

**CROWD AND NATION.
CHARACTER IN THE AGE OF RACE**

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Why still address the question of the crowd? Has something changed in its historiography? Has a new theory shaken our certainties? Far from it. Over the last few years, many good books on the subject have been published,¹ but none of them has seriously challenged the consensus on the crowd and its students—the collective psychologists—the interpretations proposed over the years, the texts to be considered, the conceptual relationships between crowd and imitation, crowd and contagion, crowd and suggestion, crowd and degeneration, crowd and totalitarianisms, crowd and democracy, and the relationship between the disciplines of biology, psychology and sociology in the study of crowds. The subject has never been as current as it is today, but its meaning has been inverted. Once, the crowd offered those who belong to it a sense of power and security, a lack of responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Now, to be part of a crowd provokes a feeling of insecurity and fear. Once, the crowd disguised and hid; now, it reveals and exposes. Once, it protected from danger, though the crowd itself could become dangerous; now, it exposes one to danger. This change is largely a result of recent terrorist attacks, which have targeted crowds of all sizes.

Beyond these current events, something else has changed for me, which became apparent while reading and re-reading some of the canonical texts on the crowd. In his *Principles of Biology*, Herbert Spencer asserts that heredity is a universal law from which nothing escapes, a

factor that distinguishes the races (that is, the nations)²: “heredity” explains why Germans are different from Anglo-Saxons, Italians from French, Welsh Celts from Irish Celts.³ When Spencer refers to races, however, he really means to designate nations. And he is not referring to individual heredity, but rather to group heredity. To justify the permanence of the traits that give a nation its particular physiognomy, Spencer and his contemporaries resorted to factors such as climate, soil, and food in addition to the historical past. The authors of this theory of national characters⁴ thought that the core that gave a nation its identity, and that remained identical through history, was effectively determined by environment, specific to geography, territory, and climate. Some theorists added to this physical explanation causes that were immaterial but no less deterministic: history, language, religion, worldviews, morals, and institutions. But what was certain was that a nation's character was unitary, fixed, and fundamentally different from that of every other nation. Alfred Fouillée wonders if national character is just a special case of collective psychology.⁵

These two readings are at the root of a reconsideration of the notions of crowd, nation, and race, as well as their mutual relationships. Like many other ideas, the concept of national character underwent a profound transformation when it came up against Darwinian theory.⁶ The notion of heredity provided a new explanation for the concept of character—which must necessarily possess lasting characteristics—one that traces, with the guarantee of science, the permanence of a character back to the laws of heredity. Even before Darwin and racial theories, the term “race” was used to indicate a community characterised by a strong physical resemblance that endures over time. Even before Darwin there was talk of national character. What happened to these terms after Darwin? What happened when evolutionism invaded, along with all other fields, the study of the nation? The concept of crowd was born after Darwin and, as I write in the introduction to this issue, Darwinism was one of the cultural conditions that made it possible.

This is how I found myself working on three concepts at the same time: crowd, national character, and race. To me, the relationships between crowd and nation intuitively appeared very close—both share similar notions of likeness and unity, the idea of *e pluribus unum*—but I didn't expect that there were many more. Race is an idea that influences both crowd and nation. I believe that race theory represents a

continuation—even more naturalist and determinist—of the theory of national characters, satisfying the same needs and displaying the same characteristics. Race theory supports the same principles as national character theory while preserving the notion of heredity, something taken to be reliable and irrefutable, in other words, scientific. When we wonder why racism settled without much difficulty in civilised Europe, we should think about the *déjà vu* effect brought by the theories of the differences between one race and another, of perfect cohesion of all races, of the fixity and historical permanence of racial characteristics, and of the impossibility (and banning) of mixture between races. These ideas, along with the notion of heredity, all have their roots in the differentialist principles of the theory of national characters.

Gustave Le Bon makes a rather mysterious statement: he says that the race's soul is manifested in the crowd,⁷ and that the same happens in the nation.⁸ Here again, we see the coincidence of crowd, nation, and race. The following pages are the result of reconsidering these three concepts and the links between them.

I – THE FACE

So far, no one has dealt with the parallels that exist between crowd and nation because they, and the disciplines to which they respectively belong, have always been considered light years apart from one another. The former indicates a group of any size, in which the individual ceases to exist and a collective entity comes to life that erases the characteristics of the individual; the latter is a classic concept in institutional and political history as well as in the ideologies of the last two centuries. The former has a negative connotation, conjuring the charge of irrationality and violence; the latter has a positive, or at least neutral connotation—it has been so present in our history for so long that we find it hard to imagine a reality in which it is not present. But there are many similarities, and indeed a close relationship, between the two concepts. “Crowd” and “nation” both conjure a single protagonist of collective actions and decisions; both are characterised by unanimity. But in both cases, this protagonist is not a single subject, but rather a multiplicity of subjects. By crowd, we mean individuals of various backgrounds, professions, ages, classes, faiths, and political beliefs. By nation, we mean all those who live within common borders and identify with the area marked by those boundaries. The multiple entities that make up both crowd and nation have a common feature:

when these individuals are together (occasionally as a crowd, and permanently as a nation), they cancel each other out as a plurality and become a single subject. Everyone behaves similarly in a crowd, and everyone feels similarly in a nation, at least regarding national belonging. All members look alike, act as one, all *are* one. In a nation, this happens in a blander way than in a crowd, which comes together for a short but intense period before breaking up and disappearing. Whilst the bonds of a nation may be softer, it stays together forever, and dissolves only in the event of civil war or foreign conquest.

