DAILY COMMENT

THE PRESENT BELONGS TO CROWDS

By Paul Elie

July 5, 2020

With almost Marxian symmetry, the profit-making power of crowds, halted by the pandemic, was swiftly reclaimed as political power through the Black Lives Matter movement. Photograph by Michael Noble, Jr. / Getty

The novelist Don DeLillo, in "Mao II," published in 1991, proposes that "the future belongs to crowds." The novel offers a series of strong images of crowds, joined by a light, suggestive plot,

and animated by oracular commentary. The images are from 1989: Chinese pro-democracy protesters dispersed by troops in Tiananmen Square; several million mourners streaming through the streets of Tehran to the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini; a "tent city" emerging in Tompkins Square Park; hundreds of English soccer fans penned against a chain-link fence during a match at Hillsborough Stadium, in Sheffield, looking "like a fresco in an old dark church, a crowded twisted vision of a rush to death as only a master of the age could paint it."

The future that belongs to crowds is our present. In April, you could have thought that "crowds are over"—as the American people were dispersed from public areas by stay-at-home orders, physical distancing, and a fear of infection. Crowds were not over, of course. The year 2020 in America is now defined by images of crowds to rival those of 1989: people waiting in mile-long lines at food banks; U.S. Park Police using tear gas to dispel protesters in Lafayette Square; more than ten thousand people gathered outside the Brooklyn Museum in support of black trans rights; President Trump onstage at a less than crowded arena in Tulsa. Urgent questions of our public life involve crowds: their nature, their power, their perils, their inevitability. So do questions of what forms our society ought to take in the near future, a future overshadowed by a pandemic and shot through with a fresh awareness of the injustice that follows when police treat citizens not as individuals but as members of a group—a crowd.

In many respects, American society is less crowded than it once was. A century ago, parts of the Lower East Side had a population density four times as great as today. Subway ridership is measured against a peak of 2.1 billion riders, in 1946. The sellout crowd for a playoff game at Yankee Stadium last October—49,277—was twelve thousand fans smaller than the sellout crowd at a World Series game in the first Yankee Stadium in 1928. Our streets are capacious compared with those of Lagos and Calcutta. But the crowds have not thinned as much as shifted, through public policy that has amounted to crowd control on a large scale. Postwar development in New York and other cities expressly invited white people out to the suburbs, and confined blacks to public-housing projects, largely segregated public schools, and neighborhoods where police applied stop-and-frisk strategies not used elsewhere. Highways, irrigation, and air-conditioning hastened the settlement of the South and West, enabling large numbers of people to live in formerly remote places. The sprawl of cities as "metropolitan areas" wound up concentrating the population as well as distributing it. The maps of COVID-19 hotspots in the United States today show a country of crowded places from sea to shining

sea. There are fifty-three U.S. metropolitan areas of a million people or more; behind New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago are another fifteen cities of three million people or more, including Minneapolis-St. Paul; Atlanta; Seattle; Washington, D.C.; and Phoenix —each a site of conflict in recent weeks.

It was through crowds, in particular, that COVID-19 spread, whether at Mardi Gras in New Orleans or through everyday life in New York, where the population is nearly twice as dense as in the next densest city, San Francisco. As stay-at-home orders took effect, it became clear how fully our public life is constructed around crowds. College campuses bring people together in a relatively small physical space, for reasons so deeply wound into our notions of higher education that, with students dispersed, schools have been forced to rethink not just their business models but their pedagogy, their notions of community, and their practices of inclusion and exclusion. Live sporting events are so intertwined with the presence of ticket-buying spectators that professional sports now appear neither sustainable nor enjoyable without them. Whereas the English Premier League added recorded crowd noise to broadcasts of soccer matches played without fans, Major League Baseball's owners and players negotiated for three months, to a standoff, because of the owners' loss of gate receipts from ticket sales, an essential part of their revenue; America's national pastime nearly collapsed.

