Kurt Baschwitz

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8 Third Book: On Mass Politics and Parliamentary Democracy

In a sense, Baschwitz’s other 1938 book was both a warning and a recommendation. The warning: Hitler was really set on a new war; concessions would not buy ‘peace for our time’, as Chamberlain famously was to say after their Munich meeting. The recommendation: not to overestimate the ‘unstoppable dark forces’ of popular support for the Nazis. More pushback from citizens and legal authorities might still be able to break their spell, he felt.

His book revisited and challenged the then-current clichés about mass psychology that were widespread throughout Europe. The book was published in German as Du und die Masse (You and the mass). It was published in the Netherlands, but only later translated into Dutch as Denkend mens en menigte (Rational man and the crowd). In my view, this is his most interesting book. But under the circumstances, it failed to have the impact that it merited.

International worries

Throughout the 1930s, Baschwitz had avidly followed the evolution of European events through both Dutch and foreign newspapers. From early 1935 onwards, fascism and National Socialism seemed to begin their international push, with Mussolini Italy’s invasion of Haile Selassie's Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and the slow unravelling of the young League of Nations. This was soon to be followed by massive Italian and German support for the fascists in the Spanish Civil War (culminating in the notorious bombing of Guernica, later painted by Pablo Picasso).

The Netherlands Medical Association (NMA) helped organize an international Appeal to Statesmen from 350 noteworthy mental health professionals from the major countries of Western Europe and North America, warning against a re-emerging war psychosis, and imploring them to invest as least as much in peace efforts as they had in the new arms race. Queen Wilhelmina of the (still neutral) Netherlands reportedly also supported the manifesto.¹

¹ See ‘War and peace – Manifesto by psychiatrists’ provided by Dr. J. Roorda, honorary secretary of the NMA, to The British Medical Journal, published in October 1935, p. 694-695.
It was in this context that Baschwitz decided to elaborate on ideas he had already tentatively put forward in some sections of his previous book Der Massenwahn, and in lectures he had given since. One should caution that terms like mass, crowd, and group have different etymologies and slightly different connotations in German and Dutch, but also in French and English – and thus fit into slightly different association networks in each language. This has often led to a subtle dislocation of meaning in the translation of the key titles and texts about mass/crowd/group psychology.

At the time, two kinds of arch-images of the mass/crowd/group had become closely connected with the rise of National Socialism in Germany – representing polar opposite views. The first consisted of the recurring chaotic mobs and street fights of the 1920s, started by rowdies of competing party militias, that often left many wounded or dead lying on the pavement in their wake.

The second was that of the highly regimented Nazi rallies of the 1930s, which annually displayed their seeming discipline and might – ultimately in a giant square built for this purpose and their successive manifestations in the party seat, Nuremberg. This image was impressively captured by Hitler’s favourite filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl in her notorious Nazi documentary Triumph des Willens (Triumph of the Will). It projected a kind of spellbinding, Messianic atmosphere.

This is well illustrated by the recollections of some ordinary people. One young girl who lived in Nuremberg at the time vividly remembered the visits of the Führer:

One could hear the hails from afar, so you knew the car with Hitler was approaching. And then the ‘Heil’ came ever closer, and became increasingly louder, it was a deafening choir of people shouting ‘Heil’. Of course I also shouted that, and raised my arm. And then he stepped out of his car, walked from the car to the entry of the town hall, and one could see him rather close up.

2 In the last (8th) full chapter of the 1932 edition, particularly sections 2 and 4.

Everybody was enthusiastic, my uncle said: ‘Isn’t it fantastic?’ But my father said: ‘It is a great theatrical piece, it is Goethe’s Faust’.

This was also Baschwitz’s opinion.4

**Cultural pessimism about the revolt of the masses**

After the apocalyptic conflagration of the previous ‘war to end all wars’, German philosopher Oswald Spengler had published two massive volumes on *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, translated as *The Decline of the West*. He argued that history moved in cycles of rises and falls, and that Europe and Germany were on a downward slope unless there was to be some fundamental rebirth. These ideas later converged with those of the Nazis.

On the eve of the Spanish Civil War, Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset published his influential *La Rebelión de las Masas*, soon translated into English as *The Revolt of the Masses*, as well as into German, Dutch, and many other languages. He expressed doubts about mechanization and massification, about mass society and mass man: their anonymity, uniformity, and mediocrity. This book resonated widely, most of all among the established cultural elites, both religious and secular, who felt their privileged position threatened.

