The Multivalence of Crowds

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Abstract

Crowds have diverse meanings and serve varied functions for their participants and observers. To make sense of this diversity, the ontology of crowds can be understood with respect to two dimensions: (1) global / collective processes versus local / individual processes; and (2) symbolic versus concrete benefits / costs. Combining these dimensions yields four ideal types: (1) crowds as symbols; (2) crowds as identities; (3) crowds as networks; and (4) crowds as power. This essay explores variation in how people relate to crowds from these perspectives and the political implications of their doing so.

Biography

Michael T. Heaney is a Lecturer in Politics and Research Methods at the University of Glasgow. He is author of a book, *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11* (with Fabio Rojas), and producer of a documentary film, *The Activists: War, Peace, and Politics in the Streets* (with Melody Shemtov and Marco Roldán).

Introduction

Leading French trade unions and their allies organized large strikes and demonstrations on March 7, 2023 – a day that they called "Black Tuesday." Crowds gathered around the country – but perhaps most intensely in Paris – where they continued their ongoing dispute with the government's effort to raise the retirement age for pensions from 62 to 64. Property damage was reported to have been committed by "so-called Black Bloc anarchists," which was used to justify the deployment of riot police with "tear gas and baton charges" (Salvoni and Allen 2023). Lacking majority support for the unpopular proposed change, French Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne announced on March 16 that the government would invoke a provision of the Constitution allowing the measure to go forward without a vote of the National Assembly (Breeden 2023). Her announcement only bolstered the size of the crowds and the scale of violence around the country.

How can we understand the crowds that gathered in France in March 2023? No single narrative explains them entirely. Perhaps the most straightforward account is that many people opposed a policy change and wanted to express that view. However, the change would merely bring the retirement age in line with countries that had similar levels of economic development, so it seems difficult to imagine that policy opposition provides the entire explanation. The decision of the government to circumvent a vote of the National Assembly – while constitutional – surely undermined its legitimacy and, thus, provides added insight into the events. Moreover, the chaos surrounding the protests set up a chance for organizations that generally aligned against the government to bring their members into the streets, possibly enabling them to gain political strength. The use of force by police likely provided an additional reason for some.

We now have several possible ways to describe the crowds in France. They were opponents of a policy. They were democrats favoring policymaking *only* through the National Assembly. They were opportunists hoping to expand their power. They were disgusted by police violence. But there are still more possibilities. Were the crowds filled with observers who simply wanted to see what was happening? Were they young people who wanted to experience the thrill of being a part of

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history? Were they *agents provocateu*r from outside France, seeing to destabilize its political

system? Did crowds arise from a combination of these possibilities?

Observers of society have long struggled to make sense of crowds. The central dilemma

they face is whether to attribute the behavior of a crowd to a collective entity or to individuals. Is

the crowd a unified mass that acts together and has a common goal? Has the individuality of its

participants been absorbed by the collective? Or do individuals enter the crowd separately and

rationally, each pursuing their own private agendas? These questions are raised by the lay

audiences who encounter crowds in person or through the media. They are even more pertinent to

the professionals whose work is affected by crowds, such as activists, politicians, police officers, and

journalists.

The debate here is a matter of *ontology*. That is, what kind of social entity is a crowd? We

must answer this question in order to know how to act toward the crowd and interpret its behavior.

If the crowd is a cohesive entity, then it demands a singular response. If it is merely an aggregation

of individuals, then the response can be disaggregated to cope with the crowd's distinctive

elements.

This essay takes the position that crowds are multivalent. They mean different things to

different people. They may even mean different things to the same person as time passes,

especially as contexts change. This position embraces the view that crowds have both collective and

individual essences that cannot be indiscriminately discarded. Crowds generally gather together for

a purpose that is shared, even if every member of the crowd does not necessarily agree on that

purpose. At the same time, individuals have distinctive motivations for participation that may align

or conflict with the crowd's overall purpose (if there is one). These meanings are created not only by

participants but – perhaps more significantly – by observers who aspire to interpret the crowd for

the larger society.

While every crowd is a distinctive social phenomenon that cannot be neatly encapsulated

with a simple label, there are two critical dimensions to crowd ontology. The first is the degree to

which crowds are (or are understood as) dependent on *global / collective* or *local / individual* processes. The second is whether the benefits and costs of crowds are (or are understood as) largely *symbolic* or *concrete*. These dimensions yield four ideal types of crowds that require discussion. First, *crowds as symbols* draw heavily upon global / collective and symbolic elements. Second, *crowds as identities* emphasize local / individual and symbolic elements. Third, *crowds as networks* lean in the direction of local / individual and concrete elements. Fourth, *crowds as power* prioritize global / collective and concrete elements. Each of these types has implications for the ways that participants and observers approach, manage, and interpret crowds.

