The Political Science Reviewer • Volume 48, Number 2 • 2024

Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* and the Future of Liberty

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There are no longer protagonists; there is only the chorus.

Ortega y Gasset
The Revolt of the Masses

José Ortega y Gasset's seminal 1930 book *The Revolt of the Masses* has a misleading title. The word *revolt* in the title gives the unsuspecting reader the impression that the book is a work of political science. It is not. Readers who approach this now-classic work in that vein are quickly disappointed, some even confused. The Spanish word for revolt is *rebelión*. *Rebelión* is more akin in English to rebellion than it is to revolt. To rebel, as Ortega explicates in *The Revolt of the Masses*, is not so much a revolt as it is a turning away from something. But a rebellion against what?

Because *The Revolt of the Masses* is a book of philosophy, and not political science, Ortega finds himself at a disadvantage in attempting to explain the nature of mass man vis-à-vis noble man; his is not the sociological notion of the masses that some readers come to expect, judging from the title. This makes *The Revolt of the Masses* a book that is often misunderstood. One of the achievements of *The Revolt of the Masses* is Ortega's exploration of the effects that metaphysical/existential turning away from authenticity and free will has on modern life and of the threat that existential negation and ennui have on the future of liberty. For this and several other reasons, Ortega's actual words should be given ample space to make the case for him through a careful reading and generous citations.

According to Ortega, mass man is a type of individual without concern for history, traditions, and high standards, what Russell Kirk refers to as the permanent things. Existentially speaking, mass man is indistinguishable from others sharing the same worldview. Mass man is a homogeneous carapace of genuine interiority.[1] Furthermore, because mass man must not be equated with any social, political, or economic class, Ortega, to the surprise of many of his readers, reserves some of his most poignant observations about mass man in relation to the chattering class and intellectuals. Intellectual mass man, Ortega contends, is the worst kind of mass man because this type of person theorizes the corruption of values, consequently spreading nihilism.

Given these views, I have divided this essay into two parts. The first part describes the fundamental metaphysical and existential underpinning of mass man and noble man that Ortega explores in *The Revolt of the Masses*. It is important to recognize the differences between mass and noble man, as these concepts have their metaphysical and existential genesis in Ortega's earliest works of philosophy: his 1910 essay, "Adán en el Paraíso" [Adam in Paradise], a work on authenticity and inauthenticity (*ensimismamiento* and *alteración*), and his seminal book of philosophy, *Meditations on Quixote*. Failure to recognize Ortega's foundational thought on philosophical anthropology and phenomenology—that is, man as a metaphysical/existential being that must contend with the nature and contingencies of human reality, the world and other people, as an entity capable of self-reflection—leads to the misleading notion that *The Revolt of the Masses* is a book of sociopolitical thought.

Meditations on Quixote is a work of philosophy that explores man's ability or lack thereof to recognize the nature of appearance (*phainómenon*, "that which appears to view") and objective reality. Ortega delves deeply into these themes in his all-important reflection on human existence—man as a proto-first man finding himself in a forest (a symbol of individual and differentiated human life as "shipwrecked")—in the opening chapter of *Mediations on Quixote*. Here, Ortega focuses on the differences between man's perception

of the "forest" and "the trees." This is an essential existential/phenomenological description of free will that has important repercussions for the future of liberty, which he presents in *The Revolt of the Masses*. It is also important to note that *Meditations on Quixote* was published 1914, three years after Ortega began to study Max Scheler's philosophical anthropology and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.

The second part of this essay looks at mass man in lieu of the heightened power and available avenues of expression mass man enjoys in modernity, especially postmodernity's aim to annihilate objective truth, values, and narratives, a condition that Ortega aptly predicts in *The Revolt of the Masses*. The destruction of standards and the essential ontological and axiological nature of hierarchies, Ortega argues, is a central preoccupation of nihilists and intellectual mass man that weakens man's capacity for self-reflection, embrace of duty, and practice of personal responsibility in both private life and society, as well as the recognition of limitation in the human person. These character traits make intellectual mass man a considerable threat to liberty in the twenty-first century, given that intellectual mass man possesses the necessary rhetorical skills to promote and advance the nihilistic traits of mass man.

Part I: Why Mass Man, and Not the Masses?

From the first page of *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega tells the reader that the masses have ascended to power in Europe.[2] His contention is that the rise of the masses to power, which was formerly reserved for qualified persons, is precipitated by the problem of agglomeration. This is a sociological fact of living conditions in modern times. While agglomeration was a fact of European life at the time that Ortega published *The Revolt of the Masses* (i.e., cities were becoming larger and living conditions improving), it is not the main focus of the book. Instead, *The Revolt of the Masses* explores the existential decay that has made man in the twentieth century become burdened by free will and examines the consequences that this has, not only for mass man as an existential category, but also for liberty.[3]

The problem that Ortega faced in presenting *The Revolt of the Masses* to a general readership is twofold. For one, the readers that he is writing for mainly understood the question of the masses as a sociological one. They conceived the idea of the masses in terms of society and agglomeration. That is, the idea of the masses is taken to mean a great number of people coming together. This commonplace notion ignores or bypasses Ortega's pre-societal and pre-political, thus metaphysical/existential, explanations of the difference between mass man and noble man on existential grounds.

