

# THE AGE OF THE CROWD

J Louw-Potgieter  
Department of Psychology  
University of Natal  
DURBAN

Moscovici, S. (1985). The age of the crowd.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 408. ISBN:

0-521-27705-1. £10.95.

In his examination of ingroup ties, Freud, unlike most social psychologists, did not choose small and simple forms of groups to illustrate his ideas. Never one to avoid controversy, he proposed a brief analysis of the psychological ties within the Catholic Church and the army. It could be said that Serge Moscovici in his latest book, The age of the crowd, continues this tradition of controversy and range of explanation in social psychology.

Psychology in society, 1987, 7, 78-82

THE AGE OF THE CROWD

In the introduction of this book, Moscovici explains his personal position as regards the science of mass psychology. Writing this book on mass psychology was for him a difficult and painful task, because "at every turn, one discovers a rather unflattering picture...of public life, leaders and the masses" (p. 9). He aimed "to penetrate as deeply as possible a branch of knowledge which has taken a long, hard look at our age, examined the domination of man by man without indulgence and shown the ways of using this power in mass societies. I refuse its view of history, I doubt its truth, but I accept the phenomenon" (p. 11). When reading the book, it is necessary to keep these personal views in mind, because at times it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the ideas of Le Bon, Tarde or Freud from those of Moscovici. The fact that Moscovici took each writer's line of reasoning to its logical extreme to show us the intellectual framework of the science that they jointly established and then applied this to present-day examples, should not be viewed as his unconditional support for these ideas. Moscovici, the social psychologist who critically questioned the conformist American ideology which spawned the Asch paradigm and who set out to document the way in which a consistent minority can bring about social change, does not share the view of society and the "anti-crowd prejudice" of these early writers: "I recoil from the vision of man and society that it proposes" (p. 10).



In the first part of the book, the reasons why a science of the masses came into being and the themes it deals with, are explored. One of the main reasons proposed is the collapse of the pre-capitalist ancien regime and the resultant change in the religious and political framework, plus the breach in the stable rural world of families and neighbourhood groups. From these roots crowd psychology emanated as a rival discipline to sociology and history, aiming to solve the enigma of how masses are formed from individuals.

The second and third parts of the book concentrate on how Le Bon invented the science of crowd psychology by means of his description of crowds: a collection of individuals who are united mentally and act in an unconscious, hypnotized manner; the leader and the past playing a powerful role in mobilising the crowd; and the notion of suggestion based on a sovereign idea (i.e. revolution, the fatherland, etc.). The charismatic leader, and the skilful use of language and images in propaganda were also explored by Le Bon, "the Machiavelli of mass societies" (p. 55), in his overtly political work. Of specific interest in the second part of the book, is Moscovici's description of Le Bon's background, the reasons why Le Bon was never accepted into academia in France and past and present French unwillingness to acknowledge this recalcitrant scholar's contribution to psychology.

In the fourth and fifth parts Moscovici deals with Tarde's contribution to crowd psychology: the notion of natural and artificial crowds; the power of the leader over the crowd; and a theory of mass communication, centring on suggestion and imitation. Moscovici shows how crowd psychology, from being a study of specific phenomena, was transformed by Tarde into a study of society in general and thus made the laws of politics, sociology and history subject to the laws of psychology.

According to Moscovici, the structures of crowd psychology had been created by Le Bon and Tarde; the only ingredient lacking was the vital spark, or motive power. This was to be provided by Freud. In a brilliant historical psychological description in the last part of the book, Moscovici contextualises Freud's ontogenetic theory of ingroup ties and phylogentic theory of the development of society (mainly contained in Group psychology and the analysis of the ego). Freud's Moses and monotheism is explored for the insights it provided into different types of leaders and the creation of a people. The manner in which French psychoanalysts derogated Freud's works containing these theories as the fantasies of an ageing man, is severely criticised by Moscovici. Provocative until the last, Moscovici ends his book with an application of the principles of crowd psychology applied to the Moscow trials and the rise of Stalin.



Should one seek a clear explanation based on rationality for the rise of the masses in this country, I am doubtful whether this book would provide it. However, any serious scholar with an interest in mass psychology will find Moscovici's acute analyses of a wide variety of mass phenomena - from hysteria in sport stadiums to De Gaulle's power over the French people - stimulating. It is recommended that the reader also refer to recent work on crowd psychology within the framework of social identity theory (see Reicher (1982)). Together these two different approaches to crowd psychology might provide interesting contrasts and challenging debates.

### Bibliography

Reicher, S. (1982). The determination of collective behaviour. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), Social identity and intergroup relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.