

Dilip Gaonkar
**After the
Fictions: Notes
Towards a
Phenomenology
of the Multitude**

01/15

e-flux journal #58 — october 2014 Dilip Gaonkar
After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude

People do not riot every day, but they have rioted often enough in the past, especially since the onset of modernity. People continue to riot with alarming regularity in the present, especially in the so-called Global South, as the saga of modernity continues to unfold now in its global phase. This repeated and continued reliance on rioting as a distinctive, but historically and culturally variable, mode of collective action (if not agency) merits greater attention than it has hitherto received. People riot over all sorts of things – the price of bread, oil, and onions; the publication of a book; the screening of a film; the drawing of a cartoon. They riot on account of police brutality, political corruption, and the desecration of the holy places. They riot when subjected to ethnic or racial slurs (real or imagined) and when continuously deprived of basic necessities like water, electricity, and sanitation. They riot for being ill-treated at health care facilities, for being denied entrance to once public, now privatized, spaces of pleasure and recreation, and generally for justice denied and petitions ignored. They riot after soccer games, cricket games, music concerts, and also before, during, and after elections. The list can be extended indefinitely.

Rioting today has multiple triggers. It is no longer provoked primarily by the sudden rise in food prices, especially the price of a loaf of bread (the standard four pound French loaf), as it did once in the well-documented cases of food riots that periodically convulsed Europe in the early modern period and became more frequent and intense in the eighteenth century.¹ Rioting today, along with modernity, has gone global and manifests itself in multiple registers. While the sudden and steep fluctuations in the price of basic staples like onions and cooking oils remain powerful triggers for rioting, especially in Asia and Africa, the scarcity and deprivation of food is no longer the primary trigger for rioting. The passions stirred by injuries and indignities – humiliation, betrayal, anger, and resentment – are no longer confined to hungry bodies. Even during the eighteenth century food riots in England, as E.P. Thompson has shown convincingly, hunger alone was never a sufficient motive for rioting.² There was always hovering in the background a palpable feeling of disappointment and perplexity stemming from broken promises and unmet expectations that were once taken for granted. Rioting is rarely a tantrum; rather, it accompanies social rupture.

The early modern European food riots, while provoked in each case by very specific local causes and circumstances, were unmistakably shaped by larger forces transforming a quasi-traditional society based on a predominantly agrarian and partly mercantile political economy



May Day, Istanbul, 2013. Photo: EFE/Tolga Bozoglu

into a modern industrial society driven by the logic of capitalist accumulation. Similarly, the period preceding the Second World War had its own share of protesting crowds, mobs, revolts and riots linked with a wide range of political movements – socialist, anarchist, fascist, and anti-colonial. However one elects to periodically mark and divide the historical continuum, one rarely escapes the crowd phenomenon from about the beginning of the seventeenth century. Each period, including the ancient and the medieval times, hosted, nursed, and disciplined its misbehaving crowds and the disorder they wrought. And each instance of misbehaving (judged as such from the normative optic of order, the gift of political community) was invariably motivated by local provocations, but those provocations were, in turn, shaped and set in motion by the larger formations – national, regional, and transnational – themselves under duress.

Riots today, while extraordinarily variable in terms of their local color and physiognomy, are also shaped by larger forces. Those forces may be characterized, albeit less confidently on account of one's interpretive proximity, by invoking phrases such as globalization, financialization, the neoliberal state and its distinctive mode of governmentality, the so-called third-wave of democratic transitions, and the new media ecology ushered in by the new game-changing technologies of information, communication, and surveillance. How might one name the present, or the societies of the present, constituted by an uneven coming together of those forces? How might one account for the persistence of rioting and the rioting crowds of people within the evolving trajectory of capitalist time and terrain? In my judgment, our time and terrain is caught in an inextricable paradox: coveting crowds and fearing riots.

The careers of the crowd as a social formation and rioting as a mode of collective agency have a parallel but not identical history. The crowd is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for any mob/riot to materialize. While the attitude towards rioting has remained steadfastly hostile, crowds are seen as unavoidable. Rioting, often viewed as politically motivated (although it does sometimes erupt in religious and recreational contexts), is denounced as having no "redeeming social value." Crowds are a different matter. Modern capitalism, in its various phases from the mercantile to the financial, has made peace with crowds. Within the capitalist imaginary, crowds have progressed from being regarded as a necessary evil (the consumer crowd) to a source of wisdom (crowd sourcing). Moreover, the crowd ethos is considered an indispensable (and

enhancing) part of the consuming experience. By contrast, the liberal democracy remains deeply fearful of crowds. From that perspective, there is something intrinsically "illiberal" about the crowd to the extent that it leads to the dissolution of the "individual." Within the liberal imaginary, the individual is the bedrock of social ontology, moral responsibility, and economic calculation and the crowd jeopardizes all those invaluable assets. Every crowd is a potential mob and susceptible to rioting. Hence, the contemporary conjuncture (or political economy) is caught in an irresolvable aporia: coveting crowds and fearing riots. The following will track the implications of one side of this aporia: the genealogy of the riot fear.

2.

Nothing is more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and to observe the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. "Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular."

