A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT OF MASS SOCIETY

by

JOSEPHINE MURIEL SCHOFIELD
B.A., University of Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1967

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department
of
Political Science

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
September, 1971
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Head of my Department or by his representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Political Science

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver 8, Canada

Date 29th September, 1971
Despite its wide currency, the term "mass society" is distinctly ambiguous. This ambiguity raises the question of the utility of the sociological concept of mass society for explaining political phenomena, specifically, the susceptibility of democratic systems to mass politics. Part 1 of the thesis attempts a precise definition of mass society using as a basis the various views of the theorists. A critical analysis of the concept is then undertaken in Part 2.

Before the model is defined, however, the historical origins of the concept are examined briefly. Its roots can be traced back to the founders of Western culture. The concept of mass runs like a thread through the history of political thought reaching its zenith in the 1930's and the post-war period. Then, it was elaborated upon by such theorists as Arendt, Fromm, Kornhauser and Selznick. Since that time it has vied with class analysis as the main explanation of the rise of totalitarianism in the West.

As the concept of the mass(es) was the antecedent of the theory of mass society, it is essential to define the former clearly. The masses are the atomized non-elites in society whose members are unattached, socially unstructured and undifferentiated, and distinguished by alienation and mediocrity. Complementing this notion of the mass(es) is
the concept of the elite(s). They are minorities who hold positions of authority in the central institutions and control the central value systems which guide and legitimate these institutions.

A model of mass society is next outlined and is contrasted with the following societal types: feudal and pluralistic. A mass society is characterized by accessible elites and available non-elites (or masses) with no group structure mediating between the two. It is this paucity of viable primary and secondary groups in mass society that distinguishes it from either a feudal or pluralistic society. The main factors contributing to the "decline of community" in mass society are rapid industrialization, rapid urbanization, bureaucratization and the development of mass culture.

In Part 2, three main criticisms are levelled at the democratic (not the aristocratic) theorists of mass society. First, their analyses are a blend of empirical and normative ingredients and not, as they claim, descriptive only. Second, the concept is too imprecise and third, it is too selective to qualify for the label "scientific." More specifically, the critique takes the following form. The elitist bias of the theorists is exposed in their discussion of the elite-mass relationship. A critical examination of the notion of atomization so crucial to the theory of mass
society is next undertaken. The pluralist bias of the theorists is, then, brought to light. It is argued that in their discussion of the "decline of community" in a mass society, an idealized model of pluralistic society is implicitly postulated as the norm. Their model is idealized because only positive features of such a society are incorporated into it and because it minimizes (or even ignores) such factors as the role of power, the nature of conflict, the unorganized, economic interests, the effects of strains and the consequences of cultural diversity.

What emerges most clearly from this critique of the concept of mass society are the scientific pretensions of the democratic theorists. In other words, far from being an accurate, objective description of social and political reality, as they claim, the concept resembles more of an ideology riddled with their value judgments. The theory of mass society, then, is an ideological position and not a scientific concept.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS v
LIST OF TABLES vi
INTRODUCTION 1

PART 1: THE CONCEPT OF MASS SOCIETY
1. THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT 6
2. THE CONCEPT OF MASS(ES) 11
3. THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF A MASS SOCIETY 17

PART 2: A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT
4. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CRITIQUE 42
5. THE ELITIST BIAS 51
6. THE RISE OR FALL OF COMMUNITY? 68
7. THE PLURALIST BIAS 90

CONCLUSION 115

BIBLIOGRAPHY 119
LIST OF TABLES

Table I: The Constituent Elements of a Mass Society 40
INTRODUCTION

Two conflicting images of modern Western society constantly recur in contemporary writing—be it literature, the social sciences or the humanities. The variation in the images presented is explicable in terms of a difference in ideological perspective. Both viewpoints agree on the structural features of modern society and the factors that produced it but they see radically different consequences for individuals ensuing from such a phenomenon.

On the one hand, modern society is viewed as the most progressive to date in terms of its egalitarian, consensual and humanitarian tendencies. The mass of the population is for the first time enjoying cultural, economic, political and social privileges previously reserved for the few. Freed from the tyrannies of want and traditional authority structures, opportunities for creative, independent living are supposed to have never been greater. In this society of "emerging freedoms" twentieth-century man is seen as enjoying a sense of security, individual dignity and identity hitherto regarded as utopian.

On the other hand, modern society is considered to bear a striking resemblance to Kierkegaard's "broken world of hollow men." The cultural, social and political disintegration of twentieth-century society has left in its wake masses of normless, unattached and insecure individuals. Overwhelmed by
the forces of technology, oppressed by an overcentralized and bureaucratic state, dominated by vast, impersonal corporations, contemporary man, far from being happier, freer, and more integrated than ever before, is seen as powerless, isolated, fearful and anomic. No wonder, then, that, everywhere alienated, mass man sublimates his frustrated desires for roots and his search for community in political aberrations—be they of Left or Right persuasion.

Now, a concept that is so flexible as to be able to embrace two such widely divergent interpretations of modern society can hardly be described as precise. The use of this concept of mass society by social scientists is, by any standard, indiscriminate. As Bramson indicates, "[s] imply because people use the same word for something is no indication that they mean the same thing."¹ The ambiguity of the term raises the question: "What exactly is a mass society?" In Part 1, this thesis attempts a definition by molding together the views of disparate theorists into some kind of coherency. Essentially, what is presented is a model of mass society, the sources of which are many and varied. The imprecision of the concept also suggests that it is less "scientific" than some of the patrons of the term would have us believe. Thus, in Part 2,

the paper will examine whether the concept is an accurate
description of reality or merely an ideology. Basically,
Part 2 is a critique of the theorists' views.

Despite its manifest ambiguity, the concept of mass
society occupies a central place in contemporary social theory. Its significance is revealed in the following comments. It has been variously described as "Marxism apart, the most influential social theory in the Western world today" (Bell); "the dominant myth of the post-modern age" (Walter); and "a specter ... haunting sociologists" (Shils).

In view of its importance, why has the "specter" of mass society failed to disturb the slumbers of political scientists during the post-war period? For, although the concept is securely lodged in the sociological imagination, it is conspicuous by its absence in the contemporary political imagination.¹ The pre-emption of the concept by sociologists need hardly concern us if its subject-matter is only peripherally political. However, the concept of mass society has an explicit political dimension that has been generally left unappraised by political scientists. It seeks to explain the sources and genesis of political extremism in Western

¹Support for this statement is provided by Tinder who laments the "blindness of both political scientists and politicians to "the menace of mass disintegration." See G. Tinder, "Human Estrangement and the Failure of Political Imagination," The Review of Politics, Vol. 21, No. 4 (October 1959), p. 620.
democratic systems. A thorough evaluation of the adequacy of this explanation is outside the scope of this thesis. A sketchy appraisal only is made during the critique. It is hoped that the start begun here might awaken the Rip Van Winkles of the profession to further analysis of this essentially political concept.
PART 1

THE CONCEPT OF MASS SOCIETY
CHAPTER 1

THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT

The intellectual history of the concept has been neglected by social scientists but such an enterprise is outside the scope of this thesis. The origins of the concept are here examined only briefly as our main concern lies with the late stages of its development.

The roots of the idea of mass society date from the very beginning of Western philosophy. Its source is found in the writings of Aristotle and Plato and their Roman successors: Livy, Plutarch and Virgil. The Greek concept of hoi polloi is closely allied with the Roman historians' idea of the "tumultuous populace:"

The picture of the mass as capable only of violence and excess originates with Aristotle's Politics. In his threefold typology, democracy is equated with the rule of hoi polloi - who are easily swayed by demagogues - and must degenerate into tyranny. The notion of the masses as developed in Hellenistic times was deepened by the struggles between plebs and aristocracy in the Roman Republic and by the efforts of the Caesars to exploit mob support; the image of the insensate mob fed by 'bread and circuses' became deeply imprinted in history. 1

Most theorists (for example, Bramson and Kornhauser), however, locate the origins of the concept in the nineteenth-

century, more specifically, in the ideas of the Counter-Enlightenment and the reaction to the French Revolution. It was no coincidence that this century was also "the century of the emergence of the political mass," created by the extension of the franchise. Aversion to this process of democratization and its effects upon society and culture was expressed by such diverse thinkers as de Bonald, de Maistre, Taine, Tarde, Acton, Burke and de Tocqueville. They feared that individual liberty would be sacrificed for equality and the effects of increased mass participation upon the performance of the elites.

The work of sociologists on various aspects of nineteenth-century society also contributed to the development of the concept of mass society. Tonnies' analytical distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft gave sociological content to the sense of structural deterioration. Durkheim used his concept of anomie to explain the spirit of discontent and unrest brought on by the social dislocations. Le Bon and Simmel's work on crowd psychology demonstrated the increased suggestibility and manipulability of people lacking group ties.

---


Weber's analysis showed the effects of the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization shaping modern society. "What made this kind of sociological theory relevant to the idea of mass society was its analysis of the atomization and depersonalization of social organization resulting from modernization."\(^1\)

It, however, is important to point out that what these nineteenth-century writers (and others before them) were discussing was not the idea of mass society as such but rather the characteristics of mass behavior:

Before [the 1930's] ..., thinking about mass behavior was restricted to dealing with the 'mass' as a part of society, examining the conditions that produced it, the types of action peculiar to it and their implications. After that time, the characteristics of the 'mass' were attributed to society as a whole.\(^2\)

Up to the watershed, the idea of the mass was equated with the mob or the nineteenth-century concept of the crowd. For Le Bon, Park et al. the mass was regarded as a regression to a lower stage of civilization. Their use of the concept

---


revealed an explicit aristocratic bias. The term "mass" had a pejorative meaning referring either to a psychic state, for example, mass hysteria or to a social condition such as mass behavior.

The earlier meaning of the concept was far removed from the idea of mass society. Walter explains what is missing:

This concept traditionally emphasized a high level of affect, intense interaction and contagion - above all, the social-psychological condition that Park termed \textit{rapport}. In contrast, the idea of mass society pictures emotional privation, mechanical interactions, isolation, atomization and alienation - a condition in which \textit{rapport} is absent.\footnote{Walter, "'Mass Society'," pp. 399-400.}

It was left to Blumer, Freud and Ortega y Gasset to add the necessary elements to the concept of mass in order to create a concept of mass society. Blumer was the first sociologist to distinguish between crowd and mass behavior adding the traits of anonymity, atomization and isolation to the latter. Freud stressed the durability of the masses, which were formerly regarded as short-lived phenomena, by stating the conditions under which permanent groups like churches and armies were transformed into psychological masses.\footnote{Ibid., p. 401.} Ortega y Gasset led the field in identifying the rule of the masses as the chief feature of the present age and in linking fascism and communism to this phenomenon.
The main impetus of the change in emphasis of the concept from applying only to a part to encompassing the whole of society, was the development of totalitarian systems. The task of creating a descriptive and theoretical literature to explain their growth was undertaken by such writers as Lederer, Mannheim, Neumann and later by Arendt, Fromm, Kornhauser, Nisbet and Selznick. It is the work of this latter post-war group that is scrutinized in this thesis. Either explicitly or implicitly, these theorists used the concept of mass society in their analyses of the sources and characteristics of extremist movements. In so doing they pinpointed certain tendencies in modern democratic society: alienation and social atomization that increase the vulnerability of such a society to political extremism. These totalitarian tendencies will be examined below in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 2

THE CONCEPT OF MASS(ES)

In attempting a definition of "mass society" it is necessary first to define "mass" for, as we saw above, the characteristics of the mass were superimposed onto society at large during the later stages of the development of the concept. Unfortunately, there is no one clear definition of the term that is generally accepted. The term has been used interchangeably with many different social groupings - the crowd, the majority, the mediocre, the mob, the Philistines, the people, the poor, the public, the workers and the non-classes. The ambiguity of the term is such that Judith Shklar might well ask "the great question: What and who are the masses?"\(^1\)

Nonetheless, even though the use of the concept often reveals more of the ideological position of the person employing it than it clarifies the social phenomenon under discussion, all writers concur - either explicitly or implicitly - on one meaning of the term. That is, they accept its purely political meaning that the masses comprise the millions who do not hold offices in a polity. We can assert, then, that the term always refers to the non-elites in society,

irrespective of how this group is viewed. Thus, this "essentially abstract concept ... takes on color only when set against the articulate, politically or economically organized minority operating in a particular institutional context." The concept of the mass generates a complementary concept of the elite, which will be defined more fully below.

If we accept Shklar's statement that there are "only two genuinely sociological theories" to account for the masses, we can come closer to establishing a precise definition of the term. One theory regards the masses as the antithesis of classes. The other theory is Le Bon's "simple elitism" that identifies the mass with the irrational crowd.

With one exception, mass society theorists do not equate the masses with classes. For them, the former lack the distinctiveness and the unity of interest that define classes:

---


2 Shklar, After Utopia, p. 160.

3 S.M. Lipset is the exception. He defines the masses as "the lower strata," "the exploited classes." See Political Man (New York, Anchor Books, 1963), p. xxiii. Also, Walter indicates that socialists use the term in its plural form only to refer to the "chosen class." See "Mass Society," p. 398.
Masses are not held together by a consciousness of common interest and they lack that specific class articulateness which is expressed in determined, limited and obtainable goals. The term masses applies only where we deal with people who... cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest. 1

Compare the definitions offered by Kornhauser and Selznick. For the former, the masses are "an aggregate of people without distinction of groups or individuals." 2 For the latter: "Mass connotes a 'glob of humanity,' as against the intricately related, institutionally bound groupings which form a healthy social organism." 3

From these definitions we can deduce that the masses are:

a) isolated,
b) unattached,
c) structureless,
d) undifferentiated. 4

All these characteristics are derived from the fact that the members of the mass belong to no organization.

