

Rabble, Masses or Humanity: Kraus and Canetti Responding to the July Revolt of 1927

Sunil CHOUDHARY¹ 

¹Assistant Professor, Amity University Rajasthan,
Amity School of Languages, Jaipur, India

Corresponding author: Sunil Choudhary

E-mail: schoudhary@jpr.amity.edu

ABSTRACT

The Justice Palace Fire in Vienna on the 15th July 1927 was a pivotal moment in the trajectory of the young First Austrian Republic. Also known as the July Revolt, it was an eruption of a long-standing partisan conflict. The resulting political deadlock left no ground for reconciliation and gave way to Austrofascism in the 1930s. The July Revolt was also a crucial episode in the evolution of crowd theory. The response of the Austrian government and the Viennese Press to this tragedy rested on the foundations of mass psychology and framed it as a struggle between Authority and Chaos. The Viennese Publicist Karl Kraus picked this account of ‘rabble’ apart in his periodical *Die Fackel* and emphasised the individual humanity of its victims. Author Elias Canetti witnessed the incidents of the 15th July himself. His book *Crowds and Power* (1960) admittedly drew many insights from that day’s memory. In contrast to mass psychology, Canetti’s crowd theory gave agency to the people who became masses. Kraus’ stress on humanity aided the transition from contempt-driven mass psychology to a fast anthropological and value-neutral crowd theory. This article examines the evolution of crowd theory catalysed by the July Revolt.

Keywords: crowds, mass psychology, Elias Canetti, Karl Kraus, Vienna

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Introduction

The transient nature of crowds has made them subject to conjecture. In the decades preceding and succeeding 1914, the individual was pitted against an amorphous collective: crowds or masses.¹ Unlike the long-term bonds of traditional collectives such as family or community, the transient bursts of common emotions characterised masses. Individuals, so went mass psychological theory, experienced a decrease in their rational capabilities while being part of the masses. The interest in this phenomenon rose with the publication of Gustave Le Bon's book *La Psychologie des Foules* in 1895. This work depicts the history of civilisation as an ongoing struggle between creative minorities, or elites, and destructive crowds.

Provisionally, the masses could be defined as transitory collectives that have little in common but certain strong emotions such as love, fear, or anger. A number of theories explore the crowd phenomenon and what it arguably represents. Some of these will be discussed later in this article. These theories vary greatly in their objectives and points of emphasis, but they are underpinned by 'Das Massenerlebnis', the occurrence of a mass experience (Ebine, 2004, p. 170). This entails changes that loosen individual's inner boundaries/inhibitions and reduce the societal distance between the self and others. Driven by emotions, the individual becomes part of a larger and amorphous collective. For mass psychologists like Le Bon, such a development affected the rational capabilities of a person for the time being. Thus, the 'emotional' masses long appeared to be the antithesis to the 'rational' individual.

Using the example of the Viennese July Revolt of 1927, this article examines the transition from mass psychology to Canetti's crowd theory. The revolt was a pivotal moment in the interwar period that altered the political trajectory of the Austrian First Republic. The images and impressions of the revolt exerted their influence on various intellectuals and authors. Apart from Kraus and Canetti, Robert Musil presented a similar climactic unrest in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*. Hermann Broch was also very interested in crowd dynamics, as evident from his theory of mass hysteria (Massenwahntheorie) in the late 1940s. His trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers*, features similar events set in the period around the end of the First World War in Germany. Another Austrian author, Heimito von Doderer, reminisced about the July Revolt in his novel *Die Dämonen* (1956).

Moreover, the revolt captured two aspects of the masses: first as a social phenomenon and then as a discursive element. I examine the polemical and theoretical contributions of satirist Karl Kraus and writer Elias Canetti in connexion with the July Revolt. Kraus worked as the editor of the Viennese periodical *The Torch* (*Die Fackel*), and Canetti was a young student experiencing this episode as a part of the masses: 'Teil der Masse' (*Die Fackel im Ohr*, p. 348). Kraus and Canetti developed distinct counterviews in the discourse surrounding the July Revolt.

