

In Defense of Political Reason

Essays by Raymond Aron

**Daniel J. Mahoney
Editor**

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Introduction

Faith without Illusions

Throughout this century, there has been much theoretical speculation about the "crisis" of liberal democracy. Aron was not closed to such speculation and he, as much as anyone, recognized that the twentieth century had witnessed grave theoretical and practical challenges to the survival and well-being of the liberal democratic regimes. An intellectually honest man, he did not deny *a priori* the view shared by penetrating thinkers of the left and the right, that a dialectic of modernity led inexorably to the weakening and even the self-destruction of liberal principles, that the political totalitarianisms and philosophical nihilisms of the twentieth century have a symbiotic relationship to the very liberalism that they reject.

But he saw no practical alternative to the liberal regime, no other regime which could find legitimacy with modern peoples. In his 1976 work, *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, he criticized the decline of civic spirit and martial virtue in liberal Europe and opposed a kind of libertarianism that attacked all institutions of authority, whether the army, university, or church. He had no respect for those who wanted to democratize every aspect of society by unionizing armies, politicizing universities and churches, and undermining deliberation in representative political institutions. However, he also refused to accept Alexander Solzhenitsyn's critique of the Enlightenment *in toto* or Oswald Spengler's gloom about the prospects for a free, mass, urban society. He defended, in an anxious but full-hearted and politic way, liberal and "decadent" Europe.

Aron's 1978 essay "For Progress" was originally published in one of the first issues of his quarterly review *Commentaire*. Beginning with a critique of the ex-Marxist, French "new philosophers" who had rather belatedly discovered the Gulag and proceeded to engage in haphazard and overdrawn political and philosophic speculations about its origins, Aron addresses the "crisis" of liberal democracy in light of the theo-

retical challenge to enlightenment principles from the left and right and the political challenge of communist totalitarianism. Despite genuine concern about the political vitality of the democracies, Aron ultimately reveals a democratic and "Kantian" faith in the vocation of mankind, a belief in the capacity of the human "conscience" to overcome the tyranny of the ideological lie and a totalitarian oligarchy. Aron's reasonable hopes that the experience of totalitarianism could restore substance and luster to the concept of the rights of man and reinvigorate the spirit of liberalism seems partially vindicated by the largely unforeseen but welcome collapse of communism. But the collapse of "hard" ideological despotism leaves what Alexis de Tocqueville called soft or "democratic despotism," nourished by political centralization, apathetic individualism, and the decline of civic spirit, as the most pressing danger to the integrity of our "pluralistic" societies. Aron both believed and hoped that Tocqueville had exaggerated fears of the likely or possible triumph of "democratic despotism." The strength of this essay lies precisely in Aron's ability to defend the dignity of liberal theory and practice while clearly recognizing the internally generated threats to its health, vigor, and well-being. For Aron, "progress" is not the result of an impersonal historical process but instead the hard-fought and never completely or eternally attained acquisition of moral agents "aspiring to (their) humanity." "For Progress" indicates that Aron remained in some limited but real sense a man of the (enlightenment) left. It remains for us, the citizens of the democracies today, to decide whether we can share Aron's qualified and sober faith in modern "progress." But Aron is undoubtedly correct: there is no viable or humane *political* alternative to constitutional democracy or modern technological progress available at the present time.

For Progress—After the Fall of the Idols

Raymond Aron

1978

Marx is not dead; in the secondary schools, in the *lycées*, even in the universities, he remains very much alive, an inexhaustible mine of quotations, concepts, and dogmas, an almost inevitable reference, if not an undisputed master. In England, sociologists have never read and discussed him so much. Althusser has disciples, almost a school there. He enjoys the same popularity in the United States. I open the June 29, 1978 issue of the *New York Review of Books*; I come across a remarkable article, "Inescapable Marx," by Robert L. Heilbroner, dedicated to an impressive list of books on Marx, his life, his theories of history and revolution, his heritage, and the meaning of his thought today—not to mention a magazine entitled, *Marxist Perspectives*, which reminds me of the collection of the 1930s, *In the Light of Marxism*.

