

THE REVOLT OF THE MASSES (JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET)

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Oh, but this is a fascinating book. Written in 1930 by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, it is one of those books that is occasionally mentioned, especially recently, but rarely actually read. 1930, in Spain, was the hinge of fate, and it has been nearly a hundred years since Ortega wrote. That means we can see where he was wrong, and where he was right, and what he wrote says to us today.

First, though, we have to hack our way through two misconceptions that both seem to attend any modern mention of *The Revolt of the Masses*. The first, simpler, misconception is that this is a book about class, about how Ortega favors the bourgeois, or the rich, over the working class, or at least that it is an analysis of their conflicts. Given that class was a hot topic in 1930, this is a reasonable guess from the title, but it is totally wrong. This misconception cropped up repeatedly after Trump's election, and, for example, the review by David Brooks in the *New York Times* of J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* was titled "The Revolt of the Masses." But Ortega was a political moderate, and seems to not have been exercised by questions of class at all. Rather, this is a book about human excellence, what it can accomplish, and how it can be destroyed.

The subtler, more pernicious, misconception is that Ortega's call for excellence is a call for masses to defer to experts—supposedly, according to various chatterers, Ortega's main point is that experts are ignored. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, Ortega thinks all, or almost all, modern experts are the definition of mediocrity, and the masses deferring to them is like deferring to a mirror. Instead, people should defer to a natural aristocracy, not of blood, but of focus and accomplishment. Those people are not experts, who are narrow, but are instead broad people of taste, judgment, and discipline. We will return to this misconception later, with specific recent examples, but now that we are past the reef, we can sail into the open ocean of Ortega's thought.

So, if this is not a book about class, who are the "masses"? Ortega divides every society into "minorities," a small set of people who are "specially qualified," and the "masses," everyone not specially qualified. The key question is who is average and who is not. A mass person

feels as if he is “just like everybody,” that he is not particularly special, and not only does this not concern him, he celebrates the fact. (Thus, someone who examines his talents and concludes he is mediocre, and feels that is a problem, is not a mass man.) But this, of course, begs the question—what makes a person above average or, in Ortega’s term, “specially qualified”? They are those who make personal demands for excellence upon themselves, and live in that way. This makes them the minority, by definition. They may not fulfil those demands; it is the demand being made, that alone, which makes the person a minority. In contrast, mass men “demand nothing special of themselves, but [] to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort toward perfection.”

The minority, the elite, are thus not coterminous with traditional aristocracy or a ruling class. Ortega acknowledges that in traditional social elites excellence is more likely to be found, but mere heredity does not make a person place demands on himself, so an aristocrat by blood can be a mass man just like a peasant or a steelworker—and a peasant or a steelworker can be a member of the minority. The class of intellectuals, in particular, fancy themselves to be above the masses, but are often vulgar pseudo-intellectuals, swept along by lazy, commonplace thinking, and therefore mass men. Children of the excellent frequently ride on their parents’ accomplishments; they thereby become mass men themselves. Ortega wants “nobility” to mean not nobility of blood, but to restore the meaning of “noble” as “well-known, that is, known by everyone, famous, he who has made himself known by excelling the anonymous mass.” Anyone can do this, from any walk of life, but few do, human nature being what it is.

Having gotten definitions out of the way, Ortega’s first substantive point is that in the past, the mass was content to exist in the background, ceding to the minority such higher-level societal functions as art, government and political judgment. No more. Now, the mass assert their right to dictate in all such areas, without having to demand from themselves, much less achieve, excellence. In politics, this is “hyperdemocracy,” and Ortega thinks it a degradation. In other areas, such as philosophy (Ortega’s specialty), it means that readers (and, today, listeners and YouTube watchers), do so “with the view, not of learning from the writer, but rather, of pronouncing judgment on him when

he is not in agreement with the commonplaces that the said reader carries in his head." It's not that the mass man thinks he's an expert. "The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will. . . . The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select." Mediocrity rules, and does not care that it is mediocre.

All this is a new thing in our history, but not in world history. It can be found in the declining years of Rome, among other places. Ortega ascribes its modern growth, though, not to decline, but to liberal democracy, to the discovery of the abstract sovereignty of the individual. He doesn't dislike liberal democracy—quite the contrary, he thinks both that it's great, and that it's inevitable and broadly irreversible, as I discuss further below. But if the individual is sovereign, we should not be surprised if each man treats himself as if he is indeed sovereign.

