

Social collectives

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Social collectives are assemblages of actors that affect and are affected by others or by a specific object or situation, and eventually share a common situation-specific understanding of the self as part of a collective. Contrary to widespread uses of the word “collective” as an umbrella term for various social formations, such as groups, communities, organizations, crowds, audiences, or gatherings, the concept developed here conceives of collectives as specific though fragile and transient episodes of dynamic stabilization in the reciprocal affections and relational self-understandings of actors involved in these formations. Because of the situational nature of affect, social collectives are therefore more expediently conceptualized and analyzed as constantly “in the making” rather than as “substantial social formations”. Most social formations are well theorized in view of their distinct structures and organizing principles. Social groups, for example, are primarily characterized by social interactions amongst all group members; organizations are described by formal membership, common goals, and hierarchies; communities are defined by enduring emotional bonds and a collective identity which tie community members to each other; and concepts of crowds and gatherings emphasize the spatial proximity of participating actors as a defining element. None of the existing principles of social organization, however, account for the specific ways in which human and nonhuman actors mutually affect – and are affected by – one another. These formations prefigure and enable these effects and relational self-understandings, much in the sense of specific affective arrangements (→ *affective arrangements*).

Groups, organizations, crowds, communities and other formations may thus transiently *become* social collectives under certain circumstances and for a certain time: Some social formations, such as organizations and communities, involve specific self-understandings, for instance through formal membership or kinship ties, whereas others, such as masses and gatherings, do not necessarily require a well-developed collective self-concept. Likewise, some social formations can more easily be understood as affective arrangements than others, making it more likely for actors to affect and be affected by one another or a situation in certain ways. Contingent on the culture and historicity of a social formation, mutual affection is also more or less likely to become categorized and labeled using pertinent emotion words (→ *emotion; emotion concept*). Indeed, many of the exemplary social formations mentioned above often develop dedicated instrumental strategies and cultural practices to shift their ontology – at least momentarily – towards that of a social collective, that is, a formation in which actors mutually affect one another and conceive of themselves as parts of a collective. In line

with ritual and conflict theory (e.g., Durkheim, 1912/1995; Collins, 2004), these strategies often aim at achieving an “embodied grounding” of the social formation in question. Discursive episodes of intense national pride, collective feelings of religious offense, or effervescence during rituals are obvious examples. This also points towards the important consequences social collectives bear for individuals and social formations. Existing research suggests that collective emotions – to which social collectives are highly conducive – promote collective action, social cohesion, solidarity, collective identity, and belonging (→ *belonging*), while at the same time constituting or promoting boundaries, exclusion, and the derogation of others. The proposed concept thus entertains the possibility that social collectives become *precursors* to other, more stable social formations in that they instigate and motivate processes such as, ritualization, symbolization, and institutionalization.

Requirements of Social Collectives

The conceptual sketch outlined above begs the question of what it is that contributes to the transient becoming of a social collective. The understanding proposed here assumes that social collectives require two essential conditions to be fulfilled: first, the existence of relational self-understandings, and second, the existence of infrastructures that promote the dissemination and exchange of ideas, symbols, practices, or beliefs and allow for actors to affect and be affected by one another. Both are somewhat related to Georg Simmel’s (1959) distinction between *content* and *form*, and, regarding the relevance of affect, to ideas in new materialism and relational ontology, albeit without compromising the importance of language, thought, and cognition for social coexistence.

Relational self-understanding

The first criterion for the emergence of social collectives is the existence of some kind of relational self-understanding (Mead, 1934), of which self-categorization is amongst the most basic forms (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Self-categorization refers to the social psychological processes by which actors conceive of themselves as being part of a specific social formation and – potentially – act according to this form of self-construal. This criterion clearly distinguishes social collectives from related concepts, such as swarms or aggregates of individuals exhibiting similar behavior, for instance, in mass panic. A social collective hence comes into existence if and only if multiple individuals situationally self-categorize as being part of a larger number of individuals who likewise self-categorize in similar ways. Analytically, this requires insights into two different epistemological domains:

The first domain is concerned with a specific first-person or “phenomenological” perspective on the world, that is, with actors interpreting events, objects, and the self as being a part of a larger collection

of individuals. This can be highly rudimentary and unspecific, as in “us against them”, where the “us” may remain entirely unspecified. Or it may be very specific and involve some form of collective identity, such as “us fans of Michael Jackson” or “us counter-protesters” against a rally of a despised political party. Importantly, this sort of relational self-understanding does not necessarily mirror a (formally) existing social formation. For example, political parties as formal organizations with clear membership rules and hierarchies of power rely on unambiguous self-categorizations and a collective identity. But different social collectives may well emerge *within* such an organization, for instance, when groups of dissenters are affected by a certain policy decision and momentarily self-categorize as “the dissenters” rather than as members of the party.

