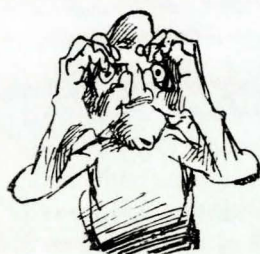


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## WOULD YOU BELIEVE . . . ?

An Introductory Critique of The True Believer

by PAUL BREINES

and



## ERIC HOFFER AND COLD WAR IDEOLOGY

by PETER WILEY



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## WOULD YOU BELIEVE. . . ?

by Paul Breines

When is a book abstract? Too often we say a book is abstract when it is merely long, or when its language is opaque, or when its arguments are hard to grasp. Yet like abstract ideas themselves these definitions miss the point. A book or idea is abstract when it is not concrete, when it is removed from reality. It is in this sense that Eric Hoffer's The True Believer is an abstract book. True, his little book is simple, compact, and clear. But it is precisely through its conciseness and its simple logic that it remains detached from reality: specifically, the reality it seeks to explain, today's revolutions and today's revolutionaries.

"The true believer is everywhere on the march, and by converting and antagonizing he is shaping the world in his own image." Thus Eric Hoffer announces the theme of his book. And one need go no further than the preface to begin asking questions about The True Believer. Is it the true believer, the fanatic, the mass movement as such which are on the march today? Or do we really find around us specific and concrete kinds of beliefs and movements? In Vietnam, for example, is America concerned about a mass movement plain and simple, or a specific mass movement that is striving to rid the country of the latest form of western colonialism? Is white America fearful of extremists in the Black ghettos, or of the sanity and reason behind the growing Black revolt against the extreme barbarism of ghetto life? Are American universities worried about student fanatics, or about rational students who are fanatically opposed to bad education, bureaucratic coercion, and university compliance with the military in the name of "neutrality" and "business as usual?" What's the problem: the true believer, or particular kinds of beliefs which say no to the American status quo?

There are several basic premises upon which Hoffer's specific arguments depend. First, he believes that the "frustrated" ("people who, for one reason or another, feel that their lives are spoiled or wasted") predominate in the early stages of all mass movements. Second, he believes that mass movements are interchangeable since the main feature of all mass movements is that they appeal to and organize the frustrated. Third, and related to the first two, he repeatedly states that mass movements cannot be studied on the basis of their aims and goals but only on the basis of the manner in which they build well-knit and cohesive units of people. Hoffer's other arguments, about the poor, the intellectuals, "good" and "bad" mass movements, and so on, all seem to grow out of his several central premises. These should be looked at first.



The individuals who are most prone to join mass movements, Hoffer states, are those who are frustrated. And those who are frustrated are, quite simply, those who are aware that their "selves or personalities are damaged; the frustrated are people who have not found fulfillment in their lives. The relationship between individual frustration and mass movements, Hoffer argues, arises from the fact that a movement or cause offers the frustrated individual the chance to lose, forget, slough off that self with which he is dissatisfied. Mass movements manipulate the frustrations felt by members of a society; they are able to extract a fanatical commitment from the frustrated in return for the security they offer to him.

This is a clear and logical conception. The question is whether it helps us understand what Hoffer calls mass movements. The first point to be made is that, whether he intends it or not, the clear implication of Hoffer's argument here is that those who tend to be attracted to the initial stages of mass movements are in some sense psychologically imbalanced; they are discontented, cranky, unable to face themselves, neurotic. For Hoffer this is true of both the leaders and the led in any mass movement.

Immediately a myriad of difficulties arise. Frustrated individuals are prone to "true believerism," says Hoffer. But when you get right down to it, what really does he mean by frustration? He means everything and nothing at once. Of course a frustrated individual is one who is dissatisfied with himself because he has not found fulfillment in his life; he is aware of his "damaged and unwanted self." A boy is not wanted by his parents, a man is not wanted by the woman he desires or the friend he seeks. This is frustration. A peasant in Cuba and his family are starving while a night-club owner in Havana overeats twice daily; a Black mother's child in Harlem is bitten by a rat in her bed while the members of the family for whom the Black mother works all have electric toothbrushes. This is frustration. These two broad types of frustration are

meaningful ones. The point is simply that they are also not identical, and do not carry the same weight in analyses of history and mass movements. It is true that a man may become a fanatical member of a political movement because his parents rejected him or because a publisher



rejected his books; if so, he may be seeking through a movement or "cause" to reject the self that others rejected. But a man may also become a fanatical member of a political movement because he and others in a like situation are starving, or because they seek equality, or because they seek to have control over the land they work or even the schools they attend.

