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Democracy and Masks. Towards an Iconology of the Faceless Crowd

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ABSTRACT

Since 2008 an object has become part of the repertoire of demonstrations, the mask. First in the Global North and then worldwide, a variety of masks – from that of the film *V for Vendetta* to that of *The Joker* and many more – have been donned by protesters. While individual masks have been investigated, the widespread use of masks as a meaningful political symbol still deserves analysis, all the more so that this artefact is absent from the political tradition of the Western World. The article formulates some hypotheses in order to understand the genealogy of the "political mask". In particular, it locates its *longue durée* visual history within the iconography of the "faceless crowd".

KEYWORDS
Political iconology; Mask; Face recognition; Multitude; Masses

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> "It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude: enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy bestowed the love of masks and masquerading".[1]
>
> Baudelaire, "Crowds"

> "But there was also a political dream of the plague […] not the collective festival, but strict divisions […]; not masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his "true" name, his "true" place, his "true" body […]. Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of "contagions", of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder".[2]
>
> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

> "Not making ourselves visible, but instead turning the anonymity to which we've been relegated to our advantage, and through conspiracy, nocturnal or faceless actions, creating an invulnerable position of attack"[3]
>
> The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*.

We all saw him, the self-proclaimed "QAnon's Shaman" bare-chested in the halls of the United States Capitol Building. With a horned headdress, white supremacist tattoos and the American flag hoisted on a spear, he was the most eccentric figure in the pro-Trump mob that rampaged the building on the 6th of January 2021. The multitude sported a variety of symbols, from Norse mythology to the fictional nation of Kekistan and flags that aimed to revive the American Revolutionary War: an altered version of the Betsy Ross flag, as well as the Gadsden flag (now associated with the Three Percenters militia). Originating as much from the halcyon days of American Independence as from 2010s internet subculture, these insignias illustrated the narratives and affective bonds that rioters understood as being immanent to their actions. Most journalists have paid little attention to this plethora of signs, and have instead proposed different

1 Charles Baudelaire, "Crowds", in *Paris Spleen* (New York, New Directions, 1974), 20.

2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prision* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

3 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Cambridge (Mass); London: The MIT Press).

genealogies. They have assimilated the assault on the Capitol to, among other things, the storming of a medieval castle by angry plebs, or the Fascist March on Rome. These and similar historical analogies ultimately prove unsatisfactory if for no other reason than because what happened on 6 of January 2021 would have hardly made sense before the advent of social media platforms and their visual economy. The rioters choregraphed a seizure of power. Neither a massive demonstration of force nor a rebellion in a context alien to representative democracy, what took place on 6 January 2021 might be better understood as a new praxis in the protest repertoire of the Global North: the symbolic (but not necessarily peaceful) intrusion of a group of people in a government building. This type of action reveals something of a contradiction: the forcible imposition of citizens' physical presence into places where citizens are not normally permitted but, by definition, are always present in the form of their delegates acting as proxies of the citizen body.

On a much smaller scale and with no casualties, at least two recent events echo the storming of the Capitol Building. On 5 January 2019, a group of yellow vests used a forklift as a battering ram to break open the gate of a Ministry in Paris. In Germany in 2020, marches against the government's policies over COVID-19 repeatedly tried to penetrate the Reichstag (the German parliament), and in November 2020 a handful of protesters gained entry. This parallel is not meant to minimise Trump's seditious incitements or the dissimilar political circumstances, but rather to highlight the shared reliance on a similar imaginary that might on the surface appear obsolete (the "storming of the castle"), but which in actual fact traverses the iconography of Western democracies. Despite the innovative role played by social media platforms, photographs of the assault on the Capitol tap into visual tropes that date back to the founding moments of popular sovereignty. A cursory look at the caricatures and etchings depicting Parisians storming the Tuileries in 1792 and 1848 reveals the *longue durée* history of this idiom. Two recurrent motifs illustrate this point: the presence of an imponent architectural barrier that has to be scaled or descended with bare hands (Figure1, 2) * *, and the "low" body parts (typically a bare foot or the buttocks, Figure3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 * * * * * *) ostentatiously placed upon the symbols of power. In Paris as much as Washington, in 1792 just like in 2021, the optical clash between humble body parts and authoritative symbols of the polity encodes an irreconcilable tension in the legal architecture of contemporary democracies. It suggests what remains the core ambiguity of the notion of "popular sovereignty:" the fact that the people have "two bodies." Indeed, the notion of "people" conflates the abstract *populus*, the juridical subject endowed with sovereignty, with the very concrete *plebs*, the lower classes.[4]

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4 Pierre Rosanvallon, *La démocratie inachevée: histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 40. For the notion of the King's "two bodies", see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400880782.

What is a Political Mask?

One of the least conspicuous aspects of the QAnon's Shaman's trappings is his mask. Indeed, the man painted his face with the colours of the American flag, thereby turning his facial features into a mask. This article focuses on masks such as this, and proposes an interpretation of the widespread practice of wearing masks at demonstrations. In particular, it concentrates on the genealogy of the collective image that is generated (or implicitly invoked) through this type of mask. The practice of protesters wearing masks has expanded exponentially over the past decade. An inventory of the masks that have been seen in the streets is long overdue, and should include political marches from Beirut to London, and from Hong Kong to Santiago and Cairo. This research would probably highlight surprising patterns, but also divergent registers and practices. Examples of this manifold language of self-fashioning include: 1) masks taken from graphic novels, Netflix series and films: for example, the mask worn by the protagonist in the film *V for Vendetta* (popularised by the hacker group Anonymous), that of Dali (taken from *Money Heist*) and the clown mask of *The Joker*; 2) masks depicting the colours of a flag (at times combining it* with the mask of *The Joker*); 3) the ski-masks of the Zapatistas and the so-called "black bloc."

