

Quotes from Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*

[THERE IS NOTHING that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange. In the dark, the fear of an unexpected touch can mount to panic. Even clothes give insufficient security: it is easy to tear them and pierce through to the naked, smooth, defenseless flesh of the victim.] 15

[It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite. The crowd he needs is **the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body**; a crowd, too, whose psychical constitution is also dense, or compact, so that he no longer notices who it is that presses against him. As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count. Not even that of sex. The **man pressed against him is the same as himself** He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though **everything were happening in one and the same body.**] 15

[THE CROWD, suddenly there where there was nothing before, is a mysterious and universal phenomenon. A few people may have been standing together-five, ten or twelve, not more; nothing has been announced, nothing is expected. Suddenly everywhere is black with people and more come streaming from all sides as though streets had only one direction. Most of them do not know what has happened and, if questioned, have no answer; but they hurry to be there where most other people are. There is a determination in their movement which is quite different from the expression of ordinary curiosity. It seems as though the **movement of some of them transmits itself to the others**. But that is not all; they have a goal which is there before they can find words for it. This **goal is the blackest spot where most people are gathered.**] 16

[For just as suddenly as it originates, the crowd disintegrates. In its spontaneous form it is a sensitive thing. The openness which enables it to grow is, at the same time, its danger. A foreboding of threatening disintegration is always live in the crowd. It seeks, through rapid increase, to avoid this for as long as it can; it absorbs everyone, and, because it does, must ultimately fall to pieces.] 16

[The closed crowd renounces growth and puts the stress on permanence. The first thing to be noticed about it is that it has a boundary. It establishes itself by accepting its limitation. It creates a space for itself which it will fill. This space can be compared to a vessel into which liquid is being poured and whose capacity is known. The entrances to this space are limited in number, and only these entrances can be used; the boundary is respected whether it consists of stone, of solid wall, or of some special act of acceptance, or entrance fee. Once the space is completely filled, no one else is allowed in. Even if there is an overflow, the important thing is always the dense crowd in the closed room; those standing outside do not really belong. The boundary prevents disorderly increase, but it also makes it more difficult for the crowd to disperse and so postpones its dissolution. In this way the crowd sacrifices its chance of growth, but gains in staying power. It is protected from outside influences which could become hostile and dangerous and it sets its hope on repetition. It is the expectation of reassembly which enables its members to accept each dispersal. The building is waiting for them; it exists for their sake and, so long as it is there, they will be able to meet in the same manner. The space is theirs, even during the ebb, and in its emptiness it reminds them of the flood.] 17

[Only together can men free themselves from their burdens of distance; and this, precisely, is what happens in a crowd. During the discharge distinctions are thrown off and all feel equal. In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself; and an immense feeling of relief ensues. It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one IS greater or better than another, that people become a crowd.] 18

[The crowd particularly likes destroying houses and objects: breakable objects like window panes, mirrors, pictures and crockery; and people tend to think that it is the fragility of these objects which stimulates the destructiveness of the crowd. It is true that the noise of destruction adds to its satisfaction; the banging of windows and the crashing of glass are the robust sounds of fresh life, the cries of something new-born. It is easy to evoke them and that increases their popularity. Everything shouts together; the din is the applause of objects. There seems to be a special need for this kind of noise at the beginning of events, when the crowd is still small and little or nothing has happened. The noise is a promise of the reinforcements the crowd hopes for, and a happy omen for deeds to come.] 19

[I designate as eruption the sudden transition from a closed into an open crowd. This is a frequent occurrence, and one should not understand it as something referring only to space. A crowd quite often seems to overflow from some well-guarded space into the squares and streets of a town where it can move about freely, exposed to everything and attracting everyone. But more important than this external event is the corresponding inner movement: the dissatisfaction with the limitation of the number of participants, the sudden will to attract, the passionate determination to reach all men.] 22

