

because it reflected badly on me and Opus Dei; Opus Dei places its members in a position where they feel obligated to breach the Eighth Commandment. When pressed by their families, Opus Dei members will often lie or practice mental reservation, not only about when they joined, but about other aspects of Opus Dei life such as corporal mortification,

and financial obligations. Despite this, Opus Dei asserts that there is no secrecy, and that indeed Opus Dei is "an open book." Those of us who have been wounded and deceived by Opus Dei wish only that they would reform their deceptive practices and allow members to join freely without subtle pressures.

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Eric Hoffer, Philosopher for the People

Richard Arnold

The son of working-class Alsatian immigrants, Eric Hoffer was born in New York City on July 25, 1902. He was orphaned at age five and stricken blind at age seven. He recovered his eyesight when he was fifteen and began to support himself, having had neither family nor schooling, when he was eighteen. During the following twenty-three years, Hoffer was what a more unkind age would call a bum. He wandered the country picking up whatever odd jobs happened along and even lived for ten years on Los Angeles' Skid Row. In 1943 he was accepted into the International Longshoreman's and Warehouseman's Union and here found his lifelong identity. ("No, I'm a longshoreman!" he shouted years later at an interviewer who had addressed him as an "intellectual.")

Despite later fame, Hoffer continued to work regular hours on the San Francisco waterfront until forced into retirement at age sixty-five. Writing, lectures, interviews, etc., he simply fitted into his schedule; he seemed to give lie to the notion that being an intellectual constituted a professional calling. Indeed, he was constantly embroiled in ferocious arguments with many leftist "worker-intellectuals" who dominated union politics. He championed the rank-and-file, especially the "misfits" who he felt were the real agents of history. "Intellectuals" he dismissed as one with



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Plato:

Plato they say was a great genius, but Plato only dealt in half-truths, he shillied and he shallied and he didn't accomplish a thing. He was an intellectual.

Hoffer always stood his own ground, as was further shown when he made no concessions to any "spirit of the times."

In the early 1950s, William Whyte was

composing *The Organization Man*, his formidable and troubled study of that complacent social conformism, which Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, considered a sign of Our Maker's benefaction. Meanwhile, Korea was in flames, the Cold War was deepening, and Joseph McCarthy set out to rescue an otherwise pristine body politic from massive communist infiltration. Hoffer's book *The True Believer* fit no Manichean scheme. This, we might say, taxonomical study of fanaticism made no effort to weigh the claims of evangelism, fascism, communism, Americanism, conformism, or any "isms" whatsoever. It merely profiled the personality types susceptible to utopian extremism and warned that this phenomenon, for better as well as worse, would be with us as long as dynamic social forces, particularly modernization, existed.

Already terse and aphoristic in presentation, *The True Believer* can be further reduced to a handful of arguments:

1. Fanaticism is not total commitment to a particular ideology, but a general frame of mind; to the fanatic, ideologies are interchangeable.

2. Fanaticism derives from the frustration and sense of personal failure individuals experience during periods of rapid social change.

3. Fanaticism sometimes serves a good end; a nation's creative potential better survives revolution than social stagnation.

Hoffer offers several other arguments in support of those above. Notable are the following:

4. Successful mass movements foster self-sacrifice over self-fulfillment. The latter is assigned to an ever-receding

future, often evoked from an idealized past.

5. As the past and future are fictionalized, so must be the present. Mass leaders must invest their goals with drama and make-believe in order to exact that degree of self-sacrifice that alone liberates them and their followers from self-contempt and self-rejection.

6. Successful mass movements are largely effected by negative personality types acting upon their most negative impulses (cowardice, for example, may compel belief in fanatical ideology in order to rationalize craven behavior).

7. The hope, pride, and confidence enjoyed by the “unified” (politically committed) individual derive from his sense of being “delivered from the meaningless burden of an autonomous existence.”

8. Some sort of faith is indispensable for most people. Those who discredit one faith create the need for another.

9. Only the fanatic can effect total upheaval. He will not accept reform because the world that has thwarted his own (often artistic) aspirations must be torn up root and branch. He alone will proceed beyond propaganda to coercion.

