

CHAPTER I I

SOCIAL MALAISE

The first and most natural task that confronts a student of any movement of social change is to locate the cause of the movement in a specific condition of discontent. In most instances the solution of this problem presents no difficulties at all—in fact, the advocate of social change himself devotes a great part of his energy to articulating this cause. When we examine agitation, however, we face an entirely different situation. That the agitator wants to exploit existing discontent is obvious enough: he seems always to be addressing people who are smarting under the harshest injustice and whose patience has been strained to the breaking point. But whenever the investigator scans the texts of agitation and, on the basis of his experience in studying other kinds of social movements, tries to discover what is the discontent it articulates, he is consistently disappointed.

The difficulty is not that agitation fails to provide him with answers, but rather that it answers a question he did not ask: whenever he asks *what* he is answered as if he had asked *who*. He finds numerous vituperative and indignant references to enemies, but nowhere can he find a clearly defined objective condition from which the agitator's audience presumably suffers. At best, agitation provides the investigator with contradictory or inconsistent references to such alleged conditions. Unless we decide that the agitator is simply a lunatic we must assume that, although a sense of discontent exists, he, unlike other advocates of social change, is either unable or unwilling to state it explicitly. Hence, the agitation analyst faces the task of himself explicating the state of discontent to which the agitator refers.

A CATALOGUE OF GRIEVANCES

Even a cursory glance at agitational material shows that any attempt to analyze it by methods that help discover the purposes of the revolu-

tionary or the reformer could lead only to an impasse. If we try to classify the agitator's complaints in terms of the simplest categories, we obtain approximately the following picture:

1. **ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES.** The agitator roams freely over every area of economic life. He may begin anywhere at all. Too much help is being extended to foreign nations. "If we have any money to offer for nothing, or to loan, or to give away, we had better give it to our own first. Of course, that is old fashioned."¹

Not only are foreigners taking our money, they also threaten our jobs. "People born in America have to commit suicide because they have nothing to eat while refugees get their jobs."²

Behind such injustices stand "The International Bankers, who devised and control our money system, [and] are guilty of giving us unsound money."³

Such situations constitute a danger to the American way of life, for "what is more likely to follow many years of Nudéal communistic confiscatory taxation, wool-less, metal-less, auto-less regimentation and planned scarcities than our finally becoming stripped by necessity to Nudism?"⁴

2. **POLITICAL GRIEVANCES.** International commitments by the United States government jeopardize political liberties. "Like Russia, the United States is suffering from the scourge of internationalism."⁵ The American people are warned: "Be not duped by the internationalists who dwell amongst us."⁶

Of course it is only reasonable that "treaties and agreements . . . shall be reached with other nations, but . . . we want no world court and no world congress made up of a few Orientals and a few Russians and a few Europeans and a few British . . . to make laws for us to obey. . . ."⁷

From within, this country is threatened by radicalism, which prepares strikes that are "dress rehearsals for a forthcoming general strike that is meant to paralyze the Nation. . . ."⁸

We face both the danger of a "Soviet America . . . where . . . an Austrian-born Felix Frankfurter presides over an unending 'Moscow trial.' . . ."⁹ and the rule of "tyrannical bureaucrats" who if they "could have their way completely" would institute a "dictatorship in America as merciless as anything on earth."¹⁰

3. **CULTURAL GRIEVANCES.** The agitator is greatly disturbed because the media of public information are in the hands of enemies of the nation.

"... the Hollywood motion picture industry is being exploited by Russian Jewish Communists determined to inject their materialistic propaganda into the fresh young minds of our children . . ."11 Hollywood is "largely dominated by aliens who have appropriated to their own use the inventions and discoveries of native citizens and who now specialize in speculation, indecency and foreign propaganda."12

"The American press will never be free" until control "is removed from racial, religious and economic pressure groups."13

4. MORAL GRIEVANCES. The enemies of the agitator are notoriously lax in morals: they engage in luxury consumption, they are a "crowd of Marxists, refugees, left-wing internationalists who enjoy the cream of the country and want the rest of us to go on milkless, butterless, cheeseless days while they guzzle champagne."14

