

Foreword

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Grant that Scipio Sighele labours over many intriguing ideas concerning social relations. Still, we find in his writings collected here a particularly salutary feature, namely, a concept, now pervasive and popular—and thoroughly modern—which his thinking nonetheless strenuously navigates away from: the idea of the *other*. Sighele is not concerned with the blank slate of the other as a figure upon whom we project; he is instead interested in the nature and effects of our *proximity* to one another, especially the ways in which social relations have historically induced us to continue to expand towards and overlap with each another. Sighele's notion of the criminal crowd—an expansion of what he discovers in the criminal couple—gives voice to a deep modern ambivalence regarding the source and extent of our vulnerability towards one another. Sighele's insight and achievement, well formulated by Nicoletta Pireddu, is to have conceived the crowd as “a new criminogenic subject,” and thereby to have uncovered a novel platform on which still further features of human sociability might become visible.

Sighele's sociological method takes as its unstated starting point the modern bureaucratic increase in control over the fate of individual lives, glimpsed first in the distinction between a “born” criminal and a person who becomes criminal only because of her susceptibility towards others. The deepest impress of this bureaucratic administration Sighele then finds between the living cells that we inhabit in our relations with one another. The criminal couple and the criminal crowd are expressions of the fact that the fate of the individual is now administratively joined

with that of all other human beings. Our susceptibility towards others is of a piece with the complicity that entertains our stake in administrative order. Our relations with one another have taken on, mimetically, the contours of the administrative power over us. Now, it is not some other person, or even their behaviour that we have to fear, as it is rather our own susceptibility towards one another, enhanced by the administrative controls over us, that makes us truly vulnerable to whatever is “criminal” in society. Recall here the absolute unknowability of the bureaucracy in Kafka’s *Castle*, and especially of how that unknowability mimetically permeates and infects all human relations. Under modern bureaucratic administration, our shared existence is presented less with the threat of some *direct* harm to any one of us and more, somehow, with the still greater threat of an *indirect* harm: that each of us might well lose hold of ourselves. The prospect of losing oneself is a threat more powerful than anything coming from some imagined other.

A fear of the loss of one’s self first becomes prevalent in the eighteenth century. Enlightened thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith wrote of it as the result of a contagion—here following Thomas Hobbes’s formulation of the body politic—that some foreign feeling or passion could be transfused uncontrollably from breast to breast. Such uncontrolled transfusions become possible only in a society large enough to have sufficient anonymity among its members. The logic of how such a contagion could happen seems to be as follows: our vulnerability to contagion from others cannot truly ignite when we know our neighbours since the boundaries that demarcate one person from another are visible in and by the recognizable face of the neighbour. Regardless the extent of the knowledge of, or familiarity we have with, our neighbour, anonymity is a term designating a certain insufficiency of what we know of others. And yet this insufficiency in turn inflames our sympathy, or at least our inclinations towards others. On the face of it anonymity would seem to be at odds with our natural inclinations towards sympathy and fellow feeling. But Sighele’s formulation of the modern crowd instead implies that anonymity and sympathy fuel one another, that we become still more inclined towards fellow feeling the less we know of one another. Anonymity makes us more susceptible to the passions of others. Knowing someone presumably means some kind of knowledge of or at least familiarity with the person and their passions. The infamous anonymity of the crowd—and we might likewise say of modern society—withdraws all knowledge of persons; it thereby instead promotes our experience of others as primarily an emotional, passion-based exchange, or better: transfusion. The sympathy or fellow feeling

crucial to Smith's and Hume's vision of what constituted the bonds in a society was premised upon just our inability to control our sympathetic inclinations towards others.

