In his foreword to a 1987 publication on *The Crowd in Contemporary Britain*, the eminent judge Lord Scarman declared that “it is high time that a properly researched and scientific study should be published of the crowd in contemporary Britain.” Though his lordship’s statement reflects his own recent role as leader of a government inquiry into the 1981 Brixton riots, it also unconsciously echoes the urgent sense of timeliness underlying Gustave Le Bon’s justification for his 1895 best-seller on crowd psychology: “Organized crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples, but this part has never been of such moment as at present.” Crowds, it appears, are an idea whose time has not infrequently come, particularly during the past two and one-half centuries of world history. That this should be the case is perhaps unsurprising: as Lord Scarman also points out, “The crowd is nothing new in human society.” Indeed, accounts of collective behavior span Western history from Plato’s worries about mob rule in *The Republic* to the Gospel descriptions of the crowd that cried for Christ’s death, from concerned reports of peasant revolts in the early modern era to newspaper headlines about the riots of the post–World War II era, Watts to Brixton to Seattle and Genoa. Yet Le Bon struck a powerful and enduring chord with his ominous pronouncement that “the age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS” (*C*, xv).

Le Bon isn’t known for understatement, and the popular success of his *Psychologie des foules* is attributable more to his way with aphorism than to rigorous sociological analysis. Rigorous or not, Le Bon’s formulations caught on because of their
ability to sum up a conviction that had been in the air since the American and French revolutions. It was shared with nineteenth-century predecessors such as Gabriel Tarde, Hippolyte Taine, Enrico Ferri, and Scipio Sighele, and with twentieth-century successors such as Sigmund Freud, Robert Park, José Ortega y Gasset, and Elias Canetti, not to mention with the leading artists, writers, commentators, historians, and politicians of both centuries. The conviction in question held that, even if “the crowd is nothing new in human history,” a quantitative and qualitative difference distinguishes modern crowds from their premodern counterparts. In some deep and essential sense, crowds are modernity. Modern times are crowded times. Modern man is the man of the crowd.

By providing a readable and provocative synthesis, Le Bon’s treatise both inaugurated and popularized the subdiscipline of collective psychology. It has been continuously in print since its first publication, translated into every major language and many minor ones—a Latvian version appeared in 1929—and going through innumerable editions. “While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one,” the work goes on to argue in a prefatory passage alluded to in several essays in the present volume, “the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase” (C, xiv–xv). Despite their purported ties to a primal scene associated with premodern and even prehistoric predecessors, modern crowds are not reducible to updated tribes or clans. Heterogeneous and unstable, they arise as the result of the promiscuous intermingling and physical massing of social classes, age groups, races, nationalities, and genders along the boulevards of the industrial metropolis. They can no longer be conceived of as the passive subjects of history: as unruly hordes—or, better, herds—tamed and disciplined by some higher order of beings, be they priests, nobles, monarchs or philosophers. Rather, the tumultuous events of 1776 and 1789 have recast the once reviled multitudes in the role of history’s protagonists. The res publica or “public thing” is now firmly in their hands: the state, economic production, communications, culture, the law. Theirs is the power to make and unmake all forms of government. Theirs is the new language of political action based upon electoral campaigns, popular assemblies, and symbolic protest marches performed in city streets and squares. Theirs are the new media of mass persuasion from broadsheets to newspapers to posters to radio and television. In the era of crowds, the cornerstone of the state is popular sovereignty, not the inherited privilege of monarchs.

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ii Gustave Le Bon, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind, 2d ed. (1895; Atlanta, Georgia: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1982), v; hereafter abbreviated as C.

