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THE REVOLT OF THE MASSES?

SOME THOUGHTS ON A MODERN MYTH

The spectre which haunted Europe in the twentieth century was neither that of Communism, as Marx predicted, nor that of the Superman, as Nietzsche hoped, but that of the masses. In their very different ways, however, Marx and Nietzsche provided the cultural context for the myth. Marx, by elevating the masses to the inheritors of power; and Nietzsche, by denigrating them as the rabble to be overcome. In this way, the two great prophets of modernity established the historical setting for our subject, after which no other principle so dominated social thought as the myth of the masses. This most persistent and widespread idea entails the belief that man exists neither as an individual, nor as a member of a traditional group, be that family, clan, estate, or class, but in a single, vast, undifferentiated body, which comprises an intractable, faceless, and anonymous multitude – a bunch of discrete beings, or, as it has often been said, an agglomeration of atoms. Indeed, no other modern term for a group has excited such widespread interest and debate as that of the indiscriminate, inchoate mass; no other concept has been so widely invoked, whether on the Left, or on the Right; nor, I think, has any other term prompted such a virulent set of analyses by the pundits, from Arnold's verdict in *Culture and Anarchy* to the assault by Ortega – whose book, *The Revolt of the Masses*, gives my paper its title – and onwards to the oracular dicta of T. W. Adorno. Yet, as with so many myths, the myth of the mass or the masses is a phantom. Though definitions abound, the concept bears little resemblance to reality. Among the catalogue of thinkers who have pronounced on the topic, however, no more than one or two have disputed its existence. The earliest and most trenchant dismissal came in Kierkegaard's *Point of View* of 1846. Kierkegaard berates what he calls the "numerical" crowd, and declares that "The crowd is the lie." The mass lacks any authenticity. In like vein, Jaspers, in his study, *Man in the Modern Age*, published in

1931, observes that "The 'public' is a phantom … a fiction". Following these thinkers, I would argue that the ghostly figure of the masses as a social category resists any workable implementation. Like any good myth, moreover, the idea is plastic, malleable, but in the final analysis obscure, even mystical in character. Much has been done to analyse it, and I could not have ventured into the field without the guidance of some outstanding secondary literature, such Giner, Günzel, McClelland and Mosocovi.

The trajectory of crowd theory runs from Plato's multi-headed monster in *The Republic* to Machiavelli's *Prince*. More narrowly, the history of the modern concept of the masses leads from Le Bon's seminal book, *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind*, published in 1895, to Canetti's monumental treatise, *Crowds and Power*, of 1960. Le Bon's work inaugurated an explosive discussion, and spawned innumerable followers, whereas Canetti effectively ended the debate. Between them, Le Bon and Canetti encompass almost everything of value that has been written on the theme. It was Le Bon who, at the dawn of the twentieth century, predicted that: "The age we are about to enter will be the *Era of the Masses*." Whilst it was Canetti, who, by including the dead in his analysis, treated the whole corpus of humanity as a single mass, and offered a complex aetiology, from the simplest social form – the pack – to the most sophisticated varieties of social order, as exemplified in the modern state, down to what he calls "the invisible crowd".

With beguiling clarity, Le Bon defines the so-called *psychological* crowd, which forms the premise for every modern theory:

> The disappearance of conscious personality and the turning of feelings and thoughts in a definite direction, which are the primary characteristics of a crowd … do not always involve the simultaneous presence of a number of individuals on one spot. Thousands of isolated individuals may acquire at certain moments, and under the influence of certain violent

> emotions – such, for example, as a great national event – the characteristics of a psychological crowd. .... At certain moments half a dozen men might constitute a psychological crowd .... On the other hand, an entire nation, though they may be no visible agglomeration, may become a crowd ....

For the first time, Le Bon outlines the full spectrum of mass phenomena, from a handful of individuals, to a nation. He thereby sets out the stage on which mass action occurs, and provides a matrix with which to analyse its mechanics. His tendentious rhetoric, which serves up incitement under the veneer of science, provides a vision both persuasive and yet utterly facile. Essentially, Le Bon offers the ruler a handbook, a manual replete with techniques by which to control the people. These devices dutifully recur in the methods employed to manipulate society throughout the twentieth century, whether in popular studies, such as Trotter's early treatise, *Instinct of the Public in Peace and War* of 1916, or in the guides to the formation of opinion, as pioneered by Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, in his book on public relations, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* of 1923, or finally, of course, in the treacherous manifestos of the century's dictators.

