

## THE COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR FRAMEWORK OF ROBERT E. PARK

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Robert E. Park's position as one of the towering founding intellects of modern social sciences is well established. He had enormous influence as a teacher at the University of Chicago, and, as a thinker, his contributions to the study of urbanism and human ecology, race relations, and collective behavior, to name just a few of his fields of interest, were dominant perspectives at the time of their writing and continue to have resonance in the literature today. The study of collective behavior and social movements has received during the last 25 years a great deal of attention by social scientists, some of whom may be unaware of Park's earlier contributions.

The intent is to offer a systematic summation of Park's conceptual framework. The first part of the paper presents Park's view of the characteristics and distinguishing features of collective behavior and the forms of collective behavior ordered in terms of their degree of institutionalization. This is followed by Park's natural history approach to the conditions of collective behavior. The third section presents his views of the functional consequences of collective behavior for social adaptation. The paper concludes with an evaluation of his framework.

### *Characteristics of Collective Behavior*

Park tells us that collective behavior is "the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common

and collective, and impulse in other words, that is the result of social interaction (Park and Burgess, p. 865). He notes that at certain high levels of collective excitement "it not so much language or gesture as the subtle suggestive influence of mere physical presence that is the medium of communication. It is not so much a common purpose as a common mood that seems to dominate the group (Park, 1931: p. 32); the persons "act under the influence of a mood or a state of mind in which each shares, and in accordance with which conventions which all quite unconsciously accept, and which the presence of each enforces upon the others" (Park and Burgess, p. 865). Park continues elsewhere that "in so far as every individual in such an assemblage (collectivity) is moved to think and act under the influence of a mood or state of mind, in which each shares and to which each contributes the resulting behavior may be described as collective" (Park and Burgess, p. 631).

Park assigns two meanings to the term collective behavior. First, he uses the term to speak of societal processes, to include "all the facts of group life" (Park and Burgess, p. 924). In this usage collective behavior points to the process whereby social order and social control are continuously being recreated. In the second meaning of the term, Park uses it to describe "those phenomena which exhibit in the most obvious and elementary way the processes by which societies are disintegrated into their constituent elements and the process by which these elements are brought together again into new relations to form new organizations and new societies" (Park and Burgess, pp. 924-925). It is this second meaning which is of interest to us.

Multiple and equally important criteria are employed by Park to distinguish the nature of collective behavior: collective behavior (A) marks the disruption of established routine; it challenges tradition; (B) is the mechanism whereby the problems of individuals and families (caused by their economic, social, and status positions and which cannot be resolved within the existing institutions) are resolved; (C) is the means through which society gradually adjusts itself more effectively to the ever-emerging problems facing it in the physical, organic, and social environments; (D) ultimately ends up in institutionalization of the collective solutions to problems; this dialectical process of conflict and resolution is forever occurring in societies; (E) in its general meaning, describes the forming and

reforming of society; institutions and social structures are both the ultimate result and cause of collective behavior, which arises because customs and mores impede continuous adjustment in the social structure.

As is apparent from the preceeding, collective behavior emerges out of the personal disposition and the behavior of individuals. Individual unrest is caused by the (1) inability of the existing institutions to fulfill the emerging needs of persons and families, (2) the tension between the desires of man to follow his unrestrained impulses and the demands and obligations which result from his involvement in systems of statuses and (3) the feelings of individuals that society does not grant them appropriate recognition (Turner, p. 191). Individual unrest becomes social unrest as individuals afflicted by similar problems begin to communicate and interact. In situations where individuals similarly affected perceive and respond sympathetically, immediately, spontaneously, to the sentiment and attitude of others, an appropriate dispositional milieu to the emergence of collective behavior materializes. According to Park, sympathetic responses among the people involved "implies the existence in A of an attitude of receptivity and suggestibility toward the sentiments and attitude of B and C" (Park and Burgess, p. 893), which has the effect of removing the natural reserves normally existing between interacting persons.

