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CROWDING THE ELEMENTS

Cori Hayden

People in high density crowds appear to move with the flow of the crowd, like particles in a liquid.

—Brian E. Moore, Saad Ali, Ramin Mehran, and Mubarak Shah, “Visual Crowd Surveillance through a Hydrodynamics Lens”

In the aggregate which constitutes a crowd there is in no sort a summing up or an average struck between its elements. What really takes place is a combination followed by the creation of new characteristics, just as in chemistry, certain elements, when brought into contact—bases and acids, for example—combine to form a new body possessing properties quite different from those of the bodies that have served to form it,

—Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*

What are crowds made of? From nineteenth-century French crowd theory to twenty-first-century hydrodynamic simulations of high-density crowd flows funded by the US Department of Defense, it seems that crowds have persisted in their power to dissolve and recombine the fundamental elements of liberal social theory and notions of democratic

publics. Neither “the individual” nor “society” has been a particularly useful or durable unit of analysis in crowd theory. People in crowds behave as if “particles” in a “thinking liquid” (Moore et al. 2011); crowds are associations of “heterogenous elements” which, “like bases and acids” in a chemical reaction, combine to form something entirely new (Le Bon [1895] 2009, 16). Crowds, as with *sociality* more broadly, are composed of ideas and gestures that are “magnetized” to each other by “imitation rays” (Tarde 1903, 69–70). Crowds can be precipitated from crowd “crystals,” and sometimes they are even rivers, or waves, or fire (Canetti 1962, 73–85). Crowd theories have long been extraelemental, in the pointed sense that they vividly recompose social theory’s vocabularies for parts, wholes, and the ties that bind.

This all sounds dreamy from the queerly elemental, science studies-ish standpoint of this volume and the work that animates it. Conditions were not always ripe for such an embrace of crowd theory. Tainted by the overt racism and elitism of some of its early practitioners, its vexing “antiliberal” commitment to theories of suggestion and imitation (Borch 2012), and its explicit mobilization by early and mid-twentieth-century fascist and authoritarian leaders (Mussolini among them), crowd theory was held at arm’s length in much of mid- to late twentieth-century social theory, as if contaminated with the very forces it sought to describe.¹

But crowd theory has been reactivated as a heterodox archive for theory and method with what feels like increasing urgency (see, for example, Borch 2012; Brighenti 2014; Chowdhury 2019; Cody 2015; Dean 2016; Kelty 2012; Laclau 2005; Mazzarella 2010; Schnapp and Tiews 2006). Strong empirical, analytic, and political demands animate this reactivation. From the tidbits sprinkled above, you can imagine how crowd theory’s idioms might seem particularly well suited to feminist and science studies–inflected arguments that sociality is constitutively *more than* social (see, among many, Murphy 2017; Papadopoulos 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). In nearby neighborhoods of science studies, the late nineteenth-century work of Gabriel Tarde has been particularly generative in efforts to rethink the social as immanent and constituted by heterogeneous ingredients, rather than as a superorganismic thing (Barry and Thrift 2007; Candeia 2010; Latour 2005). And not least, social media, big data, and internet platforms are generating crowds—of people-data, of algorithmic aggregations, of disorganized labor—in ways that seem both familiar and new (Irani, Kelty, and Seaver 2012).

In much of this literature, the return to crowds was at first celebratory,

infused with a sense of possibility from the standpoint of left, small *d* democratic, and antiracist politics, as in the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements, the ascent of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, and the power of the Black Lives Matter movement. These formations energized many with the promise of crowd potency (boosted, in turn, in and through social media) for revolutionary emergence (see Dean 2016, among others). But the authoritarian turn in Egypt after the much-celebrated events in Tahrir Square, the political events in the North Atlantic in 2016 and 2017 (including Brexit and Trump), and the continuing rise of the Far Right across Europe, South Asia, and South America have brought the illiberalism of crowd potency immediately “back” to the forefront, in both an epistemological and a political sense: epistemological, insofar as crowd theory has long suggested that the tenets of “liberal” social and political theory (including the sovereign individual and rational publics) have perhaps never quite held, “descriptively” speaking; and political, because, in their association with fascism and authoritarianism, crowds have long been associated with many of the things that twentieth-century political liberalism was supposed to have militated against and vanquished—unbridled racism and antidemocratic political formations, among them.²