Much of this work amounts to Marxology, rather than Marxism, although the majority of Marxists, even members of the Communist party, justify their position through an interpretation of the master. What distinguishes the "new philosophers" is the simultaneous condemnation of Marx, Gulag, and the Soviet Union (even if they also have to condemn capitalism and socialism at the same time). A fraction of the high—or presumably high—level Parisian *intelligentsia*, today as yesterday, does not distinguish between Marx and the Soviet Union with an inverted accent of value. The approach of hell is replacing the hope of paradise.

Alexis de Tocqueville had foreseen that the superficial agitation of democratic society would not spare intellectual life. Paris is the capital of fashionable ideas, no less than fashion. *Gurus* are revered for a few years or months, make their rounds and then move on. The new gurus who kill the gods of yesterday are not fundamentally different from the gurus of the 1950s or 1960s. Whether one discovers a structuralist Marx or excommunicates the philosophers of German ideal-

ism by dint of collages of quotations amounts to the same thing in practice. The style changes, the talent varies; sometimes the good news—the 1977 vintage guaranteed—reaches the general public and the international weeklies; later the sect returns to the obscurity from which the press had snatched it.

Does the present moment—the death of Marx by and for “the princes of intelligence”—have a different historical significance from the preceding ones, the quarrelsome association between the existentialists and the communists, the Camus–Sartre–Merleau-Ponty debates, the rise of Louis Althusser and his decline, the Maoists in Paris? I hesitate to answer. The books that reveal the truth of the day do not seem to me, as works of thought, superior to those of the recent past. Quite the opposite. But I do not trust my judgment, because of my probable bias in favor of the men of my generation.

Moreover, it matters little. What interests me is that a prolonged phase of economic crisis coincides, not with a revival of Marxism, but, at least in appearance, with a completely opposite reaction. The delayed recognition, under the influence of Solzhenitsyn, of Soviet reality has provoked a sort of total rejection in some people, not only of Marx, Marxism, and the Soviet Union, but of the master thinkers of modern civilization. The ambition of philosophers to change the world by interpreting it is becoming the primal sin, and, since its source was historical materialism, we find these young people ready to charge intellectuals and their optimism with all the crimes of the century, from the slaughters at Verdun to Gulag—a word emptied of meaning by misuse. Even the Bastille of Louis XIV is baptized “Gulag.”

Radiant socialism in opposition to sordid capitalism? There is no longer any question of it: both of them, avatars of the same capital, would show two barely different faces of the same barbarism. Let us read a few lines from the book that enjoyed remarkable success.

It is therefore meaningless to “criticize” the idea of progress. It is also meaningless to attack its “illusions.” And it is meaningless again to set up other mechanisms and other real processes in opposition to it. We must believe in progress, believe in its infinite power, and grant it all the credit it asks for. But we must simply denounce it as a reactionary mechanism which is leading the world to catastrophe. We have to say what it says, see the world as it does, record the signs of its devastation wherever it rules. And it is precisely for that reason that we must discredit it, and only in that sense that it must be analyzed, as a uniform and linear progression toward evil. No, the world is not wandering nor lost in meanders of possibility. It is heading straight for uniformity, the shallows, the mean. And in order to protest against that, now, for the first time, we must proclaim ourselves *antiprogessive*.¹

This sort of prophecy defies the old practice, dear to French education, of the *explication de texte*. Progress, I suppose, designates economic development, more or less identified with science, technology, and industrialization. Has this progress become reactionary? How? Why? Is it a one-way road to Evil? What Evil? Is it leading the world to catastrophe? What catastrophe? The catastrophe foreseen by the Club of Rome? Is it producing uniformity, leveling, and mediocrity? Leveling or mediocrity? There is no longer any choice or hope. Progress, like Marxism, leads inexorably to catastrophe, but, in distinction to Marxism, it promises no after-catastrophe.

