

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOLLOWER

In the movements of all traditional advocates of social change one can find incipient versions of their hopes for the future. The movement embodies the advocate's goal in embryo, the new world within the shell of the old. The harmonious and friendly relations that flourish or are supposed to flourish among the adherents anticipate the society they are trying to build.

Agitation is distinguished by a remarkable lack of such positive symbols. Nazi propaganda tried to conceal the essentially negative and reactive nature of the "Aryan" by developing the notions of the biological race and the hemmed-in nation. But these notions, obviously irrelevant to American life, are of little help to the American agitator when he attempts to portray his adherent. Yet, as the advocate of the endogamic community, he can hardly define his followers in terms of a social class. The American agitator falls back on the clichés of professional patriotism, Fourth of July Americanism.

The invention of the Aryan race and the agitator's glorification of the Simple American are symptomatic of similar efforts to strengthen social coercion. Both the *Volksgemeinschaft* of the Nazis and the community of pure Americans proposed by the agitator are actually pseudo-*Gemeinschaften*, or pseudo-communities. Such notions are deceptive solutions of the problem created by the disintegration of individualism. The agitator seems aware of this disintegration, but he conceives it as caused by an external force rather than as inherent in the structure of contemporary society: "There are forces at work which . . . would destroy the individuality of Americans and make of them automatons."¹

The agitator bars the way towards understanding those forces. His normative image of the follower, built simply as a reactive response to the image of the enemy, is as ambivalent as that of the enemy: deceptive strength and real impotence. In the face of the formidable threat represented by the enemy, the adherents are made to believe that they can

survive only by huddling together in an exclusive community and by obeying the orders of the leader. But if the enemy must be exterminated, the adherent can just be saved from extermination. In the last analysis, both are equally contemptible: the enemy as the projected target of the adherent's fury and the adherent because he can do nothing but resort to such projections.

THEME 18: SIMPLE AMERICANS

Striving to recruit the largest possible number of people to his banner, the agitator tries to transcend traditional political or social divisions and to appeal directly to

. . . the great common body of the American people, who are deacons of churches, trustees of churches, who go to High Mass on Sunday morning, who build the fires and keep the doors of the synagogues, who grub the stumps and husk the corn and chop the cane, and do the work.²

The majority of Americans, he intimates, support his cause. His estimates vary: ". . . these seventy-five to one hundred million real, plain, simple American folks . . ." ³ or "75% of the American people." ⁴ In more expansive moments he is "certain (that) more than eighty percent of the American people are getting sick and tired of being misled by foreign fraud." ⁵ "Everybody who is against war and communism is called an anti-semitite. 85% of America followed Nye, Smith and Coughlin." ⁶ And finally reaching a rhapsodic climax, he proclaims that "mine is not the cry of just one American citizen. It is the plea and the prayer of millions of Americans . . ." ⁷

The most obvious purpose of such claims is to instill in the listeners the feeling that, just as they cannot be wrong when they buy a nationally advertised product, so they cannot be wrong when they represent a general political trend. In addition to this reassuring function, these claims to mass following help to emphasize the basic weakness of the helplessly outnumbered enemy.

Friends and allies are equipped with seemingly unmistakable identification marks. The agitator makes his followers feel that they are something special. They must be convinced that they belong to an *élite* even if the *élite* presumes to include the vast majority of the people.

As soon as the agitator tries to define this *élite* he apparently encounters insuperable obstacles. The poverty of the characteristics attributed to the follower is in striking contrast with the richness of characteristics

assigned to the enemy. When the agitator tries to characterize this *élite* socially, he only borrows various stereotypes. When he predicts that "some day Gentile Americans are going to wake up to what is being done to the 'forgotten man'"⁸ or denounces any offenses against "the common man" and his "welfare,"⁹ he is borrowing from the arsenal of progressive clichés. When he refers to his adherents as "we old-fashioned Americans"¹⁰ or as "Individualists who still believe in Constitutional government and the American way of life,"¹¹ he is using the language of conservatism. And when he speaks of the "poor stockholders . . . the forgotten men,"¹² he is using the middle-of-the-road stereotype designed to impress prospective middle-class adherents.

