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The Phenomenal Public

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With what modes of mentality can we build a visceral, subjective sense of being in some specific mass-political society? Theorists and political cultivators standardly call upon the imagination – the kind prompted by symbols and rituals, for example. Could perception ever play such a role? I argue that it can, but that perceptions of mass-political publics come with costs of cruelty and illusion that neither democratic theorists nor participants should be willing to pay. The clearest examples of such perceptions are found in fascist political culture. My discussion aims to illuminate what it is about publics, perception, and democracy that makes this so.

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The Phenomenal Public

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Democracy's basic term is neither 'liberty' nor 'equality', but 'the people'," writes Danielle Allen in her book *Talking to Strangers*. She goes on to ask: "But where and what is this thing, the people? ...How can one even hold an idea of this strange body in one's head?"[1]

Allen is echoing concerns voiced by John Dewey in *The Public and its Problems*, where he worried about the nebulous nature of the public, in a passage that has since been widely discussed: "If a public exists, it is surely as uncertain about its own whereabouts as philosophers since Hume have been about the residence and make-up of the self."[2]

Although "the People" and "the public" have different meanings, both terms can be used to denote the body that a government purports to govern in mass society. Such mass-political groupings are smaller than all humankind, but bigger than the sum total of everyone that any one person knows. Allen's and Dewey's remarks can each prompt the same general question: what modes of mentality can be used to cultivate a subjective sense of being in one such grouping rather than another?

There is a standard answer to this question: imagination. When Allen asks "How can one even hold an idea of this strange body in one's head?", she goes on straightaway to answer: "Only with figures, metaphors, and other imaginative forms." Imaginative forms are prompts to imaginative experience, including not just figures and metaphors, but symbols and rituals as well. Allen, a democratic theorist, is interested specifically in the imaginative forms that can cultivate a sense of belonging to a democratic public. Inspired by Ralph Ellison, she emphasizes the need for rituals that make "the People" salient as a locus of political concern, welcoming of difference without domination.[3]

Another dimension to the standard answer is: emotion. Conviction, loyalty, aggression, compassion, anger, joy – these feelings can make a person feel connected to other people – even to people they will never know, but with whom they share a

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[1] Allen 2004, p. 69.

[2] Dewey 1927/2016, p. 150.

[3] Allen 2021a; 2023.

society. In *Political Emotions*: *Why Love Matters for Justice*, Martha Nussbaum draws the link between some of these powerful feelings and political society, when she writes: "If distant people ... are to get a grip on our emotions, these emotions must somehow position them within our circle of concern, creating a sense of 'our' life in which these people and events matter as parts of... our own flourishing."[4] On Nussbaum's picture, emotion that infuses imagination can instill in an individual not only a sense of being in a particular political society, but of belonging to it. "Imaginative forms" are meant to operate on each person by stirring emotions that bring "distant people" into their circle of concern. Thanks to our capacity to picture and respond affectively to what is not in our immediate environment, affectively charged imagination is a natural psychological ingredient to promote, for anyone wanting to cultivate a subjective sense of being in any kind of political society — whether in the service of democracy, or not.

In this article, I consider whether a different mode of mentality can build a sense of political society: perception. At a subjective level, what we perceive seems to be in our immediate environment, belonging to a space in which we can act, and in which many perceivers can witness and interact with the same things at the same time. There's nothing better than perceiving a situation to give it a feeling of reality.

There's no denying *some* role for perception in building a subjective sense of political society, for instance in perceiving symbols or rituals, including perhaps the buildings or other designated places where formal governance takes place. Such perceptions may be meant to activate further feeling and imagination. Some writers recommend a less incidental, more directly efficacious role for perception. In a 21st-century attempt to vindicate the political efficacy of spectators, political theorist Jeffrey Green argues that popular power in a democracy can take the form of an "ocular" power of ordinary citizens to interact spontaneously with their elected leaders, witnessing them in unscripted encounters.[5] More ominously, Walter Benjamin in 1935 described something he called "the aestheticization of politics," a phenomenon that has since been invoked as a hallmark of fascism, with its emphasis on the sensory thrill of domination. In a discussion linking more recent fascist politics to Benjamin's formulation, Federico Finchelstein, historian of politics in Latin America, writes:

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[4] Nussbaum 2008, p. 11.

[5] Green 2010. See also Stears 2021.

> Fascist practice… focused on a set of political rituals and spectacles aimed at … grounding [its politics] in lived experiences. These practices present fascism as something that could be seen.[6]

But while both Green's ocular model and Benjamin's or Finchelstein's suggestive remarks claim an important political role for perception, none of these writings address directly whether perception can ever play a more explanatorily basic role in politics, democratic or otherwise: bringing the public into the minds of the people who are in it. In short, it remains an open question whether it is possible to perceive a mass-political public.[7]

Bringing the public to mind would enable a person to feel that they grasp or apprehend a mass-political society in which their lives are located, relieving the uncertainty Dewey describes about the public's "whereabouts." How to make the public a felt presence in the mind is a natural concern for any potential leaders, activists, operatives, or other mobilizers. What if any such figures want to cultivate a more specific sense of the public's interests, its purposes, its future or its past, its vulnerabilities, its demographic make-up, its strength, or its status as a People? Without making the basic subject-matter of these things salient in some way, any further attributions to it could easily remain abstractions, removed from any immediate concern, uncharged by any feelings of identity, and easy to ignore or dismiss. Imagination is the mode of mentality that Allen and Nussbaum call on to play this basic psychological role in mass politics. This article argues that perception can do the same, though at costs that democratic theorists should not want to pay.

I begin in Part I by identifying the kind of perception of the public whose existence is most important to consider. I distinguish between two forms that perceiving mass-political society could take, in principle: perceiving a *whole public*, versus perceiving a person under the mode of presentation "member of the same mass-political public as

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[6] Finchelstein (2017, p. 38) relies here on Paxton 2004.

[7] Many studies approach perception from the opposite direction, probing what can make a person feel "seen" by public institutions or authorities. What can make a person feel that their actions are (or may be) surveilled by government or police, or that any law-breaking may be detected? (Foucault 1975; Lerman and Weaver 2014). What historical conditions can create a sense of being subject to a public "gaze" that influences how one acts, dresses, or speaks to others in public places? (Sennett 1977, Goffmann 1963; 1971). While these well-researched inquiries focus on how one may be perceived by public formations, they don't address perception from the other direction, in which a person could activate a subjective sense of being in a specific political society by perceiving a specific mass-political public.

me." In Parts II and III, I consider each kind of perception in turn, and argue that each kind of perception is possible.

Visceral ways to grasp the public via perception might sound like promising enablers of democratic participation. But I'll argue that the clearest, most powerful examples of such perception facilitate political domination and disrespect, and to that extent are at odds with principles of political equality among the ruled. My discussion aims to illuminate what it is about publics, perception, and democracy that makes this so.

I. PERCEIVING THE PUBLIC

A. "The People" and "the Public"

When Allen asks "where and what is this thing, the people?" and "how can one even hold an idea of this strange body in one's heads?" we can hear these questions as asking: What mode of mentality can a person use to build or sustain a person's own subjective sense of being in political society? How does an idea of a specific "People" come to life in the minds of individuals who identify themselves with it? Heard in this way, Allen's questions concern the psychological means a person might use to locate herself as part of a People.[8] They concern a *phenomenal public:* the subjective sense of being located in a specific mass-political society.

There are significant obstacles to forming any such living idea of a phenomenal public. Absorbed continually in one's own affairs, the "private citizen" in the United States, wrote Walter Lippmann, is consigned to the role of a spectator "who knows that his sovereignty is a fiction."[9] One's basic epistemic condition in American society was bewilderment and passivity in the face of civic matters, he argued, likening us to spectators in the back row of a theater who can't really hear the performance and keep

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[8] We can alternatively hear Allen's questions as assuming that the world actually contains the "strange body" and then asking how it can be detected: where to look for it, what methods to use to help find it, and so on. Heard in this way, the questions orient us as aspiring knowers looking in on "the People" from the outside, keen to identify a "strange body" that has its features independently of any observers. From this stance, answering the questions would position us to know things about the "strange body" such as its purposes ("the People's will"), its interests, or its opinions. Perception seems an unpromising source of such answers, just as it would be on the much smaller interpersonal scale. If one wanted to know what a friend hopes or plans to make for dinner, simply perceiving her may not answer any questions about her purpose, will, interests, or opinions with respect to the evening meal. Thanks to Richard Moran for discussion of this point.

