

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Mob

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Charles Green,
The Gordon Riots,
1896

How do you make sense of a mob?
How do you represent a mob?



Reflective Question

Have you ever been part of a mob or a riot?

If not a mob or a riot, how about a large protest or other “peaceful” event?

- ▶ Why were you there?
- ▶ What was your relation to the other people who were there?
- ▶ Did you feel connected to them? Why or why not?
- ▶ What emotions did you feel? Were they the same as others were feeling?
- ▶ How much did you feel like you were in “control” of your experience?



The “gilets jaunes” in Paris, 2018-19

Understanding the Mob

Crowd Psychology?

- ▶ Not available until late 19th Century.
- ▶ First major work: Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des Foules* (1895)
 - ▶ More than 50 years after *Barnaby Rudge*.



Resources for Dickens

- ▶ Edmund Burke and Thomas Carlyle on the French Revolution.
- ▶ Historical sources on the Gordon Riots (especially Holcroft's 1780 account).
- ▶ His own experiences (witnessing a public execution in 1840—a crowd he wrote about in a published letter a few years later).

And what did all this add up to?

Overall, I do not see an overarching “theory” of the Mob in these chapters.

- rather, a kaleidoscope of shifting perspectives and representations.
 - multiple ways of looking and describing these experiences.
- Which is another way of say that, in this novel, there are—at least!—thirteen ways of looking at a Mob.

I-III. What is a *Mob like*?

A collection of animals?

Storming of the Maypole: “more men still—more, more, more—swarming on like insects” (Ch 54)

[Clear echo of Carlyle here: “Enthusiasm in general means simply excessive Congregating—*Schwärmerey*, or *Swarming*” (*French Revolution*)]

Or is it itself an animal—a monster?

“The mob raged and roared, like a mad monster as it was” (Ch 49).

Or is it something like a force of nature?

“it is as difficult to follow to its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable, or more cruel” (Ch 52)

Or all three at the same time?

“the rioters having previously, in small parties, prevented the lighting of the street lamps, rose **like a great sea**; and that in so many places at once, and with such inconceivable fury, that those who had the direction of the troops knew not, at first, where to turn or what to do. One after another, new fires blazed up in every quarter of the town, as though it were the intention of the insurgents to wrap the city in a circle of flames, which, contracting by degrees, should burn the whole to ashes; the crowd **swarmed and roared** in every street” (Ch. 67).

What do these metaphors offer us? What are they trying to capture? What effects do they have?

What do the metaphors have in common?

What are the differences? Are they important?

IV-VI. Is the Mob spontaneous? Organic? Organized?

“A mob is usually a creature of very mysterious existence, particularly in a large city. Where it comes from or whither it goes, few men can tell. Assembling and dispersing with equal suddenness, it is as difficult to follow to its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable, or more cruel.

The people who were boisterous at Westminster upon the Friday morning, and were eagerly bent upon the work of devastation in Duke Street and Warwick Street at night, were, in the mass, the same. Allowing for the chance accessions of which any crowd is morally sure in a town where there must always be a large number of idle and profligate persons, one and the same mob was at both places. Yet they spread themselves in various directions when they dispersed in the afternoon, made no appointment for reassembling, had no definite purpose or design, and indeed, for anything they knew, were scattered beyond the hope of future union.” (Ch 52)

And yet, what are we to make of Gashford and his machinations in Ch. 52? Clearly there is organization involved.

And this raises the question of leadership. Does the mob bend to will? Can it be organized by will? Or is it a collective will?

Gashford as instigator/organizer

“As the main body filed off from this scene of action, and passed down Welbeck Street, they came upon Gashford, who had been a witness of their proceedings, and was walking stealthily along the pavement. Keeping up with him, and yet not seeming to speak, Hugh muttered in his ear:

