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THE POLITICS OF MASS SOCIETY

by
WILLIAM KORNHAUSER



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TO MY FATHER

Among the laws that rule human societies there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.

De Tocqueville

Preface

THIS BOOK examines historical and contemporary situations marked by widespread readiness to abandon constitutional modes of political activity in favor of uncontrolled mass action. It analyzes the sources of support for communism, fascism, and other popular movements that operate outside of and against the institutional order. At the same time, this study attempts to specify social conditions that sustain liberal democratic institutions. The sources of strength and weakness in democratic political systems are sought in the social structure. The central argument of this study is that insofar as a society is a *mass society*, it will be vulnerable to political movements destructive of liberal democratic institutions; while insofar as a society is *pluralist*, these institutions will be strong. A major implication of this argument is that the theory of mass society and the theory of social pluralism employ similar categories of analysis, and therefore are but two statements of a more general theory. The formulation and application of this general theory constitute the principal aim of the present work. Voting statistics and other kinds of empirical material are used to help specify the theory; rigorous testing of the theory remains to be done. Therefore, this study is offered as a tentative statement of a theory which, it is hoped, will lead to further research and theoretical analysis.

This study grew out of my association with a committee for an inventory of knowledge on political behavior, Seymour

Lipset, chairman, which was supported by a grant from the Behavioral Sciences Division of the Ford Foundation to the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University. I gratefully acknowledge the support I received from this committee. I also am grateful to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences for a year in a stimulating environment which greatly facilitated my research, and to the University of California for a grant from the Institute of Social Science and for a Faculty Fellowship to complete the study. I am greatly indebted to James Coleman, Alex Garber, Arthur Kornhauser, Ruth Kornhauser, Paul Lazarsfeld, Seymour Lipset, Leo Lowenthal, and Philip Selznick for their valuable suggestions and criticisms.

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Berkeley, California

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Introduction

IT HAS BECOME a commonplace to speak of modern society as "mass society" in order to stress its size and complexity. From this point of view, the United States and the Soviet Union are prototypes of the mass society. Such a use of the term does not add to our understanding of modern society. By covering whatever is observed in large and complex systems, "mass society" becomes merely a short-hand expression for the modern world. If the United States is observed to be pluralist, for example, then the inference is made that "mass society" may be pluralist. Or, if the Soviet Union is judged to be totalitarian, then "mass society" may be totalitarian. Used in this manner, the concept has little analytical value.

This is to be regretted because the idea of mass society has a very rich history as a conception of *specific* tendencies which undermine freedom in the modern world. This intellectual heritage is denied by those who would assimilate everything "modern" to the concept, and so are the problems around which the idea has been developed. A central aim of this study is to distinguish between mass tendencies and pluralist tendencies in modern society, and to show how social pluralism, but not mass conditions, supports liberal democracy. This effort is based on the premise that the strength of democratic institutions depends on the underlying social structure, and *not* on the idea that modern de-

mocracy is everywhere in peril. Thus, it is not to be assumed that the United States, for example, is the prototype of mass society, or that democratic institutions in the United States are not strong. Those who reject the theory when they observe anti-mass tendencies in America, England, or elsewhere confound the general criteria of mass society with the particular case. The theory does assert that contemporary societies are especially likely to develop properties of mass society, unless strong counter-tendencies exist; but it does not imply that all modern societies manifest these properties in the same degree. The idea of mass society is a diagnosis of certain underlying tendencies in the modern world, as well as a set of criteria for measuring the extent of these tendencies in specific cases.

“Mass society,” then, is not to be identified as modern society. Neither is it to be confounded with a particular class. The “masses” are not to be confused with the working class, nor are “mass movements” to be identified with social movements based on the working class. This study develops the proposition that under certain conditions any or all classes may give rise to masses, in the sense of large numbers of people who are not integrated into any broad social groupings, including classes.¹ It shall be further argued that totalitarian movements are fundamentally mass movements rather than class movements.² Specifically, although fascism tends to recruit a disproportionate number of its adherents from the middle class and communism attracts more of its adherents from the working class, these movements cannot be understood merely as political expressions of the working class and the middle class, respectively. For in both cases, a large proportion of the movement is composed of people who possess the weakest rather than the

1. This is not to deny that certain classes are more likely to give rise to masses than others. On the contrary, this study explores in great detail the differential vulnerability of classes to mass phenomena. See especially Part III, below.