[9] Lippman 1925, p. 4.

falling asleep. Like Dewey, Lippmann observed that a subjective sense of being part of self-governing public is hard to come by. Unlike Dewey, Lippmann thought democratic governance would have to proceed without relying on any such sense. But they agree that when the ordinary person is left psychologically to their own devices, public affairs tend to be inscrutable.

Although Allen and Dewey are both concerned with how a person can make psychological contact with a mass-political grouping, Allen focuses on "the People," calling it "democracy's basic term," whereas Dewey, who is equally concerned with building democratic political culture, frames his discussion in terms of a "public." Taking note of the differences between these terms will help clarify the central question at issue here.

As the familiar phrase "the will of the People" suggests, "the People" denotes a locus of political agency, both in political theory and in political rhetoric. Rousseau relied on a concept of "the People" as a locus of political will. Experts in fascist rhetoric, such as Adolf Hitler, rely on it to identify themselves so closely with "the People" that their own personal will appears as the perfect stand-in for any kind of popular political participation, beyond being an audience of spectators.[10] And the idea that "the People" would denote a locus of political agency operates even for pluralist skeptics who would replace the idea of a single locus of political agency with a set of competing groups vying for power. In these ways, proponents of democracy, detractors from it, and manipulators all operate with a concept of "the People" tied to agency.

The agential connotations of "the People" could help phrases like "We, the people" energize a population, leaving it poised to act – or at least to endorse the political acts of others. What about "the public"? While mass-political *publics* are said to have interests, hold opinions, or face dangers to its security ("threats to the public," "public enemy number one," "public opinion," "public interest"), none of these common phrases suggest any tie to sovereignty. "We, the public" is far less stirring than "We, the People."[11] A mass-political public is subject to governance, but whether it is also a

[10] Stern 1975. Schmitt (1932) posited a homogeneity (*Artgleichheit*) among the people that he thought delimited a political will that could be shared with a leader, to the point where there was an "identity between ruler and ruled" (see his "Definition of democracy" in Schmitt 2008, p. 264).

[11] I owe these key observations about usage to Richard Moran, along with the general point that as concepts, "the People" and "the public" seem to differ along the axis of agency. I'm grateful for these insights.

locus of sovereignty or self-governance is left open.[12] If a "body-politic" makes up a public, that fact is simply neutral on whether it also constitutes a People.

From now on I'll use "the public" as shorthand for "the mass-political public," where this kind of public is made of the people that any mass-political governing structure purports to govern. At any given time, many such publics co-exist. Some of them overlap: two people can be part of the same public defined by the state of California even if only one of them is part of the public defined by the city of Los Angeles. What will matter here are phenomenal publics, defined by the subjective sense of being located in a specific mass-political society.

Even skeptics about the existence of "the People" as a locus of political agency, and even analysts who find the category decidedly unhelpful in understanding political phenomena, can acknowledge a subjective sense of being part of a "People." It does not matter whether "the People" is a useful analytic category for empirical study. "The People" can exist, or not. Analogous points apply to "the public." "The public" can be nebulous, or even ill-defined, or not. Regardless of any ontological status, we can ask what mode of mentality a person may rely on to connect her to these things, psychologically.

Once we focus on subjective identifications with specific political society, we can see an important relationship within this subjective realm: feeling that one is located in a mass-political *public* is something more general than a subjective sense of being part of a "People." An upshot of this fact is that one way to come to feel located in a mass-political public is by feeling part of a "People." Alternatively, to identify oneself as part of a public, one need not feel any strong positive sense of "belonging" to a People. For instance, one need not have any affectionate feeling comparable to what some people express toward their hometown when they say "I belong here," and list wistfully all the things to love about the place. Similarly, one need not feel oneself to be a part of any locus of political agency. As Thomas Nagel and others have observed, shame at one's country's actions, such as many U.S. citizens felt during the Vietnam or Iraq war, does not depend on viewing oneself as responsible for the actions of which one is ashamed, but it does assume a more basic level of political identification.[13]

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[12] The terms "the public" and "publics" are also used by Warner (2002) to focus on implied readers addressed by texts, making texts explanatorily prior to publics in Warner's sense. A cousin of Warner's approach would analyze the public as a kind of audience, defined in relation to a spectacle that its members are observing (such as audiences of a rock band on tour, or "the theater-going public"). By contrast, in the sense at issue here, governance structures are explanatorily prior to publics, but no specific texts or episodes of performance need be as well.

[13] Nagel 1976.

For each of these subjectively different ways of experiencing oneself in political society – as part of a politically empowered or disempowered "People," or merely as part of a mass-political public – we can pose a question like Allen's: what modes of mentality could most effectively bring that political society into a person's consciousness? I focus here on the most general version of this question, and the role of perception in answering it. This role for perception is well captured in the first-person: "I can think of the public I'm in by perceiving it." Regardless of the specific type of political society, and regardless of any emotional relationship a person feels to it, can a person's perceiving the public yield a subjective sense of being in it? As a shorthand, I'll formulate the question more simply: Is it possible to perceive the public?[14]

B. The Standard View

Though the question whether it is possible to perceive the public isn't often asked, it has a presumed answer: No. The standard view is that you can't perceive the public, but instead you have to imagine it. Two claims make up the standard view, one negative and one positive.

(**SV-negative**) It is not possible for people to perceive the publics they are in.
(**SV-positive**) People can only grasp the publics they are in by using imagination.

Both kinds of grasping of the public in these claims (perception and imagination) are first-personal, in the sense that a subject would perceive or imagine a public as a public she is in.

Allen is not the only proponent of the standard view. Walter Lippmann, writing a century earlier in *The Phantom Public*, argued that the inscrutability of public affairs leaves us susceptible to manipulation by experts in political communication who seek to define for their own political purposes what will count as 'the public interest'. If we extrapolate from our own interests – or from the manipulators' – to a view of the public interest, the process will have to involve envisioning situations we can never observe. Given these considerations, Lippman would certainly endorse at least the negative part of the standard view, and arguably the positive part as well.[15]

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[14] Since I'm concerned with the general question of whether *any* specific mass-political public can be perceived, my use of "the public" is comparable to "the skunk" when it is used to talk about a species ("the skunk has stripes," "the skunk can spray odors," etc), as opposed to any particular individual skunk.

[15] Lippman 1925, ch. 1.

These two thinkers, then, seem to take for granted that people rely on imagination to grasp the publics they are in, whether they do so as earnest citizens trying actively to politically engage, or as passive targets of propaganda or other political operations.

Allen and Lippmann are writing specifically about American democracy. But even writers who are not focused on democracy, or on the United States, arrive at the same idea that the public can only be thought about using imagination. Writing in 1983, the political theorist Benedict Anderson proposed a definition of the nation, according to which "it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." The nation is imagined, Anderson wrote, in the sense that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members or even hear of them, yet in the[ir] minds lives the image of their communion."[16] The nation, like any mass-political public, has an intermediate scope between everybody, and everybody you know. On Anderson's view of how it is possible to get your mind around such a body cross-cuts all sorts of polities, democratic and otherwise.

As we saw in section 1, typical prompts for this kind of imagination include symbols, such as flags, mascots, or the seal of a city, and rituals, such as parades or spending Sundays in the park. Another type of prompt, discussed at length by Anderson and Habermas, is widely-circulated print newspapers, with their mix of stability in format and variation in content as "the news" unfolds.[17] Because newspaper readers know that many other people whom they will never meet are reading the same newspaper, Anderson reasons, they can take themselves to belong to a broader reading public.

C. Why Does It Matter Whether the Public Can Be Perceived?

If it is possible to perceive the public, then such perceptions could be leveraged for mass-political purposes. To see why cultivators of political feeling in mass society might want to orchestrate perceptual experiences, let's first consider a much older role for visualization in politics.

In the introduction to her novel *Paradise*, Toni Morrison describes a political role for representations of a place – Hell – that cannot be filled merely by having a concept of that special realm. She observes that if you wanted to make an argument for avoiding Hell, you might try to represent it in a way that does more than just describe it as a place where things are certain to go badly. Even if the prospect of going to Hell has long been part of common knowledge, a person whose conception of it was shaped only by

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[16] Anderson 1983, p. 6.

