

THEORY OF
COLLECTIVE
BEHAVIOR

by
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PREFACE

Gordon W. Allport of Harvard first introduced me to the study of collective behavior. When I was a freshman in 1948, his introductory course in Social Relations set my mind working. Later, when I was a graduate student in 1955, he reactivated and deepened

these workings. During the years after studying with him his words have returned to haunt me. So far as I know, he is unaware of my intellectual debt; I should like to record it now.

In working on my doctoral dissertation ^ I delved into the collective protests of the British working classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In trying to decipher the content and timing of these eruptions, I came to be deeply impressed with the explanatory potential of a distinctively sociological approach. The idea of attempting a theoretical synthesis of collective behavior came to me in the summer of 1958. Since then I have worked continually on this volume.

Between 1959 and 1961 I was a member of the Center for Integrated Social Science Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Known familiarly as the Theory Center, this group consisted of six or seven scholars from various departments. Each member was relieved of academic duties for one semester in each of his two years in the Center. At meetings we discussed theoretical issues arising from the work of one or more members. We had no office for meetings; we wandered peripatetically from one member's study to another. We had no secretary, no research assistants, no stationery with letterhead. Simple as it was, the Theory Center had unparalleled value. With the advance of academic specialization in the mid-twentieth century, few things can be more salutary than to have scholars take temporary leave from the confines of their research

projects to discover the minds of others in an unhurried atmosphere.

In the Theory Center we read one another's work with great care and did not fear to fire broadsides when the occasion demanded.

My work on collective behavior received and gained immensely from merciless criticism. I should like to thank the following men, members whose tenure overlapped with mine: Frederick E. Balderston (Business Administration); Jack Block (Psychology); Julian

1 Published in 1959 as Social Change in the Industrial Revolution by Routledge and Kegan Paul and the University of Chicago Press.

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Feldman (Business Administration); Erving Goffman (Sociology); Austin C. Hoggatt (Business Administration); Leo Lowenthal (Sociology and Speech); Richard S. Lazarus (Psychology); William Petersen (Sociology); Theodore R. Sarbin (Psychology); and David M. Schneider (Anthropology, now at the University of Chicago). In addition, I profited from informal explorations with Professors Lazarus, Petersen, Block, and Sarbin.

Herbert Blumer of the University of California, Berkeley, deserves a special word. His own pioneering work on collective behavior is well known; reading it stimulated me to new lines of thought. More directly, he gave me his extraordinarily painstaking criticism of an earlier draft of Chapters I-IV. I would hesitate to

estimate the time
and energy he devoted to writing long, detailed
memoranda and to
conversing with me after I had responded to these
memoranda. It is
only candid to report that on points of principle we
were frequently
at loggerheads. But his thoroughness and his keen
ability to locate
weaknesses in reasoning led me to revise the early
chapters
extensively. Several other colleagues at Berkeley
offered helpful
comments on the manuscript — Reinhard Bendix, William
Korn-
hauser, Seymour M. Lipset, and Hanan C. Selvin.

The influence of Talcott Parsons of Harvard on my
intellectual
development — influence which can be seen in these
pages — began
more than a decade ago. Even though we now stand at
opposite
ends of the nation, we have managed to continue
periodic discussions
during the past several years. His comments were
especially helpful
for Chapters II and III. Finally, Guy E. Swanson of the
University
of Michigan and Jan Hajda of Johns Hopkins wrote
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ments on the manuscript. Responsibility for all the
ideas in this
book is of course mine; but in the formation of these
ideas all these
men had an important place.

Before the final draft was prepared, Marvin B. Scott,
my research
assistant, combed the manuscript with unusual care. His
criticisms
added substance and above all clarity to the
presentation. He also
prepared the index and assisted with proof-reading. The
inevitable
but important chores of typing and writing for
permissions were
handled capably by Mrs. Carroll H. Harrington, Mrs.
Helen Larue,

Mrs. Pauline Ward, Miss Aura Cuevas, and by the staff
of the
Institute of Industrial Relations at Berkeley.

