to refer not to a specific crowd of people located in a defined physical space, but the crowd of people (a more dispersed or figurative body) that compose the state. The use of “multitude” in reference to the physical body could help to explain the shift in meaning first, from the generic “many” to “many people” and then more specifically to the body politic. In Guy de Chauliac’s “Grand Chirurgie” (~1425), multitude acquires a technical sense (in direct opposition to the use of the term to measure abstract quantities); Chauliac names in his surgery manual “multitude of veins,” “multitude of teres,” and “multitude of spirites.” The employment of “multitude” as a technical word to describe the innerworkings of the body does not seem to be particular to Chauliac; the “Medical Works” in Glasgow (~1425) also cites a “multitude of teres” as a medical symptom. Lanfranc’s “Complete Art of Surgery” (1396) as well as Chauliac refer to “multitude of blood,” a term that is also found in Henry Lovelich’s “The History of the Holy Grail” (1410).

From the 16th century onwards, “multitude” or more specifically “the multitude” appears in the English language as a reference to the body politic. In this usage, the connotations of the word align with the speaker or author’s conception of “the people.” In “Henry VI” (1593), Shakespeare includes the line, “Thou are not King: Not fit to gouerne and rule multitudes,” an early example of the use of the word to identify the people of a state. Hobbes also refers to “a multitude of men” in the “Leviathan” (1651). Elsewhere, the scream...
Shakespeare uses “the multitude” as a derogatory term, referring to “the rude multitude” in “Love’s Labour’s Lost” (1588). Ben Jonson echoes this designation with “the beast, the multitude.” (1640) Milton further injects pejorative connotations into the phrase “the multitude” in these lines from Samson Agonistes (1671): “The unjust tribunals, under change of times,/ And condemnation of the ingrateful Multitude.” This pejorative sense does not seem to be present in this excerpt from the “Junius Letters” (1769): “The multitude, in all countries, are patient to a certain point.” As perceptions of “the people” shift following the revolutions of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the term “the multitude” assumes, at times, a more positive sense. For example, Ruskin states in “Question of Air” (1869), “The strength of the nation is in its multitude, not in its territory,” and purports a more egalitarian theory of art in “Modern Painters.” “The multitude is the only proper judge of those arts whose end is to move the multitude.” It is perhaps the elasticity of this word which has kept its meanings relatively stable, but also which dictates its less frequent usage in comparison to “crowd,” “masses,” or “mob.”

SOURCES


“Middle English Dictionary,” from Middle English Compendium. http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec


Entry by Susan Schuyler