---

4This trait implies that the mass is also homogeneous. However, in another sense, as Wilensky (following Blumer and Wirth) points out, the mass is heterogeneous as it is dispersed geographically cross-cutting many groups and subcultures. See H. Wilensky, "Mass Society and Mass Culture: Interdependence or Independence," American Sociological Review, Vol. 29, No. 2 (April 1964), p. 176, ff. 9.
The isolation of the masses, their lack of membership in political or social units and their consequent lack of social interaction, result from a general process of social fragmentation. The weakening of family, church and traditional political ties leads to a psychological atomization. For the leading advocates of the theory of mass society, it is not the size of the mass— in short, its quantity—that distinguishes it but its atomized quality:

What is crucial in the formation of the masses is the atomization of all social and cultural relationships within which human beings gain their normal sense of membership in society. The mass is an aggregate of individuals who are insecure, basically lonely and ground down ... into mere particles of social dust. Within the mass all ordinary relationships and authorities seem devoid of institutional function and psychological meaning. ¹

The consequences of atomization are dire indeed. Lacking meaningful human relations, the insecurity and instability of the mass and their consequent desire to belong in some sense, render its members suggestible to manipulation and available for mobilization by elites bent on total domination.

With the refinement of sociological analysis since the time of Le Bon's work on crowd psychology, no longer is the crowd identified with the mass rather the two are distinguished. However, shades of his "simple elitism" still linger in the works of some mass society theorists. For example, the

¹Nisbet, The Quest for Community, pp. 198-199.
"irrationality" of the mass is used by Arendt, Lederer (and Koestler) to explain the success of totalitarianism and the failure of socialism.  

More important, in the sense of being more widespread among the theorists is the extension of the label "mediocrity" or "averageness" to cover the mass as well as the crowd. Members of the mass are thought not to be distinguished by excellence or creativity in any sphere. Individuals possessing these traits would, by definition, belong to the elites in society. "The mass is implicitly defined in contrast to these creative and culture-sustaining elites and hence it is conceived of as being essentially unqualified." Members of the non-elites are regarded as lacking and indifferent to cultural and aesthetic values - as "co-ordinated masses of respectable Philistines."

In answer to the question: "What and who are the masses?" we can reply, then, as follows: They are the atomized non-elites in society whose members are unattached, socially unstructured, and undifferentiated, and distinguished by alienation and mediocrity.

The idea of the mass involves a corresponding concept, that of the elite which remains to be defined.

---

1Shklar, After Utopia, p. 324.
3Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 337.
The concept of the elite as used by the theorists of mass society does not imply a single, comprehensive elite but rather a plurality of elites, each set apart from the rest of society by its pre-eminence in particular areas. These elites are minorities who hold positions of authority in the central institutions and control the central value systems which guide and legitimate these institutions. The chief function of all groups constituting the elite is to formulate and maintain fundamental values and policies in their area of competence be it culture, economics, military affairs, politics, religion or technology. "An elite, then, is composed of people who by virtue of their social position have special responsibility for standards in a given social context."¹

With both the elite and the mass defined, we can now turn our attention to sifting out the main features of a mass society. In a sense, the concept of mass(es) is the parent of such a society just as "the child is father of the man." How close the family resemblance is will be brought out below. But as in any parent-child relationship there are differences also.

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 51.
CHAPTER 3

THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF A MASS SOCIETY

In the following discussion the concept of mass society is not intended to depict any actual society. It is rather an ideal type denoting certain abstract relationships that, taken together, constitute a "mass society." Whether a given society or some part of it warrants the label "mass" is "always a question of degree."\(^1\) But the difficulty is to pinpoint this "degree" accurately. The approach adopted here circumvents this for "if we understand that what we are asserting is a relation between abstract characters - the nature of the mass and the quality of elites - this problem can be avoided."\(^2\) Comparisons between mass society and other societal types - principally, feudal and pluralistic - are made throughout this discussion. It must be stressed that these are analytical constructs and not actual descriptions.

Obviously, our first task in attempting to construct a model of mass society is to apply the characteristics of the mass described in chapter 2 to society generally. This transition from the micro- to the macro-level of analysis

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 228.

is not just a question of simply grafting these traits onto the larger collectivity. More complex surgery is involved. For example, the masses were earlier described as the non-elites. But it does not follow from this that a mass society is one characterized by no elites - the meaning deriving from a crude, grafting operation.

A mass society is distinguished by a special kind of relationship between both masses and elites. "The rule of the masses is not inconsistent with elite control of the state for that rule is expressed in the fact that the governing elite is itself formed in the image of the mass."¹

In a mass society, then, the mass supplants the values of the culture-bearing elite with its own commonplace values that tend to be homogeneous and fluid. This usurpation is aided by the pervasion of the ideology of egalitarianism which weakens respect for traditional social and political authorities. This ideology is expressed in the populist character of mass society. The popular legitimation of authority, although centering in the polity, spreads to all kinds of social institutions:

All members of mass society are equally valued as voters, buyers and spectators. Numerical superiority therefore tends to be the decisive criterion of success. In the political realm this means the number of votes; in the economic realm it is the number of sales; and in the cultural realm it is the size of the audience.²

¹Ibid., p. 321.
The power of the majority almost completely undermines the autonomy of the elite.

The elite-mass division dominates the structure of mass society. "By and large, all social positions are either 'elite' or 'non-elite'; with few intermediate gradations."\(^1\) In a sense, this corresponds to the feudal type of social structure that is characterized by a small elite and a large mass. There is, however, a crucial difference, apart from the agricultural-industrial dichotomy. Under feudalism extreme status differences mark off the elite from the mass so that the latter has no influence upon the former. But in a mass society the elite is fashioned in the very image of the mass. This relationship is not found in a pluralistic society either even though the non-elites control the elites (via elections) as in a mass society. Under pluralism, however, the latter are distinguishable from the mass electorate by their superior qualifications whereas in a mass society, the elite merely reflect the incompetence of the mass.

With one exception,\(^2\) the writers on the topic of mass society agree that a society in which the mass is "sovereign"

---


\(^2\)Shils is the "odd man out." He welcomes the fact that "in one way or another, vox populi, vox dei, is the source of mass society" viewing it as an enhancement of the masses' dignity. See E. Shils, "The Theory of Mass Society," *Diogenes*, No. 39 (Fall 1962), p. 53.
is also one in which no one is qualified. For the intervention of the mass into such key institutional areas as politics, consumption and communication, means, by definition, a spread of incompetence into these areas (ref., the mediocrity of the mass). Selznick argues that in the concept of the mass as unfit, judgments concerning the inherent competence of various strata of society are irrelevant. What is at stake is the roles of individuals not their quality. "What is really identified is a social system in which the indispensable functions of creative elites cannot be performed."¹ (The validity of this statement is discussed in the critique - for the moment it is accepted at face value).

The effect of mass pressure upon the elites is therefore a debilitating one. No longer insulated from popular pressures as they are in both feudal and pluralistic societies, the elites are prevented from carrying out their functions of creating and sustaining culture, and providing the effective social leadership that insulation permitted. Their loss of exclusiveness and authority also render them insecure hence manipulable by mass pressures especially as they are inaccessible by legitimate (in the pluralist sense) means. The mode of intervention used by the mass to gain access to the elite is, therefore, direct and unrestrained. Just as the elites are susceptible to manipulation by the masses so are

¹Selznick, Organizational Weapon, p. 278.
the masses available for manipulation and mobilization by elites. Access to elites and availability of non-elites are prerequisites of a mass society. "Elites are accessible and non-elites are available in that there is a paucity of independent groups between the state and the family to protect either elites or non-elites from manipulation and mobilization by the other."¹

It is this relative absence of a "parapolitical" structure made up of a proliferation of independent interest groups and voluntary associations that sets off a mass society from its pluralistic counterpart. In the latter, the protection afforded by such a mediating structure enables the elites to preserve their autonomy and distinctiveness whilst implementing the wishes of the people. Their demands are relayed to the leaders through the channels of communication established by groups. Lacking such channels of restraint, the non-elites in a mass society express their demands directly.

In contrast to the available hence manipulable non-elites of mass society, the availability of the mass under pluralism is low for the personal commitments elicited from membership in diverse and autonomous groups act as deterrents against elite manipulation. The non-elites, however, lack such ties

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 41.
in a mass society. Isolated except for their link with the central institutions, they are suggestible to manipulation precisely because they lack group resources and so lack the information and support required to form their own opinions. The factors responsible for the erosion of an intermediate group structure intervening between individuals-in-the-mass and "massive power" are now examined.

We saw above that the atomized, shapeless, unintegrated mass emerged from a general process of structural disintegration in society. This process can perhaps best be understood as a "decline of community." Mass societies, then, are those societies that "enjoy power and plenty and yet be poor in the vital element of community."¹

Several factors contributed to the decline in the significance of this communal concept and the concomitant rise of the masses. First, the process of industrialization under capitalism was "an isolating and separating process that stripped off the historically grown layers of custom and social membership, leaving only levelled masses of individuals."² However, industrialization produces masses only if the process is introduced in such a manner as to


²Ostrogorski quoted in Nisbet, Quest for Community, p. 96.
involve "marked discontinuities in social organization."¹ In such cases, the process has a particularly drastic effect upon primary relations. "Industrialization ... grinds down the autonomy and intensity, the numerical size, the duration and the functions of primary groups."² The decay of such groups is further exacerbated by the increased social mobility that results from this process.

Second, the process of urbanization released increasing numbers of individuals from the traditional confines of extended family, guild and village community and left them rootless in their new urban environment. Again, this characteristic of the mass is more likely to develop if the influx into the city is rapid:

The city does not develop the communal life that was formerly provided by the rural community ... The urban subcommunity loses its coherence as a result of the increasing scale and specialization of common activities. Instead of affiliation with a community, the urban resident experiences considerable social isolation and personal anonymity.³

Rapid urbanization, then, destroys smaller social units but offers only impersonality and atomization in their place.

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 150.
Third, the trend toward bureaucratization of the major institutions of society, an outgrowth of the twin processes of industrialization and urbanization, undermined the autonomy of local groups and secondary associations. This structural trend atomizes the community by rendering people's social bases of control ineffective. "[T]he growth of bureaucracy thrusts decision-making centers beyond the effective range of understanding and influence, leaving only the isolated and exposed individual."¹

There is agreement amongst social theorists that these three processes are the main agents of the decline of community. This is not to deny that there are other secondary sources such as population increase, the growth of the nation-state, and the spread of Protestantism that stressed the individual rather than the group as the central unit. The ascendancy of the doctrine of individualist-liberalism also negated the importance of the social context. The influence of these factors, however, pales besides that exerted by the development of mass culture.

This phenomenon is a byproduct of the three major processes shaping mass society and of the loosening of the traditional monopoly of culture by the upper classes. Its development sounded the death-knell for the communal concept.

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 120.
"Mass culture emerges when community, that is, groups of individuals linked to each other by concrete interests and values, is eroded. Mass culture, in turn, further undermines community."¹ The mass media exert a "homogenizing" effect upon the heterogeneous mass and brings about an uniformity in attitude and life-style and a standardization in ideas and tastes. Similarities between individuals become more important than their differences - be they ethnic, regional, etc. The distinctiveness and unique qualities of such local cultures are lost as they come into contact with mass culture. The contacts offered by the media are poor substitutes for social relationships. Instead of providing meaningful experience, they stereotype individual experience and so alienate people and intensify their isolation. The media, "by weakening community with immediate surroundings make people lonely even when in a crowd and crowded even when alone."²

For the mass society theorists, the contemporary problem of community focuses in the realm of small, primary relationships and in the area of those secondary relationships that act as mediating agents between the individual and the larger society:

Whatever the differences among individual writers, there is a common core of description in the term 'mass society' which suggests the attenuation of primary and local associations and groups ... The emphasis is upon the breakdown of immediate relationships and differentiations so that the population is now much more homogeneous but also less sharply identified and affiliated with distinctive social groups. It is in this sense that the theorist of mass society views the traditional categories of sociological analysis - family, class, community, ethnic identity, etc. - as having lost significance in mass societies. 1

The theorists do not argue that primary groups disappear in a mass society. Instead, they assert that their **functions** are weakened under mass conditions. In earlier times such primary groups as family, church and local community performed certain functions - mutual aid, welfare, education, recreation, economic production and distribution - that were indispensable for feudal society. Both the economy and the political order presupposed the existence of these small, local groups to achieve their ends. 1 Now, however, the functions of these groups have changed. For example, the church is more of a welfare and recreational agency than a religious one; or else, the functions have been redistributed to other institutions, for example, the state has assumed a major role in economic production and distribution. These changes in function affect the members' allegiances to the primary groups. They are no

---


2 Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, pp. 50-54.
longer able to act either as sources of support or meaning for individuals. Consequently, their importance in a mass society is minimal.

Intermediate secondary groups also become irrelevant for individuals in a mass society. Economic interest groups, for example, lose their hold over their members because the importance of class diminishes in such a society. Increased social (and spatial) mobility\(^1\) and the entry of most of the population into such areas as consumption and politics, blur class distinctions and boundaries. Class dissolves into mass. This sociological transformation and the psychological condition of loneliness that ensues are, for Arendt, the prerequisites for the creation of a mass society.\(^2\)

On a more general level, the spread of large-scale organization is, in part, responsible for the loss of effectiveness on the part of secondary associations. The increase in the size of these groups means a corresponding increase in inaccessibility to their members' influence. Their failure to meet the needs of their membership results in the latter's disenchantment. Lacking control, participation in these associations seems meaningless. Consequently, the

---


\(^2\)Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 336.
interrelationship between the individual and the central institutions becomes, increasingly, a direct one.

This weakening of intermediate relations is offset by the increasing centralization of decision-making, politically, in the state and, economically, in a small group of large corporate bodies. The political sector is probably the chief beneficiary in the sense of acquiring ever-increasing influence and authority but all other key institutional sectors gain from the decline in community. These national bodies take over the functions of intermediate associations. "Thus, mass society does not represent a state of disorganization but of organization around the state and other national organizations."¹

The extension in the scale of their activities removes the individual further and further from the source of decision-making. The impotence of the individual is enhanced by the bureaucratic nature of the relationships that typify these large-scale aggregates. These relationships are relatively standardized and impersonal not individualized and personal like primary relations. "This standardization and impersonality heightens the mass quality of the society."²

Oriented exclusively toward efficiency and service, and bound to the needs of the moment, these large-scale national


bureaucracies soon cease to be institutions in any meaningful sense and become merely mass organizations. For Selznick, the mass is in part responsible for this transformation. For the levelling pressure it applies on the institutional elites to accept its standards is "indifferent to long-run cultural meaning" and serves "to deny to institutions any intrinsic value."¹

Mass society, then, is dominated by centralized, bureaucratic, large-scale organizations. These mass organizations be they industrial corporations, trade-unions or mass political parties or movements, replace primary groups as the characteristic units of society. Impersonal, bureaucratic relationships replace personal, informal primary relationships. "Everywhere there is organization; everywhere bureaucratization; like the world of feudalism, the modern world is broken up into areas dominated by castles but not the castles of les chansons de geste but the castles of Kafka."²

The characteristics of mass organization constitute a microcosm of mass society. They are distinguished by size and complexity, segmental participation, high mobilization

¹Selznick, Organizational Weapon, p. 296.
and a relatively unstructured membership. The last three traits are elaborated upon below, the first being self-evident.