[As long as it feels that it is growing -in revolutionary states, for example, which start with small but highly-charged crowds-it regards anything which opposes its growth as constricting. It can be dispersed and scattered by police, but this has only a temporary effect, like a hand moving through a swarm of mosquitoes. But it can also be attacked from within, namely by meeting the demands which led to its formation. Its weaker adherents then drop away and others on the point of joining tum back. An attack from outside can only strengthen the crowd; those who have been physically scattered are more strongly drawn together again. An attack from within, on the other hand, is really dangerous; a strike which has achieved any gains crumbles visibly. It is an appeal to individual appetites and the crowd, as such, regards it as bribery, as "immoral"; it runs counter to its clear-cut basic conviction. Everyone belonging to such a crowd carries within him a small traitor who wants to eat, drink, make love and be left alone. As long as he does all this on the quiet and does not make too much fuss about it, the crowd allows him to proceed. But, as soon as he makes a noise about it, it starts to hate and to fear him. It knows then that he has been listening to the enticements of the enemy.] 23

[But images of this kind never convey more than a part of the truth. Those streaming from outside, wanting to get into the city, are not only new partisans, a reinforcement and a support; they are also the food of the crowd.] 24

[Wherever men have grown accustomed to this precisely repeated and limited experience in their churches or temples they can no longer do without it. They need it as they need food and anything else which is part of their existence. No sudden suppression of their cult, no prohibition by edict of the state, can remain without consequences. Any disturbance of their carefully balanced crowd-economy must ultimately lead to the eruption of an open crowd, and this will have all the elemental attributes which one knows. It will spread rapidly and bring about a real instead of a fictitious equality; it will find new and far more fervent densities; it will give up for the moment that far-off and scarcely attainable goal for which it has been educated, and set itself a goal here, in the immediate surroundings of this concrete life.] 25

[What the play could not achieve is immediately achieved by a fire. Fire is as dangerous to human beings as it is to animals; it is the strongest and oldest symbol of the crowd. However little crowd feeling there may have been in the audience, awareness of a fire brings it suddenly to a head. The common unmistakable danger creates a common fear. For a short time the audience becomes something like a real crowd.] 26

[The more fiercely each man "fights for his life", the clearer it becomes that he is fighting against all the others who hem him in. They stand there like chairs, balustrades, closed doors, but different from these in that they are alive and hostile. They push him in this or that direction, as it suits them or, rather, as they are pushed themselves. Neither women, children nor old people are spared: they are not distinguished from men. Whilst the individual no longer feels himself as "crowd", he is still completely surrounded by it. Panic is a disintegration of the crowd within the crowd.] 26

[Outside, facing the city, the arena displays a lifeless wall; inside is a wall of people. The spectators turn their backs to the city. They have been lifted out of its structure of walls and streets and, for the duration of their time in the arena, they do not care about anything which happens there; they have left behind all their associations, rules and habits. Their remaining together in large numbers for a stated period of time is secure and their excitement has been promised them. But only under one definite condition: the discharge must take place inside the arena.]

[1. The crowd **always wants to grow**. There are no natural boundaries to its growth. Where such boundaries have been artificially created- e.g. in all institutions which are used for the preservation of closed crowds-an eruption of the crowd is always possible and will, in fact, happen from time to time. There are no institutions which can be absolutely relied on to prevent the growth of the crowd once and for all.

2. Within the crowd there is equality. This is absolute and indisputable and never questioned by the crowd itself. It is of fundamental importance and one might even define a crowd as **a state of absolute equality**. A head is a head, an arm is an arm, and differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant. It is for the sake of this equality that people become a crowd and they tend to overlook anything which might detract from it. All demands for justice and all theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd.

3. The crowd loves density. It can **never feel too dense**. Nothing must stand between its parts or divide them; everything must be the crowd itself. The feeling of density is strongest in the moment of discharge. One day it may be possible to determine this density more accurately and even to measure it.