Karl Kraus and Elias Canetti were contemporaries in cosmopolitan Vienna. Kraus' words and actions greatly influenced Canetti, although he grew critical of the publicist's influence in later years. Despite Kraus' influence on Canetti, with regard to the masses, their approaches were quite different. Kraus, in his role as the editor of *Fackel*, was involved in the debate surrounding the 15th of July 1927, emphasised the 'individual' humanity of the revolt's victims that were being lumped together as 'masses'. This step came at a moment when the dominant interpretation in Viennese

¹ A short note about the semantic choices in the text: German word '*Die Masse*' could be strictly translated into English as 'The Mass'. Even though the German original is singular, it describes a transient collective. The English equivalent in singular seems slightly technical and could be confused with the concept of mass in physics. While 'mass' is mostly used as an adjective in the text, I prefer 'the masses' or 'the crowd'. These are used interchangeably depending on the context. I am drawing from Jonsson, Stefan. *Crowds and Democracy*. 2011. p. xix-xx. He maintains a subtle distinction between the German terms *Masse* and *Menge*. The former is rendered as *masses* or *crowds*, whereas the latter as *crowds* or *multitudes*.

media portrayed the incident as a quasi-Hobbesian battle between state authority and destructive ‘rabble’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 6).

In contrast, Canetti had an abiding interest in the phenomenon of masses. His memoirs and essays count the July Revolt as one of the key moments that led to his lifelong engagement with the theme.² Rather than focussing on the experiences of individuals, he emphasised the crowd. Canetti himself saw the July Revolt first as ‘part of the masses’ and later contrasted his experience with the prevalent crowd theories of the time. Apart from the revolt’s obvious effects on his crowd theory, Canetti used the memory of this ‘central event’ as a foil to test his other hypotheses (Canetti, 1999, p. 489). His contributions to the field become clear after perusing crowd theory from its outset.

The evolution of crowd theory was intertwined with the unfolding political developments of its time, from its origins until the 1920s. This relationship is scrutinised in the following sections. The discussion begins with a brief background to the Viennese July Revolt and its implications for understanding the crowd phenomenon, setting the stage for Kraus’ rhetorical intervention in public discourse. Finally, Canetti’s critical re-evaluation of legacy assumptions about crowds is analysed, framed by his experience during the July Revolt.

July 15, 1927–Background and Aftermath

Various factors together resulted in the Viennese July Revolt. The immediate trigger for the unrest was the controversial acquittal of two right-wing militiamen on July 14, 1927, who had killed two social democrats in a village called Schattendorf in January earlier that year. The day after their acquittal was gruesome for the First Austrian Republic: The Palace of Justice was burnt down, and police shot civilians at sight. Eighty-nine people died and more than a thousand were injured. This incident deepened the mutual political mistrust between the right and the left and lowered the chances of political reconciliation (Botz, 2001, pp. 47-48). The resulting partisan deadlock arguably set the republic on a path towards the Civil War of 1933 and the rise of an authoritarian corporatist state.

Preceding the acquittal were many long-term factors that contributed to the revolt. After the First World War, the Austrian Republic was seen as economically and politically unviable. Christian socialists wanted to continue upholding the monarchy. Social democrats and pan-German nationalists wanted to merge German-speaking Austria with Germany. Neither of these aspirations came to fruition. Distrustful of each other’s intentions, the political parties began recruiting recently demobilised soldiers in order to establish closely-aligned paramilitary organisations recruiting: notably the centre-left ‘Republikanischer Schutzbund’ (Republican Defence League) and centre-right ‘Frontkämpfer’ (Frontline Fighters).

Moreover, the New Republic was evenly divided into two political blocks, which resulted in closely fought elections with an edge for the right wing. The Social Democratic vote was concentrated in Vienna and industrial centres with the working class, whereas right-wing parties drew their support from the agrarian and lower-middle classes in the countryside and provinces. Similarly, economic tensions for resources between Vienna and other states were growing. Vienna had one-third of the total population and was a major industrial centre. In contrast, other peripheral states had economies that were largely dependent on agriculture and tourism (Andics, 1962, pp. 115-118).

Together, these factors—political instability and economic distress—made for a tense, charged

² His three-part memoirs spanning 1905-1937, *The Tongue Set free*, *The Torch in My Ear*, and *The Play of the Eyes*, mention such crowd experiences in the passing: 1914 in Vienna after the outbreak of the War and 1922 in Frankfurt after Walther Rathenau’s assassination. Furthermore, an Essay in *Das Gewissen der Worte* (1981) traces the motivations behind his philosophical magnum opus *Crowds and Power*.

atmosphere. There were repeated clashes between partisan militias, with the Social Democrat-aligned 'Schutzbund' mostly at the receiving end. Adding to the tensions was the fact that the accused in many such cases of violence were often acquitted. This was perceived by social democrats as a form of 'class justice' and biased against the working class. The counterpoint to this accusation was that acquittal judgments were delivered by sworn jury courts, a measure introduced in Austria's 1920 constitution and championed by social democrats.

