

Ludwig von Mises Institute

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In Defense of Demagogues

This short manuscript is dated 1954. It has never before been published.

For many years now, demagogues have been in great disfavor. They are not sober, they are not respectable, they are not "gentlemen." And yet there is a great and growing need for their services. What, exactly, have been the charges leveled against the demagogues? They are roughly three in number.

In the first place, they are disruptive forces in the body politic. They stir things up. Second, they supposedly fail to play the game in appealing to the base emotions, rather than to cool reason. From this stems the third charge: that they appeal to the unwashed masses with emotional, extreme, and, therefore, unsound views. Add to this the vice of ungentlemanly enthusiasm, and we have about catalogued the sins of the species demagogue.



The charge of emotionalism is surely an irrelevant one. The problem of an ideology is not whether it is put forth in an emotional, a matter-of-fact, or a dull manner. The question is whether or not the ideology is correct. Almost always, the demagogue is a man who finds that his ideas are held by only a small minority of people, a minority that is apt to be particularly small among the sober and respectable. Convinced of the truth and the importance of his ideas, he sees that the heavy weight of public opinion, and particularly of the respectable molders of this opinion, is either hostile or indifferent to this truth. Is it any wonder that such a situation will make a man emotional?

All demagogues are ideological nonconformists and therefore are bound to be emotional about the general and respectable rejection of what they consider to be vital truth. But not all ideological nonconformists become demagogues. The difference is that the demagogue possesses that quality of mass attraction that permits him to use emotion to stir up the masses. In going to the masses, he is going over the heads of the respectable intellectuals who ordinarily guide mass opinion. It is this electric, short-cut appeal direct to the masses that gives the demagogue his vital significance and that makes him such a menace to the dominant orthodoxy.

The demagogue is frequently accused by his enemies of being an insincere opportunist, a man who cynically uses certain ideas and emotions in order to gain popularity and power. It is almost impossible, however, to judge a person's motives, particularly in political life, unless one is a close friend. We have seen that the sincere demagogue is very likely to be emotional himself, while stirring others to emotion. Finally, if a man is really an opportunist, the easiest way to acclaim and power is to play ball with the ruling orthodoxy, and not the opposite. The way of the demagogue is the riskiest and has the least chance of success.

It is the fashionable belief that an idea is wrong in proportion to its "extremism" and right in

proportion as it is a chaotic muddle of contradictory doctrines. To the professional middle-of-the-roader, a species that is always found in abundance, the demagogue invariably comes as a nasty shock. For it is one of the most admirable qualities of the demagogue that he forces men to think, some for the first time in their lives. Out of the muddle of current ideas, both fashionable and unfashionable, he extracts some and pushes them to their logical conclusions, i.e. "to extremes." He thereby forces people either to reject their loosely held views as unsound, or to find them sound and to pursue them to their logical consequences. Far from being an irrational force, then, the silliest of demagogues is a great servant of Reason, even when he is mostly in the wrong.

A typical example is the inflationist demagogue: the "monetary crank." The vast majority of respectable economists have always scoffed at the crank without realizing that they are not really able to answer his arguments. For what the crank has done is to take the inflationism that lies at the core of fashionable economics and push it to its logical conclusion. He asks; "If it is good to have an inflation of money of 10 percent per year, why isn't it still better to double the money supply every year?" Only a few economists have realized that in order to answer the crank reasonably instead of by ridicule, it is necessary to purge fashionable economics of its inflationist foundations.

Demagogues probably first fell into disrepute in the 19th century, when most of them were socialists. But their conservative opposition, as is typical of conservatives in every age, never came to grips with the logic of the demagogues' position. Instead, they contented themselves with attacking the emotionalism and extremism of the upstarts. Their logic unassailed, the socialist demagogues triumphed, as argument always will conquer pure prejudice in the long run. For it seemed as if the socialists had reason on their side.

Now socialism is the fashionable and respectable ideology. The old passionate arguments of the soap box have become the tired cliches of the cocktail party and the classroom. Any demagogy, any disruption of the apple cart, would almost certainly come from the individualist opposition. Furthermore, the State is now in command, and whenever this conditions prevails, the State is anxious to prevent disruption and ideological turmoil. In their wake, demagogues would bring "disunity," and people might be stirred to think for themselves instead of falling into a universal goose-step behind their anointed leaders. Furthermore, individualist demagogues would be more dangerous than ever, because they could now be equipped with rational arguments to refute the socialist cliches. The respectable statist Left, then, fears and hates the demagogue, and more than ever before, he is the object of attack.

It is true that, in the long run, we will never be free until the intellectuals--the natural molders of public opinions--have been converted to the side of freedom. In the short run, however, the only route to liberty is by an appeal to the masses over the heads of the State and its intellectual bodyguard. And this appeal can be made most effectively by the demagogue--the rough, unpolished man of the people, who can present the truth in simple, effective, yes emotional, language. The intellectuals see this clearly, and this is why they constantly attack every indication of libertarian demagoguery as part of a "rising tide of anti-intellectualism." Of course, it is not anti-intellectualism; it is the saving of mankind from those intellectuals who have betrayed the intellect itself.