Enclosing the Subject

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“Subject” is a concept that continues to trouble political theory. Does “subject” direct us toward initiative and autonomy or subjugation and constraint? Efforts to decenter the subject—whether targeting Cartesianism, Hegelianism, Marxism, or humanism—grapple with the challenge of accounting for order and initiative, submission and resistance, freedom and determination. Scholars working out of other archives get roped into these debates when they construe politics in terms of the thoughts, actions, or feelings of individuals. Not only is agency privileged over structure but the presumption that agents are individuals formats the alternative of autonomy or subjugation as an opposition between individual and collective. Collectivity comes to be associated with constraint, with preventing rather than enabling creativity and initiative. Liberal political theorists explicitly construe political agency as an individual capacity; others take the individuality of the subject of politics for granted. I argue that the problem of the subject is a problem of this persistent individual form, a form that encloses collective political subjectivity into the singular figure of the individual.

In the first part of the essay, I set up the idea of enclosure via an inversion of Louis Althusser’s famous claim that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. The point of this inversion is less to critique Althusser than it is to provide a heuristic that can loosen the hold of the individual form on conceptions of political subjectivity. I demonstrate this point by putting the inverted formula, “the subject is interpellated as an individual,” in conversation with work in post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory. In the second part of the essay, I track the enclosing of the subject in the individual form as it appears in the encounter between psychoanalysis and
crowd theory, more specifically, in Sigmund Freud’s appropriation of Gustave Le Bon. My goal is to break free from the individualizing assumptions that hinder understanding the political subject as a collective subject. The individual form encloses collective bodies, ideas, affects, and sensations into a singular, bounded, body. The link between individuality and political subjectivity, however, is neither necessary nor natural. It is an effect contingent to the array of processes that converge in bourgeois modernity.

Just as the commodity is a form for value, so is the individual a form for subjectivity. It is a form that impedes collective political subjectivity by separating it into and containing it within individuated bodies and psyches. As C. B. MacPherson argues, at the heart of the liberal theory of the seventeenth century is a “possessive individual” conceived as “the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them.”2 For example, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke view the essence of being human as “freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession.”3 They understand the individual neither primarily as a part or member, nor as fundamentally and irrevocably dependent on relations with others human and nonhuman. Rather, the individual is in essence one who owns himself and his capacities. We should note the reflexivity here: ownership relies on and is produced through a series of separations and enclosures. Capacities are separate from others as well as separate from a self, which encloses these capacities within its person. Instead of entailing collective reproduction for common good, training, whether moral or technical, is work on and for the self. Cut off from the settings that produce and enable them and enclosed within the individual, capacities are objects of individual concern.

Although liberal theory treats the individual as a locus of freedom, the co-dependence of the commodity form and the individual form enables elision between them. In his gripping
account of the antebellum slave trade in the United States, Walter Johnson describes the
importance of individuation in the dismantling of slave families and the categorizing and
fashioning of slaves for the market. Johnson writes, “On the one hand, they were to be
transformed into exemplars of the category to which they had been assigned; but once the
categories of comparison had been established and embodied, the slaves were supposed to once
again become visible as individuals.” To be priced, slaves had to be comparable. To be sold,
they had to be distinctive enough, individuated enough, to stand out from the crowd. The
individuality of the marketed slave was produced for purchase. The elision between commodity
and individual evidenced in the slave trade demonstrates that there is nothing necessarily or
essentially liberating about the individual form. As I consider below, it emerges historically as an
ideological mechanism for the de-subjectification of collectives. The individual and, as we shall
see, not only in its liberal, possessive, variety, is a form of capture.

The Subject is Interpellated as an Individual

Louis Althusser’s reworking of the Marxian notion of ideology presents the category of
the subject as constitutive of ideology. It is constitutive of ideology because the function of
ideology is “‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.” This function, Althusser argues, is
a characteristic of ideology in general; ideology “transforms” individuals into subjects. He names
the operation at work in this transformation “interpellation.” Presenting interpellation as a “hail”
or call, Althusser illustrates it with a police shouting “hey, you there!” and a person turning
around in response. With this turn-in-response, the individual becomes a subject: “he has
recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was
hailed’ (and not someone else).” Interpellation, then, is a process of subjection. Becoming
subject, the individual both takes on and comes under ideology’s structure of beliefs and expectations.

Althusser’s account of interpellation does not imply that there are individuals “out there” prior to interpellation. Invoking Freud and the rituals and expectations accompanying the birth of a child, “that happy event,” he insists that an “an individual is always-already a subject, even before she is born.” A child is born into a structure that has already subjected it, a structure that gives it a name, a sex, a place and requires it to fill this place, to become the subject it already is. Ideological interpellation, moreover, is not a singular event, the example of the hail notwithstanding. It is constant and ongoing, embedded in material practices of recognition and misrecognition “which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, unmistakable and, naturally, irreplaceable subjects.” As Elizabeth Wingrove writes, Althusser’s theory of ideology thus explains how actors’ “subjectivity—which is to say, their awareness of themselves as unique, (relatively independent), and capable of making choices—is achieved and sustained by virtue of their subjection to the rules, practices, and relations of the multiple apparatuses within a given social formation.” Subjectivity—or individuality, which in Althusser’s discussion is the same thing—is an effect of the larger ideological material structure.

One of the most influential of Althusser’s contributions, the idea of ideological interpellation has come under significant criticism. Paul Hirst points out that “Althusser’s concept of subject supposes that subjects and individuals correspond; that the subject is the unitary ‘identity’ of the individual, that the subject effect corresponds to the classic philosophical conception of consciousness.” Judith Butler highlights the “unelaborated doctrine of conscience” underpinning Althusser’s description of the individual’s turn in response to the hail, finding there “a guilty embrace of the law.” And Jacques Ranciere criticizes the Althusserian
theory of ideology for its exclusion of class struggle, its positing of a function for ideology independent of the existence of classes.  

He charges Althusser with missing what was already clear to Marx: ideological forms “are the forms in which a struggle is fought out.”

Approaching Althusser from the perspective of psychoanalysis, Mladen Dolar challenges yet another line of critique, one which faults Althusser for positing a “clean cut,” a sudden passage from the individual—“a pre-ideological entity, a sort of material prima”—to the subject. This critique misses its mark, Dolar argues, because the real problem with Althusser’s version of subjectivation is that the subject’s illusory belief in its own autonomy is never as total as Althusser implies. Interpellation itself produces a remainder for which Althusser cannot account. Psychoanalysis proceeds from this remainder, the flaw at the heart of the individual subject. Dolar writes, “For Althusser, the subject is what makes ideology work; for psychoanalysis, the subject emerges where ideology fails. The illusion of autonomy may well be necessary, but so is its failure; the cover-up never holds fast.”

As Slavoj Žižek emphasizes, the difference between the Althusserian and psychoanalytic views of the subject is that psychoanalysis emphasizes the ineliminable gap between ideology and individual. It does so not to naturalize an individual specificity perpetually out of ideology’s reach but to treat the subject itself as nothing but this gap.

