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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Isacco Turina (2023). Tarde's ancestors. Imitation and crowds from Hobbes to Locke. *SOCIAL SCIENCE INFORMATION*, 62(1), 31-49 [10.1177/05390184231164926].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/937413> since: 2023-07-31

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/05390184231164926>

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The final published version is available online at:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184231164926>

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Tarde's ancestors. Imitation and crowds from Hobbes to Locke

Social Science Information, 62(1): 31–49 (March 2023)

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Abstract

Sociological studies on imitation and crowds usually point to the late nineteenth-century French jurist and sociologist Gabriel Tarde as their forerunner. This article argues that a lively debate on those issues already existed in Europe in the late seventeenth century. A review of works by Hobbes, Spinoza, Malebranche and Locke will show how they commented upon the dangerous influence of charismatic leaders over excitable mobs or the ordinary occurrence of someone's opinions or manners being subsequently imitated by others until they become a new fashion. These four authors developed distinct approaches to the study of imitation and crowds. I call them the 'authoritarian' (Hobbes), the 'rationalist' (Malebranche), the 'affective' (Spinoza) and the 'liberal' (Locke) frames. The authoritarian and the rationalist approaches easily lead to dismissive or hostile views, while the affective and the liberal ones may open the way to more sympathetic (or at least practical) assessments. This study aims to show that: a) early modern discussions on imitation and crowds made a significant contribution to the formation of the field of social sciences; and b) these classical authors may still prove valuable for understanding imitation and crowds in the twenty-first century, in regard to the digital environment as well.

Keywords

crowds, Enlightenment, imitations, social influence, social sciences

Résumé

Les études sociologiques sur l'imitation et les foules désignent généralement le juriste et sociologue français Gabriel Tarde, de la fin du XIXe siècle, comme leur précurseur. Cet article soutient qu'un débat animé sur ces questions existait déjà en Europe à la fin du XVIIe siècle.

Un examen des oeuvres de Hobbes, Spinoza, Malebranche et Locke montrera comment ils ont commenté l'influence dangereuse des leaders charismatiques sur les foules excitables ou l'occurrence ordinaire des opinions ou des manières de [31] quelqu'un qui sont ensuite imitées par d'autres jusqu'à devenir une nouvelle mode. Ces quatre auteurs ont développé des approches distinctes de l'étude de l'imitation et des foules. Je les appelle les cadres « autoritaire » (Hobbes), « rationaliste » (Malebranche), « affectif » (Spinoza) et « libéral » (Locke). Les approches autoritaire et rationaliste conduisent facilement à des vues dédaigneuses ou hostiles, tandis que les approches affective et libérale peuvent ouvrir la voie à des évaluations plus sympathiques (ou du moins pratiques). Cette étude vise à montrer que : a) les premières discussions modernes sur l'imitation et les foules ont apporté une contribution significative à la formation du domaine des sciences sociales; et b) ces auteurs classiques peuvent encore s'avérer précieux pour comprendre l'imitation et les foules au XXIe siècle, en ce qui concerne l'environnement numérique également.

Mots-clés

foules, imitation, influence sociale, Lumières, sciences sociales

Introduction

The first decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the social sciences with regard to imitation (Boczkowski, 2010; Borch, 2019; Borch and Stäheli, 2009; Hurley and Chater, 2005; Watson, 2017), a trend related to renewed attention paid to crowds (Brighenti, 2010; Jonsson, 2008, 2013; Mazzarella, 2010; Schnapp and Tiews, 2006). This interest is not unprecedented. Borch (2012) has retraced the waxing and waning of crowd sociology from the late nineteenth century until the dawn of the twenty-first, while Plotz (2006) has stressed the ambivalent attitude of US sociology towards crowds and masses, which has passed through alternating cycles of enthusiasm and despair. In the past few years, partly in reaction to the traumatic experience of pandemic lockdowns, some authors have hailed the crowd as an exhilarating occasion of social cohesion (Gumbrecht, 2021; Sheppard, 2021). The Internet has also spurred this revival, since the global success of digital networks and social media has popularized terms like 'crowdsourcing,' 'virality' and 'influencers' (Baltzersen, 2022; McCorquodale, 2019; Sampson, 2012; Woolley, 2022).

Despite the novelty of these terms and of the technologies that sustain them, social theorists have correctly stressed the long genealogy of crowd thinking. According to Borch, ‘crowd semantics emerged as a distinctively modern semantics, arguably even as the semantics of modernity’ (Borch, 2012: 5). However, like other historians and sociologists who consider *fin-de-siècle* Europe to have been the golden age of these semantics (Barrows, 1981; Bosc, 2007; Bovo, 2015, 2021; Nacci, 2019; van Ginneken, 1992), Borch begins his survey with the era of Gabriel Tarde, Scipio Sighele, and Gustave Le Bon. Tarde in particular is of especial importance here because imitation and crowds are closely intertwined in his work, the former being a basic social phenomenon that explains the formation of the latter (Borch, 2012: 54-55; McClelland, 1989: 139).