A second problem that Ortega's thought faces is to convince readers that agglomeration goes against the import of the metaphysical and existential inquietude that is, as he tells us, the sole concern of noble man. This is the reason, Ortega contends, that an era dominated by mass man disposes with the need for self-reflection, and thus the cultivation of authenticity in matters of morality and the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural aspects of human life. The destruction of metaphysical/existential human longing leads to despotism and, as a consequence, the loss of liberty. According to Ortega, mere living together, as is the case of the sociological conception of agglomeration, only accelerates man's flight from free will (*alteración*). *Alteración* means to live outside oneself, without the existential compunction for self-reflection. This was a concern that was to plague Ortega's thought and work, given that many of his writings began as public lectures or in newspapers. Having founded several newspapers, Ortega hoped to communicate philosophical ideas to a general readership, for he eschewed professional journals. He lamented that he never encountered any philosophy in professional journals. While he attempted to keep his philosophical imagination from becoming corrupted by neologisms and arm-chair, academic hair-splitting, he found it necessary to communicate his ideas—as a public intellectual—in what he believed to be commonsense language that expressed depth of thought, but without intellectual theorizing and affectation. The latter was a hard-earned lesson that Ortega brought back to Spain after studying in Marburg with the neo-Kantians Paul Natorp and Hermann Cohen.

It is important to observe Ortega's vast contribution in raising the level of public discourse in newspapers in the Spanish-speaking world. Throughout Spain and Latin America, from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego, Spanish-language newspapers began to see philosophical discourse as a natural component of their editorial, essayistic pages. However, this still left Ortega with the inherent frustration of having to be mindful of how to best approach his readership when addressing philosophical concerns.

While turning his attention from the problem of agglomeration to the existential nature of mass man, Ortega makes a profound disclaimer early in the book that sets the tone of *The Revolt of the Masses*. He informs readers that to understand what he means by revolt (*rebelión*),

> It is important from the start to avoid giving to the words "rebellion," "masses," and "social power" a meaning exclusively or primarily political. Public life is not solely political, but equally, and even primarily, intellectual, moral, economic, religious; it comprises all our collective habits, including our fashions both of dress and of amusement.[4]

Ortega equates the masses with the "multitude," crowds, and plentitude, a quantity that takes on a negative qualitative essence (*muchedumbre*). This gives readers of *The Revolt of the Masses* a clue as to some of the differences between mass man and noble man. Part of the answer to Ortega's posing the differences between mass man and noble man, two fundamental and opposing poles of human existence, is that these poles are not static existential characteristics that people assume once and for all. Instead, Ortega argues that the same person can vacillate between these two existential conditions during some periods of life, depending on the person's capacity for existential reflection. This is the case because life's contingencies (*quehacer*), what Ortega calls "having-to-do," force us to make decisions. In effect, Ortega ties mass and noble man to existential authenticity (*ensimismamiento*) and inauthenticity (*alteración*).

Ortega's initial foray into describing the qualitative problem of agglomeration in the early part of the twentieth century begins by asking, "Agglomeration, fullness, was not frequent before. Why then is it now?"[5] His answer is that the individuals (mass man) who make up the multitude have always existed, but not as a multitude. Here he hints at the makeup of mass man as people who are self-conscious of belonging to a group qua multitude. Mass man seeks the company of other like-minded people, in what Ortega views as an existentially vacuous suppression of free will. He explains that

> [t]he individuals who made up these multitudes existed, but not qua multitude. Scattered about the world in small groups, or solitary, they lived a life, to all appearances, divergent, dissociate, apart.[6]

While *multitude* is a quantitative term, Ortega points out that *social mass* is a term that signifies society. Yet, society is made up of individuals. This is the point in the first pages of the text, where Ortega offers a definition of mass man and noble man. Society is constituted of minorities and masses. A preliminary description, however incomplete of minorities (noble man), is warranted. Minorities are self-driven and autonomous people who practice autognosis. Ortega argues that minorities are specially qualified. What does he mean by qualified? By qualified, Ortega does not mean technical qualification of this or that kind, as in a profession. One form of qualification that defines noble man (minorities) is the demands that noble man makes of himself. This can be considered the existential ability to live by creating guiding moral, spiritual, cultural, and intellectual standards. Noble man always takes the road less traveled and welcomes difficulty as a necessary condition of human existence.

