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ERIC HOFFER AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF READING

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Eric Hoffer is a most unusual person. He was born in 1902 in New York City and taught himself to read English and German at the age of five. When he was seven years old, he suddenly and inexplicably went blind (Tomkins, 1968). At the age of 15, he mysteriously recovered his sight and became a voracious reader. Hoffer had no mentor or formal education during his youth or in his adult years, but he had books to read from the public libraries of California. After the death of his father in 1920 (his mother died when he was seven), Hoffer bought a bus ticket to Los Angeles and lived on Skid Row for the next ten years. During this time, he spent his days reading in the Los Angeles Central Library. He has been reading all his life – serious works of philosophy, science, biography, sociology, history, political science and the classics. Authors like Montaigne, the 16th century French essayist, became Hoffer's mentor. "I can't read French, and yet it's the French who always influenced me. Montaigne, Pascal, Renan, Bergson – and de Tocqueville. What a pleasure to read de Tocqueville! They were my teachers." (Tomkins, 1968, p. 41). Hoffer was obviously influenced by the lucid, literary style of the French.

When Hoffer's money ran out on Skid Row (his father had left him 300 dollars), he worked at odd jobs for the next 20 years or so. He was an ingenious person when it came to getting work. In the depression Hoffer was able to find all sorts of work. During the 1930's, Hoffer made a living as a migrant farm worker; he drifted over the whole state of California. During this time, Hoffer was slowly teaching himself to write; he wrote in notebooks and even wrote two novels. "My writing is done in railroad yards while waiting for a freight, in the fields while waiting for a truck, and at noon after lunch" (Tomkins, 1968, p. 35.)

In 1942, Hoffer joined the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union in San Francisco and went to work on the waterfront as a stevedore. He worked at this job for the next 25 years, the first time in his life he had a steady job. It was during this time that Hoffer completed some brilliant writing. *The True Believer* (Hoffer, 1951), a penetrating study of mass movements, brought recognition. Since this first book, Hoffer has published *The Ordeal of Change* (1952), *The Passionate State of Mind* (1954), *The Temper of Our Time* (1964), *Working and Thinking on the Waterfront* (1970), *First Things, Last Things* (1971), and *Reflections on the Human Condition* (1973). In 1977 he published *In Our Time*, a series of 32 brief essays that reveal an understanding of history, philosophy, sociology, political science and human nature.

A study of Eric Hoffer and his writing demonstrates that the ability to read is important to thoughtful, reflective people. Certainly Hoffer's experiences living and working have augmented his studies. There are not too many institutions of higher education that have graduated productive, humble persons with Hoffer's ability and insight. Reading stimulated Hoffer, and it may be that prolonged blindness had something to do with this. The legerdemain of psychology may help explain this interesting aspect of Hoffer's life. The fact remains that Eric Hoffer was able to become a knowledgeable man of considerable wisdom with the help of books in public libraries. This man stands as a unique model for us to emulate in many ways. He is worldly, yet he has never lived outside the United States. He is a humble person who has labored with his hands to make a living. His perception of people and events in history provide us with valuable lessons, equal to the Durants' well known *Lessons of History* (Durant, W. and Durant A., 1968).

How could it be that Hoffer, the son of an Alsatian carpenter and cabinet-maker with no formal education, has become so wise? Reading seems to be a key element. The joy, the excitement, the stimulation of reading in many areas is a most important part of Hoffer's life. Reading books consumed Hoffer; he has become a serious scholar without going to a formal school. The public library was Hoffer's classroom.

Being able to read is no guarantee that a person will be wise, honest or good, but reading in many areas may provide insight. Could it be that a reading of the sages helps us to see the world from different perspectives? There is ample evidence that the ability to read helps promote a good self-concept, emotional stability and mental health. Poor readers in school often have serious emotional problems.

Is it not a paradox, in this age of sophisticated technology and mass education, that we have so few thinkers like Eric Hoffer? Is Hoffer a mutation of the species in this technotronic, puerile age? We have a rare person in the form of Eric Hoffer, and he needs to be studied, known and understood. It may be that a technocratic society will turn its back on quality literature and humble people of letters. If this is so, we are in danger of being overrun by clever, hustling, technocratic demagogues. The Watergate scandal may have been a warning of what is to come. We can observe nefarious deeds becoming legitimate at all levels of government: local, state and national. Power and control is what our exalted leaders crave. "Even in the freest society power is charged with impulse to turn men into precise, predictable automata. When watching men of power in action it must be always kept in mind that, whether they know it or not, their main purpose is the elimination or neutralization of the independent individual—the independent voter, consumer, worker, owner, thinker—and that every device they employ aims at turning man into a manipulatable 'animated instrument,' which is Aristotle's definition of a slave" (Hoffer, 1952, p. 97).

Our era of technology has not emphasized reading and study as virtues. We have come to depend upon television, motion pictures and slick

magazines for information and entertainment. The reflective scholars in our institutions of higher education are being replaced with hustling grantsmen and strange mountebanks flooding us with shallow erudition. “. . . despite its spectacular achievements in science and technology, the twentieth century will probably be seen in retrospect as a century mainly preoccupied with the mastery and manipulation of men” (Hoffer, 1952, p. 99). Our efficiency and desire for the good life may be our doom. “A high level of bureaucratic rationality and of technology does not mean a high level of either individual or social intelligence” (Mills, 1959, p. 168).

We have relatively few people who appreciate the Eric Hoffers of the world. The public tends to pay homage to the hustling type—the power-seeking person. It is a sign of sickness when a society can but does not learn from literate, wise people and encourage its young to read and study. Being able to read may help to keep us free if we exercise our senses.

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