

- Why do people join mass movements like Communism, Nationalism and Fascism?
- Why do people march in the streets for social, political and religious movements?
- Why do millions of people sometimes decide to follow a single leader fanatically?

This book called “The True Believer” can show us. Eric Hoffer published it in 1951, when the memories of people like Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini were fresh in everyone’s mind. People wanted to understand why these movements sprang up and gripped millions of people, often with horrific results like the Holocaust.

So why should you read this summary? Well, best-selling author Simon Sinek says: “If you don’t understand people, then you don’t understand business.”

By understanding mass movements, you’ll become a better leader. You’ll know what inspires people and what motivates them to action. This will help you stand out in your career, manage a team and even create marketing that inspires people to buy your product and [spread your message for you](#).

So if you’re interested, then let’s jump into the best lessons from **The True Believer by Eric Hoffer**.

1. Under the surface, all mass movements are driven by the same emotions, frustrations and motivations.

What do a Russian Communist, Japanese Nationalist and Christian Crusader have in common?

The True Believer PDF Download

Get the book summary as a PDF here:

[dkpdf-button]

At first, it doesn’t look like much. But Eric Hoffer says that all big movements follow the same human patterns. This means under the surface all people who join mass movements have similar motivations. As we take a deeper look at why people join mass movements, you will start to see how they are similar.

Hundreds of years ago, most of the big movements were religious. That’s how Christianity, Islam and Buddhism spread over the world. About a thousand years ago, the Pope was considered the most powerful person in Europe and probably the world.

Later the movements became more nationalistic and social, and these movements were often good. For example, there was the nationalism that gave America Independence and Gandhi’s movement in India which gave a billion people freedom from British rule. In fact, in India Gandhi is now called “Father of the Nation.”

Action Step: Understand why people join one mass movement and you will understand why

people join any mass movement. You will soon understand better how to motivate people to join your own teams and causes.

2. People join mass movements to escape a powerless individual self.

The first question we'll answer is: Why do people join mass movements?

When someone feels frustrated and out of control of their life, they usually blame their surroundings. People blame things outside of themselves for their sad position in life. They'll blame the government, the economy, "the system" ... anything but themselves.

As Henry David Thoreau said, *"If anything ail a man so that he does not perform his functions, if he have a pain in his bowels even... he forthwith sets about reforming—the world."*

So people have a desire to join mass movements when they don't like their life and feel powerless to change it. When people feel individually impotent, they want to join a mass movement or holy cause so they can feel they have some power in the world again.

On the other hand...

People who feel in control of their life don't want to join a mass movement.

Someone who feels fulfilled and effective wants the world to mostly to stay the same or improve slowly. They don't want radical change because they are happy to pursue their own goals and dreams within the existing system. Most importantly, they believe they have the power to achieve their goals and improve their life through individual effort.

Unless a man has the talents to make something of himself, freedom is an irksome burden. Of what avail is freedom to choose if the self be ineffectual? We join a mass movement to escape individual responsibility, or, in the words of the ardent young Nazi, ["to be free from freedom."](#) [...]

To the frustrated, freedom from responsibility is more attractive than freedom from restraint. They are eager to barter their independence for relief from the burdens of willing, deciding and being responsible for inevitable failure.

Think about that.

When you don't have the skills or talent to create some success in your life, then freedom becomes a problem. Freedom feels like a burden because you are constantly being reminded that you're not good enough.

When people feel powerless and frustrated, the freedom they deeply ache for is a freedom

from individual responsibility. Obeying orders and surrendering to a powerful leader feels like a relief to these people. Like taking a heavy load off their shoulders.

This is our first glimpse into the mind of someone who joins a mass movement.

Eric Hoffer calls these people “True Believers.”

A true believer feels their isolated self is powerless. Alone, they feel vulnerable and undefended against the dangers of life. At best, their life feels meaningless, like endless consumption and chasing pleasure.

For a true believer, it's a relief to join a mass movement. Now they have a direction. Now they feel part of something bigger than themselves. And best of all, they are not personally responsible if the movement fails, which lets them avoid feeling not good enough again. Their sense of self is safe now because it is lost inside the larger movement.

