

© 2001 by Carl Peterson
Peterson is a graduate of the
government department at
California State University, Sacramento

The Masses are Still Revolting

“We are living in a leveling period; there is a leveling of fortunes, of culture among the various social classes, of the sexes. Well, in the same way there is a leveling of the continents. . . .” These words, first published in 1930, refer to an historic process that more than 70 years later is far from complete or irrelevant, and which has recently given an astonishing overt indicator that it will preoccupy global affairs for perhaps the next 70 years.

The masses are still in rebellion. Here we may leave out of the discussion whether or not we share Ortega y Gasset’s dismay at this prospect, but it seems clear that “mass-man,” is on the rise, and that perhaps the greatest leveling is yet to come.

Through most of the twentieth century mass-man has done his work within nation-states. He was unable to achieve the retrogression and ruin of civilization that was seen by Ortega y Gasset as a distinct possibility, yet he did imprint some of his features on all of those nations now regarded as constituting the First World. Mass-man did not however eliminate the rule of elites, those “select minorities” that Ortega y Gasset saw as the sine qua non of civilization. Elites remain in control. Rule by the few is the status quo in all First World nations. Within national boundaries mass-man appears to have been appeased, or sedated, or to have come to his senses.

And yet, mass-man is rising. While his ascent has been halted within national boundaries, mass-man nevertheless rises and makes his move across these boundaries.

This movement is both a symptom of the increasing irrelevance of national boundaries, but increasingly will be a cause of this irrelevance. This “vertical invasion of the barbarians,” stymied within borders, has begun to ignore the demarcations of sovereignty drawn and frequently ignored by the existing political authorities.

The Production of Mass-men

Ortega y Gasset’s mass-man is produced by a diminution in the “variety of situations” available to the human species. Variety of situation produces a miscellany of viewpoints and of voices that, in the liberal conception, counterpose one another. Multiplicity in opposing viewpoints generates Mill’s “marketplace of ideas” that allows selection of the best ideas among many. Naturally, this process develops an elite, those with the best ideas. But as the number of situations in the world decreases, the number of mass-men, human beings with the same viewpoint, conversely increases. Opposing voices fade away, until there is only one, that of the mass-man.

Historically, sameness of situation is generated not just by increases in the number of human beings in the world, although certainly this is a factor, but directly it is a consequence of more and more people living in the same time and place.

At first, this meant that people physically shared the same geographic location and the same, as it were, clock.

This was the earliest form of sameness of situation, intensified by the increasing number of human beings in the world, and particularly by their “agglomeration,” concomitant to industrialization, within large cities. Yet technology produces a more modern, sophisticated, though absolutely no less real, unity of time and place. The variety of situations in the world that was once produced by distance and dissimilarity in

geography is dispelled by the human power of technology to instantly broadcast “reality” across the world. As human beings globally exchange more information of all sorts, and more quickly, what had seemed to be barriers vanish between one place and another.

What had seemed to be most real is now illusion. Anyone who has flown over mountains, deserts or oceans in an airplane has experienced these geographic mammoths stripped of their previous reality. From an airplane they are just pretty maps at our feet. Yet this familiar shrinkage of geographic reality affected by an airplane is slight compared to what communications technology achieves every day faster than it did the day before.

Geographic barriers have lost much of their power to separate human beings from each other, and what loses effect, loses reality.

Reality now is that although a small, perhaps ultimately indestructible, residual effect of geography remains, technology of communication and travel each day brings more and more human beings into the same time and place. Human living space is becoming ever more homogeneous. Each day more and more of humanity is circumscribed by the same situation. The illusion of geography, abetted by certain man-made mirages, prevents us from seeing clearly enough that the world has shrunk, and that each day it becomes more of the same.

It is true that the phrase, “the world gets smaller everyday,” is not a new commonplace, still these words are spoken as though this shrinking were itself the silly illusion; that of course the concrete reality is that the globe is enormous as it always has been. We must ask, however, what significance this enormity retains. As the geographical variety and expansiveness of the globe is sapped of its impact on the human

species, it becomes more and more an abstraction, and the worldwide sameness of time and place become reality.

