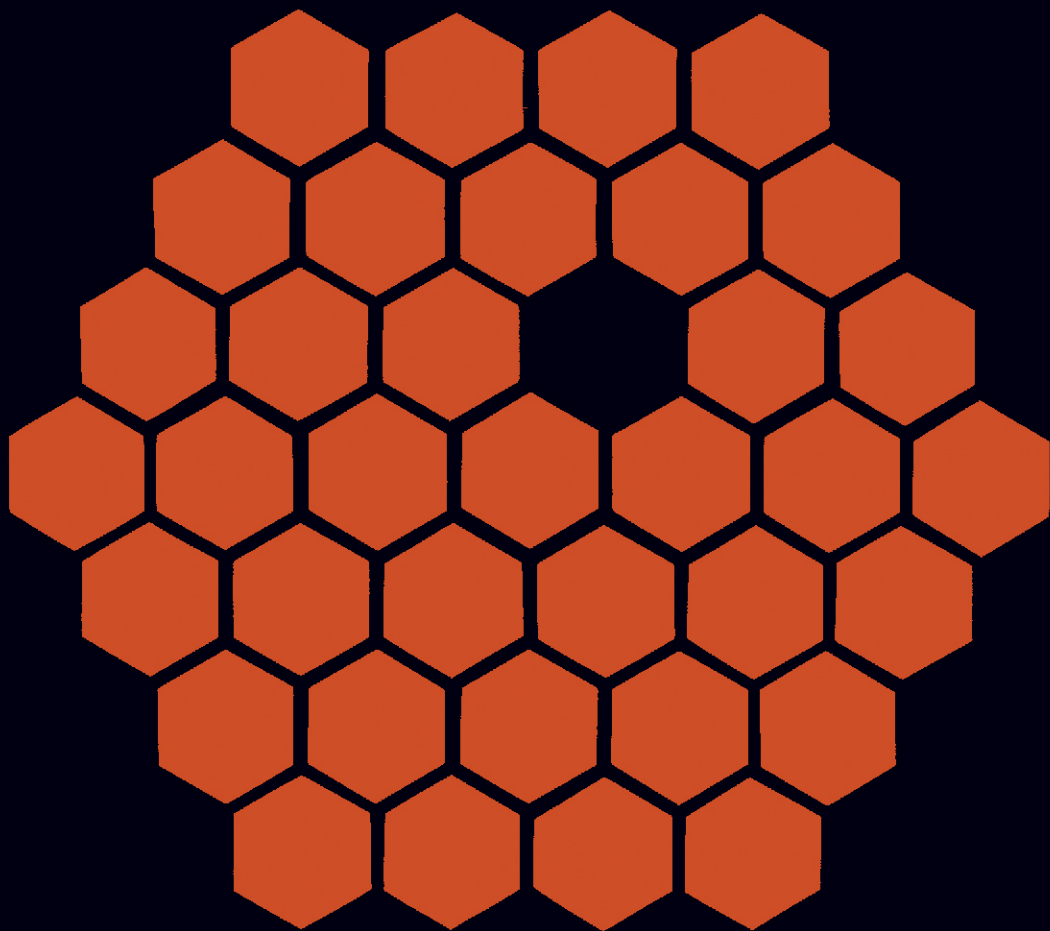


MASS SOCIETY

Salvador Giner



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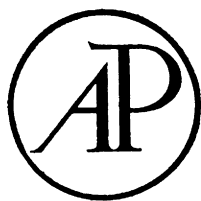
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Introduction

Men need a notion of the larger whole, social as well as cosmic, of which they are a part. In every human situation a number of concrete strands converge to create such a notion: tradition, the ongoing processes of everyday life, the economy, the polity, one's friends and foes, the predominant culture and the local subculture and, also, man's personal dispositions, resources, acumen and passions. This awareness of the general features of society does not exist for practical purposes only, it also stems from man's inner need for a meaningful map of the world in which he lives, although it is clear that the degree of accuracy or empirical correctness of the scheme as well as the range of phenomena encompassed by it are bound to vary according to the needs and powers of the individual and the social conditions of his life: his class, country, kin and occupation, among other factors. By the same token, this meaningful map of the social world discloses the distribution of authority, the cleavages of class and caste, the allocation of vice and virtue, the identity of the powers that be, the expectations of how people will behave, their typification of conduct, and so on.