The second domain involves an analytical third-person perspective which is necessary to actually circumscribe a collective - the “multitude” of actors - which is, at least in principle, capable of collective behavior or collective action. A solitary individual might simply imagine that he or she is part of some social formation and see the world accordingly. An example might be a historical group or community that ceased to exist long ago. Unless there is an actual multitude of individuals self-categorizing in this way in a specific situation, there can be no mutual affecting one another, no collectively shared emotion, and no collective action or behavior. Of course, both criteria will usually co-occur empirically. In other words, people know or believe that they are part of some larger social formation and this social formation actually exists, meaning that there are indeed a larger number of individuals self-categorizing in a similar way. But how do individuals become aware of the existence of a social formation in the first place and how do they generate beliefs about a significant number of others who are part of this formation? And how do beliefs regarding the existence of a specific social formation emerge within or spread across larger numbers of individuals? And how can a multitude of actors mutually affect one another in a specific situation which is potentially not bound to the same physical space?

Infrastructures

The second condition for the becoming of social collectives addresses these questions and pertains to the necessity of some sort of *infrastructure* which is required for any of the social formations in question (cf. for a related proposition Stäheli, 2012). Infrastructures can be as immediate as a shared physical space where face-to-face interaction is possible amongst some – though usually not all – actors occupying that space. Crowds and gatherings are usually situated in a specific material space. This space is often transformed into a socially meaningful place that can be conducive to actors’ mutually affecting one another, for example, through nonverbal bodily cues (e.g., Brennan, 2004). Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Arab Spring uprisings as well as large sports stadiums may serve as good examples here (→ *midān moments*). Infrastructures can also consist of media and

communications technologies and mechanisms of “connectivity”, through which ideas and imaginations about the collective are transmitted in a peer-to-peer or centralized fashion and through which actors can directly interact with and affect each other (e.g., Thacker, 2004) (→ *media, mediatisation*). Classical understandings of the public in a Habermasian sense (like “communicative infrastructures”, cf. Habermas, 1989, p. 327) as well as online social networks would be examples (→ *affective publics*). Mass media communications with centralized promulgators also belong to this category, although they may transmit ideas and imaginations that do not require any form of interaction, such as in authoritarian regimes where a genuine public in Habermas’ sense does not exist. Infrastructures can also consist of symbol systems which hardly involve any social interaction, but in which affect – in the sense of affecting and being affected – works through exposure to and reception of cultural artifacts, such as monuments, architecture, sites, novels, poetry, lyrics and other artworks. Nation states are a paradigmatic example given how various mnemonic practices and invented traditions fuel the symbolic realm of the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) as well as a range of structures and institutions that themselves affect and preconfigure being affected in specific ways (→ *affective citizenship*).

Of course, these distinctions are purely analytical and ideal-typical and one would expect to find amalgamations of these in social reality. It is also worth mentioning that both self-categorizations and infrastructures are highly contested and conflictual since they essentially involve elements of social inclusion as well as exclusion. The physical space at a political rally is contested between protesters and police, the space in a stadium between supporters of opposing teams. Communications in social networks struggle for attention and persuasion, and the symbolic universe of a nation state is, by definition, a matter of constant contestation.

Social collectives are therefore not void of any social presuppositions, as scholars of spontaneous crowds and gatherings often suggest. Instead, situation-specific self-categorizations and infrastructures are prerequisites for actors to mutually affect and be affected by each other and for the eventual categorization of these affections into culturally established and linguistically labeled prototypes of emotion and collective action or behavior. The existing literature, briefly reviewed in what follows, has pointed at these two requirements as defining features of various social formations, for which, however, the term “collective” is almost exclusively used as an umbrella term.

Background and Related Concepts

The history of the concept of collectives in different disciplines has been highly politicized and can be read as a story of social order and unrest rather than one of thorough social theorizing, which is probably why the term has not gained a strong foothold in social theory. Very broadly, two contrasting

perspectives on social collectives can be distinguished. First, substantialist accounts emphasizing the enduring and orderly features of collectives, rooted in what people have in common, in particular “mental” properties such as beliefs, attitudes, and values that gradually consolidate into the capacity for collective action. Second, “interactive” accounts highlight the ephemeral and situational nature of collectives and their respective forms of collective behavior, in particular in crowds and gatherings, widely considered to be disruptive to social order.

