

Book Review

Adam Biela (Ed.)

Beyond Crowd Psychology: The Power of Agoral Gatherings

Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Whenever more than three “loose and disorderly people” were spotted coming together in a group, the authorities suspected that a plot might soon be afoot. Whenever a gang of ten or twenty was detected, the elites feared an impending riot. And, should dozens or hundreds gather in one place without proper supervision or an appointed task, it was expected that an incipient rebellion would soon ensue. For this reason, crowd control was and remains one of the major responsibilities of the state and its law enforcement agencies.

Crowds (more commonly known as “mobs”) have been feared since ancient times. In order to defuse potential expressions of popular distress, the poet Juvenal famously tells us that the Romans provided the people, with *panem et circens*. We seem to prefer pub grub and beer to accompany professional sports on a large flat-screen, but the motive and the effects are the same. Gluttony and spectacle combine to leave the otherwise insurrectionist rabble flabby and docile.

Longstanding patrician fear of plebian uprisings has also been incorporated into contemporary social science where, as academic adjuncts to the ruling classes, social researchers have poked and prodded the subaltern masses in search of the triggers of collective action. Armed with this “intelligence,” the rulers have been able to discover the most effective means to silence dissent. Apart from the production of mass entertainment as a distraction (television and the twitterverse) and the occasional use of brute force (successful when used sparingly, but prone to backfire if applied too frequently), one of the best ways to deal with the disaffected is to marginalize them by psychologizing the discussion of them and their grievances.

According to Moscovici’s treatise on mass psychology, the 20th century can be called the age of the crowd ... because the crowd and the masses played an important role in the movements which established the two totalitarian systems in Europe.

- Adam Biela

By “psychologizing,” I mean redefining political protest and economic discord as manifestations of mental disease or disorder. The old Soviet Union did this with the desired results in the post-Stalin era when dissidents were routinely carted off to mental health facilities for “treatment.” In the West, however, the tradition of rendering opposition impotent by consigning it to a category of abnormal social psychology has a much longer background. Adam Biela and his associates aim to correct that.

The subtitle of Biela's collection may raise an eyebrow or glaze over an eye. For many of us, the term "Agoral Gathering" may seem odd and unfamiliar. As a noun, "agoral" refers to a powerful laxative but, I am pleased to say, we're dealing here with the adjective "agora," the central public space in the city-states of ancient Greece.

The direct translation is "meeting place" or "assembly." It was where politics and public business was conducted. It was in the Athenian agora, we may presume, that Socrates was sentenced to death. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that those people who were disgusted by "democracy" and who feared the "mob" in more recent times traced back and justified their antipathy to gatherings of ordinary citizens by referencing the taking of hemlock by that antique philosopher, sometime soldier and certified stone mason. From Martin Luther's early sixteenth-century cry for the brutal repression of peasant revolts (Pelikan and Oswald, ??: 50-51) to the disgust felt by gentler twentieth-century citizens at the popularity of lynchings in the American South, we have commonly understood crowd behaviour to be irrational, violent and extremely difficult to control.

Our disdain for the dangers posed by "crowd psychology" and "collective behaviour" results in an important ambiguity and a dilemma for inhabitants of modern liberal democracies. On the one hand, at least since Western societies came reluctantly to embrace formal democratic procedures and to accept the legitimacy of elected representative governments, it has been hard to maintain overt opposition to popular sovereignty and the principle that governments should be elected by and be responsible to the people. Democracy, it seems, is almost universally valued, if neither sincerely nor properly understood. At the same time, however, we take pains to ensure that our democratic processes rarely go further than to sanction an election every so often and do not encourage citizen involvement in public affairs between rituals of ballot-casting.

<p>"Your people, sir, is a great beast." - Alexander Hamilton, 1792</p>

It is therefore no surprise to learn that the ruling classes have not lost their anxiety in the face of mass gatherings. This fear and its underlying abhorrence of the people in action have been manifested often enough. We are therefore proud to live in democracies, as long as the wishes of the people are modulated in tone and modified in exhibition through rituals of participation that are limited to taking passing notice of political campaigns and engaging passively in well-organized acts of voting for candidates who are vetted by disciplined political parties that represent a relatively narrow range of safe opinion.

