THE INTELLECTUAL REVOLT
AGAINST LIBERAL DEMOCRACY
1870–1945

International Conference
in Memory of Jacob L. Talmon

Edited by
Zeev Sternhell

JERUSALEM 1996
THE ISRAEL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
to the power of irrational forces. Their fight was directed against the belief in progress with its Marxist, socialist and liberal manifestations. They interpreted these ideologies and western European norms as expressions of the decadence of Europe, which, through its system of parliamentary democracy and its hedonism, had destroyed vital and creative life. Fettered by its past or, alternatively, by the illusions of progress, and irrevocably poisoned by the falsehood of its bourgeois tradition, Europe was dying and could be saved only by a new political myth. Modern technology, which they admired, provided the means of making order out of chaos and gave them a new romantic myth, serving the politics of violence.

The importance of this intellectual current lies in its fabrication of a modern political mythology which inspired intellectuals, politicians and leaders of mass movements. It created a new terminology or political dictionary of modernism, based on such key concepts as ‘new man,’ ‘political myth,’ ‘dynamism,’ and ‘will to power.’ This new style signified a transition from the centrality of ideology to the centrality of myth. It became the heart of a dynamic political culture which created the ‘generation of 1914’ and influenced the various totalitarian ideologies that arose in its wake.

Michela Nacci

The Present as Nightmare:
Cultural Pessimism among European Intellectuals in the Period between the Two World Wars

The years between the two world wars were a difficult time for democracy in Europe. not only because of the rise of authoritarian regimes, but also because of the general lack of credibility afflicting the theory and practice of democracy in that period. This is only indirectly demonstrable with regard to the masses; for example, it is debatable whether the ‘consensus’ undoubtedly enjoyed by Italian Fascism derived from the people’s active consent to an authoritarian system, or merely from their passive acceptance of a lesser evil, or from the actual coercion of their attitudes and behavior. But intellectuals speak, write, determine opinion, influence the attitudes of others, and above all leave deep impressions of their thoughts and reflections. What so arrests us whenever we examine this issue, apart from the heritage of ideas left by the most prominent European intellectuals of the time, is how low an opinion they had of democracy and liberalism.

Of course, it is impossible to assign a single character to that era: alongside the pro-Fascists were the leftist intellectuals, and some of the period’s great writings are by authors sincerely committed to liberal democratic values. But if the picture requires a more subtle shading and the various positions a greater differentiation, the fact remains that liberal democratic governments were generally held in low esteem. On rereading essays written at the time and reflecting upon it, we are frequently struck by disaffection for democracy, violent invective against liberalism, criticisms of the philistine spirit that had supposedly infested every area of traditional politics, and expressions of sympathy for the Fascist and Nazi regimes. Authoritarian, conservative and reactionary tendencies prevailed, even among eminent intellectuals.

I shall examine only a part of this complex panorama, excluding the openly Fascist, rightist intellectuals. I shall treat, instead, the ‘free spirits’ who operated in Europe, the intellectuals *au dessus de la mêlée* and
their difficult relationship with democracy, as reflected in their analyses of their situation, their expressed fears or hopes, and their attempts to define their epoch. Particularly interesting in this regard are the more pessimistic observations, the bleakest thoughts, the most anxious diagnoses. While we cannot claim that optimism had disappeared altogether from the minds of these intellectuals, we note how contrary attitudes — fear, discontent, resignation in the face of evil — were more widespread and resounding.

My aim is to trace a link between two widespread attitudes: the cultural pessimism that saw the present as a nightmare, and disaffection with democracy. My guiding hypothesis is that the intellectuals who displayed these attitudes derived their notions and authoritarian tendencies from the image of their epoch as decadent and terminal in the history of civilization. This image, abstract and equivocal, crops up repeatedly at moments of crisis in contemporary history. An important aspect of it had to do with the social status of the intellectual in the modern world. The frightening transformations in the role played by cultured individuals often influenced their diagnoses of a world headed for imminent disaster, their condemnations and their proposals for solution.

It is precisely the role crisis experienced by those intellectuals who were not integrated into the authoritarian regimes that heightens their significance: they more markedly show their uneasiness about their position in a world undergoing profound change. Also, by examining their critique of their time and their search for remedies to the decline of civilization, we can see how much these uncommitted intellectuals actually had in common with the true Fascist intellectuals who supported the regimes, and arrive at an understanding of how so many of them came to embrace arguments supporting disaffection with liberal, democratic governments.

This paper addresses four issues: (1) the perception shared by intellectuals between the two wars of an epochal crisis; (2) their critiques of the idea of progress and their proposals for alternative explanations of history; (3) their critiques of mass civilization; and (4) their authoritarian inclinations.