[17] Habermas 1962. Anderson 1983.

written descriptions from long ago might regard the place and warnings about it as not entirely real or believable. A visceral representation of Hell might be more effective at conveying what inhabiting it would actually be like. A whole class of paintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Morrison observes, were visual depictions designed to make people avoid going to Hell, by showing the kinds of scenarios it would surely be best to avoid, lest one end up immersed in them for eternity.[18]

Imagery of Hell is an ingredient in religious rhetoric, designed to influence people en masse by making vivid a type of scenario defined by domination and misery. Anyone who wants to shape the character of a mass-political polity faces the inverse problem: what would be needed to make the existence and importance of a living public felt and attractive?

A first stance from which this question matters is the stance of a *cultivator* of subjective feeling of being in political society. Powerful leaders of a party, a country, or a movement can create long-lasting political forces in part by repeating claims like "We the People won the election" or "No one has set me above the people. I have grown with the people, have remained with the people, to the people I shall return."[19] This kind of propaganda has proven effective at cultivating visceral identifications. A perception of the public that contributed to this subjective sense would be an important tool for such cultivators to use.

Another set of political cultivators includes democratic theorists or practitioners who think there can be no democracy without a public that considers itself empowered to influence policies on the basis of claims about what would be best for the whole polity, all things considered. It is understandably hard to feel empowered in this specific way, if one can't even get one's mind around the locus of empowerment. And if one can, doing so could consolidate in one's mind the terms and the value of political association.

To these kinds of political cultivators, it should matter whether it is possible to perceive the public, because they need to build a subjective sense of political society.

The question should also matter to a different kind of political cultivator: theorists or practitioners who think it's important to *avoid* building any strong, emotionally powerful subjective sense of belonging to a People. On this view, if any kind of civic regard should be cultivated, it should promote the privacy and informational insulation of co-politizens from one another, lest the existence of substantive feelings

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[18] Morrison 1998.

[19] "We won all 50 states": said by Donald Trump who regularly uses the first-person plural to lie about winning (e.g., in McClure 2023). "[T]o the people I shall return": said by Hitler (quoted in Green 2010, p. 217).

of connection of the sort Nussbaum describes be taken as a suitable purview of the state. Wary of republican over-reach into the mental lives of ordinary citizens, these cultivators would oppose any efforts to build civic regard in the form of a subjective feeling of belonging to a People. Such feelings can't be a locus of intrusion if they aren't an acknowledged part of political life in the first place.

To this mildly libertarian set of cultivators, it should matter either way whether it's possible to perceive the public. Since perceiving the People would be a way to perceive the public, if it turned out to be impossible to perceive the public, these cultivators should welcome that result. And if it is possible to perceive the public, they should discourage any such perception that takes the form of perceiving the People.

Finally, there is a last perspective from which it should matter whether it's possible to perceive the public. It should matter to students of perception and imagination. Typically, we can use either mode of mentality to relate our minds, in different ways, to the same thing. We can see a red square, or we can imagine one. We can see people interacting happily, or we imagine them doing so. These two modes of mentality do not generally bias the type of contents that can occur within that mode.

But when it comes to perceiving versus imagining the public, this generalization may not hold. In the rest of this article, I argue that as a means of building a subjective sense of political society, perception seems to have a bias toward subjectively presenting polities that involve domination. Using perception, it is evidently difficult to build a subjective sense of political society without relying on domination, whereas imagination seems free of any parallel constraint. If this conclusion is right, then polities are not like red squares or happy people, when considered as potential contents of perception. Walter Benjamin was onto something, if he meant that "the aestheticization of politics" involved a kind of perception especially well-suited to fascism, maybe even specific to it.

To make this case, we need to look more closely at the differences between perception and imagination. Because each of these things are such broad categories, we will need to zero in on the difference that matters here.

D. Perception and Imagination

Some varieties of perception and imagination work together in a single mental process or episode. When you see a skunk, only some of its surfaces are visible at a time. We form all sorts of expectations about how those facing surfaces continue out of view. Philosophers and psychologists have used different labels for the capacities involved in

forming such expectations, but Immanuel Kant called them "imagination."[20] Drawing on such expectations is a kind of imagination, integral to perception, that informs how one could interact with the skunk, how big it is, where it is in relation to the oneself, how one would have to move to see the rest of it, and so on.

By contrast, the kinds of imagination and perception at issue here cannot be practically coordinated in any analogous way. Instead, the key contrast is between two fundamentally different modes of consciousness. *Perceptual experiences* present things as currently occupying the same immediate surroundings as the perceiver. *Imaginative experience*s present things as not currently in the same immediate surroundings as the imaginer.

These two modes of mentality present things to consciousness in different ways. Perceptual experiences feel like perception. One feels oneself to share immediate surroundings with things one perceives – with the potential for immediate action and interaction that sharing such surroundings affords. By contrast, imaginative experiences feel like imagination. One feels oneself to be merely imagining something, and, to that extent, at one remove from any interactions that might be possible if one were actually in the same place at the same time. Any such interactions have to be imagined.

Construed as a phenomenal difference between modes of consciousness, the difference between experiences of perception versus experiences of imagination lies in the structure of experience, not in merely scalar differences in how detailed, precise, shadowy, or vivid things appear to be.[21] Virtuosos of imagination can see scenes in their minds eye with loads of detail, or hear complicated musical pieces in acoustic imagination, without such episodes "tricking" them into thinking that music is actually playing and can be heard by anyone walking by, or that they are actually in the scene imagined.[22] If they are so tricked, the experience becomes phenomenally perceptual – a perceptual experience in the sense at issue here.[23] Feelings of perceived reality versus

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[20] For Kant, two kinds of imagination are involved, which he called "productive" and "reproductive". For full discussion of their roles see Matherne 2024. Husserl analyzed these expectations as "protentions"; Merleau-Ponty (1945) analyzed them as sensory-motor disposition (see also Noë 2002); and contemporary analyses of perception account for them as priors that enter into Bayesian updating (Hohwy 2013) or as part of the contents of perceptual experience (Siegel 2010, ch. 8).

[21] For further developments of this claim see Martin 2002 or Siegel 2020.

[22] Conversely, we can see faint outlines, or billowy vapor, without automatically feeling that these things are figments generated from within.

[23] The term "perceptual experience" can alternatively be heard as denoting whatever experience accompanies perceptual relations to external things, as opposed to the phenomeno-

imagined unreality are found at the level of phenomenal structure, not in qualitative differences of degree.

When we use this distinction to probe which modes of the mentality may be used to grasp the public, we can ask whether it is possible for someone to perceptually experience a public, or whether instead it is only possible to imagine the public as a thing that is not currently part of one's immediate perceptible surroundings, with which one cannot directly interact.[24]

Why focus on this phenomenal version of the distinction between perception and imagination, as opposed to categories defined by psychological mechanisms? We are interested in how to build a subjective sense of political society – a phenomenal public. To find how a specific form of consciousness is built, it is most straightforward to focus directly on ingredients of consciousness. And that's what experiences of imagination and experience of perception are. The forms of consciousness prompted by "imaginative forms" mentioned by Allen, or by reading newspapers on Anderson and Habermas's accounts are imaginative experiences in the sense operative here – not perceptual ones.

Because perceptual experiences characterize what things are like for the person having the experiences, they are susceptible to all sorts of distortions. A perceptual experience need not succeed in making perceptual contact with anything (it may be a hallucination), and it may not be an accurate perception of the way things are (it may be an illusion). It may seem natural to classify illusions and hallucinations as products of the imagination. But in the sense operative here, because of their phenomenology, these states belong to perception, not imagination.

Below I'll develop examples of perceiving the public that are riddled with illusions and are deeply misleading. For all that, though, they remain perceptual experiences, with distinctive powers that perceptual experiences have to motivate and convince

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logical category of experiences that feel like perception, whether they are perceptions of external stimuli or not. The two uses differ because as Perky (1910) showed, experiences that accompany perception may feel like imagination, and as the case of unwitting hallucination shows, experiences can feel like successful, veridical perceptions, without being successful or veridical. My use is the phenomenological reading.

[24] Elsewhere in philosophy, a different set of distinctions is important: not the difference between phenomenal perception versus phenomenal imagination, but the boundaries between perception and cognition (Beck 2018; Block 2023; Carranante 2020). Those boundaries are irrelevant here, along with the "Rich vs. Thin" debate about perception (Siegel and Byrne 2017). It could turn out that some mental states or activities that fall on a 'cognitive' side of various distinctions between perception and cognition may nonetheless count as perceptual experiences in the current sense, because they feel like perception, not imagination. The relevant kinds of perception and imagination are exclusive: if E is a perceptual experience of X, E is not also an imaginative experience of X.

perceivers, and to direct their minds to their immediate surroundings, instead of to merely imagined spaces.

