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POPULAR TASTE & THE AGONIES OF THE YOUNG

Harvey Swados

Within recent months the Leopold-Loeb murder case has served as the theme of a movie by Alfred Hitchcock, novels by Meyer Levin, James Yaffe and Mary-Carter Roberts, a paperback case history, and a Broadway dramatization of Mr. Levin's most successful and fascinating *Compulsion*. Superficially, it would seem obvious that this terrible murder and its aftermath—a sensational courtroom trial involving two wealthy, brilliant, wayward boys, the most successful criminal lawyer in the country, and a battery of conflicting psychiatrists —should prove magnetically attractive to writers. But thirty-three years have elapsed since the kidnap-murder, and we are surely entitled to wonder why the novelists of the 20's, the 30's, or the 40's did not seize on this drama. Inevitably too a parallel question arises: why now the Leopold-Loeb case rather than the Sacco-Vanzetti case?

The answers to these questions are interrelated. For many of us both Leopold-Loeb and Sacco-Vanzetti have now come to represent two crucial illuminations of American life in the 20's. And if numerous writers and their publics are currently intrigued with that era (for reasons beyond the scope of this brief discussion), the fastening on one sensational trial rather than on the other should be fairly clear to us in the 50's. The Sacco-Vanzetti trial was an ending; the Leopold-Loeb case a beginning. It is not just that Sacco and Vanzetti were in all likelihood completely innocent and were revered as martyrs throughout the civilized world, while Leopold and Loeb were admittedly guilty and were the universal objects of fascinated loathing—although that is not irrelevant. It is not even that Sacco and Vanzetti were poor and Leopold and Loeb were rich—although that too bears on the problem. It is, most importantly, it seems to me, that the Sacco-Vanzetti case is the *last* instance in recent history in which the American people were stirred in great numbers to protest an apparent and gross miscarriage of justice. The issues were clearcut, the verdict appalling. Just so, the Leopold-Loeb case may be viewed as one of the *first* instances in contemporary American history in which official cognizance was taken of the vast murky areas beyond such deceptively simple words as guilt and insanity. The issues were as clouded as the motives of the boys, the trial—heard by a single judge—an admission of the inadequacy of jury democracy, the judge's verdict an uncomfortable compromise between revenge and therapy dictated by psychiatric testimony.

IT IS JUST this ambiguity, just this realization—indeed, at times this reveling in the fact—that there are no simple answers, that has proved so appealing to readers and writers of the 50's. In an age which prides itself on its sophistication, its appreciation of complexity, even, at times, on its impotence, it is only natural that Sacco-Vanzetti should be scanted in favor of Leopold-Loeb as a key to understanding the 20's. Perhaps one day our bolder novelists will see in the Rosenberg case the usable tragedy of still another famous pair whose travail illuminates certain aspects of American life not revealed by the two earlier trials, each of which might be said to expose one side of the Rosenberg coin, counterfeit as it was for both accusers and accused. I mean by this that questions accepted as given, or at least questions accepted by both parties in the America of the Leopold-Loeb and Sacco-Vanzetti trials, became—in the America of the Rosenberg trial—public relations materials, to be manipulated by counsel for both the accused and the State:

The question of race and religion. There was no felt need in the 20's to prosecute Loeb-Leopold with Jewish lawyers, or Sacco-Vanzetti with Italian lawyers, or to hear the trial of either pair with a Jewish or an Italian judge. Nor was there a concomitant necessity for either defense counsel or the various defense committees to proclaim the loyal Jewishness or Italian-ness of the defendants of the 20's, as was done with such nauseathing thoroughness in the case of the Rosenbergs.

The question of politics. There was no felt need in the 20's to deny that Sacco and Vanzetti were committed and dedicated anarchists. Nor was there a concomitant necessity for the defense to portray the two as innocent liberals who preferred not to spell out their beliefs because the climate was currently somewhat unfavorable to anarchists, because nobody had the right to ask them such personal questions, and because they weren't anarchists at all but just patriotic liberty-loving Americans. The hypocrisy—or the counterfeit, as I have called it—of *all* sides in the Rosenberg case, from the sanctimonious judge who heaped on the heads of the wretched couple the onus for Korea and World War III, to the advisors of the defense how, insistent on portraying the two (with their solemn approval) as flag-waving, Sabbath-observing innocents who had never heard of international Stalinism, was so horrifying as to make the Leopold-Loeb case seem in retrospect a model of well-balanced jurisprudence and honest grappling with presently insoluble problems.

