

Mass Society, Mass Culture, and Mass Communication: The Meaning of Mass¹

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The concept of mass goes back a long way to characterize a society that consists of people somehow connected by communication while, at the same time, also dispersed in space and essentially detached from one another. Mass has also been a pejorative for critics of modern capitalist society and its culture. In the years after World War II, this latter use of the term became the target of a broadside attack by several highly credentialed scholars, who questioned its value as an analytic tool. This paper, starting with Ferdinand Tönnies, offers a brief overview of both the origins of the concept of mass and its subsequent refinement by French, German, and American sociologists into the mid-1930s. Distinguishing between its ideological connotations and the analytic use of the term helps us to focus on the most general and persistent effects of mass communication: expanding the range of common experience and making people more responsive to distant events. This effect is magnified by the ubiquity of mass media; practically no one, not even those who scorn them, can altogether escape their influence.

As a scholarly discipline matures, aficionados begin to review its history less to gain new insights than to retrieve a past in danger of getting lost. So it is that in this paper we focus on the significance and history of "mass" in order to highlight its original meaning. The appellation does indeed go back a long way before its employment not only as a modifier of communication, but also as a means to express one's

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dislike of modern capitalist society and its culture. Yet, while its meaning, to be sure, has always been somewhat problematic, it was only after World War II that the concept became the target of a broadside attack by several highly credentialed scholars, who challenged its appropriateness as a descriptor of modern society, its culture, and its media audiences. These scholars cited certain facts that “mass society theorists” were said to have ignored. Examination of the literature on “mass” suggests that their criticisms had a distinctly ideological component, and that quite different versions of the concept had been painted with the same broad brush and occasional careless readings of text — small wonder that they found inconsistencies and some all-too-obvious exaggerations in the writings of these “mass society theorists.” Rather than present a point-by-point refutation, we first examine the intellectual and political context that fueled their criticisms, and then follow this with a highly condensed overview of both the origins of the concept of “mass” and its refinement from the end of the 19th century to the mid-1930s, at which time the political Left was about to develop its own view of mass, mass society, and mass culture to counter that of conservatives. Our aim is to salvage the sociological meaning of the term “mass” from the surrounding ideological rhetoric with a focus on insights still relevant for today’s study of mass communication.

We begin with a quick look back at how “mass communication” came to denote characteristics that today most everyone takes for granted. When people speak of the media, they usually have in mind corporate bodies or government agencies whose access to modern technology enables them to disseminate the same uniform content to a geographically dispersed multitude. At first, this capability was confined to cheap print, and then later expanded to motion-pictures, both of which were still dependent on physical transport. This limitation did not extend to either radio or television, which, given their wide reach, were destined to become the media of mass communication par excellence. But to develop into mass communication, the new technology had to be employed to reach a large audience. As late as the end of the 1920s, Ernest W. Burgess (1886-1966), a University of Chicago sociologist whose interest was mostly in human ecology, could still write about the conquest of space by *new* forms of transportation and communication, such as the automobile, the motion picture, the airplane, and the radio, without even a single reference to the expansion in the size of audiences and its consequences (1929, p. 1072). Two years later, David O. Woodbury devoted a book (1931) to “communication at a distance,” grouping mass media with personal communication forms, such as letters that rely on carriers, or with those which do not.

Distance-communication nowadays would surely include networking via the Internet, which, when compounded and saturated with particular content, can reach the multitudes sought out by propagandists and public relations specialists. Be this as it may, Harold D. Lasswell (1902-1978), in his introduction to a voluminous bibliography on propaganda and promotional activities, noted that “[b]efore cheap printing and general literacy, before moving pictures and radio, the possibilities of applying stimuli simultaneously to masses were extremely restricted” (1935, p. 17). The Internet, though open to many uses, has this potential. The point we want to make is this: It took a while for scholars, concerned as they were with propaganda and its consequences, to embrace the idea that “propaganda regardless of definition, must be regarded as a special form of mass communication,” one with rather invidious connotations (Willey, 1935, p. 195). The generic label offered by Willey, however fitting, proved to be a sleeper, taking more than a decade to come into general use.

From a sociological perspective, the most striking feature of modern communication technology is its capacity to expand social relations beyond the clan, the tribe, and the local community. While ancient empires were built on military force and the loyalty of a small number of chieftains to a central authority, the typical social unit today covers far more territory and embraces more people than could once have been thought possible. This expansion is not just a matter of size, but also one of density. Individuals different in background, orientation, and skill, clustered in and around urban centers, have become more interdependent, and also, though only indirectly, more active participants in political life. The centrality of communication in the development of a common identity was, of course, a tenet of the Chicago School, a group whose influence extended beyond the University of Chicago. It drew heavily on the writings of Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), the first to attempt a systematic formulation of what was new and unprecedented about modern society. His classic treatise revolves around two fundamentally different types of relationships — *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. These two types could co-exist in the same society, but the balance between them was changing. As Tönnies described the change, the smaller, more natural community (*Gemeinschaft*), whose solidarity was based on consanguinity, was giving way to society (*Gesellschaft*), which exists as “a circle of people who, as a community, live and reside peacefully near one another but are not quintessentially connected but substantially detached and, while on the one hand they remain connected despite their detachment, they remain, on the other, detached despite their connectedness” ([1877] 1922, p. 39).² In this kind of social unit, each person acts essentially for him or herself, yet remains dependent on others by way of exchange rather than by gift giving. As consanguinity ties weaken, social relations become ever more instrumental, voluntary, and consensual while the unity of the society revolves more and more around common territory, language, or shared history propagated first through print and subsequently through other forms of communication that mediate across great distances.

Theodor Geiger (1891-1952), a Danish sociologist who, albeit erroneously, is often classified as a critic of the mass society concept, summed the consequences of technological development even more succinctly and more eloquently: “Today mutual dependence . . . exists among people, most of them strangers and personally indifferent to one another. What connects them are not the bonds of sympathy but the necessities of life” (1955, p. 79).³ Appeals to sentiments of sympathy to strengthen social solidarity no longer made sense to Geiger. The more pressing need was for people to recognize intellectually their objective interdependence; education had to be directed toward this goal. Restated in cultural and political terms, communication technology has led to a greater involvement of the masses, previously confined to the periphery of society, in the activities and ideas of its central institutions (Shils, [1962] 1975). Or, as Daniel Lerner (1957) put it, media exposure develops a capacity for empathy, without which participation in the thought life of a geographically extended society would be severely limited.

² Translations are those of the authors unless otherwise indicated.

³ An earlier, much longer version of this article with the same title had actually appeared six years earlier (Geiger, 1949).

The new media have also affected culture. There has been a far-reaching transformation of the general way of life, particularly in how people spend their leisure hours and how they take part in celebratory occasions. Traditional folk art and customary recreational activities have been partly replaced by an unprecedented flood of symbolic goods produced for the market or sold to media organizations for dissemination to their audiences. The viability of artistic creations today is less dependent on aristocratic or state patronage than so-called "high" culture had been in the past. Without momentous advances in communication technology, such a transformation would have been inconceivable.

In sum, "mass" has served as a sociologically meaningful and analytically useful category for describing certain audiences, kinds of society, and forms of cultural production. In what follows, we back this claim by reference to works in an intellectual tradition that many contemporaries seem to have forgotten or may never have known.

The Critics of "Mass"

The preceding sketch of the direction of social change, whether or not it finds universal acceptance, can serve as a background against which to judge the criticism that the concept of mass attracted in the 1950s. Knowing that controversy is the heartbeat of academic engagement, what nevertheless strikes us as mildly puzzling is the vehemence of this attack, with such respected scholars as Daniel Bell ([1956] 1959, 1962) and Edward Shils (1957, [1962] 1975) along with Raymond and Alice Bauer (1960) in the vanguard, on the usage of "mass" to characterize modern society and some of its cultural productions. Our questions are the following: What gave rise to their attacks, and why were they quite so impassioned?