In case it seems dubious that illusions or hallucinations could play such powerful roles, consider a hallucinogen that causes someone anxious and downtrodden to picture vividly a joyful scene, in which people are happy and at ease with one another. Even if there is no such scene before them – it's a drug-induced hallucination that makes no contact with reality – the perceptual experience may give the hallucinator a crucial glimpse of what kinds of interactions, interpersonal feeling, and relationship are possible, by bestowing a feeling of reality on those moments in which (so far as the unwitting hallucinator can tell) the happy scene is already realized. What a boost! The status of perceptual experiences as illusory is compatible with providing significant roles in shaping belief and action. Perceptual illusions of public would be no exception.

As many theorists have discussed, all sorts of imagination can play key "boosting" roles in politics, as well. Envisioning futures that differ from the status quo can help clarify political aims and values, and some think it should be used to help prefigure the desired political arrangements by enacting them here and now on a current scale.[25] In those roles, imagination is a guide to building the observable environment, in something like the way an architect might picture a building's layout before building it.

But in the debate about how to grasp the public, the role for imagination cannot be a stepping stone to perceiving at a future time what one currently merely imagines. If the public can be grasped only in imagination, that means it could not be experienced as part of the currently observable environment. Even more strongly, it could not be experienced as part of *any* real, observable environment. To provide any sense of actually exercising political agency as part of a public, the coordination and connectedness to a public would always have to be imagined as well.

In making my case against the standard view, I'll argue that due to their status as perceptual, even illusion-ridden perceptions of the public can present a feeling of political efficacy missing from imaginative experiences of a public. Ultimately, it's this difference in felt political efficacy that makes it worth asking what modes of mentality we can use to get our minds around a public, and toward what ends their political efficacy can most readily be marshalled.

E. The Fragility of Relying on Imagination to Grasp the Public

Symbols, rituals, and newspapers can all prompt individuals who make up a public to imagine it, by imagining themselves as part of it. But due to the need for such prompts,

[25] Kelley 2002. Cooper 2014.

the standard view can easily generate a sense of unease. The unease can arise because prompts do not ensure their own uptake. Whether they resonate to a person at all is highly contingent. Such uptake is susceptible to all sorts of obstacles and countervailing factors that can blunt or even cancel the force of the prompt.

For instance, merely recognizing a symbol does not ensure that one is imagining the public associated with it, let alone that one locates oneself as part of it. A flag expert need not feel any tinge of political emotion, let alone an emotion of belonging to a public, when recognizing a flag. Rituals can ring hollow, lack spirit, or be met with distrust or indifference. One can read a newspaper without having any image of communion with other newspaper readers.

Consider the building at the site of the twin towers felled by the attacks on September 11, 2001, called One World Trade Center. It stands 1,776 feet high to symbolize the year of the Declaration of Independence. As political theorist Jan-Werner Müller notes, "to an innocent observer, it needs to be explained that this building is 1,776 feet high."[26] Even once it is explained, the symbolic status may do little to cultivate feeling of belonging to a public. As Müller also observes, symbols are so loosely linked to the practices they symbolize that they can easily call attention to the disconnect between symbolic gesture and action, inviting accusations of hypocrisy. In this regard, he highlights the use of glass to symbolize transparency and accountability, noting wryly that glass buildings do exactly nothing to stop the officials within them from abuses of power.

Symbols, rituals, and newspapers all create interfaces that are meant to mediate between individuals and a public to which they belong. The interfaces are contingent on the right kind of uptake, and such links can be tightened or loosened. There is always the possibility of refusal by responding "that does not apply to me." The intended prompts to imagination can be treated by their addressees as failures, cordoned off and irrelevant – much in the way that the paintings depicting Hell might be met with a shrug by a dismissive, un-intimidated free-spirit who thinks: "That's just a painting, it's not real life" or "Religious warnings? They're not from *my* religion. I don't even have a religion."

If one wanted to prompt people to regard masses of others they will never meet as proudly belonging to the same polity, it might make sense to try for something more than just solemn descriptions of a fundamental principle of political association – democratic or otherwise. Visceral, specific depictions of the polity that cast it in a favorable light could provide such depictions, just as pictures of Hell can cast it in an unfavorable light. But those media have frames around them, separating off the worlds they depict from the worlds where they are located, much like a theatrical stage marks

[26] Müller 2020, p. 28.

the limits of the fictional world brought to life dramaturgically. For political purposes, to leverage feelings of political belonging, wouldn't it be more powerful to orchestrate perceptual experiences to clarify the terms and the value of political association? Since it would be perception, not depiction, no one could dismiss it as just someone else's drawing. The suggestions of imagination always lie on shakier ground, as by definition, phenomenal imagination presents things at one remove from reality.

F. How Can We Probe the Standard View?

Can the public be perceived? A first version of this question asks whether it is possible to perceive the whole that is the public, from within it. The whole is a kind of multitude, and this version of the question asks whether that multitude can be perceived by someone who takes themselves to belong to it.

I will argue that it is possible to perceive the public as a multitude, but that the most powerful examples of such perceptions facilitate domination and disrespect among co-politizens. This result motivates us to consider a second version of the question: whether it is possible to perceive a person (or group of people) under the mode of presentation "member(s) of the same public as me." Here, one would be perceiving a perfectly ordinary thing – a person or group – under a specific mode of presentation.

Because they focus on interpersonal relationships, interpersonal perception might seem to provide a chance for co-politizens to perceive one another as political equals, and in doing so make the shared public perceptually salient. But I argue that no such way of grasping the public seems available. As with perceiving the public as a whole, the clearest examples of interpersonally perceiving the public facilitate domination and disrespect among co-politizens.

II. PERCEIVING THE WHOLE

A. Dewey on Perceiving the Whole

Let's begin with how John Dewey might answer the first version of the question: whether it is possible to perceive the public as a whole.

In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey asks what makes a group of people a public in mass society.[27] His answer is that the public is an aggregate of individuals. Then he asks: what aggregates individuals into a public? What is the *unity relation* that constitutively connects members of a public? And here his answer is that a certain

[27] Dewey 1927, ch. 4.

type of causal relation helps to aggregate people into a public. When we bear the indirect consequences of one another's actions, then we belong to the same public. The public we form becomes more visible as we come to know what those indirect consequences are.[28]

Suppose we think about the public the way Dewey does, and then ask whether it's possible to perceive a public, construed in Dewey's way. A natural thought is that if you could perceive the public-making unity relations that make a group of people into a public, then that would be a way to perceive the public.

But Dewey is at pains to argue that those unity relations are not perceivable. A public's "visibility," for Dewey, is not in our sense a mark of its perceptibility. The public has to be *made* visible, he says, exactly because the indirect consequences are not automatically or easily manifest to us. For instance, market transactions and decisions about how goods will be produced very often have consequences that are unknown to the agents of those actions and to others who participate in their effects. Changes in an irrigation system can lower the tomato yield, increasing the price of a sandwich hundreds of miles away. And that is one of the public's "problems" that has to be solved: indirect consequences have to be made visible, so that a public can become "aware of itself." On their own, the indirect consequences that bind people together into a public are not perceivable.[29]

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[28] Dewey (1927) describes the visibility of the public in two different ways. In the first description, the public exists all along, but is invisible until its members come to know the indirect consequences of their actions. When Dewey talks about the public's 'eclipse' and 'submergence' (ch. 4), he is construing the public as a set of people whose lives are affected by the same things (laws, interactions, practices) – whether or not they care about those things, and regardless of how much they know about the causal paths to and from the things they care about. Further questions would arise here as to who exactly needs to know about the consequences, and whether the knowledge has to iterate in the ways characteristic of common knowledge. But this use of 'the public' in Dewey resonates to one common use, as when a sign is posted at a construction site that says "Notice of public hearing." Here, the operative meaning of 'public' is roughly 'anyone who may be affected', regardless of their epistemic position.

At other times, Dewey talks about the public coming into being only when the indirect consequences of certain interactions are made visible (ch. 2). Here, "the public" includes a type of political consciousness on the part of its members as belonging to a whole, by virtue of their position in a causal network of factors that affect them indirectly. It's the awareness that constitutes a public, which is therefore more than just the set of people who are affected by a set of laws, practices, and interactions, regardless of their epistemic position. These two uses of 'the public' differ greatly, but we can safely ignore those differences in assessing the Dewey-esque argument.

[29] Dewey 1927, p. 161.