In other words, if a category such as frustration is going to be employed in a study of mass movements, it cannot be defined so abstractly as mere dissatisfaction with one's self. We must inquire into the historical and social situation in which a self or groups of selves exist, we must ask what a particular man or group of men are frustrated about. Hoffer does not ask such questions, and the reader is left with the false impression that frustration and dissatisfaction can never express men's desire to eliminate an actually existing condition of unhappiness or misery, but that frustration is simply an abstract emotion that some men are plagued by. It is worth noting that other analysts of similar problems -- among them, Hegel, Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Fanon -- employ the idea of a "damaged self" in their studies of revolution. For example, a slave becomes aware that the self that he is as a slave is a denial of the self he might be as a free man. His slave-self is a damaged self in so far as it is not a human and free self. When such a man chooses to commit himself to a revolution against his masters he is indeed, in Hoffer's terms, seeking to "slough off" his damaged self. Now this too is simply a model, but unlike Hoffer's model it obliges one to immerse himself in the concrete life-situation of the damaged selves, for the latter are never abstractions but real people.



Further, this second model suggests that both frustration and passionate commitment to the "cause" of ending "frustration" can be rational -- depending on the historical moment, the nature of the society which produces frustration, and the character of the "cause."

Hoffer ranges rapidly, often in a single paragraph, across "mass movements" from early Christianity through the Reformation to Nazism and Bolshevism. His doing this seems so neat and logical only because he leaves out fundamental social and historical questions. Thus it appears that men are simply prone to be swept into mass movements because they are frustrated. A crucial element remains hidden: when a man is starving, or is denied justice or freedom, frustration is a sane and reasoned reaction. Equally sane and reasoned -- these do not mean devoid of passion -- can be a man's commitment to a movement which aims at eliminating hunger, injustice, coercion. Hoffer's premise that the frustrated make up the core of any mass movement is a neat one; it is so neat only because it assumes what it must examine.



The above remarks already suggest problems contained in the second of Hoffer's main principles -- that mass movements are interchangeable. This idea is largely based upon the premise that the frustrated make up the core of such movements, and many of the criticisms proposed earlier apply again here. But there are additional problems. In this aspect of his study Hoffer is employing a notion which has become a widely believed cliché: the cliché that political beliefs and movements are in a psychological sense really religious beliefs in different dress. Now this claim may perhaps be used in fruitful ways, but the fact is that its popular usage has served a very different function. It enables people to avoid discussing a particular political belief by claiming to expose the irrational or religious origin of the belief.

Take a case in point from a variation of this argument: a student proclaims that he is sick and tired of being dictated to by the paternalistically authoritarian dean. Against this, a psychology professor points out that the student is really revealing a hostility to his father. On first glance the student's claim that the dean is authoritarian has been neutralized: the source of his view of the dean is not the fact that the dean is part of a coercive institution, but a hang-up over his own father. The student should go to the counselling center for a stretch, for this will make the dean's benevolence more visible. On second glance, however, and even assuming that the student does have a real conflict with his father, the actual substance of his claim -- the dean is paternalistically authoritarian -- remains: it puts the dean, the psychology professor, and the counselling center on the line.

We have taken this detour in an effort to suggest that while one may separate, for purpose of analysis, the psychological or social origins of ideas from the content and meaning of those ideas, one cannot exclude the latter without hiding the truth of an idea. It is just this hiding which Hoffer performs through his claim that mass movements are interchangeable.

