

Preface

If an hysterical patient went to a physician in the late nineteenth century, chances were the diagnostic focus would be on the somatic symptomatology. The patient exhibiting hysterical blindness or paralysis was treated by an ophthalmologist or neurologist, who looked for pathological evidence of disease, deterioration, or damage. These procedures signaled a triumph over an earlier view that perceived hysteria as a largely female complaint in which a woman's uterus detached itself and floated about throughout her body.¹ With the work of Charcot, Janet, and especially Freud, hysteria came to be appreciated as an anxiety reaction whose pathological locus was emotional, not physiological, and was therefore not restricted to women.

Today popular wisdom recognizes that certain cardiopulmonary, gastrointestinal, and neurological symptoms originate with severe psychological stress. Nevertheless, the attraction persists for accepting the manifest sign or symptom as the most accurate measure of mental and physical health. There is an obvious need to grapple with manifest behavior. But in some instances the more accurate interpretation of behavior is to be found in latent material. The word "hysteria" in ordinary usage denotes the loss of self-control and a diminished if not total incapacity for rational and logical thinking. Hysterical individuals therefore represent chaos, disorder, and a loss of reality testing. Yet the hysterical individual may also represent a complicated organization in which the overt symptoms of emotional collapse serve to conceal personality deficits and conflicts. Where the outward impression presented by the hysterical individual may seem disorderly, it may also signify a series of psychologically defensive maneuvers designed to maintain a distorted but nevertheless cohesive internal sense of order.

In history the crowd has often been likened to the hysterical individual. In his celebrated nineteenth-century study, Gustave Le Bon included the following in his convictions about crowd behavior: "It will be remarked that among the special characteristics of crowds there

are several—such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides—which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution—in women, savages, and children, for instance.”² This view and its attendant derivatives held sway among otherwise critical minds in the nineteenth century and has strong adherents in the twentieth. Thus the crowd, frequently downgraded to the “mob,” has been associated with the loss of rational faculties and the stimulation of atavistic tendencies. However, some historians have made concerted efforts to revise our understanding of crowds by identifying the various levels of political awareness that define crowd behavior. Eric Hobsbawm, George Rude, and Charles Tilly have led the way with their respective studies of European and American crowds, mass movements, and riots. About crowds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Rude makes this representative comment: “Yet, though riots tended to follow traditional patterns, even the most short lived of them rarely appeared entirely ready made. Even a local strike or food riot would gain momentum from smaller beginnings and have clearly defined points of departure, climax, and conclusion.”³ The analogy may be drawn between our contemporary appreciation of the hysterical personality and our appreciation of crowds, mobs, and riots. Both the individual and the group, even at their most persuasive levels of disorganization, are imbued with structural sophistication that allows for ideology or politics; in short, some levels of conscious premeditation. The direction is, therefore, toward acknowledging various degrees of consciousness and awareness that remove the stigma of irrationality, primitiveness, and political naiveté from the crowd.

Rude and his cohorts fully appreciated areas of crowd behavior that were not politically motivated: “Nevertheless, in general, we may exclude from our present considerations crowds that are casually drawn together, like sight-seers; crowds assembled on purely ceremonial occasions or crowds taking part in religious or academic processions; or ‘audience’ crowds (as they have been termed) who gather in theaters or lecture halls, at baseball matches or bullfights, or who used to witness hangings. . . .”⁴ The issue remains—although for some, like anthropologists, the problem is worded differently—whether the preceding are indeed apolitical.⁵ Somewhere between the boundaries of a Le Bon and a Rude are cumbersome areas that fit in neither category and that incorporate elements of both.

One of the best examples of the latter in American history is the Zoot-Suit Riots of 1943. The study of crowd behavior as interpreted by Hobsbawn, Rude, and Tilly argues for points of historical continuity and departure that are politically and ideologically delineated. An initial and cursory examination of the Zoot-Suit Riots falls well within these parameters. There was the standing precedent of discrimination against Mexicans in California in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Political, racial, economic, educational, and even religious discrimination were de facto realities of 1943 Los Angeles. Yet there were some significant countercurrents.

