



## “Historical Fascism versus its Current Revivals”

a 5 star review by Dick Burkhardt of

# The True Believer:

**Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements**

By Eric Hoffer (1951)

This book is a real classic, derived mostly from careful observation of the rise of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism in Europe, but all-too applicable 70 years later. Not just to the US President in 2020, a cruel fascist wannabe, but also to current socio-political movements on both the Left (radical) and the Right (reactionary). In fact Hoffer sees the far Left and the far Right as mirror images, with individuals easily converted from one to the other. This is because of Hoffer’s focus is on the psychology of these individuals, especially the frustration and failure in their own lives, searching for meaning in mass movements defined by leaders and ideologies claiming to be infallible, promising grandiose visions of prosperity and dominance. These true believers have much in common with the ardent followers of many traditional religions and of cults, though Hoffer does not explore this.

Hoffer gives a long list of the attributes of successful leaders of mass movements (p 114). The US President personifies many of these but comes up short on the last, and most crucial, one: “the capacity for winning and holding the utmost loyalty of a group of able lieutenants”. He can win them, but not hold them, because he, himself, spurns them at even a slight nod to integrity over loyalty. But the other traits certainly ring true: audacity, defiance, belief in an infallible self, passionate hatred, cunning estimates of human nature, delight in spectacles, brazen disregard of consistency and fairness.

In summary, Hoffer proclaims; “The quality of ideas seems to play a minor role in mass movement leadership. What counts is the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard for the opinions of others, the single-handed defiance of the world” (p 116). Moreover, “there can be no mass movement without some deliberate misrepresentation of the facts”. And “the true believer, no matter how rowdy and violent his acts, is basically an obedient and submissive person” (p 117). “To the frustrated, freedom from responsibility is far more attractive than freedom from restraint” (p 118), so that surrender to a leader becomes a “fulfillment”, leading to a “new identity and a new life” (p 126).

By contrast, “in a free society the leader follows the people even as he leads them” or “blunders into defeat” after he becomes “contemptuous of the people” (p 119). In a successful society, “action serves as a substitute for a mass movement” (p 123), generating “easy camaraderie”. Whereas “in a mass movement, the air is heavy-laden with suspicion” (p 124), leading to “strict orthodoxy”, “associating all opposition within the ranks with the enemy threatening the

movement from without”. “The true believer must be constantly on the lookout for saboteurs, spies, and traitors” (p 125). “By elevating dogma above reason, the individual’s intelligence is prevented from becoming self-reliant” (p 128).

Yet, suspicion and dogma can be found in movements not dominated by charismatic cult leaders or political demagogues, especially today when social media allow a variety of unscrupulous characters to promote smear campaigns that keep movement people in line while demonizing outsiders. This is exactly what is happening today, especially on the Left, under the rubric “cancel culture”. Much of this has come out of the universities, particularly “postmodern” philosophy (subjective and anecdotal ways of knowing versus reason and science, identity-based power plays and antagonism versus liberal democracy and human rights, etc). This is manifested in movement ideologies such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), which feeds off particular forms of “frustration”, such as white guilt.

A philosophical movement in reaction to the Enlightenment started much earlier in Europe, beginning with Rousseau and Kant and running to Nietzsche and Heidegger, eventually undergirding the fascist ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before moving on to postmodernism, then to “critical theories” like CRT. See “Explaining Postmodernism” by Stephen Hicks. Ominously, Hoffer notes that “where a mass movement can either persuade or coerce, it usually chooses the latter” (p 109).

“Cancel culture” serves as the enforcement mechanism for today’s mass movements of identity: shame and blame tactics of intimidation. For CRT the first fundamental doctrine to be imposed is that all individual “whites” are presumed to be “racist” or “supremacist” (to some degree at least, which is lowered for “white allies” of “people of color”). The second dogma is that European culture is universally characterized by “white supremacy”, with all “oppression” presumed to be racially motivated by this doctrine of domination, as embodied in institutional practices and policies. It is also noteworthy that CRT is like fascism in proclaiming a doctrine of race, except that CRT inverts the doctrine, elevating “people of color” instead of “Aryans”.

Hoffer notes that all this rhetoric does matter. He describes “men of words” as setting the stage for mass movements, legitimizing discontent, giving it a target, and identifying potential allies. Moreover, words of discontent often reverberate through the ages, waiting to be revived, even as the causes are radically transformed. The importance of words is true even though a mass movement in itself only requires “the temperament and talents of a fanatic” to get it going, followed by “the work of practical men of action” (p 132) for it to succeed. Classically movements often fail (Stalin, Hitler) when a single leader attempts both functions: the “fanatic” tends to overrule the “man of action”, yielding chaos instead of pragmatism. Again, the US President is a perfect example.

Finally, Hoffer notes that “all true believers of our time ... declaim volubly on the decadence of the Western democracies”. Again, postmodernism and its offshoots like Critical Race Theory are today’s exemplars.