THEORY OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOUR

SMELSER

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by

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FOR HELEN

who has taught me
that both conflict and stability
are essential for growth

PREFACE

Gordon W. Allport of Harvard first introduced me to the study of collective behavior. When I was a freshman in 1948, his introductory course in Social Relations set my mind working. Later, when I was a graduate student in 1955, he reactivated and deepened these workings. During the years after studying with him his words have returned to haunt me. So far as I know, he is unaware of my intellectual debt; I should like to record it now.

In working on my doctoral dissertation[1] I delved into the collective protests of the British working classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In trying to decipher the content and timing of these eruptions, I came to be deeply impressed with the explanatory potential of a distinctively sociological approach. The idea of attempting a theoretical synthesis of collective behavior came to me in the summer of 1958. Since then I have worked continually on this volume.

Between 1959 and 1961 I was a member of the Center for Integrated Social Science Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Known familiarly as the Theory Center, this group consisted of six or seven scholars from various departments. Each member was relieved of academic duties for one semester in each of his two years in the Center. At meetings we discussed theoretical issues arising from the work of one or more members. We had no office for meetings; we wandered peripatetically from one member's study to another. We had no secretary, no research assistants, no stationery with letterhead. Simple as it was, the Theory Center had unparalleled value. With the advance of academic specialization in the mid-twentieth century, few things can be more salutary than to have scholars take temporary leave from the confines of their research projects to discover the minds of others in an unhurried atmosphere.

In the Theory Center we read one another's work with great care and did not fear to fire broadsides when the occasion demanded. My work on collective behavior received and gained immensely from merciless criticism. I should like to thank the following men, members whose tenure overlapped with mine: Frederick E. Balderston (Business Administration); Jack Block (Psychology); Julian

[1] Published in 1959 as *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* by Routledge and Kegan Paul and the University of Chicago Press.

disquieting ability to detect a loose argument, a subtle inconsistency, an unintended meaning, and a meaningless expression. Even more, she has a way of phrasing criticisms that makes it very difficult to rest before doing something about them. These qualities, infuriating at the moment, proved in the end to be a source of value for the manuscript, humility for the author, and charm for her husband.

NEIL SMELSER

Berkeley, California,
February, 1962

Feldman (Business Administration); Erving Goffman (Sociology); Austin C. Hoggatt (Business Administration); Leo Lowenthal (Sociology and Speech); Richard S. Lazarus (Psychology); William Petersen (Sociology); Theodore R. Sarbin (Psychology); and David M. Schneider (Anthropology, now at the University of Chicago). In addition, I profited from informal explorations with Professors Lazarus, Petersen, Block, and Sarbin.

Herbert Blumer of the University of California, Berkeley, deserves a special word. His own pioneering work on collective behavior is well known; reading it stimulated me to new lines of thought. More directly, he gave me his extraordinarily painstaking criticism of an earlier draft of Chapters I–IV. I would hesitate to estimate the time and energy he devoted to writing long, detailed memoranda and to conversing with me after I had responded to these memoranda. It is only candid to report that on points of principle we were frequently at loggerheads. But his thoroughness and his keen ability to locate weaknesses in reasoning led me to revise the early chapters extensively. Several other colleagues at Berkeley offered helpful comments on the manuscript—Reinhard Bendix, William Kornhauser, Seymour M. Lipset, and Hanan C. Selvin.

The influence of Talcott Parsons of Harvard on my intellectual development—influence which can be seen in these pages—began more than a decade ago. Even though we now stand at opposite ends of the nation, we have managed to continue periodic discussions during the past several years. His comments were especially helpful for Chapters II and III. Finally, Guy E. Swanson of the University of Michigan and Jan Hajda of Johns Hopkins wrote critical comments on the manuscript. Responsibility for all the ideas in this book is of course mine; but in the formation of these ideas all these men had an important place.

Before the final draft was prepared, Marvin B. Scott, my research assistant, combed the manuscript with unusual care. His criticisms added substance and above all clarity to the presentation. He also prepared the index and assisted with proof-reading. The inevitable but important chores of typing and writing for permissions were handled capably by Mrs. Carroll H. Harrington, Mrs. Helen Larue, Mrs. Pauline Ward, Miss Aura Cuevas, and by the staff of the Institute of Industrial Relations at Berkeley.

