**Mass Culture**

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**Origins of the Term**

Mass culture generally suggests social uniformity and standardization. Yet the term mass draws its meaning from the concept of mass in the physical sciences which indicates undifferentiated, formless matter. As Raymond Williams (1976) argues, this everyday sense of mass was given a social inflection in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with references to ‘the corrupted mass,’ and the ‘mass of the people.’ In the wake of the American and French Revolutions, mass became a more common term, through references to ‘the explosive masses’. This suggests two senses of mass with regard to social actors: firstly, an amorphous and indistinguishable bulk. Secondly, the more positive sense of mass as not just a dense aggregate, but one in which people act in concert and solidarity to attempt to change their social condition. Mass then can refer to the undifferentiated multitude or mob, the low, ignorant unstable crowd which could threaten social order. Additionally, especially in the nineteenth century, revolutionaries, socialists and the labour movement saw the masses as a positive resource embodying the potential for radical social change. This second sense became a rallying call for social justice to redress the alleged evils of capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This active image of the masses as the people, or large crowd, was substantiated in the twentieth century through the use of the new techniques for the mechanical reproduction of culture, such as high circulation newspapers and magazines (the ‘yellow press’), the cinema, radio and eventually television. The social understanding of the mass, therefore, became difficult to disentangle from the images of the masses in circulation through what became known as the mass media. We think of the heroic active masses presented in Soviet and Nazi propaganda films, with the masses expressing the will of the people, the nation or humanity, with the help of a charismatic leader. Yet, this second sense of the mass as a revolutionary agent, although sustained by the Cold War in the immediate Post-war Era, has become exhausted following the eclipse of state socialist regimes in many parts of the world since the 1990s.

At the same time the masses can be linked to mass production, with the visibility of masses of people seen to stand alongside the visibility of mass produced goods. While the origins of the factory system can be traced back to Song Dynasty China and earlier (Goody 1996), the mass production of a limited range of standardized goods underwent a qualitative shift in late eighteenth century and nineteenth century England. The world of mass produced things and people can be seen as interlinked, and became especially visible in the expanding cities of the new industrial economy. The efficiency savings through the increased scale and volume of mass production led to lower-priced consumer goods which established the basis for mass consumption, which dramatically expanded in nineteenth century England, France and the United States with the availability of cheap household consumer goods – from cotton clothing, to pots and pans, iron bedsteads and soap. In the second half of the century, the department store put the emphasis upon display of goods in settings designed to deny their mass origins. Consumer culture worked through a dynamic between mass and luxury. The secret was the use of display, industrial design and advertising to suggest that mass produced goods attained the qualities of refined and well-crafted luxuries.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, this process gained impetus from the changes in factory organization (scientific management) and the assembly-line (‘Fordism’) which further expanded mass production and mass consumption. The meaning of the term mass, then, shifted in the twentieth century from the fear of the inchoate, dangerous unruly crowd (the mass as mob), especially in the post-war era, to the more neutral societal sense of large numbers of people experiencing similar work and living conditions made visible in their narrow range of clothing choices, consumer goods and entertainment options. The mass became visible in the crowd, the large numbers of people at sports matches, or national festivities or other events, wearing similar mass produced clothing or uniforms. At the same time, the mass was often conceived in atomistic terms, as isolated units (‘small town in mass society’).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The image of the state mobilizing its population as part of a national project, the permanent war-footing or ‘state of emergency,’ in which the military model of disciplined ranks of uniformly dressed people – not only soldiers and school children, but people enjoying purposive leisure – provided a vision of a top-down directed mass society, the society wholly directed by the state. Such images provide visualisations of the working of government that gathered pace in the nineteenth century, in which discipline and uniformity were drilled into bodies in schools, hospitals, prisons and barracks (see Foucault 1979). This view also grew in the images of the mass as ornament, the ranks of people wearing identical costumes, trained to move together to produce intricate patterns for the distant spectators – such as the masses of women performing calisthenics in sports stadia in Nazi Germany (Kracauer 1975). This was the world with the fear of the absorption of the individual into the mass, the manipulative use of mass psychology, and in 1950s America the panic about brainwashing; the world which produced mass destruction, mass bombing and total war – the world in which the piles of naked dead bodies in Nazi concentration camps such as Auschwitz, or the heaps of skulls and bones in the Khmer Rouge killing fields of Cambodia, seemed to erase all individuality and human rights with the reduction of people to disposable bodies and body parts.

