

## **THE TRUE BELIEVER: THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF MASS MOVEMENTS**

(ERIC HOFFER)

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Eric Hoffer was, Dwight Eisenhower said in 1952, his favorite philosopher. This endorsement made Hoffer, a self-educated San Francisco stevedore, famous. *The True Believer* is the book that Eisenhower gave all his friends. Read today, however, this book is mediocre, at best. It is the type of book that congratulates the reader while pretending to challenge him; it is a mirror that reflects to the reader what he wants to hear—especially for self-proclaimed “moderates” of flexible principle like Eisenhower. *The True Believer* is the Cream of Wheat of political books—you can taste anything you want in it, and if you add the right toppings yourself, you can be sure that you will be pleased.

Hoffer was not only self-educated, he also manufactured his own life story. He claimed to be born in 1898 in the Bronx to Alsatian German immigrants, grown up there, and to have later lived on Skid Row in Los Angeles. The first records of him show up in the 1940s, when he started working on the Los Angeles docks, which he did for decades. Most of his backstory is probably false; he spoke with a Bavarian accent, and no New York accent, and the rest of his life story has zero confirmation, but it doesn't really matter, since the essential facts about him are his auto-didacticism and his close actual connection with the working man.

*The True Believer* attempts to construct a theory of irrational fanaticism as the basis for all mass movements, which for Hoffer means basically Christianity, Islam, Communism, and Nazism. It is written primarily in the form of aphorisms, which Hoffer delivers to us like Moses delivering the tablets of the law. Aphorism, though, is not argument. For the first few pages, the book seems insightful, but soon enough the reader starts to wonder where the meat is. And to the extent there is any attempt to tie the aphorisms together, it is through the frame of psychobabble, where we are told that supporters of mass movements are all merely and purely frustrated individuals seeking an outlet and a purpose, rather than rational actors. This gives the reader a feeling of superiority, since of course *he* is not frustrated, *he* is highly rational, and *he* can see clearly where the rubes went wrong. *He* would never go Nazi, or Communist.

He would #Resist! I'm pretty sure this warm feeling that Hoffer blesses the reader with is the real cause for the popularity of this book.

The book itself can be parsed pretty quickly. Hoffer first tries to explain the appeal of mass movements. He tells us that they arise because people want change, and an effective mass movement claims "the key to the future." Also, we are told that there is a big difference between the hopes that people put in mass movements and what usually results. That's not insightful; it's obvious to a child. Only mildly more insightful is Hoffer's point that people who join mass movements aren't interested in advancement, but in renunciation of themselves, by which they "gain enormously in self-esteem." From this, though, Hoffer jumps to the explicit conclusion that "all mass movements are interchangeable"; their "particular program or doctrine" is completely irrelevant.

This is silly and simplistic. While it is true that as a historical matter the foot soldiers of Communism often rapidly became Nazis, as both Patrick Leigh Fermor and Sebastian Haffner observed contemporaneously, the reverse was not true (why, I am not sure, and certainly Hoffer has no insights). Moreover, in his attempt to design a one-size-fits-all theory of mass movements, Hoffer cannot distinguish between religious belief and political belief that functions as a religion. While there are similarities in some instances, and the recognition of Communism as a type of religion was not universal in 1951, when this book was published, he overstates the similarities, and thereby undermines his whole book. In particular, religious belief tends to have a very different impact on beliefs regarding temporal actions than do non-religious mass movements. And if it were true that "one mass movement readily transforms itself to another," there would be mass conversions at times in history between Islam and Christianity, or vice versa, and that has never happened. Nor has any other mass movement transformed itself into another. Communism and Nazism were defeated and died (though zombie Communism, in the form of the modern Left, is still with us); they did not transform. This suggests that the actual ideological content of mass movements is far more important than Hoffer thinks. In fact, Hoffer thinks it is completely irrelevant, which is demonstrably false.

Hoffer, as can be seen, has an extremely limited grasp of history. You would think an auto-didact would know more, but Hoffer's own reading seems to have run mostly to philosophy (he cannot stop citing

Pascal, for example) and the Bible (though he was an atheist). He can perhaps be excused for buying into the popular mid-century myth that the Middle Ages were a time of stagnation in Europe, but it's just ignorant to say that the Industrial Revolution was "a revolution by the rich." It's equally ignorant to say that "the men who started the French Revolution were wholly without political experience [and] the same is true of the Bolsheviks [and the] Nazis." And that's just in the first few pages; there is much more of the same. Hoffer attempts to show erudition by fairly frequent footnotes, but it's a very limited selection, heavy on the Bible, and also heavy on dubious sources, including Hermann Rauschning, whose book *Hitler Speaks*, which Hoffer often cites, turned out to be a fiction, and Ernest Renan, an anti-Semite who liked some Jews, the Ashkenazi, because, he said, they were really Khazars, not Jews.