Given the protean variety of this global phenomenon, it is imperative to provide a working definition to guide the inquiry of this aspect of the protesters' visual culture. This article defines a "political mask" as an artefact that a large number of people active in the political arena use to replace their face with a shared symbol. This definition might seem odd, as a mask is generally considered to be an object that does not substitute for, but rather covers, a visage. However, as Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux has demonstrated, at least two paradigms inform the cultural connotations of masks in Western culture.[5] One tradition, which can be dubbed "Roman," associates masks with duplicity and fraud. In this context a mask is something that hides the true identity and emotions of an individual. Another paradigm, which prevailed in ancient Greek culture, understands the face as the body part that is "offered to the other person's gaze" (unlike the dressed parts). Within this cultural framework, the word signifying both mask and face, *prosopon*, does not carry ideas of dissimulation because where there is a mask, there is no longer a face (i.e., a visible body part). Thus, the mask was viewed as abolishing, or rather replacing, the face. The contemporary adoption of masks at demonstrations cannot be fully understood unless we navigate between these two paradigms, and explore the continuum between the artefact "mask" and the "idealised" body part called the "true face," to quote Hans Belting.[6] Whereas governments have

5 Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Du masque au visage: aspects de l'identité en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012). A similar point is made in Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske Geschichte einer Form* (Paderborn: Fink 2004), 35-36.

6 Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: a Double History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

passed legislation to ban objects that "hide" the protesters' visage, the way many protesters deploy masks requires that we accept that a political mask performs a new identity, one that is provisional, but not *ipso facto* duplicitous, false or fictional.

Clarifying what a "political mask" is not can also help to circumscribe this concept. A political mask is neither a religious symbol nor a costume related to a festivity. A political mask is not an artefact invented for a specific march, because what is remarkable about political masks is their iterative appearance and transregional symbolic valence. A political mask is not a face protection worn for hygienic reasons, yet nothing prevents a surgical mask from acting as a political mask. A political mask is not an object designed to dissimulate an identity in view to committing illegal acts. This intent might be present in some activists adopting the "black bloc" tactic. Yet even for them the choice of donning a balaclava is in many cases a symbolic gesture, one that does not necessarily translate into the willingness to damage property.[7] Last but not least, a political mask is not a disguise. As an historian focusing on the prohibitions affecting the 1790 carnival has pointed out, masks hide an "identity in a visible way," whereas a "disguise asserts [...] a false identity" and its "concealment is concealed."[8]

Where do contemporary political masks come from? Political masks have few antecedents in the iconography of protest developed in the Global North. The Rebecca riots, a series of riots against taxation that took place in Wales between 1839 and 1843, are worth a mention. Some protesters wore masks and dressed like women, possibly referencing the biblical character Rebecca. The practice of cross-dressing during upheavals originates in seventeenth-century England, and stems from the folk tradition of "rough music" (also known as "charivari") loud mock parades targeting local wrongdoers. Despite the carnivalesque tenure of several rallies since the 1970s, the rationale of the Rebecca riots' masks share little with contemporary protests criticising forms of political representation. Another artefact could be considered to be a forerunner of contemporary political masks: this is the infamous costume of the Ku Klux Klan. Similar to some contemporary masks, the KKK's white hoods emerged in response to "pop culture" visuals; indeed, their main source is found in the supremacist-minded depiction of the clansmen provided in the popular film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which is loosely based on the book *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905). The clan's choreographed public parades gained purchase in the 1920s, when, on occasion, marchers replaced their faces with a hood * * * *. There is a connection between contemporary political masks and the KKK's public displays, as

7 Francis Dupuis-Déri, *Who's Afraid of the Black Blocs: Anarchy in Action around the World* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014).

8 James H. Johnson, "Versailles, Meet Les Halles: Masks, Carnival, and the French Revolution", *Representations*, 73, 1 (Winter 2001): 89-116.

we shall see in due course. This article will articulate a tentative answer to the question concerning the genealogy of contemporary political masks. It understands them as part of a collective social practice characterised by the creation of an image and an imaginary. In order to engage with this emerging visual culture, the research relies on the tools of political iconology. In so doing, it aims to reveal visual taboos, conceptual shifts and unsuspected continuities, the interpretation of which complements textual analyses and their focus on high-profile thinkers, parliamentary deliberations and juridical texts. The answer regarding the genealogy of contemporary political masks is also "tentative" because further research is required to ascertain the hypotheses discussed here. This contribution is only the first outcome of an ongoing research project.

Over the past few years, several scholars have explored the "political mask". They tend to agree that, by enacting a confrontational form of anonymity, the political mask symbolically counters the asymmetry of power within the visual economy of "surveillance society," while at the same time materialising a collective, if paradoxical, identity. Echoing this argument, readings premised on the work of Foucault and Agamben have cast the act of wearing masks at political demonstrations as a social practice advocating "dis-identification." In other words, the mask would be an artefact laying bare the coercive nature of the technologies of governance. Emerging out of a "struggle over visibility", the mask would represent an indirect repost to the notion of "visibility" as expressed, for instance, in Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. From this perspective, political masks would instantiate what Giorgio Agamben has defined as a "whatever singularity."[9] A further theoretical dyad has been mobilised to understand political masks, that pertaining to the contrast between Emmanuel Lévinas' "visage"—the locus of face-to-face encounter and, therefore, the origin of ethics—and Deleuze and Guattari's "faciality"—which emphasises the ongoing production of faces via make-up, facial expressions and masks.[10] Less philosophical in spirit, some scholars have honed in on the white mask of *V for Vendetta* (the so-called "Guy Fawkes mask") and investigated the practices associated with this artefact during the Occupy movement.[11] Others have examined this mask as a "cultural pastiche," the popularity of which is indebted to the simplified Hollywood film version of the story, rather than the more politically nuanced graphic novel of the

9 Maxime Boidy, "Visibilities in Words, Visibilities on Bodies: Academic Sociopolitical Theories of Visibility and Militant Teachings From the Genoa Summit of July 2001", *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25, 4 (2019): 1-11; Érik Bordeleau, *Foucault anonymat: essai* (Montréal: Le Quartanier, 2015).

