Ortega y Gasset’s “Revolt” and the Problem of Mass Rule

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There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at the present moment. This fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power. As the masses, by definition, neither should nor can direct their own personal existence, and still less rule society in general, this fact means that actually Europe is suffering from the greatest crisis that can afflict peoples, nations, and civilization.

— José Ortega y Gasset

The Revolt of the Masses

The primary virtue of democracy is that it bestows equality upon equals. Its main vice is that it also bestows equality upon unequals. In 1930, José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) published The Revolt of the Masses, in which he examined the political and social crisis of Europe, and of Western civilization generally. He was not the only thinker to recognize this crisis, but his assessment is particularly important since it locates the root cause in the widespread distribution of social power to the masses. His evaluation, highly illuminating when it was written, is perhaps even more relevant in our time. The “revolt of the masses” continues and is gaining momentum as we proceed into the twenty-first century, and it consists in the social distribution of equality to everyone, irrespective of qualifications and individual merit-based characteristics.

1

The revolt of the masses is a product of what Ortega called “hyperdemocracy,” in which power is more or less evenly distributed throughout society and results in cultural degradation and deterioration. At the core of his perspective is an unpopular but nevertheless important understanding of one of the most important questions of politics and society, as well as the answer to it: Who should rule? Ortega understood that “human society is always, whether it will or no, aristocratic by its very essence, to the extreme that it is a society in the measure that it is aristocratic, and ceases to be such when it ceases to be aristocratic.” Human excellence, the standard for society, is only to be found in the few and not the many, humanly speaking. Now if ruling must be the reserve of the few, as opposed to the many, then our current age of hyperdemocracy and radical egalitarianism, in which the masses rule (particularly in terms of public opinion), is one in which civilization itself is being lost since “the
mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select.”

Who is this mass human type and why are they unfit to rule? Intriguingly, and discerningly, Ortega points out that the mass man is the average, ordinary man who accepts himself as he is and who is unwilling to place demands upon himself, but who also considers himself to be the equal of everyone else. This type of person is placed in contradistinction to the “select man” who places great demands upon himself in the pursuit of excellence, broadly conceived. In particular, Ortega y Gasset notes that the revolt of the masses has had a most profound effect on the intellectual fiber of society:

Thus, in the intellectual life, which of its essence requires and presupposes qualification, one can note the progressive triumph of the pseudo-intellectual, unqualified, unqualifiable, and, by their very mental texture, disqualified.

From this observation it can be ascertained that as is the life of the mind, so is the life of society in general. The revolt of the masses coexists with the predominance, even the rule of unreason. Indeed, Ortega refers to the mentality of the masses in terms of “the right not to be reasonable,” or the “reason of unreason.” The category “mass” is not particularly, or even necessarily a socio-economic class-based one, but is intellectual at the core. It is important to realize in this regard the extent to which our colleges and universities have not only become thoroughly democratized, but also have become centers for vulgar and unqualified sophistry. The faculty and the curriculum that they promote are more often than not intended to serve the interests of the masses, all in the name of equity and toleration (e.g., political correctness, multiculturalism, ethnic/gender/sexual studies). Intellectual excellence is a rare phenomenon indeed in today’s academy and yet it is the colleges and universities that are educating future generations of citizens. Note how little Americans, particularly academics, read. Indeed, it is the academy that must provide the standards and the requirements for the cultivation of reason and civility in the citizenry, but it is failing to do so.

It is especially evident from a careful analysis of U.S. Supreme Court decisions that the training the justices have received (with some notable exceptions), particularly in law schools, has not prepared them well to interpret properly the Constitution. The philosophical, normative, and evaluative nature of determining what the law actually means requires intellectual abilities that go far beyond distinguishing between “facts and values” or simply maintaining logical coherence. Probing discernment in the pursuit of wisdom within the context of the philosophy of law is required in the judiciary. And yet it is precisely this intellectual and moral excellence which mass education does not and cannot provide. The result has been judicial tyranny—the Court has taken upon itself the duties of not only interpreting the law, but of making and executing it as well—since only genuine deliberative reason can provide appropriate limits to judicial action.

II

The “ordinary man, hitherto guided by others, has resolved to govern the world himself,” in our time. But this same human type, the average, is already self-satisfied:

This contentment with himself leads him to shut himself off from any external court of appeal; not to listen, not to submit his opinions to judgement, not to consider others’ existence. His intimate feeling of power urges him always to exercise predominance. He will act then as if he and his like were the only beings existing in the world.... This type which at present is to be found everywhere,
and everywhere imposes his own spiritual barbarism, is, in fact, the spoiled child of human history.9

The revolt and subsequent rule of the masses is nothing less than the rule of the human type that is least qualified to revolt or to rule. The self-satisfied, mass human type is not simply least qualified to govern societal affairs, but is incapable of doing so.