THE AMERICAN MASS public however is not currently intrigued with Meyer Levin's presentation of the Leopold-Loeb case solely because of the honest bewilderment of the judge, or the impassioned humanitarianism of old Clarence Darrow. If the symbolic attitudes of these men, and the fathomless depths they attempted to plumb, help to account for intellectuals' fascination with Leopold-Loeb, there is another aspect, not so far touched upon in the preceding paragraphs,

that may possibly explain the rapt attention given by a wider audience to productions like *Compulsion.* I refer to the fact that Nathan Leopold and Robert Loeb were what we call in the 50's teenagers. A special kind of lost teenagers, in fact: juvenile delinquents.

The lost souls whom the readers, the general public, of the 20's cared about were the Jake Barneses and Lady Bretts, the Jay Gatsbys and Daisy Buchanans. The youngsters were busy, as always, having fun; it was the adults who were in deep trouble. (It is interesting to observe in passing how stolidly the audiences of the 50's gaze upon the spectacle of a thick-waisted Tyrone Power and a wrinkled Errol Flynn earnestly and capably portraying those doomed young comedians of *The Sun Also Rises,* in contrast to the enthusiasm with which they greet movies of, by and about teenagers.)

What has happened in the intervening thirty years is that the country has been turned over not to the wives, the widows, and the moms, but to the young. Reading *Life* magazine and the slicks, from *Woman's Day* of the A&P to *McCall's,* The Magazine of Togetherness; seeing the movies of the 50's, from the big-screen technicolor jobs like *Rebel Without A Cause* to the modest black and white films like *The Young Stranger;* glancing at the frightened newspapers, one cannot but be struck by the enormous emphasis placed on the dress, the doings, the designs for living of the young. It is understandable that manufacturers and distributors should concentrate on the fastest-growing market in the country. What is somewhat more worthy of consideration is why in the 50's the one big problem whose existence is universally admitted and discussed in United States is that of adolescent disturbance. More than disturbance, domination of the American scene. In the 20's, Leopold-Loeb were *exceptional:* their comfortable situation, their college cleverness, their social ease, were in themselves so striking as to aggravate the passions directed against the boys and their crime. Today those qualities could be described as almost typical of a substantial segment of American youth.

IT IS NOT EXTRAORDINARY that during the very period when immigration to the United States slowed to a trickle, during the very period when the last immigrant generation was frantically assimilating itself to the American way, it should have been the immigrant attitude toward children which triumphed over the traditional Yankee attitude? The immigrant faith, often the first article of that faith, was that one must sacrifice all for the children. One came to America in the first place for the children; one labored in sweat shops, coal mines, steel mills, in order that the children might have the American opportunity. One broke one's back, burned out one's eyes, even yielded up one's ideals, in order that the children might have the chance at a college education, a firm grip on the success ladder.

So today the first article of faith is that everything that carries contemporary sanction, from togetherness to religious revivalism, is being

done for the sake of the children. The parents move from city to suburb not for themselves but for the sake of the children. (I speak now of explicit justifications and rationalizations which may not always coincide with actual reasons); the father communtes to work not from choice but so that his children can grow up in the fresh air; the mother becames a chauffeur not to fulfill a secret desire but because there is no other way, even with the car pools, for the children to get to and from public school, Sunday school, ballet school, music school; and finally the parents hand over their inner selves to the ministration of the community church, not because they believe, or because they expect the act of capitulation will help them, but because they think the children must have "something" in which to believe, even if they themselves need not.

The kind of children emerging from school, church, and station wagon in the 50's would seem best exemplified by their heroes and the heroes of their parents too: Elvis Presley, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood, even James MacArthur, and—the apotheosis of the entire generation —the late James Dean. The face of each is eloquent of the tormenting discontent of an American youth for which everything is being done, to which everything is being given ... except a reason for living and for building a socially useful life.

