

THIRD EDITION

COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

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Collective Behavior

To Christine *and* Kay

Preface

Since the earlier editions of our book were published, the field of collective behavior has grown and matured. It is now represented by a section of the American Sociological Association and a publication, the *Critical Mass Bulletin*. The volume of research has multiplied many fold and a variety of theoretical positions have emerged, generating controversy and stimulating research. These developments and the evolution of our own thinking required numerous changes in this third edition. Nevertheless, we found the tradition in which we write sufficiently broad and flexible to accommodate and often to incorporate the more valuable insights from recent approaches. This tradition is now generally referred to by one of its key elements as the *emergent norm approach*.

We are indebted to many of our students and colleagues who have sought to extend our ideas as well as to those sociologists who have challenged our approach. As before, our greatest debt is to our teacher, Herbert Blumer, who welcomed both the supplements and the challenges we offered to his early definitive statement on collective behavior. Our work continues in the tradition established by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess and extended by Blumer, Everett Hughes, and Louis Wirth, all of whom were our teachers. Also among our teachers, Emory S. Bogardus, Clarence Marsh Case, and Hans Gerth contributed to our understanding of collective behavior. From the time when the first edition was being written until now, the ingenious empirical studies of our colleague Muzafer Sherif have provided valuable insights into principles of psychological functioning at both individual and group levels.

We owe a special measure of gratitude to our wives who have not only tolerated us over four decades of marriage but have also suffered through three editions of this book.

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Chapter 1

The Field of Collective Behavior

In the year 1096, in the square before the cathedral at Clermont, Pope Urban II issued his call for a crusade to free the Holy Land. Within a short time the whole of Europe was in a state of unprecedented excitement and feverish activity.

The Crusades

For several months after the Council of Clermont, France and Germany presented a singular spectacle. The pious, the fanatic, the needy, the dissolute, the young and the old, even women and children, and the halt and lame, enrolled themselves by hundreds. In every village the clergy were busied in keeping up the excitement, promising eternal rewards to those who assumed the red cross, and fulminating the most awful denunciations against all the worldly-minded who refused or even hesitated . . . All those who had property of any description rushed to the mart to change it into hard cash. Lands and houses could be had for a quarter of their value, while arms and accoutrements of war rose in the same proportion . . . During the spring and summer of this year (1096) the roads teemed with crusaders, all hastening to the towns and villages appointed as the rendezvous of the district. Some were on horseback, some in carts, and some came down the rivers in boats and rafts, bringing their wives and children, all eager to go to Jerusalem. Very few knew where Jerusalem was. Some thought it fifty miles away, and others imagined that it was but a month's journey; while

at sight of every town or castle the children exclaimed, "Is that Jerusalem? Is that the city?"

Nearly a thousand years later, in the United States, hundreds of "crusaders" converged at the call of a modern spiritual leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., to march the fifty miles from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

The Selma March

In a growing stream, the marchers assembled in Selma. The men, women, and children who followed King into the streets and into jail all through the campaign were ready to walk again. And outsiders flocked to his call; clerics and nuns, pert coeds and hot-eyed student rebels; VIP's like the U.N.'s Ralph Bunche and anonymous farmhands from the southwest Alabama cattle, corn and cotton country. A blind man came from Atlanta, a one-legged man from Saginaw, Michigan. An Episcopal minister from Minneapolis got plane fare from a parishioner and took the gift to be a sign from God that he should make the pilgrimage. And a little Selma Negro girl tagged along "for freedom and justice and so the troopers can't hit us no more."

Both of these crusades, as far separated in history as they were, raised the same sorts of questions and doubts in the minds of observers. Were the goals as simple and noble as the leaders represented them to be? Were the leaders really devout men of God seeking to overcome the forces of evil, or were they cynical schemers seeking fame, treasure, or power?

From Charles MacKay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (Boston: L. C. Page and Co., 1932; originally published in London by Richard Bentley, 1841), pp. 365-67.

From "The Selma March," copyright Newsweek, Inc., April 5, 1965, p. 25.

Were the rank and file of the crusaders, ancient and modern, motivated by sincere religious conviction, or were they, wittingly or unwittingly, really seeking adventure, loot, or publicity? What did these events, which social scientists call social movements, accomplish? After all the sacrifices made by the participants in a social movement, is the course of history significantly altered, and if it is, to what extent is the change in the direction envisioned by the leaders and followers?