My wager is that Althusser got it backwards. Ideological interpellation makes more sense as a theory of individuation than as a theory of subjection (which would account for the identity of subject and individual that remained a thorny problem in Althusser’s different theorizations of ideology). Warren Montag provides support for this inversion. He highlights Althusser’s claim that ideology “recruits” its bearers: “individuals are picked from an undifferentiated mass, singled out, removed from it and endowed with a unique identity, as if such a singling out or
separation of individuals were necessary to the functioning of the economy.”19 Confronting a crowd or mass, the ideological hail fragments it into singular elements. Montag notes the specific resonance of Althusser’s use of the term “interpellate” in the context of the protests and demonstrations of the 1960s. One would be stopped by the police “and therefore singled out from the crowd or singularized in relation to a background.”20 What was a crowd becomes so many separable individuals.

Rather than following Althusser’s emphasis on ideology in general, inverting his claim to attend to the interpellation of the subject as an individual narrows the focus to bourgeois ideology (and thereby returns class conflict to the theory of ideology). I use “bourgeois ideology” to refer to the loose set of ideas and apparatuses associated with European modernity, an instrumental concept of reason, and the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. The Protestant Reformation exemplifies bourgeois ideology’s interpellation of the subject as an individual. Breaking with the communality of Catholicism, Protestant theologies hail believers as singular souls responsible for their own salvation. Effects of the interpellation of the subject as an individual include the reduction of agency to individual capacity, freedom to individual condition, and property to individual possession. They include as well the supposition that aggregates—groups, tribes, collectivities, and crowds—are unavoidably primitive, barbaric, irrational, and atavistic.

An advantage to reversing the Althusserian account is that the subject is not pre-constrained to the individual form, a form that psychoanalysis teaches is always already as failing and impossible as it is assumed and demanded. With this reversal, the individual form itself becomes a problem, the coercive and unstable product of the enclosure of the common in never-ceasing efforts to repress, deny, and foreclose collective political subjectivity. Althusser’s
claim that “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” can then be re-read with the emphasis on individual. What is imaginary is that the conditions ideology organizes relate primarily to the singular person of an individual. The individual is itself an imaginary figure, as we learn from Jacques Lacan. It is bourgeois ideology that treats conditions that are collective and social, embedded in histories of violence and systems of exploitation, as if they were relationships specific to an individual, as if states arose through individual consent, as if politics were a matter of individual choice, and as if desires and capacities, affects and will naturally originate from and reside in an individual form. On the contrary, just as collective experience of antagonism--the “social substance”--underlies what Marx calls the “phantom-like objectivity” of the commodity, so too does it underlie the phantom-like subjectivity of the individual.

Enclosing the common

Inverting Althusser helps us conceive the individual as a form of enclosure. As Marx describes in Capital, enclosure is an operation through which what is common is seized and put into service for capitalism. Butler’s account of the constitution of the subject in language, an account that itself draws from Althusser, provides a way to access this operation insofar as the linguistic category of the subject designates a condition of common belonging.

Butler writes, “The genealogy of the subject as a critical category … suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject … The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency.” That individuals come to
occupy the place of the subject implies that more than one necessarily occupies this place at the same time. Because “subject” is the linguistic condition for intelligibility and its function is to hold open a place, the utterly singular and unique would have no place. The utterly singular would be illegible within the available terms of existence and agency. “Individual” thus designates a specific occupation of the subject understood as a common place. As a subject, the individual can only be one occupant among many. The singularity of its subject-status is purely imaginary. “Subject” is a condition for agency because the individuality of agency is a fantasy occluding the material and collective conditions for action, contracting them into an imaginary ego.

Butler associates the individual’s occupation of the position of the subject, its subjection, with foreclosure. As the individual is subjectified, it loses something of itself (even if this is something it never had). To be a subject is to be, in a way, bereft. Butler suggests that the subject is a condition of freedom at the cost of freedom, where this lost or sacrificed freedom is a kind of authenticity or potentiality for love and desire that would be available to the subject were it not for the law to which the subject is beholden: “One cannot criticize too far the terms by which one’s existence is secured.” Understanding the subject as interpellated as an individual, however, opens up another possibility. The bereavement accompanying interpellation arises from the loss of others. The individual is the one cut off from, cut out of, the collective. Caught in the isolation of the imaginary ego, the individual tries to do and be alone what she can only do and be with others.

Already in *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault treats the individual as an effect of power and knowledge as he details the making of the individual through the extension of disciplinary formulae of domination in eighteenth century Europe. Discipline involves a range
of mutually reinforcing techniques employed to solve the problem collective people create for authority. The state needs the army, but an armed assembly of the people can overthrow the state. Capital needs labor, but the concentrated power of the workers can render useless, destroy and effectively abolish, capitalist investment in raw material and means of production. Over the course of the eighteenth century, processes of enclosing, partitioning, functionalizing, and ranking spread throughout the social to turn the motley, amorphous, unruly mass into a docile, useful, combination of forces. Vagabonds and paupers are confined.\textsuperscript{28} Workers are closed off into factories. A monastic model becomes the ideal for secondary schools. The “army, that vagabond mass,” becomes a more regimented military, separated into barracks in order to prevent looting and violence.\textsuperscript{29} The enclosed are then partitioned off from one another: “Each individual has his own place; and each place is individual. Avoid distribution in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyze confused, massive or transient pluralities.”\textsuperscript{30}

As Foucault makes clear, enclosure and segmentation accompany not only technological developments, the punctuation and measuring of time, and the correlation of bodies and gestures, but also important changes in the work of power on bodies. These changes in the mode of power’s operation on bodies increase opportunities to observe and gain knowledge of them and to put this knowledge to use in securing their combined utility and docility. “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals,” Foucault writes.\textsuperscript{31} “The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities.”\textsuperscript{32} Observed and compared, bodies, aptitudes, and capacities are individuated as they are “classified in relation to one another.” Evaluated and rewarded, they shed their quality as mass and take shape as trained, specified, and knowable individuals.\textsuperscript{33} As an effect of the enclosure of the crowd, individuation is fundamentally—and deliberately—
depoliticizing, the fantasies of liberals notwithstanding. Althusser poses in his discussion of ideological state apparatuses: “What do children learn at school?” They learn that they are individuals.

Silvia Federici deepens and extends Foucault’s account of the material production of the individual in modern Europe. Tracing the peasant uprisings, popular heresies, and witch-hunts inseparable from the bloody processes of capital accumulation, Federici connects the disciplinary enclosure of the workforce with the “accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves.” She attends to the demographic and economic crisis in the first decades of the seventeenth century (crises involving dramatic population declines in Europe and the New World and leading to the establishment of the transatlantic slave trade), situating there the emergence of reproduction and population growth as matters of intellectual and state concern. A particular focus of the Mercantilists, state preoccupation with population growth manifested itself in attempts to expropriate from women their reproductive labor, rendering them literally and physically a source of labor power as it differentiated between men’s and women’s work, devalued the work of women, and demonized their knowledge of reproduction and the body. As the ruling classes endeavored to impose ever stricter discipline on an unruly workforce, moreover, inefficient social activities like gaming and drinking came under heavy scrutiny and regulation; unproductive sexuality was forbidden.