As Eric Hoffer says...

The desire to belong is partly a desire to lose oneself.

When World War II ended, almost every member of the Nazi movement considered themselves not guilty of all the horrible crimes that had been done. Why? **Because they had joined the Nazi movement to be free from individual responsibility.** Now they felt cheated when asked to accept responsibility for what they had done when obeying orders.

That wasn't part of the deal!

Action Step: Keep an eye out for groups of people who have lost faith in their own power to shape the world. These people will be the most willing to join a mass movement because they want to lose their powerless self. They want to follow orders and be free from the burden of personal decisions and blame.

3. “The New Poor” are the most frustrated people and most likely to join a mass movement.

When we think of someone who feels powerless and frustrated, we usually imagine a poor person. We imagine someone living in poverty scared they will not have enough money to feed their kids next week.

But Eric Hoffer says truly poor people do not often join mass movements. When you are really poor, then your life is energized with purpose. Let me explain...

When someone is struggling every day to get food and shelter, then every small action they do is incredibly meaningful. Every one of their actions is keeping themselves and their

family alive! So every small success like a full stomach in the evening fills a poor person with meaning. Their life is hard and difficult, but it is full of concrete and immediate goals that make them feel that their life is meaningful. This means they don't need to join a mass movement to provide their life with meaning.

So it is not the poor who usually join mass movements, but the "new poor." As Eric Hoffer explains:

It is usually those whose poverty is relatively recent, the "new poor," who throb with the ferment of frustration. The memory of better things is as fire in their veins.

The "new poor" are people who before were doing well in society and now are doing poorly.

People who used to have more income, prestige or social standing and had it taken away from them feel the most frustrated. That's why some homeless man can live on the street for years, but a stock trader may commit suicide when the market crashes just because he is no longer a millionaire.

Were you shocked when [Donald Trump](#) won the 2016 US election?

One way Trump won was by recognizing a big group of "new poor" people in America. Blue collar workers.

Manufacturing jobs used to be great. They were some of the highest paying jobs in America. Yet now most manufacturing is done overseas. And all these [blue-collar workers in America](#) were seeing their jobs disappearing and being shipped overseas. They also saw nobody in the government was trying to do anything to help them and protect their future. In fact, most politicians were promoting more free trade.

Then along comes Donald J Trump. He says he will do everything possible to save America's manufacturing jobs. Higher taxes on imports, stricter immigration and no more free trade agreements. The "new poor" of America had found their champion.

And it was because of Trump that the controversial TPP Free Trade Deal wasn't signed. It's very clear that despite Trump's many flaws, he identified and appealed to a massive group of "new poor" people. Not the poor, but the "new poor," those blue-collar workers who felt their status in society slipping and their future uncertain.

The "new poor" can also include people who were poor before, but now their life has improved.

Another type of "new poor" people that Eric Hoffer talks about are people whose lives have recently improved a little. But the improvement doesn't make them feel more satisfied. Instead they now feel more frustrated because now they have a taste that life could be

better.

For example, the peasants of Russia lived in poverty for generations. Then social changes happened and they became more free, they had a taste of private ownership. And the communist uprising in Russia happened AFTER the Russian peasants had been free for a generation. Their improved conditions actually made them more sensitive to all the things in their lives that were still unsatisfactory. Maybe there would have been no Bolshevik Revolution in Russia if the peasants had remained very poor.

By the way, I know almost nothing about Russian history, but this is a basic point that Eric Hoffer makes. He also says:

Discontent is likely to be highest when misery is bearable; when conditions have so improved that an ideal state seems almost within reach. (...) It is not actual suffering but the taste of better things which excites people to revolt.

So in summary, people who are part of the “New Poor” are most likely to join a mass movement. These are not the people struggling with the worst poverty. Rather, they are people who used to be doing well and now their social position is going down. Or they are people who used to have nothing and now their life condition has improved a little. But instead of feeling more satisfied, they now can see all the other bad things in their life that can still be improved.