Since the late twentieth century, the age of the masses appears to be behind us with the move towards more differentiated forms of culture and social life. More sophisticated production technologies enable mass customization, not just mass consumption. The utilization of digital information technologies not only in production, but also in marketing, permit more fined-grained consumer profiling and individual targeting which move beyond the previous sampling-based social research methodologies. The notion of the passive consumer has also been giving way to the view of the active consumer, or ‘prosumer,’ required to participate in the reworking of consumer goods and experiences (Toffler 1980; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). In addition, the contemporary neoliberal global economy means that citizens are required to absorb externalized state costs and develop ‘enterprise selves’ (McNay 2009) to plan and self-finance their lives in the fields of health, education, retirement, welfare. The mass ceases to be seen as a useful productive resource for the state alone, as private enterprises increasingly develop and utilize digital databases for consumer profiling. Mass culture ceases to be seen as a necessary or desirable means of cultural integration. Instead, the turnover of fashions and news events generates a more volatile and unstable sets of images and discourses. Individual enterprise, self-responsibility and self-investment become mandatory to sustain one’s present life-chances against an uncertain future.

**Mass Society and Mass Culture**

For the generation of Western intellectuals and academics writing in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, one of the main concerns was the impact of modernity on social and cultural life. The effects of industrialization and urbanization were seen as destructive of traditional communities and forms of social integration. Durkheim, for example, highlighted the destruction of the social bond and the sacred, the normative, cultural and emotional ties which held people together. Sociology as an emergent social science in the late nineteenth century was forged in the attempt to document and analyse this situation, to prepare the way for policy makers to develop solutions. Its formation within the frame of the strengthening nation-state and its predisposition to deal with the problems of social order meant it favoured images of settled social life: the ideal society as community. Mobility and movement were generally seen as disorderly and potentially threatening (Featherstone 1995: ch 8). Georg Simmel remarked that the birth of sociology could be considered as a side-effect of the rise of mass society itself (Brighenti, 2010:293).

Simmel was unusual in having a more neutral and dispassionate view of the masses in his depictions of the new world of mass consumption, cultural mixing, urban change and movement (see Frisby 1985). He theorized the effects of the rapid expansion of population and the new movement of automobiles, buses, trams etc., in large cities such as Berlin which led to the emergence of new forms of nervous excitement such as neurasthenia around the turn of the century (Simmel 1997a). Simmel went on to document the new world of consumption, changing fashions and style play, which contributed to the general sense of the ‘stylessness’ of the times. The increase in the range and intensity of goods and experiences in the expanding consumer culture overloaded the capacity of subjects to assimilate. This was evident in the wealth of goods and exotica from around the world on display for the masses to inspect and purchase, in department stores and expositions such as the 1896 Berlin Trade Exhibition (Simmel 1997b).

The concern to understand the implications of the mass was also important in the nascent social science developing in France around the same time. Here we think of the work of Gabriel Tarde, a major rival of Durkheim, who was interested in the dynamic relationship between repetition and innovation (e.g. fashion and rumour), which he regarded as one of the positive effects of modern mass societies; aspects of Tarde’s writings were later taken up by Deleuze. At the same time, one of the most influential analysts of crowds and masses, Gustav Le Bon, held a much more negative view, emphasising their feminine characteristics of irrationality, suggestibility, emotionality and impulsiveness as well as their savagery and childishness (Carey 1992:27). For Le Bon, the modern era had become the era of crowds in which the voice of the masses predominated; this meant a struggle to resist the fall into barbarism.