We can extract from these ideas a Dewey-esque argument:

P1. If the public is perceivable, then its public-making features are perceivable.

P2. Public-making features are not perceivable.

Conclusion: this route to perceiving the public is blocked.

If this argument were sound, it would not decisively establish the standard view, since there could be other routes to perceiving the public, distinct from the route described by premise P1. But the argument would still favor the standard view.

Is the Dewey-esque argument sound?

Schematically, Dewey thought of the public as building up the big from the small. Publics are built up out of individuals who are related to one another in the right way. Here we might ask: what if Dewey's picture has things backwards, and in fact, the big inheres in the small from the start? That was the approach of the neo-Kantian social theorist Georg Simmel, who thought that the mind was structured by preconditions for society, which he called "social apriorities." In introducing the idea of social apriorities, Simmel writes:

> Societal unification needs no factors outside its own component elements, the individuals....[T]he consciousness of constituting with others a unity is all there is to this unity. This does not mean that each member of a society is conscious of an abstract unity. It means he is absorbed in the innumerable, specific relations and in *the feeling and the knowledge* of determining others and being determined by them.[30]

We can think of Simmel's picture on analogy with what A. D. Smith calls the "Anstoss" in his book *The Problem of Perception*. Smith is interested in giving sufficient conditions for perceptual consciousness.[31] One of the conditions he proposes is illustrated simply by pressing your finger down on a table. When you do this, you feel both your finger and the table, simultaneously in the same experience. You experience at once your body, and a limit beyond which lies a solidity independent of your body.

Exactly analogously, Simmel thinks we experience ourselves always as a nexus between individuality and sociality. Neither strand has priority, and neither is independent of the other. We live within the structure of the social Anstoss. From the

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[30] Simmel 1908/1971, p. 7, emphasis added.

[31] Smith (2002) offers three such conditions, but only one is relevant here. He borrows the term "Anstoss" from Fichte, who was pursuing something even more abstract – the relationship of "I" to "not-I". For further discussion of Smith on perceptual consciousness via the Anstoss see Siegel 2006.

first-person perspective, we feel ourselves to be both integrated into society but also independent of it. From the second and third person perspectives, when we apprehend other people in general social terms, such as their roles as barista, bureaucrat or bus driver, we also apprehend them as a nexus of an individual and those social definitions. This apriority equips us with an idea of society, built into our experience of ourselves and other people. It's built in, in the sense that it is part of our social perception.

Would this structure of our mind give us what we need to perceive a public? It is, after all, a type of social perception. Does it allow us to experience a public, automatically, alongside our perceptions of other people?

It doesn't, though it *almost* does. But it doesn't, ultimately, because it is too general. What's immanent in the mind is society as such – not this or that politically defined society, specific to a time and place. Even if the social "as such" at issue for Simmel is a placeholder for political society, for all Simmel says, you might have to supplement the preconditions he describes with "imaginative forms" to get an idea of a specific public – just as the standard view suggests.

The face-off between Dewey and Simmel leaves the standard view looking pretty good. Simmel doesn't weaken the standard view. Dewey doesn't weaken the standard view, either. He may have been wrong to think the public is fundamentally an aggregate. (And about that, he is wrong, if Simmel is right). But Dewey is correct that in many cases, you can't perceive the direct consequences our actions have on one another that make a public "visible."

Are there other routes to perceiving the public, besides the Dewey-esque one? Or other reasons to think it can't be perceived? Let's consider some more arguments.

B. Is the Public Too Big to Be Perceived?

A simple argument for why it isn't possible to perceive the public is that no sensory field is big enough to accommodate it. In mass society, the body politic is too big for any perceiver to see, hear, or otherwise perceptually sense everybody at once.

This line of thought focuses on the spatial extent of the public. A parallel line of thought addresses its temporal extent. Some members of the public aren't quite born yet, while others have passed, yet those absent persons can still belong to a public. They show that the public has a temporal extent that reaches beyond the lifetime of any politizen.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the public cannot be perceived, because its spatial and temporal boundaries are so much bigger than any perceptual experience could present to a subject.

These lines of thought about spatial and temporal extent face the same objection. In general, one does not have to see all the parts to see the whole. I can see that a basketball is on a trajectory upward, even if I don't see its whole path. So perhaps it is possible to perceptually experience the public by perceiving only some of it at a time.

An important figure in European history had exactly this idea about perceiving the public: Robespierre. Like many others at the end of the 18th century, Robespierre was deeply concerned with the tension, arising from the democratic ideal of self-governance, between sovereignty and representation. The tension is simple: if leaders rule, what political role is left for the People – that supposed locus of self-governance? But if the People rule, then what political role is left for any leaders?

Robespierre thought this tension could be resolved, at least in part, by a form of popular surveillance of legislators that would take place while they legislate. Legislators should make laws before a big crowd, Robespierre proposed, so that they could palpably sense the presence of those people they are supposed to govern. The effect he sought was moral constraint on the legislators, to hold their temptation to corruption and deceit in check, and encourage their sense of responsibility: "before the eye of the multitude, corruption, intrigue, and deceitfulness would be quashed, responsibility would flourish."[32]

Robespierre had a specific opinion about exactly how many people had to comprise such a crowd, for it to play this role. The Salle du Manége in the Tuileries, where legislators then held their sessions, could seat only three or four hundred people, but Robespierre thought there had to be twelve thousand people for the perceptual presence to have its intended effect. As part of his model of governance, Robespierre seemed to think that popular surveillance would allow legislators to perceive the public, by perceiving a sufficiently large part of it.

Robespierre's model raises some basic questions. Even if we grant him that the mere presence of people would have the morally purifying effect he describes, why is twelve thousand the number of people needed to have this effect? Why wouldn't a more effective disincentive to corruption involve just a few dozen journalists, skilled at revealing any transgressions and abuses that powerful people may be trying to hide?

But no matter how these questions are answered, even if Robespierre's scenario would yield a perceptual experience of the public in this scenario, it's only a perceptual experience on the part of the legislators. The legislators would experience the whole public by experiencing part of it, because they are in the midst of performing proprietary political roles. Their legislative activity gives the crowd before them the power to

[32] Robespierre 1866; quoted in Bell and Zacka 2020, p. 14.

symbolize the public. For all Robespierre says, without performing that activity, no such perception of the public would occur. Would the spectators perceptually experience the public, by forming the crowd that the legislators see? What about other members of the public who aren't in the crowd, but who are observing legislators being watched by the crowd: would they experience themselves as part of the public?

Robespierre doesn't speak to these questions, as his concern lies with how to stem corruption. But for all he says, the experience of the public he envisions would be limited to the few legislators. Their perceptual situation will not generalize to other people. It therefore does not give us a kind of experience that can play any sort of cultivating or regulating role in the population at large in political society – democratic or otherwise.

Given the limited scope of these perceptions of the public, I don't want to rest my case against the standard view on Robespierre's idea that legislators can perceive the public. Instead let's consider whether other scenes of governance could make it possible for *anyone* to perceive a whole public, by perceiving a part of it that is exercising political agency.

C. The Town Hall Meeting

Consider a Town Hall meeting, where participants are trying to govern democratically, in accordance with principles of equal liberty and political equality. The fact that such principles are guiding decision-making, let's suppose, would not be observable to someone lacking the relevant background information about the matters at hand. Could such a Town Hall meeting be perceived by anyone as an episode of democratic governance? And if so, could perceiving such an episode be a way to perceive the public?

To assess whether a meeting could be perceived as an episode of democratic governance, compare friendship. If two people are friends, they can probably perceptually experience one another as friends. Presumably they got to be friends by conversing and sharing projects, interests or activities with one another. They don't perceive friendship by perceiving any of these friendship-bestowing features. Instead, their perception of friendship draws on prior knowledge that they are friends. In a case where one mistakes a stranger for someone else with whom one is friends, the mere (false) belief helps produce an (illusory) experience of meeting a friend. These considerations suggest that a Town Hall meeting could be perceived as an episode of democratic governance, by someone with adequate background beliefs, thanks to the influence of those beliefs on perceptual experience.

If democratic governance could be perceived in a Town Hall meeting, is it a way of perceiving the public by perceiving its political agency? "This is the public in action,"

someone might think, beholding the scene. Can one perceive the whole public, by perceiving the part of it involved in the Town Hall meeting?

