

A STUDY OF MENTAL EPIDEMICS

Boris Sidis

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In looking back to the medieval ages, we find them to be times in which abnormal social phenomena were displayed on a grand scale—times teeming with mobs, riots, revolts; with blind movements of vast human masses; with terrible epidemics that ravaged Europe from end to end. They were ages peculiar for the strange, striking fact that whole cities, extensive provinces, great countries, were stricken by one disease. Men went mad in packs, by the thousands. An obscure individual in some remote country place had fits of hysterics, and soon all Europe was wriggling and struggling in convulsions of hysterical insanity. The dark ages were strange, peculiar—so, at least, do they appear to us, who consider ourselves vastly superior to the poor ignorant medieval peasant, burgher, knight, with their superstitious, religious fervor, and recurrent epidemic insanities. I am afraid, however, that a similar fate may overtake us. May not a future historian look to our own times with dismay, and perhaps with horror? He will represent our age as dark and cruel—an age of the blind, senseless Napoleonic wars, of great commercial crises, Black Fridays, Coxey armies and crazes of all sorts and descriptions.

The sentinel posted by wasps becomes agitated at the sight of danger, and flies into the interior of the nest, buzzing violently; other wasps raise a buzzing, and are thus put into the same state of emotion which the sentinel experiences: they become uneasy, angry, aggressive. Susceptibility to the movements of his companions by passing through the same processes is the only way by which the social brute can become aware of the emotions that agitate his comrades. Susceptibility is the cement of the herd, the very soul of the primitive social group. A herd of sheep stand packed close together, looking stupidly into space; frighten them, and if one begins to run, frantic with terror, the rest are sure to follow, and a stampede ensues, each sheep scrupulously reproducing the identical movements of the one in front of it. Now, this susceptibility is nothing but what we, in relation to man, call suggestibility, which consists in the impressing on the mind of an idea, image, movement, which the person reproduces voluntarily or involuntarily. Suggestibility, then, is natural to man as

a social animal. Under certain conditions this suggestibility, which is always present in man, may increase to an extraordinary degree, and the result is a stampede, a mob, an epidemic.

"I protest," says Dr. Moll, a great authority in hypnotism, "against the terminology which has been to a great extent adopted, and which many doctors have helped to propagate, but which is none the less erroneous. It is often said that hypnotized persons are 'asleep,' and the two states have been partly identified. I think this a misuse of words, since there are a whole series of hypnotic states in which not one symptom of sleep appears, and mistaken conclusions are often drawn from the mistaken terminology, with resulting confusion. Susceptibility to suggestion is the chief phenomenon of hypnosis." And he goes on to say that, "however strange and paradoxical the phenomena of hypnosis may appear to us at first sight, we may be sure that there is no absolute difference between hypnotic and non-hypnotic states." Man carries with him the germ of the possible mob, of the epidemic. As a social being he is naturally suggestible; but when this susceptibility to suggestion becomes under certain conditions abnormally intense, we may say that he is thrown into a hypnotic state. We know that a limitation of voluntary movement induces light hypnosis, which is characterized by inhibition of the will; the memory is unaffected; self-consciousness remains intact, and the subject is perfectly aware of all that goes on: a loss of voluntary movements is one of its chief phenomena. Keeping this in mind, we can understand to a certain extent medieval life. The medieval man was in a state of light hypnosis. This was induced in him by the great limitation of his voluntary movements, by the inhibition of his will, by the social pressure that was exerted on him by the great weight of authority to which his life was subjected. The life of the medieval man was regulated down to its least detail. The order, the guild, the commune, the church, had minute regulations for all exigencies of life. Nothing was left to individual enterprise. Even love had its rules: there were laws governing love-making, anti the treatment by a man of the lady of his heart. There were curious love trials, one of the lovers accusing the other of having trespassed some fixed rule of love. Society was divided and subdivided into numerous parts, each having its own fixed rules, each leading its own secluded, narrow, dwarfish life. Bound fast by the strings of authority, medieval men were reduced to a state of hypnotic automata.