– David Hume, "Of First Principles of Government," *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 1758 edition.³

It is ironic that for Hume "a philosophical eye" surveying the human affairs would disclose the surprising fact that politics is grounded in opinion and hence in rhetoric. This ironic musing is literalized when the same phenomenon is viewed from a "historical eye" such as that of Edmund S. Morgan's in his prizewinning book, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (1988). Starting with Hume's quote, while charting the shift from the doctrine of *the divine right of kings* to *the doctrine of popular sovereignty*, Morgan asserts that the shift under review simply replaces one political fiction with another. That shift can be measured neither as an epistemological gain from error to truth nor as a normative gain from unjust to just.

Government requires make believe. Make believe that king is divine, make believe that he can do no wrong or make believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Make believe that the people *have* a voice or make believe that the representatives of the people *are* the people. Make believe that governors are the servants of the people. Make believe that all men are equal or make believe that they are not.⁴

04/15

What happens when fictions fail? Morgan himself concedes that fictions can and do fail:

In order to be viable, in order to serve its purpose, whatever that purpose may be, a fiction must bear some resemblance to fact. If it strays too far from fact, the willing suspension of disbelief collapses. And conversely it may collapse, if facts stray too far from fiction that we want them to resemble. Because fictions are necessary, because we cannot live without them, we often take pains to prevent their collapse by moving the facts to fit the fiction, by making our world conform more closely to what we want it to be.⁵

Morgan is not intrigued, as I am, with what happens when fictions fail and what sort of politics ensues in the wake of their collapse. What intrigues Morgan is how fictions come into being, are sustained against contingencies of history and antagonisms of the social, and how we prevent them from failing and collapsing because they are “necessary, because we cannot live without them.” Perhaps this is because he is writing about the golden age of political fictions, the age that gave birth to the greatest of all fictions, *the doctrine of popular sovereignty – the idea that there is such an entity called the people, more precisely the self-governing people*. Morgan goes on to write a stunning narrative about a web of conceptual and institutional strategies mobilized to sustain those master fictions. The book truly is a rhetorician’s delight. These fictions are so outlandish, by his own account, that they are constantly pressing against credibility. And yet they are always magically rescued in the nick of time: by a conceptual innovation such as “King’s Two Bodies” in the case of the doctrine of divine right of kings, and the enigmatic theory of “representation” in the case of the popular sovereignty. Sustaining these fictions requires an elaborate ideological



Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's book *Leviathan* reveals the sovereign constituted by his subjects.

apparatus, giving rise to a host of secondary elaborations (which is nothing short of rhetoric motion) to suture fissures and contradictions.

Moreover, the fiction thesis entails an interesting displacement of the notion of *people as force* by the notion of *people as fiction*. One of the implications is that fictions, once established, endure and gather a force of their own. Even if the British Parliamentarians might have invented the idea of people as a fiction to erase and supplant the fiction of the divine right of kings, the former once established becomes no less “real” than the latter in terms of its material effects. Now the parliamentarians have to contend with a fiction of their own creation, but somehow always in terms of its force as a fiction (and/or as a myth) rather than in terms of a putative force originating in or pertaining to the materiality of people as poor or as multitude or as governed – something disclosed by history and galvanized by a set of normative claims inherent in any political imaginary, especially the modern democratic ones.

3.

While the idea of “people as fiction” is appealing and is made to carry considerable hermeneutic burden (as with Hume, Morgan, and many others), the corporeality of the people, the very phenomenon, is repeatedly deferred from theoretical attention and analysis. It is not as if the phenomenon is intrinsically elusive. People are everywhere in various configurations and agential capacities as groups, assemblies, gatherings, crowds, mobs, and multitude. This raises the question: Why is there so much resistance to recognizing the people as corporeal in their multiplicity rather than as fictive or imagined in their unity in political theorizing?

To be sure, the gatherings of the people and their varied modes of being and doing (in terms of forms, functions, temporality, and telos) have been the subject of rigorous and extensive scholarly inquiry. This is especially true of the crowd phenomenon, the ubiquitous twin of modernity, ever since Le Bon hyperbolically declared in 1895 that we had entered “the Era of Crowds.” Ironically, this was only a few decades after the so-called “springtime of the people.” The power of the crowds, according to Le Bon, is “the last surviving sovereign force of modern times.” He continues: “While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase.”⁶

Le Bon was not the only one who was preoccupied with the crowd phenomenon in his time. He was actually a latecomer, someone who

drew on the scholarly works of his predecessors without properly acknowledging his debt. He borrowed from thinkers such as Scipio Sighele and Gabriel Tarde whose interest in crowds stemmed from being criminologists.⁷ However, Le Bon was a consummate publicist who knew how to package the contemporary fascination with crowds and mass politics (with memories of the Paris Commune, the spectacular rise of Georges Boulanger and the Dreyfus Affair still agitating the French mind) to promote his brand conservative ideology.

