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*Francesca Martinez Tagliavia*

« **The Imagination of Crowds** »

*The efficacy of a false hypothesis*



Still from Graeme Thomson and Silvia Maglioni, *In Search of UIQ* (2013)

*To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time  
the art of governing them.*

Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the  
Popular Mind* (1895)

Literature produced around the notion of *charisma* (attributed to the chief, the master, the *leader*, the Father, the *guru*, the *boss*, etc.) has supplied, in the past, arguments for Nazi and Fascist propaganda (Cohen 2013; De Felice 1968). This seems clear by Hitler and Mussolini's great interest for Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), translated in English one year later (Le Bon 2001).

Numerous western liberal and conservative statesmen were inspired by Le Bon's oeuvre, aiming to govern through a *charismatic leadership* (Cohen 2013). Among others, we see Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) and Winston Churchill (1874-1965). Roosevelt's "charismatic smile" *shapes* public opinion: he had « a strong rapport with the public and he understood how to use the media to shape public opinion »<sup>1</sup>. Churchill too, had an absolute charisma: "The Symbol of a People" titled an article on the front-page of *Gazette de Lausanne*, on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1965, announcing his death. In the same page, an other article is entitled "When We Were Alone", and says: "Churchill was more than the leader of United Kingdom at its best times. He *was* United Kingdom itself, when United Kingdom faced alone the German giant". His lion-figure staged a dramatic *spectacle*, and his voice had a special power<sup>2</sup>. But what was this *spectacle* the journalist was pointing out? A spectacle is a *magnifying glass*, a *show*, a *representation* or a *visual ideological and totalitarian narration*, that invests all dimensions of life. Finally, the spectacle is also *propaganda*.

If these leaders declare being strongly inspired by Le Bon in their will to "shape" politics in the sense of a charismatic leadership, President Theodore Roosevelt explicitly declared that Le Bon's *crowd's psychology* was one of his bedside books, and Général De Gaulle intended to react to the fall of the *traditional authority*, adapting the modern principle of authority to a time of its crisis, developing a charismatic type of authority (Decherf, 2007:219). Therefore, the issue for them, was shaping the characteristics of crowds, and determining the means of persuasion to shape their conducts, as leaders. In fact, as Yves Cohen writes, an *obsession for the chief* rises in economic, political and early social sciences since the 1890's, coupled with

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<sup>1</sup> « In terms of presidential style, Roosevelt introduced "charisma" into the political equation. He had a strong rapport with the public and he understood how to use the media to shape public opinion. He was the first President whose election was based more on the individual than the political party. When people voted Republican in 1904, they were generally casting their vote for Roosevelt the man instead of for him as the standard-bearer of the Republican Party. The most popular President up to his time, Roosevelt used his enthusiasm to win votes, to shape issues, and to mold opinions. In the process, he changed the executive office forever.», in « Impact and Legacy » of Theodore Roosevelt, The Miller Center, University of Virginia. URL : <http://millercenter.org/president/roosevelt/essays/biography/9>

<sup>2</sup> *Gazette de Lausanne*, 25/01/1965. Front-page. URL : <http://www.letempsarchives.ch/Default/Scripting/PagePrint.asp?Skin=LeTempsFr&enter=true&AppName=2&AW=1342005272109&BaseHref=GDL/1965/01/25&CurrentPage=1&Page=1&Language=fr>

the rising of a collective “We need chiefs” in the most industrialized countries. That’s why Cohen *détourne* Le Bon’s “Era of Crowds” into “Le Siècle des chefs”, to counter the naturalization of Le Bon’s charismatic leadership, making a history of “the new forms and techniques of command”, through the chief’s material processes of authority production. Cohen shows how the *interest* for the chief *precedes* the instauration of Nazi-Fascist totalitarianisms, and emerges in capitalist and liberal realms (Cohen 2013: 9).

Regarding the ways Gustave Le Bon describes the *crowd* (or, alternatively, the *mass*), the first important fact we shall note is that, according to Le Bon, and from a psychological point of view, the Crowd has a Mind (*Âme*, in French):

A collective mind is formed, doubtless transitory, but presenting very clearly defined characteristics. The gathering has thus become what, in the absence of a better expression, I will call an organised crowd, or, if the term is considered preferable, a psychological crowd. It forms a single being, and is subjected to the law of the mental unity of crowds (Le Bon, 2001 : 13).