And what is most galling of all is that "we gentiles are suckers." For "while we were praying they had their hands in our pockets."15

EMOTIONAL SUBSTRATUM

This list of diffuse complaints could be lengthened indefinitely; it should be sufficient to indicate that the grievances the agitator voices do not refer to any clearly delineated material or moral condition. The only constant elements discernible in this mass of grievances are references to certain emotions or emotional complexes. These may be roughly divided as follows:

Distrust: The agitator plays on his audience's suspicions of all social phenomena impinging on its life in ways it does not understand. Foreign refugees cash in on the "gullibility" of Americans, whom he warns not to be "duped" by internationalists. Strewn through the output of the agitator are such words as *hoax*, *corrupt*, *insincere*, *duped*, *manipulate*.

Dependence: The agitator seems to assume that he is addressing people who suffer from a sense of helplessness and passivity. He plays on the ambivalent nature of this complex which on the one hand reflects a protest against manipulation and on the other hand a wish to be protected, to belong to a strong organization or be led by a strong leader.

Exclusion: The agitator suggests that there is an abundance of material and spiritual goods, but that the people do not get what they are entitled to. The American taxpayer's money is used to help everyone but himself—"we feed foreigners,"16 the agitator complains, while we neglect our own millions of unemployed.

Anxiety: This complex manifests itself in a general premonition of disasters to come, a prominent part of which seems to be the middle-class fear of a dislocation of its life by revolutionary action, and its suspicion that the moral mainstays of social life are being undermined. The agitator speaks of "the darkest hour in American history"¹⁷ and graphically describes a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity:

This afternoon America is caught in the throes of fear, apprehension and concern. Men are afraid . . . to vote, afraid not to vote . . . Our population has been caught by the ague and chills of uncertainty. Unless these uncertainties can be removed, unless these fears can be destroyed, we shall never have prosperity again.¹⁸

Disillusionment: This complex is seen in such remarks as the agitator's characterization of politics as "make-believe, pretense, pretext, sham, fraud, deception, dishonesty, falsehood, hypocrisy. . . ."¹⁹ In fact, "whenever a legislative body meets, liberties of the people are endangered by subtle and active interests."²⁰ Ideological slogans inspire resentment: "Democracy A Misnomer, A Trick Word Used by Jew and Communist Internationalists to Confuse and Befuddle American Citizens. . . ."²¹ Values and ideals are enemy weapons, covering up the machinations of sinister powers which, "taking advantage of the mass ignorance of our people, accomplish their purposes under the cloak of humanitarianism and justice."²²

THE INDIVIDUAL IN CRISIS

The analyst of agitation now faces the problem: are these merely fleeting, insubstantial, purely accidental and personal emotions blown up by the agitator into genuine complaints or are they themselves a constant rooted in the social structure? The answer seems unavoidable: these feelings cannot be dismissed as either accidental or imposed, they are basic to modern society. Distrust, dependence, exclusion, anxiety, and disillusionment blend together to form a fundamental condition of modern life: malaise.

When we define the discontent utilized by agitation as malaise, we are, so to speak, on our own for we cannot justify this definition by explicit references to agitational statements. It is an hypothesis, but it is a highly plausible one, because its only alternative would be to see the maze of agitational statements as a lunatic product beyond analysis. Moreover, it helps to account for certain recurrent characteristics of agitation: its

diffuseness, its pseudo-spontaneity, its flexibility in utilizing a variety of grievances, and its substitution of a personal enemy for an objective condition.

The agitator does not spin his grumblings out of thin air. The modern individual's sense of isolation, his so-called spiritual homelessness, his bewilderment in the face of the seemingly impersonal forces of which he feels himself a helpless victim, his weakening sense of values—all these motifs often recur in modern sociological writings. This malaise reflects the stresses imposed on the individual by the profound transformations taking place in our economic and social structure—the replacement of the class of small independent producers by gigantic industrial bureaucracies, the decay of the patriarchal family, the breakdown of primary personal ties between individuals in an increasingly mechanized world, the compartmentalization and atomization of group life, and the substitution of mass culture for traditional patterns.