Substantialist accounts

Substantialist accounts strive to develop taxonomies and classifications of different kinds of social formations, for instance associations, bodies or organizations (Jonsson, 2013, pp. 70ff). This strand of research aims at distinguishing more “abstract collectives” from localized collectives sharing the same physical space, in particular crowds and gatherings.¹ Abstract collectives are supposed to be more enduring (and stable) social formations characterized by a certain degree of shared beliefs, values, and goals (so-called “*Dauerwerte*”, cf. von Wiese, 1956) that motivate coordinated forms of social action rather than the allegedly irrational behaviors of crowds. Past research has suggested different pathways that connect shared psychological properties to collective action. Ferdinand Tönnies (1931/2012) argued that actors are simultaneously embedded in a multitude of social relations; collectives could be distinguished according to the degree of actors’ willful commitment to these relations and their potential to pursue common goals. Most social relations would involve mutual dependency regarding the satisfaction of basic needs, such as kinship, cooperation, or exchange. Although these relations entail the sharing of resources or values, they are usually not *intentionally conceptualized* as relations by the parties who constitute them. Instead, Tönnies (1931/2012, pp. 249ff.) used the term “*Samtschaften*” to denote arrays of social relations which are deliberately and consciously intended by constituent actors bearing a number of commonalities like preferences, desires, customs, language, feelings, and thoughts. Social collectivities in this understanding include social classes, nations, or certain religious communities. These collectivities, however, are incapable of proper collective action since they cannot form a “common will” on which those actions might be based. Tönnies (1931/2012, pp. 251ff.) used the term “social corporations” (*Körperschaften*) to denote collectives bearing an institutional structure through which members could form and articulate a common will that precedes collective action. Clans, local communities, or unions are examples of these social corporations that are referred to as “collective actors” in the contemporary social sciences. The idea of a lasting orientation towards values and of the trans-individual character of social formations is also mirrored in Durkheim’s (1901/1982) holistic conception of “social facts” as collective realities that are “external” to individuals. He used the term “collective consciousness” to broadly refer to thoughts,

¹ See, for example, the concept of neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996) for social formations that are abstract and localized at the same time.

representations, and emotions that are shared across a community and hence have their very own laws (Durkheim, 1901/1982, p. 40).

These taxonomies already foreshadow more contemporary distinctions between formal and informal collectives prominent in organizational behavior and social movements research. In informal collectives, actors do share beliefs, norms, and goals. However, membership is usually not governed by formal rules (as in formal collectives) but rather through similar social practices (e.g., Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Taken together, substantialist perspectives on social formations as collectives by and large revolve around the sharing of certain stances, attitudes, and worldviews, and phenomenological aspects in which intentions and self-categorizations refer to a collective, and which entail the capacity to engage in some sort of coordinated and intentional action.

Interactive accounts

In contrast to the focus on shared ideas and worldviews and collective agency, a second strand of work has considered social collectives as situational and ephemeral patterns of interaction processes. This perspective capitalizes on non-organized and localized collections of individuals in specific social situations. These collectives have traditionally been investigated in terms of their “collective behavior”, meaning “unconventional” and, for the most part, spontaneous, non-institutionalized behavior in public places.

Crowds and gatherings are probably the most exemplary forms of this sort of social collective. A classical definition by Gustave Le Bon (1895) conceives of a crowd as a collection of individuals assembled in the same physical space, sharing a common focus of attention. Immersed in crowds, people show patterns of behavior that render all individual attitudes and characteristics irrelevant in favor of the emergence of a “collective mind” or “mental unity” (Le Bon, 1895, p. 57) (→ *Immersion, immersive power*). Le Bon not only emphasized the importance of the crowd for instigating collective behavior, but also pointed at the essential role of emotions in characterizing collective behavior as “irrational” and “exaggerated”. Essential for crowds is the process of contagion through which attitudes, emotions, and behaviors involuntarily and rapidly spread across individuals. Tarde (1962) proposed a similar perspective on crowds, although he argued that rather than contagion, imitation, (which, in contrast, is essentially based on beliefs and desires (see King, 2016)), is the key process driving the convergence of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Durkheim (1912/1995) criticized both concepts for being overly individualistic and for disregarding the importance of extra-individual social facts, in particular shared values and beliefs. However, he too suggested that individuals in crowds are often carried away by emotions, for which he coined the term “effervescence”.

