Review of Doug Murray's 'The Madness of Crowds'
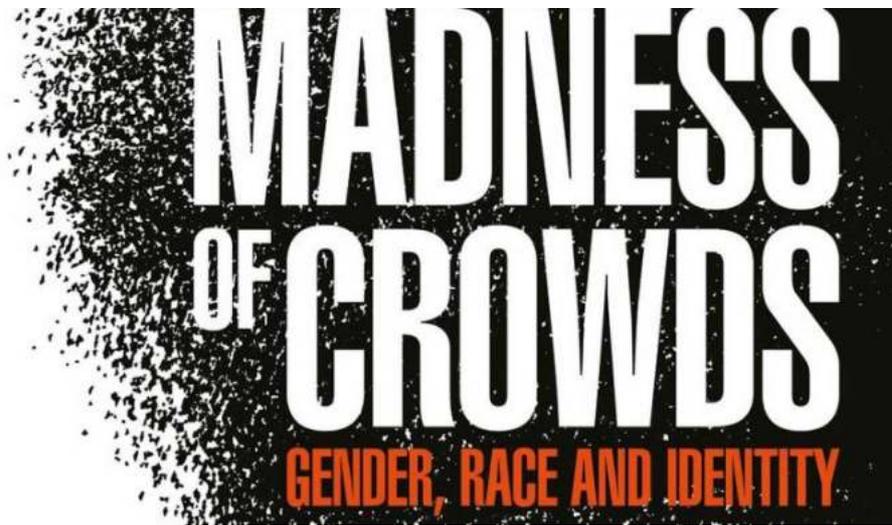
Gay. Women. Race. Trans. These are the names of the four substantive chapters of Doug Murray's new book, *The Madness of Crowds.* In each of the chapters, Murray talks about the way that politics around these four issues currently operate, arguing that they are each, and in total, 'deranging'. The chapters provide ample illustration of the politics surrounding each issue, as well as Murray's own diagnoses of how we got to where we are with them. Briefer 'interludes' separate the chapters, musing about the theoretical foundations, the role of technology, and the place of forgiveness, in our current situation.

Murray's overarching claim is that identity politics has gone too far. Each of the movements featuring in the chapter titles had almost reached its end, he claims, when instead they careened off in a wild direction. In many countries we have gay marriage, women have made major gains towards equality with men, people of colour have made major gains towards equality with white people, and trans people have it better in countries like the UK and the USA than in pretty much any other country. And yet, the rhetoric coming from each of these movements suggests that things have never been worse, and the tactics being used to punish those who get things ever so slightly wrong on the movements' values are wildly disproportionate. This rhetoric is particularly distasteful given the very real oppression that women, gay people, people of colour, and trans people actually do face in some countries — not least Yemen[1], Azerbaijan[2], India and South Africa[3].

The Madness of Crowds has a similar flavour to Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianhoff's recent *The Coddling of the American Mind,* or Laura Kipnis's slightly earlier *Unwanted Advances.* All three books are full of nearly unbelievable stories of the behaviour and tactics deployed by those who claim to be acting on the side of social justice. Indeed, *The Madness of Crowds* and *The Coddling of the American Mind* report on some of the same incidents. But while Haidt & Lukianhoff's argument was for less 'safetyism' (students claiming that ideas they disagree with make them 'unsafe') and more resilience among student populations, and Kipnis's argument was for checks and balances in the Title IX apparatus and greater focus on the empowerment of female students to say 'no' to sexual assault (and be heard), Murray's argument is for a more fundamental shift, with a less obvious pathway to implementation.

Murray wants social justice movements to end at equality and not tip into 'better than'. Women are *as good as men*, not *better than men.* People of colour are *as good as* white people, not *better than white people.* Some of the current politics around feminism and race suggest otherwise, creating a hierarchy of oppression in which, perversely, to be more oppressed is to be more morally good. This is further complicated by the idea of intersectionality (that multiple identities intersect to create unique forms of oppression), which has people constantly confused about where they sit in the hierarchy of oppression; whether they're oppressor or oppressed, whether they owe deference to another person or that person owes deference to them. As he puts it, "is a fat white person equal to a skinny person of colour?" (p. 241).

Murray also wants truth to prevail over incoherence and contradiction. The current orthodoxy has it that "anyone might become gay, women might be better than men, people can become white but not black and anyone can change sex. …anyone who doesn't fit into this is an oppressor. …absolutely everything should be made political" (p. 233). That orthodoxy clashes with our best science, which tells us that gay is (at least for many people) not a choice, that sex is real and impossible to change. To claim that people can change race but only in one direction, and to insist upon a disanalogy between changing race and changing sex without being able to explain what's different about them, clashes with common sense. The search for truth is a cherished value of liberalism, not, contra black students from Pomona College and the Claremont Colleges, an "attempt to silence oppressed peoples" (p. 136).

While Murray's overall point is well-taken, namely that social justice activists are currently behaving in ways that are both mad and maddening, the explanation and antidote could have been further developed. There's an interlude dedicated to the Marxist foundations of this movement, and this is also gestured at in other places in the book. But it's never quite clear who is supposed to be pulling the puppet-strings when Murray makes claims like "Make them doubt almost everything. And then present yourself as having the answers: the grand, overarching, interlocking set of answers that will bring everyone to some perfect place, the details of which will follow in the post" (p. 248). This suggests that the madness has been cultivated, that there is *someone* orchestrating all this and waiting to benefit. Who, though?

Earlier in the book, the hypothesis was that in the vacuum of meaning created by secularism and postmodernism, identity politics swept in to fill the void. To me, that is a more plausible explanation. But if it's right, it leaves us with the question of what can provide meaning in its place. On the last page of the book, Murray suggests "friends, family and loved ones, …culture, place and wonder" (p. 256). But people had these things before the vacuum, and have had them during it. If they need something bigger, more serious thinking will need to go into what can take the place of identity politics and be a more positive, constructive force for good.

Murray, Douglas. *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2019).

Links:
[1] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2019/10/peril-progress-prosperity-womens-well-being-around-the-world-feature/
[2] https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking
[3] https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-racist-countries