THE INTELLECTUAL REVOLT
AGAINST LIBERAL DEMOCRACY
1870–1945

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Modernity and Its Enemies:
From the Revolt against the Enlightenment
to the Undermining of Democracy

As Jurgen Habermas has shown, the idea of modernity reappears each
time an awareness of the beginning of a new period emerges in Europe.\(^1\)
In a recent lecture at the Collège de France, Octavio Paz insisted on
the relative aspect of the concept of modernity. The modern is by
nature transitory, and the contemporary a highly provisional quality:
there are as many modernities and antiquities as there are periods and
societies, and the modern age will soon become tomorrow’s antiquity.\(^2\)
And yet, we are all conscious of the fact that our particular modernity
possesses a specific quality of its own which is very different from that
experienced by people who also had a strong sense of their modernity,
but who lived in the time of Charlemagne, in the twelfth century or
even in the period of the Renaissance.

If our own modernity was originally understood as meaning a radical
break with the past, a refusal to see the past — in this case, classical
Antiquity — as a normative model, it is clear that the roots of this notion
go back to the last years of the seventeenth century. With the celebrated
‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’ (Quarrel of the Ancients and
Moderns) one finds a special hiatus, almost without precedent, which
consecrates the term ‘modernity’ as a concept of revolt, innovation and
criticism with regard to the glories of the past.

Initiated by Perrault, with his four-volume Parallèle des anciens et des
modernes en ce qui regarde les Arts et les Sciences (1688–1692), and by
Fontenelle, with his Digestion sur les anciens et les modernes (1688),
the revolt of the Moderns began a long struggle which lasted until the third
decade of the eighteenth century. The debate soon passed beyond the

also J. Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Cambridge, Mass., 1987,
pp. 1–22.

limits of purely literary questions to embrace linguistic, philosophical and political problems. The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns was in a sense the culmination of a tension intrinsic to the humanism of the Renaissance: the Ancients claimed to be the guardians of a classical and humanistic tradition, but of an authoritarian and aristocratic kind; while the Moderns, displaying a strongly critical spirit, represented a form of humanism with a democratic potential.

In the eighteenth century, these new tendencies reached their culmination. With the French Enlightenment, the scientific and philosophical revolution of the preceding century came to maturity, and it was then that the idea of an infinite progress of knowledge, of a continual progression towards a better and more moral society, came into being; it was then that the universalistic foundations of morality and law were developed and applied to politics. The rationalism, optimism and universalism of the Enlightenment, the quasi-absolute faith in science, found immediate concretization in the aspiration towards a rational transformation of political and social life.

The Enlightenment was the age of criticism, and criticism, conceived as a method of investigation, creation and action, is the distinctive feature of modernity: criticism of religion, philosophy, morality, law, history, economics and politics. The principal ideas of the modern age—progress, revolution, liberty, democracy—ensued from criticism.

It was the rational criticism of certitudes and traditional values—and in the first place, religion—which produced the theory of the rights of man, the principle of the primacy of the individual with regard to society, and the idea that the well-being and happiness of the individual are always the final objectives of any political action. It was the rational criticism of the existing order which allowed society to be conceived as an aggregate of individuals and the state as an instrument in the hands of the individual. It was thus criticism that produced our hedonistic and utilitarian vision of society and the state, without which neither liberalism, nor democracy, nor socialism was possible. And criticism, taking on traditional metaphysics, produced the categorical imperative, which remains the true symbol of the Enlightenment and its noblest expression.

The instrumental use of reason for the good of the individual thus appears to be one of the characteristic features of modernity. So, too, is the idea of human perfectibility: in the eighteenth century, the individual came to be regarded as the agent of history, responsible for his own fate. The emancipation of the human agent, in the sense that Kant gave this process, found its concrete expression in the French Revolution. The Revolution also translated into political terms the historical vision of the Enlightenment, a linear vision which conceived the future as the realization of the utopian projects of the present.

It was through the French Revolution, which was the major attempt at the concretization of the rationalistic utopia of the Enlightenment, that modernity was concretely identified with progress. 'Utopia,' said Octavio Paz, 'are the dreams of reason; active dreams which are turned into revolutions and reforms.'

Indeed, the idea that men are able, in a rational manner, to create a better future is in many ways the very essence of modernity. The fact that the concept of utopia has never been so discredited as in the year of the bicentenary of the French Revolution is without significance for the evaluation of the dominant ideological trends of our own age. The negation of the intrinsic value of the utopian idea is only another way of undermining the foundations of modernity. Conversely, if there is one conclusion that we can draw from the controversies about post-modernism and deconstruction which have troubled the last decade, it is precisely that the utopia of the Enlightenment always remains the most solid and perhaps the only ground on which a better, more just and freer society can be constructed.

