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GEOFFREY CLIVE

Revolt of the Masses
by José Ortega y Gasset

ORTEGA Y GASSETT'S CENTRAL thesis in *Revolt of the Masses* was hardly new. Since the Reign of Terror, European intellectuals, poets, and men of letters have repeatedly voiced their dread lest "lower orders" obtain the "rights of man" and consequently gain a vast and vulgar influence over every aspect of life and thought.

Even such radical revolutionaries as Marx and Lenin never trusted the *Lumpenproletariat* to work effectively for the establishment of its own terrestrial paradise, though their militant belief in such bliss might have led the typical observer to suppose the contrary. It is no wonder that Marx vilified Bakunin (who saw through this disingenuousness) for his excessive trust in the common man.

To be sure, in the centuries preceding the French Revolution, most of humanity, if not reduced to virtual slavery, was held in the lowest esteem by the fortunate few. Thus, for example, Luther's brutal attitude toward his fervent adherents during the Peasants' Revolt scarcely exhibited his exceptional spiritual gifts. Once the *philosophes* and humanitarians had laid the intellectual groundwork for the age of the masses, however, the widespread contempt of later humanitarians for the fruits of this labor became ideologically suspect as well as morally ambivalent. It was, after all, one thing for a sixteenth-century religious reformer to throw his lot in with the nobility; it is quite another for modern reformers speaking on behalf of artisans, peasants, and workers to dissociate themselves from this social class.

In the nineteenth century the term *masses* was as often associated with the Philistine elements of the bourgeoisie as with the laboring classes. When John Stuart Mill spoke of the "tyranny of the majority," he included in that majority all those from any stratum of society who would be more readily bored reading Coleridge or Wordsworth than they would consuming large amounts of cheesecake. Mill's veneration of intellectuality was so extreme and, for that matter, so naive, that he never succeeded in reconciling his own kind of rarefied happiness with the happiness of the average Englishman of his time, let alone in arriving at any comprehensive concept

of human felicity. Nonetheless, he deserves credit for warning his contemporaries about the hazards of universal democracy, at a time when it was quite fashionable to see this socio-political arrangement as a panacea for all our ills. Though higher pleasures are as vulnerable to reversal as visceral ones, Mill saw that the putative sovereignty of the "lower orders" posed a real threat to the kind of life he singled out as indispensable to the flowering of culture.

Where Mill's critique of the mass mentality was tied to his insistence on the preservation and perpetuation of a refined culture, Søren Kierkegaard's was rooted in his conviction that true salvation must always be difficult and rare. Kierkegaard's fierce attack on the leveling process in *The Present Age* grew out of his reaffirmation of New Testament Christianity as opposed to its diluted bourgeois by-product, Christendom. To him, the beliefs held by the majority of baptized Christians in the nineteenth century represented a travesty of the offense embodied in the Incarnation. If only a few are to be saved, the amelioration of the environment, whether through gradualism or revolution, will not significantly counteract the universal thrust of original sin. Accordingly, Kierkegaard addressed his writings to the exceptional individual who, unlike those in the Christian community of his day, was prepared to face the truth about himself. Virtually all subsequent diagnoses of the modern mass man have incorporated features of Mill's cerebral elitism and Kierkegaard's Spinoza-like insistence on an aristocracy of the spirit. "Man is what he eats," but only a few men are sufficiently cerebral or spiritual to skip meals when they are hungry, and only these rise above the masses.

Nietzsche did not try to become a Christian like Kierkegaard or a consistent radical utilitarian like Mill; nevertheless, in his contempt for the mass of mankind, the "herd" as he called it, he remains unsurpassed. Quite aside from his diatribes against socialists, democrats, and theists, Nietzsche consigned the majority of mankind to serve a few Overmen of unmistakable superiority and self-assurance. While his resentment of the herd is easily understandable as a psychological construct, if not always as a persuasive attack on Christianity, Nietzsche's characterization of the master morality completely defies precise definition. However, before he began to "philosophize with a hammer," he noted a diminution of vitality and spontaneity among his contemporaries which was to become one of the major themes of Ortega's thought. Ortega agrees with Nietzsche that philology and related exercises in theory divorced from concrete human concerns must prove destructive to our future aspirations. Ortega was not carried away by biological fantasies, but his pride, his aristocratic bearing, and his reverence for preeminent personalities like Einstein are Nietzschean in their contempt for mediocrity and overspecialization. Furthermore, a powerful adversary of conventionality, Nietzsche reenforced Ortega's predilection for exceptional acts and foresight.