My wife, Helen, who is a sort of Frenchwoman at heart,
conducted
much independent research for me on the social and
political
turbulences that have appeared in France since the
middle of the
eighteenth century. Later she read almost the whole
manuscript
in draft. She is the most intelligent layman I know;
she has a

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disquieting ability to detect a loose argument, a
subtle inconsistency,
an unintended meaning, and a meaningless expression.
Even more,
she has a way of phrasing criticisms that makes it very
difficult to
rest before doing something about them. These
qualities, infuriating
at the moment, proved in the end to be a source of
value for the
manuscript, humility for the author, and charm for her
husband.

NEIL SMELSER

Berkeley, California,
February, 1962

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CHAPTER 1
ANALYZING COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

INTRODUCTION

The Problem. In all civilizations men have thrown themselves into episodes of dramatic behavior, such as the craze, the riot, and the revolution. Often we react emotionally to these episodes. We stand, for instance, amused by the foibles of the craze, aghast at the cruelties of the riot, and inspired by the fervor of the revolution.

The nature of these episodes has long excited the curiosity of speculative thinkers. In recent times this curiosity has evolved into a loosely defined field of sociology and social psychology known as collective behavior. Even though many thinkers in this field attempt to be objective, they frequently describe collective episodes as if they were the work of mysterious forces. Crowds, for instance, are "fickle," "irrational," or "spontaneous," and their behavior is "unanticipated" or "surprising." For all their graphic quality, such terms are unsatisfactory. They imply that collective behavior flows from sources beyond empirical explanation. The language of the field, in short, shrouds its very subject in indeterminacy.

Our aim in this study is to reduce this residue of indeterminacy which lingers in explanations of collective outbursts. Although wild rumors, crazes, panics, riots, and revolutions are surprising, they occur with regularity. They cluster in time; they cluster in certain cultural areas; they occur with greater frequency among certain social groupings — the unemployed, the recent migrant, the adolescent. This skewing in time and in social space invites explanation:

Why do collective episodes occur where they do, when they do, and in the ways they do ?
/ In this introductory chapter we shall merely raise some questions posed by such an inquiry. What is collective behavior? What are its types? How is it to be distinguished from related behavior such as ceremonials? What are the determinants of collective behavior? Are the determinants related to one another in any systematic way? What can a sociological approach contribute to an understanding \ of collective behavior? Having raised the questions, we shall devote ' the remainder of the volume to searching for their answers. , '^

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Analyzing Collective Behavior

An Initial Clarification of Terminology. Our inquiry will cover the following types of events: (1) the panic response; (2) the craze response, including the fashion-cycle, the fad, the financial boom, the bandwagon, and the religious revival; (3) the hostile outburst; (4) the norm-oriented movement, including the social reform movement; (5) the value-oriented movement, including the political and religious revolution, the formation of sects, the nationalist movement, etc. The justification for choosing these particular types will become clear only after detailed theoretical arguments in Chapters II-V. At present we must ask: By what name shall we label these kinds of behavior?

As might be expected of a field which is underdeveloped

scientifically, even its name is not standardized. Perhaps the most common general term is "collective behavior." Different analysts who use this term, however, do not refer to a uniform, clearly defined class of phenomena.² In addition, Brown, a psychologist, has used the term "mass phenomena" to refer to roughly the same range of data which is encompassed by "collective behavior."¹ Other terms used to characterize this body of data are "mass behavior" and "collective dynamics." Both are found wanting. Because of the ideological polemics which "mass" has accumulated, this term is misleading.¹ A more neutral, but equally misleading, term has been coined recently by Lang and Lang — "collective dynamics."¹ Although collective behavior bears an intimate relation to social change,¹ it seems wise to reserve the term "dynamics" for a field more inclusive than collective behavior alone. Words like "outburst," "movement,"

¹ This term was given wide currency in the 1920's and 1930's by Robert E. Park at the University of Chicago. Those who follow in his general tradition have continued to use the term. Cf. H. Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in J. B. Gittler (ed.). *Review of Sociology: Analysis of a Decade* (New York, 1957), p. 127. Also R. H. Turner and L. M. Killian, *Collective Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1957).

- Blumer, for instance, excluded R. T. LaPiere from his general survey of collective behavior — even though his major work is entitled *Collective Behavior* (New York, 1938) — on the grounds that LaPiere's treatment "represents a markedly different conception of the field."