Crowd theory matters today in part because it reminds “us” of something that should, in fact, require no reminder, given the constitutive place of racism and settler colonialism at the heart of some prominent bastions of “liberal democracy”: perhaps illiberalism has lived at the heart of liberalism all along. The “return” of the crowd *as a matter of concern*, and the “surging energies, light and dark” (Mazzarella 2017, 2) with which it has been associated, are prompting a lot of reflection these days not just about crowds as sociological entities with particular characteristics but, more interestingly, about the vital and destructive energetics with which we associate them and about many of the deeper and ambivalent questions that crowd theory has long raised. What are the materials, substrates, media, and dynamics that bind us to each other, durably, or in punctuated moments of collective effervescence? What and who constitute us, singly and multiply? Who and what are poised to exert force in this world? What makes us vulnerable to and with each other? Do we even have the tools to apprehend such things today?

These are, of course, political questions, and I have a sense that they might flow downstream (that is, somewhat effortlessly) with a trenchant set of critiques of neoliberalism(s). The “return” of the crowd (not as a

thing that ever went away, because it did not, but as a matter of concern and as a locus of theorization) is unfurling in part in the wake and in the midst of globalized neoliberal projects which have explicitly waged wars, in multiple forms, on collectiveness—including on the social itself, on labor, on communities and peoples who were already marginalized and are now under intensified threat. In the United States, these projects have taken form in part as a decades-long conservative, right-wing, and overtly racialized (racist) war on public spending and taxation (especially of the wealthy) as loci for collective solidarity and a minimal, but nonetheless essential, social safety net (see Cooper 2017; Hohle 2012; Thomas 2017). The exaltation of individual, market “freedoms” over any notion of freedom tethered to equality and justice, as Wendy Brown (2018, 2019) has characterized US-based neoliberal projects, or, as Margaret Thatcher framed it in the UK, the exaltation of market freedoms over society itself, is meant to leave us alone—not “overburdened” by the social or the state, and instead left to pursue our lives as individuals and families, in Thatcher’s infamous Hayekian formulation (see Brown 2019; Cooper 2017).

Breakdown, atomization, dissolution: neoliberal politics in their many forms are elemental, in a deconstitutive and reconstitutive way. And their effects might reasonably lead us to wonder: Is attention to the crowd “back” as an antidote or response to neoliberalism’s atomizations, reductions, and isolations? A swing of the pendulum? Perhaps. But here is a slightly different question: What if this thing called neoliberalism (and it is many things) and these wars on “society” (which are many things) do not just atomize us? What if they have crowded us, too?

In order to think with that provocation, we need to address a prior question: What *does* it mean to think with crowds? There is something molecular about them, it seems, something not entirely more than human; when crowds come together, the viscosity is high (Saldana 2007). Crowd theory has, for this reason, long been anxious theory. It has a mood, and a universe furnished oddly, and an underdetermined politics. It is certainly not one thing. But two preoccupations animating much of this work seem important to its current salience. The first is the way that it puts the figure of the atomized individual “under strain,” in Andrea Brighenti’s (2014) apt formulation. From the late nineteenth century forward, many crowd theorists started from the proposition that when we find ourselves in crowds, however they are constituted (as physical masses, as a national crowd at a distance, as virtual swarms,

and now through and magnetized by social media), we lose ourselves—more specifically, our rationality, our individuality, our capacity for discernment, our boundaries. We are, crowd theory tells us, vulnerable to others: to suggestion, to the sway of magnetism, and to emotional contagion (see Orr 2006). The effects may be compelling and terrifying at once (Canetti 1962); they might form the very basis of sociality itself (Tarde 1903); or, conversely, they may threaten to dissolve or destroy society as “we” know it (Le Bon [1895] 2009). But in any case, the power of this vulnerability seems to lie, for many crowd theorists, in a kind of mysterious ineffability—crowds are another order of thing, an unfamiliar and hard-to-understand phenomenon or site of transformation. This point seeps into the second preoccupation that calls my attention right now. What some crowd theory voices, sometimes despite itself, is a powerful unknowability: a recognition, perhaps with humility, that there are things we may not know how to know.

An anxious, unknowable potency, the dissolution of the social, the rise of aggregations that seem not just human: is it any wonder that crowd theory has recently come calling?