To guarantee that order (if not always the law) is maintained, of course, there is always the option of intimidation, coercion and violent suppression. In June, 2010, for example, full-scale police-mounted attacks and mass arrests in the generally docile City of Toronto resulted in copious personal injuries and the false arrest of about 1000 peaceful demonstrators who were upset with the antics of global leaders who had imposed crushing economic policies on poor countries while ignoring ecological concerns world-wide. Then, two or three years later, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper added environmentalists (McQuaig, 2012, June 4), aboriginal activists, trade unionists and others to its list of probable "terrorists" (Globe & Mail, 2013, January 11; Kingsmith, 2013, August 6). State surveillance and the evident willingness to

use brute force have often succeeded in limiting direct action in support of social justice and environmental sanity.

The psychology of the crowd and masses seems to be an example of negatively oriented bias [and] is also seen in collective behavior literature. Examples of the research topics include lynch mobs, riots, panic, fads, fashions, crazes ...

Adam Biela

Biela and his associates, I am happy to report, bring another far less depressing perspective. They not only provide evidence that mass gatherings sometimes take place without the automatic result of appalling repression, but that the progressive ideals of the participants can occasionally prevail against expectations and with remarkable, transformative results. In fact, beginning with the collapse of Soviet Communism and the liberation of Eastern Europe, the idea of peaceful, popular petitioning for reform and even for an occasional revolution has achieved some (often temporary) caché. The Cold War, to cite the most, obvious example, was won—so the story goes—not exclusively by the economic advantage, military might and external examples of freedom and democracy in action in the West, nor entirely by the internal corruption, inefficiency and intolerable totalitarian repression within the USSR. Rather, liberal democracy's triumph was at least partly a consequence of the actions of large and ever larger numbers of dissidents who chose to take to the streets and did so in sufficient numbers to make wholesale slaughter an imprudent tactic.

Although, of course, we mustn't forget that hideous violence has been used with at least temporary success to crush popular uprisings everywhere from the Jalliānwālla Bāgh (Amritsar) massacre in 1919 to Tiananmen Square in 1989, we cannot deny that bringing the people to the modern agora has been of crucial significance in dismantling authoritarian regimes. Whether such demonstrations are more than straws doing final damage to osteoarthritic dromedaries or whether they are the actual proximate causes of totalitarian collapse is a matter about which future historians may amicably bicker. In our time, we cannot avoid the conclusion that brave people in central and eastern Europe provided us with seemingly counterintuitive examples of agoral gatherings “changing the political face” of politics and government.

In *Beyond Crowd Psychology*, Biela has collected a small but extraordinary set of papers that were originally presented to a symposium at the University of Bielefeld, Germany in 2012. The book specifically addresses the theme of why Soviet Marxism failed in theory and in practice during the closing decades of the twentieth century—a stunning collapse that came unannounced and unanticipated even by its most dedicated detractors and ideological enemies despite the elaborate intelligence gatherers and covert operations agencies throughout what was boastfully known as the “free world.”

Why was the demise of authoritarian rule so unexpected, abrupt, wide-ranging and above all peaceful? How was it possible to achieve what decades of the threat of nuclear conflagration, the waging of numerous “proxy wars,” the relentless propaganda and espionage had failed accomplish and to do so in so few years with so little loss of life? And what can we learn from understanding this process not only about the events in question but also about what they might portend for the future?

In providing at least tentative answers to these important questions, the contributors deal mainly with events in the former Czechoslovakia and Poland. Their studies concern events from 1979 to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 and the emergence of “post-communist” nations which, in the cases of the Czech Republic and Poland, joined NATO in 1999 (Slovakia followed in 2004). The essays provided are no mere historical narratives drawing on names, dates and places to cobble together an account of events without benefit of either advanced theoretical understanding or rigorous empirical validation.

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete follower of Joanna Southcott from the enormous condescension of posterity.

E. P. Thompson, 1963.

Grzegorz Kida, for example, offers a strikingly good chapter tantalizingly entitled “Toward the Social and Cognitive Model of Macro Transformations in Poland. Starting with the social movement called “Solidarność,” he develops a fascinating theoretical framework for research into the cognitive needs of people compelled to adapt to rapid social changes, albeit changes that may have come about as a consequence of their own actions. Profound social rearrangements such as those that occurred in Poland between 1979 and 1991 create not only the decline of existing institutions but the need to redefine social situations and find one’s place in them. Establishing a new basis for social integration is a complex process and Kida’s complementary research paradigms which encourage the investigation of conditions in which totalitarian systems have collapsed and an increasing need arises for “political, economic, and ecological information for citizens who want to control and participate in large-scale changes.” Everything from local environmental policies in severely polluted areas to employer-employee relations in the transition to a market economy are deconstructed and need to be reconstructed by people traversing new cognitive territory. The result is the foundation of an ambitious social research strategy that has enormous practical implications.