The fascination with crowds, which endures to this day, was further accentuated and conflated in the early twentieth century by the growing concern and discourse on the coming of mass society. The concepts and theories about mass man, mass psychology, and mass culture were to become intertwined with ideas about “the man in the crowd,” crowd psychology, and crowd behavior. Ortega y Gasset’s bleak assessment of the masses in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929–30) bears an uncanny resemblance to Le Bon’s anxious reckoning of the crowd:

There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at its present moment. The fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power. As the masses, by definition, neither should nor can direct their own personal existence, and still less rule society in general, this fact means that actually Europe is suffering from the greatest general crisis that can afflict peoples, nations and civilization.⁸

For Gasset, the mass-man could be anyone: the bourgeois, the Fascist, the Syndicalist (“*a type of man who did not care to give reasons, even to be right, but who was simply resolved to impose his opinions*”⁹), the expert (the learned ignoramus), and preeminently the consumer (the smug pleasure seeker who craves for “the products of civilization” without the slightest understanding of civilizing principles and processes). The masses are bereft of measures, standards, or norms; and yet they “intervene in everything and ... always intervene violently.”¹⁰

As with Le Bon on the crowd, Gasset was not a pioneer in writing about the masses. The various facets of mass society, especially life in the metropolis simultaneously anonymous and electric, had already caught the attention of Georg Simmel, Karl Mannheim, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and many others. But their voices were more scholarly and less frantic. They wrote about stranger sociality, flâneur/flânerie, commodity fetish, mass culture, new media



A crowd of Taft supporters gather at Allis-Chalmers works, Wisconsin, to hear the candidate's speech, September 24, 1908. 5x7 glass negative. G.G. Bain Collection.



A crowd marches towards Cinelandia during a protest in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2013.

(especially architecture and cinema) with fascination and in vivid detail, but rarely dismissively. Gasset, like Le Bon, was an alarmist and spoke loudly to command attention.

For Le Bon and Gasset, each conservative (often reactionary, insufferably elitist, and eurocentric) in their own distinctive ways, this was the hour of the irrational. They were neither the first nor would they be the last to raise such an alarming clamor about the barbarous horde from within and without poised to destroy Western civilization. The agitated voices that followed them kept raising the stakes, sometimes prompted by the turn of world events: deepening economic crisis; intensification of class conflict; the authoritarian turn, especially the rise of Fascism; and the challenge of anti-colonial movements. The European hegemony did, indeed, seem imperiled. All of these unfolding events had one thing in common: they brought the people into the streets and squares all over the world. During the interwar years, the gatherings of crowds, mass agitation, the general strike, and the politics of direction action (well before its nonviolent variant was fashioned by Gandhi) became frequent and inescapable.

4.

Nevertheless, the concept of the people in political theory, especially in liberal democratic theory, remained largely untouched (as it does today) by all those manifestations of the people in crowd formations. Crowds are a sociological phenomenon and political theory, fiercely normative, has little to do with them. This exclusion stems from two sets of motivations: ideological and conceptual.

First, among the elites, there is a deep and abiding anxiety regarding the capacity for self-governance by the popular classes – deemed lazy, fickle, covetous, lacking in political judgment, and not easily amenable to rational persuasion. It begins with Plato's image of the demos as the great beast which the *rhetor* (oratorically gifted politician) mistakenly believes he can mobilize and manage to realize his ends (*Republic*, VI, 493). According to Plato, irrespective of whether the ends sought by the rhetor are those of personal aggrandizement or of common good (often confused in the mind of someone like Alcibiades), he is doomed to fail because, in the long run, the direction of influence is reversed. The manipulator becomes the manipulated; the seducer is seduced; and anarchy is let loose. Plato, if possible, would exclude the demos as a collective political agent altogether. However, as Aristotle realized, even in a mixed constitutional polity the agency of the popular classes has to be acknowledged because they are the primary source of political

legitimacy, if not the sole source of sovereignty. With the near universal acceptance of the doctrine of popular sovereignty in the aftermath of the great revolution of the late eighteenth century, one would have thought the demos-anxiety would lessen and subside among elites. Instead, the anxiety intensified as to what the demos might want now that it had legitimate access to power and how the demos might proceed to obtain what it wanted. A series of ideological and institutional strategies are devised to discipline and neutralize the demos in the newly formed republics. This is strikingly obvious in Madison's defense bicameralism and the "necessity of a well-constructed senate" (then "appointed not immediately by the people") in *The Federalist* 63:

(I)t is clear that the principle of representation was neither unknown to the ancients, nor wholly overlooked in their political constitutions. The true distinction between these and the American governments lies *in the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity from any share in the latter, and not in the total exclusion of the representatives of the people, from the administration of the former.*¹¹

For Madison, the superiority of the American mode of representation is grounded in that total exclusion because it obviates the danger of the so-called legislative despotism, or in Jefferson's phrase "elective despotism." What is in need of regulation is the crowd like behavior of the people or their representatives assembled in a single house susceptible to being "stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be most ready to lament and condemn."¹² The institution of senate, not answerable to people directly (at that time), would serve as an "anchor against popular fluctuations" and "blend stability with liberty."

Thus, political theory from Plato to Madison (with Machiavelli and Spinoza being the key exceptions) appears to be deeply distrustful of the crowd. This is especially the case with liberal democratic theory where the crowd is viewed as intrinsically "illiberal" – to the extent that it allegedly dissolves the "individual." Hence, the collective agency of the people in whatever form has to be emasculated: the crowd has to be broken up and dissolved. The actual taming of the crowd could be left to the police and the behavioral scientists and the marketing of the crowd to businessmen, publicists, and the big data analysts. Since theory cannot carry out

07/15

e-flux journal #58 — october 2014 Dilip Gaonkar
After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude

such operation in the real world, it has to be accomplished conceptually. In theory the crowd can be relegated to the margins and rendered conceptually inconsequential. This relegation is actually accomplished by privileging two other concepts – one with ancient lineage, citizenship; the other of modern vintage, the public. In theory, the energetics of the crowd, its palpable material force, is diminished and depleted by bolstering the normative force of these two relatively abstract concepts: the citizen and the public.

