On the lookout for melodrama in the most arid reaches of social science? You couldn’t do better than peruse sociological writing about crowds. The pathos of large numbers is already there in Gustave LeBon’s dire warning that the crowd is the sphinx of our century, dying to consume us; it waxes in Sigmund Freud’s worry that “groups” exist in no other form than ego-abating worship of their ego-ideal leader; and it still burns strong in Serge Moscovici’s pseudo-scientific pronouncement that political riots only prove “the veneer of civilization is very thin.” Even in the twenty-first century, you can still hear echoes of the oracular tone of Thomas Carlyle or Joseph de Maistre, post–French Revolution reactionaries who feared that any mass action from below would set the social order ablaze.

In the United States, a country that was arguably born out of crowd-fueled, democratically arrayed civil unrest, the fear of crowds was a lot quieter in the nineteenth century. It did however still reach a predictable apex in the McCarthy era. This generation can be rescued from crowd thinking, writes one 1950s hyperbolizer, only when citizens “discover that their own thoughts and their own lives are quite as interesting as other people’s, that, indeed, they no more assuage their loneliness in a crowd of peers than one can assuage one’s thirst by drinking sea water.”
Perhaps largely derived from a distrust of totalitarianism most ably articulated in Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the “mass critique” of the social scientists of the mid-century extrapolated from the worst of Nazism and Stalinist Communism a generally coercive force called “the social,” which seemed now to be terrorizing not Germany and Russia but, in a different guise, America itself. Small wonder that Hannah Pitkin called her account of Hannah Arendt, preeminent theorist of the threat that “society” poses to an orderly political realm, *The Attack of the Blob*. For Arendt, social life—with its tendency to annihilate privacy and collapse public arenas into overseen and government-managed cages—had stopped being one aspect of human culture and become a dangerous underlying assault upon human freedom.iii To writers like Arendt—those in her train included C. Wright Mills, Theodor Adorno, Elias Canetti, Richard Hofstadter, and arguably even the young Jürgen Habermasiv—the enemy was all the more terrifying for being uncanny—an aspect of our own familiar selves suddenly recognized as part of an external assailant.

We may not be quick to recognize the central worry of such mass-critique writers as panic about what crowds can do, because what they mostly described themselves as denouncing was instead “society” or “the social.” The legacy of Mill trains us to see in their words mostly introspective unease about one’s lack of control over one’s own actions, rather than crowd-control protocols. But to these writers, worry about the unrestrained, licentious and determinedly egalitarian danger of crowds was, in the final analysis, the way that “the social” became visible (and hence vulnerable).

Richard Pells describes what made the dominant intellectual liberalism of the 1950s distinct from preceding decades:

> What the writers of 1930s called “community” the postwar intelligentsia labeled “conformity.” Cooperation now became “other-direction”; social consciousness had turned into “groupism”; solidarity with others implied an invasion of privacy; “collectivism” ushered in a “mass society”; ideology translated into imagery; economic exploitation yielded to bureaucratic manipulation; the radical activist was just another organization man.v

In William H. Whyte’s 1956 *The Organization Man*, aggregation itself gets hypostatized into a collective noun with its own ideational motivations (“Is the Organization to be the arbiter? The Organization will look to its own interests, but it will look to the individual’s only as The Organization interprets them”).vi And in Riesman et. al’s 1950 *The Lonely Crowd* the underlying emphasis is on rescuing democracy by protecting individual difference from the homogenizing barbarism of the crowd: “the idea that men are created free and equal is both true and mislead-
addresses Satan as “Leader of those Armies bright, / Which but th’Omnipotent none could have foyld,” that is, have overthrown, defeated.

In France it was first cloth that was “fulled” under foot, and only later by analogy grapes and wheat. For a period of time the Old French “foule” signified both the place where one beat cloth and the season in which one pressed autumn’s harvest. “Foule,” however, developed a range of metaphorical uses much sooner than its English counterpart. As early as Chrétien de Troyes’ Perceval (c. 1190) “fouler” could mean to oppress mentally, as in the following example: “Le rouge chevalier qui ne se souloit point/Faisoit tant d’armes”. [The red knight who did not “press himself” at all, made a great show of arms.] The Red Knight is unpressured, and thus energetic, indefatigable—or so he thinks until Perceval later defeats him. By the Renaissance, other kinds of pressure associated with the foot came to be expressed by the verb “fouler.” The action of kicking open a door was regularly expressed by “fouler,” but so was sullying someone’s reputation. So Philippe de Commynes writes in 1490 that song may be used both “a la louenge des vainqueurs et a la foulle du vaincu” [in the praise of the victors and the blame of the vanquished]. In other words, to dishonor or discredit someone was imagined as trampling their reputation. Another form of pressure that “fouler” could express was economic and political. In Pasquier’s royalist propaganda (c. 1555) he writes that “Nos roys sont arrivez a cette grandeur…sans foule et oppression de leurs subjects”. [Our kings have arrived at such grandeur without the “foule” and oppression of their subjects.] Francois de la Noue takes a different view of the monarch when about thirty years later he writes that “il semblera peut estre que ceste foule soit petite; mais je pense qu’elle se monte…par an”. [It would seem perhaps that this “foule” is little, but I think it is rising each year.] He’s referring, of course, to new taxes.