Federici affiliates these developments with the rationalism of the “mechanical philosophy” of Descartes and Hobbes. She attributes the popularity of Cartesianism among middle and upper-class Europeans to its provision of a model of self-management crucial for capitalism’s need for a reliable, predictable, and calculable workforce. Cartesianism provided “a
new model of the person,” where the self would work on its self, training, controlling, and stylizing its body, now configured as something other, something possessed. “The product of this alienation from the body,” Federici writes, “was the development of individual identity, conceived precisely as ‘otherness’ from the body, and in perennial antagonism with it.” As she concludes, this emergence of an alter ego represents “the birth of the individual in capitalist society.”37 Rather than the individual belonging to the world, the world exists in order to belong to it.

Foucault’s and Federici’s explorations into the disciplinary production of the individual supply ample reason to replace the idea of the individual’s interpellation as a subject with that of the subject’s interpellation as an individual. The individual is a product of European modernity, the form through which collective economic force is politically secured so as to facilitate the processes of its own exploitation. Bourgeois ideology, manifest in the disciplinary techniques that make individuals, hails the collective subject, the mass of workers, vagabonds, soldiers, and students, as individuals (even as the capacity of the common people for individuated self-discipline in the service of capital accumulation and liberal order will persist as a problem). It singles out and separates, producing the very individuals it extracts.

Nonetheless, Foucault cannot explain how disciplinary techniques and processes subjectify or desubjectify the individuated.38 We gain an understanding of bourgeois ideology’s regime of individuation at the cost of the foreclosed collective. Federici takes a step toward such an explanation when she gestures to an emergent alter ego—an incomplete individuation or individual that remains somehow plural. Psychoanalysis, built around the failures of the individual form, helps carry the explanation further. “For psychoanalysis there is no such thing as an individual,” Dolar writes, “the individual only makes sense as a knot of social ties, a
network of relations to others, to the always already social Other, the Other being ultimately but a shorthand for the social instance as such.”

Below, I turn to Freud’s discussion of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, excavating from his account the collectivity enclosed in the individual.

*The subject is the gap in the structure*

Before I turn to Freud, however, I want to mention an additional advantage to rethinking ideology as the interpellation of the subject as an individual, namely, making political sense out of the idea from Dolar and Žižek that the subject is nothing but the gap in the structure. Because Althusser takes as his problem the compliance of individuals with a system that oppresses them, he has trouble conceiving the system as itself a social product (or product of conflict); institutions are external to the subjects they produce. Dolar and Žižek, in presenting the limits of interpellation as the subject, could be seen as making the problem worse in that they have to posit the continuity of interpellating institutions that always fail. After all, they suggest that the subject as such is hysterical, resisting the interpellative hail, perpetually refusing the identity offered to her. How, though, would an institution continue if its hail were persistently resisted?

One possible answer would be that the subject is rare, the *unique* individual (or individual in the moment of uniqueness), the heroine capable of going to the limit, doing the impossible. Institutions would then be understood as persisting because most of the time they work, but this working is not through the successful production of subjects; it’s through the production of objects. Another answer would shift registers altogether, reconceptualizing the problem in terms of the concept of subjectivity: if for Althusser subjectivity consists in the identity that emerges in response to the hail, for Dolar and Žižek subjectivity consists in the gap produced and occluded
by answering the hail. These two options of unique or void, unconditioned or ineliminable, are politically unsatisfying.\textsuperscript{40} Politics diminishes into waiting for the impossible arrival of one who cannot make much of a difference anyway.\textsuperscript{41} Fortunately, these are not the only options.

Reversing Althusser’s formulation so as to understand ideology as interpellating the subject as an individual provides another option: the subject emerges where ideology fails because the subject is collective. When bourgeois ideology fails, individuation fails and the fact of collectivity impresses itself. A problem faced by one becomes a condition shared by many. Correspondingly, the subject is a gap in the structure because the people are the subject of politics. “Subject” is therefore not primarily a linguistic site of individual freedom, decision, or choice. Nor does it index the unconscious fantasies that fill-in and direct the never complete structure. Rather subject is a gap in three other intertwined senses: structure’s inability to ground or posit itself, its dependence on something external to it, and the torsion of the Real in the excess of its self-relation.\textsuperscript{42} In their self-relating, the people always come up against themselves. They encounter the practical, material limits of their association, the psychic and affective pressures of their commonality, and the effects of histories of conflict and conquest. The excess of their reflective relation to themselves as the people, or, as I term it here, between the collectivity and the common people or people-in-common, is the torsion of politics. Politics takes place in the non-identity, gap, or torsion between people and their self-governance.\textsuperscript{43} Political subjectification involves forcing this non-identity, making it felt as an effect of a subject. As Bruno Bosteels puts it in a discussion of Alain Badiou, “subject consists in the coherence of a forced lack.”\textsuperscript{44} Not just any gap is that of the subject; subject appears as the active occupation of the constitutive lack in the people.
There is politics because the political subject is collective and it is split. This split is practical and material, the condition of our physical being. The people can never be politically (or, differently put, “the people” is not an ontological category). They are only present as parts, as subsets. This is the case with crowds occupying public squares, elected assemblies, armies in battle, and opinion polls. All are necessarily parts and their partiality, the gap between parts and (imaginary) whole, is the locus, the exciting cause, of political subjectification. Even as parts, moreover, the people are only present temporarily. They may try to inscribe their presence, their having been, in documents, practices, and organizations which will take their place and operate in their stead, a taking and operating which it also and unavoidably partial. Some degree of alienation is unavoidable: making something ourselves, building collectives, creating new institutions cannot eliminate the minimal difference between the collectivity and the common people. To reiterate, the condition of politics is this practical material split between the people in common and the collective that actually comes together. Expressed in Rousseauian terms: the general will does not follow from the will of all.

The split in the people is also an effect of the group on its members in the sense that the people are never fully identical with their sovereignty. Groupness exerts a force that is more than the sum of individual expectations. The expectations of groups work back upon their members. People have them of each other as well as of themselves, and they have them of each other and themselves in ways of which they are never fully conscious. This excess manifests itself in the point of reference from which a collectivity views itself as a collective, a point sometimes occupied by a leader or held in place by a proper or common name. A name forces a gap in the collectivity it names, inscribing the non-all character of the collectivity and providing a new terrain of struggle: we argue over the name. The name-in-common can never fully designate--
capture and enclose--the collectivity even as the collectivity cannot relate to itself absent a structuring form.\textsuperscript{45}

The split in the people goes all the way down. It cannot be limited to the idea that some are excluded from the people (and hence that including them would solve the problem of the gap). Nor can it be rendered as the problem of representation (and hence addressed by attempting to bypass representation and turning directly to ontology).\textsuperscript{46} Rather, the people are not fully present to themselves. They do not know what they want. Conflicting and contradictory desires and drives render the people a split subject perpetually pushing to express, encounter, and address its own non-knowledge.

I have proposed an inversion of the Althusserian account of ideology and suggested some of the conceptual benefits that accompany it. An understanding of the subject as interpellated as an individual resonates with linguistic ideas of the subject, better fits with Althusser’s own description of ideological recruitment, and attends to the historicity of the individual itself in bourgeois modernity.\textsuperscript{47} Even more, it lets us begin to explore the gaps constitutive of collective subjectivity and thereby loosen the grip of the individual form. As he fails to uncouple subject and individual, to attend to the very crowd out of which the hailed individual is recruited, Althusser naturalizes enclosure. To be sure, he is working on the terrain of a psychoanalysis that has already enclosed the collective subject in the individual form. If we turn to Freud’s \textit{Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego}, we can see how this enclosing is accomplished. There Freud presents the individual form as a product of the enclosure of the crowd.\textsuperscript{48} A return to Freud, and to his primary interlocutor in \textit{Group Psychology}, the notorious Gustave Le Bon, reanimates the crowd as it highlights the displacement of many by one. Attending to this crowd
contributes to the dismantling of the phantom-like subjectivity of the individual by locating in the crowd the dynamics of a collective subject.