The inadequacy of such symbols is obvious: they are not sufficiently distinctive to become the exclusive property of the agitator. Still trying to construct a portrait of his followers, the agitator resorts to nationalism described as the exclusive property of Christians, the "Christian Nationalists."¹³

The Christian is defined in negative terms: he is the non-Jew, who can remain a Christian only by never mingling with Jews. The mark of purity, by which the adherent can remain faithful, is a refusal to mix with the contaminating Jews. A Christian who associates with Jews is contemptuously referred to as "Shabes-goy";¹⁴ such people are condemned as "those Gentiles to whom Christ referred as being 'two-fold more the child of hell' than the Jewish leaders of that Synagogue of Satan . . ."¹⁵

To complement his notion of the Christian follower as one who is not a Jew, the agitator tries to adapt the Nazi notion of a pure Nordic race. The results are pathetically poor: All he can produce is a vague biological intimation in "Americans of the original species."¹⁶ In the characterization "real Americans"¹⁷ the abstract adjective "real" barely conceals the negative meaning of "non-nonreal." What the agitator implies is that his adherents are all those who do not fall under any of the categories of the enemy. His *élite* or in-group is essentially negative; it depends for definition on those in the out-group. It is what the "other" is not, a pure residue. The very levelling of class differentiations and cultural distinctions involved in this image makes impossible any kind of specific or positive identification of his followers.

The agitator makes no genuine appeal to solidarity. Even when he addresses himself to the vast majority of "American Americans"¹⁸ he suggests that what unites them is the common danger they face in the Jew. By making their precarious situation their major sign of identification,

he retains his manipulative power over them. Under the guise of granting his followers identity the agitator denies it to them. He says in effect: If you belong to the common people you need not ask for something else because it is quite enough to be considered one of the common people rather than an enemy of the people. Anything else might expose you. For both he and his audience feel that the cement of our social structure is not love, solidarity, or friendship, but the drive to survive; and in his appeal to his followers, as well as in his portrait of their characters, there is no room for solidarity. There is only fear.

GRASSROOTS ANTI-INTELLECTUALS. That the agitator refers to his followers as common folk, a kind of "proletarian *élite*," might seem offhand to suggest that he seeks to disavow the anti-democratic implications of his discriminatory statements by the use of a well-tested device. But this is also a device which by its very nature often tends to transform democratic psychological patterns into totalitarian ones. Closely related to the common resentment against anyone who dares be different and hence implicitly directed against minority groups, it establishes conformism as a moral principle, a good in itself.

Seizing on the "simple folk" theme as a pretext for fostering an aggressively anti-intellectual attitude, the agitator describes his American Americans as a people of sound instincts and, he is happy to say, little sophistication. He suggests that, on one level, the conflict between his followers and the enemy is nothing but a clash between simple minds and wise guys, level-headed realists and crazy sophisticates. He delights his followers by proclaiming his own lack of intellectuality:

I do not understand political science, as an authority from an academic viewpoint. I am not familiar with the artistic masterpieces of Europe, but I do say this tonight: I understand the hearts of the American people.¹⁹

Implying that intellectual pursuits are inherently depraved, he refers contemptuously to "the parlors of the sophisticated, the intellectuals, the so-called academic minds."²⁰ Heavy is the responsibility of the "Scribes and Pharisees of the Twentieth Century . . . [who] provide a nation with its dominant propaganda including seasonal fashions in politics, religious attitudes, sub-standard ethics and half-caste morals."²¹

Here the agitator is, first of all, playing on the resentment of uneducated people against the educated, a resentment he often transforms into sneering anti-intellectualism. But in addition to this attitude which the agitator can expect to find ready-made in his audience and merely inflates,

he exploits another and at the moment perhaps more significant attitude: the modern disappointment with rationality. All the symbols of liberalistic enlightenment are the targets of his attack. Psychology, especially psychoanalysis, is singled out for vehement and sarcastic denunciation, for among other crimes "by uncovering secrets of rich men and women" it wields "'control' over the subject."²²