Returning to the two militia men whose acquittal sparked the revolt, in January 1927, the killing of two social democrats in Schattendorf was preceded by clashes between the 'Schutzbund' and 'Frontkämpfer'. The defendants claimed in their trial that their gunfire was in self-defence. The two men were acquitted on technical grounds in July, as there was only a simple majority (7-5) in favour of conviction, falling short of the required two-thirds majority of 8 to 4 (Stieg, 1990, p. 25). This unexpected acquittal caused an uproar in Vienna, where left-leaning workers' unions saw it as further evidence of 'bourgeois class justice'.

While agitated unions were keen to strike the next day to show their indignation, social democratic leadership was in a bind. They regarded the judgement as outrageous, but a party-directed demonstration would amount to discrediting the public jury system itself. Instead, they decided to vent their anguish through the party organ *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Its editor, Friedrich Austerlitz, wrote a trenchant editorial about the controversial acquittal, his intention being to calm the tempers of disgruntled people with a sharp polemic. The article ended up only fanning the flames of unrest in retrospect, achieving the opposite of its intended effect (Leser, 2001, pp. 53-92).

Due to party leaders' ambiguity, workers decided to march on their own and assemble at Ringstrasse, where all major state institutions, including the parliament, were located. To convey an impression of spontaneity, social democrats did not deploy their usual 'Schutzbund' functionaries to direct the flow of demonstration. The Viennese Police were also ill-equipped to deal with a major demonstration, as neither the social democrats nor communists officially called for a protest. The workers carried a banner reading, 'Protest the disgraceful judgement! We are taking things in our hands! (Protest den Schandurteil! Wir greifen zur Selbsthilfe!)' (Jonsson, 2013, p. 48). While most demonstrators were at the heavily guarded parliament, some smaller groups tried to barge into the nearby university, though they never succeeded. The premises belonging to *Reichspost*, a newspaper aligned to ruling centre-right parties, were attacked and set on fire (Botz, 2001, p. 37). It drew the demonstrators' ire for calling the acquittals 'a clear judgement' in its headlines.

As the revolt intensified, social democratic leaders were trying to make up for their judgement errors, attempting to persuade the police to deal patiently with protestors without using force. 'Schutzbund' volunteers were also mobilised to restore discipline. However, a scuffle broke out in front of the parliament as the mounted police began charging the crowds with sabres. This confrontation galvanised protestors, and stones were pelted. Unable to make headway at the well-guarded parliament, the nearby lightly guarded Palace of Justice became a new, easier target for crowds. Furthermore, the building bore the name of 'justice' and was thus linked to the perceived injustice surrounding the Schattendorf verdict. Several protestors barged into the premises and threw documents and files through the window. Around noon, the building was set on fire. Karl Seitz, the Social Democratic mayor of Vienna, tried to reason vainly with crowds to let the fire company pass and bring the fire under control (Botz, 2001, p. 39).

Two hours later, the Viennese Police Chief Johann Schober issued a shoot-on-sight order to police personnel. Armed with lethal training ammunition, they were ordered to clear Ringstrasse. After

several shots in the air, they opened indiscriminate gunfire in various locations, causing several casualties of passers-by having no connexion with the revolt. Meanwhile, the fire in Justice Palace proved too hard to contain and could not be extinguished in time. Crowds fled the scene as many demonstrators were shot to death. According to some eyewitness accounts, some in the fleeing crowds yelled ‘Pfui’ (shame) at the police and fell to gunshots right after that (Kraus, 1927, p. 31). Shorn of restraint, the actions of the Viennese Police resembled an open hunt, resulting in 89 deaths and thousands of injuries (Botz, 2001, p. 43). Even the fire company and ambulances were at the receiving end.