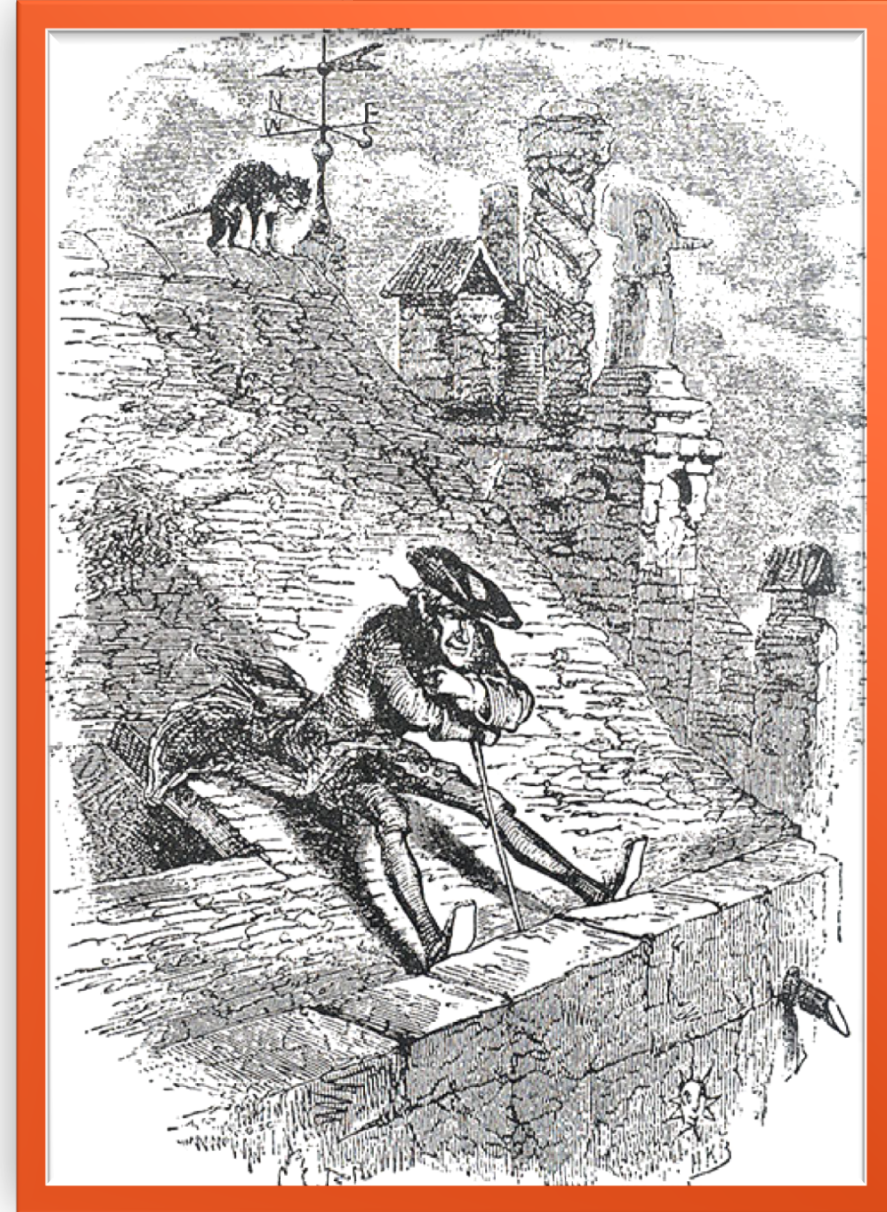
‘Is this better, master?’

‘No,’ said Gashford. ‘It is not.’

‘What would you have?’ said Hugh. ‘Fevers are never at their height at once. They must get on by degrees.’

‘I would have you,’ said Gashford, pinching his arm with such malevolence that his nails seemed to meet in the skin; ‘I would have you put some meaning into your work. Fools! Can you make no better bonfires than of rags and scraps? Can you burn nothing whole?’

‘A little patience, master,’ said Hugh. ‘Wait but a few hours, and you shall see. Look for a redness in the sky, to-morrow night.’” (Ch 52)



Hugh as leader

“Full twenty times, the rioters, headed by one man who wielded an axe in his right hand, and bestrode a brewer’s horse of great size and strength, caparisoned with fetters taken out of Newgate, which clanked and jingled as he went, made an attempt to force a passage at this point, and fire the vintner’s house. Full twenty times they were repulsed with loss of life, and still came back again; and though the fellow at their head was marked and singled out by all, and was a conspicuous object as the only rioter on horseback, not a man could hit him. So surely as the smoke cleared away, so surely there was he; calling hoarsely to his companions, brandishing his axe above his head, and dashing on as though he bore a charmed life, and was proof against ball and powder.