Offering typical patient "resistance" to psychoanalysis, the agitator scorns any suggestion that his audience of simple Americans might be frustrated. "Frustration"? No wonder Freud is worshipped in certain quarters. Did he not invent a label that enables any suspect to take the offensive against his accusers?"²³ No, not frustration, but sound, healthy instincts and common sense characterize his followers. They are not taken in by

. . . that old city-slick, tweedle-dee, tweedle-dum stuff. . . . We will come out with a crusading, militant America First Party and we are going to take this government out of the hands of these city-slickers and give it back to the people that still believe two plus two is four, God is in his Heaven, and the Bible is the Word.²⁴

Theory, discussion, interchange of opinion—all this is futile, an impediment to the struggle for self-preservation. The situation is too urgent to permit the luxury of thought. Having discovered that "actions are more realistic than hypocritical catchwords,"²⁵ the agitator tells his followers that there is no point in wasting time in talk. As the end result of anti-intellectualism, the speech-maker denounces speeches: his group "is not 'another organization.' We hold no banquets. We waste small time in speech making. *The Silver Legion* comes to Christian citizens who want ACTION. . . ."²⁶

The agitator's doctrine of aggressive intolerance is represented as the "natural reactions of plain people to [having heard] the truth."²⁷ He hardly bothers to veil his function of releasing the emotions of those simple Americans who are his followers:

Our people frequently do not express themselves because there are only a few of us who speak with abandon in times like this, but in the hearts of our people are pent-up emotions which go unexpressed because they fear their vocabularies are insufficient . . .²⁸

The agitator, in praising the simple folk, praises only their humble and folksy ways, in which the latent savagery and brutality that is both

repressed and generated by modern culture, still manifests itself. He offers them little else.

Attracted by the promise of a new spiritual home, the audience actually gets the tautological assurance that Americans are Americans, and Christians Christians. The simple American is a member of an *élite* by virtue of birth but in the last analysis, he can only be defined in negatives: he is a Christian because he is not a Jew; he is an American because he is not a foreigner; he is a simple fellow because he is not an intellectual. The only positive means the agitator has of identifying the Simple American is as a follower. The adherent who turned to the agitator in the vague hope of finding identity and status ends as more than ever an anonymous member of a characterless mass—a lonely cipher in an army of regimented ciphers.

THEME 19: WATCHDOGS OF ORDER

HYPNOTIC ALERTNESS. For all their strength, the Simple Americans are apathetic and lethargic, they are like a “slow, muscular, sleeping giant.”²⁹ This fact fills the agitator with a kind of despair; he argues, implores, cajoles, shouts himself hoarse to arouse them to awareness of their danger: “O God! When will the American people awaken and snap out of their lethargy? When will they arouse themselves to the dangers which confront them internally as well as externally?”³⁰ He summons them to alertness: “Wake up, Americans! It is later than you think! ACT BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE!”³¹

Offhand, this call to alertness may seem like that of all other proponents of social change who also excoriate apathy and indifference. But the agitator’s warnings and admonitions seem hardly to have any genuine relationship to a situation. Even the most trivial of occasions elicits the call to alertness: that “character assassins have smeared our two greatest heroes—Lindbergh and Rickenbacker—should be enough to wake up America.”³²

Significantly, the agitator never tries to justify his call to alertness by subsequent explanation, even of the most rudimentary kind. While it is possible to detect signs of similarity between the agitator’s call and religious revivalism, their actual functions are quite different. In a sermon the call to awareness is addressed to the soul of the individual, with the aim of strengthening his conscience or superego; likewise, the reformer as a rule endeavors to inculcate a stronger social sense among his

adherents by lifting their concerns from the private to the general level. But the agitator, under the guise of pursuing a similar purpose, actually invites his listeners, not to change themselves spiritually or socially, but simply to place all blame, all sin, on the external enemy. He asks them, not to become more conscious of the causes of their difficulties, but simply to give vent to their feelings: "I challenge all true Americans today to come out from your places of hiding, express yourselves, give vent to your opinions, stand squarely upon your feet. . . . America Awake!"³³