In examining this aspect of his book we will focus on Hoffer's interchanging of the Communist and Nazi movements. For here he is proposing something which many people today take for granted. The common argument states that Nazism and Communism are interchangeable because they both project total and absolute truths about man and society; because they both appeal to and manipulate the frustrated; because they are both led by fanatics; because they both provide security for, and extract sacrifice from, their respective followings. Here again, the neatness and clarity of Hoffer's argument is largely based on the fact that he avoids complicated questions. Communism and Nazism are interchangeable if as movements they are defined only in the terms that Hoffer defines them.



They are interchangeable if one assumes, as Hoffer does, that it is not relevant that Communism (he is speaking primarily of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union) aimed at the abolition of private property in industry and land and that Nazism aimed at the "rebirth of the Germanic soul." Issues of this sort, which Hoffer excludes, follow almost endlessly. Russian Communism opposed imperialist war, advocated the destruction of private industry and landed estates; it advocated the social control of work and political life. Nazism offered jobs and security to the Germans and it also glorified war and military values; it advocated the conquest of foreign territory and the destruction of the Jews. German generals, industrialists, and landlords did not oppose the Nazi movement. Russian generals, landlords, and industrialists organized a civil war against the Bolsheviks. The United States government opposed the Russian Revolution from the moment of its triumph; it opposed Nazism at an infamously late date. The masses who joined the Bolsheviks were peasants, workers, and intellectuals; the initial class-base of the Nazi movement was the German lower middle class (plus support from industry and Junkers). The Bolsheviks came to power in Russia in a land not only ravished by war but severely underdeveloped to begin with, relative to



Europe. The Nazis came to power in the midst of a deep social, economic, and political crisis but still in a society that was technologically one of the most advanced in the world. The leaderships of the Nazi movement and the Communist movement were both "successful," but to assert that they are interchangeable because their functions were identical flies in the face of, among other problems, the need of a comparative biographical-psychological study of the two sets of leaders. To say that Lenin, Trotsky, and Bukharin, on the one hand, and Hitler, Hoess, and Goebbels on the other hand were all ruthless, fanatical and clever may be true, but it is approximately one-tenth of the truth.

These are only some of the issues which arise when one looks hard at the claim that Nazism and Communism are interchangeable. Hoffer simply excludes these issues from his study. It must be stated here that it is meaningful to say that both Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany are totalitarian societies. It is equally meaningful to say that the Hitler and Stalin regimes employed terror and committed immense crimes. Further, it is meaningful to say that contemporary Soviet Russia represents a degeneration from the vision of the actual Bolshevik revolution. But to say these things is not the same as saying that Nazism and Communism are interchangeable. In fact, this claim itself functions primarily as a very comforting illusion for many Americans. It prevents them from comprehending why it is that increasing numbers of men and women in the world are opting for communism or socialism and not for American capitalism. It serves the function of sustaining the illusion that Americans live in, and make war for, a "free world."

The third premise of The True Believer is Hoffer's belief that mass movements cannot be studied through their aims and goals but only through their ability to organize a following. This principle is of a piece with his claims about frustration and the interchangeability of mass movements. In fact it should now be apparent that Hoffer's basic principles and his main arguments are circular and tautological. His repeated assertion (e.g., on pages 44, 76, and 80), that movements cannot be analyzed according to their aims, ends, and philosophies is identical with his notion of interchangeability and both of these are identical with his basic premise that the "frustrated" make up the core of these movements. That is, movements appear to be interchangeable when one does not inquire into their aims and philosophies but only into the character of their organization -- and one need not inquire into this since, regardless of what frustrated people want, they are mainly just "frustrated." In this scheme one can begin anywhere and always end up where he began, because the ugly reality is pushed out of the arena.

