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### **Unanimism: Between Sociology and Psychology**

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Mass population unbelievably has a manipulable power that is perfectly abused by Politicians, Religious leaders, or any Demagogue.

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*“All servitude is voluntary and the slave is more despicable than the tyrant is hateful.”*

Étienne de La Boétie

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## Abstract

Unanimism is relatively a new concept in the world of literature, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. This paper tries to explain, especially under a socio-psychological ground, why and how a group, crowd or population acts. Firstly, it explains the definition and history of Unanimism. Then, it analyzes the characteristics or the factors that influence Collective behavior in time and space. As human beings, Collective behavior has its own consciousness and unconsciousness (psychological characteristic). However, its consciousness and unconsciousness can be different from its participants or members. Indeed, collectivity has a special personality that acts with rationality or irrationality (social characteristic). Finally, this essay will criticize Unanimism.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Definition

In research, it is very important to define the subject, as the definition represents the borders of the research. Unanimism means a group of people, large or small, behaves in a special manner that does not necessarily conform with the intention of its components (members or participants). In reality, the concept of Unanimism is a French expression (*Unanimisme*) that was founded by Jules Romains (1885-1972), a French poet and writer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that Unanimism contains a rich terminology. Insofar as a researcher finds several expressions that are synonym or, at least, connected to Unanimism.<sup>1</sup> However, every one of these expressions tries to explain and develop some special aspects of collective behavior under the literary, social, psychological, or philosophical theories being scarcely numerous.<sup>2</sup> As far as this essay is concerned, we should limit our research to some social and psychological aspects of the concept of Unanimism. However, we will also use some philosophical terms about this concept.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Collective consciousness, Collective behavior, Collective effervescence, Crowd psychology, Groupthink, or Abilene paradox.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Selective Bibliography*, and *Concepts, Theories, and Theorists regarding Unanimism* at the end of this essay.

## 1.2 History

In reality, Unanimism is a movement in French literature begun by Romain Rolland, whose well-known book is titled *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* (The Men of Good Will).<sup>3</sup> As for this research, the literary aspect is voluntarily avoided in order to develop the social and psychological aspects of Unanimism. Although Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), a French social psychologist, sociologist, and an amateur physicist, is one of the first to explain the crowd behavior, his theory is still used by many scientists<sup>4</sup>. Before these thinkers, Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563), a French judge, writer, and political philosopher, had briefly developed some sociological aspects of Unanimism in his valuable essay written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Characteristics

First of all, we should answer one principal question depicting the characteristics of Unanimism. *What are the characteristics, or factors, of Unanimism?*

Indeed, Unanimism is a group of acts in different manners: spontaneous, emotional, conscious, unconscious, ordered, disordered, or even criminal. In fact, collective behavior has its own social and psychological characteristics that might usually be far from individual acts. Furthermore, Unanimism can cause revolutionary, social, or violent behaviors regarding its political, social, and religious ideas.

It is very important to note that the psychological and social characteristics very much overlap each other. On the one hand, scholars in social psychology are both psychologists and sociologists; on the other hand, all social psychologists use both the individual and the group as their units of analysis.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the plan of this essay dividing into psychological and sociological elements can sometimes appear both fictitious and arbitrary.

Finally, regarding the breadth of the subject, we do not pretend to present an exhaustive essay. In other words, this essay briefly explains some sociological (Part 2.1) and psychological characteristics (Part 2.2) of Unanimism. Finally, it will conclude by presenting some critics of Unanimism (Part 3).

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<sup>3</sup> It was published in French in 27 volumes between 1932 and 1946. The work was an attempt to re-create the spirit of French society from Oct. 6, 1908, to Oct. 7, 1933.

<sup>4</sup> LE BON (Gustave), *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> See LA BOÉTIE (Étienne de), *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, Paris: A. Colin, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_psychology).

## 2.1 Sociological Characteristics

### 2.1.1 Unanimism before Individualism

Romains originally believes Unanimism is an opposition to individualism or to the exaltation of individual characteristics. In his opinion, it is a kind of universal sympathy with life, existence, and humanity.