10. Slogans to the contrary, the fanatic has no use for “freedom and equality” as commonly understood. To him “freedom” means never having to make a choice and “equality” means never encountering his betters.

It is difficult to say why Hoffer—a basically apolitical, reclusive man—concerned himself so exclusively with mass social phenomena, but perhaps an answer is suggested by his reaction to American involvement in World War II. Turned down by the U.S. Armed Forces shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hoffer sought “hard work” connected with the war effort. It was thus that he became a longshoreman, affirmed his devotion to American ideals, and settled down for once and all.

Steady work and fixed residence afforded Hoffer “freedom, exercise, leisure and income.” He was now able to further develop his long-standing notion that “misfits” create history and to conclude that only those capable of undergoing a “rebirth” of identity could survive drastic social change.

Of change there was aplenty during and shortly after the war. The social transformations Hoffer witnessed over this period led him to observe that even democratic leaders (such as Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt) must master “the art of religiofication” in order to mobilize the masses in support of stupendous yet necessary tasks. At the same time, he gave final definition to his persona by resolving to remain an observer and commentator rather than become the fanatical demagogue he felt he might have easily been. He was in any case convinced that, while mass political action might rescue the creative potential of a nation, it had the opposite effect upon the individual.

Publication of *The True Believer* brought Hoffer almost instant acclaim. Ever the migrant, he wandered from obscurity to fame, then in, in 1966-67, to obloquy. At that time, he simultaneously excoriated Vietnam War protesters, lauded Lyndon Johnson’s presidency, and admonished blacks to the effect that their problems stemmed chiefly from their prejudice against themselves. Once again, Hoffer was decidedly out of step—this time to his detriment. *Time*-style pundits began to snipe at him as a “cracker barrel philosopher” who lent comfort to middle America’s apathy and bigotry. He might have thenceforth faded from the public scene had not another noteworthy observer of the sociopolitical scene taken up his cause.

On September 19, 1967, Eric Sevareid held an hour-long prime-time television interview with Hoffer. The decision to do so, he admitted, had not been an easy one: “I may as well confess I had shied away from his books for years because Eisenhower had praised one of them.”

Audience reaction was overwhelming and positive. Again, Sevareid:

Hoffer had made millions of confused and troubled Americans feel very much better about their country. He had pulled aside the veils of supposed sophistication and, in new ways, showed them again the old truths about America and why they remain alive and valid. The purpose of philosophers, he says, is to show people what is right under their noses.

His tarnished image among journal-

ists and social activists rectified by public acclaim, Hoffer withdrew from the spotlight in 1970, saying: “Any man can ride a train. Only a wise man knows when to get off.” And further “I don’t want to be a public person or anybody’s spokesman. I am not the type for it and I dislike it.”

Actually, Hoffer traced his outlook, derived from dispassionate observation rather than internally generated convictions, to his view of himself as an amalgam of charisma and cold-heartedness—a potential mass leader. He often spoke of overcoming the *temptation* to politics. Perhaps he was a latter-day St. Anthony.

In any case, Hoffer devoted his remaining years to writing and, in almost equal part, to the care and education of his namesake godson, Eric. Asked during one of his last interviews about the sustaining forces in his own life, he commented that, while many believe without hope all is lost, he could live without hope but not without courage, then quoted Goethe: “*Mut verloren—alles verloren! Da Wäre es besser nicht geboren!*” (“Courage lost, all is lost; it were better not to have been born”). He then added: “What a difference, my God!”

By all accounts, Hoffer died as a man who had lived, spoken, and written exactly as he wished, because he never allowed fear to influence him. He died fulfilled.

There is much to admire in Hoffer’s life and work, but perhaps his best legacy to us is found in the tribute he pays to “talented” individuals:

They too are critical of their times. They usually neither plot nor agitate against the prevailing disposition, their discontent colours their work and gives it an undertone of protest. There is probably nothing more sublime than discontent transmuted into a work of art, a scientific discovery, and so on. It is a sublime alchemy.

Here is the “transcendental temptation” that might as well serve as a secular humanist mandate.

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