In no small measure thanks to Le Bon, the theory of the masses swept through modernity like an intellectual conflagration. Hardly an area remained unscathed. The idea occurs, most obviously, in the political writings, speeches, and interventions of democratic leaders, such as Clemenceau and Roosevelt; and in the practice of every major dictator, many of whom knew Le Bon's ideas at first hand: on the Left, from Lenin and Stalin, the self-proclaimed "man of the masses", to Mao, the inventor of the "mass line", and on to Kim il Sung; whilst on the Right, although Franco and Salazar eschewed mass politics, Mussolini and Hitler were fearsome exponents: hence, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler summarizes his tenets in the bellicose phrase: – "*Führen heisst: Massen bewegen können*": "To lead means to move masses"; more reflectively, the idea appears in the works of the fathers of sociology, beginning with

Durkheim, who coins the term “collective consciousness”, as well as – to a lesser extent – Simmel and Weber; later, it occurs in the American classics, C. Wright Mills and Talcott Parsons; after which it shifts to a new generation of sociologists, notably Shils, Dahrendorff, and Luhmann, who famously – if tendentiously – claims that “everything that we know about society, indeed, what we know about the world today, we know through the mass media;” from the outset, the idea also gains currency with commentators like Walter Lippmann, who coins the phrase “the bewildered herd”; it forms a focal point for philosophers such as Jaspers and Arendt, for whom “war is the mightiest of all mass actions”; it appears in the psychoanalysis of Freud and Reich, who explicates the “mass psychology of fascism”; it absorbs Bettelheim in his psychology of the camps; it exercises theologians like Tillich and Bonhoeffer; it fuels the debates about modernity among cultural critics, from Ortega to Eco; it inspires the masters of critical theory, Benjamin, Kracauer, Horkheimer, and Adorno, who aims to liberate man from what he castigates as the “nightmare” of a mass society; and in similar vein it animates a legion of men of letters, notably T.S. Eliot, J.B. Priestley, Hermann Broch, and Canetti; whilst several critics also enter the fray, chiefly F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, and John Carey – who somewhat perversely treats *Mein Kampf* as a modernist masterpiece – and his discreditor, Michael Tratner. The list is bewilderingly multifarious. Clearly, we are dealing with a very strong idea, capable both of attracting diverse minds, and of fashioning the preconceptions of the shapers of history. The concept is not only ubiquitous, malleable, and polymorphous; it is promiscuous, too, in that it appeals equally to the Left and the Right; and it also displays a tendency to migrate, and traipse through the fields of discourse, from political agitation to sociology, and from critical theory to literature itself, like a latter-day Mother Courage, who trails her cartload of baggage across the spiritual battlefields of the age. Despite the place it occupies in the ideologies of the Left and the Right, which are deeply confrontational, the myth also assumes a conciliatory mode, chiefly in England and America. Thus, Mathew Arnold takes a hopeful view in *Culture and Anarchy*, which envisions an era when “the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light.” Likewise, Whitman celebrates the

American “masses”. And the inscription on the Statue of Liberty is similarly irenic, insofar as it declares that America provides a home for the “huddled masses”. The line comes from a poem called ‘The New Colossus’ by the Jewish poetess Emily Lazarus, written in 1883, and affixed to the plinth of the Statue in 1903:

> *Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,*
>
> *With conquering limbs astride from land to land;*
>
> *Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand*
>
> *A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame*
>
> *Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name*
>
> *Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand*
>
> *Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command*
>
> *The air-bridged harbour that twin cities frame.*
>
> *“Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she*
>
> *With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,*
>
> *Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*
>
> *The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*
>
> *Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,*
>
> *I lift my lamp beside the golden door!,*

Lazarus favourably compares the statue to the collosoi erected in the ancient world, notably that which stood at the harbour of Rhodes, and functioned as a symbol of culture. Her vision, which cannot fail to move, even today, praises America as the "Mother of Exiles", who liberates the "huddled masses" from oppression and slavery, and grants them the gift of freedom. The poet, and by extension the nation itself, sees America as the true home of the world's masses.

