

# Uncommon Scarcity of the Common Man

*Reginald J. White*

**I**T always had a slightly insulting flavour about it. Perhaps it was the entymological suggestion, as in THE COMMON HOUSE-FLY, or THE COMMON BOLL-WEEVIL. Or was it the vague suggestion of ill-health, caught from THE COMMON COLD? Perhaps the botanical touch likewise distressed us: something drearily plebeian and lowly culled from the category of THE COMMON RAGWORT. . . . Anyway, the instincts of proud and ancient peoples jibbed at it. A people led by Winston Churchill spat it out of their mouths as if their teeth had met on a maggot. Impoverished by the expenditures of their substance in a giant struggle against tyranny; weary of the black-out and bombs; worried by the prospect of debt and deficit: still, the English people were not going to be described as Common. Their historical memory brought up a memory of a frosty morning in Whitehall, three centuries before: a King laying down his head with grace upon a block of wood . . .

He nothing common did, or mean,  
Upon that memorable scene . . .

That was Andrew Marvell on the death of Charles I. The English have a way of adopting the nobler qualities of their less successful rulers as descriptions of themselves. Common meant Mean. Even in the hour of disaster and defeat it was a good

thing to think of Kings, and nobility, in the grand style. "For Man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes and pompous in the grave . . ." So wrote Sir Thomas Browne. Let Mr. Eliot do his worst, but the world of the English should still end with a bang, not with a whimper. "What sort of people do they think we are?" You could have combed all England in 1940, and in most other years down to D-Day, without finding a single instance of a "Common Man".

Where did it come from, this deplorable cult? Who foisted it upon us, and to what end? It started, like so much else, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his inferiority complex. To Jean-Jacques, the world of men was wicked because it was rich, well-bred, intellectually and morally sophisticated: at least, that was how the great world of France of the *ancien régime* appeared to Jean-Jacques, and Jean-Jacques was not at home in it. He turned away from it, seeking what he chose to consider the simplicities of nature. He declared war on culture, style, manners, all that is sophisticated and "artificial". He went out to find "The Common Man"—unspoilt by civilisation, cities, salons, courts and cabinets. He held up this Common Man as in all respects superior: morally superior, above all. Rousseau was the originator of that hatred of culture and refinement which has so often been assumed to be synonymous with

democracy. The People are Lowbrow, and proud of it. The Highbrow is a Fascist, or an Enemy of the People. The Common Man is right, just because he is common: because he is innocent of the sophistication, the artificiality, the proud discrimination of the aristocrat, the urban man (which means the *urbane* man), the intellectual. To be right is to be like other people: to be different is to be wrong, wicked, abnormal, unhealthy, perverse. Of course, Rousseau didn't say all this: but he led to it as the underlying assumption of democracy.

The Romantics and the Victorians took up the tale: to Wordsworth it seemed that virtue resided principally among the "statesmen" or small farmers of the Lake District, while Tennyson found few to protest against his axiomatic statement that

Kind hearts are more than Coronets,  
And simple faith than Norman blood...

Here and there some impatient spirit, like Thomas Carlyle, demanded to know whether innocence were enough, and whether the Collective Wisdom of the ballot-box could be said to have had very much to do with the civilisation of Europe, past or present. But then, everyone knows that Carlyle was a crypto-Fascist! Steadily, insidiously, the legend was built up that Public Opinion is sovereign, and Walter Bagehot had said that Public Opinion meant the bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus. Out of the fog of Victorian sentimentalism there emerged the ever more clearly seen and more devoutly worshipped figure: the Average Man—bald head, bowler hat, brief-case, and all.

Meanwhile, the United States of America was keeping pace with a sentimentalism all her own. For there, in the land of the frontier cabin and the prairie, a new civilisation was being welded out of the assorted runaways of Europe. If the United States were to acquire the homogeneity of a single nation, all these diverse folk had to be somehow made to *feel* alike in some respects: some standard pattern, some "admirable type"—as Bagehot liked to put it—had to be set up for worship as THE HUNDRED PER-CENT AMERICAN. Never was there so likely a breeding ground for the type of THE COMMON

MAN as the United States in the later decades of the nineteenth century. And had not Abraham Lincoln lent to "The Common People" the irresistible prestige of his heroic life and death? "God loves common people" said Abraham, their common father, "that's why He made so many of them". Not that there was anything common about Lincoln. But then, prophets are very rarely like their doctrines.

## II

NOW nobody wants to deny that God loves common people, or that most people are capable of being good, or that the permanent qualities of our common humanity are pretty evenly shared by everyone in much the same way. What, however, does need to be denied is that anything but confusion and ultimate degradation is likely to follow from the practice of abstracting from common humanity a sort of lay figure, an "average man", a low-level norm to which we should all try to approximate, and whose characteristics are somehow to be held in esteem at the expense of all else. And fortunately the attempt to do this is constantly being shown up as futile and irrelevant. The fact is that "average humanity" is constantly denying the average. Even when some one starts talking about himself as "The Common Man", he pretty soon makes it clear that he doesn't believe it. "Speaking as an ordinary person, or as an example of the Common Man" he begins. . . . And before you know where you are he has said something absurd, ludicrous, fantastic, and completely crazy: for instance, that he thinks all wars are made by capitalists, or that all women live by intuition, or that Modern Art is a form of Imposture. The Common Man is condemned out of his own mouth: his own peculiar brand of nonsense stamps him from the start with the most uncommon eccentricity.