"Collective Behavior," in Gittler (ed.), op. cit., p. 127.

•^ R. Brown, "Mass Phenomena," in G. Lindzey (ed.). Handbook of Social Psychology (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), Vol. II, pp. 833-876.

■◆ Representative classics in the literature on mass society are J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York, 1932); E. Lederer, *State of the Masses* (New York, 1940); K. Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (London, 1940), and H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1958). For a recent attempt to eliminate some of the ambiguities of this literature and to synthesize the material theoretically, cf. W. Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, 111., 1959).

5 K. Lang and G. E. Lang, *Collective Dynamics* (New York, 1961).

6 Below, pp. 72-73.

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and "seizure" also indicate the attempts to delineate the scope of the field. In the face of this plethora of words and meanings, we must decide early on conventions of usage.

The most accurate term for encompassing the relevant classes of events would be an awkward one: "collective outbursts and collective movements." "Collective outbursts" would refer to panics, crazes, and hostile outbursts, which frequently (but not always) are explosive; "collective movements" would refer to collective efforts

to modify norms and values, which frequently (but not always) develop over longer periods. For brevity we shall condense this awkward term into the conventional one, "collective behavior." The reader should remember that this chosen term is being used as a specific kind of shorthand, and that it has its own shortcomings. In certain respects the term is too general. "In its broad sense [it] refers to the behavior of two or more individuals who are acting together, or collectively. . . . To conceive of collective behavior in this way would be to make it embrace all of group life."i The business firm, for instance, which responds to heightened demand by increasing its production, is engaging in "collective behavior" (because persons are acting in concert), but we would not classify this response as an instance of collective behavior. Despite such shortcomings, we shall continue to use the term, partly from a desire to avoid neologisms, and partly from a lack of suitable alternatives.

An Advantage of Studying Collective Behavior. Under conditions of stable interaction, many social elements – myths, ideologies, the potential for violence, etc. – are either controlled or taken for granted and hence are not readily observable. During episodes of collective behavior, these elements come into the open; we can observe them "in the raw." Collective behavior, then, like deviance, affords a peculiar kind of laboratory in which we are able to study directly certain components of behavior which usually lie dormant.

The State of Research on Collective Behavior. In almost every

division of sociology, a general analysis must be prefaced by a commentary on the sad state of available research. Collective behavior is no exception :

The paucity of investigation is seen easily by surveying the literature on forms of collective behavior. Examples of "forms" are: panic, fad, fashion, rumor, social epidemic, rushes, reform movements, religious movements, etc. If one examines the literature concerned with each of these forms, he can see easily both the crude descriptive level of knowledge and the relative lack of theory in this area. Most investigation is in the nature of reporting:

' Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in Gitlter (ed.), op. cil., p. 128.

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either by persons fortuitously on the scene or by historians who describe, after their occurrence, certain collective behavior events.^

The indictment is sound for several reasons. First, because collective behavior is viewed as spontaneous and fickle, few points are available to begin a coherent analysis. Points of reference melt before one's eyes as a crowd develops into a mob, a mob into a panicky flight, and a flight into a seizure of scapegoating. Second, because many forms of collective behavior excite strong emotional reactions, they resist objective analysis. ^ Third, episodes of collective behavior, with few exceptions,^ cannot be controlled experimentally. Even

direct observation is difficult, since the time and place of collective eruptions cannot be predicted exactly. Finally, it is virtually impossible to "sample" the occurrence of collective episodes from a large population of events. The analyst of collective behavior must often settle for inaccurate and overdramatized accounts. For such reasons the field of collective behavior "has not been charted effectively." 4

THE NATURE OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

Having chosen a term — collective behavior — we must now ask:
To what kinds of phenomena does this term refer? This question breaks into two parts: (1) By what criterion or criteria do we exclude

1 A. Strauss, "Research in Collective Behavior: Neglect and Need," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 12 (1947), p. 352.

2 For a sketch of the varying emotional attitudes toward the crowd in Western history, cf. G. W. Ailport, "The Historical Background of Modern Social Psychology," in G. Lindzey (ed.), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. I, pp. 29-31.