Robert E. Park, the sociologist who founded the field called *collective behavior*, believed such actions played a central part in social change. He used the term *crowd* in a broad sense that seems strange today, writing, "The great classic examples of crowds are the last vast migration of peoples, the Crusades, and the French Revolution."¹

Although he described the mechanisms of collective behavior in language which carried what today we consider misleading implications—"the social epidemic" and "the influence of a collective stimulus"—he did not regard the crowd as merely a bizarre, destructive, pathological collectivity. Rather, he said of the Crusades and the French Revolution, "Crowd movements played a double role here—they were the forces which dealt the final blow to old existing institutions, and they introduced the spirit of the new ones."²

A few years before Park coined the term *collective behavior*, some European scholars, including Gustave LeBon in France, Scipio Sighele and Pasquale Rossi in Italy, and Sigmund Freud in Vienna, had begun writing about what they called "crowd psychology," "collective psychology," or "group psychology." All of them emphasized the irrationality and abnormality of the crowd. Freud said of the mobs which he saw in Paris as a young man, "I believe they are all possessed of a thousand demons . . . They are the people of psychical epidemics, of historical mass convulsions."³ Nearly a hundred years later many observers, both laypeople and "experts," still invoke such notions to explain what they regard as unusual and undesirable group behavior. After 11 people were killed in a crowd trying to get into an auditorium for a rock concert in Cincinnati, the mayor of the city said that the crowd "lost all sense of rationality."⁴ Psychologists and psychiatrists told a reporter that "mob psychology" was operating—"the tendency of individuals to be carried away by the excitement

of the groups, a contagious flow of energy, a situation in which emotion outweighs rational thinking. . . ."⁵

Although most sociologists now reject such explanations, they still find that such behavior stimulates novel questions about human group action. Accustomed to studying the regularities of group life made predictable by stable social structures and traditional norms, they ask questions about the social and psychological forces that come into play in situations where established institutional patterns cease to guide human activities. The sociologist asks questions related primarily to the interaction among the individuals who make up a crowd or social movement. How do they influence one another? Are the processes of interpersonal influence and the operation of social control similar to those found in ordinary group behavior or are different ones brought into play? How are the actions of different members coordinated? What is the relative importance of common predispositions, imitation, role-taking, and conformity to social norms in producing coordinated action? Do norms exist in a collectivity? If so, how do they develop, what is their relationship to the preexisting norms of the society, and what leads people to conform to them? A common view of collective behavior implies that it consists simply of the violation of usual norms by a large number of people at the same time—that it is disorganized, deviant behavior. The sociologist asks whether there may not be some sort of social organization present and conformity to some norms, no matter how deviant the behavior may seem as measured by usual standards.

Since a collectivity is made up of individuals, the sociologist is also concerned with the relationship of the characteristics that these people bring with them to the situation. How do such individual properties as age, education, and socioeconomic status affect the propensity of persons to become involved in collective behavior and the types they will engage in? How much does knowledge of the preexisting attitudes and the personality characteristics of participants help to predict and explain both the emergence and the nature of collective behavior?

It is the fact that people do, at times, collectively engage in behavior that seems to contrast with normal social and institutional behavior that leads the sociologist to define a special field of study. That this behavior ap-

appears to be not simply a large number of deviant acts by individuals that happen to occur at the same time, but rather seems to reflect some common influence on the participants or some interaction between them, leads the sociologist to look for the sources of coordination that make the behavior truly collective despite its contrast to conventional group behavior. Three general types of theory have emerged during this quest, each emphasizing a different possible source of coordination. Convergence theories focus on the characteristics and predispositions which individuals bring to the situation, suggesting that the simultaneous presence of people who are already similar in some way explains the emergence and the course of action of a collectivity. Contagion theories emphasize special psychological mechanisms whereby moods, attitudes, and behavior are communicated rapidly and accepted uncritically. Emergent norm theories emphasize the definition of the situation which arises under out-of-the-ordinary circumstances. This definition of emergent norm serves to guide and coordinate behavior by providing for the actors both meaning, an interpretation of what is going on, and rules about what sorts of behavior are consistent with this definition.