The intellectual response to the masses was often one of fear of engulfment in the crowd, the loss of individuality – a central theme in Nietzsche and other late nineteenth century theorists. The strong distaste on the part of many intellectuals for mass culture and fear of the masses went to extreme lengths. The masses were likened to animality, the herd, even to swarms of insects and there was often the fear of a global population explosion in which Western culture became engulfed (a view held by D.H. Lawrence, H.G Wells and many others, as we shall see below). One of the meanings of the ‘masses,’ then, is the unmanageable multitude, the crowds of urban people which threaten to engulf and endanger. The threat drew off the related meaning of the vulgar, the unstable rabble and mob. In this latter sense the term masses became identified with the urban industrial lower orders and working people, seen as a perpetual threat to the ideals of humanistic elite culture.

The negative evaluation of the masses persisted into the post-war era with one influential American commentator being particularly scathing about mass culture. Dwight Macdonald (1953:14) identified many of the key aspects of mass culture: the atomism, the uniformity and the threat of engulfment by an exploding population. Macdonald and others pointed to the failure of mass education, which was held to have produced a homogenous, regulated society, a levelling down in which the masses are fed cultural fodder -‘fun’ culture, ‘soma’ (Riccio 1993). Mass culture could be best understood in relational terms, as tied to its opposite concept high culture. The mass manufactured culture was not only seen as uniform and banal, but as lowering the standards of high culture, as eroding individuality and creativity. This was the position of many intellectuals in Europe and the United States in the early years of the post-war period. It was especially strong amongst those influenced by the German tradition where *Bildung*, culture as an educative self-formative process, reached its high point in artistic creative figures such as Goethe, Beethoven, Thomas Mann et al. Spiritual and artistic achievements were contrasted to the increasing rationalization of culture, the spread of instrumental calculation, bureaucracy and the disenchantment of the world, leading to the ‘transvaluation of values,’ a general de-valuation of culture highlighted in the writings of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Georg Lukács and members of the Frankfurt School (Bleicher 2006).

Adorno, for example, wrote in the 1940s about ‘the culture industry,’ suggesting that mass culture products such as Hollywood movies were manufactured in similar ways to the automobile industry (different numbers of stars equivalent to numbers of cylinders etc.). He held that the consumer too became integrated into the circuit, remarking that ‘popular music does its listening for us.’ Adorno also mentioned that ‘the defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimetres’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). For Adorno serious art was meant to be difficult and demanding, with avant-garde art especially designed to disrupt the comfort of familiar categories. Culture then should aim to embody the ‘perennial protestation of the particular against the general’ (Hutnyk 2006). For some this suggested that we lived in a ‘post-culture,’ a confusion of tastes and chaos of tongues in which creative standards were lost (Steiner 1971). The culture industry thesis also resonated with the critique of mass consumption, which became developed by Herbert Marcuse in his influential book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Marcuse attacked the ‘false needs’ generated by consumer culture in which ‘The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home kitchen equipment.’

Consumer culture, then, was often seen as an ersatz, inferior culture, based upon a similar type of mass manipulation as occurred with the use of the mass media in Nazi Germany. This distaste for the mass persisted into the 1950s, with the influential sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) remarking that contemporary mass society was

A relatively comfortable, half-welfare and half-garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent and atomised; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve completely; in which coherent publics based on definite interests and opinions fall apart; and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass produced, like the products, diversions and values which he absorbs.

**Positive Evaluations of Mass Culture**

Not all critical theorists followed this negative view of the mass. Leo Lowenthal (1961) stressed the democratic and enlightenment potential of mass marketed books which emerged in the eighteenth century. But more significantly, in the 1970s with the translation of the inter-war writings of Walter Benjamin a more complex view of consumer culture and the mass media began to emerge. Walter Benjamin stressed the mutability of the urban mass and its resistance to stable forms; crowds were seen as flows of amorphous energy (Cooper, 2001). Modern societies produce a mass of moving events that provide continuous change. Film and the mass media reveal this world and capture momentarily events and put them into communications flows in newspapers. The news collects these fragmentary events to give them temporary order and meaning. For Benjamin this form of distracted perception was a defining feature of mass society – a way of seeing the world as if in a sort of reverie. This could be contrasted to the concentration of the serious spectator when viewing a work of art who is absorbed by the artwork. In addition, the materials of mass culture such as plastics and paper are designed for a short life; hence, mass production means a loss of objecthood. Rather, objects were now part of a mutable system along with circulating signs, images, events and forms. Yet for Benjamin this mutability and distraction was not necessarily seen as a loss. Various new social types such as the *flâneur* emerged in the new urban mass culture of the nineteenth century, productively fed off the half-formed perceptions while strolling through the city without a plan or purpose.