To this abdication before a mysterious and pitiless destiny, I still prefer the optimism of the rationalists of the recent past. The eloquent and naive voices that irritated me so much a half century ago are recovering some freshness for me.

The history of human industry is rightly the history of civilization and vice versa. The propagation and discovery of the industrial arts both was and still is fundamental progress. It permitted a happier and happier life for ever greater masses over ever vaster territories. It was the industrial arts, through the development of ideas and societies, that made possible the development of reason, sensibility, and will. It was the industrial arts that made modern man the most perfect of animals. The industrial arts are the Prometheus of ancient drama. Keeping them in mind, let us read the magnificent verses of Aeschylus and let us say that it was the industrial arts that made men out of those weak ants that haunted dark caves, out of those children who did not see what they saw, did not understand what they heard, and who, throughout their lives, blurred their images with the phantoms of their dreams. . . . Beyond any doubt, it will be the industrial arts that will save humanity from the moral and material crisis in which it is struggling. Science and industry are superior to fate rather than subject to it. They are the third God that is putting an end to the gods, to the tyrants of heaven and earth. . . .²

As soon as I left the sheltered little world of the university, I collided with the calamity of the Germans, their nationalistic delirium. I revolted against the faith of these men of good will; I no longer shared their confidence in the capacity of science to save humanity from its moral and material crisis. To reflect on the course of human history is to become conscious of the human condition, of an incoherent world, torn by conflicts among classes, nations, and ideologies. A dramatic condition that forbids immoderate hopes but does not justify resignation.

Forty years ago, I meditated on history in the shadow of the Great

Depression, my glance turned toward World War II, whose warning symptoms only the blind did not perceive. Today I am writing in the shadow of an economic crisis, completely different from that of the 1930s. The "undiscoverable" war, the war of Superpowers, remains improbable. Ever since the cultural revolt of the 1930s, however, modern civilization in its entirety has been on trial. If socialism is no better than capitalism, where does the blame fall if not on science, progress, technology, and, indeed, economic development? An accusation as old as the accused: Rousseau against the Encyclopedists; the counterrevolutionaries against the Enlightenment and the Revolution; Nietzsche against the petty bourgeoisie or socialism. Was it with the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, or in 1789, at the time of the French Revolution, that the West took the fatal turn? I leave to others this historical trial and its verdict.

Today there is no longer any point in unmasking Marxist mystifications. It is nihilism, the opposite of the Marxism of yesterday, one has to denounce today. The death of Marxism or the defeat of the left threatens to carry off hope as well. As early as twenty years ago, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that Marxism was not one philosophy of history among others, but historical Reason itself—which he condemned along with Marxism. A generation later, the same line of argument goes even further. The failure of Marxism would reveal modern civilization in its entirety as irresistible progress toward Evil. We who remain faithful to democracy, science, and liberalism, let us accept the challenge. Let us have no polemics, but begin to examine our consciences.

Let us think back to the years immediately following the war. No one raised his voice against growth or industrialization, either on the left or the right. The left blamed the Malthusianism of French bosses. Statisticians compared the number of persons nourished by the French peasant and by the American farmer. For years, the Soviet growth rate challenged West Europeans. Ordinarily more clairvoyant, many economists foresaw the imminent lowering of the Iron Curtain by Westerners themselves, incapable of bearing the comparison between the lot of the workers in France and that of the liberated proletarians to the East.

If the French economy had not kept pace in the race, or if it had progressed in the manner of Great Britain—that is, half as fast as the German Federal Republic—the French, in their humiliation, would again, as they did in 1938, denounce the inefficiency of capitalism and capitalists. After the war, we had no other choice than to give up forever or to renew our old structures through science, technology, or industry.

A nation that was one of the greatest in Europe, and which still desires to maintain its rank in the world, had to submit to the imperatives of work and productivity. (Let us say progress if others prefer the word.) Are we to call this kind of progress "reaction"? Quite evidently, it does not lead us backwards, it leads us toward a society without precedent—a society that no one is forced to prefer to those of the past. But toward which societies of the past are we to turn our glances and regrets?