Now, you may be thinking: “*This is all super interesting, but how does it help me start or grow my business?*”

Here’s how...

Action Step: **Ask yourself: who are the “New Poor” in your market?** What part of your market desperately wants “the good old days” to come back, a time when their life felt simpler and easier? These people are more frustrated than most people which means they are motivated to find a solution to their problems. Your product could be one of those solutions.

(Side note: If you are just starting a new online business and need to find out what people want to buy, then [Pat Flynn’s book Will It Fly?](#) will help you a lot. [Check out my notes on the book.](#))

4. Passionate HATE Gives People Purpose, Unity and a Scapegoat

Do you remember the last election in your country?

It doesn’t matter what country you live in, the most popular politician are masters of stirring up hate and anger. Whether it’s a left-wing politician yelling about how rich people don’t

pay enough taxes, or a right-wing politician shouting about how the government is wasteful. The most influential politicians know that strong emotions will motivate people to go out and vote for them.

And every successful mass movement stirs up hate and anger towards someone, something or some group of people.

Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil.

When Hitler was asked whether he thought the Jew must be destroyed, he answered: "No... We should have then to invent him. It is essential to have a tangible enemy, not merely an abstract one."

In every mass movement, there is a devil. Hitler united people against the Jews, who he blamed for Germany's economic problems. Lenin did it against the bourgeois, the middle-class people who owned property. Christianity has a devil sneaking around every corner, hiding between your ears, who wants you to burn and suffer forever.

There's nothing that unites people together faster than a common enemy. As they say, "*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*"

Why do groups of people like having an enemy?

Here's one reason: Remember that a True Believer joins a mass movement in the first place because they feel insufficient and powerless. So having an enemy allows them to [redirect their attention](#). Instead of looking at their own shortcoming and failures which is very uncomfortable, they can instead channel anger against someone else. They can nurse an extreme outrage toward someone else.

Action Step: If you want to lead and unite a group of people, look for a common enemy. For example, many "natural health" authors talk about an enemy like "[Big Pharma](#)," which is the idea that large food and drug companies sometimes do unethical things for profit. This enemy fires up their readers and surely helps sell a lot of books and supplements.

5. Every mass movement is started by "Men of Words"...

Now Eric Hoffer breaks down the 3 stages of a mass movement. In a nutshell, he says each movement is started by men of words, comes into being by fanatics and is stabilized by men of action. These are 3 different types of leaders that play an important role in creating huge movements.

First, we'll look deeper at the first stage. The man of words.

The man of words is an intellectual. He criticizes established institutions and undermines the existing order. He casts doubt on old beliefs and belittles the people in

power. [The man of words plants seeds into the minds of people.](#) Seeds that later will grow into mass movements.

But the man (or woman) of words doesn't organize the movement themselves. They only create the ideas that will later shape the movement.

Jesus, Buddha and Karl Marx were all men of words.

- Jesus never built churches or an organization of priests and nuns. That was done later by other people.
- Buddha never built temples or monasteries. That was done later by other people.
- Karl Marx never created a communist economy. That was done (or at least attempted) later by other people.

The man of words only sets the stage for a later mass movement. They prepare the soil and make people ready and eager for change.

The man of words often has very good intentions. They want to make the world better. But the results of their words are unpredictable. Eric Hoffer says Men of Words can sometimes create changes they never wanted.

For example, the French intellectuals who brought about the Enlightenment wanted to... well... *enlighten* people. They wanted people to be free of old fears, superstitions, and prejudices. They wanted people to follow their individual reason instead of old traditions based around the church and crown.

And they succeeded, in a way. People stopped worshipping the King. Many people became disillusioned with religion, especially organized religion. They lost their respect for the old authorities. However, Eric Hoffer says their ideas also had unexpected consequences.

When we debunk a fanatical faith or prejudice, we do not strike at the root of fanaticism. We merely prevent its leaking out at a certain point, with the likely result that it will leak out at some other point.

The Frenchmen of the enlightenment who debunked the church and the crown and preached reason and tolerance released a burst of revolutionary and nationalist fanaticism which has not abated yet.