4. The crowd needs a direction. It is **in movement and it moves towards a goal**. The direction, which is common to all its members, strengthens the feeling of equality. A goal outside the individual members and common to all of them drives underground all the private differing goals which are fatal to the crowd as such. Direction is essential for the continuing existence of the crowd. Its constant fear of disintegration means that it will accept any goal. A crowd exists so long as it has an unattained goal.] 29

[In the rhythmic crowd, on the other hand (for example the crowd of the dance), **density and equality coincide** from the beginning. Everything here depends on movement. All the physical stimuli involved function in a predetermined manner and are passed on from one dancer to another. Density is embodied **in the formal recurrence of retreat and approach**; equality is manifest in the movements themselves. And thus, by the skillful enactment of density and equality, a crowd feeling is engendered. These rhythmic formations spring up very quickly and it is only physical exhaustion which bring them to an end.] 30

[Steps added to steps in quick succession conjure up a larger number of men than there are. The men do not move away but, dancing, remain on the same spot. The sound of their steps does not die away, for these are continually repeated; there is a long stretch of time during which they continue to sound loud and alive. What they lack in numbers the dancers make up in intensity; if they stamp harder, it sounds as if there were more of them. As long as they go on dancing, they exert an attraction on all in their neighborhood. Everyone within hearing joins them and remains with them. The natural thing would be for new people to go on joining them forever, but soon there are none left and the dancers have to conjure up increase out of their own limited numbers. They move as though there were more and more of them. Their excitement grows and reaches frenzy.] 31

[THE stagnating crowd is **closely compressed**; it is **impossible for it to move really freely**. Its state has something passive in it; it waits. It waits for a head to be shown it, or for words, or it watches a fight. What really matters to it is density. The pressure which each member feels around him will also be felt as the measure of the strength of the formation of which he is now part. The **more people who flow into that formation, the stronger the pressure** becomes; feet have nowhere to move, arms are pinned down and only heads remain free, to see and to hear; every impulse is passed directly from body to body. Each individual knows that there must be a number of people there, but, because they are so **closely jammed together, they are felt to be one.**] 34

[For the individuals who compose such a crowd the period of stagnation is a period of marvels; laid down are all the stings and weapons with which at other times they arm themselves against each other; they touch one another, but do not feel confined; a clutch is a clutch no longer; they do not fear each other. Before they set forth, in whatever direction this will be, they want to make sure that they will remain together when they do. They want to grow closer together beforehand and, to do this, they need to be undisturbed. The stagnating crowd is not quite sure of its unity and therefore keeps still for as long as possible.] 35

[Instead of the slaughtered enemy, it can be all the dead everywhere who lie in the common earth and await resurrection. Everyone who dies and is buried adds to their number. All who have ever lived belong there, and there are so many of them that they cannot be counted. The earth between them is their density and, though they lie there separately, they are felt to be close to each other. They will lie there for an eternity, until the Day of the Last Judgment. Their life stagnates until the moment of resurrection, and this moment coincides with that of their assembly together before God, who will judge them. Nothing happens in between. As a crowd they lie there; as a crowd, they rise again. There is no more sublime proof of the reality and significance of the stagnating crowd than the development of this conception of Resurrection and Last Judgment.] 39

[The slow crowd has the form of a train. Sometimes it includes from the beginning everyone who is going to belong to it, as with the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt. Their goal is the Promised Land and they are a crowd so long as they believe in this goal. The story of their wandering is the story of their belief. Often the difficulties are so great that they begin to doubt. They hunger and thirst and, as soon as they grumble, they are threatened with disintegration. Again and again must the man who leads them strive to re-establish their faith. Again and again he succeeds, or, if he does not, the threat of enemies does. Their wandering stretches over forty years and contains many examples of the formation of quick, transitory crowds. Much could be said about these, but the point now is that here they are all subordinated to the more comprehensive conception of a single slow crowd moving onwards to its goal,] 39

