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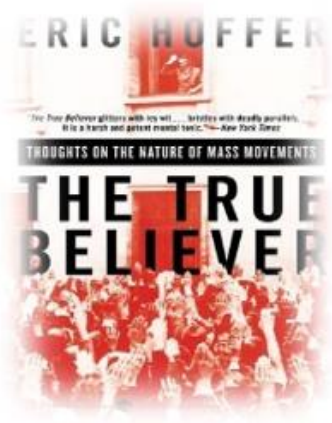
Eric Hoffer and 'The True Believer'



"All I can say is by way of discourse, and nothing by way of advice. I should not speak so boldly if it were my due to be believed."
– Michel Montaigne [1]

J.B.S. Haldane counts fanaticism among the only four really important inventions made between 3000B.C. and 1400A.D. [2]

What does a short work of philosophy written three-quarters of a century ago tell us about America in the first quarter of the 21st century?

As I noted in a recently reissued ***Book Note*** from 2020 about Machiavelli, [3] certain authors reappear when times are uncertain and the future seems threatening. Dostoyevsky, for the religiously and philosophically inclined, is one; William Butler Yeats, or at least his poem "The Second Coming," another; Eric Hoffer is yet another.

Who was Eric Hoffer?

Why is his now 73-year-old ***The True Believer,*** a meditation on Nazism, Communism, and other mass movements, commanding renewed interest?

Hoffer represents a type no longer, if it ever was, common in American culture. He was a public intellectual; he was not associated with any university or "think tank." He did have an unsatisfactory stint on the faculty at the University of California Berkeley in the 1960s after he became famous, but in the sweep of Hoffer's life that was an aberration.

Hoffer's account of his life was minimalist and contradictory, leading some to question it. [4] Setting those reservations aside, according to Hoffer he was born into a poor immigrant family in New York City in 1898 (the date is uncertain; some have placed it in 1902). Allegedly the son of German immigrants (they might have been Alsatian), Hoffer had a trying childhood. Reading in both English and German by the time he was five, when his mother fell down the stairs while holding him (which various sources have happening when he was either five or seven), he was left partially blind. His mother died when he was still a child. When his eyesight inexplicably returned at age 15, fearing he'd lose it again, Hoffer became a voracious reader – a habit he sustained for the rest of his life.

His father died when he was 20. Penniless, Hoffer did what many did in early 20th century America. Like Huck Finn, he lit out for the West and landed in California, where he spent the remainder of his life. Living for a time on Los Angeles' Skid Row, he worked as a manual laborer and then itinerant farmworker as he migrated north before finally settling in San Francisco. He became a longshoreman on the San Francisco docks. Many years later, when asked if he was an intellectual, "Hoffer proudly responded, 'No, I'm a longshoreman.'" [5]

Working part time on the docks, he combined his laboring life with his voracious reading. His books were the only possessions he kept. He became a writer, a

keen observer of his times, and an inveterate notetaker, which led to his aphoristic and epigrammatic style of writing. An aphorism is "a concise statement of a principle," such as "Let us value the quality of life, not the quantity." [6] One of the dangers of such a style, although clear and lucid, is that it can also sound didactic, as if the author were revealing truths beyond the reach of argument.

Hoffer avoided this trap. One of his heroes was Michel Montaigne, the great 16th century French essayist. Hoffer is sometimes called the "blue-collar Montaigne" because he discussed philosophical concepts in a clear and simple style. Like Montaigne, he did not preach or pontificate; he simply asked challenging questions, or posed knotty theories, and offered opinions about them to spark discussion (the "discourse" noted in the epigraph with which this ***Book Note*** begins). In short, like Montaigne, Hoffer was a "thinker" who challenges us to look closely at our experience and the world around us. Like Montaigne, he urges us "to pay attention."

