An Analysis of

Eric Hoffer

The True Believer

Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements

Jonah S. Rubin
# CONTENTS

## WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

- Who Is Eric Hoffer? 9
- What Does *The True Believer* Say? 10
- Why Does *The True Believer* Matter? 12

## SECTION 1: INFLUENCES

- Module 1: The Author and the Historical Context 15
- Module 2: Academic Context 19
- Module 3: The Problem 23
- Module 4: The Author’s Contribution 27

## SECTION 2: IDEAS

- Module 5: Main Ideas 32
- Module 6: Secondary Ideas 37
- Module 7: Achievement 42
- Module 8: Place in the Author’s Work 46

## SECTION 3: IMPACT

- Module 9: The First Responses 52
- Module 10: The Evolving Debate 57
- Module 11: Impact and Influence Today 62
- Module 12: Where Next? 66

- Glossary of Terms 71
- People Mentioned in the Text 80
- Works Cited 85
THE MACAT LIBRARY

The Macat Library is a series of unique academic explorations of seminal works in the humanities and social sciences – books and papers that have had a significant and widely recognised impact on their disciplines. It has been created to serve as much more than just a summary of what lies between the covers of a great book. It illuminates and explores the influences on, ideas of, and impact of that book. Our goal is to offer a learning resource that encourages critical thinking and fosters a better, deeper understanding of important ideas.

Each publication is divided into three Sections: Influences, Ideas, and Impact. Each Section has four Modules. These explore every important facet of the work, and the responses to it.

This Section-Module structure makes a Macat Library book easy to use, but it has another important feature. Because each Macat book is written to the same format, it is possible (and encouraged!) to cross-reference multiple Macat books along the same lines of inquiry or research. This allows the reader to open up interesting interdisciplinary pathways.

To further aid your reading, lists of glossary terms and people mentioned are included at the end of this book (these are indicated by an asterisk [*] throughout) – as well as a list of works cited.

Macat has worked with the University of Cambridge to identify the elements of critical thinking and understand the ways in which six different skills combine to enable effective thinking. Three allow us to fully understand a problem; three more give us the tools to solve it. Together, these six skills make up the PACIER model of critical thinking. They are:

**ANALYSIS** – understanding how an argument is built
**EVALUATION** – exploring the strengths and weaknesses of an argument
**INTERPRETATION** – understanding issues of meaning
**CREATIVE THINKING** – coming up with new ideas and fresh connections
**PROBLEM-SOLVING** – producing strong solutions
**REASONING** – creating strong arguments

To find out more, visit WWW.MACAT.COM.
CRITICAL THINKING AND THE TRUE BELIEVER

Primary critical thinking skill: CREATIVE THINKING
Secondary critical thinking skill: ANALYSIS

Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* is one of the most widely read works of social psychology written in the 20th-century. It exemplifies the powers of creative thinking and critical analysis at their best, providing an insight into two crucial elements of critical thinking.

Hoffer is likely to go down in history as one of America’s great creative thinkers – a writer not bound by standard frameworks of thinking or academic conventions, willing to beat his own path in framing the best possible answers to the questions he investigated. An impoverished, largely unschooled manual laborer who had survived the worst effects of the Great Depression in the United States, Hoffer was a passionate autodidact whose philosophical and psychological education came from omnivorous reading. Working without the help of any mentors, he forged the fearsomely creative and individual approach to problems demonstrated in *The True Believer*.

The book, which earned him his reputation, examines the different phenomena of fanaticism – religious or political – and applies Hoffer’s analytical skills to reveal that, deep down, all ‘true believers’ display the same needs and tendencies, whatever their final choice of belief. Incisive and persuasive, it remains a classic.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ORIGINAL WORK

We know little about Eric Hoffer’s early life. The story he himself told—that he was born in New York City in 1902, to working-class German immigrants who died when he was young—has never been verified. His biographer suspects Hoffer was himself a German immigrant, born in 1898, who entered the US illegally from Mexico. Despite never receiving a formal education, Hoffer read voraciously. He spent his entire working life as a longshoreman on the docks in San Francisco. When *The True Believer*, his most famous work, was published in 1951, the “Longshoreman-Philosopher” became a media sensation. Hoffer went on to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom just a few short months before his death in 1983.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THE ANALYSIS

Dr. Jonah S. Rubin holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago, focusing on memory and death in post-Franco Spain. He is currently a visiting professor in anthropology at Bard College, New York

ABOUT MACAT

GREAT WORKS FOR CRITICAL THINKING

Macat is focused on making the ideas of the world’s great thinkers accessible and comprehensible to everybody, everywhere, in ways that promote the development of enhanced critical thinking skills.

