

CHAPTER X

WHAT THE LISTENER HEARD

In Europe, Hitler and Mussolini openly advocated a radical break with contemporary society. They explicitly repudiated capitalism and liberalism, and negated the democratic way of life in favor of a system based on charismatic leadership. To make their ideas attractive they resorted both to a glorified evocation of the preliberalistic past and to a distorted version of contemporary revolutionary ideologies. The very name National Socialist shows how the Hitler movement tried to incorporate elements of ideologies that appealed both to the past and the future.

These preliberalistic and revolutionary elements of the fascist appeal in Europe served to mask the actual meaning of the movement. In practice. Nazi totalitarianism was no more feudal than it was socialist. Its break with contemporary society took place only on the cultural and ideological level; the old liberalistic values were ruthlessly pushed aside for the needs of an industrial war machine. Old forms of economic and social coercion were perpetuated and strengthened.

The American agitator, however, has no preliberalistic tradition on which to fall back, he does not find it expedient to pose as a socialist, and he dares not explicitly repudiate established morality and democratic values. He only indirectly and implicitly assumes the mantle of charismatic leadership. He works, by necessity rather than choice, within the framework of liberalism.

Study of our themes shows that this limitation does not prevent him from conveying the principal social tenets of totalitarianism to his audience. The themes point to the disintegration of existing institutions, the perversion and destruction of democracy, the rejection of Western values, the exaltation of the leader, the reduction of the people to regimented robots, and the solution of social problems by terroristic violence. The American agitator shows that manipulation of people with a view to obtaining their conscious or unconscious adherence to his movement

need not take the detour of preliberalism or perverted socialism; that the psychological attitudes and social concerns that flow from the crises of liberal society provide a sufficiently fertile soil for the growth of anti-democratic tendencies. It is as though the American agitator had evolved a method of directly converting the poisons generated by contemporary society into the quack remedies of totalitarianism—he does not need to resort to pseudo-feudal or pseudo-socialist labels. His themes could be transplanted to another country—much more easily than corresponding Nazi slogans could be transplanted to America. The mythical notion of the pure-blooded Nordic Aryan German superman would have to undergo many profound changes before becoming an effective appeal in this country; but the agitator's Simple Americans could be used in other countries as Simple Germans, or Simple French, or Simple Britishers etc. One is tempted to say that the American agitation is a standardized and simplified version of the original Nazi or fascist appeals.

Because the American agitator dispenses with such secondary labels, his methods of appeal are also more universal in scope, and are not bound to any specific national tradition or political situation. Despite his professions of Americanism, not a single one of his appeals refers to concerns or situations specific to America. The feelings that he stirs are in no sense limited to this country: for the social abscesses on which his invectives thrive can be found in any modern industrialized society.

The agitator seems aware of this when he declares that "I stand before you tonight, as I have stood before similar groups all over America, as a symbol of a state of mind that exists in America . . ." ¹ He does not tell us what this state of mind is, but on the basis of a study of his themes we can construct a portrait of the state of mind of his most susceptible kind of listener. This listener does not directly participate in the major fields of social production and is therefore always fearful that, given the slightest social maladjustment, his insignificant little job will vanish and with it will vanish his social status. He senses that in some way he cannot quite fathom life has cheated him. And yet he wonders why his fate should have been so unhappy. He abided by the rules, he never rebelled, he did what was expected of him. Bound and circumscribed by a series of uncontrollable circumstances, he becomes increasingly aware of how futile and desperately aimless his life is. And worst of all, he can no longer believe in any miraculous salvations, for no matter how much he hopes for them he is far too much the modern man really to place his faith in miracles. He is on the bottom, on the outside, and he fears that there is nothing he can do about it.

Yet there are others. . . . The intellectuals who talk about ideals and values and morals, who make a living—and a clean, comfortable living—by manipulating words. Smart alecks who paint pictures of wonderful societies in the future and who live so comfortably in this one. They—most of them Jews, of course—seem to have beaten the racket.