2. For a critical evaluation of the utility of class analysis for the study of totalitarian movements, see Bendix (1952).

strongest class ties. Furthermore, both movements tend to draw many adherents from all major social classes. This common property of a mass (rather than class) base helps to explain the *similarity* between fascism and communism, namely, their *totalitarianism*.³

Classes subsist along with masses but they become less effective determinants of political behavior insofar as society is a mass society. The decisive difference is between the behavior of people who form a mass and that of people who are attached to independent groups. Therefore, a second aim of this study is to show how variations in the character of the individual's social relations influence his receptivity or resistance to the appeals of totalitarianism.

The primary utility of mass analysis centers in its power to explain *crisis politics* and the extremist response, whereas class analysis would appear to be more useful in the area of *routine politics*. For if class theory began as an explanation of economic crisis and political change, it increasingly finds effective use as a mode of analysis of political alignments under more or less stable conditions of industrial society. This is demonstrated in the burgeoning literature on the bases of electoral cleavage within modern Western

3. Carl Friedrich (1954, p. 48) recently has distinguished between works on fascism and communism which stress their similarities and works which stress the distinctiveness of fascism: "Sigmund Neumann, in *Permanent Revolution* (1942), treats them [fascism and communism] as basically alike. . . . Franz Neumann, in *Behemoth* (1942 and later), on the other hand, deals with the Hitler dictatorship as something quite distinctive, essentially the creation if not the creature of big business, the bureaucracy, and the army. Among earlier works, Alfred Cobban's *Dictatorship, Its History and Theory* (1939) . . . [treats] Fascist and Communist dictatorship as alike. . . . Two other volumes also stressed the connection between Fascist and Communist dictatorship: *Dictatorship in the Modern World* (edited by Guy Stanton Ford, 1935 and 1939), and Hans Kohn's *Revolutions and Dictatorships* (1939). Among the books emphasizing either explicitly or by implication the distinctness of fascism, mention might be made of E. B. Ashton (pseudonym), *The Fascist—His State and His Mind* (1937); Herbert W. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (1928); G. A. Borgese, *Goliath, the March of Fascism* (1937); Max Ascoli and Arthur Feiler, *Fascism for Whom?* (1938); and several books on Nazi Germany, including Frederick L. Schumann, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (1935 and later); Fritz Morstein Marx, *Government in the Third Reich* (1936 and later); Karl Loewenstein, *Hitler's Germany* (1939 and later)."

democracies. The present study seeks to show that mass theory is useful for the analysis of sources of extremist tendencies in these same societies.

Mass society is not synonymous with industrial society nor with the working class in industrial society. It also is to be differentiated from totalitarian society. Many theorists of mass society are prone to liken totalitarian societies to mass societies. This conception leads to certain major difficulties of analysis, since the kinds of social process they identify as mass phenomena pertain primarily to weaknesses in democratic institutions which make them vulnerable to capture by totalitarian elites, rather than to the nature of totalitarian institutions themselves. Confusion results when the same concept is used to explain both the weakness of democratic institutions and the functioning of totalitarian institutions. Therefore, a third aim of this study is to distinguish between mass institutions and totalitarian institutions, and to specify the relations between them. Mass society will be conceived of as a set of conditions under which democratic institutions are vulnerable to totalitarianism, rather than as a set of conditions underlying totalitarian institutions.

The theory of mass society does not imply a low valuation of democracy, but merely claims that certain tendencies in modern society must be checked if democracy is to remain strong. These tendencies are the loss of autonomy on the part of elites and the loss of independent group life on the part of non-elites. The atomized society invites the totalitarian movement, which provides both pseudo-authority in the form of the charismatic leader and pseudo-community in the form of the totalitarian party. Since democracy may encourage the atomization of society, it may carry with it certain self-defeating tendencies. Democracy of course also contains many self-sustaining processes. For example, it also encourages the formation of multiple elites and associations which help to maintain a wide dispersal of

power. The theory of mass society does not imply that any given democracy may not successfully sustain itself, but only that those factors with which it is concerned cannot be ignored in any assessment of the main paths along which democratic societies may move.