Thus, an image of society is composed by the cognition of the existing situation and by its interpretation in terms of meaning; the latter contains a diagnosis of its estimated imperfections, and a statement – no matter how inarticulate – about the direction of change. Therefore, the image or mental map of a society contains a descriptive as well as an evaluative side; these always appear linked, for man is not just a cognitive being and cannot confine himself to description. He hopes, fears and judges: these are sentiments that he expresses in his values and that, in turn, strongly affect the contour of his cognition of the social world. An image of society expresses something fundamental in man's imagination of his fellow men and of his active reflection upon his own condition.

Since practically every individual has in some measure an image of society there could conceivably be as many of these as there are people. (And perhaps, in some philosophical sense, this is true even in the most 'primitive' of human communities.) In fact, however, it seems reasonable to assume that the images prevailing in a given complex society fall into clusters, that they are shared with differing degrees of emphasis and intensity by larger or smaller numbers of individuals quite often to be found in the same social

class, political party, religious sect, ethnic minority, occupational category, or some kind of social formation. In complex, and especially in modern, societies there is a tendency for each section to develop a variant view of the world. The fact that some outlooks span collectivities and overlap each other, or are diffusely held throughout wide areas of the society, does not invalidate these remarks: it only points to the complexity of the phenomenon.

The proper description and analysis of such outlooks or images of society is a very difficult task, as the criteria of demarcation are often as unclear as the key notions usually employed to define and explain them. Thus in discussing them it is often hard to know whether one is dealing with religions or ideologies, with doctrines or theories, with hypotheses or dogmas, with the conscious elaboration of an interpretation by a given group or the less conscious products of the mentality typical of a collectivity, such as a social class. Quite frequently, several of these elements enter the picture. And this is precisely what happens with the 'mass society' outlook, with which this book is concerned.

The social basis of the mass society outlook will not be studied here, although in some specific cases reference will have to be made either to its social origins or to its followers or supporters. Suffice it to say that this basis is variegated, diffuse and contradictory; it includes a sizeable number of creative and critical individuals alongside a considerable number of people who act as the day-to-day interpreters of the world to their audiences: journalists, political ideologues, lecturers, priests sacred and profane; it permeates the verbal reflections on life in general uttered by countless people in all walks of life. With such a variety of spokesmen, it is not surprising that we should find amongst its expressions some of the most acute and penetrating comments on man's contemporary plight next to the most barren and boring of commonplaces, as well as the embodiment of extreme reactionary attitudes side by side with some of the best-known expressions of left-wing radicalism. To complicate things further, we find that in some instances the mass society outlook in practice adopts the form of a rigid ideology to which other explanations are merely appended, whilst in others it itself appears as ancillary to a more prominent set of beliefs, bringing them up to date, as it were, or imparting to them a much-needed gloss of immediacy and actuality. It is in all these different guises that it appears in the speculations of the philosopher of history, in the dire warnings of the prophet of doom, in the loose promises of the lay preacher of hedonistic and libertarian joys; it is thus that it finds a place in right-wing pessimism, in neo-Marxism and in existentialism, as well as in a number of other philosophies characteristic of this age.

If this is so, however, is not the reader entitled to ask whether a distinctive 'mass society outlook' really exists or, conceding that it does, whether the attempt to identify its core and the range of its implications is a worthwhile intellectual exercise? Unfortunately, the answer to this cannot be given in one single sentence, and this book itself – in its entirety – is an attempt to substantiate the claim that the outlook in question exists and that it possesses a considerable degree of inner coherence and distinctiveness; that it is one of

the most important and prominent in the cultural imagination of modern man at many levels and that, in fact, modern secular culture cannot be explained without it. At the same time, this book attempts to criticize the mass society conception in a systematic and rigorous way.

In order to be able to proceed, I shall start with some working definitions whose proper substantiation and criticism are two of the chief aims of what follows. As I say, one of the major social outlooks present in, and characteristic of, the modern world is a conception called the 'mass society' interpretation. In some quarters it also receives the name of the 'theory of mass society'. Yet, I hasten to say, it very rarely appears in a guise that can deserve the title of theory, with its minimal connotations of logical rigour and falsifiability. I will nevertheless retain the expression 'theory' in many instances, in order to remain faithful to sources and common speech, conscious however of the pitfalls and fallacies involved. (Moreover, the fact that the word 'theory' is so lavishly used by mass society 'theorists' to describe their cogitations is quite revealing in itself.) The outlook in question claims basically that modern society is the result of a general breakdown of the elements of differentiation that internally diversified former societies, as well as the parallel result of a loss of the sense of the sacred: technology, economic abundance and political equality have created a homogeneous society, in which men are the prey of the impersonal forces of bureaucracy and regimentation, while ideological fanaticism is their only, fatal refuge from the moral desert created by generalized apathy and secular disbelief.