And even more so, there is that secret and inaccessible gang which lives in air-conditioned penthouses, enjoys the favors of movie stars and luxuriates on yachts, the lucky few, who tempt him with the possibility of success and the dream of escape from his own grimy and dreary life.

Sometimes openly, more often in the veiled areas of his daydreams, our listener admits to himself that in this world—and who can imagine any other?—all that counts is success. Only the successful are to be admired. It is a deadly struggle, and those who fall must be discarded. These standards are inculcated in him by every medium of mass amusement. The very places for which he goes for relaxation—the movies, the comics, the radio—provide him not with spiritual refreshment but with an exacerbated feeling that success is the all essential fact of modern life . . . and that he is not successful.

And so the listener grumbles. He grumbles against bureaucrats, Jews, congressmen, plutocrats, communists—whatever political stereotype he can find to suggest to him concentrations of power. He grumbles against the foreigners who come to this country and get good jobs. He grumbles against the party in power, votes for the one out of power and then grumbles against it. But he knows no other means of venting his social dissatisfaction and at one point or another he begins to become suspicious of the efficacy of his grumbling. And what is more, even grumbling has its dangers. One must be careful where one grumbles. A lot of it has to be kept inside one, repressed, barely touching the rims of consciousness.

The listener would like to do something about it, something drastic and decisive that will do away with the whole mess. Imagine—strike one blow on the table and everything is changed.

REHEARSAL OF VIOLENCE

How prevalent is the type that has been briefly sketched above? There is reason to believe that at least strands or aspects of this “ideal” personality type are widespread in modern life. The voluminous literature on psychic discontent, ranging from advice on how to keep friends and influence people to prescriptions for peace of mind, testifies to this fact.

For a variety of historical circumstances, social and economic, the American agitator has not succeeded in gaining any large masses of adherents. Except for the early years of the New Deal and those preceding Pearl Harbor, the agitator's audience has been limited to a hard core of followers: disgruntled old men and frustrated spinsters, cranks, toughies, unemployables, and certain undefined groups. Such audiences are often unkindly identified as the lunatic fringe.

The agitator must know that he can hardly expect to achieve significant results without reaching a wider audience; his ambitions are certainly not confined to his present groups. But he seems to sense that such initial audiences reflect on a small scale what might under certain social conditions characterize large masses of people. The beginnings of European fascism were equally modest, its original followers recruited from similar strata of the population. The American agitator tends to behave as if his present performance were merely a rehearsal and his audience merely paradigmatic. He can afford to be "unserious."

In an economic crisis the distinction between unemployables and unemployed merges, the middle class loses its security, and the youth its confidence in the future. The possibility that a situation will arise in which large numbers of people would be susceptible to his psychological manipulation, seems to provide the agitator with the impetus to continue his present small-scale operations at the head of his legion of misfits and malcontents.

THE SOCIAL BASIS OF AGITATION

It is the deep and pervasive presence of the social malaise which we sketched in an earlier chapter that is both the origin of agitation and the field in which agitation flourishes. Malaise gives rise to agitation, and agitation batters on malaise. In some dim nook of his consciousness, the agitator seems aware of this; he has a keener sense of history than those of his critics who think he can be banished from history by showing that he is inconsistent. He claims to be issuing the "most important challenge that could be made to a bankrupt, blood-drenched, war-torn, hate-filled, Satan-run world,"² and he predicts that "unreasonable force will hold sway"³ if the present intolerable situation persists. This prediction, it must be granted, is not entirely fantastic and it is precisely because the agitator does refer to pressing realities, because he does

touch on the most exposed and painful sores of our social body that he is able to meet with a response.

The agitator's themes are distorted versions of genuine social problems. When he encourages disaffection from all current loyalties, he takes advantage of a contemporary tendency to doubt either the sufficiency or efficacy of western values. When he takes advantage of the anxiety and fears of his listeners, he is playing on very real anxieties and fears—there is something to be anxious and fearful about. When he offers them a sense of belonging, no matter how counterfeit it is, and a sense of participation in a worthy cause, his words find response only because men today feel homeless and need a new belief in the possibility of social harmony and well-being. And when he calls upon them to depend on him, he capitalizes on both their revolt against the restraints of civilization and their longing for some new symbol of authority. That which they utter under their breaths, the *sub rosa* thoughts which they are hardly ready to acknowledge to themselves become the themes flaunted in agitation.