BEFORE THEY RECOMPOSE, THEY MUST DISSOLVE

Twenty-first-century “elements thinking,” as Stefan Helmreich usefully glosses it in his contribution to this volume, is a way to call forth and think with entanglements or with “molecular-molar meshwork” (Helmreich, this volume; see also Puig de la Bellacasa, this volume). It is a refusal of divisions between science and the social. It signals an openness to the chemopolitical (see Murphy, this volume). This orientation, Helmreich observes, stands in marked contrast to the kind of elements thinking that spiked in the late nineteenth-century natural and social sciences (e.g., Durkheim’s sociology, or hydrodynamics), which sought to identify the basic, irreducible building blocks at the root of more complex entities. In other words, much work in the late nineteenth-century social and natural sciences aspired “to scale up—one might say, to *compound up*—from elementary to more complex processes and forms” (Helmreich, this volume). *That* elements thinking theorized a starting point in the smallest, irreducible unit—an elementary social form, an individual, a water molecule—which does not change as it is scaled up or multiplied to compose larger entities (a body of water, or a society) (Helmreich, this volume).

The weird wonderfulness of such late nineteenth-century crowd theorists as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde is that more and less directly, they stood in opposition to this way of thinking about composite wholes and the elements that make them up. For all of the differences between Le Bon and Tarde in orientation and sophistication, they both offered a theory of crowds that often stood markedly in opposition to a liberal (in the epistemological sense) sociological vocabulary of what, who, and *how* we are, on our own and in relation to others. At the heart of crowd theories' refusals of late nineteenth-century elements thinking was the dissolution of the individual itself. Crowd theory *is* a theory of deindividuation (Borch and Knudsen 2013; Dean 2016).

Organized around and heavily influenced by a burgeoning body of work in psychology and medicine on hypnotism, late nineteenth-century French crowd theorists took seriously (and some were slightly terrified by) the notion that perhaps everyone—not just “hysterics” and the otherwise pathologized—could be susceptible or vulnerable to suggestion, emotional contagion, and the sway of imitation. With the elaboration of an experimentally observable understanding of the vulnerability of the individual as a sovereign site of rationality, will, and autonomy, the idioms of sleepwalking, contagion, and suggestion began to enliven theories of how all manner of things worked and worked *on us*—from market speculation (where a theory of crowds had in fact been articulated as early as the 1840s), to the experience of urban density, to the mesmerizing and zombifying effects of mass consumption, to political revolution and the rise of workers' demands (see Schnapp and Tiewes 2006).

For Le Bon, nothing other than the sciences of hypnotism could explain how reasonable people, when brought together in certain conditions, might do and be (terrible) things they would never do or be on their own. His wildly popular, polemic, slightly hysterical work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* ([1895] 2009) is an easy target in any attempt to understand crowd theory's “miserable” fate in the halls of twentieth-century academia, as Christian Borch (2012) so memorably puts it. Like the multitude of writers and scientists whose work he set out to synthesize (plagiarize?) and popularize (vulgarize?), Le Bon was preoccupied by the turmoil that had followed the French Revolution, by the short-lived socialist uprising of the 1871 Paris Commune, and by the ascent of the popular classes as a new kind of mass and force. With their demands for equality and for workers' rights, their ascent into governance, and their

capacity to take the streets, crowds and their power seemed very hard to put back in the bottle (“There is no power, Divine or human, that can oblige a stream to flow back to its source” (Le Bon [1895] 2009, [7])). The new “ERA OF CROWDS,” Le Bon practically shouted, amounted “to nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists” (6–7). His analytic efforts seemed guided by anxious resignation: better to understand them, so as “not to be too much governed by them” (9).

Key to understanding them was understanding how crowds cause individuals to lose their faculties of reasoning and self-control, precisely as “in the case of the hypnotised subject, for whom the conscious personality has entirely vanished; will and discernment are lost” (Le Bon [1895] 2009, 18).³ A pungent late nineteenth-century evolutionary racism permeated it all: “by the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct” (19).

The insults piled on. Crowds are feminized; “Latins” are the most feminized of all; workers making unreasonable demands are no different than the “Esquimaux incapable of reasoning” (Le Bon [1895] 2009, 24, 42). It is compulsive and compulsory for any of us writing about Le Bon and crowd theory now to speak the insults aloud, so as to distance ourselves very much from them (see Borch 2012; Dean 2016; Mazzarella 2010).