10 Anonymous, "Fous ta cagoule, Vers une étho-politique de l'anonymat", *Lundimatin*, 9 February 2019 https://lundi.am/fous-ta-cagoule

11 Pete Lampard, "Understanding Culture in Social Movements: A Historical Materialist Approach to the Guy Fawkes Mask" (PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 2018)

same name.[12] Another strand of scholarship has discussed ski-masks: the colours of the "black bloc," the "visual activism" of Zapatistas and that of the Pussy riots, whose colourful ski-masks have been construed as an "affective generator."[13] Stimulating interpretations have relied on the work of Dario Gamboni to read the "black bloc" as a "composite image," whereas other have likened its black ski-masks to the Guy Fawkes mask and cast them as "blank images" that can assume all possible meanings and signal "the presence of an absence" in the political arena.[14] The visual inclusivity of these masks suggests an analogy between these "blank figures" and Ernst Laclau's idea of "the people" as an "empty signifier" strategically invoked by "populists." One could opine that, while the political mask materialises a "blank" signifier, the appeal to "the people" is anchored in the history of popular sovereignty, without which it would fall on deaf ears. Yet political masks, too, have an iconographic history that is far from "blank."

While acknowledging the topicality of these analyses, this article offers a different perspective. Its core hypothesis is that the current proliferation of masks can be understood as the re-emergence and re-enactment of an iconographic motif that is immanent to popular sovereignty and universal suffrage, the "faceless crowd." This is a history of archives, dreams and nightmares, of disciplinary visual mechanisms and attempts to deliver a collective subject from their disempowering frameworks.

The Faceless Crowd

In this article, the term "faceless crowd" indicates a visual motif depicting a crowd formed by individuals whose "natural" facial traits are deliberately made unrecognisable. On occasion, it is not entirely clear whether a crowd is deliberately faceless or simply too far in the background for their facial traits to appear. Yet, in most cases, the presence of this motif is unambiguous. A work by Félix Valloton offers a paradigmatic example. Although the artist repeatedly depicted riots and demonstrations, only one of his crowds is purposefully faceless, that painted in *The Crowd* * (1894). The person located in the foreground has no facial features (apart from

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12 Andreas Beer, "Just(ice) Smiling? Masks and Masking in the Occupy-Wall Street Protests", *European journal of American studies*, 13, 4 (2018): 1-14; "Ein neues Gesicht für den Dissens? Die Ästhetik der V-Maske zwischen Comic, Film und Occupy-Protesten." *kritische berichte*, 1 (2016): 96-107; Oliver Kohns, "Guy Fawkes in the 21st Century : A Contribution to the Political Iconography of Revolt", *Image [&] Narrative*, 14, 1 (2013): 89-103.

13 Carolin Behrmann, "'Indignati, guerriglia black bloc'. Zur Farbenlehre des Versammlungsrechts", *Bildwelten des Wissens*, 10, 1 (2014): 19-27; T.J. Demos, "Between Rebel Creativity and Reification: For and Against Visual Activism", *Journal of Visual Culture*, 15, 1 (2016): 1-18; Caitlin Bruce, "The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protests and Transnational Iconicity", *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 12, 1 (2014): 42-62.

14 Maxime Boidy, "Une iconologie politique du voilement. Sociologie et culture visuelles du black bloc" (PhD dissertation, Université de Strasbourg, 2014); P. Ruiz, "Revealing Power: Masked Protest and the Blank Figure," *Cultural Politics an International Journal* 9, no. 3 (January 1, 2013): 263–79, https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-2346973.

a beard), suggesting that it is not distance that has erased the people's visage.

Several studies have explored the iconography of the crowd in Impressionism, Futurism and Fascism. Yet the *longue durée* history of how and why the crowd is depicted as faceless in still images has received little attention. In what follows, this motif will not be understood as the mere illustration of a concept, but rather as a political subject, the history of which can be sourced in literature, laws and police archives, just as in still images. Pierre Rosanvallon has argued that "'the people' does not pre-exist the fact that it is invoked [...]; it has to be constructed."[15] Judith Butler has indirectly echoed this contention, maintaining that, in order to achieve a public existence, collective subjects must constantly be nominated and performed lest they become unthinkable. This performative approach has also been applied to the institutionalisation of social categories; in recent years, in particular, sociologists have conceded that the making of a social group is not only a matter of political rhetoric and administrative definitions, but also one of image.[16] The cultural history of contemporary democracy stands incomplete without this type of visual investigation, and the current worldwide use of political masks cannot be fully comprehended without exploring how the faceless crowd has been portrayed and staged since the end of the nineteenth century. While being inextricably linked to the history of contemporary democracy, this narrative reveals turning points that are not generally associated with popular sovereignty, such as 1848, 1945 and the historic dates when census suffrage was abolished or the franchise was extended to women. Before sketching the iconology of the faceless crowd, however, the origin of the phrase "faceless crowd" must be briefly outlined.

The term "faceless crowd," with some variation, exists in most European languages (*gesichtlose Masse; foule sans visage, безликая толпа, masa sin rostro, folla senza volto,* etc.). It is first attested in French and German-speaking regions at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By contrast, in Mandarin (匿名群众) and Arabic (الجماهير العادية), for instance, this syntagm appears much later and often in translations from European languages.[17] This primacy is textual, but suggests that an iconology of the faceless crowd may have also begun in Europe. The first major instance of a phrase similar to it can be found in Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), where the philosopher talks in terms of *formlose Masse*.[18]

15 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010) 24; Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

16 Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London, New York: Zed Books, 2013).

17 This research has been conducted mostly using Google Books.

18 For a detailed analysis of the notion of "the masses", Stephan Günzel, "Der Begriff der 'Masse' in Philosophie und Kulturtheorie", Dialektik, 2, 4 (2004): 117-135; *Dialektik*, 1, 5 (2005): 123-140, *Dialektik,* 2, 5 (2005) 113-130 and "Der Begriff der 'Masse' im ästhetisch-literarischen Kontext. Einige signifikante Positionen", *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 45 (2003): 151-166.