One answer, but only a partial one, can be found in the general sense of well-being that had taken hold, especially in America, after nearly two decades of depression and war. To be sure, areas of deep poverty remained even in the United States of America. Yet, no objective observer during this post-war period could have failed to recognize the rise in the general standard of living, the increase in home ownership, and the significant gains in the well-being of parts of the working-class — gains that came to a level where one could even speak of the "affluent worker" (Goldthorpe, 1968). Industrial expansion also facilitated the absorption of new arrivals displaced from the countryside or from abroad, many without special skills or unaccompanied by family, so that they were apt to feel lonely, even altogether lost, in an unfamiliar urban environment. Their predecessors, the ones who had provided the raw material from which the images of the mass had been constructed, had nearly dropped out of sight, and as living conditions improved, revised images became applicable. Especially important in reinforcing expectations of upward mobility were the generous benefits made available to returning war veterans. They opened new opportunities for higher education and, over time, led to higher rates of political participation and more sophisticated cultural consumption. These same years were also a period of relative domestic tranquility. Threats to public order from wildcat strikes, illegal seizures of property, demonstrations culminating in violent clashes with the police, and acts of terrorism had decreased significantly from peaks reached after WWI and during the Great Depression. All these had been harbingers of what Bell (1960) predicted, perhaps a bit prematurely, would be the end of ideology. In any event, the model of nameless masses on the margins of society no longer quite fit.

Second, a new and possibly greater perceived threat than civil strife came with the onset of the Cold War, a threat that persisted, in varying strength, for decades until the dissolution of the Soviet dictatorship. Theories of mass society came to be seen in a new light. Explanations of the vulnerability of politically and industrially advanced societies, such as Nazi Germany, in terms of rootless and restless masses as easy prey for agitators (see Lederer, 1940; Fromm, 1941) lost relevance while apprehension about Soviet expansion grew. In the meantime, social scientists remained on call in the ongoing propaganda contest, much as they had during the war against the Axis, and a good many, gradually and over time, were to tone down the highly critical views they had previously held of their own society. The clear superiority of Western democracy, hapless and messy as it might be, was invoked to counter the promise of equality and other arguments used by communists to win over the downtrodden everywhere. Marshaling evidence on the rich social relationships, the responsiveness of government, the exceptional achievements in science and technology, and the free reign their country had given to artistic creativity was a project in which those who took their citizen duties seriously were happy to participate.

Third, perhaps their most convincing refutation of "mass society" was based on a cumulation of research findings about the continuing relevance of primary groups and personal networks, even for relationships believed to be dominated by an impersonal cash nexus or subject to rational management. Studies conducted quite independently of one another and in a variety of settings — such as the factory work floor (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1934), urban slums (Whyte, 1945), the military (Stouffer et al., 1949; Shils & Janowitz, 1948), or bureaucratic organizations (Blau, 1955) — highlighted interpersonal relationships and group norms as influences on behavior strong enough to override, at least on occasion, formal organizational controls. Other studies of the voting public and of mass audiences subject to a plethora of persuasive communications depicted recipients neither as isolated nor as hapless captives of propagandists (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Bauer, 1958). Numerous small-group experiments, a genre just coming into its own, offered further evidence of the strength of group influences. Summaries of such research findings appeared in a Shils monograph on the "present state of American sociology," in which he hailed the rediscovery of the primary group (Shils, 1948), and in the literature review provided by Elihu Katz as a theoretical underpinning for findings, albeit less than conclusive, about the effect of personal influence on decisions people make in everyday life (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

A parallel shift took place in the dominant paradigm for macro-politics. Sociologists, as well as political scientists, embraced pluralist models, in which power appears more dispersed than in the traditional dichotomy of élite versus the population at large. It led William Kornhauser (1959) to redefine mass society as nothing more than an abstraction that postulated a mass of isolated and alienated individuals whose relation to an authority, such as a totalitarian state, was the *only* bond to unite them. A mass society in this pure form exists only as the theoretical extreme on a continuum. It surely does not provide a true picture of American democracy, where élites are open to influence from a variety of competing interest groups with varying amounts of citizen participation, and where no one group has a monopoly of power.

Post-war critics attacked the "mass society" concept by depicting all its exponents as subject to the same misconceptions. Daniel Bell, quite rightly, discerned inconsistencies in the meanings given the

term by various authors and went on to charge that the “theory” had no “organizing principle — other than the highly general concept of ‘breakdown of values’ — that put the individual elements of the theory together in a logical, meaningful — let alone historical — manner” ([1956] 1959, p. 22). What the theories articulated were the dissatisfactions of conservatives still yearning for an orderly past while neo-Marxists, as Shils (1957) had pointed out, developed their own version of the ills found in modern society. Many formulations about mass society — on both the Right and the Left — did indeed carry considerable ideological ballast. But so did the critiques. Bell’s was first presented at a conference sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and then published, somewhat shortened, in *Commentary* magazine — both venues indicative of the Cold War mentality that had helped to inspire them. Pointing this out is not meant as a rebuttal of Bell’s criticisms, but only to underline the ideology behind his argument, which he adorned with citations lumping together a variety of theorists, as if there were no space between, on the one hand, efforts by sociologists — such as Georg Simmel, Karl Mannheim, and Herbert Blumer — to specify the nature of a “mass” and, on the other, the philosophical and social pessimism to be found in the writings of Nietzsche, Spengler, Ortega y Gasset, Marcel Gabriel, and other conservatives, not even to mention Adorno and others of the Frankfurt school. Differences and contradictions within so heterogeneous a collection are what one would expect.

Concerning at least one sociologist, Herbert Blumer, Bell was off the mark, when he took him to task for a sentence he quoted out of context. The mass, reads the quotation, “has no social organization, no body of custom and tradition, no established set of rules or rituals, no organized group of sentiments, no structure of status roles and no established leadership” (Blumer, [1936] 1951, p. 186, cited in Bell, [1956] 1959). What Bell missed, or misread, is that, for Blumer, the mass referred not to the whole society nor the “masses,” but to a specific form of elementary collective behavior *within* society, limited in time and directed toward some object of attention. The object that can attract a *temporary* mass typically

arises outside the domain of local group life. . . . The mass that behaves . . . is made up of detached individuals. These individuals, to be true, have their own local attachments, share in convivial association, belong to primary groups, live and act to a great extent in accordance with conventional patterns, but [only] insofar as they belong to a mass, is it as alienated individuals in a new area of life not [adequately] covered by local group tradition. (Blumer, 1935, p. 118)

There is not even a hint that Blumer, in defining a “mass,” meant to depict American society or modern society in general as “atomized” and its people as estranged from one another. His intent was to distinguish between the behavior of a crowd and the behavior of a mass audience.

The criticisms of the Bauers were more focused on the model of communication that they imputed to the “critics of mass society.” They challenged three premises that, implicitly or explicitly, underlay a model abandoned by researchers cognizant of the cumulation of evidence. The premises were “(1) that informal communications play a minor role, if any, in modern society; (2) that the audience of mass communication is a ‘mass’ in the sense of being socially ‘atomized’; (3) that content and effect may be equated” (Bauer & Bauer, 1960, p. 13). As to the first, obviously absurd premise, one can only wonder whosoever would claim that people had stopped conversing. As to the second premise, the quotation from

Blumer, just cited, should suffice as a refutation while, as to the third, surely, recognizing that content matters and that messages can be framed to maximize impact falls far short of “equating” content with effect. Taken together, the three, as stated by the Bauers, seem little more than a strawman all too easily knocked down, even without research evidence. On the related issue of mass culture — whether the stream of entertainment available via the media has lowered taste — the Bauers judged the question still open, because data about the past sufficiently reliable for a comparison would be hard to find. They did, however, make a reasonable case that there is more “high” culture today than in earlier historical periods, even if it might be overwhelmed by a still greater increase in mass-produced popular culture.