5.

The deferral of the crowd is already implicit in the classical distinction between *populous* and *multitude* which goes back to the ancients, especially to Cicero, a distinction that has been given a new reading recently by Hardt and Negri, Paolo Virno, and others associated with the Autonomia movement – all of whom draw their inspiration from Spinoza’s political writings.¹³ The people and the multitude refer to two different forms of human collectivities or gatherings of individuals as they become manifest in the political realm. The former signifies the mode of becoming and being one and the latter dwells on becoming one while remaining a plurality. One might think of them as two different modes of being political; the mode of being one and the mode of being many.

These two modes and their competing claims to agency, authority, and legitimacy are closely associated with the authority and legacy of Hobbes and Spinoza respectively. In each of their political writings, what is distinctive about the people and the multitude turns on their differential relationship with a third term, namely the state or whatever else constitutes and represents the unity of a given political community and its sovereign authority. The autonomists, such as Virno, portray Hobbes as an implacable opponent of the multitude. According to that reading, Hobbes posits a strict either/or binary: “if there are people, there is no multitude; if there is a multitude, there are no people.”¹⁴ This is an overstatement. As Malcolm Bull points out convincingly, people and multitude continue to exist side by side, although in different juridical/normative orders.¹⁵ For Hobbes, in order for a multitude to become a people (the passage to peoplehood) it has to be incorporated into a political community. Cicero, not Hobbes, was the first to advance such a claim: “a people is not any collection of human beings, but an assemblage of people in large numbers associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good” (*The Republic*, I.39).¹⁶ Hobbes simply gives a more robust, albeit fictional, reading of what is entailed in becoming

“associated in an agreement.” He has much to say about the contractual mode of incorporation: how in the state of nature (“poor, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short”) with one’s natural rights rendered null and void by being continually exposed to the “violent death” through the predation of others, the individuals (or parts of a multitude) are made to accede to social contract and found a civil society; and, thereby, yield some their rights to the sovereign body that would govern them unconditionally. Unlike Aristotle’s citizen body, which both “rules and is ruled” in turn (*Politics*, III, 1277), the relationship between the multitude and the people is fixed and not reversible. The multitude cannot resist, let alone rule, because any attempt to do so would be an act against the state and against the people – the state and people being one and the same thing. Since power of the sovereign body as the protector stems from the sovereign powers originally surrendered by the people, the reasons and acts of the state are in fact the reasons and acts of the people. This paradox is acutely illustrated in passage from De Civa, cited by Bull:

In every commonwealth the *People* Reigns; for even *Monarchies* the *People* exercises power, for the *people* wills through the will of *one man*. But citizens, i.e. the subjects are a *multitude*. In a *Democracy* and in an *Aristocracy* the citizens are a *multitude*, but the *council* is the people; in a *Monarchy* the subjects are a *multitude*, and (paradoxically) the King is the *people*.¹⁷

By contrast, Spinoza’s philosophical anthropology, given his Aristotelian stress on human sociality and rationality, bypasses the fabled passage through contract (as form and as moment) in its account of the civil state that resolutely refuses the fiction of “peoplehood” in the Hobbesian sense. For Spinoza, a multitude is perfectly capable of acting in unison to found and sustain a commonwealth without renouncing its plurality, its mode of being many. A multitude’s mode of being one and many simultaneously, especially in its relationship to the state (or the sovereign body), is made legible in terms of the interplay between three concepts operating in seemingly different registers: right (juridical), power (physical), and fear (affective). Each individual, like any other singular entity (human as well as non-human), possesses the natural right to exist and to act in a manner appropriate to its mode of being. However, for Spinoza, right is strictly coextensive with power in the order of nature. One can exercise an unrestricted right only insofar as one has the requisite power to do so. Since a single individual’s right and power are negligible, it is

08/15

e-flux journal #58 — october 2014 Dilip Gaonkar
After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude

09/15

only natural that human beings fear solitude: “But since fear of solitude exists in all men, because no one in solitude is strong enough to defend himself, and procure the necessaries of life, it follows that men naturally aspire to the civil state; nor can it happen that men should ever utterly dissolve it”.¹⁸ Thus, a multitude’s entry into the civil state has little to do with the voluntary acts of autonomous individuals coming together. It happens naturally because “men must necessarily come to an agreement to live together as securely and as well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the rights which naturally belong to them as individuals and their life should be no more conditioned by force and desire of individuals, but by the power and will of the whole body.”¹⁸ The sovereign body constituted on the basis of such a compact, if it were to succeed, must set aside the pull of desire that draws each man in a different direction, and instead, be “guided in everything by reason” and under the guidance of reason act as if it were of “one mind.”