There's reason to think not. As democratic theorists have long observed, political agency in democracy combines formal, centralized, institutionalized procedures of governance, with an informal, open-ended, socially diffuse spaces in which politically relevant opinions are formed and expressed. The centralized procedures are obviously essential, but the socially diffuse component is, too, as it creates the space from which official decisions can be contested. In a democracy, such disagreements with official policy are supposed to be politically relevant. The Town Hall or citizens' council belongs only to the formal, centralized aspect of democracy.

These observations cast doubt on the proposal that perceiving a Town Hall meeting as an episode of democratic governance could be a way to perceive the whole public. At best, it would be a way to perceive the part of the public involved in the formal aspects of democratic governance.

But here, the basic point about perception re-arises. Since many whole things can be perceived *only* by perceiving some of the whole at a time, why wouldn't it be possible to perceive the public, at a moment, by perceiving the part of it engaged in that moment in a formal part of democratic governance – on analogy with seeing a skunk?

In reply, in the case of the skunk, the unseen parts are continuous with the parts that are seen. They are spatially continuous, continuous in color and texture, and part of the same causal unity. By contrast, the formal and the informal parts of democratic governance are discontinuous in all sorts of ways. As Dewey emphasized, democracy can be thought of as both an ethos, and as a type of regime.[33] Whereas political opinions can be formed anywhere and everywhere, and exchanges of political views happen wherever people interact, formal centralized aspects of governance take place in designated places, such as a Town Hall.[34]

These observations suggest a general challenge to any proposal for perceiving the whole public – the *demos* – in a democracy. Wholes can be perceived by perceiving

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[33] Dewey 1952.

[34] Müller (2020, p. 24) points out the historical precedent of these architectural differences when he writes "Think of the fact that in ancient Athens political discussions took place not just in the *ekklesia* on the Pnyx, but also in the *agora* (similar arguments can be made for the Roman *forum*)....The agora was not dedicated to a single purpose...The point is that in democratic Athens official political sites for debate and decision making were complemented by spaces where the demos could meet in its diversity."

parts of them, when and because the parts are continuous with the whole.[35] But whereas regimes have dedicated spaces to mark the seat of the formal political power, an ethos is the wrong kind of thing to have a designated space that delimits the scope of its operation. The informal dimensions of the demos are by necessity not linked in any of these ways with the participants in the formal structures of governance. This fundamental discontinuity presents an obstacle to perceiving the *demos* by perceiving a part of it engaged in formal aspects of governance.

D. The Mob

Like the Dewey-esque argument, our reflections on the Town Hall example leave the standard view looking pretty good. Perceiving the public by perceiving a Town Hall meeting would be a counter-example to the standard view. But on reflection this case turns out not to challenge the standard view at all, since it does not provide a case of perceiving the public.

The most powerful counter-example to the standard view, I'll argue next, comes from a different type of example: a certain type of large-scale mob. This kind of mob, I'll argue, gives masses of people in it a perceptual experience of a whole public. The experience is riddled with illusions, but those illusions endow the perceptions with frighteningly powerful political roles. It shows that while there is no metaphysical basis for rejecting the standard view, there is a normative one.

i. What Makes a Crowd a Mob?

Writing in 1960 about crowds and power, Elias Canetti emphasizes how compelling it can be to feel connected to a crowd of people whom one does not already know:

> In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself; and an immense feeling of relief ensues. It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one is greater or better than another, that people become a crowd.[36]

Canetti thinks that crowds generate a feeling of connectedness across social divisions and distances. Here he draws on a basic point of agreement in the otherwise contentious history of crowd theory: the idea that crowds have their own dynamics and

[35] This observation was central to the gestalt psychologists' theory of object perception, and is preserved by theories superseded it, such as Spelke 1990 and Carey 2009.

[36] Canetti 1960, p. 18.

produce their own affordances for disturbances and violence. Some thinkers tried to cast doubt on this idea, on the grounds that crowds couldn't be a fundamental locus of dynamics or agency; only individuals in a crowd could do that.[37] But unlike other parties to this debate, Canetti approaches the topic as a phenomenologist. He is asking simply: what does it feel like to be part of a crowd? And his answer emphasizes a feeling of expansion:

> it seems as though the movement of some of [the people in the crowd] transmits itself to the others....the urge to grow is the first and supreme attribute of the crowd... The natural crowd is the open crowd; there are no limits whatever to its growth; it does not recognize houses, doors, or locks and those who shut themselves in are suspect.[38]

Although Canetti approaches the topic of crowds with a focus on how different kinds of crowds feel, he does not shy away from claims about what makes them feel that way. These claims put him directly in dialogue with earlier crowd theorists who hypothesized that crowds make people susceptible to emotional contagion, and worried about the consequences for individual responsibility.[39] Canetti is focused on a much less cognitively sophisticated dynamic, in which a tendency toward expansion simply maintains the coherence of the crowd, as opposed to dispersal. By contrast, when fifteen people previously unknown to one another board a bus they have been awaiting, they disperse, rather than sticking together in one part of the bus. The number of bus-riders may grow as the bus rolls along making its stops, but it is not the growth of a crowd.

Canetti's "open crowd" is not in a building. It is not in the Salle de Manége, or in a vast stadium. It is out in the open. The type of mob whose participants can easily come to a perceptual experience of a public, I'll argue next, is an open crowd on the edge of violence, prone to break down social barriers, and infused with feelings of connectedness and political agency.

This kind of mob is episodic: it exists only as long as it is gathered. By contrast, some theorists use "the mob" as a term that attributes specific political dispositions to a set of people, regardless of whether the people said to belong to the mob gather together at a single place or time. For example, throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt uses "the mob" to denote people who "prefer mob rule

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[37] For discussion, see McClelland 1989, ch. 6.

[38] Canetti 1960, p. 18.

[39] For an opinionated overview of the worry, see McClelland (1989, esp. chs. 6 and 7) and Park (1975).

to law."[40] A similar disposition is attributed by historians' claims that Black Americans migrated north in the first half of the 20th century "to escape the white mob," or when political arrangements under Jim and Jane Crow are said to encompass "the culture of the mob."[41]

The distinction between episodic and dispositional mobs can also apply to digital contexts. A digital, dispositional mob can be composed of people who occupy a vast range of locations, ready to "pile on" in response to only the most superficial layer of information. When the disposition is activated, an episodic mob exhibits some of the same crowd dynamics found in episodic mobs that are intent on aggression.

Some dispositional uses of "mob" are clearly pejorative. They figure in attempts to discredit political movements by adjoining the word "mob" to the name of a movement, as in "the Antifa mob" or "the Black Lives Matter mob." These labels attribute to the whole movement a disposition to form violent or unruly crowds.[42] The kind of mob attributed to these movements is defined in terms of political dispositions, not in terms of a specific episode.

It's the episodic type of mob, not any disposition to form such mobs, that provides the strongest candidate for producing a perceptual experience of the public. That's because episodic mobs produce impressions of political agency, and of belonging to a group that includes people one has never and will never meet.

ii. What Can Make a Mob Feel Like a Public?

Canetti highlights two features of open crowds that will help us see how a mob could feel like a public: the feeling of connectedness just discussed, and visible diversity. Visually, a mob can look heterogeneous. In a recent example, participants in the mob in the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 were variously old and young, men and women, anti-Semites and orthodox Jews, outlandishly costumed and regularly dressed people. The diversity ran deeper than anything visible. Some participants were wealthy and others were not; some were working while others were unemployed; some were pro-law enforcement, others were anti-law enforcement, even anarchist; some participants'

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[40] For a book-length treatment of Arendt's dispositional notion of the mob, see Verstegen 2018.

[41] Grossman 1989. Gooding-Williams 2024 reads W.E.B. DuBois's analysis in *Darkwater* of the culture of the mob as incorporating the Schmittian element that I argue helps make it feel like a public. On the persistence of the culture of the mob after Jim Crow in southern regions of northern states, see Pimblott 2017.

[42] Siegel 2021.

minds were changeable, others were and remain recalcitrant; afterward some became contrite while others hardened. It was a visibly and ideologically diverse crowd drawn from the political right wing of the U.S.[43]

But even when a mob looks and is diverse, it feels unified from the inside. This pair of features gives us our first clue as to why and how a mob could generate a perceptual experience of a public. It is a way to generate the intermediate scope of the public in mass society, where the public is smaller than everyone in the world, but bigger than the set of people known by any single member.

A third feature, when added to these two, turns the crowd into a mob: being energized for violence.[44] These three features all figure in an account we can extract from Canetti of what can make a mob feel like a public. A mob affords an experience of a public when it directs its destructive energies against a political opponent, disregarding any constraints that law, respectable society, or social boundaries might place on violent domination of their opponent.