The face of each is one facet of the composite faces of the rich, handsome, gifted, doomed Leopold and Loeb. The sullen sulkiness of the speed-hungry Presleyan, whose motorcycle is his religion; the liquid-eyed wretchedness of Mineo the immigrant's son, who cannot belong; the bouncy emptiness of Natalie Wood, who would die like Joan if there were an ideal worth dying for; the cleancut loneliness of the unloved MacArthur, whose Dad has a closetful of suits but no time for Son; and the astonishingly tortured and grief-ridden countenance of the Dean of them all, dead in his Porsche at 24—these speak more eloquently of the essential quality of American life in the 50's than once did Andy Hardy, Harold Teen, Our Gang or Shirley Temple for their day. Is it any wonder that the terrible story of Leopold and Loeb should return to challenge us more potently today than ever before, a ghost returned to haunt our uneasy consciences?

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE MASS

Nicola Chiaromonte

If it is true that we live in a mass society, we must immediately admit one fact: there are some individuals who are more affected by it than others, but there are not, nor can there be, privileged persons. There cannot be, on the one hand, the anonymous and vulgar mass which lacks idealistic motives, and on the other a few individuals who succeed in keeping intact their nobility and the cult of the highest values. The mass and the few are inextricably mixed. At certain times we feel ourselves to be *individuals* endowed with feelings, needs, and spiritual demands which are not those of the anonymous crowd. And we speak of the mass situation in so far as we experience the confusion between, and the mutual involvement of, the anonymous and the personal. We feel a contrast between our individual beings and a social situation in which necessity, automatism, and collective servitude are especially refractory both to the individual's personal demands and to the "aristocratic values" which (at least at times) the individual seeks and by which he sometimes feels himself inspired.

What is a "mass situation"? Simplifying greatly, one can say that it is a social situation in which the experience of collective necessity is very strong. Before developing his famous analysis of the "revolt of the masses" Ortega y Gasset "places" the phenomenon of the "mass" by drawing the reader's attention to what he calls a "visual experience" —"the fact of agglomeration, of plenitude... The cities are full of inhabitants, the houses full of tenants, the hotels full of guests, the cafes full of customers, the parks full of strolling people, the waiting rooms of famous doctors full of patients, the theaters full of spectators, and the beaches full of bathers."

"What previously was, in general, no problem, now begins to be an everyday one, namely to *find room,*" he observes. Now, if he had dwelt upon this experience of agglomeration, of the crowd, of *not finding room,* he would perhaps have led us to the heart of the "mass situation."

Even if we treat it in his terms, as extremely simple and commonplace, this experience is not, in the first place, purely "visual": it is also spiritual. It signifies for us the *essential* way in which the individual comes in contact with the life of others—or rather, of *everybody.* This becomes clear once we recognize it as a fact in the life of the individual consciousness, rather than as an external fact.

Not finding room is an agonizing experience. It means to feel oneself shut out, or at least to risk that; the others are already there, they occupy all, or almost all, the available space. To find room, an effort is necessary; one is obliged to make room for oneself. The struggle is not a struggle for life in general; on an astoundingly humble level, we must fight to occupy the little space which we need, which in some sense belongs to us, since we have the same right to it as others do. But no one guarantees it to us, apparently, since the simple presence of others in a crowd obstructs and prevents it. And it is also clear that the others have the same right as we do.

This experience does not occur merely on certain intermittent and rare occasions. It is regularly repeated in hundreds of instances, whenever, in fact, we come into contact with collective existence, instead of remaining in the circle of private relations between individuals. It is an absolutely typical and fundamental experience, more fundamental than the situations themselves in which we undergo it (work, search for material necessities, relations with bureaucratic machinery, participation in political life, amusements)—since one repeats substantially the same experience in each one of these instances.

Nor is this a purely physical fact (and even less is it completely "visual") concerning space and material necessities. It is enough to say, "finding room becomes a problem" to become aware that this implies a spiritual situation, and, precisely, a situation of preliminary hostility towards the others, those who take up the space and threaten not to let us have even the indispensable minimum of it. This hostility, on the other hand, is immediately contradicted by the evident fact that the others are not there to keep us from being ourselves, but because they are looking for what we are looking, and are equally hindered and impeded by the crowd. This hostility, then, is unreasonable and has no right to show itself. But to recognize this does not wipe out the feeling any more than it calms the anxiety to "find room": it only represses and muffles the feeling, which continues to lie, intact, at the bottom.

