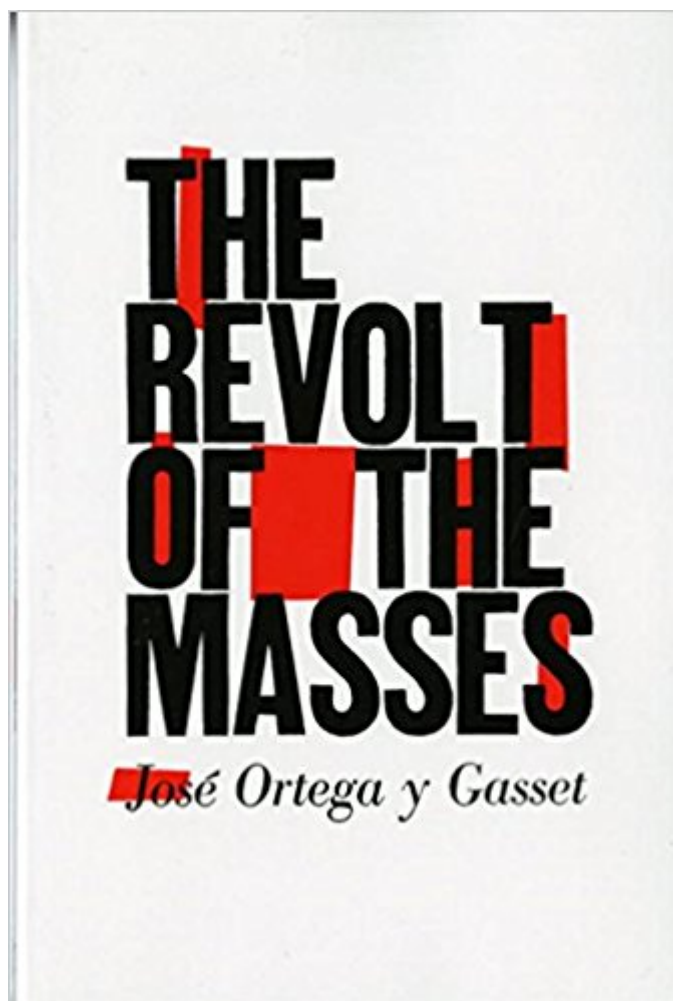


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The Revolt Of The Masses



Synopsis

Social upheaval in early 20th-century Europe is the historical setting for this seminal study by the Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset. Continuously in print since 1932, Ortega's vision of Western culture as sinking to its lowest common denominator and drifting toward chaos brought its author international fame and has remained one of the influential books of the 20th century.

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Customer Reviews

Social upheaval in early twentieth-century Europe is the historical setting for this seminal study by the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset of the 'mass man'-the phenomenon of mass culture that more than any other factor stamps the character of modern life.

"Decalogues retain from the time they were written on stone or bronze their character of heaviness." Ten Commandments? Heavy commandments? Why endure such a weight? Leave them behind!" All over the world, the lower ranks are tired of being ordered and commanded, and with holiday air take advantage of a period freed from burdensome imperatives. But the holiday does not last long. Without commandments, obliging us to live after a certain fashion, our existence is that of the "unemployed." "This is the terrible spiritual situation in which the best youth of the world finds itself today. By dint of feeling itself free, exempt from restrictions, it feels itself empty." This written in 1932. Seems prescient. Gasset's deepest criticism is against the "mass-man". Who is this? "When one speaks of 'elite groups' the usual scoundrels twist the sense of this expression, pretending to be unaware that the select

man is not the petulant person who thinks himself superior to the rest, but the man who demands more of himself than the rest, even though he may not fulfill in his person those higher expectations." Thus is self-demand, self-examination, self-criticism." Undoubtedly, the most radical vision that it is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every instant what they already are, without making an effort towards perfection; mere buoys adrift." ("And how am I to face the odds of man's bedevilment and God's? I, a stranger and afraid in a world I never made.") A. E. Houseman

The intellectual life, which of its essence requires and presupposes quality, one can note the progressive triumph of the pseudo-intellectuals, the unqualified, the unqualifiable, and the disqualified by their own mental make-up. "On the other hand, it is not rare to find today among working men, who before might be taken as the best example of what we are calling 'mass,' 'outstanding disciplined minds.'"