Crowds as Symbols

To the extent that crowds are symbols, what they actually are is less important than how they are perceived, understood, discussed, or represented. It is possible for those perceptions, understandings, discussions, or representations to become uncontroversial and widely accepted. Alternatively, they may be hotly debated and fought over.

To say that the perception of a crowd is more important than its truth is not to say that contending audiences do not debate about the truth. Each side may present evidence supporting its view of what the crowd is. These debates may even be scientific in nature. For example, methodologies for counting crowds are becoming increasingly sophisticated, merging data from aerial photography, video surveillance, urban planning, and other sources using deep-learning approaches (Sindagi and Patel 2018).

Controversies surrounding crowds as symbols often revolve around crowd *size* and the *composition* of the crowd. Comparison of the 2017 Presidential Inauguration of Donald Trump and the 2017 Women's March on Washington is a case where discussion of crowd size became a focus of public attention. As recent memory will allow few readers to forget, Donald Trump defeated feminist icon Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. During the campaign, Trump displayed persistent misogyny while uttering repeated offensive comments toward members of

various racial, ethnic, national, and religious groups. These circumstances helped to give rise to the Women's March on Washington, which was held on January 21, 2017 – the day after Trump's Inauguration.

The Women's March was a socially significant event in its own right as a manifestation of resistance to Trump, a revival of the women's movement, and a demonstration of the possibilities for organizing through social media (Fisher 2019; Meyer and Tarrow 2019). The Women's March on Washington, along with affiliated gatherings around the world, was collectively described by some journalists as one of the largest protests in history, possibly involving some 3.5 million participants (Tufekci 2017). When photos of the Women's March on Washington were juxtaposed to photos of the presidential Inauguration, the comparison demonstrated that the Women's March attracted an obviously much larger crowd (Robinson 2017).

Advocates for President Trump might have easily deflected comparisons between the march and the Inauguration with a series of simple arguments. The presidency is determined by the number of votes, not by the number of people who attend the Inauguration. The Inauguration was shown on television, so why attend in person? The urban geographic location of the Inauguration was proximate to where some of Clinton's most dedicated supporters lived, while Trump's strength was in America's midwestern heartland and in the South. Yet, these arguments were not advanced by the White House.

Instead, the White House press secretary falsely claimed that the 2017 Inauguration had been the largest in history and photos of the Women's March had been doctored in order to distract attention from the Inauguration (Hunt 2017). To further compound the problems with this ridiculous claim, the president personally intervened with the National Park Service to arrange the distribution of more flattering photos of the Inauguration (Swaine 2018). These events – and revelations about them – only served to amplify the significance of the enthusiasm gap between the two gatherings.

The statements and actions of President Trump and his administration embraced the symbolic importance of crowd size at both events. Even though it meant blatantly twisting the facts, they sought to present the crowd at the Inauguration as larger than the Women's March. In doing so, the president's stance aligned with what is normally the line of activists – that the size of a crowd reflects the intensity of views held in the public.

In contrast, when enormous crowds that protested the imminent war on Iraq on February 15, 2003 were described by *The New York Times* as another "superpower" (Tyler 2003), then President George W. Bush dismissed them. He condescendingly stated that taking into account the size of crowds would be like making policy "based on a focus group" (Purdum 2003). This statement aimed to minimize what was a worldwide challenge to his leadership. Bush's response rejected the symbolism of the crowd.

Whether or not the size of a crowd truly represents the sentiments of a nation or community has little basis in objective reality. But *debates* about size become social facts that are real. Participants may join a crowd in part because they want to be counted on their side of the debate. Observers may try to swing these discussions in their favor. Strategic actors may look to the debates about crowds for clues about opportunities and threats in the next stages of politics.

The symbolism of a crowd may depend not only on its perceived size but on its perceived composition. Is the crowd made up of "good" people or "bad" people? Are they old or young? Christians or pagans? Partisans or average people? If the crowd is "good," then it merits a different response than if it is "bad."

Crowd composition famously became an issue in the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally and the counterprotest to it in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12, 2017. The rally was advertised to mobilize far-right and White-nationalist communities ostensibly to protect a statue of General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate (i.e., pro-slavery) army during the American civil war. Numerous people were seriously injured or killed from the clashes between far-right marchers and counter-protesters, as well as from efforts to police these events. Of particular note

was the murder of counter-protester Heather Heyer by James Alex Fields, Jr., who deliberately drove his car into the crowd in which Heyer was peacefully marching (Fieldstadt 2019).