One element that unites both crowd and nation is that both possess a definite character. According to Cesare Lombroso:

Temperament is to the individual what race is to the people. That is, the physio-psychological basis, largely hereditary and largely acquired, which determines in one as it does in the other attitudes, trends, native energy, from which individual or collective personality is sealed, through the ages as in different geographical areas.⁹

This view, useful in defining a criminal type, according to Lombroso, must be extended from the individual to the collective: “It is always the isolated individual (*Selbstwesen*) who is studied and described, while it is necessary to study and describe the temperament and character of the individuals in their real and ongoing life, i.e., amid society, as a member of a collective (*Gliedwesen*).”¹⁰ Character therefore unites individual and social phenomena. Distinct from the character of the individual is the social character of a group, a crowd, a sect, or a nation.

Another element that unites crowd and nation is determinism: just as a crowd is determined by the race from which it originates (we will see this in section 3), a nation is determined by its character. To explain the essence of a nation is to attempt to trace the natural, physical, geographical, racial, historical, moral and institutional elements from which this character originates. Thus, the theory of national characters attempts to explain the special characteristics that make each nation unique and unrepeatable in world history. These characteristics depend on the world in which a nation is found and from which it takes its shape. They model the traits of a nation—the nation goes into a mould (*moule*) which gives it form. Jules Michelet (one of the central authors of national character theory) asserts that the nation starts from its geography, and over the course of its history, through ever closer unification, it becomes a spiritual entity, all without, however, losing its original geographical footprint. For Edgar Quinet, it is landscape that

forms nations: there are steep and stony nations, nations with open horizons and gentle slopes, nations in the South and the North, in humid warmth and dry cold. These natural traits are important in influencing and determining the characteristics of a nation: its energy, softness, tenacity, laziness; its predisposition to freedom or tyranny, to dominate or to be enslaved, to be industrial workers or farmers. All of these traits depend on climate, geography, and the sky. In this case, as in that of the crowd, the natural environment in which a nation grows determines its character. Though the national body has the ability to achieve great endeavours—material, spiritual, or institutional—that endures over the centuries, it cannot choose what or how to be. The nation's essence is given, determined by the original context in which the nation is formed. Character is immutable: a lazy nation will never become active; a vassal state will never become an independent nation.

“What counts in a people is its character,” writes Gustave Le Bon.¹¹ He continues:

Les qualités de caractère dont l'ensemble constitue l'âme nationale d'un peuple, sont formées par des lentes accumulations ancestrales. Elles finissent par composer un agrégat très stable de sentiments, de traditions et de croyances, codifiant à travers les âges les nécessités auxquelles est soumise la vie de chaque nation.¹²

We should connect what Le Bon asserts here with the theory he expressed the following year in *Psychologie des foules*: in the crowd, what speaks is the race's soul, i.e., its ancestral background that remains unchanged over the centuries. Collective psychology attributes the homogeneity among members of a crowd to the mechanisms of contagion and imitation. It is here that national character theory intersects with collective psychology: the character of a nation, homogeneous across large numbers of people, is an effect of the same mechanisms that are at work in a crowd, which crowd resembles the soul of the race (we'll return to this point in section 3):

La double action du passé et de l'imitation réciproque finit par rendre tous les hommes d'un même pays et d'une même époque à ce point semblables que, même chez ceux qui sembleraient devoir le plus s'y soustraire, philosophes, savants et littérateurs, la pensée et le style ont un air de famille qui fait immédiatement reconnaître le temps auquel ils appartiennent.¹³

In other words, the face of the crowd resembles the face of the nation. Both crowd and nation demonstrate a unity so compact that

they produce a “face,” something intrinsically individual. . The face is single and unique (barring exceptions resulting from disease or nightmares), allowing individuals to recognise and to be recognised. It is said of both crowd and nation that the intimate unity of those who comprise them cancels the faces of the component parts and gives rise to a single face, new and different from that of each individual. Crowd and nation behave as if they were a single individual. For the crowd, this belief was echoed by all who saw it as a dangerous entity; for the nation, by all those who identified the nation with a particular character. But despite the many common features that crowd and nation share, contemporary scholars have dissociated them. As a result, we often fail to see how these authors, themes, dynamics, and methods of investigation were much more intertwined than we imagine.

If the crowd has a face, and therefore is an individual, does it also have a character? This is not a pointless distinction. Looking at the study of the nation and the crowd during this period, we see that the investigation of the character of nations sketches the face of the crowd, with the list of its features and its behaviour (both normal and, more often, pathological). Collective psychology does so in reference to the crowd, while national character theory and the psychology of peoples do so in reference to the nation. What interests us here is that, in both cases, from a multiplicity of individuals we see the emergence of a collective entity with a united and recognisable face. Every reflection on the nation thinks of it as having a roughly coherent set of characteristics, but not all representations of the nation demonstrate a series of fixed and ever-present traits that give rise to a real character resembling that of an individual. France, Britain, Italy, and Germany are depicted not only as beautiful women with bared breasts and vague attributes of honour, freedom, and courage; they are most profoundly characterized according to the elements that form the individual character in those countries, the individual faces that each correspond to a nation. Italy is feminine, indolent and seductive; Britain is tenacious and serious; Germany is disciplined and speculative; France is sociable and bright. They are nations transformed into persons, each one with a unique character, a face.