**The Unconscious is a Crowd**

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud concerns himself with man as a member, man in his belonging to: how is it that that to which man belongs, belongs to him? These concerns lead him to discuss problems of identification, attachment, and the intensification of affect, problems of ties and their undoing, as Dolar expresses it. As Freud turns to group psychology, he brings the insights of psychoanalysis to bear on crowd theory, a field that emerged in late nineteenth century social science at the convergence of discussions in biology, criminology, psychology, and sociology and bourgeois fears incited by the revolutionary crowds of the Paris Commune of 1871. Crowd theorists sought to understand the dangerous irrationality of the crowd. Why did people in crowds become more instinctual, emotional, and violent? In pre-disciplinary or even interdisciplinary style, crowd theorists used evolution to rank human civilizations, hypnosis to explain imitation in groups, and medicine to diagnosis crowd pathology. At the time of Freud’s intervention, crowd theory was well-established and widely-accepted. Freud enters the discussion so as to expand the influence of the newer field of psychoanalysis by demonstrating how psychoanalysis better explains group behavior.

While he engages several different crowd theorists, Freud relies most heavily on the work of Gustave Le Bon. Le Bon was a pessimistic conservative who presented his racist, elitist, and misogynist ideas as scientific discoveries. His immensely popular 1895 book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, consolidates literary and historical accounts of the crowd from Emile Zola and Hyppolite Taine with work on criminal crowds from Scipio Sighele and Gabriel
Tarde. The Crowd announced to its readers that they were entering an Era of Crowds (capitalization in the original). It instructed them to fear it. It was certainly possible, Le Bon warned, “that the advent to power of the masses marks one of the last stages of Western civilization, a complete return to those periods of confused anarchy which seem always destined to precede the birth of every new society.” The masses were now in charge and the most likely result was the collapse of civilization.

The Crowd appeared at a time of increasing worker militancy. In France, the number of workers in syndicates tripled between 1890 and 1900. The number of strikes quadrupled over two decades. In 1886, in the dramatic miners’ strike in Decazeville, workers threw a deputy director of the company out of a window; he was then mauled to death by the crowd. In 1890, plans for massive May Day demonstrations prompted the government to garrison 38,000 troops in Paris to avert what some feared to be a resurgence of the Commune. Le Bon offers his theory of the crowd as guidance for understanding this new era even though he thought little could be done to shape it. His subsequent fascist admirers try to disprove this second point by drawing from his work in their efforts to stir and channel mass feeling.

Le Bon’s account of crowds arises out of his antipathy toward the transformation of the popular classes into governing classes. Lamenting that the “divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings,” Le Bon decries the way association, far more than universal suffrage, is making the masses conscious of their strength. The masses establish syndicates and labor unions, before which authorities capitulate. They fight to limit the hours of labor, nationalize mines, railways, factories, and soil, equalize the distribution of products, and eliminate the upper classes. The efforts of the masses, Le Bon warns, “amount to nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark
back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilization.”57 Le Bon’s findings thus confirm and amply already intense anxieties among the elite.

Nineteenth-century crowd theorists ask what makes law-abiding individuals in a crowd act like criminals. Le Bon answers that a crowd is a new collective being. Assembly into a crowd results in new psychological characteristics as all the thoughts and feelings of the collectivity are turned in an identical direction.58 Under conditions that Le Bon attributes to “exciting causes,” something emerges that is not present in individuals alone, “just as in chemistry, certain elements, when brought into contact—bases and acids, for example—combine to form a new body possessing properties quite different from those of the bodies that have served to form it.”59 Despite his claims to originality, Le Bon steals this idea from Sighele, who had been involved in a public dispute with Tarde over who deserved credit for originating crowd theory.60 Plagiarizing both, Le Bon schematizes the tropes that had by that time become inseparable from the crowd concept—contagion, suggestion, affective intensification, and de-individuation.61

The vehicle for Le Bon’s schematization is the unconscious. He writes, "The substitution of the unconscious actions of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age."62 This emphasis on the unconscious provides the opening for psychoanalysis. In Group Psychology, Freud joins the crowd theory discussion by means of a twist: not only is the crowd unconscious but the unconscious is itself a crowd. Freud thus accepts Le Bon and adds an inversion of Le Bon. The inversion is possible because Le Bon’s concept of the crowd is psychological. Crowds are not coincident with a mass of bodies in the street. Rather, “crowd” involves a concentration and directionality that encompasses people in a specific place and that extends to a wide array of structured institutions (parliament and jury)
and imaginary communities (race and nation). More than a set of social relations, “crowd” for Le Bon is a process (“like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies”) or force in which individuals get caught (“Ideas, sentiments, emotions and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes”). Early twenty-first century commentators will describe the same phenomena with terms like cascade-effects, bandwagoning, confirmation basis, and bubbles. Informed by nineteenth century science, Le Bon affiliates crowd processes with hallucination, barbarism, and the direction of the spinal cord instead of the brain (another point he steals from Sighele). Le Bon describes the strength of the crowd force in terms of the danger its poses: the power of the crowd is the “last surviving sovereign force of modern times” and “the only force that nothing menaces.”

Le Bon conceives the unconscious racially as a hereditary substratum of similarity upon which individual differences are built. The unconscious encompasses a wide array of passions and instincts passed down through the generations. Vastly more influential than the mind’s conscious life, the unconscious always threatens to subsume the individual’s independent intellectual aptitudes, themselves fragile feats of reason, education, and elite culture. In a crowd, common characteristics overpower the rare attainment intelligence. Ordinary qualities triumph over distinction and specialization. As Le Bon puts it, these qualities “in crowds become common property.” Individuals in a crowd, no matter their differences in occupation, intelligence, character, or mode of life, possess a collective mind, what Le Bon attributes to the “psychological law of the mental unity of crowds.” Tarde theorizes the same phenomena under the heading of “imitation.” In terms resonant with Le Bon’s, anxiety about subjection to the crowd, or, differently put, over the fragility of the individual as a form of subjectivity,
characterizes over a century of inquiry into the crowd, from Durkheim, through Mill, through twentieth century American sociology's emphases on the mass and conformity. 68

In Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, the unconscious is a crowd in two senses. The first is an analytic or structural sense of a repressed product of history, whether of family or species, as it impresses itself within the individual. Freud commends Le Bon’s discussion of the unconscious because it resonates so well with his own (adding that “as a matter of fact none of the author’s statements bring forward anything new”). 69 The second is a more metaphorical or analogical sense where the unconscious is described in terms of the affective dynamics of the crowd. The forces in the unconscious are like the directed intensities of crowd processes. Freud shifts back and forth between these two senses in his attempt to explain the nature of group ties and the emergence of individual from group psychology, explanations that never quite cohere.