My wife, Helen, who is a sort of Frenchwoman at heart, conducted much independent research for me on the social and political turbulences that have appeared in France since the middle of the eighteenth century. Later she read almost the whole manuscript in draft. She is the most intelligent layman I know; she has a

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CHAPTER 1

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem. In all civilizations men have thrown themselves into episodes of dramatic behavior, such as the craze, the riot, and the revolution. Often we react emotionally to these episodes. We stand, for instance, amused by the foibles of the craze, aghast at the cruelties of the riot, and inspired by the fervor of the revolution.

The nature of these episodes has long excited the curiosity of speculative thinkers. In recent times this curiosity has evolved into a loosely defined field of sociology and social psychology known as collective behavior. Even though many thinkers in this field attempt to be objective, they frequently describe collective episodes as if they were the work of mysterious forces. Crowds, for instance, are "fickle," "irrational," or "spontaneous," and their behavior is "unanticipated" or "surprising." For all their graphic quality, such terms are unsatisfactory. They imply that collective behavior flows from sources beyond empirical explanation. The language of the field, in short, shrouds its very subject in indeterminacy.

Our aim in this study is to reduce this residue of indeterminacy which lingers in explanations of collective outbursts. Although wild rumors, crazes, panics, riots, and revolutions are surprising, they occur with regularity. They cluster in time; they cluster in certain cultural areas; they occur with greater frequency among certain social groupings—the unemployed, the recent migrant, the adolescent. This skewing in time and in social space invites explanation: Why do collective episodes occur *where* they do, *when* they do, and *in the ways* they do?

In this introductory chapter we shall merely raise some questions posed by such an inquiry. What is collective behavior? What are its types? How is it to be distinguished from related behavior such as ceremonials? What are the determinants of collective behavior? Are the determinants related to one another in any systematic way? What can a sociological approach contribute to an understanding of collective behavior? Having raised the questions, we shall devote the remainder of the volume to searching for their answers.

An Initial Clarification of Terminology. Our inquiry will cover the following types of events: (1) the panic response; (2) the craze response, including the fashion-cycle, the fad, the financial boom, the bandwagon, and the religious revival; (3) the hostile outburst; (4) the norm-oriented movement, including the social reform movement; (5) the value-oriented movement, including the political and religious revolution, the formation of sects, the nationalist movement, etc. The justification for choosing these particular types will become clear only after detailed theoretical arguments in Chapters II–V. At present we must ask: By what name shall we label these kinds of behavior?

As might be expected of a field which is underdeveloped scientifically, even its name is not standardized. Perhaps the most common general term is "collective behavior."[1] Different analysts who use this term, however, do not refer to a uniform, clearly defined class of phenomena.[2] In addition, Brown, a psychologist, has used the term "mass phenomena" to refer to roughly the same range of data which is encompassed by "collective behavior."[3] Other terms used to characterize this body of data are "mass behavior" and "collective dynamics." Both are found wanting. Because of the ideological polemics which "mass" has accumulated, this term is misleading.[4] A more neutral, but equally misleading, term has been coined recently by Lang and Lang—"collective dynamics."[5] Although collective behavior bears an intimate relation to social change,[6] it seems wise to reserve the term "dynamics" for a field more inclusive than collective behavior alone. Words like "outburst," "movement,"

[1] This term was given wide currency in the 1920's and 1930's by Robert E. Park at the University of Chicago. Those who follow in his general tradition have continued to use the term. Cf. H. Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in J. B. Gittler (ed.), *Review of Sociology: Analysis of a Decade* (New York, 1957), p. 127. Also R. H. Turner and L. M. Killian, *Collective Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1957).

[2] Blumer, for instance, excluded R. T. LaPiere from his general survey of collective behavior—even though his major work is entitled *Collective Behavior* (New York, 1938)—on the grounds that LaPiere's treatment "represents a markedly different conception of the field." "Collective Behavior," in Gittler (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 127.

[3] R. Brown, "Mass Phenomena," in G. Lindzey (ed.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), Vol. II, pp. 833–876.

[4] Representative classics in the literature on mass society are J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York, 1932); E. Lederer, *State of the Masses* (New York, 1940); K. Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (London, 1940), and H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1958). For a recent attempt to eliminate some of the ambiguities of this literature and to synthesize the material theoretically, cf. W. Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, Ill., 1959).

[5] K. Lang and G. E. Lang, *Collective Dynamics* (New York, 1961).