To this day, no system of thought has been invented which, for the good of man and society, can improve on the rationalistic criticism, universalistic humanism and faith in progress of the eighteenth century. This is demonstrated forcefully in the famous debate between Cassirer and Heidegger on Kant, held in Davos in 1929, as the crisis of European civilization was coming to a head. A few years later, at a lecture to the Kulturbund in Vienna in May 1935, Husserl made one final attempt at sounding the alarm against the dismissal of rationalism: 'The crisis of existence in Europe,' he said, 'which is revealed by innumerable symptoms of mortal peril, is not some dark fate, some inscrutable destiny. The cause of this crisis was not the essence of rationalism itself, but only its alienation, the fact that it becomes immersed in naturalism and objectivism.'

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4 O. Paz, 'Poésie' (above, note 2), pp. 4-5.
were constantly dividing the European nations, Husserl affirmed their common cultural heritage; in the face of the naturalist deviantion, he maintained that there was ‘essentially no zoology of peoples’ and in the face of the irrationalism of Heidegger’s followers, he asserted his fundamentally different conception of the naive rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. 8 ‘I, too, am certain,’ he said, ‘that the crisis of Europe has its roots in the deviations of rationalism, but that is no reason to maintain that rationalism as such is bad in itself, or that it is of secondary importance in human existence as a whole.’ By then, however, it was too late to stop the onslaught of those forces which represented a triumph of anti-enlightenment values.

It is no accident that all the enemies of modernity since the end of the nineteenth century have singled out Kant and Rousseau for attack. From Nietzsche, who condemned ‘the ... stiff and decorous tartuffery of the old Kant,’ 9 to the French Personalists at the time of the 1940 defeat, it was always the eighteenth century which was held responsible for Europe’s decadence and decomposition. Sorel and Le Bon, Unamuno and the Spaniards of the generation of 1898, the English vorticists and the German Revolutionary Conservatives all reached the same conclusion.

Strong irrationalist tendencies were the common denominator of this vision of the world, as summarized by Miguel de Unamuno. Hegel made famous his aphorism that all that is rational is real and all that is real is rational. But there are many of us who, not convinced by Hegel, carry on believing that the real, the really real, is irrational, and that reason is built upon irrationalities. 10 Robert Musil, for his part, sought to demonstrate that rationalist thought, which had been rich two centuries before, had degenerated by the end of the nineteenth century into a ‘despicable and ridiculous’ positivism. He described the antirationalist reaction of the turn of the century as ‘a need for the irrational, for the fullness of facts, for reality.’ 11

In The Man without Qualities, Musil analyzed the evils of pre-1914 European culture in terms which in many respects strongly recall those used by Maurice Barrès, his predecessor by thirty years, in Les Démocrètes (The Uprooted). While it would be difficult to imagine two writers as different by origin, training and personal experience as Musil and Barrès, they had a common denominator: Nietzsche. Nietzsche was the dominant intellectual force of Musil’s formative years, 12 while Barres, imbued with Nietzsche’s rejection of modernity, characteristically described ‘the rationalist idea’ as ‘antagonistic to life and its spontaneous forms.’ 13 Rousseau’s great sin, as he saw it, was to have sterilized life by trying to rationalize it. 14

Barrès, in many respects the father of the French political novel, had the greatest influence of any French writer on the generation of the end of the century. He was not only well known in the Latin countries of Europe and South America; he also had considerable influence in Vienna, and his work left its mark on Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Hermann Bahr. 15 But the appeal to intuition, to instinct, to the deep forces of the soul and the unconscious as against the artificial domain of the rational was common in that period. This explains the nature of the struggle against modernity. ‘In all essential points,’ wrote Nietzsche, referring to Beyond Good and Evil, ‘this book is a criticism of modernity, including modern science, modern art, even modern politics.’ 16

Let us note in passing (we shall return to this later on) that Nietzsche’s thought was not, as has often been said, apolitical. For Nietzsche, the ‘Enlightenment’ (he put ‘Enlightenment’ in inverted commas, like all the other key words of the liberal lexicon: ‘liberty,’ ‘progress,’ ‘future,’ ‘scientific spirit,’ etc.) had ‘something revolting about it.’ 17 It gave rise to the French Revolution, ‘that gruesome farce which, considered closely, was quite superfluous,’ and which marked the beginning of ‘the last great slave rebellion.’ 18 For modernity, according to Nietzsche, derives from a single source: the slave morality, which

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8 Ibid., p. 4 (Preface by the translator).
9 Ibid., p. 20.
19 Ibid., pp. 49 and 61.
is 'essentially a morality of utility,' for which humanism, progress, altruism, egalitarianism, hedonism, utilitarianism and eudemonism are merely different expressions. Translated into political terms, that means democracy, liberalism and socialism. In more general terms, the 'slave morality' amounts to decadence.