By the mid-thirties, the famous Dutch historian of mentalities Johan Huizinga joined the fray with *In de Schaduwen van Morgen*, translated into English by his son as *In the Shadows of Tomorrow*, and at the same time into German and other languages. This work began as a mere speech that developed into an essay, then became a small book and a big bestseller. Huizinga denied being a cultural pessimist. He spoke out against Nazism and anti-Semitism, and warned that the madness of the modern world might soon erupt into a frenzy and a fury that would stun everyone.

In his new book, Baschwitz discussed the visions of such Cassandras as well as the emergence of real mass politics during the interwar years.5 Lenin’s October Revolution, Mussolini’s March on Rome, Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch and subsequent other *coups de force* were all driven by a certain view

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of mass psychology and seemed to reconfirm its basic correctness – or so it was said. Dominant leaders turned out to be able to grab power by appealing to the darkest instincts of masses/crowds/groups in crisis situations, and thus impose a radical change of regime.

These ideas derived from the early mass psychology of the 1890s. The first monograph about *La Folla Delinquente* (*The criminal crowd*) was a master’s thesis by Scipio Sighele (later himself an irredentist/nationalist movement leader). Sighele was a student of the socialist party leader Enrico Ferri: a lawyer associated with the newly emerging criminology school of Cesare Lombroso.

They argued that in riots, the mass did indeed make individuals do stupid and bad things, through fermentation and contagion, suggestion and imitation. But for some (‘born’ or even ‘habitual’ criminals), this corresponded to their inclinations: they should therefore be taken out of circulation to protect society. For ‘occasional’ criminals, however, this went *against* their normal inclinations, and they should be let off with only a light sentence, or even a mere warning. (Better and more detailed explanations of the mental processes involved here were later developed by a well-known American social psychologist of Italian stock, Philip Zimbardo).6

After French colleague Henri Fournial had done a Ph.D. thesis on the question in legal medicine, the same subject was then picked up by French criminologists like Gabriel Tarde, and medical men like Gustave Le Bon. The latter theorized about a ‘dissolution’ of the civilized mind in the crowd, leading to a resurgence of primitive tendencies, and a heightened receptivity to the inflammatory slogans of the others and/or of their strong leaders.7

Le Bon’s apodictic book had meanwhile become a national and international bestseller, and influenced most major politicians of the early 20th century: democratic or dictatorial, left or right. Large fragments of Hitler’s notorious *Mein Kampf*, for instance, were in fact copied straight out of the German translation of Le Bon.8 Baschwitz’s mass psychology pupil and successor Brouwer later assigned me to investigate the roots of this approach for my own Ph.D. doctoral dissertation in archives throughout Italy and France, which I did.

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6 See Zimbardo.
7 See the histories by Barrows, Nye, and McClelland, as well as Giner.
8 For a detailed comparison, see Stein.
Baschwitz’s plea for a different approach

Baschwitz claimed that the earlier mass psychologists’ view of crowds and their actions was slanted, and sometimes based on perceptual illusions. The authors had a tendency to exclude themselves (and their social category) from the mass/crowd/group, and to look at it from above and afar. Furthermore, they contrasted themselves to it in absolute terms: good/bad, rational/irrational, and so on. Instead, Baschwitz proposed the use of a ‘relative scale’: there might be some of that in certain crowd events, but not all of it and not always. He also proposed a ‘hierarchical principle’ and differentiation: a clear distinction between the various degrees of individuals’ involvement in the group and its actions.9

First of all, Baschwitz distinguished between ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ masses – as we have already seen. The visible ones were physically assembled in one place at one time: the participants would be able to see and hear (and smell and touch) each other. They could engage in direct interaction, such as during a performance or a demonstration. The invisible masses, on the other hand, were physically dispersed and only psychologically connected through communication channels and the mass media (like posters, flyers, and newspapers). They could only engage in indirect interaction.

This observation (which he ascribed to American social psychology pioneer Ross) was in fact older: it had already been implied by Le Bon himself. Baschwitz was apparently unaware that it had also thereafter been the focus of Tarde’s last book (a collection of earlier essays) on L’Opinion et la Foule (Public opinion and crowds), and that it had even inspired a Ph.D. doctoral dissertation in German on Masse und Publikum (The mass and the public) by American journalist/sociologist Robert Park – only translated into English very, very much later.

During the intervening years, Park had become the pioneer of an entirely different American approach to mass psychology: the collective behaviour sociology of naturally emerging social phenomena (later developed further by Herbert Blumer and his ‘symbolic interactionist’ school). Putting visible and invisible masses/crowds/groups on the same plane allowed Baschwitz to approach the dynamics of newspaper audiences, persuasion campaigns, and public opinion in a similar way – which became one of the hallmarks of his life’s work.