A body so constituted (under the sovereignty of one, few, or many) is a repository of wide range of rights and powers before which the individual must yield in fear and reverence but also with hope. It has, among other things,

the sole right of laying down laws, and interpreting them in case of disputed meanings; of applying and enforcing the laws; and, compelling men to obey laws by the threat of punishment, including “universally feared punishment of death.”²⁰ This might sound a bit like the contract with the Hobbesian Leviathan, but there is one crucial difference. The rights and powers of the sovereign body, just as in the case of the individual, are coextensive. Its right to command and to elicit obedience depends in the last instance on its power (real or perceived) to impose its will: “sovereigns only possess this right of imposing their will, so long as they have the full power to enforce it: if such power be lost their right to command is lost also, or lapses to those who have assumed it and can keep it.”²¹

Two additional features of power bind the sovereign and the subject (or a multitude) in a complex matrix of fear. First, the subject’s power is not fully transferable. It cannot be detached as if were a movable property and handed over to devise an omnipotent entity devoid of fear. According to Spinoza: “No one can ever so utterly transfer to another his power and, consequently, his rights, as to cease to be a man; nor can there ever be a power so sovereign that it can carry out every possible wish.”²² Thus, the sovereign can



Pro-democracy protesters exhibit DIY protective gear on the first day of the mass civil disobedience campaign Occupy Central, Hong Kong, 2014. Photo: Epa/Alex Hofford

never be fully secure from the fear of his subjects who have transferred him their rights and power, but not irrevocably.

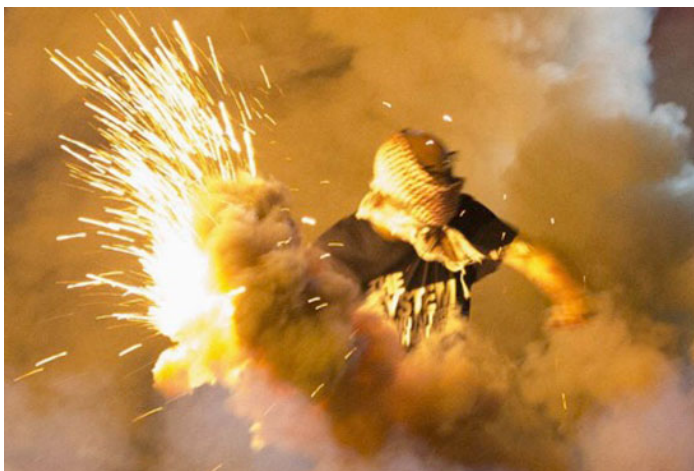
Second, power grows numerically. An individual's power increases when combined with that of another. So it is only natural that individuals would form groups to augment their power to live securely and to live well; and thus, to enjoy their rights collectively. The greater the number, the greater is the power of the multitude. Precisely for that reason, the sovereign body standing for "the power and the will of all (or of a multitude in its mode of being one)" is formidable and inspires awe, fear, and reverence among its subjects. However, its power is not absolute and indivisible as imagined and posited in the juridical register. It may and is often challenged and resisted in the physical register by a multitude in its mode of being many. Spinoza insists that a multitude's mode of being many is never evacuated and rendered void by its mode of being one.

In fact, the sovereign and the multitude (in its default mode as many) are bound together in a cycle of reciprocal fear which can never be permanently arrested or fully erased. While an individual's fear of the sovereign is palpable and continuous because any infraction of the law could elicit punishment, the sovereign's fear of a multitude is fitful and diffuse. This asymmetrical cycle of fear is driven by motivations grounded in Spinoza's rather starkly realist view of human nature. According to Spinoza, what makes an individual abide by his promises is not an innate sense of moral obligation but a calculus of fear and hope: "Everyone has by nature a right to act deceitfully, to break his compacts, unless he be restrained by the hope of some greater good, or the fear of some greater evil."²³ The same calculus motivates and governs a multitude as to whether it adheres to or abandons a compact. For Spinoza: "This law is so deeply implanted in the human mind that it ought to be counted among the eternal truths and axioms."²⁴

Spinoza has much counsel to offer on how to manage such a symmetrical dynamics of fear. Much of what he says, he claims is quite obvious to everyone, something gleaned from experience. According to Spinoza, a commonwealth "founded and guided by reason" is bound to prosper by avoiding arbitrary actions and by promoting the common good; and thus, striving to attain the ends of the civil state which is "nothing but peace and security of life."²⁵ Such a commonwealth would command the allegiance of her subjects, both of body and of mind, and instill fear and reverence. By contrast, a commonwealth is bound to ruination where the sovereign authorities are prone to arbitrary actions – who "proceed to slay and rob subjects,

ravish maidens;" who compromise the majesty the office by "running with harlots drunk or naked about the streets;" who engage in "open violation or contempt of laws passed by themselves;" and who, more than anything else, prevail upon their subject to act unnaturally – to embrace what they hate and shun, what they admire, that is, the things they regard with honor and that excite ridicule and disgust. In such a commonwealth, fear turns into indignation, reverence into contempt, and "the civil state into a state of enmity."²⁶ The necessary principle for erecting a durable commonwealth is quite simple: "to frame our institutions so that everyman, whatever his disposition, may prefer public right to private advantage." And yet, while "necessity is often the mother of invention," notes Spinoza ruefully, "she has never yet succeeded in framing a dominion that was less in danger from its own citizens than from open enemies, or whose rulers did not fear the latter less than the former."²⁷

Such is the three-fold play of right, power, and fear constitutive of a politics as imagined from the standpoint of the masses (or of multitude). In his seminal essay on Spinoza, Balibar has convincingly argued that Spinoza views and analyzes politics, especially in making his case for democracy, from the stand point of the masses – a standpoint saturated with fear.²⁸



A protestor throws back a smoke bomb in a clash with police in Ferguson. Photo: Reuters

6.