In one way or another, these ideas were taken up by Sorel, Maurras, Spengler, T.E. Hulme, Ortega y Gasset, Carl Schmitt and many others. All of them were fascinated by the decadence which they felt to be synonymous with what Nietzsche called 'the century of the masses,' and which social psychology after Le Bon called 'the age of the crowds.' They watched with apprehension the rise of 'the herd animal, man,' who claimed to possess free will and to create values. The idea that only a cultivated elite is capable of rising above the herd and creating new values was the cornerstone of the social sciences at the turn of the century. Elitism was characteristic not only of what is generally called the Italian school of political sociology, but also of the work of Durkheim and Max Weber, not to mention that of Gumplovicz, which deeply influenced the thought of Mosca.

It was the historical opus of Hippolyte Taine, however, which served as the primary source of inspiration for the elitist theoreticians. For Taine, the French Revolution had the character of a real cultural disaster. It was to be explained as the revenge of the inferior and the weak against the great and powerful, as a plebeian reaction against the natural masters. The fall of the old France was possible only because the elites had given way before the vile populace. This analysis of the causes of the Revolution gave the young Sicilian Gaetano Mosca the idea of expanding Taine's explanation into a general law of the evolution of societies. It is not surprising that Nietzsche considered Taine 'the foremost historian now living.' There can be no doubt that Taine's dread of Jacobinism left a profound mark on Nietzsche's thought.

Nietzsche's contribution to the revolt against the philosophy of the Enlightenment was all the more significant and revealing in that this manifestation of antihumanism was also a manifestation of the most consistent cosmopolitanism. No major thinker at the end of the nineteenth century had a deeper sense of the cultural unity of Europe, and none was more vigorously opposed to xenophobia and antismatism. None despised nationalism more than he did, and no German of his time so abominated German nationalism and its prophets, beginning with Treitschke. If Nietzsche opposed nationalism, however, it was because he had a horror of the 'herd morality,' egalitarianism and democracy. He saw nationalism only as a particularly violent and hateful aspect of the democratic movement, just as socialism was another facet of the same evil. His drive to undermine the foundations of universalism, egalitarianism and democracy required adherence neither to nationalism nor to antismatism. Cobineau, too, was neither a nationalist nor an antismite.

However, the element that was missing in Nietzsche was to be found in Heidegger, whose irrationalistic tendencies were accompanied by a strong völkisch dimension. It is interesting to note how much Heidegger's tone in speaking of the Black Forest resembles that of Barrès evoking his native Lorraine. Heidegger opposed the Black Forest to Berlin in the same way that Barrès, the major nationalist writer of his time and one of the very first in Europe to define his thought, even before the end of the nineteenth century, as 'national socialism,' contrasted rural Lorraine with Paris. One's native soil was regarded as the only effective barrier against Kantian deracination, disintegration and the moral corruption of bourgeois society. For Heidegger, as for Barrès, common folk, because they were simple and close to nature, were a source of social sanity and moral rectitude, and thus the only element capable of re-creating the organic unity of a nation destroyed by modernization.

In moments of doubt, when he had to make a particularly difficult decision, Heidegger asked the advice of the earth.

Recently I got a second invitation to the University of Berlin. On such an occasion I leave the city and go back to my cabin. I hear what the mountains and woods and barnyards say. On the way I drop in on my old friend, a seventy-five-year-old farmer. He has read in the newspaper about the Berlin invitation. What will he say? He slowly presses the sure glance of his clear eyes against mine, holds his mouth tightly closed, lays his faithful and cautious hand on my shoulder — almost imperceptibly shakes his head. That means: absolutely No!

20 Ibid., pp. 207 and 153.
21 Ibid., p. 115.
22 Ibid., p. 193.
23 Ibid., §§ 251 and 241.
24 Ibid., pp. 115-118.
The same applies to the characters of Barrès’s novels. The young men of Lorraine, in order to overcome the influence of their Kantian teacher and cleanse themselves of those ‘vague, floating humanities they had been taught in high school,’ went back to nature by taking a walk along the banks of the Moselle, in accordance with the principle that ‘the enlightenment of the individual consciousness’ is attainable only through ‘a knowledge of one’s dead and one’s soil.’ The formula la terre et les morts (the soil and the dead) is the French equivalent of Blut und Boden: volkisch thought was not limited to Germany and was not a German monopoly. In this connection, a comparison with France is particularly instructive.