The topic of crowd composition was brought to the fore by President Trump when he stated on August 17, 2017 that "you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides" of the Charlottesville events, after admitting that there were "some very bad people in that group" (Holan 2019). On a certain level, there is a difficult-to-deny truth in Trump's remark in that it seems likely that there were at least *some* "very fine" people in a crowd of thousands of people. But there was a strong inclination of interested observers to view the entire Unite the Right rally as a cohesive, collective force. That force was on the wrong side of history. Even if some of the people at the rally were "very fine people," they had chosen to affiliate themselves with neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, the Ku Klux Klan, and other hate groups that had organized it. The emergent debate about what had happened in Charlottesville came out strongly against the far-right contingent and was not inclined to split hairs about who was good and who was not in that group. Subsequently, the majority of Americans opposed President Trump's response to the events in Charlottesville (Santhanam 2017).

The racism, hatred, and incivility associated with the groups and individuals at the Unite the Right rally – along with the extensive history of oppressing African Americans in the Commonwealth of Virginia – provided plenty of symbolic fodder for political actors in the center and left parts of the political spectrum. Yet the widespread rejection of Trump's comments on the composition of the rallygoers might well be understood as having helped to crystalize the crowd symbolically. Indeed, presidential candidate Joe Biden would go on to explain that Trump's statement was pivotal in motivating his own decision to run (successfully) for president in 2020 (Beaumont 2019). Regardless of whether this was Biden's *true* motivation, it matters that he *gave* this reason and used it throughout his campaign.

When crowds are symbols, construction of their meanings is heavily reliant on elite political discourse, media coverage, and internet discussion. These streams may converge, as they seemed

to do over the comparison of the 2017 Women's March and the Inauguration. But they may alternatively push in different directions. For example, although political discourse and media coverage generally condemned the Unite the Right rally, internet discussions on the topic were polarized, reaching equilibrium on both sides of the issue (Tien, Eisenberg, Cherng, and Porter 2020).

The symbolism of crowds has the potential to hold a place in the public imagination over time. The Boston Tea Party of 1773 continues to channel the American spirit of resistance to taxation. The Haymarket Square (Chicago) massacre / riot of 1886 symbolizes the international struggle for workers' rights. The March on Washington (DC) for Jobs and Freedom of 1963 will forever be associated with the struggle for African-American civil rights. The crowds in Zuccotti Park (New York) of 2011 evoke the excesses of financial industry and inequalities in the American political economy.

Looking forward, there are many questions to investigate further about the symbolism of crowds. For example, when are crowds remembered symbolically and when are they forgotten? Why do we remember the March on Washington of 1963 much more so than the March on Washington of 1941? Why did we take note of Occupy Wall Street in Zuchotti Park in 2011 but not the March on Wall Street of 2009? Why do the crowds protesting the death of George Floyd symbolize Black Lives Matter more clearly than the crowds that mobilized after the deaths of many others who died unjustly at the hands of police? Crowd size and composition likely played a part. Timing, media coverage, the eloquence of the crowd's advocates, and the severity of police responses also provide probable explanations. These factors could be combined with broader scholarship on symbols (Burke 1989; Edelman 1964; Ortner 1973) to help interpret the dynamics of crowds.

Crowds as Identities

Thinking of crowds as identities keeps the focus of attention on the symbolic (as opposed to concrete) elements of crowds while moving the field of vision from the global / collective level to the

local / individual level. Identities are reflected by the choices that people make about what crowds to join, as identities are manifestations of symbolic linkages between individuals and groups.

The crowds where I find myself say something about how I see myself, while my presence in a crowd contributes to making a crowd what it is. Conversely, the crowds that I associate with help to shape who I am, as I am socialized by the crowd. If other people observe what crowds I am in, they may use that knowledge to make inferences about who I am and what the crowd is. Hence, crowds can help to answer fundamental questions of identity, such as "Who am I?", "Who are we?", "Who are you?", and "Who are they?".

The crowds to which a person belongs can be a cause or an effect of identity (or both). The tension between cause and effect is well illustrated in Ziad Munson's (2008) thoughtful study on *The Making of Pro-Life Activists*. Munson was interested in how people became pro-life activists (i.e., opponents of abortion). He looked at this question through people's involvement in several local activist groups that were pro-life. In this instance, pro-life groups were the "crowds" that people were associated with.