"... the effect of this circular form of interaction is to increase the tensions in the group and, by creating a state of expectancy, to mobilize its members for collective action." (Park and Burgess, p. 789)

It produces "a heightened, intensified, and relative'y interpersonal state of consciousness" (Park and Burgess, p. 893). In short, a collective sentiment emerges. This new opinion, sentiment, or orientation, is social and the property of the group (Park and Burgess, p. 34). It is this collective sentiment that informs the behavior of the participating individuals. It represents what Park calls "a mood", directing the collective behavior of the group.

The scope and boundaries of collective behavior depend on the level of abstraction that Park grants to the concept. Park perceives collective behavior as being continuous with other social processes. This is quite apparent in Park's treat-

ment of the crowd, for even as he adopts much of Le Bon's phraseology and negative frame of reference, accepting the idea that the crowd harms the individual personality, he sees the crowd in a social context, stressing its functions. He agrees that ours is an age of multitudes, of crowds. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, incidents of collective behavior are clearly social since they exhibit concerted action, even though the participants may not be aware of the causes and the ultimate consequences of their collective activities.

In accordance to his natural history model, every manifestation of collective behavior shows three major chronological states: (A) social unrest, (B) mass movement, (C) institutionalization (Park and Burgess, p. 786). Park states that the range of collective behavior is very wide, since it may include both emotional and highly rational behavior; "it may involve all degrees of fusing of the individual awareness with that of the group, from the separateness of discussion groups to the single spirits of the mob" (Park, p. 631). Consequently, Park's forms of collective behavior can be most parsimoniously analyzed in accordance with their degree of institutional evolution (Park and Burgess, p. 874) rather than with the level of irrationality they exhibit.

Park associated mechanisms of social control with each level of institutionalization of the collective behavior forms. Rapport is the simplest form of social control and is exhibited more often in crowds. Laws, public opinions, and the mores are other types of social control characteristic of more advanced forms.

For Park, an institution consists of a concept and a structure. The concept defines the purpose, interest, or function of the institution. The structure embodies the idea of the institution and furnishes the instrumentalities through which the idea is put into action (Turner, p. 221). The term structure relates to both functionaries, buildings and the physical properties of the institution as well as to the system of statuses and roles which the institution necessitates to function. Institutions must correspond to a social situation, a felt social need, if they are to be effective. They must be supported by public opinion; "otherwise they remain mere paper projects or artifacts that perform no real function" (Turner, p. 221).

The forms of collective behavior identified by Park can be arranged in accordance to their degree of institutionalization:

A. Social Unrest — In Park's scheme, the least institutionalized forms of collective behavior are:

1. Social and psychic epidemics
2. The crowd
3. The public
4. The gang
5. Fashion
6. The strike
7. Panics, stampedes, and what he calls unorganized crowds.

Unorganized crowds are uninstitutionalized borderline forms in which Park showed much ambivalence. For instance, he implied that since the person in a panic or in a stampede lacks psychic unity (Park and Burgess, p. 876), or the ability to act concertedly and manifests a desire to protect himself even at the cost of others, then these social forms were not instances of collective behavior; "Men in a state of panic have like purposes but no common purpose" (Park and Burgess, p. 34), for all social groups, even the ones which show the least amount of institutionalization and continuity through time, have (a) a way or method of defining their aims and formulating their policies, making them explicit, and (b) some machinery, functionary or other arrangement for realizing their aims and carrying their intention into effect.

The crowd has the following characteristics:

1. The social and personal distinctions among the participants disappear.
2. The special talents and special knowledge of the participants disappear, while the attitudes, passions, and sentiments which are the common heritage of mankind remains.
3. The individual loses the sense of responsibility for his actions.
4. The crowd itself is anonymous, has no generally accepted function, is not recognized, and does not recognize itself in any corporate capacity.
5. A common focus of attention (Park and Burgess, p. 593).
6. A collective sentiment or mood (Park, p. 632).

