

## Collective behavior





# Collective behavior

## Spartacus (1960)



# Collective behavior

## Collective action

- ∴ Group of people acting “as one”
- ∴ Often the focus is on *unexpected* action
- ∴ Informal, non-institutional coordination

## What makes this kind of behavior notable?

- ∴ Unexpected outcome
- ∴ Acts in opposition to existing power structures
- ∴ Only works because enough people participate





# Collective behavior

## Why is collective action difficult?

The perspective from  
rational choice theory



### Tragedy of the commons

- ∴ Shared pasture needed by all
- ∴ “Default” state: overgrazing
- ∴ Best outcome equal and controlled allocation
- ∴ No single herder would do better by limiting behavior
- ∴ Solution is cooperation
  - Community norms
  - Government oversight
  - Punishment for misuse

### Describes pervasive features of collective action

- ∴ Collective good perceived to be at odds with individual good
- ∴ All or nothing: if not enough people participate situation is same (or worse)
  - Risk of acting alone
- ∴ Solutions require communication, community, and unified behavior

# Theories of collective behavior

## Explaining Collective behavior:

**Contagion/  
convergence** Social order breaks down in crowds

**Rational  
choice** Collective behavior solves collective problems

**Emergent  
norms** Groups develop new norms in face of unexpected situations

**Value-added** Collective behavior response to strained social situations



# Theories of collective behavior

## Contagion and convergence

Older theories of collective behavior center on how crowds form and disperse

Crowds seen as events where social order breaks down



### Contagion theory

- ∴ Crowd membership alters normal behavior
- ∴ Anonymity creates dissociation
- ∴ People caught up in the crowd will do things they otherwise would not (violent, irrational)
- ∴ “Mob mentality”
- ∴ Popular idea but not supported empirically

### Convergence theory

- ∴ Like-minded people will find one another
- ∴ Latent (hidden) desires expressed in crowd
- ∴ “Release” of underlying tendencies
- ∴ Responsibility for personal actions diffused
- ∴ Some similarities to Durkheim’s “collective effervescence”



# Theories of collective behavior

## Rational Choice

- ∴ Focus on mutually beneficial cooperation
- ∴ Going against the grain potentially costly
- ∴ Overall cooperation benefits everyone (Prisoners' dilemma)
- ∴ Conclusion: cooperative behavior needs a core of committed participants



## Emergent Norms

- ∴ Interactionist—behavior based on norms
- ∴ Norms are expected responses to expected situations
- ∴ In unexpected situations, new norms emerge
- ∴ Negotiation of what is “acceptable” creates coordination of action

# Theories of collective behavior

## Value-added theory

- Functionalist approach—focus on social strain
- Six conditions for collective action:
  - **Structural conduciveness**  
(awareness and opportunity)
  - **Structural strain**  
(e.g. perceived inequality)
  - **Spread of generalized belief**  
(agreement on clearly-defined problem)
  - **Precipitating factors**  
(event or ‘spark’ that sets off action)
  - **Mobilization for action**  
(emergence of networks/leaders pushing action)
  - **Failure of social control**  
(insufficient intervention by authorities)
- **Sees collective action as generally disruptive and undesirable for a functioning society**  
Early 1960s



# Image credit



Photo by [Claudio Schwarz](#)  
on [Unsplash](#)



Still from [All of US Are Dead](#) (2022)



Video: [WGU Japlandic](#)  
([YouTube](#))



Still from [West Side Story](#) (2021)

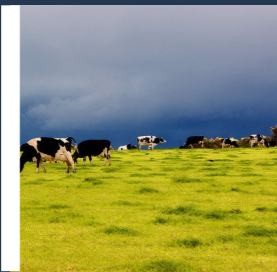


Photo: [Martin Abegglen](#)  
([Flickr](#))



Still from [A Simple Plan](#) (1998)