These views are more or less mirrored in later works, such as Robert Park's and Ernest Burgess's (1921) account, according to which a crowd is characterized by the dominance of a common drive amongst its members that results from the suppression of all individual impulses. This is achieved through "circular reactions", which Herbert Blumer (1946) later defined as a form of "interstimulation wherein the response of one individual reproduces the stimulus that has come from another individual and in being reflected back to this individual reinforces the stimulation" (p. 170). Teresa Brennan (2004) has elaborated how these concepts of circular reaction and interstimulation can be understood as processes through which actors mutually affect one another.

Blumer furthermore developed a typology of crowds that reflects gradual shifts in their degree of institutionalization. In "casual crowds", members only briefly turn their attention to some source of stimulation, such as a row in the streets (Blumer, 1946, pp. 178ff.). "Conventionalized crowds" share some similarities with rituals when they come together on a more or less regular basis, for instance when watching a football match. "Expressive crowds" gather for the purpose of exaltation, excited feelings, and bodily movements, as in dancing. In contrast, "acting crowds" are captivated by a common object and the pursuit of an external goal related to this object (see Dolata & Schrape, 2014; Borch, 2012, p. 147f.).

Quite some effort has been put into identifying criteria that distinguish localized, actually assembled crowds from the "substantive" kinds of collectives discussed above and into delineating the ways in which both types might interact. Durkheim (1912/1995) proposed a well-established account of how, in rituals, shared beliefs and values as well as processes of affecting and being affected coalesce. Taking a different perspective, Wilhelm Vleugels (1930) coined the distinction between "latent" and "active" crowds. Latent crowds (or "separated crowds" in Tönnies's terms) are first and foremost "communities of feeling" (*Gefühlsgemeinschaften*), meaning those parts of a population that share a certain way of evaluating or assessing events or states of affairs (often with respect to their rights and duties), and thus develop a latent feeling of being connected in solidarity (cf. Menzel, 1931). Members of latent crowds do not directly interact with each other, but develop similar beliefs, ideas and, eventually, emotions, by being exposed to mass media, in particular newspapers and political propaganda. Active crowds (or "assembled crowds" in Tönnies's terms), on the other hand, are physically assembled crowds as described by Le Bon and others. They can be outcomes or transformations of latent crowds, but may also emerge from mere gatherings of otherwise entirely unrelated individuals (Vleugels, 1930). Active crowds are characterized by "affects, aroused passions, and instincts" to which participants irrationally succumb (von Wiese, 1956, p. 32).

These ideas have been taken up by the Chicago School, which further elaborated typologies of crowds and masses. Whereas crowds are characterized by the dominance of a common drive that results from

the neglect and suppression of all individual impulses, a public retains all of these individual impulses. A public is not characterized by a common drive, but aims at deliberation and the rational exchange of arguments regarding a specific issue. It can therefore even be understood as a platform that promotes the emergence of individual impulses in the first place (cf. Borch, 2012, p. 143). Although crowds and publics are distinct forms of social formations, they are both distinguished from social groups in that they share an ahistorical character. Crowds and publics may precede other kinds of social groups, and it is only through interactions and communications that they gradually develop shared goals and values. Crowds are, in a sense, an innovative force that propels actors out of old ties into new ones.

A further relevant distinction is that between crowds and masses. Blumer (1935) introduced the mass as a type of social collective that is unique to modern societies because it requires modern media, such as motion pictures and newspapers. Masses are considered “a homogeneous aggregate of individuals who in their extra-mass activities are highly heterogeneous. In the mass they are essentially alike, are individually indistinguishable, and can be treated as similar units” (Blumer, 1935, p. 118).

Importantly, however, individuals in masses do not interact with each other and masses do promote collective behavioral dispositions. Blumer (1935) mentions “war hysteria, the spread of fashion, migratory movements, ‘gold rushes’ and land booms, social unrest, popular excitement over the kidnapping of a baby, the rise of interest in golf” as examples (p. 115).