Two Kinds of Space

But let us just say that all of the above has been accepted for the sake of argument. Naturally we can say that as six billion human beings and scores of nations are moved toward the head of a pin, then earlier perceptions perhaps no longer match the existent reality. As the globe shrinks, human beings are sucked into the same time and location as if by a vortex, and the earlier divisions and arrangements will perhaps not survive this compression of space.

Yet for our purposes there remain two main types of space in the world that define an individual's situation: *living space* that once seemed to be determined by geography, but evidently is everyday less dependent on physical separation of human beings; and there is *political space*. Living space, let us emphasize here, in case this has gone unnoticed, has nothing to do with physical space, but refers to the constellation of public objects that are available to occupy a particular human mind. Political space has to do with rule, and, with one exception is inhabited by two types of people, those who rule and those who are ruled. Thus, one's situation within political space is either to rule, or to be ruled, and insofar as political space is concerned one's viewpoint is determined by whether one rules or not. Only within democracy are these two types of inhabitants compressed into one: in this case those who rule and those who are ruled are the same.

From these definitions we see that living space and political space are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. Speaking generally, the history of modern nations until now has seen the compression of living space and political space into one.

In effect, a political space had generally circumscribed the constellation of public objects, and a particular political space had always been a public object exclusive to the human beings within one particular living space.

Until now, only with empire were living space and political space decoupled. In modern and ancient empires political space was exported from the home state with the result that a single political space was shared by a variety of living spaces. In the early 21st Century this relationship has reversed so that a single living space is now shared by various political spaces. It follows that so long as the world continues to grow smaller, and that a vast homogeneous living space envelopes more and more human beings, there can never again be empire. Because there can never again be separation between the ruling political center and a variety of outlying living spaces, talk of a new American empire, or a new empire of any imperial nation, is therefore simply absurd. Empire is in a sense the opposite of what is now beginning to order the world.

Before the accelerated shrinking of the world, differentiation between living space and political space, although it has always existed beneath the surface of the modern world, never developed significance. The enormity of the globe confined the political spaces to their geographic and temporal prisons, so that they seemed to be, and could be treated as, identical to the partitioned living spaces, and as functions of the state. Thus, the American individual's situation was distinct from that of the French individual, or the Russian individual, or the Japanese individual, and all were distinct from one another in a characteristic way. One could purport to explain a lot simply by reference to nationality. It was not really necessary to refer to factors outside the geographic confines of the particular nation to explain what constituted the individual situation. Presumably, from

the genius of the particular political system burgeoned all sorts of effects that produced the individual's situation in any given country. So long as this was true it was not really possible for there to be a mass-man of the world. It was only possible for there to be American mass-men, Russian mass-men, French mass-men, etc.

Globalization

What is called “globalization” and “economic interdependence” is the product of an international ruling elite physically dispersed within what are still called nations, responding to the reality of a world shrunken by technology. Globalization ignores national boundaries to the degree that these boundaries no longer really exist; that is, these boundaries are fictions that in some instances the new elite finds useful, but more and more often man-made barriers between nations must be ignored where their existence is contradictory to a newer, more potent reality: sameness of situation is pervading the human world.

The European Union is a product of European elites attempting to grapple—on a smaller scale—with the same type of problem presented by a generally shrinking globe. Europe, like the world, is shrinking, and in fact it has been already been small for a long time. It follows logically, that since Europe has the longest experience with smaller living spaces compressed into one another to form a greater homogeneous living space, that it would be the first to attempt to produce a super-nation through conscious design, that is, that it would attempt to formally create a political space commensurate with the great, undesigned European living space. But the European Union is not globalization; it is Europization. Its result may be a new super-state, yet this state will nevertheless be ruled more and more by the imperatives of globalization. It is even possible that if

globalization moves quickly enough that the European Union will be obsolete even before it is complete.

Ortega y Gasset's "special minority" rose to the occasion of global shrinkage in the 20th Century, and is carrying out a program of globalization, but concomitantly it develops for itself, and rules, the first truly international, or maybe, rather *meta-national* political space. As we noted earlier, political space with one exception has two types of inhabitants: those who rule, and those who are ruled. Only in the case of democracy-- which we do not presently see on a large scale anywhere in the world—is there only one political class. Two distinct groups, then, populate this new undemocratic political space.