The Present as Nightmare

'What beginning can there be in the end?' wondered Hermann Broch at the close of a 1916 essay.1 The end to which he referred was none other

than that of Western civilization. In that essay, Broch dealt with the death of style, and argued in a rather Spenglerian manner that any art declines and perishes when it passes from a 'primitive' to a 'rational' style. For him, as for others, the sign of an exhausted culture was the disappearance of spontaneity and the appearance of knowledge, of rational reflection. Broch saw this as a recurring historical phenomenon, but added:

This time ... it will all come about in a more radical manner. Not only a style is about to end, but an entire civilization. ... The white man's civilization had its particular geographical mission which has now drawn to a close. For two thousand years this culture has become constantly more rational without becoming more profound, in order to fulfill its geographical mission which now has been accomplished. ... Nothing else is left. The traffic, gone wild, will circle around an already overly explored earth, like an aimless energy, constantly more hysterical; the skyscrapers rise pointlessly toward the heavens, the locomotive runs off its tracks into the night, toward nothing.2

Unease with the age, malaise, a sense of suffocation, of a dead end, of estrangement from world events and trends — all these were typical not only of particularly misanthropic authors or discouraging moments, but of a wide assortment of intellectuals throughout the period. What is more, disgust for the epoch in which one was condemned to live, or, in another version, the fears generated by that epoch, contributed to a broad diagnosis of the age as a time of crisis, decline or finality — the decline of Western civilization. This diagnosis took on various names and varying features from one author to another, but it remained distinctly recognizable: for Paul Valéry it was 'the crisis of the spirit,' for Oswald Spengler 'the decline of the West,' for René Guénon 'the crisis of the modern world,' for Sigmund Freud 'civilization's discontents,' for Hermann Broch 'the breakdown of values,' for Stefan Zweig 'the end of the golden age of security.'

The very name of Spengler evokes the phenomenon to which we are referring. From the very moment it appeared, his Der Untergang des Abendlands was much more than just a successful book. The term 'Spenglerism' has since become synonymous with cultural pessimism,

1 H. Broch, Notizen zu einer systematischen Aesthetik, in Gesammelte Werke, VI, Zürich

2 Ibid., pp. 31, 32.
apocalyptic thought and catastrophism, as well as with a kind of historical synthesizing that has little regard for historiographic rigor. In this work, Spengler set forth his criticism of linear evolution, his cyclical explanation of the historical process, and his conceptualization of civilizations as organisms that are born, grow to maturity and die. In Spengler’s great historical construction, founded on the idea of declines and rebirths, the present epoch was assessed as one of history’s numerous examples of the breakdown and extinction of a civilization. Not only was such a process conceivable in the abstract; it was happening, now, in the West. The eclipse of the individual by the state, the dominance of technology, politics, the big city, money, the middle class, the analytical spirit and rationalism—all these were signs of decline.

Notwithstanding Spengler’s prominence in this regard, it is interesting to note that the discovery of civilization’s finitude was made simultaneously by more than one author. The same intuitions and diagnoses that informed Spengler’s conceptualization influenced many other intellectuals, and the specific signs of the decline of the West became the central themes elaborated by contemporary observers of the period.

Paul Valéry wrote in 1919: ‘We, civilization, now know we are mortal.’ For him, as for many others, the First World War had the effect of making timely the legends of the fall of ancient civilizations. The record of ruined cultures was transformed from curious tale to explicative model in the history of civilization. The circumstances of the fall of Babylonia were the same as what one could read about in the newspapers.

But those who formulated these catastrophic reflections on the contemporary age did not limit themselves to rendering the distant past timely for the immediate present, to inevitably anachronistic effect. They took pains to analyze the internal texture of civilizations, discovering them to be elusive phenomena indeed. Valéry wrote: ‘We maintain that a civilization has the same fragility as a life.’ Not only did the civilization of the European West seem threatened, but the very emergence and stabilization of civilization in general seemed purely fortuitous. As Julien Benda wrote in his well-known *La Trahison des clercs*, in a tenor analogous to Valéry’s: ‘Civilization as I understand it here—the moral primacy conferred on the cult of spiritual treasures and the sense of the universal—seems to me, in the development of man, merely a happy accident.’ As he saw it, history was characterized far more by lengthy spans of obscurantism (which for Benda was synonymous with irrationalism) than by enlightened epochs like the Hellenic age. The past showed that civilization was the exception rather than the rule, not a reality inevitably linked to the human species, but a difficult, painstaking acquisition always on the verge of being lost. Moreover, in contrast to Spengler and his fellow believers in historical cyclicity, Benda was convinced that a civilization, once lost, could not be regained. Rebirths of civilization were chance events, and rare at that. If the exponents of the cyclicity theory could at least believe that deaths were followed by rebirths, the advocates of casualty had no conceptual foothold, no certainty about what might follow the end.

It bears noting in this connection that even Freud’s two famous essays, *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, share not only the same fears and bleak diagnoses of the contemporary situation, but also the conviction that civilization (a term Freud used in a very different sense than Benda’s) is acquired so arduously by humankind that it must be protected from humanity’s own tendencies to boredom and weariness. ‘It is necessary, in my opinion,’ he wrote, ‘to appreciate the fact that all men harbor tendencies that are destructive and therefore antisocial and hostile to civilization, and that in a great number of individuals these tendencies are strong enough to influence human society.’

Spengler’s own influence was widespread and extended even to his detractors. Albert Einstein wrote to Max Born in 1920: ‘Spengler hasn’t spared even me. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, it’s easy to let him get the best of you, only to laugh about it the next day.’ Spengler’s name, invariably accompanied by a touch of suspicion and condescension, was a hallmark of the age of cultural pessimism, a distinctive sign marking one’s spiritual paternity; one might be a bit ashamed of it, but it was undeniably a formative influence.

Spengler was accused of using analogy too freely, of forcing historical events to fit his theory, of predicting developments that failed to
come about and of being, at bottom, an optimist for declaring that civilizations are reborn by iron necessity. Nevertheless, he was given credit for having reawakened European minds from the optimistic torpor into which they had fallen. If he had predicted wrongly, his merit lay in the very attempt to predict, in his demonstration that the future of Western civilization was a problem, and an agonizing one. On this point, between the two wars, many were agreed.