In contrast, mass man is content to be a follower of others like himself, to follow popular trends. As such, mass man lacks or willingly turns away from any form of life that embraces strife. Mass man, Ortega tells us, comprises people who imitate each other. However, by imitation he means the absence of differentiation among people, thus creating what he refers to as a common social quality.

Ortega is also quick to point out that mass man does not mean "the working man." He refers to mass man as a qualitative phenomenon, not a quantitative one. This is why for him mass man is best appropriated through an existential category:

> In this way what was mere quantity—the multitude—is converted into a qualitative determination: it becomes the common social quality, man as undifferentiated from other men, but as repeating in himself a genetic type.[7]

Mass man lives off the strife and imagination of others, as a loafer of the high standards of noble man. This entails character traits like envy and resentment. Resentment, as is also the case in Scheler's thought, is a central component of the thought of mass man intellectuals, Ortega informs us. For this reason, mass man does not understand that life, as Ortega contends, is defined by insecurity. Because Ortega defines human life as insecurity that can be assuaged only through convictions and beliefs, mass man never "assimilates" to life. Instead, this type of person resents the structure and order of objective reality, which demands that people save themselves by saving their noninterchangeable circumstances. He explains,

> Life, which means primarily what is possible for us to be, is likewise, and for that very reason, a choice, from among these possibilities, of what we actually are going to be. Our circumstances—these possibilities—form the portion of life given us, imposed on us. This constitutes what we call the world.[8]

Consequently, Ortega offers a description of mass and noble man that he believes goes to the core of humanity:

> For there is no doubt that the most radical division that it is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, pilling up difficulties and duties; and those for

> whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves.[9]

Biographical Existence versus Biological Life

At the core of Ortega's explanation of the differences between mass and noble man is the distinction he makes between biographical and biological life. This distinction makes it plain to see how Ortega eschews sociological terms or ideas that attempt to explain the rise of mass man solely on positivistic terms. While there is a common-sense understanding of biological life, the same cannot be said about Ortega's idea of biographical life.

One of Ortega's responses to positivism is to view biological life as consisting of sensual processes that do little to differentiate man from animals. This is why Ortega says that man is an "extra-natural" being. What he means by this is that man, like a sculpture in high relief, removes himself from the background of nature. What enables man to transcend nature is the ability to cultivate a sense of interiority. Interiority entails self-reflection and intuition of the essence of the self as the root of reality, what Ortega calls radical reality. Radical reality is the root reality of the self in space and time, as a human person, that enable man to decipher objective reality. Radical reality is Ortega's way of recognizing that man contains within the structure of his being the capacity for self-reflection. This does not mean that radical reality is the most important reality. On the contrary, man's capacity for self-reflection allows for the decipherment and appropriation of objective reality, as distinct from the essence of the self. Ortega conceives of objective reality as that which is "other" than myself. In effect, objective reality is the "not me." The latter are metaphysical/existential categories, not political constructs.

Radical reality enables man to orient himself to the structure and order of objective reality. This is precisely what mass man is incapable of doing or is unwilling to do. While mass man has always found himself "lost" or objectified by the material world, Ortega contends that the age of agglomeration has compounded and accelerated mass man's embrace of inauthenticity. This is the case

because mass man now finds that he can hide, existentially speaking, by creating an allegiance with other people.

Agglomeration, by necessity, Ortega argues, is the dominant force that annihilates man's capacity and need for self-reflection. In addition, agglomeration creates conditions that accentuate mass man's inability to come to terms with himself. Agglomeration works in the service of mass man and against life by enabling an inauthentic state of being, where man does not bother to concern himself with genuine care or effort.

Biological life is sensual and tends to direct itself toward external, worldly experience, which rarely sees a capital return on investment, as it were, regarding contemplation into the nature of the self. Contrary to this, Ortega maintains that biographical life, which is characterized by existential self-reflection, is the recognition of the self through a process of autognosis. This turns biological life into an interiority-driven sense of self that Ortega regards as biographical existence. This makes biographical existence an existential category.

Hence, biographical life is the opposite of mere biological or zoological life. Biographical existence is the existential dimension of human life. Biographical existence pertains solely to man as an existential being and de-emphasizes physical, sensual life.

The essential question of biographical existence, as Ortega conceives this, is how can man maintain the tension that self-reflection requires in order to safeguard genuine authenticity? This is the metaphysical/existential essence and raison d'être of *Meditations on Quixote*. This is the major point of contention that exists between mass man and noble man. The cultivation of authenticity is a lifelong endeavor, a life-project, that has tremendous implications for morality and human values. As such, this is the existential tension that Ortega argues regulates society. In addition, Ortega contends that this tension is existential in nature and cannot be conceived as sociopolitical. As a consequence, the differences between mass and noble man are not necessarily differences between people. Rather, these two poles demarcate difference between types of people. The latter is the case because man must be vigilant not to lose his authenticity and supplant it with inauthenticity.