The last issue is the one that also troubled Edward Shils ([1962] 1975), who railed against the image of a “homogeneous” mass, leveled downward to the lowest denominator, alienated from society, egotistic, amoral, and without any serious beliefs and loyalties beyond an occasional zealous attachment to some radical movement or ideology. His argument, highly theoretical, is tightly reasoned. The indisputable decline in the sacredness of authority and the dispersal of primordial ties, formerly the basis for social solidarity, have gone hand in hand with a clear movement toward inclusion of the entire population into society. The mass of people today, he opined, indubitably experience greater affinity with the central institutions of their society than they did in the past, and the élites, for their part, have come to share many objects and standards with the multitude. These three developments have, together, shifted the center of gravity toward the individual. Shils did not specifically mention the role of communication in this shift, but apparently had it in mind when he acknowledged that, while there is today “perhaps a greater homogeneity than in the much less loosely integrated societies of the past,” the complexity of modern society precludes that complete homogeneity perceived by the critics of “mass society” (1975, p. 101), a term he abhorred, but for which he was unable to find a satisfactory substitute.

Origins of the Term

To explicate the meaning and significance of “mass,” we turn first to the work of Gustave LeBon (1841-1931). Why start with LeBon, whose writings are no longer taken very seriously? And why not go farther back: to de Tocqueville, who warned of the threat of equality to liberty; to Karl Marx and his characterization of the proletariat in capitalist society; to John Stuart Mill’s concerns over the rise of mediocrity; to Matthew Arnold’s apprehension over the decline of standards, to Hippolyte Taine’s inquiry into the motivations behind mass movements, or to any number of others? The answer is that, even without a mention of LeBon’s name, his descriptions of the mass in *La psychologie des foules*, first published in 1895, and in some subsequent writings, have pervaded disputes on the subject ever since. Specifically, his warning that “the age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds” ([1895] 1916, p. 3) resonated widely, coming as it did at a time when working class parties were gaining ground and Western societies were still reeling from the turbulence that came in the wake of rapid industrialization and mass migration to cities. His book went through 26 printings and was translated into many languages. Although generally remembered as a treatise on crowds, and mostly cited in that connection, it is as much about the advent of mass society as it is about crowds, riots, and mobs. LeBon, to be sure, couched his explanations in psychological terms — contagion, loss of individuality, and regression to a more primitive mental state were his favorite terms. What qualifies the book as a treatise on the mass is LeBon’s conflation of crowd behavior with that of the larger mass, as when he, for

example, allows that "thousands of isolated individuals may acquire at certain moments, and under the influence of certain violent emotions — such, for example, as a great national event — the characteristics of a psychological crowd." The mere agglomeration of people, however, is not sufficient to cause the disappearance of the conscious personality and turn the feelings and thoughts of a multitude in the same new direction ([1896] 1926, p. 26).⁴ Nor is "their simultaneous presence on the same spot . . . indispensable. The action of contagion may be felt from a distance under the influence of events which give all minds an individual trend and the characteristics peculiar to crowds" ([1896] 1926, p. 144). Crowds are recruited from an already rebellious people; a local uprising, as it spreads, develops into a mass movement.

For LeBon, the proximate crowd and the diffuse crowd are generically similar. Participants in both are slaves to the impulses they receive ([1896] 1926, p. 41), some so ephemeral that they scarcely exist for more than a day, and even "the more important ones scarcely outlive a generation" (1926, p. 167). This is where communication enters. LeBon assigned primary responsibility for the fickleness of opinion to mass circulation newspapers. The attention for which they typically clamor moves them to monitor and, at the same time, court and reflect the opinion of their readership. They act as the vehicle through which ordinary people (i.e., the "masses") exert influence on statesmen, whose fear of ever-shifting public opinion, "*des opinions populaires*," is so great that the press tends, more and more, "to become the supreme guiding principle in politics" ([1896] 1926, p. 170) and also, by implication, in other sectors of society. "Contagion," once having done its work among the lower classes, reaches the higher ones, so that in the end, "every opinion adopted by the populace always ends in implanting itself with great vigour in the higher social strata" ([1896] 1926, p. 146). With this last statement, LeBon seems to anticipate Shils, albeit with one huge difference: LeBon sees everyone and everything, including culture, dragged down in the process.

More deserving of continuing attention, though largely overshadowed by LeBon, is Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904). He had a less psychological and more sociological view of the role of the mass in society. The main question addressed in his writings is this: What is the nature of the social bond that unites a multitude of individuals who "do not come in contact, do not meet or hear each other; [but] are all sitting in their own homes scattered over a vast territory, reading the same newspaper?" This is essentially the same question that Tönnies had framed and sought to answer in terms of the shifting balance between Community and Society. Tarde looked for answers in a different direction. For him, the bond that forged some kind of unity among a mass of geographically dispersed inhabitants lay "in their simultaneous conviction or passion and in their awareness of sharing at the same time an idea or a wish with a great number of other men [sic]" ([1898] 1969, p. 278). His resort to "imitation" as the all-pervasive social mechanism behind every meeting of minds, friendly or hostile, should not distract us from his perceptive diagnosis of the "currents of opinion." They emerge, definitely not from imitation between people meeting on the streets or at a public square, but within a population whose individual members, while sitting in homes that are scattered over a wide territory, are reading the same newspaper. Without a mass

⁴ Because of missing pages in the copies available to us, we switch between the original French and the English translation of the book.

readership, there could be no public opinion other than in salons and cafes, plus sporadic input from crowds limited to the range within which a human voice can be heard.

Tarde looked upon the press as the major medium of *public* communication,⁵ but he never claimed that it could ever substitute for the direct informal discourse within families or among neighbors, friends, and working associates. Rather, three mutually auxiliary inventions — printing, the railroad, and the telegraph — had enabled the multitude to interact more intensively and “combined to create the formidable power of the press . . . that prodigious telephone which has so inordinately enlarged the former audiences of orators and preachers” and in the course of it, allowed all sorts of publicists and promoters to exercise leadership over the public. Here, Tarde may seem to be echoing LeBon, but he certainly was not. In describing the present as “the era of the public or publics,” he was envisioning a more pluralistic society. He firmly rejected his predecessor’s formulation about this being the era of crowds while describing the present as “the era of the public or publics, and that is a very different thing.” One can, and always does, belong simultaneously to several publics, but one cannot be part of more than one crowd at one time, so that “the gradual substitution of publics for crowds . . . is always accompanied by progress in tolerance” ([1898] 1969, p. 281). On some occasions, to be sure, an overly excited public deteriorates into a crowd, but such a “fall from public to crowd, though extremely dangerous, is fairly rare . . . [and] it remains evident that the opposition of two publics, always ready to fuse along their indistinct boundaries, is a lesser danger to social peace than the encounter of two opposing crowds” ([1898] 1969, p. 282).

One of the great achievements of the press was to move conversation beyond small talk to “bigger” things, to persons and images, as we might say today, that have caught the public’s attention. Tarde was among the first to recognize that, to quote him once again, the “increasing similarity of simultaneous conversations in an ever more vast geographical domain is one of the most important characteristics of our time for it explains for the most part the increasing authority of opinion versus tradition and even of reason.” He also recognized in the growing dissimilarity of conversations that follow one another both one cause of the instability of opinion and a counter-weight to its power. And these opinions, as he stated by way of a footnote, be they stable or changing, testify to the immense social progress in recent years. Classes and professions coalesce, and the nation becomes “real” only on the day when a sustained conversation between individuals belonging to quite different professions and classes becomes the societal norm ([1898] 1969, p. 312; [1898] 1904, p. 104).⁶

The press takes on the additional role of mediating between legislative institutions. Being in continuous and instant touch, reflecting the ongoing and reciprocal action and reaction within a population far larger, and more dispersed, than the local constituency of a member of parliament or the residents of a capital city, like Paris, the press brings together the multiplicity of opinions across the country and, over time, consolidates them into the composite that comes to stand for *the* collective opinion of the entire

⁵ *Studies in Public Communication* was the title of a short-lived journal published by the University of Chicago from 1959 to 1962.

