



Crowds Publics

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Crowds and Publics

Abstract

The last decade of protests have demonstrated the disruptive force of crowds. When the crowd appears in sites unauthorized by state and capital, it creates a political opening, the possibility for political subjectivation. Unlike the fiction of the public sphere, of that phantom public produced by an ideology of publicity that substitutes the fantasy of a unified field of deliberative processes for the actuality of partisan struggle, the crowd expresses the paradoxical power of the people as political subject. Insistent and opaque, the crowd illuminates attributes of political subjectivity distinctive to the contingent, heterogeneous unity of collectives, attributes missed in mistaken characterizations of the political field as consisting of individuals and operating through procedures of democratic deliberation. Rather than a matter of deliberation, choice, and decision, the politics of crowds manifests as breaks and gaps, in the unpredictability of an exciting cause, as well as through collective courage, directed intensity, and capacities to cohere. This does not mean, however, that the crowd is a political subject. The crowd is the Real that incites the political subject. It's a necessary but incomplete component of political subjectivity, the disruptive power of self-conscious number as it feels its own force.

Keywords

affect, Badiou, Canetti, crowd, Le Bon, public, subjectivation, struggles

Since 2011, the most important social actor worldwide has been the crowd. The most pressing political challenge has been the struggle over, around, and through the crowd. Of what politics is the crowd the subject?

Hong Kong, Ferguson, Gezi Park, Thailand, Ukraine, Tunisia, Tahrir Square, Greece, Spain, Chile, Brazil, Madison, Montreal, Oakland, Zuccotti Park: these place names have become markers of political intensity in a new cycle of struggles. They may, separately or together under a common name, come to designate an event. Whether they do come to designate an event—like the Paris Commune or 1968—will depend on the politics to which the crowd gives rise: Will this politics retroactively determine some or all of these place names as steps forward in the revolutionary process of the people as a collective political subject?

In this essay, I explore the divisive politics of the crowd's political rupture of the democratic politics enclosed in the public sphere. Since 2011, the crowd has introduced a gap within the political order of capital and state. Breaking with the suffocating reflexivity of contribution and critique in the mediated networks of communicative capitalism, insistent crowds impress themselves where they don't belong, their very presence challenging the privatization of even ostensibly public places.¹ Struggles in multiple locations now appear as one struggle. We see Gezi Park connected to Montreal connected to Tahrir Square. Instead of the separate incommunicable strikes of a multitude of singularities, the press of the crowd in place after place suggests the movement of the people, pushing questions of similarity, meaning, and alliance. Which side are we on?

Because of the instability of meaning in communicative capitalism—what Slavoj Žižek terms the decline of symbolic efficiency—current struggles rely less on empty signifiers like *freedom* and *justice* to hold their place than they do on common images and names, the more generic, the greater the reach: umbrella, tent, mask, Occupy.² The generic image and common name (the precursor from the early 2000s was the “color” revolutions) do not designate identities or goals. They point to tactics anyone can use. That anyone can use them means that intentions can remain oblique, even opposed to those of others struggling under the same name. Yet insofar as these tactics-as-names are used in struggle, they inscribe a negation, an opposition, even as what is negated or opposed remains

¹ For a discussion of communicative capitalism, see Dean (2009) and (2010a).

² See Žižek (1999: 322–34).

unclear, unstated. The common name and image can incite, carry, and extend a politics, providing the terms through which a politics may be legible after it appears. The common name and innocuous image mark a hole in the dominant order, a gap that is a site of open, ongoing, struggle. Because name and image precede ideology, the struggle over the meaning of the sign is part of the larger political struggle. Notice, even in the face of repeated assertions that Occupy Wall Street was “about” democracy, the name is now (rightly) associated with anticapitalism. Similarly, a component of the political struggle of Occupy Central in Hong Kong was over whether it was, at heart, anticapitalist or pro-parliamentary democracy.

When the crowd appears in sites unauthorized by state and capital, it creates a political opening, the possibility for political subjectivation. Unlike the fiction of the public sphere, of that phantom public produced by an ideology of publicity that substitutes the fantasy of a unified field of deliberative processes for the actuality of partisan struggle, the crowd expresses the paradoxical power of the people as political subject, and here I mean the people as a divisive force, the people against the ruling class or the one percent, the people as the *rest of us*.³ The crowd presses forward unexpectedly, then dissipates. We feel the force of many, even as we know they are not all; there are always more. Insistent and opaque, the crowd illuminates attributes of political subjectivity distinctive to the contingent, heterogeneous unity of collectives, attributes missed in mistaken characterizations of the political field as consisting of individuals and operating through procedures of democratic deliberation. Rather than a matter of deliberation, choice, and decision, the politics of crowds manifests as breaks and gaps, in the unpredictability of an exciting cause, as well as through collective courage, directed intensity, and capacities to cohere.

This does not mean, however, that the crowd is a political subject. The crowd is the Real that incites the political subject. It’s a necessary but incomplete component of political subjectivity, the rupture effected by the concentrated push of many, the disruptive power of self-conscious number as it feels its own force.

The Affective Intensity of Provisional Being

The most influential early crowd theorist is Gustave Le Bon. His widely reprinted and translated book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, laid the groundwork for the twentieth-century theorization of crowds. Benito Mussolini found Le Bon inspiring, particularly Le Bon’s discussion of the leader (Falasca-Zamponi 1997: 21). Commentators such

³ For a critique of the notion of the public sphere, see Dean (2002). For a discussion of the people as the rest of us, see Dean (2012).

as Sigmund Freud also contributed to a reception of Le Bon that emphasizes the role of the leader (Freud 1955: 64–144).⁴ But Le Bon doesn't talk about leaders until midway through *The Crowd*. When he does, he treats the leader as the nucleus of will around which a crowd forms, what we could also express in Lacanese as an object-cause of crowd desire. The crowd doesn't desire the leader. The leader incites and directs the desire of the crowd. The leader is an instigator, an agitator whose intensity inspires the crowd and concentrates its attention. And even as Le Bon allows for the rare, great leaders of history, he focuses primarily on the fact that the leader begins as one of the led and that he is led himself, hypnotized by the idea, as Maximilien Robespierre was, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The idea possesses the leader such that nothing else exists for him, which explains why leaders of the crowd "are recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness" (Le Bon 1896: 119). The leader concentrates and transmits an idea, turning it into a cause of action. Indeed, Le Bon considers the possibility that mass periodicals may even be replacing the leader in that they, too, can simplify, consolidate, and transmit ideas.

