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## The phenomenon of the crowd in American psychology of the late XIX – early XX centuries

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### Abstract

The article describes the content of the concepts of the mob, developed by representatives of American psychological thought of the late XIX - early XX centuries. A criticism of C. Cooley of previous theories created on the other side of the Atlantic is presented. The dependence of the initial views of B. Sidis on the material of the theory of "heroes and crowds" N.K. Mikhailovsky. His original ideas are analyzed about the role of suggestion in public life, the splitting of consciousness as the physiological basis of suggestibility and the conditions for the general "I" of a crowd (mob) to dominate the personal "I" of its constituent individuals. Characterized by the concept of E.A. Ross "mob mind" as a mental state. His thoughts on social "insanities" and "quirks" (craze and fad) are given. The contribution of B. Sidis and E.A. Ross in the development of scientific ideas about collective behavior.

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### Keywords

American psychology, crowd, mob, concepts of the mob, suggestion, properties of the mob, mob mind, personality in the mob.

## Introduction

The processes of industrialization of the late XIX century gave rise to largely similar social problems in different countries. Urban population growth, impoverishment of the proletariat, intensification of the class struggle, destruction of the traditional social order in North America were compounded by mass migration and aggravation of racial and ethnic strife [Butsch, 2008; Frezza, 2007; Drury, Stott, 2011, etc.]. However, American social thought of that time rejected the anti-democratic interpretation of mass behavior characteristic of the first Western European theories of the crowd [Butsch, 2008; Leach, 1986; Staheli, 2013, etc.]. On that basis, largely original concepts were developed, which were later demanded by the Chicago School of Sociology and researchers of deindividuated behavior. Let us consider specifics of understanding of the crowd by the representatives of American science at the initial period of studying this phenomenon.

### Ch. Cooley`s critique of West European theories of the crowd

Among critiques of the theories of the crowd of French and Italian authors of the late XIX century [Sighele, 1892; Tarde, 1892; Le Bon, 1895, etc.] remarks of Charles Horton Cooley are stand out for their thoroughness. The well-known sociologist and social psychologist devoted a chapter to this question in his monograph [Cooley, 1909]. It, in particular, pointed to the incorrectness of the transfer of negative characteristics of the crowd to democracy in general, as well as the absence of a systemic threat to society from the "irrational and degenerate" crowds. In his opinion, a healthy democracy is primarily characterized by the immunity of citizens to the calls of demagogues and sensations of journalists. As an experienced firefighter is not inclined to panic at sounds of another siren, a sophisticated voter will retain self-control and sanity of judgment by force of a long-lasting habit in a situation where destructive passions would have raged in another society.

Ch. Cooley saw the origins of ideas about the dangers of "the era of crowds" in a frightening impression of the revolutionary events in France. However, it did not seem obvious to him that the nascent French democracy had demonstrated a failure to develop. It was necessary to take into account the objective difficulties that it could not overcome: the long-standing class conflicts, the inevitable militarism, the lack of experience of self-government of people due to the suppression of political initiative by the monarchy. Thus, private characteristics were taken as general ones. He postulated that under normal circumstances nothing could be further from democracy than the power of irresponsible crowd.

Ch. Cooley noted that personality changes in the crowd, fairly exaggerated by researchers, are not fundamentally different from those that are characteristic of the state of excitement in a variety of life situations. In the same way, he did not recognize as unique the terrifying effect of spontaneous group, which is quite consistent with a sense of timidity when approaching an extraordinary person and equally transient. Reasonable objections were raised by the thesis about the intellectual inferiority of the crowd, formed in its opposition to "rationally thinking" individual. Ch. Cooley believed that this point of view is typical for a society where reading took the place of meeting as an incentive to thinking. However, it was not always like that. For a long time, religious or secular celebrations, accompanied by music, dance, performance of artists or speech-making, contributed more to personal fulfillment than the habit of solitude. In addition, there is no reason to suspect that outside the crowd, the individual, intent in his everyday tasks, will certainly be at the top of mental existence.

According to the scientist, the essence of the crowd lies elsewhere – in the ability to extend and strengthen any feeling in the absence of social organization. This is greatly facilitated by the strangeness

of the situation for the individual, who "in a throng being like one fallen overboard in that he is removed from his ordinary surroundings and plunged into a strange and alarming element. At once excited and intimidated, he readily takes on a suggested emotion – as of panic, anger or self-devotion – and proceeds to reckless action" [Cooley, 1909, 150-151]. The behavior of such crowd is impulsive. It can express both the lowest desires and deep moral inspirations. To insist a priori on the first, denying the second, means to ignore a possibility that "it may be one of those voices of the people in which posterity will discover the voice of God" [Cooley, 1909, 154].

