

# Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

---

DANIËL DE ZEEUW

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE MASSES:  
THE FUTURE OF A TRUE ILLUSION

Review of Christian Borch's *The Politics of Crowds: an alternative history of sociology* (2012) and Stefan Jonsson's *A Brief History of the Masses: three revolutions* (2008).

Krisis 2014, Issue 2

[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

Thinking of the masses, stereotypical 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century images and scenes immediately come to mind: roaming crowds gathering for fascist festivals, factory floors with workers standing side to side and back to back, the great battles of the First World War, the anti-Jewish pogroms, and so on. But did masses and crowds outlive the second millennium? Or is their fate intimately tied up with its end, as the above stereotypes seem to suggest? If so, why bother to think about the masses as a concept, save for idea-historical inquiries? Is there any relevance for this vocabulary and the type of political problematic it signals, in terms of articulating the present? Or has its explanatory force subsided in the face of societal and scientific transformations? In a normative sense (pretending that we could actually influence the tectonic shifts mentioned above, a philosophically naive or

rather 'idealist' assumption): is the category of the masses worthy of being saved, resuscitated, reinvigorated? And what recent societal trends are to be marked as possibly benefitting from such a re-appropriation, functioning – prospectively – as the latter's external ground of legitimation? Secondly, in a more descriptive sense, one could ask: is the general narrative of historical passage underlying and more or less assumed by these questions – namely that of the demise of the modern discourse of masses and crowds in so-called postmodernity – a correct reconstruction of the real shift of both societal and discursive formations?

Is it really that obvious that we have left behind the era of the masses? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, urbanisation is still on the rise, globally; the scale of the organisation of industry and work continues to be massive and is still expanding; and people still flock together, in physical spaces (squares, music events, shopping-malls) and increasingly via digital media, initiating new collective modes of online conduct. This would be one way of arguing for the continuing relevance of the category of the masses (although given the emergence of the web, a set of further specifications and differentiations is clearly needed, e.g. how do we conceive co-presence in networks ontologically and epistemologically vis-à-vis classical crowd psychology). The fact that the obviousness of the narrative about the demise of the masses contradicts the reality of ongoing modernization leads us to suspect the presence of a necessary illusion – perhaps the seemingly intuitive validity of this narrative (the end of the era of masses) is dependent on a certain 'individualism' gaining ideological territory at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that – arguably – fulfils a strong social function and has some basis in social reality. It is from this ideological perspective that another argument for the continuing relevance of the concept of the masses announces itself: by presenting – by means of the use of 'categories of collectivity' – a contrast and thinking against the grain of an individualism that has become hegemonic, it is able to disclose shifts and adaptations in these legitimizing discursive formations as such. Such a critical perspective is much needed, as the ontological privileging of the individual person as the basis of social relations strictly defines the limits imposed upon our self-understanding and imagination regarding the potentialities inherent to new socio-economic formations. This *political-methodological* problem can be further articulated by assigning, hypothetically, the category

of the collective to the basic socio-economic position and experience of the so-called working class, inasmuch as the category of the individual is tied to that of the bourgeois, as Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* (1960) indeed argues when he claims that what defines proletarian culture vis-à-vis bourgeois individualism is 'the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from this' (346).

Instead of pursuing this hypothesis any further, in the following paragraphs two recent book-length reconstructions of the various mass and crowd semantics of modernity will be discussed that also argue for the continuing relevance of the analytic frameworks at hand as well as reject the idea that the distinctively modern problematic connected to the category of the masses is superseded and its riddle solved, thus contributing to the ongoing political-methodological discussion outlined above. Whereas Christian Borch's *The Politics of Crowds: an alternative history of sociology* (2013) stays within the confines of the sociological tradition, Stefan Jonsson's *A Brief History of the Masses: three revolutions* (2012) takes both a political-ontological and art-historical take on mass discourse, especially the problematic of representation and democracy connected to it. Both however share what one could call an historically informed, discourse-analytical approach. This means that the masses are not presented as part of a relatively clear-cut representational problem (i.e. how do we conceptually capture the masses as they truly are, empirically, 'out there') and the specific form of critique that fits such an approach (such and such representation of the masses is to be rejected as it does not correspond to the actual dynamics of the social field). Instead, both trace genealogical lineages of various literary and scientific mass tropes connected to each other in a loosely coherent patching of discursive political practices ordered generally along class lines, and on the basis of a biopolitical conception of modernity.