Nevertheless, Tarde was not the first to combine imitation and crowds in his theory. As this article will show, such issues were already being debated in the second half of the seventeenth century. While it is known that these themes have a long tradition dating [32] back to Aristotle and Plato, their place in early modern philosophy has been understudied. Indeed, McClelland’s (1989) book on crowds and mobs ‘from Plato to Canetti’ skips this period, jumping from Machiavelli in the Renaissance to Montesquieu in the eighteenth century. This article intends to fill this gap by highlighting the role that imitation and crowds play in the works of four outstanding philosophers of the late seventeenth century, namely Hobbes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Locke.

I select these authors not only because of their general significance in European intellectual history, but also because each of them developed a distinct approach to crowds and imitation. I call them the ‘authoritarian,’ the ‘rationalist,’ the ‘affective’ and the ‘liberal’ approaches, and I argue that they still contribute to framing discussions on imitation and crowds, not least in the digital environment. The authoritarian and the rationalist stances easily lead to dismissive or hostile views, while the affective and the liberal ones may open the way to more sympathetic (or at least practical) assessments. My first aim is therefore to show that the views of these classical authors on collective behavior are still sociologically relevant.

My second aim focuses on the early emergence of a social thought from the moral and political insights of post-Cartesian philosophy. While it is widely acknowledged that social sciences were born in the eighteenth century with Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and others (Aron, 1965; Heilbron, 1995; Singer, 2004; Wagner, 2000), these Enlightenment thinkers were themselves building on the systems of those who had preceded them. I will

contend that a certain way of looking at society which is typical of the modern social sciences began to take shape in the late seventeenth century from the reflections of – among others – Hobbes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Locke. These authors began to critically observe social life because of their anxieties about the social and political turmoil of religious wars and their aftermath. In so doing, I move from Borch's suggestion that 'the crowd may be seen as a diagnostic category: it offers a lens or prism on how sociology has observed modern society and its social and political constitution at different times' (Borch, 2012, 15).

In conclusion, I will seek to apply the historical knowledge gained from these classics to the task of illuminating crucial aspects of imitation and crowd dynamics in the twenty-first century.

The authoritarian frame: Hobbes

My review begins with England in the 1650s, a period marked by widespread fears about the outbreak of religious ferment perceived as threatening the precarious peace that had followed the end of the English civil wars. While part of the discussion, particularly at legislative level, was specifically concerned with the dangers of Catholic penetration, the overall debate encompassed the entire gamut of so-called *enthusiasts*, a loosely-defined term that could refer to sects like Anabaptists or Quakers but could also apply to Calvinists or Catholics, depending on the author's view (Heyd, 1995). In fact, until the end of the eighteenth century, educated Europeans who identified with rationality and social order used 'enthusiasm' (in German *Schwärmerei*) as 'a powerful term of opprobrium' and 'the smear word of choice' (Goldstein, 1998: 29–30). In sum, enthusiasm was 'the antiseif of Enlightenment' (Pocock, 1998). [33]

Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1996; henceforth *L*; citations refer to chapter and page) is fraught with anxiety about the danger that 'false prophets' represent for the peace and prosperity of the commonwealth. Crucial to this paper's topic is Hobbes's depiction of the processes by which self-appointed leaders gain social influence. This may happen because 'men' are already inclined 'to be drawn to believe any thing, from such men as have gotten credit with them; and can with gentleness, and dexterity, take hold of their fear, and ignorance' (*L*, 12: 82). Indeed, this is the very origin of all religions, which are 'founded at first, upon the faith which a multitude hath in some one person, whom they believe [...] to be a holy man, to whom God himselfe vouchsafeth to declare his will supernaturally' (*L*, 12: 83–84). According to Hobbes, miracles are only a way to gain the trust of followers: '[I]t belongeth to the nature of a Miracle, that it be wrought for the procuring of credit to God's Messengers, Ministers, and Prophets, that

thereby men may know, they are called, sent, and employed by God, and thereby be the better inclined to obey them' (*L*, 37: 301). Whence derive the risks connected with the pretensions of those who falsely claim to work miracles by which they are able to gain sway over large groups of followers. However, self-appointed prophets are only one instance of a general threat: that of highly esteemed citizens or collective bodies that use their reputation to split and fragment the authority that, for the sake of the common good, must reside only in the sovereign. Therefore, subjects

are to be taught, that they ought not to be led with admiration of the vertue of any of their fellow Subjects, how high soever he stand, nor how conspicuously soever he shine in the Common-wealth; nor of any Assembly, (except the Sovereign Assembly,) so as to deferre to them any obedience, or honour, appropriate to the Sovereign onely, whom (in their particular stations) they represent; nor to receive any influence from them, but such as is conveyed by them from the Sovereign Authority. (*L* 30: 234)

The power of prestigious example is the reason that justifies that 'in a man that hath such reputation for wisdom, as that his counsells are followed, or his actions imitated by many, his fact against the Law, is a greater Crime, than the same fact in another: For such men not onely commit Crime, but teach it for Law to all other men' (*L*, 27: 211). Hobbes also mentions horizontal imitation between neighbouring nations and in excited mobs, of which he gives a striking account:

Feare, without the apprehension of why, or what, [is called] PANIQUE TERROR; called so from the Fables, that make *Pan* the author of them; whereas in truth, there is always in him that so feareth, first, some apprehension of the cause, though the rest run away by Example; every one supposing his fellow to know why. And therefore this Passion happens to none but in a throng, or multitude of people. (*L*, 6: 38)