And yet, for all of that awfulness, Le Bon continues to compel, as part of a recent return to the broader field of crowd theory of which he is a part—Tarde, Durkheim, Freud, Canetti, and many others—and the very strong sense that there might be something there for us now, for good or for ill. Before news outlets started overlaying Donald Trump’s shouty profile with Le Bon quotations (see Ryan 2016), “the Frenchman” had already made a perhaps more unexpected return. The political theorist Jodi Dean, fueled by the energies animating the Occupy movement in New York’s Zucotti Park in 2011, found something “ingenious” in Le Bon’s work, despite the fact that he was an unapologetic “racist” and a “plagiarist”—namely, his rendering of the crowd as a “provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements” (Dean 2016, 9). That heterogeneity, and the provisional being that it constitutes, are what she wants to understand, and harness, and direct into sustained revolutionary energy. This political energy is not and will not be made of individuals. She writes, “Against the presumption that the individual is the funda-

mental unit of politics, I focus on the crowd” (4). To that end, she shows us what Le Bon’s theory of crowd transformation can sound like when recuperated and rewired from within, as a story *for* radical democratic mobilization against the elite: “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” (9).

Exactly. With a difference. If Le Bon painted a picture of people in crowds as less than, or reduced—not to something elemental or irreducible, but rather infantilized and “suggestionized”—he also argued that this very process made crowds into something *more than*, and radically different from, the sum of their parts. Hence the analogy to chemical reactions with which I opened this chapter: “In the aggregate which constitutes a crowd there is in no sort a summing up or an average struck between its elements. What really takes place is a combination followed by the creation of new characteristics, just as in chemistry, certain elements, when brought into contact—bases and acids, for example—combine to form a new body possessing properties quite different from those of the bodies that have served to form it” (Le Bon [1895] 2009,16). The antireductionism and deindividualizing effects of this move are crucial. Le Bon, oddly seeming to anticipate Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, says, “The individual in a crowd differs essentially from himself” (19).⁴

Indeed, the notions of imitation and suggestion fueling Le Bon’s observation ran right through the work of most of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French crowd theorists (for a careful and thorough history of this literature, see Borch 2012). Not all of this work pathologized the processes of deindividuation that came to live at the heart of crowd emergence. Gabriel Tarde, whose many strands of thinking have lately been the subject of a vigorous, multipronged resurrection, essentially called forth an alternate universe organized around the composite principle of imitation-suggestion (Barry and Thrift 2007; Candea 2010). He too insisted on dissolving the individual as the irreducible starting point for understanding social life. Ruth Leys (1993, 281) says of Tarde’s deployment of imitation and suggestion, “By dissolving the boundaries between self and other, the theory of imitation-suggestion embodied a highly plastic notion of the human subject that radically called into question the unity and identity of the self. Put another way, it made the notion of individuality itself problematic.” This analytic

commitment did not confine itself to the realm of the human. Extending Spinoza's idea of the monad in his own *Monadologie*, Tarde made clear that while the emergent disciplinary sciences were becoming attached to their own "final elements," each of those reductions, or foundations, was in fact a fiction: "those final elements at which all sciences arrive, the social individual, the living cell, the chemical atom, were final only to the eyes of their particular science; even themselves are composites" (Vargas 2010, 208). Society as aggregate (a thing that is the sum of its individual parts) was one of the targets of Tarde's insistence on the nonreductive nature of all entities. Tarde explicitly took issue with Durkheim's notion of society as superorganism, as if it were an overarching, prior, objectified "container" composed of individual elements (Candea 2010).⁵ Instead, he argued that the social is immanent—bottom-up, but without a solid bottom—emerging in minute, infinitesimal relations of association (see Vargas 2010, 208). Thus, the dynamics of suggestion-imitation and contagion were not the pathological attributes of a debased crowd; rather, these processes lay at the heart of sociality *itself* (see also Laclau 2005)—hence Tarde's famous and ever-intriguing declaration that "society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism" in *Laws of Imitation* (1903, 87). In Tarde's world, we start and end in relations of imitation, association, and ever-multiplying "difference" that just "keeps differencing" (Vargas 2010, 209). Thus, "a society is always in different degrees an association, and association is to sociality, to *imitativeness* so to speak, what organization is to vitality, or what molecular structure is to the elasticity of the ether" (Tarde 1903, 69–70). One might imagine that this domain-meshing idiom—combined with his not very liberal displacement of the individual as the locus of agency and sociality—could help explain why Tarde "lost" the battle royal with Durkheim over who would get to define a twentieth-century science of the social.