> The many as single individuals—and this is a favourite interpretation of [the term] "the people"—do indeed live together, but only as a crowd [*Menge*], i.e. a formless mass [*formlose Masse*] whose movement and activity can consequently only be elemental, irrational, barbarous, and terrifying. If we hear any further talk of "the people" as an unorganised [*unorganische*] whole, we know in advance that we can expect only generalities and one-sided declamations.[19]

The crowd as a pliant matter describes "the people" when this entity is nothing more than a mere summation of private citizens (and interests); that is, before the people are sublated by the state as the representative of the universal. In Hegel's text the metaphor of the "body politic" is latent; indeed, by defining the crowd as an "inorganic" (*unorganische*) whole, Hegel grounds his state doctrine in a biological terrain, as confirmed by another passage of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, "when it becomes part of the organism, the mass attains its interests in a legitimate and orderly manner. If, however, such means are not available, the masses will always express themselves in a barbarous manner."[20]

Hegel's "formless crowd" is reminiscent of Hobbes' "multitude" insofar as it designates a political subject *ex negativo*, by means of what is *not*, or rather *not yet*—not yet "state" for Hegel, not yet "people" for Hobbes. For Hegel, the formless mass is depicted as a "barbarous" subject suitable for shallow meditations and demagoguery. It is a living being, to be sure, but something that is marked by an inharmonious, "terrifying" (and possibly monstruous) physiognomy until it is transubstantiated into the state. Hegel taps into a set of metaphors that were common already in Ancient Greece, where the *topos* of ochlocracy (mob rule) pervaded the harangues of those who opposed the idea that power should be exercised by all male citizens (the *demos*), rather than by the rich elite (the oligarchy) or the "best ones" (the aristocracy).[21] The New Testament took these condemnations even further by having Jesus virtually sentenced to death by the crowd, which preferred sparing the life of Barabbas, a bandit/rioter/revolutionary (the gospels diverge on this point). This metaphoric continuity should not obscure the fact that Hegel speaks from within the paradigm of popular sovereignty. His concept of the crowd is set against the tensions between a census male suffrage (excluding the vast majority of the population from the vote) and a universal male suffrage, as formulated in the French Constitution of 1793, which never came into effect.

A focus on the face was still absent from Hegel's wording in 1820. This is similar to mainstream European languages; the first written instances

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19 Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 344.

20 *Ibid*. 343.

21 John S McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob: from Plato to Canetti* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

of "faceless crowd" seem to have surfaced in France, where *foule sans visage* is attested in the early 1850s (and is absent, for instance, from Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840). Semantic research also shows that this phrase gradually gained purchase in Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century. At this stage of the analysis, it is not far-fetched to surmise that the primacy given to the face reflected the emergence of photography as a medium, and the attendant hope to turn the visage into a repository of information—into an "operative portrait,"—that could be stored and processed by scientists, psychologists, and law-enforcement institutions.[22]

To be sure, the throngs of European and North American industrial cities slowly moved left the outskirts of philosophical theory and literature and arrived on the centre stage of the European political arena in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. As Michela Nacci has argued, the crowd was increasingly being constructed as a political subject in its own right, one that was defined by the same lack of rationality and conscience that Hegel had attributed to it some 60 years earlier.[23] Historians have explored the discursive emergence of the crowd in one of the most important academic disciplines of the time, crowd psychology.[24] Criminologists, sociologists, psychologists and intellectuals such as Le Bon, Sighele, Ferri, Lombroso and Tarde began describing the crowd as a ruthless, suggestible subject whose erratic behaviour could not be more different than that of a judicious, autonomous white bourgeois man. The crowd was akin to dreadful natural phenomena (storms, volcanos, tumultuous oceans, etc.), animals and their instincts, supposedly inferior populations ("primitive" people) and, not least, women, who were considered to be voluble, impulsive and "hysterical."[25] Admittedly, crowds were also capable of heroism, as in the case of an army, but even this behaviour could be dismissed as a by-product of the crowd's "herd mentality." Within the discursive framework of crowd psychology, the bourgeois white man was deemed superior to the throng, yet scholars cast a dark shadow on him as well. Indeed, one of the discipline's postulates was precisely that anyone could ravage and lynch under the "hypnotic" spell of the crowd and its ability to spread like a "contagion."

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22 Roland Meyer, *Operative Porträts: eine Bildgeschichte der Identifizierbarkeit von Lavater bis Facebook* (Konstanz: Konstanz university press, 2017).

23 Nacci Michela, *Il volto della folla: Soggetti collettivi, democrazia, individuo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019).

24 The bibliography is vast and includes Michael Gamper, Masse lesen, Masse schreiben: Eine Diskurs- und Imaginationsgeschichte der Menschenmenge 1765-1930; Olivier Bosc, *La foule criminelle: politique et criminalité dans l'Europe du tournant du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2007); Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Robert A Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage, 1975).

25 Annette Graczyk, "Die Masse als elementare Naturgewalt", in *Das Volk: Abbild, Konstruktion, Phantasma*, ed. Annette Graczyk (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), 19-30.

From the 1910s onwards, the determinism of crowd psychology—an admixture of evolutionism, misogyny, racism and climate theory—was increasingly discredited in academia. This disavowal notwithstanding, the work of Le Bon and his colleagues continued enjoying popularity and exerting influence upon intellectuals and politicians. In the 1920s, Le Bon was still quoted by Freud as a key reference, as well as by Mussolini, who claimed to have read his complete works.[26] Until the 1950s, debates on "mass society" were rarely free from the imprint of crowd psychology. Suffice it to mention José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*, which was the best-selling philosophical essay in Germany between the 1930s and the 1950s.[27] As the title of Ortega y Gasset's book suggests, the term "the masses" (and the coinage "anonymous masses") was now catching on, and it was often contrasted with the terms "crowd," "class" and "nation" by thinkers such as Kracauer, Benjamin and Canetti, as well as by sociologists including Theodor Geiger and Gerhard Colm. This shift was not merely terminological. As Jonsson's study has shown, while Le Bon's "crowd" embraced the upper classes, in the interwar years the term "the masses" was often a coded allusion to the working classes and the underclasses.[28] These verbal changes are useful hermeneutical tools for exploring the iconography of this subject. Nonetheless, the shifts that intellectuals aimed to capture were not directly reflected by the images, which tell a partly different story.

From the faceless crowd to the political mask

The research that I have conducted thus far shows the existence of five loosely chronological conceptual shifts in the Global North. 1) From the 1890s onwards the faceless crowd, often one made of bourgeois individuals, appeared as an urban political subject eliciting apprehension. 2) In the interwar years, images of a faceless crowd grew in number and popularity. At the same time, a number of visual strategies were put in place to provide a reassuring depiction of this subject. Despite significant differences in their visual idioms, painters, photographers and caricaturists contributed to the emergence of what can be called a visual taboo, which spanned the period from the initial establishment of census male suffrage to its generalisation in the Global North. This taboo can be formulated as the *inability/unwillingness to represent the faceless crowd as being capable of autonomous and positive political action*. 3) The third conceptual shift began in the early 1960s. The motif of the faceless crowd was no longer a prerogative of industrialised countries, and it began to surface in

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26 Benito Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, vol XXII, eds. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, (Florence: La Fenice, 1954), 156. Mussolini's claim dates from 1926.