Guy Debord and the Situationists took up some of these insights in the 1960s with their Surrealist-inspired advocacy of *derive* (drifting in the city) and *detournement* (making unexpected connections), as a creative counter to the commodification and mass regimentation of urban life (Bonnett 2006). In his *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1970) had drawn attention to the negative role of spectatorship in modern societies; at the same time the volume, density and mass of urban life could throw up interesting connections for the drifter, which might ultimately lead to the subversion of mass culture.

Benjamin had long been interested in aura, the way in which inanimate objects, such as precious works of art, possessed a strange power and could even seem ‘to look back at us’ (Hansen 2008). Yet for Benjamin, aura was not just erased through the development of mass reproduction. He held that everyday banal objects, the detritus of consumer culture, in their design, packaging and illustrations, could still awaken in us something akin to aura, albeit in a fragmentary and allegorical way, through their potential to ignite half-formed memories, or prompt utopian longing (Benjamin 1999; Buck-Morss, 1989; Hansen, 2008). Aura, then, was not just lost with the decline of the work of art and the new conditions of mass reproducibility. Mass objects (a bus ticket, a handbill, an advertising poster) could work in allegorical ways, to suggest something lost that could be recovered. The aura in effect could be transformed from art and luxury objects to mass consumer things – a sort of re-enchantment of the urban landscape, the ‘dream worlds of mass consumption.’ Benjamin (2010) had sought to explore the radical implications of the new techniques of mass reproduction such as photography, film, radio. For some in the 1960s generation, such as Enzensberger (1974), Benjamin’s work held out the potential to think through the de-massification of the media, without a return to craftsmanship and the individuality of the heroic artist. Rather, the exploration of the potential of media and communications technologies suggested the promise of moving into an era of greater audience and user interactivity along with the exploration of new forms of subjectivity and sociality.

**Critiques of Mass Culture Theory**

In Britain the critique of mass culture and defense of high culture has a long history, yet an important break with this tradition occurred in the post-war era through the influence of Raymond Williams. In his analysis of the shifts in the meaning of culture, Williams (1958, 1961) noted that an important earlier meaning was the sense of culture as cultivation (originally drawn from natural growth, the culture of plants and flowers, e.g. orchid culture), which is near the German term *Bildung* mentioned earlier. Nineteenth century defenders of high culture such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1837/1934) and Matthew Arnold (1869/1932) emphasized the importance of the cultivation of an educated elite who would pursue perfection through knowledge, as well as disseminating ideas for the middle classes below to imitate. This tradition was sustained into the twentieth century and into the immediate postwar era through the writings of T. S. Eliot (1948) and F.R.Leavis (1930), who defended the idea of a cultural elite fashioning high culture and protecting the minority culture against the mass. Williams in contrast held that ‘culture is ordinary:’ based on common experience, and a shared structure of feelings. Indeed, for him the effects of the mass media could be seen as positive, in freeing the working class from didactic high culture, and had potential to generate a common culture. Williams (1958) argued that ‘much of what upper-class egalitarians dreamed up for him, the ordinary man does not want – especially literacy.' For Williams a common culture should not just involve the transmission of higher values but the respect and receptivity of the everyday culture of the common people.