Comparatively little has been written about the concept's origins, though these do have a bearing on current usage. The word "mass", as one or two commentators have noted, derives from the Latin "*massa*" – and ultimately from the Greek, "*maza*" – which means an unformed body of material, such as clay. The Vulgate, Romans 9:21 speaks of a potter having complete power over a *massa*, a shapeless lump. The word means "lump", "bulk", "burden", and "heavy weight". From the outset, then, we can observe at least three significant senses: 1) a solid, malleable body; 2) a large "quantity"; and 3) the sense of "deprecation" when applied to people. Apart from the Gospels, we find examples in Augustine, who is among the first to apply the word to human beings, both in *The City of God* and elsewhere. He coins the terms "*massa damnata*" and "*massa peccati*" for the human race corrupted by original sin. For example, in his *Letter to Simplicianus* 1. 2. 16, he writes: "Therefore all men are one condemned mass [*massa damnata*] of sin that owes a debt of punishment to the divine and supreme justice." Likewise in the *Enchiridion* 27: "... the whole condemned mass of the human race lay in evils, or even rolled about in them, and was precipitated from evils into evils." For Augustine, the word has both the sense of "substance" and of "quantity", and it is also deeply pejorative. As such, his doctrine became immensely influential. Indeed, there is a direct correlation between Augustine's term and modern usage. The secularization of his concept in the Enlightenment heralded the redemption of the masses in the social thought of Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Marx. Much insight derives, of course, from earlier images of the crowd, as in Shakespeare, and his depiction of what he calls "the fool multitude"; or, as Wentworth Dillon, 4th Earl of Roscommon, bluntly puts it: "*The*

multitude is always in the wrong." The distinction between crowd and mass is by no means absolute, and hinges on points like the extent, volume, anonymity, detachment, chaotic form, stability, and arbitrary structure of the masses.

The rise of the masses becomes possible with the emergence of equality as a political category. Two or three philosophers, whilst they do not actually use the term, laid the metaphysical foundations for the mass age. I chiefly mean Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. These three prepared the ground conceptually, inasmuch as *Leviathan*, the *Second Treatise*, and the *Social Contract* create the theoretical arena for a mass society, and efficiently, insofar as Rousseau's thought contributed directly to the rise of the very real masses in the French Revolution. Hobbes's celebrated – or notorious – thirteenth chapter establishes the political basis for the idea of a *social mass*:

> Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.

Hobbes's egalitarian order underwrites the later idea of a human mass. Locke's *Second Treatise* goes somewhat further by affirming the role of the multitude as the lynch-pin of the body politic:

> Perhaps it said that the people, being ignorant, and always discontented, to lay the foundation of government in the unsteady opinion and uncertain humour of the people is to expose it to certain ruin and no government will long be able to subsist, if the people may set up a new legislative, whenever they take offence at the old one. To this I answer,

> Quite the contrary. People are not so easily got out of their old forms, as some are apt to suggest. They are hardly to be prevailed with to amend the acknowledged faults in the frame they have been accustomed to. And if there be any original defects or adventitious ones introduced by time, or corruption: it is not an easy thing to get them changed, even when all the world sees there is an opportunity for it. This slowness and aversion in the people to quit their old constitution has, in the many revolutions which have been seen in this kingdom, in this and former ages, still kept us to, or, after some interval of fruitless attempts, still brought us back to our old legislative of kings, lords and commons.

According to Locke, though he elsewhere defends revolution, the multitude remains reactionary, and harbours no real desire to upset the established order. His embedding of the people in the constitution as a multitude effects an implicit support for what later became mass society. In a similar vein, Rousseau's vision, which prefigures a classless society, where "the general will" and "the common good" determine behaviour, consolidates the understanding of humanity as a single entity. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau famously states:

> As long as several men assembled together consider themselves as a single body, they have only *one will* which is directed towards their common preservation and general well-being. Then, all the animating forces of the State are vigorous and simple, and its principles are clear and luminous …

This utopia, formulated with such imperishable optimism, inspired almost every subsequent attempt to inaugurate a mass society, and it comes as no surprise that some of the earliest uses of the modern concept occur during the age of the French Revolution.