⁶ The abridged English translation ends rather abruptly; the latter part of the citation and footnote is ours from the French publication.

country ([1898] 1969, p. 77). Notwithstanding such an achievement, clearly unprecedented, some things remain the same. No matter how many “artificial” groups (Tarde’s term) rise to defend some common interest — of an industry, a region, an occupation, a political tendency, or whatever else — their existence does not diminish the social value of the deep attachments most people have to their family or locality. Anyone who doubts this, so Tarde contended, would be committing a grave error: “Far from it: to become civilized is to find more affinities with others each day. The increased social field requires a better human heart, greater and more tender, just as a larger garden requires more abundant water” ([1898] 1969, p. 130). The power of family ties remains undiminished, even as these new groupings gain importance. Surely, Tarde’s concept of mass has little, if anything, in common with the parody of “mass” that some critics of mass-society theory have used to discredit it.

Mass Society: Further Development of the Concept

By addressing the concept of mass and the role of the public in the management of mass society in the way he did, Tarde charted a path for others to follow. Brief sketches of various efforts to build and elaborate on his work are grouped here under four headings: society and collective behavior, the rebellious masses, masses and public opinion, and the turn to propaganda.

Society and Collective Behavior

Tarde’s most immediate successor was Robert E. Park (1864-1944), whose name is closely linked to the Chicago school of sociology. Collective behavior, as Park defined it, subsumes the processes and interactions that give rise to certain recognizable, usually ephemeral, social formations — crowds, masses, and currents of public opinion. From this perspective, crowds form as a spontaneous coming together of people into more than normally intense interaction, and they should “be viewed as the result of a specific sociological process whose general characteristics are those which generate collective attention” (Park, [1902] 1972, p. 45). He notes, taking cues directly from Tarde, that whereas a crowd is limited in size “by the length to which a voice will carry or the distance that the eye can survey,” a public develops through contagion without direct contact (Park & Burgess, [1921] 1969, p. 868). This lack of contact does not mean that the individuals who make up a public are isolated, that they exist only as part of an anonymous mass. Quite the contrary:

In the larger realm of politics and in the small world of intimate social life, certain general concerns that dominate thoughts and conversation are always present. . . . Thus collective attention appears as a process in which the group acts upon itself. (Park, [1902] 1972, p. 46)

Even modern advertising achieves its “desired effect more from interaction between people than from direct suggestion” (ibid., p. 45).⁷

⁷ The original title of the book from which this passage is translated was *Masse und Publikum*. The German term for mass applies equally to a crowd physically present and to a scattered multitude.

Here again, Park adopts Tarde's concept of the public as developing out of several diffuse "crowds" of people or groups. Participants are transformed into self-conscious partisans by the opposition they encounter. Viewed as a form of collective behavior,

so-called public opinion is generally nothing more than a naive collective impulse which can be manipulated by catchwords. Modern journalism, which is supposed to instruct and direct public opinion by reporting and discussing events, usually turns out to be simply a mechanism for controlling collective attention. The "opinion" formed in this manner shows a form that is logically similar to the judgment derived from unreflective perception: the opinion is formed directly and simultaneously as information is received. (ibid., p. 57)

In this respect, a public is quite unlike a crowd that does not move beyond a common awareness. The words and actions expressed in public opinion, insofar as they result from discussion among individuals with opposing positions, will be based, more or less, "upon the presentation of facts" (ibid., p. 57). And finally, what is ultimately accepted as public opinion does not have to be "acceptable to each individual member of the public to the same degree. It is much more an opinion or an attitude which is external to every individual and which is viewed as something objective" (ibid., p. 59). It is, to paraphrase Park, more like an abstract norm to which people concede, much as, for example, they accept without much question the validity of scientific discoveries about which they themselves may know very little.

Along a somewhat different line, Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), of the University of Michigan, noted that, with the expansion of consciousness and rational cooperation, tradition, which has a long extension in time but covers very little space, has to compete with thought and practices that arrive "sidewise, as it were, from contemporaries . . . [but] may endure only for a day" ([1909] 1929, p. 335). The unity so produced suggested to Cooley a form of collective behavior distinct from that of either a crowd or a public; in short, what others have called a "mass."

German sociologists sought to define a crowd or mass not as a process or in behavioral terms, but formally, as a basic sociological category. This holds especially for Georg Simmel (1858-1919), whose major interest was in the formal characteristics of social relationships, not in the dynamics stressed by Tarde and some others. Simmel's definition of a mass turned on numbers, and numbers alone. He saw these as having the same consequences in all settings. The unity of an organization, political party, social movement — it does not matter which — derives from some similarity in all the individual participants. Because "what is common to many must be accessible even to [the] lowest and most primitive among them," the more widely the common property that unites them is shared, the more it is destined to be the simplest, lowest, most primitive, least valued — inferior to the richness of the individual personality ([1908] 1950b, p. 93). This explanation makes obvious that individuals, when part of a mass, respond only to simple ideas, are more moved by emotional appeals than reason, rarely reach consent on a positive aim but prefer instead to unite in opposition to something (1950b, p. 397), and differ sharply from aristocracies that never include more than a minority. And, for Simmel, whatever is true of a mass or a mass organization holds true even more so for people crowded together in close physical proximity.

Passages such as the above have induced some critics of “mass society theory” to locate Simmel in the same conservative camp as LeBon. A more careful reading of texts reveals that he actually saw in the “mass” a liberating influence: its unity, by virtue of its size, consists “not of the total individualities of its members, but only of those fragments of each of them in which he [sic] coincides with all others” (1950, p. 33). Since small groups absorb more of their members’ personalities than larger group, every increase in size grants individuality more latitude. Simmel went farther still in his embrace of modern “mass” society when, in an altogether different context, he lauded the individualism fostered by a monetarized economy: “Money, for its part, inasmuch as it converts impulsive-subjective procedures [*Verfahrensweisen*] into impersonal ones that are subject to objective norms is still a breeding ground for economic individualism and egotism” (Simmel, 1907, p. 490). Money also opens new opportunities for individual development, although those opportunities are limited to the intellectually motivated or the economically comfortable. Both economic and non-economic individualism were also being fostered by the more impersonal lifestyle that flourished in the modern metropolis ([1903] 1950a, p. 423). Because of Simmel’s many-sided mix of opinions and observations, he does not quite fit into the category of “mass society theorist” as depicted by some critics.

Among other efforts at defining the mass (see Vleugels, 1926), the most ambitious is an article by Gerhard Colm (1897-1968), published in the famous *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. This seldom-recalled sociologist endeavored to replace the loose colloquial notion of the mass or the masses with a theoretical construct devoid of ideology. References to the mental unity of members which, in some form after all, characterizes every kind of grouping, do not suffice for Colm because they fail to define the *special* nature of the bond around which a mass forms. His definition singles out the cumulation of shared experiences [*Wir-Erlebnis*] — disappointments, deprivations, grievances, etc. — that may ultimately unite people to whom most other channels for pursuing some objective or general goal, often poorly stated, are closed. He does not mention numbers as a determinant and actually seems closer to Park than to Simmel, neither of whom he cites, in observing that the feelings of identity in a mass are vague in comparison with other group formations. It is when the mass as a whole moves into action that the momentum inherent in this collectivity is superimposed on the individual (1924, p. 688). Other attributes of this mass are its homogeneity, its lack of structure, and its inability to accomplish very much. The mass as a mass, he explains, cannot bargain or strike a deal without the leaders who really act outside the mass. Masses typically form in historical circumstances where the recent shattering of social relationships has left many people adrift. Mass action directed against existing authorities then, in most instances, gains in appeal (1924, p. 692).