A key aspect of the emergence of a more positive attitude towards mass culture was the re-evaluation of the role of intellectuals as guardians of high culture. Herbert Gans (1974), in his discussion of mass culture in the United States, further suggests that the attitude of the intellectuals towards mass culture can be viewed as a series of waves or swings, with the critique of mass culture appearing more strongly at times when the intellectuals have lost power and status such as the 1940s and 1950s and declining when they gained influence and prestige as in the 1960s. It also is possible to detect a longer term erosion of the power of the intellectual from around the turn of the twentieth century, when the term emerged with Zola’s involvement in the Dreyfus Affair, and coming to an end with the death of Jean-Paul Sartre in 1980, as Bourdieu (1980) argues. If one characteristic of an intellectual is the capacity to become a self-appointed spokesperson for humanity, then we see a rejection of this ambition along with a lack of support from the public in the late twentieth century. This is one strand of the movement that became referred to as postmodernism in the 1980s, which also entailed a global de-centring of the authority of Western intellectuals (Featherstone 1995, 2007).

Yet at the start of the trajectory of the intellectuals, in the late nineteenth century, there was generally a marked rejection for mass culture, particularly in Europe, as John Carey (1992) emphasises. For Carey the masses served to act as an imaginary abstract projection, the opposite of creative artistic individuality. Yet the masses do not exist, because as he remarks ‘We cannot see the mass. Crowds can be seen; but the mass is the crowd in its metaphysical aspect... The metaphor of the mass serves the purposes of individual self-assertion because it turns other people into a conglomerate. It denies them the individuality which we ascribe to ourselves and to people we know’ (Carey 1992:21).

The masses can therefore be an abstract projection, which enables it to assimilate all the fears of engulfment and being lost or overwhelmed by a lower-other which allegedly could destroy those who strive for artistic identity. This inchoate sense of ill-defined otherness or facelessness made it possible for the masses to be likened by Nietzsche to a herd of animals, or a swarm of poisonous flies. Other writers liken the masses to bacteria and bacilli; they were associated with dirt and disease. The novelist D H Lawrence likened the masses to ‘the monster with a million wormlike heads’ (Carey 1992:77). H.G. Wells, like Ortega y Gasset, to whom he paid tribute, was worried in 1930s about the implications of an explosion in the world’s population and referred to ‘the extravagant swarm of new births,’ the ‘swarms of black, brown and dirty white and yellow people, who do not meet the new needs of efficiency,’ and will have to go (Carey, 1992:119, 125).

In wartime and colonial encounters, it became easy for these sentiments to become exacerbated through institutionalised racist practices, murder and extermination (Theweleit 1987; Elias 1996). The racist policies towards the Irish which developed in England in the nineteenth century were also based on animalization (see Stallybrass and White 1986). This fear of the mass was also linked to the middle and upper classes’ feeling of revulsion and disgust when brought into close contact with working-class people in the new urban spaces and modes of transport (trains, buses, trams) which encouraged social mixing and made it difficult to maintain social distance. For those educated into the ideal of the civilized or cultivated person to be part of the established elite, there was the fear of falling, of being engulfed by the vulgar mass of outsiders and of losing self-control.

Like Carey, Raymond Williams (1958: 289) challenges this projection of fear onto the masses and argues that `Masses are other people. There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.’ Williams' statement also operates as an injunction: we must adopt an attitude of goodwill towards the masses and realize that they are ordinary people, with solid values and virtues not too different from ours. He is asking us to reverse the way in which established groups emphasized the masses’ lowness and vulgarity, through the contrast to their own assumed self-control and cultivated taste for painting, books, music, and food or drink. For those educated into high cultural tastes based on careful discrimination and fine distinctions, the tastes of the common people can appear too simple, too closely linked to sensual desire and the pleasures of animality (Bourdieu 1984: 32). Good taste won with difficulty entailed a refusal of simple pleasures.

A critique of the intellectuals and sympathy for the masses has become virtually the orthodox position amongst academics. Since the 1970s, the influence of critics of mass culture such as Matthew Arnold, Ortega y Gasset, Dwight Macdonald or Theodor W. Adorno has practically vanished. The anti-elitism and demands to respect the non-literary culture of ordinary people was bolstered in Britain through the influential work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. Notable here was the way in which everyday life and popular cultures were taken seriously through ethnographies of youth cultures, class cultures, race, gender and the media by members from the 1970s onwards (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1978; Hebdige, 1979). The work of Paul Willis (1978) is particularly interesting in this respect for his analysis of the ways in which the motor bike boys he studies rejected and reworked the meaning of ‘throwaway’ mass consumer items such as old 78 rpm records of rock singers which became collected, revered and iconized and a key part of a complex youth subculture.