For the first time, the crowd is characterized and depicted as a collective mind, a sort of an *individual*, who feels, thinks and acts, but is mostly conducted by its unconscious, depending on “hereditary influences”: race and gender (Le Bon, 2001: 16). The problem is, this collective individual cannot represent itself, and is out of control, therefore needs a chief to acquire a political form (Hobbes 2009; Canetti 1966; Moscovici 1991; Marcucci 2010, 2013).

How does Le Bon describe the absence of control, the *exceptional* character and the radical *alterity* of this crowd or “multitude” (Le Bon, 2001: 68)?

In the shapeless and cohered crowd melt men who have lost their individuality, their critical capacities, compressed and unified, rendered impulsive under a process of mutual contagion, in which sentiments – especially the simplest - are exaggerated (Le Bon, 2001: 30, Dantier 2002:7):

The individualities in the crowd who might possess a personality sufficiently strong to resist the suggestion are too few in number to struggle against the current. At the utmost, they may be able to attempt a diversion by means of different suggestions. It is in this way, for instance, that a happy expression, an image opportunely evoked, have occasionally deterred crowds from the most bloodthirsty acts. (Le Bon, 2001:19)

The crowd is strongly suggestible and credulous; its opinions are extremely spontaneous and mobile. Its unconsciousness and brutality depend on their « intolerance, dictatorialness and conservatism » (Le Bon, 2001:31), similar to that of barbarians, who are spontaneous, ferocious and violent (Le Bon, 2001:10, Van Ginneken, 1992):

Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian — that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings, whom he further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images — which would be entirely without action on each of the isolated individuals composing the crowd — [...] (Le Bon, 2001:19)

But the crowd is also « distinguished by feminine characteristics » (Le Bon, 2001:23, Barrows, 1981), which are predominated by « exaggeration and ingenuousness of the sentiments » (Le Bon, 2001:29), like children, « that is to say, by precisely the most impressionable persons » (Le Bon, 2001:27).

From the point of view of their opinions and ideas, crowds are contradictory, have « rather narrow ideas », « the sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes » (Le Bon, 2001:13).

Concerning their ways of thinking, logical reasoning does not influence crowds, and Le Bon stresses from the beginning of his essay, on their “extreme mental inferiority” (Le Bon, 2001:4), and on the absolute influence images exert on crowds, because *a crowd thinks in images*:

A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first. We can easily conceive this state by thinking of the fantastic succession of ideas to which we are sometimes led by calling up in our minds any fact. Our reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of its imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact. (Le Bon, 2001:23-24)

As for the ways they associate ideas, masses are irrational: their ideas only have the *appearance* of the logical analogy or succession. Concerning their imagination, they are greatly influenced to processes of suggestion, *producing mental images*, that don't correspond to reality. Le Bon reports from a newspaper, that a mother recognizes his son in a corpse, but then police shows that she was mistaken, she did *a bad recognition based on a false impression*; the corpse isn't his son's:

the starting-point of the suggestion is always the illusion produced in an individual by more or less vague reminiscences, contagion following as the result of the affirmation of this initial illusion. If the first observer be very impressionable, it will often be sufficient that the corpse he believes he recognises should present — apart from all real resemblance — some peculiarity, a scar, or some detail of toilet which may evoke the idea of another person. The idea evoked may then become the nucleus of a sort of crystallisation which invades the understanding and paralyses all critical faculty. What the observer then sees is no longer the object itself, but the image-evoked in his mind. (Le Bon, 2001:26-27)

The only ideas that can have an influence over a crowd must have very *simple shapes* and to be *visual*. The visual is a “guise” of something, a *mode* of something, and more precisely, a “disguise”, a disguised or transvestite idea, the false appearance of something. This *suggests* that *visually disguising reality* - ideas and things - is the only way to influence a crowd, where “disguising,” indicates a “false appearance”<sup>3</sup>: “The power of words is bound up with the images they evoke, and is quite independent of their real significance » says Le Bon (Le Bon, 2001:60). For him, as a matter of fact, « appearances have always played a much more important part than reality in history, where the unreal is always of greater moment than the real” (Le Bon, 2001:40).