Eva Naništová, for her part, brings forward an analysis of “Retrospective and Current Approaches to the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia. Her interest in the process of social change is informed by a thorough knowledge and a cogent exposition of “transitology,” the study of major instances of change including both revolutionary and non-revolutionary political alterations that also involve “existential” issues of “moral reconstruction and rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity and love.” She references writers from the enormously influential American sociologist and student of social dynamics Charles Tilly to the undisputed leader of the “second generation” of the Frankfurt School Jürgen Habermas in building an inventory of attributes of agoral gatherings from carefully engineered exercises in civil disobedience to strikes and linking them to psychological states as esoteric as spiritual or even mystical self-transcendent experiences. Using methods that are unabashedly empirical and rendered in charts that are both informative and accessible, her interpretation of the personal aspects of participation in political transition is both revealing as a case study and provocative as a values-based alternative to more common explanations.

Throughout, this collection not only speaks of particular contexts but also allows a meta-narrative to frame what turns out to be a credibly optimistic account of events that may yet have implications for other parts of the world. It goes (or should go) without saying that the fall of the

Soviet Empire was an unusual event. The challenge is to normalize it as both social science and political praxis. More recent agoral gatherings, perhaps nowhere more notable than in Egypt, appeared to outside observers to be carrying on the torch. There, in 2011, demonstrators at Tahrir Square ostensibly brought down the thirty-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, only to see its democratic experiment upended after only two years and replaced with the current military regime of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in 2013. Events in Tunisia and Tahrir Square brought brief and unexpected hope to people craving a measure of freedom, equity, the rudiments of the rule and due process of law in what the lawyers call “natural justice.” The hope such events stirred has largely been rudely dashed in countries where authoritarian governments (whether dominated by militaristic or theocratic leadership) have experienced broad dissent and have reasserted cultural dominance and political control or, as in the case of Libya, a country that experienced externally imposed “regime change” only to be allowed to descend into chaos following its 2011 “liberation by NATO bombing raids.”

In light of the apparent failure of “Arab Spring,” the larger consequence of this monograph may be that it makes a serious effort to redeem collective action and to remove it from the domain of social pathology, abnormal psychology and aberrant, irrational behaviour. It therefore contributes to a growing reconsideration of power relations in which collective political action is given a legitimate normative base and is no longer predismised as toxic to the body politic, but as redemptive, restorative and ultimately rational. Social scientists, in this case, are catching up to recent generations of social historians who have brought movements such as the English Luddites out from under what Edward Thompson famously called “the enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson, 1964; Perkin, 1978). Together with the work of writers such as George Rudé (1964) and Eric Hobsbawm (1959; Hobsbawm & Rudé, 1978), phrases such as “social bandits” (Hobsbawm, 1969) and “the moral economy of the English crowd” (Thompson, 1993) have reinterpreted past collective activity and helped forge a link to visionaries such as Tolstoy and inspirational leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. *Beyond Crowd Psychology* expands and moves this project ahead.

About the Reviewer

Howard A. Doughty teaches cultural anthropology and political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.

References

Globe & Mail. 2013, January 11 Editorial. *Aboriginals, Stephen Harper and the problem of talking*. Retrieved May 9, 2014 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/editorials/aboriginals-stephen-harper-and-the-problem-of-talking/article7257016/>

Hobsbawm, E. 1959. *Primitive rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Hobsbawm, E. 1969. *Bandits*. London, UK: Orion.

- Hobsbawm, E. & G. Rudé. 1978. *Captain Swing: A social history of the great English agricultural uprising of 1830*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Kingsmith, R. 2013, August 6. Canada's surveillance state equates protest to terrorism. *Desmog Canada: Clearing the Pollution that Clouds the Public Square*. Retrieved May 9, 2014 from <http://www.desmog.ca/2013/08/02/canada-s-surveillance-state-equates-protest-terrorism>
- McQuaig, L. 2012, June 4. Stephen Harper government turns environmentalists into public enemies. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved May 9, 2014 from http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2012/06/04/stephen_harper_government_turns_environmentalists_into_public_enemies.html
- Pelikan, J. L. & H. C. Oswald. 1967. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 46., Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress Press.
- Perkins, H. 1978: 87-101. "The condescension of posterity," the recent historiography of the English working class. *Social Science History* 3(1).
- Rudé, G. 1964. *The crowd in history, 1730-1848*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Thompson, E. 1964. *The making of the English working class*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Thompson, E. 1993: 185-258. The moral economy of the English crowd. In *Customs in common*. New York, NY: New Press.