

## About Crowds.

"The renewal of civilisation has nothing to do with movements which bear the character of experiences of the crowd; these are never anything but reactions to external happenings. But civilisation can only revive when there shall come into being in a number of individuals a new tone of mind independent of the one prevalent among the crowd and in opposition to it, a tone of mind which will gradually win influence over the collective one, and in the end determine its character. It is only an ethical movement which can rescue us from the slough of barbarism, and the ethical comes into existence only in individuals..."

So wrote the late Dr. Albert Schweitzer.

The point of this essay is to draw to your attention, a book titled **The Crowd** by Gustave Le Bon.

First published in 1895, the book has never ever been out of print. The book is not only a classic, but is one of the best selling scientific books in social psychology and collective behaviour ever written.

Le Bon analyses the nature of crowds and their role in political movements. He presents crowd behaviour as a problem of science and power - a natural phenomenon with practical implications. The book was the first to expand the scope of inquiry beyond criminal crowds to include all possible kinds of collective phenomena.

Le Bon emphasises the various areas of modern life where crowd behaviour holds sway, particular political upheavals. He focuses on electoral campaigns, parliaments, juries, labour agitation and street demonstrations. His treatment of crowds is far from complimentary.

Although I have not been able to find any hard evidence, there are some who believe that the book was closely studied by both Hitler and Mussolini. Both knew how to manipulate and influence crowds. It is arguable that the fascist theories of leadership that emerged in the 1920s owed much to his theories of crowd psychology. Indeed, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* largely drew on the propaganda techniques proposed in Le Bon's 1895 book.

Hitler certainly had all of the essential characteristics of a successful crowd leader. 'That is an unshakeable belief in himself, and an iron will. More of a man of action than a great thinker, not gifted with great foresight as this quality generally conduces to doubt and inactivity. Morbidly nervous excitable, and half deranged, bordering on madness, but an unshakeable faith in himself and his cause, with convictions so strong that all reasoning was lost on him.' (A perfect description of The Führer, written when Hitler was only four years old).

Written in 1895, the above description fitted the German Fuhrer to a T. The description also fits Napoleon and Mussolini and Chairman Mao. Likewise, General Franco of Spain, and Peron, the Argentinean Dictator. And, likewise, Pol Pot. Two other outstanding examples were Lenin and Stalin, especially Lenin.

'Contempt and persecution do not effect them, or only serve to excite them the more. They sacrifice their personal interest, their family - everything. The very instinct of self preservation is entirely obliterated in them, so much so that often the only recompense they solicit is that of martyrdom' - Chile's Communist leader Allende is a perfect example of this phenomenon.

‘The intensity of their faith gives great power of suggestion to their words. The multitude is ready to listen to the strong willed man, who knows how to impose himself upon it. Men gathered in a crowd lose all force of will, and turn instinctively to the person who possesses the quality they lack.’

Not all great leaders have the unique gifts of say, The German Fuhrer. Quoting Le Bon: ‘The men of ardent convictions who have stirred to souls of crowds have been the Peter the Hermits, the Luthers, the Savonarolas, the men of the French Revolution, [we can add all of the above, including Ghandi and others], have only exercised their fascination after having themselves been fascinated first of all by a creed. They are able to call up in the souls of their fellows that formidable force known as faith, which renders a man the absolute slave of his dream. To endow a man with faith is to multiply his strength by ten.’

‘It is not by the aid of the learned or of philosophers and still less sceptics, that have been built up the great religions which have swayed the world, or the vast empires which have spread from one hemisphere to the other.’

In the cases just cited, we are dealing with great leaders, and they are so few in number that history can easily reckon them up. The book though mainly deals with the crowd. For instance:

‘Should a legislator wishing to impose a new tax, choose that which is theoretically the most just? By no means. In practice the most unjust may be the best for the masses. Should it at the same time be the least obvious, and apparently the least burdensome, it will be the most easily tolerated.

‘It is for this reason that an indirect tax, however exorbitant it be, will always be accepted by the crowd, because, being paid daily in fractions of a farthing on objects of consumption, it will not interfere with the habits of the crowd, and will pass unperceived. Replace it with a proportional tax on wages or income of any other kind, to be paid in a lump sum, and were this new imposition theoretically ten times less burdensome than the other, it will give rise to unanimous protest. This arises from the fact that a sum relatively high, which will appear immense, and will in consequence strike the imagination, has been substituted for the unperceived fractions of a farthing.

‘The new tax would only appear light had it been saved farthing by farthing, but this economic proceeding involves an amount of foresight of which the masses are incapable.

‘The facts of history demonstrate that social organisms being every whit as complicated as those of all beings, it is in no wise in our power to force them to undergo on a sudden far reaching transformations. Nature has recourse at times to radical measures, but never after our fashion, which explains how it is that nothing is more fatal to a people than a mania for great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would only be useful were it possible to change instantaneously the genius of nations.

‘This power however, is only possessed by time. Men are ruled by ideas, sentiments and customs - matters which are the essence of ourselves. Institutions and laws are the outward manifestation of our character, the expression of its needs. Being its outcome, institutions and laws cannot change this character.’

Neither Ludwig von Mises nor F. A. Hayek mention Le Bon in any of their writings, yet I'm sure they would be familiar with this great European masterpiece. On page 864 of his 'Human Action' Mises says:

'The masses, the hosts of common men, do not conceive any ideas, sound or unsound. They only choose between the ideologies developed by the intellectual leaders of mankind. But their choice is final and determines the course of events. If they prefer bad doctrines nothing can prevent disaster .....

The [Classical] Liberals gave the world Capitalism, a higher standard of living for a steadily increasing number of people. But the pioneers and supporters of capitalism overlooked one essential point; a social system, however beneficial, cannot work if it is not supported by public opinion .....

Is the same fate in store for our civilisation? There is ground to fear that this is the case, but we are not as yet in a position to be certain of it.

Summing up, discover the nature of different types of crowds, their complete lack of reason, their brutality etc etc. Le Bon's unique 232 page book is a great intellectual investment.

Every man of who deals with society should read and understand this great book. If I taught economics, I would be making my economics classes aware of it and its great value in understanding Human Action.

'Civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future - all of them conditions that crowds left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising. In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power, crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall. It is at such a juncture that their chief mission is plainly visible, and that for a while the philosophy of number seems the only philosophy of history.'

From 'Human Action' by Ludwig von Mises. Page 38

Ronald Kitching. 22.9.02. 1500 Words.

**Ronald Kitching**

P.O. Box 9809

Frenchville QLD 4701

Australia