Crowds loom ominously in Hobbes's pages:

[T]hough the effect of folly, in them that are possessed of an opinion of being inspired, be not visible always in one man, by any very extravagant action, that proceedeth from such Passion; yet when many of them conspire together, the Rage of the whole multitude is visible enough. For what

argument of Madnesse can there be greater, than to clamour, strike, and throw stones at our best friends? Yet this is somewhat lesse than such a multitude will do. (*L* 8: 54–55) [34]

Hobbes's world seems already haunted by some of the specters that would preoccupy the ruling classes in nineteenth-century Europe: seditious crowds, the invisible spread of subversive ideas, and the mounting popularity of deceitful leaders. In both periods, the thoughtful scholar musing on these dangers would examine the attitudes of individuals and groups and reach similar conclusions about the irrationality of mobs, the unchecked power of their leaders and the natural inclination of human beings to imitate and follow those whom they trust. Reason has but a limited place in public discussion, let alone behavior, since

when wee believe any saying whatsoever it be, to be true, from arguments taken, not from the thing itselfe, or from the principles of naturall Reason, but from the Authority, and good opinion wee have, of him that hath sayd it; then is the speaker, or person we believe in, or trust in, and whose word we take, the object of our Faith; and the Honour done in Believing, is done to him onely. (*L*, 7: 49)

Hence the conclusion that '[t]o imitate, is to Honour; for it is vehemently to approve' (*L*, 10: 65). But imitation does not occur only among individuals. It is also at work between nations, with disastrous consequences:

I doubt not, but many men, have been contented to see the late troubles in England, out of an imitation of the Low Countries; supposing there needed no more to grow rich, than to change, as they had done, the forme of their Government. (*L*, 29: 225)

Instead of the sovereign power that Hobbes would like to see presiding undisturbed over the entire commonwealth, the observation of public life reveals him an intricate web of informal and dispersed authority founded on chance, passions, fancy, charisma and particular interests rather than on the bedrocks of reason, law and order.

I take Hobbes as representative of an authoritarian stance on crowds, one that tends to see in the mass the degradation of the rational, responsible individual and the breeding ground of social disorder. This way of looking at crowds, epitomized in Le Bon's (1960) best-seller *The Crowd*, was widespread among bourgeois elites in Europe between the end of the nineteenth

and the beginning of the twentieth century (Barrows, 1981; Bosc, 2007; Bovo, 2015, 2021; Nacci, 2019; van Ginneken, 1992). Indeed, ‘contempt for the masses’ is a theme that traverses reactionary modern thought, as Femia (2001) and Sloterdijk (2000) have shown. In fact, its ideological position is today more ambiguous and often depends on the political leaning of the mass under consideration. In contemporary culture wars, well-educated leftist intellectuals typically despise right-wing populism, whereas conservative-minded elites may dismiss progressive social movements and civil rights rallies. In a sense, the bad mass is always the mass of the others.

Whilst this is somewhat obvious, Hobbes’s observations can still be fruitful insofar as they stress the capacity of crowds, including digital ones, to develop new forms of authority, while at the same time weakening old and more established ones. This can be seen for example in contemporary Islam, where digital preachers who have not had an official theological formation are spreading innovative and more informal ways to live their faith among a public of mostly young Muslims (Echchaibi, 2011). Thanks to the [35] mobility that online communication allows, they often settle in countries far from the traditional centers of Islamic teaching in the Middle East, thereby contributing to the delocalization of religious authority.

The rationalist frame: Malebranche

In the 1670s other authors regarded the unchecked spread of ideas and emotions as an unavoidable component of social life. In France, Malebranche, a Catholic priest, was mainly preoccupied with the spread of unwarranted beliefs, a major hindrance to the triumph of the Cartesian method, which he regarded as the only safe way to achieve both genuine knowledge and salvation of the soul. In his *Search after Truth* (1997; henceforth *S*) he conceived imagination as both a providential means devised by God to strengthen the necessary bonds of family and civil society, and a potential source of delusion and foolish behavior (Talon-Hugon, 2017). Central to the imagination’s power is the human physiological inclination towards imitation and compassion, without which no collective body could survive:

Of course, there are powers in our brain that naturally incline us towards imitation, for this is necessary to civil society. Not only is it necessary that children believe their parents, pupils their teachers, and inferiors those above them, but also that all men have some disposition to adopt the same manners and perform the same actions as those with whom they wish to live. For in order for men to be bound to one another, they must resemble one another in body and spirit. (*S*: 113)

This attitude is predetermined by divine providence in order to foster what we would call today empathy and pro-social behavior: ‘This compassion in bodies produces a compassion in the spirits. It excites us to help others because in so doing we help ourselves. Finally, it checks our malice and cruelty’ (*S*: 114).