Exactly why the anonymous "mass" came to displace the ugly "crowd" has yet to be explained. It likely stems from the cardinal place taken by the concept of "mass" in Newtonian physics, and the correlative growth of materialism. The French *philosophes* – La Mettrie, Voltaire, Diderot – defined the territory, with their polarized understanding of the thinker and the common herd, or those who, according to Voltaire, "walked in the shadows" and those who "dwelt in the light". The first author to lend prominence to the actual term "mass" was, I believe, Diderot, who employed it as early as 1751 in the *Encyclopaedia* to deny that the common people were capable of Enlightenment: "The general mass of men are not made so that they can either promote or understand the forward march of the human spirit." The heroes of the French Enlightenment proposed an Enlightenment for the few. This internal contradiction defines the entire debate, taking in Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and the rest. With the French Revolution, moreover, the term becomes politicized. A technical use appears in Burke's *Reflections* of 1790, where he writes of "the whole of civil and political mass." This is perhaps the earliest sociological occurrence. It does not signify "masses" in the modern sense, however, but the totality of society which, as Burke believes, undergoes destruction – he writes: decomposition – in a revolution. A major semantic development then takes place at the time of the Revolutionary Wars, when universal conscription came into force. Beginning in August 1793, this carried the name "*levée en masse*", and the phrase probably did much to popularise the term "masse" in Europe. Evidence for the idea in revolutionary circles appears for example in the work of the German Jacobin, Georg Forster, writing in his *Parisian Sketches* of 1793. Here he observes with the scorn so typical of mass psychology: "the people is a lifeless mass, a dead body, who merely follows mechanical drives." As Forster confirms, in the Enlightenment, the term is freed from its religious context, and takes its new direction as the appellation of choice for a broad and supposedly inferior section of the population. This can later be seen in Carlyle's history, *The French Revolution*, of 1837, in which Carlyle praises what he calls "the mob", the common name for the revolutionary crowd:

> Other mobs are dull masses; which roll onwards with a dull fierce tenacity, a dull fierce heat, but emit no light-flashes of genius as they go. The French mob, again, is among the liveliest phenomena of our world. So rapid, audacious; so clear-sighted, inventive, prompt to seize the moment; instinct with life to its finger-ends! That talent, were there no other, of spontaneously standing in queue, distinguishes, as we said, the French People from all Peoples, ancient and modern.

For Carlyle, the mob constitutes a natural force, a vital spirit, an organic and living body:

> Your mob is a genuine outburst of Nature; issuing from, or communicating with, the deepest deep of Nature.

Carlyle's scorn for the "mass" and his misguided idealization of blind activity, his praise of the protean mob, impacted on wider social thought, and joined the general trend in which, starting in 1789, the myth of "the masses" becomes the object, banner, and inspirer of every subsequent revolution.

Given the sparsity of occurrences around 1790, it seems unlikely that the *Philosophes* and the Revolution alone – with its universal appeal to the "people", not the "crowd" – would have caused the term's later currency. If one were to pick a single cause, the authors of Grimm's *German Dictionary* believe, it lies in Goethe's writings. Firstly, Goethe accepts the *philosophes*' dichotomy between "elite culture" and "mass culture". Secondly, he introduces the term "masses" for the majority. Thirdly, he employs it to denote "ignorance" and "stupidity". Fourthly, he employs it for a vast mumber. Fifthly, he uses it as early as 1795 in such prominent places as *Faust*, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, and the *Maxims and Reflections*. In the *Travels*, Jarno gives vent to the most questionable modern spin:

> The State and the Church may find grounds to assert their rule: for they are dealing with the obstinate masses [*widerspenstige Masse*], and as long as order is maintained, it matters not at all by which means …

Jarno's cynical politics denies the need for freedom and admits of any means to control the people. This may not be exactly Goethe's view, but his own doubtful take certainly features in the *Conversations with Eckermann*:

> There is much stupidity in the laws of the Church. But it wants to rule, and for that it needs a bigoted mass, which cringes and fawns, and is inclined to let itself be governed. The elevated and well-paid clergy fear nothing more than the enlightenment of the lower masses.

Goethe mocks both sides in like measure. His elitist scorn, which he shares with the *philosophes*, became a trope in subsequent theory, whether in Nietzsche or in the theory of mass communications, and severely impacted on later social thought. For, in the very act of liberating humanity, mass theory has tended to ridicule, and disenfranchise humankind. Goethe's unquestioning endorsement of the word "mass", in all probability inspirited later theorists.