Having laid the veil over the realities of revolution by his abstract and

circular arguments, Hoffer permits the realities of counter-revolution to unveil themselves within his main theses. It is with a discussion of this problem that the present review will conclude. The True Believer is not merely a book. It is also a political event and a political force, for it serves as a support of some of the most widely held political illusions in contemporary America. Hoffer's insight that the frustration originating in an awareness of a damaged self is at the source of mass movements is an important one, and we have tried to show the ways in which he misuses it. But something should also be said about the specific political thrust of this argument (and of Hoffer's book as a whole), which lies in its message that ultimately the true believer, i.e., the revolutionary, is a sick man. This is a clear warning to the many Americans in search of mental health. Here Hoffer shares the view of all the major institutions in contemporary America. It can be put in the following form: one's "sanity quotient" rises according to the degree he is able to adapt himself to the status quo. That is, a man is normal when he is able to accept and function well within the existing social order. And indeed, if the legitimacy and normalcy of a particular existing social order are taken for granted, then adaptation to it is a mark of mental health. But that is a big "if": it's the kind of "if" out of which revolutions grow.

Today America grants its citizens the right to question a part of the whole system and the right to work to change or improve that part. But it insists that no one in his right mind can attack the social system as a whole, the given order in its totality. This is precisely what the revolutionary does.

And this is precisely the point that Hoffer -- and he is not alone -- will not comprehend. Judged by the standards and needs of the existing society -- say, America, 1967 -- revolutionaries are out of their minds. To the enemy of revolution, the Reason of revolution appears to be madness. Over this point the liberal and conservative citizens and the progressive educators seek further "dialogue." The revolutionary does not, for he is indeed out of their minds.





# ERIC HOFFER AND COLD WAR IDEOLOGY

by Peter Wiley

Despite the fact that we learn little or nothing from Hoffer's specious concepts, it is important not to dismiss this book as silly and irrelevant. We should examine it more closely, if only to find out why such a book would impress the University bureaucracy, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the CBS television network as informative. Hoffer knows little, and cares less, about historical analysis, but that should not keep us from subjecting his book to such an analysis.

While he claims to be objective, he is in fact making a series of implicit and explicit contrasts which cater to contemporary stereotypes about mass movements. In this manner he encourages an irrational response to revolutionary social change, rather than freeing us from current prejudices. For example, he constantly contrasts the pathological "true believer" and his following with the "well-adjusted," "practical," "reasonable liberal," obviously to the further detriment of mass movements. In another implicit contrast, Hoffer assures us of the superiority of Western institutions, particularly those of the United States and England, implying that the Soviet Union, which represents the quintessence of a mass movement, is undoubtedly a playground for the mentally unbalanced.

We must ask ourselves why in 1951 Hoffer was concerned about the spread of mass movements and what was the historical situation which compelled him to want to discredit them. We will find the answer if we recall that the U.S. was in the midst of the Cold War, while in the Korean conflict American troops were stalemated by the North Korean and Chinese communists, the forces of "violence" and "irrationality." Because Hoffer's tract clearly reflects the anxieties of the period it is a good example of the compulsive anti-communism which obscured the ugly realities of the Cold War.

Although we associate the beginning of the Cold War with the growth of Russian expansionism after the war and the collapse of the wartime alliance, the Cold War actually originated with the U.S.'s confrontation with revolutionary nationalism during the war. In both Western Europe and the former colonial empires the populace had armed itself for the resistance struggle against fascism. (Does this conform to Hoffer's descrip-



tion of the formation of mass movements?) In these countries (France, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, and China, to name a few) communists played a leading role in the struggle. The armed and potentially revolutionary resistance movements presented the United States with its greatest wartime political problem. The U.S. was eager to restore enough of the status quo ante bellum to assure the reconstruction of European capitalism. With respect to the colonial peoples, Franklin Roosevelt, in the Atlantic Charter, promised self-determination and the end of colonialism, but the United States made no effort to fulfill this promise when England and France quickly regained control of their former colonial possessions. England invaded Greece in 1944 to fight against the anti-fascist resistance, rearmed the Japanese against the Vietminh in 1945 before turning Vietnam over to the French, and sent a squadron to seize Hong Kong in 1945 in defiance of an agreement signed with Chiang Kai-Shek; and England and France between them reoccupied the Middle East. The U.S. was at first hesitant and mildly critical -- after all, the war had been a Crusade for Freedom -- but soon realized that revolutionary nationalism threatened its plans for hegemony in Europe and the Pacific, and that it therefore had to be suppressed.