In reality, the apparition of Unanimism is much more ancient than Individualism. Insofar as Moses introduced the concept of “people” as a reality in which every individual had to lose his/her individuality.<sup>7</sup> In ancient Rome, we observe the concept of “Roman people” depicting the group of persons that subjected themselves to the Roman State, symbolized by the acronym of SPQR (*Senatus Populusque Romanus*): the Senate and the Roman People.<sup>8</sup>

According to Caratini, Individualism was recovered by the Christian thought in Europe, where God’s love constituted a personal relationship.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he believes that Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German philosopher and classical philologist, gave a philosophic value to the individualist thought.<sup>10</sup> However, before Nietzsche, Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish philosopher and theologian, had put individual in the highest scale of values.<sup>11</sup> We should notice that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are the founders of existentialism.

For Nisbet (1913-1996), an American conservative sociologist, Individualism appeared in the ancient Greek society during the Cleisthenean reforms (509 BC.). Instead of the tradition of kinship-based pluralism of Athenian authority, Cleisthens created a new monolithic unity that arose from governmental system reaching directly down to the individual citizen.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, there was in the new Athens “a manifest individualism, sprung from the fact that henceforth the individual, not the kinship group, was the irreducible and unalterable unit of the Athenian military-political system.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, before the Cleisthenean reforms, there existed *kinship* guilt, because “the family, even the clan and whole tribe,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. CARATINI (Roger), *Initiation à la philosophie*, Paris: l’Arhipel, 2000, p. 646.

<sup>8</sup> CARATINI (Roger), op. cit., p. 648.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 649.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 652. As far as Nietzsche’s work about individualism is concerned, see NIETZSCHE (Friedrich Wilhelm), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883-1885.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. CARATINI (Roger), op. cit., pp. 625 and 708.

<sup>12</sup> NISBET (Robert), *The Social Philosophers: Community and Conflict in Wetsren Thought*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973, p. 32. See also BUTTS (R. Freeman), *The Morality of Democratic Citizenship: Goals for Civic Education in the Republic’s Third Century*, Center for Civic Education Calabasas, California, 1988, Ch. Three.

<sup>13</sup> NISBET (Robert), op. cit., p. 33.

bore the guilt and also the responsibility for offenses committed by” the individual.<sup>14</sup> The Cleisthenean reform replaced kinship guilt with *individual guilt*.<sup>15</sup>

For some authors, to know where one belonged, during the Middle Ages, meant to know who one was.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, “*identity was not personal but communal, a matter of affiliation, status and role. One was a Baker or a Smith, perhaps a Goldsmith, or one was Mat’s son; that was all the ID that was needed either for external recognition or internal self-assurance. Not to know where one belonged was to be truly alien, unprotected and unacknowledged, homeless mind without a sense of self.*”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, “*the discovery of the individual, the creation or invention of “modern man,” was also paradoxically the source of the first portent of alienation, the first sense of peril to the integrity and dignity of the human person.*”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the new consciousness of individual personality, produced by the Renaissance and celebrated by the Enlightenment, was counterbalanced by the consciousness of opposing forces bent upon the destruction of personality.<sup>19</sup>

In reality, we are witnessing the passage from a unit society to an individualized society whose members find their individuality, but never their dignity and sense of existence. Historically and socio-psychologically, this passage explains how the ancient society, based on the circular relationships between kinship and State, was firstly changed to the modern society, based on the linear relationships among human rights, and was then changed to postmodern society, based on countless individual rights.

### 2.1.2 Abilene Paradox

According to Jerry Harvey, professor of management science, “the *Abilene paradox* is a paradox in which a group of persons collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of any of the persons in the group. It is caused by a common breakdown of group communication in which each member mistakenly thinks that their own preferences are counter to the group’s, and, therefore, do not raise any objections.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> MONTAGU (Ashley) & MATSON (Floyd), *The Dehumanization of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983, p. xix.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. xix.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. xx.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. xx.