Despite the great difference between its history and that of Germany, France, too, after having produced the only successful liberal revolution on the European continent, harboured a deep-seated revolt against the eighteenth century and modernity. Illogical though it may seem at first sight, France also had identity problems. The crisis of liberalism was no less profound in the most advanced liberal society on the continent than it was in Germany, Italy or Austria.

By the turn of the century, revolt against modernity had become a profound social phenomenon. Langbehn’s Rembrandt als Erzieher, published in 1890, was an instant commercial success: more than forty printings were sold out in the first two years. A few years earlier, Paris had watched in amazement as Drumont’s La France Juive emerged as the greatest best-seller of the end of the century. The rise of antisemitism as an ideology and a social phenomenon was one of the essential features of the crisis of modernity and of liberalism. The organic nationalism of Barrès and Maurras and the antisemitism of Drumont, Guérin and Morès were in no way inferior to the antisemitism of Wagner, Marr, Treitschke, von Schönrer or Lueger. If Paris did not have an antisemitic mayor at exactly the same time that Karl Lueger took over Vienna’s City Hall, it was only because the French capital, since the Commune, no longer had an elected mayor. A few months after ‘der schöne Karl’ was appointed mayor of Vienna, the French Parliament awarded 158 votes to a bill that, had it passed, would have constituted a de facto revocation of the emancipation of the Jews.

The crisis of liberalism, of adaptation to the mass society and the politics of the masses, was a general European phenomenon. Social psychology, led by Le Bon and Sighele, taught that the masses were activated by myths, and politics was thus the art of manipulating men’s instincts, emotions and fears. Meanwhile, democratization meant not only the introduction of universal suffrage but also cultural integration, and it was precisely cultural integration which permitted a real national integration. It soon turned out that the spread of literacy, compulsory education and the reading of newspapers had produced a totally unexpected result: the acquisition of culture by the masses was to the advantage neither of liberalism nor of socialism, but chiefly benefitted nationalism. ‘We can wait. Knowledge liberates,’ said an Austrian liberal in 1861. A generation later, such optimism was no longer possible. It was obvious by then that democracy and culture had not turned the boors of yesterday into enlightened citizens with universal values. Nowhere was the disappointment greater than in France, and nowhere did it have greater significance for the whole of Europe.

Indeed, nothing better illustrates the enormous difficulties encountered by liberal democracy in responding to the social aspirations and emotional needs of the new urban masses than the similarity of the obstacles which appeared both in the first nation-state of the European continent and in the multinational empire of the Hapsburgs. This was the real significance of the Dreyfus Affair. In the very last years of the century, some of the liberals and socialists who had engaged in this extraordinary battle, at once a merciless political struggle and an unprecedented collective moral drama, perceived with dismay that the people could be made to believe or do anything. The sovereign people was merely a vile multitude with sordid instincts. It seemed that Gustave Le Bon had not been so wrong after all. ‘One can no longer deny it,’ wrote Clemenceau. ‘It is with the complicity of the people itself that the evil is amongst us. The people does not want to know [the truth]. It is the greatest evil on earth.’

Indeed, the image of democracy was in no way improved by the agitation of the end of the century. How could it have been otherwise, when the most zealous defenders of universal suffrage, the will of the people and courts of justice were the antisemitic groups? The loss of faith in the intrinsic virtues of democracy, the new-found conviction that the law of the majority was not necessarily that of liberty and justice, was a grave portent for the future of democracy.

In the general attack on the emancipatory function of the Enlightenment, liberalism and socialism were revealed to have common

27 Ibid., p. 238.
29 G. Clemenceau, Contre la justice, Paris 1900, p. v.
enemies. According to their cultural critics, liberalism and socialism both sinned by way of a similar humanism, a similar universalism, a similar utilitarianism. In a revealing passage from his essay, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), Carl Schmitt stressed the indissoluble connection between Marxism and liberalism, which derived from their common materialist character: 'If one has followed the bourgeois into economic terrain, then one must also follow him into democracy and parliamentarianism.'  