Rebellious Masses

Mass uprisings, disruptions of public order, and demonstrations causing the fall of governments — events that had spurred the diatribes of LeBon — presented a challenge to social scientists. Colm did not proceed beyond recognizing the mass as a reservoir for crowds during uprisings against existing authorities. It remained for Theodor Geiger (1891-1952) to offer a sociologically grounded analysis of the *actions* the mass carries out. He begins by distinguishing between the “mass” and the “masses,” declaring that the two are not identical, and that the term “masses” had become an over-used epithet for the working class, which was indeed the recruitment reservoir for the “mass.” Rather, the mass had to be

viewed as a "collectivity [*sozialer Verband*] supported by the destructively revolutionary multitude, for which up to now there has been no other name" (Geiger, 1926, p. 37). Such a mass arises not only in conventional politics; it also has to be understood as a protest directed toward community and against society — as in the meanings Tönnies assigned these terms (1926, p. 168). The unity of purpose of the mass is evidenced in demonstrations, protests, strikes, seizures of property — actions that, although local, are nevertheless conditioned by the existence of a larger, more dispersed mass, encompassing a diversity of individuals, all of whom, being similarly situated in society, have experienced similar frustrations and grievances. Class conflict provides the context.

Robert Michels (1876-1936) and, subsequently, Hendrik de Man (1885-1953), two other sociologists of the Left,⁸ explicitly warned against imagining that the followers of the socialist parties were "nothing but a large homogeneous, uniform gray mass ignoring the many gradations and specialties" (Michels, [1926] 1987, p. 89). Only through organizations do these working-class people, who may not even be fully familiar with the platform or program of their party, develop a tolerably homogeneous ideology. As Geiger put it, "no revolution is carried solely by the mass — rather the mass has only *one* function conferred on it — destruction" (1926, p. 57). This conception of mass movements and mass action developed with reference to working-class opposition accords with the negativity Simmel imputed to a mass. It also seems to fit the category of elementary collective behavior as defined by Park, but otherwise, it is of no great help in clarifying the nature of the mass as it functions within the context of mass communication.

Masses and Public Opinion

With the epithet of the Great Society, Graham Wallas (1858-1932) meant to evoke an image of a social universe expanded to the point where people "find themselves working and thinking and feeling in relation to an environment, which, both in its world-wide extension and in its intimate connection with all sides of human existence, is without precedence in the history of the world" (Wallas, [1914] 1917, p. 3). It is simply too diverse, too heterogeneous, to be held together or to act in accord by feelings of sympathy between people. For any consensus or unity of will to emerge, there must be some meeting of minds among people separated not only in space, but also by time. This could be achieved, Wallas averred, only through intellectual activity that "sharpen[s] the mental picture which every member of the Great Society forms of that larger multitude of his contemporaries, whom he will never see, but whose lives he must necessarily influence" (1917, p. 154). Leaders, too, must learn how to gain support from constituents.

The complexity of social organization and our expanded environment require that policies be more consciously shaped. No longer can we rely on the vague impulses to which people — in crowds or in an agitated mass — ordinarily react from day to day; nor can we rely on the simplistic ideas that parade as genuine thought but really are nothing more than some by-product, whether of religion, of tradition, or

⁸ Michels started as a socialist, but he became an admirer of Mussolini's fascism. The biography of de Man, a Belgian who, in the 1920s, qualified as one of the most creative thinkers of the Left, includes a short stint as a collaborator with Nazi occupiers. Despite their somewhat checkered political pasts, both adopted an essentially anti-establishmentarian perspective.

of someone's copyright, administrative position, or private wealth. These are, after all, what generates wild electoral contests, war fevers, and other negative outcomes. They can only be countered by what Wallas called the Organization of Thought (1917, p. 227). Framing the issue of public competence — the very issue that would later preoccupy Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, and Karl Mannheim — in positive terms, Wallas distanced himself from the contemporary crowd psychology expounded in Britain by William McDougall and Wilfred Trotter. The Individual Thought, which takes place in silence and solitude, relying only on personal memory and imagination, no longer worked. The solution of problems required the Organized Thought, which includes the entire stock of knowledge in which social arrangements are grounded and only develops by way of discussion and communication. The requirement for participation is to have

a large body of knowledge in common, . . . be familiar with the peculiar strength and weakness of each of the others and, above all, . . . be influenced by the same desire to follow the truth 'whithersoever the argument may lead.' (Wallas, 1917, p. 242)

Every adult member of the Great Society belongs, to some degree, to the vast impersonal Thought Organization that has been created by modern means of communication.

That our more personal Thought-Organizations work even tolerably well is, indeed, mainly due to the fact that the members of Parliament, Municipal Councillors, Government Officials, and Company Directors bring to their meetings minds already saturated by those statements and arguments about the world beyond the reach of their senses, which reach them through newspapers and books. (Wallas, 1917, p. 280)

Although people in general look to these same sources to set the framework for some conversations, Wallas cautioned against confusing the two levels of public discourse:

[the] impersonal Organisation [of Thought] with the personal communication which takes place when men who live in the same street or travel in the same conveyance, converse with each other; and to speak, for instance, of the 'public opinion' of a new suburb, where no one knows his neighbor and each season-ticket holder reads his newspaper in silence in the morning train, as if it were due to the same process as the 'public opinion' of an agricultural village on the day after some event which every householder has discussed with every other. (Wallas, 1917, p. 281)

It would help more if society were better able to provide education for ordinary citizens as a precondition for more popular participation in the larger public discourse.

The Turn to Propaganda

Wallas completed *The Great Society* before the mass disillusionment that followed the senseless slaughter during four years of warfare had taken hold. That WWI should have enjoyed popular support as long as it did, and even been welcomed at its outset by some of the more educated as actually liberating, raised questions about the competence of the multitude. How could people have been initially so aroused,

and then held captive to a cause that squandered their countries' resources and drained them of their young manpower? Critics of the war fixed on a new culprit — propaganda. There was an outpouring of exposes concerning monstrous falsehoods about enemy atrocities and the patriotic appeals that had emanated from the people's own government (see Nicolai, 1920; Bornecque, 1921; Baschwitz, 1923; Lasswell, 1927; Ponsonby, 1928). Among the most thoughtful of this genre were two books — *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925) — both by Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), who had studied with Wallas.

The point of departure for Lippmann was the simple psychological proposition spelled out in *Public Opinion*, the earlier of his two books, that people make decisions and act on the basis of information about the world. The proposition applies no less to decisions in the public sphere than to those in private life. Yet, the world that people confront is altogether too big, too complex, with too many things happening all at the same time to give them the William Jamesian "direct acquaintance" with anywhere near all relevant facts. No one, even under the best of circumstances, is positioned to experience more than a tiny slice of the events that rivet national attention. In order to navigate their way through the larger universe, people construct a rudimentary model, some sort of mental map, from what they read in the press and, increasingly since Lippmann wrote, from the newer mass media. All of us — eminent leaders, statesmen, and law-makers no less than ordinary citizens — piece together our picture of the environment from what *other* people have observed and reported, supplemented by what each imagines for him or herself. Lippmann coined a new word, stereotypes, to stand for the pictures that people carry in their heads. Once they take shape, stereotypes act like a screen that inserts itself between people and the more complex reality, including the light in which group actions and public events are perceived. The resultant picture is always refracted, not only by propaganda and manipulation of the news through formal and informal censorship, but equally by omissions and misunderstandings on the part of recipients. These are caused "by physical and social barriers [to communication] . . . by scanty attention, by the poverty of language, by distraction, by unconscious constellations of feeling, by wear and tear, violence, monotony" (1922, p. 76). This list, meant to be merely illustrative rather than exhaustive, anticipates the "mediating factors" that members of a later generation, believing that they had come on something new, would cite in support of a theorem about the limited effects of mass communication.