This study attempts to account for some of the major social factors that weaken democratic order by applying the theory of mass society to a variety of empirical materials. It is an effort to gauge the plausibility of this theory as an explanation for a limited range of phenomena. It proceeds first by formulating the theory of mass society in light of its intellectual roots; and second by applying the theory to political movements in Western society. Part I delineates the major properties of mass society which make it vulnerable to anti-democratic movements. Part II examines conditions under which these movements (especially communism and fascism) have gained strength at the expense of democratic institutions. Part III analyzes the social composition of these movements, that is, the kinds of people who flock to mass movements bent on destroying democratic society. The Conclusion summarizes the implications of the theory of mass society for the conditions that support liberal democratic order, and raises certain questions about the present situation in American society.

PART I

THEORY

OF MASS SOCIETY

Chapter 1

Two Views of Mass Society

THE THEORY of mass society has two major intellectual sources, one in the nineteenth century reaction to the revolutionary changes in European (especially French) society, and the other in the twentieth century reaction to the rise of totalitarianism, especially in Russia and Germany. The first and major source may be termed the *aristocratic* criticism of mass society; the second, the *democratic* criticism of mass society. The first centers in the intellectual defense of elite values against the rise of mass participation. The second centers in the intellectual defense of democratic values against the rise of elites bent on total domination. The defensive posture of the aristocrats has been adopted by democrats who, having won the nineteenth century war of ideas and institutions with the former, now seek to preserve their values against the totalitarian challenge.

Not all intellectual rejections of revolutionary change have been based on the idea of mass society. Criticisms of nineteenth century trends that may properly be termed theories of mass society found the decisive social process to be *the loss of exclusiveness of elites and the rise of mass participation in cultural and political life*. Burckhardt (1955) *

* Names and dates in parentheses refer to the items in the list of references appearing at the end of the book.

and Gustave Le Bon (1947) were among the leading aristocratic critics of mass tendencies in the nineteenth century; Ortega y Gasset (1932), and Karl Mannheim (1940, pp. 79-96), in his discussions of elites, are twentieth century representatives of this approach.¹

Similarly, not all democratic criticisms of totalitarianism are based on a theory of mass society. Those which may properly be termed theories of mass society find the decisive social process to be *the loss of insulation of non-elites and the rise of elites bent on total mobilization of a population*. Emil Lederer (1940) and Hannah Arendt (1951) are leading representatives of this conception of the nature of mass society.²

Paradoxical as it may appear to be, these democratic critics have come to rely heavily on the intellectual weapons employed by aristocratic thinkers against the rising flood of democratic ideologists during the nineteenth century. The central idea taken over by these democratic theorists from their aristocratic critics is that *the preservation of critical values (especially freedom) requires the social insulation of those segments of society that embody them*. Aristocratic and democratic critics of mass society agree on this, even as they disagree on the content of the values to be preserved—especially the nature of freedom—and, correspondingly, on the segments of society that embody them.

The aristocratic notion of freedom emphasizes the conditions that permit men to act as they *ought* to act, that is, in accordance with standards of right conduct. Mannheim has noted that this idea of freedom is counterposed to an egalitarian conception: "Men, . . . [the aristocratic theorists] claimed

1. Catholic critics of nineteenth century society, like Bonald and De Maistre share certain views with aristocratic critics. So do such aesthetic critics as Arnold. In the most general sense, all anti-bourgeois intellectuals of the nineteenth century shared certain ideas which were congenial to a theory of mass society. For a brief review of conservative ideas since the French Revolution, see Viereck (1956).

2. Arendt's recent discussion (1956) of authority closely follows the aristocratic criticism of mass society.

are essentially *unequal*, unequal in their gifts and abilities, and unequal to the very core of their beings" (1953, p. 106). Standards of right conduct are most highly developed in the upper reaches of society, and therefore the "true bearers," the "true subjects" of liberty are the "organic communities" of aristocratic elites. "The 'liberty' of the different estates under feudalism which meant their 'privileges,' and the distinctly qualitative and non-egalitarian flavour which was contained in the medieval concept, is here revived once more" (Mannheim, 1953, p. 107). The traditional order based on moral law insulates aristocratic elites and thereby preserves liberty.