Of course, Tarde's complex and heterodox conceptual universe is precisely why he has been reclaimed in so many arenas of late; for example, Bruno Latour (2005) has declared him the true paterfamilias of science studies as actor-network theory.⁶ But beyond Tarde and science studies, crowd theory seems powerful and necessary now in no small measure because of its interlinked commitments to antireductionism and to the dynamics of imitation, suggestion, and contagion, unmoored (sometimes) from their association with pathology. The decentering of the individual and the potency of imitation-suggestion recur in calls to dust off crowd theory—to reactivate it, and with it, perhaps, our own crowd energies as

well. Jodi Dean substitutes the crowd for the individual as her starting place for political mobilizing and analysis. Andrea Brighenti (2014, 68) argues that “the reassuring image of the individual as a ‘building block’ entering various social compositions does not hold. Crowd states make individuals *invisible*.” Christian Borch (2012), for his part, suspects that imitation and suggestion are actually central concerns to which sociologists should now be attending.

Crowd theory is an archive of conceptual work that does not hold the individual steady, isolated, and sovereign. Its epistemological anti-liberalism or illiberalism was “the problem.” Its illiberalism beckons.

THAT WHICH EXPRESSES BUT DOES NOT EXPLAIN

If crowd theories have been theories of deindividuation, they have also been theories of nonexplanation, or of a certain indeterminate unknowability. There is something ineffable, diffuse, and resistant to reduction about the crowds of crowd theory. In this ineffability, we might identify a reactivation of a different kind of “elements thinking.”

Le Bon, for a start, was slightly flummoxed at the impasse in understanding that crowds presented (to paraphrase: it is relatively easy to know that crowds work in this or that way, but it is so much harder to know why!). But Elias Canetti’s *Crowds and Power* (1962) shows us how to dwell in this impasse. Passionately interested in the phenomenology of being within crowds, Canetti’s work too runs roughshod over the fundamental elements of liberal social analysis, not least by attending to how crowds make vulnerable the presumed boundaries between individuals. But this book is very different from—and resolutely indifferent to—the work of earlier crowd theorists cleaving to imitation-suggestion. Canetti’s idiom is all his own. *Crowds and Power* is populated by crowds that want nothing more than to expand, as if they are something alien and hungry—they want to “feed on anything shaped like a human being” (16). Indeed, crowds do and do not consist of men as humans. Inflation is a crowd phenomenon, made of money and people simultaneously—both exalted and depreciated in the idiom of “the million.” “In an inflation, the unit of money suddenly loses its identity. The crowd it is part of starts growing, and, the larger it becomes, the smaller becomes the worth of each unit” (186). The results can be terrifying. “In its treatment of the Jews National Socialism repeated the process of inflation with great precision” (188).

Canetti's (1962, 75) mythopoetic catalog of crowd formations across millennia weaves through other "collective units which do not consist of men, but which are still felt to be crowds." In fact, he provides us here with an elemental crowd theory, in the earth, fire, water, and air sense. Perhaps it is now a crowd theory for environmental-political catastrophe. Canetti writes of fire as a crowd, absorbing, growing, encompassing all in its path; he writes of crowds standing tall and still, uniform, menacing and menaced, in ways that are alternately beautiful and threatening. Corn (not your usual Galenic or witchy element) planted in rows is a crowd, marked by sameness and uniformity and often met with death, mown down by blade. Forests are crowds, dense, tall, and unmovable, like an army. And though he calls these things (corn, forests, fire) crowd symbols, their crowdedness is not metaphorical. Fire's attributes are not *like* the crowd's attributes; they *are* the crowd's attributes. "Fire is the same wherever it breaks out: it spreads rapidly; it is contagious and insatiable; it can break out anywhere and with great suddenness; it is multiple; it is destructive; it has an enemy; it dies; it acts as though it were alive, and is so treated" (77).

Water, in the form of the sea, rivers, and waves, is a crowd too: "The sea is multiple, it moves, and it is dense and cohesive. Its multiplicity lies in its waves; they constitute it. They are innumerable; the sameness of their movement does not preclude difference of size. The dense coherence of waves is something which men in a crowd know well. It entails a yielding to others as though they were oneself, as though there were no strict division between oneself and them. . . . The specific nature of this coherence among men is unknown. The sea, while not explaining, expresses it" (Canetti 1962, 80; emphasis added). Canetti's poetics (for I do not know what else to call them) are remarkable. Apparently underwhelmed by the decades of prior work attempting to explain "the specific nature of this coherence among men," Canetti, with the sea, evokes it instead.