Lippmann further surmised that the direct and immediate impact of what people see, read, or hear about may be small, but the emotions stirred by these impressions tend to persist, especially when attached to some symbol — a name, a slogan, a cause, or a party — that serves as the rallying point for some multitude. The power of such a mass, or whatever one calls it, is nevertheless limited. People, if there are enough of them agreeing to act together, can occasionally, through strikes, boycotts, or mass demonstrations,

resist what they do not like or coerce those who obstruct what they desire. But by mass action nothing can be constructed, devised, negotiated, or administered. . . . The limit of direct [mass] action is for all practical purposes the power to say Yes or No on an issue presented to the mass. (1922, p. 229)

Implementing what people clamor for and making sure that they reap the full benefits of any concession remains a task for leaders and spokesmen with special skills. To believe otherwise, as Lippmann put it most forcefully in *The Phantom Public*, is to subscribe to a "false ideal of democracy," based on a misleading fiction that all citizens can think and act as if they were office holders. They clearly cannot. Noble as it may be as an ideal, detailed input into policy by everyone is unrealizable, not because citizens are incompetent, but because of the unbridgeable difference between *insiders*, located where they have information on which they are positioned to act, and *outsiders*, who, while they may observe and judge though only from a distance, are too preoccupied with other things to develop expertise on the many complex issues government agencies deal with from day to day. And when the people do intervene, they are often manipulated for some partisan end (1925, p. 155).

The "engineering of consent" and the proliferation of professionals skilled in its techniques were a great concern to Lippmann. He believed that the public, if only people were to use their limited knowledge correctly, could exercise some real power in public affairs without falling victim to propagandists. Lippmann, it seems, was not as unmitigated a pessimist as some take him to have been.

An alternate, but not inconsistent, explanation of the ease with which masses can be misled was offered by Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), a refugee sociologist from Germany clearly perturbed by the strong electoral showing of the Nazis and the apparent mass support they were enjoying since their takeover of his industrially and politically advanced country. Mannheim's diagnosis stressed the effect of technology, not only on communication, but on society generally. Demands for specialization increase the interdependence among its component parts; for such a complex social system to work, the cogs have to mesh. Reason applied to technology, he argued, is primarily functional, focused only on the adaptation of means and tasks to an already determined objective. It trumps a more genuinely creative substantive rationality necessary for an evaluation of the ends and of the principles that shape them, so that "[with] each new act to fit in, the average person gives up a part of his [or her] intellectual autonomy . . ." (1935, p. 36). It is not, Mannheim was careful to say, that the world has become less rational, only that "irrationality" used to be more confined to the private sphere, but, given the fundamental democratization that modern societies have undergone, it is no longer so confined (1935, p. 19). Now that they have the franchise, the general populace — the once passive masses — play a more active role in politics than ever before. Their all-too-evident susceptibility to emotional propaganda signals the disproportionality between requirements of rational governance on the one hand, and an absence of organizations to mediate between the élites and the population at large on the other. Older, more "organic" publics have been replaced by a public that is "atomized" — not to the degree imputed by the mass society critics, but only in the very specific sense of lacking the dense network of organizations through which the people in liberal democracies (he cites England as an example) make themselves heard. The more such mediating groups are short-circuited, the easier it becomes to rally the multitude behind some vague cause.

Certainly, by the end of the 1930s, if not sooner, propaganda defined as "the manipulation of symbols to control controversial attitudes" (Lasswell & Bienenstock, 1939, p. 10), was recognized as

indispensable, even in a democracy, for achieving any — self-serving or laudatory — political end.⁹ More and more leaders, whether of business or citizen associations, had their own public relations staffs. So-called experts in persuasion made full use of the tools that a new breed of empirically-oriented social scientists were putting into their hands. Psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, practitioners — even historians and journalists — all contributed to an understanding of how propaganda worked. Many of these studies were “defensive,” intended to alert people to its presence and, above all, to inoculate them against falsehoods and tricks used to mislead a gullible public. A major center for this research was the Institute of Propaganda Analysis in New York City. It sponsored studies of content and how messages were crafted to exploit the vulnerabilities of audiences, but it was less involved with the empirical investigation of actual effects. The same fears fueled studies of propaganda during WWII, which later supplied grist for a misleading fiction: that communication scholars had falsely depicted the mass media as “all-powerful” persuaders and manipulators of rootless and alienated individuals. Actually, as noted by two researchers involved in research on psychological warfare during the war, the nature of government propaganda shifted away from overtly moralistic and emotional appeals and toward more factual presentation (Kris & Leites, 1947). The trend confirms the power of Lippmann’s insight about the power of information that is experienced only via the media. “Factual” misrepresentation can be hard to detect, even by experts, and still more so by the multitude of lay people, the bystanders to the political conflicts played out on the narrow arena that the media of mass communication provide.

Mass Culture

Culture has to do with the content and quality of collective life. A distinction between esteemed culture, with its rich and subtle meanings requiring cultivation, and the culture that succeeds on the market has long been recognized. The latter is often maligned by literati as “merely popular,” hence destined to be soon forgotten, which has, in fact, been the fate of many such creations and performances. “Mass culture” has come into wide use as a term deprecating the value of commercially marketed arts and entertainment packaged to appeal to people in particular demographic categories. Media managers are inclined to perceive their audiences as a statistical mass, paying little attention to people’s vital needs or capacities for development. Much criticism of mass culture has expressed a concern, most prevalent among conservatives, about the influence of the masses and their alleged propensity to intervene in just about everything, imposing their own vulgar views on others while neither making any demands on themselves nor respecting, or even showing proper regard, for the standards of a more discriminating minority. Germans designate this state of affairs as *Vermassung* — massification would be an English equivalent, but is too awkward to enter parlance.

Attacks on contemporary culture from the Left have taken a different tack. These once were aimed at the deficiency of cultural opportunities for the working class, given a system where everything, including standards for recreation and leisure, are largely set by people focused only on profits. *Capitalism and Its Culture* by Jerome Davis (1891-1979), a Marxist sociologist and exponent of this viewpoint, exemplifies this genre. It contains not even a single reference to “mass culture” (Davis, 1935). The

⁹ Early scholars who worked on the *practice* of propaganda include Edward L. Bernays (1928) and Ivy Lee (1925).

traditional Left, looking ahead to the development of a genuine working-class culture, had pinned its hopes on variants of the Proletkult, as practiced for a while in the Soviet Union, to encourage workers to be culturally creative, and to push writers, movie-makers, and visual artists to feature proletarians as chief protagonists in their works. Not until the 1940s did the neo-Marxist Left, led by the refugees of the Frankfurt school of sociology, but also harking back to the nearly forgotten Antonio Gramsci, fashion its own radical critique of mass culture as the product of a cultural industry.