Furthermore, the experience of the crowd is not freely chosen. One is in a crowd on the street, on public conveyances, in a movie, in a stadium, not because one has decided to mix with the crowd, but because one cannot help it. One cannot avoid submitting to the numerous bondages of organization and bureaucracy which life in common imposes; one cannot escape even during leisure.

The situation which follows from this concerns everyone, the most refined intellectual as well as the most humble worker. Not even the economically privileged individual escapes. The way in which he enjoys his advantages depends, in fact, on the way in which others must seek to satisfy their needs.

ACTUALLY, it is always possible to avoid to some extent the

material bondage imposed by collective life. But one cannot escape the predicament of collective living in its spiritual aspect.

Daily participation in "mass" life can seem occasional and transient—limited to certain moments and therefore analogous to the automatic way in which we obey the needs of the body. (Equating the needs of the body and relations with our fellows is in itself a serious fact!) But in any event, if instead of looking at these moments from the outside, as unimportant intervals of time, we try to think of them from the inside, as moments of life and of consciousness, these, let us say, passive moments will no longer seem so indifferent.

Immersed in the crowd, the individual feels himself a unit among many interchangeable units. And this, if you think about it, is already the beginning of a dissociation which does not stop here. In his family and the circle of his friends and acquaintances, the individual never feels himself a mere unit. Besides, it is all very well to think that once having left the crowd, one regains all one's individuality, whole and differentiated. But in the meanwhile, one has been aware of an elementary identity with the others which overcomes and wipes out every personal difference as well as every shade of individual thought.

It therefore seems legitimate to inquire whether he who leaves the crowd after feeling himself confused in it is, in truth, the same individual as before; whether he has the same ideas of himself and of his own ineffable quality as he had; whether indeed he has the right to retain such an idea and whether, by being too sure of it, he does not risk forming an idea of himself which is too favorable, too vaporous and idealistic.

This inquiry may seem idle. But when we reason as if the indistinct communication with others, imposed on us by our daily life, injures in no way our individuality or the quality of our "values," our reasoning implies an assumption which is not so simple: that those moments have no importance, are moments effectively indifferent. The trouble is that a great enough number of unimportant moments and indifferent acts gives us the precise image of the perfect *mass-man*—the man whose existence has a minimum of importance and who passively submits to this fact without even recognizing it.

Even on occasions of little weight (like those given as examples), the experience of the crowd is not limited to the feeling of anonymity. Indeed, to be precise, it is not we who feel anonymous in the crowd, it is the others who are anonymous to us. However, we know that the same thing happens to us in the eyes of others. In reality, no one is anonymous, but we all find ourselves in a situation of anonymity. It is because of this fact (given the very ordinary necessity which has brought us together) that we can speak of ourselves as all equal, as units that are undifferentiated and interchangeable.

My relations with my neighbor then assume a rather peculiar quality: the person next to me is a stranger and, at the same time, reflects at every point my own condition. Thus reflected by him, my condi-

tion is not the "human condition" in general, my "nature" is not the human nature of the novelists and philosophers, but, so to speak, *what is left over of it.* In that situation, I am reduced to the minimum and I know it—just as I know that a panic in the crowd would be enough to crush me.

II

One outlines in this fashion a rather wretched image of individual destiny; and one also begins to perceive what is effectively the relation between a mass situation and aristocratic values—a relation of externality and suspension.

This appears clearly enough when one realizes that communication between individuals in a crowd is reduced to conventional signs, or, in any event, to a very impoverished language. It is not that I cannot have a conversation with the next fellow. But it is as if I do not know him; as if I have in common with him only a humanity which is both very much reduced and rather general; as if, in addition, I know that my relation with him is purely occasional and transient. It is evident that there is no room for a genuine exchange of feelings and thoughts between us. One could indeed say that, given the situation in which we find ourselves, we can communicate only by remaining external to each other as much as possible. We can exchange only the most conventional words. The expression of complex ideas, subtle evaluations, the communication of delicate feelings must evidently be left for other occasions.