This is all very well, but the innate disposition towards imitating others is likely to go awry because ‘strong imaginations’ tend naturally to impose their views and manners on weaker ones. The trouble is that such imaginations often belong to unreasonable people and, moreover, they are ‘extremely contagious’:

Strong imaginations are extremely contagious; they dominate weaker ones, gradually giving them their own orientation, and imprinting their own characteristics on them. Therefore, since those who have a strong and vigorous imagination are completely unreasonable, there are very few more general causes of men’s errors than this dangerous communication of the imagination. (*S*: 161)

Armed with this theory, Malebranche mounted an attack against his religious enemies. Thus, he depicted Protestant revolutions as – at least in part – the effect of misled imagination: ‘The religious revolutions that have occurred in Sweden and Denmark could again serve to prove to us the power some minds have over others [...]. These surprising changes are indeed proof of the contagious communication of the imagination’ (*S*: 169). As for atheists and free-thinkers, they embody the very model of dangerous strong imaginations: [36]

But the strong imaginations whose impression and contagion we must most carefully avoid are those of certain minds of the world who put on the air of freethinkers, which is not difficult for them to acquire. For all we need do at present is to deny original sin and the immortality of the soul, or to ridicule some accepted opinion in the church, and to do so with a certain air, in order to acquire among ordinary men the rare quality of being a freethinker. [...] it is clear that these minds must triumph over others, and hence communicate their errors and their malignity through their power over the imagination of other men. (*S*: 172)

Although Malebranche did not explicitly talk of enthusiasts, he was probably alluding to them when he lamented ‘the force of a visionary mind that speaks vividly without understanding what it says, thereby causing the minds of those who hear what it says to believe strongly

without understanding what they believe' (S: 171). Given all this dismal evidence, his final verdict on associated life was discouraging: '[I]t is because of this union [with all men] that we live by opinions, that we esteem and love everything that is loved and esteemed in the world, despite the remorse of our conscience and the true ideas we have of things' (S: 195).

Whilst Hobbes took a normative stance on political government, Malebranche, like other French moralists, was more concerned with describing the ordinary functioning of social life. This focus enabled him to develop original analyses of fashions, interaction and leadership. Nevertheless, he shared with Hobbes a deep mistrust of these informal flows of influence. But rather than on authoritarian premises, his hostility was based on rationalist ones. From this perspective, the main problem with influence is that it spreads false and unchecked opinions that confuse minds and contradict true knowledge, which is only attainable through a well-ordered use of reason enlightened by the holy scripture.

Variations on this theme – although couched in secular terms that eschew references to theology – are expressed today in numerous criticisms of the misinformation and fake news that circulate online, misleading people on both political and scientific matters (Bakir and McStay, 2018; Bronner, 2016; Forgas and Baumeister, 2019). These criticisms are sometimes predicated on the conviction that Internet users are a dispersed mass of impressionable people easily induced to believe weird and baseless ideas that run counter to the advice of sane reason as endorsed by trusted experts and institutions. This view resonates with Malebranche's anxieties about the volatility of people's minds in social environments because it depicts the public as fundamentally irrational and social communication as a formidable hotbed of false opinions.

The affective frame: Spinoza

The philosophy of Spinoza, an older contemporary of Malebranche, has recently received sustained attention in the social sciences (Kwek, 2015; Taylor, 2021). While for Hobbes society was the outcome of a deliberate contract and for Malebranche a sort of necessary evil, Spinoza held a naturalist view that saw human beings as spontaneously 'inclined to bond, to stick together, to form societies, which as a consequence should be understood as perfectly natural creations' (Van Bunge, 2012: 92). Indeed, humans are 'fundamentally (inter)dependent creatures, strongly influenced in their affective lives by those of their fellows' (Bijlsma, 2014: 3). Spinoza elaborated on this notion in his *Ethics* (2018; [37] henceforth *E*; citations refer to

book, part and page) where he outlined a theory of the ‘imitation of affects,’ that is, a transmission by sympathy from like to like: ‘[I]f we imagine something similar to us being affected by some emotion, this imagination will express an affection of our body similar to that emotion. Therefore, from our imagining that something similar to us has been affected by some emotion, we are affected by a similar emotion’ (*E*, 3, 27 Proof: 115). This attitude is more evident in children, who ‘laugh or cry merely because they see others laughing or crying; they instantly desire to imitate anything they see others doing; and they desire to have for themselves everything they imagine others are pleased with’ (*E* 3, 32 Scholium: 120). Reciprocal actions of this kind weave together a dense network of emotional and physical exchanges which forms the basis of any community. Although spontaneous, the imitation of affects should not go completely unrestrained. The wise reader was encouraged to ‘keep himself from imitating’ the emotions of vengeful and envious people, but doing so requires ‘a singular power of spirit’ (*E*, 4, Appendix 13: 216). In fact, ‘from the same property of human nature from which it follows that people are compassionate, we see that it also follows that they are envious and ambitious’ (*E*, 3, 32 Scholium: 120). Nevertheless, life in society still produces more good than bad (*E*, 4, Appendix 14: 217; *E*, 4, 35 Scholium: 183) and a person ‘who is led by reason is freer in a commonwealth where he lives by the common decree than in solitude where he obeys only himself’ (*E*, 4, 73: 213).