In the introduction Borch states that 'the present book is not about real crowds and their actual behavior', whilst remaining agnostic as to their ontological status for pragmatic reasons. Besides shedding light on the concepts involved, the genealogy of mass and crowd semantics here also provides 'a doorway to studying the repeated attempts to mark out the

proper and legitimate fields of sociological research' (14). Hence the subtitle: an alternative history of sociology – alternative because the history of sociology is observed not from the winners but the losers point of view: the type of sociological thought that has done away with the notion of masses and crowds, and the marginalized paradigms of various crowd semantics of the past and the present that Borch explores, respectively.

Why is it that since the 1970s the significance attributed to crowds and masses in sociological thinking is waning? Two conventional answers – that there are no longer any such crowds (realism) or that science has acquired better explanatory models (constructivism) – are deemed only partly adequate. Borch shares with Sloterdijk the rejection of the thesis that with the end of physical crowds 'the era has vanished in which the management of the masses is the central problem for modern politics and culture' (280). This rejection is substantiated by providing an extensive historical review of sociological crowd semantics as part of broader societal and political trends through a hybridization of the methodological frameworks of Michel Foucault, Niklas Luhmann and Robert K. Merton. He analyses several semantic plateaus in the nationally and historically specific contexts of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century French sociology (Ch. 1 and 2), Weimar Germany (Ch. 3) and the Chicago School in the USA (Ch. 4). The second half of the book focuses on the semantic shift from the notion of co-present crowds to dispersed, atomized masses, e.g. the conservative and *Frankfurter Schule* diagnosis of mass society and the critique of totalitarianism (Ch. 5 and 6). This part also includes the study of collective behavior in American sociology from the late 1950s onwards and the subsequent marginalization of crowd and mass semantics (Ch. 7), the remnants of mass semantics in its postmodern or 'post-political' variety by Jean Baudrillard, Peter Sloterdijk and Michel Maffesoli, as well as the resuscitation of the notion of Multitude by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Ch. 8).

On the basis of this research, the epilogue enquires into the fate of the category of the masses in contemporary critical theory and the way it can be renewed so as to function, once again, as a critical conceptual tool with which to grasp hold of a highly complex social dynamic. He claims that classical crowd-psychological notions such as suggestion and contagion

can still be useful analytical tools for grasping contemporary social formations. Unfortunately (but understandably) this outlook itself remains a mere suggestion, in that he does not pursue the (often media-) theoretical fields in which these concepts are actually taken up in recent years: concerning both late capitalist and radical democratic appropriations and re-configurations of mass semantics in terms of affective, viral and self-organizing networks (Parikka 2008), McLuhanite global villages and hive minds, collective intelligence, crowdfunding and sourcing, smart and flash mobs, distributed thinking, peer-to-peer production, and fashionable tropes of sociality such as sharing, collaborating, participating, and so on (Rheingold 2002; Surowiecki 2005). Nor does he consider ANT, or various Simondonian and Deleuzian social ontologies. Future studies into these realms however can and should make extensive use of Borch's rich historical overview with countless references to literature that deserves not to be forgotten, and can be useful in de-fetishizing a flourishing neoliberal, media-savvy crowd semantics suffused with what Richard Barbrook calls the Californian Ideology and in which extensive use of the tropes of sociality mentioned above is made.