Ever since great cities have come into existence, we have been familiar with the image of next-door neighbors who meet every day without ever knowing each other, with the singular freedom and the grave solitude involved therein. The meaningless conversations consisting of commonplaces which people exchange when they meet have already been the subject of irony. We have a picture of human relations reduced to elementary proportions, to the point where their value is negative.

Similar images have been considered comic when opposed to the ideal fullness of authentic human expressions among beings who love each other or who have an ideal in common, a noble interest, a heroic destiny. We have naturally assumed that, while on the one hand there was the common people (the "mass") which got more and more common, there remained on the other hand, in some circles or privileged classes (the youth, or the people, or the proletariat, or even the elite) the cult of authentic feelings and of "aristocratic values"—a human "nature" more or less intact.

We did not ask ourselves if that were possible: if one could in fact imagine a society in which spiritually privileged individuals (or groups, or classes) could exist with others who were subjected to an obscure commonness, without the quality of the one being influenced by the material and spiritual way of life of the others.

To think in this way was both grossly materialistic and irredeemably idealistic—materialistic because it was imagined that in a society relations between individuals could remain purely external, physical, economic, material; idealistic because it assumed the existence (at the bottom and on the fringes of the common conditions of existence) of a soul, a consciousness, that was impervious to the quality of the relations which could be established between individuals who live together in a determined social situation.

GIVEN THE EXISTENCE on the fringes of the crowd, of an elite (or of a chosen class) what will be the relations between them? What, in other words, will be their common language? At the very least it will be a mixture of the selected and of the vulgar. In which case, the spiritual privilege of the elite has already been rather trimmed down. One can, of course, make the hypothesis of a radical withdrawal of the elite from the mass; or assert that, in the last analysis, the only possible relation between the two is that of violence. But the question of language will not be clarified. How will the elite make itself understood without adapting its language (that is, its values) to the mass?

The example used here, of the situation of the individual in a crowd, may seem frivolous. It only concerns, in fact, the most obvious aspect of the "mass situation."

One must, however, keep two things in mind. The first is that the nature of a society consists wholly in the manner of being together which it offers to the individuals who compose it—the way in which they *can* experience that fundamental bond which Aristotle calls *philia*. If in the society in which we live mass conditions and mass relationships predominate, this cannot fail to affect our vision of the world and of human relations; and thereby, the efficacy of aristocratic values in collective life.

In the second place, it is evident that the mass situation is not limited to daily and occasional relations of the individual with the crowd. The crowd is neither a prime fact nor an occasional phenomenon: it is the ultimate form, the form most evident and striking, of other facts that are more weighty and serious.

Still, when these general facts are enumerated in the usual way—working conditions, relations between the individual and the State, forms of technical and economic organization—one will still not have an image of the situation as it takes shape in the individual consciousness.

The collective demands from which the phenomenon of the "mass" is born are all prosaic: so prosaic that they appear indisputable and indisputably rational. It is an elementary rationality, which has the quality both of natural necessity and constriction from above. Thus, keeping to the obvious, it is natural and inevitable that, in the crowd on a subway, everyone has his share of discomfort. But no one, except

perhaps technical specialists, could say whether that was inevitable in an absolute sense or "just"—whether one could not do something better. Indeed, since it is a question of material conditions, the "better" will always seem possible, but also doubtful, since the way of obtaining the "better" remains obscure. In daily experience, the mass situation is presented as an accomplished fact, that is neither just nor unjust; it is simply there. Its modes depend, of course, on the ability and good will of those in charge. But intrinsic in the very form of collective life is "necessity."

To live in a mass society means to automatically perform acts that are not free; doing what one does, not because it is natural, and not even because one considers it positively useful, but because one wishes to avoid the complications and bad results which would come (to oneself *and* to others) from acting differently. For the single individual this can be more or less painful. That is, the advantages which one derives from yielding to collective demands instead of resisting them can be more or less great. From the point of view of conscience, however, what matters is that one feels oneself subjected to an overpowering force which comes neither from a moral norm nor from the sum of individual demands, but simply from the fact of collective existence. It is an experience of disorder maintained by laws of iron.