Add to these notions of Marx and Engels, Mill, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, Flaubert's hatred of shopkeepers and the mature Dostoevsky's repudiation of political radicals, and it is far from surprising that the elite in our century, notwithstanding the raised standards of living in the West, have not exactly opened their arms to the average specimens of society. Consistent with the fact that the term

“masses” almost invariably cuts across socio-economic demarcations, Ortega in his *Revolt of the Masses* views the mass man as a psychological type appearing no less among physicians and artists than among resident managers, technocrats and unskilled workers.

The favorable reception of Ortega's book in the early thirties, then, must be ascribed not to the novelty of his central thesis, but to its peculiar relevance at a critical juncture in European history. The Great Leader of the Soviet peoples had embarked in their name upon the murder of millions of peasants. Hitler had mesmerized the majority of his countrymen with rhetorical flourishes oddly alien to the land of poets and thinkers. And Mussolini's Blackshirts sang the “Giovinezza,” heedless of the humanists who had labored so long in the cradle of modern European culture. In Spain itself, which was particularly close to Ortega's heart, there loomed the figure of Franco, doubtless one of the last men on earth to suggest the rehumanization of *Homo sapiens*. Quite correctly, Ortega saw in these developments a monstrous threat to what remained of European civilization after the First World War and its frenetic aftermath. Spectacular progress in science and technology, far from helping to sustain moral values, was proving compatible with their erosion and perversion. In industrialized nations there was no lack of statistical proof of an unprecedented standard of living extending to many of the formerly deprived. Yet the quality of life was sinking abominably, like an independent variable cast off from its quantitative moorings. Ironically enough, in America the promise of a college education was still taken as an intimation of immortality despite Schopenhauer's warning that virtue and happiness could not be taught. It is hard to think of a book written in the last fifty years that was more propitiously launched and more ideally matched in terms of subject matter to the prevailing ambience than the *Revolt of the Masses*.

Ortega is sympathetically disposed to the success of the masses, especially over the past two centuries, in improving their material well-being. He dissociates himself from any theory of decadence which links creature comforts with spiritual atrophy. In contrast to such politically simple-minded poets as Eliot, Pound, and Yeats, who could find paradise only in the Middle Ages or in some cognate “fairlyland forlorn,” Ortega frankly admits that any contemporary willing to change places with an ancestor would be a fool. Men of letters may have been happier in less emancipated times when ignorance allowed the poet's imagination to soar unchecked into rarefied heights of allegory and anagoge, but this advantage scarcely offset the terrible suffering endured by ordinary humanity. The secularization of modern man through scientific revolutions, in short, does not affront Ortega, as it does so many other critics of twentieth-century life style.

I think there can be no doubt about it; any past time, without exception, would give him the feeling of a restricted space in which he could not breathe. That is to say, the man of today feels that his life is more a life than any past one, or, to put it the other way about, the entirety of past time seems small to actual humanity. This intuition as regards present-day existence renders null by its stark clarity any consideration about decadence that is not very cautiously thought out.¹

At the same time, however, Ortega deplors the diffusion of the mass mentality in our society. Ortega defines this mentality as comprised of inertia, excessive self-satisfaction, and an unwillingness to accept any authority outside a narrow selfhood. According to him, most of us, like primitives in pristine nature, are content to project an uncritical attitude toward experience. But, in fact, our environment is anything but given. By taking it naively for granted, we betray a complex historical legacy. Not only do we lack a comprehensive culture, observes Ortega, but, with a few exceptions, we have no understanding of the principles governing the technological wonders of modern life, and thus complacently assume the desirability of all artifacts that do our bidding.

The accuracy of Ortega's profile of the mass man is difficult to assess, if only because the weaknesses he imputes to mass man have plagued mankind from time immemorial. Kierkegaard's attack on the complacency of Christians in Christendom was already implicit in the writings of St. Jerome. Jimmy Durante's saying, "Everybody gets into the act," is paraphrased by Stravinsky to the effect that today everybody feels himself qualified to judge the merits of a musical composition. On further reflection, however, it seems obvious that amateurs have always comprised the largest segment of any public. Similarly, while most of us lag behind seers and prophets in judging the signs of the times, isn't it asking too much to expect human nature in general to transcend the apathy of accommodation transmitted from generation to generation? It is one thing to fault Heidegger and the German universities for self-deception and opportunism in the face of National Socialism, quite another to lament an absence of intellectual leadership on the part of German functionaries and technicians. In this connection, note the striking similarity to the overwhelming majority of Soviet Academicians who have sided with their government in its most recent campaign against such dissidents as Sakahrov and Solzhenitsyn. Nietzsche's *Thoughts Out of Season* would have been superfluous in a United States or Europe open to innovative programs and spiritual rebirth. The excellences which Ortega contrasts with the mediocrities inherent in the mass mentality have always been in short supply. Were the revolt of the masses to cease, it is doubtful whether our technocrats and officials would become any more imaginative than their predecessors. Though Ortega does not emphasize this, the overpopulation of the earth may yet turn out to be the most destructive modern force to be locked in irreconcilable conflict with the maintenance of a genuine culture. "Mathematics for the millions" is not the only thing that is proving to be an illusion.