Munson observed that some people had clear pro-life views prior to joining the groups. This pattern is to be expected when identity causes crowd participation. A person identifies as pro-life, so they enter a pro-life crowd.

An *unexpected* result in Munson's findings was that many people who joined pro-life groups did not begin with pro-life views or identities. Instead, they were initially neutral on the issue or in some cases even pro-choice (i.e., supporting the option of abortion). Their eventual pro-life identities developed through their involvement with the crowd. The crowd helped people to define themselves as pro-life such that the crowd caused identity.

What brought about these unexpected dynamics? Munson found that people often joined new groups when they were going through a major turning point or transition in their lives. For example, they had moved cities, started college, got divorced, or lost their job. As a result of these changes, they had *biographical availability* (McAdam 1986). They were looking for new crowds.

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Wandering through the social space and trying out new crowds is one way that people explore their identities. Am I like the people here? Are they like me? If I stay here, can I make a difference (Jasper 1997, 197)? This exploration can take place locally, such as by visiting various bars, coffee shops, social organizations, or churches. It can also happen in larger crowds akin to those encountered in the previous section. For example, some participants in the Women's March identified with the crowd, potentially connecting through devices such as knitting pink hats (Presley and Presswood 2018). Other participants felt that they did not fit in, perhaps due to racial or ethnic differences with the majority of the crowd (Brewer and Dundes 2018; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2017).

A person's choice of crowds may tell others something about who they are. In Scotland – where some social conflicts are channeled into sporting contests – which football / soccer games a person attends may reveal something about their ethnic and religious loyalties (Bradley 2006). It is traditional for Irish Catholics to support the Celtic Football Club and attend its games. Anglo-Protestants are expected to root for the Rangers Football Club and be a part of that crowd. A person caught in the wrong crowd may *feel* out of place and even be *treated* as out of place. In fact, it is not unheard of for opposing crowds to clash violently after matches between teams, with injuries being a routine occurrence (Ridley 2022).

Identities do not necessarily *originate* in a crowd (though they may). Yet crowds can still serve a vital role in *reinforcing* or *undercutting* identities. For example, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Queer (LGBTQ) identities remain stigmatized in many places in the world. A person who is newly realizing an LGBTQ identity may be unsure of that identity or whether they should express it publicly. Participating in an LGBTQ pride parade is a way that these individuals can explore these identities (Peterson, Wahlström and Wennerhag 2018, 201). In this case, joining the crowd has the potential to strengthen or reinforce their LGBTQ identity. Conversely, the answer to the identity question is sometimes "I don't belong here" (Sanin 2019). People may reach this conclusion after witnessing others express identities inconsistent with their values. For example, other activists in a social

movement or political party may behave in ways that appear sexist or homophobic, leading the individual to seek another crowd to join.

A person's identity may not be determined through their involvement in any single crowd. German scholar Georg Simmel (1955) postulated that, in modern societies, a person's identity is composed of multiple, overlapping group affiliations (Borch 2012). Daily life is a matter of moving from crowd to crowd. The context of these crowds may change over time. For example, Clifford Stott and John Drury's (2000) ethnography the 1990 poll tax demonstration and riot in Trafalgar Square, London, England revealed that crowd identities changed with the context as the police were deployed into the crowd. As police perceptions of the crowd shifted – coming to view it as irrational, normless, and violent – they exerted coercive force over the crowed. As a result, the crowd's identity transitioned from primarily being about the poll tax to being about clash between the police and the protesters.

When various crowds do not align with one another, people may face cross-pressures (Horan 1971). Cross-pressures may be explicit, such as when friends from one crowd ask me why I am also part of another crowd. Or, pressures may be informal, coming from differences in the way things are done, or the values that are expressed, in the crowds. I may find ways to manage these cross-pressures such that I can reconcile my participation in both crowds. However, cross-pressures may lead me to make a choice between the crowds, clinging to one identity and abandoning another. For example, I may come to feel that I cannot continue to be a part of both the March for Life (that is anti-abortion) and the Women's March (that advocates for a wide range of women's rights including, but not limited to, reproductive choice).

The foregoing arguments and examples demonstrate that there are inextricable dynamics associated with crowds as identities. As individuals change their identities, they adjust their crowds. These changes may be conscious and intentional – as when I decide to oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, thus, start attending antiwar protests. Yet, they may be gradual and unconscious – as when my biographical availability to participate in events changes as I age. When I am young, I

have time and energy to get out in the streets for many causes. When I get married and have children, my life demands that I spend more time at home. Finally, with retirement, I may have more opportunities to be a part of crowds again, if I want.

