

Nationalism in America is a Farce that Will End in Tragedy

Karl Marx famously began [*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*](#) by observing that Hegel “remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. Hegel, and by implication Marx, was wrong. The uniqueness of circumstance and the individuality of actor mean that history does not, and cannot, repeat itself. But sometimes historical conditions and attitudes do recur, albeit in modified forms. More arresting is Marx’s comment that history repeats “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Today the farce being played out in the United States is plain for all who care to witness it. The historic tragedy that the farce obscures is harder to discern, and portends the resurgence of conditions and attitudes that in the past have led to disaster.

Writing in the 1920s, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset chronicled the ascent of the “mass man” in the cultural and political life of Europe. Ortega did not equate the masses with the working class any more than he associated the elite with civility and decorum. An attitude of mind, rather than class affiliation or identity, distinguished the mass man. Simply put, Ortega argued that the mass man lacked the intellectual and spiritual discipline necessary either to exercise power or to safeguard tradition. His was a commonplace, pedestrian mind that remained dull and inert until animated by some external stimuli that quickly provoked a compulsion to act. Unwilling to engage in rational debate, to apply the rules of logic to disagreements, to acknowledge external judgments, or even to recognize the existence of other points of view, the mass man “is satisfied with thinking the first thing he finds in his head.” He has no ideas as

such, but can only express his “appetites in words.” Fearful of diversity and incapable of tolerating, or even of apprehending, distinctions, the mass man embraces a deadening conformity and “crushes... everything that is different, qualified and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated. Such intellectual and spiritual vulgarity, Ortega reflected, had brought to the vanguard a type of man without precedent in the long history of Europe, a man who “shows himself resolved to impose his opinions” by coercion and force without giving due consideration either to evidence or reason.

Ortega lamented the assertion of this right to be unreasonable—the “reason of unreason” to use a phrase from [*Don Quixote*](#). Obedient to no authority, the mass man “feels himself lord of his own existence.” He refuses to challenge himself to improve. He places on himself no demands of any kind, but instead “contents himself with what he is, and is delighted with himself,” regarding his “moral and intellectual endowments as excellent [and] complete.” The man of true excellence, by contrast, appeals always to a transcendent standard. If none exists, or if he can no longer access those that served in the past, he must invent a new one, which is more severe, arduous, and exigent. Discipline is the commanding principle of his life, and he is forever dissatisfied with himself, striving always to attain the lofty ideals that he has established. Ortega linked the rise of the mass man with the emergence of syndicalism on the left and fascism on the right. Both movements revered action and violence, ultimate expressions of the barbarism into which European civilization had descended. Yet, the lineage of such brazen enmity and resentment is even more venerable.

In their political offensive against socialism and democracy, many European statesmen, generals, aristocrats, entrepreneurs, clergymen, and intellectuals had, by the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, found in nationalism a convenient

doctrine to electrify and exploit the masses. Until after the Revolutions of 1848, nationalism had been a liberal initiative. Liberal nationalists, such as the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini, sought to create a Europe composed of free and independent states each peopled by free and independent citizens. During the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalism severed its relations with liberalism and became the incubator of dictatorship and war.

Militant nationalists rejected the emphasis on individual liberty in favor of national unity. Determined to achieve or to restore national greatness, they assailed parliamentary government for breeding division and spreading discontent. They accused minorities and foreigners of contaminating the purity of the nation, and persecuted them in an effort to rid the land of such afflictions. Displays of military prowess came to symbolize the vigor of the national spirit and the resolve of the national will. Rather than an instrument of compromise, a vehicle for reconciling differences, or a means to solve problems, politics blundered into a spectacle of emotion, permitting nationalists to transform the nation into an object of worship and to reprove any critique of their persons or their programs as illegitimate and traitorous. Political opponents became enemies of the people and the state. Each nationalist triumph lured Europeans further into a dream world, increasingly estranged from reality. In time, Ortega wrote, they came to prefer this "fictitious existence suspended in air." As early as 1902, the German philosopher Friedrich Paulsen warned not only of the threat that nationalism posed to the peace of Europe but also of the danger it presented to the traditions of rational thought, moral conduct, and humane sentiment:

A supersensitive nationalism has become a very serious danger for all the peoples of Europe; because of it, they are in danger of losing the feeling for human values. Nationalism, pushed to an extreme, just like sectarianism, destroys moral

and even logical consciousness. Just and unjust, good and bad, true and false, lose their meaning; what men condemn as disgraceful and inhuman when done by others, they recommend in the same breath to their own people as something to be done to another country.

With growing fanaticism, nationalists saw themselves and their countrymen as a heroic people with a unique history and culture that was distinct from, and better than, those of the inferior "races" whom they had every right to conquer and to dominate.

During the twentieth century, anti-Semitism became the most virulent expression of the radical nationalist world view. The myth of the diabolical Jew illustrated Georges Sorel's insight that people are unified by their hatreds and stirred by their passions. Although a champion of the proletariat, Sorel, like the radical nationalists, insisted that the appeal to myth (for Sorel it was the myth of the general strike) inspired heroic action and offered simple, clear, and persuasive explanations for circumstances that were otherwise tortuous, mystifying, and often frightful. Myth afforded not the opportunity for thought, analysis, or contemplation, but performed instead as a call to arms. Long before the Nazis perfected the technique, the sensational polemics issued against the Jews became the standard method of propaganda by which nationalists advanced their mythic deceptions and aroused the masses.

Those who embraced such positions were impervious to rational inquiry. On the contrary, they had abandoned reason and made superstition, fear, and hatred vital components of political life. They sought not so much to fashion a new civilization as to destroy the old one, believing that the rules and standards of society had subjected them to a terrible violation of their rights. "Primitives in revolt," as Ortega characterized them, they had inherited a comparatively prosperous and stable

world, while remaining unaware of, and perhaps indifferent to, the effort required to create and sustain the many advantages from which they benefitted. As a consequence of their grievances and their ignorance, they could forsake any and all obligations to their fellow human beings. Like perpetual children, they yearned to be free to exercise the rights and privileges that they thought they deserved, which the unworthy, the unrighteous, and the unjust had so cruelly denied them.

They imagined that life was easy and bountiful, or that it ought to be. When they found themselves toiling under grave limitations, deprived of the things to which they believed justice entitled them, they looked for someone to blame. In their determination to assert themselves and to exercise power over others, they forfeited intellectual and emotional maturity. They dispensed with civility and truth. They came to mistrust ideas and to despise intelligence. They negated morality, adopting whatever expedient served the interests of the moment and enabled them to justify actions for which there could be no justification. Whether they considered themselves revolutionaries or reactionaries, they became consumed by partisan zeal. The nineteenth-century German historian Theodore Mommsen concluded that those bewildered but uncompromising souls routinely dismiss:

logical and ethical arguments... They listen only to their own envy and hatred, to the meanest instincts. Nothing else counts for them. They are deaf to reason, right, morals. One cannot influence them.

Mommsen likened such a disposition of mind to a terrible disease for which medicine had no cure.

That many Europeans during the 1920s and 1930s, including the well-educated and the well-born, found such attitudes congenial proved ominous for the future of civilization in the

West. It revealed how acquiescent the mind is to false but emotionally gratifying doctrines, recounting what by then was already the sad, old story of how easily decent persons can sink into corruption, decadence, and barbarism. Farcical this narrative may have been. But if the historical drama played out in Europe during the early twentieth century began as farce, with actors pretending to catastrophe because they did not really expect it to happen, it was a farce that ended in tragedy.

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