The religious ecstasy that animated the medieval man was especially favorable to his spontaneous self-hypnotization; for, as Ribot points out, ecstasy is mono-ideism, the intense concentration of attention on one object, an essential condition of hypnosis.¹

The most striking phenomenon in medieval history is that of the crusades, which agitated European nations for about two centuries, and cost them about seven million men. People were drawn by an irresistible longing toward the Holy Sepulcher, which fascinated their mental gaze, just as the butterfly is blindly drawn toward the candle. This attraction of devout Christians by the holy Sepulcher manifested itself in pilgrimages, which at first were rare, but gradually spread, and became a universal mania. Bishops abandoned their dioceses, princes their dominions, to visit the tomb of Christ. At the time of its highest tide, the flood of pilgrims was suddenly stopped by the Seljukian Turks, who conquered Palestine about 1076. As a maniac, when thwarted in his purpose, becomes raving and violent, so did Europe become when the flood-gates of torrent were stopped, and let to trickle through. European humanity fell into a fit of acute mania, which expressed itself in the savage ecstasy of the first crusade. Peter the Hermit and Pope Urban II were the heroes who first broke the ice, and directed the popular current to the conquest of the Holy Land. The fiery appeals of the emaciated, dwarfish hermit Peter carried everything before them. The frenzy which had unsettled the mind of the hermit was by him communicated to his hearers, and they became enraptured, entranced with the splendid schemes he unfolded. Meantime Pope Urban II convoked two councils, one after another; at the second council, that of Clermont, the pope addressed a multitude of thousands of people. His speech was at first listened to in solemn silence; gradually, however, as he proceeded, sobs broke. "Listen to nothing," he exclaimed, "but to the groans of Jerusalem! . . . And remember that the Lord has said, 'He that will not take up his cross and follow me is unworthy of me.' You are soldiers of the cross; wear then, on your breasts or on your shoulders, the blood-red sign of him who died for salvation of your soul!" Leaving the fields and towns, agricultural serfs and petty traders displayed intense eagerness to reach the Holy City. If a rational individual interfered with a word of warning, their only answer was the suggestion of the pope: "He that does not follow me is unworthy of me." Heinrich von Sybel, in speaking of the first crusade, tells us that "we can hardly understand such a state of mind. It was much as if a large army were now to embark in balloons in order to conquer an island between the earth and the moon, which was also expected to contain the paradise. Swarms of men of different races, with their wives and daughters, with infants taken from the cradle, and grandsires on the verge of the grave, and many sick and dying, came from every direction, all of them ready led to the conquest of the Holy Land. Peter the Hermit, Walter the Penniless, and Gottschalk, became the heroes, the ringleaders of the mobs, which were cut to pieces before they

reached Palestine. Then followed an army led by pilgrim princes, who succeeded in conquering the Holy Land, and founded there a Christian kingdom; but this kingdom was unstable, and it fell again and again into the hands of the unbelievers, and crusade after crusade was organized, each being a weaker copy of the preceding, until 1272, when the crusade epidemic was completely at an end. During the same period of time there were also Western crusades against the Arabians in Spain, and against the unfortunate Albigenses in southern France. In the crusade against the Albigenses, according to Albert von Stade, a peculiar religious mania broke out among women: thousands of them, stark naked, and in deep silence as if stricken with dumbness, ran about the streets; in Luttich, many of them fell into convulsions of ecstasy.