These objective causes have been operating for a long time with steadily increasing intensity. They are ubiquitous and apparently permanent, yet they are difficult to grasp because they are only indirectly related to specific hardships or frustrations. Their accumulated psychological effect is something akin to a chronic disturbance, an habitual and not clearly defined malaise which seems to acquire a life of its own and which the victim cannot trace to any known source.

On the plane of immediate awareness, the malaise seems to originate in the individual's own depths and is experienced by him as an apparently isolated and purely psychic or spiritual crisis. It enhances his sense of antagonism to the rest of the world. Those groups in our society that are at present most susceptible to agitation seem to experience this malaise with particular acuteness—perhaps precisely because they do not confront social coercion in its more direct forms.

Although malaise actually reflects social reality, it also veils and distorts it. Malaise is neither an illusion of the audience nor a mere imposition by the agitator; it is a psychological symptom of an oppressive situation. The agitator does not try to diagnose the relationship of this symptom to the underlying social situation. Instead he tricks his audience into accepting the very situation that produced its malaise. Under the guise of a protest against the oppressive situation, the agitator binds his audience to it. Since this pseudo-protest never produces a genuine solution, it merely leads the audience to seek permanent relief from a permanent predicament by means of irrational outbursts. The agitator does not

create the malaise, but he aggravates and fixates it because he bars the path to overcoming it.

Those afflicted by the malaise ascribe social evil not to an unjust or obsolete form of society or to a poor organization of an adequate society, but rather to activities of individuals or groups motivated by innate impulses. For the agitator these impulses are biological in nature, they function beyond and above history: Jews, for instance, are evil—a "fact" which the agitator simply takes for granted as an inherent condition that requires no explanation or development. Abstract intellectual theories do not seem to the masses as immediately "real" as their own emotional reactions. It is for this reason that the emotions expressed in agitation appear to function as an independent force, which exists prior to the articulation of any particular issue, is expressed by this articulation, and continues to exist after it.

Malaise can be compared to a skin disease. The patient who suffers from such a disease has an instinctive urge to scratch his skin. If he follows the orders of a competent doctor, he will refrain from scratching and seek a cure for the cause of his itch. But if he succumbs to his unreflective reaction, he will scratch all the more vigorously. This irrational exercise of self-violence will give him a certain kind of relief, but it will at the same time increase his need to scratch and will in no way cure his disease. The agitator says: keep scratching.

The agitator exploits not primarily the feelings generated by specific hardships or frustrations, but more fundamentally those diffuse feelings of malaise which pervade all modern life. The malaise which is experienced as an internal psychic condition, can, however, be explained only by the social process in its totality. Such an explanation—following the classical method of articulating causes of discontent in universal and verifiable terms and then proposing definite methods to remove them—is beyond the resources of the agitator.

Here the agitator turns to account what might appear his greatest disadvantage—his inability to relate the discontent to an obvious causal base. While most other political movements promise a cure for a specific, and therefore limited, social ailment, the modern agitator, because he himself indirectly voices the malaise, can give the impression that he aims to cure some chronic, ultimate condition. And so, he insinuates, while others fumble with the symptoms, he attacks the very roots of the disease in that he voices the totality of modern feeling.

Because the malaise originates in the deepest layers of the individual psyche, it can appear to be an expression of frustrated spontaneity and

essential spiritual needs. The agitator, implicitly working on this assumption, thus claims in effect that he represents the most general interests of society, while his opponents, who concern themselves with such limited, specific matters as housing or unemployment or wages, represent only selfish class interests. He can excoriate the others for their seemingly materialistic attitude, since he, on the contrary, has at heart only the nation and the race.

He can thus identify himself with any symbol suggesting spiritual spontaneity and, by extension, with any symbol suggesting that he strives to gratify suppressed instinctual impulses. He can appear as the enemy of those unjust constraints of civilization that operate on a deeper, more intimate level than those imposed by social institutions, and he can represent himself as a romantic defender of ancient traditions today trampled down by modern industrialism.