Still, his dense, aphoristic style can make summarizing Hoffer's thoughts difficult. In Hoffer's ***The True Believer***, almost any of his sentences could serve as the thesis sentence of entire paragraphs, if not chapters and essays. As, for example, these observations:

> "Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil." p. 113
> "Faith in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves." p. 141
> "The less justified a man is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready he is to claim all excellence for his nation, his religion, his race, or his holy cause." p.16
> "A man is likely to mind his own business when it is worth minding. When it is not, he takes his mind off his own meaningless affairs by minding other people's business." p.17
> "The permanent misfits can find salvation only in a complete separation from the self; and they usually find it by losing themselves in the compact collectivity of a mass movement."" p. 59
> "We can be absolutely certain only about things we do not understand." p. 100.
> "It is startling to realize how much unbelief is necessary to make belief possible." p. 99.
> "The fanatic is perpetually incomplete and insecure. He cannot generate

self-assurance out of his individual resources — out of his rejected self — but finds it only by clinging passionately to whatever support he happens to embrace." p.105

"There is perhaps no more reliable indicator of a society's ripeness for a mass movement than the prevalence of unrelieved boredom." p. 64.

"To ripen a person for self-sacrifice he must be stripped of his individual identity and distinctness." p. 78. [7]

These notions illustrate why Hoffer is still being read 73 years after ***The True Believer's*** first publication, for as Robert Schmuhl says in ***Notre Dame Magazine***, "Hoffer's analysis could readily apply today to QAnon, Putinism, Al-Qaida, or any other movement that takes extreme positions and tries to make fringe ideologies central to mainstream thinking and action." [8] Schmuhl might have added, if he were writing today and not two years ago, the MAGA zealots making a mockery of the once great Republican Party and the U.S. Congress or the pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel protestors now roiling American college campuses.

Quite frankly, after almost 50 years, I re-read ***The True Believer*** as part of my ongoing attempt to understand the mindset of the extremes threatening to tear our country apart. As Hoffer says, "The decent, average people who do the nation's work in cities and on the land are worked upon by minorities at both ends – the best and the worst … (T)he game of history is usually played by the best and the worst over the heads of the majority in the middle." (p.29)

What is the nature of these movements percolating on society's edges?

Who joins them?

Hoffer's first observation might be the most startling. He does not say that mass movements – whether religious, nationalist, or political – are identical. He asserts, however, that these movements and their members share certain characteristics, such as fanaticism, intolerance, and a desire for change. As a result, these movements attract similar people. The ideology a person might embrace, therefore, is more a factor of time and place than an abstract value judgment.

What characteristics do people joining such movements share? Absolutely certain in their beliefs, they are or become fanatics who reject any doubts or criticisms. Dogmatic, they are intolerant of opposing views. They are all but impervious to counter viewpoints.

But most of all they long for change.

Why?

Because they loathe the present.

Why? Because they feel out of place, undervalued, and rejected. They feel (emotions are more powerful than thoughts) as if they have lost their culture. More to the point, since they believe in their own virtue, they don't feel responsibility for their culture's loss, but believe fervently that it has somehow been taken from them.

They feel dispossessed. Although often still residing in the place of their birth, they feel like strangers in a strange land.

Loathing the present, they yearn for an idealized past to which they can't return. Realizing they can't return to a gone world (or a world that never really existed – they are one and the same) they seek a brighter future embodying all that lost world's imagined verities. They reject Thomas Wolfe, who said "you can't go home again." They want to go home again – they want someone to restore their gone world. Like almost all religious believers everywhere, they seek a lost paradise.

Sound familiar?

"Make America Great *Again*!"

Who are these seekers?

They can be scoundrels playing a scam, but "the masses" in a mass movement are the genuinely disaffected. In our time, the scoundrels playing a scam are the plutocrats seeking business deregulation and tax breaks, but the genuinely disaffected come in two major buckets – the frustrated and those who cannot bear the burden of freedom.

Sometimes the groups overlap, other times not.

Hoffer uses the word "frustrated" to "denote people who, for one reason or another, feel their lives are spoiled or wasted." (p. 204). They believe their lives have been somehow debased by forces beyond their control. In American culture during the past 50 years those forces include, among many others, deindustrialization, globalization, immigration, minority and women's rights movements, and urbanization. The disaffected and frustrated believe that the cumulative result of this tsunami of change demolished their culture and irremediably spoiled the present. (p.18)

They are not wrong.

American culture is radically different than it was 40, 50, or 60 years ago. Whether one approves of those changes determines how one reacts to them. But one cannot deny the reality of the changes. Some people thrive in the new multi-cultural America; others do not.