Not every mob marshals its destructive energies in this way. Think of noisy exuberant sports fans who overturn cars, break glass, tear down lamp poles, or find other ways to disrupt public spaces after a victory.[45] By contrast to rioting sports fans, the mobs that afford an experience of the public direct their destructive energies toward an "anti-public": people present in a polity whom the mob regards as not belonging there. For instance, for rioting insurrectionists, reigning governors are an anti-public. Participants in a lynch mob, along with their sympathizers, think they are asserting rights to rule over the anti-people. Mobs like these assert themselves as a rightful public. In terms introduced by jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, adviser to Hitler's Nazi regime, the mob treats its participants as "friends" who constitute the

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[43] Barry, Feuer and Rosenberg 2021.

[44] Canetti 1962, p. 20. Canetti's claim that crowds contain a potential for violence may seem to hypostasize the crowd into its own locus of agency, and risk attributing powers to a whole (a crowd) that could only truly belong to its elements (the people in the crowd). If individual people are the only locus of agency, then Canetti's rhetoric when he speaks of a crowd's "momentum" might seem objectionable or at least misleading. And yet the widely acknowledged need for "crowd management" techniques comports well with Canetti's assumption that crowds have a violent potential. The potential can arise from physical dynamics endangering collapse, "crushes" or stampedes in overly dense crowds, or from dynamics that operate in part through mood, emotion, and motivation, as discussed in the pre-history of scientific social psychology by Gustave LeBon (1895/2009) and Gabriel Tarde (1901).

[45] Wan and Nutt 2018.

rightful public mobilized against "enemies" whose status as threatening deserves to be met with exceptional measures, including violence.[46]

When mobs direct their violent energies in this way against an anti-public, they are not making claims addressed to a public. Mobs are not the kind of street gathering in which people hold up signs or perform other expressive acts conveying messages of the form "this principle is right and it should guide our community" or "this practice is wrong and we should not tolerate it" or "this republic is not living up to its own ideals."[47] Protestors who convey such messages behave as only one part of a public, addressing another part, with whose minds and hearts they would like to join, on terms that differ from the status quo. In attempting this kind of political communication, such protestors are not claiming to be the full public already.

By contrast, the kinds of mobs that challenge the standard view assert themselves as already constituting the rightful public. Everyone else is simply in the way. The mob's social identity is given visceral definition by its fight against the obstacles to its political will.[48]

So three features can make a mob feel like a public: a mood of connectedness within the open crowd, visible diversity of its participants, and readiness for violence against some supposed anti-people.

These features may allow us to appreciate how it could feel compelling, satisfying, and exhilarating to gain an impression of the public by participating in a mob. In generating a perception of the public, mobs solve a problem of missing political agency. Under authoritarian rule, the people are not supposed to have any political agency. Under democracy, they are, but as Lippmann emphasized, it is hard to experience oneself as exercising any such agency in mass society. But to someone who is breaking down physical boundaries in public spaces, it won't feel hard to experience political agency at all. Exerting such force shows the permeability and therefore the weakness of the things that get broken – doors, windows, walls.

These considerations suggest that a mob can perceptually manifest political features that might otherwise stay abstract. Due to the felt momentum of the crowd, the consequences of togetherness become palpable. Contra Dewey, it does not feel nebulous anymore. One can feel viscerally, immediately, and strongly connected

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[46] Schmitt 1932.

[47] For many examples including the Prague Spring, Arab Spring, and more see Chenoweth 2021.

[48] A contemporary example of this outlook is easily found in the words of participants in the insurrection of January 6th, 2021: "this is our house"; "the [Capitol] building belongs to us"; "we own it, they don't own it" (quoted in Barry, Feuer and Rosenberg 2021).

to people one doesn't even know. And contra Lippmann, in a mob, one's epistemic distances from politics can appear to be closed. There you are, enacting your agency, through manifestly political actions.

If feelings of political agency offered by a mob seem to manifest the power of the *demos*, such feelings can connect the mob to political rhetoric that portrays it as taking extraordinary measures necessary to defend democracy.[49] The connection to such political rhetoric could be forged in at least three ways: it could motivate participants to join or sympathize with a mob; it could be taken to justify violence already done to a supposed anti-public; or its actions could reinforce the vision of the polity communicated by the rhetoric. When mob action and political rhetoric join forces in all three ways, they help form a political movement.

iii. The Illusions of Mobs

I've argued so far that mobs can generate a perceptual experience of a public, and that such experiences play powerful political roles. The political roles are not necessarily precluded by the fact that in such experiences, we can find at least four illusions, all captured by Hannah Arendt's remark that a mob is a "caricature of the people."[50]

The first illusion arises from the mob's experience of exerting political agency. This experience contributes to generating a perception of being a public. Not every part of it is illusory, since a mob can indeed make political things happen – as is shown by the storming of the Bastille, and numerous other revolutions that have used mob violence to unseat political power. Sometimes mob violence feels like an assertion of political power, and it is.

But another aspect of the mob-induced experience of political agency is illusory: the experience of self-governance. As a roving, open crowd moves through space it claims as its own, participants may feel that the people's will is concretized at last. But such agency is limited in its temporal scope to whatever someone can do during the gathering. Governance has the wrong time-scale to be enacted during the episode created by a mob. If members of the mob experience themselves as contributing to self-governance, that part of their experience is an illusion.

A second illusion concerns a different aspect of political agency. A drugged subject can hallucinate what happiness would really be like, but mob-induced perceivers of

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[49] Observers of the 2021 insurrection have noted this feature (O'Toole 2023; Snyder 2021; Allen 2021b).

[50] Arendt 1951, p. 107.

the public do not experience what political equality among the ruled would be like. They experience only what political equality among the supposed rightful public feels like, when they are mobilized against the anti-public – a formation sometimes called "Herrenvolk democracy."[51]

A third illusion of political equality found in Herrenvolk democracy is described by Canetti: "Only together can men free themselves from their burdens of distance; and this... is what happens in a crowd. ...distinctions are thrown off and all feel *equal.*"[52] From the inside, such connectedness and togetherness in violent agency can feel like political equality among the destroyers. Like the experience of political agency, the mob-induced experience of political equality need not be entirely illusory. Within the episode of the mob, the mob's participants may be equally violent. They may be equally vulnerable to one another, or to forces trying to disperse or control their mob.

But as Canetti points out, social distances can't be removed by gathering. And differences in political power among the mob may remain – for example if only some of them will ultimately be punished for the violence they inflict. In this way, the experience of political equality within the mob may also be an illusion.

A last and most important illusion concerns the appearance of danger posed by the anti-public to the mob. Here it is useful to distinguish insurrectionist mobs aiming to topple a brutal regime, which may indeed pose an existential threat to the people it brutalizes, from mobs of politizens terrorizing other politizens, such as lynch mobs.[53] Setting aside the relatively few brutal regimes overturned by insurrectionist mobs, when a mob's political opponents don't constitute an existential threat to anyone, fears or beliefs about the dangers posed by the anti-public are badly exaggerated.

E. Can Perception of the Public Play a Non-Dominating Role or Only a Schmittian One?

The counter-example I've presented to the standard view is a perception of the public that both cultivates and relies on the distinction between a rightful public and an anti-public. In principle, that same role could be played by any mode of grasping the public, perceptual or otherwise. We can call it the Schmittian role, since it is defined by the distinction between "friend" and "enemy" (rightful public and the anti-public):

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[51] van Den Berghe 1967.

[52] Canetti (1960, p. 18) goes on to point out that closing of social distances is an illusion.

[53] Sometimes, due to its construal of its political enemies, mobs punch up and punch down at the same time. In Nazi Germany, Jews were construed both as the anti-people, but also the elites who supposedly controlled banks and government.

Schmittian role: grasp the public first-personally in ways that cultivate a Schmittian vision of the polity.

We can contrast the Schmittian role with the role of cultivating political relationships consistent with democracy in which co-politizens do not dominate one another politically. Such relationships include political equality among co-politizens, without limitation by any category of an anti-public threatening the existence of the rightful public. We can call the role of cultivating such a vision the non-dominating role.

Non-dominating role: grasp the public first-personally in ways that cultivate democratic politizenship without domination among co-politizens.

If a mental mode of grasping the public plays the non-dominating role, its scope is universal: in principle, any politizen could grasp its public in that way – not just legislators, as in Robespierre's scheme of popular surveillance, and not just members of a self-proclaimed rightful public. If a mode of grasping the public is available only to some politizens, it would not be as good at cultivating pluralistic democracy as modes that are available more widely. The perceptions afforded by the Schmittian mob are not available to anyone deemed part of the anti-public, and that is by design.