Collective psychology accomplishes the same task: individuals disappear and give rise to the crowd. The crowd has a face and a character: impulsive, irrational, imaginative, emotional, violent, unanimous. The crowd is presented both as always characterised by

these same characteristics, and as influenced by race: there are crowds from the North and the South, wild crowds and quiet crowds, Anglo-Saxon crowds and Latin crowds. It is up to the reader to guess which are the worst. It is curious not only do that the constructions of crowd and character under the hegemony of race develop in parallel, but also that the founding authors of collective psychology were deeply interested in national and racial characters. This is the case with Le Bon, Fouillée, Théodule Ribot, Gabriel Tarde, and Hyppolite Taine. Both tasks combine psychology, sociology and biology; both manifest of the crowd and other nations; and both believe that a nation where crowds have influence is a nation near its end.

Collective psychology is not all the same—neither wholly determinist nor wholly anti-democratic—and similarly not all national character theories are the same. Both theories, however, do share important common features in their determinist elements. Both share an important feature: that of naturalising social reality: crowds and nations are presented as the soul of the race, its heredity, its instinct. Indeed, Claude Blankaert speaks fittingly of a biology of nations.¹⁴ History also acquires an authoritative function that has the strength of natural law. The roots of different nationalities are so deeply buried as to seem like geological eras, quasi-natural, and in any case so long ago as to acquire a sort of eternity. History states that nations have always been like this, and the authority of history cannot be questioned. In this way, both the character of the crowd and national characters become given and indisputable, facts of nature. Race, for its part, is already in this period a concept that contains a substantial part of nature.¹⁵

II - *IMITO ERGO SUM*

If we look at what for the fin-de-siècle authors were the mechanisms that create and hold together these two entities—crowd and nation—we realise that most are the same: imitation, contagion, suggestion, control of the unconscious, irrationality, and racial influences. Let's look at imitation, which has an equally important role for both crowd and nation. We see this, for example, in the work of Walter Bagehot. In *Physics and Politics*, one of the most influential books of the period, Bagehot wonders what is the secret to national coherence. We do not always live with our closest friends, but we nonetheless have constructs such as the nation, which allow their

members to live alongside one another over the centuries. For Bagehot, this is an amazing feat, but also an intellectual problem that would be unsolvable if we did not know the psychological laws that hold a crowd together to the point of canceling out the personality of the individual. It is here that we move from nation to crowd, a transition which—like that from character to race, or from race to collectivity—is ubiquitous in these texts. Bagehot was inspired by the Darwinist idea that the struggle for survival begins from the relationship between nations, and that it is the strongest or most adaptable nation that overcomes the weaker. Even the formation of national character is owed to the law of survival of the fittest: the nation protects its favourite traits, and ousts those it dislikes. Imitation figures here as a powerful, primitive and universal dynamic, in which those who live on the same soil tend to look alike. Thus, the national character is formed and passed down across generations thanks to a hereditary mechanism. This mechanism, no longer found only in the individual but also in the group, ensures the permanence of that character. Imitation plays a huge role in primitive civilisations and decreases with the progress of civilisation.

Though Fouillée questions Bagehot's account, he shares this view that the nation is formed through mutual imitation, and draws a similar parallel between nation and crowd. He writes:

We are not going to say, like Tarde, that imitation is the social phenomenon par excellence, but there is no doubt that it is one of the most important social phenomena. The degree of sociability, among people, can also be measured based on its power to imitate and on its pleasure to imitate. It is not true, as Bagehot claims, that the power of imitation decreases with civilisation, nor that more advanced peoples mimic less. What they do is imitate their predecessors less, but imitate their contemporaries more. Civilisation itself is nothing but an immense network of imitations, mutual actions and reactions. You can therefore rest assured that people will imitate more, which does not exclude but, on the contrary, rather provokes the parallel movement of invention.¹⁶

If the nation endures, the crowd is provisional, but the principle behind both is that of imitation. Fouillée concludes, what is the psychology of peoples if not collective psychology applied to an entire nation?¹⁷ This is the sentence I quoted at the beginning, relocated in context.

Regarding imitation, it is impossible not to quote Tarde, the greatest theorist of imitation as a base phenomenon of civilisation, human development, and social dynamics. Tarde was a sociologist, but

in the same way that the authors mentioned above were also sociologists: Tarde believed that “the psychological is explained with the social because the social comes from the psychological.”¹⁸ In this respect, he was an underdog adversary of Emile Durkheim. While Tarde mixes the sociological plane with the psychological, and attacks Durkheim, sociology aligned itself with Durkheim's position according to which a sociology which wishes to be a science must resort exclusively to explanations that fit in with the societal plane, without involving different spheres such as psychology and biology. Studying society using the tools of psychology and biology is just what all these authors do. This passage simultaneously brings an end to Tarde's ambitions for French sociology and to the fortunes not only of collective psychology, but of all those studies (economics, politics, art, literature, history, constitutionalism) in which psychology and biology contributed to the interpretations of the phenomena discussed. What can be called the interpretation of society on natural bases thereby came to an end.

But even Tarde distances himself from “naturalist sociologists”, whom he criticises for:

the elastic meaning given (...) to the term ‘heredity’, which serves them for better or worse in expressing the transmission of vital characters by generation, the transmission of ideas, customs, social things, ancestral tradition, home education, custom-imitation.¹⁹

The criticism is directed at many of the authors we have discussed above, for example Le Bon and Ribot, who do exactly that. Tarde states that his intent is to isolate the purely sociological side from human matters from the biological side. At the same time, he believes that they are inseparable from each other. Tarde also does not doubt the importance of race and the physical environment. (“I'm well aware of this”, he writes). In effect, he occupies a middle ground between the position of the naturalist sociologists and that of Durkheim. Regarding the former, he reduces the importance of natural factors, and declares that he tried to ignore them, but eventually had to admit their importance. The result is a mix of different camps and a use of naturalistic and psychological explanations in sociology.