The appearances must be “image-like”, which means that they have to be visual: a visual (would it be a picture, an image, or a theory) *resembling* to reality and illogical:

Whatever be the ideas suggested to crowds they can only exercise effective influence on condition that they assume a very absolute, uncompromising, and simple shape. They present themselves then in the guise of images, and are only accessible to the masses under this form. These image-like ideas are not connected by any logical bond of analogy or succession [...]. (Le Bon, 2001:36)

What seems even more important for Le Bon (and interesting for us), is that the « image-like » appearances - that we are now allowed to define as *false ideas* – are *projected by an invisible operator*, and therefore, they « may take each other’s place like the slides of a magic-lantern which the operator withdraws from the groove in which they were placed one above the other » (Le Bon, 2001:36). Le Bon is describing political power as the functioning of a modern *slide projector*, handled by a superior operator, as if a crowd was a *public in a cinema*, dazzled by the images that mysteriously appear on the screen, *edited* in an illogical way, from whose they “come under influence” and are capable of doing the most “dissimilar

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<sup>3</sup> Just two decades before, in his critique against capitalist production, and, Karl Marx made the critique of the bourgeois *image* of capitalist production. The “false appearance” of the wage-exchange had the objective to *veil*, to *mask*, to *occult* the actual class relationship, based on class exploitation. For Marx, false appearance triumphs in the capitalistic mode of production. See Karl Marx, *Lohnarbeit und Kapital*, 1849; tr. it. *Salario, prezzo e profitto*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1970, a cura di V. Vitello, p. 55.

acts”, without any consciousness of what they do, as they are “under influence”, not capable to think consequently. The “slides” – the image-like ideas - are simple, clear and effective statements projected on a screen, by a projector.

These image-like ideas [...] *may take each other's place like the slides of a magic-lantern which the operator withdraws from the groove in which they were placed one above the other.* This explains how it is that the most contradictory ideas may be seen to be simultaneously current in crowds. According to the chances of the moment, a crowd will come under the influence of one of the various ideas stored up in its understanding, and is capable, in consequence, of committing the most dissimilar acts. Its complete lack of the critical spirit does not allow of its perceiving these contradictions. (Le Bon, 2001:36).

Who is the invisible operator withdrawing simple statements (especially visual) to influence crowds? It is an “orator in intimate communication with a crowd” (Le Bon, 2001:39). The invisible operator must establish an “intimate communication” *with* the crowd, which means, an *affective relationship*, while withdrawing slides, one above the other. His “reason” and “arguments” “evoke grandiose and vague images in men’s minds, but this very vagueness that wraps them in obscurity augments their mysterious power. They are the mysterious divinities hidden behind the tabernacle, which the devout only approach in fear and trembling » (Le Bon, 2001:60).

The specification that the slides are “placed one above the other” indicates the “slide holder”, which is one of the four main elements that compose a projector - together with the “electric incandescent light bulb”, the reflector and condensing lens to direct the light to the slide, and the focusing lens (on the objective). Interestingly, “certain transitory images are attached to certain words: the word is merely as it were the button of an electric bell that calls them up » (Le Bon, 2001:60).

First, the operator who projects images for the crowd uses somehow a “projector”, a media, a *dispositif* where images are condensed, are well set towards a focused objective, and from which they are projected on this objective, which has to be seduced. The crowd seems, therefore, at the same time the *screen* on which images are projected, and the *public*. Second, if slides are projected one *above* the other, it means that *each slide cancels (occults, conceals) the slide before.* The narration is, therefore, made invisible. Third, if the crowd is the “objective”, it means that the people are *interpellated*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Interpellation is “the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects.” In Cindy N’Guyen, “Interpellation”, Keywords Glossary, “Theories of Media”, University of Chicago, 2004. URL: <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/interpellation.htm>

An orator in intimate communication with a crowd can evoke images by which it will be seduced. If he is successful his object has been attained, and twenty volumes of harangues — always the outcome of reflection — are not worth the few phrases which appealed to the brains it was required to convince. (Le Bon, 2001:39).

