Collective Psychology

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[The] tendency toward affective memory is born from the psychological reason of association, according to which what appears once together in the field of the psyche tends to reawaken. In the struggle for survival, this tendency has grown and has been strengthened by human beings. It is certain that by being able to guess the inner emotion of the soul from external signs, one can bring solace to oneself and to others. The empathy, which has a psycho-physiological basis, was developed in the struggle for life.

The great task of civilization lies in the perfecting of these external manifestations of emotion so as to awaken the inner sensational state with the pleasure or pain that accompanies it in people dispersed in time and space by way of language or art or writing. We would never have experienced Niobe's pain had a poet not sung it, had the song not been gathered in writing, had sculpture not modelled it for us in marble or bronze, had painting or photography not collected it and disseminated it in millions of exemplars.

Science has attempted to make permanent these emotional and fleeting externalizations and express them in all their complexity. Phonographs and cinematographs, which both attempt to conserve fleeting particulars of figure and sound, were responses to this need. In other words, the external manifestations of emotions, which are sympathetic discharges through which we live in other people's affective worlds, attempt through art to become permanent and transmittable in their complexity to people who are distant from us in space and time [...].

But this state of reflection would achieve little if, inside every soul, there were not similar constitutions thanks to which phenomena are born, externalized, and reflected in the same way. For this reason, we say: the soul of the crowd is made possible by the similarity of the psyches that make it up, and thanks to the sympathetic discharges, reflect external states of excitement either in short or long temporal and spatial terms.

Several factors change this tendency of the collective soul. They are: the greater or lesser number of individual psyches that make up the collective soul; the degree of psychic sensitivity; the choice and use of the means of externalizing inner emotion [...] The latter factor, which interests us the most at this time, hinges on the choice and use of sympathetic discharges, and leads us to a discussion of the relationship between the senses and the collective psyche. The senses, in the narrow field of the individual psyche,
are not only the entry ways, the apparatuses, the collectors and condensers of the impressions of the external world, but are also our psyche's means of externalization. The more complex senses of smell, hearing, and sight, of which the latter is the most complex and of the greatest functional utility, all derive from the primitive and indistinct sense of touch. Subsequently, to collect and transmit the emotions of the soul, human beings have, first unknowingly, then knowingly, perfected language passed on through mimicry, exclamations, monosyllabic and radical language, before going on to complex modern idioms. Ultimately, with writing, art, and science, it has attempted to define the inner emotions of the soul and external nature so as to transmit not pale memory but living reality.

We can say that human beings, firstly unconsciously, then consciously, have developed and perfected the means of collecting, expressing, and conserving the inner emotions of the soul and external nature, combining in the struggle for survival, their own souls with those of others into a single psyche.

And such external manifestations of inner emotions of the soul do not have equal importance: there exists among them a functional and representative hierarchy. At the bottom are the so-called senses of attitude (mimicry, exclamation, language); higher up are the plastic arts in which the effect is less intense than the glimpsed or seen spectacle, but which is more permanent and expands further through space. So, whoever witnessed Niobe's torment felt it more than if they had seen it portrayed in marble or on a canvas; but this real torment would have been fleeting had it not been eternalized in the poet's song or in the cold purity of marble. Lastly, at the top of the pyramid are the sympathetic discharges represented by the gestures, the words, the acts of an eternalized reproduction: such is the theatrical representation in which the emotional discharges are similar to the natural ones that tell stories and can be reproduced either by the work of the artist or by machine (cinematographs). From here, the collective soul can easily come forth in the narrow or scattered crowd in time and space, the more the individual neuro-psychic wave communicates by way of complex, natural or artificial means.

Imagine we are faced with a dumb mute who is suffering and can only communicate their suffering by contracting their face and through passionate postures of their person. Pain, as it is reflected in the onlookers, immediately creates a psycho-collective state since one is in the presence of a crowd that is temporally and spatially defined.

It is certain, though, that if the sufferer could shout, discharging more powerfully and complexly the inner emotion of the soul, the effect on the
onlookers would be more vivid and would be felt beyond the location of the sufferer.

Now, if we imagine that the person could shout, and among the onlookers there were some blind and deaf people, these onlookers would be less aware of the pain than they would have been if they had more perfect organs to receive the psychic waves. And if this scene of pain was represented in marble or on a canvas, it would leave a lesser impression than if it was seen, but more than if it was read; and if, in the end, it was represented on stage accompanied by music and in the cinema it would have an effect as if it was alive, if not more alive, than if the scene was experienced in real life.