There are several elements in this loose definition, of which I wish to underline only two at this stage: the identification of the majority with the mass, and the identification of man with mass man. These elements have implications for the mass society interpretation which it is convenient to stress here, however sketchily:

(a) The mass society vision is rooted in a certain conception of the majority of the population of a given society in which the latter is seen as a mass or, as it is often said, as 'the masses'. This implies, implicitly or explicitly, that those who hold this view divide their social world between 'the few' and 'the many', and that virtue, reason and human excellence are more often than not seen as concentrated among the former, who form the elite, the aristocracy (hereditary or otherwise) and the upper part of the society. The lower part of society is formed by the mass: it is *hoi polloi*, the plebs, the populace, the proletariat. The mass is supposed to be powerless when well ruled, and ephemerally powerful when its riotous crowds are allowed to get out of control under certain critical circumstances. This mass is basically amoral, superstitious, and ignorant. The masses, of course, share characteristics with the people (i.e. the people are also the many), but a people is composed of a law-abiding, tradition-oriented majority: the people are 'folk', who live in communities, whose values and beliefs are enhanced by a stable traditional culture. (The relative independence of these communities from each other lessens the effects of the sheer numbers of the people as a whole, for local and kin identifications are predominant amongst them.) This conception of the

masses is very old in the history of social thought and precedes the modern rise of the mass society outlook by many centuries. The traditions forming it have been decisive in shaping the mass society interpretation in every way.

(b) The growth of a mass interpretation of modern society has been accompanied by the development of a notion that is, essentially, the negative counterpart to the liberal theory of the individual. The opposite of a free, rational, individualistic man is not the member of the primeval tribe or horde; it is mass man. For, although mass man is supposed to live in the apparently advanced environment of a modern civilization, he is not really a member of civil society: he is manipulated, unfree, and alienated. Mass man is defined by his supposed affinity to the masses: he is their microcosm. He lacks individuality, that is, distinctiveness, moral sense and a sense of direction. He is thus a modern barbarian who, unlike his historical predecessors, does not threaten civilization from outside, but insidiously lurks in its very midst, forever eroding its delicate web.

The following pages will attempt to unfold many of the questions either hidden or explicit in the conception of the modern world as a mass society – undifferentiated, manipulated, dominated by mass production, mass consumption and the mass media – and of the corresponding notion that masses and mass men now dominate history. I shall first trace the origins of the two latter notions in the framework of the main traditions of Western social thought in an attempt to show that they are far from being marginal or secondary interpretations to its mainstream. Hopefully, this will prove both that the roots of the interpretation are far older than is usually assumed, and that the tradition of the mass society outlook has been decisive in determining its present form, imagery and vocabulary. Once this exposition and analysis have been carried out, a unified interpretation of the mass society conception will be presented. This has not been done before – save in a number of short essays, not always critical – for what one finds are either general uncritical statements of the mass society vision itself or, more frequently, presentations of one or some of its particular dimensions, as for instance the ‘mass politics’ or the ‘mass culture’ interpretations. One of the chief purposes of what follows is precisely to show the extent to which the mass society outlook is a total outlook that not only embraces a vision of history and of man, but also purports to explain with no lack of detail modern politics, culture, social inequality, community life and most of our discontents and malaises.

The vastness of such claims, and the overwhelming volume of the extant literature on the subject – whose great bulk, alas, is not precisely diminished by this book – pose some considerable practical problems to any writer attempting my kind of general, unified and critical analysis. He may easily get lost in the unending forest, and exhausted in his ambition to cover or refer to all the material that can conceivably be called relevant. He will, moreover, be bedevilled and bewildered by the extremely uneven quality of the literature under scrutiny: as I said before, one finds within the mass society outlook some of the finest – if often somewhat wrong – statements on

the modern crisis along with masses (if I am allowed the expression myself) of stuff that cannot always be declared worthless if they are to be considered from the point of view of content analysis, as such abundant documents are revealing symptoms of the ideologies, self-images and discontents of the modern world. For these reasons this is only in appearance just another book about books. The pages to come, especially from chapter III onwards, will show to what extent we are dealing with moods, fears, images and outlooks that are those of an age, and more specifically, those of certain occupations, classes and trades. Accordingly, I have written this book with the help of the two following criteria, which I entreat the reader to remember:

(1) Although she or he may think that this volume is too long as it is, I have attempted a closely argued and compact presentation of the mass society outlook, its origins, traditions, ramifications, and criticisms. In so doing I had to leave out many sources that did not seem to me to be essential to the presentation of the critiques, speculations and beliefs involved, or that were mere repetitions of earlier statements. For the same reasons I have not attempted systematically to discuss and locate the place the mass society outlook occupies in the realm of contemporary social thought vis-à-vis other equally important theories and general explanations of our world. In several crucial cases, however, its overlaps, tensions and dynamic relationships to alternative explanations have been appropriately pointed out.