Segmental participation has two dimensions: extent and quality. As a mass organization only demands a partial commitment from the individual, his interest and participation in it is limited. The quality of his participation is also segmental in that relationships are levelled and depersonalized:

Individuals interact not as whole personalities but according to the roles they play in the situation at hand. This is characteristic of urban life and of formal organizations where only the functional relevance of individuals is prized. The personalities of the individuals are levelled; men deal with themselves and with each other as abstractions and as manipulable commodities. 1

Thus, mass organizations fail to offer opportunities for participation equivalent in extent and quality to those proffered by their predecessors, primary groups.

For an organization to qualify for the label "mass," mobilization of the rank-and-file must be high. A book club

1Selznick, Organizational Weapon, p. 287. This whole discussion of the characteristics of mass organizations owes much to Selznick.

Compare Fromm (who closely follows Marx) on the functional nature of the contemporary employer-employee relationship:

The owner of capital employs another human being as he 'employs' a machine. They both use each other for the pursuit of their economic interests; their relationship is one in which both are means to an end, both are instrumental to each other. It is not a relationship of two human beings who have any interest in the other outside of this mutual usefulness.

or a trade-union in which the only activity of the membership is dues-paying, do not qualify. Activity in a mass organization is mobilized from the center rather than generated through groups within the structure for the latter are absent. There are only the undifferentiated mass and the elite and so the organization is unintegrated like the mass itself. In order to achieve its ends, the elite must win the consent of the membership:

Consent in the age of organization does not connote self-government, much less the idea of participation as practised in the ancient 'polity.' It means, instead, 'commitment' which is something far different. Commitment is the special prescription for a mass age where men are isolated and their lives depersonalized and bleak. Their wants are psychic and hence to be satisfied by 'integration' rather than made more anxious by the demands of participation. The aim of the elite therefore is to convert 'neutral men' into a 'committed polity.'

This process of conversion is helped by the fact that the mass is alienated. Lacking attachments to any groups outside the organization, the mass turns to it for sustenance. "The result is a group which may be manipulated and mobilized—hallmarks of a modern mass organization."2

As mass organizations neither build upon nor support primary relations among members, the relationship between the membership and the centralized elite is unmediated and

---

2 Selznick, Organizational Weapon, p. 289.
impersonal. The attachment of the mass to the symbols employed by the elites to control it is also unmediated. These "new unmediated man-symbol relationships have a manipulative directness"\(^1\) that is lacking in older forms of symbolic control such as those found in feudal or pluralistic societies. As traditional symbolic controls were mediated through group channels, the individual was provided with some means of assessing their significance. But in these new relationships, the individual, lacking such intermediaries, is unable to test the ideas symbolized. As they bear little or no relation to his daily life, his relationship with the symbols is both "superficial and artificial."\(^2\) Members of the mass are, therefore, susceptible to manipulation by the symbols.

The elite is aided in its symbolic manipulation of the non-elite by the communications media. The former is able to make use of these means because, in a mass society, the relationship between the media and the political sector, for example, is a "contingent" one in contrast to the "autonomous" relationship in a class (or pluralistic) society.\(^3\) Manipulation is further facilitated in a mass society as the masses are "mere media markets":

---

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 290.

\(^2\)Ibid.

In this view, the public is merely the collectivity of individuals each rather passively exposed to the mass media and rather helplessly opened up to the suggestions and manipulations that flow from these media. The fact of manipulation from centralized points of control constitutes, as it were, an expropriation of the old multitude of little opinion producers and consumers operating in a free and balanced market.

Unlike a pluralistic society where discussion is the dominant mode of communication and the media are merely utilized to link discussions between "primary publics," a mass society is dominated by a communications technique that is essentially manipulative in character. Organizational elites are in full command of the channels of communication - they not only create but also control mass opinion.

Mass organizations are regarded by mass society theorists as paltry substitutes for the primary and secondary groups they have replaced. They fall down on three counts: on the type of participation they offer, on the nature of the commitment they elicit and on the manipulation they exercise. (In fact, we would not expect to find a viable group life in a mass society, the macrocosm of a mass organization, for, being masslike, groups, by definition, are insignificant). For the theorists, mass organizations are unable to provide the direction and support, the psychological meaning and identity, and the

---

socialization to members that the customary authorities provided. Perhaps their greatest failure is their inability to inculcate values:

Institutions functioning under conditions of mass society do not touch the character and the personal values of those exposed to them. Being solely instrumental means, the major associations and institutions of the society cannot act as agencies through which values are inculcated. Because of this, the political elites of the society cannot mediate decisions to the acceptance of the rank-and-file. ¹

Instead of countering the alienation of the mass, these organizations may actually enhance it and so fail as agencies of integration.

In failing to assume the role and functions of the groups they have replaced, mass organizations fail to provide a structured force between the individual and "massive power." The effects of this lack upon the individual are graphically described by Wright Mills:

And, in the mass, he loses the self-confidence of the human being - if indeed he has ever had it. For life in a society of masses implants insecurity and furthers impotence; it makes men uneasy and vaguely anxious; it isolates the individual from the solid group; it destroys firm group standards. Acting without goals, the man in the mass just feels pointless. ²

As he lacks a sense of belonging to primary groups and as he finds membership in the large-scale, impersonal aggregates an

²Wright Mills, Power Elite, p. 323.
unsatisfactory substitute, the individual in a mass society is essentially isolated. "The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships."\(^1\) His sense of isolation and the resulting feelings of insignificance and powerlessness are manifestations of his alienation defined as "attitudes of indifference, helplessness, distrust or apathy which result when the individual has no sense of identification with the organization on which he is dependent."\(^2\)

Alienated mass man is a product of the process of social disintegration that destroys the bonds of allegiance to both primary and intermediate structures. Personal alienation is thus related to the structural properties of mass society. "The alienation of the individual in modern societies is the psychological statement of detachment."\(^3\) The social and political alienation of the individual have the same root: lack of attachment to primary or secondary groups. Belonging to no social or political body, the individual is free to reunite in new groups that purport to offer him the "community" he so desperately needs:

\(^1\)Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 317.
The alienated mass man is in society but not of it. He does not accept responsibility for the preservation of value systems hence may easily be moved to new adherence. 1

The search for community is not unique to a mass society but is a "timeless and universal phenomenon" - the shape and intensity of which varies from age to age. 2 In a society characterized by sudden social change and dislocation, and by a decline of community, this search looms large in importance. The quest for community can be defined as "the need for human beings to dwell in more intimate relationships with each other, to enjoy more affective ties, to experience some closer solidarity than the nature of urbanized and industrialized society seems willing to grant." 3 In their search for a substitute for the primary bonds they have given up, individuals enter the arena of political extremism. Participation in mass movements provides a means of satisfying their desire to belong. They experience a sense of reintegration into a "greater" community.

For the mass society theorists, the source of political extremism is located in the atomized conditions of mass society. The obstacles to community created by such conditions enhance the susceptibility of the mass to movements

2Nisbet, Quest for Community, p. 30.
that offer a similar phenomenon. "The dread spectacle of totalitarianism as an organized movement in every Western country at the present time cannot be divorced from the proffer of community to individuals for whom sensations of dissolution and alienation have become intolerable."\(^1\) However, the theorists consider the images of community presented by such movements to be merely substitute forms. For Kornhauser, their ideologies and programs only "simulate but do not create community."\(^2\) Similarly, Fromm regards man's ties of allegiance to these movements as "pseudo." For him, "these new bonds do not constitute real union with the world" and never can, for they represent attempts to solve neurotic symptoms that result from unbearable psychological conditions. "They leave unchanged the conditions that necessitate the neurotic solution."\(^3\)

Extremist movements are utterly dependent upon the existence of the mass for their own creation and growth. The decline of community creates the opportunity for mass-oriented elites to mobilize the non-elites in order to destroy institutional restraints on political power and

\(^1\)Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, pp. 33-34.  
\(^3\)Fromm, *Fear of Freedom*, p. 205.
to gain control so as to transform mass into a totalitarian society. "People cannot be mobilized against the established order until they first have been divorced from prevailing codes and values."¹ The elites of totalitarian movements exploit the sense of aloneness and disillusionment that characterizes the mass in order to secure a total commitment from its atomized members. "Compared with all other parties and movements, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual members."² In the "intolerable emptiness" of mass society, then, the only kind of loyalty possible is the attachment to anti-democratic movements - a bond the mass zealously clings to.

In order to manipulate the mass and to keep it in a constant state of mobilization, the totalitarian elites employ a variety of emotion-invoking devices and symbols. Perhaps the most effective of these is demagoguery. The impact of a skilful agitator upon his mass audience can be devastating:

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 123. For differences vis a vis mass and totalitarian societies, see pp. 32-34, p. 41 and pp. 122-123.
²Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 323.
In him, the martyr ultimately triumphant over his detractors and persecutors, the adherents see all their own frustrations magically metamorphosed into grandiose gratifications. They who are marginal suddenly have a prospect of sharing in the exceptional; their suffering now can appear to them as a glorious trial, their anonymity and servitude as stations on the road to fame and mastery. The agitator ... shows them how all the accumulated stuff of repression and frustration can be lit up into a magnificent fireworks, how the refuse of daily drudgery can be converted into a high explosion of pervasive destruction. 1

He succeeds, where mass society failed, in arousing the emotions of an alienated mass but to what end? According to the theorists, the masses' quest for community finds its resting-place in political aberrations that threaten not only democracy but also the very social fabric that nurtured them.

The threads of the above discussion on the constituent elements of a mass society can now be drawn together. The dominant interrelationship in such a society is the elite-mass one — besides this, all others pale into insignificance. Accessibility and availability, respectively, distinguish these two aggregates which are both manipulable, the one by the other. These traits depend for their creation upon the atomized conditions of a mass society.

The atomization of mass society arises from the breakdown in the functioning of primary groups and secondary associations and the failure of the large-scale, impersonal mass organizations that replace them to assume their roles and functions. The latter offer only mechanical interaction not social. People are socially isolated from one another and interact only as segmented, impersonal, role actors. The decline of community leaves individuals isolated, unattached, structureless, and unintegrated thus available for mobilization by movements proffering fellowship.

The isolation and the concomitant alienation of the individual are exploited most successfully by elites bent on total domination. Purporting to satisfy the desperate quest for community pursued by the mass, these elites merely use the communal vision as a means of manipulation in order to achieve their own anti-democratic ends.

A simple tabulation of the main characteristics of mass society is presented below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Elements</th>
<th>Psychological Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Isolation</td>
<td>Emotional privation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct elite-mass relations</td>
<td>Alienation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralized national relations</td>
<td>Susceptibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attenuated primary and intermediate relations</td>
<td>Manipulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Egalitarianism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impersonality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Atomization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART 2

A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT
CHAPTER 4
THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CRITIQUE

Having delineated the concept of mass society in Part 1, we now turn our attention to an assessment of it. The problem, however, is to decide upon what dimension this critical evaluation should be undertaken. Is the concept purely "scientific?" Or, is it solely an ideology? Does it merely describe social and political reality? Or, is it rather a perspective for evaluating such phenomena?

The basic contention of this thesis is that the concept of mass society is not "scientific" in the modern, loose sense of the term, that is, purely descriptive implying no set of values. It is an ideological viewpoint, a Weltanschauung, that is, a selective interpretation of the conditions in society made by those who share some particular conception of what it ought to be.¹ To deny that the concept is "scientific" is not to deny its analytical value. Thus, to dismiss, as Bramson does, the concept as mere ideology because it does not meet the canons of science, is too glib a conclusion.² "To neglect, in the name of science, the idea of mass society, and to refuse to explore the sense in which it is true is to withdraw from

²Bramson, Political Context, pp. 117-118.
the present age with the obstinate purity that builds a Copernican ghetto in a city of Ptolemaists.¹

The concept, then, is not based wholly on empirical evidence but contains within it certain value orientations that underlie the arguments of the theorists and determine the problems to be discussed. This blending of facts and values would seem to be inherent in the subject-matter of social science but as the ongoing, unresolved controversy over the fact-value dichotomy demonstrates, this opinion is by no means generally accepted. Thus, not all the theorists would accept that their analyses are distinguished by an intermingling of empirical and normative elements. Selznick, for example, gives no overt indication that he regards the concept as anything other than an "analytical category"² and so ignores in toto the value presuppositions inherent in the concept. Kornhauser, whilst recognizing that the concept is a "value perspective for evaluating the quality of culture and institutions" as well as a "theory" in the scientific sense,³ explicitly distinguishes between them. For him, the theoretical nature of a concept is

²Selznick, Organizational Weapon, p. xvii.
³Kornhauser, "Mass Society," p. 64.
The terms "theory" or "analysis" used by the theorists require elaboration. First, they can be used interchangeably. Second, in contradistinction to value perspectives, they are essentially non-normative. In either activity - analyzing or theorizing - no judgments are passed, no preferences expressed.
separate from its value relevance. Unfortunately, however, this distinction is not strictly observed and, as will be shown below, value judgments are sometimes disguised as facts.

In the arena of methodological combat within contemporary social science, to label those of a positivist persuasion "ideologues" is analogous to throwing a red rag at the proverbial bull. Nonetheless, theorists such as Kornhauser and Selznick who claim that the neutrality of science permeates their analyses of mass society, lay themselves open to attack for their scientific pretensions. Hopefully, this critique will expose their hidden value premises and in so doing knock one more nail into the coffin of the sterile fact-value dichotomy.

In a sense to attack pretensions is to attack "straw men" for much of what the theorists say, especially Kornhauser, is of value and adds to our understanding of the forces that strengthen and, conversely, weaken liberal democracy. This thesis in no way aims to depreciate the theorists' contributions but it does intend to point out the danger of too easy an acceptance of some of the key propositions of the concept by professional and "pop" social scientists. These ideas have percolated through contemporary literature to such an extent that they are now accepted as "obvious truths" rather than as

---

1Kornhauser, Politics, p. 24.
unconfirmed hypotheses (ref., the alienation hypothesis). In part, the responsibility for this rests on the shoulders of the theorists for claiming that the concept of mass society is "scientific" in nature. Their pretensions, then, can justifiably be criticized.