The emphasis on the leader displaces our attention from what is ingenious in Le Bon's notion of the crowd, namely, his rendering of the crowd as a "provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements" (1896: 6). Le Bon presents the crowd as a distinct form of collectivity. The crowd is not a community. It doesn't rely on traditions. It doesn't have a history. The crowd is not held together by unstated norms or an obscene supplement that extends beyond its own immediacy (although crowd images and symbols clearly shape the reception and circulation of crowd events).⁵ Rather, the crowd is a temporary collective being. It holds itself together affectively via imitation, contagion, suggestion, and a sense of its own invincibility. Because the crowd is a collective being, it cannot be reduced to singularities. On the contrary, the primary characteristic of a crowd is its operation as a force of its own, like an organism. The crowd is more than an aggregate of individuals. It is individuals changed through the torsion of their aggregation, the force aggregation exerts back on them to do together what is impossible alone.

The crowd phenomena that interest Le Bon define a new political era of mass political involvement. What the people desire is less significant than the fact that they desire. Crowd desire registers in the concentration that negates, in the positivity of a negation of the boundaries and separations ordering social being, in the pulsion of the people's desire even as what it is a desire for remains unstated, unconscious. For Le Bon, the po-

⁴ For a critique of Freud's reading of LeBon, see Dean (2016: 363–93).

⁵ Christian Borch (2012) provides a history of sociology structured as a history of crowd semantics, that is, an analysis of the crowd as a theoretical concept in sociology.

litical unconscious is a crowd of diverse and indeterminate others to whom we belong and the forces this belonging exerts. His crowds teem with the embodied passion that public sphere theory excises yet sometimes attempts to reinsert in its versions of collectivity.

Collective Enjoyment

From the nineteenth through the twenty-first century, crowd observers and commentators react to large political crowds with combinations of anxiety and enthusiasm. Social order disrupted, anything can happen. Exemplary here is Hippolyte Taine's account of crowds in the French Revolution. Written in the aftermath of the Paris Commune of 1871, Taine's portrayal influenced Le Bon. It continues to serve as a prototype for crowd description; we hear its echo in contemporary reports of crowds.

Taine describes a tumultuous buzzing swarm. "The starving, the ruffians, and the patriots all form one body, and henceforth misery, crime, and public spirit unite to provide an ever-ready insurrection for the agitators who desire to raise one" (Taine 1878: 30–31). Taine's crowd doesn't have a politics. It is the opportunity for politics. Need, violence, and a sense of justice reinforce each other. The crowd manifests the desire of the people but without telling us what it's for, telling us instead that it can never be one thing, never one and never a thing, that until it is dispersed it will remain beyond satisfaction. Taine ventriloquizes in advance twenty-first century internet commentary: "In this pell-mell of improvised politicians, no one knows who is speaking; nobody is responsible for what he says. Each is there as in the theatre, unknown among the unknown, requiring sensational impressions and transports, a prey to the contagion of passions around him, borne along in the whirl of sounding phrases, of ready-made news, growing rumours, and other exaggerations by which fanatics keep out doing each other" (Taine 1878: 31). Here in the upheaval of the political crowd there is no clear or singular demand, no person of known responsibility. The setting is one of rumor without knowledge and rhetoric without basis. People in the crowd are speaking, and their collective desire exceeds what is individually spoken.

In the contemporary United States, it could seem that what the people desire most are cheap consumer goods. Our most prevalent image of crowds is that of Black Friday shoppers surging through the doors of Walmart. Ubiquitous screens feature chaotic hordes cohering through the concentration of individual desires before the closed doors of big box stores, the aggregated intensities of personal wants for things hinting at a collective will to take that just might go over the edge and reject the codes of price and property. In these crowd images, capitalism formats our setting so that only consumers and commodities appear, the consumers welded into a single mass through the erasure of social space, the com-

modities now so desirable as to have been magically able to effect this erasure. Black Friday shoppers know the role they play. Decades of media coverage have made that clear enough with their interviews of bargain hunters braving bitterly cold and long lines, excited in the press of bodies against glass, and desperate enough to punch, kick, and grab in this scene of shopping staged as looting. The form of crowd action capital expects in these spectacles of consumption—wait, press, rush—has been well-established.

Late twentieth-century Britain offered a particular sort of crowd experience for those standing in stadium terraces watching football. As Bill Buford describes it:

...the physicalness was constant; it was inescapable—unless you literally escaped by leaving. You could feel, and you had no choice but to feel, every important moment of play—through the crowd. A shot on goal was a felt experience. With each effort, the crowd audibly drew in its breath, and then, after another athletic save, exhaled with equal exaggeration. And each time the people around me expanded, their rib cages noticeably inflating, and we were pressed more closely together. They had tensed up—their arm muscles flexed slightly and their bodies stiffened, or they might stretch their neck forward, trying to determine in the strange, shadowless electronic night-light if this shot was the shot that would result in a goal. You could feel the anticipation of the crowd on all sides of your body as a series of sensations (Buford 1993: 166).⁶

Buford attempts to understand the violence of English football fans, a violence not only of fighting (beating, kicking, knifing) and property damage (smashing, burning, throwing), but also of crush, stampede, collapse, and suffocation. Crowd violence is more a product of design, architecture, patterns of ticketing and transportation than it is a spontaneous expression of anger.