For Tarde, the social dynamic consists of two distinct and complementary mechanisms: invention and imitation. While invention is individual, through imitation it becomes social. Imitation, he writes, is “a remote action by one spirit on another, an action consisting of an

almost photographic reproduction of a cerebral cliché on the sensitive plate of another brain.” For Tarde, there is no difference between conscious and unconscious imitation, intentional or unintentional. The more meaningful distinction is between imitation and counter-imitation: “There are, in effect, two ways to imitate: do exactly as the model, or do exactly the opposite.”²⁰ For Tarde, this is the cause of the progressive differentiation that Spencer theorised without being able to explain it. Overall, through imitation and counter-imitation, humans come to resemble each other more and more.

According to Tarde, imitation is not a pathological phenomenon that occurs solely in a crowd, leading to the weakening and even to the eradication of the individual. This marks a significant difference with those (the crowd psychologists who link imitation with the crowd and see it as a mechanism that erodes the solidity of individual boundaries and the constitution of the single subject. If for crowd psychologists, imitation leads to unison, and therefore to the danger of the disappearance of the individual, for Tarde, imitation brings an ever-greater resemblance between social entities, and, over the long term, world unity. The dominant opinion among his contemporaries was that the ever-increasing similarity between different regions, countries and continents poses a threat: diversity is assimilated and erased in the average person, without substance and without meaning; similarity prevails over difference; and the individual is lost, along with everything that is specific, original, and unique in him. Thus, civilisation as a whole is diminished. For Tarde, in contrast, since imitation is typical of society, and neither unique to crowds nor pathological, the progressive decline in the diversity of places, personality, and behaviour results in a greater proximity between all parties of the world. He perceives no danger in this unity, unlike those who, before globalisation, look critically on a greater world unity.

The increasing similarity of the many gives rise to the national character: the result is a unity of attitudes and of the heart. For Tarde, character has neither historical nor natural reasons; it is purely the result of imitation. Thus, even regarding national character, his position differs significantly from that of other characterologists. Both in nation and in society, people are not born similar, but become so. Therefore, Tarde contrasts the development from the homogenous to the heterogeneous, as theorised by Spencer, with the development from the heterogeneous to the homogenous. There is no need to underline

the role played by imitation in achieving this step: Different elements become similar elements through imitation and intentional or unintentional repetition, which follow invention.²¹

III – RACE AS CAUSE, RACE AS EFFECT

Another element that unites crowd and nation is race. During this period, the term race as a synonym of nation is moving towards the term race in the sense we recognise it today. The term has not always possessed the biological and differentialist connotations that have become inseparable from it: in this period, it has a racialist content but not always a racist one.

Le Bon is among those who place crowd and nation together under the banner of race; just as in the crowd there is what Le Bon defines “l’âme de la race,” the imprint of race can be clearly observed in the nation. The parallelism between crowd and nation explains why, in his handling of the crowd at one point, Le Bon considers the issue of civilisation and its end. His *Psychologie des foules* ends with the explanation of the phases that civilisations go through. Here, the term “civilisation” means something almost completely identical to the term “nation.” For these authors, a nation involves a language, sometimes a race, always a past, and invariably a civilisation. Civilisation has several levels of meaning: from a place in history to good manners, from a produced culture to the world view it centres around. After reading Le Bon's most famous work, many scholars have wondered what the life and death of civilisations has to do with crowds. This connection is less apparent when one separates the subject of crowds from the larger culture of which Le Bon is a part: evolutionism, Darwinism, naturalism, continuity between humans and animals, biological psychology, national character theory, and the sociology of modernity. At the time, however scholars of the crowd were analyzing these issues together, simultaneously working on psychology, studying animal behaviour and the physiology of the nervous system, applying evolution to all the themes and scientific fields they cover, comparing crowd behaviour to national character (in which they include heredity), applying the mechanisms at work in the crowd to the nation to explain the homogeneity of a people, and continually using the concept of race. So, it is natural that a cyclical philosophy of history, in which civilisations are thought of as organisms in analogy with living organisms, should find a place in their considerations. After all, it

already happened with Quinet, Thierry, Taine and other characterologists, who theorised the character of the nation and dealt with life and death of civilizations. For Le Bon, the decline of a civilization occurs when crowds appear and the state becomes excessive, passing laws that seek to regulate everything and expand bureaucracy.

The interplay between crowd and nation under the banner of race is therefore very close, whatever the term “race” may indicate. For Le Bon, the “mental constitution of races” determines everything. He writes:

Alongside accidental circumstances, there are large permanent laws that direct the march of each civilisation. The most general of these permanent laws, the most unshakeable, derive from the mental constitution of races. The life of a people, its institutions, its opinions and its arts are only the visible traces of its invisible soul. For a people to transform its institutions, its opinions and its arts, it must first transform its soul (...).²²

Race continues the work begun by character. As with all characterologists and racialists, Le Bon takes race to be the natural element that automatically generates a civilisation, a nation, or a national character. Like the characterologists—who substitute character in place of race—Le Bon believes that civilisations are unique, self-enclosed, natural-like bodies, which must not have contact or crossbreeding between them. He argues that the idea of unitary races results in unitary civilisations, different and impermeable, which do not and should not mix with each other, and that this is a new idea that belongs to him. In truth, however, starting from Madame de Staël, many nineteenth-century authors did little but recite this same idea.²³

Ribot also links crowd and nation, and ties both to the notion of heredity: “La permanence du caractère national est le résultat et en même temps la preuve expérimentale de l'hérédité psychologique dans les masses.”²⁴ He also extends the hereditary mechanism from the individual to the collective. In this way, both crowd and nation come to possess a certain character as a result of heredity. Before Le Bon, Ribot argued that the crowd has a certain appearance because of race, influenced by the past, habits, and tradition. The laws of heredity operate within the nation, and the effect of this is that just as an individual inherits the characteristics of his ancestors, a stable population inherits the characteristics of distant ancestors. Through this process, a nation maintains its characteristics over the centuries.