Matheron (2020: 163–178) has authoritatively argued that this tendency to be affected by others’ actions and states of mind is at the core of Spinoza’s political theory as set out in his last unfinished work, the *Political Treatise*. His anti-hierarchical view of human interactions has induced some authors to hail him as a forerunner of radical democracy (for a critical view, see Renault and Sibertin-Blanc, 2018). However, closer inspection shows that the horizontal network of reciprocal influence is compounded by a vertical and unilateral one by which sovereigns can transmit their own passions and will to their subjects, as explained in the *Theological-Political Treatise*: ‘Though hearts cannot be commanded in the same way tongues can, still hearts are to some extent under the control of the supreme power, which can bring it about in many ways that most men believe, love, and hate whatever it wants them to’ (Spinoza, 2016: 298).

However, Spinoza advocated abiding by the (tolerant) law of the state as the surest warranty of peace and personal safety, particularly for independent thinkers against whom zealous religious leaders might otherwise turn the rage of the multitude (Steinberg, 2010). This is where

his direct experience of religious and political conflicts in Holland enters the picture. Like his contemporaries Hobbes and Malebranche, Spinoza had to cope with the disturbing effects of the influenceable nature of his fellow humans in turbulent times: ‘Imitative affect can also trigger the formation of a frenzied mob, capable of ripping apart a man from a rival political party. Both the emulation of the wise and the emulation of those who are crazed will count as instances of the human predisposition to imitate the affects of those with whom we come into contact’ (Gatens, 2018: 55; see also Matheron, 2020: 133).

Despite these strong reservations, Spinoza’s view of social life is founded on a positive – or at least neutral – assessment of the inclination of human beings to imitate and be imitated, and therefore also of their disposition to group and act together. This affective frame is recognizable today in analyses of social movements that emphasize the [38] emotional bonds tying activists together (Goodwin et al., 2001; Traïni, 2009). It also underpins neo-Durkheimian accounts of mass events as ‘rituals of intensity’ (Gumbrecht, 2021) able to foster social cohesion and produce collective effervescence. More generally, social scientists who denounce the dangers of growing individualism in late-capitalist societies (e.g. Bellah et al., 1985) stress the inherent value of what is also known in sociological parlance as ‘social capital’ (Häuberer, 2011; Putnam, 2000). Spinoza was arguably the first modern thinker to theorize this affective dimension of communitarian life.

Struggling with the social self

Before moving to the liberal tradition, my discussion considers what image of self and society emerges from the above three philosophers. While the heritage of Descartes looms large behind their works, their systems are rather at odds with each other. Hobbes was a pragmatic (and possibly atheist) thinker, wary of religion in general and of Catholicism in particular, whereas Spinoza – a Jewish outcast – was an unconventional believer who crafted a *sui generis* monist metaphysics. Malebranche, for his part, was a dualist and a Catholic priest. What they had in common was a rationalist mindset that underpinned both their distaste for zealotry and superstition, and their reliance on clear and distinct ideas to achieve trustable knowledge. However, they also had a shared interest in concrete social life, although it was observed from a moral point of view. It might well be this concern that explains their unease with the standard Cartesian self. Descartes had developed his famous *cogito* by severing its ties with any external entity and excluding history from his philosophy. This is where his successors did not follow

him. Passionately engaged in current religious and political affairs, they came to focus on and speculate about their human fellows' behavior. In so doing, they began to elucidate social phenomena that had previously received scant attention. As a result, they grew disillusioned about the part played by reason in human deeds. In the first chapter of his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza made it clear that 'those who believe that a people, or men divided over public business, can be induced to live by reason's dictate alone, are dreaming of the poets' golden age or of a fairy-tale' (Spinoza, 1958: 265).

However, all that is not rational is not always blatantly aberrant. It might also be spontaneous and unconscious. In effect, these philosophers discovered that a large part of life goes unperceived. According to Hobbes, most of time people are not masters of their thoughts: 'For, (I believe) the most sober men, when they walk alone without care and employment of the mind, would be unwilling the vanity and Extravagance of their thoughts at that time should be publicly seen: which is a confession, that Passions unguided, are for the most part meere Madnesse' (*L*, 8: 55). Malebranche maintained that the motions of nerves that stir our passions happen without intervention of the will: 'Now it should be noted well that all this happens mechanically, that is to say, that all the various movements of these nerves in all the different passions do not occur through any command of the will, but, on the contrary without its orders, and even against them' (*S*: 98). In Spinoza, unawareness of motives becomes a general rule: '[H]uman beings are mistaken in thinking they are free. This belief consists simply of their being conscious of their actions but ignorant of the causes by which they are determined' (*E*, 2, 35 Scholium: 73). [39]

Far from founding itself on the assumption of a rational, autonomous and self-creating individual, modern European philosophy was born from anxious uncertainty about (or lucid disenchantment with) human passivity, ignorance and dependence. These thinkers found that ordinary people do not conform either to the medieval ideal of a rational creature made in the likeness of God or to the Renaissance project of a free, awake and creative human being. Moreover, the supposed atomism of modern Western anthropology is contradicted by early depictions of life in society as a meld of mutually influencing actors, ideas and wills. Admittedly, a well-educated reason would make it possible for a person to preserve her integrity from external contamination; indeed, such is the aim of philosophical inquiry. As a matter of fact, however, such vigilant defense is the privilege of a few enlightened minds. For the greatest

part of mankind, imitation of alien attitudes and semi-conscious subjection to opinions and charismatic leaders are the norm.