The abnormal suggestibility of medieval society was most clearly seen in the crusades of children. About 1212, between the fourth and fifth crusades, Stephen, a shepherd-boy at Cloyes, in imitation of his elders, began to preach to children of a holy war. Stephen soon became the rage of the day; the shrines were abandoned to listen to his words. He even worked miracles. The appeal of Stephen to the children to save the Sepulcher aroused in the young a longing to join him in the holy pilgrimage. The crusade epidemic rapidly spread among the little ones. Everywhere there arose children of ten years, and some even as young as eight, who claimed to be prophets sent by Stephen in the name of God. When the "prophets" had gathered sufficient numbers, they began to march through towns and villages. Like a true epidemic, it spared neither boys nor girls: according to the statements of the chroniclers, there was a large proportion of little girls in the multitudes of hypnotized children. The king, Philip Augustus, by the advice of the University of Paris, issued an edict commanding the children to return to their homes; but the religious suggestions were stronger than the king's command, and the children continued to assemble unimpeded. Fathers and mothers to bear upon the young all the influence they had to check this dangerous migration mania, but of no avail. Persuasions, threats, punishments, were as futile as the command. Bolts and bars could not hold the children. If shut up, they broke doors and windows, and rushed to places in the processions which take passing by. If the children were detained so that escape was impossible, they pined away like migratory birds kept in seclusion. In a village near Cologne, Nicolas, a boy of ten, began to play at crusade-preaching. Thousands of children flocked to him from all sides. As in France, all opposition was of no avail. Parents, friends, and pastors sought to restrain them by force or appeal; but the young ones pined, so that, as the chroniclers say, their lives were frequently endangered, as by disease, and it was necessary to allow them to

depart. Hosts of children assembled in the city of Cologne to start on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There they were divided into two armies, one under the leadership of Nicholas, the boy prophet, the other under some unknown leader. The armies of the little crusaders, like Coxey's army of our own times, were soon reduced in numbers by mere lack of food. After many tribulations, the army led by Nicholas, considerably reduced in size, reached Rome, where the pope, Innocent III, succeeded in diverting this stream of little pilgrims back to Germany. Ruined, degraded and ridiculed, the poor German children reached their homes; and when asked what they in reality wanted, the children, as if aroused from a narcotic state, answered that they did not know. The other German army had a worse fate. After untold sufferings and enormous loss of numbers, they reached Brindisi, where they were treated with extreme cruelty. The boys were seized by the citizens and sold into slavery, and the girls were maltreated and sold into dens of infamy. The French little crusaders met with a similar fate. When, after a long and fatiguing journey, they at last reached Marseilles, two pious merchants voluntarily offered to provide vessels to convey the children to Palestine. Half of the vessels suffered shipwreck, and the rest were directed to the shores of Africa, where the little pilgrims fell into the hands of the Turks and Arabians. The two pious merchants were slave-dealers.

The medieval ages present us with an uninterrupted chain of epidemics. No sooner did the crusade mania abate than another epidemic took its place—that of the flagellants. The initiator, the hero of the solemn procession of flagellants is said to have been St. Anthony. In 1262 the flagellants appeared in Italy. "An unexampled spirit of remorse," writes the chronicler, "suddenly seized on the minds of the Italians. The fear of Christ fell on people noble and ignoble, old and young; and even children of five marched through the streets with no covering but a scarf around the waist. All carried a scourge of leathern thongs, which they applied to their bodies, amid sighs and tears, with such violence that blood flowed from the wounds. The flagellant epidemic spread into Germany, and penetrated even into Poland. As it was slowly dying out, there arose another terrible epidemic, the "black death" with its horrible persecutions of the Jews. No sooner was the black death over than another epidemic, the dancing-mania began to spread. In the year 1374, at Aix-la-Chapelle, men and women began suddenly to dance in public, on the streets and in the churches. In wild delirium, and for hours together, they continued dancing, until they fell to the ground in a state of exhaustion. While dancing they neither saw nor heard, being insensible to external impressions. From Aix-la-Chapelle, the epidemic spread to the Netherlands. A few months later it broke out at Cologne and at Metz. Peasants

left their plows, mechanics their workshops, housewives their domestic duties to join the wild revels; girls and boys quitted their parents, and servants their masters, to look at those strange scenes, and greedily imbibed the poison of mental infection. In the year 1418 Strasburg was visited by this plague. St. Vitus was the patron saint of the dancing-mania, and his name was used as a contra-suggestion. The dancers were conducted to the chapel of St. Vitus, where they were usually cured of the disease. St. Vitus dance attacked people of all stations, the virulence of this plague decreased as time went on, until the great movement of the Reformation absorbed the attention and energy of Northern nations.