Although on the whole the Spanish thinker avoids romanticizing the past, his distaste for overspecialization leads him to praise the eighteenth century at the expense of our own: "The most immediate result of this *unbalanced* specialization has been that today, when there are more 'scientists' than ever, there are much less 'cultured' men than, for example, about 1750."² One wonders how Ortega arrived at this determination. After all, the task of becoming a cultured individual today is infinitely harder than it was in 1750. The recent expansion of information has been so enor-

mous that only a handful of individuals can now assimilate, let alone integrate, the upshot of inquiries in diverse domains of knowledge.

There is a recurring confusion in Ortega's position between the value of comprehensive culture and the value of expertise; his ideal of the cultivated man is seriously at odds with the necessary fragmentation and complexity of modern knowledge. He cannot have it both ways. Either he must opt for the dilettante who responds superficially to the call of all arts and sciences or he must go along with the professional whose intelligent reflections are limited to a rigidly defined area of competence. After all, Einstein himself may well have been frustrated at trying to fix his refrigerator in Princeton.

Interestingly enough, it was in the year 1750 that Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, objected to the blind enthusiasts of the Enlightenment as barbarians at heart. Far from being able to find among his contemporaries Ortega's retrospective image of the cultivated man, Jean-Jacques bemoaned the fact that such a philosopher-king had not existed since the glorious days of Stoic virtue and *apatheia*.

Ortega's denunciation of twentieth-century culture also strikes a false note in the following crescendo:

What I affirm is that there is no culture where there are no standards to which our fellow-men can have recourse. There is no culture where there are no principles of legality to which to appeal. There is no culture where there is no acceptance of certain final intellectual positions to which a dispute may be referred. There is no culture where economic relations are not subject to a regulating principle to protect interests involved. There is no culture where aesthetic controversy does not recognize the necessity of justifying the work of art.⁸

While it is undoubtedly true that a general breakdown of standards has occurred, it follows neither logically nor experientially that legality and economics have disappeared altogether. Moreover, the justification of works of art, like the justification of "works of love," has never been an easy or feasible task. Analytic philosophers are characteristically unhappy unless they can justify everything under the sun, but this does not alter the fact that beyond a certain point it is useless to look for further reasons. Though God be dead, not everything is permitted; though philosophical aesthetics are largely irrelevant, artists continue to create.

However, once due allowance is made for Ortega's sporadic flights of romantic fancy and for his indulgence in broad generalizations, his book continues to stand up remarkably well. The gist of his thesis is that in the twentieth century mediocrity encapsulated in mass culture reigns supreme and, as a corollary, that any set of values which departs from this accessible norm, especially in an esoteric direction, is frowned upon as culturally arrogant and socially remiss. The masses, Ortega emphasizes, are not generically lower class, but include the self-complacent from all walks of life: from the academic humanist who prostitutes his knowledge in the market place by endless chatter about abortion, discrimination, and drugs, to the or-

dinary “nice guy” who regards himself as an authority on everyone’s likes and dislikes. Today, millions of Americans, who do not mean what they say and cannot grasp the meaninglessness of their compulsive role-playing in every sphere of existence, corroborate Ortega’s indictment of our civilization.

This is not to suggest that America is alone in having followed such a course, but the glamor and fascination of certain forms of pathological behavior currently prevailing in the New World have been less accentuated in the Old. In spite of the fact that the *Revolt of the Masses* was inspired by Ortega’s firsthand knowledge of traditional European culture, a reevaluation of his point of view in terms of American realities appears singularly appropriate in the year 1973. For me, a directly perceived aspect of this experience which offers some germane insights into the mass mentality revolves around the great experiment in universal higher education which has gained momentum since World War II.

To follow Ortega’s categories of analysis: quantitatively, there can be little doubt that the extension of educational opportunities to more and more people is proving beneficial and humane. Professional educators and sociologists rejoice in the fruits of upward mobility. An increasing number of young Americans from a wider spectrum of backgrounds can now look forward to “creative careers” in the rarefied atmosphere of the arts and sciences, thereby fulfilling the hopes of their parents and grandparents. Everywhere these days one hears talk about college, credits, courses, and graduate work; and the economical and political situation permitting, a new dispensation of *Geist* may legitimately be anticipated.