Heredity, a biological process, is thus placed at the base of the nation, a cultural-historical reality. Similarly, for Le Bon, the soul of the race emerges in the crowd and is decisive for its characteristics. Two symmetrical processes bring together crowd and nation under the banner of race.

Heredity, according to Ribot, conveys feelings and passions, as Darwin argues: in present feelings, we find the indelible mark of the generations that made them what they are and that worked unconsciously to fix them forever. In animals, the transmission of individual character is a fact:

L'hérédité des penchants, des instincts et des passions chez les bêtes est une très bonne démonstration de cette forme de l'hérédité chez l'homme, en ce qu'elle nous débarrasse de toutes les explications superficielles, tirées de l'influence de l'éducation, de l'exemple, de la force de l'habitude, des causes extérieures par lesquelles on a cru pouvoir remplacer l'hérédité.²⁵

Ribot describes precisely the operation performed by national character theory: instead of heredity, natural or moral elements were placed carrying out the same task later attributed to hereditary transmission.

For Ribot, national character is as hereditary as individual character: "Nous allons voir comment elle [l'hérédité] transmet et fixe certains caractères psychologiques dans un peuple comme dans une famille."²⁶ There is mobility in all life—not just that of the state—and all life has a cause:

Mais, au milieu de ce tourbillon incessant qui constitue leur vie, il reste quelque chose de fixe qui est la base de leur unité et de leur identité. Chez un peuple, cette somme de caractères psychiques qui se retrouvent dans toute son histoire, dans toutes ses institutions, à toutes les époques, s'appelle le caractère national. Le caractère national est l'explication dernière, la seule vraie, des vices et des vertus d'un peuple, de sa bonne et de sa mauvaise fortune. Cependant, cette vérité si simple est à peine reconnue. Le succès et les revers d'un peuple ne dépendent pas de la forme de son gouvernement; ils sont l'effet de ses institutions. Les institutions sont l'effet de ses mœurs et de ses croyances religieuses. Ses mœurs et ses croyances religieuses sont l'effet de son caractère. Si tel peuple est actif, tel autre indolent, si l'un a une religion intérieure et morale, l'autre une religion extérieure et qui s'adresse aux sens, il faut en chercher la cause dans leur manière habituelle de penser et de sentir, c'est-à-dire dans leur caractère. Le caractère, à son tour, est-il un effet? On n'en peut guère douter. Il est extrêmement probable que tout caractère,

individuel ou national, est le résultat très compliqué des lois physiologiques et psychologiques. Mais la science des caractères est si peu avancée, qu'on ne peut rien hasarder sur les causes de leur formation et que l'on doit considérer provisoirement le caractère comme une cause irréductible.²⁷

What role does legacy play here? Character is transmitted by heredity. In a people at its beginnings, character is already formed:

Ils (character traits) résultent de sa constitution physique, du climat, de diverses autres causes; et comme un peuple se perpétue par le moyen de la génération, comme c'est une loi de la nature que le semblable produise le semblable, comme les exceptions à cette loi tendent à s'effacer à mesure qu'on examine de grandes masses et non des cas particuliers, on voit par des faits palpables comment le caractère national se conserve par l'hérédité. (...) La permanence du caractère national est le résultat et en même temps la preuve expérimentale de l'hérédité psychologiques dans les masses.

An ethnographic psychology is therefore necessary:

Même en l'absence de ces travaux scientifiques, fondés sur une critique exacte, les historiens ont fait depuis longtemps des remarques décisives sur le caractère des peuples et l'impossibilité de le transformer. Ainsi, le Français du XIX^e siècle est au fond le Gaulois de César.²⁸

That the current French were the Gauls of Caesar was a widespread belief and expressed in almost identical terms.

National character, in this version, is dependent on three elements: some primitive traits that are, for now, unshakeable; the influence of the environment; and the hereditariness of those traits. So, in Ribot's work, we find all the classic characteristics of the national character, plus the added element of heredity. It is heredity that ensures the permanence of national character, which, prior to the introduction of the notion of heredity, was seen as being ensured by climate, geography, history, institutions, and customs.²⁹ Heredity therefore takes the place that, in national character theory, was taken by climate, food, territory, material or moral factors. At a time when Darwinism was quickly spreading, it became possible to provide an explanation like this. In fact, we have seen that Spencer, Bagehot, and Ribot apply hereditary mechanism to the nation as the guarantor of its permanent character.

Naturalist sociologists use a very elastic version of heredity to explain, with the transmission of vital characteristics between

generations, the passing of ideas, mœurs, and social behaviour, through ancestral tradition, home education, and imitation. For Tarde, the use of heredity to explain social phenomena in the work of authors like Ribot and Le Bon is abusive. The naturalist school sees in non-imitation an effect of difference of race. For Tarde, in contrast, “les caractères physiques qui séparent les peuples” are simply irrelevant. The Greeks were physiologically similar to the Romans, yet they didn’t imitate them. The idea that distinct races are impermeable to reciprocal borrowings is refuted by Japan, which at the time began to imitate Europe.³⁰ It is civilisation that creates race, says Tarde, not vice versa. His thesis represents the exact opposite of that of the characterologists and raciologists. For Tarde, race is a national product in which prehistoric races have merged, interbred, mixed, and been assimilated. Every civilization makes its own race or races, in which it is embodied for a certain period.³¹