The label "scientific" is misapplied to the concept on three grounds. First, the "theory" of mass society is not purely descriptive but is characterized by a mixture of normative and empirical elements. "Two things are mixed up in that theory: a judgment as to the quality of modern experience - with much of which any sensitive individual would agree - and presumed scientific statements."¹ A prime example of this blending is supplied by Selznick. For him: "To analyze mass behavior is to identify a 'disease'."²

Second, the "theory" is imprecise as shown by the amount of conflicting evidence that fits several of its hypotheses (ref., alienation and the concept of the mass). The ambiguity of certain of the terms in part explains this. "Although it provides theoretical support for many investigations, lack of precision denies it the function of theory in the scientific sense."³

Third, the concept of mass society falls down because it ignores some data that do not fit. It cannot, therefore, qualify as a theory for the latter does not imply a set of facts but is oriented toward comprehending as wide a number of data as possible. The concept resembles more of an ideology than a theory in its selectivity of information. Consequently, the theorists' "empirical description of society cannot be regarded as sociologically reliable." Their misinterpretations of society "stem from selective biases ... that fail to take into account all necessary factors."¹

An attempt to substantiate these charges is made throughout Part 2. Before beginning this process, it is necessary to define more specifically our targets of criticism. Since the work of Kornhauser, the theorists of mass society are divided into aristocratic and democratic camps. All these theorists, irrespective of their value orientations, accept the necessity of elite rule in society - mass or otherwise. The central problem confronting them in a mass society is the debilitation of traditional culture-bearing elites and of the core values they sustain, brought on by their lack of insulation from popular pressures.² The unique feature of a mass society is that for the first time in history elites are formed in the image of the mass (and are thus unqualified) and so are unable to perform their functions.

¹White, Beyond Conformity, p. 124.
This precis of the theorists' argument prompts two interesting questions. First, what kind of values, culture and functions are debilitated in a mass society? Second, are they inextricably connected to a certain group and a particular societal form?\(^1\) (An attempt to answer the two separate issues raised in the latter is made in Chapters 5 and 7 respectively).

The only point of agreement among the theorists is on the main values to be preserved, that is, freedom and order. Aristocratic and democratic critics of mass society concur on "the preservation of critical values especially freedom."\(^2\) Likewise, order is also a paramount value. "The emphasis on order which is fundamental to sociology is brought to a focus in the theory of mass society."\(^3\) The theorists, however, differ according to their value perspectives, over which groups embody freedom and over the type of society in which liberty and order are most likely to flourish. For example, the earlier self-avowed aristocratic critics of mass society, arguing that it is only possible for some few persons to achieve liberty, favoured feudal society as the form best suited to protect the freedom of the elite from the non-elites and to maintain order. In contrast, the more contemporary

\(^1\)I am indebted to Dr. Martin Levin for raising these questions.

\(^2\)Kornhauser, Politics, p. 22.
theorists - generally liberal democrats - opt for a pluralistic society as the most stable and likely environment in which to preserve the freedom of the many, the non-elites from elite domination.

Only this latter group is attacked in this paper. We have no quarrel with the aristocratic critics for they, unashamedly, admitted to their value preferences. These critics of mass society were "explicit aristocrats who never thought of apologizing for the special and exclusive nature of their own standards."1 Our quarrel lies with the democratic theorists (Arendt, Fromm, Kornhauser, Nisbet and Selznick) for introducing into their "scientific" treatises unacknowledged preferences whilst professing a method divorced from values and revolving only about facts. By confusing their roles as objective observers of society and as evaluative critics of it, they expose their analyses to Parsons' and White's criticism of "the theory of mass society as an ideological position congenial to certain groups of intellectuals."2

A prime example of a democratic theorist who fails to adhere to his intention to discuss the problem on a theoretical plane alone is Kornhauser. He confuses his distinction between theoretical and value orientations and in so doing reveals his

---


own preferences. "In spite of his desire, a particular political philosophy - one in which the efficient cause is constitutive (freedom) ... conditions the statement of the problem."¹ Precisely how? For Kornhauser, the dilemma confronting democratic theorists is twofold: how to safeguard the freedom of the non-elites and how to maintain the political order. But in this interpretation of the democratic critique of mass society, the problem is never one of ends and goals other than freedom and order, ranked respectively. Freedom is the "ultimate value" or the value "constitutive of the good society."² The equally prime democratic value, equality is scarcely considered.³ This neglect weakens Kornhauser's analysis for it suggests that a personal preference that excludes equality as one of its components and that places a heavy weight on liberty, and not an objective, comprehensive interpretation of democratic theory has determined the problem for him.

Kornhauser's preference for liberty also leads him to confuse the democratic theoretical and value orientations despite his explicit statement that his interest lies only with the former. Theoretically, the democratic theorists

---

² Ibid., p. 250.
³ Apart from scanty references to equality in Kornhauser, Politics, pp. 23, 31, 120.
insist upon self-determination by non-elites. In contrast, the democratic value is liberty. But cannot self-determination and liberty be one and the same thing? As Pitcher points out, if "democratic values emphasize liberty, or liberty plus certain forms of decision-making that protect liberty, it is not clear how the self-determination of the people, Kornhauser's theoretical or analytical proposition describing democratic theories, is different from democratic values."¹ This confusion of description and evaluation is not unique to Kornhauser. Submerged in all the contemporary theorists' analyses of mass society is an elitist bias, which is now discussed.

¹Pitcher, "'Politics of Mass Society'," p. 249.
CHAPTER 5

THE ELITIST BIAS

Despite their disclaimer that they are conducting only a "theoretical" exercise, the democratic theorists do display an elitist bias in their discussion of the elite-mass relationship. This contention that the theorists are elitists and/or conservatives is a popular one espoused by the Bauers, Bell, Bramson, Walter, Parsons, White and Wolin. However, much of their criticism falls down because it is either unsubstantiated or misdirected. The Bauers, for example, only "suspect" the theorists of elitism and make little attempt to support their suspicions with evidence.¹ Instead, "they serve up unproven assertions spiced with a liberal dose of innuendo."²

The attacks of Bell and Bramson are weakened by their failure to distinguish between the aristocratic and democratic critiques of mass society. For Bell, the theory of mass society is "a defense of an aristocratic cultural tradition," and "a conservative defense of privilege."³ Here he is attacking aristocratic theorists for something

²Coser, "Comments on Bauer," p. 79.
they would openly admit to. Bramson's criticism is similarly misguided. For him, the elitist position of the theorists "emerges in conjunction with their preference for a *Standesgesellschaft*, a hierarchically organized social order, the ideal for which is often sought in medieval models."¹ His criticism is limited in that it is only applicable to aristocratic theorists who are explicit elitists anyway.

It is too simplistic to lump, as the Bauers, Bell and Bramson do, all the theorists of mass society together into one bag and then to proceed to label them "conservatives." There exist considerable moral, political and scientific differences amongst them² - amongst even those of a similar value orientation (compare Mannheim and Kornhauser, for example). In an effort to be more precise than other critics, the targets of attack are defined in this paper. They are the contemporary democratic theorists, particularly Kornhauser, Nisbet and Selznick. They are accused of introducing implicit value judgments into their self-appointed value-free analyses of the elite-mass relationship and in so doing revealing an elitist bias. More specifically, in their supposedly neutral discussion they are charged with making implicit judgments about the quality

²Coser, "Comments on Bauer," p. 79.
of mass society as compared to other societal types; and, by implication, the quality of the mass as compared with other aggregates.

The theorists—although democrats—accept a priori the necessity of elite guidance. Moreover, the freedom of the mass appears to depend upon elite rule. "Civil liberty requires considerable social autonomy of both elites and non-elites."¹ Their carte blanche acceptance of the necessity of decision-making by elites relatively free from the pressures of non-elites seems on first sight to be a damning indicator of the democratic theorists' elitism. For are they not arguing, in effect, that rule by a qualified minority is inevitable, if liberty is to be maintained? The inevitability of elite rule is assumed on the basis that nowhere in their discussion are there any qualifications to it introduced. Irrespective of social conditions, elite guidance appears necessary. For Parsons and White, as for Walter, this acceptance is sufficient evidence of the theorists' elitism.²

However, is their acceptance of the elite principle, in fact, incompatible with their democratic leanings as the above critics suggest? To the extent that any large, complex

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 230.

system—democratic or otherwise—employs minority leadership in order to handle the affairs of the system effectively, it would seem that the critics are overlooking a practical reality of political life:

There is leadership everywhere ... and leadership implies a division between the few who make up the vanguard and the many who make up its train. In this respect democracy equally with other forms of state accepts as basic the fact of elite.1

Consequently, the democratic theorists' acceptance of minority leadership need not in itself expose their elitist bias.

Where such a bias emerges is in their discussion of the factors that contribute to the peculiar nature of the elite-mass relationship in a mass society. The basic complaint of the theorists is that such a society is characterized by rule by an inept majority. In this sense mass society is inferior to previous societal forms that are distinguished by rule by a competent minority. The unique form of rule in a mass society occurs because the elite is formed in the image of the mass which is, by definition, incompetent. Thus, the elite is not especially qualified but it is implied that it ought to be. Insofar as the process of cultural levelling prevents the emergence of rule by a qualified minority, it is implicitly condemned by the theorists. Selznick, for example, regards

---

the levelling process as undesirable because it destroys the distinctiveness of the elite. For him, "a mass society is one in which no one is qualified. This is so because the relationships involve a radical cultural levelling, not because no superior individuals exist."¹

The process of cultural attenuation, then, destroys the possibility of qualified minority leadership. Instead, the entry of the mass of the population into such areas of "cultural incubation and development" as education, leisure and politics means that such agencies "must adapt themselves to the intervention of the mass by permitting participation on the basis of low standards of knowledge and conduct."²

The mass, by definition, are unable to take over the role of the elite as cultural innovators. Thus, in a mass society the established cultural standards and the "stable," "diverse" and "critical" values of traditional elites are replaced by the arbitrary opinions and fluid, homogeneous and uncritical values of the mass.

Surely in this discussion Selznick reveals a definite anti-democratic bias. For is he not implying that social betterment harms culture or, more specifically, the cultural standards and values of a relatively narrow elite? In the theorists' preference function the preservation of the

² Ibid., p. 322.
distinctiveness of this elite and the values it symbolizes, appears to carry a higher value than the process of democratization. Their elitist stance arises, in part, from their attempt to apply two incompatible standards simultaneously, the one aristocratic and the other, democratic. On the one hand, they are concerned to protect the position of a certain elite and on the other, they identify themselves with the virtues of the common man. "They have tried to combine elitism and democracy - things compatible perhaps in a Periclean or Jeffersonian sense of popular government led by 'the Best,' but, under contemporary conditions, radical opposites."¹ Hughes is here referring to the theorists' desire to preserve and impose the special cultural standards of a small elite in a society that emphasizes the value of popular judgment. Their position does seem to resemble, as Lipset indicates, the classic case of trying "to have the cake and to eat it too,"² of trying to combine the best of two possible worlds - aristocracy and democracy.

The elitist bias in the model of mass society also emerges in the concepts of elite and mass, particularly in the latter. The theorists' image of the elite, conceived in terms of superior moral character, is essentially positive. In

² Lipset, Political Man, p. 413.
contrast, their image of the mass is basically negative for it is implicitly and unfavourably compared with the elite. Both concepts, then, reveal the elitist bias of the theorists but that of the mass does so in more of a subtle way. In the latter, the theorists express their preference "almost secretly, not stating it directly, but holding it as a latent assumption while talking about not the elite, but 'the mass.'"¹

According to the theorists, the elite is a superior minority as contrasted with the inferior mass. Members of the elite, unlike the inept mass, are competent to rule in matters of state, culture, education, etc. This idea of a narrow, sharply defined elite suitably qualified to perform a "vitally useful" role in the social system has its origins in a tradition dating back to Plato. "The concept of the elite fits naturally with a tradition of political and social theory in which hierarchy, order and differentiation are fundamental ideas: a tradition as old as political thought itself and as recent as modern sociology."²

A troublesome point in the theorists' discussion of this concept is how to ensure that the elite will be qualified. What guarantee is there that its members will possess the

¹Wright Mills, Power Elite, p. 331.
"requisite values and skills" to carry out their leadership functions, that is, as policymakers, as guardians of the cultural heritage and as protectors of its standards and values? The theorists offer only the palliative of education. But surely this is no guarantee of an elite of quality: "To indicate that the elite in a liberal-democratic or pluralistic society (Kornhauser's preferred model for society) are educated is not to face the issue squarely, for as he himself reports, one-quarter of Hitler's S.S. elite at one time possessed Ph.D. degrees." Presumably, the mass men amongst the elites reached the same educational level as their pluralistic peers but the former obviously lack the requisite qualifications. What criterion, then, distinguished a man of quality from mass man? How do we sort out the sheep from the goats? The theorists seem to evade such considerations. The hoary question of how to ensure that leadership is of the required calibre or character is not answered satisfactorily by them.

In fact, the whole discussion of the concept of the elite by the theorists seems almost deliberately vague. The concept is not tied to classes or hierarchies of power as it was for

1Kornhauser, Politics, p. 52.
2See ibid., p. 57.
explicit aristocrats. It is a moral rather than a social concept - "the aristocracy becomes a scatter of morally superior persons rather than a socially recognizable class."¹ But, as Wright Mills indicates, to generalize the aristocratic ethos in this way and to empty it of social content are unsatisfactory for they provide no widely accepted criteria for judging who is elite and who is not.

The theorists' penchant for an elite of ill-defined quality may be unrealistic under contemporary conditions. Walter argues that modern elites tend increasingly to be recruited from psychopaths who manifest behavioral traits similar to those attributed to the mass by the theorists. Contemporary liberal democracies are no more immune from such "abnormal and delinquent leadership" than are dictatorships. Thus, no benefit is to be gained from substituting the pathology of the elites for that of the mass. "He who revolts from the masses to the fantasy of an aristocratic refuge is exactly in the position of the man in the fable who sold his breeches to buy a wig."²

The theorists could, of course, reply that this affinity between the personality of the elite is typical of a mass society or, at least, evidence that mass phenomena are infiltrating other societal forms. Until, however, they

¹Wright Mills, Power Elite, pp. 330-331.
proffer a more precise and less loaded concept of the elite, Walter's point retains a certain validity.