None of this implies decadence—contra Oswald Spengler, Ortega thinks that relative to the nineteenth century, which viewed itself as a time of "plenitude" when the destination of society had been reached, the twentieth century, viewing the future as open-ended and in flux, is in many ways superior. (At this point, you have to remember it's 1930, look around you at the world of 2018, as well as the past hundred years, then chuckle grimly and draw your own conclusions.) But the twentieth century takes it too far, because the mass men dominate, and they have "lost all respect, all consideration for the past." Thus, the mass men both see the future as open, but assured, and themselves as perfect and satisfied. That's a dangerous combination, for it leads to a world "empty of purposes, anticipations, ideals." It was those things the minority supplied, and it was those things that drove the world forward. Now, with the triumph of the masses, nobody supplies those things. So the twentieth century is an apogee—but the nature of apogees is there is nowhere to go but down.

Thus, the nineteenth century, for all its accomplishments, also gave us the rise of the mass man, and the mass man will, unless his rise is constrained, within thirty years, "send our continent back to barbarism." (This is a book quite explicitly about Europe. America is treated as close to a non-entity, with thinly veiled contempt. And Europe is defined as

France, Germany, and England—it does not, for these purposes, really even include Spain.) The mass man, for example, feels that he himself is qualified to decide, and should decide, political matters, rather than his vote “supporting the decision of one minority or another.” That will lead to the disappearance of liberal democracy, which Ortega regards as man’s highest political achievement (“legislative technique”), but it will also lead to the end of “industrial technique,” since the pursuit of technical excellence by minorities drives industry forward, just like other pursuit of excellence drives political organization forward.

It is this latter “industrial technique,” this combination of “scientific experiment and industrialism,” that Ortega names “technism.” Technism has allowed the mass man to escape the feeling that dominated all prior societies, that of material scarcity and restrictions. At the same time, liberal democracy makes the mass man believe that he is master of his psychic and political destiny. Thus, the mass man feels in his bones that life is now “exempt from restrictions” on every level. That is to say, in modern parlance, he is emancipated. “The world which surrounds the new man from his birth does not compel him to limit himself in any fashion, it sets up no veto in opposition to him; on the contrary, it incites his appetite, which in principle can increase indefinitely.” Ortega’s objection is not that appetites increasing is bad; he did not foresee the logical endpoint of total emancipation, which is total autonomy combined with total tyranny and a denial of basic reality. Instead, his objection is that the mass man fails to appreciate that all this, that benefits him, was created with great toil by the excellence of minorities; he thinks it manna from heaven. What characterizes the mass man is inertia—the opposite of the ceaseless, self-generated search for excellence that characterizes the truly noble. And this failure to understand the sources of the bounty that blesses him, his “radical ingratitude,” combined with the new dominance of the mass man over society, means it will all disappear, and barbarism will return, as excellence flees.

For Ortega, such barbarism isn’t of the type that, looking backward, the twentieth century actually delivered. Rather, “barbarism is the absence of standards to which appeal can be made.” That seems like not a fatal problem, but it is. No standards, no progress, only regress. Certainly, mass men are the creators of such tripe as Syndicalism, Fascism (explicitly in the Mussolini sense) and, Communism (“a monotonous

repetition of the eternal revolution,” oblivious to history, like all these movements). They are created by “the type of man who does not want to give reasons or to be right, but simply shows himself resolved to impose his opinions. This is the new thing: the right not to be reasonable, the ‘reason of unreason.’ . . . Hence his ideas are in effect nothing more than appetites in words. . . .” (Ortega would not have enjoyed spending time on Facebook, much less Twitter.) When mass men of politics say they are “done with discussions,” this is what they mean. It implies also that “direct action,” that is, violence, becomes not the *ultima ratio*, the final argument when all others are through, but the *prima ratio*, the first argument. This is always true, “at every epoch when the mass, for one purpose or another, has taken a part in public life.” In all areas, what is recognized by the excellent, the minorities, in all times as “civilized,” from literature, to sexual relations, to art, to manners, to justice, decays. It is those standards for those things that make “the community, common life” possible. Result of their end: barbarism, if we don’t change course.