27 Axel Schildt, *Moderne Zeiten: Freizeit, Massenmedien und "Zeitgeist" in der Bundesrepublik der 50er Jahre* (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1995), 327-328.

28 Stefan Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

different parts of the world as part of the leftist imagery. By the late 1960s, however, these visualisations increasingly conjured a political subject that was autonomous and invested with a constructive political agenda. 4) Starting in the late 1960s, some artists/activists began not only to portray the faceless crowd, but to perform it as well. In the 1980s, the use of the political mask gained momentum only to culminate with the iconic ski-masks of the Zapatistas. 5) The last shift took place around 2008 and it is inextricably linked to the digital images circulated on social media, which diversified the inventory of masks and enabled protesters in hundreds of cities around the world to coordinate demonstrations such as the Million Mask March.

The images examined here provide examples of this shifting iconography from the first to the fourth shifts as outlined above. Their treatment, and the theoretical meditations accompanying them, are admittedly cursory. My goal is not to offer conclusive evidence of my theses, but rather to outline the provisional founding of a research project that aims not only to describe the main tendencies inherent to this iconography, but also to articulate in-depth, innovative readings of some little-known artworks.

1) *The emergence of an icon and a collective subjec*t. Starting in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the faceless crowd begins to appear in paintings. The role of this medium is not accidental, and reflects the emergence of crowd psychology, which initially represented an elitist discourse in the sense that it foregrounded a warning by and for the conservative- and socialist-minded upper and middle classes. Despite the fact that the categories and metaphors of crowd psychology percolated to the intellectual and artistic life of European countries—and indeed some painters personally knew its theorists—it would be inaccurate to argue that the visual conventions surrounding the faceless crowd emerged in response to crowd psychology.[29] Rather, both artists and "psychologists" were part of the same cultural environment, and one does not need to posit a direct causal relationship. The reception of Monet's *Le Boulevard des Capucines* * (1873) exemplarily shows that, even before the emergence of the representational codes that came to define of the faceless crowd (Monet's painting does not overtly suggest apprehension and his crowd cannot be considered deliberately "faceless"), the moral categories and anxieties of crowd psychology were already grafted onto his cityscape. At the first exhibition of the Impressionists, art critic Louis Leroy expressed his shock at the view of the indistinguishable people of Monet's crowd. By relying on the metaphorical field of crowd psychology, which was then still in its gestation, Leroy compared the individuals in the painting to anonymous

29 Christine Poggi, "Mass, Pack, and Mob. Art in the Age of the Crowd", in *Crowds*, eds. Jeffrey Thompson Schnapp; Matthew Tiews (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 159-202, see endnote 31, on page 404.

"specks in the marble" and feared that a prolonged exposure to such a dehumanising portrayal of human beings might cause an apoplexy.[30]

Two decades later, as seen in the case of Futurist artist Boccioni and expressionist painter Ensor, the motif of the faceless crowd emerged with a tangible power. Ensor painted several works that grant a masked crowd the role of protagonist.[31] In his *Self-Portrait with Masks* (1899) *
the contrast between masked crowd and individual could not be more striking. The crowd is the locus of the false, the grotesque, the inauthentic. The individual arises from this faceless and bodiless mass to claim his right to beauty and autonomy. In *Christ's Entry Into Brussels* (1889) *, the socialist slogans are ridiculed, and the procession turns into a carnival masquerade. When Ensor makes a parody of the king, however, the crowd becomes a positive actor. This is the case with *Belgium in the Nineteenth Century* *, a painting that overturns the iconographic model proposed by Hobbes on the frontispiece of *Leviathan* *. This suggests that when Ensor postulated for the crowd the possibility of a positive political action—here the demand of universal suffrage—he intentionally avoided the depiction of a faceless crowd. The case of Boccioni mirrors a similar dynamic. As Christine Poggi has argued, two paintings Boccioni made between 1908 and 1911, *Crowd Surrounding High Equestrian Monument* * and *Riot* *, echoed the ideas of crowd psychology.[32] His faceless crowds are fanatical and violent subjects. Their features encapsulate an aspect often highlighted by Le Bon and other theorists: the madness of the crowd concerns all social classes. The crowd prostrated in front of the equestrian monument is a distinctively bourgeois crowd that acts much like what were "primitives," thereby testifying to the regression of the "civilised man"'s mind to the primordial stages of humanity. (The same credulous faceless crowd was also depicted by Hans Windisch in *Das Idol* on a 1919 front cover of the anarchist publication *Der Einzige*.) In Boccioni's crowds, the closer one gets to the idol the less recognisable the visages become; the more instinctive the action in the fray, the more the faces blend into the mass of colours, or the paper is left blank. In so doing, Boccioni devised a fairly intuitive semantic strategy: if the facial traits acted as the identifying features of a person, and thereby the proof of its moral responsibility, their erasure could not but signal a form of debasement that prefigurated promiscuity, chaos and unrest. In both Ensor and Boccioni, the symbolic prominence of the face in the crowd can be connected to the "scientific" work of figures such as Lombroso and Alphonse Bertillon (a police officer), who claimed that an informed biometric analysis would allow the authorities to predict whether a criminal would re-offend. Insofar

30 Louis Leroy, "L'Exposition des impressionnistes", *Le Charivari*, 25 avril 1874 https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Exhibition_of_the_Impressionists.

31 Stefan Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy: the Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2013), 69-117.

32 Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: the Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton Princeton University Press, 2009), Chapter 2.

as the propensity to delinquency was deemed to be innate, the correct interpretation of a nose, a mandible or even a tattoo would indicate whether an inmate was a "born criminal". A faceless crowd, therefore, was a crowd in which anthropometry was unable to extract the information produced by "positive science."