Those who knew the France of 1938 do not miss it: the condition of the worker was incomparably harsher, and peasant life was narrower and more painful; only the children of the bourgeoisie and a few hundred or thousand scholarship-holders had access to secondary and higher education; the establishment jealously guarded its powers and privileges; more closed in on itself than ever, France was unaware of the universe and feared the future, Germany and war.

Do we wish to go back further, to the France of the peasants who elected Napoleon III by plebiscite? Or had those Frenchmen, 80 percent of whom lived still in the countryside or little towns, already been wounded by "progress," because the intellectuals believed in the Enlightenment, and because individuals no longer accepted, as a decree of God or nature, their place in society or the established order? I do not believe that those who call progress "reaction" go so far as to eliminate, in their nostalgia, the equality of individuals before the law, the citizenship of all, as formal as it may be, and, with them, the liberties that were baptized the rights of man.

Promethean ambition and the rights of man (or universal citizenship) have nothing in common, one will probably object. Logically, the objection is valid. The will to become master and possessor of nature in no way explains the participation of all in the government of the city and the respect for individuals. But, historically, these two movements of ideas and events are interrelated. Learned men are eroding the prestige of men of quality or birth. Certainly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed or foresaw the corruption of morals by the arts and sciences; citizens as he conceived them, poor and virtuous, do not resemble those of today—producers, consumers, taxpayers, and television viewers. The Encyclopedists and Saint-Simonians both applauded the future, our present, of which they had a presentiment. Rousseau detested it in advance; he liked the *Ancien Régime* no better. Civil liberties, in an austere city—a dream on the edge of the historically possible.

I would not, however, say that progress, as it is unfolding, leaves no way out. If we suppose that progress embraces "science, technolo-

gy, and economic development," it is absurd to decree it "a one-way road to Evil." If, in their recovery from ideology, these philosophers will no longer permit the sacrifice of the humble to the constructions of the master thinkers, why do they forget that the science that produced the bombs and nuclear centers also eliminated epidemics and, for the majority of mankind, famine?

Goats have devastated the terrain of civilizations more often than pollution. And knowledge has a greater chance of arresting the spread of the desert in the Sahel than prayers to the gods and invectives against science. I am ashamed of these remarks, worthy of Mr. Homais, but those who beat their *mea culpa* on the chests of others and replace their delirium of yesterday with another, opposite in kind, arouse my bile from time to time. There is no good, in history, that does not include a share of evil. The least costly and most effective investments are perhaps those of hygiene. They save millions of lives; they do not assure the means of living decently. Teaching every child to read and write does not suffice to elevate him to culture. Are we to prefer the illiterate to the semi-cultivated? Are we to prefer the peasant who, a century ago, hardly left his village, to the agricultural producer of today who drives a tractor, knows the world through television, and whose daughters desire an urban style of living?

Understand me well: I take the quarrel with industrial society seriously, whether it comes from the Club of Rome (shortage of energy, nonrenewable resources, and pollution) or from thinkers who fear the deterioration of man or of the quality of life. Serious questions call for inquiries and answers. What I am attacking is cheap pessimism, historical fatalism, and "irresistible progress toward Evil."

Toward what "evil" is "progress" leading us? War, totalitarianism, concentration camps, mediocrity, or egalitarianism? The wars of the nineteenth century were bloodier than most wars of the past, but, at the same time, they have left fewer traces from a material standpoint. In 1920, Spanish influenza wiped out the lives of about ten million people, as many as the war. The voids were rapidly filled and no population was bled as that of Germany during the Thirty Years' War (reduced by half). Perhaps, in terms of percentage of population, losses in combat have risen in the twentieth century. Some estimate at a million the number of Algerian victims between 1955 and 1962. The Algerian people today exceed fifteen million. At the time of the conquest, Algeria numbered two or three million souls. Must we weep for the dead of the conquest and the liberation? Yes. Must we imagine what Algeria would be today if the French had not conquered it in the preceding century? That would be an exercise in *counterfactu-*

al history, devoid of meaning. No one can answer. How can we compare the evils inflicted to the benefits disseminated, even involuntarily?