<sup>20</sup> See HARVEY (Jerry B.), “The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement,” *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1988, pp. 17-43; HARVEY (Jerry B.), *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*, Lexington and San Diego: Lexington Books and University Associates, 1988; HARVEY (Jerry B.), *How Come Every Time I Get Stabbed In The Back, My Fingerprints Are on The Knife?*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

### 2.1.3 Collective Behavior

The expression of *collective behavior* is coined by Robert Ezra Park (1864-1944), an American urban sociologist and one of the main founders of the original Chicago School of sociology. Next, Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), an American sociologist, developed the theory of collective behavior. According to this theory, a collectivity can be neither conformist (following prevailing norms) nor criminal (in violations of the norms), while it acts in a spontaneous way. This theory takes four forms: the crowd, the public, the mass, and the social movement.

In his famous work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896), Gustave Le Bon, on the one hand, interpreted the French Revolution as irrational reversions to animal emotion, and, on the other hand, inferred from it that such a reversion is characteristic of crowds in general. In fact, Le Bon depicted the “Contagion theory” or “Popular mind”, insomuch as the crowd assumes a life of its own, while it creates emotions and pushes people toward irrational, even violent actions. Le Bon’s ideas are developed by Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), a French sociologist, criminologist, and social psychologist. Tarde believes individuals sociologically act according to the laws of imitation and innovation.

Le Bon’s theory is similar to the theory called “Herd behavior”, containing the biological aspects of Unanimism. As this term depicts, like the behavior of animals in a herd, a group of people can act together without a planned direction. Such theory is contrary to theories of “Groupthink” and “Group dynamics” which are based on consensus, thinking, and making decisions.

However, Richard Berk, an American sociologist, has justly criticized Le Bon’s theory in *The Myth of the Madding Crowd* (1991). He holds the crowd acts in several dimensions, and the traditional stereotypes of emotionality and unanimity often do not describe what happens. Furthermore, despite the factor called “safety in numbers”<sup>21</sup>, we cannot find any compelling research evidence to shows a fundamentally irrational basis to collective behavior.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.1.4 Collective Effervescence

In this point of view, collectivity is one kind of energy formed by the gathering of people during a social event, such as a sporting event, a carnival, a rave, or a riot. This energy can cause people to act differently than in their everyday life.

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<sup>21</sup> According to this factor, “the larger the number of people involved in an action, the less the blame for that action can be attributed to any one individual.” HAGEDORN (Robert), *Sociology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Toronto: Dave Dimmel, 1990, p. 514.

<sup>22</sup> HAGEDORN (Robert), op. cit., p. 515. About *Criticisms of Collective Behaviour Theories*, see ibid. pp. 513-515.

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist, developed some ideas about collective effervescence in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) being essentially based on studies of the Australian aborigines. In his opinion, the division of universal religious into profane and sacred results from the lives of these tribe members, which is mostly spent on performing menial (survival) tasks, such as hunting and gathering. If these tasks are profane, the rare events on which the whole tribe gathers together becomes sacred, and the high energy level associated with these events gets directed onto physical objects or people which then become sacred.

### 2.1.5 Voluntary Servitude

“Voluntary Servitude” is a socio-political theory being presented by La Boétie in his essay titled the *Discours on Voluntary Servitude* (*Discours de la servitude volontaire*) in the middle of 16<sup>th</sup> century. La Boétie is often considered one of the earliest advocates of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance. However, I think that he is far from being embraced by the last characteristic, while he believes: “A subject people shows neither gladness nor eagerness in combat: its men march sullenly to danger almost as if in bonds, and stultified; they do not feel throbbing within them that eagerness for liberty which engenders scorn of peril and imparts readiness to acquire honor and glory by a brave death amidst one’s comrades.” His ideas about dominated people by the tyrant are very interesting. I believe he depicts a “Collective responsibility”, when he writes: “A people enslaves itself, cuts its own throat, when, having a choice between being vassals and being free men, it deserts its liberties and takes on the yoke, gives consent to its own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it.”