### **The concept of the mob developed by B. Sidis**

The first consideration of the phenomenon of the crowd by emigrant from Russia and future famous scientist can hardly be called successful. The main points of his article [Sidis, 1895] was based on the retelling of the theory of "heroes and crowd", which was unknown to a foreign reader [Mihajlovskij, 1882]. The model of hypnotic communication in the crowd, the features of behavior of her situational leader, the insignificance of motivation and personal properties of such "hero", the leveling of individual differences of wingmen, the monotony of living conditions as a prerequisite for social hypnotization – all this, as well as a number of historical and ethnographic examples, was borrowed from the works of N.K. Mikhailovsky without mentioning the original author.

The theoretical differences of the publications are that, firstly, Boris Sidis refrained from using of the concept of imitation in relation to the crowd, which was essentially significant to his predecessor, secondly, he extend to the crowd an important for later researchers idea of William James about the weakening of individuality as a result of forced restriction of freedom of movement, thirdly, he contrasted (which was irrelevant to N.K. Mihajlovskij due to the focus on the phenomenon of street crowd) situational leader with true "hero" who can leave a mark in history. If the first holds the attention of others only for the time of his extreme behavior, the second, a great warrior, politician, religious figure, amazes others with the scale of the individual, characterized by a unique set of properties. The acute observations of B. Sidis concerning the role of leaders, the structure of the crowd and the force of her influence on the personality, made during the anti-Jewish pogroms in the South-West of Russia in the 80s of the XIX century, deserve attention.

More original views on the phenomenon of the crowd were presented in the monograph "The Psychology of Suggestion" [Sidis, 1898]. The author abandoned the idea of opposition of the destructiveness of the crowd to the creativity of society typical for researchers of collective behavior of that time [Staheli, 2013]. In each and every aspects of social life he identified a common feature: "...the spirit of suggestibility lies hidden even in the best of men; like the evil jinn of the Arabian tales is corked up in the innocent-looking bottle. Deep down in the nature of man we find hidden the spirit of suggestibility. ...Not sociality, not rationality, but suggestibility is what characterizes the average specimen of humanity, for man is a suggestible animal" [Sidis, 1898, 17]. And whatever forms suggestibility takes – normal, as in everyday life, or pathological, as in the mob, it is accompanied by physiological changes different in strength, but the same in nature. According to B. Sidis, their essence lies in disaggregation of consciousness, "splitting of the spirit" when awake, controlling and reasoning personal "Self" loses its strength, and an ancient reflex, subwaking consciousness, impersonal "Self" is revealed on the surface of mental life.

According to B. Sidis, the possibility of splitting of consciousness has provided humanity with unique advantages during evolution. On the one hand, the activity of personal "Self" became the basis for the progress of civilization with her science, culture, art, social organization. On the other hand,

suggestibility, activated by subwaking consciousness, created the conditions for instant communication, successful orientation towards others, and a high degree of community management. The problem is that increasing social pressure, as more economic, political, religious and cultural prescriptions accumulate, turns the modern man into a puppet, a simple automaton. Increasingly, his personal "Self" able to think and to live freely is oppressed, a field of consciousness is narrowed, and the dominance of the impersonal "Self" leads to the fact that "Men think in crowds, and go mad in herds" [Sidis, 1898, 343].

According to his remark, not every crowd becomes a mob. In one case, suggestion remains indirect, and the disaggregation of consciousness – fleeting and unstable, and in the other case direct and intense mutual suggestion leads to the defeat of consciousness as a result of its stable disaggregation. It occurs under several conditions, namely:

- forced restriction of freedom of movement due to crowding;
- narrowing of the field of consciousness with the appearance of the object of general attention;
- formation of "the matrix of the mob", combination of external monotony and internal inhibition;
- atmosphere of general excitation due to increased intensity of mutual suggestions.

As a result, the crowd quickly assimilates new members, reduces criticality to any suggestion, and gives impulsiveness to people's behavior. "Like a cannibal it feeds on human beings" [Sidis, 1898, 304].

### **The concept of the mob developed by E.A. Ross**

One of the founders of social psychology Edward Alsworth Ross also distinguished two types of spontaneous groups – crowd and mob, but did it differently. From his point of view, the crowd excited or seeking for violent has not yet entered the mental state of mob (from "mobile"), if each of her members does not obey the general impulse, but only shows the initial tendency to specific behavior, protected by the awareness of anonymity against the background of the large number of people gathered together. The main feature of mob is the atmosphere of unanimity due to intensive processes of mental infection through mutual suggestion. The state of Mob Mind is changeable, when one suggestion is replaced by another; it is irrational, since intelligence and experience are replaced by impressions of the current moment; momentary due to the fact that the orgy of excitement leads to the depletion of reactions to external stimuli; cowardly, because suggestion clamps quickly dissipate. Other possible characteristics of the mob, such as ferocity, shamelessness, crime, courage, intolerance, etc., are caused to a large extent not by the nature of suggestions, but the law of large numbers [Ross, 1897].