Perhaps the most noticeable was the creation of the Bracero Program in 1942. This international accord between Mexico and the United States provided for the importation of thousands of Mexican farmworkers. The original purpose was to release American fieldhands for work in defense industries or military service. In some instances braceros ended up working in defense-related jobs, although it was specifically against the protocols of the agreement. Both sides agreed the Bracero Program was Mexico's single most important contribution to the war effort. Cooperation was also evident between the Mexican and American military services. Naval units from the two countries exchanged information about potential Japanese activities in Baja California, and the Mexican army was quick to rescue and return American pilots and their planes whenever they crash-landed in Mexican territory. At the time of the riot Mexican naval officers were in training in San Diego—an exercise intended to upgrade their surveillance capabilities and to foster better relations between the two countries. On 5 May 1943, Mexican soldiers paraded in downtown Los Angeles in celebration of the defeat of the French at Puebla. The epitome of this cooperative honeymoon was the organization of special social functions for the daughters of the Mexican and American admirals. These were powerful symbolic and political gestures of goodwill.

The political and psychological perception of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the war years is a complicated matter. The advent of the Zoot-Suit Riots crystalized areas of ambiguity and introduced a new perception of Mexican Americans—the condensed imagery of gangs, pachucos, and zoot-suiters. It was easy for contemporaries on the political Left to see the riots as a recrudescence of the racism that flourished in the immediate and distant past. If there was a difference it seemed to be that a wider press coverage was given to the alleged an-

tics of zoot-suiters, and that the targets of the combined efforts of servicemen, civilians, and law enforcement agencies was restricted to youth.

However, the extraordinary quality of the riots is found in the symbolic means through which servicemen attacked zoot-suiters. Instead of directly acting out their grievances and launching a maniacal reign of destruction, the attack on zoot-suiters remained largely an indirect expression of the unconscious angst of young recruits. The overwhelming predominance of symbolic behavior in a group poses a challenge to historians. Is historical meaning to be found in the manifest or latent content of human events?

This study emphasizes the analysis of symbolic expressions as they unfolded during the ten-day riots that revealed elements of the impulsive characteristics described by Le Bon and elements of consciously formulated—albeit often distorted—political agendas. It is important to make a disclaimer about the scope and limits undertaken in this work. This book makes no pretense about presenting a history of the Zoot-Suit Riots, Chicano youth, or the social status of Mexican Americans during the Second World War. Nor is it an attempt to present a chronology of the riots from their initial incident to the waning moments of the last confrontation. The focus, rather, is on the latent, unconscious, and irrational processes that describe and identify the underlying assumptions and distortions in the behavior of servicemen, the military command in general, the press, the local and state bureaucracies, and the investigatory activities of political committees and law enforcement agencies. In a manner similar to the diagnostic approach and treatment of the hysterical personality, the objective here is to ascertain the nature of the covert structures, continuities, and hierarchies that give the riots psychological and historical meaning. As such, this work is an alternative to studies that have understood the riots within a more literal, traditional, and manifest context. Common among the preceding is an approach that accentuates the centrality of racial conflict and socioeconomic deprivation in the formation of gangs. These studies offer invaluable insights into the social and political history of Mexican Americans in the war years; however, few if any have benefited from previously unavailable navy and army accounts that make it possible to broaden the interpretation of the riots beyond the confines of the barrio.

The bulk of the military records pertaining to the riots are found at the Federal Archives and Records Center in Laguna Niguel, California. Although the records are housed at this location, they remain under the authority of the commandant of the Eleventh Naval District in San Diego. The records are kept in three boxes with some of the more important materials found in files P8-5, EF-44, and P13-5. Together these files contain transcripts of conversations; telegrams; letters from military commanders, civilians, and politicians; arrest records; and both army and navy memos. These documents reveal a tale that is radically different from popular assumptions about the riots. Many of the documents are classified restricted and attest somewhat graphically to the importance given the riots by the military high command. The United States Navy promptly responded to my request to examine these files by granting unconditional permission, and the staff of the Laguna Niguel Federal Archives and Records Center generously facilitated the research by assisting in the location and photocopying of the necessary materials.

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The Zoot-Suit Riots