Who constitutes the other group within this new political space? The new special minority, drawn from the ruling elites of the elite nations, rules international political space; that is, in those instances where it rules, it rules everyone. Therefore, everyone other than this special minority is at least latently in this second group.

We can see now the potential that is developing from two new conditions: 1) The various living spaces are being drawn into, and absorbed by, one homogeneous living space. 2) A new political space has been born that is capable of including everyone everywhere.

Given that the individual's situation is defined by living space and political space, a worldwide sameness of situation is beginning to be possible. Conditions are set for large-scale production of mass-men of the world.

Mass-man Redux

Earlier I remarked on the frustrated rise of mass-man in the 20th Century that seemed to put to rest Ortega y Gasset's fears about the possible end of civilization. Mass-man, "ordinary man resolved to govern the world himself," rising in the industrialized nations, failed to permanently seat himself in power. Totalitarian states ruled by mass-men turned out, at least so far, to be dead branches of political evolution. Mass-men within First World "democratic" nations were able to create and rule popular culture, and to extract some political concessions from the special minorities, but they never ruled politically. The "vertical invasion of the barbarians" failed, at least in the sense envisaged by Ortega y Gasset, who feared that under the rule of mass-man civilization might fail to the extent that it could no longer even provide the basic requirements of human existence.

Lately, however, mass-men have escaped the confines of national political space, and have joined the new special minority in the new political space created in response to the shrinking world. Although we said earlier that the new elite rules everyone—and so everyone is drawn into the new political space—in fact the international world has not yet definitively left behind its old form, but now oscillates between the old and the new.

The world is both what it was and what it will be. Everyone is not yet in the new political space because the national political spaces continue to preoccupy most of the world's population. Yet it is possible that the new mass-men of the world are just the first of a worldwide wave of mass-men that will one day soon pour into the new political space.

The new mass-men are not merely those mass-men who perceive the new reality that is replacing the old international framework; they are the ones who, in Ortega y Gasset's words, take "direct action," according to the new reality. That is, they see violence as a legitimate means to achieve their political objectives within the new political space. Acting upon the new reality places them alongside, and in opposition to, the special minority within the new political space, for only these two groups clearly see the new reality as the paramount one, and therefore rise from the old national spaces to act within the meta-national one. That one of these groups rules and the other is ruled separates and fixes their situations.

Previously stymied within national boundaries, the new mass-man of the world has determined that his great problem lies not within his state, but that his problem is with the world. He sees that in some sense his own nation does not even exist as a sovereign, but is merely a local facade of the worldwide political space. The new mass-man therefore acts in the political space where he perceives that his state is not a sovereign. His prognosis is that an attempt to address his problem within his national political space would be useless, since that is not where his problem can be solved. There is a new set of rulers, ruling a political space above the nations, and the mass-man of the world sees that for his problem to be solved it must first appear on the plate of these rulers.

Just as the special minority ruling the new political space is not located anywhere in particular, but is in essence everywhere in the new living space, the new mass-man, although he exists physically in time and space, operates from no particular national locus. Mass-man, mirroring the new special minority, draws representation from, and

physically exists in, scores of nations around the globe. Thus, the activity of the new mass-man is demonstrably not local in its objectives, just as the activity of the special minority is global in scope, not local.

Naturally, if it is true that the objectives of the new mass-man are not local, then it is unlikely that any local solution will address his problem. Thus, for example, a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma could not by itself mollify the new mass-man. The new mass-men are freshly escaped from the national political spaces, and they arrive bearing the imprints of various conflicts within the old spaces, yet they are not merely re-fighting the old battles. The new mass-men carry a variety of grievances, yet they share, as we have observed, a similar situation, and they have, whether they act in cooperation or not, an overarching common goal. The new mass-men, just as those mass-men of the first half of the 20th Century, so decried by Ortega y Gasset, are alike in that they are “ordinary men resolved to govern the world themselves.” The new mass-man, like the old one, is really seeking power. This and the willingness of the new mass-man to use violence as a tool of political action, coupled with the possibility that there are a quarter of a billion people in the world ready to enter the new political space as mass-men, explains why it would be very difficult to overestimate the alarm with which the new terrorists are viewed by the special minority inhabiting the new political space.