In appropriating part of the aristocratic critique of mass society, viz., their desire to preserve the exclusiveness of the elite, the democratic theorists seem also to have adopted - perhaps unconsciously - the aristocratic concept of the mass:

This conception sees humanity as divided into two species: the primitive, formless mass, and the elite, which is evolved, refined and purified from the mass and, presumably, restrained by inner controls. When the masses are quiet, settled into the forms of piety and authority set up for them, they are human; when they are presumptuous and pass over these limits, they are barbarians. 1

The image of the mass that emerges from the "theory" of mass society conforms in essentials to the above description. It appears as an inept, potentially dangerous aggregate.

Why is the mass regarded as a potential danger by the theorists? Two reasons can be gleaned from their discussion. First, the mass poses a threat to the traditional elites hence to tradition and its cultural values. A mass society is characterized by a relative lack of respect for tradition especially traditional beliefs. It is a society of the "living contemporaneous mass." 2

Similarly, Nisbet talks of

1Ibid., p. 75.

the "traditionless mass." For Selznick, the fundamental meaning of "massness" is the "weakening of values," and: "Where values weaken, manipulation arises." Lacking values because the mass is atomized, its members also lack discipline for "the discipline of values within a person has a close and continuing relationship with the discipline of values supported by human inter-relationships."

Second, in challenging the legitimacy of traditional elites, the mass is also indirectly confronting the accepted order of power succession and the hierarchical structure of society. Mass behavior is seen as a consequence of "the withdrawal of deference to established institutions." The question of whether such withdrawal is ever justified, under certain circumstances, is brushed aside. Selznick, in particular, seems so committed to the preservation of institutions qua institutions that any attempt to question their value is interpreted as a sign of "reds under the beds," that is, subversion on the part of extremists.

The possibility that institutions may rigidify in their operation and become too deeply involved in the maintenance

---

1 Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, p. 203.
3 Nisbet, op. cit., p. 230.
of the status quo at the expense of service to their clientele is scarcely considered. Indeed, the hypothesis is tendered that this possibility is likely to increase, the more established the institution. The issue of the legitimacy of such institutions depends upon one's place in the hierarchy. From the point of view of most (but not all) members of the institutional elites, they remain legitimate. From the perspective of the mass whose members are at the receiving end, the power of such institutions is no longer regarded as legitimate. Its consequent withdrawal of deference, then, can result from the malfunctioning of institutions.

How far the theorists' concept of the mass is grounded in fear rather than fact is demonstrated by the ideological nature of the concept. An examination of the characteristics imputed to the mass by the theorists indicates that they are not empirically valid but are stereotyped notions. The very fact that conflicting evidence, to that of the theorists exists should make them wary of such categoric statements as (1) "the mass is distinguished by mediocrity;" (2) "the mass is atomized;" and (3) "the mass is alienated hence suggestible to extremist behavior." The cumulative effect of such statements is described by Bell:
The image of the mindless mass capable only of violence and excess is a product of a tradition-bound, class-biased point of view ... As a result of its largely unquestioned acceptance throughout social theory, it has had the impact of a cumulatively self-confirming hypothesis; its oft-repeated declaration that this is what the mass is disposes people to act in that fashion and has further the effect of inhibiting considerations by the policy-maker, democratic leader and social theorist of what the mass is capable of.

It is in the theorists' discussion of the mediocrity of the mass that their elitist bias emerges most clearly. By this, they presumably mean that the mass lacks a discriminating taste, an inability to judge so that its members will select the mediocre, the superficial and not the superior and profound. Influenced by y Gasset and seemingly unaware of the aristocratic corollaries that stem from the acceptance of his mediocrity thesis, the theorists see the mass as possessing a "commonplace mind ... that crushes beneath it everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select." Mass man is, then, the average man. Indeed, he is, by definition, a mediocrity and as such does not possess competence. The exact nature of his incompetence is hard to establish. For Selznick, mass man, "the Stalinoid," lacks competence in "the defense of

---


2J. Ortega y Gasset, "The Coming of the Masses," in Rosenberg and White (eds), op. cit., p. 45.
institutional integrity.¹ We can deduce that he also lacks competence in decision-making - political or otherwise. Incompetence appears to be almost a generic trait of the mass that cannot be alleviated by increased educational opportunities, etc.:

It is not ... simply the fact that the average man is uninformed. He lacks, even more, the capacity to accumulate the necessary knowledge on which to base an intelligent opinion. By definition not a superior man, he is said to be essentially an imperfect, even inferior man.²

Mass man, therefore, is average, inherently incompetent and inferior. All these characteristics combine together to produce the mediocrity of the mass. It is contended that the theorists' characterization of the mass in this way depends upon value preferences not facts. Questions of mediocrity and inferiority are surely matters of judgment. Implicitly postulated in their discussion are superior standards by which the mass falls short. These standards are those of the elite who, for the theorists, is superior in judgment, taste, qualifications - nay even, innate intelligence. The rule of an inept majority is contrasted unfavourably with the rule of a competent elite. "Unfortunately, the only judge of the elite's competence is the elite itself."³ There then arises

¹Selznick, Organizational Weapon, p. 297.
²Spitz, Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought, p. 127.
³Walter, "Masses and Elite," p. 76.
a case of "quis custodet custodes?" Thus, contrary to Selznick's denial that extra-scientific judgments are made about the various strata in a mass society, the mass is unfavourably contrasted with the elite (see p. 20 of the text).

The elitist overtones of the theorists' model of mass man are further highlighted in their debate concerning mass culture. Basically, there seem to be two questions. On the one hand, are the cultural standards set for the masses? On the other, do the masses get what they want and they deserve? If the former, then, the mass cannot help but be mediocre because a cultural elite (or social conditions) prescribe standards for it. If the latter, then, since the standards are mediocre, the mass is ipso facto mediocre as well.

The paradoxical situation of the contemporary theorists is that they embrace both positions. This seeming inconsistency is explicable on ideological grounds. That is, each position assumed by the theorists represents not a theoretical but an ideological approach described by White as "reforming" (structure-oriented) and "moralizing" (value-oriented) respectively. Further, each ideological wing is representative of the democratic and aristocratic interpretations of mass society.\(^1\) Thus, in adopting both

---

\(^1\)White, *Beyond Conformity*, p. 58.
conceptions as "a basis for a general theory of mass society,"\(^1\) Kornhauser and his followers have unwittingly also assumed their value premises. This explains, in part, why the theorists are at one and the same time "social democrats" and "cultural elitists."\(^2\)

On the one hand, the theorists as social-structure ideologists blame the "low quality of supply" for the mediocrity of the mass. Obviously, the unique feature of a mass society is that the mass sets the standards as any elite is formed in its image. Consequently, in such a society it is not the cultural elite that is held responsible for the mediocrity of standards but social conditions. Given a favourable social environment (the restoration of community ties, the abolition of anonymous authority, etc.), cultural standards would be superior. But in an atomized mass society the mass is so alienated that it cannot be expected to create and accept anything better than mediocre culture, social conditions being what they are.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Kornhauser, Politics, p. 38.

\(^2\)Parsons and White, "Mass Media," p. 68.

White suggests another reason why these intellectuals of liberal-radical persuasion adopt an elitist position in regard to mass culture. This area directly impinges on them. Whereas in other areas such as economics, they could afford to be liberal, in their own private domain of culture, they adopt a contrary stand. "The standards now being focussed on are those over which the intellectuals consider themselves to be the guardians," White, Beyond Conformity, p. 208.

\(^3\)Parsons and White, op. cit., p. 69.
On the other hand, the theorists, as moralizers, place the blame for mediocrity squarely on the shoulders of the mass. They argue that mass man does have "consumer sovereignty" and so must be held responsible for the low quality of cultural standards.\(^1\) The mediocrity of such standards is correlated with the loss of exclusiveness of the elites in a mass society. The mass is incapable of maintaining the same level of quality in its protection of culture as traditional elites and so, inevitably, standards decline. Thus, it is as moralizers that the theorists reveal their elitist bias.

The important point to emerge from this discussion is that the theorists' concept of the mediocre mass is ideological not theoretical. To label it the latter is, therefore, a misnomer. Whether the mass is or is not mediocre is an open not a closed question. We now turn to discuss whether or not the mass is atomized.

\(^1\)Ibid.; see also White, *Beyond Conformity*, p. 57.
THE RISE OR FALL OF COMMUNITY?

The theorists argue that the atomized mass is a product of social disintegration. Lacking the attachments of independent groups, the mass is socially unstructured or unintegrated. As its members do not share values and norms in common, they can behave in an uniform and undifferentiated way. Individuality is assumed to disappear on entry into this aggregate. Mass man is seen as an isolated, anonymous detached particle and as such an easy target for manipulation - organizational or propagandist. This concept of the atomized mass is crucial to the so-called theory of mass society. Atomization is the antecedent condition that gives rise to alienation and extremist behavior. If it is found to have little basis in empirical reality, then, the theorists' fundamental thesis crumbles. At present, a debate is raging between the theorists and their empirical critics over the extent of atomization in the modern community.

Mass communications research in the U.S. throws into question the concept of the atomized mass. It challenges the notion that members of the mass have no contact with one another except via the media. The findings of researchers reveal that the messages of the mass media are received within a group context. The influence of primary groups is especially
strong in acting as a buffer between the media and the individual-in-the-mass:

Now to the extent that mass communications research has revealed the existence and the importance of intermediate groups between the media and the 'masses,' it has also undermined the concept of manipulability as following from the atomization and isolation of the individuals who compose the mass. So that evidence which contradicts the one image will also contradict the other. 1

Research in other areas besides communications also disputes the concept of the atomized mass. Various sociologists have discovered in America, that "most massive of all mass societies" (Shils), the persistence and stability of primary bonds; the continued existence of a widespread and relatively stable associational structure; and thriving voluntary organizations.

It is on the basis of such research findings that the theorists of mass society are accused of falsifying the extent

---

1Bramson, Political Context, pp. 108-109. The various studies that contradict the image of the atomized mass are cited on pp. 99-101.

of contemporary isolation. But do such results really destroy the validity of their atomization thesis? Once again, the critics of mass society are weak adversaries. Their naivete is subject to attack for they "seem to think that this information, which is anything but startling ... is enough to rid social thought of a noxious illusion." Bell and the other critics are particularly naive in thinking that one instance is sufficient to invalidate a hypothesis:

Those who reject the theory when they observe anti-mass tendencies in America, England or elsewhere confound the general criteria of mass society with the particular case. The theory does assert that contemporary societies are especially likely to develop properties of mass society, unless strong counter-tendencies exist; but it does not imply that all modern societies manifest these properties in the same degree.

The critics also misinterpret the "theory." The theorists never make the claim that primary relationships and secondary associations disappear in a mass society. They argue only that their functions lose their significance so that such groupings exist only on the periphery of society and fail to involve their members psychologically, (which is very difficult to prove). The mere existence and number of groups is not a valid

---

indication of pluralism. "The important question is not whether primary groups exist or whether they flourish in mass society, but rather what their orientation and function tend to be; whether they are autonomous or dependent; whether they provide conditions of freedom or become auxiliary engines for the forces of mass society."¹

Empirical research into the question of whether the pluralist group structure is subject to these forces of mass society tends to support the notion of the decline of community. Vidich and Bensman's study of Springdale revealed the dependence of this small town upon the institutions of a mass society. The response of its citizens to their powerlessness in the face of domination by mass organizations is interesting. They refused to recognize their loss of local autonomy and instead, reaffirmed the values (rugged independence, equality and grass-roots democracy) that were denied by reality. In this sense, their values are "quixotic" but these defenses are also "realistic in that they enabled the Springdaler to survive in a world over which he had no control."²

Much of Stein's research indicates a similar erosion of independence on the part of local communities. His review of


a variety of empirical studies of community organization leads him to conclude that there is, indeed, an "eclipse of community" in North America:

The process seems to have two poles. On the one hand, individuals become increasingly dependent upon centralized authorities and agencies in all areas of life. On the other, personal loyalties decrease their range with the successive weakening of national ties, regional ties, neighborhood ties, family ties, and finally, ties to a coherent image of one's self. These polar processes of heightened functional interdependence and diminished loyalties appear in most sociological diagnoses of our time. 1

Although these processes appear uniform in their impact, the responses to them are anything but the same. Stein compared the postures of individuals toward mass society in three different suburbs and Springdale. He found that their reactions varied. The cynicism of the "exurbanites," and the sophistication of the suburbanites in Park Forest and Crestwood Heights, toward the workings of a mass society contrasted sharply with the naivete of the small towners. These differences, however, represented only "so many minor variations on a single major theme," 2 the decline of community.

Caution is advised in accepting this decline of community as verified because there are certain methodological problems involved in the research on community organization. First,


2Ibid., p. 296.
the extent of the representativeness of community studies is limited. Second, generalizations are difficult to make because of the differences — regional, economic, age, etc. — as between communities. Third, the studies are confined in time and space and so their relevance for understanding future or past studies is always in question. Moreover, even if the image of decline is an accurate reflection of the process of atomization, does this verify the hypothesis for the theorists? The United States might be an exception; the same interpretations may not apply in other cultural contexts. To test whether similar forces create everywhere similar conditions, a large assumption made by the theorists, requires a variety of cross-cultural studies that have not yet materialized.

The concept of atomization, as developed by the theorists, attempts to explain the appeal of political extremism. What has research into the relationship between the atomized mass and mass movements uncovered? Much intellectual effort has been expended in an attempt to establish the exact nature of the support of Nazism. No definitive answer is forthcoming as yet, for the social bases upon which the Nazis built their success are still hotly debated between the mass and class

---

1 For an elaboration of the above points and a discussion of the problems posed by the use of differential levels of abstraction in community research, see ibid., pp. 94–96, 295–301 respectively.
theorists, both using as weapons, sophisticated statistical techniques in their analyses of voting returns.