This is a concern that recognizes the fluidity and dynamic structure of human nature in lieu of choice-making: free will.

Couched within the structure of biographical existence, as an existential category, are Ortega's ideas of "life-as-drama/narrative" and the idea that man is the "novelist" of his own existence. These three ideas correspond to a fourth idea: Ortega's belief that life is a tragic endeavor that pins noble man against the forces of the world and society, as these, he contends, will be increasingly dictated by mass man in the future. *Noble man*, what we are also referring to as minority, is a term that appears throughout his work, even though it makes its most poignant impact in *The Revolt of the Masses*. Noble man cultivates nobility of spirit and the desire to transcend his moral shortcomings. The latter is an axiological concern that informs Ortega's complete works. Noble man is the opposite of mass man and mediocrity. Nobility is a spiritual/existential category, not one that has anything to do with nobles as a social class. This concept is akin to Nietzsche's idea of a spiritual aristocracy. Noble man practices a form of quixotism that attempts to decipher appearance from reality—what Ortega calls a *heroic task*. The latter term first made its appearance in his first book of philosophy, *Meditations on Quixote* (1914).

Ortega's argues that cultivating the tension of having to distinguish appearance from reality throughout a life is a heroic act. For one, it is easier to let the dominant Geist of the time and the force of popular trends dictate life. Noble man does not make life easier for himself by taking moral shortcuts. In addition, to resist the objectification that the world and society submit man to requires the courage and convictions that only noble man, qua noble man, possesses. In consequence of embracing this effort, noble man is offered the clarity of mind and spirit that guides life in a constructive manner. This is one way that noble man saves his circumstances, Ortega is adamant.

Another consequence of attempting to embrace authenticity as a way of life is that this task safeguards beliefs and convictions that keep man from becoming mass man, which consequently uphold human liberty through the cultivation of authenticity that originates in self-reflection. This is a lifelong endeavor that makes great demands on noble man, and one that mass man rebukes as being an existential

burden. Ortega recognizes that objective reality is akin to a machine that continually spews out contingencies that man must accept or reject. Man's ability to recognize and respect objective reality is contingent on man's ability for self-reflection. It is self-reflection that turns man inward, that recognizes itself as a subject. Only through the appropriation of subjectivity can man come to terms with objective reality.

However, a disclaimer is warranted that cites the difference between subjectivity as the outcome of existential self-reflection and mere subjectivism. Subjectivism is the reckless affirmation of a selfless life. As such, subjectivism, which is a form of relativism, is arrived at through relativism and nihilism. This is why Ortega contends that mass man embraces a vulgar and vacuous life that is guided, if at all, by subjectivism as a sensual condition that cannot transcend any understanding of life as biological. In contrast, subjectivity is cultivated by existential fullness—interiority, Ortega calls this—the biographical driving force of man as radical reality. Ortega's reaction to positivism is made clear by reminding us that even science is a process undertaken by individual persons:

> Some will think that, *speaking seriously*, life is the process of existence of a soul, and others that it is a succession of chemical reactions. I do not conceive that it will improve my position with readers so hermetically sealed to resume my whole line of thought by saying that the *primary*, *radical* meaning of life appears when it is employed in the sense not of biology, but of biography. For the very strong reason that the whole of biology is quite definitely only a chapter in certain biographies, it is what biologists do in the portion of their lives open to biography. Anything else is abstraction, fantasy and myth.[10]

One way that noble man cultivates subjectivity is through imposing duties and responsibilities on himself, while mass man only demands rights. Ortega argues that mass man is not "interested in the principles of civilization." This is why he finds it so important that noble man adhere to the view that civilization is not static. Instead, civilization and material progress must be maintained

through strife. Historical periods of crisis, as Ortega believes is the case with modernism, cannot be understood, much less alleviated, without the cultivation of higher standards. High standards are met with difficulty. Ortega argues that there is no reason to believe that "progress" is a linear process. Instead, this process oscillates between decadence and historical periods when people confront the "height of the times." The latter is a theme Ortega explores in *The Revolt of the Masses* and further develops in *The Modern Theme*. This is one reason why mass man turns away from values that make demands on it. Ortega stresses his idea of aristocracy of merit:

> This all the more in my case, when it is well known that I uphold a radically aristocratic interpretation of history. Radically, because I have never said that human society *ought* to be aristocratic, but a great deal more than that. What I have said, and still believe with ever-increasing conviction, is 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.[11]

Mass Man Finds Free Will a Burden

A component of revolt in *The Revolt of the Masses* is Ortega's contention, existentially speaking, that mass man finds free will a burden. The latter is a constituent character trait of mass man that is compounded by the demands objective reality makes on individuals. Mass man's rejection of free will, Ortega predicts, will be a great threat to liberty in the future. Downplaying the force of free will in human life eventually turns sinister. The Spanish thinker argues that this is the case because mass man, who will eventually come to rule society, morally, spiritually, and sociopolitically, comprises people who will benefit most from eschewing the demands made on them by objective reality.

