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Millenarian Mobs

An old and dangerous story.

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Drawing by Gustave Doré

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THE AMERICANS WHO CONFESS OTHER PEOPLE'S RACISM ABSOLVE themselves inexpensively by a moral mechanism common to humanity: the more I profess to hate evil, the more I showcase my own goodness. Such confessions, however, have a particular history of tragedy in Christian civilization. Again and again over the centuries, persons who have imagined themselves cleansed by ritual confessions have believed themselves elevated above the rest of humanity and, hence, entitled to oppress or even annihilate those around them. Today's self-purifiers, arms outstretched in supine submission, who then countenance violence against persons, property, and cultural symbols, are mostly unwitting protagonists in yet another chapter of a hoary history.

Although Judeo-Christianity teaches that perfection is not of this world, nevertheless the Old Testament (see the Book of Daniel) and the New (Revelation, chapter 20) refer tangentially to a final state in human affairs in which all evil will have been defeated and the virtuous will have triumphed over their enemies. In the Book of Revelation, this final stage is to last for a thousand years. Jesus Christ's warnings notwithstanding, people have hearkened periodically to "false prophets" who brandish the prospect of ultimate vengeance over evil. Between the 11th and 16th centuries, any number of movements of this sort used ritual confessions to cleanse themselves, and energized the mobs that waged Europe's bloodiest wars of that age. Thereafter, though such movements secularized their terms, they fit into the same moral and intellectual categories. Now as ever, they are about destroying civilization in the name of altering the human condition.

But whereas revolutionary movements from the Middle Ages to roughly the middle of the 20th century opposed the ruling classes wholeheartedly and found no friends among them, this generation's movements have intense, problematic relations with those classes, about which more below.

Today we see scenes of monuments which had stood for decades, now destroyed and defaced, as well as the forceful cancellation of names from circulation. Smashing others' idols was, and remains, a staple of tribal warfare. The Old Testament recalls the divine command to destroy idols, and the clashes between Christian and Muslim armies always aimed as much at symbols as at people. *The Song of Roland* contains a lyrical account of Charlemagne's iconoclasm in his campaign against the Saracens. In the 6th century, Emperor Justinian made Constantinople's Hagia Sophia cathedral the Christian world's biggest and most important church. The Muslims who added that city to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 killed its priests, toppled its statues, and made it into the principal mosque of the Muslim caliphate at war with Christendom. In 1923, Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's modernizer, turned the building into a museum in order to end that war. But in July 2020 Turkey's Islamist president Recep Erdogan, consistent with his hostility to Judeo-Christian civilization, turned it into a mosque again and began covering up what remain of the Christian frescoes on its walls. Destroying symbols, however, has had no place *within* Christian civilization. As the equivalent of torturing dead men, it has always been the work of cowards likelier to run from living enemies. On the other hand, war against statues, paintings, books, biographies, etc., has been a defining feature of civilization's revolutionary enemies, consistent with their chosen identities as alien tribes.

What follows is a glance at the bloody history of this little-known flaw. It is a tale whose cautionary moral Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn best expressed: the line between good and evil runs not between persons—never mind between parties, classes, or races—but down the middle of every human heart. That is central to our civilization.

Fire and Sword

Always, millennial movements grow out of ordinary struggles. A few firebrands interpret the struggles radically, gather followers, and lead them along their own apocalyptic logic to bloody disaster. Social dislocations, as well as injustices, failures of leadership, and excessive expectations have been like tinder waiting for sparks. The crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries, the Church's corruption in the 13th, the bubonic plague in the 14th, socioeconomic changes in the 15th, nationalism and the Reformation in the 16th—all spawned movements that shared characteristics with what, from the time of the French Revolution until our day, human beings have experienced as violent, revolutionary totalitarianism.

History records dozens of long-forgotten names of movements—Pastoureaux, Flagellants, Cathars, Free Spirits, Ranters—and of individuals such as Tanchelm, Gioacchino da Fiore, Thomas Müntzer, and Jan van Leyden. Their circumstances and modes of expression mean nothing to us. But their common characteristics are memorable because they are timeless and with us yet.