In Italy the dancing-mania took a somewhat different form. The belief was widely spread that he who was bitten by a tarantula, a species of spider whose sting is no more harmful than that of the ordinary wasp fell dangerously ill, and could be cured only by dancing. By the end of the fifteenth century tarantism became the plague of Italy. Crowds of affected persons thronged the streets of Italian cities, and danced to the merry tune of the tarantella. Foreigners of every color, negroes, Gipsies, Spaniards, Albanians, were attacked by this plague. So irresistible was the power of social suggestion that even they who fully denied the effects of the tarantula's bite had to succumb to the prejudice of the age.

The following chronological table may, perhaps, show best the unbroken chain of

MEDIEVAL EPIDEMICS

A. D.

Pilgrimage mania	1000 - 1095
Crusade mania	1095 - 1272
Flagellant mania	1260 - 1348
Black Death	1348 - 1356
Persecutions of the Jews	1348 - 1383
Dancing mania	
St. John's dance	
St. Vitus's dance	
Trarantism	

1374 - end 15th century

1418 - end 15th century

1470 - end 15th century

Social suggestibility is individual hypnotization written large. The laws of hypnotism work on a great scale in society. No hypnotic suggestion is effective unless it accords with the character, with the subconscious nature of the subject. The same holds true in the case of social hypnotization. Each nation has its own bent of mind, and suggestions, to be effective, must work in that direction. The Jew is a fair example. Religious emotions are at the basis of his character, and he is also highly susceptible to religious suggestions. The list of Jewish Messiahs is inordinately long. It would take too much space to recount the names of all the "saviors" among the Jews from the second destruction of the temple down to our own times. A few strong cases, however, will suffice. In the year 1666, on Rosch Haschanna (Jewish New Year), a Jew, by name Sabbathai Zevi, declared himself publicly as the long-expected Messiah. The Jewish populace was full of glee at hearing such happy news, and in the ardor of its belief, in the insanity of its religious intoxication, shouted fervently "Long live the Jewish king, our Messiah." A maniacal ecstasy took possession of the Jewish mind. Men, women, children fell fits of hysterics. Business men left their occupations, workmen their trades, and devoted themselves to prayer and penitence. The synagogues resounded with sighs, cries, and sobs for days and nights together. The religious mania became so furious that all the rabbis who opposed it had to save their lives by flight. Among the Persian Jews the excitement ran so high that all the Jewish husbandmen refused to labor in the fields. Even Christians regarded Sabbathai with awe, for this event took place in the apocalyptic year. The fame of Sabbathai spread throughout the world. In Poland, in Germany, in Holland, in England, the course of business was interrupted on the exchange by the gravest Jews breaking off to discuss this wonderful event. The Jews of Amsterdam sent inquiries to their agents in the Levant, and received the brief and emphatic reply, "It is he, and no other!"

Wherever the messages of the Messiah came, there the Jews instituted fast-days according to the cabalistic regulations of Nathan the prophet, and afterward abandoned themselves to gross intemperance. The Jewish communities of Amsterdam and Hamburg were especially conspicuous for their absurd religious extravagances. In Amsterdam the Jews marched through the streets, carrying with them rolls of the torah, singing, leaping, and dancing as if possessed. Scenes still more turbulent, licentious, and wild occurred in Hamburg, Venice, Leghorn, Avignon and in many other cities of Italy, Germany, France, and Poland. The tide of religious mania rose so high that even such men as Isaac Aboab, Moses de Aguilar, Isaac Noar, the rich banker and writer Abraham Pereira, and the Spinozist Dr. Benjamin Musaphia, became ardent adherents of

