> what they want. No truth, but error has always been the chief factor in the evolution of nations, and the reason why socialism is so powerful today is that it constitutes the last illusion that is still vital.... The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduces them.[7]

The dissociation between the 'true signification' of words and the images they evoke requires some rhetorical devices to make it possible. According to Le Bon, there are three such devices: affirmation, repetition and contagion. 'Affirmation pure and simple, kept free of all reasoning and all proof, is one of the surest means of making an idea enter the mind of the crowds. The conciser an affirmation, the more destitute of every appearance of proof and demonstration, the more weight it carries.'[8] As for repetition, its 'power is due to the fact that the repeated statement is embedded in the long run in those profound regions of our unconscious selves in which the motives of our actions are forged. At the end of a certain time, we have forgotten who is the author of the repeated assertion, and we finish by believing it.'[9] Finally, contagion:

> Ideas, sentiments, emotions and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes. This phenomenon is very natural, since it is observed even in animals when they are together in number.... In the case of men collected in a crowd all emotions are very rapidly contagious, which explains the suddenness of panics. Brain disorders, like madness, are themselves contagious. The frequency of madness among doctors who are specialists for the mad is notorious. Indeed, forms of madness have recently been cited – agoraphobia, for instance – which are communicable from men to animals.[10]

At this point, we should distinguish the descriptive validity of the features of mass psychology enumerated by Le Bon from the normative judgements with which those features are associated in his discourse. The unfixity of the relationship between words and images is the very

precondition of any discursive operation which is politically meaningful. From this point of view, Le Bon's remarks are penetrating and enlightening. What, however, about the distinction between the *true significance* of a term and the images contingently associated with it? That distinction corresponds, broadly speaking, with the distinction between denotation and connotation – one that contemporary semiology has increasingly put into question. In order to have a one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified, language would need to have the structure of a nomenclature – something which would go against the basic linguistic principle, formulated by Saussure, that in language there are no positive terms, only differences. Language is organized around two poles, the paradigmatic (which Saussure called associative) and the syntagmatic. This means that the associative trends systematically subvert the very possibility of a purely denotative meaning. To take some of the examples given by Saussure: there is in language a tendency towards the regularization of its forms. To the nominative Latin word 'orator' corresponds the genitive 'oratoris', while to the nominative 'honos' corresponds the genitive 'honoris'. But the tendency towards the regularization of linguistic forms makes all words that end with 'r' in the nominative end with 'ris' in the genitive, so that at a more advanced stage in the evolution of Latin, 'honos' is replaced by 'honor'. These associative rules regularizing linguistic forms even create, in some cases, entirely new words. This is the rule that Saussure called the *quatrième proportionelle*: to *réaction* corresponds, as an adjective, *réactionnaire* and, by analogy, *répression* leads to *répressionnaire*, which is a term which did not originally exist in French.[11]

What is most important for our purpose is to stress the fact that this associative process does not operate only at the grammatical level – which was the level primarily studied by Saussure – but also at the semantic one. In actual fact, both levels constantly cross each other, and lead to associations which can advance in a variety of directions. This is the process that psychoanalysis essentially explores. In Freud's study of the Rat Man, for instance, 'rat' becomes associated with 'penis', because rats spread venereal diseases. In this case the association operates primarily at the

level of the signified. But in other cases the association results originally from the similitude of words (what Freud called 'verbal bridges'): 'ratten' in German means 'instalments', thus money is brought into the Rat complex; and 'spielratten' means gambling and the father of the Rat Man had incurred gambling debts and was thus also associated with the complex.[12] As we can see, it is a completely secondary matter whether the association starts at the level of the signifier or that of the signified: whichever is the case, the consequences will be felt at both levels and will be translated into a displacement of the relationship signifier/signified.

Since this is the way things are, we cannot simply differentiate the 'true' meaning of a term (which would necessarily be permanent) from a series of images connotatively associated with it, for the associative networks are an integral part of the very structure of language. This assertion certainly does not deprive of their specific characteristics the kind of associations to which Le Bon refers; it implies, however, that this specificity should be located within the context of a larger set of associations, differentiated from each other in terms of their type of performativity. The mistake is to present those associations as perversions of a language whose true meaning would require only syntagmatic combinations.

This is most evident when we consider the three 'rhetorical devices' described by Le Bon as the means of bringing about the dissociation between true signification and evoked meaning. In each case, Le Bon's thesis can be sustained only by considerably simplifying the performative operation that the devices are supposed to carry out. Let us consider them one by one. Affirmation: for Le Bon, this is an illegitimate operation whose only function is to break the link between what is affirmed and any reasoning that would support it. For him, to assert something beyond the possibility of rational proof can only be some form of lying. Is this so, however? Should we conceive of social interaction as a terrain on which there are no affirmations that are not grounded? What if an affirmation is the appeal to recognize something which is present in everybody's experience, but cannot be formalized within the existing dominant social languages? Can such an affirmation – which would be,

as in Saint Paul, 'madness for the Greeks and scandal for the Heathen' – be reduced to a lie because it is incommensurable with the existing forms of social rationality? Patently not. To assert something beyond any proof *could be* a first stage in the emergence of a truth which can be affirmed only by breaking with the coherence of the existing discourses. Of course, the case to which Le Bon refers – affirmation without proof as a way of lying – is not an impossible one, but it is only one instance within a series of other possibilities which he does not even consider.