[There is a second type of slow crowd which can better be compared to a network of streams. It starts with small rivulets gradually running together. Into the stream thus formed other streams flow and these, if enough land lies ahead, will in time become a river whose goal is the sea. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca is perhaps the most impressive example of this type of slow crowd. From the remotest parts of the Islamic world caravans of pilgrims set out, all in the direction of Mecca. Some of these begin small; others are equipped with great splendor by princes and, from the start, are the pride of the countries where they originate. But all of them in the course of their wanderings encounter other caravans with the same goal; and so they grow and grow until, near their goal, they become enormous rivers. Mecca is the sea into which they flow] 40

[The discharge is denied to the slow crowd. We could say that this was its most important distinguishing mark and, instead of slow crowds, we could speak of crowds which have no discharge. But the first term is preferable, for the discharge cannot be entirely renounced. It will always be contained in the conception of the final state. It is only postponed to a far distance; where the goal is, there too is the discharge. A vision of it is always strongly present, though its actuality lies at the end of the way.]

The slow crowd tends to lengthen and protract the process which leads to the discharge. The great religions have developed a particular mastery of this business of delay. Their concern is to keep the followers they have won and, in order to do this and also to win new ones, they have to assemble them from time to time. Such assemblies will result in violent discharges and, once these have happened, they have to be repeated and, if possible, surpassed in violence.] 41

[The minds of the faithful are full of such images of invisible crowds. Whether these are the dead, or devils, or saints, they are imagined as large, concentrated hosts. It could be argued that religions begin with these invisible crowds.] 45

[In even larger numbers, that they tum up again in the 19th century as bacilli. Instead of the souls, they now attack the bodies of men; and to these they can be very dangerous. Only a tiny minority of people have looked into a microscope and really seen them there. But everyone has heard of them and is continually aware of their presence and makes every effort not to come into contact with them-though this, considering their invisibility, is a somewhat vague endeavor. Their power to harm and their concentration in enormous numbers in very small spaces is undoubtedly taken over from devils.] 47

[T HE BAITING CROWD forms with reference to a quickly attainable goal. The goal is known and clearly marked, and is also near. This crowd is out for killing and it knows whom it wants to kill. It heads for this goal with unique determination and cannot be cheated of it. The proclaiming of the goal, the spreading about of who it is that is to perish, is enough to make the crowd form. This concentration on killing is of a special kind and of an unsurpassed intensity. Everyone wants to participate; everyone strikes a blow and, in order to do this, pushes as near as he can to the victim. If he cannot hit him himself, he wants to see others hit him. **Every arm is thrust out as if they all belonged to one and the same creature.**] 49

[For the most striking thing about a mass flight is the force of its direction. The crowd has, as it were, become all direction, away from danger. Since the goal of safety and the distance from it are the only things which matter, all the previously existing distances between men become unimportant. Strange and widely dissimilar creatures who have never come near each other before suddenly find themselves together. In their flight all the distances between them disappear, though the differences of course do not. The flight crowd is the most comprehensive of all crowds. It contains absolutely everybody and the picture of diversity which it thus presents is further complicated by the differing speeds of the fugitives: there are young and old among them, strong and weak, those less and those more burdened. But the picture is misleading. Its motley colors are only incidental and, measured against the overpowering force of direction, utterly insignificant.

The impetus of the flight continues to multiply so long as everyone recognizes that there are others fleeing with him. He may press them forwards, but he must not push them aside. The moment he starts to think only of himself and to regard those around him purely as obstacles, the character of the mass flight changes completely and it turns into its exact opposite; it becomes a panic, a struggle of each against all who stand in his way. This reversal generally occurs when the direction of the flight has been repeatedly impeded. **To block** the crowd's way is enough to **make it break out in another direction**. If its way is repeatedly blocked, it soon no longer knows where to turn. It grows **confused about its direction and thus loses its coherence**. The danger which, till then, had united its members and given them wings, now sets each man up as an enemy of the next. Everyone is intent only on saving himself] 53