For the next two days following this bloody revolt, social democrats declared a general strike. However, their attempts to mount pressure on the national government did not yield the desired results. Christian Socialist Chancellor Ignaz Seipel, who authorised Schober to issue a firing order, turned the tables on social democrats demanding his resignation. He argued that the social democrats failed to gauge the fervent mood after the acquittal and that this failure allowed the revolt to spiral out of control. These missteps leading up to the revolt were an indictment of their indecisive leadership (Andics, 1962, pp. 219-222). With social democrats on weak ground, the Seipel-led government hailed Police chief Schober as a ‘steadfast bulwark of the state order’ who saved the republic (Kraus, 1927, p. 1). Without commenting on police violence and excess, the government commended the police leadership during the revolt. Large factions of the Viennese press and businesses quickly echoed this account. Voices from both the conservative and liberal presses chimed in, claiming that policemen saved Vienna ‘from the downfall, plunder and possibly much worse’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 16).

Playing on prevalent sociopolitical fissures, this distortion of events firmly focussed on the burning Palace of Justice as a motif for the danger posed by social democracy. The original grievance about the dubious acquittal quietly receded into obscurity, whereas extreme police violence was hailed as heroism against the ‘wrathful rabble’. The government and hoteliers, as highlighted in the press, were more concerned about the potential negative impact of the revolt on tourism. However, one contrary voice stood out through its public intervention in this discourse, where a staggering loss of human lives was dismissed for the preservation of the state order.

Karl Kraus and *Die Fackel*

Satirist Karl Kraus, editor of the periodical *Die Fackel* (The Torch), frequently mentioned the distorted vision of reality created by the Viennese media. With the inception of the periodical in 1899, he set out to trace purported signs of the progressive decline of humanity in essays about language criticism (Sprachkritik). He argued that language not only serves the instrumental purpose of communication but also functions as a barometer of the prevalent culture. Always a keen monitor of the press, he extensively cited reports from other publications and statements from public figures in his works to bolster his arguments. Kraus also wrote dramas and poetry and held popular reading sessions in Vienna and other cities. There, he recited excerpts from both his works and from his favourite authors such as Shakespeare, Goethe, Kierkegaard and Nestroy.

The select canon represented a humanistic cultural ideal that he propagated as a counterpoint to the supposed moral and ethical decline of the times. During the First World War, Kraus took a critical view of war mania in the media. He wrote essays in *Die Fackel* leading up to the war and published the book *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (The Last Days of Mankind) in 1921, which consisted of an expansive montage of detailed excerpts from wartime documents and reports, barely disguised as fiction.

The political turmoil surrounding the July Revolt took on a partisan character, with some defending police impunity and others demanding more accountability for the loss of lives. A leading liberal paper, *Neue Freie Presse* (New Free Press), proclaimed that ‘Schober is today not only an Austrian, but a European figure’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 48). In September 1927, Kraus had placards pasted all over Vienna addressing Police chief Johannes Schober and calling for his resignation (Stieg, 1990, p. 98). The placard sought to correct the unqualified praise for Schober.

This set the tone for the October 1927 issue of *Fackel* titled ‘Hort der Republik’ (Bulwark of the Republic). Kraus targeted Schober for his alleged incompetence: ‘He has failed the job of ensuring that fewer people have accidents on the roads’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 89). Kraus used his mastery of language to put the July Revolt and its public consequences into perspective. Its stated goal was to “say to the world, ‘how all of this happened’, to let them hear once more of the deeds, fleshly, bloody, unnatural, incidental courts, blind murder. . .” (Kraus, 1927, p. 91).

Kraus’ intervention holds an important place in the scheme of this article. It is true that he did not delve deeper into the nature of new collectives that caught the attention of his contemporaries like Sigmund Freud and Hermann Broch. Among contrasting images of ‘rabble’ and ‘masses’, he occupies the middle ground of asserting ‘humanity’ in the July Revolt. He espoused the ideal of justice and the rule of law against the violations committed in the name of preserving civilisation. His consistency in opposing legitimised ‘murder’ by the state—be it in the form of a World War or the bloodshed on the streets of Vienna—accentuated the moral authority of his polemic. Where the state and the press spoke of ‘elements’ of the rabble, Kraus stressed the casualties of passers-by who succumbed to indiscriminate shooting (Stieg, 1990, pp. 104-105). His actions broke the feeling of resignation surrounding the July Revolt, in which ‘authority versus chaos’ interpretation seemed inevitable. I argue that Kraus’ polemics impacted Canetti’s understanding of the July Revolt. Indirectly, it played a role in reconciling crowds with individual humanity, as expounded in *Crowds and Power*.

