Introduction: A Book of Crowds

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IN HIS FOREWORD TO A 1987 publication on *The Crowd in Contemporary Britain,* the eminent judge Leslie George Scarman declared that "it is high time that a properly researched and scientific study should be published of the crowd in contemporary Britain."[1] Although Scarman'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."[2] Crowds, it appears, are an idea whose time has not infrequently come, particularly during the past two and a 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."[3] 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.[4] 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,[5] 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.[6] 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 has gone 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 on 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.

Le Bon's apocalypticism is hyperbolic and conveys the mixed sense of panic and expectation that animated public debates regarding the rise of mass-based civilizations and market-based economies at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century mark. As contemporary critics such as Tarde were quick to point out, his analysis is also crude, confusing as it does the vast realm of opinion or "mental" forms of assembly with that much smaller and intermittent realm of "psychic connections produced by physical contacts."[7] There can nonetheless be little disagreement regarding the accuracy of Le Bon's claims regarding the leading role assumed by mass assemblies in the political, economic, and cultural life of the industrial era. But to what degree has that leading role carried over to the postindustrial world? Do we still inhabit an era of crowds in any meaningful sense? Have modern models of political action been supplanted by more recent models that, instead of being based on the literal physical massing of bodies in public places, are based instead on spectacular gestures shaped by and for electronic media, representations that erase the boundary line between public and private space and that rely on virtual and asynchronous forms of presence and participation? If so, what are the implications for democracy, culture, and society?

Starting in 2000, the Stanford Humanities Lab (SHL) Crowds project undertook the task of tracing a cultural and social history of the rise and fall of the modern crowd—particularly the political crowd—between the great revolutions of the eighteenth century and the present. From the outset, the project's working hypotheses were as follows:

1. The era of popular sovereignty, industrialization, and ur-

banization saw the rise of a constellation of new forms of mass assembly and collective social action that reached their apogee in the first half of the twentieth century.

2. These forms began to attenuate gradually in the second half of the century, particularly in the wake of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as a result of the proliferation and ever-increasing prevalence of virtual or media-based forms of "assembly" over physical assemblies in postindustrial societies, as well as to long-term trends promoting economic decentralization, suburban sprawl, increased mobility, and political disengagement.
3. This shift, rather than abolishing the equation between crowds and modernity, has reshaped it, channeling experiences of crowding in postindustrial societies into certain limited domains of civic and electoral ritual, entertainment, and leisure, while assigning to large-scale mass political actions a fallback function restricted to times of exception (war, acute social conflicts, and the like).

The thesis was thus less one of rupture than of a process of specialization whose ultimate outcome is a progressive reduction of the role of physical crowds to that of an icon that circulates within a political economy characterized by the coexistence of media aggregation and bodily disaggregation. The icon in question is subject to a variety of uses and appropriations; its currency is sustained by contemporary resurgences of the history of marches, rallies, riots, and assemblies. It tends, however, to appear under an ever-deepening patina of otherness and anachronism: "otherness" inasmuch as the face of contemporary multitudes has increasingly become a foreign face associated with conflicts in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa relayed into first world living rooms and bedrooms via electronic media; "anachronism" to the degree that, even in the developing world, contemporary mass actions appear to have become ever more "citational"—they quote, sometimes in a nostalgic key, from a previous, now irrecuperable heroic era of crowds—or designed for media audiences in remote locations—hence the prevalence of banners in English in non-Anglophone settings. The result is a decoupling of Le Bon's equation between crowds and contemporaneity.

As explained at greater length in the second half of the introduction, this volume represents one of three interconnected outputs of the SHL Crowds project. None of the three could have been realized without the generous support of the Seaver Institute, and of its director Victoria Seaver Dean, whose willingness to underwrite this experiment has been at once courageous and exemplary. Like the exhibition Revolutionary Tides: The Art of the Political Poster 1914–1989, to which it is tied, and the Web site (http://crowds.stanford.edu/) that serves as a bridge between exhibition and book, *Crowds* explores, nuances, and challenges the above working hypotheses by means of a sustained engagement with key aspects of the history of modern crowds. Its overall ambitions are to provide a reconstruction of the corpus of images and fictions of the collectivity that artists and writers elaborated between the eighteenth century and the present; to explore literature and art's complex dialogue with the new media-saturated public sphere that emerged in tandem with the new politics founded on principles of popular sovereignty; and to examine the interplay between these cultural products and the emergence of crowd-centered discourses in social sciences such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, and economics. A comprehensive cultural history of modern crowds can only be written by bringing together this multitude of facets in the service of a multiperspective, multilayered portrait.