Tarde therefore does not reject the concept of race, but uses it a way opposite to that of his contemporaries. He seeks to determine the extent to which imitation, non-imitation, and counter-imitation, depend on races and their closure. That is to say, he questions the importance of this notion that sits somewhere between the natural and the cultural. For Tarde, race is both the sharing of certain physical traits and, as is the case throughout the nineteenth century, common participation in the same national entity. On the one hand, skin colour and facial proportions; on the other hand, the long history of a country and the ideas and values that characterise that history—the slow accumulation of traditions made possible (and highlighted together) by institutions and customs. The idea that national character is internally homogeneous, separate from the different organisms on the outside (i.e., other nations), was already contained in the theory of national characters, and continued in racial theory. For some, each national character is a whole which cannot and should not intermingle with any other. If it is true that literature expresses the spirit of the nation in which it lives, then each nation can only read the literature that belongs to it (there are those who go as far as to advise against translation altogether). National characters that intermingle muddy the purity of character, blurring and maiming distinct traits. The same considerations are also valid for race, even when racial theory does not possess racist meaning; each race is different from the others, and each race cannot and should not intermingle with the others. Therefore, the

affirmations on race are preceded and accompanied by those on national character. As a result, an inadvertent coupling of the two terms, in which race assumes the meaning of national character and begins to cover the same field. National character thus becomes ever more markedly racial, and the race element becomes ever more decisive in the formation of national identity. And just as race has a constantly changing meaning, heredity increasingly plays a role it did not have before. From both sides, there is a slide towards the accentuation of naturalistic elements.

Tarde feels the need to differentiate himself from this trend. He writes that for naturalist sociologists, imitation can only occur within a race; the differences between one race and another prevent any relationship of exchange, let alone imitation. In contrast, Tarde denies race a prominent role in explaining the dynamics of history and society. For him, the “physical characteristics that separate peoples” (*i.e.*, races) have nothing to do with imitation, counter-imitation, or non-imitation.³² Furthermore, Tarde does not conceive of race as a closed organism.

The thesis of this article is that the concept of national character preceded that of race and performed the same function while displaying similar characteristics. In the theories of national character, we find determinism and indeterminism, differentialism and anti-differentialism, character as something closed and incommunicable or the result of interbreeding and mixture. Tarde's conception is, unusually, indeterminist and open, constructivist and anti-naturalist—as we would say in today's terms—though it maintains a naturalist background.³³

The biggest difference is that, for Tarde, race is an effect, not a cause.³⁴ It is a civilisation that creates its race, not a race that creates its civilisation. This differentiates Tarde not only from the growing racist positions around him, ever more visible in the definition of national character, but also from many versions of national character theory which, while not being racist, made the characteristics of a civilisation depend on the decisive influence exercised by character (identity, language, religion, institutions, geographic position, climate, food, landscape, etc.). There are few non-determinist versions (even if still not racist) of the idea of close ties between national characteristics in the form of character and the type of civilisation. For such theories,

the move to racism is an easy one. Tarde, in contrast, with a reversal that would be adopted in the 20th century by the constructivist historiography of the nation, argues that what is going on is a creation rather than a mere acknowledgment of a state of affairs. And in this creation, it is civilisation that constructs race. In his theory, the starting point is not natural data (the racial makeup of a country, for example), but rather the cultural and historical data of national identity. What is stressed is the importance of all elements of this identity in fabricating a shared sense, a particular solidarity—in short, an idea of a nation.

For Le Bon, in contrast, race is the ultimate cause. But what does “race” mean for him? Race corresponds to the unconscious that prevails in the collective;³⁵ the unconscious is produced by time, by heredity, and by race:

Our conscious acts derive from an unconscious substrate mainly created by hereditary influences. This substrate includes the many ancestral residues that constitute the soul of the race. Behind the confessed causes of our actions, there are undoubtedly secret causes that we don't confess, but behind those secret causes, there are more causes that are more secret since we ourselves ignore them.³⁶

The conscious part within us makes us different from each other; the unconscious part is what makes us look alike:

It is above all the unconscious elements that form a race's soul that gather all the individuals of that race, and, it is above all those conscious elements, the results of education but, especially, of an exceptional heredity, that distinguish them. People who differ in terms of intelligence have very similar instincts, passions, feelings.³⁷

Le Bon's understanding of race applies as well to crowds:

These are exactly the general qualities of character, carried by the unconscious and that most normal individuals in a race possesses in more or less the same measure, that crowds have in common. In the collective soul, the intellectual attitudes of individuals, and therefore their individuality, are cancelled. The heterogeneous drowns in the homogeneous, and unconscious qualities predominate.³⁸

So, similarity in the crowd is due not only to imitation—set in motion immediately when people gather in large numbers—but most importantly to the unconscious elements that form what Le Bon calls “the race's soul.” Here, biology plays its role, as does history. The background that we ignore is made up of the results of both the hereditary process and the work of time. The prevalence of this

simultaneously natural and historical background in the crowd ensures that the members of the crowd look alike; when, instead, mindful elements prevail, individual differences express themselves. The individual is a matter of awareness; the crowd is a matter of unconscious.

