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## The Evolution of Collective Behavior: A Dramaturgical Presentation

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## The Evolution of Collective Behavior: A Dramaturgical Presentation

### Cover Page Footnote

Paper presented at the 2013 Georgia Sociological Association Annual meeting at Jekyll Island, Georgia.

**University of Inquiry**  
**Department of Futurology**

**Social Control and Collective Behavior Evaluation Committee**

Minutes of the meeting of October 11, 2016

Members present were: Messrs: Bates, Berger, Dynes, Orwell, Plato, Skinner, and Turner.

The secretary reported that according to the procedures established at our previous meeting, old business would not be discussed so that the entire meeting could be devoted to the discussion prepared by our Sub-Committee for the Control and Elimination of Collective Behavior. Professor Berger chaired this sub-committee and Messrs. Plato, Skinner, Turner, Dynes, Orwell and Bates were the discussants.

Chairman : The Social Control and Collective Behavior Evaluation Committee has agreed that collective behavior involves the development of coordinated, non-institutionalized behavior, based upon the emergence of new norms, values, division of labor, and systems of stratification within a group or collectivity. Therefore, a fundamental prerequisite for the emergence of this new structure for social action is the existence of a crisis situation in which the traditional structure is perceived as being unable to cope with the demands of a changing situation. Traditionally, efforts to establish or maintain social control and minimize the role of collective behavior have focused on reactive efforts to limit the expression of non-institutionalized, collective sentiments. However, our data files are cluttered with examples of the inadequacy of that approach. In every epoch our institution has had to deal with panics, riots, revolutions and various forms of collective protest. What is needed is a new and comprehensive approach to the social construction of reality which will eliminate not only the manifestations of collective behavior and its causes.

Plato: To understand, control, and eliminate collective behavior we must initially concern ourselves with its form or essence. Collective behavior, in its most elementary form, involves change. To eliminate collective behavior, change must be eliminated. A static society, especially a distinguished university, will eliminate change.

Skinner: Basically, I agree with Plato's fundamental analysis of the essence of collective behavior. However, I feel that the concept of a planned society that institutionalizes mechanisms for change is a more practical, though less philosophically elegant, approach for the elimination of collective behavior. Regardless of the competence of the engineer, be he a social scientist or philosopher king, the existence of planned, alternative procedures may maintain a system when it is faced with some unknown input from the environment. Unlike my distinguished colleague and precursor, I do not view change as evil. I view only unplanned change as dysfunctional for system-maintenance.

Plato: If we can create the university which most closely attains the form of a just and harmonious society, then any change that occurs detracts from its nature and is a less reasonable form of social organization.

Chairman : Obviously, you are both in basic agreement as to the need for order and direction in the development of a social construct that is insulated from the dynamics of disorder. Your differences are basically those of faith in the original acts of social engineering. Aside from this difference, how would you propose that a society eliminate those structurally conducive conditions that may create environments susceptible to collective behavior?

Plato: A just society, in which there exists a balance between reason, spirit, and desires, is the environment for the elimination of collective behavior. This society, or university, can only exist where men realize their innate inequality as to their capability to reason, and accept the rule of those who are more informed with this ultimate of qualities. It is injustice and not inequality which creates the stresses and strains within a system. Those leaders (senior faculty) who are best informed with reason are able to create and maintain a stable and static form of social organization which insures for all people a just society. Each individual is encouraged to maximize his achievements within his realm of competency to the utmost of his abilities. This is crucial to maintaining stability and order among both students and faculty.

Skinner: In the vernacular of the past – right on!

Plato: Specifically, a division of labor and a stratified society, or in this case – university, facilitates an environment of justice for all people. Those most qualified for each task are permitted to actualize their potential. Those possessors of reason rule and control the inputs into the system so that all receive the benefits of a just rule. It is in this process that a balance between reason, spirit and desire can be established in a society whose members share unequally in these qualities. The application of this philosophy implemented to its logical conclusion creates a social environment in which stresses and strains are not possible, and likewise, the development of crisis and change. My treatise, *The Republic*, is an application of this principle to the socio-historical environment of the Greek city state. The specific techniques of institutional control predicated a static society. However, I readily admit that the methods I proposed may possibly be antiquated and simplistic. However, the philosophical reasoning behind my scheme is still logical and efficient.