We can certainly see this degradation of all standards today, to a degree that makes Ortega’s prescience startling (although he was far off the mark on one matter, which I talk about last). Not only is the mass man as Ortega defines him far more dominant, over the whole Western world, than in Ortega’s time, but we see the barbarism Ortega identifies has long since arrived. Certainly almost nobody demands excellence in any field; instead, the mass men who rule demand such rubbish as “diversity and inclusion,” the wholesale granting of unearned benefits on the basis of (preferred) immutable characteristics. The very idea that there is such a thing as excellence is denied as a matter of course. Similarly with the political processes Ortega identifies. We hear all the time, mostly from the Left but also from the Right, that the time for discussion is over, and the time for action is here, by which the speaker means “conform to my unreasoned and emotion-driven demands or be crushed.” (Such language is all over the latest push to confiscate firearms, for example, along with other forms of knuckle-dragging political behavior that would have horrified Ortega, with his focus on high rationality and political liberty.) And, more broadly, what characterizes everything in the West is a call for total autonomy implemented,

if necessary, by government tyranny, and a rejection of any standards as an offense against emancipation.

Ortega believed that as long as the minority of the excellent dominates, progress is inevitable. And the reverse is also true. Therefore, Ortega would, perhaps, not be surprised by the situation today. Moreover, since barbarism has arrived in the form of the domination of mass men, it is natural that a portion of those mass men hold themselves out as the minority, as the elites. But, of course, they are merely the rulers—they do not actually demand of themselves any pursuit of excellence at all. The names of categories are maintained, in art, politics, and culture, but they are hollow, for the standards are set by mass men clothed in false skins. So, it is entirely possible, if standards have decayed and barbarism returned, for there to be nobody at all to whom the masses can turn for guidance. The polestar may simply have winked out, to, perhaps, be restored at a time to be announced, when the world is remade.

Thus, *The Revolt of the Masses* feels surprisingly fresh, given not only its age but all the water that has passed under the bridge since it was written. Yes, Ortega does display a simplistic, if touching, faith in liberal democracy, which has since his time shown its deficiency. The Europe of 1930 is the triumph of “liberal democracy and technical knowledge,” shown by, among other things, a tripling of the population of Europe. (Ortega is wrong here, of course—there is no necessary, or actual historical, linkage of liberal democracy with the rise of technical knowledge or its impacts in the Industrial Revolution.) He concludes that “liberal democracy based on technical knowledge is the highest type of public life hitherto known,” and though it might be possible to imagine a better, anything better must continue to embody both liberal democracy and technical knowledge, and that it would be “suicidal” to return to any pre-nineteenth-century form. It is the “truth of destiny.”

That was a supportable argument, maybe, in 1930, but not now. True, the term no longer means what it meant for Ortega. For him, it meant political liberty, “consideration for one’s neighbor,” “indirect action” (i.e., a rejection of violence), and, explicitly, universal suffrage where the mass of voters chose among programs offered by their betters. Today, it means, as Ryszard Legutko says, “coercion to freedom,” where no political liberty is offered to those opposed to unbridled autonomy, and democracy means only being allowed to vote for what today’s elites,

who are not Ortega's minority, allow. Ortega thought liberal democracy "announces the determination to share existence with the enemy." Those who today howl "I can tolerate anything but intolerance" can have nothing in common with this sentiment. So perhaps we can say that Ortega may have been right, but liberal democracy as he used the term is dead, a casualty of the barbarism he feared, replaced by its zombie equivalent (although probably such zombification was inevitable, in the nature of liberal democracy, as several recent writers have claimed).

As I promised, let's turn back to the second misconception about Ortega's thoughts, regarding "experts." In the past few years, there have been minor outbreaks of renewed interest in Ortega's thoughts, always facile. For example, in the *Atlantic*, a colloquy recently appeared between a staff writer and a reader, where the statement was endorsed by both, that Ortega "describes a movement that appeals to a cross-section of non-intellectual people across class lines that seems to parallel Donald Trump's cross-cultural appeal. There it seemed to lead to Fascism." Ortega would have a conniption. His objection is not that the mass man fails to be intellectual; it is that the mass man does not pursue excellence. For the most part, Ortega loathes modern intellectuals as the very worst type of mass man. Nor does he make any suggestion at all that mass men lead to Fascism; rather, he says that the domination of mass men leads to regression in political organization, one possible end of which is Fascism. The *Atlantic* colloquy continues, with such gems as "[T]he digital age seems to have trouble accepting 'elite' consensus regarding complex topics such as climate change (and gun control, evolution and tax policy, among many other subjects where the vast majority of scientists, economists, etc., accept certain basic facts that are rejected by large swaths of the public)." Ortega did not care about what scientists and economists had to say. At all. He would call them ignoramuses, narrow men whose narrow learning did not qualify them to say anything at all to society at large, especially about topics not subject to rigid calculation. His "elites" were men of excellence and broad learning, not sophists and calculators.