The democratic notion of freedom, on the other hand, implies the minimizing of social control (including that of the traditional order), that is, the removal of as many external constraints on the individual as is consistent with the freedom of his fellows. Freedom so conceived is dependent on *equality of rights*. This value is embodied in the whole community. Therefore, it is the independent group life of the non-elite which functions to preserve liberty, as independent groups insulate people from domination by elites.

In sum, these two versions of the mass society differ in their conception of freedom and the social foundations of freedom. One sees mass society as a set of conditions under which elites are exposed to mass pressures. The other conceives of mass society as a set of conditions under which non-elites are exposed to elite pressures. Nevertheless, they share a common image of mass society as the *naked society*, where the direct exposure of social units to outside forces makes freedom precarious. We shall attempt to formulate a general theory of mass society that incorporates elements from both the aristocratic and democratic criticism. This is our objective in Part I of the present study.

But to reach this goal, it is necessary to explicate partial and polemical versions of the theory. Therefore, we consider first the major argument of the aristocratic criticism

of mass society, and then we analyze the democratic criticism of mass society. First a word about the bases for distinguishing these two views.

Our interest is in analyzing the theoretical basis of each approach, rather than in examining the value orientation typically associated with each of them. The two approaches have been distinguished according to whether the condition of elites or the condition of non-elites is identified as the basic criterion of "mass society." This means that any theory that locates the decisive feature of mass society in the exposure of accessible elites to mass intervention is classified as "aristocratic," while any theory that locates the essential feature of mass society in the exposure of atomized non-elites to elite domination is classified as "democratic." The choice of the terms "aristocratic" and "democratic" to describe these two theories should not obscure the fact that the classification is based on an *analytical* rather than a value distinction. However, there is an affinity between each of these theoretical positions and each value orientation. Most writers on mass society whose *theories* have focused on the loss of insulation of elites have also advocated aristocratic *values*, while most of those whose theories have focused on the loss of insulation of non-elites have also advocated democratic values. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions, for some writers hold values of the one type and expound theories of the other. When this occurs, the contributions are classified according to the theoretical, not the value, position of the writer. This explains why Mannheim, for example, is cited as a representative of the "aristocratic" approach; though committed to the preservation of democratic *values*, his *theory* of mass society tends to stress the way in which mass participation undermines elite functions.³

There is a second point, relating to the theoretical nature of the classification (rather than its value relevance), that

3. Critics of the theory of mass society generally fail to differentiate between the aristocratic and democratic versions of that theory. A recent example is Daniel Bell's critique (1956).

should be borne in mind. Our interest is in the logic of each argument, rather than in the work of particular theorists. A separate series of logically connected propositions about the nature of mass society is related to the major premise of each approach. A particular theorist may well incorporate aspects of both arguments in his writings, without thereby providing a clear outline of either argument or a general and systematic statement of the theory of mass society. It may sometimes happen, therefore, that the same writer is at one time cited in support of a proposition embodied in the aristocratic approach, and at another time cited in support of a proposition embodied in the democratic approach. This will occasion no confusion if it is recalled that *ideas, not men, are the objects of classification*. On the whole, it is true that those who adopt the major premise of one school tend to ignore the social processes central to the major premise of the other school. Yet there are some exceptions, particularly De Tocqueville, who analyzed not only the need for insulation of elites, but also the role played by multiple autonomous groups in the insulation of non-elites.

What follows is not an historical reconstruction of ideas on mass society, but a logical reconstruction of two major intellectual traditions that are intermingled in the literature on mass society. *Our integrated statement of mass-society theory is based on elements drawn from both traditions. At the same time, it accepts the democratic concern with the identification of conditions favorable to the preservation of democratic values.*

The Loss of Authority in Mass Society

During the nineteenth century, aristocratic critics of bourgeois society spun a rhetoric of pessimism concerning