Next Hoffer spends a lot of time on "potential converts," but he really only has one point, which is that those who are psychically frustrated are likely to be converts. We are subjected to interminable aphorisms about such "disaffected" people, whom Hoffer divides into eleven groups, such as "the poor," "misfits," "outcasts," "minorities," "the ambitious," "the impotent," "the bored," and so on. The three people left in any given society who cannot be said to fit into any of these categories are apparently the only people immune to the lure of fanaticism. To all these people, Hoffer says, a mass movement offers them the chance to escape themselves; to have not freedom, but release from irrelevancy and a dead-end life. They want "freedom from the intolerable burden of an autonomous existence." Which is, broadly, true enough for all people, since people seek transcendence, not autonomy, but is so broad as to be meaningless.

In his third section, Hoffer talks about "united action and self-sacrifice." This is, Hoffer says, the mechanism by which the frustrated are lifted outside of themselves. They can do this more effectively if they see themselves as part of a whole; when isolated, men break under attack. United action is easier if a luminous future is looked for, and if the present is deprecated. By the same token, those who subscribe to mass movements are not susceptible to rational argument; they are ideologues. What else unifies mass movements? Again, we are given a shotgun list: hatred, imitation, persuasion, coercion, leadership, etc.

All this is like saying that the mechanism of all life on Earth is the Sun: true enough, but a bit far upstream to prove anything.

Finally, Hoffer attempts to outline the life cycle of mass movements. He claims that mass movements are started by “men of words” who crave recognition. They themselves are not fanatic in the sense that Hoffer uses for those who actually drive mass movements, and are often swept aside by those more comfortable with chaos. Those, in their turn, are replaced by the “practical men of action,” who solidify, channel, and control the mass movement. At this point, not the earlier “active phase,” new creative energies are unleashed, or can be. And eventually the cycle begins again. Maybe, but this again ignores both the differences between religion as mass movement and modern political ideologies, and that over two thousand years a lot happens, so you can always find some apparently relevant examples to shoehorn into your framework, while ignoring the rest of history.

So that’s the book. I, and other readers, would quickly forget it, except for two things. The first is as a historical footnote of the 1950s. Hoffer maintained some prominence for thirty years, much loved on the Right for bringing to popular recognition that Communism was (and is) a religion as much as a political movement. Ronald Reagan gave Hoffer the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983 (he died in 1984). The second, and more interesting, is that *The True Believer* has achieved an afterlife as a text of the modern American Left.

From the time of Eisenhower until 2007, the American Right, embodied for all relevant purposes in the Republican party, was the party of contented losers. Other than fighting Communism, the Right was happy, or happy enough, to cede all control of policy to the Left, and not to fight the destruction of America by the cultural Marxists. And on economic policy, the Republican party was eager to cooperate with the globalists, the Koch brothers and George Soros joining hands and tap-dancing on the graves of jobless men who killed themselves with Oxycontin and Mexican black tar.

But in 2007, the Tea Party arose, in retrospect an existential threat to the Left and to Republicans cast in the mold of the pusillanimous Bush family. This was fanaticism reborn! Who might offer us insight, said Jeb Bush over Thanksgiving dinner, having called his good friend Hillary Clinton to discuss? Perhaps Eric Hoffer, whom Poppy knew? And so

it was that the establishment Republicrats began citing Hoffer again, warning against the chthonic fanaticism that the Tea Party embodied, driven by fear and frustration, as against the rational, calm leadership that they offered, if only people would ignore all their massive failures, like that inconvenient Iraq thing, and accept increases in average GDP per capita as the sole measure of American success, while ignoring to whom the gains were actually accruing.

This soothing bedtime story was put back on the shelf when the Tea Party was successfully destroyed, but like all bedtime stories, it became useful again soon enough, this time when Trump won. Hillary, between bouts of drunken crying, began suggesting to her red-eyed minions that *The True Believer* was a book they should read, if they wanted to understand how the dumb people who voted for Trump were really Nazis. In other words, Hoffer has been weaponized today as an argument against all social change—or rather, against social change in the wrong direction, since social change in the Left direction is mere rational acceptance of inevitable Progress. The beauty of Hoffer in this endeavor is that in a book of aphorisms, one can always easily find an aphorism that appears to fit any circumstance, and use the authority of the author to polish up what is, if examined closely, almost always a banal thought of dubious general applicability.

Oh, I suppose this book isn't totally worthless. The reader doesn't gain much confidence from Hoffer's own slippery attempt to deflect criticism, though. "But this is not an authoritative textbook. It is a book of thoughts, and it does not shy away from half-truths so long as they seem to hint as a new approach and help to formulate new questions." Sonorous words to admit that the book is merely a lazy form of stone soup—as long as the reader brings all the knowledge and content, he will be satisfied, just as in the old bedtime story of the itinerant fraudster. And beyond that, most of this book is just plain boring. I had to force myself to finish. You should not bother starting.