30 It may be said that with Marxism, the philosophy of the Enlightenment gained a new dimension: at his death, Marx was the last of the rationalists. Nietzsche captured this very well when he said that 'the boors and imbeciles of socialism' were as despotic and pernicious as Locke, Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

All these antimodernistic tendencies were brought together most perfectly in the thought of Thomas Ernst Hulme, a truly paradigmatic figure who was all the more fascinating because he was outside the Germano-Austrian and Franco-Italian cultural spheres. Killed in the War in September 1917 at the age of thirty-four, Hulme was an exceptional personality. Though his friend, the well-known sculptor Jacob Epstein, may have exaggerated in comparing him to Socrates and Plato, there is no doubt that this young philosopher was marked out, as Bergson said of him, 'to produce interesting and important works.'  

32 Hulme had translated Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics* and Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, and he was an extraordinary transmitter of ideas, who compelled recognition by the force of his personality. All those who have left memoirs describing London's intellectual life at the turn of the century have remarked on the impact of his presence, seeing in him the leading figure of the intellectual scene of his time.

At the centre of his thought was a violent attack on humanism, human perfectibility and the idea of progress. His harshest criticisms were aimed at that 'on which everything really depends': 'these abstract conceptions of the nature of man' and the idea that existence is, or should be, the source of all values.  

34 Hulme condemned the spirit and art of the Renaissance (Donatello, Michelangelo, Marlowe), an era in which a new psychology and a new anthropology had given rise to a harmful philosophy; which in turn passed on its conceptual framework to ethical and political systems that were no less injurious (Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza). While Hulme, to be sure, did not deny that this humanism might possess a certain attraction and that it had heroic origins, he claimed that it could only lead to 'a sentimental, utilitarian romanticism':

35 It was bound sooner or later to end in Rousseau. There is a parallel development in art. Just as humanism leads to Rousseau, so Michaelangelo leads to Greuze.

The contempt that Hulme felt for Rousseau was equalled only by his admiration for Pascal. Humanism, for him, represented what was false; the antihumanistic vision represented what was true. Fortunately, he thought, humanism seemed to be coming to an end.

To the humanistic conception of human nature, to faith in the perfectibility of the individual and in progress, Hulme opposed the religious conception, based on the idea of original sin and the fall of man. That is why he was so hostile to romanticism: underlying romanticism and the French Revolution was the Rousseauist conception of the individual. Rousseau, he said, taught the men of the eighteenth century that 'man was by nature good,' that he was 'an infinite reservoir of possibilities' and that at the root of all evils lay 'bad laws.' According to Rousseau, the destruction of that oppressive order would open up infinite horizons of progress. Classicism, said Hulme, was defined by an exactly opposite conception, namely, that 'man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him.'  

Hulme rejected the idea that the individual should aim at the spontaneous development of his personality. Such a conception, he thought, deformed the nature of ethical values, in that it derived them from subjective and therefore egoistical phenomena such as individual desires and sentiments. It was the logical result of humanism, and it led to romanticism. Fortunately, however, an antihumanistic revival was now, since the beginning of the century, expressing itself in a transformation of literature, society and politics, in accordance with

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principles that were ‘classical’ in the sense that the Action française gave to the term.

Such was the conceptual framework which, in the years before World War I, Thomas Huime passed on to Yeats, Pound, Lewis and T.S. Eliot. They were all agreed in rejecting the humanistic tradition, and they all rebelled with extreme violence against democracy. For Eliot, writing in 1924, Huime was the great precursor of a new state of mind, characteristic of the twentieth century. He was ‘classical, reactionary and revolutionary ... the antipode of the eclectic, tolerant and democratic mind of the last century.' Huime, indeed, was a protagonist of a new type of revolution.

A follower of the intuitive philosophy of Bergson, he immediately grasped the importance of Sorel. By the time he began to exert his authority within London’s avant-garde circles, he had already assimilated the main arguments of the Reflections on Violence. No one has given a more precise definition of the place of Sorel in the history of ideas, describing him as ‘a revolutionary who is antidemocratic, an absolutist in ethics, rejecting all rationalism and relativism, who speaks contemptuously of modernism and progress, and uses a concept like honour with no sense of unreality.’

What appealed to him in Sorel was precisely the profoundly antihumanist, antirationalist and antidemocratic quality of the Reflections on Violence, and, of course, its pessimism and classicism. It was his pessimistic conception of man which underlay his conviction that ‘the transformation of society is an heroic task requiring heroic qualities ... virtues which are not likely to flourish on the soil of a rational and sceptical ethic.’ With Sorel, said Huime, the pacificist, hedonistic and rationalistic system of ideas that still dominated the intellectual scene would be swept away. Huime concluded by saying that for all those who were beginning to be disenchanted with liberal democracy, Sorel would appear as ‘an emancipator.’