It is natural that the individual in a crowd should count for what he has most externally in common with others. But this is also a grave constriction, because an individual can appear as a simple physical unit only when seen from outside. From *his* point of view, he cannot help feeling himself the free and mobile center of a network of vital relations which concern not only his fellows, but also the world as a whole and the meaning of his own existence. Now the conditions of mass society have this in common: the individual's own point of view is regularly driven down to the bottom. From this, along with the inevitable passivity, comes an experience of privation and of painful tension. Not having room also means not having room for the spirit.

Such a subjugation can be accepted as "natural." But it can never be "just" in the sense in which one says, for example, that among friends it is just that everything be shared equally. The difference is that, in this last case, even an unequal division could be just, provided that all agreed to it. In the case of the great number, even an arithmetically unexceptionable division is always imposed from outside: it can appear materially equal, but we can never be sure that it is justified.

EXCEPT WHEN HE RECOGNIZES common necessity, the individual who is part of a mass feels that every individual reaction (or attempted reaction) is affective; and the affective reactions are out of place there. What is normally required of us is a certain rationality of behavior—a certain *apathy,* at least in the sense of not brusquely opposing one's own demands to those of others. Even when a mass is carried along by "collective feeling," the characteristic fact is that the individual

who lets himself be carried along can no longer distinguish his own feeling from those of the others, while the passion of all of them feeds his; he is completely subjected to the occasion. To escape, a violent wrench is required, a decision to separate himself from others, a desire to be *heretical.* Or else one must submit, adapt oneself, maneuver, manage things cleverly, and wait for the propitious occasion which permits everyone to have a little more space, ease, and freedom.

We are together because "we can't help it." This is the prime fact. No one can help it. Everyone knows that the other person is constrained by the same necessity which has compelled one's self. Here is, one could say, the normative fact of the "mass situation," its justification, and even the foundation of its humanity. Only if we recognize this necessity, this common subjection, does the other person impress himself on our consciousness as a "fellow man." Otherwise, the relation between individuals in a mass is material, external, and provisional, and the next fellow appears as a profoundly alien being, or even as an obstacle and an enemy; if he were removed our situation would be easier, we would be more comfortable, there would be *more room.*

In such a situation one is infinitely distant from any sense of security; everything is precarious. The individual next to me is nothing to me, and yet he is a man like me; his closeness weighs on me, but so does mine on him; contact with my fellows is inchoate and transitory, but I never cease being with them. In this way we experience a brutal sense of the ephemeral, material, dreary, overwhelming. *Oi Brotoi.* All is momentary, there is no durable meaning either in our acts or in our thoughts. We are mortal.

The condition of the individual in the mass is completely ambiguous and obscure: caused by all and willed by no one; inevitable and "natural," but unjustifiable and artificial; solitary and unanimous; essentially unstable and dangerous, but yet reassuring; loaded with violence and hostility, but yet fraternal. What is most ambiguous and obscure is the relation between the individual and his fellow. How does one treat him, and speak of him? *Who* is he—this being who is both an intimate and a stranger? It would be almost as easy to imagine what the first men were like in the dawn of time.

WHAT CAN BE the relation between such an experience and "aristocratic" demands?

This—to return to the commonplace examples which we have purposely chosen—is a little like asking oneself if it is possible to read Kant in a packed train, or to practice epicurean wisdom in the middle of a mass of peasants on strike. Obviously not, and normally one would not even have such an idea. But why not? All you need is sufficient power of concentration and self-control. However, the question would be: If in similar situations, the individual could think and act so "aristocratically" would he conceivably communicate to his neigh-

bor the fruits of his reflections, or persuade him to imitate his conduct? Obviously, we are dealing in absurdities.

Now, if one speaks of the relationship between the mass situation and spiritual and cultural "values," the first point to clear up is that of the language which is appropriate to the relationship, of the meanings which it allows to be communicated.

When one deals with a worker in a shop, or with an individual in a subway crowd, the mass situation is much more indifferent and, at the same time, much more rigid than any other social occasion. By its very nature, it admits both the Buddhist and the Christian, the humanist and the sectarian, the crudest and the most sensitive person; it is neutral as regards any distinction of race, color, or nationality; it is democratic in the extreme. But it is also exclusive, special, and demanding: obviously there is not a Christian way to work a lathe or a humanistic way of being on a train. The Christian, humanistic, or other "values" are reserved for different, more "suitable" occasions.