the Messiah. Spinoza himself seemed to have followed these strange events with great interest. The tide of religious mania rose higher and higher. In all parts of the world prophets and prophetesses appeared, thus realizing the Jewish belief in the inspired nature of Messianic-times; men and women, boys and girls, wriggled in hysterical convulsions, screaming praises to the new Messiah; many went raving about in prophetic raptures, exclaiming, "Sabbathai Zevi is the true Messiah of the race of David; to him the crown and kingdom are given!" The Jews seemed to have gone mad. From all sides rich men came to Sabbathai, putting their wealth at his disposal. Many sold out their houses and all they possessed, and set out for Palestine. So great number of pilgrims that the price of passage was considerably raised. Traffic in the greatest commercial centers came to a complete standstill; most of the Jewish merchants and bankers liquidated their affairs. The belief in the divine mission of Sabbathai was made into a religious dogma of equal rank with that of the unity of God. Even when Sabbathai was compelled by the Sultan to accept Mohammedanism, the mystico-Messianic epidemic continued to rage with unabated fury. Many stubbornly rejected the fact of his apostasy it was his shade that had turned Mussulman.

After Sabbathai's death a new prophet appeared by the name Michael Cordozo. His doctrine in spite of its manifest absurdity, spread like wildfire. "The Son of David," he said, "will not appear until all Israel is either holy or wicked." As the latter was by far the easier process, he recommended all true Israelites hasten the coming of the Messiah by turning Mohammedans. Great numbers, with pious zeal, complied with his advice.

Turning now to the American, who somewhat resembles the Hebrew both in business ability and religiousness, we find social suggestion working in him on a larger and grander scale. The American is highly suggestible, and the short history of his national existence is full of instructive cases of mental epidemics. A few instances will, perhaps, suffice for our purpose. At the beginning of the present century a mania of religious revival swept over the continent of northern America, and reached its acme in the camp meetings of the "Kentucky revivals." The first camp-meeting in Kentucky was held at Cabin Creek, and continued four days and three nights. The scene was awful beyond description. The preaching, the praying, the singing, the shouting, the sobbing, the fits of convulsions, made of the camp a pandemonium. Religious suggestion soon affected the idle crowd of spectators, and acted with such virulence that those who tried to escape were either struck by convulsions on the way, or impelled to return by some unknown, irresistible power. The contagion spread with great

rapidity, and spared neither age nor sex. The camp-meeting of Indian Creek, Harrison County, is especially interesting and instructive for its bringing clearly to light the terrible power of suggestion. The meeting was at first quiet and orderly. There was, of course, a good deal of praying, singing, and shouting, but still nothing extraordinary occurred. The suggestion, however, did not fail to come, and this time it was given by a child. A boy of twelve mounted a log, and raising his voice, began to preach. In a few moments he became the center of the religious mob. "Thus, O Sinners," he shouted, "shall you drop into hell, unless you forsake your sins and return to the Lord." At that moment some one fell to the ground in convulsions, and soon the whole mob was struggling, wriggling, writhing, and "jerking." In some camp-meetings the religious mob took to dancing, and at last to barking like dogs. Men, women, and children assumed the posture of dogs, moving on all fours, growling, snapping the teeth, and barking.

It would take volumes to recount all the mental epidemics religious manias, political plagues, speculative insanities, financial crazes and economical panics from which society in general and democracy in particular continually suffer. One thing stands out clear and distinct before the student of Social Psychology, and that is the extreme suggestibility of gregarious man. Man is a suggestible animal par excellence.

Boris Sidis

1. In my experiments in suggestion made in the psychological laboratory of Harvard College, I found that when the attention, in perfectly normal people, was concentrated on one point for some time, say twenty seconds, commands suddenly given at the end of that time were very often immediately carried out by the subject. Concentration of attention on one point is highly favorable to suggestibility.