Le Bon continues saying that « the images evoked in their mind by a personage, an event, an accident, are almost as lifelike as the reality » (Le Bon, 2001:40). But does Le Bon refer to images that *crowds produce* or to images *the operator evokes* in their minds? Who is the *subject*? Who produces a « personage », an « event », an « accident » in a *newspaper*, for example? The ones who read it, or the ones who *disguise* it? If crowds “need” to be interpellated by « violent propaganda » (Le Bon, 2001:44), they are like « sleepers » intensely dreaming with eyes wide open, as if *somnambuls* or *hypnotized* (Spinoza 1965; Tarde 1890, 1901; Reynié 1989, Karsenti 1993, Zourabichvili 2003):

The images evoked in their mind by a personage, an event, an accident, are almost as lifelike as the reality. Crowds are to some extent in the position of the sleeper whose reason, suspended for the time being, allows the arousing in his mind of images of extreme intensity which would quickly be dissipated could they be submitted to the action of reflection. (Le Bon, 2001:44).

To the question asking *who* produces the image, Le Bon’s answer could be in the following statement, which, nonetheless, goes on with the ambiguity: « crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images » (Le Bon, 2001:44).

I think Le Bon is saying that someone (supposedly the operator, the orator, the hypnotist) impresses images on crowds, meaning that he gives a visual form to shapelessness, by impressing it with strong images and persuade the crowd with false, *disguised* statements, *images of terror* capable of *moving* people, that is to say, *to make them act*: « it is only images that terrify or attract them and become motives of action » (Le Bon, 2001:44). « Moving » people means *emotionally affect them, to touch them, while they have the capacity of being touched and let circulate other affects* (Spinoza 1965; Tarde 1890, 1901; Reynié 1989; Karsenti 1993; Lazzarato 2002; Zourabichvili 2003; Citton, 2008; Marcucci 2013). For Le Bon, to emotionally affect people, means only inducing an impulse, a movement (by *impressing* images). Crowds are thought by Le Bon as *moving or animated pictures*.

Images of terror particularly exert their influence (*efficacy*) if played in very clear « theatrical representations », « bread and spectacular shows » similar to those given by the roman emperors to the servile crowd in the Coliseum, *a theatre of death* :



For this reason theatrical representations, in which the image is shown in its most clearly visible shape, always have an enormous influence on crowds. Bread and spectacular shows constituted for the plebeians of ancient Rome the ideal of happiness, and they asked for nothing more. (Le Bon, 2001:44)

The marvellous and the mythological side of things, no matter which truth or reality lies beneath, astound crowds. Propaganda is a form which hides its reality, as a copy or a photograph *hides*, for Le Bon, the reality it *reproduces (masks)*, except for the “small number of learned men” (Le Bon, 2001:5) who acknowledge what stands behind this illusion, and are able to *unmask* images. Le Bon writes:

If we imagine a world whose inhabitants could only copy or photograph objects, but were unable to touch them, it would be very difficult for such persons to attain to an exact idea of their form. Moreover, the knowledge of this form, accessible only to a small number of learned men, would present but a very minor interest. (Le Bon, 2001:5)

That is why, for Le Bon, « popular imagination » is at the core of any statesman power, which means that a politician *should* apply narrative and ideological masks to his real action, to “strike the popular imagination”, producing a “startling image which fills and besets the mind”. *Le Bon is giving advice to the politician on how to govern the crowd*: “To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them» (Le Bon, 2001:42-43).

