

IRRATIONALISM, LIBERAL
DEMOCRACIES, AND
INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

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“Is Democracy Really Dying?” In 2018 *The New Republic* posed this question to its readers by reviewing some of the books published on the crisis of Western democracies and the risk of new forms of fascism.¹ For some years now, writers of all stripes have been lining up to pen liberalism’s epitaph. The left demands more social democracy to counter the pernicious effects of neo-liberal economics. On the right, liberalism’s cosmopolitanism, which has no apparent regard for nation, religion or family, has been decried and the traditional values anchored in the idea of community have been invoked.²

For most scholars, we are witness of a general crisis of democracies.³ Is this the third reflux followed the third

¹ T. Shenk, “Is Democracy Really Dying? Why so Many Commentators Share an Overly Grim View of America’s Fate”, *The New Republic*, August 20, 2018.

² H. Drochon, “The Anti-democratic Thinker Inspiring America’s Conservative Elites”, *The Guardian*, April 21, 2018.

³ N. Urbinati, “Reflections on the Meaning of the ‘Crisis of Democracy’”, *Democratic Theory*, 1, Summer 2016, 6-31. A different view is in S. Levitsky, L. Way, “The Myth of Democratic Recession”, *Journal of Democracy*, 1, January 2015, 45-58.

wave of democratization described by Samuel Huntington?⁴ Reflux or not, new intolerant, racist, anti-democratic and potentially authoritarian forces are gaining a growing consensus in the people and seems to cast dark clouds on the health of the democracies in US and Europe. How to face them? Right in the middle of post-1989 third wave and of the celebrations for the end of history,⁵ in Madison, one of the greatest historians of the 19th and 20th centuries tended to describe the reality less schematically. George L. Mosse was not only a great historian of fascism and nationalism, but also a central figure of the intellectual debate on the perils – as it has been argued⁶ – of normalcy, of the dark side

⁴ S. Mainwaring, F. Bizzarro, “The Fates of Third-Wave Democracies”, *Journal of Democracy*, 1, January 2019, 99-113. The reference is to S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

⁵ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992).

⁶ K. Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy. George L. Mosse and the Remaking of Cultural History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014). On Mosse, see also, E. Gentile, *Fascination with the Persecutor. George L. Mosse and the Catastrophe of Modern Man* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021).

of modernity and, in a broader sense, of the crises of liberal democracies.⁷

His biography is closely related to his studies. Born in Berlin in 1918, Mosse was forced to leave Germany in 1933 after the Nazi seizure of power. He found refuge in England and then in the United States, where he completed his studies at the Quaker college of Harverford and Harvard University. After the war he became one of the greatest historians, teaching first at the University of Iowa, since 1955 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and, since 1969, also at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In Madison, Mosse was a real legend, especially in the sixties and seventies, becoming an active member of a lively university. As he stated in his memoir, “the Holocaust was never very far from my mind” and all his studies “have tried to find the answer to how it could have happened”.⁸

⁷ I have developed this element of Mosse’s work in a broader essay: D. Aramini, “Confronting Nationalism and the Recurring Crisis of Liberal Democracies: Mosse’s Contribution to the Public Debate”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 56, 4, October 2021, 1009-1039.

⁸ G.L. Mosse, *Confronting History. A Memoir* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 219.

In the nineties, although representative institutions appeared to have emerged strengthened, Mosse stressed that their stability should not be taken for granted because “the problem of mediation between the people and government is still acute” and the populist ideal of democracy “is not dead”.⁹ As he did since the early years of his career, when he underlined the civil commitment of the historian, engaged “in the battle for the freedom of the intellect”,¹⁰ Mosse insisted on the continuity between past and present enemies, embodied by dogmatism and fanaticism, in “those who think they have the monopoly over the truth”, “who want instant utopia”, “who lack tolerance towards individual rights and freedom, who seek security in a rigid conformity and in emotion not tempered by reason”.¹¹

Pressed by the appearance of neo-Nazi skinheads, he stressed that neoliberal economies and advanced industrialization had created a marginalized underclass

⁹ G.L. Mosse, “Concepts of Democracy – The Liberal Inheritance and the National Socialist Public Sphere”, Lecture paper undated, in Leo Baeck Institute, George L. Mosse Collection (LBI, GLMC), b. 16, f. 24.

¹⁰ G.L. Mosse, “Luther College Lecture, undated”, in LBI, GLMC, b. 18, f. 3.