Besides being a somewhat formal sociological term, the category of the masses also belongs to an affective and aesthetic register that is of great importance for the self-conception of modern society. It is as belonging to these registers that Jonsson approaches the discourse on masses and crowds, especially in relation to the aestheticizations that confer symbolic power upon the more political-philosophical notion of the sovereign People. In Hobbes' *Leviathan* for example—arguably the most famous symbolization of the modern, contract-theoretical ideal of a perfect political order—the body of the sovereign is populated by thousands of small bodies representing the People. In this body, the suggested unity faces the concrete multiplicity of the implied referent, disclosing the former's metaphoricality, i.e. its performative force: but what has only the semblance of unity breaks down in the masses of bodies in as much as the apparent facticity of this multiplicity is itself always already figural. This discrepancy—between the people represented as one and the multitudinous masses as the more-than-one—can be constructed as a difference constitutive of democracy, the motor that propels society towards ever more inclusive and egalitarian forms. But it can also function as the cornerstone of a crit-

ical attempt at unmasking democracy as an ideological fiction with which such unifying metaphors are complicit.

The people as represented on the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan* are part of a more general problematic peculiar to modernity: how to represent and legitimate the organization of the body politic? This is one of the main questions guiding Jonsson's brief history. The revolutions mentioned in the title refer, rather associatively, to the French revolution of 1789; the Belgian messianic socialism of around 1889; and the uprisings of 1968 in the West and 1989 in eastern Europe. To each an artwork corresponds: a sketch for the (never finished) *Tennis Court Oath* (1791, by Jacques-Louis David), *Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889* (1888, by James Ensor) and *They Loved It So Much, the Revolution* (1989, by Alfredo Jaar).

Besides an art-historical reconstruction of the masses that problematizes various ways of sociologically and artistically framing them, Jonsson also offers a contemporary discussion about the fate of democracy in our globalized world that reveals 'blind spots in contemporary discourse on politics and society' (6). And indeed, according to Jonsson, the masses are actually always *framed* in this framing, in the sense of being at the wrong end of a split constitutive of the People, in which the masses are excluded from political representation. Understanding the uneasy coupling of democracy and mechanisms of representation historically and (socio)logically requires a sensibility for 'the visible and invisible lines drawn through the social terrain that prohibit the majority from approaching the center of the picture' (6).

For Hobbes, what precedes the people as sovereign One is a multiplicity of individuals, a multitude as it resides in a state of nature. The multitude is not at all *constitutive* of the sovereign People—it is excluded from the foundational, law-making contract in whose name the people as sovereign is erected on a legitimate basis. So the founding of a state is at least partly premised on a strict separation of people and multitude. This split returns again and again in modern political philosophy as well as crowd psychology, where Hobbes' multitudes have become masses. But while the category of the masses indeed at times figures and functions discursively like a Hobbesian multitude, as one speaks of the masses as the will of

the people's 'darkening double', like Le Bon's *foule*, Hegel's *Pöbel* and Marx's *Lumpenproletariat* excluded from the social order (57), it can also take the place of the sovereign people, i.e. as the founding/founded subject of a social contract. The boundaries separating these political figures are constantly redrawn, their denotations and connotations shuffled so as to align them with specific social transformations and political demands (44).

Besides existing in opposition to the people, the masses are also delineated against the autonomous individual, itself the basic element of the people, and likewise presumed sovereign master over its own constitution. As Gustave Le Bon upheld, the de-individualized crowd is without will 'at the mercy of all external exciting causes' and so 'the slave of the impulses it receives' (Le Bon 2002: 11). Here the masses are again the very antithesis of the *sovereignty* of both the people and the individual.

By analyzing such discursive lineages taken from sociology, political philosophy and art history, Jonsson discloses significant semantic interconnections between the notion of democracy, the masses and biopower: for example the science of statistics, concerned with 'unspecified quantities of people or things' for whose protagonists the sovereign is less an abstract political figure than 'a phantom whose qualities can be discerned only through the bare fact of numbers' (9). It is also in this context that Adolphe Thiers speaks of a mass of vagabonds that one cannot locate anywhere, as Alexandre Calerre describes the masses as dis-eased by a contagious hystero-demonopathy. Such terror-ridden renderings of the masses help defuse the inner workings of the rather clean, apparently self-sufficient discourse of democratic politics when it engages in the analytics of collective processes.

