Paraphrase Exercise

Read the paragraphs and write 1-3 sentences paraphrasing this paragraph.

The "unruly mob" concept is usually taken as read and used as the basis for crowd control measures and evacuation procedures across the world. Yet it is almost entirely a myth. Research into how people behave at demonstrations, sports events, music festivals and other mass gatherings shows not only that crowds nearly always act in a highly rational way, but also that when facing an emergency, people in a crowd are more likely to cooperate than panic. Paradoxically, it is often actions such as kettling that lead to violence breaking out. Often, the best thing authorities can do is leave a crowd to its own devices.

"In many ways, crowds are the solution," says psychologist Stephen Reicher, who studies group behaviour at the University of St Andrews, UK. Rather than being prone to irrational behaviour and violence, members of a crowd undergo a kind of identity shift that drives them to act in the best interests of themselves and everyone around them. This identity shift is often strongest in times of danger or threat. "The 'mad mob' is not an explanation, but a fantasy," says Reicher.

All this has profound implications for policing and the management of public events. "The classic view of crowd psychology, which is still widespread, talks about the loss of selfhood, leaving people at best out of control and at worst generically violent," says Reicher. "That is not only wrong, it's also counterproductive. If you believe all crowds are irrational, and that even rational people are liable to be dangerous in them, then you'll treat them accordingly, often harshly, and stop people doing things they have a right to do. And that can lead to violence."

One of the most important is that the current approach to managing crowds, which is all about control and containment, can be counterproductive. Police tend to assume that people in crowds are prone to random acts of violence and disorder, and treat them accordingly. But aggressive policing is likely to trigger an aggressive response as the crowd reacts collectively against the external threat. This is why many researchers consider kettling to be a bad idea. "You're treating the crowd indiscriminately, and that can change the psychology of the crowd, shifting it towards rather than away from violence," says Stott. He has found that low-profile policing can significantly reduce the aggressiveness of football crowds, and that if left alone they will usually police themselves.

It can be hard to shake off the idea of crowds as inherently violent or dangerous, but it is worth remembering that they have also been responsible for just about every major societal change for the good in recent history, from the success of the US civil rights movement to the overthrowing of communist regimes in eastern Europe. Good leadership and individual heroics are all very well, but if you're looking for a revolution - or even just a good way out of a difficult situation - what you really need, it seems, is a crowd.

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