That the passions of others might somehow invade us (in Sighele this means one's susceptibility to becoming criminal) is possible only because of our natural predisposition towards sympathetic fellow feeling. And Smith's justly famous notion of the internal spectator is premised in turn upon a certain degree of anonymity between actor and audience, which, continued inwardly for each of us—via the “impartial” spectator—this anonymity between people implies a like anonymity within each person, hence a rather high degree of opacity towards oneself. Our natural sympathy towards one another, or what we might also call our susceptibility towards each other, is where the bonds that tie us to one another are first forged. And yet, the very means by which we come to bind ourselves to one another are turned against us by the modern administrative order of society. When a society achieves a sufficient degree of anonymity among its members, the sympathy that was deployed towards one another is supplanted instead by an administrative bureaucracy. The suggestion here is that there is a kind of equivalence, and even a complementarity, between the anonymity of modern society and the facelessness of modern administrative bureaucracies. That our neighbours are no longer recognizable to us—and this without any diminishment of our capacity for fellow feeling—makes it all the easier for us to have a kind of sympathy towards the administrative powers over us. The social inclinations that foster our being so readily administered are one and the same as our long-standing inclinations towards one another. This might well explain how it is that we became so adept at being administered; the means by which we forge connections with one another have been redeployed by and towards that which has power over us. Indeed, and bluntly, we might best describe our relation to modern bureaucratic administered society as an instance of the Stockholm syndrome.

According to Sighele, another prominent feature of the phenomenon of the crowd is that it includes what he describes as the simultaneity of experience. Two thoughts come immediately to mind, the first being that simultaneous experience is sometimes taken to be the signal achievement of modernity, as well as an explicit goal in a great many works of modernist art. One need only recall Stephen Kern's book, *The Culture of Space and Time, 1880–1918*, to find a rich source that surveys the many technological developments, such as the telegraph and telephone, etc., as well as the literary examples of Proust, Woolf, and Joyce, among others, that eclipsed the spatial and temporal constraints that kept one

experience demarcated from another. In this light, the hallmark of the modern era is the technical and cultural erasure not only of the boundaries between experiences, but so, too, the boundaries between individuals. The second thought to arise in response to the crowd's simultaneity of experience is to acknowledge that Sighele intends something more cohesive and comprehensive with this phrase than merely the notion that individual experiences are somehow coordinated or synchronized in and by the crowd. The stronger version of this idea is to recognize that the novelty of the modern crowd carries with it the novelty of an experience—as well as a *simultaneity* of experience—not previously possible. The crowd makes possible a new form of unity of experience. And this particular unity leads us naturally to Freud, and especially to his notion of the oceanic as the fullest expression of the unity of experience. The crowd, in other words, beckons to us like the oceanic.

We might appreciate the most pointed formulation of this kinship in Elias Canetti's famous explanation, in his *Crowds and Power*, that the phenomenon of crowd occurs in just that moment when human beings crowded together overcome their inhibitions towards being touched and jostled by others and thereby achieve a kind of transcendent euphoria of crowd unity. For Freud the oceanic unity is always a return to an earlier stage of life, to an organic and even an inorganic state of existence. Freud writes of the oceanic as something we long for, a quest for the means by which we might lower the barriers between us in service of connecting or reconnecting with people as well as with things. The unity promised by the oceanic is a regression to an earlier state. But so, too, we might say that the crowd allows us to *progress* towards unity by means of our organic and inorganic memories of non-individuation. The crowd is then the prototypical modern phenomenon that exposes an enhanced, updated version of our primeval sociability. Thus, although the oceanic may well be a site of longed-for unification, the crowd is more like an administratively enforced one.

If the crowd comes about by means of the lowering of the barriers as well as the distinctions between and among us, then so, too, in the crowdedness of modern life does the individual transcend certain boundaries within herself. Thus, to whatever extent our responses to the world, its people, and things have become aesthetic, we might credit the lowering of the distinctions between our various faculties that have come into existence through evolutionary transformations. Our expansiveness becomes possible only with the lowering of the boundaries outside as well as within us. Although the crowd might sometimes appear as a kind of barbaric atavistic regression, Sighele reveals in us, in the end, an

ambivalence about our very connectedness to other people, as well as an *ambivalence* towards the separateness or continuity within the individualized, segmented portions of each person's own psychology. Sighele's sociological focus then lights upon the crowd as a proto-aesthetic phenomenon insofar as the crowd partakes of the same dynamic of transcending separateness for the sake of a rejuvenated and rekindled unity. Further, Sighele's studies imply that our ambivalent relation to sociability extends to ambivalence towards the condition of being human. We might say that Sighele helps uncover in us an ambivalence regarding our own expansiveness. As our previously somewhat organic sense of community, or at least of clan and family, weakens, and the idea of the stranger and the unknown other achieve a greater proximity to each of us, it becomes possible to fear the prospect of becoming something else. Vulnerability towards the *other* is also vulnerability towards what each of us might yet become.