The perception of a crisis involving an entire epoch, the theme of \textit{finis Europae}, the prediction of an apocalypse which would put an end to Western civilization, the sense of the decline of a world, of man’s benign inventions being transformed into his ruin, of ends perverted by their means, of a divergence of material from spiritual progress — in all these, Spengler resembled the intellectuals of the age, perhaps more closely than some may have wished. What is certain is that analogous forms of culture despair were strikingly characteristic of the intellectual life of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. We shall cite only a few of the numerous examples.

Albert Schweitzer wrote in 1923: “Today we are living under the signs of the collapse of civilization. This is not a consequence of the war; on the contrary, the war was just a symptom of it.” Writing when he was already in Africa (one of the many to flee civilization in those years), Schweitzer accused philosophy of not having reflected sufficiently on the vital problems of mankind, of having abdicated, with positivism, its basic function. Numerous perils threatened modern humanity in a world preoccupied with history and economics: dehumanization, the overemphasis of material progress, the rise of a mass mentality, big-city life.

A similar view was endorsed by Nicolai Berdyaev: “Today we begin to witness the barbarization of the European world. ... Twilight is falling on Europe. European societies are entering into a period of old age and transitoriness.” Berdyaev repeatedly compares his time with that of the fall of the Roman Empire, and here, too, the signs of the end have

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The Present as Nightmare

a familiar ring: materialism, empty intellectualism, the resurgence of pagan cults, the deification of the state.

Johan Huizinga observed:

We are living in an obsessed world. And we know it. No one would be astonished if, one fine day, this dementedness of ours erupted into a crisis of utter madness which, once having spent itself, would leave Europe obtuse and disoriented; the moors would continue to hum and the flags to wave, but the spirit would be dead.\textsuperscript{12}

And again:

The prospect of a civilization which continues to carry on has long inspired the anxious question: is not the cultural development we are witnessing rather a process of barbarization?\textsuperscript{13}

Huizinga was appalled by the urban spirit he saw coming into being in cities like New York, which seemed the ideal terrain for the mass reactions he found so terrifying. The shift from an agricultural, hierarchical, cohesive society to an industrial, atomistic, egalitarian one was in his eyes the most disastrous paradox of modern times. Birth control by scientific means and the general utilization of science for destructive purposes seemed to him a perfect example of the heterogenesis of ends. Democracy was meritorious only to the extent that it was tempered with elitism: left to itself, it favored the emergence of modern mass dictatorships, or of that domination of the massified mentality which frustrated the intentions of the most perfect governments.

Of course, the barbarization Huizinga saw emerging before his eyes was very different from the thundering end of civilization described by Spengler. Where Spengler, from his German perspective, had predicted ever greater mechanization, a predominance of utility and power, the Dutch historian was careful to emphasize that ‘the sensation of nearing an end’ derived from the abandonment of reason, the puerilism prevalent among men and nations, in short, the ‘civilization’ depicted by Spengler ‘plus a good dose of dementedness, charlatanism and cruelty, mixed with a sentimentalism that [Spengler] did not foresee.’\textsuperscript{14

\textsuperscript{12} J. Huizinga, \textit{In de schaduw van morgen, een diagnose van het geestelijk lijden van onze tijd}, 1935; Italian translation, Turin 1962, p. 3; English translation, London-Toronto 1936.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., Italian translation, p. 138.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp. 142-143.
Nevertheless, an attentive reading of Huizinga will discern a broad agreement on the specific signs of decline that Spengler had identified.

One of the forms of decline described in the Spenglerian historical morphology was the recurrent passage from Kultur to Zivilisation. For Spengler, Zivilisation was the most external and artificial stage of the human species, the end product of the process of becoming, death following life, senility following old age, mechanism following organism. Such a shift took place in the fourth century, and again in the nineteenth. This stage of civilization was characterized by the growth of big cities, the disunity of peoples and the rise of the rootless individual, the disappearance of tradition and religion, a decline in the birth rate, the triumph of intellect, practicality and materialism, the affirmation of science and utilitarianism, the oblivion of the unconscious, and, lastly, democracy.15

In addition to the tendency to rationalism (which Spengler saw as an evil to be condemned and Huizinga as a good thing which unfortunately was being lost), many more features of Spenglerian Zivilisation were cited by other authors as signs of the time of decline in which they were living.

In 1914, Thomas Mann wrote:

Culture signifies unity, style, form, decorum, taste; it is a certain spiritual organization of the world, even when that world is thoroughly adventurous, sanguine, wild, bloody, frightening. Culture can combine oracle, magic, pedantry, cannibalism, orgiastic cults, inquisition, auto-da-fé, St. Vitus’ dance, witch trials, a rage of poisonings and the most varied cruelties. Civilization is instead reason, enlightenment, calm, restraint, composure, scepticism, clarification ... spirit. Yes, spirit is civil, it is bourgeois; it is the sworn enemy of the instincts, of the passions, it is anti-democratical, anti-heroic, and it is only an apparent contradiction in terms when we affirm that it is also anti-genius.16

This distinction between, on the one hand, culture, which is by nature profound and pernicious cruelty, incarnating itself in music, religion and philosophy, and, on the other hand, the bourgeois mediocrity of pacifist, humanitarian, democratic, enlightened civilization, informs other essays by Mann from this period, above all his Beruchtungen eines Unpolitischen. It also constitutes the philosophical framework of The Magic Mountain, in the clash between Naphtha, representing culture, and Settembrini, the mouthpiece of civilization.