We can say the same about repetition. Some of Le Bon's initial assertions about it can be readily accepted – namely, that it is through repetition that social habits are created, and that these habits are embedded 'in those profound regions of our unconscious selves in which the motives of our actions are forged'. We could say, in that sense, that repetition plays a multiplicity of roles in shaping social relations: through a process of trial and error, it makes possible a community's adjustment to its milieu; a dominated group, through the recognition of the same enemy in a plurality of antagonistic experiences, acquires a sense of its own identity; through the presence of a set of rituals, institutional arrangements, broad images and symbols, a community acquires a sense of its temporal continuity; and so forth. In that sense, repetition is a condition of social and ethical life. As Benjamin Franklin put it: 'I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was in our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct.'[13] Le Bon, however, does not explore the plurality of language games that one can play around repetitive practices, and retains from them only one element: their opposition to rational deliberation. Let there be no doubt: what Le Bon is constructing as an exclusive dichotomy is not habit in general versus rationality, but a habit created through manipulation and one which results from the sedimentation of a rational decision. However, since the rationality of the habit is the guarantee of its legitimacy, we are left with no alternative but the categories 'rationality' and 'irrationality'. Thus he asserts:

> The inferior reasoning of crowds is based, just as is reasoning of a higher order, on the association of ideas, but between the ideas associated by the crowd there are only apparent bonds of analogy.... The characteristics of the reasoning of crowds are the association of dissimilar things possessing a merely apparent connection between each other, and the immediate generalisation of particular cases.... A chain of logical argumentation is totally incomprehensible to crowds, and for this reason it is permissible to say that they do not reason or that they reason falsely, and are not to be influenced by reasoning.[14]

So it is clear how Le Bon's reasoning is structured: disconnected – that is, purely associative – connotations are opposed to a process of logical argumentation. The result is that there is nothing we can conceive as a specific way of crowd reasoning: its *modus operandi* is treated as the mere negative reverse of rationality conceived in its strict and narrow sense. The possibility that repetition points to something comparable present in a plurality of instances – for example the sense, for a variety of social strata, of sharing a common experience of exploitation – is not taken into consideration at all.

Finally, contagion. For Le Bon, contagion can only be a form of pathological transmission. Its explanation is to be found in the general phenomenon of 'suggestibility' which was, at the time, the *Deus ex machina* omnipresent in the discourse on mass psychology. What, however, explains suggestibility is something to which no attention whatsoever was paid. As Freud put it: 'My resistance took the direction of protesting against the view that suggestion, which explained everything, was itself exempt of explanation.'[15] Also in this case, a set of questions could be formulated which would undermine the dogmatism of Le Bon's view. What, for instance, if contagion were not a disease but the expression of a common feature shared by a group of people, one which is difficult to verbalize in a direct way, and can be expressed only by some form of symbolic representation?

How can we explain Le Bon's systematic simplification of the horizon of possibilities opened by each of the categories he analyses? Why are his

explanations so one-sided and biased? It does not take long to realize that it is because his thought is grounded in two crucial assumptions which have dominated much of the early stages of mass psychology. The first, as should be abundantly clear from the passages I have quoted, is that the dividing line between rational forms of social organization and mass phenomena coincides, to a large extent, with the frontier separating the normal from the pathological. This first assumption is, in turn, embedded in another which is certainly present in Le Bon, but also in most of the literature of his time concerning mass behaviour: the distinction between rationality and irrationality would largely overlap with the distinction between the individual and the group. The individual experiences a process of social degradation by becoming part of a group. As he puts it:

> by the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian – that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings, whom he further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images – which would be entirely without action on each of the individuals composing the crowds – and to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits.[16]

This fact had been observed long before Le Bon. In the words of Serge Moscovici:

> This phenomenon is universally confirmed by public records. According to Solon, a single Athenian is a wily fox but a group of Athenians is a flock of sheep. Frederick the Great trusted each of his generals as an individual yet he described them as fools when they were gathered together in a council of war. And we are indebted to the Romans for this most apt and universal of proverbs: *Senatores omnes boni viri, senatus romanus mala bestia,* or *senators are all good men, the Roman senate is a noxious beast.*[17]

The intellectual history that I shall sketch in Chapter 3 is largely the history of the progressive abandonment of these two assumptions. This abandonment made possible a different and more nuanced approach to the problems of mass society. I shall begin my story from the zero-degree of this intellectual transformation – that is to say, from the moment in which the two assumptions were formulated in the crudest and most uncompromising way: in the work of Hippolyte Taine. Later, I shall describe how changes in psychiatric theory and a progressive transference of individual 'rationality' to the group opened the way to a new understanding of mass behaviour. (Le Bon himself already represents a certain departure from Tainean dichotomies.) The highest point in this reversal of paradigms is the work of Freud, in which the two assumptions are resolutely abandoned.