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Wyndham Lewis, too, found Sorel ‘the key to all contemporary political thought,’ a

symptomatic figure whom it would be hard to equal. Carl Schmitt, coming from a totally different milieu, was fascinated by Sorel in the same way: for him ‘the theory of myth is the most powerful symptom of the decline of the relative rationalism of parliamentary thought.’ Ortega y Gasset went even further: ‘When the reconstruction of the origins of our epoch is undertaken, it will be observed that the first notes of its special harmony were sounded in those groups of French syndicalists and realists of about 1900, inventors of the method and the name of “direct action.”’

Since the end of the nineteenth century, this cultural revolt has found its conceptual framework in the idea of antimaterialism. To be sure, Tocqueville too had been horrified by the materialism of the masses, but he tried to neutralize it, as far as possible, not by undermining democracy but by improving it. It was only with Renan that the concept of materialism became not only a major factor of historical explanation, but also an instrument in the struggle against democracy. After predicting that the nineteenth century ‘will be regarded in the history of France as the expiration of the Revolution,’ Renan attacked the ‘democratic spirit ... which can be well described as materialism in politics, and which ultimately could only give rise to “a sort of universal mediocrity.”’ Though he made this analysis in a long essay published before the Franco-Prussian War, the defeat of 1870 gave it a dramatic dimension. Renan continued his campaign in La Réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France, arguing that ‘materialism’ was the summation of what he called ‘the sickness of France.’

Democracy and socialism were forms of materialism, but there was also a ‘bourgeois materialism’ that was yet another aspect of that same mediocrity which had carried all before it since the end of the eighteenth century. It was materialism that had caused the decadence of France, and it was liberal and bourgeois materialism that were defeated in 1870.

An identical view appears in Wagner’s ‘German Art and German Policy’: for him, too, European culture had ‘reached the abyss of

42 Huime, Speculations (above, note 32), p. 259.
43 Ibid., p. 257.
44 Ibid., pp. 254 and 258-260.
46 Schmitt, The Crisis (above, note 30), pp. 68-76.
48 E. Renan, ‘La monarchie constitutionnelle en France,’ La Revue des deux mondes, LXXXIV (1869), pp. 73, 75 and 92.
sordidest materialism.” For Treitschke, the responsibility for this decadence lay with the Jews, who ‘share heavily in the guilt for the contemptible materialism of our age.’

Seventy years later, at the time of the 1940 defeat, the same analysis — yet totally free of any kind of antisemitism — and the same general approach reappeared in the work of the left-wing Catholic Emmanuel Mounier. Once again, the collapse was blamed on individualism, the French Revolution, bourgeois liberalism and communism: it was ‘a certain form of Western civilization’ that had been defeated. Like Renan in 1870, Mounier did not discover the dangers of liberal democracy only after the military debacle. Throughout the 1930s, Mounier had expressed his sympathy for attacks on materialism coming from the most varied quarters. While praising Hendrik de Man’s ‘critique of determinist materialism,’ he also expressed satisfaction at the revolt of the French young Right, led by Thierry Maulnier. Maulnier was the intellectual leader of the French equivalent of the German Conservative Revolution, and an ardent admirer of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (he wrote the Introduction to the French edition of Moeller’s Third Reich) and Ernst von Salomon. Mounier drew a comparison between Maulnier’s analysis and de Man’s: both were praised for their opposition to liberalism and Marxism, and for their unconditional struggle against materialism. In the name of these common antimatematicalism, Mounier had similar praise for the Italian Fascist Left.

At a symposium organized in Rome in May 1935 by the left-wingers of the Italian Fascist party and a group of French admirers and fellow-travellers, Mounier stated that ‘even those in the French delegation who by their training had been staunch opponents of Fascism publicly admitted the close kinship they felt with the constructive vigour of the new generation.’ He expressed his rejection of the entire ‘bourgeois civilization’ that was now being challenged by the ‘Fascist civilizations.’ Although he recognized and understood the totalitarian character of Fascism, he could not help but feel attracted by its total rejection of the liberal and bourgeois world, its ‘revolutionary negation of bourgeois rationalism.’

When Mussolini gave his classic definition of Fascism in 1932, he described it as a revolt against ‘the materialist and feeble positivism of the nineteenth century.’ A year later, upon the founding of the Spanish Falange, José Antonio Primo de Rivera began his speech with an attack on Rousseau. Drieu la Rochelle expressed the same sentiment in 1940: ‘France has been destroyed by rationalism.’