3 For example, G. W. Ailport and L. Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1947); L. Festinger, A. Pepitone, and T. Newcomb, "Some Consequences of De-Individuation in a Group," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 47 (1952), pp. 382-389; J. R. P. French, "The Disruption and Cohesion of Groups," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 (1941), pp. 361-377; French, "Organized and Unorganized Groups under Fear and Frustration," in *Authority and Frustration*, University of Iowa Studies: Studies in Child Welfare,

Vol. XX (Iowa City, 1944), pp. 231-308; D. Grosser, N. Polansky, and R. Lippitt, "A Laboratory Study of Behavioral Contagion," *Human Relations*, Vol. 4 (1951), pp. 115-142; N. C. Meier, G. H. Mennenga, and H. Z. Stoltz, "An Experimental Approach to the Study of Mob Behavior," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 36 (1941), pp. 506-524; A. Mintz, "Non-Adaptive Group Behavior," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 46 (1951), pp. 150-159; A. Pepitone, J. C. Diggory, and W. H. Wallace, "Some Reactions to a Hypothetical Disaster," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 51 (1955), pp. 706-708; N. Polansky, R. Lippitt, and F. Redl, "An Investigation of Behavioral Contagion in Groups," *Human Relations*, Vol. 3 (1950), pp. 319-348; G. E. Swanson, "A Preliminary Laboratory Study of the Acting Crowd," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 18 (1953), pp. 180-185.

^H. Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in Gittler (ed.), op. cit., p. 127.

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and include instances as appropriate objects of study? Do we include the rumor? the riot? the mass migration? Are conventionalized festivals, demonstrations, and heroes' welcomes a part of the field? How do we classify semi-institutionalized forms like the lynching mob? In posing such questions we attempt to establish outside limits for the field. (2) What are the major types of collective behavior? By what principles do we derive these types? What, for instance, is the relation among the boom, the bandwagon, and the fad? Should we consider them separately, or are they special cases of

a larger type?

These questions demand that we establish the internal divisions of the field. Although the demarcation of lines is not an end in itself, and is not so intriguing as the inquiry into causes and consequences of collective behavior, it is of prime importance. Before we can pose questions of explanation, we must be aware of the character of the phenomena we wish to explain.

In delimiting and classifying the field of collective behavior, we may proceed with varying degrees of formality. By a common-sense method we would simply list those kinds of behavior that traditional conceptions of "collective" or "mass" denote and connote. The boundaries of such a common-sense classification are usually vague. By an analytic method, at the other extreme, we would specify in advance the formal rules for exclusion and inclusion and classify instances according to these rules. For purposes of scientific analysis it is always desirable to move as close as possible to the analytic extreme. Let us consider two recent attempts to demarcate the field of collective behavior, then indicate the lines along which we shall move in this volume.

Roger Brown has advanced a number of dimensions for classifying collectivities: (a) size — it is important to know whether a group will fit into a room, a hall, or whether it is too large to congregate; (b) the frequency of congregation; (c) the frequency of polarization of group attention; (d) the degree of permanence of the psychological identification of the members. Using such dimensions. Brown distinguishes

collective behavior (which he calls mass phenomena) from other forms of behavior. 1 Brown, then, circumscribes the field largely on the basis of physical, temporal, and psychological criteria. Within the field. Brown first mentions crowds, which he divides into two types - mobs and audiences. Mobs are subdivided into the aggressive (lynching, rioting, terrorizing), the escape (panic), the acquisitive (looting) and the expressive. Audiences may be intentional (recreational, information-seeking) or casual. Here the criterion for

1 Brown, "Mass Phenomena," in Lindzey (ed.), op. cit., pp. 833-840.

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sub-division seems to lie in the different goals of collectivities. In addition, Brown mentions certain kinds of mass contagion, mass polarization (audiences of radio or television broadcasts), the social movement, and finally "the mass as an unorganized collectivity." * The last four types receive little systematic treatment. Nevertheless, on the whole Brown has attempted to set off a distinctive field according to explicit criteria.

Herbert Blumer, in his attempt to circumscribe the field of collective behavior, contrasts it with (a) small group behavior, and (b) established or culturally defined behavior. In the first instance, then, the criteria for inclusion are physical (size), and cultural (relation of the behavior to rules, definitions, or norms).

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