Few intellectuals propagated the élitist view quite as doggedly as the renowned José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), an outspoken conservative whose name has often been linked to that of LeBon. Ortega y Gasset openly expressed his disdain for the unschooled, whom he saw enamored by cultural objects with no real worth. To him, "mass" denoted not a particular social class, but a certain kind of person found among all classes, who, among other shortcomings, had no real appreciation of art:

[T]o the majority of people, aesthetic pleasure means a state of mind which is essentially undistinguishable from their ordinary behavior. It differs merely in accidental qualities, being perhaps less utilitarian, more intense, and free from painful consequences. But the object towards which their attention and, consequently, all their other mental activities are directed — people and passions — is the same as in daily life. By art they understand a means through which they are brought in contact with interesting human affairs. Artistic forms proper — figments, fantasy — are tolerated only if these do not interfere with the perception of human forms and fates. ([1925] 1968, p. 9)

People in the mass depended on sentimental intervention; they remained preoccupied with the human content in a work. Theirs was not the true artistic pleasure, of which, Ortega y Gasset believed, not many were capable. And while there had always been an abundance of such "mass" persons, they used to be scattered around the world and "lived a life, to all appearance, divergent, dissociate, apart. Each individual or small group occupied a place, its own, in country, village, town, or quarter of the great city" ([1929] 1930, p. 13). Insofar as cultural success remained in their hands, they dragged everyone and everything down toward their level.

Actually, concern over a dilution of taste started long ago with the growth of a literature aimed at a broader audience. As early as 1817, the critic, William Hazlitt (1778-1830), a shrewd observer of the literary scene, deplored the "diffusion of public taste" promoted by public institutions and artificial means that were not synonymous with its elevation:

The principle of universal suffrage, however applicable to matters of government, which concern the common feelings and common interests of society, is by no means applicable to matters of taste. . . . The highest efforts of genius, in every walk of art, can never be properly understood by the generality of mankind, . . . [whose taste is incapable of even gradual improvement]. ([1817] 1930a, p. 163)

Public incompetence, Hazlitt believed, would also affect creativity. It hung like "a millstone round the neck of all original genius that does not conform to established and exclusive models" ([1818] 1930b, p. 96). In vying for popular applause, as some writers were tempted to do, they abandoned their own standards and became willing to pander to those "of the public for novelty and extraordinary effect" ([1816] 1877, p. 85). With these and other comments, Hazlitt anticipated the critics of mass culture by noting its effects on poets in a literary world that still encompassed only a small readership of relatively educated persons.

That situation — a literary world of moderate size — no longer exists. Literary critics have had to broaden their perspective and, without abandoning concerns over mass competence, had to come to terms with the consequences of an unforeseen flood of entertainment and education via the media of mass communication. Nowadays, more people than ever participate, partake in, or have available so much material, so easily, and so quickly. New genres develop and old ones are adapted for mass distribution. The problem has been redefined somewhat. Criticism has been more focused on the erosion of literary tradition than on the alleged incompetence and interventionist posture of individuals that Ortega y Gasset had emphasized. In comments on mass civilization and minority culture, F. R. Leavis (1895-1978), a defender of the humanities against the onslaughts of mass culture, illustrated the shift by advancing a psychological Gresham's law. Content "debased for mass distribution," he asserted, drove out better quality information and culture (Leavis, [1930] 1969, p. 9). Among the symptoms of this debasement were the abridgment of canonic works and their adaptation for movies, or even for comic strips. The same nefarious consequences extended beyond literature to all of leisure and social life. Where advertising slogans and journalistic hype have become pervasive, linguistic versatility is bound to decline, and people's lives are accordingly impoverished. The main defense, following Leavis, is to keep literary tradition alive.

Much commentary about the "culture" disseminated by the media does not specify exactly what is new and unique to it. The one characteristic of mass culture just about everyone should be able to agree upon is its lack of roots in a hallowed local tradition. It is not an expression of people's everyday life, certainly not in the same way that folk culture is. Instead, the content — the creations, artifacts, and performances that constitute mass culture — is received from somewhere else. A second feature, a consequence of the decline in aristocratic and older forms of state patronage, is the pressure on the creators and distributors of these contents to find or build audiences sufficient for economic viability. To maximize appeal, productions are suffused with marketing stratagems. These include packaging, sensationalism, cross-media promotion, a star system, going after records, offering prizes, novelty, and rapid obsolescence. There is a premium on being the "latest" and most up-to-date. Whether all these stratagems necessarily result in a "dumbing down" to the lowest possible level, as the Bauers contended, remains an open question. The most sought audience seems more nearly to represent some kind of a "middle mass," the largest possible number of those who could be at least minimally satisfied. And, finally, mass culture is near ubiquitous, its contents so pervasive that hardly anyone within reach can altogether escape its influence. It absorbs even the avant-garde.

The fundamental issue having to do with mass culture is not its quality, but how it functions. Karl Mannheim emphasized the absence of institutions that connect producers with recipients and the consequences of such a situation. Audiences that represent organized groups were said to react differently

than an unorganized mass, the kind that has taken over as the arbiter of success. Without a requisite stable institutional structure, popular sovereignty, in culture as much as in politics, can have messy results, as for example, in the literary world, where, Mannheim surmised that, in earlier days “an author, after he or she had once gained an audience, could expect to retain it for at least a generation. In the fluid mass society [of today] this stable audience, selectively recruited from the higher status groups, is replaced by an audience that has just gathered, one that, in the typical case, comes solely for the sake of one particular play. There is no permanent theater group with a distinctive repertoire but only a cast assembled for the *one* play. Such an impermanent fluctuating audience needs new sensations to reassemble,” a condition bound to result in an increasing number of initial successes with no seconds or thirds,¹⁰ because the audience attracted when the playwright first bursts on the scene would already have disintegrated. Lacking a loyal circle of followers, authors and other cultural producers turn directly to the “open mass and, in this way, are more subject to the laws of mass psychology than they would be where there is an organic or socially evolved structure to serve as a cushion” (Mannheim, 1935, p. 74). Among the alternatives that Mannheim had in mind was a theater designed for the working-class and run by the unions or some organized entity to act as a brake on this tendency, rudimentary forms of which already existed in England and other liberal democracies.

Claims that the influence of mass culture is entirely negative are hard to sustain. Instructive on this issue are inferences about mass responses that Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), a student of Park, drew from queries to youthful movie-goers at a time when movies were even more important entertainment than they are today. He documented how movies provided youths with images of life unknown to them. Such an audience's importance becomes greater when these images operate *against* traditional forms. Blumer believed that, by tapping into, and exploiting, basic human values — common emotions, passions, and sentiments universal in humans beings — and placing them in a novel setting, motion-pictures turned the attention of individuals outward, beyond locally defined life. Like all agencies of mass communication, “they make what has been remote and vague, immediate and clear. By reason of this ability they are especially effective in establishing stereotypes. The effectiveness is greatest where the initial familiarity with the object is least, for in such situations the object now shown in a definitive and familiar way becomes a norm” (Blumer, 1935, p. 125). Blumer does not depict the mass of movie-goers as entirely passive recipients. They still select what to see and what to pay attention to. The power lies with the culture industry. Highly sensitive to the varying tastes and desires of its clientele and lacking a clear cultural program of its own, it sets in motion an impetus to something of an interplay between the convergent selection of the mass and offerings of producers, which, over the long run, helps channel popular tastes, creates all kinds of expectations, raises aspirations, and has some influence on how people prefer to live. Blumer conceptualizes this kind of audience as a mass:

It consists of individuals with the most heterogeneous background — differences in families, in communities, in local cultures, and in class affiliations. This mass [like every other mass] has no form or organization. It has no program, no rules, no tradition, and

¹⁰ While this has not, as far as we know, been documented in any study, acquaintances in the publishing world have told us that to get a first novel accepted for publication is easier than a second one. Warhol's 15 minutes of fame may be an even more apt phrase.

no culture. It has no group consciousness, no we-feeling, no bonds of loyalty. In it, the individuals are anonymous, have no social positions, no designated functions. (1935, p. 122)

A multitude of movie-goers constitutes a "homogeneous" mass, but *only*, as Blumer makes clear, with respect to the particular behavior. In this case, all of them having gone to the movies makes them part of that mass audience, and of that audience alone. Only in this context are they perceived as identical units, while in all their other "extra-mass activities they are highly heterogeneous . . ." And they are also, but only within this mass, "anonymous." They do not all know one another, but they still

have their own local attachments, share in convivial association, belong to primary groups, live and act to a great extent in accordance with conventional patterns, but insofar as they belong to a mass, it is as alienated individuals in a new area of life not covered by local group tradition . . . , " (1935, p. 118)

which is where audience members are most open to influence from the mass media.