The centrality of crowds and crowd-related phenomena to modern life has long been acknowledged to the point of becoming a mere commonplace, readily absorbed into larger, more encompassing labels like "mass culture." It has remained marginally visible in most post–World War II scholarship either as a result of the ubiquity of the phenomena in question (which have become naturalized over the

course of two centuries) or because it has been approached in piecemeal fashion within the framework of a single discipline. An inherently expansive question requiring expertise from a diversity of disciplines and specializations within them, modern crowds are precisely the sort of large-scale topic that the SHL was established to address. SHL (http://shl.stanford.edu), founded in 2000 with seed monies from Stanford's then-president, Gerhard Casper, offers the opportunity for scholars and students in humanities disciplines to undertake the sort of large-scale, long-term, team-based, technology- and resource-intensive research projects that have traditionally been the domain of the laboratory sciences. Humanists have typically worked in isolation, performing their research and their writing much like traditional artisans, training their graduate and undergraduate students accordingly, and relying on the medium of print for the presentation and dissemination of their research results. Much as in the sciences and social sciences, disciplinary and institutional pressures have led to increasing hyperspecialization in humanities disciplines over the course of the post–World War II period and have often contributed to a narrowing of research agendas. On the positive side, the result has been a higher degree of rigor and expertise in individual fields and subfields, and the emergence of an expanded archipelago of domains of expert knowledge; on the negative side, fundamental questions can find themselves overlooked in favor of a myriad of mostly centripetal conversations limited to specific subdisciplines, with the result being a widening gulf between university-based research and potential interlocutors both within the university (students, curators, librarians) and outside (members of the educated public, media, museums, corporations). The SHL was founded on the belief that major opportunities for collaboration and innovation, not to mention for imaginative uses of information technologies and digital media, are lost as a result of the limitations imposed by this conventional approach to the production and presentation of humanities research.

The SHL has put in place a new model for humanities research and hands-on humanities training at all levels, from undergraduate to postdoctoral, that is project-based and collaborative in nature. Teams of faculty, students, and other on- and off-campus collaborators work under the leadership of a principal investigator in a true laboratory setting on undertakings whose scope and ambition render them high impact, high visibility, and multidisciplinary in a true (that is, nonornamental) sense. Project outputs typically experiment with hybrid models of scholarly "publishing," involve the multipurposing or repurposing of both new and traditional forms of scholarship, and cast students in the role of researchers and project leaders. SHL projects envisage themselves as "big humanities" projects—the analogy with "big science" is intentional—built on expert knowledge, but with an outreach dimension that often involves partnerships with public institutions such as museums, contemporary arts centers, and libraries, as well as innovative uses of social software, collaborative authoring tools, and new media technologies. The lab operates as an incubator: it provides physical facilities, financial and technical support, and expertise in project design and implementation while serving as a matchmaker with intramural and extramural partners once projects reach a mature phase of development.

The Crowds project was one of the flagship projects dating back to the time of the SHL's creation. During the course of the five years of its development, it has involved over fifty undergraduates, several dozen graduate students, and faculty at Stanford, the University of California, Berkeley, and numerous other institutions. An ongoing reading group and three seminars have played a key role in its unfolding with many of the elements that make up the *Crowds* book, as well as the Crowds Web site (http://crowds.stanford.edu/), prepared as course assignments within a seminar setting. The book itself is an experimental hybrid whose contours deliberately overlap those of the project Web site and

the Revolutionary Tides exhibition. This book, the product of a complex gestational process that deviated from standard models for putting together multiauthor volumes, assumed its shape as an unabashedly *crowded* volume, with conventional essays interwoven with semantic histories and testimonials—the result of sustained interaction and teamwork involving a core project team made up of faculty and graduate students.