The United States' confrontation with revolutionary nationalism eventually led to conflict with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, devastated by German occupation, was eager to maintain the wartime alliance. Therefore, it counselled the resistance movements in Greece, China, and Yugoslavia to act with moderation and not to antagonize the occupying powers even though occupation meant the restoration of reactionary governments. But when the U.S. and England challenged the Soviet Union's own right to dominate the countries that were absolutely indispensable to its defense, particularly Poland, the detente with the Soviet Union collapsed.

By 1947 the True Believer was on the march, but so also was the restoration: counter-revolution, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. The U.S. took the side of the monarchy in Greece, thereby intervening in a civil war caused by England's invasion in 1944. Arms were sent to Chiang Kai-Shek's tottering regime to fight Mao Tse-tung's Red Army. The CIA helped fix the Italian elections in order to oust the communists from a coalition government. By 1951 these confrontations had escalated into major conflicts in Korea and in Vietnam, where the U.S. was assuming more and more of the financial backing for French colonialism.

That the revolutionary nationalist movements had a program no one can doubt. They were fighting for national independence (which as we now know meant independence from the Soviet Union as well), and for the radical transformation of their economies through agrarian reform, the



expropriation of those foreigners who had exploited and controlled their resources for years, and planned development. From their point of view and from the point of view of the other subject nations their program was in their self-interest and highly rational, despite Hoffer's claims. Their struggle was and is ruthless, violent, and fanatic; but we must remember that these characteristics were instilled in the mass movements by the intensity of the repression practiced by Western "practical," "reasonable liberals" and their local counterparts. After all, it was a liberal democrat who bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, incinerating tens of thousands, in order to impress the Soviet Union with the U.S.'s diplomatic determination.<sup>2</sup> It was the French who shelled Hai-phong in 1946 to demonstrate to Ho Chi Minh that they would not tolerate an independent Vietnam. And it was the British who had earlier released Japanese prisoners of war to fight against their former ally in Vietnam, the Viet Minh.<sup>3</sup>



The United States' role in the Cold War as the main supporter of reactionary and colonialist regimes was made to appear to the American people as something entirely different. Sophists and charlatans, like Hoffer, and ugly demagogues, like Joe McCarthy, were ready to throw up a smoke-screen of anti-communism. Tracts like The True Believer were produced to maintain ideological conformity by assuring people that the U.S. was the embodiment of virtue and freedom and that revolutionary movements were the embodiment of evil and slavery. Such a crude dichotomy not only became the ideological cornerstone of American foreign policy, but also poisoned the minds of more and more people because of its dissemination by the mass media and educational institutions. An irrational response to a rapidly changing world became the focus of American political and intellectual life.

Today, rather than subsiding, the confrontation between the U.S. and revolutionary nationalism has intensified. Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba have been invaded, and the U.S. is fighting a major land war in Vietnam to the detriment of the Vietnamese and American people. Asia, Latin America, and Africa promise future Vietnams as the U.S. sends a constant flow of arms and "advisers" to bolster reactionary military regimes on all three continents.

The continuance of American expansion now more than ever demands that we remain ignorant about its causes and consequences. With every

escalation of American intervention in Vietnam an articulate opposition to the war is growing. The causes of American expansion are beginning to be questioned and individuals are beginning to trace their origin to the very foundations of the political and economic structure. The "threat" from without is being matched by the "menace" from within. Important segments of the Black freedom movement are seeing themselves as colonized people within the U.S. and are identifying with the revolutionary nationalism which they were taught was their worst enemy. Periodically, The True Believer is pulled off the shelf in order to promote the stale cliches of the Cold War ideology. But the struggle to liberate men's minds and bodies from the shackles of the past has begun anew and the theories offered by the Eric Hoffers of the world will no longer suffice.

### FOOTNOTES

1. William S. Allen, The Nazi Seizure of Power, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965; Franz Borkenau, World Communism, Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1962; Franz Neumann, Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944, New York: Oxford U. Press, 1944
2. See Gar Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965.
3. George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, The United States in Vietnam, New York: Delta Books, 1967.

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