Not finding it necessary or important to make existential demands on himself, mass man rejects objective reality as oppressive and thus

attempts to create forms of reality that are amenable to his own whims and passions. The creation of forms of reality that are amenable to mass man is a central aspect of Ortega's work, for it means that mass man will come to rule over all societal institutions through the sheer force of nihilism: Ortega refers to this as violence. Jean François Revel calls this the "totalitarian impulse." Ortega calls it "the element of terror" in the character of mass man. Existentially speaking, this element of terror is the wellspring of all forms of inauthenticity and the systematic implementation in every quarter of society:

> The element of terror in the destiny of our time is furnished by the overwhelming and violent moral upheaval of the masses; imposing, invincible, and treacherous, as is destiny in every case. Whither is it leading us?[12]

The element of terror disposes with any consideration for the past, for tradition. Classicism is laid bare, rejected, and forgotten. Mass man lives for the moment, given that the present is not only the only time mass man knows but that it is also considered the best time in history. Best and newer mean more. Thus, mass man views the past as mere provincialism. This is one reason why Ortega equates modernity with vulgarity; the postmodern period he so aptly predicted would eventually put on display the implication of mass man's vulgarity. Ortega points out that ironically, the character of mass man, which will come to dominate all aspects of postmodern life, cannot be conceived as mere decadence. This is because decadence must be conceived as a decrease in the vitality of standards, and mass man does not believe that the past was better than his own age. As a result, mass man believes himself to be living in the best of times. This is the case, even though mass man has no understanding or imagination to make sense of the past:

> To start with, our present life feels itself as ampler than all previous lives. How can it regard itself as decadent? Quite the contrary; what has happened is, that through sheer regard of itself as *more* life, it has lost all respect, all consideration for

> the past. Hence for the first time we meet with a period, which makes tabula rasa of all classicism, which recognizes in nothing that is past any possible model or standard, and appearing as it does after so many centuries without any break in evolution, yet gives the impression of a commencement, a dawn, an initiation, an infancy.[13]

The tension and strain that noble man maintains in distinguishing appearance from reality is felt in noble man's realization that man needs security in order to thrive morally and spiritually. Security comes at a price, an existential price that noble man is willing to pay, while mass man is not. This situation becomes complicated, Ortega points out, when we realize that one of the dominant traits of mass man is staunch resentment of higher standards and values. This is why he argues that mass man is a "naysayer" who attempts to keep others from embracing higher standards. Envy and resentment play a vital part in Ortega's description of mass man, especially in *The Revolt of the Masses*. The great contribution that Ortega makes to our understanding of envy and resentment, as these pertain to agglomeration, is not only his diagnosis of mass man as a dominant pathological character trait but also his prescription of mass man as a destructive force in society.

Noble man embraces reason as an ahistorical, objective tool that man must place at the service of life. Reason uncovers the structure and order of human reality, as this pertains to the aspects of reality that remain out of our control. Mass man, especially in postmodernity, rejects reason, instead exchanging reason for relativism's quest to turn reason into a mere historical, thus relative, conditioned reflex. While Ortega believes that reason is limited in how it can best serve life, he does not prescribe to irrationalism. The latter is important because, as he argues, reason should be used in the service of life, not serve as an abstraction. Mass man, he contends, finds reason a threat to his whims and passions. Because mass man does not reflect about life—an existential condition that he denies himself—life never ascends to the level of the biographical. This means that mass man disposes of reason in

exchange for whims and passions that speak directly to subjectivism. The ultimate victim in this game of cat and mouse between mass man's rejection of self-reflection and objective standards, while sustaining the enjoyment of self-serving rights, is free will. Free will is a burden to mass man because, among other things, it sheds a light on man's solitary biographical existence.

One tragic character trait of mass man is his desire to squash the past. Ortega is adamant that to safeguard advanced civilizations, man must retain historical knowledge. This, he argues, requires "effort" that only noble life can manifest. The latter is a form of "technique of the first order." At best, the past keeps us from committing the same mistakes over and over. This is why Ortega argues that "the most 'cultured' people to-day are suffering from incredible ignorance of history."[14] This is the opposite of effort. He calls this "inertia."

In his first book of philosophy, *Meditations on Quixote*, Ortega offers an existential/phenomenological understanding of subjectivity. In that work he uses the metaphor of man in the forest of the Escorial, outside Madrid. The forest acts as a totality whose essence man cannot truly appropriate without first paying close attention to the trees that surround him and make up the forest. Lost in this wilderness, man must turn inward and find solace in the difficult task of being an individual. More than an intellectual act, Ortega tells us, this is a heroic act. The ability to sustain this heroic act throughout a lifetime is what differentiates noble man from mass man.