What the agitator does, then, is to activate the most primitive and immediate, the most inchoate and dispersed reactions of his followers to the general trends of contemporary society.

After he has subtly awakened his adherents to a realization that in some inexplicable way they are being crushed, the agitator diverts them from a true consciousness of their troubles and from any possible solution to their problems by the following "reasoning": The forces that threaten to crush them are irresistible, inexorable, and uncontrollable by rational means. To oppose them with the "bare bodkin" of ideals would be sheer folly—a kind of utopian quixotism. Therefore the best thing to do is to join them, to become one of the policemen, one of the destroyers in the service of destruction. This proposal is essentially tantamount to a suggestion that the adherents destroy themselves. Since the forces against you are so overwhelming, join with them . . . and be overwhelmed. Like a cheater in solitaire, the adherent is to become a conqueror by defeating himself.

To recognize and play upon those disturbing sicknesses of modern life that the run-of-the-mill politicians ignore, and then to divert his followers from any rational attempt to regain health—this is the essential objective role of the agitator in society. The basic implication of his appeals is that submission to social coercion is to be more ready and unquestioning. Hence the basic implications of the themes—the charis-

matic glorification of the leader, the extinction of civil liberties, the police state, the unleashing of terror against helpless minority groups. For all his emphasis on and expression of discontent, the agitator functions objectively to perpetuate the conditions which give rise to that discontent.

A DICTIONARY OF AGITATION

The themes cannot be understood in terms of their manifest content. They rather constitute a kind of secret psychological language. The unimpressed listener may wave it aside as a kind of mania or a mere tissue of lies and nonsense. Yet some people succumbed to it: in America a few, but in Europe millions. Were there no other evidence at hand, this one fact would be sufficient to establish the conclusion that there are powerful psychological magnets within agitation that draw groups of people to the leader's orbit. But we now also have at our disposal the classification of agitational themes that has appeared in these pages—our attempt to translate the secret code of agitation into language accessible to all. As we analyze this material, we find that its essential meaning—that which attracts the followers—cannot be reached by means of the usual methods of logical inquiry, but that it is a psychological Morse Code tapped out by the agitator and picked up by the followers. How conscious the agitator is of the genuine meaning of his message is a moot question that we have not attempted to answer here; it is a job for another investigation. But for the purpose of finding the inner meaning and the recurrent patterns of agitation, the presence or absence of consciousness on the part of the agitator is ultimately of secondary importance.

In any case, the distinction between the manifest and latent meaning of an agitational text must be seen as crucial. Taken at their face value, agitational texts seem merely as indulgence in futile furies about vague disturbances. Translated into their psychological equivalents, agitational texts are seen as consistent, meaningful, and significantly related to the social world.

In all his output, the agitator engages in an essentially ambiguous activity. He never merely says; he always hints. His suggestions manage to slip through the nets of rational meaning—those nets that seem unable to contain so many contemporary utterances. To know what he is and what he says, we have to follow him into the underground of

and power—the weapons that ultimately decide all disagreements. We will offer you scapegoats—Jews, radicals, plutocrats, and other creatures conjured up by our imagination. These you will be able to berate and eventually persecute. What difference will it make whether they are your real enemies so long as you can plunder them and vent your spleen on them?

Not utopia but a realistic struggle to grab the bone from the other dog—that is our program. Not peace but incessant struggle for survival; not abundance but the lion's share of scarcity. Can you realistically expect more?

To win this much you will have to follow me. We will form an iron-bound movement of terror. We will ally ourselves with the powerful in order to gain part of their privilege. We will be the policemen rather than the prisoners. And I will be the leader. I will think for you, I will tell you what to do and when to do it. I will act out your lives for you in my public role as leader. But I will also protect you. In the shadow of my venom you will find a home.