The factors modifying the crowds’ opinions are images, words, and the visual montage of the two: short formulas, slogans, and simple illusions. If crowds « place themselves instinctively under the authority of a chief» (Le Bon, 2001:68), then « a crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master» (Le Bon, 2001:68). How then shall the « master », the « chief » be? He has to be affirmative, repetitive, contagious, able to augment disproportionately his prestige, thanks to « words — words which are as powerful as they are chimerical and whose astonishing sway » (Le Bon, 2001:53), and Le Bon shall demonstrate how should be a leader’s politics of imagination on crowds. The master’s ability will be that of using religious and military metaphors, aiming to provoke « the arousing of faith — whether religious, political, or social, whether faith in a work, in a person, or an idea — [which] has always been the function of the great leaders of crowds, and it is on this account that their influence is always very great » (Le Bon, 2001:69).

If Le Bon’s attempt was to describe the most precisely the characteristics of a crowd, its major trait was its unconscious need to be commanded, and the need to be *lead* by a chief (Freud 1921:156). The chief has, therefore, to possess a strong sense of initiative, a strong

will, an irreducible faith in his ideal, and to exert on the crowd a great force of *attraction* and of *emotional involvement*. If simple ideas are diffused by “contagion”, then we can spread them through *mass media* - newspapers, radio, manifestos, and other forms of mass communication or propaganda. A chief’s prestige depends on the magnetic fascination he can exert through techniques of mass persuasion, *connecting* with the desires, needs, beliefs and fears of the crowd. At the same time, the chief must shape his postures, gestures and manners as if he were at the same time the director and the principal actor of this scene, to give more strength to his representation (Marin 1981; Michaud 1996, 2003; Luzzatto 1998, 2001; Diehl 2006, 2007; Belpoliti 2009).

From an authority based on a specific function, to an authority based on pure suggestion, charisma is drawn by the mere power of a dominant personality, acting as a *visual operator*, an illusionist. The word “operator” is used by Le Bon also as *hypnotist*, and suggests that politics is a *theatre* where the chief commands producing illusions:

For this reason theatrical representations, in which the image is shown in its most clearly visible shape, always have an enormous influence on crowds. Bread and spectacular shows constituted for the plebeians of ancient Rome the ideal of happiness, and they asked for nothing more. Throughout the successive ages this ideal has scarcely varied. Nothing has a greater effect on the imagination of crowds of every category than theatrical representations. The entire audience experiences at the same time the same emotions, and if these emotions are not at once transformed into acts, it is because the most unconscious spectator cannot ignore that he is the victim of illusions, and that he has laughed or wept over imaginary adventures. (Le Bon, 2001:40-41)

But the charismatic chief is also the operator of a *camera obscura* (a photographer), or, more precisely, for Le Bon, the one who secretly draws shadows in Plato’s Cave. Le Bon takes position, concerning the dialectics between truth and appearance, adopting a radically anti-Illuminist position:

Whatever be the ideas suggested to crowds they can only exercise effective influence on condition that they assume a very absolute, uncompromising, and simple shape. They present themselves then in the guise of images, and are only accessible to the masses under this form. These image-like ideas are not connected by any logical bond of analogy or succession, and may take each other’s place like the slides of a magic-lantern which the operator withdraws from the groove in which they were placed one above the other. This explains how it is that the most contradictory ideas may be seen to be simultaneously current in crowds. According to the chances of the moment, a crowd will come under the influence of one of the various ideas stored up in its understanding, and is capable, in consequence, of committing the most dissimilar acts.

Its complete lack of the critical spirit does not allow of its perceiving these contradictions. (Le Bon, 2001:36)

Le Bon's interpretation of Plato's allegory of the Cave - in which people are dazzled by all sorts of illusions (as they cannot *touch* the models of the pictures shown to them) - builds a theory of the form based on the pre-eminence of *real/true* objects (the model) upon *copies/reproductions/photographs* (the pictures), as, for him, the chief is the *model* for the crowds, which should be his passive *mimetic reproductions* (copies, photographs, etc.).

We could go on in the analysis.

Before coming to our (temporary) conclusions, what is, for Le Bon, a *political upheaval*? It is a « profound antipathy for the images evoked by certain words ». And what prevents against revolts ? Changing words, substituting to a false appearance, another one :

Thus, when crowds have come, as the result of political upheavals or changes of belief, to acquire a profound antipathy for the images evoked by certain words, the first duty of the true statesman is to change the words without, of course, laying hands on the things themselves, the latter being too intimately bound up with the inherited constitution to be transformed. (Le Bon, 2001:62)

### *Imagining Crowds*

In his major book, Gustave Le Bon - father of social psychology, in late nineteenth century - builds a *visual theory of the crowd* and a *visual politics of charismatic domination*. Nevertheless, we can conclude that Le Bon formulated a *false hypothesis*, based on a *false effective appearance*.