An important dynamic, then, is the discovery by academics and intellectuals of the ways in which mass culture and the banal commodities of consumer culture are actually used and have been re-evaluated. There has also been a reappraisal of the vulgar, with the popular pleasures of the carnivalesque tradition of the common people and acknowledgement of the need to respect their cultural rights, values and way of life. The popular tradition of carnivals, festivals and fairs celebrated symbolic inversions and transgressions of high culture, favoring excitement, emotional expression and direct bodily pleasures, albeit within a temporary circumscribed time-frame (Bakhtin 1968; Stallybrass and White 1986).

Elements of the carnivalesque tradition were displaced into literature, especially from the late eighteenth century onwards. The culture of the lower orders remained a source of fascination, especially for the Romantic Movement through writers such as Wordsworth, Rousseau and Herder. A further strand of the carnivalesque tradition was taken up in the artistic and literary bohemias and avant-garde which developed in Paris and subsequently other large cities after the 1830s (Seigel, 1986). The culture of the ‘lower other,’ the attractions of the ‘otherness' of the forest, fair, theatre, circus, slum and savage continues to remain a source of fascination for the middle classes.

Bohemian, underground and counter-cultural themes migrated into advertising in the fashion, music and entertainment industries, with Punk in the 1970s just one example of the celebration of the messy disordered look (Hebdige 1979; Martin 1981; Pels and Crebas 1988). Likewise mass culture objects, themselves once denigrated, have become taken up within art. Pop Art in the 1960s, as in the work of Andy Warhol, celebrated banal consumer goods such as Campbell soup cans, Brillo pan-scrubber boxes etc. Many of these influences fed into postmodernism in the 1980s in a new era of fascination with ‘depthless’ consumer culture, cultural play and anti-intellectualism (Featherstone1995, 2007). The writings of Jean Baudrillard were influential in this context. In his *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983) he argued for the usefulness of the mass and its capacity to absorb everything through the mass media. In effect, the masses remained essentially undifferentiated and unresponsive to stimuli; like a black hole they could suck in and absorb all positions and dogmas, yet remain untouched and un-persuadable.

**Making the Mass Productive: Population Dynamics**

It is useful to a return to a discussion of the crowd as the key element for the understanding of the mass. In the writings of late nineteenth century theorists such as Le Bon, the crowd was regarded as something dangerous and threatening to established social order, as capable of inducing delirium and irrationality. But the crowd and mass are also interesting from an epistemological angle, given they are the types of social entity that threaten the physical and psychic boundaries of the individual. This is something that cannot easily be integrated into the vocabulary of social facts and emphasis on holism we find in influential sociological figures such as Emile Durkheim (Brighenti 2010). At the same time Durkheim was interested in what he called the ‘collective effervescence’ of the crowd, the currents flowing through it, suggesting a phenomenon which could not be understood through the whole/parts, one/many conceptual apparatus. This suggests a more process-centred multidisciplinary approach is needed which could better incorporate the movements and continuities, the intensities and discharges, the instabilities and emergent properties of social life: an approach which utilizes the notion of multiplicity.[[2]](#footnote-2) For Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the crowd, mass, pack or sect cannot be understood as a numerical aggregate of individuals nor an organic expression of a group, or fragment of a lost unity; they are neither subjects nor objects, but rather a plural entity (Brighenti 2010). Here the emphasis is upon becoming: on movement through time and a shifting series of encounters.