Examples from Research

Given this extraordinarily broad array of concepts traditionally filed under the label “social collective”, it is not intuitively clear how a social collective can be meaningfully conceptualized as ontologically distinct from other social formations such as communities, organizations, movements, or crowds. The understanding of social collectives proposed here assumes that they are specific and distinct social phenomena – not merely an umbrella term for various social formations. In a nutshell, substantialist accounts would argue that collectives are trans-situational social formations in which actors share beliefs, values, feelings, and eventually a common will, whereas interactive accounts emphasize that collectives are those social formations that manifest situation-specific collective behavior. Both provide, by way of different infrastructures, critical potentialities through which actors mutually affect each other and eventually come to share a common emotion. Substantialist understandings hint at existing commonalities that promote – as the smallest common denominator – similar self-categorizations. Interactive accounts emphasize the necessary material, symbolic, and technological infrastructures that enable (latent or active) sharing and reciprocal awareness of this sharing, allowing for actors to mutually affect and be affected by each other.

The proposed understanding of social collectives subscribes to the interactive view that they are transient and situation-specific “aggregate states” or “dynamic stabilizations” of other social formations, rather than an enduring and substantive social entity. Such situations are, however, not bound to Goffmanian “encounters” (Goffman, 1961) in a shared physical space, but also encompass spatially dispersed actors. Nevertheless, collectives require an infrastructure that facilitates mutual affectivity and being affected, which may even be a media space or symbolic universe. Borrowing from the substantialist perspective, the proposed understanding also holds that actors need to have an (episodic) self-understanding as part of a group of actors that self-categorizes and is affected in similar ways. The proposed sharing of beliefs, goals and values in the substantialist account is, in a very rudimentary sense, a precondition for these transiently converging self-categorizations, and would likewise require a corresponding infrastructure.

Existing research has emphasized the utility of this notion of social collectives in many ways. For example, a study of the embodiment of belonging through religious practices amongst members of a Pentecostal church and a Sufi order in Berlin conceives of collectives as constantly “in the making” (Dilger, Kasmani, & Mattes, 2018). Focusing on notions of space and place, the study demonstrates how social collectives are actively generated, performed, and experienced through the physical co-presence of several actors. These spaces (and their mediatized analogues) provide the infrastructure for the embodied ways in which actors mutually affect each other. The religious backdrop of Pentecostalism and Sufism respectively provides the basis not only for congregating in ritual practices but also for shared self-categorizations. The study thus helps to make sense of how collectivity is articulated and stabilized beyond gathering in a shared physical space. It conceives of religious communities and gatherings as social formations that constitute specific affective arrangements, which in turn promote certain modes through which actors affect and are affected by each other.

A second study has looked at social collectives in the context of film and cinema. Subscribing to philosophical notions of community, Hauke Lehmann (2017) conceives of social collectives as emerging in between individual and idiosyncratic self-understandings, and historicized and cultural forms and patterns of the (collective) self. This in-betweenness carries a specific affectivity and is conceptualized in its potential to create shared sensibilities and modes of world-relatedness. This shared sensibility, although highly transient and ephemeral, may culminate in perceptions and concepts of “we-ness”. In this context, film and cinema assume a critical role in that they project individual and corporeal forms of feeling and being affected towards collective forms of affectivity and self-understanding. In other words, they simultaneously provide the infrastructures for shared self-categorizations and the capacity to affect and be affected, and are a privileged means for re-instantiating transient social collectives.

Conclusion

Social collectives, as proposed here, are distinct types of social formations that come into being at the borderlines of transient social situations and certain forms of relational self-understanding. These relational self-understandings are not without presuppositions, but instead draw upon existing views of the self in social contexts and material as well as medial infrastructures that can enable actors to affect and be affected by others. Social collectives by no means render other sorts and theories of social formations obsolete. On the contrary, theories of social groups, organizations, communities, crowds or nation states provide the necessary insights into social processes that enable or promote self-categorizations and infrastructures. Their hierarchies, histories, political strategies, institutions, networks, etc. all inform the different ways through which common self-categorizations and reciprocal affect can be achieved, either intentionally or as unintended consequences. Given that actors categorize themselves as part of a larger collection of individuals and given that infrastructures allowing for relational affect between actors and for similar self-categorizations are in place, social collectives can situationally emerge for certain episodes. These episodes can be conceived of as specific transient “states” or modes of being of other (already existing) social formations or may contribute to the generation of these (often more enduring) social formations. This *collective becoming* thus provides an “embodied grounding” of various (also more abstract or latent) social formations and contributes to collective actions, behaviors, and emotions.

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