What has brought about this change in circumstances in which the many, the average, and the unqualified decide and rule? Ortega finds the cause in the advent of liberalism in the nineteenth century.10 He finds the liberalism and egalitarianism of our age to be in need of preservation on the one hand, but also in need of being superseded as “liberalism had its reason, which will have to be admitted per saecula saeculorum. But it had not the whole of reason, and it is that part which was not reason that must be taken from it.”11

It has been argued that one of the most important advances in the science of politics and government, the American constitutional founding with its establishment of the rule of law, was nevertheless incomplete and is, therefore, in need of augmentation.12 Specifically, the problem of liberalism (equality and the rule of law) largely derives from the creation of institutions that provide more liberty to individuals than has ever been possible, but that are seemingly incapable of assuring those same liberated individuals to live responsibly in the freedom provided. Ortega compares the average mass man of our time to the corrupt (as opposed to meritorious) aristocrat who inherits a life which he has not created and which he is unqualified to live, since “all life is the struggle, the effort to be itself,” and the mass man is “self-satisfied” and complacent.13 In this way, the masses have inherited institutions and conditions that not only require great intellectual and physical effort and risk to create, but also require that same exertion in order to be maintained. Indeed, in the estimation of Eric Fromm, modern man attempts to “escape from the burden of his new freedom,” and the most poignant expression of the mass escape from freedom is the refusal to reason, to live thoughtfully.14

III

There is a connection between reason and culture, insofar as “culture originally meant the culture of the mind.”15 Indeed, Ortega asserted that to be a cultured human being, one would need to cultivate the mind so as to educate moral character and intellect, since “we cannot live on the human level without ideas.”16 This integral connection between reason and culture is precisely what is disconnected in the mass man who has acceded to social power through the egalitarianism and the hyperdemocracy of our age. Strikingly, Ortega asserts that:

This average person is the new barbarian, a laggard behind the contemporary civilization archaic and primitive in contrast with his problems, which are grimly, relentlessly modern. This new barbarian is above all the professional man, more learned than ever before, but at the same time more uncultured—the engineer, the physician, the lawyer, the scientist.17

It might be added, shocking and disconcerting as it may be, that professional academics also belong on Ortega’s list.

If there is an integral relationship between reason and culture, there must also be a correlation between reason, culture, and rule. And the correlation between these is broken by liberal democracy and technicism so that the mass liberal democrat is also a technocrat who has skill-based, methodological knowledge, but little awareness of or concern for the larger scheme of things.18 It is for this reason that Ortega is able to maintain that the mass barbarian of our time includes most notably those of the profes-
ional ranks. Note, for instance, the extent to which American political science has focused intransigently upon the utilization of methodological rationality over against philosophical inquiry, even following rigorous, thorough, and devastating critiques of the “scientific” study of the political. And note also the great failure of that same discipline to recognize, much less to provide, solutions for the most pressing problems of our time.

But why is the human landscape so quantitatively populated with qualitatively deficient human beings who now exert so much control over daily life, particularly in the form of public opinion, science, and education? How is it that “public authority is in the hands of a representative of the masses?” These questions go to the heart of Ortega’s thesis.

Ortega suggests in no uncertain terms that mass, egalitarian hyperdemocracy is destroying civilization and culture. But he goes further in noting that society itself is “aristocratic” in its very nature. In other words, it can never be the many, the mass, the average, the commonplace, and the complacent, who rule. In this respect, modern liberalism is misguided because it presupposes that governance (of both self and others) is possible by the many, when in point of fact, it is only possible by the few at every level of society. This derives from the apparent fact that government or rule requires great effort and exertion, it requires the exercise of reason, and it requires excellence. And this is the preserve of the few. Indeed, it could be asserted that it has always been the few who have placed great demands upon themselves in any of life’s domains. In other words, it is always easier to put forth less effort rather than more, and most people, most of the time, choose the path of least effort. But precisely because they do this, they are disqualified from ruling, for they cannot even rule themselves. Liberalism contains an inherent problem in that it is intended to secure liberty, but this intention is disassociated itself from a sober, realistic view of what the limitations of liberty are once human nature is considered.