From the tolerance that is intrinsic in such a situation comes the optimistic attitude in looking at "modern times." Since the modern situation is presented as a simple state of fact, in itself neutral as to the more complex demands of the individual, one deduces that, whatever its imperfections and present evils, it is always possible to "christianize" them, let us say, or "humanize" them—to make them evolve towards the "better."

The pessimists, on the other hand, see in the simplicity and in the wretchedness of the mass a virulent and active negation of complex and "noble" demands. From the point of view of the uniqueness of the individual as from that of the universal quality of "values," the situation appears to them very nearly the worst possible.

The crucial fact, however, escapes both optimists and pessimists. To speak of "values" regarding a concrete situation means to speak of modes of being, not of ideal pure relations. Now, it is as modes of being that Christian or humanistic "values" are found to be suspended, reduced to suitable proportions (that is, to some form of private cult), and therefore inoperative. Optimism seems groundless. But if one speaks of "values" in a purely spiritual sense, then, certainly, no state of fact can contradict them. On the plane of discourse, "values" remain eternally valid, for one can validly talk about them in any situation. It would be absurd to maintain that a given social situation hinders liberty of thought or the possibility, for the individual, of behaving honestly and delicately to the man next to him. What a factual condition can hinder is the natural translation of thoughts into acts; or that an individual's noble behavior represents not a private and exceptional fact, but a norm to which all *ought to* conform.

The intellectuals' pessimism refers to the discursive efficacy of moral and cultural "values" on the mass. But actually the crisis concerns more fundamental facts.

III

The individual, in his work, in politics, in the circumstances of social life, may submit to acting in a given way because "he can't help it." In behaving this way, however, he does not deny that it would be better to be able to do what he does with the conviction of doing something good and useful. But he feels forced to put aside the question of good and evil. Naturally, if the necessity to which he submitted seemed to be in absolute contradiction to his firm religious or moral convictions, he would not act as he does; he would have compunctions about doing wrong and his situation would change. But what one does because one cannot do otherwise does not appear as a moral choice, does not openly contradict any "value." Indeed, such an action is characterized by rationality, in the sense in which one considers it rational for the individual to submit to circumstances independent of his will. Thus, it hardly seems reasonable for a worker to oppose the technical demands of the factory on the grounds of conscience; or for a citizen to claim the privilege of individual liberty as against bondage to the collective organization. Such ties do not appear bad in themselves, just as being crushed in a mob does not seem degrading in itself. There is no reason to be opposed to them.

And yet the situation is obscure and troubling.

The question of doing right or wrong, whatever sense it has, is present and disturbing just because it is avoided, or better, repressed. The ambiguous character of the situation is revealed by the fact that there seems to be no reason at all to oppose it. But neither does one accept it. There are, instead, many reasons to submit to it. But they are reasons of convenience, more than of conscience. Conscience (in the sense of willing assent to what one does) is suspended.

This experience of suspension, of obscurity, of doubt, is the severe test to which the modern situation puts "values"—not only traditional beliefs, but the idea itself that it is necessary to believe in something, and that the difference between believing in what one does and *what one is,* and not believing in them, is a real difference.

For this reason the mass situation is a morally extreme one. In sum, it is what we mean by nihilism: to live by setting aside the question of whether what one does day by day has any meaning, to know that one sets aside the question, and to recognize, at the same time, that this does not change the course of events.

The course of events, in fact, does not change. But existence is deprived of meaning when it is reduced to a long series of obligatory and indifferent acts. It is stripped of value, not so much with respect to the "values" of culture and of tradition (which can always be in some way maintained and cultivated privately), but in itself. Existence is literally "unbelievable," and an unbelievable existence means an existence which drags on in a state of continual bad faith.

In order for this to happen, it is necessary—it is important to insist upon this—that material or, at any rate "objective," conditions be bad.

It is enough for the individual to find himself in an ambiguous situation respecting his own action, to do what he does without conviction —to act without violating any deeply felt belief, but also without clearly observing one.

IV

One can at this point return to what, according to Ortega y Gasset, distinguishes the mentality of the mass-man: the fact that "to have an idea does not mean to have reasons for having it."