This man was Hugh; and in every part of the riot, he was seen. He headed two attacks upon the Bank, helped to break open the Toll-houses on Blackfriars Bridge, and cast the money into the street: fired two of the prisons with his own hand: was here, and there, and everywhere—always foremost—always active—striking at the soldiers, cheering on the crowd, making his horse’s iron music heard through all the yell and uproar: but never hurt or stopped. Turn him at one place, and he made a new struggle in another; force him to retreat at this point, and he advanced on that, directly. Driven from Holborn for the twentieth time, he rode at the head of a great crowd straight upon Saint Paul’s, attacked a guard of soldiers who kept watch over a body of prisoners within the iron railings, forced them to retreat, rescued the men they had in custody, and with this accession to his party, came back again, mad with liquor and excitement, and hallooing them on like a demon.” (Ch 67)

Why does the question of organization and leadership matter?

How does it change the character of the mob? How does it affect its representation?

VII-VIII. Should we view the Mob as a singular mass? Or as individuals?

One of the key tensions or dialectics in play in this chapter: a constant oscillation between the mob as a “creature” and the mob as a collection of individuals.

- ▶ Singular mass: as we’ve already seen, the novel regularly describes and metaphorizes it collectively: creature, monster, sea, swarm, etc.
- ▶ But, at the same time, there are multiple scenes—some of the strongest, I would argue—where the novel zooms in on the particulars of the mob. I would like us to look at one such scene: the destruction of the Maypole.



John stared round at the mass of faces—some grinning, some fierce, some lighted up by torches, some indistinct, some dusky and shadowy: some looking at him, some at his house, some at each other [...].

Yes. Here was the bar—the bar that the boldest never entered without special invitation—the sanctuary, the mystery, the hallowed ground: here it was, crammed with men, clubs, sticks, torches, pistols; filled with a deafening noise, oaths, shouts, screams, hootings; changed all at once into a bear-garden, a madhouse, an infernal temple: men darting in and out, by door and window, smashing the glass, turning the taps, drinking liquor out of China punchbowls, sitting astride of casks, smoking private and personal pipes, cutting down the sacred grove of lemons, hacking and hewing at the celebrated cheese, breaking open inviolable drawers, putting things in their pockets which didn't belong to them, dividing his own money before his own eyes, wantonly wasting, breaking, pulling down and tearing up: nothing quiet, nothing private: men everywhere—above, below, overhead, in the bedrooms, in the kitchen, in the yard, in the stables—clambering in at windows when there were doors wide open; dropping out of windows when the stairs were handy; leaping over the bannisters into chasms of passages: new faces and figures presenting themselves every instant—some yelling, some singing, some fighting, some breaking glass and crockery, some laying the dust with the liquor they couldn't drink, some ringing the bells till they pulled them down, others beating them with pokers till they beat them into fragments: more men still—more, more, more—swarming on like insects: noise, smoke, light, darkness, frolic, anger, laughter, groans, plunder, fear, and ruin! (Ch 54)

We get the “mass” and the “swarm” here, but we get more specificity and particularization.

How does this passage “zoom in” on the mob?

How does Dickens begin to “individualize” here?

And what is the overall effect in the passage?

IX-X. What does the *Mob want*?

What *motive* (or motives) is (are) driving the Mob?

General motives:

“The great mass never reasoned or thought at all, but were stimulated by their own headlong passions, by poverty, by ignorance, by the love of mischief, and the hope of plunder.” (Ch 53)

Lack of motivation entirely:

“sober workmen, going home from their day’s labour, were seen to cast down their baskets of tools and become rioters in an instant; mere boys on errands did the like. In a word, a moral plague ran through the city. The noise, and hurry, and excitement, had for hundreds and hundreds an attraction they had no firmness to resist. The contagion spread like a dread fever: an infectious madness, as yet not near its height, seized on new victims every hour, and society began to tremble at their ravings.” (Ch 53)

But there are also some specific motives that appear in places. Think of the motives of Simon and Hugh. And let’s look at the Newgate scene.