This alleged spirituality is vague enough to include or exclude anything at all, to be dissociated from history and to be associated with the most primitive biological instincts. In its name the agitator can appeal to the Promethean energies of sacrifice and promise to satisfy the essential needs for participation in communal life, for spiritual security, spontaneity, sincerity, and independence. He can easily switch from money and unemployment to spiritual matters.

. . . there is something deeper, more substantial which has been removed from the foundation of our national life than the mere loss of money and loss of jobs . . . Charity means seeking first the kingdom of God and His justice rather than seeking banks filled with gold.²³

Malaise is a consequence of the depersonalization and permanent insecurity of modern life. Yet it has never been felt among people so strongly as in the past few decades. The inchoate protest, the sense of disenchantment, and the vague complaints and forebodings that are already perceptible in late nineteenth century art and literature have been diffused into general consciousness. There they function as a kind of vulgarized romanticism, a *Weltschmerz in perpetuum*, a sickly sense of disturbance that is subterranean but explosive. The intermittent and unexpected acts of violence on the part of the individual and the similar acts of violence to which whole nations can be brought are indices of this underground torment. Vaguely sensing that something has gone astray in modern life but also strongly convinced that he lacks the power to right whatever is wrong (even if it were possible to discover what is wrong), the individual lives in a sort of eternal adolescent uneasiness.

The agitator gravitates toward malaise like a fly to dung. He does not

blink its existence as so many liberals do; he finds no comfort in the illusion that this is the best of all possible worlds. On the contrary, he grovels in it, he relishes it, he distorts and deepens and exaggerates the malaise to the point where it becomes almost a paranoiac relationship to the external world. For once the agitator's audience has been driven to this paranoiac point, it is ripe for his ministrations.

The prevalence of malaise in recent decades is reflected in growing doubt with relation to those universal beliefs that bound western society together.* Religion, the central chord of western society, is today often justified even by its most zealous defenders on grounds of expediency. Religion is proposed not as a transcendent revelation of the nature of man and the world, but as a means of weathering the storms of life, or of deepening one's spiritual experience, or of preserving social order, or of warding off anxiety. Its claim to acceptance is that it offers spiritual comfort. A similar development may be found in morality. There are today no commonly accepted—commonly accepted as a matter of course and beyond the need for discussion—moral values. Such a pragmatic maxim as "honesty is the best policy" is itself striking evidence of the disintegration of moral axioms. And much the same is also true for economic concepts: the businessman still believes in fair competition, but in his "dream life . . . the sure fix is replacing the open market."†

As a result, the old beliefs, even when preserved as ritualistic fetishes, have become so hollow that they cannot serve as spurs to conscience or internalized sources of authority. Now authority stands openly as a coercive force and against it is arrayed a phalanx of repressed impulses that storm the gates of the psyche seeking outlets of gratification.

When, for whatever reasons, direct expression of feelings is inhibited, they are projected through some apparently unrelated materials. We may accordingly assume that if the audience is not aware of the causes of the malaise, this is due not only to the inherent complexity of these causes, but chiefly to unconscious inhibitions, which probably originate in a reluctance to struggle against seemingly superior forces. So the agitator sanctions immediate resentments and seemingly paves the way for the relief of the malaise through discharge of the audience's aggressive impulses; but simultaneously he perpetuates the malaise by blocking the way toward real understanding of its cause.

* Cf. Horkheimer, Max: *Eclipse of Reason*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1947.

† Mills, C. Wright: "The competitive personality," *Partisan Review*, p. 436 vol. XIII, 4, 1946.

All such utilizations of malaise are possible only on condition that the audience does not become aware of its roots in modern society. The malaise remains in the background of agitation, the raw material of which is supplied by the audience's stereotyped projections of the malaise. Instead of trying to go back to their sources, to treat them as symptoms of a bad condition, the agitator treats them as needs that he promises to satisfy. He is therefore not burdened with the task of correcting the audience's inadequate ideas; on the contrary, he can let himself be carried along by its "natural" current.