Several depictions of the working class by far-left artists such as Eugène Laermens *, Theophile-Alexandre Steinlein * and Jules Grandjouan * *, and the jubilant crowd of Mitschke-Collande *, come close to depicting a faceless crowd. Yet artists routinely opened up a breach in the compact mass, usually in the foreground or through a "divine" ray of light. This semantic strategy enabled them to show some faces, and infuse the endless expanse of bodies with a touch of "humanity" that was coded by the epiphany of the visage and its ability to elicit empathy in the viewer. It is only in *Demonstration* (1905)* that Steinlein seems to blur deliberately the individual facial traits in order to let the faceless crowd of a demonstration invade the public space. This motif is reiterated by Hans Richter's *Revolution* *(1918) (an allusion to the German revolution of 1918) where a faceless crowd, this time without flags, occupies the streets. Departing from Steinlein's unambiguous visual statement, Richter lets the viewer decide whether this faceless collective subject will act as a spectator or merely as an actor in the ensuing events.

2) *The interwar years and the "capture" of a subject*. It has been widely noted that crowds, or rather "the masses", constituted a leitmotif of the interwar years both in fascist-elitist discourses and those of the Left. It is generally agreed that it was no longer the medium of painting that best embodied the spirit of this new political subject, but rather photography and, most importantly, cinema. As Walter Benjamin famously argued in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the new "techniques of reproduction" constituted a sort mirror for the crowds, and allowed for what can be described as their subjectivation. According to Benjamin, this process was mediated, paradoxical as it may seem, by the masses' "faces."

> In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves [*sieht die Masse sich selbst ins Gesicht*]. This process [...] is intimately connected with the development of the techniques of reproduction and photography. Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye.[33]

At a time when the social structures of the Old Regime were collapsing and male suffrage was being established in the Global North, this

33 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1935), 26

panoptic mechanical eye came to dominate the visualisation of what Jonsson has defined as "post-individual" masses.[34] Yet the visual taboo enunciated above was not countered. From the 1910s onwards, when the faceless crowd was not outright dismissed as a "bunch of zeros" (think of the equation of "faceless" with a total lack of intellection in Werner Heldt's 1933-1935 *Rally (Parade of Zeros)**), this collective subject was depicted in such a way as to indicate its inability to express a concerted and autonomous political will. In Europe, there emerged four (at times overlapping) iconographic strategies, or rather visual dispositifs. Despite their heterogeneity, their instantiation shared a common goal. This was to provide reassuring, productive images of the crowd, turning its advent onto the stage of history into an unescapable necessity that did not *ipso facto* imply the "decline of the West." The fours visual dispositifs can be summarised as follows.

2.1) A faceless crowd active on the political scene could be represented in a positive light if it was the victim of repression. This motif obliquely appears in *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (1910-1911)* and it is discernible in the woodcut made by Richard Seewald for the anarchist magazine *Revolution**. The crowd is far from the viewer, but the faces of the protesters are deliberately replaced by identical squares. The motif of the faceless crowd as a symbol of suffering humanity dates back at least to two paintings and the plaster that Honoré Daumier devoted to the topic of "the fugitives" **. As will be demonstrated, the motif of sorrow was to become extremely productive in the 1960s when the image of the faceless crowds would break the visual taboo that initially characterised its representation.

2.2) The faceless crowd could take the form of an army, which was typically depicted through the reiteration of the same figure or a silhouette * * *. The army as a faceless group of people had already been used by Bonnard in *The Parade Ground* (1890)*, but his antimilitarism was now turned on its head, as in this visual dispositif depersonalisation symbolised obedience. This iconography also corroborated one of crowd psychology's core contentions, namely that the crowd had a "natural" propensity for imitation. Meanwhile, this visual language often "nationalised the masses", bearing out the idea that crowds should never be left unguided; otherwise, they would loot, rape or kill indiscriminately.[35] It is within this framework that the hoods of the 1920's Ku Klux Klan should be understood. For all their religious undertones, the clansmen's political masks were derived from the cavalry of *The Birth of a Nation*, where the costume acted as a paramilitary uniform.

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34 Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy*.

35 George L Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic wars through the Third Reich* (New York: H. Fertig, 2001).

2.3) The faceless crowd could be portrayed positively if it featured submissiveness and embodied productivism, notably by highlighting pleasant geometric shapes formed by the coordinated action of a large number of human bodies. Despite some rather schematic parallels, Kracauer's 1927 essay "The Ornament of the Masses" is, to date, the most cogent attempt to read this omnipresent motif and its both oppressive and emancipatory implications. While recalling Hegel's idea of the crowd as a pliant matter, the depiction of the "masses" in the guise of a human ornament (as in Pierre Ichac's photographs of Sokol gymnastics exercises*) rendered individual faces irrelevant and hence virtually invisible, despite the fact that this representation of the crowd relied on photography. The ornament of the masses boomed in the 1920s, when it mostly came to evoke the integration of individuals in a harmonic whole. In contrast to the crowd psychologists' descriptions, this characterised the faceless crowd as orderly and willing to accept the *diktats* of the state, industry or existing socialism. In Rodchenko's photographs* of athletic parades, the faceless crowd emerges even in the absence of masks, panoramic perspectives and blurred images, by the sheer similarity of the athletes' identically shaved faces.

2.4) In the interwar years the representation of the crowd also followed the iconography devised by Abraham Bosse and Hobbes for the frontispiece of *Leviathan* in 1651, the twentieth-century legacy of which has been outlined by Bredekamp * * * * *.[36] This subject was made faceless by downsizing its members, and granting the surmounting body of the leader absolute primacy. For instance, an "oceanic" faceless crowd was a mainstay of Fascist image politics.[37] People could take shelter in the "body politics" of Mussolini *, whose sovereign power was often depicted, unlike that of Hitler, as "the incorporation of a multiplicity".[38]

Deviations from these overarching dispositifs rarely occurred. However, incipient attempts to challenge them can be found in some linocuts produced by the artists gravitating around the Colognes Progressives, an informal grouping launched in the aftermath of World War I. Hans Schmitz's *Die Masse* (1923)*, where the schematic and identical visages turn into masks, or Gerd Arntz's faceless and yet diverse crowds* (as well as the crowds Arntz subsequently made for infographics) still await a sustained analysis exploring their original position within the *longue durée* history of this iconography. An only apparent departure from these four visual dispositifs is also seen in a poster* crafted by the Bolshevik camp during the Russian Civil War. The poster depicts a group of robber barons, whose "masks" are in the clock, as it were. Listing them in order

36 Horst Bredekamp, *Thomas Hobbes - Der Leviathan: Das Urbild des modernen Staates und seine Gegenbilder. 1651-2001* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001).