On the one side are arrayed the proponents of mass analysis who argue that Nazism was essentially a mass phenomenon. Arendt, for example, contends that the recruits for the Nazi movement came from "the politically neutral and indifferent masses."1 Similarly, Kornhauser favours the idea that extremist movements have a mass rather than a class base. "The primary utility of mass analysis centers in its power to explain crisis politics and the extremist response, whereas class analysis would appear to be more useful in the area of routine politics."2 The study of O'Lessker also supports the atomized mass hypothesis. He points out that the success of the Nazis in 1930 depended, in part, upon "the outcast and the apathetic."3

On the other side, there are the supporters of class analysis who contend that, on the contrary, Nazism was a class not a mass phenomenon. Lipset attributes its success in 1930 to the support of the middle class, specifically, the non-Catholic bourgeoisie. He argues that this extremist

---

1Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, pp. 311-312.
2Kornhauser, Politics, p. 15.
movement did not become a mass movement until after this crucial election. He rebuts the mass thesis on the grounds that:

The most outcast and apathetic sections of the population can be won to political action by extremist ... parties only after such parties have become major movements not while they are in their period of early rise. To support a new and small movement requires a relatively complex, long-term view of the political process which insecure, ignorant and apathetic persons cannot sustain. 1

Allen also supports the class idea in his study of the predominantly middle-class town of Thalberg. He concludes that there the rise of Nazism was a class revolt on the part of the middle class against the working class. "The most important factor in the victory of Nazism was the active division of the town along class lines." 2

Nazism or other mass movements that present an extremist view of politics are complex, many-sided phenomena. Consequently, no one single explanation can adequately account for their origins and growth. Rather, a combination of factors must be considered. To explain, say, the rise of Nazism, at least both models - the quasi-Marxist class and the atomized mass - would seem to apply in varying degrees, the

1Lipset, Political Man, pp. 150-151.
precise extent of which is still an unknown quantity. The concept of the atomized mass does not offer an adequate explanation on its own. Thus, to dismiss, as the theorists tend to do, class analysis as irrelevant to an understanding of extremism is a myopic view. Conversely, it is equally short-sighted for the class analysts on their part to ignore mass theory. Also, Nazism is but one example of an extremist movement. The theorists of mass society seem to assume that the similarities between such movements are greater than their differences but it is conceivable that the latter might outweigh the former. Until much more work has been done on the nature of recruitment to such movements, judgment concerning the utility of the concept of the atomized mass is suspended. We now turn to examine the subjective corollary of atomization, that is, the concept of alienation.

Some argue that this concept of alienation is synonymous with the idea of mass society. It forms the apex for the Bauers and Bramson, who describe the "theory" as "a persistent parable," "a statement of alienation" respectively.¹ The feeling of alienation as experienced by mass man is, perhaps, most lucidly expressed by Fromm.

¹Bauers, "America, 'Mass Society,'" p. 72; Bramson, Political Context, p. 64.
"Man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished 'thing,' dependent on powers outside of himself unto whom he has projected his living substance."¹

For the theorists of mass society, the alienation of mass man is a consequence of social disintegration. "Social atomization engenders strong feelings of alienation and anxiety, and therefore the disposition to engage in extreme behavior to escape from these tensions."² Under normal conditions the alienated mass is quiescent but in times of, say, economic and social dislocations, it is susceptible to elites bent on total domination. Lacking the control mechanisms offered by a group structure, mass man is free to indulge in destructive, unrestrained behavior, that is, anti-social behavior.

The "theoretical" model of the theorists, then, embodies a "structure-alienation-behavior" sequence. In this tripartite ordering "[a]lienation is the crucial intervening variable: it is produced by the social structure and, in turn, produces distinctive behavior."³ This behavior

---


²Kornhauser, Politics, p. 32.

can either take the form of mass apathy or mass activism. "Precise predictions about the behavioral and psychological results of alienation are not made by the theory except at the extremes of a continuum which runs from no signals (resulting in apathy) to appeals in time of acute societal distress (yielding active mass movements)."¹ A number of questions arise out of the theorists' discussion, each of which is discussed in turn:

(1) Whether alienation is related to the structural properties of a mass society?

(2) Whether alienation has the specified consequences?

(3) Whether the concept of alienation is a parable or a proposition?

(1) The theorists argue that a viable intermediate structure mediating between the individual and the larger society serves as a bulwark against the development of alienation and, conversely, that the lack of such a structure is likely to produce alienative feelings. The hypothesis that structural conditions do lead to alienation seems to be borne out by empirical studies. Rosenberg found that feelings of futility based on a sense of personal inadequacy and on the unmanagability of political forces derived from the particular

nature of the political and social structure. "The mass
nature of the society, characterized by wide disparities of
power, promotes the sense of personal insignificance; the
centralization of government fosters a sense of remoteness
from the key decision-making processes."\(^1\) An attempt to test
the alienative consequences of membership and non-membership,
undertaken by Seeman in the U.S. (450 workers sampled in
Columbus, Ohio) and Sweden (558 workers sampled in Malmo),
revealed that members of trade unions or employers' associations exhibited less powerlessness than non-members.\(^2\)

These findings appear congruent with the proposition
that group members are less alienated than their unorganized peers:

But to say that the evidence is 'congruent' with
mass society theory is to recognize that the
direction of causation implied in that theory
has not been demonstrated. Does membership lead
to low alienation, or is it rather that only
the non-alienated join organizations?\(^3\)

There is another consideration inhibiting the acceptance of
the structure-alienation hypothesis. Rosenberg's sample of
seventy in Ithaca, New York was of the free-floating type and


so his data are statistically unreliable. Seeman's research, though more exact, is confined to an occupational context. All his data reveal is that the hypothesis holds for such a context. Alienation might be a situationally-related variable, as Dean suggests,\textsuperscript{1} and so workers alienated in the factory might be thoroughly integrated (or, at least, less alienated), in other settings such as primary groups, local community associations, etc. More empirical studies need to be done on the relation between the atomization of a social structure and alienation before the hypothesis can be accepted or rejected.

(2) The question of whether alienation results in extremist behavior is broken down into two parts. First, the relationship between alienation and apathy is discussed. The studies of Rosenberg, Neal and Seeman cited before all found that alienation defined as powerlessness is a "determinant of political apathy." Likewise, Templeton in his analysis of the 1960 national elections in the U.S. discovered that "alienated individuals tend to withdraw from politics in terms of both their knowledge and interest."\textsuperscript{2} These research findings would appear to bear out the alienation- apathy


hypothesis of the mass society theorists. Dean, however, rejects it on the basis of establishing low correlations between alienation scales (powerlessness, normlessness, social isolation) and political apathy scales (interest, influence, behavior, voting).\(^1\) As his study is more comprehensive than the others in the sense that more criteria are employed, the validity of the hypothesis remains suspect.

An alternative argument not considered by the theorists is that apathy can equally as well result from integration as from alienation. The cross-pressures arising from multiple-group affiliations can compel voters into political apathy as much as the lack of any group ties. "Individuals who are subject to pressures driving them in different political directions must either deviate or 'escape into apathy.'"\(^2\) Thus, non-voting can be either a consequence of alienation or of the voters' inability to decide.

Second, the correlation between alienation and activism is now examined. There is a curious lack of empirical studies of this relationship. Abcarian and Stanage only suggest that activism in contemporary radical "rightist"

\(^1\) Dean, "Alienation," pp. 187-188.

movements is a manifestation of political alienation. Similarly, Hofstadter postulates that the development of the "radical right" in the U.S. is related to a sense of powerlessness and victimization on the part of its supporters. Almond's study of why people join the Communist movement in the West is more reliable in that it is based upon a sample of former party members (221 American, British, French and Italian respondents). He argues that alienation is a crucial factor in explaining the appeal of Communism. "[T]here are met in this movement all the alienations of man, rushing from many and unlike tributaries into a torrent of wrath without end." If we consider all C.P. members, irrespective of rank, as activists or, at least, potential activists, then, alienative feelings defined as neurotic hostility, social isolation and self-rejection, played a significant role in their decisions to join. However, the incidence of alienation among the upper echelon, surely the most active in the ongoing sense, was relatively much lower than amongst the middle and lower echelons and the rank-and-file. Only expressions of


hostility distinguished this group to any significant extent. The limitations of the sample are such that Almond's findings only support the alienation-activism hypothesis, they do not verify it. As yet, this hypothesis is neither confirmed nor invalidated.

Either form of activity - activism or apathy - is regarded by the theorists as a neurotic symptom resulting from the alienation of the mass. Activist involvement, for example, in extremist movements is seen by them as a form of sublimation of all the sensations of loneliness, insecurity, despair and resentment that result from the break-up of the social structure. What the theorists overlook is the equally valid argument that the mass can be stirred into participation in extremist movements for sane, even rational motives. Such motives include "an active defense of their self-respect, self-determination, inalienable rights and other sublimations of their ... wants as well as their sense of oppression."  

As well as being regarded as a form of collective insanity, mass activism is confined by the theorists to take place outside of institutional channels. This concept of mass behavior

---

1 Compare Tables I, II, III, in ibid., pp. 261, 273, 281, respectively.


3 See Kornhauser, Politics, pp. 45-46.
might just be too restrictive for it excludes persons with a "frantic attachment" to politics - pluralist or otherwise - as extremists. The "overattached" are found amongst the ranks of the elite. They are not Selznick's "Stalinoids" but are "the successful operators who, lacking ... 'the nerve of failure,' constantly persuade themselves that their actions are meaningful, when in fact these actions may harm long-run goals if the operators dared spell them out."¹ The overattached within the system like their counterparts ultra vires are likely to be alienated but the restrictive nature of the concept of mass politics eliminates the former from consideration. As Walter points out, to limit the concept to extra-institutional action "also implies that any large-scale opposition to institutionalized power using unauthorized techniques is defined as 'mass politics.'"² Resistance as well as mass movements are included under this definition.

Accepting the theorists' limited definition of mass behavior for the moment, it remains to enquire whether, in fact, such behavior is as destructive as they contend. "The actual history of revolution does not indicate that the masses are prompted into action solely by the urge for destruction

and that they are destructive when in action ...; the
distinction is to be borne in mind that the masses are not
mobs or crowds.\(^1\) Moreover, destructive behavior is not the
sole prerogative of the mass. Couch points out that a greater
part of the killing in various rebellions, etc., is done by
the established authority not the mass. This suggests that it
is not the personality of mass man but "something about the
social relationships inherent in authority that is responsible
for widespread destruction of life."\(^2\)

(3) Certain shortcomings in the use of the concept of
alienation by the theorists hinder labelling it a "theoretical
proposition." In the hands of Fromm, for example, the concept
becomes ambiguous. As Schaar indicates, Fromm defines
alienation in two different ways: subjectively to describe
felt misery experienced by participants themselves, and
objectively to explain unfelt anxiety. Thus, he is able to
manipulate empirical findings to suit his argument. Fromm's
interpretation of job-satisfaction surveys illustrates
Schaar's point.\(^3\) The admitted dissatisfaction of the workers
is interpreted as a sign of subjective alienation; expressions

\(^1\)Hardman, "Masses," p. 200.

\(^2\)C.J. Couch, "Collective Behavior: An Examination of Some
p. 314.

\(^3\)See Fromm, Sane Society, pp. 296-297.
of satisfaction are interpreted as manifestations of "unconscious" alienation. "This sort of manipulation is especially troublesome in Fromm's work because, although his system is derived largely from certain philosophical convictions, he asserts that it is based on empirical findings drawn from both social science and from his own consulting-room."¹ What Fromm seemingly fails to realize is that his concept of objective alienation or "reification" is based essentially upon his value premises rather than on facts. This reification concept involves "a value judgment about the quality (or lack of quality) of human life in a given social setting, as made by a detached and neutral observer." Consequently, this concept "cannot be studied empirically without first making several critical value assumptions."²

Kornhauser shies away from employing the concept of alienation to describe an objective situation. His analysis confines itself to treating alienation as a subjective attitude only. He uses all five meanings of the term as defined by Seeman: powerlessness over environment, isolation from cultural and social institutions, self-estrangement from one's own role, the meaninglessness of life, the normlessness

---

of individual conduct. However, they are used "rather indiscriminately." Operational measures of alienation are employed for the first three meanings of the term (political inefficacy, social isolation, low ego strength) but for the remainder (anomie and normlessness) only allusions are made despite the existence of scales of such feelings developed by Dean and Srole respectively.

The intermingling of facts and values and the lack of precision that distinguish these theorists' concept of alienation raise serious doubts as to its scientific value. Indeed, in the "theory" of mass society the concept does seem to be "more than a hypothesis; it is a perspective." As a perspective, then, it is concerned with the quality of the experience of individuals. As such, the theorists cannot claim that the neutrality of science pervades their analyses:

Science cannot measure the quality of an experience. There exists no metric unit by virtue of which this could be affected. An argument about the 'essential quality' of an experience is not a scientific one; it is an esthetic or philosophical one. It must rest on extra-scientific judgments. Yet the Golden Age which many mass society theorists look back or forward to, as the antithesis of 'modern alienation,' is held to be a superior one in precisely those terms.

---

3 Nisbet, Quest for Community, p. 15.
Given that the concept is a "parable" of alienation and not a theoretical proposition, it is legitimate to ask whether it merely reflects the projected fears of the theorists rather than acts as a reliable index to the conditions of a culture. No one can deny that the position of established American intellectuals has not been affected by the onslaught of the ideology of populism and that to some extent their position has been rendered insecure by it. Their insecurity gives rise to other alienative feelings such as resentment and futility. Further, as Shils points out, the American intellectual community is atomized.\(^1\) Lacking cohesion as a group, it seems plausible that their feelings of isolation, insecurity and estrangement could be projected onto something external such as the mass, in an attempt to disown them. The objectively atomized and subjectively alienated mass is, therefore, but a mirror-image of the intellectual elite:

In such themes of estrangement we are dealing with rootless shadowy apprehensions of the intellectual rather than with the empirical realities of the world around us. Extreme and habitual intellectualism may ... produce tendencies of a somewhat morbid nature — inner tendencies that the intellectual is too frequently unable to resist endowing with external reality.\(^2\)

---


\(^2\)Nisbet, Quest for Community, p. 19.
Nisbet, however, goes on to reject the idea that the contemporary preoccupation with alienation is a mere figment of the intellectuals' imagination. He finds a "good deal of evidence" in the mid-twentieth century to suggest that "philosophical intimations of alienation and dissolution are set in a context of analogous mass intimations."\(^1\)

Unfortunately, this evidence is nowhere cited. So long as the concept of alienation is supported in such a loose way by the theorists, so long will they expose themselves to the charge that it is a product of their tortured minds. Until much more reliable empirical research is done, "there must remain the nagging suspicion that alienation may be little more than an expression of the malaise of the intellectual, who, rejected by and in turn rejecting the larger society, projects his own fear and despair onto the broader social screen."\(^2\)

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 20.
The theorists' whole discussion of the decline of and quest for community is permeated by a pluralist bias. Implicit in their concept of community is a preference for the pluralist model of society (and an idealized model at that). We have no quarrel with their viewpoint that the optimum conditions for the survival of their cherished values of freedom and order are found in a democratic pluralistic polity. What is subject to attack is the collective blindness of the theorists who fail to see the ways in which values themselves determine what they see as facts. The aim of this chapter is to show how a specific ideology about society is masked as a description of it. The discussion takes the following form: the argument of the theorists is presented first and then the assumptions underlying it are brought to light in order to reveal their selectivity.

