Reconsideration

José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*

In 1929, when *The Revolt of the Masses* first appeared, José Ortega y Gasset was well known to Spaniards. To them, he was a philosopher and stylist, a journalist and moralist, a professor and potential politician—if the left was ever to be permitted into politics. Only a few months previously, with a show of scornful bravado, he had turned his professorial office into a significant political gesture: the failing dictator, Primo de Rivera, had closed the University of Madrid to prevent student demonstrations against his regime; in response Ortega had hired a large theater and, week after week, continued his course on metaphysics to a growing audience of students, intellectuals, and opposition personages, as well as to much publicity in the papers.

The Revolt of the Masses
by José Ortega y Gasset
Published in 1932
in an anonymous translation
by W. W. Norton & Co.
Currently available in paperback
from W. W. Norton & Co.; $1.50.

With Ortega, this publicity had not caught hold of some surprised pedant, a philosopher unconcerned with public affairs and unwilling to write for effect. On the contrary, for 25 years, Ortega had been a radical polemicist, a philosopher, to be sure, but one who delighted, as he put it, in writing "esthetics on a trolley car." Schooled in the national self-examination that followed the War of 1898, he took as his mission the task of awakening in his fellow Spaniards a respect for intellect, a contempt for political venality, and a desire for social reform. Over the years, many had learned to revere or revile him, seeing that with his persistence, with his limpid style, stinging sarcasm, and reformist vigor, he was managing to push Spaniards perceptibly closer to European standards. Thus he had become known as the Europeanizer, *par excellence*.

To gain a position from which he could better plant his Europeanizing goads, Ortega had taken several important initiatives in publishing. He had helped to found *España*, a lively weekly journal of politics and the arts, and he created, owned, and directed *Revista de Occidente*, the most prestigious monthly in the Spanish language. Furthermore, he helped edit and frequently wrote for *El Sol*, a powerful Madrid newspaper, politically independent and intellectually authoritative, one of the great dailies of the world during the inter-war years. Up to the Spanish Civil War, most of Ortega's writing first came out in *El Sol:* editorials, lectures, hundreds of political commentaries, and numerous series on special topics that, when later collected, became some of his most familiar books. Significantly, these latter were not written first as books, but as pithy essays, 1500 to 3000 words long, tailored to be read by a particular audience at a particular time.

On the morning of October 24, 1929, *El Sol* ran the first installment of *The Revolt of the Masses*. Within a month, it had carried ten; then the series lapsed for seven weeks; after which the remaining seventeen sections appeared at the rate of roughly two a month from January through August. Only then was the book pulled together by reprinting the articles unchanged in the order in which they had been published. At the time, Ortega did not realize he was putting out a world-wide bestseller; thinking the book would go to people who knew of it and him through his journalism and other writings, he issued it without a prefatory word. But when the book caught on, finding readers far and wide, he regretted this decision; he wrote a "Prologue for the French," a "Prologue for the Germans," and an "Epilogue for the English"; and the Spanish version has grown with explanatory matter until it is more than half again as long as the original.

Not so the American. A certain game manliness, proof of an editorial *machismo*, may be found in the decision to publish the American version without a word of introduction. But this choice, reaffirmed in ensuing editions, has meant that American readers, outside an occasional Hispanicist, have not been alerted to the work's journalistic origin, with the resultant strong statements and striking images, the repetitions and haltingness of argument. But whatever formal defects the book acquired from its origin, Ortega felt these well worth a substantive gain. To him, good journalism was not a popularizing debasement; the good journalist who wrote close to the moment of his lived experience was the man most likely to speak the truths of life.

This view did not stem merely from pride of profession; Ortega founded his whole philosophy on *life*—not on soul or spirit, not on physico-chemical processes, but on life as it is lived in its drama, its occasionality, its circumstantiality, its integral risk and uncertainty. He insisted that the meaning of every statement was conditioned by the occasion of its utterance; its truth and error inhered in the life of he who uttered it. As a result, most of that which pretends to be social science Ortega disdained for its dead will to abstraction, for its flight from circumstantiality. To him, human praxis was not to be guided by abstract theory, no matter how sophisticated in concept or confirmed in empirical tests. At bottom, men acted, not on knowledge, but on problems; hence in actuality, human activity was guided by a complicated, functioning problematic. Thus *The Revolt of the Masses* is a proclamation in the first person; its sentences are decidedly declarative, and any meaning beyond the writer's factual report that this was how he perceived things to be when he wrote depends entirely on each person's personal concurrence.

Yet translation betrays: at the crucial point of circumstantial validation, the degree to which the American version obscured the circumstances of the original left the work highly susceptible to misinterpretation. Ortega conceived the series in 1928 as the great prosperity approached the brink; in it he foretold collapse and identified the financier as the archetypal mass-man, uncomprehending yet needlessly confident and smugly satisfied with his incompetent success. In 1932 the American version appeared in quite different circumstances that quite changed the meaning, for unprepared readers, of the word "masses." Ortega was committed to an idiosyncratic meaning for it, seeing the masses as the class of men whose personal character was inert, an immobile mass like that measured in physics, and he used the term with abandon against Spain's bumbling elites. But in 1932 few Americans knew anything about José Ortega y Gasset, and most either feared or pitied the "masses" as the

hordes of hungry unemployed. Thus the book seemed to sound a flamboyant warning against the fast-growing welfare state. Suffice it to say that such was not the case.