The affective dimension of mass phenomena such as crowds, financial market interactions spanning trading floors and screens, or flocks of birds in flight is complex (see Venn 2010). The double nature of the masses and crowds suggests that while they may be involved in benign and peaceful celebrations of the nation (royal funerals or coronations, sporting events), which affectively bind people together, there is always the danger that large crowds in urban areas could turn into a riotous mob. Michel Foucault (1979) noted that the display of sovereign power at the public spectacle that took place with the destruction of the criminal’s body always held the danger that the crowd’s emotional response would run contrary to the expectations of the authorities and become a stimulus for violence, riot and even rebellion. His book *Discipline and Punish* provides an account of the growth of systematic control and the application of disciplinary techniques to unruly crowds and masses, along with their separation, confinement and surveillance. Referring to the new panopticon type prison, Foucault (1979:200) remarks that one object was ‘to avoid those compact, swarming, howling masses that were to be found in places of confinement, those painted by Goya or described by Howard.’ The birth of the prison, but also the hospital, school and barracks provided a new architecture of visibility and differentiation with the individual cell, or desk, or hospital bed. It also involved regimes of recording bodies and subjecting them to disciplinary control. This contrasts markedly with the previous practice of treating people as an undifferentiated mass and relying on exclusion to offer control.

The taming of the unruly bodies of the crowd and the institution of a disciplinary and surveillance apparatus to train and control people is generally seen as an epochal product of modernity, something extended to more and more areas of social life. Effectively, the people who make up the various crowds and masses become differentiated, documented and subjected to carefully graded treatment and punishment through the disciplinary and normalizing techniques of state power. But in addition to this set of disciplinary technologies to order and control the body, Foucault identified the emergence of a second ‘regulative technology of life,’ in which people are considered and analysed on the population level. This means there are two distinctive technologies of power: one technique is disciplinary; it centres on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body to make it useful and docile. The second technology is centred not upon the body but upon social life and brings endeavours to control and predict the series of random events that can occur in a living mass (Foucault 2004:249).

In effect modern governance takes the population as its primary object, so that the terrain of government is population. Foucault emphasises the rise of statistical knowledge through which populations can be analysed and conceptualised: birth rates, death rates forecasting and estimates. In trying to conceptualise this newly discovered aspect of social life, he suggests that it amounts to the discovery of ‘a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted’ (Foucault 2004: 245).

In the eighteenth century, then, the population became an object of government and the underpinning for the new science of political economy, a science that isolates the economy as a specific domain of reality, with related techniques of intervention. Especially relevant is Foucault’s reference to a form of government, not defined by territoriality, but by a mass, the mass of the population. It is possible, then, to conceive of the mass as de-territorialized, as we find in the current phase of globalization in which the financial markets and new information technologies such as the Internet link together people and technologies into a new mass. The neoliberal integration of the global markets in the late twentieth century opened up a new era with a rapid increase in the size and volume of trading, making the financial markets an interesting mass phenomenon. The proliferation of ratings agencies using sophisticated digital technologies and metrics has become an important part of this process. This reflects the impulse to measure and evaluate performance, to manage risk in a world which constantly seeks to invent new types of financial instruments such as derivatives, hedge funds, short-selling, subprime mortgages, etc., which have flourished with the globalization and computerization of the financial markets (Knorr-Cetina & Bruegger 2002; MacKenzie 2008).

Almost all the information about people’s lives is now digitally available – census, health information, employment and tax records, purchase and consumption habits in books, music, movies from Amazon, ITunes or Wal-Mart, along with telephone calls, Internet sites visited and friends made via Facebook – and can be coded back onto each person’s location. Mobile phones constantly track our movement and also carry information about who we call or text and for how long. It is not just humans who are trackable, but the world of things. Katherine Hayles (2009) has written about the increasing use of RFIDs (radio-frequency identification devices) that are attached to containers and increasingly to more and more consumer items. They send back information to their home base about their present location and state – for example, whether a wine bottle is in the supermarket, at home on the shelf, has beern put in the garbage, or is in the rubbish dump. As the unit cost diminishes this type of computer chip will soon be ubiquitous –every object will have a trackable digital identity and can interact with, or ‘talk to’ other devices and the urban infrastructure. Increasingly RFID tags are embedded into personal items and identity documents, including office key cards, school IDs, credit cards, passports, driver's licenses, clothing, phones, groceries, transport and toll passes. The use of biometrics also means chips are inserted in pets and human bodies. Such information helps agencies to better understand mobility patterns to enable cities plan their transport infrastructure and surveillance needs (Crandall 2010). Not only are individual people and things more readily locatable from the mass as they move through the physical space of the city, but there is also an increase in data gathering via the Internet. A growing number of web analytics firms also amass information on Internet website users and develop computer algorithms to make sense of this data. In effect categories of identity are being inferred upon individuals based on their web use.