The theorists argue that the lack of a viable, independent group life in a mass society threatens the liberty of not only the mass but also the elite. Why? For in such a society both groupings are directly exposed to one another. What type of social structure provides the requisite autonomy? "The theory of mass society implies that social pluralism is a social arrangement which performs this function."¹ The social checks

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 230.
and balances among a plurality of diverse groups provide the insulation that both elite and mass require if their respective liberty is to be maintained.

A pluralistic society allows the elites to perform their leadership functions unimpeded by the direct, unrestrained and often violent popular pressures applied on leaders in a mass society. As Kornhauser puts it, "intermediate groups help to protect elites by functioning as channels through which popular participation in the larger society (especially in the national elites) may be directed and restrained."¹ Conversely, the liberty of the mass is protected for the multiplicity of independent groups form a buffer between it and the elite. Via groups, members of the mass are firmly attached to proximate symbols and relationships which act as deterrents to manipulation. A concern for proximate objects elicits a definite, independent, real and responsible response from individuals because they relate to their personal experience; whereas a concern for remote objects as in a mass society only elicits abstract, irresponsible reactions for they do not relate to the daily existence of individuals.²

Freedom and order cannot possibly flourish in a mass society because, for pluralists, the social roots of such

¹Ibid., p. 77.
²Ibid., pp. 43-44.
values are found in groups. In a mass society, however, are "destroyed or diminished the social relationships and cultural values by which human beings normally live and in which they gain not merely their sense of order but their desire for freedom."¹ In effect, what the theorists are saying is that a society possessing a pluralistic social structure is ipso facto a free and stable society; and, conversely, that an atomized society is one in which liberty cannot flower and disorder reigns.

The theorists' argument only holds if we accept their assumption that freedom lies within association. Thus, a mass society is one that lacks "the reinforcement of associative tradition."² We can equally well argue, like the nineteenth-century liberals, that freedom lies outside of association, that groups place fetters on individual liberty, and that the breakdown of traditional group authority has liberating consequences for individuals. Depending on one's viewpoint, one can see in man's isolation either alienation or liberation. In either case, the proposition is ideological demonstrating a pluralist or unitary orientation respectively. By no yardstick is it scientific, that is, demonstrably true or false.

¹Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, p. 199.
²Ibid., p. 203.
Additional evidence that the nature of the theorists' discussion is ideological not purely descriptive is furnished by the fact that they all but ignore the tyrannies imposed by group life in modern society. For Bramson, such tyrannies include ethnic and racial discrimination and the provincialism of the small, local community.¹ This selectivity seriously weakens the analytical value of the concept of mass society.

Not only are freedom and order threatened in a mass society but also democracy itself. For the theorists, "the strength of democratic institutions depends on the underlying social structure."² This follows from the pluralist assumption that "it is in the basic associations of men that the real consequences of political power reveal themselves."³ In other words, the statuses and social memberships that men hold reflect the present location and distribution of power in society. Intermediate groups possess their own power bases and are, therefore, relatively independent of the state. They also prevent dominance by any one group. Where there is a viable, independent group structure, liberal democracy flourishes but in a society characterized by atomization,

¹Bramson, Political Context, p. 22.
²Kornhauser, Politics, p. 13.
³Nisbet, Quest for Community, p. 48.
democracy is doomed to wither away because it lacks the social bases to sustain it. Thus: "As a corollary a pluralistic structure is implicitly posited as an essential condition for democratic politics."¹

Fundamental to all the assumptions discussed so far is a prior assumption concerning the nature of man. For pluralists, "man is a being whose nature is shaped by social groups" and whose destiny is almost "to serve as a palimpsest registering the crisscross of social interrelationships."² Man, then, has no identity outside of group life for his sense of self is derived from meaningful relationships with others in an organic community. Only the type of community found in a pluralistic society is genuine because therein is group identification and loyalty. In contrast, mass and totalitarian societies can proffer only pseudo-communities and an inferior form of existence for they lack the requisite type of social structure:

Man does not live merely as one of a vast aggregate of arithmetically equal, socially undifferentiated individuals ... As a concrete person he is inseparable from the plurality of social allegiances and memberships which characterize his social organization and form the diversities of belief and habit which form a culture. ³

³Nisbet, Quest for Community, p. 267.
This assumption helps to clarify the negative image of the mass held by the theorists. For them, members of the mass are non-human because they lack the group umbrella - they are "mere particles of social dust," "shells of humanity."\textsuperscript{1} However, do all group members irrespective of the extent and quality of their participation, qualify for the converse label of "concrete persons?" Or, is it solely the most active participants? The imprecision of the "theory" of mass society becomes apparent here for nowhere are these elemental sociological distinctions incorporated into the theorists' respective analyses. Moreover, their argument seems particularly utopian in that it ignores the findings of sociologists themselves which reveal that group membership is confined to a minority in many Western pluralist democracies.

Issues of precision aside, we can say that, for pluralists, the prime units of theoretical consideration are the intermediate associations and primary groups and not "atomized political particles." The former determine the nature of man and his relation to society. Man is related to society through groups. From these he derives not only his sense of identity but also a sense of belonging and a sense of status. Group membership determines his outlook on life and his attitudes towards others as well as toward himself. It produces a specific type of individual:

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., p. 191.
Social and cultural pluralism invites the development of differentiated, autonomous individuals, for variety in institutions and values encourages the individual to compare different models of conduct and to integrate elements from several models into a distinctive identity. The autonomous man respects himself as an individual, experiencing himself as the bearer of his own power and as having the capacity to determine his life and to affect the lives of his fellows. Personal autonomy does not develop apart from society and culture: it requires pluralism in society and culture. Non-pluralist society lacks the diversity of social worlds to nurture and sustain independent persons. 1

A clearer example of an ideological commitment to pluralism would be hard to find. This "statement of hope" rather than a "fact" is located in Kornhauser's "theoretical" discussion of the features of a pluralist society. The statement, however, ignores the personal disorganization that can result from the cultural heterogeneity of such a society. 2

The danger of postulating personality types such as "pluralist man," "mass man," is pointed out by Wilensky. He found that those who fit the image of the former in a pluralistic society - the "Happy Good Citizen-Consumer" - also fit the image of the latter in a mass society in the sense that they tended to be unusually prone to personality-voting, to be dependent upon the media for opinion-formation, and to be susceptible to mass behavior generally. He concludes that

1Kornhauser, Politics, p. 110.
"Any accurate picture of the shape of modern society must accommodate these ambiguities."¹ At present, the idea of mass society fails to make such an accommodation.

Kornhauser's romanticized image of pluralist man exemplifies the type of treatment applied by the theorists to pluralistic phenomena. A charge of romanticizing not the pluralist but the pre-industrial order has been levelled by critics at the "theory" of mass society. Although there are traces of this in the work of the contemporary theorists,² this criticism seems somewhat irrelevant in that it really only applies to the earlier aristocratic theorists. It is contended here that a more relevant criticism of the democratic theorists is that they romanticize pluralism. This aspect has been neglected by critics generally (but not absolutely) and so it is hoped that the following discussion will make something of an unique contribution.

The contention that an idealization of pluralism colors the theorists' analyses of mass society demands elaboration. Like the model of mass society, the model of pluralistic society in the "theory" is an ideal type. In one sense the theorists' use of this term is non-controversial for in the

²See, for example, Kornhauser's lament for the passing of the village-based society in "Mass Society," p. 58.
case of both societies, the ideal type is conceived of as a theoretical construct for the analysis of empirical reality. In the case of pluralism, however, the term takes on a further meaning that is essentially normative. Not only is "ideal" used in the sense of idea but it also connotes perfection. Only positive features are incorporated into the theorists' model of pluralism. It is in this sense that their model is said to be idealized. "Implicit in the theory of mass politics is an idealized conception of the pluralistic social and political system held necessary for the maintenance of democratic institutions."¹ The selectivity and distortion arising from this idealization seriously affect the scientific utility of the model. It downplays - even at times ignores - the following factors:

1) the role of power,
2) the nature of conflict,
3) the unorganized,
4) economic interests,
5) the effects of strains,
6) the consequences of cultural diversity.

Precisely how the theorists exclude each of these factors from consideration is now discussed.

1) The role of power is underestimated in the pluralist model because the view of political pluralism that emerges in the "theory" of mass society is essentially sociological:

   It is indeed the very model of a sociological theory, for political behavior is accounted for, so to speak, in non-political terms. The group, and the norms and values emanating from it, are the center of the theory. 1

For the proponents of the sociological theory of political pluralism, the stability of a democratic society is dependent upon multiple group membership. For cross-cutting rather than overlapping allegiances are likely to prevent any group becoming completely homogeneous on economic, political and social dimensions. Consequently, every group will have to compromise if decisions are to be made.

   A major shortcoming of this "compromise pluralism" is its minimization of the conception of power as developed in political science. Instead of taking the group as the arena in which differences of opinion are resolved, veto or pressure group pluralism considers relationships as between independent groups. Each group holds countervailing power over one another and the viability of democracy is maintained so long as one group does not become predominant. In Perrow's view, bargaining among groups and confrontations of power is a

"more basic mechanism" than compromise within groups primarily because it reflects a concern with the exercise of power, that is lacking in the sociological view.\(^1\)

2) Another example of the "over-sociological" approach of the theorists of mass society is given by Gusfield. His specific criticism of their idealized model of pluralism is that it minimizes the force of conflict. "It fails to give adequate weight to barriers which conflicts of interest offer to political harmony and compromise under any political structure."\(^2\) This failure stems, in part, from the concept of conflict held by the pluralist school. From such a perspective, conflict in a pluralistic society cannot but be other than moderate. Why? Their argument rests on the assumption, that is "a repetition of the ideological bias of nineteenth-century liberalism," that there is a natural harmony of interests sustaining the social and political system:

Occurences of sharp conflict are therefore indicative of disruptions in the form of social arrangements. There is nothing in the content of interests and beliefs which makes compromise improbable.\(^3\)

---

\(^1\) Ibid., pp. 412-413.


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 26.
This conception of conflict, however, ignores pluralistic sources of political extremism as it equates extremism with a mass not a pluralist society. In certain instances the pluralistic structure, so lauded by its patrons, actually enhances activist sentiments. Gusfield describes four situations in which this occurs. The first involves disenfranchised classes or the unorganized which is elaborated upon later. The second instance concerns doomed and defeated classes which, contrary to the pluralist assumption that groups will accept defeat and compromise when their interests are challenged, are prepared to use violence and other non-democratic means to achieve their ends. Not only groups but a neutral and non-competing element like public opinion may employ non-political means outside of the pluralistic machinery to influence governmental decisions. Extremism can also result from the periodic crises that develop out of the incompatibility between the long-run perspectives of leaders and the short-run interests of groups. In all these instances, political extremism is resorted to by "well-structured" groups not by the atomized mass. Such a course of action is taken because of the inability of the pluralistic structure to accommodate them.

"Failure to recognize that pluralist assumptions cannot alone sustain political institutions is at the root of the implicit ideology of the theorists of mass politics."

---

1Ibid.; for an elaboration of these four situations, see pp. 24-25.
3) Perhaps the most serious limitation of the pluralist model is its failure to cater for the unorganized, the non-joiners, which, as surveys show, constitute a majority in Western democracies. An assumption crucial to pluralism is that the interests of all significant groups are given representation. However, if we take the case of the U.S., long known as the best approximation to a pluralist democracy, we find there that the representation of many deprived minority groups is insignificant and hence their influence on policy-making is minimal (ref., Indians, Mexicans, Negroes, Puerto Ricans; the aged, the unemployed, etc.). Lacking organization, non-groups also lack the key to political effectiveness in a pluralist democracy:

In Congress and the clientele agencies of the Executive, the unorganized are the unrepresented. And the unrepresented are by definition unable to force their choice of issues onto the political process.  

They must either function outside of the "rules of the game" or else force their way into the representational system as the pluralistic structure fails to provide a mechanism for the peaceful entry of new groups into such a system.

The unorganized tend to be concentrated amongst the

---


lower-status segments of the population. This fact has serious implications for the utility of the pluralist model. It is argued here that such a model is class-biased in that it functions effectively only for a minority of the population in the upper and middle echelons of society:

That is, at the level of the middle and upper classes, political pluralism may be an excellent interpretation for the behavior of some of the leaders ... Political pluralism is not a theory, however, which explains the behavior of those who are outside the system - the lower classes, the unemployed, deprived minorities, etc. 1

Thus, in effect, what the theorists are doing is generalizing from upper- and middle-class behavior for society as a whole. Their pluralist model, then, has only a very limited utility for, far from applying to all major segments of the population, it explains the behavior of a very small minority indeed.

It is tentatively suggested that this class bias of the pluralist model stems, in part, from the theorists' elitism discussed earlier. If one of their main concerns is to preserve the distinctiveness of the elite, following here the aristocratic orientation, then, is it not natural that their idealized version of pluralism should be set in the context of elite behavior, given that this group are for the most part drawn from the upper and middle classes? Perhaps

---

unconsciously, the theorists are taking elite behavior as a norm by which to judge other, less desirable modes of action such as mass behavior.

4) On a more concrete level, the class bias inherent in the pluralist model is closely associated with its minimization of the role of economic interests. Perrow argues that such interests are downplayed by the theorists because pluralistic groups tend to be composed of the economically wealthy.