Mass-men acting as international terrorists have used violence as, in Ortega y Gasset’s words, their “prima ratio,” their first political act within the new political space, and thus are separate from those individuals who, for example, publicly and peacefully protest the activities of the World Trade Organization. Nevertheless, there is some question whether the terrorists have not, according to Ortega y Gasset’s standards,

“previously exhausted all [other means] in defence of the rights of justice which [they] thought [they] possessed.” If they had, then this would make their violence, not the “prima ratio,” but an “ultima ratio,” violence employed only when all previous reasoned attempts to gain justice had been denied. As we have said, the new mass-man entered the international political space after his goals had been frustrated within the old national political spaces. However, within the new space, the terrorist is a mass-man who has never attempted to use dialogue to gain his political objectives. He has, in Ortega y Gasset’s words taken “direct action.”

Exported Living Space

I have said that an effect of the shrinking globe is that it is as if all human beings are being drawn toward the same center. This is however something of a simplification of what is happening. There is no single national or cultural living space that is without opposition drawing all others to become more like itself. Each of the remaining living spaces exerts a gravitational pull of its own, and each one pulls just as it is being pulled, yet the same can be said of the planet Mercury and its relationship to the Sun. Mercury also exerts a gravitational pull on the Sun; the Sun is minutely perturbed by Mercury. However, the most obvious observed effect is that Mercury is captive to the Sun, not the other way around.

So it is with the center that is drawing all living space to itself. This center cannot accurately be called the United States of America, and it cannot be called Europe, but certainly the center is Western, and it has captured all of the remaining living spaces in the world.

As depicted earlier, the shrinking of the world is not a conspiracy or a deliberate projection of power, yet the Western vortex appears to those living spaces farthest from the center not only as if it were pulling them, but also, as if it were rushing outward, toward them. To the captive living spaces, global shrinkage may look like an invasion. Where the old empires exported political space, it appears now to the inhabitants of the outlying living spaces that the great Western center is exporting living space that inexorably displaces their own. Strange living space appears to invade the familiar. To the conservative new mass-men, this export of living space looks like relentless aggression.

Yet global shrinking is not really a simple one-way process of export. When the world gets smaller, not only is the center brought closer to the periphery, but also at last the periphery arrives at the center, and must make itself known there.

The newly accelerated pace of global shrinkage produced a shock in the late summer of 2001, as a piece of the peripheral living space came crashing into the center. As far as the center of the world living space was concerned, it was as if another dimension had suddenly found a hole in space and time through which to displace familiar reality. Somehow, it seemed that these strange beings from another world—who would pilot commercial aircraft full of the innocent, into commercial buildings full of the innocent—had found a way to violate the primal laws of physics; they seemed to come from somewhere but out of nowhere, appearing as if through a wormhole in time and space, and then disappearing into the flames of this world.

Perhaps never has television so accurately captured a deeper reality than in that instant just before the jetliner disappeared into the great tower.

Perhaps it is only through shocks such as this that we will realize what has been happening to the old notions of time and space. For a long time the public objects of the central living space had effectively flowed outward, overwhelming and canceling the counterflow of public objects from the outlying living spaces. Now, an excluded reality of the outlying living space—terrorism—had erupted within the central living space. Somehow, the Third World had arrived in New York, not as an immigrant, but on its own terms. The Third World is no longer elsewhere. It is in the center of the world living space, and so it is everywhere.

National Security in the 21st Century

When political space and living space were effectively compressed into one identity within the state, it was possible for a nation to independently pursue its interests more or less as a discrete reality independent of the interests of the other nations. In keeping with what was seen as the eternally antagonistic relations of states, Machiavelli's advice to the Prince is predicated upon the state as an independent actor struggling for survival in competition with other independent actors. This does not mean that the Machiavellian should not take into account the interests of states other than his own. To the contrary, much of his calculation would have to do with how the adversarial Princes perceive their own state interests. But we have seen that the old barriers between nations—that would allow the Prince to reasonably conceive of his nation as an independent "ship of state"—are now far from hermetic. Living space now flows freely across national demarcations, and a new political space has risen above the nations, and has begun to rule them in common. The purported sovereign, discrete, nature of the nation is not yet entirely fictional, but it becomes a little more so every day.