37 Jeffrey Schnapp, "The Mass Panorama", *Modernism/modernity*, 9, 2 (April 2002): 1-39.

38 Susanne von Falkenhausen, "Vom 'Ballhausschwur' zum 'Duce' Visuelle Repräsentation von Volkssouveränität zwischen Demokratie und Autokratie", in *Das Volk*, ed. Graczyk, 3-17.

of disappearance from the political scene, the object depicts Nicholas II, Kerensky, Kornilov, Kolchak, Yudenich, Denikin, Wrangel and "Pan" (the Polish army), announcing that the capitalists' public personas had reached their "final hour."

3) *The end of a visual taboo*. By the 1960s, suffrage was extended to women almost everywhere in the Global North, and most of the European Empires had disintegrated. At this stage of the research, it is still impossible to identify an unequivocal link between these novel political circumstances and the subsequent shifts in the iconography of the faceless crowd. Yet, it is hardly coincidental that the increasingly widespread acceptance (at least formally) of universal suffrage paralleled the creation of novel images of the faceless crowd. The rhetoric of the crowd as a potentially criminal subject persisted, and the recourse to a faceless or a grotesque heap of faces often coded such a damning verdict. In 1963, the hideous crowd of Argentinian artist Noé Luis Felipe voted for "blind force"*, recalling Ensor's masks or the faceless crowd, driven by base instincts and misguided by agent provocateurs concealed in its ranks, that had been portrayed by Orozco in *The Masses* (1935)*. Visual strategies such as the "ornament of the masses" (e.g., in a poster of May-June 1968*) and the iconography of *Leviathan* persisted. In particular, Maoist China invited the deployment of this iconography in Europe, possibly suggesting the artists' prejudice that individual personality was less pronounced in a largely agricultural society. One can think of Thomas Bayrle's ingenious Mao* (1966) and Mario Ceroli's *China**.

However, new pictures of faceless crowds were coming to full fruition outside of the framework that had marked its appearance in the previous 70 years. Spain was one of the first countries where artists experimented with new codes. Painters such as Joan Antoni Toledo, Saura, Rafael Canogar, Juan Genovés and Equipo Crónica shaped a repertoire of faceless crowds that bestowed positive political agency upon them, relapsing neither into the "ornament of the masses" nor the visual semantic of *Leviathan*. In fact, the departure from this visual trope constitutes the main theme of Toledo's lithograph *Caesar** where the faceless crowd, conjured by the iteration of the same silhouette, is located above the sovereign and opposes his will. Nevertheless, one of the four visual dispositifs discussed above did act as a repository of ideas: the faceless crowd as a victim. From the political prisoners of Augustí Ibarrola* to Genovés (who would paint faceless crowds for most of his life*), several depictions of faceless crowds were initially premised on this model.

Yet, a confrontational faceless crowd slowly emerged in the late 1960s. An example of this is Genovés's *The Wait**. On the frontispiece of *Leviathan*, the crowd is fully incorporated into the body of the sovereign and stares at his towering face. On the contrary, the throng of *The Wait* is not subsumed by a superior entity, but rather looks out at the spectator. However,

the sovereign did not disappear, but is only concealed, because its power operates within regimes of visuality that are no longer Hobbes's. Here the people are observed through what can be construed as a telephoto lens, a device that alludes to the gaze of power in Genovés' late 1960's production. Another feature of his assembled people contradicts previous representation of faceless crowds. They do not overstep the white line, a concerted decision that proves its autonomy and self-control while facing its invisible opponent. Unlike most of Genovés' subsequent works, the throng of *The Wait* is virtually faceless, but not homogeneous, as every character has individual features. A productive tension is at play here, one that tries to amalgamate anonymity and social differences, and which tentatively challenges the iconology of the faceless crowd's victimhood. The motif of the faceless crowd as being capable of halting to form a line would surface again in one of the final scenes of the film *V for Vendetta*; this same action precedes the collective gesture of the crowd removing their white masks so as to unveil the numerous and diverse human faces behind them.

Examining Equipo Crónica's *Demonstration. Or Quantity becomes Quality** (1966) within the history of this iconography allows for a new understanding of this painting. Deliberately or not, the Spanish duo relied on a graphic conceit, the iteration of the grainy picture of a crowd, that had been pioneered by 1930's artists who translated Mussolini's state-centred vision of the individual and his despise of "the masses" into images.[39] In a graphic tour de force* published by architectural partnership BBPR, the pictures of the masses provide a modernist version of the iconographic model invented by Hobbes (the final part of Mussolini's quote reads, "we consider individuals first and foremost from the perspective of their function within the state"). The extent to which this iconography of the crowd also informed the Francoist regime requires further research. What is certain is that Equipo Crónica had contact with Italy (namely with communist art critic Mario De Micheli); in fact, the group's first "post-colonial" faceless crowd—the repetition of the same picture of jubilant black men—was published on the front cover of the Italian art magazine, *D'Ars Agency**.

With regard to this iconography, the primacy of Spain can probably be explained. As I have argued in a previous publication, this manifold visual language testified to both the attempt of circumventing censorship (depicting crowds hosting red flags was inconceivable under Franco) and the need to broaden the anti-Franco camp, whose epicentre was moving from the exiles in France towards the Iberian Peninsula in the 1960s.[40] For all its diversity, in Spain the image of the faceless crowd generally repre

39 Ishay Landa, *Fascism and the Masses: The Revolt Against the Last Humans, 1848–1945*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351179997.

40 Jacopo Galimberti, *Individuals against Individualism. Western European Art Collectives (1956-1969)* (Liverpool University Press, 2017).

sented a cautious, if cunning, way to visualise an oppositional subjectivity that was making itself manifest in civil society, factories and mines.