In such direct appeals to the people to cease being "very patient and good-natured,"³⁴ in such warnings that "long enough we have been apathetic,"³⁵ and in such direct statements as "that's the way I like my people to be, angry,"³⁶ the agitator defines the alertness of his Simple Americans as something that is the opposite of alertness. They are invited, not to organize rational responses, but to act out their impulses. The agitator plays on his audience's predisposition to seek escape from rigid psychological controls. People want unconsciously to "give in," to cease being individuals in the traditional sense of self-sustaining and self-controlled units. The ability to control oneself reflects a more basic ability to compete with others and thereby determine one's economic and spiritual fate. But today the social pressures to which each individual is subjected are so overwhelming that he must yield to them both economically and psychologically. He must act according to the pattern of conformist social behavior rather than according to the needs of his individual personality. The social and cultural pressures to which he is subjected become the determining factors in molding his personality. As a result, the very diminution of his "ego" decreases his ability and his willingness to exercise self-control. Hysteria, an extreme expression of this lack of self-control and a psychological trait that is rapidly spreading through all of society, is the audience reaction on which the agitator banks when he calls for displays of anger and emotion. When the agitator so insistently demands such outbreaks, he lifts an already tottering taboo from the conscience of his audience and suggests to them that an abandonment of self-control has by now become the socially correct mode of behavior.

But since he was the one who released the instinctual urges of his audience, the agitator is in an especially favorable position to control and manipulate them. The alerted Simple Folk rush hysterically in obedience to the agitator's call; where do they go? Responding constantly, they are kept in a perpetual state of mobilization and are not given an opportunity to collect their thoughts. What takes place is not an awakening but

rather a kind of hypnotic trance which is perpetuated by constant admonitions to alertness.

Just as the enemy never rests—"certain Jewish organizations are working day and night to open America's borders to five million Jewish refugees"³⁷—so the Simple Americans are asked to be on guard constantly and indefatigably. The audience is driven to submit to the agitator's incessant harangues until it is ready to accept everything he says in order to gain a moment's rest. Once they are aroused, the simple folk "are known to be *pure hell!*"³⁸ but the very way in which they have been aroused merely perpetuates their inferior status.

"LET'S GO." In designating his followers as Simple Americans, the agitator no doubt seeks to give them a sense of superiority and strength; yet, as we have seen, the image of the adherent which he constructs is singularly lacking in positive gratification. Themes like the "Endogamic Community" and "Housecleaning" suggest some sort of spiritual gratification. But even these indulgences and gratifications prove to be essentially negative. At no point does the agitator promise any substantial improvement in his adherent's status. Perhaps, then, we might infer that the agitator is appealing to the notion that the poor man should be content with his lot on the dubious grounds that he is somehow morally superior to both the rich and those who rebel against the rich. But such an inference is only partly correct.

When the agitator appeals nostalgically to the "good old times," he can at most be vaguely sentimental—hardly an attitude by means of which to solidify his followers in his movement or to present them with a satisfactory image of themselves. It is difficult to believe that "dreams of little white houses with blue roofs, built near singing streams, with sheep and cattle grazing in quiet pasture land"³⁹ or the maudlin account of a party where "the women baked yummy cakes, sold refreshments, etc. We all sang and had a jolly, sociable and inspiring time besides. . . . Rich people are noticeable by their absence in this cause"⁴⁰ represent the sole positive stimulus available to the agitator. For somewhere, somehow the agitator must give his followers the feeling that his calls to alertness have some reality basis and that by heeding his appeals they will get something worthwhile.

One possible clue may be found in the extreme aridity of the agitator's statements. Although he does not explicitly advocate a dangerous and frugal life, as the Fascists did to some extent, his dubious and often di-

rectly negative attitude towards material benefits and pleasures suggests that what he does dangle before his followers' eyes is the prospect of participating in a Spartan *élite*—an *élite* without special happiness or privileges but with greater access to the centers of social power. The American American is always seen as surrounded by dangerous and cunning enemies, and all that he can do is to use social power as a means of self-preservation. The agitator intimates to his audience that the thing that matters is not so much possession of goods as social control; once you are "in" you are likely to get a share of what can be had. Such a promise of a share in actual social control may serve as a very powerful antidote to the pervasive and frustrating sense of exclusion from which his audience suffers. The agitator, unlike all traditional advocates of social change, does not promise a good society, he does not tell his followers that there will be delicious fruits to be had once power is attained. All he tells them is that power in itself is worthwhile.