When Victor Hugo describes a fifteenth-century Feast of Fools in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), he famously compares the gathered multitude to a body of water: "To the spectators at the windows, the palace yard crowded with people looked like a sea, into which five or six streets, like the mouths of so many rivers, disgorged their living streams. The waves of this sea, incessantly swelled by new arrivals, broke against the corners of the houses."[8] Like Hugo's living streams, scholarship on crowds has itself come in waves over the past century—indeed, often in direct or oblique response to waves of crowd activity. If Le Bon and company attempted to define and analyze the menace of crowd behavior in the turbulent years after the Paris Commune and during Third Republic industrial strikes and post-Risorgimento uprisings, World War I proved an inspiration to the Anglo-Saxon sociological tradition for studies of collective activity in the military and in wartime civilian populations.[9] The next great wave of crowd studies, inspired by a Marxism running the gamut from mild to militant, concentrated on crowds in history, eschewing two fundamental principles of its predecessors: the idea that there exists a single psychology of the crowd—indeed, that there exists something like *the* crowd at all—and the concern with control over collective behavior. Following Georges Lefebvre's lead, George Rudé's classic study of the *Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959) examines crowd events "from below," analyzing the varied demographic makeup of different Revolutionary multitudes and emphasizing the motivated and purposeful nature of crowd behavior.[10] Rudé's study finds its analogue in a body of work by leftist historians, including Lefebvre, Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson—studies redescribing the Revolutionary and labor mobs that so concerned Taine and Le Bon as collections of discrete individuals engaged in a long tradition of protests against food shortages and political injustice.[11] The American school of social psychology, having reached a somewhat similar conclusion regarding the agency of collectivities from Neil Smelser's *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962),[12] found itself poised to react to the mass demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s with a mixture of political sympathy and scientific curiosity: typical is Sam Wright's *Crowds and Riots: A Study in Social Organization* (1978)—number 4 in the series Sociological Observations along with *The Nude Beach* (number 1) and *Seeking Spiritual Meaning* (number 2). "This is a book," Wright begins, "based on my observations of crowds and riots. . . . over a three-year period, I took notes while sitting, walking, and running about in situations of collective behavior."[13]

Neither the running about of activist social psychology nor the meticulously reconstructed riot demographics of the Rudé school of social history were much in evidence, however, when literary and cultural historians began revisiting the crowd. Instead, turn-of-the-century crowd theorists made a comeback as a series of studies devoted to reconstructing the intellectual and historical context of Le Bon and his peers began to appear: Robert Nye's *The Origins of Crowd Psychology* (1975); Serge Moscovici's *The Age of the Crowd* (1981; English edition 1985), which rehabilitates largely uncritically turn-of-the-century crowd writings; Susanna Barrows's *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (1981), which attempts to limn the gap between empirical evidence of uprisings in the late nineteenth century and the rhetoric of

the crowd psychologists; Jaap van Ginneken's *Crowds, Psychology, and Politics* (1992), which extends and refines the foregoing studies.[14] The disciplinary marginality of these inquiries is amply demonstrated by the series designation of Barrows's book: Yale Historical Publications, Miscellany. The topic continues to be addressed to this day, but only in monodisciplinary and monographic studies: studies focusing on specific food riots in preindustrial Europe, examining the image of the crowd in the French nineteenth-century naturalist novel, tracing the demographic rise of industrial cities, analyzing group portraiture as practiced by this or that modern artist, charting the emergence of mass revivalist movements or mass entertainment forms.[15] But to date, there has been nothing approaching a comprehensive study of the cultural or historical importance of crowds and crowding, not to mention a study that intertwines humanities and social science perspectives.[16] To echo Lord Scarman, it is high time that such an enterprise be undertaken.

