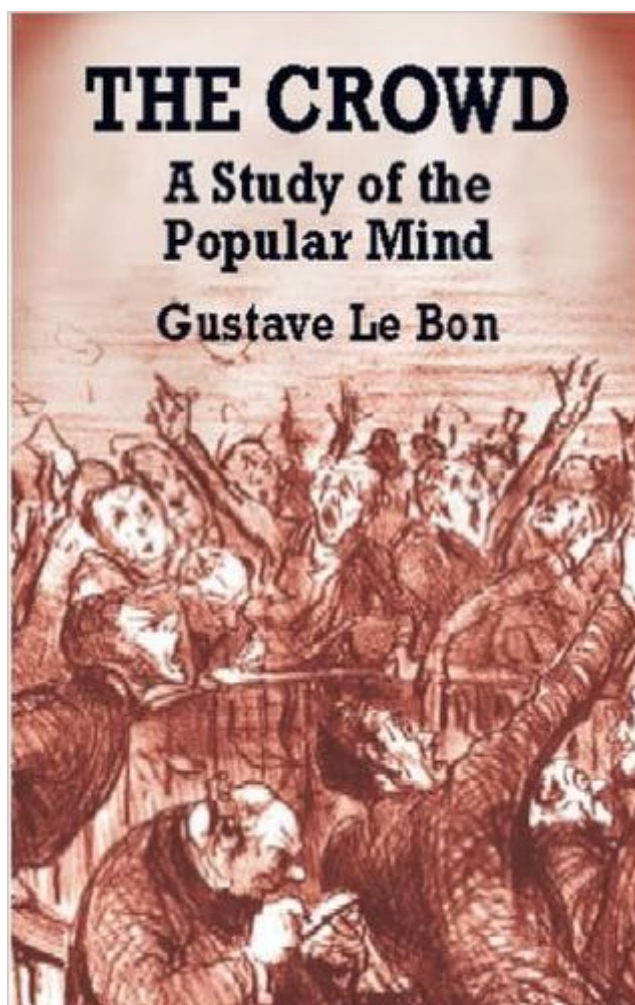


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# The Crowd: A Study Of The Popular Mind



## Synopsis

One of the most influential works of social psychology in history, *The Crowd* was highly instrumental in creating this field of study by analyzing, in detail, mass behavior. The book had a profound impact not only on Freud but also on such twentieth-century masters of crowd control as Hitler and Mussolini — both of whom may have used its observations as a guide to stirring up popular passions. In the author's words, "The masses have never thirsted after the truth. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim." Although the volume focuses on crowd psychology, it is also brilliantly instructive on the effects of the generally accepted beliefs of a nation's citizenry on the processes of history. Among the topics covered here are general characteristics and mental unity of the crowd; the crowd's sentiments and morality; its ideas, reasoning power, and imagination; opinions and beliefs of crowds and the means used by leaders to persuade; classification of crowds, including criminal and electrical assemblages, as well as the functioning of criminal juries and parliamentary assemblies. A must-read volume for students of history, sociology, law, and psychology, *The Crowd* will also be invaluable to politicians, statesmen, investors, and marketing managers. "Any study of crowd behavior, popular psychology, fascism, etc. would do well to begin with Le Bon's work." — Anson Rabinbach, Professor of History, Princeton University.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind by French social theorist Gustave LeBon is a short

treatise on the principles of large gatherings of people. As the disclaimer on the title page notes, the ideas in LeBon's book were popular at the time of the late 19th century but are no longer in vogue today. The reasons for this are obvious, as LeBon unpretentiously puts to fault all the rhetoric about "democracy," "equality," "fraternity," and "equality" as being mere catchphrases that self-serving demagogues use to control the spirit of the masses. He cites the French Revolution and the demands of Socialism and Communism during his time. LeBon outlines the way crowds tend to think (in vivid images illogically connected), how they reason (they don't for all practical purposes), how they express exaggerated emotion, how they are very quick to take action without coherent thought and of the general extreme-conservatism and intolerance of crowds. The individual who becomes part of a crowd tends to lose himself, and feels invincible as he is aware of the similarity of mind and purpose of all those surrounding him. LeBon notes how individuals become unthinking entities of the Herd, and can be unconsciously made to do acts, which can either be of great criminality or heroism. The reasoning of the solitary individual is superior to that of a crowd which has no individuality. All are "equal" in a crowd where, for instance, a mathematician is caught up in the same spirit as a laborer and class and intelligence differences fall to the lowest common denominator. One advantage of crowds is that they can express the spirit of a class, caste, or race of a people better than the individual can, and that crowds are capable of great deeds such as victory in a war or the spread of a religion that would be beyond simply one person's effort. The back title of *The Crowd* mentions that Hitler, Mussolini in addition to Freud were familiar with LeBon's work, and it is readily apparent that their followers acted very similar to the behavior that LeBon describes. The basic point of *The Crowd* is this: For Better or Worse, Never Underestimate the Power of Stupid People in Large Groups.

I think the reviewer Derek Pillion summed up this book rather well. But I want to relate something that came into my mind after reading the following passage from chapter III: "A hundred petty crimes or petty accidents will not strike the imagination of crowds in the least, whereas a single great crime or a single great accident will profoundly impress them, even though the results be infinitely less disastrous than those of the hundred small accidents put together. The epidemic of influenza, which caused the death but a few years ago of five thousand persons in Paris alone, made very little impression on the popular imagination. The reason was that this veritable hecatomb was not embodied in any visible image, but was only learnt from statistical information furnished weekly. An accident which should have caused the death of only five hundred instead of five thousand persons, but on the same day and in public, as the outcome of an accident appealing strongly to the eye, by

the fall for instance of the Eiffel Tower [sic], would have produced, on the contrary, an immense impression on the imagination of the crowd.... To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them."What came into my mind after reading that passage? Airplanes and collapsing towers. This book is a must read for any thinking person.

This is a short book whose pages have a far greater impact than the title might suggest. As many reviewers have already noted, the book simply explains the mechanisms that guide the popular imagination and outlines the simple principles that enable the few who grasp them to hold control over vast populations. What struck me particularly was how the recipes for power suggested by Gustave Le Bon are reflected in contemporary neo-liberal economic and socio-cultural agendas. Those who are involved in developing education policies will find the book especially useful. Writing over a century ago, Le Bon criticized the liberal education system and advocated the more common sense practical type of learning that neo-liberal agendas have been pushing for since the late 70's. It also makes a strong case for the impact of simple messages over crowds. Common sense arguments, logic and thoughtful concerns, Le Bon argues, are lost on the masses. Indeed, it is widely believed that this was one of Benito Mussolini's favorite books. We are living ever more in an era of simplistic thinking. By reading this book you will understand how this has occurred and how demagogues rise to power. As with another reviewer, I also stay away from crowds. This book unraveled the unconscious instincts that always make me avoid crowds and anything that is too popular.

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