



Mad crowds disease

Description

Mobs, herds, battalions, minions, spectators: these are groups to whom we readily ascribe a mood â?? celebratory, triumphant, ugly, angry, battle-weary, hysterical, frenzied, supportive, enthusiastic, docile.

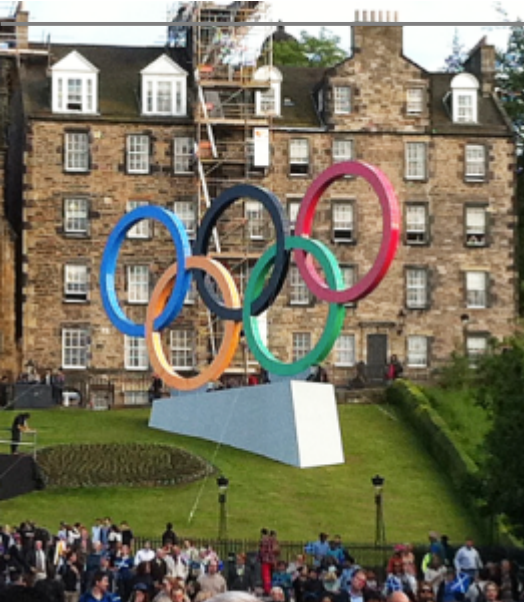
I confess to being moved by the presence of crowds on George IV Bridge in Edinburgh as the Olympic torch relay passed by. I had stumbled across different segments of the route while driving through the Scottish countryside in the Spring. Signage indicated the relay route. Weâ??d seen the relay on tv. There was the build up; the waiting. Then the confirmation that the torch, flame, relay, bus, entourage, [really does exist](#).



The madness of crowds

Commentators point out how readily we get caught up in the mood of the crowd. In the 1850s, the Scottish journalist Charles Mackay wrote

We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till



new folly more captivating than the first.

I interpret the book in which this passage appears (*Memoirs of*

Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds) as a polemic in praise of the individual against the collective. Collectives are error-prone, superficial, and prone to delusion.

Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.

This sentiment runs counter to the current enthusiasm for crowd-sourcing, producer-consumers co-creation, digital social media, Internet democracy â and âOlympic values.â

Is madness a mood, or just a pejorative way of describing any crowd-sourced feeling? Perhaps it indicates a loss of control to the inevitable power that resides in large numbers.

What is a mood anyway? In his detailed treatise on *Ethics*, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) dealt with what he termed *affectus*. This is the means by which âthe power of action of the body is increased or diminished, aided or restrained.â

Translators substitute for *affectus* the word *emotion*, which we are inclined to think of as an internal state of mind, but it also implies movement and disturbance â an *inclination* in fact, as if sliding down a plane, or leaning in a particular direction. If thereâs no object, cause or identifiable focus for the *affectus* then we call it a *mood*.

Mood is an intensity, a booster, with unspecific object, that increases the tendency to act in some way, or that requires effort to resist. Itâs obvious as a crowd phenomenon. Mood is the power surge that compels and strengthens the actions of the people in the crowd and those watching.

What moves us?

How am I moved by a crowd? I can think of several options.

- Crowds are a way of transmitting, amplifying and circulating a mood. So I adopt or catch a mood and its effects, as if a contagion, or perhaps the mood effect is a signal in a sophisticated network relay.
- When it fits the mood then it's ok for me to flail my arms around with a digital camera, clap or perform other actions more extreme and in keeping with the crowd. Moods provide permission and encouragement to act in certain ways.
- In so far as I'm moved, then the crowd is the focus. Solidarity, whether the experience is direct or vicarious, can touch us. I, among others, have been surprised by my own response to spectacles, in which there are crowds, that focus on objects about which I am ordinarily indifferent: royal weddings, state funerals, opening ceremonies â?? even when experienced through television.

When caught up in the mood of the crowd am I in fact moved by whatever it is that moves the crowd, or moved by the crowd?

References

- Mackay, Charles. 2008. *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. <http://www.gutenberg.org>: Gutenberg. First published in 1852.
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- Spinoza, Baruch. 1997. *Ethics*. Trans. A. Boyle, and G. H. R. Parkinson. London: Everyman. First published in Latin in 1677.
- Surowiecki, James. 2005. *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few*. New York: Anchor Books.

On the subject of mood also see [Ambience on demand](#), [After affects](#), [Kim Jong-Il orz](#), and [E-motion](#).



Category

1. Society

Tags

1. affectus
2. emotion
3. mood
4. Olympics
5. Spinoza
6. torch relay

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