IV

Freedom cannot exist without responsibility. The revolt of the masses is the direct result of a profound ignorance and neglect of this central principle, which brought Ortega to observe that the modern masses believe that they have rights but no duties. Such a state of mind will lead them to ignore all obligations, and in feeling themselves without the slightest notion as to why they are possessed of unlimited rights. This belief in ignoring all obligations while maintaining unlimited rights is the direct result of being spoiled. The “spoiled child” is a kind of human monster that is created by an upbringing which is essentially materialistic, and affluent, but which is also undemanding and limitless.

Thus, it is not that political liberalism is essentially flawed, but instead that it cannot function properly without an associated social program of responsible upbringing, without a certain kind of civic education and expectation, without the standards and the requirements of human excellence. Citizens are made and not simply born, and in this, it would appear, lies part of the answer.

Civic education alone cannot grasp the root of the problem of mass rule since “a characteristic of our times is the predominance, even in groups traditionally selective, of the mass and the vulgar.” In other words, Ortega points toward a socio-political fact which is not simply politically incorrect, but quasi-unthinkable in a mass democratic age in which rule is placed equally in everybody. Society and civilization must operate within a principle of economy that takes its bearings from an understanding of the aristocratic (merit-based) aspects of human nature:
There exist, then, in society, operations, activities, and functions of the most diverse order, which are of their very nature special, and which consequently cannot be properly carried out without special gifts. For example: certain pleasures of an artistic and refined character, or again the functions of government and of political judgement in public affairs. Previously these special activities were exercised by qualified minorities....The mass asserted no right to intervene in them; they realised that if they wished to intervene they would necessarily have to acquire those special qualities and cease being mere mass. They recognised their place in a healthy dynamic social system.26

Ortega is not suggesting that the rule of law and the political institutions and structures that secure it are at fault since he sees the difficulty as being located in the social sphere. His perspective is consistent with the belief of the American political commentator Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) that there is a “functional derangement of the relationship between the mass of people and the government,” in which "the people have acquired a power that they are incapable of exercising," since "a mass cannot govern."27 Lippmann went as far as to state that “where mass opinion dominates the government, there is a morbid derangement of the true functions of power,” and that “this breakdown in the constitutional order is the cause of the precipitate and catastrophic decline of Western society.”28

The problem of mass rule stems from the misunderstanding and the misapplication of the principle of equality in democratic times. It is assumed that since everyone is equal politically (before the law), everyone must be equal socially and economically. This distortion of the original purpose of equality (the prevention of tyranny and discrimination, and the fostering of opportunity) leads to vast and pervasive structural social problems in terms of governance and order.

Consider, for example, the effects of the introduction of egalitarianism into marriages, families, and households. The mistaken view that equality is the basic principle of marriage has resulted in men and women assuming co-leadership positions where decision-making authority is divided equally, resulting in constant tension in terms of rule and in substantial increases in separation and divorce. But this is not all. It is now commonly accepted in many social quarters that marriage is not simply a bond between man and woman, but a union between man and man, and woman and woman. Even the natural, economic “division of labor” has been undermined by the introduction of radical egalitarianism into households, thus creating serious problems related to the raising of children and producing a situation in which both parents (if they remain married) work outside of the home. Families and households are, it goes without saying, in disarray.

The inappropriate introduction of the principle of equality into intellectual realms is distinctly evident in our time. To be noted, above all, is the extent to which the purpose of “freedom of speech” is considered to be the right of one to express one’s self equally. But in point of fact, the purpose of this freedom is not merely to allow the free expression of ideas in the form of speech, but to foster the subsequent evaluation of different points of view in order to determine which is superior. In other words, it is often erroneously believed (in the press, public forums, university classroom debates, etc.) that, because all points of view should be freely expressed, each is of equal value and merit. The only way in which all points of view could be of equal value and merit, of course, is if each is essentially relative. And indeed, there is a direct connection between the relativism of our time and radical egalitarianism. Both relativism and egalitarianism attempt to mask or avoid the fact that
some ideas are better than others, that the better ones are fewer, and that they are thought by the few who have the ability (by nature and effort) to think them.