DEFINITION OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

While Park and later students of collective behavior had much to say about the excitement, the emotion, and sometimes the destructiveness of crowds and social movements, these were never their central interests. They have not regarded the various forms as sideshows to history, freakish but inconsequential; rather, they have viewed them as central to the drama of social change. Park never regarded the crowd as the only significant form of collectivity. His doctoral dissertation, written at Heidelberg in 1903, was entitled *Masse und Publikum*—"The Crowd and the Public." While he believed that the public, in contrast to the crowd, was controlled by the norms of logic, he still argued that both "serve to bring individuals out of old ties and into new ones."⁶ Similarly, current popular interest in the sometimes exciting, sometimes horrifying behavior of crowds is matched by interest in publics and public opinion. Many people would readily agree with Park that many social changes begin with slow,

cumulative shifts in public opinion. Of equal interest to both laypeople and social scientists are the activities of social movements. Much of the daily news and of the content of history books consists of accounts of the challenges offered by social movements.

In line with both popular preoccupations and the classic definitions advanced by Park and his student, Herbert Blumer, we included as the major forms of collectivities the *crowd*, the *public* and the *social movement*. These are the types of human groupings in which what we call collective behavior usually takes place. As Blumer points out, all social behavior is "collective," so the use of the term to refer to a particular kind is arbitrary and conventional. As he put it, however, "The student of collective behavior seeks to understand the way in which a new social order arises, for the appearance of a new social order is equivalent to the emergence of new forms of collective behavior."⁷

Not all the collective behavior studied by social scientists is so momentous as the phrase "the appearance of a new social order" suggests. Often episodes of crowd behavior constitute mere interludes of revelry, flight, acquisitiveness or destructiveness. Not all social movements are of profound political or religious significance. Even the less significant instances of collective behavior are worthy of study, however, because in them we may be able to observe the dynamics which operate in all types of collectivities and perhaps in all human groups.

Collective behavior may be defined as those forms of social behavior in which usual conventions cease to guide social action and people collectively transcend, bypass, or subvert established institutional patterns and structures. The field thus defined is clearly a division of sociology, not of social psychology. Collective behavior refers to the actions of collectivities, not to a type of individual behavior.

As a group, a collectivity is more than simply a number of individuals. A group always consists of people who are in interaction and whose interaction is affected by some sense that they constitute a unit. This latter sense is most universally expressed in the members' concern to define the group's opinions and what the group expects of its members.

But collective behavior is not merely identical with the study of groups. A contrast is generally drawn between collective behavior and

organizational behavior. Organizational behavior is the behavior of groups that are governed by established rules of procedure, which have the force of tradition behind them. Even in the case of a new organization, there is generally a concern to find operating rules that have sanction in the larger culture, such as Robert's *Rules of Order*, and any action once taken becomes an incipient tradition through the principle of observing precedent. Collectivities, or the groups within which collective behavior takes place, are not guided in a straightforward fashion by the culture of the society, however. Although a collectivity has members, it lacks defined procedures for selecting and identifying members. Although it has leaders, it lacks defined procedures for selecting and identifying them. The members are those who happen to be participating, and the leaders are those who are being followed by the members. The collectivity is oriented toward an object of attention and arrives at some shared objective, but these are not defined in advance, and there are no formal procedures for reaching decisions.

There is coordination of at least an elementary sort between the individual members' actions. In some instances, such as panic flight, the behavior of each individual is similar and parallel to that of the others, and the behavior of all is directed toward the same objective. In other cases, a division of labor may be discerned in the collectivity, giving the impression of a more complex coordination of the members. Yet the coordination and direction do not seem amenable to explanation in terms of established norms, preexisting social organization, or primary-group integration. There exists, nevertheless, a sense of constraint that forces individuals into certain types of behavior and leads to punishment of nonconformity. The task of studying collective behavior involves identification of the sources of this coordination and exploration of the relationship to ordinary social behavior.

Collective behavior contrasts even more sharply with institutional behavior, which characterizes groups that are envisaged in and guided by the culture of the larger society. Yet the continuity between all these ideal types of human interaction must be emphasized. Although in some cases, as in short-lived crowds, collective behavior may involve people who are essentially strangers to each other, in most instances it develops between people who are

already related to each other in organizations or informal groups. The emergence of both new norms and new social relationships must thus be considered. Jack Weller and E.L. Quarantelli underscored this when they observed, "Phenomena need not involve the emergence of both social norms and relationships to be usefully regarded as collective behavior."⁸ They suggested a threefold typology. In one type the normal social relationships endure but norms emerge, as when a hospital staff has to operate in an extraordinary fashion during a disaster. In a second type enduring norms are followed but an emergent, ephemeral collectivity carries out the action—this we have called "conventionalized" collective behavior. It is of the type that occurs week after week in football crowds in the United States, or at rock concerts. Collective behavior involving both emergent norms and emergent structure or social relationships constitutes only one of these three ideal types. It is of particular importance in the analysis of social movements, for an important element of this sort of collectivity is the action of one or more pre-existing "social movement organizations" around which is formed a new coalition with a somewhat novel program of action.