Almost invariably the leaders have been outcasts, or what Marxists call "lumpen-intellectuals." In the Middle Ages they were half-educated, dissident or apostate lower clergy. Their initial focus was some obvious evil. As often as not, they claimed heavenly messages or apparitions as their authority. Their audience was twofold: those who saw themselves as the evil's primary victims and those who wished to shed their responsibility for it. To the former, the prophets promised redress and immediate relief, while to all, and especially to the latter, they promised a role in a holy enterprise. Some sort of confession of sin and cleansing ritual would follow. Some of these—the Flagellants' self-abuse, for example—were bloody impressive. Most ritual cleansing, however, was symbolic.

Those who had undergone cleansing believed themselves so pure that they were no longer capable of sin. These elect believed they could, and even should, engage in the very practices that they had decried in others. Ridding the world of misbelief *and* misbelievers motivated the ritually purified elite. But the masses to whom they transmitted their mission dispensed with self-cleansing. They reduced the mission to killing their enemies. They would cleanse themselves as well as the world while entitling themselves to primacy and vengeance by wreaking destruction. Because the elect often lived luxuriously among their miserable followers, those whom they attacked often considered the latter to be the formers' pawns—which, in a sense, they were. But all seem to have been seized by the same demons.

Our own generation's ruling classes are seized by no demons. Instead, they are principally concerned with holding on to power, and short-sightedly regard the revolutionary movements as allies against their socio-political competitors. That is why today it makes sense to consider the violent masses, and to some extent even the purified elite, as in effect pawns of the ruling classes.

Criticism of evils combined with peaceful openness accounted for the welcome from the authorities and ordinary people that most of these historical movements enjoyed at their outset. Peasants and townspeople put food and lodging at the disposal of reformers who professed holiness so intensely. But once the mechanism of moral redemption had set itself in motion and a movement had acquired a sizable following, the company of holy people—the army of saints—would set upon the evil ones, destroying or desecrating churches and public buildings. In many (but not all) places, the Jews were the first targets for fire and sword. Iron discipline reigned within the movement itself, as well as the deification of its leaders. Some distributed their bath water to be drunk. Mere popular resistance could not stop them.

Medieval society's loose, complex, small-scale structure offered little resistance to the movements' spread until the damage they caused became extensive enough to rally diverse authorities to suppress them. Even then, for example, the Shepherds' Crusade that started in 1251 helped spark and partially blended with peasants' revolts. The sentiments involved led to a similar flare-up 130 years later, which also required a national effort to suppress it. Typically, the purified elect would fortify towns or castles, where they would live out their revolutionary fantasies and from which they would raid the countryside. In 1424, the Adamites' leader, who ruled his raiders from his fortified river island, called himself "Adam Moses." The Cathars set their headquarters in the southern French castle of Montségur. Defeating them in 1229 took a 20-year campaign by the king of France and the pope.

Blood for Wine

These movements' foremost historian, Norman Cohn, describes in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) what they offered to people awash in filth, who had lost faith in their leaders and their futures. To "the disoriented, the perplexed, and the frightened," they held out the prospect of long-sought vengeance—of taking power over the evil ones and destroying them utterly. At the very least, they offered a justification for the robbery, rape, and murder they had always dreamt of committing. "Soon we will drink blood for wine" was a common refrain. They also offered partnership in an enterprise said to be of transcendent goodness that, not incidentally, would satisfy the congenital human desire to transcend the human condition, an enterprise that would set those who took part in their proper place—that is, atop others.

Cohn shows how the adherence of lower-class masses, the phenomenon of crowds shut off from alternative sources of information and argument, helped drive these movements along their radical logic, to the point that their adepts became utterly closed to reality. We might say of them that they mixed and drank the Kool-Aid that killed them. Note well: although these mobs, like all others, scattered the moment they faced firm resistance, once the elect had internalized their own propaganda, killing them was the only way of stopping them. Even as some who had come to believe themselves invincible were being executed, they would shout: "Earth, divide thyself!"

More than a century ago the sociologist Max Weber, looking to the future as well as to the past, wrote that

> *a salvationist kind of religion can very well originate in socially privileged strata. The charisma of the prophet…is normally associated with a certain minimum of intellectual culture…. But it regularly changes its character…when it penetrates to under-privileged strata…the unavoidable adaptation to the needs of the masses.*

The masses and the elect end up agreeing on bloodshed.

