Mass man

As well as losing faith in the content of hothouse culture, the secessionists ceased to believe that it could or should be spread down the social scale.

The social condition for this intellectual change was the emergence of mass man and mass culture. The inhabitants of the modern world's vast new cities were emerging from absolute poverty, to a degree of material security and education, moving up Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Their cultural and political needs would be supplied not by the top-down spread of elite values, but by the marketplace. The gramophone would give them music, and it would be Ragtime not Beethoven. They would watch films, and the most popular films would, then as now, appeal to basic, and sometimes base, human emotions. Politically, too, they were slipping beyond the bourgeoisie's control. Some turned towards socialism, others to anti-semitic demagogues.

The intellectual reaction to this phenomenon was described by John Carey in his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. He argues that mass man was a fantasised phenomenon, a bogey of clever people. In fact, the intellectuals' fears had a basis in reality. To understand this, we need to spot a surprising difference between how people then and people now saw the fundamental problem of social order. Now, it is almost universally accepted that the basic problem society must cope with is individualism and selfishness. Economists take this as a universal phenomenon; sociologists and cultural critics tend to think of it as specific to our society; but both sides agree that this force is what threatens social order. The economic argument is that many vital resources, like clean air and national defence, are public goods, which cannot be provided to an individual without also existing for all others in the society. But the free market, or uncoordinated action more generally, will not provide enough of them, because no individual takes account of the benefit of his actions in providing these goods upon the others. Importantly, since collective political goals are themselves public goods, any kind of group political action is expected to face endemic apathy and absenteeism.

By contrast, in the early 20th century, people saw the prime threat to social stability as collective human passions. Gustave le Bon wrote in his 1895 book *The Crowd*: "The substitution of the unconscious action of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age." Here, by the way, we see the link between the ideas of the masses and of unconscious instinct. A quarter of a century later, after the war, Julien Benda's *Trahison des Clercs* drew on the same idea with heightened alarm:

> Consider the political passions by which men ally themselves against other men, principally those of race, class and nationality.... For the space of a century, and more day by day, these passions are reaching a degree of perfection which has never been seen in history.[226]

Supposing that the problem of collective unreason was not imaginary, and that these observers were reacting to a real phenomenon, why might human collective passions have been so dangerous in the early twentieth century? One answer certainly lies in the era itself and its war, inflation and political instability: when social institutions are tottering, there is more to gain from banding together to change them. I suspect that another reason lies in the subsequent development media technology, in particular television. As the next chapter will show, TV and other screen media are highly addictive, so much that most people spend sizeable parts of their leisure time consuming them. This consumption is basically passive and individualised. Modern consumers still feel and think very much in the stereotyped collective forms provided to them by mass society, but they do not act much on these emotions and thoughts. The masses of the early 20th century were exposed to media that reflected and heightened their collective passions, but not yet to media that provided a substitute for human companionship. They spent more time together than we do. This social capital made them politically more capable, and so more dangerous, in particular from the perspective of the elite.

In place of the civilising crusade, different reactions to mass man emerged. One

was scientific detachment. Le Bon's intellectual heirs developed the science of mass psychology. Freud, in particular, linked the phenomena of twentieth-century politics, including the creation of Jewish or bourgeois hate figures, to the primitive instincts of the id. These ideas find continuation in the contemporary science of mass opinion, which, though more individualistic, is equally focused on the irrational. Another reaction was contempt. The prime exponent was Nietzsche, who held in equal disdain the German masses and their preferred form of political expression, anti-semitism. Still others, following Marx, identified with the masses and their political aspirations. They wanted to guide society, but as advisers to the proletariat; they rejected established religious and ethical values as a class swindle and tried to develop new ones. Later in the century, the dialecticians of the Frankfurt School would manage to combine these attitudes, developing a brand of Marxism in which the proletarian subject was wholly deluded by capitalist culture.

The most primitive, and prescient, reaction to mass culture was fear. In Death in Venice, Thomas Mann's hero sits watches a street musician at his hotel:

> Rather than Venetian, he seemed from the race of Neapolitan jokers, half bully, half comedian, brutish and corrupt, dangerous and entertaining... It was a song that the isolated Aschenbach did not remember ever hearing before; a vulgar hit in incomprehensible dialect and furnished with a chorus of laughter, which the band joined in full-throatedly each time. Words and accompaniment would stop, leaving nothing but a rhythmically controlled but very naturally-played laugh, which the soloist could imitate to the life. With the renewed separation between himself and the patrons, his cheek had returned, and his artificial laughter, rising rudely to the terrace, had a note of scorn. At the end of each sung verse, he seemed to be irresistibly overcome with the giggles. He swallowed, his voice trembled, he covered his mouth with his hand, he hunched himself up, and on

> the beat, an uncontrollable howl of laughter burst out of him, with such reality that it was infectious and spread to the audience, so that even on the terrace an aimless, self-feeding hilarity broke out. Just this appeared to double the singer's exuberance. He bent his knees, his shoulders shook, he held his sides, he laughed himself sick, he was no longer laughing, but screaming; he pointed up as if there was nothing funnier than the laughing people above, and in the end there was laughing everywhere, in the garden and on the terrace, down to the waiters, bellboys and servants in the doors.
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> Aschenbach no longer sat back in the chair, he sat up straight as if to protect himself or flee. But the laughter, the rising smell of disinfectant, and the presence of his beloved caught his senses in an unbreakable, inescapable web.

The musician prefigures the fascist demagogue, the manipulator who plays the masses through deliberate art and instinctive connection, who despises and subverts the established social hierarchy, who spreads unreason like the plague running through Venice.

But none of these people believed any more that the poor could or should be enculturated into the middle classes. The political conflict of interest was too great, or the rival forms of commercial culture were too seductive. Indeed, cultural elites in general began to see a much more antagonistic relationship between themselves and the society they were part of. The twentieth century would be the century of the intellectual, who saw himself as attacking, not supporting, mainstream values.

Modernist artists in particular denied a direct responsibility to wider society: valuing art for art's sake, they separated themselves from and looked down upon the commercialized mainstream. "If it is art, it is not for all," Schoenberg wrote, "and if it is for all, it is not art." Even the idea of the artistic avant-garde was less to do with leadership than with exploration; the avant-garde artist or thinker would follow the dictates of his or her own ideas; society might follow if it wished.