This threefold play of right, power, and fear is triggered by the multitude's default mode of being many rather than of being one. It could be argued, as Malcolm Bull does, that Spinoza's multitude in its mode of being one is not significantly different than Hobbes's people in its sovereign embodiment in the juridical order, standing apart and above the multitude that constitute it.²⁹ Moreover, Spinoza is no more

sanguine than Hobbes about the multitude's susceptibility to unruly passions and to act savagely and self-destructively. Time and again, he registers his fears about the turbulent temper and fickle behavior of the multitude. The key difference between the two, as indicated before, pertains to a multitude's mode of being many. For Hobbes, a multitude as plurality ceases to exist except as subjects when transfigured into a sovereign people, united and indivisible. For Spinoza, a multitude as plurality never ceases to exist even when united and acting as one mind under the guidance of reason. Without romanticizing the multitude, Spinoza reckons with a multitude's potential to act rationally, especially under democratic governance. As with Aristotle, Spinoza believes that a larger deliberative body is less prone to irrationality or to act covetously in its own narrow interests. The greater the number (of many), unlike a small faction (of few), it is less likely that everyone's untrammelled passions and ill-conceived interests would converge to produce policies and actions detrimental to the commonwealth. While one's individual passions are countermanded by the passions of another, one's capacity to reason is augmented by that of another in the deliberative process. A multitude, whether while curbing and managing its wayward passions or while augmenting its prudence and wisdom, draws its strength from its plurality rather than its unity. A multitude's residual power and dynamism (bio-power, as it were) lies with its mode of being many rather than of being one.

Thus, it is not surprising that a wide array of contemporary political thinkers, drawing their inspiration from Spinoza (and Machiavelli) among others, have been drawn to theorizing a multitude's mode of being many and the varied corporeal manifestations of the many – especially the crowd – rather than the traditional preoccupation with the formation of the sovereign state, its myth and mystery. The internal contestation and self-division built into the mode of being many is the necessary condition for challenging and deterring the sovereign body from turning politics into administration (Weber), into governmentality (Foucault), or into police (Rancière). Thus, the multitude as a plurality inaugurates an imaginary and a practice of politics as agonistic rather than consensual, as nomadic and open rather than tethered and contained (as under a constitutional regime). What fascinates many political thinkers today – Étienne Balibar, Partha Chatterjee, Ranjit Guha, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau, Warren Montag, Jacques Rancière, James Scott, Paolo Virno, and many others is the multitude's drift towards a politics given to exploring the possible – the

good, the bad, and the ugly – rather than mastering the habitual and the probable.³⁰

My thinking in this essay is deeply indebted to this tradition of reflection, fraught with gaps and contradictions, often not given to privileging the concept of multitude (or drawing a sharp distinction between Hobbes's people and Spinoza's multitude). What I want to do in the rest of the essay is to dwell on some hesitations (rather than refusals) and silence in this body of reflection, especially regarding the crowd as the paradigmatic manifestation of the multitude in our time marked by the ever deepening global disorder.

7.

The master fiction of democratic politics since the onset of modernity posits an abstract entity called the people, or more precisely a self-governing people. But this fiction, riddled with mounting anomalies, is withering. It has strayed too far from reality. We no longer live in the golden age of fictions as recounted in Morgan's book. Perhaps, we are between fictions with no alternative master fiction ready to supplant the "self-governing people" in sight. In the interregnum, we live among failing states, collapsing societies, and insurgent citizenry. Such is the case, at least, in large parts of the Global South. One might ask whether it is viable to continue to think of politics in our time, especially the triumphant democratic politics of our time, as something that is or can be sustained by recourse to fictions, such as of one people united, indivisible, and embodied in a sovereign state. If one suspends, if not abandons, such fictions, the palpable reality of the multitude in its plurality, in its mode of being many, has to be mapped and theorized: Where is a multitude? Who constitute a multitude? How does a multitude manifest itself? There is no comprehensive set of answers for these pressing questions. However, one could venture some preliminary observations.

An adequate answer to these questions, in my judgment, would require the formulation of what one might call a phenomenology of the multitude. Such a phenomenology, to be worthy of that designation, should strive to disclose a multitude's historically variable mode of being political. From its earliest appearance in Western traditions – as *demos* among the Greeks and as *plebs* among the Romans – the multitude as an agential category and as a form of subjectivity signals the primacy of the political in its engagement with the world. In our times, not abruptly but following an enduring historical trajectory, the multitude's mode of being political is imagined primarily within a democratic idiom. Nowhere is this more evident than in the

unshakable link forged since the onset of modernity between the idea of democracy and the doctrine of popular sovereignty within the framework of the nation-state.