## 2.2 Psychological Characteristics

### 2.2.1 Collective Consciousness

“Collective consciousness”<sup>23</sup> refers to the common beliefs and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within society. This term is used by Durkheim in his books *The Division of Labor* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In *The Division of Labor*, he argues that in “traditional” or “mechanical” societies, based around clan, family or tribal relationships, religion played an important role in uniting members through the creation of a common consciousness. In these societies, the contents of an “individual’s

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<sup>23</sup> *Conscience collective* in the original French.



consciousness” are largely shared in common with all other members of their society. In this way, they create a mechanical solidarity through mutual likeness.

When it comes to punishment, Durkheim is a strong advocate of morality in society. So, he believes that having good strong morals prevents society from disintegrating. Disintegration happens if the collective conscience has become weak.

### **2.2.3 Crowd Psychology**

“Crowd psychology”, or “social facilitation theory,” assesses that people can typically gain direct power by acting collectively. In fact, a large group of people is able to bring dramatic and sudden social change in a manner that bypasses established due process, and can provoke controversy. Social scientists have developed different theories for explaining “Crowd psychology”, and the ways in which the psychology of the crowd differs significantly from the psychology of those individuals within it. If Carl Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist and the founder of analytical psychology, developed the theory of the “Collective Unconsciousness”, other major thinkers of crowd psychology (such as Le Bon; Wilfred Trotter (1872-1939), a British surgeon and a pioneer in neurosurgery; Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), a French sociologist and criminologist; Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), an Austrian psychiatrist and the founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychology; and Elias Canetti (1905-1994), a Bulgarian-born novelist) classically present psychological characteristics.

Freud considers that people in a crowd act differently than those who are thinking individually. In fact, the minds of the group merge together to form a way of thinking. Each member’s enthusiasm is increased as a result, and one becomes less aware of the true nature of one’s actions.

Ralph Herbert Turner and Lewis Killian, American sociologists, have recently developed the “Emergent-norm theory” of crowd dynamics. They argue that crowd behavior reflects, on the one hand, the desires of participants, and, on the other hand, it is guided by norms that emerge as the situation unfolds. This theory points out that people in a crowd take different roles, such as leaders, inactive bystanders or even opponents.

### **2.2.4 Collective Unconsciousness**

“Collective Unconscious”, or known to laymen as “Collective Subconscious” is a term of analytical psychology. While Freud does not distinguish between a collective psychology and an individual psychology, Jung distinguishes the collective unconscious from the personal subconscious

particular to each human being. The collective subconscious is also known as a reservoir of the experiences of human species.

### 3. Some Critics of Unanimism

We have briefly examined the principal aspects of Unanimism under its social and psychological aspects. Unanimism is usually opposite of Individualism, because the former takes precedence when it comes to respecting individual rights, or more precisely his rights to act as he does. It may be evident why communitarianism, or even communism, is so close to totalitarianism. However, the theories of Unanimism have timidly explained the role of *leadership* and propaganda in crowd psychology or collective behavior.<sup>24</sup> In every group, mass population or society, there is often a leadership, or more accurately a decision-maker, over the others (members or participants). Edward Louis Bernays (1891-1995), one of the pioneers in public relations, says: “*If you can influence the leaders, either with or without their conscious cooperation, you automatically influence the group which they sway.*”<sup>25</sup> In reality, these “public relations techniques” increasingly develop, and consequently strengthen the role of leadership in manipulation and propaganda.

So, what does “Collective consciousness” or “Collective unconsciousness” mean? Is it not the same as “conscious leadership” or “unconscious leadership”? Serge Moscovici, a French social psychologist, has justly noted that the majority influence in many ways is misleading, because if the majority was indeed all-powerful, we would all end up thinking the same. In addition, his study suggests that minorities can have an effect on the opinion of a majority<sup>26</sup>.

In reality, some of the Unanimism is very dangerous, when we consider that the fascist theories of leadership, which emerged in the 1920s, owed much to Le Bon’s theories of crowd psychology. Indeed, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) drew largely on the propaganda techniques proposed in Le Bon’s book (The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind). In his famous book *Propaganda* (1928), Bernays wrote a major feature of democracy was the manipulation of the mass mind by media and advertising.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* seems to be an exception.

<sup>25</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_Bernays](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Bernays).

<sup>26</sup> About leadership, see Kurt Lewin, and Organizational studies.

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