



The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity, Douglas Murray, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019, pp. 280, \$28.00 hardcover.

Is Our Crowd Mad?

Matthew Stewart

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Derangement is one of Douglas Murray's keywords in his study of social justice activism, identity group politics, and intersectionality. Of intersectionality, currently the presiding principle for campus progressives, he remarks that "it is a system that is not just unworkable but dementing, making demands that are impossible towards ends that are unachievable." (3) This sound judgment could be applied equally well to various other progressive shibboleths—to "cultural appropriation," for example, a related concept shot through with contradictions and double standards, infused with a spirit of bitterness, and generative of impossible demands. Those who try to refashion society

upon such terms seem rationally challenged, and there is often a serious moral "derangement" as well. Nonetheless Murray maintains a spirit of measured analysis rather than opting for fiery polemic. For each bald criticism, there seem to be a dozen probing and pointed questions, often tinged with humor or light sarcasm. Social engineers and left-cause advocates are indeed denounced, but Murray's main concern is with the rest of society, which is now forced to live with (or worse, live *by*) these activist terms. Nowhere is this truer, of course, than in the modern academy.

The overarching thesis can be plainly stated. The last quarter of a century has seen the acceleration of culturally deleterious trends begun several generations before, culminating in a present "in which all our grand narratives have collapsed." (1) The campaign to fill the resultant void of meaningfulness is clearly being won by progressive and radical activists, whose agenda "is probably the most audacious and comprehensive effort since the end of the Cold War at creating a new ideology." (2) *Probably*: there is the measured and litotical voice. Murray's purpose, then, is to warn of "not just a future of ever-greater atomization, rage and violence, but a

Matthew Stewart is associate professor of humanities and rhetoric at Boston University and the author of *Modernism and Tradition in Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time* (2009); mstewart@bu.edu

future in which the possibility of a backlash against all rights advances—including the good ones—grows more likely.” (9) After a lucid and engaging introduction, four major chapters ensue: “Gay,” “Women,” “Race,” and “Trans.” Of the last chapter, the author remarks that although it “affects by far the fewest number of people, it is nevertheless fought over with an almost unequalled ferocity and rage.” (6) Three shorter, extremely useful “interludes” are placed between the chapters: “The Marxist Foundations,” “The Impact of Tech,” “On Forgiveness.” Academic readers will be particularly interested in the first interlude, a brimming articulation of the harm done by postmodernists, nihilistic intelligentsia, and activist professors. His discussion of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (probably the least familiar figures under discussion) puts paid to the claim that “cultural Marxism” does not exist or, at best, is a misnomer. The final interlude on forgiveness brings a welcome set of ethical and spiritual considerations to our present madness.

Murray’s title echoes the famous 1841 study *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* by the Scotsman Charles Mackay. Mackay explored literal crowd behavior, but also displayed a wide-ranging interest in all sorts of manias, in sudden,

intense bursts of foolhardiness that sweep up many, not just a few. In short, Mackay’s pages already contain thorough explorations of irrational behavior treated as their own discoveries by contemporary behavioral economists and social psychologists. Moral panic, groupthink, willful ignorance, the sudden overthrow of sensible modes of conduct, the proclivity of men and women to dismiss evidence that contradicts their biases, wishful thinking of the wildest sort—these are all interests shared by Murray.

“The madness of crowds” theme comes most literally into focus in the analysis of social media. Electronic platforms nurture a rush to judgment and provide a stage for extremists and catastrophizers that enables them to quickly develop into cybermobs. While social justice precepts most often originate in the academy, Murray avers that “the ferocious winds of the present . . . emanate from social media . . . There attempts to weigh up facts can be repackaged as moral transgressions or even acts of violence.” (110) The rapidity with which social media pile-ons occur has been remarked upon by many, as has their severity and relentlessness. Murray’s analysis is strong in its emphasis on the simultaneous newness and power of social media. The rush to use,

then weaponize platforms such as Twitter has not been matched with anything close to a comparable effort to understand exactly what these media are doing to public discourse or to the social fabric. Heedlessness rules.

As can ideology. Murray's description of Machine Learning Fairness (MLF) will come as news to many readers and constitutes the most illuminating element in his discussion of high tech's impact. In an effort to eradicate what it perceives as unwanted biases, Google has engineered its search algorithm with the goal that, in their words, "technology should work for everyone." But Murray has found that "in recent years the [Silicon] Valley has not just adopted the ideological presumptions of intersectionalists and social justice warriors. They have embedded them at a level so deep that this provides a whole new layer of madness" in the internet itself. (112) Search the term "gay couples," notes Murray, who is himself gay, and the images that come up will be of just that: gay couples. Search the term "straight couples," and the images that appear at the top of the search are also of gay and lesbian couples. The small number of straight couples shown includes a sizable percentage of negative cut lines. Gay couples

are smiling and happy. Straight couples are troubled, unhappy, even dysfunctional, in need of lessons from gays. (Machine Learning *Fairness*, remember.) Other search examples (physicists and art history terms provide examples) demonstrating more academic and less strictly sociological concerns also yield results that are distorted, sometimes bizarre. On my own trial search for "physicists," Einstein's image came in at number seventeen, though searching for "famous physicists" moved him up to number nine, where he was helpfully identified as "a male physicist."

Most readers of *Academic Questions* will probably recognize the campus imbroglios and outright crises cogently recounted by Murray, and a substantial percentage of the non-academic cases will probably be familiar as well; therefore, this review has emphasized a few particulars in relative detail rather than rehearse the majority of these incidents. But make no mistake, Murray's analyses even of the most hashed over episodes are very much worth reading for the criticism that he extends, often with wit and almost always through probing questions. Pysma, erotema and epiplexis are amongst the author's favorite

tropes. Hypophora, less so.¹ And Murray presents himself as a supremely quotable author. “To ‘deconstruct’ something,” he writes, “is as significant in academia as ‘constructing’ things is in the rest of society. Indeed, it is one curiosity of academia in recent decades that it has found almost nothing it does not wish to deconstruct, apart from itself.” (53) Murray notes that the aforementioned Google search-engine jiggery, “sacrifices truth in pursuit of a political goal. Indeed, it decides that truth is part of the problem—a hurdle that must be got over.” (120) Here is the author on the absence of forgiveness: “only the worst version of someone’s life contains the information that makes the internet stop and look. It is pure gold for a network

addicted to shaming and schadenfreude.” (175) One more example, this one summarizing transsexual activists’ stance and tone, remarkable for “the spurious certainty with which an unbelievably unclear issue is presented as though it were the clearest and best understood thing imaginable.” (230) Whether he is discussing the widely reported racialized rowing at Yale (the Christakis case), the rioting at Evergreen State (the Weinstein/”white day of absence” case), the deplatforming of so-called TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) in the UK, or some less-familiar example of radical derangement, Murray’s verbal dexterity helps one see anew and more clearly the fight that must be fought. This book is a flagship.

¹A refresher on these rhetorical terms. Pysma involves a series of questions, some of which may require extensive, involved answers. Erotema is what people commonly refer to as a “rhetorical question”; that is, the answer to the question being asked is strongly implied, if not dead certain. The user of erotema is confident that his audience knows the answer to the question and is ready to agree with him. Epiplexis is a sort of scolding question to which no answer is really expected, and may not even be possible. It is used to reproach, insult or castigate. “Is that what you wore to your job interview?” “What were you thinking?” Hypophora is a figure of speech in which a writer raises a question, and then immediately provides an answer to that question.