Le Bon points out that by race he means psychological race, whose traits are transmitted hereditarily.³⁹ What counts in a crowd, as in a nation, is race—that is, character. Both the face of the nation and the face of the crowd are produced by race. Le Bon writes:

Les éléments de classification que l'anatomie, les langues, le milieu, les groupements politiques ne sauraient fournir, nous sont donnés par la psychologie. Celle-ci montre que, derrière les institutions, les arts, les croyances, les bouleversements politiques de chaque peuple, se trouvent certains caractères moraux et intellectuels dont son évolution dérive. C'est l'ensemble de ces caractères qui forme ce que l'on peut appeler l'âme d'une race.⁴⁰

What Le Bon is describing is nothing less than national character:

Cet agrégat d'éléments psychologiques observable chez tous les individus d'une race constitue ce qu'on appelle avec raison le caractère national. Leur ensemble forme le type moyen qui permet de définir un peuple. Mille Français, mille Anglais, mille Chinois, pris au hasard, diffèrent notablement entre eux mais, ils possèdent cependant, de par l'hérédité de leur race, des caractères communs au moyen desquels peut être construit un type idéal du Français, de l'Anglais, du Chinois, analogue au type idéal que le naturaliste présente lorsqu'il décrit d'une façon générale le chien ou le cheval. Applicable aux diverses variétés de chiens ou de chevaux, une telle description ne peut comprendre que les caractères communs à tous, et nullement ceux qui établissent une distinction entre leurs nombreux spécimens.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

In Italy, as in France, positivism was quickly dismissed and even ridiculed. This is not the place to provide an explanation for why this happened, but what I do want to emphasize is the great impact that the liquidation of positivism, evolutionism, and naturalistic approaches to the social sciences in general had on the ideas of crowd, race, and national character. Lucien Febvre does not even take care to annotate one of Le Bon's passages⁴² in his volume dedicated to contesting historical and social sciences that draw their inspiration from biology, those that repeat as if it were a magic formula, "man's relationship with nature, man's relationship with nature." What the relationship was

exactly between individuals and nature, whether Darwinian or Lamarckian, was impossible to know, since at the time it was sufficient to invoke evolution at every turn in order to be fashionable.⁴³ But Febvre takes Taine as his example, the most deterministic among the historians and scholars of society of the time. It is clear that he has a good time dismantling the causal relationship that Taine establishes between humans and their milieu, also because nature isn't absent from his geographical analysis: but it is, in fact, a nature investigated historically and made by humans. Febvre also dismisses without discussion the solution to the problem of the birth of society posed by the naturalists, that is, based on a presumed "social instinct" typical of humans, and perhaps also of animals. Today, we are much more cautious regarding the importance of nature and the nature of sociality. Regarding the latter, we realise that sympathy, which occupies such an important place in modern and contemporary morals, is nothing more than the tendency implicit in man towards sociality among peers. The success of the social sciences, beginning in the end of the nineteenth century, was profoundly different in France and Italy. On one side, there was Durkheim, who freed sociology from the grip of biology and psychology; on the other side, there is the idealist condemnation of social sciences and naturalism. The reintroduction of sociology to Italy is well known to have had to wait a good half a century after its heyday in France, and it arrived from the United States rather than from Europe. But in any case, sociology has completely disowned its past. Literature, nothing more than literature, fantasy, syllogistic deductions, eccentric theories, astrology: this is how Febvre describes the research of sociologists who use evolution, who "simplify" the relationship that humans have had through history with nature and the influence it has on them, who exaggerate the effect of environment and climate, who find their model in formulae and natural science procedures. These are sterile procedures, if not dangerous ones. The influence of the land and climate on human beings, and their moral ideas, from Bodin to the Abbé Du Bos up to Montesquieu, furthermore, appear to Febvre to be rather puerile.⁴⁴ Not to mention national character, which, for Febvre is just individual character turned into a collective one. Even the passage from individual to national seems an abuse to him, since a people have no real existence on a par with the individual. Besides, nothing seems precise in these studies, nothing is clear, nothing is deepened—all is "wanting to explain emptiness with the arbitrary."⁴⁵

Febvre's observations are convincing, his tone less so. However, this is the tone that has imposed itself on the human sciences for the past century. It is for us to decide whether we have not also thrown away nature's baby with the bathwater of naturalisation. And at the same time, we have never fully paused to understand how racist ideology was formed without recourse to the illuminists as obvious scapegoats. In this article, I argued that this formation took place over the course of the nineteenth century, an era that still leaves much to be studied. I believe that the theory of national character established the premise of racism. In other words, I believe that over the course of the nineteenth century, the (central) notion of national character, as a result of crossing it with that of the crowd and the incorporation of heredity, became increasingly naturalised. However, I believe that, in this process, it maintained and stressed the principal characteristics of national character: uniqueness, difference, closure, hierarchy, the impossibility and banning of interbreeding. The idea of race decisively influences those of character and of crowd, but at the same time, race maintains character; and character, for its part, has a lot in common with the crowd. Therefore, character is slowly transformed into race (first racialist, then racist), and the crowd is considered as a mixture of social and animal elements where climate, territory, institutions, customs, and religion act alongside race and heredity. "We need to operate like the naturalist in psychology as well"⁴⁶, writes Le Bon. Whether, and how, nature can be present in sociology, psychology, and the other human sciences; whether, and how much, these disciplines making up the sciences of man can work together; whether sciences of man and sciences of nature form two sets that must ignore and seal themselves off from each other, or whether they can and must work in concert— questions from two centuries ago continue to beckon to us in the present.