The liberal frame: Locke

Nascent liberalism (or, better, what later came to be known as such) had to deal with this set of intertwining problems. For all his enmity towards Hobbes and Malebranche, Locke nevertheless shared their concern over the social consequences of imagination gone astray, as evidenced in the *First Treatise*: ‘The imagination is always restless, and suggests variety of thoughts, and the will, reason being laid aside, is ready for every extravagant project; and in this state he that goes farthest out of the way, is thought fittest to lead, and is sure of most followers’ (Locke, 2003: 38). The trouble with unbridled fantasy, particularly in religious matters, is that it easily leads to social disorder. Whence derives Locke’s critique of enthusiasm, conceived as a sort of madness that should be treated accordingly (Tabb, 2019). In this he joined other authors who, like his contemporary Leibniz (Strickland and Cook, 2011), examined modern prophecies from a political as well as scriptural point of view. His solution, though, was innovative in that he entrusted all citizens, including the newborn, to the guidance of their peers by resorting to reputation as the most effective means to induce moderation and reasonableness, as he states in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1997; henceforth *Essay*; citations refer to book, chapter, section and page):

I think, I may say, that he, who imagines commendation and disgrace, not to be strong motives on men, to accommodate themselves to the opinions and rules of those, with whom they converse, seems little skilled in the nature, or history of mankind: the greatest part whereof he shall find to govern themselves chiefly, if not solely, by this law of fashion; and so they do that which keeps them in reputation with their company, little regard the laws of God, or the magistrate. (*Essay* 2, 28, 12: 321)

Judged more widespread and efficient than both divine and civil laws, the ‘law of reputation’ (Brady, 2013) is tasked with ensuring the social viability of ideas and behaviors. As it has been observed, ‘man’s natural desire for esteem [...] rendered the Lockean individual pliable, and ensured that his estimations of what was pleasurable or painful were shaped in socially-beneficial ways through his interaction with others’ (Stuart-Buttle, 2017: 660). So central was this social attunement to Locke’s recipe for a [40] virtuous commonwealth that he placed it at

the core of his pedagogical system. In a Lockean education, children ‘learn to distinguish right and wrong according to what is praised and criticized, and they learn to be motivated by the reward of esteem and punishment of shame’ (Brady, 2013: 349).

Locke’s antidote against the unreasonableness of most people most of the time (*Essay*, 2, 33, 4: 354) is of especial relevance here because it assigned to civil society a substantive role that would be stressed by subsequent authors and, in the fullness of time, would become a key driver of the rise of social sciences. But civil society is from the outset a rather ambivalent companion for the individual. On the one hand, it enabled Locke to eschew the Hobbesian endorsement of an absolute sovereign as the only reliable guarantor of social peace. The judgment of peers embodies an informal, non-violent authority that resorts to reproach more than to repression and prevents breaches rather than punish them. On the other hand, however, it subjects each group member to the constant evaluation of their conduct by all the others. As Wolin (1960: 343–351) has famously claimed, Locke was one of the first to describe a modern trend that would evolve into what would come to be called ‘social conformity.’ In an attempt to free individuals both from the grip of intolerant government and from that of their own imaginations, Locke resorted to the judgment of society as a better alternative.

In short, Locke saw social inclinations as a resource that can be adroitly mobilized in order to promote desirable behaviors and to discourage inappropriate ones. This practical program is at the core of what I call the liberal frame, which is still apparent in projects for the use of political, social or technological influences to nudge people into making healthy or otherwise reasonable choices (Sunstein, 2019; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Outside the social sciences, ethologists who point to the evolutionary benefits of pro-social feelings and imitative tendencies (de Waal, 2006; Keupp et al., 2018) can also, by analogy, be seen as working within this tradition. The domain of marketing has probably made the most of these insights. Indeed, while theoretical economics professes its faith in the individualistic models of *homo oeconomicus* and rational choice, its practical branch deploys advertising techniques based on the propensity to imitate others and the suggestive power of status symbols in pursuit of commercial ends. In the field of human resources management, knowledge about social influence acquired from experimental psychology is employed to increase labor productivity. Team building, internal competition, and employee rewards are some of the weapons in the management’s armory (Ledford, 2014; Zeuch, 2016).

The emergence of a modern conception of society

In their struggle against fanaticism, philosophers in the late seventeenth century came to look closely at the habits of religious and political sects which represented both a detested enemy and a fascinating subject. In their refutations of the enthusiasts' manners, we find some of the first modern interpretations of social processes, particularly in the domains of interaction and the formation of organized groups. Hence, post-Cartesian philosophy did not boast the triumph of an autonomous and compact individual self; rather, it presented various instances of what has been defined as 'the anxiety of freedom' (Mehta, 1992). The authors surveyed here followed Descartes' suggestion to devise a method [41] with which to achieve clear, distinct and well-founded knowledge. But in the process, they discovered that real people seldom conform to Descartes' ideal of a detached and self-sustaining mind. Rather, they are entangled in a web of interpersonal influences that make the crafting of a rational and reliable individual a rare achievement, albeit a most precious one. Their quest for a trustable knowledge then became an inquiry into social and political issues.

