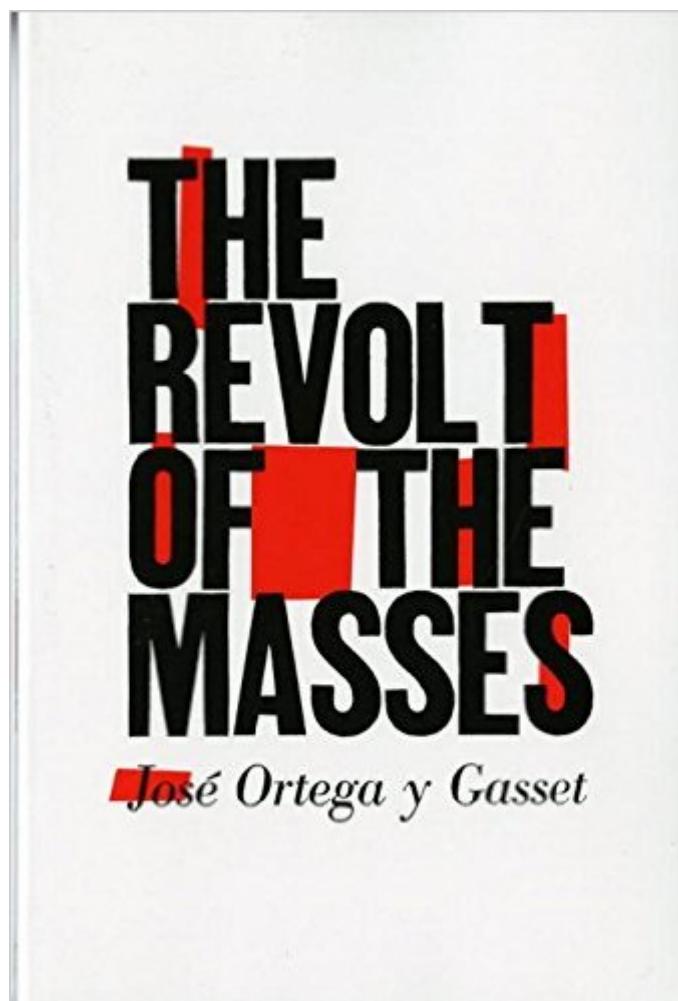


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The Revolt Of The Masses



Synopsis

Social upheaval in early 20th-century Europe is the historical setting for this seminal study by the Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset. Continuously in print since 1932, Ortega's vision of Western culture as sinking to its lowest common denominator and drifting toward chaos brought its author international fame and has remained one of the influential books of the 20th century.

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Customer Reviews

A superbly written book, "The Revolt of the Masses" can be considered of limited value if one views it from a strictly historical perspective. True, Ortega y Gasset, writing in 1932, offered a clear and devastating critique of the tenets of fascism in particular and totalitarianism in general. He is particularly effective when he takes apart fascism's mystical elevation of race, blood and soil, arguing that the popular appeal to these factors was shallow, explained nothing about the process of nation-building, and was used only as a political expedient for the emerging dictatorships of Europe. But one could argue that however effective his argument, Ortega y Gasset, a Spaniard, was in perfect position to critique fascism and its foibles, being able to observe it from a closer perspective than others. After all, the war for men's hearts and minds was fought out in no small part on Spanish soil in the '30s. Ortega y Gasset was also not alone in critiquing the rise of mass man, which is the book's major point. Joseph Wood Krutch, for example, in "The Modern Temper" (an excellent companion to this book) had pointed out that the emergence of mass society and the development of technology had stripped away Man's sustaining illusions, at great cost. "The Revolt of the Masses" decries the leveling of society that the author observes, and the reader is at first