Essay 1 Introduction: Biography and Works
Essay 2 Peaceful Coexistence: Pessimism, Superiority, and Liberalism
Ch1 The Reality of the Masses
Ch2 The Rising of the Historic Level
Ch3 The Altitude of the Times
Ch4 The Growth of Life
Ch5 A Statistical Datum
Ch6 The Dissection of the Mass-Man Begins
Ch7 Noble Life and Vulgar Life
Ch8 Why the Masses Intervene in Everything
Ch9 Primitivism and the Technical
Ch10 Primitivism and History
Ch11 Age of the Self-Satisfied Dandy
Ch12 The Barbarism of "Specialization"
Ch13 The Greatest Danger, the State
Ch14 Who Commands in the World?
Ch15 Arriving at the Real

Issue Endnotes

'We live at a time when man believes himself fabulously capable of creation, but he does not know what to create. Lord of all things, he is not lord of himself. He feels lost amid his own abundance. With more means at its disposal, more knowledge, more technique than ever, it turns out that the world today goes the same way as the worst of worlds that have been; it simply drifts.' "How did he know!" Today, on the other hand, the average man has the most mathematical "ideas" on all that happens or ought to happen in the universe. Hence he has lost the use of his hearing. Why should he listen if he has within him all that is necessary?" "There is no reason now for listening, but rather for judging, pronouncing, and deciding. There is no question concerning public life, in which he does not intervene, blind and deaf as he is, imposing his "opinions." "But, is this not an advantage? Is it not a sign of immense progress that the masses should have "ideas," that is to say, should be cultured? By no means. The "ideas" of the average man are not genuine ideas, nor is their possession culture; his ideas are like putting truth in checkmate. Whoever wishes

to have ideas must first prepare himself to desire truth and to accept the rules of the game imposed by it. It is no use speaking of ideas when there is no acceptance of a higher authority to regulate them, a series of standards to which it is possible to appeal in a discussion.””These standards are the principles on which culture rests. I am not concerned with the form they take. 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.”This work sounds a clear, even painful, warning. Nevertheless, can hardly be denied. Gasset concludes - “Arriving at the Real Issue””This is the issue: Europe has been left without a moral code. It isn’t that the mass-man despises an obsolete one for an emerging one, but it happens that the vital center of its regime is precisely the desire to live without submission to any kind of moral code.””How has it been possible to believe in the amorality of life? Doubtless, it is because both the whole culture and modern civilization lead us to that conviction. Europe is now collecting the sad consequences of its spiritual behavior. Europe is slipping without reluctance on the slope of a magnificent culture, but one with no roots.”Easy to read. Hard to ignore.(See “Memoirs of a Superfluous Man”, by Albert Jay Nock. Similar conclusions. Also, “The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future”, by Joshua Mitchell. Adds additional insight on the theme.)

Read this book. If you don’t walk away with a deeper and broader understanding of our modern condition, I’ll eat my hat. Gasset wasn’t a class warrior or an elitist. He was a keen observer of humanity and the times. He shows us that what divides us is our willingness to challenge ourselves to be better. Our conception of self as either mass (think Sarah Palin) or specially qualified divides us, and the mass have taken over. America’s love affair with “everyday Americans” is the rot in the foundation of society. Read this book to find the inspiration to become exceptional, and the humility to follow those who already are