The subtitle of Baschwitz’s book was Contribution to an exact mass psychology. While the first edition focused on an empirical mass psychology

9 See the Introduction and Section I-8-d. Compare Ebels-Dolanová, p. 187.
(briefly mentioning new social psychological experiments and surveys), only the second edition (of 1951) devoted more attention to the exact numerical measurement of certain aspects.

Instead, the larger part of the book was again based on a comparative historical method, which Hans Delbrück had already applied to wars, Crane Brinton was applying to revolutions, and Barrington Moore would apply to the social origins of dictatorship and democracy. Baschwitz compared different instances of major riots, lynchings, and more, and critically reviewed the standard interpretations provided. His intent was to show that there was much more to them than originally met the eye.

**Baschwitz’s ‘empirical’ mass psychology**

Baschwitz began the empirical part of his book by reconsidering the effects of wild riots. The most classic examples were the taking of the Bastille prison in Paris on 14 July 1789, or the Tuileries on 10 August 1792. Similar examples concerned the events of 1830-1831, 1847-1848, those in France of 1870-1871, or those in Germany and elsewhere of 1918-1919. In each case, precise circumstances played a key role in each successive stage: tentative steps, impunity, the most radical taking the lead. It is the superstitious belief in the ‘devilish crowd’ and ‘mass daemonia’ itself, he said, that contributes to the fateful paralysis of bystanders and authorities.

These reactions may affect the troops as well: the rebels may take over their command intact, the troops may begin to fraternize with them, or the army may begin to disintegrate. But during the events in Italy in 1922, or in Germany in 1923 and beyond, it was often the authorities themselves that made the troops stand back, when fascist and Nazi gangs tried to impose their will on groups of people. If it were not for these orders, things would have turned out differently: tentative and unorganized crowds, Baschwitz emphasized, can hardly ever overwhelm decided, organized troops.

Both invisible and visible masses may seem to adhere to some new idea or demand. But even massive crowds can only mobilize a small percentage of an entire city population. Furthermore, a large part of any crowd consists of mere onlookers and bystanders. Many may drift along, but only a few take the lead, and an even smaller group commits violent acts. This was the case during successive republican revolutions in England, America, and France, and more recently also in Germany.

French Blanquists during the Paris Commune, Russian Bolsheviks, Italian fascists, and early Nazis claimed to represent widespread popular
feelings, but in fact they were very small minorities imposing their will on other people. They were reluctant to call a ‘general strike’, for instance; and on some occasions their designs were even frustrated by general strikes called by their opponents.

Furthermore, unorganized masses, crowds, and mass meetings are helpless against persistent troublemakers or organized heavies sent by competitors. This may lead them to appoint their own ‘stewards’. The mounting hostilities can easily escalate into recurring brawls, street fights, and near civil war – as it did in Italy and Germany in the early twenties. But it was the changing economic tide of the late twenties that ultimately brought the Nazis their decisive election gains. The president and the army command failed to uphold democracy, law and order, handing dictatorial powers to Hitler and a small clique that could not be voted out again.

Baschwitz cautioned, however, that it is also a misconception that the mere use of force is sufficient to suppress a mass movement: witness Bismarck’s failed Kulturkampf against the Catholics, or his Sozialistengesetze against the Left. Such measures often provoke tenacious resistance instead. Even the use of police goons against the opposition is often ineffective or counterproductive (as in Tsarist Russia). A police state as such cannot impose permanent acquiescence on a population.

Terror and the dangers of acquiescence

According to Baschwitz, classical mass psychology was misleading. It is only the paralysis of the will to act on the side of the legal authorities, which provides violent active minorities with the necessary room to impose their designs, and in turn provokes the acquiescence of peaceful passive majorities. But this acquiescence is only partial and temporary. It is caused by a distortion of ordinary judgment, and a suppression of contrary feelings.

It is also wrong to say that violent minorities commit such crimes ‘under the protection’ of peaceful majorities. Baschwitz says the opposite is often true: violent minorities commit such crimes by terrorizing peaceful majorities. People standing up to them do indeed take a risk of attracting their attention and malevolence. But these people later tend to exaggerate these earlier risks by invoking the myth of ‘mass daemonia’: the dark unstoppable force of the crowd. Examples were the killing of innocent hostages, for instance in Munich in 1919. But often ‘mass crimes’ are not committed by masses at all, but by active minorities hiding within them.
This even holds true for most hate crimes against outlawed groups and minorities: religious, racial, national, etc. Already during the Middle Ages, Jews were blamed for the Black Death, heresies, and much more. The Turkish Muslim authorities considered the minority Armenian orthodox Christians along the border to be a dangerous Fifth column during the First World War with the Russians. Poor whites in the U.S. South played a large role in the Ku Klux Klan and the lynchings of blacks. Curiously, this hate is often legitimized with erotic fantasies about the ‘danger to our girls and women’ – even in Streicher’s notorious Nazi rag *Der Stürmer*.