Crowds, with waves and as waves, in this way seem adjacent to explanation. Stefan Helmreich, again my fellow traveler here, suggested as much in the wake of the election of Donald Trump (Helmreich 2020; García Molina and Cossette 2016). In a 2016 interview in *Cultural Anthropology Fieldsights*, and subsequently in the essay, *Wave Theory~Social Theory* (2020) he reflected on the reverberations between his own work on hydrodynamics and the recurring, insistent invocation of "waves" to

speak to the political moment (“‘populist waves,’ ‘waves of nationalist sentiment,’ ‘a wave of economic angst,’ ‘a Catholic wave to White House win,’ ‘a wave of angry white voters,’ ‘waves of protest,’ ‘a wave of hate crimes’”) (García Molina and Cossette 2016).

Helmreich offers an acute reading of what this recurring invocation of waves does: it expresses, rather than explains. The figure of the wave wells up “when structural, analytic, or causal accounts are . . . difficult to settle upon” (2020, 318). If their invocation could prompt us to ask questions about causality, Helmreich wonders whether we even have the tools with which to answer. “Are critical anthropology’s listening instruments always the right ones? Even if we anthropologists and other social theorists listen, do we know what we are hearing?” (García Molina and Cossette 2016).

What resources for thinking, for hearing, *are* adequate to this moment? Crowds and waves are not the only idioms in circulation right now that evoke and think with that which is diffuse, powerful, immersive and that are not always or easily reduced to explanatory models, building blocks and their composite forms, or the language of structure, logics, or formations (Murphy 2017). For a start, I think of Jackie Orr’s (2006) work with and on panic, suggestion, and mediation; Christina Sharpe’s (2016) meditations on racism as atmosphere, as the weather that makes it hard for Black bodies to breathe; Joseph Masco’s (2010) work on the strange weather of the US security state; and, of course, a vast catalog of post-Deleuzian affect theory, among many other touchpoints. Such interventions are ways of dwelling in the constitution and effects of illogic, violence, mana, vitality, life force, nonindividuated relations, collectivity, and intensities. They prompt us to think about how solidarities and affinities are constituted through such forces. They are ways to theorize the surrounds that constitute us, that compose us, and that can energize and overwhelm us.

Crowds and crowd theory are not “meta-” to this catalog of ways of thinking and engaging in the world. They are right in the midst. Perhaps they are in the air.

CLOUD CROWDS

I have suggested thus far that the crowds of crowd theory engage elemental thinking in two senses: first, in the way they presumably dissolve

and radically reformulate elemental theories of individual-society; and second, in the way that they constitute crowds as more-than-human mediums, and as an almost atmospheric modulation.

These two points deliver us directly to a third, and by now achingly obvious, observation: it is nearly impossible to evoke crowds in these ways today without contending with social media. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms are among the most potent activating mediums for crowds today, from the ways they help constitute masses on the street, to their production of algorithmically aggregated swarms of similarity, to their tremendous efficacy in enabling the “contagious” spread of highly charged affect. Social media crowd us right up.⁷

In this sense, we might say that “the cloud”—that multiply obfuscating term that points to the tangled infrastructures of data, the internet, and social media (Hu 2015)—is one of the many places where we find crowds today, in all of their potency and in their many forms, including and especially in the form of anxieties about them.

There is something elemental about this point too. In *The Marvelous Clouds*, media theorist John Durham Peters (2015) helped propel the resurgence of contemporary elements thinking by routing the “new” in new media through something both familiar and strange. He argues that new media, digital media, and social media (same, not the same) are not primarily sources of information and meaning; rather, they must be thought elementally—that is, environmentally and infrastructurally, as if they are habitat (4).⁸ Peters brings earth, soil, fire, water, ozone, and clouds to the core of his engagement with digital media precisely because these elements evoke but do not explain (in his words, they “have meaning but do not speak” [3]). Thinking media as elemental, he argues, recasts the problems that we confront in and through them. “So-called new media do not take us into uncharted waters: they revive the most basic problems of conjoined living in complex societies and cast the oldest troubles into relief” (4). Peters names these oldest troubles “civilizational.” I might say, more specifically, that the troubles we have made through social media (*What has Facebook wrought?*) are troubles we know from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century crowd theorists, and thus they are elemental troubles of a more recent vintage.