The 92-page issue is divided into two parts: extensive quotes from various sources and Kraus’ commentary. In the citation montage, he published excerpts from government statements, parliamentary debates, press reports, feature articles, advertisements, and eyewitness accounts. The excerpts were published in no particular order; however, the polyphony in the montage creates a dissonant effect for the reader. Inconsistency emerges between the narrative presented by press sources and accounts of eyewitnesses about the revolt, and the supposedly authoritative media voices are read as tendentious. This divergence between eyewitness reports and media responses to the revolt is also palpable in the semantic register. Government statements and press reports tended to employ an identifiable standard range of abstract phrases while referring to the July Revolt, such as ‘tragic events’, ‘unfortunate incidents’, ‘terrible events’, and so on. On the other hand, the eyewitness accounts tended to narrate experiences on the day of the revolt rather generalise it with phrases and recount police violence in detail. There existed a stark divide between the incident and the constructed medial reality.

The sharpness of Kraus’ commentary in the essay has much to do with the reader’s impression of the dissonance in the montage. The counter-narrative focuses on arbitrary shooting. Kraus establishes it as a starting point of his text by asserting that, ‘innocent blood has been shed on 15th July’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 48). With regard to workers’ protests and the Palace of Justice fire, the editor treads a fine line:

Yes, in all its excess and despite the stupidity of symbolic destruction of justice, it was a pronouncement of human dignity, the demonstration of the most lively and loudest feelings, leaderless and exposing official incapability, which collapsed before the power apparatus of naked heartlessness. (Kraus, 1927, pp. 54-55)

Kraus acknowledges that the unrest on July 15 could not be explained through a single lens. There had been a cause for the protest demonstration, and there was ‘stupidity’ in destroying a state building. There were demonstrators against injustice, and the Palace of Justice was set on fire; and the shootings eclipsed all of them. The account propagated by the government and readily endorsed by the press distorted this sequence, by which the demonstration and the arson were branded in equal measure as ‘riots by the wrathful rabble’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 6). Kraus also wonders about the hyperbolic glorification of the police for the bloodshed: ‘That an institution, supposed to look out for pickpockets and speeding motorists has succeeded in saving the republican honour by massacring the passers-by!’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 69). Moreover, valorising the police action also meant that Schober’s orders to shoot and the heavy number of casualties were not given due attention. Kraus underlined the arbitrary police violence in his long campaign for the Police chief’s removal. The campaign took many forms in the following days—from a placard to a song mocking Schober and a play.

Besides the crusade against the Police Chief, Kraus saw himself as a defiant defender of ‘higher justice’ against media distortions: ‘. . . in the face of verbal shame (Wortschande), which, as once for the fatherland, now applauded the murder of people for its hotel business’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 91). The press was once keen on propagating the war, and now it was distorting reality around the July Revolt. This critique was related to press reportages related to the hotel industry’s endorsement of Schober and the Viennese Police. Some reports flagged an adverse impact of the unrest on tourism. The liberal newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*, for instance, lamented the conditions in Vienna after the July Revolt: ‘One is no longer curious about the sights of this city’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 10). When read along with other citations, this emphasis on the shortfall in tourist numbers seems rather callous to human suffering.

To understand the effectiveness of Kraus’ work, it is prudent to briefly reflect on the function of satire in public discourse. Satire is not just lampooning reality; it holds up the mirror of a higher ideal to reality. Kraus upheld this tenet in his polemic, stressing ‘his right to stand up to the conflicts, which result between the norms of humanity and the peculiarities of the Austrian state’ (Kraus, 1927, p. 80). He asserted universal norms of justice against parochial whims. His indignation came from this ethical clarity, given how press-driven distortions constructed a simple reality of ‘authority versus chaos’ and excluded uncomfortable yet necessary questions of human dignity. With his public actions, Kraus attracted a fair share of detractors and supporters. Notably, his placard calling Police chief Schober to resign had a considerable impact on Elias Canetti, a young chemistry student.

Canetti and Human Dignity in Masses

Canetti relates in his memoir *Die Fackel im Ohr* (The Torch in the Ear) how his reverence for Kraus reached its peak just after the placard action: ‘His posters were the only thing that kept us going in those days. I went from one poster to another, paused in front of each one, and I felt as if all the justice on earth had entered the letters of Kraus’ name’ (Canetti, 1999, p. 485). For Canetti, the July Revolt was much more than an opportunity to appreciate Kraus’ unwavering commitment to humanist ideals: ‘During that brightly illuminated, dreadful day, I gained the true picture of what, as a crowd, fills our century’ (Canetti, 1999, p. 490). Joining the spontaneous demonstration of workers,

he was immersed in the events of the July Revolt, witnessing the storming and later burning of the Palace of Justice and fleeing indiscriminate police gunfire. He stated:

Fifty-three years have passed, and the agitation of that day is still in my bones. It was the closest thing to a revolution that I have physically experienced. Since then, I have known quite precisely that I would not have to read a single word about the storming of the Bastille. I became a part of the crowd, I fully dissolved in it, I did not feel the slightest resistance to what the crowd was doing. (Canetti, 1999, pp. 484-85)

The elements and motifs that he registered on July 15 led him to chart a path towards a different theory of masses, culminating in his work *Crowds and Power* (1960). He held the 15th of July as a model: “an event limited in both space and time, with an indisputable cause and taking a clear and unmistakable course” (Canetti, 1999, p. 489). His experiences in the crowd did not conform to existing mass psychological explanations. While leader-crowds dynamics underpinned psychological and sociological crowd theories, crowds during the July Revolt were largely leaderless. Canetti theorised that the fire as a potent crowd symbol and the idea of an ‘open’ and ‘flight crowd’ (not to be confused with ‘panic crowd’) had their origins in the Viennese July Revolt. For instance, an open crowd, similar to the masses in the July Revolt, does not necessarily need a leader or a central figure. Acknowledging these epistemological debts, Canetti stated, ‘This day was responsible for some of my most important insights in my book on crowds’ (Canetti, 1999, p. 489).

To understand Canetti’s contribution in asserting human dignity in *Crowds and Power*, one must briefly recapitulate key ideas in the influential crowd theories of Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud. Le Bon’s mass psychology operates on several pre-set coordinates. Deriving the meaning of the masses from binary oppositions, such as individual-versus-collective, rational-versus-irrational, civilisation-versus-anarchy, and masculine-versus-feminine, among others, the supposed ‘age of the masses’ had to be seen as a negation of the civilizational ‘progress’ at the turn of the century. However, it becomes clear from the orientation of this work that his intention was less to explain this phenomenon systematically and more to create a Machiavellian manual about the impending ‘mass society’ – to forewarn political and economic elites that Le Bon linked with ‘civilisation.’ This implicit political project has arguably contributed to its lasting appeal.

Freud’s mass psychology had several motivations (Moscovici, 1986, p. 279 ff.). Although contemporary developments were part of Freud’s impulse to address the societal significance of masses, his work interacts critically with Le Bon’s analysis, relying on suggestion to explain crowd dynamics. Freud did not actively contest Le Bon’s binary oppositions; instead, he channelled these irrational and emotional attributes towards a leader-crowd relationship. He conceptualised a theory of a relationship in which the crowd libidinally admired and subjected themselves to the ideal-type leader by harking back to the primal horde (Urhorde) led by a strong man. At their core, these two theories support the notion that crowds are either deviation or negation from the norm, be it that of a rational individual or an individual shorn of primordial attachment to the leading figure. Another significant similarity lies in the fact that crowds are not to be understood on their own terms. Rather, their existence is instrumental: negating the individuality or idealising the leader. This seeming lack of agency was one thing Canetti strived to address.

Epistemologically, *Crowds and Power* differs significantly from the analyses of Le Bon and Freud. Instead of a distant observation position from outside or above, it describes crowds from an immersive vantage point—from inside. Canetti’s anthropological-historical theorisation accords human dignity to crowds by locating within individuals a desire to be one of many. By being in crowds, humans overcome the primal fear of touch of the unknown (Berührungsangst), which shapes social and

interpersonal hierarchies and divides (Canetti, 2007, p. 12). In other words, the tendency to become a part of many is inherent in humans to overcome isolation and distance.

Four important attributes shape the experience of a crowd: equality, growth, density, and direction. In his work, Canetti introduced further categories and subcategories of crowds, such as feast crowds, baiting crowds, flight crowds, open crowds, and closed crowds. In producing a detailed study of heterodox historical-anthropological literature, Canetti abstained from casting crowds in a positive or negative light. For him, crowds have long been a value-neutral phenomenon throughout human history. However, crowds in modernity have become increasingly embedded in the entrails of power. Hence, the second half of *Crowds and Power* investigates the element of power by tracing its primaeval anthropological roots to survival or avoiding death. In other words, survival is an act of attaining power. Canetti perceives the workings of power and commands as closely linked with the fear of death. While crowds affirm life and vitality through the transgression of distance, those in power operate through commands that are essentially suspended death sentences for the subjects.