Part II: Intellectual Mass Man

In chapter 8 (Why the Masses Intervene in Everything) of *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega progresses from his description of mass man to ask what degree of influence mass man has in modern life. Answering this question is essential in understanding his contention that the intellectual mass man is an "agent provocateur" in the annihilation of the past and culture-enhancing values.

One key to Ortega's understanding of the destructive force that mass man exerts on society is his contention that the intervention of mass man "is solely by violence."[15] It is important to reiterate that "mass man" does not mean a class of people. Rather, it is a character

trait and disposition toward life and the negation of objective reality. For this reason, the great question for Ortega becomes, What happens to society, culture, the arts, and civilization when mass man ascends to power? This, he contends, is the essential question to be asked in the twentieth century.

Mass man forces his vulgarity on everyone in society:

> This is what in my first chapter I laid down as the characteristic of our time; not that the vulgar believes itself superexcellent and not vulgar, but that the vulgar proclaims and imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right.[16]

Because mass man finds safety in numbers, in the sense of agglomeration into the spaces and institutions once ruled by noble man, this type of person is emboldened into believing himself capable of ruling and thus believing he is entitled to do so. The phenomenon of mass man coming to rule over others, including noble man, is what Ortega warns his readers about, as quantity is turned into alleged quality—a barbaric leveling of standards. Leading this charge in the twentieth century are mass man intellectuals, he warns.

Mass man's ideas are not ideas at all. Ortega believes that to be the case because "ideas put truth in checkmate." Mass man cannot have ideas because ideas require that thinkers first pay allegiance to truth and the objective conditions that it demands of seekers. This is akin to Parmenides's contention that truth (*aletheia*) can come about only through an active search. Truth is not passive, and thus it must be proactively desired. The absence of truth is opinion (*doxa*). Consequently, if mass man does not uphold the integrity of truth as a higher authority that "regulates life," standards crumble, in which case opinion is all that mass man can hope for. Ortega introduces the reader to intellectual barbarism:

> If anyone in a discussion with us is not concerned with adjusting himself to truth, if he has no wish to find the truth, he is intellectually a barbarian. That, in fact, is the position of the mass man when he speaks, lectures, or writes.[17]

So it is that intellectual barbarism becomes the force that rules Western civilization after the ascent of mass man to power.

Not finding it necessary or expedient to pay heed to any standards, intellectual barbarism is open to embracing moral, spiritual, cultural, and sociopolitical aberrations. This is a direct consequence of mass man becoming "hermetically sealed" from having to pay allegiance to objective standards. With the annihilation of reason as a tool that works in the service of life, Ortega believes that even reasonableness will be discarded by mass man. He uses the phrase made famous by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, "reason of unreason." In its place, opinion will rule over vacuous lives.[18]

Ideas are the purview of reflective subjects, not vague subjectivism. To have ideas means submitting to the notion that there is a realm of truth that ideas can appropriate. The negation of truth and objective reality leaves man only with opinions. Opinions, Ortega argues, dispense with the necessity for discussion, given that there is nothing objective to communicate. In turn, this means there can be no communal ideation as to what constitutes the most productive life to contribute to society and culture. Halfway through *The Revolt of the Masses* Ortega poignantly predicts the dissolution of culture and manner of life the West has enjoyed.

Mass Man, Postmodernity, and the Threat to Liberty

While today the word *postmodernity* is in vogue, we encounter the coming-to-be importance of this form of relativism in Ortega's thought, especially in *The Revolt of the Masses*. We ought not to forget that the cultural and moral program that is "postmodern philosophy," if any such thing is possible, is in its conception and negation of reason and objective truth. Postmodern philosophy aims to annihilate (deconstruct) objective truth and narrative structures that promote understanding of objective reality. In these pages, we have already outlined the differences between subjectivity and subjectivism. In addition, we have seen how only through self-reflection (subjectivity), which places man in an existential condition to reflect on the self, can man branch out and make sense of society and the world—in short, the objective reality that is "not me."

Postmodern philosophy is by its own definition anti-philosophy. This is what deconstruction is, given that postmodern philosophy believes that human reality is a sociopolitical construct of conservative and traditional thinkers and writers in Western civilization. On the surface, the destructive anti-philosophy that is postmodern philosophy appears to create nothing, but this is true only in the sense that it does not create anything of lasting value. The aim and purpose of postmodernism, through deconstructionism and other philosophies of negation, is deconstruction of objective truth and its correspondence with objective reality. This unprecedented attitude toward truth, knowledge, the arts, and sociopolitical organization is an attack on human reality. Deconstructionism and the other nay-saying philosophies that mostly originated in France in the 1960s are possible only because of the resentment of objective reality and values that is the staple of mass man. Postmodern philosophy offers mass man an opportunity to revel in his quest to destroy objective standards. It is this theme that Ortega busied himself with throughout his work.