In fact, as matters of concern, crowds and social media seem in some respects to be one and the same. The catalog of resonances is vast and constantly expanding, as I have argued elsewhere (Hayden 2021). Algorithmic filter bubbles immerse us in spaces of self-reinforcing and

ever-amplifying similitude, producing quasi-Tardean socialities constituted in imitation and similarity (Seaver 2012, 2021). Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms have become tremendously effective, often more-than-human, “suggestionizing” forces, as Le Bon described crowds; the specter of the mob (even if the mob is the state) is never far from the surface (I am thinking particularly of the 2019 *New York Times* investigative report, “A Genocide Incited on Facebook,” on the Myanmar military’s use of social media to cultivate anti-Rohingya sentiment [Mozur 2019]). Forms of data generation that feed on that which “looks like a human”—bots, markets in Twitter followers, click farms, “fake” accounts that might be automated and/or human-made—are central to how Facebook and Twitter elicit data crowds. Even as we are microtargeted as consumers and political animals, we are not thereby “isolated”: we are swimming in crowds, having been deindividuated and algorithmically recomposed within “similarity spaces” (Seaver 2021). Social media’s ability to fuel and enable an almost uncontrollably rapid transit of affect, “violent antagonisms,” fakeness, and “irrationality” (Phillips 2018) is the problem named by Le Bon’s concerns with crowds as mediums, magnetized by the force of imitation-contagion. As Whitney Phillips (2018) says of metric-driven online news in the age of social media, “things traveling too far, too fast, with too much emotional urgency, is exactly the point.”

As with Canetti’s fire as crowd, the resonances between crowd theorists’ analytics, openings, observations, and anxieties and what we experience in social media are not “mere” similarities. Perhaps social media should be called crowd media, because the imagination of (more than) sociality on which these companies bank is the crowd (Hayden 2021). Facebook’s business model, after all, is based explicitly on the monetization of emotional contagion. The platform, as with so many of its counterparts today, sells attention and hence advertising by multiplying clicks and shares, which in turn multiply more rapidly the more intense the emotional affect involved (see Baldwin 2019; Phillips 2018; Lanchester 2017; Vaidhyanathan 2018). Not surprisingly, then, Facebook has routinely been used as ready-made experimental terrain for psychologists trying to understand how emotional contagion works (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock 2014).

Facebook *is* the fire; it is also arguably the smoke. Either way, among the things that many of us suspect are burning are the foundational underpinnings of liberal democracy and “liberalism” itself, flawed as

such formations have always been, and exceedingly so in their neoliberal extremes. We see this in part in an increasing (and disconcertingly LeBon-ian) alarm that social media's particularly crowd-y modality of "connection" through "contagion" (Hayden 2021) may be threatening the constituent elements of society itself. Critics of Facebook, including but certainly not limited to a chorus of its former employees, have become vocal about the ways that these platforms and the forces they fuel and feed upon might well be unraveling "the social fabric," and with it, the substrate of rationality on which political equality and democracy are based (Wang 2017). Media and internet scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018) offers an adjacent critique in *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*; so does philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2017) in his book *In the Swarm*, in which he refers to the hot mess of atomized, lonely outrage and immediacy that has come to stand for "authentic" communication on social media as "the shitstorm"; and so do countless politicians, activists, writers, and many others, myself included, on a regular, profane basis. At the heart of many of these critiques, as with critiques of neoliberalism, is the persistent sense that society, and sociality, have been rent asunder; that the fundamentals of a social contract that might recognize and demand equality, not to mention collective responsibility for one another, are being torn up; that we are left with something elemental, or stripped bare—base "shittiness," perhaps; atomization; only isolated individuals and (maybe) our families.

We are, in these terms, currently experiencing an elemental (i.e., political) crisis. But what if, as crowd theory has long insisted, this base pair—individual and society—is not quite enough to name the troubles and the energies with which we are contending? What if these atomizations *crowd*, too? After all, at least in the United States, these ongoing atomizations and the racialized political economic formations that have fueled them have also reconstituted or even recharged a host of not new and not arbitrary illiberal solidarities, patriarchal whiteness prominent among them (Anderson 2016; Cooper 2017). The January 6 riot at the Washington, DC, Capitol, and the deadly theatricality of the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, with their tiki torches, are of course merely among the more spectacular examples.

Thinking about social media almost symptomatically, as crowd potency and as crowd threat, certainly churns up some of the biggest political and social questions confronting us today, including the compositional questions I broached at the outset of this chapter: What *are*

the materials, substrates, connecting forces, vulnerabilities, and dynamics that bind us to others? What is it that threatens or destabilizes such binding forces? These questions cannot be treated as if they are purely psychological phenomena, as Le Bon might have had it. They are political and political-economic questions; they are normative, descriptive, and conceptual questions; they are invitations for struggle. They are also historical—which is to say, specific. And, insofar as they are atmospheric, they are also (infra)structural. After all, if the cloud (as internet, as social media) is “elemental” in John Durham Peters’s assessment, it is also, as Tung-Hui Hu (2015, 147) argues for the deregulated United States, a “metaphor for private ownership.” That we should be so intensively and often pleurably crowded by and through platforms that are, at their core, vehicles for private capital accumulation is crucial to, but not a reductive explanation for, our current compositional troubles.