¹¹ G.L. Mosse, “Response,” 31.

seeking what Mosse defined as “a fully furnished house”, an identity, with no hopes and no expectations, except for rioting.¹² As he stated in the aftermath of the German reunification, it was a common and growing problem in Europe and US, where the radical right was rising and nationalism was growing in strength. As this underclass was being integrated into society “through demagoguery”, “through liturgy”, “through ritual”, it shaped a “potential threat”, especially because once again racism, and nationalism (a kind of nationalism more based on economic concerns than on territorial ones) provided “a safety anchor” and an explanation of reality. Immigrants, the poor, Islamic fundamentalism provided that enemy capable of cementing, by contrast, membership, and group identity.¹³

He identified, with concern, the resurgence of the brutalization of the language of politics and he warned to

¹² S. Lathrop, “Racism Lies Abroad for Europe. Interview with G.L. Mosse”, 1992, in LBI, GLMC, b.2, f. 8; S. Del Re, “Fermate quegli hooligan. Intervista a G.L. Mosse”, *Panorama* (6 December 1992), 15–16.

¹³ G.L. Mosse, ‘A New Kind of German Unity?’, article published in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera* (30 September 1990), in LBI, GLMC, b. 41, f. 46; G.L. Mosse, Interview with Jean Feraca on WHA Wisconsin Public Radio (18 November 1991), in UW-Madison, George L. Mosse Program in History Archive.

not ignore the centrality of how modern mass politics works. Nationalism remained, in his view, the strongest ideology of the century, still rooted in popular minds. It was therefore necessary to prevent the erosion of the ideals of individual freedom, defend diversity against the assault of absolute systems of belief. His deep criticism of the theory of modernization during the fifties and sixties, and in the nineties of a free market that promised welfare to everyone, was rooted on the fact that no political body could exist or survive – in his opinion – with ideals based on material progress alone.¹⁴ Mass society needed something else, above all during time of crisis: the desire for utopia.¹⁵ As he showed in all his works, the age of mass politics “advocated a different definition of democracy”, in which political participation “was defined through the acting out of a political liturgy in mass movements or in the streets, in finding security through the symbols and myths which

¹⁴ G.L. Mosse, “Commencement Address – 1960”, in LBI, GLMC, b. 16, f. 23; G.L. Mosse, “Retarded Germany”, *The Progressive*, 2, February 1968, 44–5; C. Hassan, “L’arcipelago nazionalista. Intervista a George Mosse”, *l’Unità*, October 25, 1991.

¹⁵ G.L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe: the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. An Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Rand Mc Nally, 1961), 421.

constituted the drama of politics”.¹⁶ In a word, irrationalism was the key element in involving masses in politics. During a lecture on Calvinism, he showed that to draw people to a cause, the night, darkness, candles had to be used as well as the organization of a dramatic collective act.¹⁷ Political parties or representative institutions had not been able to provide the sense of a true democracy and a community, unlike this new irrational politics. According to Mosse, this dramatization of politics was a belief system that responded to a mass need: the search for a new identity in an increasingly alienated (and global) world. He criticized the constructivist approach of historians like, among the others, Eric Hobsbawm, who talked about the invention of tradition and of artifacts resulting from public policies to obtain consensus. Propaganda, in his view, was “singularly inappropriate for it denotes something artificial which

¹⁶ G.L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Third Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 420. See also: Id., *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1975).

¹⁷ Cf. P. Breines, “Finding Oneself in History and Vice Versa: Remarks on ‘George’s Voice’”, *German Politics & Society*, 4, Winter 2000, 9–10.

attempts to condition the minds of men by means of deliberate 'selling' techniques."¹⁸ This drama of participation included the bottom-up sharing of political ideas and demands and was crucial in mass politics.¹⁹ What he described in his works was indeed not just history but "still present history".²⁰ He believed, and the nineties confirmed his view, that the need for utopia, for belief systems, for secular religion, for fairy tales, for leaders, for a healthy and happy world remained a driving force, especially in a world without a guide and in time of crisis. The risks of new authoritarian synthesis, of intolerance, of myths were always ready to catalyse general dissatisfaction and to turn the assault to parliamentary regimes.²¹

¹⁸ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 10.

¹⁹ Gentile, *Fascination with the Persecutor*, 85-105.

²⁰ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 214.

²¹ G.L. Mosse, *Intervista sul nazismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1977), 128, 140-4, 147-8.