Postmodern philosophy and its attendant values in the arts, science, morality, religious beliefs, economics, and the sociopolitical sphere is a leveling of culture and civilization. In its place, postmodernity attempts to install the very thing that Ortega predicted would happen to Western civilization: mass man as ruler. By the time of his death in 1955, Ortega predicted that postmodernity was creating cultural, moral, and sociopolitical conditions that would enable mass man to avenge himself on the alleged notion that he has been trampled and victimized by reason and objective standards. Ortega is emphatic about the threat that mass man poses for culture and liberty in the future:

> All our communal life is coming under this regime in which appeal to "indirect" authority is suppressed. In social relations "good manners" appears in the form of insult. The restrictions of sexual relations are reduced. Restrictions, standards, courtesy, indirect methods, justice, reason! Why were all these invented, why all these complications created?

> They are summed up in the word civilization, which, through the underlying notion of *civis*, the citizen, reveals its real origin. By means of all these there is an attempt to make possible the city, the community, common life.[19]

A key component of the pathos of mass man is demoralization. By turning against the demands that human contingencies make on man, what Ortega calls "*quehacer*" (having to do), mass man not only ignores objective structures but also negates himself in the process. Self-negation destroys human potential, possibilities that enable us to self-reflect, and authenticity. Instead, by negating the essence of the self, mass man breeds contempt for objective reality through self-loathing. Close inspection of these themes in Ortega's thought make us ask, Why do postmodern intellectuals, who embrace contempt for human reality, believe they have anything to contribute to the future of man?

Modernity has emboldened mass man to ascend to positions that were formerly the purview of noble man. This, in turn, further inflates mass man's ego to construe free will as an existential burden. Instead, one of mass man's characteristics is not to permit others to achieve tasks that he does not want to do itself. In addition, aided by lax attitudes and pathos about the nature of human life, mass man embraces a spurious concern for all things serious. This is why Ortega calls this the "vertical invasion of the barbarian." He writes, "The actual mass-man is, in fact, a primitive who has slipped through the wings on to the age-old stage of civilization."[20] What does Ortega see in modernity that is responsible for the empowerment of mass man to bring barbarism into postmodern times?

Concluding Remarks: The Corruption of Rationalism, and Technicism

To answer the latter question, two components of Ortega's thought come to mind: the corruption of rationalism, with a capital *R*, and the ascension of "technicism." The latter is Ortega's word for scientism. The first of these—bloated rationalism—moves away from life by turning life into mere physical processes (i.e., physicalism and

biologism). This violates Ortega's contention that reason is one of several tools that man has at his disposal that aid the process of living. While reason is a component of man's ability to decipher the riddles of the universe and the nature of the self, it remains one of several tools. This is why Ortega's philosophy is called philosophy of vital reason.

What does rationalism (with a capital *R*) gain by turning life into a mere object of study? Ortega views this as the leading cause of positivism and other forms of philosophical materialism's quest to objectify human life. This concern is partly responsible for Ortega's having to differentiate between biological life and biographical existence. While Ortega explains that he embraces rationalism, he warns that rationalism has become bloated in modernity, thus turning against life, a vital existential concern for self-reflecting persons. But, bloated, how? As only one of the tools that aid man to live, reason does not have jurisdiction over all aspects of life. The tragic error that rationalism commits is to believe that it can throw a blanket, as it were, over all aspects of human life by reducing it to biology.

The consequences to human existence of rationalism's overreach are enormous, Ortega contends. One of these is that it destroys man's capacity and faith for reason as a process of self-discovery, and even of the salvation of our circumstances. Once rationalism is viewed as the solution to all human problems, man's metaphysical and existential condition becomes subsumed to the alleged power of science. The absorption of human existence by science is especially poignant in mass man, given that mass man finds free will a burden.

Ortega properly correlates the ascent of science with culture. Culture is the reservoir of man's vital and existential output. According to him, the formation of culture is an outgrowth of existential inquietude. Science is one of the creations of man's desire for understanding and knowledge. Ortega contends that wanting to know is not a priority for most people. In this regard, he disagrees with Aristotle's notion that man by nature wants to know. Instead, Ortega believes that the embrace of awe and wonder is an existential

inquietude that is cultivated by noble man. Knowledge is gained only through necessity and want. This is why he suggests that if culture becomes decadent, so too will the pursuit of science in its purest form.