If Goethe epitomizes the cultural giant, who helped to promote the notion of "the masses", his use of the term nonetheless lacked the rigour to validate it for philosophy. This fell to a pair of thinkers both deeply imbued with Goethe's works, and impregnated with revolutionary ideology. I am of course referring to Hegel and Marx. In Hegel, the idea of "the masses" enters metaphysics; and with Marx, it implants itself into social and political thought. With that, these two protagonists inaugurate the inflationary popularity that mass theory came to enjoy in the twentieth century. Yet whilst it would be an exaggeration to claim that they deal at any great length with the idea, it certainly occupied a pivotal role in their work, and

they treat it with such trenchancy and flair as to attract widespread notice. Here, then, and in the analogous debates of the Young Hegelians, men like Marx's teacher and friend, Bruno Bauer, and his sometime collaborator, Arnold Ruge, that is: the so-called Left Hegelians, we find the crucible of the modern idea of the masses.

In a line quoted by Ortega, Hegel claims that "The masses are advancing". Hegel is the very first to envision the mass-age. His prescience notwithstanding, he occupies a more conservative standpoint than any of his predecessors. In an untitled essay of 1800, he asserts that: "The common rabble of the German people and their estates … ought to be collected into a single mass by a conqueror, and ought to be forced, to consider themselves as Germans." This, it has been argued, probably constitutes the first theoretical conjunction of *the masses* with *power*. On that ominous note, the idea of "the masses" as a collective body enters philosophy. It recurs several times and at greater length in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* of 1820. Here the *locus classicus* appears, rarely discussed in the English commentaries, but with which the Young Hegelians and the Marxists wrestled. The key lines, which Marx attacks, come in *Paragraph* 279. Hegel writes:

> The people apart from their monarch, and the common membership necessarily and directly associated with him, is a formless mass. It is no longer a state. In it occur none of the characteristic features of an equipped whole, such as sovereignty, government, law-courts, magistrates, professions, etc. When these elements of an organized national life make their appearance in a people, it ceases to be that undefined abstraction, which is indicated by the more general notion "people".

Marx calls this a tautology, but, as has been argued, there is nothing tautological about Hegel's definition. Stripped of its subtleties, the concept of the "formless mass"

corresponds to the condition of a people in its essence, its pure form, without the structures – government, and so forth – that occur in its normal manifestation. Hegel's text represents the most radical definition of the masses hitherto. For in his abstraction, the modern myth assumes its most pristine yet pernicious form, in that Hegel's human beings appear entirely, and categorically, deprived of humanity. In the *Addition* to *Paragraph* 290, Hegel continues in like vein:

> For some time past the chief task has been that of organization carried on from above: while the lower and bulky part [i.e. *massenhafte*] of the whole was readily left more or less unorganized. Yet it is of high importance that it also should be organized, because only as an organism is it a power or force. Otherwise it is a mere heap or mass of broken bits [i.e. *zersplitterte Atomen*]. An authoritative power is found only in the organic condition of the particular spheres.

Hegel believes that the so-called "masses" need to be ordered by a superior force, i.e a government, to assume a structured, or what he calls an "organic" form. Without what he designates as a controlling "force", the mass remains inorganic and disorganized. This much-debated passage forms the nodal point of modern mass theory, and establishes the starting-point for every future philosophy, whether on the Left, or on the Right. Understandably, Marx fastens on these ideas in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, a short essay written in 1843. The *Critique* exhibits Marx in fine fettle, as he negates religion, and pleads for an egalitarian society. The kernel of the relevant paragraph reads as follows:

> The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad*

> *hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But, for man, the root is man himself.

Almost the whole of Marx's rhetorical arsenal features in this skittish paragraph: the astute intellect, the destructive bite, the fiendish reversal, the beguiling paradox, the waspish allusion, the superior doctrine, the rhetorical flourish, the educated evangelism, the sarcastic wit, the savage triumphalism. At the centre stands the idea of the masses, which Marx wrests from Hegel's right-wing politics, and imbues with a new, revolutionary meaning. In the place of Hegel's dictatorship of the state, whose task it is to govern the masses, and lend them organic form, Marx inserts the volatile stuff called "theory", and specifically *radical* theory, whose role it is to "grip" the masses, and take charge of man himself. *Radical theory* here becomes the vehicle to liberate the masses, and to give them proper form. This is the aporia of the *intellectualized masses* which preoccupied so many later revolutionaries.