The person in the crowd feels mental isolation and is prone to suggestibility. The crowd has no historical identity; "it has therefore neither symbols, ceremonies, rites, nor ritual; it imposes no obligation and creates no loyalties" (Park and Burgess, p. 790). A crowd is formed when rapport develops between the participating individuals. Rapport is produced by milling. Mutual responsiveness and sympathy among the members ensures the creation of a collective representation to which all conform (Park and Burgess, p. 893ff). Park's debt to G. Le Bon is his conception of the crowd is quite obvious. But he went beyond Le Bon in his emphasis on the public.

The public, like the crowd, exhibits a common purpose which dominate the participant. As in the crowd, "... individuals are mutually responsive to the motives and interests of another" (Turner, p. 216). However, in the public no complete rapport is established and the individual is not dominated by the group to the extent that is true in the crowd.

Essentially, the public thrives in discussion, in rational assessments of different points of view which allow for critical judgement and differences of opinions (Turner, p. 219). The public, like the crowd, is not institutionalized (Turner, p. 216).

Social and psychic epidemics are even more unexpected and irrational manifestations of widespread social disorganization; they are crowd-like in nature, as are strikes and gangs (Turner, p. 260).

Parks identifies sects as expressive and orgiastic crowds. However, political and religious sects show a degree of continuity and conscious organization that places them more appropriately in mass movements, the next subtypology of collective behavior to be considered.

B. Mass Movements — In these instances of collective behavior a greater degree of institutionalization has taken place, although they still do not belong to the system of traditions and norms of the society. This subtypology includes the following forms of collective behavior:

1. Sects — both religious and political
2. Mass migration
3. Crusades
4. Reforms
5. Labor movement
6. Political parties
7. Revolution
8. War

Every mass movement has some organization and direction. Clear leadership emerges as well as a division of labor and discipline. Mass social movements "exhibit a cycle of typical events which take place in a more or less regular and predictable way" (Hughes, p. 32). Social movements have a natural history.

Sects, according to Park, reject segments of the established system of mores. The group constituting the sect adopts idiosyncratic modes of speech and dress (Turner, p. 233ff). Park recognizes that sects have the same origins and same natural history as other forms of collective behavior. However, sects develop a body of doctrine and dogma as well as a body of functionaries and administrators to advance the goals of the group (Turner, p. 234). Outside persecution and interference tend to solidify the sect and contribute to its institutionalization. The major characteristic of sects is their intransigency and radicalism, especially during their early years.

Park distinguishes between two types of sects — the political and the religious. He notes that their difference can be traced back to their origins as social unrests. As crowds, the political sect is an extroverted group (Hughes, p. 26), while religious sects are typically introverted crowds — they withdraw from this world. Religious sects "characteristically have at some time in their history been backed in their efforts to act... they have suffered some sort of psychic trauma, from the consequences of which they have never recovered" (Hughes, p. 28).

Revolution, according to Park, usually originates in political sects (Hughes, p. 27). Revolutions find fertile social ground not in conditions of hardships and poverty, but instead in conditions of prosperity; their origins can be traced back to the hopes and dreams of men (Park and Burgess, p. 877ff). Often they facilitate the formation of political parties, through which the leadership maintains control over its partisans. Park distinguishes between revolutions and historical revolutions; the latter refers to great and subtle changes which characterize modern civilization. "These changes are revolutionary in nature but they are neither intended nor recognized as revolution until they are history" (Park and Burgess, p. 934. In contrast to the sects, "political parties are characteristically accommodating and compromising" (Hughes, p. 27).

Consistent with the evolutionary and natural history model, Park rejects the notion that revolutionary changes cannot be included within an evolutionary perspective. He insists that revolutionary changes are themselves the fruit of evolutionary processes that can be described, studied, and analyzed using the natural history approach. The only difference in changes brought about by revolutions and wars is their suddenness and great magnitude. In fact, Park calls all changes brought about by social movements mutations — “mutations that are planned and promoted.” (Hughes, p. 61)

Reform movements are characteristically the product of modern life. They tend to furnish a vocation and a profession to some people, much as politics is the arena of the professional politician. Reform, unlike revolution, does not “seek to change the mores but rather to change conditions in conformity with the (existing) mores.”