[6] Below, pp. 72–73.

and "seizure" also indicate the attempts to delineate the scope of the field. In the face of this plethora of words and meanings, we must decide early on conventions of usage.

The most accurate term for encompassing the relevant classes of events would be an awkward one: "collective outbursts and collective movements." "Collective outbursts" would refer to panics, crazes, and hostile outbursts, which frequently (but not always) are explosive; "collective movements" would refer to collective efforts to modify norms and values, which frequently (but not always) develop over longer periods. For brevity we shall condense this awkward term into the conventional one, "collective behavior." The reader should remember that this chosen term is being used as a specific kind of shorthand, and that it has its own shortcomings. In certain respects the term is too general. "In its broad sense [it] refers to the behavior of two or more individuals who are acting together, or collectively. . . . To conceive of collective behavior in this way would be to make it embrace all of group life."[1] The business firm, for instance, which responds to heightened demand by increasing its production, is engaging in "collective behavior" (because persons are acting in concert), but we would not classify this response as an instance of collective behavior. Despite such shortcomings, we shall continue to use the term, partly from a desire to avoid neologisms, and partly from a lack of suitable alternatives.

An Advantage of Studying Collective Behavior. Under conditions of stable interaction, many social elements—myths, ideologies, the potential for violence, etc.—are either controlled or taken for granted and hence are not readily observable. During episodes of collective behavior, these elements come into the open; we can observe them "in the raw." Collective behavior, then, like deviance, affords a peculiar kind of laboratory in which we are able to study directly certain components of behavior which usually lie dormant.

The State of Research on Collective Behavior. In almost every division of sociology, a general analysis must be prefaced by a commentary on the sad state of available research. Collective behavior is no exception:

> The paucity of investigation is seen easily by surveying the literature on forms of collective behavior. Examples of "forms" are: panic, fad, fashion, rumor, social epidemic, rushes, reform movements, religious movements, etc. If one examines the literature concerned with each of these forms, he can see easily both the crude descriptive level of knowledge and the relative lack of theory in this area. Most investigation is in the nature of reporting:

[1] Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in Gittler (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 128.

either by persons fortuitously on the scene or by historians who describe, after their occurrence, certain collective behavior events.[1]

The indictment is sound for several reasons. First, because collective behavior is viewed as spontaneous and fickle, few points are available to begin a coherent analysis. Points of reference melt before one's eyes as a crowd develops into a mob, a mob into a panicky flight, and a flight into a seizure of scapegoating. Second, because many forms of collective behavior excite strong emotional reactions, they resist objective analysis.[2] Third, episodes of collective behavior, with few exceptions,[3] cannot be controlled experimentally. Even direct observation is difficult, since the time and place of collective eruptions cannot be predicted exactly. Finally, it is virtually impossible to "sample" the occurrence of collective episodes from a large population of events. The analyst of collective behavior must often settle for inaccurate and overdramatized accounts. For such reasons the field of collective behavior "has not been charted effectively."[4]

THE NATURE OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

Having chosen a term—collective behavior—we must now ask: To what kinds of phenomena does this term refer? This question breaks into two parts: (1) By what criterion or criteria do we exclude

[1] A. Strauss, "Research in Collective Behavior: Neglect and Need," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 12 (1947), p. 352.

[2] For a sketch of the varying emotional attitudes toward the crowd in Western history, cf. G. W. Allport, "The Historical Background of Modern Social Psychology," in G. Lindzey (ed.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. I, pp. 29–31.

[3] For example, G. W. Allport and L. Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1947); L. Festinger, A. Pepitone, and T. Newcomb, "Some Consequences of De-Individuation in a Group," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 47 (1952), pp. 382–389; J. R. P. French, "The Disruption and Cohesion of Groups," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 (1941), pp. 361–377; French, "Organized and Unorganized Groups under Fear and Frustration," in *Authority and Frustration*, University of Iowa Studies: Studies in Child Welfare, Vol. XX (Iowa City, 1944), pp. 231–308; D. Grosser, N. Polansky, and R. Lippitt, "A Laboratory Study of Behavioral Contagion," *Human Relations*, Vol. 4 (1951), pp. 115–142; N. C. Meier, G. H. Mennenga, and H. Z. Stoltz, "An Experimental Approach to the Study of Mob Behavior," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 (1941), pp. 506–524; A. Mintz, "Non-Adaptive Group Behavior," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 46 (1951), pp. 150–159; A. Pepitone, J. C. Diggory, and W. H. Wallace, "Some Reactions to a Hypothetical Disaster," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 51 (1955), pp. 706–708; N. Polansky, R. Lippitt, and F. Redl, "An Investigation of Behavioral Contagion in Groups," *Human Relations*, Vol. 3 (1950), pp. 319–348; G. E. Swanson, "A Preliminary Laboratory Study of the Acting Crowd," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 18 (1953), pp. 180–185.