Crowd identities change too. They may become "hip" or "hot" – and they may just as readily lose this status. As transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and non-binary rights have come under attack in recent years, it has become increasingly fashionable to join crowds supporting them. For example, in Glasgow, Scotland, a pro-trans rally of a few thousand people gathered in January 2023 on short notice to respond to parliamentary developments unfavorable to the liberalization of gender recognition. A small portion of that crowd is photographed in Figure 1. Concomitant with these gatherings has been a widening of trans-associated identities in society, especially among young people (Monro 2019).

Figure 1. Trans Rights Rally, Glasgow, Scotland

Note: Photo by Michael T. Heaney, January 21, 2023.

Looking forward, there is much more to know about the micro-dynamics of crowds as identities. How much can a person's identity be established through joining a crowd? Drawing an example from my own life, I remember my participation in an antiwar rally in Washington, DC on

January 25, 2003, as an especially important experience in shaping my identity. As I marched along

with what was probably more than 100,000 people, I was filled with feelings of affirmation of my

opposition to a prospective war on Iraq, as well as a feeling of power. Surely, decision makers *had* to

listen to us. Of course, they did not. Still, this experience validated and strengthened my antiwar

identity. Marching on this day contributed substantially to my decision to direct my professional

research toward the antiwar movement. That led to many scholarly publications, such as Heaney

and Rojas (2014; 2015). My professional identity is now permanently connected to the antiwar

movement of the 2000s.

It may seem extraordinary for a single event to credibly shift the nature of a person's

identity. Yet ethnographic research suggests otherwise. Alice Goffman's (2019) investigation of

social occasions showed that they have outsized potential to create turning points in people's lives.

The crowds in Goffman's research were considerably smaller than a typical antiwar gathering, yet

they helped to set the stage for major decisions and choices that had long-term consequences for

the people that made them. Thus, there is a need for scholars to explore more systematically the

nature of crowds as identities in order to deepen what is known about the individual, local, and

symbolic elements of crowds.

Crowds as Networks

Approaching crowds as networks continues the previous section's focus on the local / individual

level of analysis. Yet there is a nontrivial shift from the symbolic to the concrete elements of the

crowd. The crowd is concrete in the sense that those in the crowd extract benefits or are vulnerable

to costs as a result of their participation. In this instance, the benefits or costs are channeled

through other actors in the crowd, functioning as networks.

Observers of crowds have long been fascinated by their potential network aspects. English

scholar Francis Galton (1907) was among the first to write about the supposed "wisdom of crowds."

He examined the guesses of 787 competitors (including, but not limited to, butchers and farmers)

who were asked to estimate the weight of a dressed ox. Individually, the contestants each had an approximately equal (but low) chance of pinpointing the correct value. However, the crowd as a whole was fairly accurate.   The average guess was within about one percent of the true value, even though the pattern of guesses did not follow the expected normal distribution. The lesson taken from Galton's analysis was that, even though any particular member of a crowd may not know more than any other, the crowd as a whole seemed to know something.

Modern scholars continue to work to uncover the source of the crowd's wisdom. Some theories attribute it to the benefits of diversity in the crowd (Page 2008). Other others conjecture that accuracy results from information exchanges in networks (Becker, Brackbill, and Centola 2017), especially as may be facilitated by electronic communication technologies, such as mobile phones and social media (Howard and Hussain 2013). For Susanne Lohmann (1994), crowds can spread information through what she called "information cascades." Her investigation of the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany (1989-1991) showed that mobilization spread information that the police were unlikely to respond violently to protests that were challenging the regime. This information emboldened the crowds and helped to bring down the regime, ultimately leading to the unification of East and West Germany. For Jennifer Hadden (2015), crowds are a setting for imitation through networks. Her study of international climate change advocacy organizations showed that these groups tended to imitate the tactics of those organizations they were connected to through networks of climate change actions.

From the perspective of the ontological argument of the present essay, it does not matter which – if any – of these arguments is most correct. Rather, what matters is that people turn to crowds *seeking* information through networks. If people use these networks and act on them, then crowds have a network essence.