If one assumes that such a man thinks capriciously; that, good reasons being clear to him because they are written in the heaven of intelligible Ideas, he arbitrarily chooses, *against* them, the idea which suits him; and that then, even knowing the place of truth, he "does not care in the least to be in the right," then, certainly, his will appears as wicked as it is obstinate.

But such an assumption is not legitimate. Such a man, granted that he exists, would be an intellectual sophist, not a mass man.

Even according to Ortega y Gasset's definition, the *mass man,* the "man in the street," *homo communis,* is not someone who refuses to give reasons or does not care about being in the right: he has not reasons to give and, as for being in the right, he *cannot* care about it. He has only the ideas that his situation provides—no more than that. In a situation in which the most obvious reasons are reasons of fact and of necessity, he can receive only conventional, stereotyped ideas. These ideas are not false; rather, they are neither false nor true. The mass man has literally lost true reasons. This is the only fact which explains how, in the modern situation, the "aristocratic values" have, in their turn, "lost power."

In what sense, then, may one say that the intellectual is superior to the man of the masses? In no sense. The intellectual can distinguish himself from the mass only by his greater consciousness of their common situation. But he can show this consciousness in only one way —by speaking the truth without presuming that he is the sole owner of it. As a matter of fact, the question is not majority and minority, the mob and the elite. *The mass situation involves everybody.* The necessity of daily relations, which not even the most privileged can avoid, makes us all part of the mass; we are all forced to use the current language, especially those who strongly desire to communicate with their fellows and to address the community as such.

The language of the mass, based as it is on ready-made notions, consists of cut and dried formulas in which words have a fixed value, purely indicative and only slightly expressive. The most obvious example is the language of propaganda, advertising, and what are called, not by chance, "media of mass communication." Such a tongue resembles the language of cybernetics which the experts themselves call a dead language—incapable of transmitting information about *new facts.* The simple mixing of such a conventional language with the more or less

authentic language of private life and of significant exchanges between individuals creates a situation without precedent.

So that the situation of the intellectual, or of the Platonic philosopher who, having returned to the cave, seeks to communicate to his fellows the truths which he has glimpsed, is paradoxical. The language of the street is ineluctable; no one has created it, but everybody is forced to use it. To the extent to which he preserves some freedom, however, the intellectual cannot accept a situation and the language it involves simply because "he cannot help it." But, on the other hand, he cannot ignore a state of things and a language to which, since he is only an individual among others, he yields like the others. If he wishes to talk to others, he is obliged to use their language. No matter how refined, sensitive, and aware he may be, he can define his ideas only in relation to the ideas of the mass; even if it is to oppose them. This already sets him in bondage. On the other hand, if he truly seeks lost reasons and truths, if he wishes to communicate meanings and not merely to use formulas, if he feels himself the more or less worthy heir of a tradition, the intellectual must wish to be free. But he knows one thing for certain: he exists and works in a situation in which he himself has only an equivocal and doubtful relation to tradition, to the "aristocratic values," to reasons and intelligible truths. This is an extreme situation.

The situation is extreme not so much as regards culture as its *raison d'être,* which is truth lived and participated in. Culture, in fact, is the ground not of truth, but of the search for it. Truth appears only in lived experience, in feeling oneself in harmony with the nature of things and the world. And common truth is found and lived in common: it is a vital harmony which no idea or cultural form, no single individual, can ever really express, much less create.

Truth—like man himself—does not merely need to be left at liberty, not to be oppressed; above all, it must be freely sought and desired. Now, to the extent to which the individual's experience of his social existence is an experience of non-truth and of non-free acts, he does not seek the truth; he wants ready-made ideas, quickly reassuring; he seeks, not freedom, but the organization of a force capable of assuring the satisfaction of his needs. Of truth, as of liberty, the individual feels only the privation, and only when he is face to face with himself —in the lack of reason and of sense which he discovers in his existence.

So corrupt a situation does not change by virtue of pure ideas, nor by violence, but uniquely, "according to the order of Time," through our suffering the common lot in common, seeking to understand it.

And the fact remains that we do not leave the cave in a mass, but only one by one.

Translated by PAUL ALPERS

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