It is around this same time at the end of the 16th C. that “fouler” regularly begins to refer to the action of a mass of people as well as of things. Montaigne writes in his Essais of the common occurrence of people struggling to be first: “les ames [que] seroient a se fouler a qui prendroit place la premiere”. [The souls who would press to take first place.] And at the opening of Racine’s play Athalie Abner describes a crowd of worshippers as “le peuple saint en foule inondait les portiques” (i, 1). [The devout people “en foule” inundate

Consider for a moment how greatly the suspicious 1950s divagated from the collectivist or at least crowd-cheering ethos of the 1930s. In King Vidor’s 1928 The Crowd for instance, much of the film’s visual delight comes from conglomeration shots: lines of chatting women leaving an office building at quitting time, spinning through the revolving door or climbing together onto rides at Coney Island. In among these teeming masses, the occasional deviation is generally for disaster—the one man struck down in the street is distinct from the crowd that gathers round him. When a happy couple is picked out, they are applauded in their moment of most perfect conformity with their surroundings. That was a 1930s dream, of the average hero, but by the 1950s it reappears in Whyte and Riesman as a nightmare of stagnation and immersion.

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i I am grateful to Linda Schlossberg, Sean McCann, Alex Star, David Cunningham, Peter Knight, Jeffrey Schnapp, and Matthew Tiews for conversations and insightful critiques of an earlier draft of this article.

ii David Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, The Lonely Crowd (1950; abridged and revised 1961; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 307; hereafter abbreviated as LC.


iv Habermas’s The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere is far more indebted to Arendt’s work on “the social” and “the public” than it acknowledges, and surprisingly ready to align itself with John Stuart Mill’s fear of “the social” as invidious internal enemy.


vi William H Whyte, The Organization Man (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 397; italics in original; hereafter abbreviated as OM.
Italian has the words “follare” and “folla” from the same Latin root, and they take a similar course from the textile mill and the winepress into the streets; however, the noun forms in French and Italian have divergent histories. In French “foule” was used to refer to a multitude of people in one place as early as the thirteenth century, though more frequently it was used to mean the place where the action of “pressing”—whether literal or figurative—occurred. Yet Italian doesn’t produce an equivalent in “folla” until the seventeenth century. Modern dictionaries always cite the example of the Jesuit orator, Paolo Segneri, who in a work from 1673 writes, “Non vedi tu ciò che accade in un’altra folla? Quanto entra in chiesa chi allor fa forza ad entrarvi, tanto pur v’entra chi lascia in essa portarsi dall’impeto della calca, che gli vien dietro.” [Don’t you see what happens in another mass? However much one might struggle to enter a church, so much easier it is to relinquish one’s movement to the force of the crowd which comes behind.] Here “folla” begins to describe not just a mass of things under pressure but specifically a mass of people. Before Segneri, and indeed for some time after, the transitional locution was “folla di gente” or “folla del popolo” (mass of people).

When comparing the fates of “folla” and “foule” it is worth noting the existence in Italian of the noun “calca,” signifying crowd, which Segneri also uses in the above example. “Calca” had been in use since at least the thirteenth century, and may be both the reason why the sense of “crowd” was so late in developing in “folla” and also part of the reason why it appeared at all. “Calca” and “folla” are very closely related, not only because they share a concern with footwork—in “calca” from the Latin “calc,” heel, it is literalized—but because both derive from verb forms, “calcare” and “follare,” respectively; and most philologists agree that “folla,” n., was probably modeled on “calca.” Nevertheless, the existence of “calca,” which was used most prestigiously with footwork—in “calca” from the Latin “calc,” heel, it is literalized—but because both derive from verb forms, “calcare” and “follare,” respectively; and most philologists agree that “folla,” n., was probably modeled on “calca.” Nevertheless, the existence of “calca,” which was used most prestigiously
by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the sense of “crowd,” may have been a hindrance to the development of “folla” before it was ever its inspiration. That is, writers after the Tre Corone already had a powerful way of imagining as well as naming a mass of people in the word “calca.”

While in Italian the idea of pressure contained in the Latin “fullo” culminates in the idea of a thick mass of people, in English, for reasons I will not explore here, this sense never develops, neither in “full” nor “foil.” In French, on the other hand, we discover yet another conceptual wrinkle in the life of the Latin root. At the end of the eighteenth century the idea of pressure was internalized in the pair, “refoulement” and “defoulement,” the notions of repression and release respectively. When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud’s works were translated into French, these words became official psychoanalytic vocabulary.

NOTES
[1] As an adjective “full” evolved in coordination with the Germanic family of words “foll” (OHG), “foll” (OFris.), “fullr” (ON), “fulls” (Goth.), and cognate with the Greek “polus” and Latin “plenus.”

[2] A famous example by Dante is from Purgatorio 6.9 “a cui porge la man, più non fa pressa; / e così da la calca si difende”

Entry by John B. Hill

Thousands of us had been cut off. We were failed witnesses, clotted and stagnant, blinded by the buildings meant as a backdrop for the television audience relaxed safely at home. It was an indignity for us to be smeared against the very cause of our frustration. We were an inconvenience to each other and to the crowd-control authorities. I naïvely hated those people. They were the others, the ones art was happy to offend or confuse. They were the undifferentiated ones we artists needed to frame our absurd singularity. My conception of this art-world “we,” however, was a fantasy, as I had yet to obtain even the tiniest milieu. I was as cut off as that Independence Day crowd. My goal was to build a studio in my head and treat the world as a hallucination. I was proud to imagine myself as socially unintegrated.

The crowd and I were an unhappily fused horde of grumbling consumers—hungry sheep unconsciously obeying nebulous orders. We wanted a big show, but our frustration had made us stale and viscous, not volatile like the black-out rioters of the next summer, the antiwar demonstrators of 1962 or the rock audiences I had joyously merged with as a teenager. We eventually dispersed into an ebb tide of aversion and disappointment. On the long walk home, however, the throng atomized into fellow New Yorkers: attractive, eccentric and driven people, neighbors, proto-friends, colleagues and lovers.