The present volume provides a deliberately crowded, multilayered look at modern multitudes by weaving together three types of contributions: full-length essays that slice their object of study in a number of ways; short essays that assume the form of "testimonies" regarding firsthand experiences of crowd behavior; and microhistories that track the shifting semantic fields of key vocabulary concerning collectivities. More extensive sets of both the testimonies and semantic histories figure on the Crowds project Web site, alongside a searchable database of rare but important social science writings on crowds from 1850 to 1920 in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United States. The main sector of the Web site also features iconographic resources, reference materials on crowd theorists, and arrays of virtual galleries concerning topics such as theater riots, subway crowds, and crowd photography, and the history of techniques for calculating the size of crowds. In short, although the *Crowds* book is designed to function as a freestanding, self-sufficient artifact, its true identity is that of a print/digital hybrid that blurs the line between components that are static and dynamic, definitively "built," infinitely buildable. Its cover provides shelter not only to paper pages but also to flickering pixels and digital sound files.

The backbone of the volume, however, consists in essays written from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives. Some track the history of a particular type of crowd: Susanna Elm describes the collective activity associated with pilgrims and martyrs; Allen Guttmann provides a historical overview of sports crowds; Urs Stäheli analyzes the behavior of crowds in financial markets. Other essays focus on problems of representing mass phenomena in different media: Jeffrey T. Schnapp uses the medium of photography as a lens through which to investigate the modernity of crowds in "Mob Porn"; Christine Poggi surveys "Art in the Age of the Crowd"; Andrew V. Uroskie discusses "The Spatial Rhetoric of Mass Representation"; John Plotz analyzes the vexed issue of the crowd as represented in American sociology; Anton Kaes explores the interplay between film's mass audience and its portrayal of urban crowds. Some of the contributions provide theses on the historical rise of certain aspects of the modern crowd: Joy Connolly interrogates the American interest in Roman crowd rhetoric; William Egginton outlines the shift from audience to crowd on the basis of the dynamic interplay of intimacy and anonymity in early modern theater audiences; Stefan Jonsson provides an overview of "The Invention of the Masses" in nineteenth-century France; Joan Ramon Resina discusses the rhetoric of medicalization in twentieth-century Spanish crowd theory. Other articles investigate crowd dynamics in specific contexts: Jessica Burstein's "Agoraphobia" riffs on the psychodynamics of externality and collectivity; Charles Tilly's "WUNC" provides a set of criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of collective action; Haun Saussy in "Crowds, Number, and Mass in China" examines the interaction between Asian and western imaginations of crowd behavior; Jobst Welge outlines the idealization of solitude that provides the counterpoint to modern descriptions of the

multitude. Abstracts of each contribution appear following the table of contents to the book.

The essays are accompanied by an array of personal testimonies in which writers, scholars, artists, social activists, and ordinary witnesses reflect on their participation in major and minor moments of the post–World War II history of multitudes and on the impact that such events have had on their lives. The purpose of these contributions is to provide an experiential counterpart to the historical essays, with an eye to tracking continuities and discontinuities between the present era and that of Le Bon. Variable in character and tone, they address this issue as *an open question*, whereas the essays tend to position themselves on one side or another of the project's working hypotheses.

Interspersed among the essays and testimonies are a sampling of microhistories that explore the shifting semantic fields of terms associated with multitudes in such languages as English, Russian, Chinese, ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Spanish, French, and Italian. Like the visual conventions for representing crowds elaborated by artists, words powerfully shape the very debates and conversations within which they circulate as a common coin. Much rides on the distinctions of meaning, nuance, or implication between terms like *crowd, multitude, mob, mass, people*, and *collectivity*. Microhistories of these and other keywords provide a tightly focused framework for reconstructing the history of mentalities and ideas in ways that complement the arguments elaborated in the full-length essays. A more exhaustive set of semantic histories is available on the Crowds Web site. (Readers of this volume are encouraged to submit additional semantic histories and testimonies, as well as virtual galleries, via the contact e-mail addresses listed on the Web site.)

As noted above, one of the SHL's core goals is to expand the audience for high-level humanistic research by means of partnerships with public institutions. To that end, this book is being published concurrently with a major exhibition, Revolutionary Tides, which runs from September 14 through December 31, 2005, at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University and reopens at the Wolfsonian-Florida International University in Miami Beach, where it will be on display between February 24 and July 25, 2006.