In addition, the erosion of mediaeval political theory that had centered on a transcendent source of authority posed the dramatic question of the nature and basis of an authority immanent in the social body. This authority existed *de facto*, as Hobbes, Spinoza and Malebranche came to realize on observing the ebbs and flows of sects, crowds and fashions. In the emerging liberalism of Locke, the reciprocal influence of everybody on everybody else began to take the form of modern public opinion. If correctly put to use, the mutual action of any citizen upon any other could – by itself or with only limited recourse to political authority (Stuart-Buttle, 2017: 660) – bring about a tolerant and thriving commonwealth. In Hume, Ferguson and Adam Smith, these early analyses provided the basis for a political economy focused on the social disposition of human beings, its consequences, and the best ways to govern the latter. Concepts of sympathy, imitation and collective behavior were key components of their descriptions of human activity (Broadie, 2006; Smith, 2019, 68-69).

Histories of the rise of the social sciences have usually pointed to the mid-eighteenth century as their formative period (Aron, 1965; Heilbron, 1995; Singer, 2004; Wagner, 2000). While there is solid ground for such a claim, this article has ventured into earlier decades to shed light on 'the foundation of the foundation', that is, the intellectual and political context in the aftermath of European religion wars in which early Enlightenment writers began to focus their attention on social facts. From this foray into the prehistory of the social sciences we can derive

two main conclusions. The first concerns the prime role played by debates on enthusiasm. It was in the course of public battles over the perceived danger of sectarianism that these writers came to look more closely at processes of group formation, mutual influence and social interaction. In doing so, they subjected human behavior to a rational examination that was the product of the ongoing scientific revolution. But while physicists could dream of a totally rational understanding of the natural world, political philosophers and moralists could not dismiss human passions as irrelevant to the evidence. Though lamenting the irksome distortion that passions and imagination brought into the human world, they nevertheless had to take stock of them.

Therefore – and this is my second point – they made a place in their systems for irrational forces like those driving imitation and crowds. By doing so, they acknowledged the strength of non-rational motives in human conduct while at the same time endeavoring to reduce them to rational explanation. In the early 1730s, heated controversy raged in France over a series of miracles and convulsions on the grave of a popular priest in a Parisian cemetery (Kreiser, 1978). The renowned physician Philippe Hecquet published a detailed naturalistic account of these wonders and proposed a sobering remedy:

The young girls in question had to be removed from the nefarious influence of several groups: the churchmen who championed their high-flown religious claims; the laymen who came to their aid by touching their contorted bodies in a too familiar and covertly erotic manner; and the [42] crowds of bystanders who sang their praises. Once the impressionable girls had been placed in infirmaries under the eyes of physicians, once they had been deprived of social approval for their grandiose fantasies of being God's chosen instruments, once (to rephrase the point in Freudian terms) they ceased to derive secondary gain from their pathological behavior, Hecquet was certain that 'all the convulsions will vanish because imagination will have changed its object'. (Goldstein, 1998: 42–43)

Here we have the outline of a sociological analysis maintaining that a given medical, religious and social fact is actually the output of the concurrent action of more or less organized groups and individuals animated by different interests and motivations, without any supernatural intervention. By manipulating these variables, it is possible to change the outcome. Characteristically, reason is located outside the scene: it lies in the scientifically oriented gaze of the spectator, while it is implied that actors themselves cannot understand the meaning of what is happening and are overall unaware of the situation that they contribute to creating. This

posture, I would argue, is already that of the social scientist. Of course, Hecquet was no sociologist and at that time the discipline itself was far from being established. Nevertheless, his interpretation is proof that earlier speculations on the empirical workings of society were sufficiently widespread to inform the judicious inquiry of a rational-minded observer into a complex and confusing public event. Within this framework, crowds, influence, and imitation are already assigned ‘to the dark side of modern society: to something which is intrinsic to the edifice of this social order, and which is associated with all sorts of negative features’ (Borch, 2012, 15).

A discontinuous yet lively tradition of thought

With few exceptions (e.g. McClelland, 1989), emphasis on the late nineteenth century as the golden age of theories of imitation and crowds as expounded in the works of Gabriel Tarde, Scipio Sighele, and Gustave Le Bon has somewhat induced sociologists to lose sight of earlier proponents of analogous views. Indeed, far from being relatively recent or marginal issues, imitation, influence and crowds have presided over the growth of the social sciences since at least the late seventeenth century, paving the way for the outburst of comments on the centrality of mobs in the French Revolution a century later (Gamper, 2007). Imitation was detected not only among individuals but also at the level of entire nations: this perception, already present in Hobbes, would become more prominent in Hume (1998) and Bagehot (1873). Meanwhile, the idea that, by means of reciprocal and continuous interpersonal influences, society shapes each of its members right from their birth was becoming received knowledge in the works of liberals like Shaftesbury, Ferguson and Smith, laying the basis not only for future theories of socialization and social organization (Wolin, 1960) but also for their rejection in the name of a solitary and heroic assertion of individuality – a current of thought that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century with Rousseau and the Romantic movement (Klein, 1998: 156).

Both the docile liberal individual and the indocile Romantic one were contemptuous of crowds and mobs, which still today represent the antithesis to the autonomous, creative and self-affirming self. Indeed, despite their slightly different focuses, the themes of imitation, crowds and influence share a common anti-individual attitude. Not that the [43] self-standing individual is attacked in principle. On the contrary, the writers cited in this article would have liked to see it triumph over its irrational and unaccomplished counterparts, be they the influenceable man of the crowd or the passion-ridden woman. But on considering real people,

they had to acknowledge that in everyday life most of them fall most of the time well short the standard of such a rational and self-possessed individual.