NOTES

- [1] Here, I list the principal works on the crowd to have appeared in recent years: R. A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic*, Sage, London, 1975; S. Barrows, *Distorting mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, Yale University Press, New Haven- London 1981; A. Mucchi Faina, *L'abbraccio della folla. Cento anni di psicologia collettiva*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1983; A. Mucchi Faina, *Psicologia collettiva: storia e problemi*, Roma, Carocci, 2002; O. Bosc, *La Foule criminelle. Politique et criminologie dans l'Europe du tournant du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 2007; C. Borch, *The politics of crowds. An alternative history of sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2012; C.O. Doron, *L'homme altéré: races et dégénérescence (XVII^e-XIX^e siècles)*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2016; D. Palano, *Il potere della moltitudine: l'invenzione dell'inconscio collettivo nella teoria politica e nelle scienze sociali italiane tra Otto e Novecento*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2002; J.-C. Coffin, *La transmission de la folie 1850-1914*, L'Harmattan, 2003; R. Parkin-Gounelas (ed.), *The Psychology and Politics of the Collective. Groups, Crowds and Mass Identifications*, London, New York, Routledge, 2012.
- [2] Over the course of the paper, we will see the passage from the idea of race as nation to the idea of race in a biological sense.
- [3] H. Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, London, Williams & Norgate, 1864-1867, 2 vols., cf. vol. 1, pp. 291-292.
- [4] Cf. about these M. Nacci (ed. by), "A Mould for the Nation. The theory of national characters in nineteenth-century French political thought", *The Tocqueville Review/ La revue Tocqueville*, vol. XXXV n° 1 – 2014.
- [5] A. Fouillée, *Esquisse psychologique des peuples européens*, Paris, Alcan, 1903 (2^e éd.).
- [6] Here, I am not interested in the orthodoxy of the theory, if it goes back to Darwin or Lamarck, or even a vague transformism. Cf., regarding the issues of Darwinian orthodoxy, *L'introduction du darwinisme en France au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Vrin, 1974.
- [7] G. Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, Paris, Alcan, 1895, cf. p. 16.
- [8] *Ibid.*, *Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples*, Paris, Alcan, 1894, cf. pp. 2-5.
- [9] C. Lombroso, *Studi sulla criminalità ed altri saggi*, Torino, Bocca, 1901, p. 423.
- [10] As above, p. 426.
- [11] Le Bon, *Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- [12] As above.
- [13] *Ibid.*, *Psychologie des foules*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- [14] C. Blankaert, *Paul Broca et l'anthropologie française, 1850-1900*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009.
- [15] A. Fouillée, *Tempérament et caractère selon les individus, les sexes et les races*, Paris, Alcan, 1926, VII ed.
- [16] *Ibid.*, *Esquisse psychologique des peuples européens*, *op. cit.*, p. 469.
- [17] *Ibid.*, *Tempérament et caractère*, *op. cit.*
- [18] As above, p. VII.

- [19] G. Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation: étude sociologique*, Paris, Alcan, p. IX.
- [20] As above, p. XI.
- [21] As above, cf. p. 78.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- [23] *Ibid.*: “Because this statement is entirely new, and history being unintelligible without it, in my latest work (*Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples*), I have devoted four chapters to demonstrating it. The reader will see that, despite appearances that deceive, neither language nor religion nor the arts nor, in a word, any element of civilisation, can pass intact from one people to another.”, therein, p. 70n.
- [24] T. Ribot, *L'hérédité psychologique*, Paris, Germer Baillière, 1882, 2e éd. entièrement refondue. I use that of 1893, with a Préface de la cinquième éd., Paris, Alcan, p. 122.
- [25] As above, p. 90. Cf. pp. 86-87, 89.
- [26] As above, p. 120. Cf. p. 91.
- [27] As above, pp. 120-121.
- [28] As above, pp. 122-123.
- [29] Moreover, even for Ribot, in its initial phase, character is kept stable and transmitted from generation to generation by these elements. Cf. as above, p. 123.
- [30] Cf. as above, pp. IX, XV-XVI.
- [31] Cf. as above, p. XVII.
- [32] Cf. as above, pp. XIII-XVI.
- [33] Cf. as above, pp. XVIII-XIX.
- [34] Tarde, *op. cit.*, cf. p. 21.
- [35] The belief that unconscious life manifests itself especially in collectivity is widespread: for example, see E. Dupouy, *Psychologie morbide: des vésanies religieuses, erreurs, croyances fixes, hallucinations et suggestions collectives*, Paris, Leymarie, 1907, p. 211.
- [36] Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- [37] As above.
- [38] As above, p. 17.
- [39] Id., *Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples*, *op. cit.*, cf. pp. 2-3.
- [40] As above, pp. 15-16.
- [41] As above, p. 16.
- [42] L. Febvre, *La terre et l'évolution humaine. Introduction géographique à l'histoire*, avec le concours de L. Bataillon, Paris, La Renaissance du livre, 1922, p. 249.
- [43] Cf. as above, pp. 16 et seq. For social instinct, cf. p. 18.
- [44] As above, p. 127.
- [45] As above, p. 130. cf. 127 et seq.
- [46] *Ibid.*.

ABSTRACT

What relationship is there between the crowd and the nation? This article investigates these two concepts during the epoch (last quarter of the XIXth century) which saw collective psychology flourish. According to collective psychology, the crowd is a single subject which does not coincide with the sum of the members making it up: the crowd, that is, has a face. The nation possesses the same feature, especially in the version of national character: each nation is a collective subject and each nation has its own personality. What is even more significant is that in both cases, the concepts of race, heredity and imitation play a very important role: the crowd expresses the soul of the race, and the nation is closely interlocked with the race. The crowd and the nation show in action a hereditary mechanism of a type, which is not individual, but collective, thanks to which their features are maintained through time. Finally, the crowd and the nation show the fundamental role which imitation plays within them: in the crowd, resembling others is pathological (autonomy and originality of individual judgement are lost), while sharing some features with other citizens within the nation serves to cement unity. Crowd, nation, race, heredity ceaselessly pursue each other giving rise to versions which may or may not be deterministic, naturalist, racist, depending on the various authors.