[4] H. Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in Gittler (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 127.

and include instances as appropriate objects of study? Do we include the rumor? the riot? the mass migration? Are conventionalized festivals, demonstrations, and heroes' welcomes a part of the field? How do we classify semi-institutionalized forms like the lynching mob? In posing such questions we attempt to establish *outside limits* for the field. (2) What are the major types of collective behavior? By what principles do we derive these types? What, for instance, is the relation among the boom, the bandwagon, and the fad? Should we consider them separately, or are they special cases of a larger type? These questions demand that we establish the *internal divisions* of the field. Although the demarcation of lines is not an end in itself, and is not so intriguing as the inquiry into causes and consequences of collective behavior, it is of prime importance. Before we can pose questions of explanation, we must be aware of the character of the phenomena we wish to explain.

In delimiting and classifying the field of collective behavior, we may proceed with varying degrees of formality. By a common-sense method we would simply list those kinds of behavior that traditional conceptions of "collective" or "mass" denote and connote. The boundaries of such a common-sense classification are usually vague. By an analytic method, at the other extreme, we would specify in advance the formal rules for exclusion and inclusion and classify instances according to these rules. For purposes of scientific analysis it is always desirable to move as close as possible to the analytic extreme. Let us consider two recent attempts to demarcate the field of collective behavior, then indicate the lines along which we shall move in this volume.

Roger Brown has advanced a number of dimensions for classifying collectivities: (*a*) size—it is important to know whether a group will fit into a room, a hall, or whether it is too large to congregate; (*b*) the frequency of congregation; (*c*) the frequency of polarization of group attention; (*d*) the degree of permanence of the psychological identification of the members. Using such dimensions, Brown distinguishes collective behavior (which he calls mass phenomena) from other forms of behavior.[1] Brown, then, circumscribes the field largely on the basis of *physical*, *temporal*, and *psychological* criteria. Within the field, Brown first mentions crowds, which he divides into two types —mobs and audiences. Mobs are subdivided into the aggressive (lynching, rioting, terrorizing), the escape (panic), the acquisitive (looting) and the expressive. Audiences may be intentional (recreational, information-seeking) or casual. Here the criterion for

[1] Brown, "Mass Phenomena," in Lindzey (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 833–840.

sub-division seems to lie in the different *goals* of collectivities. In addition, Brown mentions certain kinds of mass contagion, mass polarization (audiences of radio or television broadcasts), the social movement, and finally "the mass as an unorganized collectivity."[1] The last four types receive little systematic treatment. Nevertheless, on the whole Brown has attempted to set off a distinctive field according to explicit criteria.

Herbert Blumer, in his attempt to circumscribe the field of collective behavior, contrasts it with (*a*) small group behavior, and (*b*) established or culturally defined behavior. In the first instance, then, the criteria for inclusion are *physical* (size), and *cultural* (relation of the behavior to rules, definitions, or norms).

The contrast between collective behavior and small group behavior reveals several criteria other than physical size alone, The first criterion is *psychological.* In the small group, the individual has a "sense of personal control or a . . . sense of command over the scene of operation." In collective behavior, or large group behavior in general, the group conveys a sense of "transcending power" which "serves to support, reinforce, influence, inhibit, or suppress the individual participant in his activity." The second criterion refers to the mode of *communication* and *interaction.* In small groups these processes "[rest] on personal confrontation and [follow] the pattern of a dialogue, with controlled interpretation by each participant of the action of the other." In large groups new forms of communication and interaction arise, such as the uncontrolled circular reaction of the psychological crowd, or the one-way communication of the mass media. The third criterion refers to the way in which participants are *mobilized for action.* "A small group uses confined, simple, and direct machinery." In larger groups new devices such as "incitation, agitation, gaining attention, the development of morale, the manipulation of discontent, the overcoming of apathy and resistance, the fashioning of group images, and the development of strategy" gain precedence.[2]

With respect to the *cultural* basis of contrast, Blumer states simply that "most large group activity and structure in human societies is an expression of [established rules, definitions or norms]." Collective behavior, by contrast, "lies outside this area of cultural prescription." It is behavior which develops new forms of interaction to meet "undefined or unstructured situations."[3] In order to decide whether an instance of behavior qualifies as collective behavior, then,

[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 840–873.
[2] Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in Gittler (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 129–130.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

an analyst would apply these criteria. Although Blumer has not explored many of the logical relations among the criteria, he gives a number of relatively explicit bases for defining a relevant range of phenomena for study.