This departure from the class inflected ancient view multitude as demos, an entity barely conscious of its sovereignty, to an idea of a *national people*, sovereign and indivisible, is a tropological mutation/swerve put in play by Herder among others, which powerfully combines cultural identity, nationalist longings, and democratic aspirations. The idea of a self-governing national people, which steadily replaced the liberties of the ancients (that privileged political equality and collective participatory agency) with those of the moderns (à la Benjamin Constant) – once again through a series tropological maneuvers by liberal and republican ideologues alike, such as the equivalence between bourgeois/citizen/ human being or the subsumption of the “individual will” under the “general will” – continues to haunt as well as galvanize modern democratic imaginaries fueled by nationalist movements. It is only now, under the pressures of globalization with the idea of the national form fraying at the edges, that the idea of the multitude – the people without history – is returning to its ancient roots as demos and plebs.

A phenomenology of the multitude would have to begin where they live: the slums, and where they congregate: the street. In Mike Davis’s catchy phrase, we live on a planet of slums.³¹ This is an indispensable starting point. The slum is a sort of interior and also a horizon; the street is the public space of mutual display. The street and the slum have multiple functions: they serve as a workshop (production), a market (exchange), theatre (style) and more than anything else as a school. In the autobiographical writings of the Black Panthers in the United States and of the Dalit Panthers in India, the street and the ghetto/slum is often characterized as the primary site of pedagogy for the oppressed.

The most striking political phenomenon in our time is the Return of the Crowds in the streets and squares everywhere. The crowds in the street often live in slums and work in the informal economy, thus free from the supervisory gaze and the punitive arm of the state. From Lagos to Peshawar, from Manila to Mexico City, pretty much everywhere in the Global South, the specter that haunts the Western-style liberal democracy is no longer guerillas in hills but crowds in streets and squares.

Reference to the street is critical. It does not merely refer to the fact that people (qua multitude) pass through the street during a demonstration, which they certainly do, but to

something more. Today, people are in streets as a permanent condition. It is where many of them live, if not in the nearby slum. The street is where people come together; where they look at each other; where the *mutual display* takes place; and, where common horizons, however temporary, are established. According to Marx, only the industrial labor, unlike the fragmented peasantry, is capable of a revolutionary consciousness and hence of revolutionary action (necessarily collective) because they work and live together in a common and visible space that alerts them to their mutual plight, their state of being exploited and oppressed. Today, the street has replaced the factory. The street is theater – the mirror in which people recognize themselves as poor and oppressed and yet strong and indispensable.

Streets and slums mutually reinforce each other. Slums are proliferating across the globe at an extraordinarily rapid rate. Today more than two billion people live in slums or slum-like conditions and that number is expected to double by 2030. Life in the slums as described and analyzed both in scholarly studies and in popular media is one of the most dynamic points of intersection of the good, the bad, and the ugly. The material conditions of life, especially sanitary conditions that severely compromise public health, are palpably ugly. The bad is pervasive in slums: crime and corruption, violence and intimidation, sheer poverty, inequality and injustice point to the general abuse of human beings by other members of the same species. On other hand, there is also much that is good in slums: resilience in the face of adversity, community spirit, creative and economic use of scarce resources etc. Without celebrating the slums, there is much to learn from slums, especially the practices of politics in camped spaces, both literally and figuratively.³²

The discussion about strategies for strengthening democratic forces in the Global South is usually conducted in terms of the complexity of civil society, the vibrancy of the public sphere, and the recognition of human rights. One cannot positively correlate these liberal democratic themes and aspirations with the emergence and continuing presence of people in streets. Many components of civil society, especially the NGOs of every ilk, and of political society, such as political parties and trade unions, are actively engaged in trying to shape the direction and to harness the energies of people in street. But they don’t control them. The sheer and obdurate presence of people in the street exceeds any specific mobilization in their name by any given state institution, political party, or NGO. This is the key point. There are many instances of mobilization by

specific groups for specific purposes, many of them quite successful, from electoral politics to NGO work.

At one level it seems like “people in the street” is a reserve pool from which the state, political parties, trade unions, NGOs, crusading religions, or anyone in need of bodies can borrow to mount their demonstration and display their populist power. This is evident from what has been happening recently in Turkey and Egypt. Both sides, the anti-government protesters and the pro-government supporters, have been able to mobilize huge demonstrations. The anti-government rallies in Gezi Park and Taksim Square in Istanbul and Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in Cairo were gamely matched by the pro-government forces in adjacent venues. Most of the bodies for these rallies came from streets. This gives the impression that people, under duress and in discontent, are being manipulated. Perhaps they are but they are not unaware of it. What we have here is the phenomenon of the *fungability* of people. People are being borrowed for a variety of purposes, both in the economic and political realm. People also know that they are being borrowed and they are lending their bodies. Fungability refers to the fact that people can and are continually inducted into various programs and projects generated both by the governmentality of the state and by the politics of mobilization. People are the privileged object of governmental hailing, but the structure of that subjectification is rather haphazard. It does not have enduring properties ascribed by Althusser to the dynamics of interpellation. It is often conducted en masse with a rhetoric so loud and tired, especially in its appellative mode, the message or inscription is bleached in white noise. Never before has political rhetoric been in such a state of fatigue. One has been hailed so many times, for so many different and contradictory causes and campaigns, sometimes with a reward of a meal and a glass of beer or a movie ticket or a festive but risky ride in an open truck to a rally. This is hardly what one might call effective interpellation. The practices of people in the collective political mode are full of irony, skepticism, feigned humility and enthusiasm. In marching, one is simply lending one’s body and that body has been lent one too many times to bear the imprints of a legible ideology.