Revolutionary Tides has a narrower focus than the *Crowds* book. It examines the artistic consequences of the triumph of popular sovereignty as a political ideal more than a century after the French Revolution. The exhibition and accompanying catalog (published in Milan by Skira in English, French, and Italian) track the changing face of revolution from World War I through the year of the fall of the Berlin wall by means of more than a hundred political posters as well as a number of related sculptures and objects from twenty countries, drawn from the collections of the Hoover Institution Archives and the Wolfsonian-Florida International University. Whereas the conventional approach to poster art emphasizes classifications based on artist, period, and nationality, or the development of specific technical practices, Revolutionary Tides is instead concerned with the emergence of a common graphic vernacular for depicting multitudes as political actors on a worldwide scale and in a multiplicity of only loosely interconnected artistic, political, and historical settings.

The show proposes a macrohistory of the political poster, with microhistorical texture provided by highly detailed captions gathered together in the Revolutionary Tides section of the Crowds project Web site, one "wing" of which serves as a virtual counterpart to the physical exhibition. It is organized into narrative units, each of which explores a particular graphic convention, iconographic element, or theme related to political crowds. Each unit blends together works by such celebrated artists as John Heartfield, Gustav Klucis, Valentina Kulagina, Norman Rockwell, and Xanti Schawinsky with works whose authors are long forgotten.

How to represent the people as the cornerstone of the

legitimacy of modern nation-states, their institutions, and laws? How to translate the abstract notion of the popular will into concrete visual terms? How to portray the decisive role played by mass movements in effecting social change? How to depict the modern mass leader with respect to the multitudes and vice versa? How to transform the mass medium that is the political poster into an effective tool of mass persuasion and mobilization? These are the sorts of questions that the artists represented in Revolutionary Tides set out to answer, however divergent their artistic stances, political beliefs, or the historical context to which they belonged.

When our project team first set to work in 2000, it was easy enough to see the signs that Le Bon's *era of crowds* was nearing its end, at least in the world's leading industrial/postindustrial nations. The signs were both direct and indirect, short term and long term. Mass conscription armies were rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Organized labor was on the decline, and the organization of work was becoming increasingly flexible and atomized. Voting patterns continued to drift toward nonparticipation. Although urban agglomerations continued to expand in developing countries, suburban development was the driving force in their wealthy counterparts. On the American scene, the marches on Washington of the late 1990s seemed pale echoes of their Civil Rights era predecessors. "Crowds" of twenty individuals packed into the lens of a television camera had replaced the masses of demonstrators of an earlier era, and even the 1999 Seattle WTO protests seemed cast in the mold more of anarchist skirmishes than of classical mass actions. The defining collectivities of the new millennium seemed to be the online masses in chat rooms, connected only by fiber optics and a shared passion for collectibles, gossip, or massively networked multiplayer games; or drivers, each hermetically sealed into an automobile container, gridlocked in roving bumper-to-bumper assemblies; or pedestrians milling about each in a solipsistic entertainment cocoon of his or her own devising.

These and other features of contemporary life point to a fundamental shift in the nature of multitudes. But do they truly dictate the crowd's obituary—or at least the obituary of crowds as literal physical assemblies? Probably not, as attested to by a recent upsurge in optimistic ruminations on the present and future of crowds found in works of economic analysis (James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds*), technological foresight (Howard Rheingold's *Smart Mobs*) and even political theory (Tony Negri and Michael Hardt's *Multitudes*). So any obituary would be premature.[17] Various pasts continually inhabit every historical present, even in the era of globalization. History remains forever capable of high degrees of simultaneity, complexity, and contradiction. Even at its leading edge, brief fads like that for "flash mobs"—crowds of the underemployed and overconnected who contact each other by e-mail and wireless devices in order to assemble for the simultaneous performance of quirky gestures—confess the enduring lure of collective action, however ironically. And the millions worldwide who marched against the war in Iraq, the hundreds of thousands who continue to bring down regime after regime in the former Soviet bloc, the oceanic multitudes who participate in mass acts of mourning like the funeral ceremonies of Pope John Paul II, the legions of fans who regularly fill athletic stadiums, argue against any rush to declare the crowd at its end. Whether those who comprise such crowds belong to the past or to the present, this book is their book.