The personalists of the 1930s provide an instructive example of the attraction exerted by both Fascism and Nazism. They did express some reservations, but these concerned the practice of Nazism; they were in full sympathy with the Nazi revolt that was directed simultaneously against liberalism and Marxism. ‘National-Socialism’ was to be praised, said Alexandre Marc, a converted Jew and a prominent personalist intellectual, because it ‘manifests a desire to break with materialism.’ This was a central point in the long ‘letter to Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Reich’ published in November 1933 by the Robert Aron-Arnaud Dandieu group (Robert Aron, a Jew, was later persecuted by the Vichy régime). Nazism had ‘grandeur’ because it was a ‘legitimate revolt against modern materialism.’

These texts are highly characteristic of the reasons for the attraction which Fascism exerted upon many intellectuals. If Mounier worked until the end of 1942 for the Vichy government’s National Revolution,

53 On 25 October 1940 the American Catholic journal The Commonwealth published a message from Mounier under the title ‘Letter from France — A Personalist Leader, Editor of Esprit, Sends This Message to America from France’ (pp. 8-11); cf. John Helman, Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left 1935-1959, Toronto 1981. Mounier wrote: ‘The first step to take is to place oneself on the scale of vision of the man who at this moment has taken the initiative in the history of Europe. Herr Hitler on several occasions has declared that he envisions his policies on the scale of a thousand years. The “realists” smile. But on reflection this perspective would seem a bit narrow’ (p. 8).
it was not because of any lack of political judgement. Similarly, Heidegger’s attitude towards the Nazi regime is to be explained not by opportunism, but by a certain community of ideas. In his lectures of that period, Heidegger spoke of the ‘intimate truth and grandeur’ of National Socialism.63 The terms used correspond to those of the French personalists. Habermas emphasizes that when these lectures were published in 1953, Heidegger did not in any way dissociate himself from his 1935 text. In this connection, Habermas has correctly pointed out that if there was no Nazi intelligentsia as such, that was only because the mediocrity of the Nazi leaders rendered them incapable of accepting the intellectuals’ offers of service.64

This was one of the great differences between Fascism and Nazism. In Italy, the intellectuals played a prominent role in both the founding of the movement and its rise to power, and in the codification of the system. The privileged circle of the founders of the regime included not only Marinetti, followed by a considerable number of avant-garde artists, but also eminent academics such as Michels and Panunzio. The role of Gentile is well known; Pirandello was a member of the Fascist Academy. Mosca had a few ingenuous remarks to make about the regime, and he served under it as a senator. Pareto, who died in 1923, never concealed his sympathy for the Fascist movement. It would be difficult, indeed, to find a single major social scientist who did not have very serious doubts, one way or another, not only about the praxis of liberal democracy, but also, and above all, about its principles. After all, the very emergence of psychology, sociology and political science as autonomous fields of research and teaching was rooted not only in a reaction against Marxism, but also in a critique of democracy.

When it finally did appear, the opposition of the intellectuals was directed far more against the brutality of the newly established regime than against their ideologies. Hence, one finds a great deal of ambiguity and contradiction both in their thinking and in their actions. They were often confounded by the cunning of history, for the concrete forms taken by the eagerly awaited antimaterialistics did not always correspond to the hopes of their sensitive spirits. For example, though Croce became a dissident in 1925, his famous anti-Fascist ‘Manifesto of the Intellectuals’ cannot obscure the support he gave the Fascists in the critical years of their seizure of power. A strong intervention with the

63 J. Habermas, Profils philosophiques et politiques, Paris 1974, p. 91.
64 Ibid., p. 90.

king by the liberals might have led to Mussolini’s dismissal after the assassination on 10 June 1924 of Matteotti, whose courage and moral strength were legendary. The event had left Mussolini’s entourage in a panic. At that critical moment, Croce decided that Fascism had, after all, done a great deal of good and that it would be most inadvisable to work for its downfall. On 26 June, Senator Croce gave a vote of confidence to the Mussolini government.

In Spain, Ortega y Gasset placed himself in the Republican camp in 1931, only to join the opposition a year later. During the Civil War, he hoped for a Nationalist victory, but he went into exile a few months after Franco’s seizure of power. Unamuno, after being dismissed from his post as Rector of the University of Salamanca by the Republican government in 1936, was removed from the same post at the end of that year by the Franco regime.65 Spengler, Jünger and Freyer, each in his own way, distanced themselves from the Nazi regime, but not for intellectual reasons. The brutality and vulgarity of the new rulers made it difficult for the intellectuals to relate to them. It was one thing to engage in learned discourse about the slave morality, to deplore the decadence of bourgeois society and passionately oppose its materialism; it was quite another to accept state terrorism as a normative form of government. But their later rejection could not undo the concrete results of their obsessive criticism of the heritage of the Enlightenment. The proponents of the Conservative Revolution did National Socialism a great service, by helping to lead the upper classes into the Third Reich.66 The victims of the July 1944 hangings included several who had joyfully welcomed the rise of Nazism.