Today, people know who they are. Under the spell of the nationalist democratic imaginary one is prone to imagine people as sovereign/citizens, but people think of themselves primarily as the “governed” and “poor,” especially in the Global South. If two out of eight billion inhabitants on earth think of themselves primarily as poor (eking out a meager existence on earnings of a dollar or two a day) and engage the political in

the language of poverty that fluctuates between patience and violence, what is the ideological function of imagining and positioning the people through the mediating category of citizenship? The politics of the people, the politics of the governed (in Partha Chatterjee’s phrase) cannot be understood exclusively in the idiom of citizenship, even though they do not disavow it. The slum-dwellers often invoke the idiom of citizenship to claim municipal rights, i.e., fair access to water, electricity, and basic public health services, but citizenship with its promise evacuated by corruption and neglect, is no longer the hallowed point of political arrival, but a portal through which they pass, time and again, strategically.

Although the idea of peoplehood serves as the ground in the founding performative phrases such as “we the people,” it is soon made to yield to something more specific and legible such as citizenship. It is assumed that the telos of a people as a collective entity is to become rights bearing individual citizens. Once the juridical reality of the rights bearing citizen is reified and objectified, the grounding of the principle of peoplehood is seen as a mere trope, a founding fiction. What is forgotten is that the “people,” if it is a mere trope, is no more a trope than the trope of citizenship its spawns. The priority of the people is displaced by the actuality of the citizen with yet another tropic maneuver, metalepsis. Hence, saying that the people are a trope is simply another version of the fiction thesis. It does not erase the fact that the multitudes keep mulling about in increasing numbers in streets, squares, and slums.

Moreover, the material reality of the people qua multitude cannot be scattered and settled into a matrix of multiple identities and roles offered by the associational life of civil society, nor into class solidarities, nor into the cultural identities of race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual preference. This confirms and discloses the fact that the category of people is a collective remainder, ever present and operative, something that exceeds all (real, imagined, and hailed) identities. People precede them both as a source and survive as the remainder as they pass through these identity forms.

The closing years of the last millennium and the opening years of the new millennium have witnessed the so-called people without history, or on the edges of history, storming the gates of history in the streets and squares everywhere: Tiananmen (Beijing, 1989), Azad (Tehran, 1979 and 2008), Tahrir (Cairo, 2011), Taksim (Istanbul, 2013), Maidan (Kiev, 2013) and elsewhere. In this twilight of political fictions these monumental showings of the people might be no more than mere surface eruptions of a gathering

momentum of the micropolitics of crowds, mobs,
and multitudes.

x

e-flux journal #58 — october 2014 Dilip Gaonkar
After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude

14/15

Dilip Gaonkar is an Associate Professor in Rhetoric and Public Culture and the Director of Center for Global Culture and Communication at Northwestern University. He is also the Director of Center for Transcultural Studies, an independent scholarly research network concerned with global issues. Gaonkar has edited a series of books and special journal issues on global cultural politics: *Alternative Modernities* (2001), *New Imaginaries* (with Benjamin Lee for Public Culture, 2002), *Cultures of Democracy* (for Public Culture, 2007), and *Globalizing American Studies* (with Brian Edwards, 2010). He is currently working on a book manuscript on *Crowds, Riots, and the Politics of Disorder*.

1
See George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (London: Serif, 1999; original 1964, revised, 1981).

2
E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* 50 (February 1971).

3
Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of the Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988). Hume is cited on 13.

4
Morgan, 13.

5
Morgan, 14.

6
Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Dover, 2002), X. The first English translation was published in English in 1896.

7
See J. S. McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti* (London: Unwin Hayman, 1989); Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

8
José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1964; originally published in 1932), 11.

9
Gasset, 73.

10
Gasset, 68.

11
The Federalist: From the Original Texts of Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1937), no. 63, 413.

12
The Federalist, no. 63, 410.

13
See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Casciato, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotexte, 2004); Sylvère Lotinger and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (New York: Semiotexte, 2007).

14
Virno, *The Grammar of the Multitude*, 23.

15
Malcolm Bull, "The Limits of Multitude," *New Left Review*, 35 (September–October 2005): 19–39.

16
Bull, "The Limits of Multitude,"

25.
17
Bull, "The Limits of Multitude," 24.

18
Benedict de Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, trans. from the Latin by R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), vi, 316.

19
Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. from the Latin by R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), xvi, 202–3

20
Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, iv, 309.

21
Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, xvii, 205.

22
Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, xvii, 214.

23
Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, xvi, 204.

24
Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, xvi, 203.

25
Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, v, 313.

26
Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, iv, 310–11.

27
Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, xvii, 217.

28
Étienne Balibar, "Spinoza, The Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses," in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3–37.

29
Bull, "The Limits of Multitude," 29.

30
See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Ranjit Guha, *Elementary aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1883), Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries* (London: Verso, 1999); Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

31
See Make Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

32
For an excellent account of a Mumbai slum, see Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (New York: Random House, 2012).