A crowd forms in a place. It depends on the boundedness of a setting to concentrate its intensity. On the one hand, the boundaries demarcate the permissible “the crowd can be here, but not there” (Buford 1993: 190). They establish the divisions that en-form the crowd. On the other, these very limits invite transgression, directing the crowd’s attention. They provide the thresholds that, once crossed, enable the crowd to feel its strength and renew its assertion of power. Buford attends to this crowd feeling, the exhilarating moment when a sense of individuality is obliterated as all the mediators of social interchange that maintain our separateness give way to the “jubilant authority of suddenly being in a crowd” (Buford 1993: 194). Charge, atmosphere, pressure, expectation, excite-

⁶ Thanks to Joe Mink for this book.

ment: the affective sensibility of the collective becomes desirable in itself, the shared sense of the power of numbers. This sense lets us construe the crowd as the positivity of negation, a positive expression of the negation of individuality, separateness, boundaries, and limit. We could say that the crowd is a public that enjoys collectivity rather than enclosing it within a mediated sphere where individuals fantasize about their audience.

The Discharge

Buford's depiction of the violent crowds associated with English football supporters repeats key elements of Elias Canetti's classic work *Crowds and Power* (1984). Canetti associates the crowd with a primal fear, the fear of being touched, particularly by the strange or unknown. Only in a crowd, the denser the better, is this fear shed. "As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch," Canetti writes (1984: 15). "Suddenly, it is as though everything were happening in one and same body. This is perhaps one of the reasons why a crowd seeks to close in on itself: it wants to rid each individual as completely as possible of the fear of being touched" (Canetti 1984: 16). Norms of appropriate proximity dissolve. Conventional hierarchies collapse. In place of the distinctions mobilized to produce the individual form, there is a temporary being of multiple mouths, anuses, stomachs, hands, and feet, a being comprised of fold upon fold of touching skin.

Canetti describes the moment of the crowd's emergence as the "discharge." This is the point when "all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal" (Canetti 1984: 17). Up until that point, there may be a lot of people, but they are not yet that concentration of bodies and affects that is a crowd. Density, though, as it increases, has libidinal effects: "In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself, and an immense feeling of relief ensues. It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one is greater or better than another, that people become a crowd" (Canetti 1984: 18). Canetti gives us the crowd as a strange attractor of *jouissance*, a figure of collective enjoyment.⁷ The libidinal energy of the crowd binds it together for a joyous moment, a moment Canetti renders as a feeling of equality and that we might also figure as the shared intensity of belonging. The feeling won't last; inequality will return with the dissipation of the crowd. Very few give up the possessions and associations that separate them (and those who do form what Canetti terms "crowd crystals"). But in the orgasmic discharge, "a state of absolute equality" supplants individuating distinctions (Canetti 1984: 29).

⁷ See Dean (2009) for a discussion of strange attractors.

Canetti's crowd equality clearly has nothing to do with *bourgeois equality* of the sort Karl Marx excoriates in "The Critique of the Gotha Program" (1972: 525–41). This is not the formal equality of a common standard applied to different people, objects, or expenditures of labor. Rather, the equality Canetti invokes is one where "a head is a head, an arm is an arm, and the differences between individual heads and arms is irrelevant" (Canetti 1984: 29). Deindividuation accompanies intense belonging. Just as Marx parenthetically notes that unequal individuals "would not be different individuals if they were not unequal" (1972: 530), so does Canetti associate inequality with differentiation, with the siphoning off of the fluid, mobile substance of collectivity into the form of distinct individuals. This experience of equality in the crowd, he argues, infuses all demands for justice. Equality as belonging—not separation, weighing, and measure—is what gives "energy" (Canetti's term) to the longing for justice.

Too many, Canetti argues, castigate the crowd for its destructiveness without seeking its cause. He associates destructiveness with the discharge, almost as if the crowd were crying out in ecstasy: "the noise of destruction adds to its satisfaction." Sounds of shattering glass augment the jubilation of the crowd while prolonging enjoyment by promising continued growth and movement; "the din is the applause of objects" (Canetti 1984: 19). Particularly satisfying is the destruction of boundaries. Nothing is off limits because there are no limits. The windows and doors that make houses into separate spaces, spaces for individuals apart from the crowd, are smashed. "In the crowd the individual feels that he is transcending the limits of his own person. He has a sense of relief, for the distances are removed which used to throw him back on himself and shut him in. With the lifting of these burdens of distance he feels free; his freedom is the crossing of these boundaries" (Canetti 1984: 20).

Canetti's crowd desires. It wants to grow, to increase and spread. It will persist as long as it is moving toward a goal. In addition to equality and density, then, he attributes to crowds traits suggestive of what psychoanalysis treats as desire: growth and direction. The urge to grow is a push to be more, to eliminate barriers, to universalize and extend the crowd feeling such that nothing is outside it. Direction intensifies equality by providing a common goal. The goal must remain unattained, if the crowd is to continue to exist. Expressed in Lacanian terms, desire is a desire to desire.

The People or the Mob

Some contemporary crowd observers claim the crowd for democracy. They see in the amassing of thousands a democratic insistence, a demand to be heard and a right to assembly. In the context of communicative capi-

talism, however, the crowd exceeds democracy. Communicative capitalism reconfigures the relation among crowds, democracy, capitalism, and class. On the one hand, the democratic reading of the crowd blocks these changes from view. It harnesses the crowd into the service of the very setting that the crowd disrupts. On the other hand, the democratic reading opens up a struggle over the subject of politics: the determination whether a crowd is the people or the mob.⁸

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the crowd posed questions of power and order. “The crowd—” Walter Benjamin writes, “no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth century writers” (1978: 166). At the time, the crowd appears as a quintessential political expression of the people.⁹ Inseparable from the rise of mass democracy, the crowd looms with the threat of the collective power of the masses, the force of the many against those who would exploit, control, and disperse them. Whether feared or embraced, the flood, intrusion, or crush of crowds thrusts the collective many into history.