One of the most important network mechanisms in crowds is that they enable participants to meet new people. *Some* of those new connections create sparks that spread widely. Dana Fisher's (2019, 86-87) research on activists resisting the Trump administration found that some

people who met at the Women's March on Washington used the bus ride home to discuss the formation of local chapters of a new organization that became known as "Indivisible." Indivisible would go on to become a critical force in keeping that resistance alive at the grassroots level in communities around the United States (Corrigall-Brown 2022). Beyond the symbolic aspects of the Women's March discussed above, the crowd operated as a network that self-perpetuated and spread rapidly.

Crowds as networks not only facilitate meetings among strangers, but also serve as gathering places for people who already know one another. My research on Washington, DC protesters showed that many survey respondents claimed to know people prior to the marches that they attended; having these relationships was significantly associated with being involved in the Black Lives Matter movement (Heaney 2022, 1371). Similarly, Figure 2 shows activists for improved health care for myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) meeting after an action outside the White House. A crowd may be akin to a convention where people holding niche interests are able to meet by mixing among those in attendance.

Figure 2. #MEACTION Activists after an Action in Washington, DC

Note: Photo by Michael T. Heaney, September 19, 2022.

The network structure of crowds may vary from randomness to intricacy depending on the presence or absence of subgroups in the crowd. These subgroups are crowds within the crowd. Smaller groups may wish to free ride upon the organizational infrastructure supplied by the crowd in order to enable its members to assemble, possibly including organizations with only tangential relevance to the larger crowd's purpose. For example, members of a pro-Palestine contingent at an anti-Iraq War rally believe that they can advance their cause, even if the event is (arguably) about something else. Alternatively, subgroups may have more refined concerns within the purpose of the crowd, such as geographically local constituencies or a women's interest section (Heaney 2020, 22-23). A third possibility is that a subgroup is an insurgency that aspires to capture leadership of the crowd from its primary organizers. The networks of the crowd may emerge from the concatenation of these and other types of subgroups.

While the structure of networks within crowds may be built by assembling already existing subgroups, it also has the potential to emerge endogenously from interactions within the crowd. Research by Lorenzo Isella and his colleagues (2011) reveals that the nature of these emergent networks vacillates temporally. They used Radio Frequency IDentification (RFID) devices to monitor crowds at a scientific museum in Dublin, Ireland and an academic conference in Turin, Italy. They found in both cases that the network structures sometimes followed spanning-tree patterns with small cliques connected by long chains of connections. In other cases, the networks converged into core-periphery patterns with dense central cores surrounded by sparser outer rims. Min Yin and her colleagues (2016) discovered an intermediate pattern between spanning trees and core-periphery structures in their analysis of communication in a crowdsourcing network.

Research on Twitter crowds demonstrates the endogenous appearance of polarized patterns when topics are political, though they observe a range of other structures when topics are nonpolitical (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, and Himelboim 2014). Similar patterns were detected in research my colleagues and I conducted of crowds at the 2008 Democratic and Republican national conventions (Heaney, Masket, Miller, and Strolovitch 2012). We found polarization of memberships

in political organizations, with connections provided between the poles only by a few groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Sierra Club (a pro-environmental organization).

Looking forward, it would be interesting to track the progressing integration of networks in physical and virtual crowds. A recent analysis by Christopher Barrie and Arun Frey (2021) established that data collected through face-to-face surveys at the Women's March and, separately, by scraping online Twitter hashtags led to similar inferences about the demographic and ideological composition of the crowd. This result provides a hint that networks in a physical crowd and the parallel social media networks tied to that crowd are closely related to one another, or at least have the potential to be. While online crowds and physical crowds have typically been treated separately by scholars, the Barrie and Frey result provides a basis for speculating that online and physical networks may (to some extent) be two sides of the same coin.

As social media and other electronic communication technologies evolve, so will the complexity of networks between virtual and geographically rooted crowds. In the recent past, cellular network congestion has proven to be a barrier for using virtual networks during some physically crowded events (Shafiq, Ji, Liu, Pang, Venkataraman, and Wang 2013). If people on the ground have difficulty accessing online networks, then integration of the two crowds is limited. Engineering solutions are reducing these difficulties, thus expanding potential for integration.

Likewise, rapid innovation in social media technologies and applications adds to the multidimensionality of crowd networks (Bhimani, Mention, and Barlatier 2019). These developments will likely reduce the validity of mapping online crowds *only* using Twitter, Facebook, or other widely used platforms; niche platforms with smaller user bases may be key to understanding the crowd's structure. In the present or near future, it may be more plausible to think not only about links between geographic and virtual crowds but also links to communities within virtual crowds. It is easy to imagine expanding feedback between these worlds. For example,

could differences in *online* crowds help to shape the structure of *geographic* crowds? Could an online crowd cause the polarization of a geographic crowd?