The concept of mass, so defined, does not refer to a particular stratum of society any more than mass culture refers to an impoverished human existence. It denotes a specific form of elementary collective behavior distinct from the emotional crowd, from the discourse that takes place in the public sphere, and from mass movements with varying degrees of organization. The limits of media effects cited by Blumer are equally noteworthy: he expected effects on youngsters, given their more limited experience, to be greater than on adults, but the images that a movie conveys are apt to be recast, and possibly even rejected, after further experience with the media or in actual life. Blumer was very aware that the influence of a picture "is dependent not solely upon its content but also upon the sensitivity and disposition of the observer. . . . Sometimes the meanings which movie-goers may get from the same picture are diametrically opposite" (1933, p. 180). Nor does being part of a mass eliminate group influences. Conversation certainly plays a role

in defining what an individual will see in a picture — the aspects that he [or she] will select to pay attention to. An individual's sensitivity and perception are built very frequently in response to what his [or her] associates think and say. . . . [T]he different interpretations which are made of pictures are replicable to some degree in terms of the interests of one's group. (1933, p. 186)

Companions or associates can also be barriers to media influence when they "look askance at a certain kind of picture, make depreciating remarks about it, ridicule its character and term one's interest in it as childish. One's attitude is likely to change by adopting the attitude of the group toward the picture" (1933, p. 134). Given these qualifications regarding media influence, the title of Blumer's article "Moulding of Mass Behavior through the Motion Picture" turns out, regrettably, to be somewhat misleading. His main claim for the media is that they help move children into the adult world and masses out of their provincialism.

Mass Revisited

Our review of the social science literature on "mass," albeit selective, has tracked its evolution into an analytically meaningful concept devoid of the ideological connotations seized upon by its critics. We also point out that the ensuing controversy over "mass society" or "mass culture" theory touched on interests and commitments not only inside, but also beyond academia. By showing that people in general were better off, less exploited, more able to resist manipulation, that they enjoyed warmer social relationships, and so forth, than predicted in either the Right or Left version of the theory, the critics did raise some valid objections, however misguided their blanket condemnations might have been. There was also, as we tried to point out, an important subtext behind their objections, one that has occasionally spilled over into the narrower field of mass communication to support the validity of the "limited-effects" theorem strongly promoted by researchers in, or with connections to, the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. This new paradigm of mass communication, which was about to become conventional wisdom, was an obvious boon to the media industry. Research findings that emphasized the dependence of media effects on factors, including personal influence, that "mediate" between content and response, rather than on content alone, gave the First Amendment arguments of media conglomerates freedom from onerous regulations with this additional backing from science.

The typical discourse in the academy revolves more around scientific issues than politics and policy. Our review of the sociological literature on mass refutes claims by critics that developments in survey research had laid the concept to rest once and for all. This is not to overlook or downplay their documentation of the various ways in which individuals respond to communication and of how messages are screened, relayed, or reinterpreted in their passage through interpersonal networks. But an over-commitment to a particular method, such as the survey, can be self-limiting. Some see only what the instrument to which they are wedded is designed to show. Those who build their case against the concept of mass on research by focusing on individual variation are apt to miss the forest because they see only trees. The more recently "discovered" barriers to communication did not elude the sociologists discussed in our review, whose insightful reflections, however vulnerable to parody, merit our continuing attention.

Mass, we repeat, is a valid sociological concept. It denotes a temporary convergence of choices by a geographically dispersed multitude that lacks cohesion. Such a mass — referred to as a diffuse crowd by Tarde and Park — grows, disintegrates, or renews itself with every shift in its attention. The participants are indeed anonymous, but only with regard to their presence in a particular mass. At best, they have a vague awareness of the numerous but nameless others attracted by the same object or media content, who adopt the same fashion, behave in a similar way, or move in a parallel direction, either as individuals or as members of some group to which they belong. The frequency and ease with which masses form is a hallmark of mass society. Other features include the expansion of the universe of discourse, increases in the role of reason, the growth of individualism, and the potential for establishing links between people living in different worlds. Such a conception has nothing to do with social pessimism or nostalgia for a lost world.

That the large audiences "assembled" by the media fit this concept of mass is beyond question. Masses do exist, even if only as statistical aggregates and without a distinct will or common goal. Their

existence, however, is fully compatible with families gathered around a television set, a group of friends going to the movies together, and exchanges among people in general about what they read or have seen. None of these joint activities detract from the power of the mass, which resides primarily in its numbers. Massive shifts do have serious consequences. The extent to which masses control the issues at hand, instead of being manipulated, is an interesting question for which there is no categorical answer. Nevertheless, the mass as a mere aggregate — of individuals, of households, of circles of friends, of work associates, and what have you — cannot achieve anything, or even discuss and exchange ideas with persons and authorities outside their normal orbit, without some sort of organization. A mass is not synonymous with a public.

The consistent and ongoing effect of the media is to expand the range of common experience among the participants in the mass they attract. People have become much more responsive to distant events. Research on the effects of mass communication needs to focus equally on two different levels: that of the individual, and that of the larger polity and society. The two are not always commensurate. What appears on the micro-level of interpersonal discourse as a small movement confined to an already impressionable minority can have significant impact on political culture. To take one example: a national election, where each vote counts the same, and where the outcome is determined by their distribution within a mass. A remarkably small number of swing-voters acting within a short time span can actually reverse an expected outcome. Three conditions predispose the mass of prospective voters to media influence: weak party preference at the outset, issues that emerge during the campaign, and pressure from family and peers. The upset, in short, is caused by voters who deviate only minimally from their original personal and social dispositions. They may not have had a clear preference to begin with; the campaign may have increased the salience of issues already important to them, and whatever their doubts, they may have been swayed by people to whom they normally listen. None of this matters as much as the impact of minimal shifts by a small number of people on the political fate of a country.

A similar paradox operates outside elections as well. A *mere* reinforcement of existing attitudes can sharpen polarization to a point where the compromises necessary for an effective policy are out of reach. Similar phenomena occur in the economic and cultural realms. A major change may represent nothing more than a change in brand preference or between two similar television serials by enough people to cut into the profitability of corporations or, in some circumstances, of industries. Sometimes, behavior consistent with prior attitudes can even become the trigger for an economic downturn. In culture, too, we need to focus as much on changes in fashions and fads as on who follows them for what personal reasons.

A final word on mass communication. For a complete assessment of its impact, one needs to look beyond specific outcomes by focusing on the pervasiveness of the media. On some matters, and especially at critical times, they provide vital information. Even the Internet, often considered an alternative to the mass media, takes account of the news and, on occasion, serves as the primary source for a major story. The two are inextricably linked. As Tarde, Lippmann, and many other early writers recognized, the power of media with access to the mass stems less from what they ask of people (prescription and persuasion) than from their portrayal of the world beyond the personal acquaintance of audiences. Unable ever to catch the full diversity of events and situations, the media supply the bits and pieces that, when put

together, form the symbolic environment to which active citizens, including bloggers and nerds, are bound to react in one way or other. Hardly anyone — not even those who scorn the media — escapes their reach. In at least one regard, institutional leaders and élites enhance this influence through their concern about likely third-person effects, which makes them forever anticipate, and attempt to forestall, the response of the anonymous multitude to the continuous flow of images over the mass media. The resultant discourse and maneuvering, much of it played out in the public sphere and difficult as it is to map, needs to be moved into sharper focus by researchers in mass communication. How to do so lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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