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen challenges the Freudian postulate of the unity of the subject of the unconscious, suggesting instead that it is multiple, unascrirable, unidentifiable. 70 In a compelling deconstructive reading of psychoanalysis’s binaries of subject and other, desire and object, Borch-Jacobsen draws from René Girard to treat desire as primarily mimetic, positing a “primordial tendency” to identification. 71 The details of this discussion exceed my purposes here. What’s compelling is Borch-Jacobsen’s attunement to the ineluctable problem of individuation in psychoanalysis, the problem of being apart when one is always a part. As parts, we remain inextricably interconnected: every attempt to be apart, to separate, involves connection at another point or on another plane. 72 Following a nuanced treatment of Freud’s writing on narcissism as symptomatically deploying sexuality in the context of his professional rivalries, Borch-Jacobsen
turns to *Group Psychology*. He asks whether *Group Psychology* is premised on a possibility Freud cannot let himself think, namely, that of “a mass-ego, a primordial crowd.”

There is much to admire in Borch-Jacobsen’s reading. I want to note, however, where mine will diverge from his. Rather than attending to the two different senses of the unconscious as a crowd in Freud, Borch-Jacobsen absorbs the dynamic in the structural. He treats the crowd-unconscious (for Le Bon and Freud) as a womb, “a soft, malleable, plastic, infinitely receptive material without will or desire or any specific instinct of its own.” Crowd as “matrical mass” fits with Borch-Jacobsen’s emphasis on the imaginary. It also fits with his critique of Freud insofar as Freud attempts to enclose the crowd within the form of the individual. But neither Le Bon nor Freud present the crowd as infinitely receptive and incapable of desire. Le Bon notes that influencing the crowd takes skill; the crowd senses its own strength and is thus intolerant of contradiction in those who speak before it. Since neither truth nor argument make a difference to crowds (they are not infinitely receptive), Le Bon emphasizes affirmation, repetition, and contagion as more promising methods of influence. Freud says that the crowd “may desire things passionately” and that it can tolerate no delay “between its desire and the fulfillment of what it desires.” His primary argument is that crowds are tied together libidinally; they are products of desire. In short, the unconscious processes associated with the crowd are more subjectal than Borch-Jacobsen acknowledges. The collectivity desires and wills, destroys and creates. These attributes precede Freud’s attempts to contain them in the unconscious of an individual whose own subjectification is contingent upon this containment.

Dolar goes further than Borch-Jacobsen when he suggests that the unconscious as Freud describes it *Group Psychology* takes place *between* the individual and the collective, “in the very establishment of the ties between an individual (becoming a subject) and a group to which s/he
would belong.” Dolar declines to read Freud in terms of a collective unconscious because that would demand a defined collectivity, a community to which it would pertain, but no such pre-given community exists.” Because Le Bon’s crowds are heterogeneous as well as homogeneous, criminal as well as moral, gatherings forming a collective mind “doubtless transitory, but presenting very clearly defined characteristics,” however, I see no reason to presume a “defined collectivity.” “Defined collectivity” implies a collectivity that is known and inscribed rather than crowd characteristics, dynamics, and attributes that are themselves definable. It suggests bounded groups rather than momentary collectivities formed through a concentration of forces the exciting causes of which can only be retroactively determined. In Group Psychology, the unconscious is nothing but collective, an insight Freud attempts repeatedly to repress by enclosing its processes in an individual form never adequate to its task. Psychoanalysis as a field is possible and can contribute to the debates in crowd theory because the dynamics it investigates are already collective even as they are enclosed in the generic form of the individual.

“a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements”

Freud quotes extensively from The Crowd. Two ideas significant for Le Bon’s crowd concept appear in the first passage Freud lifts: the crowd as a source of new feelings, thoughts, and ideas and the crowd as the novel consistency of a provisional being. First, individuals in a group are “in the possession of a sort of collective mind that makes them feel, think, and act in manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation. There are certain ideas and feelings which do not come into being, or do not transform themselves into acts except in the case of individuals forming a group.” Second, the psychological group is a “provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements, which for a
moment are combined, exactly as the cells which constitute a living body form by their reunion a new being which displays characteristics very different from those possessed by each of the cells singly.\(^7\) Freud does not question the emergence of previously inexistent ideas and feelings. Nor does he challenge the notion of a new, provisional being. He fully assumes the idea that in a group individuals combine into a temporary unity, a collectivity that did not exist prior to this combining. Freud wants to know what unites people in a crowd, what the character of the ties that bind them together is.

Le Bon had not concerned himself with what unites people in a crowd because he begins from the fact of collectivity—the provisional being of the crowd—seeking to understand its effects. He thus tries to explain why actions and affects not previously possessed by individuals emerge in a crowd.\(^8\) Freud recounts Le Bon’s three explanations. The first is that a crowd feels itself to have enormous power. This feeling of invincibility makes a person less likely to hold himself in check which means that he yields to instincts he would otherwise restrain. Freud writes this off as unimportant: of course our deepest selves lack responsibility; the crowd enables the individual to “throw off repressions.”\(^9\) Le Bon is mistaken in taking the sentiment of invincible power as a cause for the appearance of something new—nothing new is appearing. Impulses repressed in the unconscious have simply become free to manifest themselves. As Freud notes, his disagreement with Le Bon here stems from their differing accounts of the unconscious. Le Bon’s “racial mind” lacks the dimension of the “unconscious repressed” conceptualized by psychoanalysis, so for him the crowd does give rise to something new, something that cannot be reduced to the substratum of hereditary influences. Freud’s objection treats the dynamic Le Bon describes as a structure, shifting between the two senses of
“unconscious” such that behavior in a crowd manifests what is already contained in the human mind.

More interesting to Freud is the second explanation Le Bon provides for the change effected by crowds: contagion. Contagion is kin to hypnosis in that it induces people to act in unexpected ways. Freud quotes Le Bon: “In a group every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest.” The third explanation for why individuals change in crowds is suggestion. Freud fills the page with Le Bon’s description of the “magnetic influence given out by the group,” the vanishing of conscious personality and loss of will, “the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts.” Commenting on an asymmetry in Le Bon's account, Freud observes that contagion refers to members’ effects on each other; suggestion, particularly when understood in terms of hypnosis, implies something else entirely, the operation of a hierarchical relation of influence. Who is the hypnotist?