Commentators who, like Le Bon, want to keep the people in their place warn against the “extraordinary rebellion of the masses” (Ortega y Gasset 1930: 132). They depict crowds as brutal, primitive, even criminal, mobs. In contrast, commentators seeking the overthrow of elites champion the crowd’s political vitality. Workers, peasants, and commoners of every sort are recognizing and asserting themselves as sovereign. Marx famously describes the crowds of the Paris Commune as the people “storming heaven” (1871). For nineteenth- and twentieth-century observers, then, crowds and popular democracy are intertwined. At issue is whether the sovereignty of the people can be anything other than mob rule.

A benefit of the democratic reading of the crowd is its revelation of a split: the mob or the people. The crowd forces the possibility of the intrusion of the people into politics. Whether the people is the subject of a crowd event is up for grabs. The crowd opens up a site of struggle over its subject. A crowd might have been a mob, not an event at all. It might have been a predictable, legitimate gathering, again, not an event but an affirmation of its setting. And it might have the people rising up in pursuit of justice.¹⁰ A crowd event is, or will have been, an effect of the political pro-

⁸ For a nuanced discussion of the figure of the crowd, see also William Mazzarella (2010).

⁹ But not only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is a vibrant historical literature on preindustrial and revolutionary crowds, some of the best of which comes from the British Marxist Historians’ Group. See, for example, George Rudé (1995), and E. J. Hobsbawm (1959). For a recent engagement with the postrevolutionary US-American crowd, see Jason Frank (2010).

¹⁰ As I explain in *The Communist Horizon* (Dean 2012), this is a divisive vision of the people as the rest of us.

cess the crowd event activates. The crowd does not have a politics. It is the opportunity for politics. The determination whether a crowd was a mob or the people results from political struggle.

Resisting for a while the urge to classify crowds in terms of a pre-given political content enables us to consider crowds in terms of their dynamics. Crowds are more than large numbers of people concentrated in a location. They are effects of collectivity, the influence—whether conscious, affective, or unconscious—of others.¹¹ Contemporary social science analyzes these effects with terms like *band-wagoning*, *bubbles*, and *information cascades*. Mainstream commentary continues to use terms from earlier crowd theory: *imitation*, *suggestion*, and *contagion*.

The democratic claim for the crowd was powerful in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Democracy could name an opposition. Even as communists registered the limits of bourgeois democracy in its use as an instrument of capitalist class rule, democracy could still register a challenge to existing structures of power. In the twenty-first century, however, dominant nation-states exercise power as democracies. They bomb and invade as democracies for democracy's sake. International political bodies legitimize themselves as democratic, as do the contradictory entangled media practices of communicative capitalism. When crowds amass in opposition, they poise themselves against democratic practices, systems, and bodies. To claim the crowd for democracy fails to register this change in the political setting of the crowd.

Democratic governments justify themselves as rule by the people. When crowds gather in opposition, they expose the limits of this justification. The will of the majority expressed in elections stops appearing as the will of the people. That not all the people support this government or those decisions becomes openly, physically, intensely manifest.¹² Disagreement and opposition start to do more than circulate as particular contributions to the production of nuggets of shareable outrage in the never-ending flow of clickbait in which we drown one another. They index collective power, the affective generativity that exceeds individual opinions. Many press back, using the strength of embodied number to install a gap in the dominant order. They make apparent its biases, compromises, and underlying investments in protecting the processes through which the capitalist class accumulates wealth. They expose the fragility of the separations and boxes upholding electoral politics. The crowd reclaims for the people the political field democracy would try to fragment and manage.

¹¹ See Brennan (2004).

¹² In his account of the idea and image of crowds in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, Stefan Jonsson presents the mass as an effect of representation, more particularly of the problem of representing “socially significant passions” and the structuring of the social field via a distinction between representatives and the represented (Jonsson 2013: 26).

Under communicative capitalism, the democratic claim for the crowd reinforces and is reinforced by the hegemony of ideals of decentralization and self-organization. Early crowd theorists describe the crowd as primitive, violent, and suggestible. In our present context, these descriptions are often inverted as “smart mobs” and the “wisdom of crowds.”¹³ Such inversions appropriate the crowd, enlisting it in support of capitalism as they strip away its radical political potential.

Business writers like James Surowiecki, for example, talk about the crowd in terms of collective intelligence. Surowiecki’s primary interest is in how to harness this intelligence, which he treats as information compiled from diverse and independent sources. His claim is that a crowd of self-interested people working on the same problem separately in a decentralized way will come up with the best solution. Cognitive diversity is key, necessary for avoiding imitation and groupthink (necessary, in other words, for blocking the affective binding-together of a provisional collective being). Surowiecki’s exemplary crowds are corporations, markets, and intelligence agencies. Their wisdom depends on mechanisms like prices and systems that are able “to generate lots of losers and then to recognize them as such and kill them off” (Surowiecki 2004: 29). In actuality, Surowiecki’s crowds are not so much crowds as they are data pools. He can treat the crowd as wise because he has condensed it into information, dispersed it into individual heads, and reagggregated it under conditions that use the many to benefit the few. Aggregation, Surowiecki admits, is decentralization’s paradoxical partner.

Eugene W. Holland commandeers Surowiecki’s claims for the wisdom of crowds in his attempt to envision a free-market communism (Holland 2011). Holland wants to show the plausibility of horizontal, bottom-up, decentralized, and self-organized social organization. Jazz, soccer, the internet, and markets all demonstrate, Holland argues, how group members adapt themselves to one another in the absence of top-down coordination. There are limits to these examples as social models. When playing, musicians and soccer players know and accept that they are involved in a common endeavor.¹⁴ A performance and a game necessarily restrict who and how many people can play. Jazz and soccer don’t scale. Further, and more fundamentally, Holland ignores the unavoidable production of inequality on the internet and in markets. Concerned with avoiding anything that smacks of state power, he neglects the extreme division between the one and the many that arises immanently. Self-organization in complex networks doesn’t guarantee horizontality. In fact, it produces hierarchy.

¹³ See, for example, Rheingold (2002), and Surowiecki (2004).