Almost coterminous with the Hegel critique, Marx opened up another front by attacking Hegel's followers, the New Hegelians, in the sardonically titled *Holy Family* of 1845, a work which Lenin claimed provided the basis for scientific socialism. Here, too, the interpretation of the masses' role proves pivotal. Marx pillories the Young Hegelians' work as "a *campaign* against the masses" [*Feldzug gegen die Massen*]. The point at issue concerns Bauer's claim that the masses cannot embody a revolutionary purpose, since they cannot adopt radical ideas. Marx, of course, holds that the masses constitute the revolutionary class *per se*. The argument reaches its climax in a section called "Spirit and Mass", in which Marx quotes Bauer at length, and turns his own words against him in a sardonic dialectic. The conclusion of this diatribe leads to the instatement of the masses *as a subject*. The masses do not, as in Hegel, require the structuring control of a state, or, as in Bauer, depend on the acts of absolute Criticism, but themselves constitute the masters of history. With biting irony, Marx declares that, on Bauer's view, "the mass [is] only the *raw material*,"

whereas – so Marx implies – the mass must become the *agent of history*. In this sense, *The Holy Family* certainly fulfils Lenin's claim, by inaugurating a true theory of the masses, which constitutes the origin of revolutionary socialism. This has a vital implication: crowd theory, so often treated as an adjunct to philosophy, merely a peripheral branch, in fact lies at the very heart of modern social and political thought.

Two or three strands appear to have merged to create the modern myth. Firstly, the contempt for the masses, associated with Voltaire, Goethe, and Nietzsche; secondly, the philosophical idea, as formulated by Hegel and Marx; thirdly, the popular usage, as found in Carlyle, Arnold, Whitman, and others; and finally, the pragmatic psychology promulgated by Le Bon. The importance of Le Bon lay in his providing a detailed, readable, and practical guide to the workings of the crowd, in which he explicitly addresses political leaders. With Le Bon, the concept of a controlling agent, a leader or dictator, becomes key, insofar as his book modulates the polarity of the "elite" and the "masses" into the duality of "the masses" and their "leader". Moreover, by treating the electorate as a mass, and parliament as a mass, too, he inserts mass theory into the polity in a way that could be accepted in any quarter. Thus, Lenin read Le Bon, Mussolini quotes him, and Hitler almost certainly knew his book. – Although Ian Kershaw and Peter Longerich suppose he relied on a secondary source,[1] there is no reason to doubt that Hitler possessed the ability to read Le Bon's peppery best-seller for himself. His sexist view of the "masses" as "feminine" comes straight from Le Bon. – Even without examining the question in detail, then, it seems fair to say that all of the complex threads of the multifarious tradition – Voltaire and Diderot, Goethe and Nietzsche, Hegel and Marx, Le Bon and his contemporaries – reappear in the opinions of the century's dictators and their paladins. These contemptible rulers collectively translated the idea into an instrument of power. With Le Bon and the agitators who succeeded him, therefore, the intellectual analysis of the masses turns into a manifesto for dictatorship.

The impetus for the new stance arose chiefly on the Left, with the Russian Revolution, though it grew equally virulent on the Right, with the rise of Fascism. The myth figured strikingly in the most representative political tracts, starting with Lenin's *What is to be Done?* of 1902, and continuing to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* of 1925-26. Both these works enjoyed a phenomenal reach. In the first instance, *What is to be done?* demands the education of the masses, so that their "revolutionary activity" can be promoted. Yet Lenin plays fast and loose with the idea, just as he does with his followers, writing in his *Letters on Tactics* of April 1917 that the Bolsheviks should be prepared to *oppose* the masses and reject what he calls "mass intoxication". In his *April Theses* of that year, he appeals to "the masses" as the ultimate ground of government. But then again, he undermines their authority: "The masses must be made to see," he asserts, "that the Soviet of Workers' Deputies are the only form of revolutionary government …." In two key speeches to the Central Committee, on 10th and 16th October 1917,[2] in which he impelled the Party to the revolution that began a fortnight later, he again insists on the "masses" as the only source of power. At this point, the erstwhile *theory* becomes the instrument of *practice*. With the *hauteur* of a cerebral upstart, and melding Marx with Le Bon, Lenin claims:

> It's impossible to be guided by the mood of the masses. For it is changeable and cannot be accurately gauged; we must be guided by an objective analysis of the revolution. The masses have put their trust in the Bolsheviks and are demanding from them not words but deeds …

On the very eve of the revolution, Lenin exercises all the conceit of power, in order to deride, control, and manipulate the masses. Although he sometimes uses the term "masses" synonymously with a class, namely the proletariat, as he does in his *Theses on Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress…* of July 1920, he elsewhere means every revolutionary class. He employs the term thus in *Left-Wing Communism* of