What was the case, then? Ortega averred that in the world that he experienced two fundamental developments were operating, one way or another, in the life of each person, complicating his personal, interpersonal, and public conduct. First was the spread of affluence, and second the increasing blindness and mechanization of large institutions (including nations) as they set their long-term goals.

Ortega described how affluence was having portentous effects on the character development of each person, particularly on the mass-man. Those who enjoyed the basic benefits of industrial democracy—the upper and middle classes, intellectuals and big labor—were prone in crisis to use the state's monopoly of force to suppress any movement that augured uncertain departures from established ways. Ortega described how the mass-man, coddled by affluence, set the public tone, and alert Spaniards of 1929 would have found his analysis of mass-man's self-satisfaction, his reliance on direct action, his technical barbarism, his dangerous statism, to have been a telling dissection of General Primo de Rivera and all he stood for. So too acerb Americans of 1972 will find it to be a significant anatomy of John Mitchell, Spiro Agnew, and all they represent.

The second great problem: the 20th-century nation-state had become a spiritual impediment that had to be transcended if the man of comfort were to find a demanding idea towards which to aspire. At the very time when Europeans needed a large sense of the future, the successful institutionalization of the nation-state left each with stunted aspirations, and thus the European "has discovered that to be English, German, or French is to be provincial." With penetration Ortega observed that "it is not institutions, *qua* instruments of public life, that are going badly in Europe; it is the tasks on which to employ them." Then and now, the "great powers" seem incapable of applying their power to an historic enterprise that is worthy of their pretensions to greatness; instead they build Maginot lines and fight mechanistically in Vietnam. The constructive invitations to concerted action that might spontaneously incite people to common undertakings within the nation-states had been basically fulfilled. The only new national movements that might develop would be dangerous perversions, involutions of the spirit; and either such manias or more stasis would do nothing to counter the debilitating effects of affluence on the mass-man.

Ortega was not very hopeful. But he thought that something good could develop if Europeans could somehow find the strength to aspire beyond the nation-state. "Europe has been built up in the form of small nations. In a way, the national idea and sentiment of nationality have been her most characteristic invention. And now she finds herself obliged to exceed herself. This is the outline of the enormous drama to be staged in the coming years. Will she be able to shake off these survivals, or will she remain forever their prisoner?" To shake off the nation-state Europeans had first to recognize that the offices of *national* politics, economics, society, law, art, literature, schooling, and scholarship had all been developed; these merely awaited the men who would perform them, who had merely "to take office" as the phrase goes. Then, the Europeans' whole perception of life could change, opening to a great sense of possibility, as they recognized that the offices of *European* life, of its politics, economics, society, law, art, literature, schooling, and scholarship, were yet to be invented. Each embarking in his own way on such a creative effort, the European might find, without catastrophe or renouncing his affluence, a new frame of reference by which he would perceive his advantages, not as cause for complacency, but as occasions for discontent with the given and hope for the possible.

With 40 years of retrospect, Europeans may take some comfort from Ortega's desire, voiced in *The Revolt of the Masses*, for transcending the provinciality of the nation-states, but only in a narrow view. Like the rebellion of the masses itself, the problem arising from the basic fulfillment of national offices is a problem not confined to Western Europe. In recent years many Americans have realized that however efficiently our institutions have functioned, some of the tasks on which we employ them have been going badly: our policies, domestic and foreign, are not worthy of our pretensions. This is a sign that now our repertory of national aspirations is also a repertory of stunted aspirations, which, if not transcended, could lead to paralysis and destructive instability. The offices of American life are there to be taken by ambitious men, while the young, emotionally moved by an unfulfilled idealism, seem increasingly stifled by a bitter frustration. Therefore, the enormous drama to be staged in coming years is still the one Ortega suggested—whether Westerners can transcend their traditional idea of the state. But should that transcendence end simply in a United States of Europe, it would merely seem to substitute another unstable parochialism for that now in force: thus the limit of Ortega's aspiration is the challenge of our own.

Robert McClintock

Correspondence

Unemployment

Sirs:

As the person directly responsible for the statistics on employment and unemployment, I was disturbed by your article on the "Invisible Unemployed (Feb. 26)." The article creates the impression that the Bureau of Labor Statistics has been hiding some of the country's jobless persons under a statistical carpet. That is not the case.

The BLS publishes regularly a vast amount of data about all persons of working age, whether they are employed, unemployed, or outside the labor force. With regard to the persons outside the labor force, the Bureau has taken several special steps in recent years to determine who they are, whether they are interested in working, and, if so, why they are not looking for a job. Far from being made available only upon request, as your article stated, detailed data on these persons are published every quarter in *Employment and Earnings*, one of the Bureau's major periodicals. Moreover, these data have also been the topic of special BLS reports. One such report, focused especially on the "discouraged workers," that is, those persons who want a job but who do not look for one because they think their search would be in vain.

While some persons think that the "discouraged workers" should be included with the unemployed, President Kennedy's Committee to Appraise Employment and Unemployment Statistics (more familiarly known as the Gordon Committee) did not think so. The Committee specifically recommended that these persons not be included in the unemployment count but