Liberalism and the Utopian Elan

What was the solution? Which antidotes to use to prevent new catastrophes? Liberalism needed to find the utopian elan to survive. In the nineties, Mosse continuously stressed two points. The crucial question was not to abolish and dismantle the myths and stereotypes of the nation or worst, in a globalized world, to consider the nation as a remnant of the past, something concerning just uneducated people (like the European culture thought in the first half of the 20th century), but to humanise them, to make them democratic. Nationalism, and irrationalism, are crucial in mass society to make the citizens feel as members of a cemented community deeply rooted in that tradition able to provide a common and stable identity. Therefore, it was necessary to keep on working on humanizing nationalism by strengthening its liberal roots.²² In short, the key question for Mosse was how to maintain the values of Enlightenment, of autonomy, of reason and tolerance, of the free play of mind in a world of

²² G.L. Mosse, "Can Nationalism Be Saved? About Zionism, Rightful and Unjust Nationalism", Lecture 1995–1996, in LBI, GLMC, b. 16, ff. 14–17.

mass politics and mass irrationality. *Bildung* was essential to this goal. It represented for Mosse an identity rooted into the idea of culture as an antidote against irrationalism. In a 1996 lecture, he noted that *Bildung* was “the best guarantee of a true universalism”, which did not reject nationalism as a whole, but rather meant that each nation would become “a human people”, respectful of individuals and of their freedom. The rediscovery of the first nationalist thinkers and Zionists, in his opinion, would have been very instructive.²³

Were Mosse’s words themselves a sort of utopia? When read today, in the midst of a Western world questioning the principle of liberalism and a general climate of pessimism as to the future of liberal democracies, facing the rising of populist demands and new forms of antiliberal and nationalist forces which remember to us a very dark past – like showed in a cartoon published on the *New York Times*

²³ G.L. Mosse, “The Universal Meaning of the Concept of Bildung”, Lecture, Tel Aviv University, 1 November 1996, in LBI, GLMC, b. 19, f. 13. See also: Id., *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985); Id., *Confronting the Nation. Jewish and Western Nationalism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1993).

the 22nd September 2018²⁴ or after the Capitol Hill assault in January 2021, and the most recent and ridiculous no-vax violent manifestations –, Mosse's works offer in my opinion surprising considerations. His insistence on the irrationalism as a crucial element in mass politics, his analyses on how mass politics works, his words on the dangers for individual freedom, help us to keep our eyes wide open, vaccinating us against the recurring threat of irrationalism and intolerance. His research avoids regarding the evils of democracy as only originating in the present, but also considers how they should be addressed within a culture of mass politics. Mosse was persuaded that it was now necessary to adopt the 'new politics' to direct mass movements toward parliamentary democracy. In mass society, politics had become a secular religion.²⁵ "The new politics – Mosse stated – provided an objectification of the

²⁴ In the cartoon, two persons are looking at the European continent and at its right-wing riots. The first one argues: "a glimpse into Europe's dark past?". "Or its future", is the second one's remark.

²⁵ Mosse explained these crucial topics in a long interview held in 1979 in Italy. An English edition of this interview is going to be published by the University of Wisconsin Press for the end of 2022 with a new introduction written by myself.

general will; it transformed political action into a drama supposedly shared by the people themselves”. Aware of the “danger of being captured” by irrational forces, as happened to himself,²⁶ in his opinion the ‘new politics’ was essential to give a sense of belonging that allowed a deeper participation to the masses.²⁷ However, it had to be balanced with the education (or *Bildung*), with the use of reason and a critical mind, and centered on a process of humanization of nationalism in order to shape a new liberal politics rooted on the individual rights, freedom, welfare, and tolerance. In 1979, he warned: “if we do not succeed in giving nationalism a human face, a future historian might write about our civilization what Edward Gibbon wrote about the fall of the Roman Empire: that at its height moderation prevailed and citizens had respect for each other’s beliefs, but that it fell

²⁶ In his memoirs, he remembers the emotional commitment when he witnessed the swearing-in of Israeli paratroopers on Masada (Mosse, *Confronting History*, 185).

²⁷ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 1–2. About the Mossean ‘new politics’, see E. Gentile, “A Provisional Dwelling. The Origin and Development of the Concept of Fascism in Mosse’s Historiography”, in S.G. Payne, D.J. Sorkin, J.S. Tortorice (eds), *What History Tells. George L. Mosse and the Culture of Modern Europe* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 81–91.

through intolerant zeal and military despotism”.²⁸ According to him, the early Zionists could show the way: in a world where radical nationalism was rising, they had given shape to a humanised and liberal form of nationalism. This was the task of the intellectual, namely both to emphasize the dark side of nationalism and to highlight its sense of cosmopolitan solidarity centred on the individual, constantly looking for a balance between myth and reason. Mosse was a real Liberal, strongly believing in human potential, but also a man of 20th century, with his own utopia, being convinced that, as he argued, “men must dream before they can act”.²⁹

²⁸ G.L. Mosse, “Friendship and Nationhood: About the Promise and Failure of German Nationalism”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2, April 1982, 365.

²⁹ G.L. Mosse, “Can Nationalism Be Saved? About Zionism, Rightful and Unjust Nationalism”, *Israel Studies*, 1, Spring 1997, 171.

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