Wars always assume the form of the societies from which they emanate. Weapons depend on industry; military organization depends both on social organization and on weapons. In 1914, universal suffrage was in accord with conscription; weapons, still relatively simple, permitted the mobilization of millions of combatants. The growing cost of arms now tends to reduce the number of combatants. Some of them, the pilots, need gunner-mates. We are free to prefer other military institutions, for example, those of the *Ancien Régime*, with the recruitment of officers from the nobility, and of simple soldiers from the lowest classes of society. If we condemn war on moral grounds, we must condemn it also when politico-technological circumstances limit its ravages.

War, the settling of conflicts among political entities by force, is not an invention of modern civilization. Democracy, nationalism, technology, and science make possible the mobilization of millions of men, the manufacture of tens of thousands of cannons, and wars of peoples and of propaganda. But the same capacity to produce and act in common permits the reconstruction of material ruins in a few years. Let us compare the Western Europe of 1955—ten years after the end of the Third Reich—with that of 1935; aside from the concentration camps, tombs, and the massacre of the innocents, the Europeans of the West found themselves freer, less divided, and more prosperous than twenty years earlier.

A materialistic and cynical reckoning? I agree. Each person is "unique and irreplaceable." How many Menuhins perished at Auschwitz before revealing their genius? How many Cavailles or Lautmans whose deaths deprived humanity of the works they bore within them? Who can forget? Who can forgive? But neither history nor the species, judging from the experience of centuries, cares about individuals. As for peoples, the decline in the birth rate threatens them with extinction more than war—with the exception of the Holocaust, which is without parallel. Conquerors have more than once run their swords through hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, but never was the extermination of a human group conceived cold-bloodedly, never organized and executed so methodically, and, I dare say, so rationally.

Are we to incriminate rationality, because it can be made to serve life and death indiscriminately? Similar methods of organization apply to the movement of armored divisions and of drivers on vacation, to concentration camps and to the camps of the Club Méditerranée.

No, rational organization does not bear its soul within itself. In a famous lecture, at the 1965 Congress in Heidelberg, to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Max Weber, Herbert Marcuse denounced the distinction between formal and substantial rationality, or more precisely, the incompatibility between the two. He denounced "the neutrality of technical reason with regard to all external affirmations of substantial values."

Marcuse imagines the reconciliation of formal and substantial rationality in automated production, which would liberate man from socially necessary but dehumanizing work. Until today, he admits, Max Weber has had the last word. The rational organization of production does not, as such, determine its goals: private or public, production serves ends imposed upon it from without. And rational bureaucracy risks being subjected to the irrationality of a charismatic leader.

According to Marcuse's criticism, Max Weber had at the outset assumed private enterprise and the market, along with *das Gehäuse der Gehörigkeit*, that is, the edifice of powers or the servitude of the majority. The experiments with public enterprises and planning have all crystallized *das Gehäuse der Gehörigkeit*. It is therefore, Marcuse, argues, necessary to imagine enterprises that would remain efficient without the separation of labor and management, or even to imagine automation that would combine formal and substantial rationality without submitting it to political, and therefore, often irrational, will.

Herbert Marcuse's polemic against Weberian rationality, which was acclaimed in 1965, reminds us of the debates of the Weimar Republic. Capitalism or socialism, privately or publicly owned property, the market or planning: these antitheses set the terms of debate and discussion at that time. But now the demystification of Soviet reality strips the old notion of the nationalization of the means of production of its charms. Utopia has to be sought at the farthest reaches of progress in a technology that is liberating in its own right—and even then data processing occasions nightmares as well as rosy dreams.