THE HISTORY OF THE FIELD

Although we identify Robert E. Park as the founder of the field of study called collective behavior, interest in the phenomenon goes back much earlier and has never been confined to sociologists. An example of such an early interest was the book published in 1841 by an English scholar, Charles Mackay, entitled *Memoirs of Extraordinary Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*.⁹ Gustave LeBon, writing a half-century later, was representative of a number of writers who held a predominantly negative view of the behavior of what they called "the crowd."¹⁰ LeBon, for example, believed that when the "mind of the crowd" took over—whether in a mob, in the French Chamber of Deputies, or in an entire nation—people acted destructively, under the influence of instincts which are ordinarily inhibited.

Such views have since been reflected in what became a very popular explanation of collective behavior, although not among sociologists—the pathological approach. This often represented an application of some version of psy-

choanalytic theory to the analysis of social movements as well as of crowds. One of the earliest examples was *The Behavior of Crowds*, written in 1920 by Everett Dean Martin.¹¹ Martin regarded the crowd not as a particular kind of collectivity but as a mental condition resulting from simultaneous release of repressed, socially forbidden impulses. Thus, he coined the memorable saying that the crowd consists of "people going crazy together." A more recent view of collective behavior as irrational and socially undesirable is to be found in the widely read paperback book by the longshoreman-philosopher, Eric Hoffer—*The True Believer*.¹²

So widespread was the influence of what Lang and Lang have called the "pathological view" of the crowd and social movements that critics have mistaken it for the dominant theme in sociological theories of collective behavior.¹³ In 1970 Currie and Skolnick asserted:

Collective behavior theory has its roots in the antidemocratic theorists of nineteenth-century Europe, best represented by LeBon. In being transferred to American social science, the antidemocratic biases in "crowd" theory were modified but not abolished.

Perhaps the most fundamental of these biases is the implication that collective behavior is in some sense "irrational" behavior.¹⁴

But a conscientious reading of the work of such sociologists as Robert E. Park, Herbert Blumer, Ralph Turner, Kurt and Gladys Lang, and Joseph Gusfield shows that all have rejected the assumption that collective behavior is necessarily less rational than institutional behavior. A possible exception is Neil Smelser, who developed a social-structural explanation derived from Talcott Parsons' general theory of social action.¹⁵ In Smelser's "value-added" approach, the major determinant of collective behavior is some sort of strain in the social structure, demanding action to relieve the strain and reorganize the structure. The social-psychological mechanism involved, however, is mobilization under a generalized belief, and Smelser's "generalized belief" does sound very much like some of LeBon's ideas. It is held to be both generalized and "short-circuited," leading to action that bypasses many of the specifications and controls required for effective, realistic social action. So, Smelser says, "Collective behavior is the action of the impatient."¹⁶

The widespread social movements and the many instances of anti-establishment crowd action which swept the cities and campuses of the United States during the 1960s aroused an unprecedented interest in the topic. If "classical" collective behavior theory did indeed portray collective behavior as irrational, irresponsible, and destructive, then it could be charged with reflecting a political bias in favor of law and order and of sympathy with official perspectives on social problems and how to solve them. Thus there developed what may be called a "politico-rational" approach to collective behavior rejecting the stereotype of irrationality and substituting one which, in the words of Gary Marx, tended to "see all violent outbursts as 'rational,' 'intrinsically political,' and 'instrumental and purposive.'"¹⁷ Rather than rejecting the utility of the concepts "rational" and "irrational" as applied to group behavior, many sociologists merely reversed what they perceived as the traditional emphasis.