In the middle part Jonsson convincingly argues against the paradigmatic reading of James Ensor's *Christ's Entry* as expressing a similar dismissal of the masses. Instead Jonsson shows that, on the level of its formal features and visual grammar, the painting is marked by the absence of the divisions through which the critique of the masses is conventionally articulated. By depicting the carnivalesque mass as a fluid aggregate without center, as something in-between collectivity and individuality, humanity and besti-

ality, identity and anonymity, mask and face, reason and (non)sense, Ensor 'discloses a reality anterior to those cultural and conceptual systems of representation that organize the social field into distinct entities, fixed meanings, and stable identities' (88).

What remains problematic is that throughout the book Jonsson expresses his sympathy for both Hardt and Negri's social-realist notion of multitude as well as Rancière's more constructivist leaning towards an understanding of the people and the idea of a *demos*, because these two approaches are actually incommensurable. The Spinozian absolute democracy Hardt and Negri propose should appear suspect from the perspective of a problematization of the masses in terms of their conceptual and metaphoric 'framing' as a representational dilemma, one transposed to and reiterated on the level of political ontology by Rancière and post-foundationalists such as Laclau and Mouffe. In other words, to think of institutional representation as an unnecessary distortion of the autonomous spontaneity of a multitude of productive forces contradicts the anti-positivist, dialectical sensibility for the constructed nature of objective social reality. Connected to this is Jonsson's supposition that the political form of representation that results from the great modern revolutions *always* contradicts the ideal of the *true* *demos*, as it institutes a group of representatives that by default excludes the represented majority. But this misses the significance of political representation as a form of symbolic power, a performative gesture. Here, it makes no sense to speak of the represented as excluded from political power, as the representatives act in their name. Insofar as mechanisms of exclusion persist, they lie not so much within the relation of representation but within this relation's relation to its outside, on whose basis it is able to constitute itself as such.

So although Jonsson successfully and productively engages the history of mass semantics with contemporary discussions in political ontology, he fails to represent the latter in a philosophically sound and well-differentiated manner. One cannot have one's cake and eat it too: either the substantial excess of the Multitude or the unbridgeable gap inscribed in every social reality that prevents it from being legitimated in terms of a positive identity.

Besides being incommensurable this double inspiration remains largely implicit and selective. The fact that he does not include a discussion of these ideas beyond mere mention, nor properly attribute his own normative evaluations to these political-philosophical frameworks undermines not only the falsifiability but the legitimacy of his critique of modern mass semantics itself, as well as the political forms of representation proposed as potential alternatives.

Needless to say, the notion of the masses – referencing that notorious entity also known as crowd, mob, plebs, horde, herd, proletariat, multitude, and so on – plays a seminal part in the philosophical and sociological discourses of modernity. In the preceding decades however, use of the term has become increasingly unfashionable and deemed obsolete. Besides the contingency that is part of unfolding academic fashions, there are several aspects to the demise of the category of the masses. In poststructuralist strands of thought it has been criticized for having homogenizing and reductive effects when applied to the complex and diverse reality of its actual elements, understood as irreducibly heterogeneous particularities. A social realist would argue that this critique is rooted in an actual transformation of the referent: the masses themselves have become more individualized and atomized. But, as a more constructivist account of social reality would show, one can never separate what is perceived as qualitative transformations in the social field from structural alterations and shifts within the discourses through which the former is articulated.