Why, then, have crowd theory’s crowdings come calling? Perhaps because crowd theory itself recomposes the elements of social action and analysis; perhaps because, as an archive of an “illiberal” twentieth-century social theory, crowd theory raises unresolved questions about the not so submerged “undersides” of political liberalism itself; perhaps because its underdetermination is confusing and unmooring, befitting a moment when new composites (“illiberal democracy” among them) are scrambling and rearranging the twentieth century’s terms of political orientation; perhaps because the crowd, in fact, never went away as both an excessive and a necessary form of mass politics, even if the postwar North Atlantic world told itself a different story (Chowdhury 2019). Perhaps because, as Canetti noted, there is something very powerful about finding, and losing, oneself in a crowd; the question, as ever, is what we do with and through that potency.

NOTES

1. William Mazzarella (2010) notes the “contempt” with which crowds and their theories have been held in social theory, just as Christian Borch (2012) observes that crowd theory was banished to the “margins of respectable sociological theory” for a large part of the twentieth century.

2. *Illiberalism* is a complicated, troubling, and troubled term. I am invoking it here in a kind of composite sense. If crowd theory is arguably “illiberal” in the sense that it destabilizes the foundational figure of sovereign individuals and rational publics, it can also remind us that these liberal elements should not and cannot serve as the yardstick against which all other political forma-

tions are measured (for arguments that mass politics in India and Bangladesh are importantly and not pejoratively illiberal, see Chowdhury 2019; Cody 2015). It is in these senses that Christian Borch calls crowd theory antiliberal. But the term *illiberal* also has a renewed and specific life in normative political science and punditry, as, for example, in the form of a new composite, *illiberal democracy*. The term first surfaced as an accusation leveled in the late 1990s at “emerging” democracies which were considered not quite good (liberal) enough and which “still” bore the marks of preceding authoritarian regimes (Plattner 2019). That accusation has now come to be embraced by some of its targets, including right-wing figures such as Hungarian president Viktor Orban, who sees “illiberal democracy” as a pretty good description of his vision for an anti-immigration, pro-patriarchal-family “Christian democracy” that is not tainted by “Western” values (Plattner 2019). Alongside this trajectory we could point to what Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008) call postliberal projects, in which ostensibly liberal states make decidedly illiberal moves—revoking citizenship for targeted groups, suppressing the Black vote—in the name of protecting particular, narrowly conceived “freedoms.”

3. The individual who finds himself in a “psychological crowd” is “no longer conscious of his acts”; “under the influence of a suggestion,” he shows “irresistible impetuosity”—an irresistibility made all the stronger because of the multiplying, “reciprocal force” of a crowd whose members, through “suggestion and contagion,” are all directed toward the same idea ([1895] 2009, 18–19). In a crowd, subjects lose their ability to deliberate and *then* act: it is all impulse, as the same idea immediately fuels the same action, accomplishing something that no people in their right mind would do outside of a crowd.

4. But the anticipation is actually not that odd. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze drew directly on Gabriel Tarde, Le Bon’s contemporary and fellow traveler in the elaboration of theories of imitation and suggestion, as a nonreductive way in to his reworking of sameness and difference.

5. Durkheim was a target, but it seems prudent to resist the polemical move to flatten him out in the rush to rescue Tarde from “obscurity”; see, for example, Mazzarella’s (2017) beautiful reanimation of Durkheim in *The Mana of Mass Society*.

6. Anyone familiar with Bruno Latour’s career-long war against the a priori idea of “society” as something that explains things happening at a “smaller,” individual scale will understand the exuberance. Latour celebrates Tarde’s monadology thus: “Tarde offers a very odd type of reductionism since the smallest entities are always richer in difference and complexity than their aggregates.” “Because he does not stop at the border between physics, biology and sociology . . . , he does not believe in explaining the lower levels by the higher levels” (2005, 2).

7. Thanks to Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (personal communication with the author, November 8, 2019).

8. Peters (2015, 4) writes, “Digital devices invite us to think of media as environmental, as part of the habitat, and not just as semiotic inputs into people’s

heads.” This move cuts both ways: he also argues that the environment is a medium, constituted by human meaning-making practices but not wholly determined by them.

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