“It was perfectly notorious to the assemblage that the largest body, which comprehended about two-thirds of the whole, was designed for the attack on Newgate. It comprehended all the rioters who had been conspicuous in any of their former proceedings; all those whom they recommended as daring hands and fit for the work; all those whose companions had been taken in the riots; and a great number of people who were relatives or friends of felons in the jail. This last class included, not only the most desperate and utterly abandoned villains in London, but some who were comparatively innocent. There was more than one woman there, disguised in man’s attire, and bent upon the rescue of a child or brother. There were the two sons of a man who lay under sentence of death, and who was to be executed along with three others, on the next day but one. There was a great party of boys whose fellow-pickpockets were in the prison; and at the skirts of all, a score of miserable women, outcasts from the world, seeking to release some other fallen creature as miserable as themselves, or moved by a general sympathy perhaps—God knows—with all who were without hope, and wretched.” (Ch 63)

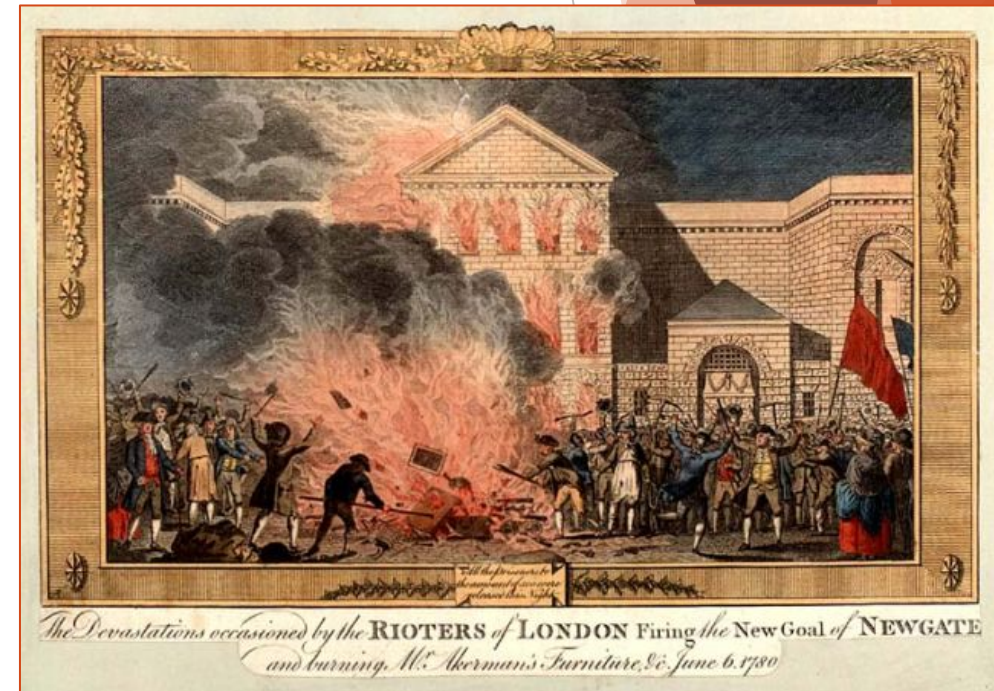
Things are getting complicated.

Why does this matter?

What effect does that have on our ability to make sense of the mob?

What effect does that have on our ability to see them as a mob?

How can we hold lack of motives, general motives, and specific motives together in these chapters?