The problem at hand is not, therefore, one of the rule of law and equality before it, but is found in the democratization and radical egalitarianism of the social sphere. While modern liberalism secures the liberty and rights of individual citizens equally via the rule of law, it does not address how society is to be ordered and structured, particularly in terms of “who should rule.” Indeed, the introduction of the principle of equality into the social sphere, which hyperdemocracy facilitates, is the root of the problem.29

Governance must be differentiated from law. Whereas law secures the liberty of all individuals equally, which of those individuals should rule, and in what social capacity and instance, is certainly not a matter to be understood in terms of equality. Indeed, the insight of Aristotle, for example, would suggest that a proper understanding of nature (particularly human nature), via the use of reason, would provide the best outline for the structure of society, a structure which is hardly egalitarian.30

The “revolt of the masses” is a revolt of unreason against reason in human affairs. It is grounded in what Alexis de Tocqueville understood to be a fundamental problem of democracy in which equality is valued more than liberty:

...democratic countries have a natural taste for freedom; left to themselves, they seek it, cherish it, and view any privation of it with regret. But for equality their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible; they call for equality in freedom; and if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery. They will endure poverty, servitude, barbarism, but they will not endure aristocracy.31

It is to Ortega’s great credit that he had the insight and the fortitude to reveal this problematic matter to us. It is, however, an entirely open question whether we will, ultimately, value liberty over equality, since this would require accepting that some are more fit to rule than others, and that this is so because it is the few who pursue excellence and nobility and the many who must follow their example. Indeed, the “revolt of the masses” forces us to confront, once again, the classic problem of rule addressed in Plato’s Republic, in which the answer to the question “Who should rule?” is provided in the understanding that just rule is the rule of wisdom, even though the wise do not often wish to rule and the many do not wish them to rule either.32

Liberal, constitutional democracy can only be preserved if it is limited, and this requires the limitation of mass rule and its associated unreason (since every just regime can potentially lapse into its own unjust form). We must, therefore, expect and anticipate the revolt of the few as a countervailing force against mass revolt. And who are those few? They are those who are best able to reason since there is an integral relationship between reason and rule. The revolt of the few must consist in the constitution of public philosophy, in the rule of philosophy or wisdom in public affairs.33 We must await the accession of political philosophers to social power, not as a result of popular mass demands or a political philosopher’s lust for power, but as a result of the wise refusing, finally, to be ruled by the unwise. The wise must be obligated to rule since the freedom that is so essential to reason and law requires it. And the masses must be infused with the appropriate public virtue and humility to listen to wisdom.

Plato was correct, as difficult as this is to admit in democratic-egalitarian times, in asserting that justice requires that philosophers (as opposed to sophisti-
cated public intellectuals) be kings in terms of guiding public opinion, science, and education by philosophizing openly, in the Socratic sense, in the socio-political domain. The “revolt of the masses” can only be corrected by that which is not mass, complacent, and commonplace, particularly as insofar as the intellect is concerned.

Liberal, constitutional democracy requires political philosophy, even though it shuns and often disdains it. Political philosophy creates and illuminates the natural distinction between that which is average and that which is excellent, between mere opinion (doxa) and true knowledge (episteme), between the real and the ideal, between who we are and who we ought to be. Without the necessary, even obligatory coalescence of law and reason, liberty itself is seriously endangered since the masses care more for equality than for freedom and the excellence it requires. Liberal, constitutional democracy is in need of political philosophy precisely because while “all men are created equal” in terms of how the law should apply to them, human individuals are certainly not equal in every respect, and society should and must reflect this, particularly in terms of “who should rule.”

Genuine freedom under law in effect produces inequality and it is this inequality that completes the dialectic of liberalism which Ortega found missing. Liberal, constitutional democracy must come to terms with the natural and urgent necessity of the recognition and preservation of human inequality in terms of the distinction between human ignorance and human excellence.

The solution to the problem of our age hinges upon whether the masses will listen to reason and whether the wise will speak truth to the many who are presently imbued with the mistaken belief that they are already in possession of it, or that it simply does not exist because they have not taken the time or made the effort to find it. Practically and tangibly connecting wisdom and rule in every regime is urgently needed. In this way, democracy must be made to acknowledge, support, and protect political philosophy if government of, by, and for the people is to be made minimally tolerable in the twenty-first century.

THE LONG DRINK

Water is never the chosen drink—
until you reach that dry end-point in thirst

where only the most basic element
will quench it. Cold water is the body’s drink:

everything else is the vanity of taste buds: those wines
and coffees and soft sour-whiskies—nothing more

than water dressed up in alien clothes,
drinks of comfort for the psyche that lives

on artifice and cleverness, and demands difference.
The body is not dressed up. It’s naked, self-confessing.

no matter how we try to cover it. It wants...water,
being mostly water itself, and when that want is stirred,

it rises up, upends the psyche, and pours into its mouth,
in gulps longer and deeper than any other animal’s,

matter’s one elixir, stirred only with minerals, earth-tastes.
And you dare not interfere. You dare only watch

from the ground, as the body takes in its awesome drink—
then, satisfied, creeps back

into the hurrying streams beneath the skin
where psyche never goes.

—Robert Champ