To Ortega, "special qualifications" are not those of experts. Our experts are scientists and similar types who are narrow and ignorant outside of a tiny area, yet presume to think otherwise. His leaders, to whom the mass should defer, are men of great mind, not technicians.

They are aristocrats. In fact, Ortega despises the “‘man of science,’ the high-point of European humanity,” as being actually “the prototype of the mass man.” This is because the days of scientific discoveries by generalists, like Newton, are over, and the days of narrow specialization by each scientist are here. Science itself is not specialized, and in fact must be informed by areas outside science—but scientific work, today, must be specialized. The days of encyclopedic minds are gone, and what we have are specialists, each only knowledgeable in “the small corner of which he is an active investigator.” Given this hyper-specialization, men who are overall mediocre, rather than excellent, can actually keep science advancing (this is today called the “Ortega Hypothesis”), because “a fair amount of the things that have to be done in physics or biology is mechanical work of the mind which can be done by anyone, or almost anyone.” But such men think they are excellent, even though each “knows very well his own tiny corner of the universe; [but] he is radically ignorant of all the rest.” He is a “learned ignoramus,” which is bad enough, but worse is in store, for “By specializing him, civilization has made him hermetic and self-satisfied within his limitations; but this very inner feeling of dominance and worth will induce him to wish to predominate outside his specialty. The result is . . . that he will behave in almost all spheres of life as does the unqualified, the mass-man.”

This is what we see, most of the time, when people demand that the public listen to “experts”—that we listen to specialists in one area who are thereby presumed to be competent to lecture us in areas either only loosely related, or, more often, wholly unrelated. The names are endless, but include everyone from Bill Nye to Stephen Hawking. It is these specialists, Ortega says, who exist in a state of “‘not-listening,’ of not submitting to higher courts of appeal,” a characteristic of the mass man. That is, the experts we are told today we must listen to are, for Ortega, the archetypical mass men, whom we should ignore, and to whom we listen to at our peril.

Finally, Ortega veers off the mark in his last chapter, which covers a third of the book. Here, he extols the need for a European superstate. This chapter has various insights, including that force follows public opinion, and that if Europe does not rule the world, it is not clear that anyone will or can, leading inevitably to “universal barbarism.” His analysis of nationalism is interesting (“In defending the nation we are

defending our tomorrows, not our yesterdays”), but his idea that all states proceed to fusion of social classes (which seems in contradiction to the rest of his book) is demonstrably false. The biggest problem, though, is that he extends this idea of fusion, or consolidation, to extend beyond the nations of Europe, to a true fusion of Europe. We have seen the zenith of this idea in our lifetimes, and it was not a very high zenith. It has been falsified that “The more faithful the national State of the West remains to its genuine inspiration, the more surely will it perfect itself in a gigantic continental state.” Nor is it true that “Only the determination to construct a great nation from the group of peoples of the Continent [will] give new life to the pulses of Europe.” Quite the contrary, in fact, as we have seen. The so-called great nation is about to be no nation at all, as all can clearly see. It is not the failure of prediction that bothers me, but that the reasoning and analysis on which it is based, which is conclusory and fantastical, is far inferior to that in the rest of the book.

Despite the last chapter’s failings, this book is very much worth reading and pondering. (I read it because my mother asked me to, on the grounds that she would likely never get around to it herself, and I would do her a service by reviewing it.) It does not offer a program to fix the problems identified—that is something we will have to come up with for ourselves. I don’t know if Ortega had anything to say about that in his other writings. My guess is that he would not be surprised by Europe’s terminal decline, or by that America was able to extend his thirty-year deadline for the West by a few decades, yet is now in the same leaky boat of the Europe of 1930, but with more holes and more fat people in the boat.