And no one can go back.

Not able to go back to their lost and imagined, idealized paradise, those who do not thrive in the new America feel engulfed in a world they did not make and do not fit. They feel powerless to influence it. They are not conservatives, for they reject the true conservative's call for personal responsibility. How they can be responsible for a world they never made? As Hoffer says, "the radical and the reactionary loathe the present. They see it as an aberration and a deformity." (p.93) Yearning for their unrecapturable past, they seek a radical cultural and social change to restore their shattered world.

They seek hope in a leader who can promise its return. And, to paraphrase Hoffer, any leader who would unite them must, like Moses, first give them hope of a promised land. (p.89)

They gather in mass rallies drawing emotional sustenance from one another as they succumb within the safety of the mass ceding all power to the authoritarian leader preaching, "Only I can save you!"

Here Hoffer sounds very much like another thinker from mid-20th century America, Erich Fromm. In ***Escape from Freedom***, published 10 years before ***The True Believer***, Fromm examined how some people escape the burden of personal responsibility by seeking refuge in authoritarian movements and leaders. Having sacrificed their individuality, they find security in the group. Secure within the group, however, they often turn towards destructive behaviors, either against themselves ("deaths of despair" in post-modern America) or others by venting aggressive behaviors towards perceived threats or scapegoats (cf. the "Unite the Right Rally" in Charlottesville, Virginia, vigilante border patrols, and anti-Muslim bigotry).

Too dense for a mere ***Book Note***, Hoffer's analysis of the appeal of a movement's leader pandering hope to the dispossessed, the alienated, and the hopeless is sobering. He wrote in the late-1940s. Some of his examples analyze the appeal of religious leaders, in particular the power of a secular leader transforming their movement's practical causes – border control, job training, business deregulation, etc. – into a holy cause beyond reason's reach. Hoffer

calls this “religiofication.” (p. 6) For a comic version, think of former President Donald Trump in Lafayette Square holding a Bible upside down. Not so comical, however, are the somber parallels Hoffer draws that he could not have known between our times and the examples he does use – the rise of Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler.

In particular, I found his analysis of a movement’s rise insightful. Hoffers says, “mass movements do not usually arise until the prevailing order has been discredited.” (p. 161). He says mass movement leadership follows a curve with three arcs or subsections. First come the “men of words” followed next by the fanatics, and then the “practical men of action." (Quick aside: Hoffer wrote long before our time. He used “man” and “men” as generic descriptors of all actors on the public stage. In our time, we’d say *people* or some other phrase to make the remarks gender neutral. For simplicity’s sake, I am going to use Hoffer’s original language and not litter the remainder of this Note with *“sics”* indicating I know he is out of style.)

His analysis works; there is more than a little truth to it. It can describe the three phases of transforming any organization, culture, or nation. Most often, different people will occupy these roles, but it is possible for one person to occupy all three. But that is rare.

The “men of words” are the prophets who come before the transformation; they challenge – perhaps denounce, more accurately – the current situation. They frequently do that in prophetic language, language that makes the need for mere reform seem weak as they call for transformational conversion, an all-or-nothing need to upend society in order to save it.

Speaking only about American politics, in our times think William F. Buckley in his “God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of ‘Academic Freedom,’” which while ostensibly about academia was really about the need to overthrow Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. A little later think of John Stormer’s “None Dare Call It Treason,” or Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign, or Pat Buchanan at the 1992 Republican Convention declaring a culture war for the soul of America. The men of words formulate the movement’s philosophy, excoriate the present, and describe the coming new order. Less dramatically phrased, in my words not Hoffer’s, they are the table setters. Or as Hoffer says, “the militant man of words prepares the ground for the rise of the mass movement.” (p. 173)

Next come the fanatics. They are the true believers, for, as Hoffer says, “when the moment is ripe, only the fanatic can hatch the genuine mass movement” (p. 177). The fanatic emerges from the most ardent critics of the present.

Where do they come from? Hoffers says they come from the least creative of the men of words.

The creative find fulfillment in their work; the less creative find only frustration. In short, they are failed artists. Too simple a generalization, but what Hoffer means is that the fanatics who bring the movement to life are those who thrive in chaos and disorder. Not able to create orderly processes, they flourish in chaos, which is their element. The job of the fanatic is to bring the men of words' prophecies to life and to bring down the prevailing order so that the new might arise from its ashes.