The Illusion of Progress

Mann’s Naphtha is characterized, among other things, by his hatred of democracy and the bourgeois spirit, which he defines as ‘the revolutionary of conservatism.’ One of Settembrini’s principal beliefs, by contrast, is in progress. This association of Zivilisation — that is, the world’s decline — with historical optimism, with faith in the ever-greater civilization of humanity, was held in common by the exponents of the culture of crisis between the two wars. All of them contributed arguments against this linear, progressive vision of history.

The Enlightenment saw the convergence of progress in all fields (especially the arts and sciences) as eventuating in the civil and moral improvement of humankind and, through the civilizing of savage peoples, envisioned the participation of the entire world in that march forward. According to the various nineteenth-century versions of the idea, and above all that of positivism, which left the longest-lasting impression on posterity, progress depended on the development of industry and the expanding capabilities of science and technology. Industry was a source of wealth and stable social organization, while science and technology were naturally good means of dominating nature and defeating backwardness and disease. Of course, not everyone in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was convinced of humanity’s ‘magnificent and progressive’ future; critical voices were not lacking even then. But, in the afterglow of the unprecedented destructiveness of the First World War, and in the face of the grim potential evinced by its weaponry, surviving humanity now formed an image of the preceding period in which the idea of progress itself bore an overriding stigma of naïveté and facile optimism.

Those who had seen the horrors and devastation wrought by technology now associated material progress and industrial development with rampant folly and social disintegration. Progress was no longer seen as continuous, infinite and all-embracing; it was, rather, a process limited in space and time and linked to specific fields of production or research. Ultimately, it was dissociated altogether from overarching world developments: from being perceived as the

15 In this connection, Spengler notes that the same concept of democracy ‘goes hand in hand with an exclusively machine-based, urban existence.’ Cf. the Italian translation of Der Untergang des Abendlandes, Milan 1970, p. 550.
16 T. Mann, Gedanken im Kriege, 1914; Italian translation in Scritti storici e politici, Milan 1957, p. 35.
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driving force of industrialism and the philosophy behind it, progress was reduced to a matter of individual perfectionism and ethical ideals. Often nothing remained of the original idea of progress except the aspiration to inner perfection, or the conviction that it was necessary to save oneself from a ‘progress-ridden’ world. Cultural pessimism did see the present as being characterized by progress — but it was an aberrant, negative progress.

Spengler wrote in 1918:

A thoroughly absurd method of historical interpretation is the kind adopted by one who, by giving free reign to his own political, religious and social prejudices, is to the three phases, which he dares not alter one whit, provides just the slant that leads them up to where he stands, imposing case by case, as the absolute measure of millennia of history, the sovereignty of reason, humanitarianism, the welfare of the greatest number, economic evolution, enlightenment, the freedom of peoples, the subjection of nature, world peace and so forth, and undertaking to demonstrate that those millennia simply did not comprehend or know how to reach what they ought to, while in reality they just wanted different things from what we want. The point was that humanity, taken as a whole, was not progressing toward some ultimate, ideal finality. Rather, humanity was divided into multiple civilizations; each experienced a specific kind of progress, whose fruits were not everlasting but came to naught with the death of the historical organism in which they had developed. History therefore always recommenced from the beginning, even if this eternal recommencement had an element of superhistorical permanence. The phases of the birth and death of every civilization followed a necessary order which the historian could only record. Progress was characterized not only by the fragility of its acquisitions but also by the fatalism of a cyclical movement that was ineluctable, recurrent and always the same.

Of the elements of Spengler’s concept that so struck his contemporaries, his explicit or implicit criticism of the idea of progress must have been especially important. Rejecting the notion of a unique, eternal, cumulative civilization, he pointed to the existence of multiple civilizations with ephemeral accomplishments; to the mortality of refined and powerful cultures; and to a naturalistic concept of civilization. With the West located squarely in a phase of decline, he prophesied a Europe crushed beneath the weight of non-European peoples with higher birth rates, making disciplined use of a technology the West itself had bestowed on them. All of these were suggestive themes, emphasizing highly disquieting signs that favoured cultural pessimism.

The unity thus denied the idea of progress made a strange reappearance in the ‘mystical’ concept of history espoused by Broch as part of his critique of linear evolutionism. Broch believed that each historical epoch is an organic unit with its own soul, a unique, transient style that defines and expresses it. Only on the basis of a strongly unitary concept, defining history as a whole, is it possible to determine the end of an epoch. But though Broch’s new conceptualization of historical totality enjoyed a certain moment of prestige, it hardly troubled Spengler’s sleep, or that of his fellow critics of progress.

Huizinga wrote:

Spengler’s Decline of the West functioned throughout the world as an alarm signal. This does not mean that every reader of that famous book was converted to his views. But it familiarized them with his thought of the possibility of a decline of our present-day civilization, while before they were still swaddled in an unquestioned faith in progress. ... It would be very instructive to be able to see expressed in a graph the rapidity with which the word ‘progress’ has vanished from use throughout the world. Huizinga wedded the belief that all civilizations are condemned to break down to a contempt for ‘the terminal century’s happy illusion,’ according to which the division of labor, increased literacy, the diffusion of information, medical breakthroughs and increased scientific knowledge would make possible a perfect social harmony.