And then, watch the way he conducts his life. He hates living in a block of flats: he wants a garden, something he can make as little like anyone else's garden as possible. He hates to live in a terrace: semi-detached is the least of his ambition. And if he can

make his house look different from the houses on either side of him, he will, even to the extent of calling it "Shalimah" or "Chez-nous". Planners get his goat. He rejoices in the discomfiture of Gallup Polls: the hope of proving they have got him wrong—*him*, the Common Man,—fills him with delirious delight. He resisted the holding of a Census in England in 1801, because somewhere in the Bible it said "Thou shalt not number the People". He makes it as difficult as he can for anyone who wants to number him, "assess" him, or find anything out about the amount of money he earns, how much he gives his wife, and how many children he has. He invented the word "Snooper" to convey his contempt for his most hated enemy. He calls a policeman a "Cop" because it sounds mean and spiteful. He takes every opportunity he can find, and he invents opportunities where they are non-existent, to evade, elude and circumvent laws, by-laws, regulations and The Ten Commandments. His ego is his most priceless possession, and he cherishes it chiefly because it is unlike the ego of anyone else. He invents private rules, private morality, private codes of all kinds, because they enable him to live according to his dreams instead of according to someone else's ideas.

Of course, he *looks* common, but that is because he hopes to avoid detection. There is nothing like a uniform to escape notice. The City Man's uniform of bowler-hat, black coat and pin-stripes is the best disguise in the world for the private adventurer. But what goes on under that black felt dome on his head, or beneath that black well-pressed coat of armour which he calls his "suitings", would startle Machiavelli and appall Casanova. The most likely-looking Common Man on record is H. H. Crippen, of Dewdrop Crescent, London. Slightly pop-eyed, with a high collar, a water-cart moustache and a quiff, he possessed all the features of "The Little Man" of the comic-strip. He is still on show in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's in London, simply because he poisoned his wife and buried her under the basement-floor of his respectable residence in the Crescent. He was the first criminal to be overtaken by the arm of the

law at the end of a wireless-wave. He was only stopped at the last moment from going ashore in the Land of the Free with his mistress dressed up as a boy by the wonders of science, and from that moment until the drop "launched him into Eternity" (as the papers say), he made it clear that Ethel Le Neve had nothing to do with the death of Belle Elmore, the ex-music-hall star who had been Mrs. Crippen. A gallant gentleman, for all his faults, his Counsel said. And certainly not "Common".

### III

AND what of Mr. Chaplin and Mr. Wells? Between them, these two very uncommon men have probably done more than anyone to put across The Common Man in our century. Yet Mr. Chaplin is a genius of quite uncommon quality, and Mr. Wells was about as unlike Mr. Kipps, and Mr. Polly, and Mr. Lewisham as those very uncommon men are unlike each other. Perhaps it might be said that these great creative artists have succeeded better than they could know, for at their hands the Common Man has been revealed to us in all his rare eccentricity,—indeed, in his glory. After their work, surely it is high time that we dropped the name in favour of some title of greater splendour.

Our final protest must be made in terms of politics. The concept of the Common Man has been a concomitant of Democracy. It expresses a great truth; that, in the words of Colonel Rainborough, "the poorest he that is in England hath a life to lead as well as the greatest he." But like many another great truth, it can be made to lead us into falsehood unless we know precisely what we mean by it. What Colonel Rainborough meant was plain. He meant that there are certain basic rights which all men, however poor and insignificant they may be, are entitled to—in order to make the best of themselves. He was not asserting the equal right of all men to be Common, but rather the equal right of all men to be themselves. It is an assertion of the right to individuality, not to conformity. Now, with the growth of democracy—and

more especially with the growth of democratic techniques of government—it has become increasingly difficult for the individual to keep his feet. The great modern state, with its great techniques of organisation, has swept the individual into categories, classes, grades, income-groups, classifications of all kinds. It is always a great deal easier for governments to govern if they can lump and dump people in these great categories. Quantitative politics are always simpler than qualitative. Unfortunately, in the process of lumping and dumping the individual gets lost. And getting lost, when the thing you are lost in is a crowd, has a soporific effect: you can get rid of responsibility by lining up in the right queue at the right hand-out window. Living your life in a category, duly approved by the state-statisticians, is simpler not only for government but for you. Therein lies the great temptation, and that way lies the end of democracy. De-

mocracy has got somehow to find the way to solve the problem of organisation without sacrificing liberty. The organisation has got to be made to serve the individual and not to swamp him.

To reconcile ourselves to such descriptive abstractions as THE COMMON MAN is the surest way to aid and abet the swamping process. Before we know where we are, we are talking of THE MASS MAN. Democracy turns more readily than any other social pattern into Totalitarianism. We have seen it happen, and we should not belittle the part played by soporific abstractions like the Common Man in bringing about the great betrayal. Let us not bow the knee before this, the latest idol of man's inveterate passion for generalisation. The Economic Man destroyed much, and in his turn was destroyed. The Common Man is capable only of destroying himself.

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### *A Citizen's Duty*

Resisting tyranny is the duty of every citizen who wishes to live in a free country.

WINSTON CHURCHILL