Not the traditional "gravy" promised by politicians, but power conceived of as the right directly to exercise violence is what the agitator offers his followers. And here again the agitator is perhaps less unrealistic than might appear offhand. By permitting his followers to indulge in acts of violence against the enemy group, the agitator offers them the prospect of serving as semi-privileged agents of a social domination actually exercised by others. But the followers nonetheless do share in the reality of power, since power ultimately is grounded on force and they are to be the dispensers of brute force. True, the followers are to get only the dregs of power, the dirty part of the game—but this they will get. And hence their feeling that "it's the right of Christian Americans to be the master in the United States of America,"⁴¹ has some psychological justification. Though they have only the prospect of becoming watchdogs of order in the service of other, more powerful groups, the watchdogs do exert a kind of subsidiary power over the helpless enemy.

This promise of sadistic gratification is relayed through linguistic stimuli. Intimating that the act of venting pent-up emotions on a scapegoat is, if not quite desirable, something natural and hence unavoidable, the agitator says that "good Americans are boiling inside and some of them, unfortunately, are looking about for something, perhaps a group on which to focus their attention, on which to lay the blame for conditions."⁴²

He clearly indicates the direction in which they are supposed to look: "Liquidate the millions of bureaucrats . . . kick out the top heavy Jew

majority, many foreign born that NOW dictate and direct our domestic and foreign policies."⁴³

The outbreak of violence is justified by the agitator in legal terms by being implicitly compared to a police action: ". . . The rank and file of sober, sincere, and peaceable citizens [should] pull them [New-Dealers] out of power and lock them up, pronto, as their crimes may be proven."⁴⁴

As justification for such calls to violence, the agitator paints vivid pictures of the enemy's brutality. For though the enemy is seen as inhuman, he is allowed one all too human characteristic—enjoyment of cruelty. The enemy "would actually and physically crucify Father Coughlin . . . there is in their hearts a sadistic thirst for blood."⁴⁵ The enemy has an apparently unquenchable thirst for blood; they would like "to drink the blood of every German"⁴⁶ and "with their own foul tongues, they would lap up the blood of their own critics."⁴⁷

BLOOD AND DEATH. Perhaps the most effective though indirect method by which the agitator encourages violence is his consistent use of images which condition the audience to accept violence as "natural" and respectable. In his world murder and death are invariable parts of the landscape. His threats are couched in the language of brutal action, of explosions of anger that sweep everything aside. He predicts that the enemy's activity will "dynamite a Boulder Dam of public reaction which will create a domestic crisis unequaled in the history of our people."⁴⁸ The people ought to march on Washington "with monkey wrenches and lead pipe"⁴⁹ once his ideas have begun to "ignite in the public mind."⁵⁰ He complains that he is

. . . smeared in the press, boycotted, liquidated, described as a menace, fired from his job, relieved of his command, viewed with suspicion, editorialized against, hounded with gossip, preyed on by character assassins, ripped from gut to nose, he must be socially disemboweled, economically wrecked, burned out with the sulphur of editorial excoriation, banished if possible, exiled wherever practical, scorned, branded as psychopathic, isolated as one of the lunatic fringe.⁵¹

This torrent of words exemplifies a basic function of modern agitation: rehearsal. The verbal fury of the agitator is only a rehearsal of real fury.