Another great historical synthesis launched in those years, initially less popular but of more lasting influence in the long run, is that laid out by Arnold Toynbee in A Study of History. The problem of the fall of civilizations is clearer than the problem of their development. Toynbee asserted. Based on a challenge-response mechanism, the blueprint for the development of civilizations offered by the English

17 Spengler was referring here to the Antiquity-Middle Ages-Modern Age scheme.
18 Spengler, Der Untergang (above, note 15), p. 60.
19 Huizinga, In de schaduw (above, note 12), Italian translation, p. 6.
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historian was actually more complex than Spengler’s. In his vision, civilizations as they evolved and died formed the spokes of a kind of imperceptibly turning wheel. The nature of the fall of civilizations could be described in three successive phases: first, the creative energy of the minority wanes; then, the majority stops imitating the creative minorities (mimesis); and finally the society loses its social unity. The unitary notion of history, according to which the flow of the various civilizations is one, could be traced, in his view, to three illusions: the egocentric illusion, which sees all histories culminating in the history of the present world in which one lives; the illusion of an immutable Orient; and the illusion of progress. As for the last, notwithstanding the subtler nuances of his thesis, Toynbee wrote:

The illusion of progress as something which proceeds in a straight line is an example of that tendency to over-simplification which the human mind displays in all its activities. In their ‘periodizations’ our historians dispose their periods in a single series end to end, like the sections of a bamboo stem between joint and joint or the sections of the patent extensible handle on the end of which an up-to-date modern chimney-sweep pokes his brush up the flue.21

Some of the exponents of cultural pessimism believed that progress was simply more uncertain and laborious than the theoreticians of progress allowed. They frequently distinguished between material progress and spiritual progress, maintaining that the two could not happen simultaneously: on the contrary, the first stifled the second. Elsewhere, however, the rejection of progress was given a more overarching explanation, as in the case of René Guénon’s theory of the progressive breakdown of civilization following upon a ‘solar beginning.’ Drawing upon Hindu doctrine, Guénon divided each of the cycles of man’s life on earth into four ages, which were four progressive darknings of the primitive spirit. The world was now in the fourth age, that of extreme darkness, and would most likely soon come to an end, unless a sudden upset should enable civilization to make a comeback upon a more elevated plane. In the dark age, only the experimental sciences and their practical applications had any validity, but they themselves might be the cause of civilization’s final collapse. According to Guénon, the discoveries of the modern age and its greatest boast, science, were the fruits of pre-existing beliefs, though these beliefs pertained not to progress but rather to

an ongoing process of degeneration. They were fragments which had been detached from the wholeness of knowledge that had contained them, demonstrating once again the march of time for the worse, the progressive materialization of all things.

As Georges Friedmann wrote in 1936, in a rather dated but still important essay, the idea of progress in its golden age was viewed as one with science and democracy. All three were lasting conquests that would bring peace, improvement, well-being and justice to humanity. Friedmann noted how these ideals, typical of the socialist parties and the enlightened middle class of the late nineteenth century, had all fallen together into discredit, surviving only in the Communist Parties in the West and in Socialist Russia. Friedmann was a faithful fellow-traveller,22 but his observation was accurate enough: in the new climate of cultural pessimism, attacks upon democracy were in keeping with the criticisms lodged against science and technology, and found a niche more easily where the idea of progress had lost its hold.

The Barbarity of Mass Civilization

If we try to name the objects of the period’s intellectual apprehension or derision, we can find many: modernity, material progress, the end of European hegemony, the greater vitality of coloured peoples, the growing importance of the United States, the application of optimism to history, and so forth. While each of these elements of fear of the future has its own validity in the intellectual life of the period, there is a single term which unites them all, and also serves to define what was so repellant, in the consciousness of many intellectuals, about the present.

‘Mass civilization’ was a phenomenon already described by the most prominent historians and sociologists of the time, under the rubric of ‘mass society’: a society in which the masses participate — and claim the right to do so — ever more in activities once reserved for elites, from politics to production, from the military to sport. But the tide of cultural pessimism assigned wider and weightier ramifications and more complex roots to this perceived democratization of life. ‘Mass civilization’ came to signify the barbarization of customs, the homogenization of behavior, political demagoguery and the effort to generate consensus by means of propaganda, the standardization of products, men and ideas, the death of art and the reign of quantity.

21 Ibid., p. 53.

The source of these catastrophic developments was industrial society itself, which paved the way for a terrible, overwhelming conformity in human society. Industrialism represented a de facto incentive towards democracy, understood not as a political system but in the sense used by Tocqueville in describing America: 'democracy as a way of life.'

T.S. Eliot stated in 1939:

The more highly industrialized the country, the more easily a materialist philosophy will flourish in it, and the more deadly that philosophy will be. Britain has been highly industrialized longer than any other country. And the tendency of unlimited industrialism is to create bodies of men and women — of all classes — detached from tradition, alienated from religion and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words, a mob. And a mob will be no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed and well disciplined.

The whole school of cultural pessimism concurred on this point. This emphatic anti-industrialism also appeared as the dominant motif where the apprehension of a crisis of Western civilization was integrated with authoritarian tendencies, manifested so persistently by so many.

A central element in Albert Schweitzer's diagnosis of the decline of Western civilization refers to the highly touted material conquests of the contemporary world: 'If on the one hand,' he writes, 'they make men less dependent on nature, on the other they reduce the number of free and independent individuals.' The shift from handicrafts to industrial production had reduced freedom and the ability to think. Excessive fatigue, loss of unity and of the spiritual value of work, alienation from the soil and nature, life in oversized conglomerates, the hyper-organization of society: all these were elements which, according to Schweitzer, would engender a mass mentality; these were reasons for affirming that civilization should be saved from 'progress,' from the big city and the urban spirit. 'Modern man,' wrote Schweitzer, gets lost in the mass in a way that is unprecedented in history: this is perhaps his chief feature. Lack of concentration makes him receptive, almost to a pathological degree, to the opinions which society and its organs of expression put into circulation.