¹⁴ Kian Kenyon-Dean uses high school band as a compelling counterexample. Unlike the jazz ensemble unified through the music, high school band is typically divided into at least three groups: band geeks who want to play, the resistant disrupters, and the indifferent (Kenyon-Dean 2015).

The clearest exposition of the constituent role of inequality in complex networks comes from Albert-László Barabási (2003). Complex networks are networks characterized by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment. Free markets and the internet are prime examples. Complex networks have a specific structure, a power-law distribution of the items in the network. The most popular node or item in the network generally has twice as many links as the second most popular, which has more than the third most popular, and so on, such that there is very little difference among the crowd of those at the bottom but massive differences between top and bottom. This is the structure that produces blockbuster movies, best-selling novels, and giant internet hubs. The idea appears in popular media as the 80/20 rule, the winner-take-all or winner-take-most character of the economy, and the long tail.¹⁵

In these examples, the one in first place emerges through the generation of a common field. These commons can be generated in a variety of ways: in comments on a post (think of Reddit and the ways readers vote posts up and down; Holland's examples are Slashdot and Kuro5hin [2011: 88–90]), in web articles (think *Huffington Post* blogs or other sites offering lots of clickbait), on Twitter (via hashtags), and through competitions (think of contests for the best city tourism app), to use but a few examples. The contest generates a common field that will produce a winner. The more participation there is—the larger the field—the greater becomes the inequality, that is to say, the greater is the difference between the one and the many. Expanding the field produces the one.

Holland, like so many advocates of self-organization, ignores the structure that free choice, growth, and preferential attachment produce. Using Wikipedia to illustrate his point, Holland emphasizes the equality of Wikipedians (2011: 88). Clay Shirky, however, notes that “the spontaneous division of labor driving Wikipedia wouldn't be possible if there were concern for reducing inequality. On the contrary, most large social experiments are engines for harnessing inequality rather than limiting it” (Shirky 2008: 125). The so-called wisdom of crowds doesn't spontaneously generate a free and equitable order. And contra Holland, networked experiments in decentralized self-organization don't lead in the direction of dehierarchized social change but rather toward ever more extreme differentiation between the few and many. Networked communication doesn't eliminate hierarchy. It entrenches hierarchy by using our own choices against us.

Although it may seem far removed from the brutal mob of the nineteenth century, the twenty-first century's wise crowd is similar in one crucial respect: both attempt to prevent the crowd from introducing a gap

¹⁵ The term *long tail* comes from Chris Anderson (2004). For a longer discussion of power laws and the long tail, see Dean (2012).

through which the people can appear. Depictions of primitive and atavistic crowds in the nineteenth century naturalize their disparagement and repression. Social order and mob rule are antithetical. These people don't belong in politics. They are not *the people* with a divisive claim to justice. Twenty-first century evocations of the wisdom of crowds like Surowiecki's and Holland's likewise efface the crowd gap, this time absorbing it into idealized market and networked processes. Militant, disruptive, political crowds become so many self-organizing units, the self-interests of which naturally converge. Nineteenth-century treatments of the crowd as a mob acknowledge antagonism but try to prevent it from being linked to the people. Twenty-first century versions of smart mobs deny antagonism altogether, substituting the interactions of individuals and small groups for organized political struggle. Surowiecki and Holland try to ensure that these interactions don't coalesce into provisional heterogeneous beings but remain differentiated singularities. Each rejects imitation, a basic crowd dynamic, Surowiecki to avoid bubbles and riots, Holland to guarantee difference. They may use the term *crowds*, but their crowds neither become collective beings nor force a gap. In the complex networks of communicative capitalism, the so-called wisdom of crowds isn't a matter of the intrusion of the many into politics. It's the generation and circulation of the many in order to produce the one.

Numerical Force

In the contemporary United States, political crowds, crowds authorized by neither capital nor the state, rarely manifest out-of-doors.¹⁶ Increase seems a desire limited to capital. It was 2011 that became a year of hope and disruption when protesters from Madison, Wisconsin through the multiple Occupy encampments shot a hole in the wall of expectations and enabled us to glimpse radical, collective, possibilities. For the most part, though, political crowds occur elsewhere—Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, even Canada. The 2 December, 2013 headlines for the news program, *Democracy Now!* expressed this status quo as it highlighted the thousands protesting in the occupied territories against potential Israeli expulsion of Bedouin Arabs, the thousands rallying in Honduras for an election recall, the tens of thousands protesting in Mexico against their president, the hundreds of thousands in Ukraine protesting the government's refusal to boost ties to the EU, and the “Republican Tweet Mocked for Racist Claim.” The Republican National Committee had tweeted a photo of Rosa Parks with the message: “Today we honor Rosa Park's bold stand and her role in ending racism” (“Headlines” 2013). Thousands retweeted it with the hashtag #RacismEndedWhen.

¹⁶ For the people out-of-doors, see Woods (1969).

In the *Democracy Now!* headlines, domestic social media snark, contained in and channeled through networked communications, appears at the same level as mass protests in other countries as if to stand in for the missing crowd, the many invoked in terms like *crowd-sourcing*. Yet again political energy is captured in communicative capitalism's circuits of drive. But this contained and limited media moment still indicates the necessity of the crowd for politics. The thousands of repetitions under a common name—marked by the hashtag—push back against the Republican Party's rebranding efforts, demonstrating its failure to comprehend ongoing racism in the United States. For a little while, the Twitter crowd turns lack into a common object. They disorder the Republican social media plan, their intrusion via a common name denegating the minimal difference of communicative capitalism's personalized media. Their force comes from their provisional being-many-as-one until it is swept back into the engulfing media flow. Even here, even in communicative capitalism's virtual crowds, we can glimpse an expression of crowd desire, a desire irreducible to either a specific object or specific individuals counted up as the force of their aggregation counts for nothing. Social media is thus also a site of permissible, laudable, increase; everyone wants more friends, forwards, and followers.