There is thus a ‘differential affect’ reserved for the in-group and the out-group, Baschwitz observed. Authors of the ‘Roman school’ had said that even trial juries, mass meetings, and national parliaments often displayed characteristics of the anonymous and seemingly unanimous crowd. Although this was occasionally exaggerated, it remained true that a ‘silent panic’ often captures passive majorities when they are confronted by vocal minorities.

When they remain inactive in the face of persecution, Baschwitz said, silent majorities strive to maintain their self-respect by implicitly assuming some kind of guilt on the part of the victims (as he had already observed in his previous work on mass propaganda and enemy images). This was another example of ‘unburdening oneself’ and the need for ‘evening out’ contradictory mental tendencies.

The facts provided in this book by Baschwitz thus contradict the claims of the pessimist and Roman schools: that the mental level (morality, intelligence) of the individual automatically sinks when in a crowd. Of course there are lighter forms of credulity, such as those concerning faith healers or ‘get rich quick’ schemes. But we have found no proof that a majority of ordinary people can be brought to violence, said Baschwitz – under normal circumstances. It is the intimidation by violent minorities, the paralysis of the authorities, and the ‘silent panic’ among peaceful majorities that are responsible for most derailments.

A system of government collapses, said Baschwitz, when its leading representatives get the feeling that they fail at the tasks that the times have imposed on them, or become demoralized over the consequences of their errors. Conversely, it can also happen when the subjects give up their consent and acquiescence, and demand justice. This may indeed lead to sporadic revolts. But mass psychology must relinquish its belief in fairy tales and magic formulas concerning mass daemonia and leader prestige (i.e., charisma).
Publication, translation, and reception

Baschwitz may initially have hoped for a temporary weakening of the Nazis grip on power, which would allow him to publish or promote *Du und die Masse* in Germany. Yet it was already too late, and it never happened. Fortunately, almost 50 Dutch publishers had set up a German-language division, and one picked it up. But the impact abroad was of course very limited.

Baschwitz authorized a translation into Dutch, but by the time it was ready to go to print in 1940 the German invasion had already taken place. It was thus only upon liberation in 1945 that it was first published in Dutch – without any changes. Meanwhile, Finland had been subject to a tug-of-war between Germany and the Soviet Union. It had a Swedish-speaking elite and some Swedish-language publishing houses, one of which published a Swedish translation of Baschwitz’s book in 1944. Such ideas were apparently well received by the Swedish newspapers.10

In 1951, a new German edition of the book was published (by the more academic publisher Brill in Holland – now led by his friend, history professor Nicolaas Posthumus), and a new Dutch edition as well – by the same publisher as before. There were some minor changes in terminology: the ‘Great War’ became the ‘First World War’, etc. There was an additional inserted page before the older discussion of Hitler and his *Mein Kampf*. But subsequent parts on Nazism and anti-Semitism remained largely the same. Assistants also added a register.

The text was re-organized somewhat: five chapters with 21 sections became two-and-a-half parts with 22 sections. The major changes concerned the insertion of entirely new post-war sections about more recent Anglo-American social science literature. The book had previously just mentioned older classics (translated into German) like *Social Psychology* by Edward Ross and *The Group Mind* by William McDougall. But in this new edition, Baschwitz briefly discussed a whole range of newer Anglo-Saxon sociological and psychological publications from the interwar period. These included works by the aforementioned Walther Lippmann and Harold Lasswell on public opinion and persuasion, but also ones by Floyd Allport, Charles Bird, Charles Ellwood, Franklin H. Giddings, and Kimball Young.

Even George Gallup and the newly developed ways to gauge opinions and attitudes (through representative samples and later even scales) were

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10 The cover mentioned praise for them by reviewers in the *Svenska Dagbladet*, and others in Göteborg and Lund papers.
mentioned. While his own knowledge of the English language was still limited, Baschwitz had stirred the university's assistants and students to go orient themselves with these materials immediately after the end of the new war. He had apparently become aware that the recent overseas approaches opened new vistas fundamentally different from the continental European approach thus far.