How then to conceive of national interest when boundaries between the states are breaking down and are already, as never before, failing to make good those distinctions implied by the words “sovereign nations”? Where does national interest begin and where does it end, when the nation itself has become a blurred concept?

Today we are in a transitional zone where nations and their interests have been partly absorbed by the new political space that rises above them. The United States has a national interest in its own security, in protecting its citizens from terrorist attacks, yet as it pursues the terrorists dispersed throughout scores of nations, it has been lured into the new meta-national political space. The new mass-men are natural inhabitants of the new political space, and must be addressed there, yet within this space the United States is an outsider, a sovereign entity of the old, fading international framework, and it must be a contradiction within the new political space whose very existence signifies the beginning of the end of the sovereignty of nations.

In the old international form, threats to national security were seen to emanate distinctly from other nations and could be addressed on that basis. The terrorist threat of the new mass-men, however, has no national locus, but emanates from everywhere. The United States, pursuing national security as if the world has not changed, as if there is no new political space overarching the nations, must soon suffer from its mistake of entering this political space as a sovereign nation.

To the United States, the problem of the new mass-man now seems to be as big as the world—as will all problems that are rightfully addressed within the new political space. As the United States ambitiously, unilaterally, undertakes to solve this problem, it must act contradictorily. On the one hand, its own concept of national security is

predicated upon the discrete, sovereign nature of nations. On the other hand, as it pursues the terrorists into the new political space, it must be tempted to ignore the sovereignty of the other nations of the world. It will be tempted to ignore and even trample those demarcations of the old international form, as it finds them impediments to the pursuit of national security. Just as the rulers of the new political space and the new mass-men have ignored boundaries between the nations, so too must the United States ignore these boundaries as it grapples with a problem that it perceives as its own national security, but that is really a problem of world security, and is therefore properly within the scope of a political space that rises above the nations.

It is no surprise that the most extensive national power in the world would confuse world security with its own national security, for so widespread are the ramifications of United States' involvement throughout the world that it is perhaps not overweening presumption for the U.S. to assume that one is the same as the other. The problem is, however, not only that U.S. security interests may not be identical with world security interests, but also that the U.S. has been led to pursue these interests on a plane where it cannot be successful. The new mass-men, physically dispersed within the geographic boundaries of various nations, but acting within the new political space, present a problem that cannot be solved by a sovereign nation acting alone, no matter how powerful that nation is, for the new mass-men span both worlds, the old and the new. The new terrorists hide within the old world, protected by the remaining national barriers, but act within the new, wide-open political space. To properly address the new mass-man as a problem, the old world must irretrievably be dissolved.

The new political space tends to dissolve national boundaries as it adapts to the reality of a shrunken globe, yet the United States enters the new political space in pursuit of national security, an exploit that purposely emphasizes and strengthens U.S. national identity and boundaries, while at the same time ignoring and at times battering the sovereignty of the other nations. The picture that the United States must present to the world when it pursues the new mass-men into the new political space is that of the imperialist bully, concerned only with its own interests, claiming the world as its province, and disdaining the sovereign boundaries within the international order.

Because they dissolve and ignore national boundaries largely through agreement among themselves, the creators and rulers of the new political space have been able to work almost unnoticed. The new mass-men did not go unnoticed and did not wish to, while the United States thus far appears to be tempted to deal with the impediments that national boundaries present to its pursuit of the new mass-men, not through consensus but through brazen unilateralism; thus where the rulers of the new political space have quietly negotiated away certain national boundaries, the United States may use force and coercion to assault barriers so far untouched by negotiation.

Together, the new mass-man and the United States will present a crisis to the old international order. The inescapably public violation of national sovereignty, actively sought by the terrorists, and produced as a byproduct of the United States' "war on terrorism," may bring chaos, or on the other hand, an international attempt to consciously, publicly design the new political space to grapple with the fate of the world.