Not all crowds install a gap. State and capital try to keep crowds in check, to absorb them back into the state of the things, the constant circulation of spectacles we collectively produce for the private accumulation of the few. When the protests following the 2009 presidential election in Iran were described as the Twitter Revolution and the overthrow of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in 2011 was called the Facebook Revolution, the disruptive acts of a revolutionary people were inscribed into a US-centric technophilic imaginary. The revolutionary opening was subsumed into communicative capitalism, proffered as more evidence of the liberatory character of the networked media practices that support and extend economic inequality. At the same time, by pointing to these platforms, the terms *Twitter Revolution* and *Facebook Revolution* mark them as crowd fora. Twitter and Facebook are not just tools; they are manifestations of the affective intensities associated with crowds—cascade effects, enthusiasm, band-wagoning, contagion. What a revolution was for or against, what it established, what it meant, what in fact was going on is submerged under the wave of quantity that takes the place of significance. More materially, the platform revolutions suggest the possibility that the crowd may incite an anticapitalist, even communist, collective political subject, the revolt of the many against the few. A business writer setting out the ways companies can “leverage” the creative power of the crowd while drastically cutting costs warns that even if they aren't paid, “people will want a sense of ownership over their contributions” and “develop proprietary feelings over the company itself” (Howe 2008: 181). At a moment when twenty-first-century capitalists are lauding the wisdom of

crowds and celebrating crowdsourcing as the future of business, to say Twitter Revolution and Facebook Revolution is to broach the possibility that the posting and sharing many could seize the means of communications.

Capitalist enthusiasm for the wisdom of crowds as a way to offload work onto those willing to do it for free inverts the characterization of the crowd prominent in nineteenth-century crowd theory. Early crowd theorists described the crowd as primitive, violent, and suggestible. Later extensions of crowd theory link the crowd to the leader, rendering suggestibility as the fascination with the leader that incubates totalitarianism. Both the early and later versions associate crowds with deindividuation, irrationality, and affective intensity. In contrast, contemporary attempts to use combinations of networked technologies, competition, and prizes to expropriate the social substance render crowds as smart, knowing, and creative, as sources of value. On the one hand, the inversion is possible because of a shift of terrain from streets to networks. The crowd that contemporary companies attempt to exploit is the one that remains separated into individuated bodies as it produces itself in another space through networked personalized digital media devices. On the other hand, but correspondingly, the inversion is possible because of a shift in communication. It's not just a matter of where the crowd is; it's a matter of what the crowd is doing: the crowd is communicating, expressing opinions, sharing ideas, discussing, critiquing. In other words, the crowd is doing all the things previously associated with the public, but, as the aggregated, stored, quantifiable, and searchable activity of hundreds of millions, these same things lose any capacity they might have had to register a gap. The wisdom of the crowd isn't a matter of reason or argument; it's not a question of its content. It arises from its circulation, from repetition, accumulation, and correlation.

Communicative Capitalism and the Public Sphere

Communicative capitalism realizes the ideals of the public sphere: participation, inclusivity, equality, and reflexivity. People are encouraged to share their opinions, express themselves, and get involved. It doesn't matter what these opinions are as long as they are included (transparency is another version of the same norm). Networks are supposed to grow, to include more and more people and ideas, everyone, in fact; everyone and everything is supposed to be online, available, accessible. Everyone is supposed to be ready and able to contribute their point of view, their time and attention. Even theorists seemingly at a distance from the democratic advocates of publics and counterpublics enthusiastically repeat the injunction to include, enjoining us to broaden our vision of the public to include animals and objects. These theorists are doing the ideological

groundwork for naturalizing the tags and sensors that will continue communicative capitalism's processes of enclosure in the "Internet of things". In the networked interactions of communicative capitalism, moreover, utterances, and contributions are equivalent: posts, likes, comments, and tweets count as equal additions to the circulating flow. A truth is as good as a lie; agreement and disagreement both register as engagement. Word clouds illustrate this fundamental equivalence as they register quantity, the number of times a word is repeated regardless of context. The claims of the disingenuous are no different from the sincere: some people have raised questions about the science of climate change. And, because communicative capitalism realizes the public sphere ideal of reflexivity as well, all these points that I'm making, these critical reflections are themselves part of the mix; there is nothing surprising or disruptive about critical reflection. These days it can even precede that upon which it reflects; think, for example, about pundits who criticize a political speech before it has been made or activists who criticize a march before it occurs. And then there is a debate over the critique, reflection on the possible impact of the debate on the event before it occurs. Reflexivity, the very turn and gesture of the critical impulse, is caught in the environment it produces; each reflection participates in the public sphere as another addition, another contribution that is included and that is equal to any other—cat picture, beheading, lethal virus.

One of the first theorists to grasp the impact of networked media or, in the language of the time, cyberspace, was Slavoj Žižek: already in the nineties he pointed out that what was lost in the move to virtual reality was not reality but the virtual.¹⁷ What he meant was that computer-mediated interactions impact the dimension of meaning and signification associated with the symbolic order, the norms and understandings we take for granted as the background knowledge everybody knows. Žižek considers several ways computer-mediated interaction threatens virtuality. One is the loss of the binding power or performative efficacy of words. In online interactions, the binding power or performative efficacy of words declines; at any moment, the visitor to cyberspace can simply unhook himself (Žižek 1996: 196). Since exit is an option with nearly no costs, subjects lose incentives for their words to be their bonds. Consistency is the ultimate internet hobgoblin. A second, more fundamental threat involves the dissolution of the boundary between fantasy and reality, a dissolution affecting identity and desire. Insofar as digital environments enable the realization of fantasies on the textual screen, they close the gaps between the subject's symbolic identity and its phantasmic background (Žižek 1997: 163). Instant gratification fills in the lack constitutive of desire. Hypertextual play enables the unstated subtext of any text to be

¹⁷ I draw here from my longer discussion in Dean (2010b).

brought to the fore, thereby eliminating the textual effects of the unsaid. Differently put, fantasies that are completely realized cease to be fantasies. A repercussion of this filling-in is a third threat, a threat to meaning. The gap of signification, the minimal difference that makes some item or answer significant, that makes it feel right or the one dissipates. But instead of eliminating the space of doubt, the filling-in occasions the loss of the possibility of certainty. Žižek asks, “Is not one of the possible reactions to the excessive filling-in of the voids in cyberspace therefore informational anorexia, the desperate refusal to accept information, in so far as it occludes the presence of the Real?” (1997: 155). The feast of information results in a more fundamental starvation as one loses the sense of an underlying Real. All three threats—to performativity, desire, and meaning—indicate cyberspace’s foreclosure of the symbolic (the elimination of the space of the signifier as it slides into the Real that thereby itself loses the capacity to appear as Real).