Mass migrations are the most elementary forms of mass social movements (Hughes, p. 60). Crusades, both reformatory and religious, depend for their success on the ability of their leaders to tap some common human sentiment (Park and Burgess, p. 877). Park distinguishes crusades from revolutions: “crusades are political attempts to correct a recognized evil and revolutions are a radical attempt to reform an existing social order.” (Park and Burgess, p. 878)

### *Conditions of Collective Behavior*

Park's basic model utilizes the natural history approach for the study of collective behavior. Applied to the study of collective behavior, this meant that Park would study the sequences through which a social unrest would eventually become institutionalized.

Park's model for the explanation of the social processes which create social movements and their eventual institutionalization was primarily a contagion model. Persons with common problems congregate, milling occurs and the mere physical proximity of the participants, as well as the other forms of interaction that would take place among them, accentuates in each individual a feeling of sympathy and receptiveness for the feeling and interest of others. This is what Park called a circular reaction, resulting in a heightening of the point of agreement between the participants — rapport —



and in loss of critical judgment. Thus a collective representation is created and the group acts. Its actions can be either reflective or expressive, and characteristically the group adopts a stance vis-a-vis the dominant system of values, ranging from reformation to rejection and revolution.

The link between the initial unplanned emergence of an instance of collective behavior, (at the social unrest level) and its evolution into a mass movement is not clearly delineated by Park. He says that eventually the need is felt to formalize the social unrest into a system of leadership, and that is division of labor, a dogma, and a body of values materializes. Apparently, institutionalization takes place only if a widespread social need exists to which the social unrest corresponds and is the symptom of and which is not appropriately resolved by the existing social system. This is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the institutionalization of instances of social unrest.

For Park the proliferation of instances of collective behavior is the result of the peculiarities of modern civilization and the great urban centers where men relate to each other "symbiotically rather than socially." Modern civilization has not

developed a tradition, a body of mores, or a moral solidarity sufficient to insure either the perpetuation of existing social institutions, or the orderly succession of those economic, political and cultural changes which embody the aspirations of the modern world. (Hughes, p. 341)

Modern civilization is marked by its great territorial size and the magnitude of its diverse cultural centers; by the immense complexity and interdependence of modern industry and society in general; by the increasing speed in the rate of mobility of physical entities, (migration, communication); by advances in technology and science; and by the great increase in freedom which modern man experiences: freedom of self-expression and self-revelation, freedom to move about, and freedom to compete for an occupation.

Modern man is released from the bonds of traditional familial and tribal loyalties as the result of these social changes. His character becomes "enlightened" and sympathetically attuned to the interests of others, developing his rational faculties and rejecting, much that is customary and magical. At

the same time that these changes are taking place, the traditional, sacred moral solidarity of society weakens. Park notices the increasing secularization of all social relations; the individual develops secondary relations at the expense of his primary ties (Park, 1931, p. 35).

It is in this context of increased social and cultural complexity that Park searched for the background conditions of collective behavior:

Individuals released from old associations enter all the more readily into new ones. Out of this confusion new and strange political and religious movements arise, which represent the groping of men for a new social order (Park and Burgess, p. 867).

In sum, Park poses a cumulation of social and psychological processes in his explanation of collective behavior. He perceives modern man as alienated from the traditional system of mores and customs. Psychologically, man is isolated and groping for meaning in life. Thus, collective behavior is the result of man's efforts to alleviate the problems of his human condition. This mode of conceptualization is a reflection of Park's life-long interest in conflict. In Park's system, the evolution of collective behavior is cyclical. It is a dialectical model which is cyclical in its emphasis on process. The process whereby the social structure is adapted to the needs of the individual has a pattern, a natural history, a repeatable sequence all its own and independent of space and time. Consequently, Park is not concerned with specific problems of societal stability. Collective behavior never ceases.