In France, an artist who had been exposed to the work of Equipo Crónica, Gérard Fromanger, began to appropriate this motif and contributed to its popularisation. His first faceless crowds—found in the series *The Red**—emerged from the 1968 movement and updated the motif established by Steinlein's *Demonstration* in 1905. From 1971 onwards, particularly through the series *Boulevard des italiens* **, Fromanger's faceless crowds became both more allusive and inclusive, but not less political in spirit, as they were embedded in the painter's intellectual acquaintances in the far-left Parisian milieu, from the Salon de la Jeune Peinture to Deleuze and Foucault. Partly via Paris, this imagery spread to the pages of *The Tricontinental,* a leftist magazine founded after the Tricontinental Conference in Havana (1966), and acting as the official outlet of the OSPAAAL, the anti-imperialist, socialist Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In and around the OSPAAAL hundreds of militant posters were created. Designed by Cuban artist Alfredo G. Rostgaard, two of them participated in the attempt to reformulate the image of the faceless crowd. Both posters represent guerrillas and are indebted to the motif of the faceless crowd as an army. But while the 1971 poster* relies on the arc of a rainbow to infuse this canonical icon with a pop nuance, the second*, made in 1969, associates the faceless crowd with three masks. From the 1930s, the USSR's graphic artists had pioneered an "universalising" iconography of the masses that emphasised the ethnic heterogeneity of the proletariat under the guidance of a Leviathan-like Stalin * *. In line with the political agenda of the Tricontinental, Alfredo G. Rostgaard also aimed to materialise a multi-ethnic population, but his three figures are presented like masks offered to a guerrilla whose visage is a blank silhouette—one of the most common visual tropes for portraying a faceless crowd.

4) *Performing the faceless crowd*. At the end of the 1960s, the iconography of the faceless crowd witnessed a further shift. If, until this point, the subject was generally depicted from an exterior vantage point, in the 1970s and 1980s, a growing number of demonstrators began to embody the faceless crowd, and the most common way of "performing" this subject was by actually wearing a mask. The black bloc became a strategy of action in the 1980s. However, it was a group of artists who first organised a march that starkly resembled a "black bloc". This performance took place in Manhattan in 1967, and was the brainchild of the collective Black Mask. Founded by artists/activists influenced by Dadaism and the Situationist International, the group's "black mask" referenced popular depictions of petty thieves and "bandits." In so doing, the group infused the faceless crowd with a captivating criminal aura, and vice versa. The 25 men hoisted banners against Wall Street and enacted an incendiary imaginary that shared nothing with that of the Civil Rights and the workers' movements.

An issue* of their magazine showed that their black ski-masks originated as much in Franz Fanon's 1952 book *Black Skin White Mask* as in the black hoods of Fantomâs. Created in the 1900s, this crime fiction criminal exercised a lasting fascination on avant-garde artists throughout his 50-year long saga. The character's masks and protean ability to change face were initially linked, as Dominique Kalifa has demonstrated, to the fears of the "dangerous classes" in turn-of-the-century Paris. However, if the masks of Fantomâs concealed a bourgeois sociopath (which echoed the scripts of crowd psychology), the march of Black Mask choreographed a politicised faceless crowd that was incommensurable with "the system," and defied its taboos surrounding the visual rhetoric of rallies and democratic representation.

A further example of protesters enacting a faceless crowd can be found in the 1977 movement in Italy. The "creative wing" of this movement, particularly the loose grouping of pranksters and performers that came to be called Metropolitan Indians, often adopted the white facial make-up* of mime artists. During their first press conference, one of them donned a white mask* and refused to show his face in front of the journalists. He identified himself as "Gandalf the Purple" and declared that he was speaking "in a personal capacity, and therefore" (he was quick to add) "in the name of", a list of farcical collectives ("the Red Laughter Cells," "the EAPM, the Elusive and Absent Political Movement", etc.) that existed but were often made of just one person.[41] This post-individualist political statement, which blurred the distinction between person and group, between representative and represented, relied on the mask to create a sort of visual synecdoche. The artefact allowed the "spokesperson" to operate a transition from the one to the many, who were absent but conceptually present via his blank face. This shift also characterised the iconic ski-masks of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, which are part of the imagery of radical democracy and post-individual leadership that emerged alongside the alterglobalist movement. As a propaganda video* featuring Marcos clarifies, the Zapatista's ski-masks are constructed as a visual tool to strike a balance between inclusiveness, diversity and unity of intents. Possibly the first masked political leader, what Marcos describes as "his photograph" is actually a mirror directed towards the camera, and the ominous black political masks donned by the people are taken off in order to unveil a smiling humanity—Marcos' only "true" image.

41 Author's interview with Olivier Turquet (Gandalf the Purple), 23 October 2020.

Conclusion

Since 2008, the mask has become part of the repertoire of political demonstrations. This article, which is the provisional outcome of an ongoing research project, formulates some hypotheses in order to explore the genealogy of the current widespread utilisation of "political masks." In particular, this examination has located this manifold symbol within the history of the "faceless crowd", an image, a political subject and a catalysator of fears, the iconography of which still requires sustained analysis. A tentative attempt has been undertaken to develop a conceptual grid upon which to map the five shifts that this iconography has experienced. First, the faceless crowd emerged in the late nineteenth century in the same cultural context that shaped crowd psychology. Second, the faceless crowd was "captured" in a set of four visual dispositifs in the interwar years. Third, some artists broke the visual taboo that had characterised the iconography of the faceless crowd over the previous 70 years. In the 1960s, the faceless crowd began to be represented as an autonomous political subject. Fourth, the faceless crowd was not only depicted in a positive light but also performed, anticipating the fifth phase of this iconography, which was not examined in this article, and coincides with the re-enactment of the faceless crowd via the political mask, a phenomenon that has marked the past 12 years.

This genealogy suggests conceptual continuities that still need to be more fully developed. However, they are undoubtedly embedded in the history of popular sovereignty, as well as in that of an elitist rhetoric that no longer foregrounds the abashedly classist and racist arguments that typified it before World War II, but which is increasingly influential today when the economy is, to quote Quinn Slobodian, "encased" in a bid to protect it from the "encroachment" of democratic elections and decision making.[42] In a context where politics has become increasingly mediated by digital images, examining the iconography of the faceless crowd provides an innovative perspective on an elusive political subject that accompanies, almost like a moot point, the slow and conflictual emergence of universal suffrage. By concentrating on its current and past visual instantiations, this investigation aims to open new avenues for the understanding of the recent, or perhaps structural, crisis of representative democracy.

42 Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: the End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

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