Can his followers then have any qualms about the retaliatory methods they use against the enemy? For against such a background of enemy ruthlessness, in an atmosphere that reeks with cruelty and murder, the

sadistic urges of both agitator and follower are unloosed. Perhaps unconsciously and perhaps not, the agitator slips in an anticipatory description of his followers' cruelty: "We pushed you out of Coney Island, Rockaway, Long Beach and we will push you outta here—out into the ocean."⁵² He loves to imagine how fearful and cowardly the enemy is: ". . . Winchell is perhaps best known for his physical cowardice . . . afraid to pass an undertaking parlor by himself . . . terrified at the smell of embalming fluid."⁵³

Indulging in verbal equivalents of the violence he evokes, the agitator wishes he "could write messages that would burn the trousers off the brazen intolerants who have the unmitigated gall to criticize us."⁵⁴ Or he gloats at the thought that "many Americans of the original species would like to see the Hon. Hans von Kaltenborn broadcast with his bare feet on a hot brick."⁵⁵ And he promises that "there'll be some fat, greasy scalps hanging on the wall."⁵⁶

In the guise of a warning that the destruction of the enemy will not be fun, he promises fun, and while urging restraint he spurs his followers to violence: "Hanging hordes of Jews in apple orchards, or even watching the cracking of their Communist front with satisfaction, has nothing to do with yanking this country from its devil of a MESS!"⁵⁷ Or in the guise of a little joke, he continues to urge violence: "Next time, let's plow under the international bankers instead of the pigs and cotton."⁵⁸

A favorite symbol of sadism, the delighted description of whipping, also occurs in agitation:

Christ, we recall, took the cord of his garment and physically lashed the money changers out of the portico of the sacred Temple in Jerusalem. Was Christ precipitate? Are we to be more 'Christian' than Christ? . . . Let's go!⁵⁹

Reaching macabre depths of perversity and sadism, he adds: "So you might as well start adjusting your thinking to the inhuman orgasm that's ahead, before America sings her Locust-Swarm savagely. . . ."⁶⁰

THE ELDER BROTHER. By encouraging such sadistic fantasies the agitator does not, like most political leaders, appear in the role of the restraining or moralizing father but rather as the elder brother who leads the small-fry gang in its juvenile escapades. Yet it would be erroneous to infer that he preaches free and wild joy in aggression. For with every gesture that urges his audience to indulge in violence, he reminds his followers, no matter how indirectly, that their aggression involves the forbidden, that they are still weak and can free themselves from the enemy's tyranny

only by submitting unconditionally to his leadership. In the anticipated hunt, the followers can expect no spoils: they must be satisfied with the mere hunt itself.

Though they are destined to be the watchdogs of order tomorrow, today they are still weak: "Do not think for a moment that it will be easy—or fun."⁶¹ The blending of strength and weakness that characterizes the agitator's image of the enemy also holds for his followers. Like the enemy conspirators, the followers must shun the light of day, for they are always in danger of attack by the enemy. Here, as in so many other instances, the image of the adherent is merely an inversion of the image of the enemy. The agitator confesses to this weakness:

A man said to me, "Come to Houston and talk to my friends." I went over there and there were about one hundred of them, and when I got over there I was supposed to have a meeting at a public place, but they said, "We are going to have it out in one of the houses because we are afraid of the reprisals of the New Deal if we held it in a place where our names are known."⁶²

So the agitator, for all his claims to the support of the overwhelming majority of the people, has no recourse but to turn to conspiracies; he urges his followers to form "platoons of 25 persons" which "are pliable. They can be suddenly thrown into action in their respective districts in the work of teaching the principles of social justice to others."⁶³

The agitator's gift to his audience—his permission to indulge in violence—is a Trojan horse. Even the promised violence is hard to deliver, even that one last shred which might give some measure of positive personality to the image of the adherent turns out to be illusory. All that remains is the immediate condition of constantly renewed excitement and terror; the followers are allowed no rest, they must constantly ward off enemy attacks which never occur, they are called to the most heroic and self-sacrificing acts of violence that never take place. In the end the follower again becomes an "innocent bystander" who is the most deeply involved accomplice.

The adherent is nothing but an inverted reflection of the enemy. He remains a frustrated underdog, and all the agitator does is to mobilize his aggressive impulses against the enemy. The underdog becomes watchdog and bloodhound, while yet remaining essentially an underdog; for the most he can do is to react to external threats. The image of the adherent thus serves indirectly to condition the audience to authoritarian discipline.