### *Consequences of Collective Behavior*

Park, for all his evolutionary perspective, vacillated in the implications of the macro-societal transformations he described. He thought that man's lifeway was becoming increasingly complicated, but he did not associate this social transformation with unmixed progress (Hughes, pp. 333-334). Moreover, latent forces dominated the historical process quite apart from man's manifest intentions.

Industrial democracy, or something corresponding to it is coming. It is coming not entirely because

se of social agitation. It is coming, perhaps, in spite of agitation. It is a social change, but it is part of the whole cosmic process. (Park and Burgess, p. 832).

Although he associated collective behavior with a natural history approach, Park conceived the possibility that social unrest and instances of collective behavior could mark not a process of societal reintegration, but, rather, the dissolution of all civilized social ties. Social unrest could become dysfunctional if its magnitude and the rate of its occurrence reached such levels that "the whole existing social structure is impaired, if society is, for that reason, not able to readjust itself." (Park and Burgess, p. 926).

The consequences of collective behavior for the individual could be to alleviate his personal problems. Park stated that the conflict between the individual and the social structure often finds resolution in mental illness and other manifestations of psychic impairment. Thus, the existence of collective behavior was a healthy sign of the viability, dynamism, and fluidity of the social system and a realistic method of coping with problems.

### *Conclusion*

Park's contributions to our understanding of collective behavior are many. Among the most significant are:

- a) his distinction between crowd and public,
- b) his break with the conservative European tradition represented by Le Bon, in his emphasis on the functional, adaptive effects of collective behavior,
- c) his integrative, overarching conceptual framework of collective behavior forms, establishing the analytical commonalities of otherwise dissimilar events such as social movements, panics and crowds.

His legacy is very much alive and well today. His symbolic interactionist perspective is at the center of emergent norms theory of collective behavior. His emphasis on institutionalization and organization is at the foundation of resource mobilization theory; his partial adoption of the Le Bonian

approach to collective behavior, with its emphasis on psychological deficits, is at the heart of relative deprivation and status inconsistency formulations. In short, many seemingly opposed contemporary perspectives in the field of collective behavior and social movements can trace descent from Robert E. Park.

There are a number of problems too. It is unclear how Park conceives the linkage between instances of social unrest and institutions.

In his discussion of crowds, an instance of social unrest which has a central importance in his work, Park accepts much of Le Bon's negative views of the crowd and of its effects on the psychological well-being of the participants. Unlike Le Bon, however, who arrives at a pessimistic conclusion from a consideration of the effects of unrestrained popular participation in the affairs of society, Park assigns to collective behavior a beneficial effect in modern societies. However, it is unclear how Park could logically and consistently derive from a situation of social unrest marked by behavioral and psychological retrogression at the individual level, a functional and positive effect of the same instance of social unrest at the societal level. Presumably dramatic transformations would become necessary so that the common good would be advanced from a temporary base of human misery. The dialectic contradiction is that, for Park, who assumes that individuals are a consequence of society and not the reverse, as in social contract theories, collective behavior breaks down society — the source of individual reality — even as it builds collective, shared social meanings. Collective behavior is both a destroyer and a builder of nomic worlds.

Park assumes ever-recurring change to be the subject matter of sociological concern. He uses as data anecdotes of cases which confirm his theory, never mentioning a negative case representing an exception to his generalizations. Nor does he state his hypothesis or the limits of his work clearly. Indeed, he has been characterized as being "guided by intuition rather than by systematic concerns" (Turner, p. XVII). Park is interested in understanding the social world. He searched for the meaning and causes of human acts and did not deal with statistics and other quantifiable information. His dependence on sympathetic introspection to understanding human motives and the emphasis he placed on participant observation, life histories, letters, and other personal documents

makes his conclusions difficult to duplicate. He assumed that life in society is marked by the tendency of social institutions to accommodate and be responsive to the desires of individuals. This is only one, and perhaps not the most plausible conception of the relationship between the individual and the structures of social domination, for its suffused notion of social-progress-as-social-evolution is nowadays widely discredited.

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