So the man of words prepares the soil for a mass movement. He shakes people out of their old beliefs and unsettles the established institutions.

Action Step: Before you can mobilize people, they have to be prepared for change. This means shaking them out of their old beliefs and debunking established traditions. Usually a "Man of Words" does this years before the mass movement comes into existence.

6. ...Every mass movement comes into being through Fanatics...

The fanatic peddles HOPE. He comes at the right time and makes people imagine a glorious perfect future. He convinces them a perfect world is just around the corner, which inspires millions of people to action.

When [Christianity](#) was rising through Europe, it preached the end of the world and salvation were just around the corner. Eric Hoffer says that a distant goal does not excite people, but a heaven on earth coming soon will convert many people.

If people really believe that a wonderful future without problems is just ahead of us, they will easily sacrifice all they have in the present to get there. That's why the fanatic never talks about the present but a vision of the future.

The fanatic often promises things which are impractical or impossible, but that's not a problem to his followers. Remember that a True Believer feels frustrated. They are not looking for a practical and realistic plan. They're looking for a holy cause they can lose their self inside of. Therefore, the more miraculous and unrealistic the movement sounds, the more purpose they feel from joining it.

The man of words cared about the truth. The fanatic doesn't because he is already absolutely convinced that he has the truth. He has an unwavering belief the world conforms to his simple formula and people are attracted to that confidence.

The Fanatic also convinces people they have access to some irresistible powers.

For men to plunge headlong into an undertaking of vast change, they must be intensely discontented yet not destitute, and they must have the feeling that by the possession of some potent doctrine, infallible leader or some new technique they have access to a source of irresistible power.

For example, the followers of the Nazi Party believed they had some irresistible powers.

1. First, the genetic superiority of the Aryan race.
2. Second, the new techniques of [blitzkrieg](#), propaganda, etc.
3. Third, an electrifying leader.

It was these beliefs that convinced tens of millions of German people they could accomplish the impossible goal of world domination.

Action Step: To launch and expand a movement, fill people with hope. They need a vision of a soon-to-be glorious future without problems. This is the only way for people to desire and endure great change.

7. ...And every mass movement is stabilized by Men of Action.

After a mass movement has exploded and taken over, then it's time for the third stage which is the Man of Action.

The Man of Action brings structure and order to the mass movement. This means the once explosive and dynamic movement is sealed into institutions.

Christianity became the Church. The American Revolution became the government. And so on...

Mass movements start out being flexible and organic. They are open to new ideas and change. For example, early Christianity borrowed many ideas from Pagan religions like Easter and the Christmas tree. But as the movement becomes mature, it becomes conservative and hardens into a solid structure.

This is a job for the Man of Action, who creates rules, rituals and a hierarchy.

These structures exist until another mass movement comes along to destroy them. As they say, history doesn't repeat, but it does rhyme.

Action Step: After a movement has grown, structure must be added to make it stable. This means formal rules, traditions and authority roles.

In short, those are the three stages that every mass movement follows. The Men of Words prepare the soil by making people question existing power structures. Next, Fanatics mobilize people en masse by igniting an extraordinary HOPE in their hearts. A vision of a beautiful future that is soon-to-come. This vision greatly appeals to all the people who feel individually powerless. Finally, if the movement is successful then the man of action comes along. He transforms the throbbing and living movement into a fixed structure and new established order.

Conclusion

This is an unconventional book to study. We've learned how movements start and grow. We've learned some deep truths about how people work.

And like we said in the beginning... if you understand people then you will be more successful in life. Life and business is all about influencing people, whether you want to build a team for your business or start a great Youtube channel.

Many of these ideas we talked about are subtle. So I recommend you read or listen to this summary again in a couple of days to help these ideas really sink in. And always think about how you can apply this knowledge practically to your own life and

business.

- How can people feel they are joining a movement when they buy from you?
- Do you and your audience or customers share a common enemy?
- Who are the most frustrated people in your marketplace?

If you enjoyed this note, then you'll also like [Pre-Suasion by Robert Cialdini](#), written by a professor who is THE world expert on the psychology of influence.