In our egalitarian age, we often scoff at any arguments that contain words like ‘superior,’ ‘inferior,’ or extol the value of hierarchy. So, many will instinctively cringe at the elitism - and it is elitism - that Ortega y Gasset exhibits in *Revolt of the Masses*, which essentially warns that societies who don’t realize how much their existence is predicated on hierarchy of superiors to inferiors will become

directionless and cease to exhibit excellence. But I hope those readers stick around, because there is more here than our egalitarian gut reactions can capture. Ortega starts off by defining what he means by 'mass man' and how he is different from the exceptional men. Mass men are those who are content where they are, have opinions but seldom really think and reflect, have no conception of themselves as creatures bounded in a place, a time, and various social roles, and, in a sense, are simply directionless. Compare these to the exceptional people, those who live life with a sense of purpose (that has little or nothing to do with hedonistic egoism), strive for greatness, and have the thoughtfulness to 'make things happen.' Written in 1932, Ortega is concerned that several European countries are falling for doctrines like fascism and socialism that put most of their emphasis on 'mass man' rather than appreciating that civilization owes its existence, upkeep, and progress to the exceptional. Ortega is not advocating hereditary rule (has exceptionality is something deserved and earned, not inherited). But Ortega's concern - prefiguring Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy: Third Edition*) is that the very processes that led to an improvement in everyone's conditions (presumably capitalism) was leading to its own destruction, by deluding the mass man into thinking that material comforts and abundance are just a naturally existing part of the world's fabric. Thus, the masses demand a certain easiness of condition that, in reality, must be worked for, and lack any appreciation that the very exceptional people they demean are the ones largely responsible for material comfort and abundance in the first place. Ortega is generally labeled a conservative, and I think this is somewhat accurate, though it would not be a stretch to call him a classical liberal either. Like conservatives in the vein of Burke and Oakeshott, Ortega displays a fierce disdain for ahistorical and rationalistic approaches to social thought - approaches that do not pay careful attention to the present as a contingent outcome of specific historical circumstances, or attempts to 'make the world over' as if we can deduce the proper first principles from pure reason rather than close historical study. In the vein of conservatism (a la Kenneth Minogue's *Liberal Mind, The*), Ortega also suggests that a world where persons no longer act according to their roles in social hierarchies is a world that quickly leads to narcissism, hedonism, and directionlessness. For Ortega, one finds the most purpose in life when one sees oneself as bounded by place, time, existing social roles, and purposes OTHER THAN simple egoistic pleasure. For my money, I agree with Ortega on a good many things. His bemoaning of the purposelessness (and, because of that, the stupidity) he finds in the mass man can in many ways be read as a critique of modernism, where many people's primary goal is to keep up with everyone else and live for distraction (as opposed to purpose). Ortega's suggestion that the 'revolt of the masses' will lead to an ever-increasing egalitarianism that seeks to remove any whiff of tradition and (legitimately arising) hierarchy may

also be playing out to various degrees. I have a few problems with this work, though, particularly owing to the author's oscillation between suggesting that he doesn't believe in historical determinism and reminding us that we must each fulfill our destiny. I've read and reread sections of the book, but do not see how the author can be interpreted as not contradicting himself (or what he means by 'destiny'). Also, the final chapter of the book (which many consider the best) is, to me, a very rhetorical jeremiad where Ortega obsesses over the thought that, in the future, Europe might not 'rule the world.' I simply hope this was not the primary impetus for writing the book, because if 'mass' is code for 'non-European' and 'superior' and 'excellent' are codes for 'European,' then a very interesting book becomes a mighty shallow one. (I personally read the book as if that chapter was simply a postscript.) Interesting read here, particularly for our egalitarian ears. Ortega's ideas may strike some as quaint or outmoded. But if one looks close, Ortega is, at least in some ways, writing about what we've become.

Even better than when I read it is undergraduate school in 1980. Insightful and extremely meaningful today as we face climate change decisions. Grab your thinking cap and a new notebook, since you will be writing many notes. I wish I had a course I could teach it in.

This is a far far better translation than any other, cf. the Norton edition. This essay presents the argument of the relevance of the book

today. <http://laurencejarvikonline.blogspot.com/2015/11/the-revolt-of-elites.html>

This book is almost 100 years old yet explains perfectly how the mass-man mentality can propel someone like Trump to a position even he doesn't understand. Underlying premise of the book: the masses come to their own conclusions based on nothing (no research, no education, no real information...), yet they believe their opinions to be of equal value and just as legitimate as those of the illuminati!

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