The loss of the symbolic is the loss of a space of signification. Consider, for example, the difference between celebrity photographs on the wall of a restaurant and celebrity images on one’s Facebook wall.¹⁸ The wall of a restaurant has a degree of duration; the fixed space suggests a space of belonging. To be included is an accomplishment of sorts; to be excluded means that one does not belong. Visitors generally see the same photographs year after year; to the extent that the photographs remain the same, they mark the continuity of the restaurant over time, testimony to the longevity of its appeal. Like the walls, the relationship between proprietor and customer relies on a kind of fixity; those who eat do not cook; they do not clean; they are not liable for damages. The restaurant space is a private space to which they have access as paying customers. Facebook walls are different and not simply because they are screens. Rather, they are fluid, changing, and ubiquitous. Few friends faithfully inspect each other’s walls. Even as we may observe patterns in our friends’ postings, we recognize that these patterns are nonall, nontotalizable, shifting snapshots and moods. Given that any of us can be on Facebook, Facebook walls can’t mark inclusion and exclusion. They subvert distinctions between public and private. My friends are on my wall and I am on theirs. Our walls don’t feel like walls. At best they are momentary shifting depositories for billions of microacts of publicity. One can add pretty much whatever one likes, recognizing nonetheless that the fact of this adding registers very little. Not even all of one’s friends will see it; Facebook’s algorithms choose for us who sees what. It’s not personal; it’s business.

More information, more participation, more reflection, more inclusion: the realization of public sphere ideals in communicative capitalism

¹⁸ My discussion here is in dialogue with W. J. T. Mitchell’s reading of the public image with respect to the “Wall of Fame” in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (Mitchell 1994: 371–96).

produces their opposite. Instead of finding information, people are ever more doubtful and unsure; how do we know what to believe? There is always something that we have missed or left out, in fact more that we have missed than we can ever know. The intensification of the demand to include dissolves the space of inclusion so that people feel ever more excluded. There is no big Other whose recognition of our inclusion would count; more is happening somewhere else, and we are not included in it.

For theorists in the humanities, the concept of the public sphere held a particular attraction in the nineties. *Social Text* and *Critical Inquiry* published more articles with the term *public* in the title in 1990 than any year before or since; for *Public Culture* the boom years for *public* were 1993 and 1994. The appearance in 1989 of the English translation of Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989) no doubt factors in here as the book became the subject of conferences and exchanges. A broader explanation for the seeming obviousness of the importance of the complex of ideas of public, public sphere, counterpublics, and publicity to some in the nineties may be the rise of civil society, the end of the Cold War, and the acceleration and demassification of media with the prominence of personal computing, video recording, pagers, fax machines, cable, and the internet. More specifically, with the so-called end of ideology and ostensible defeat of communism, the great battle of the twentieth century seemed to have been won in favor of markets and parliamentary democracy. Politics would henceforth involve protecting the freedom of markets and vitality of democracy, being sure that they were as inclusive, transparent, and participatory as possible as well as trying to maintain some kind of separation and balance between them. Too much democracy would prevent the market from carrying out its productive and distributive functions just as too much market could lead to monopolies, bubbles, crashes, and recessions. Much of the Left agreed that there was no alternative to capitalism and folded itself into issue and identity politics. Oppression came to be seen not in terms of exploitation but in terms of exclusion, exclusion from equal participation in the public sphere or spheres of civil society. Keeping the basic political frame intact, the goals of politics were then the complex of norms and ideals around publicity: inclusion, visibility, voice, awareness, participation, being counted, being seen, being heard.

The reflexivity of these last three items—being counted, being seen, being heard—is worth noting as they mark a shift to the self (that is, the individual or group trying to register). What had been a focus on outcomes turns into a self-centered focus on one's own registration, which is difficult and fragile in communicative capitalism. Signs that we count are reassuring—so many retweets, so many likes. It doesn't matter whether they agree or disagree; the very indication that we've been seen or heard provides its own little charge. The fact of appearing delivers a little nugget of enjoyment (in the jargon of Jacques Lacan). The goal doesn't matter

insofar as a kind of political satisfaction accrues to the aim as the path or process becomes itself the vehicle for enjoyment. The dynamic here is thus that of drive rather than desire. Contemporary democracy, structured through the norms of the public sphere, runs a program of democratic drive, where participation, attention, and circulation provide the enjoyment attaching people to a system where the solution to the problems of democracy appears as more democracy rather than as changing the system.

Jacques Rancière's account of the staging of disagreement rather than figuring the political as such (the political confrontation between politics and the police) exemplifies this sublimation of politics in democratic drive. As drive, democracy organizes enjoyment via a multiplicity of stagings, of making oneself visible in one's lack. Contemporary protests in the United States, whether as marches, vigils, Facebook pages, or internet petitions, aim at visibility, awareness, being seen. They don't aim at taking power. Our politics is one of endless attempts to make ourselves seen. It's as if instead of looking at our opponents and working out ways to defeat them, we get off on imagining them looking at us.