So did air travel. Operating passenger flights pre-pandemic involved attracting crowds of people who would pay for the convenience of travelling by plane from one place to another, at a cost reduced by their willingness to sit in very close proximity to a hundred or more strangers for a few hours. As people stayed home, leery of the crowds inside the planes and loath to quarantine for two weeks once on the ground, the airlines warned of financial collapse, because the cost structures that they have put in place depend on every aspect of their operation running at full capacity all the time. Those structures no longer apply. Air travel this week is down seventy-five per cent from this time in 2019; the Washington *Post* reports that "a majority of people say they will not fly until at least two months after all COVID-19-related restrictions end." Even then, knee-to-knee seating in coach may be a thing of the past.

With almost Marxian symmetry, the profit-making power of crowds, which the pandemic put a halt to, was swiftly reclaimed as political power through the Black Lives Matter movement. The protests of the past month have shown that, now as ever, the most immediate and dramatic way for people in a

free society to register discontent and call for change is by massing in the streets. Those people, most wearing masks, gathered in frank and perilous defiance of social-distancing guidelines. (The protests do not seem to have resulted in a noticeable increase in cases, perhaps because the crowds were outside, and because the streets where they assembled were otherwise largely empty—or it may simply be too early to tell.)

The sheer size and civility of the protests created crowd images that stand in majestic contrast to the cell-phone video of George Floyd's death. That video captures four officers of the law slowly and indifferently killing a man—a man all alone—and doing so as if they were out of public view; the images of the protests, seen by tens of millions of people, show tens of thousands assembled lawfully and peaceably, as Homeland Security agents surveil them from helicopters. The crowds are what made the moment feel transformative—at once new and a successor to the summer of 1968, a moment when, in the historian James Miller's formulation, a generation felt that "democracy is in the streets."

The protesters in Lafayette Square on June 1st had outsized significance, not just because they were outside the White House but also because the man inside it has staked his claim as a populist who derives his mandate from his ability to draw crowds and speak for them as well as to them. During the pandemic, Donald Trump, deprived of the rallies that stoke his ego and suggest that he has popular support, has withdrawn like a general in his labyrinth. When the crowd massed outside the White House, he sought to oppose it with a hastily mustered palace guard. On Twitter, he urged his supporters to rush to Lafayette Square in counter-demonstration. That crowd didn't materialize. So he contrived to take his brand of populism to the populace, through a campaign rally, set for North Carolina and then moved to Oklahoma, where the participants would not be subject to physical distancing. Again, the crowd didn't materialize. The six thousand people who did attend were just about the number who would have been there if the organizers had enforced distancing measures. In any case, it was an indoor gathering of exactly the wrong size: large enough to risk the transmission of COVID-19 but not large enough to give the campaign the image of a crowd that the President craved.

Now the virus is spreading easily again, transmitted person to person through the crowds of people assembled in bars, restaurants, churches, and shopping malls, in states where stay-at-home orders are lax or nonexistent. Some states are now pulling back their openings, and shutting bars and beaches, in

particular; but it seems possible that the crowds in the states that opened early will not diminish, and that whole regions of the country will haphazardly go along with the idea that crowding together is the right thing to do—economically, politically, spiritually—even if it means that tens of thousands of avoidable deaths may result. Crowds are us, by this way of thinking, and COVID-19 deaths are part of the cost of our innate human sociability.

Crowds of people, DeLillo observes in "Mao II," can inspire awe, fear, a religious sense of possibility and transformation, or the simple bodily pleasure of joining "the surge of the noontime crowd" in midtown Manhattan. Along with those strong impressions, crowds right now stir personal, practical concerns about safety, which each of us feels from one moment to the next. And the broad questions of crowds and public life, brought into view this spring by the pandemic and the protests, still await our full attention. Is it right that the President demonizes public assembly, the lifeblood of his campaign strategy, as a threat to civil society (and demands that it be policed aggressively) when the opposition practices it? Is it sensible to restart the economy in such a way that facilities from airports to meat-processing plants must put people alongside one another as tightly as physically possible? Is it sustainable to suppose that the measure of success of a business enterprise is that it attracts crowds of customers—that it "goes to scale"? Those are questions that we, as a society, need to be asking one another—in our homes, communicating via our devices, and yes, in crowds in the streets.

Paul Elie, the author of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs.

More: **Crowds** **Coronavirus** **George Floyd** **Protests** **Pandemics** **Society**