In conclusion, we can say: the temporally and spatially defined crowd the collective soul is formed by an exciting stimulus that invades individual psyches at the same time and with such great force that it leaves more than an isolated impression. This excitement, which arrives as a nervous wave in individual psyches, can come out in sympathetic discharges (expressions of the face, shouts, etc.), which combine and increase in each of us, bringing them together with the inner psychic emotion through which the collective phenomenon becomes stronger and more intense.

This is a static condition of the collective soul caused by a rapid and simultaneous invasion of excitement, by way of the common entry and exit of the nervous waves in the brain that combine together.

In the scattered crowd, the excitement is not rapid and simultaneous, it is successive; and, because the souls do not remain isolated, external excitement is projected among them giving each of them their own and personal excitement. The sympathetic discharges of the senses are prolonged and perpetuated in art, which tends toward complex and powerful representations. We are then faced with a dynamic form of the collective psyche. Lastly, just as in the crowds there is a tendency toward stability, passing, that is, from an undifferentiated to a differentiated state and to live for a longer or shorter time, psychology’s static and dynamic phenomena follow one another. In fact, every static phenomenon attempts to unfold itself in time and become dynamic, wherein great emotion is not lost. Rather, it is relived as memory and as more or less faithful representations of truth that move other crowds or the same crowd at a later time and create in the future other identical psycho-collective emotions. In this way, a great artistic exposition, in a thousand ways, can be experienced again by other peoples and persons, it calls others to it, puts in the soul of distant people a part of that crowd’s feelings where it happened and creates from it a psychic reflex: it does not lose, in a word, thanks to modern apparatus of
representation and transmission, the virtue of excitement, which is able to awaken psycho-collective facts. [...].

As we said in the opening chapters of this book, in the lower crowds, the collective soul is formed by way of simple sympathetic discharges, such as the voice, signs, mimicry, which do not transmit inner motions a great distance. This is why we have chosen to limit ourselves and work with a certain consistency in terms of space and time; this is also why there is such a real harmony between the image, the limited crowd and cerebral mass, between the sympathetic discharges and neurons.

These neurons, as we sleep, shorten and the unity of the brain fractures or breaks. In the same way, if an uncanny force isolates the individuals of a defined crowd, since the sympathetic discharges are no longer possible at a distance, the collective psyche stops since its basic material and its organs of transmission have been struck.

And the uncanny causes can be the affecting action of one crowd on another: for example, a line of soldiers at a demonstration by striking workers; like the atmospheric agents that rupture the unity of the crowd, such as falling rain; basins of water thrown on an outdoor meeting; like feelings that rise brusquely and have a strong dispersive power, such as the public’s fear of a fire in a theatre.

Such affective movements, if they brusquely end the life of a defined crowd, have little value for the crowd scattered in time and space, which has its own way of composing the sympathetic discharges at a distance, since it is an un-doer of crowds and has its own means of dissolution.

That which, in fact, constitutes the essence of a scattered crowd is the possibility of sending the inner emotions of the soul through time and space by way of sympathetic discharges that are capable of being projected far. In the sympathetic discharges—as we said—there is a hierarchy among the forms of mimicry and interjection, according to one ascends from projecting inner emotions a short distance so that they last only an instant, to the word, to the plastic and representational arts, to phonographs and to cinematographs, which not only send a feeling through time and space, but attempt to reproduce it in all its complexity and make it evocable whenever one wants.

The scattered crowd rests, then, on the potential for great projections of an inner emotion, common to many people, and that forms the cement of the collective soul. And this cement is both material and ideal; it is, for example, a newspaper and the idea it disseminates; it is a series of books, pamphlets that have been inspired by a thought, and the thought itself that it sustains and propagates [...].
It seems from this that the dissolution of a crowd is tied to this central and coordinating theme, which is both material and ideal, both means of diffusion and nervous-psychic wave, thought or feeling, or the one and the other together. To break up a scattered crowd it makes no sense to undermine its material cohesion, which being minimal, is extremely resistant. Rather, it is necessary to operate on the apparatus of long range dissemination, which is the cement of the collective soul.