[From the moment of its birth this crowd is transfused with the negativeness of prohibition, and this remains its essential characteristic as long as it exists. Thus one could also speak of a negative crowd. It is formed by resistance; the prohibition is a frontier nothing can cross, a dam nothing can pierce. Each person watches the other to see whether he remains part of the dam. Anyone who gives way and transgresses the prohibition is outlawed by all the others. In our own time the best example of a negative, or prohibition, crowd is the strike.] 56

[Every command leaves behind a painful sting in the person who is forced to carry it out. The nature of these stings will be examined in more detail later. All I want to say here is that they are indestructible. People who are habitually ordered about are full of them, and feel a strong urge to get rid of them. They can free themselves in two different ways. They can pass on to others the orders which they have received from above; but, for them to be able to do this, there must be others below them who are ready to accept their orders. Or they can try to pay back to their superiors themselves what they have suffered and stored up from them. One man alone, weak and helpless as he is, will only rarely be fortunate enough to find an opportunity for this, but, if many men find themselves together in a crowd, they may jointly succeed in what was denied them singly : together they can tum on those who, till now, have given them orders. A revolutionary situation can be defined as this state of reversal,] 58

[People are in physical proximity to their own kind and acting within a familiar and natural unit. All their curiosity and expectation, meanwhile, is directed towards a second body of men divided from them by a clearly defined distance. The sight of it fascinates them and, if they cannot see it, they can still hear it, and all their own actions turn on its actions and intentions. The confrontation calls for a special kind of watchfulness, raising the specific density within each group. Neither can disband until the other does. The tension between the two groups exerts its pressure on everyone belonging to either.] 63

[CROWD CRYSTALS are the small, rigid groups of men, strictly delimited and of great constancy, which serve to precipitate crowds. Their structure is such that they can be comprehended and taken in at a glance. Their unity is more important than their size. Their role must be familiar; people must know what they are there for. Doubt about their function would render them meaningless. They should preferably always appear the same and it should be impossible to confound one with another; a uniform or a definite sphere of operation serves to promote this. The crowd crystal is constant; it never changes its size. Its members are trained in both action and faith. They may be allotted different parts, as in an orchestra, but they must appear as a unit, and the first feeling of anyone seeing or experiencing them should be that this is a unit which will never fall apart. Their life outside the crystal does not count.] 73

[CROWD SYMBOLS is the name I give to collective units which do not consist of men, but which are still felt to be crowds. Com and forest, rain, wind, sand, fire and the sea are such units. Every one of these phenomena comprehends some of the essential attributes of the crowd. Although they do not consist of men, each of them recalls the] 75

[Fire is sudden; it can originate anywhere. No one is ever surprised when fire breaks out; here, there, or somewhere, it is always expected. Its very suddenness is impressive and people invariably search for a cause. The fact that often none can be found adds to the awe inherent in the idea of fire. It has a mysterious ubiquity; it can appear anywhere and at any time.

Fire is multiple. Not only does one know that there must be fires in many, indeed in innumerable places, but the individual fire itself is multiple: we speak of flames and of tongues of flame. In the Vedas fire is called "The one Agni, manifoldly ablaze".] 76

[Waves are not the only multiple element in the sea. There are also the individual drops of water. It is true that they only become drops in isolation, when they are separated from each other. Their smallness and singleness then makes them seem powerless. They are almost nothing and arouse a feeling of pity in the spectator. Put your hand into water, lift it out and watch the drops slipping singly and impotently down it. The pity you feel for them is as though they were human beings, hopelessly separated. They only begin to count again when they can no longer be counted, when they have again become part of a whole.] 80

[In so far as rain has become a crowd symbol, it does not stand, as fire does, for the phase of raging and irresistible increase. Nor is it ever as constant as the sea, and only rarely as inexhaustible. Rain is the crowd in the moment of discharge, and stands also for its disintegration. The clouds whence it comes dissolve into rain; the drops fall because they can keep together no longer, and it is not clear whether, or when, they can coalesce again.] 82

[The direction in which a forest draws men's eyes is that of its own growth. A forest grows steadily upwards; the equality of its trees is approximate, consisting, in fact, only in uniformity of direction.]84