Among the condemnations of mass civilization and of the standardized man who was its product and champion, La Revolución de las masas by José Ortega y Gasset stands on a level with Spengler's Decline in its apocalyptic predictions for the West. This 1930 pamphlet long suffered the fate of being treated as a literary symbol — whether interpreted as an anticipation of Fascism or as a libertarian outcry against the gagging of free thought — rather than as a text to be read with care. It dealt with the most outstanding anthropological mutation of recent times: the transformation of the thinking individual, a creation of the modern world and of liberalism, into mass man. Ortega specifies that the hero of his text has no clear class characteristics, but, rather, belongs to the spiritual category of the petite bourgeoisie. His description of this human being who lives in a middling state of well-being, wishes to be like everybody else, thinks only in stereotypes, is well-informed and at the same time ignorant, and does everything his peer group does, was a perfect portrait — and as such, it greatly struck his contemporaries — of the mobs in mass societies, the anonymous inhabitants of the metropolis.

In another, lesser-known essay, Ortega wrote:

For the past two generations European life has been tending toward de-individualization. Everything is forcing man to lose his uniqueness and to become less solid. ... It is a fact that lately many Europeans are taking great pleasure in ceasing to be individuals and in blending into the collectivity. There is an epidemic delight in feeling oneself part of the mass, in not having an exclusive destiny. Man is getting socialized. ... The socialization of man is a frightening destiny.

Reflecting on the origin of the fearful potency of the collectivity that reduces men to sheep, Ortega concluded that its origins lay in liberal democracy, the scientific experience and industrialism. Other prophets

24 A. Schweitzer, Verfall und Wiederaufbau (above, note 9), Italian translation, p. 35.
25 Ibid., p. 41.
of crisis took a similar view: in warning of the possible collapse of Western civilization because of the reigning barbarity of standardized men, they, too, evoked on the one hand the creation of a civilization of machines, and on the other the failure of nineteenth-century liberalism, which had surrendered precipitously to a levelling democracy (so precipitously as to make one think it already contained the seeds of this massification). The beautiful democratic ideals of equality, literacy, universal suffrage, and ever wider participation in political life had been transformed into the 'rebellion of the masses,' an indiscriminate flattening of roles and nullification of values.

For the reactionaries among these intellectuals, the process that led from liberal democracies to mass regimes where the collectivity reigned could not be reversed in a way that allowed for continuity; the resulting regimes were already infested with total democratization. For those who, on the contrary, had seen elitist liberalism as the best attainable form of regime and believed in the possibility of democracy, this headlong fall of the European states into an identical mass society demonstrated their grave incapacity to channel the forces erupting from society's lowest strata, revealing an intrinsic flaw in the principles of those regimes.

A key notion in these pessimistic considerations was thus the idea that industrial society by its very nature was the first step toward a full-fledged mass civilization. This thesis comes through in the excerpt from Eliot quoted above, and it was, as we saw, a firm conviction of Ortega's. The thesis that every civilization based on machines destroyed values that were indispensable to a harmonious social life, that factory work was deleterious to producers and consumers alike, that consumer society represented a terrible threat to a people's ideals — in short, that at the roots of contemporary mass collectivism lay J.P. Taylor and Henry Ford — stands out as a common chord in the denunciations and invectives of those who predicted or feared the march of collectivism in Europe.

This viewpoint was the most radically pessimistic of them all, since industrialism was a widespread reality throughout the West. Only by way of the most violent expression of their desires could the critics of mass civilization hope to turn back the clock, to wipe out industrial progress and assembly-line production, the production and purchase of vast amounts of standardized consumer goods by people who more and more resembled one another.

Moreover, it was precisely this viewpoint that could spawn the idea that the most terrible, restrictive and liberty-destroying dictatorship was that which was growing gradually out of mass societies, with their abundance of riches and formal freedoms. Eliot wrote:

Or we might get a 'totalitarian democracy,' ... a state of affairs in which we shall have regimentation and conformity, without respect for the needs of the individual soul; the puritanism of a hygienic morality in the interest of efficiency; uniformity of opinion though propaganda, and art encouraged when it flatters the official doctrines of the time.27

The opinion expressed here by the great Anglo-American poet is identical to that of the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, who coveted that liberalism dug liberty's grave. Both, hardly by chance, were intellectuals who still lived and worked in the heartland of liberalism, though they had lost every hope in its vitality, its capacity to transform itself and its power to resist the entry of the masses onto the public scene. Eliot stated: 'Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanized, brutalized control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.28

The worst of it was that this control would not be imposed from without, would not be the insane initiative of some power-hungry tyrant. The forces that labored for despotism were the same as those that guided the development of mass society. They brought about the dissolution of the collective consciousness and, by the same token, the destruction of a people's traditions. Freedom was conceded to all opinions and therefore even to the most senseless; instruction was substituted for education; skill was encouraged over wisdom; and all forms of art and culture were debased, leading to what Eliot called 'the chaos of ideals and the confusion of thought.' Appeals to the masses, through advertising in peacetime and through propaganda in wartime and in politics, always utilized those instruments that spoke to the most vulgar and emotional parts of the human spirit.