The case *against* rationalism turns easily into the case against totalitarianism. Do not the means of communication figure among the conditions indispensable to totalitarianism? Only those regimes deserve to be called totalitarian in which a single party holds a monopoly of activity or political legitimacy—a party that professes an ideology: that the State decrees a political, indeed a human, truth. The Soviet regime comes closest to the perfect example, because, in the name of atheism and materialism, it combats the faith of the Church, the Christian religion. The claim of the State-party to possess the supreme truth explains the monopolization of the means of communication. The State ideology must not, in the main, be called into question.

Does such a regime require radio and television? The founders of the Soviet State, Lenin and his companions, had neither at their disposal. Marxist-Leninist fanaticism, the kind that animated Lenin and his companions, characterizes certain features of our civilization; it presupposes the weakening of transcendent faith, the de-Christianization of the masses; perhaps the pseudo-science of Marxism borrows its authority from the cult of true science. Even Hitler's racism covered itself in scientific ragged finery. In this sense, these totalitarian ideologies have some affinity with modern civilization. They caricature science at the same time that they mimic religion or the Church. Toynbee defined Marxism more than once as a Christian heresy: the proletariat will save humanity; the most disinherited will rise to the top for the good of all; the way of the cross—"the class struggle"—will end with the reconciliation of men with one another and with nature. Alain Besançon interprets Leninism as a gnosis, with the perfect ones (the party) confident in their election and in the abyss between them and the others, between the corrupt world and the world that will emerge from the revolution.

I doubt that any century has been spared the superstitions and sects that swarm around Churches. The media did perhaps facilitate Hitler's rise to power; Lenin owes his victory above all to the war. Totalitarian ideologies (I am thinking of Marxism and its derivatives) mingle half-truths, vestiges of Christianity, ancestral dreams, and scraps of science and science-fiction. As for the techniques of communication, they do not seem to me to be either the origin or the supporting pillar of totalitarian regimes (as is often said). Of course, they provide power with additional instruments; they make it possible to mislead crowds, to broadcast the litanies of the State's truth or philippics against the eternal, forever elusive enemy, capitalism or imperialism, to the last village and into the brush. But before television or the computer, the police, denunciations, and bureaucracies functioned with pen and paper.

I even wonder, at the risk of paradox, whether State propaganda does not bring saturation and, indeed, provoke rejection. Hitler did succeed in casting a spell over crowds with his voice—but not Stalin, hidden in the Kremlin and in his cunning. After the attack of the Nazi armies, when he finally brought himself to address the country, he appealed to perennial sentiments, to patriotism, to the defense of Holy Russia. In the countries of Eastern Europe, not even governments dare to use stiff, emotionless language any longer. In Hungary, the scaffolding, mounted in ten years by the conquerors and their servants, collapsed in a few days in the year 1956, and free of a carapace of lies the Hungarians came to themselves. In an even more spectacular,

non-violent manner, in Czechoslovakia twelve years later, the truth broke out in a storm. In spite of all technical means, the State had not convinced its subjects. Perhaps millions of men had lived in two universes at the same time: the universe of the official truth that they heard, and the universe of the other truth that they harbored deep inside themselves without even knowing it.

Was the totalitarian outcome in some way predetermined by the intellectual origins of modernity? If the answer is "yes," the Enlightenment, liberalism, capitalism, socialism—those moments of thought and of Western history—would form a necessary sequence and the verdict is final. I myself wrote the following words that I have not yet retracted:

The philosophy of the Enlightenment, liberalism, naturally, if not necessarily, ends in socialism, indeed, in Marxism, just as rivers end in the sea.