As already mentioned, the rendering of the demise of the category of the masses would reveal a certain ontological primacy of the individual that was allowed to establish itself in the last decades, becoming the hegemonic way of objectively capturing social reality, an ontology for which collective individuations are derivative or epiphenomenal. The validity of this perspective derives its main force from an historical account of the resurgence of particular strands of liberalism including – according to some – the movements of 1968, whose alternative (often communitarian) individualism in terms of personal autonomy and expression has come under heavy scrutiny from more orthodox Marxist perspectives. In the context of post-war American crowd semantics for example, 'the challenge posed to the notion of the liberal subject by the classical image of the crowd is

(at least partly) responsible for the crowd topic's gradual expulsion from the central sociological agenda' (17).

Yet another important aspect of the critique of the category of the masses concerns its ideological signature. Historically, use of the term has been predominantly negative: in the conservative tradition of crowd psychology, e.g. Le Bon and Gasset; the individualist tradition associated with Nietzsche and Stirner; the philosophers of authenticity, e.g. Kierkegaard and Heidegger; as well as Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass-culture. Yet on the other end of this spectrum operated various socialist and communist traditions, in which the masses figure in a more positive, even utopian sense, as the collective protagonist of a coming society. More recently the term multitude has come to replace the masses in this utopian sense, as an emancipatory collective subject whose mode of individuation has ontological primacy over the individual, and incorporating a recognition of the irreducible heterogeneity (now called singularity) for which use of the term masses was criticized in the discourses of post-modernity.

In any case, when one speaks of masses it is always out of *concern for* them, in the sense of being concerned with (fearful of), or as being concerned about, out of sympathy, respectively. Those who are purportedly not part of the masses – academics, artists, politicians and administrators – concern themselves in this fashion. So the category of masses is epistemologically and normatively defined for those *not* part of it, and for whom it constitutes a problem, to be probed, eliminated, illuminated, and so on. The masses live, as an ungraspable reality, a question mark, in their representations of the world. 'There, in that ant-heap of the humble and unknown, the strangest types exist [...] Those bare feet and arms, the rags, the ignorance, the abjection, the dark places, all may be enlisted in the service of the ideal [...] cannot light penetrate to the masses?' (Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*).

In my view the category of the masses continues to be of critical importance, particularly in this spectral, phantom-like sense, i.e. as having its proper reality within such representations, just as for Foucault the plebs is not a real sociological entity and for Baudrillard the notion of the

masses 'has nothing to do with any real population, body or specific social aggregate'. The masses as such do not exist: except that they are constantly invoked through discursive practices and in that sense quite real, in Philip K. Dick's crypto-Lacanian sense, as something that refuses to go away even if one stops believing in it.

By studying the way crowd semantics of the last centuries were essentially concerned with finding solutions to the problems of emerging modern mass social formations (partaking in the history of what Foucault dubbed 'biopower', the art of governing populations) both Borch and Jonsson show the persistence and on-going relevance of this problem for the economic and political institutions of the present, debunking the ideological fantasy that somehow the age of the masses (and its dangers) has been overcome or is no longer of concern to the powers that be, replaced instead by a free collective of contracting autonomous, individual actors. A similar fantasy has contributed to the demise of the notion of class. In both cases, shifts in discursive formations that resemble and help stabilize shifts in socio-economic power-formations are presented as descriptions of emancipatory evolutions of society itself, or: its reduction to individuals, families, corporations and institutions, precluding alternative formulations through which the lingering spectre of the masses can be articulated anew as a political force.

Daniël de Zeeuw is an editor of *Krisis* and a PhD candidate at ASCA (University of Amsterdam) researching the political aesthetics of anonymity in popular culture, art and activism.

## References

- Le Bon, G. (2002) [1895] *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Courier Dover Publications.
- Parikka, J. (2008) 'Politics of Swarms: Translations Between Entomology and Biopolitics'. In: *Parallax* 14(3).
- Rheingold, H. (2002) *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*. New York: Basic Books.
- Surowiecki, J. (2005) *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Anchor Books.
- Williams, R. (1960) [1958] *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. Anchor Books.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.