Before turning to the next section, it is necessary to clarify that the treatment of crowds as networks in the category of a concrete phenomenon is not intended to suggest that networks cannot have a symbolic component. As Joel Podolny (2001) explained, networks can serve as both "pipes and prisms." As *pipes*, they channel concrete things, such as information, resources, and personnel. But, as *prisms*, they channel *status*. A person may be considered more or less prominent based on who they are linked with. This section does not deny this argument, though it does emphasize the more concrete flows through networks.

Crowds as Power

Conceptualizing crowds as power returns the discussion toward the global / collective level and away from the local / individual level, without intending to deny the possibility that crowds can exert power over localities or individuals. There is a broad academic literature that emphasizes the multiple dimensions of power (Baldwin 2021; Digeser 1992), ranging from limited, short-term views to millennia-long conceptions that help to account for the foundations of human civilization. The perspective adopted in this section is perhaps closest to that of Robert Dahl (1961), sometimes called the "first face of power" or "coercion." It is the ability of one actor to force another actor to do something that they otherwise would not do. From this vantage point, the crowd as power is primarily a concrete (rather than symbolic) phenomenon. The other faces of power could have been incorporated into other sections of the essay. For example, Michel Foucault's (1995) view of power might have been blended into the discussion of crowds as networks. But this discussion is omitted due to space constraints.

The attack on the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, is a classic example of a crowd as power. The attack occurred immediately following the March to Save America that was held on the White House lawn, featuring President Trump as one of the speakers (Kanno-Youngs and Rosenberg

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2021). Over 2,000 rioters forcibly entered the Capitol, at least some of whom had the intention of stopping the confirmation of Joe Biden's election as President of the United States, potentially including the murder of high officers within the US government (Lucas 2022). This event has been widely discussed as an "insurrection" or an "attempted coup." Although the riot did not overturn the 2020 presidential election, it did slightly delay the official confirmation of the election's outcome. It showed that a nontrivial number of people were willing to use violence against the federal government in order to advance their political agendas. They signaled that their struggle on behalf of Donald Trump and his vision of American government and society would continue even as most of the rest of the nation moved on into another presidential administration. Investigations and criminal prosecutions stemming from this riot are still ongoing as of this writing in March 2023.

The Capitol riot is hardly the only contemporary example of using a crowd as power. On June 13, 2020, protesters burned down a Wendy's fast-food restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia (Fox 5 Atlanta Digital Team 2022). The protest was a response to the killing of Rayshard Brooks, an African-American man, as he was fleeing police. Brooks' death was one of far too many instances of the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police, which has fueled the Black Lives Matter movement (Woodly 2022). From the perspective of instrumental rationality, the arson might appear to have been senseless and irrational. It was the *police* that killed Brooks, not *Wendy's*. And the only real financial damage was to the stockholders of the insurance company that would pay for the loss. But from the perspective of crowds as power, the arson made sense. The crowd showed the Atlanta police and the people of Atlanta that they had the willingness to act collectively and use force if they could not expect to receive just policing. Today they burned down a building. Tomorrow they might broaden their aggression. The message to authorities that they favored substantial police reform was quite clear.

History is littered with examples of crowds using collective violence to gain power, from coordinated destruction to scattered attacks to revolutions (Tilly 2003). Crowds need not even be very large to achieve outsized outcomes. Revolutionary forces in Cuba and Russia, for example,

were only modestly sized when they took control of the state (Chomsky 2015; Trotsky 1932). Their power flowed from acting strategically at a time when the state was otherwise weak and surrounded by chaos.

Online crowds, too, have demonstrated the capacity to act collectively and exert power. "Doxxing" is a form of crowd behavior in which a person's private information is released publicly online, thus allowing in-person crowds to exert power over people. These actions have been used disproportionately against women, often involving some form of sexual harassment (Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin 2020). Social movements also are increasingly deploying doxxing as a technique to gain power. For example, the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong has turned doxxing against police officers as a way to counter harsh tactics frequently used against the movement (Lee 2022). Of course, doxxing is only one of myriad online tactics that have developed – and are developing – to give power to online crowds.

Discourses around "cancel culture" can be thought of as a family of strategies designed to produce power for ideologically-rooted crowds. Pipa Norris (2023) explained that cancel culture can be used against dissenting voices on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, depending on the geographic area in question. Prospective US presidential candidate Ron DeSantis is using (as of 2023) a kind of cancel culture argument in his attack against educational institutions in Florida to gain attention from potential Republican primary voters (Alterman 2022). DeSantis's arguments and legislation may be the vanguard of a broader movement to arise in the near future in Republican and other right-leaning circles.