(2) Because of the specific nature of the mass society outlook I have referred to authors – original and unoriginal – without much warning as to the relative importance or uniqueness of their respective contributions, and quite often, though not always, without reference to their political allegiances and social attitudes. Highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow sources – to use for once a deplorable expression dear to some mass culture ‘theorists’ – often mix in my study without much comment, though I hope the context and the content will in practice always clarify the quality of the material and locate it in its proper place within the cultural universe under analysis.

* * *

In this book I have tried to show the unity of the set of problems and corresponding interpretations which enter the mass society outlook, while dealing with each one of its components in a relatively independent manner. Accordingly, though one single argument runs through the entire work, some readers may find that it is useful for them to read only certain parts, for each major theme has been presented with a certain degree of autonomy. Thus, while people with an interest in the history of ideas will follow the argument as it unfolds from the start, others may find that the first three chapters are not directly relevant to their fields. Chapter IV is a good place to start for those who want to know about the general theory of mass society as it appeared, fully-fledged as it were, in the twentieth century – they may even want to confine themselves to it, as its most accomplished formulation occurred in the works of the authors analysed there. Yet special theories have been developed

over the last few decades on each aspect of the complex and ambiguous notion of the mass society that may interest particular readers: those pre-occupied with the breakdown of the community in modern times could concentrate on chapter vi; problems of class and class conflict appear in chapter vii; mass politics of both the totalitarian and the democratic kind are dealt with in chapter viii; people interested in popular and mass culture could, for a start, concentrate their attention on chapter ix. Some of the philosophical questions raised by the mass society vision of modern man and his plight are analysed in chapter x. Finally, a number of important issues in the formation of the structure of modern sociological theory are approached in chapter v. The critique to be found in the last two chapters encompasses all these issues and will therefore be relevant to all readers. For obvious reasons, I have refrained in this critique from attempting to refute many assertions and explanations which are patently wrong; their mere presentation in the more analytical and descriptive parts of the study has been considered sufficient.

A note on sources and bibliography

Notes are at the end of each chapter. A full bibliography can be found at the end of the book; it includes all works cited in the text except those of classical authors up to the nineteenth century. Thus writers such as Isocrates, Plato or Machiavelli are quoted according to the standard method (work, book, paragraph and line, as the case may be) and the reader can find the reference in any edition, original or translated.

The bibliography also includes several works not mentioned in the text but which may be useful as sources for further enquiry. In spite of its extent it is not exhaustive, but I am confident that it covers most materials and work on the subject or relevant to it.

Acknowledgements

Despite the limited aims and quality of this book, a few personal comments and acknowledgements about it are in order. I have been working on its subject matter – and on other issues related to it – for a number of years. I became interested in the critique of anti-democratic thought when I was a law student in Catalonia, at the University of Barcelona, though I was then more absorbed by the practical demands of an unbearable state of public affairs than by serious study. I carried this preoccupation with me to the University of Chicago. As a graduate student there I detected in the explanations about modern society of several important American sociologists a pessimistic and a disappointed tone about the people at large that I had not expected. These feelings, it seemed to me, had become clearly embodied in the widely accepted theory of mass society. And it was on this theory that I finally wrote my doctoral dissertation. However, this book is definitely not the thesis I once wrote, though it inevitably bears some resemblance to it. More direct results or reflections of that initial work have been published, and are referred to in the Bibliography at the end of this volume. I would like to think that the fact that more than a decade has passed since I first began to work on the subject has helped me to avoid reproducing the more dreary aspects of the style expected from a dissertation.

I am painfully aware of the shortcomings of this study and would not like to embarrass my friends and teachers by mentioning their help as being absolutely decisive in its production. Yet it really is true that it owes to them more than courteous references often mean. My debt to Professor Edward Shils, himself an authority on the mass society question, is very great. It was with him that I first discussed the theme of this book at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, of which I had the good fortune to be a Fellow for four years. His rigorous and demanding guidance, both there and at King's College, Cambridge, never ceased to make up for my somewhat random and uneven academic inclinations. It was also at King's that the late Sir Frank Adcock read and most patiently discussed the material on which chapter 1 is based. My interest in early modern reactionary thought owes much to a course given by Professor René König at the University of Cologne; I found him helpful and sympathetic when I was at the lowest ebb of my student years. My treatment of Mannheim would not be the same