1920, where he claims that at the time of the revolution: “All programmatic and tactical views were tested by the action of the masses.” Whereas it is clear that, unlike Hegel and Marx, Vladimir Ilyich regards the mass as being composed of *classes*, he treats them as a single, corporeal body, which stands opposed to its leaders. Rather like Mephistopheles confusing the student in Goethe’s *Faust*, in a scene which he quotes elsewhere, Lenin writes:

> The mere presentation of the question—“dictatorship of the party *or* dictatorship of the class; dictatorship (party) of the leaders, *or* dictatorship (party) of the masses?”—testifies to most incredibly and hopelessly muddled thinking. … It is common knowledge that the masses are divided into classes, that the masses can be contrasted with classes only by contrasting the vast majority in general, regardless of division according to status in the social system of production, with categories holding a definite status in the social system of production …

Here Lenin, the misguided idealist, becomes a demagogue. He can be seen to engage in that wilful sleight of hand by which, as his biographer Robert Service argues, he dazzles with ideas, in order to trick his audience into thinking that he is offering a viable thesis. Having, then, restored the classes to their place in the masses, and thereby undermining the whole idea of the masses, Lenin wilfully proceeds to identify them with their leaders. He continues:

> One can see simply a thoughtless and incoherent use of the now “fashionable” terms: “masses” and “leaders”. These people have heard and memorised a great many attacks on “leaders”, in which the latter have been contrasted with the “masses”; however, they have proved unable to think matters out and gain a clear understanding of what it was all about.

Lenin envisages a concordat of leaders and led, a unity of the masses with their masters, and puts the matter with typically waspish brevity: "To go so far, in this connection, as to contrast, *in general*, the dictatorship of the masses with a dictatorship of the leaders is ridiculously absurd, and stupid." His corollary admits no doubt: in the dictatorship of the proletariat, the masses act as rulers. This is clearly a blatant lie, which exposes the myth of the masses for what it is: a piece of political phantasmagoria. Lenin's vacillations between proletariat and leadership once again reinstate the perennial dichotomy between masses and elite. Further analysis would reveal the link between theory and violence in his doctrine, whereby the inhuman concept of a "mass" validates equally inhumane acts. For, as he chillingly observed, "we are engaged in annihilation."[3] Where Lenin led, others followed. Even Gramsci did not remain untouched by such posturing, arguing that: "The masses don't exist politically, if they are not framed in political parties." By 1917, then, in the hands of Lenin, Trotzki, Stalin, and others, the myth of the masses had fed into a labyrinth of deceit, corruption, and murder.

Hitler for his part espoused a *quasi-magical* view of the mass to assert his own brand of chaotic rule. His brutal but incisive dicta indicate his reliance on Le Bon: his belief in the irrationality of the crowd, its alleged femininity, and the supposed fickleness of its opinions, all derive from the French thinker. Likewise, the techniques he advocates with which to manipulate the masses, and to stir them to action by inflammatory rhetoric, bespeak an origin in crowd psychology. As *Mein Kampf* proclaims in the war-cry I quoted earlier: "To lead means to move the masses … The finest theoretical insight has neither purpose nor value, if the leader [i.e. *Führer*] does not spur the masses into action …." As with so much else, alas, Hitler's woebegone confession constitutes a prophecy. He dilates upon the "psyche" of the "broad masses" [*die Psyche der breiten Massen*], exposes what he calls their "love" for their "ruler", defines their enthralment to dogma, invokes their voluntary subjugation to "spiritual terror" [*geistige Terrorisierung*], praises the abuse of their human rights, and even – with evil clarity – exposes what he calls the "inner madness" [*innerer*

Irrsinn] of the entire doctrine of the masses! In his *Conversations* of 1940, he supplements all this by advertising what he calls "fanaticization" – "I have fanaticized the masses," he explains, "in order to turn them into the tool of my politics." With duplicitous honesty, Hitler betrays the ugliness of his intent, the baseness of his methods, and the pathological core of his views, whose psychotic tangle is designed to ensnare and entrap. Historians tend to denigrate his gifts, albeit his biographer Alan Bullock calls his writing on the masses quite "brilliant"; and Canetti almost gets it right, voting him the "supreme empiricist of the masses;" but the phrase falls far shy of Hitler's iniquitous metaphysics. On the Left and the Right, therefore, the myth of the masses served to justify dictatorship, and had the same dire results. According to a word coined by Heidegger, and taken up by Arendt, the twentieth century engaged in "*Verwaltungsmassenmord*" – i.e. mass murder by administration. The fatal consequence of our baleful myth, promulgated so widely in modernity, is the rise of the "mass murderer", and the horrifying prospect of the "mass grave", whether in Sobibor, Babi Yar, Rwanda, or Srebrenica.