In the relationship between the masses and human dignity, Canetti placed the crowd phenomenon firmly ‘within’ the domain of the individual. Distance or the ‘fear of being touched’ by the Other permeates human interactions. Paradoxically, it engenders a desire to overcome this fear by becoming a part of the many in certain circumstances (Canetti, 1978, pp. 16-17). This drive lies at the core of Canetti’s theorisation, in which crowds emerge as a liberating, equalising phenomenon springing from ourselves. The extensive typology in *Crowds and Power* illustrates the scope of this phenomenon within the human condition—be it festive or mourning masses, open or closed crowds. Thus, Canetti goes beyond the narrow frame employed by Le Bon’s mass psychology, whose theories cater to the political significance of crowds in an ‘excited’ state. Elias Canetti’s contribution to asserting human dignity rests on his originality in bridging the individual-masses gap of previous theories and relinking crowds from power equations.

A common critique of *Crowds and Power* mentions the analytical inaccessibility of his ‘anti-systematic’ treatise.³ Over 30 years in the making, this work consists of short essays about various classifications of crowds and power without any central or overarching framework. Canetti eschews abstract theorisation and derives his thesis from concrete instances. His experience during the July Revolt and other crowd-related incidents prodded him to investigate the concept of crowd phenomenon. These attributes go back to his insistence on privileging experience over abstraction.

The treatise is also noted for its refusal to engage in an explicit dialogue with other contributions in the larger field or with related disciplines such as sociology and psychology. Going by the list of cited literature, *Crowds and Power* does not mention the works of other crowd theoreticians, like Le Bon or Freud. This is a curious choice, as Canetti’s memoirs describe his scrutiny of their works (Canetti, 1980, pp. 212-215). As a young scholar, he held Freud’s mass psychology—and by extension, Le Bon—as a foil to test against his crowd experiences. Though his interest in the phenomenon began in the 20th century, his investigation brought him to its various forms—like symbols, crystals, and packs, dating back to primaeval times. Examining myths, history, and anthropology, the crowds sprang from the desire to multiply. Canetti refers to it as ‘Massentrieb’. It is not a modern phenomenon per se. What makes it ‘modern’ though is its entanglement with power and commands.

³ French psychologist Serge Moscovici called *Crowds and Power* a kind of ‘black hole of thinking’ (as cited in Stieg, 1990, p. 9).

Conclusion

I argue that the import of the July Revolt in Vienna lies not only in the cultural or political dimensions of the act itself. The key legacy of the revolt concerns the awareness of crowds made apparent by this episode—both as a discursive construct and a social phenomenon. Discourse about crowds before and after 1914 was embedded in reigning power relations. As democracy and political equality became the norm, fears about popular rule also surfaced. Mass psychology was one such response to changing realities, as Gustave Le Bon explains. Mass psychology did not properly elucidate crowds. Instead, it led to a situation where the deliberately vague notion of crowds became entangled with the agency to define the self. In such binary equations, crowds—as opposed to elites, the individual self, or the leader—were those who could not be distinguished.

Canetti worked around this entanglement by seeing in every human being the inherent mass drive—an antidote to primal fear—which need not be ‘mediated’ or ‘instrumentalized’ by any leader or elites, thereby rendering masses as liberating and equalising forces consistent with human dignity. Karl Kraus offers a counter-narrative after the July Revolt and thus, in his own way, asserts human dignity. Eyewitness accounts and individual vignettes belied the dominant discursive account of ‘authority versus chaos’ that reduced individual humans to ‘rabble’. Through his media critique, Kraus engages in putting July 15, 1927 in perspective with all its complexity.

Having said that, what the national government propagated and the large part of the Viennese media endorsed after the July Revolt is certainly not an anachronism; something similar goes by the name of ‘narrative’ almost a century later. An innocuous technical term from cultural studies today glosses over distortions on sensitive issues. As the world today grows more complex, our storeys are getting simpler. An overarching story with emphasis on key elements does not do justice to the whole picture. Not unlike the subtexts in Gustave Le Bon’s mass psychology, binaries are employed with ease—between civilisation and destruction, or authority versus chaos. Networked societies in the age of information at present tend to accelerate this trend. What kinds of crowds—physical or digital—are expected to emerge from these developments? These questions link the past to our times.

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ORCID:

Sunil CHOUDHARY 0009-0003-9154-650X

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