Skinner: A society, or in our case a university, must initially decide upon its primary goals and then develop and apply those techniques which will insure the attainment of those goals. This form of rational and efficient planning and administration requires a minimization of emergent behavior. The socialization processes outlined by both Plato (*The Republic*) and myself (*Walden II* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*) are based primarily on the maximization of normative techniques of social control. Individual happiness is insured by creating a stable, well-ordered environment that allows each individual to maximize his potential in those areas which have been ingrained in him as rewarding for both himself and his university.

Turner: I hate to interrupt this fascinating dialogue, but I believe that you are missing the point about the role of emergent norms in collective behavior situations. They are temporary accommodations to circumstance and situations which occur beyond the existing capacity of a system to manage a crisis. Their very essence, so to speak, is that they are beyond socialization or planning parameters. Instead of the contagion of the mob, for which we acknowledge the contribution of our colleague LeBon, behavior within a crowd is guided by norming acts that establish the boundaries and rules for the actions of a group or crowd. Frequently, for example,

groups confront novel or ambiguous situations and new or emergent norms may appear. They may guide behaviors during the crisis event and may or may not persist after the return to normal conditions or situations.

Both of my colleagues, Plato and Skinner, assume that social conditioning is the ultimate vehicle for maintaining social control. They do not, however, appreciate that some situations or events are beyond the boundaries of existing social controls. However, I concur with them in that normative restraints, even emergent ones, will shape the types and forms of collective response. However, borrowing from the Value-Added Model of our colleague Professor Smelser, when a structurally conducive environment exists in which significant stresses and strains challenge the rule of the status quo and the mechanisms of collective social control appear to fail, a potentially disruptive situation exists. If there is a generalized belief that something should and can be done and actors are mobilized for change, then there is an increase in the likelihood of a collective behavior event. If these conditions persist and efforts by those charged with maintaining social order appear to fail, a collective behavior episode is likely to occur. Therefore, in seeking to eliminate collective behavior, we must pay close attention not only to the normative but also to the structural.

Plato: The educational practices, marriage management and child rearing procedures which I proposed in *The Republic* are analogous to your techniques presented in *Walden II*. In addition, they create structurally conducive environments which will limit the potential stresses and strains which contribute to collective behavior episodes. Similarly, if we are to eliminate collective behavior in the university environment, then we must establish similar structural arrangements.

Skinner: My operant conditioning label may be somewhat novel, but the actual technique of this form of social control has been with us for a long period of time. In *Walden II*, I only exploited the potential of this form of social control to its logical conclusion.

Turner: Previously, collective behavior in a university environment could be reduced and eliminated by limiting opportunities for collective interaction. For centuries, this has been a difficult problem since learning environments structurally have been places for planned and, at times, spontaneous interaction. With the advent of new technologies, such as online instruction, the goals of a university can be met without potential problems of an environment for convergent activity.

Chairman: Then the development of an environment of private acceptance created through the techniques of operant conditioning assures the dominance of the established norms and structure of a society, and in this instance a university. Professor Bates, you have something to add.

Bates: The digital domain has clearly become an active environment for learning. As an attempt to transform the university, distance learning has sought to influence and mobilize large numbers of individuals. Though capable of conducting learning in an isolated and structured environment which would be conducive to the strategies suggested by both Plato and Skinner, today's distance learning is increasingly interactive and dynamic. This dynamic environment will make the control and elimination of collective behavior difficult if not impossible.

Dynes: Historically, crowd behavior has been a primary topic of the study of collective behavior. The emotional contagion and lack of rationality of the mob evolved into the analysis of the various forms of crowd behavior, as noted by Blumer in the 1930s. Orrin Klapp noted that the existence of systemic tensions and new social definitions create environments conducive to acts of collective behavior. Turner and Killian added the role of norming acts which reflect the adaptation of a new, if only temporary, definition of a situation which occurs during a crisis (Miller, 1985). Finally, Smelser's Value-Added Perspective combined many of these previous perspectives into a series of requisite stages necessary for the emergence of a collective behavior episode (Miller, 1985).