Imitation, crowds and influence then prove to be integral parts of the modern discourse on society. They are motifs underlying the long history of rationalist accounts of collective life, not discoveries that any single author may have made at a particular time. Almost like mycelia – the underground vegetative threads that at unpredictable spots and moments, depending on environmental and atmospheric conditions, give rise to visible mushrooms – these themes run through the theoretical tradition of the past several centuries, ready to reappear in the works of a new author or school, sometimes without cognizance of earlier uses.

Back to the present

This article has been concerned with rediscovering a part of this history; a part that, as I have argued, has played a major role in the early formation of the modern conception of society. In conclusion, I shall explore some ways in which the four authors reviewed can provide useful insights for a sociology of imitation and crowds in the twenty-first century. At the risk of overschematizing their thought, I would suggest that each of the frames that they developed points to a substantive aspect of the topic. The authoritarian view embodied by Hobbes highlights the power of crowds and imitation to breed new centers of authority, often in competition with traditional ones. The rationalist, Cartesian stance represented by Malebranche underlines their propensity to spread new fashions and opinions, also in contrast with more established modes of thought. Indeed, it is their potential to destabilize the *status quo* that makes them unpalatable to both thinkers.

By contrast, Spinoza and Locke paved the way for a more sympathetic – albeit far from uncritical – judgment. On the one hand, Spinoza’s affective attitude emphasized the free and spontaneous course of human passions in the vagaries of imitation and group formation. On the other hand, the liberalism championed by Locke discovered in these irrational tendencies a resource that can be harnessed for social, economic or political purposes.

I maintain that these perspectives are still valuable, and that they resonate with notable features of crowd and imitative dynamics in present-day societies. To begin with, Hobbes sensitizes us to the challenge that large aggregations of people, either physical or online, can raise to institutional powers. This is visible in recent movements, from the Arab Springs to Black Lives Matter and MeToo. It is also at work in the trajectories of new political leaders,

particularly former media celebrities – like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Donald Trump in the US, president Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine or the Five Stars party founder Beppe Grillo in Italy – who are able to translate their large following into powerful electoral clout. These movements and personalities are not in principle either conservative or progressive. The content of their program might be of any political stripe. What they have in common is that all of them use mass trends to leverage social and political changes. They may also contribute – as in the example of Islamic digital preachers discussed earlier (Echchaibi, 2011) – to delocalizing traditional authorities. [44]

For his part, Malebranche can make us attentive to the fact that these same trends also generate knowledge, opinions and worldviews, controversial as they might be. A case in point is Wikipedia, where a community of contributors is intent on correcting one another in order to provide reliable information to the public (Baltzersen, 2022). Online forums of parents, patients, consumers or pet-keepers are also active in exchanging advice and experiences with the aim of helping others to make informed choices. Within each forum some individuals may gain a special reputation for their charisma or reliability, possibly triggering imitative trends (Xiong et al., 2018). However, the recent wave of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Moore, 2016) reminds us that mass-produced knowledge does not necessarily comply with scientific standards of accountability and may even actively breach them in an attempt to establish a new orthodoxy.

Spinoza's affective stance makes clear that interactions, on both a small and massive scale, produce feelings, sometimes with all-too-real consequences: panic at a stadium or in a mass rally can lead to deadly stampedes; and fear has effects on financial markets as well (Lo et al., 2005; Lee and De Andrade, 2011). Besides classical Durkheimian situations of emotional bonds and collective effervescence in face-to-face rituals (Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1995), new mediated forms of shared feelings have emerged online, from mourning (Mitchell et al., 2012) to hate speech (Siegel, 2020), from indignation (Gong, 2015) to psychological support (Mo and Coulson, 2013). It is also generally acknowledged that love and attachment for distant celebrities can be no less strong and sincere than those experienced in the real world (Chia and Poo, 2009; Stever, 2017), with ethical implications when media personalities knowingly use their ascendancy to channel their followers into commercial or political decisions.

This last point introduces Locke's contribution. The liberal frame alerts us to the fact that imitation and crowds generate behavior that, under given circumstances, can be funneled or

molded in certain forms or directions in order to produce a desired outcome. The advertising and data industries are obvious examples. Economic actors in a position to make money from mass behavior, be it online or offline, have the interest and sometimes the means to maneuver it to their advantage. That these efforts are partial and that they may fail and even backfire does not mean that they are not actively pursued – as the commercial success of many digital platforms and social media based on data harvesting and the monitoring of audience trends clearly shows. Such schemes may otherwise be benevolent or paternalist. This is the case of persuasive technology, that is, ‘information technologies aimed at influencing people’s attitudes or behaviors through open and transparent means’ (Oinas-Kukkonen et al., 2019, v).

Taken together, these classical philosophers can enhance our understanding of collective phenomena in the digital age by highlighting that imitation and crowds, be they online or offline, are likely to generate authority, opinions, affects and behavior that have an impact on society at different levels, potentially challenging and switching power in the political, economic and cultural domains. [45]

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