While the impassioned defense of any kind of anti-establishment social action as "rational" subsided during the 1970s, the emphasis on rationality in collective behavior did not. Widespread interest developed in theories emphasizing the rationality of decision making in collective behavior. The "gaming approach" advocated by Richard Berk seeks to apply decision theory to crowds, attempting to develop methods for discovering how each individual tries to maximize rewards and minimize costs as he or she considers various courses of action.¹⁸ Even more widely applied has been the approach to social movements called by its advocates "resource mobilization theory." It, too, emphasizes "the importance of costs and rewards in explaining individual and organizational involvement in social movement activity." Charles Perrow has described two variants of this theoretical approach.¹⁹ What he calls "RM I" has been formulated mainly by Anthony Oberschall, Charles Tilly, and William Gamson. RM I, Perrow says, "is Clausewitzian in character; protest is the continuation of orderly politics by other (disorderly) means. Because protest grows out of the ongoing political process and is a part of it, it need not be irrational nor discontinuous. . . ."²⁰ The RM II version has been formulated by Mayer Zald and John McCarthy.²¹ It is even more rationalistic than RM I theory, and is based on an economic-organizational, input-output model.

THE COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR TRADITION

None of these approaches is derived from the tradition based on the attempt of Robert E. Park to delineate a field of study in sociology which he termed collective behavior. Although many of Park's characterizations of crowd behavior seem to reflect a pathological approach, it is clear that he did not regard collective behavior as abnormal or undesirable. Impressed by the powerful hold of culture and social control on the members of a society, he was intrigued by the question of how they could ever break out of their established routines and establish a new social order. The alternation between the old and the new—in other words, social change—was to him as normal a part of social life as was order, tradition, and continuity. Although he placed undue emphasis on “impulse” as the dynamic element in collective behavior, he emphasized that the “common and collective impulse was always the result of social interaction.” That he did not believe the crowd to be driven by repressed, instinctive forces to act blindly and irrationally is indicated by his assertion that, “the organized crowd is controlled by a common purpose and acts to achieve, no matter how vaguely it is defined, a common end.” He added that in contrast to the animal herd, “the crowd. . . responds to collective representations.”²²

In 1939, Park's student, Herbert Blumer, wrote what has become a classic statement on the nature of collective behavior. He was asked to contribute a section on the topic to a volume called *Principles of Sociology* which Park was editing.²³ Blumer's contribution consisted of five chapters. In the first three, he outlined the mechanisms of elementary collective behavior and the forms of elementary collective groupings—the crowd, the mass, and the public. In a separate chapter, he dealt with social movements which he regarded as differing from elementary forms in that “as a social movement develops, it takes on the character of a society,” developing a culture, a social organization, and a new scheme of life.

Like Park, Blumer did not regard collective behavior as pathological, destructive behavior. It was to be, rather, that part of sociology devoted to the study of social action which was not under the influence of custom, tradition, conventions, rules, or institutional regula-

tions—behavior which “arises spontaneously and is not due to pre-established understandings or traditions.” Its importance lay in the fact that

while the student of sociology in general is interested in studying the social order and its constituents (customs, rules, institutions, etc.) as they are, collective behavior is concerned with studying ways by which the social order comes into existence, in the sense of the emergence and solidification of new forms of collective behavior.²⁴

Blumer was also a student of the philosopher and social psychologist, George Herbert Mead, whose ideas became the basis of what is known as the symbolic interactionist approach in sociology. This includes important conceptions of the nature of society and of individual action. One is that “society,” the social order of which Park and Blumer wrote, is not a static system or structure but a process of ongoing activity in which human beings construct and share their social worlds. Hence the approach to collective behavior derived from Park through Blumer has never been compatible with concepts of structural determinism. A second important feature is that the individual is viewed primarily as an actor, constructing his or her line of behavior by making symbolic representations to the self as to what the situation is and what other people expect—hence “symbolic interactionism.” Therefore the “collective behavior” approach has historically incorporated the notion that people act on conceptions rather than on objective reality, even though these conceptions may have to be revised as they are tested by encounters with reality. This emphasis on consciousness as the most salient characteristic of human social action makes the approach incompatible with theories of biological or psychological determinism which view human behavior as merely the release of impulses in overt action.

Many of the concepts used by Blumer in his early, tentative treatment of the “mechanisms of elementary collective behavior,” such as “circular reaction,” “social contagion,” and “homogeneity” seem to later writers in the collective behavior tradition to be inappropriate or misleading. In his own subsequent writings, he used them less and less and used more concepts derived from the symbolic interactionist approach which he pioneered and named. What has endured to characterize the “collective be-