made uncomfortable by the argument. I found myself mentally attacking Ortega y Gasset's elitism. I nearly concluded that the book was simply an apologia for an anti-democratic bias and for those who would protect political power from seizure by the common man. On further reflection, though, I concluded that Ortega y Gasset's argument is more complex and that the sustaining power of the book lies in its deeper layers of meaning. While he is certainly elitist, he glorifies the elites who invest in society and contribute to it, not those who simply hold onto power for its own sake and justify their hold by clinging to the past. In fact, he upholds republicanism as the most effective form of government -- and the one most difficult to sustain. His strongest point -- and the one most important for the modern reader -- comes when he says that the mass of men have no appreciation for the labor required to build nations and societies and the commitment required to sustain them. He writes pessimistically that the mass man of his day had little or no appreciation for this effort and considered his place in the world to be justified, rather than earned. This is an old-fashioned message, but in my opinion it was one that we do well to heed today. How many of us today consider our goods and services and access to intellectual and monetary capital -- much less our political rights -- as things that we must constantly struggle to preserve? How many of us take the time to consider the societies in which we live as dynamic, organic entities that must be studied and understood if we are to appreciate their worth? How often do we undertake even a cursory analysis of the routes we have taken to get to where we are today with an eye toward seriously reforming that which needs changed and preserving that which makes society strong? Some might find the author's insistence that mass society must defer to a group of elites repugnant and of course if the idea is embraced simplistically it is just that. But if one is prodded by Ortega y Gasset's demand for a radical commitment to building society, he will quite possibly begin looking at his surroundings and the time in which he lives with a new appreciation and sense of urgency.

In this brief but sophisticated work, Jose Ortega y Gasset argues against the onslaught of the "mass-man" in social and political life. Who is this mass-man? The mass-man, Ortega argues, is a primitive man who makes use of all the products of modern civilization, but does not appreciate nor respect the superior intelligence and effort by the individuals who are responsible for their development. He takes it for granted that civilization is "just there" and has no appreciation for the intricate processes that are required in order to maintain it. The mass-man is content in his own mediocrity, and feels it unnecessary to strive toward excellence. This mass-man who once submitted to his superiors, now feels compelled to involve himself in everything and impose his will on everyone. This is often done through violence and is done without regard for rationality or

reason. The mass-man is like a spoiled child who has taken over the household. It seems that there have been a couple of different interpretations of this book by reviewers. Some have pointed to Ortega's elitism and contempt for mass-man as a sign of him being anti-democratic. And this certainly seems like a logical conclusion except for the fact that Ortega himself asserts that a liberal democracy is the ideal form of government! I was somewhat puzzled by this seemingly contradictory pronouncement myself. It seems to me that democracy inevitably leads to rule by the mass-man. After all, democracy literally means "rule by the people." Nevertheless, on page 76, Ortega writes: "The political doctrine which has represented the loftiest endeavour towards common life is liberal democracy. It carries to the extreme the determination to have consideration for one's neighbor and is the prototype of 'indirect action.' Liberalism is that principle of political rights, according to which the public authority, in spite of being all-powerful, limits itself and attempts, even at its own expense, to leave room in the State over which it rules for those to live who neither think nor feel as it does, that is to say as do the stronger, the majority. Liberalism-it is well to recall today-is the supreme form of generosity; it is the right which the majority concedes to minorities and hence it is the noblest cry that has ever resounded on the planet." Contrary to some other reviewers, I also found Ortega's philosophy to be very progressive. One of his main criticisms of mass-man is of his primitive and archaic way of thinking. He points out that movements like fascism and communism tend to look to some bygone glorious past as a model for government. He calls them a "monotonous repetition of the eternal revolution." Ortega instead urges us to look to the future, to persist in bettering ourselves, and maintain liberalism until it can be superseded by something better. I found this book to be somewhat paradoxical. Although it seemed that some of the author's ideas contradicted each other, I still found it to be a very worthwhile and intriguing read. Although written in the 1930's, there is much in it that remains relevant today and I would not hesitate in recommending it. It is definitely intellectual candy for the political/philosophical mind.

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