It works with leading academics from the world’s top universities to produce new analyses that focus on the ideas and the impact of the most influential works ever written across a wide variety of academic disciplines. Each of the works that sit at the heart of its growing library is an enduring example of great thinking. But by setting them in context – and looking at the influences that shaped their authors, as well as the responses they provoked – Macat encourages readers to look at these classics and game-changers with fresh eyes. Readers learn to think, engage and challenge their ideas, rather than simply accepting them.
‘Macat offers an amazing first-of-its-kind tool for interdisciplinary learning and research. Its focus on works that transformed their disciplines and its rigorous approach, drawing on the world’s leading experts and educational institutions, opens up a world-class education to anyone.’

Andreas Schleicher
Director for Education and Skills, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

‘Macat is taking on some of the major challenges in university education … They have drawn together a strong team of active academics who are producing teaching materials that are novel in the breadth of their approach.’

Prof Lord Broers,
former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge

‘The Macat vision is exceptionally exciting. It focuses upon new modes of learning which analyse and explain seminal texts which have profoundly influenced world thinking and so social and economic development. It promotes the kind of critical thinking which is essential for any society and economy. This is the learning of the future.’

Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former UK Secretary of State for Education

‘The Macat analyses provide immediate access to the critical conversation surrounding the books that have shaped their respective discipline, which will make them an invaluable resource to all of those, students and teachers, working in the field.’

Professor William Tronzo, University of California at San Diego
WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

KEY POINTS

• Eric Hoffer (1898–1983) was a self-educated longshoreman working on the docks, who lived in San Francisco in the United States. He wrote in his spare time.

• Hoffer’s unique approach in *The True Believer* was to look at radical political movements and dissect their psychological appeal to frustrated individuals, rather than simply analyze their stated beliefs.

• Published in 1951, *The True Believer* was one of the most popular academic works of the 1950s and 1960s. The book received renewed interest following the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001,* as modern scholars try to explain why some people volunteer to die in the name of political or religious ideas.

Who was Eric Hoffer?

Born in New York City in the United States in 1898, Eric Hoffer was a self-educated laborer who wrote philosophical, psychological, and literary works in his spare time. He moved to California as a young man in search of work, after both his parents died. While he never received a formal education, Hoffer was nevertheless a passionate reader. He moved around frequently looking for a stable job, but wherever he went, Hoffer always rented a modest room near the
municipal library. After being exempted from the mandatory draft during World War II* because of a hernia, Hoffer found a job as a longshoreman on the San Francisco docks. In the late 1940s, as he started to think deeply about the postwar world, he began writing his first book, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements.*

Partly due to Hoffer’s incredible life story, the book became an overnight success and remained popular throughout the following two decades. By 1967 it had sold over 500,000 copies. After its publication, Hoffer became an in-demand public intellectual and was interviewed on national television, as well as being appointed to a US presidential commission—a group of people put together at the request of the president to undertake a specific task of research or investigation—by Lyndon B. Johnson.* The University of California, Berkeley hired Hoffer as an adjunct professor in the late 1950s and he rose to the position of senior research professor. Yet Hoffer continued to work on the docks until union rules forced him to retire at the age of 67.

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan* awarded Hoffer the Presidential Medal of Freedom,* America’s highest civilian honor, calling him “an example of both the opportunity and the vitality of the American way of life.” Hoffer died in his modest home in San Francisco in 1983, at the age of 84.