Weber's references to the past concerned the French Revolution, a phenomenon that flowed from the philosophical speculations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and from the technocratic reflections of A.R.J. Turgot and others, but whose most characteristic feature was the Terror of 1793-94, of which the guillotine was only the mildest manifestation. These revolutionaries aimed to kill not only their flesh-and-blood enemies but also the past and its symbols. Hence they defaced churches, turned Christian altars to the worship of the goddess Reason, and abolished the seven-day week to eliminate the Sabbath and its author.

Weber's fears for the future were soon realized. In the 1920s and '30s, as the Nazi party's intellectuals scoured German history for their movement's roots, they came across one of the documents to which Norman Cohn refers, the "Book of a Hundred Chapters," written circa 1510 by an unknown hermit somewhere by the upper Rhine. We don't know whether anyone ever read that book a half-millennium ago. Nor need anyone have read it, because it summarized what had already become German revolutionaries' standard critique of Christian civilization. This included the Free Spirits' perversion of the Holy Trinity into the notion of history consisting of three phases, the final one of which, the Age of the Spirit, was about to dawn. In that age, the elect would become members of the Spirit. German Idealist philosophers' dialectic simply translated that three-phase salvationist scheme into secular terms. G.W.F. Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and countless epigones have made much of an all-too-simple scheme that seems to impose itself on reality by the power of dialectical science. It fit just right. No one should be surprised that the Nazis proclaimed the *Third* Reich would reign for *a thousand* years.

As if following the hermit's book, they said the German nation had been betrayed into worshiping the false god of the Jews, and that the usurpers had taken the nation's independence and wealth. Now, all true Germans had to repent. Thus cleansed, they must destroy the symbols of the false religion, dispossess and destroy its officials. Then the Germans could settle down to worshiping the Norse gods while enjoying their rightful, eternal mastery and prosperity—at least for a thousand years.

Hitler, in his published table talk, claimed that he and Stalin were the only true revolutionaries because, unlike Mussolini, they were tearing down their countries' intellectual and physical ties to the past. Mussolini, he noted, had done nothing to cut Italy off from its past. He had neither destroyed buildings and statues nor burned any books. The king still reigned, and the priests ran the educational system. Hitler was proudest of the Nazi party's burning of bad books.

But had Stalin made the same comparisons, he would surely have noted that Hitler had not destroyed any church in Germany nor, before the war, had he killed any clergymen. No one will ever know how many Russian Orthodox priests Stalin ordered either to be shot outright or murdered in the Gulag—350,000 is a low estimate. Few Ukrainian Catholic priests escaped murder. Eradicating knowledge of Russia's past while denigrating Christian civilization as the enemy of the proletariat became the focus of the Soviet regime's educational system. Ostentatiously, it desecrated churches or simply razed them. The 1931 demolition of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior—by some measures Christendom's biggest church—was Stalin's boldest statement in support of Marxism's contention that all previous history had been an abomination, and of the Communist Party's right to crush its enemies. It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of civilization's symbols. Suffice it to note that in 1990, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, Russia's impoverished people set about rebuilding that cathedral to its precise specifications.

Suicide of the West

The logic of millennialist revolution is very much alive among us. History teaches that the names of the evils—of the supposedly oppressed and their oppressors, as well as their grievances—are interchangeable and irrelevant. Today, we need not imagine that the corporate magnates, the hard-bitten politicians, the FBI officials, who kneel draped in Kente cloth in penitence for "white racist America," who declare solidarity with the mobs that deface statues—that any of them believe in anything other than their own power and advantage. Nor need we imagine that the majority of those mobs' members are doing anything other than enjoying a holiday from the law. Protagonists and pawns are part of a revolutionary avalanche that must flow by its own logic.

Today, as in the Middle Ages, the mobs, the fires and desecrations, the ever-present focus on "the Jews!" have nothing to do with any truth or with the details of any particular event or accusation. What sense does it make for a mob in Brussels, Belgium, to tear down a statue of Julius Caesar in protest against four U.S. policemen's killing of a black man whom they were arresting? Or for that matter, for a mob in Philadelphia to deface a monument to an unknown soldier of the Revolutionary War of 1776, or for Bostonians to organize the removal of a statue of Abraham Lincoln? Alas, the millennialists and their mob do not need specific grievances against specific targets. The civilization itself is the only real target; its existence and the mob's lack of complete mastery over it are the only grievances that really matter. They need know only that the civilization they are attacking has become vulnerable, undefended, and may be safely treated with contempt. If we do not share that contempt, history shows we have no choice but to treat the millennialist mob as the enemies they are.

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