As we have seen, Le Bon explains throughout his treatise, what are the characteristics of the "crowds", why do they need to be commanded by a charismatic chief, and how shall this chief behave, purposely using the *visual* to give a political form to the crowd, and to maintain the multitude under his control. The efficacy of visual representation is the means through which the dominant class can maintain his power.

My hypothesis is that, following the use made after *The Crowd* by early twentieth century men of industry, liberal western statesmen, and European dictators -, Le Bon's thesis has worked as a *self-fulfilling prophecy*.

Le Bon produces a strange relationship between *belief* and *behaviour*, where the content of the first *shapes* the second. Making Le Bon's theory of charismatic leadership a self-fulfilling prophecy, means not distinguishing between from one side, the political and visual *imagination* of a crowd, and, from the other side, the *shaping* of a crowd. Formulating clearly this distinction seems to be a necessary act of critique.

Le Bon captures the fact that an *affective* dynamics constitutes the charismatic relationship between a chief and a crowd, but then denies the very same fact: if, according to the sociological observation, crowds are strongly imaginative and imagining, and the leader projects images, why the nature of this relationship, as a power relationship, is occulted?

Not distinguishing between *imagination of crowds* and *crowd moulding*: this is how Le Bon's argument fulfils itself, as if it were the formula of a prophetic authority. It has already been said how Le Bon's theory has been used for purposes of propaganda, but it has not been explained why and how his hypothesis have been so successful, why it really has produced charismatic regimes, despite the fact that Le Bon denies, in fact, the *heart* of the very same hypothesis he carries on. Actually, there is an opposition between the *political interest* undermined by Le Bon's argument, and the fact that it is a hypothesis, an observation. The hypothesis is false, and the political interest denied, that's why it is so important to stress on the distinction raised by Yves Cohen. In *Le Siècle des chefs*, he immediately points the political effect of not distinguishing, in producing a *naturalization of hierarchy*:

What we shall here underline, is the way the observation is formulated (vocabulary) and elaborated (sociological thesis): the « formation » of « society » is paradoxically natural phenomenon and it consists in the apparition of a « power » to command and direct. Not only the chief, but also hierarchy is naturalized [...]. (Cohen 2013:10-11).

Therefore, Cohen suggests distinguishing between the *interest for the chief* and the *need for a chief*. How do Le Bon's *visually produces this ambiguity*, between « the way the observation is formulated (vocabulary) » and the way the same observation is « elaborated (sociological thesis) »?

If we follow Le Bon's hypothesis, if we accept it, the political interest of his "observation" – meaning, the way he *depicts* class struggle - is unrecognized, unacknowledged! If Roosevelt or Hitler fulfilled what Le Bon suggested to do (and that's his political efficacy), we cannot. We must *dissociate* and *critique* the interest from the hypothesis: we have seen how Le Bon uses an argument against itself.

If various scholars have explored the use of images in twentieth century's political regimes, what hasn't already been explored is how this conflict between the interest and the hypothesis emerges as a proper *visual theory*, in Le Bon's study of the charismatic leadership.

If Hitler, Mussolini and Roosevelt aren't background actors of twentieth century history, the political power of Le Bon's argument has always been associated to its false hypothesis and not to the political interest guiding it (the ideological "false appearance"). What hasn't been seen is this conflict between the interests of his social class, and a sociological observation.

All those who have followed Le Bon's argument, have followed a false hypothesis based on the production of a false appearance, that is to say, *ideology*.

Therefore, we must oppose to Le Bon's argument a critique, starting from operating a necessary distinction: the more one follows the *interest* leading the argument, the less one follows the *false hypothesis* that is developed.