As the suggestion of the leader, seized upon by the active core, spreads through the ranks, it becomes more and more powerful. What began as a fascination in the center of the mob becomes true mental intimidation on the periphery, to which the unprepared personality cannot resist. Emotions take precedence over reason, extremists influence the previously moderate or indifferent people, and law-abiding citizens are capable of crime. In this process, E. Ross highlights three aspects: extension, emotional and mental contagion of the participants from each other; intensification, an increase in overall activity against the background of spiritual unity; predisposition, the emergence of feelings of sympathy as a result of formed unison, able to pave the way to mental unity of mob [Ross, 1909].

If in the description of the role of suggestion in public life in general and within the mob E. Ross followed the path defined by B. Sidis, then in the analysis of the impact of urbanization on the activity of mob, as well as fundamental differences between public and crowd, he developed the provisions put forward by G. Tarde [Tarde, 1892; 1898]. In particular, E. Ross argued that the public scattered in space

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of the set of people who receive information from the same sources and therefore have similar tastes and beliefs can go into the state of mob mind. The symptoms of this are "craze" and "fad", including an irrational unity of interests, feelings, opinions or actions of interacting individuals as a result of suggestion and imitation. The results of such contagion of minds sometimes reach a degree of social history, despite the fact that its original cause is usually insignificant. Herewith, "craze" meant the mimetic unanimity, accompanied by a mass excitement (these are financial panic, the cult of the new Messiah, rumors of war, a coup, fears of a cholera, a mysterious murders, the appearance of the comet, and so on), and "fad" meant a sudden focus of public attention and interest on the prestigious novelty (vegetarianism, spiritism, water treatment, short women's hairstyles, domestic lizards, philosophical pessimism, poetry of decadents, etc.).

Most of "fads" are relatively harmless, while "crazes" represent a double danger: each of them not only breaks a current of public life, but also has a cumulative effect, expressed in the strengthening of repeated influences, even when their content is fundamentally different. E. Ross described the seven laws of social crazes in non-operational and uncountable form. In particular, he pointed out that each of them requires time to its climax; at the stage of rapid spreading they are able to affect the most sober minds; at the "peak" of their development mass readiness to believe in the most absurd suggestions is shown; the higher the level of social tension, the more pronounced the negativity of the consequences; the wave of some extreme emotions is quite often followed by others; changing society more prone to madness than traditional; ethnic or mental homogeneity contributes to the development of crazy [Ross, 1909].

If in everyday life many suggestions from the general flow block each other, then in the state of mob mind they are able to break the strongest will as repeated hammer blows destroy the boulder. It is no accident that E. Ross attached special importance to the identification of factors that prevent the emergence of mob mind. So, when discussing of problems in contact groups he considered it expedient to follow the rules of the British parliamentarism (the chairman does not participate in a debate, speakers address the chairman, listeners do not interrupt speakers, and navigation, getting personal are considered as inadmissible, and so on). As for the opposition to suggestion in distant groups, he recommended a set of measures, including higher education, familiarity with classical literature, avoidance of sensational press, country life, sports, care of family and property, participation in voluntary associations, the desire for intellectual self-control, etc. All this looks quite trivial, but more concrete in comparison with usual for those times maxims saying that only a morally mature person is able to resist the crowd [Mihajlovskij, 1882].

## Conclusion

At the end of the 20-ies of the last century, the phenomenon of the crowd almost completely disappeared from the pages of professional journals [Reicher, Potter, 1985]. This was probably due to the development of an experimental method in the social sciences, for which the crowd was not the most appropriate object. However, already in the 40-ies the representatives of the Chicago School of Sociology and since the early 60-ies experts in the field of deindividuation of behavior again turned to the legacy of the first researchers of the spontaneous groups. The ideas of B. Sidis and E. Ross had indirect influence on scientists who consider collective behavior in the paradigm of social identity. The bases for this assumption are the modern editions [Reicher, Potter, 1985; Reicher, 2001; Drury, Stott, 2011; Spears, Postmes, 2015; etc.] of theses of the late XIX century on the formation of a common "Self" of the crowd in the process of suppression of personal "Self" of individuals, and also about emergence of special mental state as a result of such changes, which was once called "mob mind".

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## Феномен толпы в американской психологии конца XIX – начала XX вв.

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## Аннотация

В статье описывается содержание концепций толпы (mob), разработанных представителями американской психологической мысли конца XIX – начала XX веков. Излагается критика Ч. Кули предшествовавших теорий, созданных по другую сторону

Атлантики. Отмечается зависимость первоначальных воззрений Б. Сидиса от материала теории «героев и толпы» (crowd) Н.К. Михайловского. Анализируются его оригинальные идеи о роли внушения в общественной жизни, расщеплении сознания как физиологической основе внушаемости и условиях доминирования общего «Я» толпы (mob) над личными «Я» составляющих ее индивидов. Характеризуется концепция Э.А. Росса «разума толпы» (mob mind) как психического состояния. Приводятся его мысли относительно социальных «помешательств» и «причуд» (craze and fad). Оценивается вклад Б. Сидиса и Э.А. Росса в развитие научных представлений о коллективном поведении.

#### Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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#### Ключевые слова

Американская психология, толпа, концепции толпы, внушение, свойства толпы, разум толпы, личность в толпе.

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