Looking forward, the use of crowds as power is not only unlikely to disappear, it is prone to evolve into more complex forms through the co-evolution of virtual and geographically-rooted crowds. Imagine another Capitol riot ten or twenty years in the future. This time, the virtual crowds are able to feed information in real time to crowds physically located at the Capitol. The virtual crowds monitor and synthesize online discussions about the riot, perhaps even making the case to the broader public about why a coup d'état is needed or justified. Picture similar events unfolding in

a country with weaker political institutions that are less supportive of democracy, possibly even

explicitly drawing lessons from the US Capitol riot of 2021. One does not need to venture far into

dystopian fiction to invent such scenarios.

At the same time, governmental and pro-democracy tactics are on the horizon (or already

here) that surveil the internet to suppress online and geographically based crowds (Chan, Yi, and

Kuznetsov 2022). Both crowds and those who seek to control crowds will remain attentive to

crowds as power. Understanding technological developments and how they can be adopted by

human organizations will be critical to anticipating changes to come.

Conclusion

The ontology of crowds presented in this essay is visualized in Figure 3. The figure is depicted with

two axes: Processes (vertical) and Benefits and Costs (horizontal). Each of the crowd types (symbols,

identities, networks, and power) are situated in the corners of the figure. However, no sharp lines

are drawn between the types. It is easy to imagine how the types might blend into one another,

with symbols and power overlapping or identities and networks coming together. Surely, any

combination of the four types could be present in some situation.

Figure 3. An Ontology of Crowds

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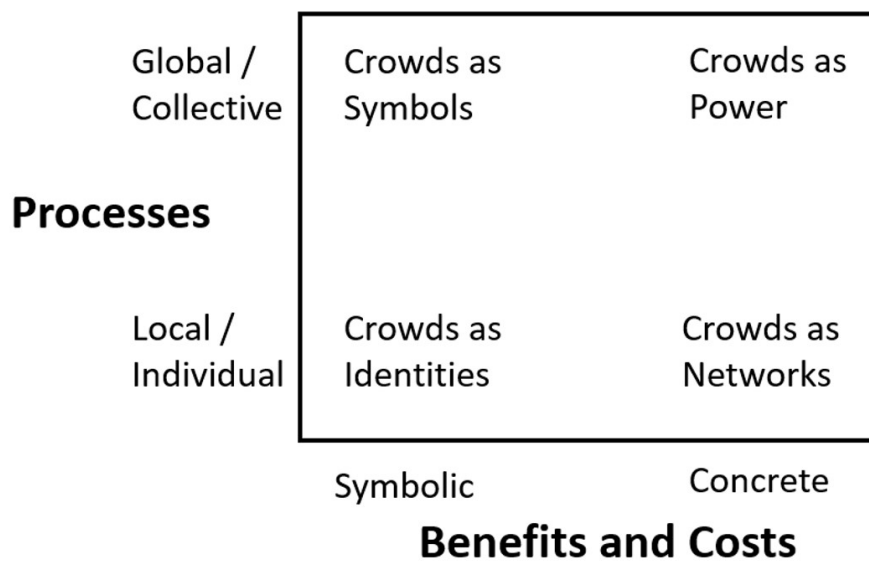
The purpose of the ontology is to facilitate theorizing about various ways to conceptualize crowds. If people are puzzled about the behavior of a crowd, it could be because they are looking at it from a different point in this two-dimensional space than are the crowd's participants. For example, an observer may wonder why a crowd has formed to protest a policy that is never going to change. This behavior may be irrational from the point of view of crowds as *power*. But as an instantiation of crowds as *identity*, it may be quite sensible. I join the crowd because doing so is an affirmation of who I am. Why do members of a local community join a Ku Klux Klan rally when the *symbolism* is so awfully bad? But seeing the crowd as a *network* makes my participation appear as a sensible way to meet other White nationalists (Blee 2003). The anti-government protests in France introduced at the beginning of this essay – along with many other examples – could be interpreted by considering this framework.

Crowds are flexible and dynamic phenomena. They are inseparable from human society. They mean different things to different people in different times, places, and contexts. Observers may impact these meanings as much or more than the people who are actually a part of the crowd. Today, crowds are both in the streets and in the cloud. The politics of crowds consists of finding ways to draw these considerations together.

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