Momentarily setting aside the matter of the hypnotist in the group, just as he did the question of group ties, Freud includes another long quote from Le Bon: “by the mere fact that he forms part of an organized group, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian, that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings.” Freud approves, commending not just Le Bon’s “identification of the group mind with the mind of primitive people” but also noting the convergence between crowd theory and psychoanalysis. What crowd theory has found in crowds, psychoanalysis has observed “in the unconscious mental life of individuals, of children and of neurotics.” The
processes that Le Bon describes as changing the man in the crowd are for Freud indications of the crowd already in the man. He then repeats multiple elements of LeBon's description, saying that the group is changeable, irritable, impulsive, credulous, incapable of persevering, desirous, intolerant of delays in the satisfaction of its desire, open to influence, and that it thinks in images. “It has a sense of omnipotence;” “no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation, can make itself felt.” The group is inclined to extremes, lacks a critical faculty, and respects force. It has a thirst for obedience: "It wants to be ruled and oppressed and to fear its masters." Groups demand illusions. Distinctions between truth and falsity matter little. Words function more magically than rationally. A group “knows neither doubt nor certainty,” a phenomenon of unconscious life that Freud reminds his readers he has already discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

To repeat, insofar as Le Bon conceives the crowd in terms of a dynamic wherein energies are concentrated in a single direction, he sees the force of crowds expressed in races, castes, classes, nations, juries, parties, and parliamentary assemblies. All these can override individual judgment and opinion, eliciting effects that exceed what an individual would rationally decide to do on his own. These are psychological crowds where “crowd” names the novel consistency temporarily formed from interlinked processes. The last third of *The Crowd* examines the particular characteristics that arise when different collectivities are “transformed into a crowd under the influences of the proper exciting causes.” Most commentators on Le Bon miss this transformative dimension of Le Bon’s crowd concept, criticizing him for blurring the boundaries of the crowd such that there is no difference between juries and mobs rather than commending him for shifting attention to the dynamics shaping collectivities. Freud does not miss this point because he does not share the sociologists’ concern with classifying groups. His interest is in
establishing the reputation of psychoanalysis by demonstrating its explanatory power. For Freud, whether an individual is physically in a group—in the crowd or in an institution—is no different from whether the group manifests itself in the individual—as with the nation or race. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the individual in a crowd and subject to its emergent dynamics is just another instance of the individual as such, a fragile ego grappling with unevenly repressed desires and drives.

*From group psychology to individual psychology ... and back*

Although Freud praises the brilliance of Le Bon’s depiction of the group mind, he’s not satisfied with Le Bon’s discussion of what ties the group together. It is here, in fact, where Freud thinks that psychoanalysis can contribute to crowd psychology. Instead of taking for granted the primacy of an instinct to sociality, psychoanalysis can explain the desires and instincts that underlie group cohesion. The liability to affect and intellectual inhibition that alters the individual in a crowd, Freud argues, should not be attributed to number, to a quantity of people, but rather explained with basic psychoanalytic concepts. Moving from many to one, Freud’s explanation encloses the directed intensities of Le Bon’s crowd into an individual unconscious. Collective desire is reduced to an amplification of frustrated individual desires. Forces associated with the crowd become unconscious processes within an individual. Freud works to prevent these processes from rupturing the individual, but his efforts at containment never quite succeed, held in place, ultimately, through the reassertion of the “scientific myth” of the primal horde.

In his initial step toward enclosure, Freud criticizes the authorities on group psychology for appealing to “suggestion” in their attempts to understand crowd processes such as imitation and contagion, in other words, “influence without logical foundation.” Freud finds these
accounts of suggestion circular: they rely on the idea that suggestibility is a fundamental mental fact (ein weiter nicht reduzierbares Urphänomen). As Borch-Jacobsen writes, “when Freud rises up against the tyranny of suggestion, he is of course militating in favor of the autonomy of the individual subject.”

Already in his shift from the active process of “suggestion” (die Suggestion) to the more passive, receiving,” suggestibility” (die Suggerierbarkeit), Freud takes a group process and makes it into an attribute of an individual.

Looking “behind the shelter, the screen, of suggestion,” Freud finds love. Group ties are libidinal ties. The individual gives up his distinctiveness to the group because he wants to be in harmony with its members. Given the violent, disruptive, and volatile crowds Le Bon describes, this is a strange move. Freud justifies it by faulting Le Bon for paying insufficient attention to the leader and by shifting attention to groups typically ignored by crowd theory, the church and the army. This enables Freud to oedipalize the crowd, to enclose it into the oedipal relationships crucial to his theory of individual psychology. Church and army are each headed by a leader (Christ, commander) "who loves all the individuals in the group with an equal love." The illusion of equal love is absolutely essential, Freud tells us. Everything depends on it. Christ stands in relation to the individuals in the church as an elder brother or “father surrogate.” Because of the equality of members—each shares equally in Christ's love—the church is like a family. Members call each other brother: “the tie which unites each individual to Christ is also the cause of the tie which unites them with one another.” The army is basically the same, with the fundamental difference being that this familial structure is repeated in a hierarchical fashion (sections, units, squadrons, etc.). What matters to Freud is the double nature of the libidinal tie of the group: individual to leader, individual to individual. Group ties have to be libidinal if they are to be strong enough to limit the narcissism Freud attributes to the individual.
Yet the forces Freud describes exceed the structure in which he wants to place them. He has been attempting to remedy the problem of the circularity of suggestion by appealing to libido. To cement his case, he considers the complicating example of panic (as discussed by another crowd theorist, William McDougall). On the one hand, panic “means the disintegration of the group.” On the other, it is an intensification of affect through contagion. This produces the paradox that what binds unbinds. Freud thinks that understanding group ties libidinally solves the problem insofar as panic is analogous to anxiety and thus manifests because of an increase in danger or cessation of emotional ties. Borch-Jacobsen points out the resulting contortions this results in for Freud:

the disappearance of the libidinal-political bond that ensured the cohesion of the
group does not liberate narcissistic egos in a pure and simple unbonding. In a way, it liberates nothing at all, and especially not autonomous subjects
(individuals), since panic consists precisely in an unmasterable overflowing of
ego by way of (affects of) others; or, put somewhat differently, panic consists in a mimetic-contagious epidemic narcissism. The example of panic is thus not the counter-example of the group, and Freud’s argument can easily be turned around: by making panic the exemplary example of individual psychology, a paradoxical result is achieved—namely, that narcissism does away with itself in one of its most striking manifestations, since panic is tantamount to a gaping, more or less bewildered opening toward others.93

Another way to describe this same contortion is to note that it results from Freud’s structuring of process. Panic is an affective force, a flow that disrupts as it moves. It is not the counter-example
to the group or crowd because it is itself crowd as directed intensity. The problem Freud
encounters is the result of his attempt to enclose this intensity in the form of the individual.

There are further challenges Freud encounters as he deploys psychoanalysis against
crowd theory and explains group ties as a reinforcing combination of aim-inhibited object love
and mutual identification. At key points he illustrates his argument by appealing to girls and
women: the hysterical sympathetic identification of boarding school girls longing for secret love
affairs and the “troop of women and girls” crowded around the musician with whom they are all
in love. Le Bon’s fierce and powerful crowds ready “to pillage a palace, or to die in defense of a
stronghold or a barricade” are diminished and truncated, enclosed in the bourgeois sites of
boarding school and concert hall, the ferocity of collective power turned inward as identification
through love for a shared object. Collective desire becomes nothing but common frustration.

Borch-Jacobsen explores Freud’s discussion of the imbrication of identification and
object love, drawing out the strange loops in Freud’s efforts to shore up an individual ego the
emergence of which perpetually eludes him. Freud presents a graphic representation of these
loops at the close of chapter eight. I limit myself here to noting his concession: “We cannot for
long enjoy the illusion that we have solved the riddle of the group with this formula.”94 Freud
recognizes that his discussion of church and army unfairly emphasizes the leader and keeps “the
other factor of mutual suggestion too much in the background.”95 He wonders whether it would
have been more modest just to accept the idea of a herd instinct (he invokes Wilfred
Trotter, *Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace*, 1916). He concludes, however, that there is no
such thing as a primary herd instinct. Such an instinct leaves no room for the leader, which Freud
has already asserted to be crucial. The leader is necessary because he is that point in relation to
which all the others are equal to one another. Group members assert their equality to one another
in light of the leader’s superiority to them all. Freud presents the demand for equality as a reaction-formation arising out of envy; if one can’t have the special relation to the leader, no other shall either. The equality of the crowd is thus a kind of negative solidarity of rivals.