"Group membership is both a luxury which can be afforded by the affluent, and a means of protecting their investment."¹

Such liberal notions as tolerance, compromise and bargaining can only occur amongst those who enjoy a surplus and are not faced by threats. For such persons, the focus of the theorists, economic interest does not play an important part in explaining their behavior.²

Amongst the economically deprived lower class, however, material interest might be expected to play a more important role. Such a group does not enjoy the privileges - economic or otherwise - of the middle and upper classes and so its extremist behavior can be explained in economic terms. Perrow concludes that Kornhauser's rejection of the "simple" economic

¹Ibid.
²See Kornhauser, Politics, pp. 162-163.
interpretation of mass behavior is based less on reliable analysis and more on a class bias, a preference shared with many sociologists:

Schattschneider has observed that the chorus in the pluralist heaven sings only in upper-class cadences. Much of sociological imagery is scored in the same churchly mode. We have, then, not only the danger of sociological imperialism, which seeks in group relations ..., the explanation of good and evil, but the danger that the very criteria utilized to define and locate good and evil may be biased in favor of those who already have and to whom it shall be given. It is not so much the absence of conflict and the assumption of a natural harmony of interests that disturbs us in the pluralist and prevailing sociological view ..., but that conflict on the part of the less privileged is automatically deemed disruptive, while the harmony of interests exists for those who have interests worth harmonizing. 1

5) The pluralist model is further idealized in that it underestimates the effects of the presence of strains upon the role of groups. From the pluralist perspective, primary and secondary groups are assumed to have restraining effects on people. In this view, a mass society is susceptible to extremism precisely because it lacks the mechanisms of restraint offered by groups. Why do pluralists assume that groups have a restraining role? First, attachments to and identification with intermediate groups are likely to create similar loyalties to national structures that will lead to social restraints in the

---

demands of the mass upon the elites and in their evaluation of the latter's decision.\(^1\) Gusfield, however, contests the validity of this assumption arguing that doomed and defeated classes "may come to feel that the existent political order is insufficient to command their allegiance."\(^2\) In such a situation their previous attachment to national structures is transformed into a sense of alienation from them.

Second, the socializing function of secondary groups contributes to restraint. Such groups are likely to socialize members to accept the "rules of the game" and to achieve objectives through discussion, bargaining and compromise rather than via more direct means. But, as Pinard indicates, such groups can also exert important "communicating effects," (for example, the transmission of new information).\(^3\) Group members are more likely to learn about the spread of new mass movements than atomized people and so in this sense the socializing function of groups can be used to foster the cause of extremism as opposed to moderation.

Third, group participation is assumed to foster the development of a sense of political efficacy while lack of it

\(^1\)Kornhauser, Politics, p. 67.


is supposed to engender alienation and the search for political ventures. Group participation gives rise to "a realistic concern for national and international affairs" and, conversely, atomization leads to a lack of concern for the same.¹ Pitcher proffers an alternative hypothesis to that of Kornhauser:

The interest in national and international affairs engendered by their relations to intermediate groups will create recruits for the mass society, since in reality the average citizen can know little and do little about the larger issues of the national life ... As soon as he is aware of the reality of politics, even on the local level, the more disillusioned, the more privatized he will become. The more social scientists make him aware of his lack of power, the more the man who thought he had power will react. ²

Thus, the theorists' claim that primary and secondary groups exert restraining effects on membership is "a one-sided view of the role of intermediate groupings."³ Such groupings can also exert "mobilizing effects," that is, they can motivate and legitimate group participation in a new social movement, or else adopt a neutral position between the two extremes. The orientation a group will take is dependent upon a crucial factor, that of strains. In a situation of severe strains,

¹Kornhauser, Politics, p. 65.
mobilizing and communicating effects will tend to predominate over restraining effects and "integrated individuals and pluralist societies will be more prone to political movements than atomized people and mass societies."¹ Consequently, the "theory" of mass society only holds in situations of no or few strains. Its basic proposition, the lower the degree of integration, the greater the susceptibility to extremism, applies when the success of mass movements is problematic to start with. In the presence of severe strains, the proposition falls down due to the failure of the "theory" to accommodate more than one view of the role of groups and its neglect of the importance of the extent of strains.

6) The cultural value-relativism that often accompanies a plural environment is discounted by the pluralist model. Such relativism can produce reactions to the political order equally as negative as those attributed by the theorists to the valueless mass culture. The tolerance for a variety of cultural values that characterizes a pluralistic society can lead to a cultural relativity of values that, in turn, leads to "the elimination of whole-hearted value involvement and inevitable political lassitude. Politics then has no compelling meaning; it is an attitude tentatively held but not vigorously defended."²

¹Ibid., p. 682.

active citizens, a pluralist society can manufacture an apathetic mass.

Consistent with the theorists' idealization of the pluralist model is their tarnishing of the model of mass society. For if the former incorporates only the positive features, it follows that the latter contains only negative aspects. The transition from a pluralist to a mass society is analogous to the "Fall from Grace" and as such is implicitly bemoaned by the theorists. The "angelic" nature of a pluralistic heaven where all it sweetness and light is contrasted with the "demonic" nature of mass society full of mournful gloom. So overdrawn are both these societal images that one is tempted to dismiss, with Bell, "the theory of mass society as an ideology of romantic protest against contemporary society."¹

The theorists present only the costs of life in a mass society. They ignore or, at most, pay lip-service to the benefits such a society can offer. The mass model is perhaps the most blatant example of the selectivity that stamps the so-called theory. The ideological myopia of the theorists prevents them recognizing the positive consequences of such processes as bureaucratization,

democratization, industrialization and urbanization. They see only the socially disintegrative effects of such forces. These processes, however, can act as positive agencies of social integration as well as devices of social dissolution:

It must be also pointed out that the same forces operate to incorporate persons into a larger national culture and social system. While mediating structures and local units may be weakened, direct attachment to the total society is enhanced.  

For Shils, this greater attachment of most of the population to the center, the elites, is the hallmark of a mass society. "The inclusion of the entire population in the society, or a pronounced tendency towards that inclusion is what makes the mass society." Far from a weakened consensus in mass society, the sense of affinity created by the forces of social change, enhances it for this sense cuts across class, ethnic and kinship boundaries.

This notion of mass society as consensual is as acceptable as the concept of such a society offered by the theorists. Whether or not the conditions therein increase the possibility of substantive consensus around specifically pluralistic norms is less acceptable. Gusfield argues so.

---

1Gusfield, "Mass Society and Extremist Politics," p. 27.
3Gusfield, op. cit., p. 29.
But his use of the term "pluralistic" to describe the value-system of a mass society is very questionable as pluralism presupposes a diversified multiplicity of groups that is, by definition, not found in a mass society. Nonetheless, Gusfield conceives of such a society composed of many groups and in so doing he raises the issue of whether mass society can be seen as made up of multiple sub-groups linked together through multiple memberships. It is ironical that his "very critique of pluralism has to be framed in a pluralistic context."\(^1\) The questions raised by him point to the problem of using ideal types for analysis. Such societal types as mass and pluralist represent polar extremes: at one end of the continuum are no groups and at the other, many groups.

The theorists ignore not only the consensual nature of mass society but also the beneficial consequences of increased differentiation in function and structure that accompany bureaucratization. Kornhauser, for example, sees only increased alienation resulting. He criticizes the differentiation of functions that characterize large-scale organizations, for splitting a person from his role and so enhancing his feelings of self-estrangement. A "given social function is so specialized or otherwise limited that it cannot provide sufficient meaning to summon commitment."\(^2\)

---

\(^1\)Perrow, "Sociological Perspective," p. 418.

He overlooks the possibility that specialization of function might actually increase the self-awareness of the individual. "Through differentiation, he becomes conscious of what he was formerly unaware of."\(^1\)

It is interesting that Kornhauser and the other theorists' reaction is so negative toward increased differentiation in social organization. For it can be argued that this process plus the increased complexity and heterogeneity accompanying industrialization, etc., is one factor that made a crucial contribution to a pluralistic power structure. "A series of new elites are created as a result of industrial and urban development, each elite prevailing on some but not all issues, in contrast to the single elite dominance in the small, nineteenth-century community."\(^2\) Moreover, the course of structural differentiation led to an increasingly ramified network of criss-crossing solidarities that typify the pluralistic social structure.

Again, only the destructive effects of the processes of democratization, urbanization and industrialization are

---

\(^1\) White, Beyond Conformity, pp. 132-133.

considered in the theorists' model of mass society. The emancipating features of such processes are underplayed. The theorists, however, do not go so far as to argue that these processes lead directly to totalitarianism as some of their critics charge. They only suggest that under certain specific conditions, urbanization, for example, could contribute to personal alienation, the first step on the road to political extremism. What they do overlook are the benefits accruing from such processes. Democratization, for example, incorporated the mass into the political system. This is but one instance of White's phenomenon of extensity, that is, the spread of gains over larger proportions of the population created by such a process as democratization.\(^2\) Industrialization in destroying "primordial ties" and reducing the power of tradition and hierarchy "set loose the cognitive, appreciative and moral potential of the mass."\(^3\) Similarly, urbanization destroyed the primary community but at the same time "released its members from the close constraints and enforced norms of group life." In this sense, mass society is "one of emerging freedoms."\(^4\)

---


\(^4\)Greer, "Individual Participation," p. 338.
The model of mass society presented by the theorists is, then, essentially partial. They stress the "nasty, brutish" aspect of the conditions there and ignore the more positive side:

If it is granted that mass society is compartmentalized, superficial in personal relations, anonymous, transitory, specialized, utilitarian, competitive, acquisitive, mobile, status-hungry, etc., etc., the obverse side of the coin must be shown too - the right to privacy, to free choice of friends and occupation, status on the basis of achievement rather than of ascription, a plurality of norms and standards rather than the exclusive and monopolistic social controls of a single dominant group, etc., etc. For if, as Sir Henry Maine once put it, the movement of modern society has been from status to contract, then it has been, in that light, a movement from a fixed place in the world to possible freedoms. 1

The divergence in the interpretation of social conditions is explicable in terms of ideology. The value perspectives of Gusfield and Shils are obviously different from those of the theorists of mass society. Where the latter see stability, freedom and integration, Shils sees only conflict, class barriers and inequality constraining personal development. Where the latter sees enhanced consensus, increased individual dignity and altruism, the theorists see extreme conflict, alienation and egoism. The models of pluralism and mass society are, therefore, ideological not theoretical constructs.

1Bell, "Theory of Mass Society," p. 79.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the concept of mass society from a critical point of view. It has attempted to point out its many methodological weaknesses which must be overcome before it can be considered an adequate explanation of the following three phenomena: the differences between a liberal democracy and a mass society, the causes of totalitarianism, and the relationship of the mass to totalitarianism.

Several criticisms have been levelled at the unscientific nature of some of the democratic theorists' key propositions especially those concerning the mass. First, far from being firmly grounded in empirical reality, it has been shown that their notion of the mediocre mass incorporates the chief stereotypes of collective behavior as developed by Le Bon and y Gasset plus their elitist overtones. Thus, it is an ideological not a theoretical concept.

Second, their notion of the atomized mass is suspect. The whole controversy surrounding the concept of atomization illustrates the kind of circularity of argument one encounters in studying this elusive topic. For the theorists, atomization and the consequent weakness of attachment to political institutions results from the breakdown in the functioning of primary and secondary associations in a mass
society. The problem is, simply, how to verify this? The theorists do not accept the criterion of lack of or decline in membership of groups thus refuting the empiricists' evidence that many such groups thrive (at least in the U.S.). The former argue that it is not the number of groups but their functions that have been displaced in a mass society. But, how can one demonstrate this conclusively?

The subjective corollary of atomization, the concept of alienation so central to the "theory" of mass society, is also open to criticism. The relationship between alienation and the atomized structure of mass society has not yet been securely established, although there does seem to be a correlation. Whether or not alienation leads directly to extremist behavior (either apathy or activism), as the theorists propose, remains an open question as conflicting evidence fits the hypothesis. In view of this, it would appear to be more profitable to regard their concept of alienation as a "parable" rather than a theoretical proposition. In other words, it is more useful as a perspective for evaluating the quality of an individual's experience than as an objective device for merely describing it.

At present, the concept of mass society is too ambiguous and too imprecise to qualify for the label "scientific." Obviously, ideal types are not per se
inadequate theoretical models. Use of such types as feudal, pluralistic and mass by the theorists allows certain factors to be isolated which facilitates comparison and explanation. However, the selective nature of their types goes beyond the bounds of acceptable theorizing. For only the positive features of pluralistic society and, conversely, only the negative aspects of mass society are incorporated into the respective types. Consequently, the theorists lay themselves open to the charge of idealization.

The sketching of the two extremes - one black (mass society), the other, white (pluralism) - leads the theorists to some curious conclusions. According to them, their chosen democratic values of freedom and order can only survive in a pluralistic society safeguarded by multiple elites. Here, they conduct a *volte-face* for, originally, they argued against the aristocratic theorists that these values were best preserved by the non-elites, the many and not the elite, the few. This change in their position arises from their minimization of the prime democratic value, equality, throughout their analyses. To accentuate the virtues of pluralism, mass society is painted in the worst possible light. Here, tyranny and disorder reign as the atomized mass follows capriciously the dictates of "unscrupulous" elites. The infiltration of the values of the democratic theorists into their "scientific" analyses of mass politics is seen clearly in this juxtaposition of the two types of society.
The main target of attack throughout the thesis has been the scientific pretensions of the contemporary theorists of mass society. Hopefully, these have been exposed by revealing their elitist and pluralist biases. These biases prevent consideration of all relevant factors. Their failure to realize that their analyses are coloured by such preferences is a serious one for it limits the analytical utility of the concept.

The concept is, in fact, more useful as a perspective for evaluating social and political reality than for explaining it. The concept of mass society, however, cannot be slotted into one ideological category but is rather composed of a mixture of ideologies spanning the left-right continuum. Nisbet has described it as the "ideology of lament" due to its stress on the disintegration of the family and the small community. If the concept is seen as ideology, its value is enhanced for it articulates the subjective elements of contemporary life. "It is a sensitive indicator of changes dimly perceived, and perhaps it is a proto-scientific formulation of truth, bringing to consciousness features of reality not yet substantial enough to be grasped by the methods of science."\(^1\)

1. Books


2. Articles