Qualitatively, however, broad aspects of this educational growth are discouraging. As anyone teaching can testify, a vast number of students are bored to tears with their studies. Many, lacking a constitutional bent for the life of the mind, are there because their parents want them to be or because a college education is thought of as a prerequisite to success in American life. They tend to feel that they are wasting their time learning either to analyze Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, or “rapping” uninhibitedly about sexual equality and the mysteries of skiing and being. What really concerns these students is credit: academic credit to procure a degree as expeditiously as possible, and the financial credit it will make accessible to them when they face the problem of earning a living.

In addition to this cult of material success, the idolatry of immediate gratification transforms much of higher education into a perpetual farce. Drifting and widespread private disaffection among students cannot be imputed solely to their being overeducated for the available jobs, which they consider menial. It should be pointed out that these students, often driven into an academic environment by false expectations of the college experience, comprise collectively a paradigm case of Ortega’s *Mass-Man* inadvertently enveloped in disillusionment. Whether victims of the idolatry of education or of the myth of “making it,” such students are, for the most part, unconcerned with intellectual activity, unable to grasp its importance for them, and indifferent to its historical roots.

Alas, this syndrome is scarcely confined to students. In their frustration at trying to deal with a disenchanting and sometimes even hostile student body, faculty

members develop a passion for identification with the young, like that of the old man on board the boat from Trieste to Venice in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Emulating the silliness of those whom he likes to refer to as his co-workers, many a faculty member today tends to resemble a twisted image of his charges. In order to accommodate himself to the fads of his students and to conceal a disillusionment with his initial professional commitment, he is prepared to sacrifice all standards of scholarship and teaching for the sake of gaining the widest possible popularity. He comes to see grades as obsolete, lectures as academic, traditional problems as dead by definition, and excellence of performance as irrelevant to the poor in their quest for equality. From this it follows that students know as much as their instructors, that every conceivable topic is worthy of being discussed in the classroom, and that the improvement of the greatest fool, like the corrigibility of the greatest sinner, can only be questioned by the most hardened reactionary. In the end, according to such reasoning, faculty and students are transformed into a single happy family, discoursing together on all subjects without privilege or special competence. This dilution of knowledge is further exacerbated by the fact that so many who profess it exemplify the mass mentality. Many individuals now teaching are attracted to the academy by questionable motives not too dissimilar from those which attract the mass of students. Were they educated bourgeoisie they would at least have the grace to laugh at themselves from time to time and to recall how in previous centuries antics similar to their own were caricatured without mercy. Often basically uncultivated and devoid of historical perspective, they sincerely confuse their folly with innovative programs and original ideas. Thus they reinforce Ortega's paradoxical critique of *Mass-Man* as being at once deficient in comprehensive culture and without competence in any special branch of knowledge.

Not only in American higher education, but in American life as a whole, the leveling tendencies which are the focal point of Ortega's analysis continue to play such a vigorous role that his critique, with all its defects, retains its existential relevance. Unlike David Riesman who argues in *The Lonely Crowd* that we suffer from excessive "outer-directedness," Ortega, it seems to me, hits the nail on the head when he diagnoses our ills as above all the products of towering and misappropriated self-love divorced from reverence for what over the centuries has proven best for life and thought. What is the use of being "inner-directed," if the authority of the self rests on fads and delusions? Preparedness for the future presupposes a genuine appropriation and appreciation of the past.

When the *Revolt of the Masses* first appeared, Ortega was frequently taken to task for displaying pre-Fascist tendencies which the critics linked to his elitist biases. Rereading his book today, I feel that the substance of his argument completely supersedes whatever objectionable prejudices he may have held. In this connection, it should be reiterated that such Fascist leaders as Franco and Hitler, when they actually came to power in Europe, radically repudiated the core of Ortega's plea for the rehumanization of every area of man's endeavor.

Moreover, an amazing number of his predictions have come true. Somewhere he characteristically remarks that in the foreseeable future millions of people will be crossing the Atlantic on a regular basis and that, while this experience will undoubtedly prove beneficial in many respects, it will, at the same time, diminish the quality of travel abroad. While the beauties of the European landscape have remained basically intact, anyone of discrimination who has spent a recent summer on the Continent must have been appalled by the deterioration of the terrain brought about by the sheer numbers of visitors. The distance that separates the Salzburg of Hugo von Hofmannsthal from the Salzburg of today embodies the sad truths of Ortega's argument.

REFERENCES

1. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), p. 25.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.