For the herd instinct Freud substitutes a horde. Man is a horde animal, “an individual creature in a horde led by a chief.”96 The crowd revives the originary form of the primal horde. Freud notes that the dynamics associated with crowds—“the dwindling of the conscious individual personality, the focusing of thoughts and feelings into a common direction, the predominance of the affective side of the mind and of unconscious psychical life”—are contained in his idea of the primal horde.97 He thereby morphs crowd processes into a closed, mythic, ur-form of sociality. Group behavior corresponds to a regression to a primitive mental state.

According to Freud’s myth of the primal horde, because of the strong emotional ties connecting the group, there were no individual impulses or actions, only collective ones; “there was only a common will, there were no single ones.”98 The oldest psychology, he posits, is group psychology; individual psychology comes out of it “by a gradual process which may still, perhaps, be described as incomplete.”99 But Freud quickly corrects himself, making individual and group psychology co-primary. Why? Because of the leader, the free, strong, and willful father of the horde. The leader reintroduces the problem of individual psychology at another level: not just where did this primal father come from but how one who was a member becomes a leader. "There must therefore be a possibility of transforming group psychology into individual psychology."100 Freud’s solution is nearly nonsensical. It turns back in on itself by suggesting that the sons were initially individuals forced by the primal father’s sexual jealousy into group psychology, which would mean that individual psychology comes first. And, it posits a successor
who will be allowed access to women, breaking his libidinal ties to the group. Succession is force in reverse, as if the sons in the horde retained their initial individual desires rather than merging them in group psychology. Freud uses the myth to hold in place and conceal the disruption of the individual form of psychic structure by crowd processes. The myth narrates the processes together in a story where division is forced no less than connection and where the affective dynamics that disrupt are the same as those that bind.

In a postscript to *Group Psychology*, as if compelled to make his myth itself more dynamic, Freud brings in the patricidal story from *Totem and Taboo*, adding dissatisfaction, new developments, breakdown, and compensation to the abbreviated version to which he had earlier gestured. Freud does so in order to provide another origin for, a mythic myth of, the emergence of the individual from the group. The first who really breaks free of the group is the poet. The poet disguises the truth of the slaying of the father, putting a hero in the place of the crowd (present in fairy tales as the small animals and insects who help the hero accomplish his tasks). By creating the hero myth, the poet provides the group with an idealized individual with whom each can identify. Each can imagine himself as the hero, acting alone and abolishing the one who oppresses them all. The poet, an imaginary figure of imagining, writes the individual into being, much as Freud himself does when he asserts the primacy of the father of the horde.

The figures of leader and poet take the place of the crowd, becoming themselves models of subjectivity in its individuated form. As I mentioned, Freud finds Le Bon’s discussion of the leader insufficient. In *The Crowd*, Le Bon does not mention leaders until midway through the text. When he does, he treats the leader as the nucleus of will around which a crowd forms, in Lacanian terms an object-cause of crowd desire. The crowd does not desire the leader; the leader incites and directs the desire of the crowd. The leader is an instigator, an agitator whose intensity
inspires the crowd and concentrates its attention. And even as Le Bon allows for the rare, great leaders of history, those whose will is so powerful and enduring that “nothing resists it; neither nature, gods nor man,” he focuses primarily on the fact that the leader begins as one of the led and that he is led himself, hypnotized by the idea as Robespierre was by Rousseau.101 The idea possesses the leader such that nothing else exists for him, which explains why leaders of the crowd “are recruited from the ranks of the morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness.” For Le Bon, then, the leader concentrates and transmits an idea, turning it into a cause of action. Indeed, he considers the possibility that mass periodicals may even be replacing the leader in that they, too, can simplify, consolidate, and transmit ideas.

Rather than conceiving the leader as hypnotized, Freud treats the leader as hypnotist: “the hypnotist asserts that he is in possession of a mysterious power that robs the subject of his own will; or, which is the same thing, the subject believes it of him.”102 He argues further that the very uncanniness of hypnosis suggests something familiar but repressed, whether the child’s relation to his parents or the primal horde. Freud thereby transfers a certain passivity in Le Bon’s leader—fascination with the idea—to the crowd. The leader becomes active in their place. As primal father, the leader acquires a freedom, independence, and intellectual capacity altogether missing in Le Bon’s version even as he bears traces of the excesses of the crowd in his own furious enjoyment. Freud emphasizes that the father of the horde needed no reinforcement from others; Le Bon makes the leader himself a follower, a conduit for the natural instincts of a crowd no longer obedient to governmental authority.

Just as Freud transposes the activity of the crowd on the leader, so too does he transfer the crowd’s creativity to the poet. Early in Group Psychology he acknowledges the genius of groups “as is shown above all by language itself, as well as by folk-song, folklore and the
like.” Le Bon had credited crowds with the creation of language. By the end of *Group Psychology*, creativity is the province of the individual, the singular poet who invents the heroic myth of the slaying of the father.

Freud presents psychoanalysis as capable of explaining aspects of behavior in groups central to crowd theory. Where crowd theorists see strength in numbers, contagion and suggestion as innovative, producing actions that are unexpected and uncontrollable, Freud finds explicable patterns of individual psychology: nothing new here, except Freud’s own findings. The collective subjectivity of Le Bon’s powerful, sovereign, often criminal, and often heroic crowd is incorporated in an individual figured as leader or poet. The individual form becomes itself the site of struggling desires, drives, ideals, and anxieties, organic processes localized at best in a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements. So rather than explaining the crowd, Freud encloses it. Where there were many, there appears one. Psychoanalysis’s attempt to account for collective desire condenses and displaces it into the individual form. Perhaps surprisingly, we learn more about collective subjectivity from the notorious Le Bon than we do from Freud.

**Conclusion**

When the subject is interpellated as an individual, the strengths of many become the imaginary attributes of one. The individual appears as the locus of a capacity for innovation and interruption that is only ever an effect of collectivities. The generative practices people undertake in common are denuded of their shared sensibilities, reduced to the activities of separate selves. If ideology is the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, as we learn from Althusser, these conditions will be represented as individual matters of individual
preference and choice, belief, and circumstance. The contradictions constitutive of capitalist relations will exist side by side, appearing as so many dreams or neuroses. Collectivity, in turn, will be figured derivatively, in the shadow of the individual such that the subjectivity it evinces fails to appear as an effect of a subject. Rather than a dynamic force of collective willing, desire appears as personal longing. Rather than an inescapable circuit of activity, drive appears as addiction. While the subject of psychoanalysis is not the reasonable, self-aware subject of liberalism, when the unconscious is rendered as that of an individual, psychoanalysis is recruited as covert support for an individuated subjectivity conceived in terms of a rational and knowable will. Recognizing the people as a collective subject becomes all the more challenging because the terms of what counts as the act of a subject are truncated and distorted. Instead of heterogeneous, conflictual, temporary, unbounded, and in need of support from objects and figures that exceed it, the subject as individual is impossibly, fantastically, independent and enduring. The crowd becomes unconscious again in the continued operation of enclosure effected by the individual form.