Around the same time that some theorists are working with ideas of publicity and the public sphere, others are emphasizing depoliticization, dedemocratization, and postpolitics. Public sphere and postpolitics are two sides of the same coin, two approaches to the same field where subjectless circuits of communication have displaced a collective political subject. Chantal Mouffe makes a powerful version of this argument with her critique of Habermasian deliberative democracy. Habermas negates "the inherently conflictual natures of modern pluralism," she argues (Mouffe 2000: 105). Together with Rawlsian liberalism, deliberative democracy disavows the way that "bringing a deliberation to a close always results from a *decision* which excludes other possibilities" (Mouffe 2000: 105. See also Mouffe 2005). The norms and ideals constellated around publicity and the public sphere fail to grapple with the fact that politics is necessarily divisive. A decision for one course rather than another excludes some possibilities and positions. Part of the challenge of politics is the ability to take responsibility for that exclusion, avowing it as a condition of politics rather than a barrier to it. Once the Left became liberal, presenting itself in terms of appeals to democracy, a politics limited to civil society, and ideals of inclusion and civility in a public sphere, it could no longer name an enemy. Or, its enemy became the same as those of the liberal democratic state—terrorism, fundamentalism, and any advocacy of organized political power. On this score, rather than seeking to build apparatuses of power the ultimate Left liberal gesture was exposing power's operation in an embrace of a fantasy of relations totally devoid of power. The real effect of this fantasy was the empowerment of capital as a class.

Key to the strength of Mouffe's position is her careful use of Carl Schmitt's critique of liberal parliamentarianism. Schmitt argues that lib-

eralism seeks to evade the core political opposition between friend and enemy, replacing politics with ethics and economics. This replacing is a displacing of the intensity characteristic of the political to another realm. In Schmitt's words, "the political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only *the intensity of an association or dissociation* of human beings whose motives can be religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of another kind and can effect at different times different coalitions and separations" (Schmitt 1996: 38, own emphasis added). The political marks the intensity of a relation, an intensity that characterizes the antagonism constitutive of society (around which society forms).

Crowds, when they amass in sites unauthorized by capital and the state, transmit this intensity. They are vehicles of disruption that rupture the dominant liberal democracy imaginary that has been the form of postpolitics. Crowds insist on and express division (in this vein, Canetti emphasizes double crowds that thrive in their opposition). I have argued that the realization of democratic norms of publicity, inclusivity, reciprocity, and equality (equality in the form of the communicative equivalent of contributions) in communicative capitalism has resulted in the diminution of the efficacy of critique and the strengthening of capitalism. Communication becomes a number game: how many hits, shares, and retweets? How many followers? In a numbers game, capital has an advantage. One can pay for a better place in Google search results; one can pay to promote posts on Facebook. Money may not be able to buy me love, but it can buy me likes. These examples are trivial, though, when it comes to capital's real impact on communications: ownership of the platforms, of the companies that provide network access, of the data and metadata communication use generates, of the factories that make the multiple devices that have become dearer to us than appendages.

Conclusion

I have emphasized the political opening of the crowd event. The energy of the crowd opens to political subjectivity, but it is not the same as political subjectivity. The crowd is a libidinous, collective intensity: a provisional, heterogeneous being constituted out of the egalitarian discharge. Even as contemporary crowds express the momentary force of aggregated number generated in communicative capitalism, they push forward with the rupture of communicative capitalism's ideology of publicity. Crowds are not publics of opinion-exchanging individuals. They are the push of collectivity; we are many and strong. Crowds insist, not to be included but to break through, to disrupt. People act together in ways impossible for individuals, a phenomenon that preoccupied the early twen-

tieth-century crowd theorists. When it inscribes a gap within dominant arrangements, the crowd prefigures a collective, egalitarian possibility—but prefigures in a completely literal way: prior to figuration. The crowd by itself, unnamed, doesn't represent an alternative; it cuts out an opening by breaking through the limits bounding permitted experience. It misassembles what is present and threatens what is not yet there. People are there but, through the active desire of the crowd, differently from how they were before, combined into a state of such absolute equality that "differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant" (Canetti 1984: 29). Together, previously separate people impress the possibility of the people as the collective subject of a politics.

The crowd is necessary but insufficient, an incomplete part of a politics not yet the politics of a part, half a split subject. For the crowd to become the people, representation is necessary. Some on the Left—autonomists, lifestyle anarchists, and libertarian communists—so embrace the energy unleashed by the crowd that they mistake an opening, an opportunity, for an end. They imagine the goal of politics as the proliferation of multiplicities, potentialities, differences. The unleashing of the playful, carnivalesque, and spontaneous is taken to indicate political success, as if duration were but a multiplication of moments rather than itself a qualitative change. For the fantasists of politics as beautiful moment, any interpretation of a crowd event is to be contested because of its unavoidable incompleteness, its partiality. They forget, or disavow, the fact that the non-all character of the people is the irreducible condition of struggle. And so they treat organization, administration, and legislation as a failure of revolution, a return of impermissible domination and hierarchy rather than as effects and arrangements of power, rather than as attributes of the success of a political intervention.

The politics of the beautiful moment is no politics at all. Politics combines the opening with direction, with the insertion of the crowd disruption into a sequence or process that pushes one way rather than another. There is no politics until someone announces a meaning and the struggle over this meaning begins. Most of us have experiences in everyday life that confirm this point; we come across a bunch of people in an unexpected place and want to know what's going on. What are they doing, what is everybody looking at, why are police there? Have we come across a protest, a crime, an accident, a film set? Insistence on remaining within the infantile fantasy of the beautiful moment of indeterminacy attempts to forestall politics and its necessary division. Put it in terms of the crowd: a crowd can provide an opportunity for the emergence of a political subject, but it doesn't determine this emergence. The crowd doesn't explain its actions. It abjures telling some other what it means. The crowd refuses justification because its voice is multiple, babel; it is not a being that knows what it is saying. (But is there such a being?) The crowd's chaotic moment is indeterminate, to be configured with respect to power, truth,

justice, or the hegemonic array of forces. Disruption, alone, doesn't need or engender political subjectivity. The cacophony of impressions and transports of the unknown among the unknown releases a sense of the many channeled in the everyday along set paths, igniting possibilities that will appear in retrospect to have been there all along. The political challenge is maintaining fidelity to this sense of the many—the crowd discharge—without fetishizing the cacophonous rupture.

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