Question: If Buchanan and those others I named were the prophets, is it possible former President Trump is the fanatic bringing their prophecies to a conclusion with the destruction of the existing order? Calls for dictatorship, calls for overthrowing the U.S. Constitution, and other recent pronouncements have nothing conservative about them. They are the war cries of the fanatic seeking the final overthrow of the sociopolitical order condemned by the men of words.

Which leads to the question, who will be the practical men of action? For any movement to survive, the chaotic style of the fanatic that frequently finds those around him at odds with one another as they vie for place amid the chaos must be replaced by individuals who can actually run things. As Hoffer says, "only the entrance of a practical man of action can save the achievements of the movement." (p. 181)

I won't venture predictions about who that might be, but the analysis makes more than a bit of sense. I think of organizations to which I have belonged that underwent transformational change: there was a prophet who called for change; there was a fanatic who made it happen (frequently the same person); and there were practical individuals who made the organization "work." When the latter left, almost always the organization floundered and a few even failed. Why? Because the new wave of managers were not leaders. They lacked the vision and the energy (passion?) to sustain the organization.

Or in American history, the three-part analysis describes almost perfectly the founding of the United States. First there were the men of words, which in American history were the pamphleteers and sermon makers who descried "taxation without representation." As John Adams said, "the American Revolution began long before Lexington and Concord." Then there were the fanatics who fanned the flames to ensure the movement would not die out – Samuel Adams, the Sons of Liberty, and Patrick Henry come immediately to mind. But it would have all been for naught if practical men of action, like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin had not been on the scene to ensure that things were actually steered to success.

Hoffer's ***The True Believer*** doesn't solve anything. But, as he intended, to the attentive reader it provokes a multitude of questions with the prescience of its observations. Although written over 75 years ago, it casts a revealing light upon our times.

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"The True Believer" at **HarperCollins Publishers** available at The True Believer – HarperCollins accessed May 1, 2024.

End Notes

1. Michel Montaigne quoted in Eric Hoffer, **The True Believer** (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951; Digital Version June 2010 ISBN: 978-0-062-02935-5), Loc. 93,
2. Hoffer, Eric. **The True Believer** (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951; Digital Version June 2010 ISBN: 978-0-062-02935-5), p. 208. Hoffer is quoting Haldane from J.B.S. Haldane, **The Inequality of Man** (London: Chattus & Windus, 1932), p. 56 where Haldane lists the other three as 1) the general use of iron, 2) paved roads, and 3) voting.
3. See Roth, Andrew, *"What Were Machiavelli's True Motives"* available at Roth Book Notes--Machiavelli.pdf (jeserie.org) accessed May 2, 2024.
4. Notes on Hoffer's life come from a mashup of sources, including *"Eric Hoffer: American Writer"* in **The Encyclopedia Britannica** available at Eric Hoffer | Biography, Writings, & Facts | Britannica; *"Eric Hoffer"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at Eric Hoffer - Wikipedia; Tim Madigan, *"The True Believer Revisited"* in **Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas**, Issue 34, available at The True Believer Revisited | Issue 34 | Philosophy Now; and my personal **ChatGPT4 account**, and as we know there is no telling where Chat gets its information but re Hoffer it is consistent with other sources; all accessed May 2, 2024.
5. Quoted in Tim Madigan, *"The True Believer Revisited"* in Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas, Issue 34, available at The True Believer Revisited | Issue 34 | Philosophy Now accessed May 2, 2024.

6. "Aphorism" in **Merriam-Webster Dictionary** available at Aphorism Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster accessed May 5, 2024.
7. All quotes from Hoffer in this ***Book Note*** are from Hoffer, Eric. **The True Believer** (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951; Digital Version June 2010 ISBN: 978-0-062-02935-5).
8. Schmuhl, Robert, "What I'm Reading…", **Notre Dame Magazine** (May 5, 2022) available at What I'm Reading: The True Believer, Eric Hoffer | Stories | Notre Dame Magazine | University of Notre Dame (nd.edu) accessed May 2, 2024.

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