It was from this same perspective that cinema and household gadgets could be lumped together as the consummate products of industrial society. Genius in the service of utility, the substitution of the machine for the human hand and the end of art — these were the far-reaching consequences for which the prophets of crisis held those inventions responsible. The denunciations that cinema inspired in authors like Hermann Hesse and contemporary observers like Georges Duhamel

28 Ibid., p. 22.
are comprehensible only within this context. Hesse saw in the movies 'the most horrendous and obtrusive products that can be found in the way of surrogates for art and false drama.' He was disgusted by their atmosphere, which he saw as physically and morally depraved, by 'that atrocious music,' 'those idiotic subtitles,' 'that horsey laughter' of the masses of spectators. 29 Duhamel spoke of collective hysteria and the decay of intellect, of 'intestinal laughter,' of pleasures savoured in the shadows; and he cried murder — the murder of art in a mass society, obviously. 30 The 'Steppenwolf' in whom Hesse projected his revulsion for the modern world exclaimed, in an extreme, all-embracing judgement of mass civilization:

Oh, it is difficult to find a trace of divinity in the midst of the life we lead, in such a satisfied, bourgeois time as this, so lacking in spirit, with the sight of this architecture, these shops, this politics, this humanity! ... I cannot stay for long in a theatre or cinema, I hardly manage to read a newspaper, and rarely read a modern book, I don’t understand what people find in crowded railway trains and hotels, in packed cafés where they play raucous, asphyxiating music, in bars and burlesque houses of smart luxurious cities, in world expositions, conferences for lovers of culture, mammoth sports arenas... 31

This description echoes the opening pages of La Rebelión de las masas and Duhamel’s description of the future world already here. As Duhamel expounded, ‘A society that has been exposed to industrialism for two centuries is heading for the worst kind of decadence.’ 32

The ubiquity of household gadgets made it apparent that the human species was no longer capable of modifying itself advantageously and was compensating for this inability by inventing artificial means of adaptation, thus condemning itself to an existence from which any effort at all, even a pleasurable one, would be banned. Since the next logical step in this negative utopia was the invention of the robot, human beings were in a fair way to being transformed into impotent dominators, at the service of their machines — a vision that effectively sums up the fears of the prophets of crisis.

It is on the basis of this same notion of industrial society as the true engine of collectivism that Europe, already developed into an integral

mass society, could be likened not only to Bolshevik Russia, with its heroized, tyrannical masses, but also to the America of consumerism, newspapers and electoral extravaganzas. Indeed, it was the latter rather than the former that seemed the truer incarnation of collectivism and anonymity. America was a perfect representation of Europe’s future cast, since, in Duhamel’s words, ‘no nation has yet yielded itself more deliberately than the United States to the excesses of industrial civilization.’ 33 The New World was accomplishing something even more frightening than communist political collectivism: to wit, a social collectivism from which it was well-nigh impossible to escape. To the extent that Europe was becoming a mass civilization, it was becoming Americanized.

Thus, one of the less direct but equally significant forms by which fears about the fate of society were expressed in those years was by way of violent attacks upon ‘Americanization.’ A nation whose modernity inclined toward the fully developed American form was no more than a human aggregate, no longer held together by a tradition, a common history, or a sense of solidarity or belonging. Over this atomized mass of nullified individuals loomed the shadow of a state bureaucracy that had lost any useful purpose, but was beggared by its own people to become powerful and oppressive.

For some, this process characterized the whole modern epoch. Among these was Berdyayev, who wrote in 1923:

Modern man isolates himself, and when he transforms himself into an isolated atom he is overwhelmed by a sense of inexpressible terror from which he seeks to escape by joining collectivities, with the purpose of overcoming and putting a stop to the loneliness and abandonment that threaten him with perdition and spiritual and material starvation. This atomization and its effects give birth to the process of conversion to collectivism, to the attempt by mankind to create a new principle through which to escape from its loneliness. 34

For others, the interrelated spread of social atomization and collectivism, the emergence, not necessarily by coercion, of thrusts toward regimentation was related to more recent changes and to a

30 C. Duhamel, Sèches de la vie future, Paris 1930, p. 152.
32 C. Duhamel, Sèches (above, note 30), p. 87.
33 Ibid., p. 18.
34 N. Berdyayev, Semy istorii (The sense of history, 1923), Italian translation, Milan 1971, p. 129.
narrower idea of modernity. The principal culprit, in all events, was industrialism, which annihilated culture and levelled mankind. For the rest, if we enquire into the cause of what Benda described as the cleric's transformation into an intellectual in the service of a group, the answer lies in the cancellation of all differences between the intellectual and the rest of society, a development that could only occur in a world that put production above every other requisite and demanded that the intellectual produce, enlist in the service of practical appetites, and give the world its due.

The philosopher Karl Jaspers, in his reflections on the contemporary age, affirmed that the technological world is one of mediocre men devoid of historical memory, of any real contact with things, and of any existential singularity. Jaspers, too, envisioned the society of the future as bleak and dehumanized:

If the individual counts only in terms of what makes him present, he becomes a universal and no longer a self. There are men predisposed to this form of life: they are those who no longer wish even to be themselves, and they occupy the most prominent place in society.35

This image, familiar from the negative utopias, pamphlets and contemporary impressions that we have discussed, refers not to the totalitarianism of a rigid ideology but to a mass society in which, with time, politics is destined to count for less and less. In this kind of society, Jaspers noted, mass man is born as a new anthropological category. His features are the same as those assigned to him by Ortega and the rest: he is unconscious, inhuman, destructive and intolerant of any sort of greatness, and he embraces superstition without faith. Like Benda, Jaspers noted that in order to be socially accepted, the intellectual had to exalt whatever pleased the mass and to accept using the language of advertising. Jaspers wrote:

Only he who feels comfortable amidst all that is base can avoid recoiling in horror before the repugnant character of the countenance manifested by mass man's appearance and actions, before his odious laughter, his ignoble boasting and complaining.