XI. What does the Mob *feel*?

“The besiegers being now in complete possession of the house, spread themselves over it from garret to cellar, and plied their demon labours fiercely. While some small parties kindled bonfires underneath the windows, others broke up the furniture and cast the fragments down to feed the flames below; where the apertures in the wall (windows no longer) were large enough, they threw out tables, chests of drawers, beds, mirrors, pictures, and flung them whole into the fire; while every fresh addition to the blazing masses was received with shouts, and howls, and yells, which added new and dismal terrors to the conflagration. Those who had axes and had spent their fury on the movables, chopped and tore down the doors and window frames, broke up the flooring, hewed away the rafters, and buried men who lingered in the upper rooms, in heaps of ruins. Some searched the drawers, the chests, the boxes, writing-desks, and closets, for jewels, plate, and money; while others, less mindful of gain and more mad for destruction, cast their whole contents into the courtyard without examination, and called to those below, to heap them on the blaze. Men who had been into the cellars, and had staved the casks, rushed to and fro stark mad, setting fire to all they saw—often to the dresses of their own friends—and kindling the building in so many parts that some had no time for escape, and were seen, with drooping hands and blackened faces, hanging senseless on the window-sills to which they had crawled, until they were sucked and drawn into the burning gulf. The more the fire crackled and raged, the wilder and more cruel the men grew; as though moving in that element they became fiends, and changed their earthly nature for the qualities that give delight in hell.

[...]

If Bedlam gates had been flung wide open, there would not have issued forth such maniacs as the frenzy of that night had made. There were men there, who danced and trampled on the beds of flowers as though they trod down human enemies, and wrenched them from the stalks, like savages who twisted human necks. There were men who cast their lighted torches in the air, and suffered them to fall upon their heads and faces, blistering the skin with deep unseemly burns. There were men who rushed up to the fire, and paddled in it with their hands as if in water; and others who were restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their deadly longing. On the skull of one drunken lad—not twenty, by his looks—who lay upon the ground with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, white hot; melting his head like wax. When the scattered parties were collected, men—living yet, but singed as with hot irons—were plucked out of the cellars, and carried off upon the shoulders of others, who strove to wake them as they went along, with ribald jokes, and left them, dead, in the passages of hospitals. But of all the howling throng not one learnt mercy from, or sickened at, these sights; nor was the fierce, besotted, senseless rage of one man glutted.” (Ch 55)

What emotions do we see here? Are they the only emotions we encounter in the Mob in these chapters?

Let's think back to the Newgate passage:

“There was more than one woman there, disguised in man's attire, and bent upon the rescue of a child or brother.”

“a score of miserable women, outcasts from the world, seeking to release some other fallen creature as miserable as themselves, or moved by a general sympathy perhaps—God knows—with all who were without hope, and wretched.”

And a part of that scene that we hadn't looked at:

“But the anguish and suffering of the two sons of one of these [condemned] men, when they heard, or fancied that they heard, their father's voice, is past description. After wringing their hands and rushing to and fro as if they were stark mad, one mounted on the shoulders of his brother, and tried to clamber up the face of the high wall, guarded at the top with spikes and points of iron. And when he fell among the crowd, he was not deterred by his bruises, but mounted up again, and fell again, and, when he found the feat impossible, began to beat the stones and tear them with his hands, as if he could that way make a breach in the strong building, and force a passage in.” (Ch 64)

Are all of the emotions of the mob to be condemned?

XII. How does Dickens want *us*, the readers, to feel during these Mob scenes?

How are we supposed to feel during the assault on Newgate?

Or, let's look at a passage from the destruction of another house:

“At one house near Moorfields, they found in one of the rooms some canary birds in cages, and these they cast into the fire alive. The poor little creatures screamed, it was said, like infants, when they were flung upon the blaze; and one man was so touched that he tried in vain to save them, which roused the indignation of the crowd, and nearly cost him his life.

At this same house, one of the fellows who went through the rooms, breaking the furniture and helping to destroy the building, found a child's doll—a poor toy—which he exhibited at the window to the mob below, as the image of some unholy saint which the late occupants had worshipped. While he was doing this, another man with an equally tender conscience (they had both been foremost in throwing down the canary birds for roasting alive), took his seat on the parapet of the house, and harangued the crowd from a pamphlet circulated by the Association, relative to the true principles of Christianity! Meanwhile the Lord Mayor, with his hands in his pockets, looked on as an idle man might look at any other show, and seemed mightily satisfied to have got a good place.” (Ch 66)

What emotions does this elicit in you?



XIII-XIV. How do ordinary folk respond to the Mob?