Althusser asks why the relation given to individuals of their collective material life is an imaginary relation. My answer is that it is imaginary because bourgeois ideology gives it to them as individuals. Althusser pursues a different explanation, one that emphasizes practices of belief—kneeling, praying, shaking hands. He wants to get at the material dimension of ideology in practices, but he underplays the ways these practices are collective, generic. In themselves, they are not individuating but rather the practices of a body of believers, a collectivity. Deploying Freud as back-up, Althusser nevertheless asserts that the *individual* is always-already as subject, particularly to the extent that it is born into a family, a place: “it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father’s Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable.”
His assertion points not to the inevitability of subjectivity but to the specificity of interpellation as an individual in the bourgeois family. Althusser intermixes generic and naming practices, failing to distinguish between those that involve groups and those that single out an individual by name.

Le Bon is an odious reactionary. *The Crowd* sounds the alarm, alerting elites to the threat of mass power and giving the rest of us a window into the will formed, expressed, and unleashed as that of a collective subject. Collectivity brings with it a sense of invincibility, an immense courage and capacity to put self-interest aside. It is accompanied by an unshakeable equality, a demand for justice that Freud acknowledges even as he derives it from an original envy. The “exciting causes” of the crowd’s directed intensity are unpredictable and temporary, which adds to the anxiety of elites endeavoring to hold on to a privilege they associate with their individuality before they are themselves swept up, compelled into thoughts and actions they abhor. Destructive, creative, temporary, and unpredictable: the crowd alerts us to the wide array of subjective attributes characteristic of collectivities.

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5. Althusser, 262.

6. Althusser, 264.

7. Althusser, 192.

8. Althusser, 189.


14. Ranciere, 151, italics in original.


18. Montag, 104.

19. Montag, 137.

20. Montag, 137.

21. Althusser, 256


25. Butler, 23.


31. *Discipline and Punish*, 170. Foucault notes that the disciplinary power reverses the “axes of individuation.” Procedures of “ascending” individuation mark the individuated as possessing more power than others, as great and privileged. Hence, portraits are painted and tales or told of kings and nobles. Ascending individuation is not exactly an individuation. It is a glorification, a
process for the generation of prestige and immortality so that the glorified is an exemplar of a group, whether that group be family, tribe, or nation.


34. In a nuanced discussion of the ways gender, race, and class become imbricated in a new notion of individual identity in eighteenth century Europe, historian Dror Wahrman writes, “In the *ancien régime* of identity … the preference for generic categorization had meant that collective categories that identified groups had primacy over categories that identified individuals … But in the new configuration of the late eighteenth century such categories contributed to the generation of unique identity before they generated the identicality of a collective group, and were thus closer to the new understandings of self” *The Making of the Modern Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 278.


36. Federici, 86.

37. Federici, 151-152.

38. Molly Anne Rothenberg writes, “As purely external (and discursive) productions, subject positions have no interiority from which they might mount resistance to their own conditions of determination. Where Althusser conceives of subjects as mis-recognizing (and therefore in principle capable of recognizing) the truth about their relations to real conditions of their production, Foucault conceives of subjects as nothing more than the conditions of their production and so incapable of misrecognition or recognition,” *The Excessive Subject*
My goal is to demonstrate the sense in which this interiority is transindividual, a crowd at the heart of the person.

42. See Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of the Mobius strip in *Organs without Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 2003); see also Rothenberg’s explication of the logic of the empty set as the addition of a negation, 30-45.
46. See Bosteels’ critique of this move in *The Actuality of Communism*.
49. Dolar, “Freud and the Political.”


55. Le Bon, 10.
56. This point and the following are indebted to Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors*.

57. Le Bon, 8-9.

58. Le Bon, 15.

59. Le Bon, 16.


62. Le Bon, 4.

63. Le Bon, 10, 73.

64. McClelland, 168.

65. Le Bon, 8.

66. Le Bon, 17.

67. Le Bon, 13.

68. In an analysis of the rise of “mass” as a sociological category in France, Stefan Jonsson identifies four (loose and overlapping) moments: mass as innumerable individuals, mass as the violent and criminal mob of the poor, mass as organized movement of workers, and, finally, mass as political sickness, the madness of all collectivity, “The Invention of the Masses: The Crowd in French Culture from the Revolution to the Commune,” *Crowds*, 47-75. Eugene E. Leach recounts crowd psychology in the US, tracing the reception of the work of Le Bon and Tarde as well as the work of Boris Sidis, “America’s only original crowd psychologist,” a


70. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, translated by Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988). He writes, “the cleavage or division of the subject that psychoanalysis keeps talking about takes place against the background of unity, a unitary subject,” 6. Borch-Jacobsen presents his account as an alternative to a Lacan’s association of desire with interdiction. He overstates the difference between them insofar as he and Lacan both conceive desire as the desire of the Other, enjoyment as indirectly accessible, and the object of desire as separate from the object-cause of desire. Žižek’s version of Lacan, moreover, suggests an even greater compatibility with Borch-Jacobsen in that he, too, emphasizes that desire has no object prior to an intervention that establishes desireability, as in, for example, Žižek’s discussions of ideology as a matrix of desire, of enjoyment as originally stolen, and of the ego ideal. Although a thorough exploration of the possible convergences is beyond the scope of my analysis, a potential benefit in Borch-Jacobsen’s emphasis on desire as imaginary is that it opens up a thinking of desire in the wake of the decline of symbolic efficiency, allowing for an understanding of the rivalry, hatred, and violence that Žižek associates with the alliance of the imaginary with the Real.

71. Borch-Jacobsen, 47.

72. Borch-Jacobsen writes, “The so-called subject of desire has no identity of its own prior to the identification that brings it, blindly, to occupy the point of otherness, the place of the other
(who is thus not an other): an original alienation (which is thus not an alienation); and an original lure (which is thus not a lure, either)” 48.

73. Borch-Jacobsen, 133.

74. Borch-Jacobsen, 139.

75. Le Bon, 30-31.

76. Freud, 13.

77. Dolar, “Freud and the Political.”

78. Le Bon, 13.

79. Freud, 7.

80. “How is it that these new characteristics are created?” Le Bon, 17; Freud, 9. Borch-Jacobsen misreads Le Bon and Freud here. He treats as descriptive characteristics of the crowd what Freud and Le Bon present as explanations why new characteristics appear, 139. McClelland makes the same mistake, misreading the causes of new characteristics as the new characteristics themselves, 203.

81. Freud, 9.

82. Freud, 10.

83. Freud, 11. I should add here that even today nearly everyone who writes about crowds describes crowds in terms of contagion and suggestion. We see the language of contagion, for instance, in discussions of the movements of 2011 as well as in networked media.

84. Freud, 12.

85. Freud, 15.

86. Freud, 13.

87. Freud, 15.
88. Le Bon. 90.
89. Freud, 29.
91. Freud, 27; paragraph 40 in the original German.
92. Freud, 33.
94. Freud, 62.
95. Freud, 63.
96. Freud, 68.
97. Freud, 70.
98. Freud, 70.
100. Freud, 72.
101. Le Bon, 71, 68.
102. Freud, 73.
104. Althusser, 183.
105. Althusser, 192.