In France, too, some of the protagonists and admirers of the great antimaterialistic revolution ended by taking up arms against the Nazis, or becoming their first victims. Meanwhile, however, a century and a half of republican tradition was swept away in the course of six months. The Vichy racial legislation of October 1940 set the seal on the destruction of the principles of the French Revolution. The National Revolution is hardly imaginably without the long antimaterialistic gestation that preceded it. Of course, the cultural rebellion in France did not overthrow democracy on its own: it was the German war machine which bore the direct responsibility. But when the Republic

65 Dobson, An Introduction, pp. 31-35; and Nozick, Miguel de Unamuno, p. 33 (both above, note 11).
fell, the ideological framework for an alternative solution was fully in
place.

Thus, everywhere in Europe, there was an antidemocratic,
antinationalist, antiuniversalistic doxa. It undoubtedly owed more to a vulgarization of
major works than to the great works themselves, but if it did not always
truly reflect all the nuances of high culture, it nevertheless represented
the principal ideas that had been brewing.

Here, finally, we come to the classic but already banal question of the
responsibility of the intellectual. No writer can be held responsible for
consequences of his teaching which he did not intend. But on the other
hand, an intellectual operates in a specific historical context, and his
work does have consequences. Even Nietzsche’s spiritual constructions
and aesthetic preferences had immediate political implications, as he
himself was well aware. We can hardly imagine, then, that Heidegger, in
the highly charged emotional climate of the 1930s, was unconscious of
the significance which both his teaching and his activities had suddenly
assumed. The celebrated apoliticism of the German universities in fact
represented a profound antidemocratic and antibourgeois conformism.
Elsewhere in Europe, no major intellectual really claimed to stand
outside political controversy. If there was, in Julien Benda’s words, an
‘intellectual betrayal,’ it consisted not in a rejection of politics, but in
the engagement of so many intellectuals in the battle against the spirit
of the Enlightenment.

Neither the criticism of liberal democracy, nor unemployment,
inflation or military defeat necessarily had to lead to Fascism, Nazism
or the various forms of the National Revolution. It was the combination
of all these factors that gave rise to the crisis of the 1920s and 1930s.
However — and this is a very important point — everywhere in
Europe, the political revolt was preceded by the cultural one. It is the
cultural revolt, with the participation both of those who engaged in
political activism and of those who protected their ‘purity’ by staying
out of practical politics, which explains the ascendancy of the Fascist or
semi-Fascist movements and regimes. The desire to purify the world
of the defilements of the eighteenth century and to introduce various
forms of discipline such as classicism and nationalism, together with
the rejection of liberal and bourgeois decadence, united in a single
momentum the inner core of Fascist intellectuals and the extensive
external circles of fellow-travellers.

The waiving of many intellectuals undoubtedly was nurtured by
fear that the higher culture might be swamped by the mass society. As
Ortega y Gasset wrote:

Modernity and Its Enemies

The characteristic of our time is not that the vulgar believes itself
super-excellent and not vulgar, but that the vulgar proclaims and
imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right.67

What is truly essential, however, and what gives the cultural revolt its
political significance, is the fact that this rejection of the mass society
was directed first of all against democracy: against the masses casting
balloons, against the masses going on strike, against the May Day rallies
and, in short, against the demand for equality. Thus, it was only very
rarely that the revolt was directed against those mass movements par
excellence which were the nationalist and Fascist movements. The reason
was simple: these were mass movements of an unprecedented kind.
Their elitist and anti-egalitarian character immunized them against this
kind of criticism. The great virtues of the Fascist mass were precisely
obedience, unity of spirit and the acceptance of natural hierarchies.
These new masses were fundamentally different in their nature, their
objectives and their behaviour from those of the nineteenth century, in
the heyday of the popular movements.

The intellectual rejection of the mass society was the rejection of
an exorbitant, outrageous pretension that had arisen since the French
Revolution, of people demanding the right to self-government and
equality. This was the beginning and the end of the matter: by
undermining the foundations of democracy and trying to destroy
the spirit of the Enlightenment, the cultural revolt, though it did not
identify itself with Fascism, undoubtedly paved the way for it.