The *interest* of our argument is therefore, to show how Le Bon's self-fulfilling prophecy has exerted authority in building charismatic regimes, through a discourse, at the core of which stands the *affective power of the visual*.

In Le Bon's theory of charisma, there is something more than the simple fact that *sentiments* are engaged in the charismatic leadership: there is the power of images. According to him, images are *affective*, they are *active* agents carrying on significations. The visual realm is, for him, the realm of sentiments, affects, passions, and desires. He says something true, but then, denies the fact that the *significations* of images are a social construction, based on the interpretative work of a spectator, or a public. If images work through affectivity (*image-affect*), why deny the relational nature of their production, showing crowds as *passive*, and the chief as *active*?

Le Bon seems to get the point, but in a false way, because he attributes to the crowd an image (he *images* the crowd, he depicts it), but then he appropriates this image: a chief *informs* the crowd (*imagines it*), therefore the crowd doesn't produce images. But hadn't he said "visible social phenomena appear to be the result of *an immense, unconscious working*» (Le Bon, 2001:6)? And hadn't he spoken about the rich *imagining* production of crowds ?

And here, Le Bon recognizes that it is incorrect, to limit the argument to a vertical chief-collectivity relationship (and to attribute charisma to the personality of the chief) to explain charisma, *occulting* the leader's class interest and the *projective* work of the crowd, *which is a*

*collective imagining work*. How to explain this occultation of social power relationships throughout the circulation of affects?

Because the projective work of crowds “synthetize the most diverse unconscious aspirations and the hope of their realisation”, then *bourgeois capitalist class must occult it*. This is what Le Bon is saying:

The power of words is bound up with the images they evoke, and is quite independent of their real significance. Words whose sense is the most ill-defined are sometimes those that possess the most influence. Such, for example, are the terms democracy, socialism, equality, liberty, etc., whose meaning is so vague that bulky volumes do not suffice to precisely fix it. Yet it is certain that a truly magical power is attached to those short syllables, as if they contained the solution of all problems. They synthesise the most diverse unconscious aspirations and the hope of their realisation. (Le Bon, 2001:60)

From the one side, the efficacy of Le Bon’s argument is that of being part of the dominant ideology of the twentieth century: that’s its interest. From the other side, the political efficacy of Le Bon’s argument can be neutralized deconstructing his false hypothesis. Deconstructing its efficacy through visual critique may be exemplary of how we can *denaturalize* social and political power relationships defining contemporary charismatic and populist regimes: in the political interest of this false hypothesis stands *our* interest.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. « In terms of presidential style, Roosevelt introduced "charisma" into the political equation. He had a strong rapport with the public and he understood how to use the media to shape public opinion. He was the first President whose election was based more on the individual than the political party. When people voted Republican in 1904, they were generally casting their vote for Roosevelt the man instead of for him as the standard-bearer of the Republican Party. The most popular President up to his time, Roosevelt used his enthusiasm to win votes, to shape issues, and to mold opinions. In the process, he changed the executive office forever.», in « Impact and Legacy » of Theodore Roosevelt, The Miller Center, University of Virginia. URL : <http://millercenter.org/president/roosevelt/essays/biography/9>

2. *Gazette de Lausanne*, 25/01/1965. Front-page. URL : <http://www.letempsarchives.ch/Default/Scripting/PagePrint.asp?Skin=LeTempsFr&enter=true&AppName=2&AW=1342005272109&BaseHref=GDL/1965/01/25&CurrentPage=1&Page=1&Language=fr>

3. Just two decades before, in his critique against capitalist production, and, Karl Marx made the critique of the bourgeois *image* of capitalist production. The “false appearance” of the wage-exchange had the objective to *veil*, to *mask*, to *occult* the actual class relationship, based on class exploitation. For Marx, false appearance triumphs in the capitalistic mode of



production. See Karl Marx, *Lohnarbeit und Kapital*, 1849; tr. it. *Salario, prezzo e profitto*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1970, a cura di V. Vitello, p. 55.

4. Interpellation is “the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects.” In Cindy N’Guyen, “Interpellation”, Keywords Glossary, “Theories of Media”, University of Chicago, 2004. URL: <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/interpellation.htm>