In Chigwell (John Willet in particular):

“Rumours of the prevailing disturbances had, by this time, begun to be pretty generally circulated through the towns and villages round London, and the tidings were everywhere received with that appetite for the marvellous and love of the terrible which have probably been among the natural characteristics of mankind since the creation of the world. These accounts, however, appeared, to many persons at that day—as they would to us at the present, but that we know them to be matter of history—so monstrous and improbable, that a great number of those who were resident at a distance, and who were credulous enough on other points, were really unable to bring their minds to believe that such things could be; and rejected the intelligence they received on all hands, as wholly fabulous and absurd.” (Ch 54)

“John stared round at the mass of faces—some grinning, some fierce, some lighted up by torches, some indistinct, some dusky and shadowy: some looking at him, some at his house, some at each other—and while he was, as he thought, in the very act of doing so, found himself, without any consciousness of having moved, in the bar; sitting down in an arm-chair, and watching the destruction of his property, as if it were some queer play or entertainment, of an astonishing and stupefying nature, but having no reference to himself—that he could make out—at all.” (Ch 54)

“John Willet, left alone in his dismantled bar, continued to sit staring about him; awake as to his eyes, certainly, but with all his powers of reason and reflection in a sound and dreamless sleep. He looked round upon the room which had been for years, and was within an hour ago, the pride of his heart; and not a muscle of his face was moved. The night, without, looked black and cold through the dreary gaps in the casement; the precious liquids, now nearly leaked away, dripped with a hollow sound upon the floor; the Maypole peered ruefully in through the broken window, like the bowsprit of a wrecked ship; the ground might have been the bottom of the sea, it was so strewn with precious fragments. Currents of air rushed in, as the old doors jarred and creaked upon their hinges; the candles flickered and guttered down, and made long winding-sheets; the cheery deep-red curtains flapped and fluttered idly in the wind; even the stout Dutch kegs, overthrown and lying empty in dark corners, seemed the mere husks of good fellows whose jollity had departed, and who could kindle with a friendly glow no more. John saw this desolation, and yet saw it not. He was perfectly contented to sit there, staring at it, and felt no more indignation or discomfort in his bonds than if they had been robes of honour. So far as he was personally concerned, old Time lay snoring, and the world stood still.” (Ch 55)

The ordinary folk in London

“The peaceable citizens being afraid to lay hands upon [rioters], singly and alone, it may be easily supposed that when gathered together in bodies, they were perfectly secure from interruption. They assembled in the streets, traversed them at their will and pleasure, and publicly concerted their plans. Business was quite suspended; the greater part of the shops were closed; most of the houses displayed a blue flag in token of their adherence to the popular side; and even the Jews in Houndsditch, Whitechapel, and those quarters, wrote upon their doors or window-shutters, ‘This House is a True Protestant.’ The crowd was the law, and never was the law held in greater dread, or more implicitly obeyed.” (Ch 63)

“In place of the usual cheerfulness and animation of morning, everything was dead and silent. The shops remained closed, offices and warehouses were shut, the coach and chair stands were deserted, no carts or waggons rumbled through the slowly waking streets, the early cries were all hushed; a universal gloom prevailed. Great numbers of people were out, even at daybreak, but they flitted to and fro as though they shrank from the sound of their own footsteps; the public ways were haunted rather than frequented; and round the smoking ruins people stood apart from one another and in silence, not venturing to condemn the rioters, or to be supposed to do so, even in whispers.” (Ch 67).

How do you compare these responses?

Why these responses? What is the novel saying here?

How does the novel want us to feel about these responses?

What does this tell us about the intelligibility of the mob?



Questions for Discussion

- ▶ What does the Mob add up to? Is the Mob any one thing? Does Dickens have a “theory” of the Mob?
- ▶ What did Dickens leave out in his representation of the Mob? Anything important?
- ▶ How does the structure of the narrative produce specific impressions of the Mob? How does it emphasize/undercut an experience of the Mob?
- ▶ What are the experiences of individual characters in relation to the Mob?
 - ▶ Gabriel
 - ▶ Barnaby
 - ▶ Haredale
- ▶ What relationships/connections between people are possible in the time of the Mob?
- ▶ Who/what is to blame? Can we assign blame for the Mob?
- ▶ How do these chapters fit into the overall narrative? How do they connect to the overall project of this novel?
- ▶ And how does this question of how to make sense of a Mob (represent a Mob) help us think about other Dickens novels or aspects of his overall style?