I've argued that perceptions of the public can play the Schmittian role. Can they ever play the non-dominating role?

Since this question concerns interpersonal relationships, it brings us to the second way of perceiving the public: interpersonally, by perceiving co-politizens under the mode of presentation "same public as me."

III. INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTION

A. Perceiving Persons As Members of the Same Public As Oneself

To probe whether interpersonal perception can provide a way of grasping the public egocentrically, we can use the following strategy: look for a type of relationship X, such that if it is possible to perceive another person as standing in relationship X to oneself, one can perceive the public by perceiving that relationship.

i. Neighbors

A natural candidate for X is: being a neighbor. In her analysis of political dynamics among neighbors, political theorist Nancy Rosenblum notes that unlike friends,

whose lives may be separated by oceans or time zones, neighbors share public spaces (the surrounding neighborhood) and may share semi-private ones as well, including hallways, garbage areas, laundry rooms, and borders between adjacent properties. What could make a perception of someone as a neighbor a perception of the public?[54]

Groups of neighbors are often thought of as a civic unit poised to participate in local or national politics.[55] If we think of neighbors as fellow participants in politics, electoral or otherwise, this mode of presentation of neighbors would be a way to perceive co-politizenship, the defining relationship of the public. Perceiving neighbors as fellow activists or voters poised to address the public would make the public salient in our perceptions of them. And nothing in such a mode of presentation relies critically on any Schmittian structure. We need not locate our neighbors in any scheme of rightful public versus anti-public, in order to think of them in political terms.

So there are modes of presentation of neighbors that could make the public salient, via roles of fellow voter or activist. But Rosenblum gives us is good reason to doubt that we regularly think of neighbors in this way. She argues that the neighbor relation is instead the seat of dynamics in which we exert "the soft power that comes with proximity."[56] Because neighbors can and do hear, overhear, and observe one another, they are in a position to be a nuisance, an aggressor, or an aid. Her considerations suggest that our perceptions of our neighbors are not typically ways to perceive the public at all.

There are, however, other modes of interpersonal perception among co-politizens that do make the public salient and provide my next counter-example to the standard view.

ii. Partisan Perception

In his 2019 book *Overdoing Democracy*, philosopher Robert Talisse observes that in the U.S., around the time of his writing, "Our social spaces have been colonized by the categories, allegiances, and divisions of politics... [denizens of the US] are nearly constantly *communicating* their politics to one another."[57]

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[54] Rosenblum 2016; 2020.

[55] The system of "wards" used by political parties in the United States is an example. Wards are the smallest institutionalized unit of democratic participation.

[56] Rosenblum 2020, p. 123.

[57] Talisse 2019, p. 73.

He has in mind the phenomenon of social sorting by political affiliation. It's not just that one could reasonably well predict which party's candidates a person is likely to vote for on the basis of things that have nothing to do with politics, such as whether a person buys their coffee at Dunkin or Starbucks, drives a hybrid car or pickup truck, or carries a tote bag. Such correlations, which would be strange enough, do not yet show anything about social perception. But Talisse points to evidence that people actually use these cues to form immediate impressions of political affiliation.[58] This makes the phenomenon a kind of social perception.

One dimension of political polarization is that political affiliation gets expressed as identity, as opposed to merely beliefs or commitments whose adherents cut across other social divides. When political affiliation is both felt and perceived in others as an expression of social identity, it becomes possible to have what we can call partisan perception. In the social context Talisse discusses, partisan perception is infused with affect, with the valence determined by whether the person perceived is a co-partisan or an anti-partisan. Under what Talisse and others call *affective polarization*, partisan groups have a high level of distrust and antipathy toward members of opposing groups.[59]

Partisan perception under affective polarization can be an occasion for perceiving moral properties. If one perceives a person as affording concern and deserving respect, then they attribute those morally inflected properties to that person. Concern and respect would then be prompted by experiences of someone else as a co-partisan. If one instead perceives a person as affording disregard and deserving disrespect, and as less deserving of concern than co-partisans, that would be a kind of immoral perception. Under affective polarization, disregard and disrespect are easily prompted by experiences of someone else as an anti-partisan.

Partisan perception is thus a way to perceive someone else as being in the same public as oneself. It is a way to perceive the public in the interpersonal mode.

Interestingly, the counter-example to the standard view given by partisan perception once again, like the earlier counter-example, rests on the Schmittian structure. We can see at least two respects in which partisan perception of the public resembles perception of the public from within a mob.

First, at an interpersonal level, partisan perception is a way of sorting a legitimate public from the anti-public. A strong morally charged impression with explicitly political consequences is formed in an instant, not on the basis of an extended flow of information, such as one would find in discussion or activities or getting to know

[58] Talisse 2019, ch. 3.

[59] Talisse 2019, p. 98. See similarly Mason 2018.

someone. Second, just as a mob is a spectacle, partisan perception belongs to small-scale interpersonal spectacle, which we are "constantly communicating our politics" to one another, as Talisse puts it (with dismay).

Some theorists of fascism would say that these similarities between partisan perception and the perception of a public afforded by certain mobs are exactly what we should expect from what Benjamin called the "aestheticization of politics."[60] Unlike the perceptions of a public generated by the kind of mobs I have described, perceiving someone as an anti-partisan need not bring about illusions of political agency or social connectedness to a multitude. But it is just as likely to bring about the illusion of facing an existential threat.

B. Conclusion

Both examples of perceiving the public are ways to make co-politizenship salient in perception. Co-politizenship is the defining relationship of publics. Without any way to make this relationship salient, a perception of another person or a crowd would not be a perception of a public.

If the *contents* of perception characterize how the immediate environment seems to the perceiver, we can say the co-politizenship relation is included in the contents of these perceptions. In both examples, co-politizenship enters those contents through a Schmittian structure. In the interpersonal case, from within the perception, someone else can be presented either as belonging to the rightful public or to the anti-public. And in the group case, a mob is presented as personifying the rightful public, mobilized against the anti-public. Here, the felt unity of the mob makes co-politizenship within the group salient and adds a positive valence, while its reason for mobilizing makes co-politizenship with the anti-public salient, and adds a negative valence.

Could anything else besides a Schmittian structure put co-politizenship into the contents of perception?

In the Town Hall example, I gave reasons to think that experiencing the formal aspects of democratic governance could not generate an experience of the public as a whole. It could at best be a perception of co-politizenship with the people participating in formal aspects of governance. In the example of neighbors, I borrowed Rosenblum's reasons to think that experiencing one another as neighbors is not in general a way to experience one another as co-politizens.

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[60] Benjamin 1935.

The neighbor relation and the practice of formal democratic governance are only two possible routes to perceiving the public. If these routes fail, that faillure does not by itself show that no other routes are possible. But it may leave you, as it leaves me, suspecting that perception of the public may be doomed to be Schmittian, and that this insight was shared by both Benjamin and democratic theorists who defend the standard view.

Benjamin did not address whether such perceptual manifestations of politics can *only* occur in fascist political culture; he just highlighted the tendency of fascist political culture to tie politics to visceral experience (a point echoed by Arendt's remark that the mob is a "caricature of the public"). Allen and Lippman don't explicitly address whether *any* public can be perceived; they're focused on why, in American democracy, the public's role as a political agent has to be imagined. But taken together, perhaps all three thinkers offer a collective insight about the relationships between politics and perception. Something about democracy precludes the possibility of perceiving democratic politizenship, either interpersonally or as the defining relationship of a whole public; while something about fascism creates the possibility of perceiving the public, either interpersonally or as a whole, at the cost of cruelty and illusion.

Assessing this potential insight would require identifying the relevant dimensions of democracy and fascism. Since there isn't space to do that here, I'll end with an observation about the interpersonal way of perceiving the public. Just as one can perceive another person as a friend, thanks to the influence of background beliefs on perception, it is presumably also possible to perceive another person merely as a co-politizen, without relying on any structure of rightful public and anti-public, or partisan and anti-partisan. But if that kind of theory-laden perception reflects the perceiver's vision of the polity as organized around principles of non-domination, there is no need for it to help establish and maintain them. The crucial question is whether there is a way to perceive the public that cultivates such a vision, without relying on it having already shaped the perception.

Absent any such way to perceive the public, polities that hope to be organized around principles of non-domination may need ways for imagination of their public to approximate the power of perception.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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