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Bernalos’s description of the destructiveness of the 'imbeciles' is at times remarkably similar to Ortega’s characterization. Referring to this dominant new human category, he writes:

They have invented neither iron nor fire nor gas but use expertly all that they are given through the only effort they are in reality incapable of, the effort to think by themselves. They will love killing more than thinking, this is the trouble! And you go right ahead and furnish them with mechanical devices!

The danger of barbarization was more acute under democracy — understood in this broad sense — because mob passions were stronger. Bernalos went on to express an opinion that he held in common with Eliot, Ortega, Huizinga and many more great twentieth-century intellectuals,

People living under democracies are nothing but a mob, a mob perpetually duped by an invisible orator, by opinions originating from every corner of the earth, those opinions that grasp its entrails, with more influence over its nerves the more they strive to speak the same language of its desires, hatreds and terrors.\(^{36}\)

Eliot, Ortega, Huizinga and Valéry complemented their critique of mass society with an admiration for cohesion and fullness of meaning, for the organicity of the Middle Ages. Eliot sought a remedy for the totalitarianism of mass society in the idea of a Christian community; Ortega admired the vitality of Fascist and Russian Communist-style regimes, which at least had myths and stirred the imagination; while Huizinga nostalgically recalled a world in which everyone was assigned a place and kept to it. Mounier, too, testified to the attraction that the forcefulness of Fascist-type regimes held for him. Broch, who saw the epoch as that in which culture had been most widely disseminated among the masses and was most despised by them, undertook to construct a new unity by restoring the Platonic idea. ‘It is a question,’ he declared, ‘of regaining religiosity in all its communal cohesion.’\(^{37}\) For Valéry, the true dictatorships were those of the ‘general system of existence’\(^{38}\) which never before had so weighed

upon and regulated humanity. ‘My conclusion,’ he observed, ‘is that political freedom is the surest means of making men slaves.'\(^{39}\) If man was enslaved by anything, it was not political dictatorships, but modernity.

When disaffection for one’s own time is so great, when liberalism appears as a sclerotic system and democracy as an invitation to barbarity, when modernity is experienced as a sickness and progress is tantamount to degeneration, what is likely to mount is the desire to escape from it all, from this life of servitude, this mediocre culture and waning vitality. One means of doing so was to view the developments of the period from an aloof distance. Other escapes took a backward direction, in the quest for strong, unitary, contemplative epochs. For many, including Berdyaiev, Broch, Huizinga and others, that meant the Middle Ages. Others, like Guénon and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, whose pessimism was still more radical and extreme, looked to the dawn of human history, the mythic, heroic, superhuman solar ages inhabited by warriors and godlike men. Lastly, there were those, like D.H. Lawrence and Herman Hesse, who would simply have wiped the slate clean of this world of machines and madness.

All of these thinkers reviled the present as evil, degenerate, mediocre or nightmarish. All of them, furthermore, saw as a central issue the destiny of the intellectual in a ‘mass,’ ‘democratic,’ ‘modern’ society, depending on the designation preferred — the three terms being, for our authors, mutually interchangeable. They felt that the society of ‘imbeciles’ was transforming them into manufacturers: in the worst case, manufacturers of material goods, or, only slightly better, suppliers of merchandise to be consumed in the marketplace of culture. Overwhelmed by the ongoing transformations in which they saw their own role being continually degraded, they remained extremely sensitive to the notions of spiritual hierarchy, social guidance and the organicity of the social body. They reacted in different ways: some by championing the purity of the cleric, some by deprecating mass civilization, others by emphasizing their estrangement from politics and their lack of influence, and still others by dreaming about the leadership roles their caste no longer had.

In some ways, the world was just as they saw it: Europe was indeed dominated by dictatorships, even if they were political in character and not dictatorships of modernity; the masses, though they demanded

39 Idem, ‘Fluctuations sur la liberté’ (1938), in ibid., p. 90.
power, often passively followed their leaders' watchwords. For the most part, though, these intellectuals failed to leave the ivory tower of their mental constructs, and their criticisms of democracy remained mere idle reflections. Nevertheless, the climate they helped to create is responsible for the discredit into which liberal democracies fell in those years. The cultural pessimists paved the intellectual way for those who wished to flock toward strong, if unjust, regimes. Nostalgia for a leadership role the intellectuals felt they were losing contributed much to their pessimistic assessments of the present, and to their contempt for production, prosperity and the standardization wrought by mass civilization. From their perspective, facing what they saw as their destiny either as manufacturers or as technicians of the big machine, the uniform took on a special beauty, while the inequalities imposed by authoritarian regimes assumed a unique validity. Even those who fought on the 'right' side, or who did not fight at all, contributed to spreading the notion that anything was better than the moribund liberal democracies, that mankind could find itself again only by abandoning its formal freedoms, and that civilization could be saved only by the energy and the warrior spirit of radically antimodern men.

PART II:

GERMANY — ANTIMODERN MODERNISM