**What Does *The True Believer* Say?**

In *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements,* Eric Hoffer argues that mass movements*—the radical politicization of urban populations—have many similar features. Regardless of the specific political, religious, or ideological beliefs of the particular people involved, mass movements all appeal to the same type of individual. Hoffer spends the majority of the book describing the psychological profile of those who join these extremist groups. He also details the types of leaders they attract and how these movements develop.
Most analysts study extremist organizations by analyzing the words and writings of their leaders. First, they try to understand the group’s philosophy, their ideas. Then they look to describe why a specific group of people finds this ideology so attractive. But Hoffer takes a different approach. He argues that the people who join cults, fascist and authoritarian parties, or political movements all suffer from the same psychological shortcomings. These individuals have low self-esteem, finding little of worth in their own characters. They have become frustrated with their own situations, have lost all faith in themselves, and, as a result, no longer value their individual identity.

According to Hoffer, mass movements step in to fill this void in the frustrated individual: “Faith [in the extremist group] in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves.” Extremist organizations replace people’s lost sense of self-worth with a focus on the group. Since the people these groups appeal to already want to change their lives, they are willing to abandon their individuality and devote themselves to an organization that promises to radically alter the world. Followers profess undying loyalty to the group’s leaders and show unquestioning faith in its mission. And, having abandoned any sense of personal self-worth, they become willing to die for the cause.

Since the types of people who join mass movements all have the same characteristics, Hoffer argues, extremist groups are interchangeable. People join mass movements to escape their own frustrations and to find a sense of purpose. Yet, the specific group they join is really a coincidence, rather than being about a specific ideology. In fact, Hoffer claims that people who manage to escape one mass movement often end up joining another. This happens because they have not resolved the underlying psychological sense of inferiority that led them to join such a group in the first place. Since mass movements recruit from the same population, this also means that extremist groups compete directly with one another for recruits.
When a person joins a mass movement, he or she is no longer available for recruitment by another. One mass movement’s gain is another extremist group’s loss.

Hoffer wrote *The True Believer* after witnessing the fascism of Nazi* Germany and the rising totalitarianism* of Soviet* Russia beginning to regulate all aspects of their citizens’ lives. But Hoffer did not believe that mass movements are always evil. At times, he argues, a mass movement can be a necessary source of good, of renewal and revival. He sees India’s pioneer of nonviolent resistance Mohandas Karmachand “Mahatma” Gandhi* and US presidents Abraham Lincoln* and Franklin Delano Roosevelt* as leaders of positive mass movements.

**Why Does The True Believer Matter?**

Hoffer’s work inspired academics and politicians who wanted to understand movements that appealed to regular people, or populist movements.* The True Believer persuaded Americans to look at mass movements not only by examining the speeches and slogans of their leaders, but also by looking at the social and psychological conditions of their members.

Hoffer originally wrote the book after thinking about both Nazism and Stalinism.* At the time, most analysts saw these two movements as polar opposites. After all, they had been on opposite sides of the battlefield during World War II as Germany opposed Russia. Hoffer wanted his work to explain the appeal of both movements using a single framework. This novel yet understandable approach made it an instant success, with American politicians praising the book’s emphasis on individuality and self-reliance as an antidote to the allure of mass movements. Hoffer’s storybook biography, which exemplified the American dream* that hard work and honesty will see you do well out of life, also inspired people to read it. *The True Believer* had a major impact on sociologists studying radical political movements, especially those interested in how fringe social groups
develop over time and eventually gain mainstream acceptance. Hoffer’s work provides a model for studying the role of individual believers in forming the nucleus of a mass movement.

But perhaps the greatest testament to *The True Believer* is the durability of its ideas. Following the terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalist group al-Qaeda on the United States on September 11, 2001, many commentators wondered why individuals would willingly volunteer to kill themselves in the name of religion. Publishers rushed *The True Believer* back into print, because its arguments about how people lose their sense of self and become willing to die for a cause seemed more relevant than ever. Drawing on Hoffer’s work, modern writers look to understand the psychological factors that lead people to join radical militant groups. Today, analysts often talk about how terrorist organizations take advantage of poverty and frustration to breed hatred and radicalism. *The True Believer* provides a language for understanding how these social and psychological conditions might well create a fertile ground for radical groups.

Over six decades after its publication, *The True Believer* is still essential reading for anyone interested in political mobilization. The work provides a good insight into transnational terrorist organizations, populist political movements, religious revivals, and political trends. It is clear that Eric Hoffer’s thinking and ideas have stretched way beyond his own lifetime.

**NOTES**


References