These theoretical perspectives all required structurally conducive situations of physical proximity as a prerequisite for the collective behavior. Historically, they reflect the environment of the middle-part of the twentieth century. However, with the advent of the personal computer and its subsequent iterations, the nature of structurally conducive environments changed.

Bates: The creation of virtual communities changed the field of collective behavior, especially for those of us in the university environment. For example, crowd swarming has evolved as a result of the ease with which news and information can be shared electronically throughout the world. Structurally conducive environments are no longer physically limited. Technology has made events such as the Arab Spring, with its crowd behavior and emotional contagion, possible.

Chairman: So, we are now confronted not only with the traditional issues of collective socialization but also with having to deal with more fluid contexts or environments. However, are there any specific techniques which you feel could reinforce the power and influence of planned operant conditioning of the participants in a physical or virtual environment?

Turner: In my value-added model of collective behavior I establish the structurally conducive environment as a prerequisite for the emergence of any form of collective behavior. Traditionally, this has been associated with a physical environment. However, in light of today's new technologies, we may need to expand the concept of a structurally conducive environment to now include a virtual as well as a physical dimension. In fact, all of the traditional forms of collective behavior will now have to be updated to include virtual environments.

Bates: I agree with most of what my colleagues have said, but just as a new technology, such as online learning, has created a safer environment which is less likely to be structurally conducive to emergent behavior it also has created a new environment that no longer relies on face-to-face interaction as a prerequisite for collective behavior. We are now experiencing virtual environments that can provide digitally conducive conditions for the emergence of collective behavior. The recent Arab Spring, flash mobs, and Facebook likes document the potential power of digitally facilitated collective behavior. Online rumors, fads and other forms of collective behavior, once limited to physical proximity, have now created a more complex field for the study or control of collective behavior.

For example, LeBon and Blumer talked about the interactional roles of emotional contagion in various forms of crowd and other forms of collective behavior. Since today's societies, and in particular university environments, are increasingly linked with various forms of social media,

virtual contagion is a potential reality. Cell phones are now linked to the internet and physical access is no longer a requirement for collective behavior. Information and emotional videos are quickly shared among groups. Tweets and twitters are enhanced with pictures and videos. Digital swarming has transformed the physical crowd to a virtual crowd.

In an environment of emerging technology, chat rooms and other social media formats might be able to play a similar role in supporting the normative order if we can restrict and monitor digital access effectively. However, such action would require a strong institutional commitment to mechanisms of social and technological control.

Orwell: Technology can enhance the potential of collective behavior, but it can also eliminate the opportunity for collective behavior. In 1984 interactive television effectively isolated individuals even when they were in environments conducive to the emergence of collective behavior. With 24/7 observation and monitoring, spontaneous behavior is both rare and risky.

Chairman: As we have been charged with not only understanding but controlling collective behavior in our university environment we need to conclude this discussion with some recommendations.

Plato: A university community which is a just society and one in which students, faculty and staff recognize their roles and responsibilities will limit the episodes of collective behavior. The faculty, as philosopher kings, can govern a static and just institution.

Skinner: The internalization of the student code, as a form of operant conditioning, will contribute to the elimination of collective behavior at the university.

Turner: Obviously, for collective behavior to be restrained within our institutional environment we must continually be alert to any possible structural environments which might be conducive to the emergence of collective behavior.

Dynes: Having established centers for Disaster Research at Ohio State and Delaware, I am very pleased that we are actually using our work to address a real issue.

Bates: The emerging technology of the digital domain has created a more difficult environment for the control of collective behavior and I am concerned that our recommendations may be counter-productive and create more rather than less collective behavior.

Orwell: The new technologies are a double-edged sword. However, as a university we can use this technology to control and eliminate collective behavior. If we upgrade our monitoring technology, members of the university community will have few, if any, opportunities for emergent behavior. If the NSA can do it, so can we. Really, I love the Dean.

Chairman: Gentlemen, thank you for your informed understanding and recommendations. The social construction of an environment of just planning, internalized norms and effective monitoring will facilitate the devolution of collective behavior in our institutional environment. I will submit your recommendations to the faculty.

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