The first 1938 German edition of Du und die Masse, meant as a warning, was widely reviewed as such in the major Dutch newspapers, but of course not in the German or Austrian ones. An elaborate review in the liberal Amsterdam Algemeen Handelsblad linked its lessons to Hitler and Mein Kampf. The Amsterdam De Telegraaf linked it to the manifestations of anti-Semitism. The heading of the review in the Hague Het Vaderland even linked it to political psychology – a new field that some foreign scholars had hinted at, but that was only to take off many decades later.11

At one point, there was even talk of an English translation of Du und die Masse. German-speaking American officials were all over Europe after the war. A high officer at the headquarters of the U.S. Air Force and the ‘National Military Establishment’ in Washington at one point personally recommended the book to the publishing house newly founded by Henry Regnery in Chicago: witness a (partial) copy of his 1954 letter among Baschwitz’s papers. It said:

I want to call your attention to the work of Kurt Baschwitz, professor of social psychology at Amsterdam University. I [...] consider him to be the leading authority in the field of crowd psychology [...] I am particularly impressed by his book Du und die Masse, now in its second edition. To my knowledge this book is the only current analysis which deals scientifically with the problems of revolutionary mass behaviour [...]. I am sure that Baschwitz would agree to include into an American edition examples and footnotes which would render the book most useful to the American reader.12

11 5 December 1938, 12 February 1939 and 22 November 1938, respectively. Gustave Le Bon had also hinted at the field, as had Graham Wallas. Today it is a thriving discipline, with an international and several national societies, annual meetings, a journal, handbooks, and more.
12 A copy of the first page (with a letterhead) of the typewritten letter is in File 5-6 of the Baschwitz papers (‘unsorted correspondence’). Unfortunately the second page with the signature is missing, so we do not know who sent it.
I vaguely remember having once bumped into an American colleague at a political psychology conference, who said he had very much liked the book, and had tried to promote its translation. But apparently to no avail.

Baschwitz was also interviewed at the time for the Dutch edition of the *Reader’s Digest* – one of the dozens of editions in foreign languages that reportedly made its global circulation exceed a record 10 million at one point. But it is not clear whether this interview made its way into other editions, or to the U.S. itself. According to his then-assistant Brouwer, the same *Het Beste* even offered to pay a modest sum for the interview, and asked to what good cause he would like to donate it. Baschwitz reportedly responded that he would like to spend it to the good cause of ... a decent suit – as he was still in dire need.13

So, unfortunately, Baschwitz and his provocative ideas on mass psychology remained largely unknown on the other side of the North Sea and of the Atlantic.

**Excerpt from *You and the mass* (Last paragraphs, with its overall conclusions)**14

Let’s beware of an ideology that speaks of a struggle between ideas, as if these were autonomous spiritual beings! An exact mass psychology is concerned with people of flesh and blood. Not a single idea, however noble, is safe from terrorists infringing right and the law – they can even be turned into their complete opposites.

Someone capable of normal thinking and pervaded with the truth of his ideas, believes that they are so persuasive that sooner or later they will also come to illuminate other brains. [But only] exceptional exemplars of our species arrogate themselves [the right] to force whatever seems right and good to them upon others – by horror and blood, suffering and humiliation. They should not be judged for the various colours they wore and still wear at each separate moment, but for the abnormality they have in common, the disdain for people inspired by delusions of grandeur.

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13 Goudsblom, de Rooy, and Wieten, p. 31-2.
14 Translated from the Dutch version. The last paragraphs again have rather long and contorted sentences with plenty of appositional clauses. I have tried to provide a literal translation, but felt forced to break them up into almost double the original number of much shorter sentences.
War is the father of all evil: the First World War led to a mental paralysis. It weighed on the governments and peoples of the civilized world like a burden of lead. It cleared the path for violent minorities. It also led too many independently thinking contemporaries astray, into doubting the force and the power of free thought and its honest expression. On the basis of provisional results obtained so far, however, exact mass psychology teaches us the following.

[The belief in] suffocating, frightening, irrational powers [that are] dominating the collective thought and action of human masses is based on an optical illusion. As is the frightening belief in the irresistibility of bullies that speculate on the brutal and blind passions of the mass. In reality, they are only capable of profiting from a transitory state of paralysis, resulting from fear and helplessness.

We want to hope, that practical politics will also acknowledge this important finding prepared by mass psychology. The rediscovery of the overwhelmingly large majority of decent people.\(^\text{15}\)

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15 My italics. The German version has ‘League’ for ‘majority’. Remember his plea for the founding of a ‘League of Decent People’ in the D.A.Z., during a brief lull in Germany, on 14 August 1927. Also compare the dictum attributed to the 18th century founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke: ‘All that is required for evil to prevail, is for good men to do nothing’.