A consequence of the corruption of rationalism leads to science turning away from science qua science. Instead, science begins to serve other interests, whether economic, technological, or sociopolitical. Science turns into what Ortega calls technicism because the overarching concern of reason becomes external to human existence. He explains this by showcasing what becomes of science once that culture becomes "deadened":

> If this fervour is deadened—as appears to be happening—technicism can only survive for a time, for the duration of the inertia of the cultural impulse which started it. We live with our technical requirements, but not by them. These give neither nourishment nor breath to themselves, they are not *causae sui*, but a useful, practical precipitate of superfluous, unpractical activities.[21]

What Ortega refers to as technicism in *The Revolt of the Masses* is called scientism today. Technicism and the corruption of rationalism go together. Technicism is the corruption of science. Hence, technicism is pseudoscience. According to Ortega, mass man "has no attention to spare for reasoning." This intellectual laziness and lack of curiosity makes scientism a substitute for genuine knowledge as far as mass man is concerned. The success of science in creating a higher standard of living is merely taken for granted by mass man. Mass man assumes that he has a right to the "goods" that science supplies. It is not science proper that mass man desires but the creations of applied science, whether medications, gadgets, or flying machines. This makes it easy to confuse science with scientism, for the latter is not only the result of bad, politicized science but also the creation of pseudoscience.

Taking science for granted while embracing the claims of scientism is ominous for human liberty in the future, Ortega

predicted. This is a destructive situation for civilization, for Ortega recognizes that science will be the last of man's institutions or way of life that will lose its vigor in the future, given the quest for objectivity in science. He explains, "The monstrosity is increased a hundredfold by the fact that as I have indicated, all the other vital principles, politics, law, art, morality, religion, are actually passing through a crisis, are at least temporarily bankrupt."[22]

Notes

1. José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas*, vol. 4 (1929–1933) (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1964). "Prólogo para franceses," 121. This is a prologue to *The Revolt of the Masses* that Ortega included in the publication of the 1937 edition of the book. Ortega found it necessary to bring the book "up to date." He also wrote an "Epílogo para ingleses" to the book. It is in this prologue that he informs the reader that his ideas contained in *The Revolt of the Masses* would appear in a follow-up book, *El hombre y la gente* [*Man and People*], 118. *Man and People* was published posthumously, in 1957.
2. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 11.
3. Ortega y Gasset, *Obras Completas*, vol. 4 (1929–1933), 143. The genesis of *The Revolt of the Masses* is Ortega's 1921 book *España invertebrada*, the essay "Masas" that was published in the newspaper *El Sol* in 1926, and two lectures he gave in Asociación de Amigos del Arte in Buenos Aires in 1928. (See "Prefatory Note" in *The Revolt of the Masses*.)
4. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 11.
5. Ortega y Gasset, 13.
6. Ortega y Gasset, 13.
7. Ortega y Gasset, 13.
8. Ortega y Gasset, 47.
9. Ortega y Gasset, 15. Ortega is explicit in his philosophical anthropology, as this describes human existence in metaphysical/existential terms that shed light on free will.
10. Ortega y Gasset, 79.
11. Ortega y Gasset, 20.
12. Ortega y Gasset, 21. Ortega is adamant that mass man's "element of terror" is a serious threat to human liberty in future eras.
13. Ortega y Gasset, 36.
14. Ortega y Gasset, 91.

15. Ortega y Gasset, 68.
16. Ortega y Gasset, 70.
17. Ortega y Gasset, 71.
18. Ortega y Gasset, 73. Ortega writes, "This is the new thing: the right not to be reasonable, the 'reason of unreason.' Here I see the most palpable manifestation of the new mentality of the masses, due to their having decided to rule society without the capacity for doing so. In their political conduct the structure of the new mentality is revealed in the rawest, most convincing manner; but the key to it lies in intellectual hermetism. The average man finds himself with 'ideas' in his head, but lacks the faculty of ideation. He has no conception even of the rare atmosphere in which ideas live. He wishes to have opinions, but is unwilling to accept the conditions and presuppositions that underlie all opinion. Hence his ideas are in effect nothing more than appetites in words, something like musical romanzas."
19. Ortega y Gasset, 75.
20. Ortega y Gasset, 82. Ortega explains, "Spengler believes that 'technicism' can go on living when interest in the principles underlying culture are dead. I cannot bring myself to believe any such thing. Technicism and science are consubstantial, and science no longer exists when it ceases to interest for itself alone, and it cannot so interest unless men continue to feel enthusiasm for the general principles of culture," 83.
21. Ortega y Gasset, 83. In its purest form, science is the outcome of man's desire for knowledge. This necessitates a certain pathos that guides awe and wonder into scientific channels: "Has any thought been given to the number of things that must remain active in men's souls in order that there may still continue to be 'men of science' in real truth?" 84.
22. Ortega y Gasset, 87. In the final pages of *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega is clear and succinct in his argument that "in the next few years Europe may grow enthusiastic for Bolshevism." By this point in the book, Ortega has already tied mass man to Bolshevism and other forms of despotism, which he predicts will be a threat to liberty: "the mass-man is simply without morality, which is always, in essence, a sentiment of submission to something, a consciousness of service and obligation." Mass man is a threat to liberty, its own and others', because mass man is a conformist who cultivates "moral inertia."