Within the field of collective behavior, Blumer notices two major foci of interest: (*a*) the study of "elementary forms of collective behavior," such as the excited mob, or the war hysteria; (*b*) the study of the ways in which these elementary forms develop into set and organized behavior.[1] The defining characteristic of elementary collective behavior is restlessness which is communicated by a process of circular reaction, "wherein the response of one individual reproduces the stimulation that has come from another individual and in being reflected back to this individual reinforces the stimulation."[2] Several mechanisms characterize the development of such a state of unrest—milling, collective excitement, and social contagion.

Blumer identifies four basic elementary collective groupings: the acting crowd, the expressive crowd, the mass, and the public. The first two differ in that the acting crowd (a mob, for instance) has a goal or objective, whereas the expressive crowd (the dancing crowd of a religious sect, for instance) expends its impulses and feelings in "mere expressive actions." The mass differs from both in that it is more heterogeneous, more anonymous, less organized, and less intimately engaged in interaction; mass behavior is, in fact, a convergence of a large number of individual selections made on the basis of "vague impulses and feelings." The public, finally, is a group of people who focus on some issue, disagree as to how to meet the issue, engage in discussion, and move toward a decision. The public differs from the crowd in that disagreement (rather than unanimity) and rational consideration (rather than spectacular suggestion) occupy a prominent place in the development of a public.[3] Even this brief summary shows that a number of disparate criteria—character of the group objective, nature of interaction, degree of organization, degree of rationality—are used to distinguish among these elementary groupings. On the whole, the relations among these criteria remain unclear in Blumer's work.

Blumer illustrates the transition from elementary collective behavior to organized behavior in discussing the social movement. During its development, the social movement "acquires organization and form, a body of customs and traditions, established leadership, an

[1] H. Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in A. M. Lee (ed.), *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology* (New York, 1951), p. 168.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 170. For a critique of this and related concepts, below, pp. 154–156.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 178–191.

enduring division of labor, social rules and social values—in short, a culture, a social organization, and a new scheme of life."[1] The major types of social movements are the general (for instance, the women's movement), the specific (for instance, a movement to reduce the tax on alcoholic beverages), and the expressive (for instance, a fashion movement). The difference between the general and the specific lies in the breadth of objectives involved in the attempt to reconstitute the social order. The expressive movement differs from both in that it "[does] not seek to change the institutions of the social order or its objective character."[2] Later we shall modify some of these distinctions. At present we wish merely to illustrate some of the existing principles of division in the field of collective behavior.

In this study we shall attempt a delineation of the field of collective behavior which differs considerably from those just reviewed. As a first approximation, we define collective behavior as *mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action.* Blumer's definition of a social movement—"[a] collective [enterprise] to establish a new order of life"[3]—implies such a redefinition. Our conception, however, extends to elementary forms of collective behavior as well, such as the panic and the hostile outburst. Such a definition calls for clarification of such terms as "redefines" and "social action." We shall take up these tasks in Chapters II and IV.

Collective behavior must be qualified by two further defining characteristics. As the definition indicates, collective behavior is guided by various kinds of beliefs—assessments of the situation, wishes, and expectations. These beliefs differ, however, from those which guide many other types of behavior. They involve a belief in the existence of extraordinary forces—threats, conspiracies, etc.—which are at work in the universe. They also involve an assessment of the extraordinary consequences which will follow if the collective attempt to reconstitute social action is successful. The beliefs on which collective behavior is based (we shall call them *generalized beliefs*) are thus akin to magical beliefs. We shall define and explore the nature of these generalized beliefs in Chapters IV and V.

The third defining characteristic of collective behavior is similar to Blumer's contrast between collective and culturally prescribed behavior. Collective behavior, as we shall study it, is not institutionalized behavior. According to the degree to which it becomes institutionalized, it loses its distinctive character. It is behavior

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 199.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 214.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 199.