Mass theory, as can readily be understood, entered a new phase after the Second World War, when a definite caesura set in, albeit one still encounters oddly unreconstructed views, especially in England, in the cheapskate populism of John Carey, and in France, more surprisingly, in Sartre, in the Situationism which animated 1968, as well as in Foucault and Bourdieu. In the revision which now began, no-one went quite as far as Tillich, who declared that "the mass is sacred," but in large part, the theoreticians, who had once so artfully constructed the myth, now set about refuting it. In 1955, J. B. Priestley, in a rare British intervention, coined the term "admass" to dismiss the entire phenomenon:

> Admass is my name for the whole system of increasing productivity, plus inflation, plus a rising standard of living, plus high pressure advertising and salesmanship, plus mass communications, plus cultural democracy and the creation of the mass mind, the mass man.

Adorno could not have put it better. – Not unlike Priestley's analysis, several sociological studies also appeared, which took different starting-points, used different methods, and came to different but, in the end, cognate results. With one exception, the authors were German-Jewish intellectuals, exiles who had made their home in England and America, and wrote in direct response to the Shoah, publishing their results between 1950 and 1960. In their various ways, they all refute the myth. I am thinking of Arendt's chapter 'The Masses', in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; Canetti's *Crowds and Power*; Shils' 'Theory of Mass Society'; and Adler's 'Man or Mass?' These four shared a background in Central European thought – Shils, though American, belongs with the rest thanks to his debt to European sociology – and, in the case of the German speakers, they either knew each other personally, or knew each other's work. This lends their project a coherence that supplants the tensions between them and their often violent disagreements. Whether destabilizing the idea, as with Arendt, inverting it, as with Shils, or rebuffing it, as with Adler, they all return to first principles, to introduce a new, humane vision. As an example, let me cite Canetti on the spontaneous crystallization of the masses, in an act that resembles a creation *ex nihilo*:

> The crowd, suddenly there where there was nothing before, is a mysterious and universal phenomenon. A few people may have been standing together – five, ten, or twelve, not more; nothing has been announced, nothing is expected. Suddenly everywhere is black with people and more come streaming from all sides as though streets only had one direction. Most of them do not know what has happened and, if questioned, have no answer; but they hurry to be there where most other people are. There is a determination in their movement which is quite different from the expression of ordinary curiosity. It seems as though the movement of some of them transmits itself to the others. But that is not all; they have a goal which is there before they can find words for it. This

> goal is the blackest spot where most people are gathered.

Canetti's phenomenology links the intangibility of mysticism with the precision of natural science, inasmuch as his crowd, by some inexplicable mechanism, appears to follow the law of universal attraction. With the eye of a trained scientist – he did his doctorate in chemistry in 1929 – Canetti exploits the observational method, and transfers the Newtonian concept of a physical "mass" to humanity. In contrast to all previous authorities, he envisages an autonomous crowd. This lends the mass a new dignity. By releasing the teeming constellation of human beings from a leader, and invoking the leaderless, non-ideological mass, Canetti grants it the nobility of an independent identity, a truly productive selfhood. Against the weight of tradition, Canetti – in some ways like Shils – celebrates the *positive mass*, freed from the shackles of leadership in general and, in particular, of a brutal, unscrupulous dictatorship. Furthermore, as my namesake argues: "The idea of the masses is a fiction." When we consider the human being as an individual, it is clear that the "mass" cannot come into being. That marks the end of the myth. All four exponents of this clear-sighted school, in their different ways, aim to break free from ideology, destroy the abuse of the masses, and liberate the individual. Did, then, the masses revolt? Hardly. They didn't even exist.

Footnotes

[1] Scholars cite Julius R. Roßbach, *Die Massenseele*, Munich, 1919. Hitler's knowledge of this text would not of course preclude his acquaintance with Le Bon. See Peter Longerich, *Hitler*, 2015, p.89.

[2] Robert Service: Lenin. A Biography. London, 2000, pp.304-5.

[3] Service, op. cit., p.322.