

History: Don't Expect Much from 'The Masses'

In the movie *Gladiator*, when Maximus enters the arena to boisterous cheers from the crowd, the jealous Commodus laments, "They embrace him like he's one of their own."

His sister Lucilla responds, "The mob is fickle, brother. He'll be forgotten in a month."

The mob is fickle.

With these words, the character Lucilla succinctly expresses a belief that prevailed throughout much of the West's history, namely, that most people in a society belong to "the mob," by which is meant not the poor and underprivileged, but the group of individuals who choose to pursue neither truth nor goodness.

In his famous essay ["Isaiah's Job,"](#) Albert Jay Nock uses the prophet Isaiah as a paradigm of this belief. As Nock points out, in the Bible, God told Isaiah that his mission was not to "the masses," who would inevitably ignore his warnings. Instead, his mission was to "the Remnant"—the small group of scattered, anonymous individuals of good will who still remained in society. Isaiah's preaching was to "reassure *them* and keep *them* hanging on."

Nock shows that one finds a similar estimation of "the masses" in Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and other great figures in Western history. These figures also chose to address their messages not to the masses but to "the Remnant," who had "the force of intellect" to apprehend great truths and the "force of character" to live them out.

However, in modern times, something changed. According to Nock, some in the West began to theorize that the majority of

people were capable of the heights of wisdom and understanding and goodness:

“In the 18th century, however, certain European philosophers spread the notion that the mass man, in his natural state, is not at all the kind of person that earlier authorities made him out to be, but on the contrary, that he is a worthy object of interest. His untowardness is the effect of environment, an effect for which ‘society’ is somehow responsible. If only his environment permitted him to live according to his lights, he would undoubtedly show himself to be quite a fellow; and the best way to secure a more favorable environment for him would be to let him arrange it for himself.”

Thus, in the past two centuries, the Western world has set about expending most of its energy on the masses. It has gradually simplified education so that all can participate, simplified public discourse so that all can understand, and simplified the arts so that all can be entertained. Through these adjustments, it was hoped, the gap between the masses and the Remnant would close.

However, Nock concludes that the results of this experiment have been “unimpressive”:

“On the evidence so far presented one must say, I think, that the mass man’s conception of what life has to offer, and his choice of what to ask from life, seem now to be pretty well what they were in the times of Isaiah and Plato.”

Moreover, this failed mission to the masses has been at the expense of “the Remnant,” whom society less and less offers the deep intellectual and moral formation necessary for their growth.

According to the traditional Christian interpretation of the

Bible, [most people are not saved](#); most people do not go to "heaven." In Matthew 7, the way that leads to life is described as "narrow" and those who find it are "few."

One wonders if it works the same way in secular society. Will it always be the case that no matter how many people you lead to the founts of knowledge and wisdom, most will choose not to drink?