With online marketing there has been a move from demographic to digital classification, as data from purchase and search queries are used to construct databases of purchase intentions. Through mathematical algorithms, commonalities between data patterns are identified and so that computer data can enable real-time access and matching (Cheney-Lippold 2011). A new algorithmic identity can be created and continually updated to provide users’ preferences and interaction histories within the system, and then construct individual profiles to recommend purchases (cf. Amazon Books). Many of these databases are vastly superior to those constructed by social science research in terms of their extent, scope and real-time updating, and provide much more fine-grained information about consumption, lifestyle and cultural values of different groups (Burrows and Gane 2006).

Two things should be noted about this process. Firstly there has been a move away from the disciplinary societies with their regulation of bodies which Foucault (1979) outlined. Also through the emergence of neoliberal forms of governance, there has been a retreat of the state from some of these areas. Now it is not only the state that is interested in making mass populations productive, but corporations and other private bodies that engage in ‘data-mining.’ According to this argument and its inflection by Deleuze (1992) we are moving from disciplinary societies to ‘societies of control.’ In this scenario control ceases to be primarily normative, inculcated through disciplining the body through lengthy education processes and enclosure, but occurs through more open mechanisms, in which our fragmented virtual identities constructed in the digital databases become assimilated into categorical groupings through statistical regulation. Our online identities are constantly modulated through digital algorithms which provide both surveillance and generate inferences about the flexible and shifting purchase categories we should fall into. The digital mass, or virtual mass, the mass of data accumulated about our habits and preferences within a globally dominant consumer culture, then, can be made increasingly productive with real-time feedback mechanisms, amounting to a new form of population regulation with greater potential for modulation, category flexibility and governance at a distance.

At the current historical juncture, it would seem that the masses and mass culture are no longer what they were in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, no longer defined by easily recognised common forms of behaviour with reference to education, employment, class and taste differences. The masses as a category can be seen to retreat alongside the demise of uniform mass production and mass consumption. Today the range of categories and distinctions has become more highly differentiated and modulated providing a more complex patchwork. This has been accompanied by a switch in the mode of the regulation and governing of the mass that make up society. A move from disciplinary normalising techniques inscribed onto bodies, to more open forms of control through the modulation of digital identities in databases, which operate modes of inclusion and exclusion, through tagging and tracking, enabling governance at a distance. At the same time, attempts to explore and harness the productive potential of masses, in both the social and natural worlds, continue apace. Scientific digital devices have become increasingly used to grapple with large-scale multiples – of molecules, species, particles and people – which they see to measure, count and classify (Mackenzie and McNally forthcoming). This process also multiplies the methods which in turn make reality itself appear to multiply into different sets and worlds. Consequently the continuing research into masses of various types, casts interesting insight into the perennial struggle to decide what is identity and difference; it also introduces greater complexity along with the search for appropriate methods to realise its evanescent and elusive potential.

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1. *Small Town in Mass Society* is the title of a book by Viddich and Bensman (1958), which was a community study of a Midwestern US town that they saw as under threat from the mass media and social processes. See also Stein’s (1960) discussion of American communities under threat from the societal processes of industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization. The narrative was one of loss and the danger of massification as the traditional order gave way to modernization. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term multiplicity is derived from Riemans’ mathematics and was developed by Bergson and Husserl. It was taken up by Deleuze (1991)and Deleuze and Guattari (1987:36). It also is used in different forms and guises in the work of Latour and Lepinay (2010), who like Deleuze, also draws on the work of Tarde. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)