Words probably dictated to me by Montesquieu's formula: monarchies tend toward despotism. In appearance, nothing is more contrary than the thought of the Enlightenment, of Montesquieu or of Voltaire, to socialism or Marxism. By what route did Spengler, and many others with him, embrace, in a single historical movement, the Enlightenment, liberalism, and socialism? Simplified to the point of risking caricature, the path is traced as follows.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment exalts reason and even individual reason; it destroys the authority of the Church and, at the same time, the authority of religion, although belief in a clock-god or a vague theism survives. It is an optimistic philosophy, which preaches the education of the human race, roots out superstitions, and places trust in science. The liberalism of the economist accords with the inspiration of the Enlightenment; the image of an organic society—each of the *states* or persons occupying an appropriate position, and together forming a coherent and hierarchical whole—gives way to a completely different image: a society constantly agitated by thousands and thousands of individuals in pursuit of their interests, wealth, and advancement. These individuals no longer obey higher authority, whether God or legitimate or semi-sacralized powers.

Once man has rejected masters and gods, once all possess the same right to happiness, socialism dogs liberalism. For a long time biological analogies (the survival of the fittest) or the invisible hand (from the clash of egoisms emerges what is best for all) justified economic liberalism. For a long time political liberalism sought justification in

the efficacy of dialogue: by exchanging opinions, by bringing together their knowledge, citizens would arrive at the truth or right decision. But the argument continues: what remains of the utilitarian or rationalist foundation of liberalism? Free competition among individuals does not assure the rise of the fittest: the starting points are too unequal. Qualities that favor success are not those that inspire respect and obedience. In commercial or electoral competition, victory does not of itself turn the victor to *un homme de qualité*—unless public opinion considers success a criterion of worth. Once success is taken to be arbitrary or unfair, the less favored will demand not so much the right to the pursuit of happiness as the guarantee of a piece of it.

Political debates focus more and more on the national product and its distribution. The richer the societies, the more bitter the struggle for the standard of living. Can our civilization rise above the alternative of commerce or tyranny? Or is it actually in the throes of both extremes which it falsely sets in opposition? The commercial and monetary order of the West means also multi-national corporations, tentacular bureaucracies. "Prometheus putting an end to the tyrants of heaven and earth?" Yes, perhaps, but perhaps also:

No one knows who will live in this edifice; whether at the end of this transformation entirely new prophets will emerge; whether the old ideas and ideals of yesterday will regain new vigor, or whether, on the contrary, a mechanical petrification, adorned in its shrivelled importance, will prevail. In that case, for the "last men" in this evolution of culture, the following words would become true: soulless specialists, heartless men of pleasure; this nothingness boasts of reaching a summit of humanity never yet attained. (Max Weber)

Let us abandon these distant perspectives. Promethean and organized, our societies continue to contain *das Gehäuse der Gehörigkeit*, the structure of material production and bureaucracy in which more than 80 percent of the population—the wage-earners—spend their working hours. Outside of this edifice, do not our societies resemble Tocqueville's vision: family cells, exclusively concerned with their little affairs, reading the same books, watching the same programs on television, unaware of, and yet imitating, each other.

I see a countless crowd of similar and equal men on treadmills, in pursuit of vulgar little pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each man, aloof, is like a stranger to the destinies of all the others: his own children and personal friends constitute the whole human race for him; as for the rest of his fellow-citizens, he is next to them but does not see them;

he touches them but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and, if he still has a family, we can at least say that he no longer has a country.

How many times this text has been cited as proof of the prescience of Tocqueville! Let us translate into sociological jargon: the nuclear family, the narrow horizon of the petty bourgeois, egoism set up as the norm of life—in short, a hardened humanity, a swarm of mediocre men, each concerned with himself and unaware of his nothingness. What does their number matter, since all are cut on the same model? How much they resemble one another without knowing it! The same scorn came of Nietzsche's pen a few decades later. Less blinded by hatred of capitalism than Marx, too aristocratic to love the democracy of the *common man*, both Tocqueville and Nietzsche saw the rise of the class whose numbers economic progress was to inflate. Let us call this class the petty bourgeoisie, which ranges from the most skilled workers to average white-collar employees. The peasantry is disappearing; what remains of it is being transformed into wheat and meat producers—into machine operators. Are we to condemn this society without precedent, whose urban style reaches into what used to be called the country, this society that is striving to teach all its children to read and write? In the name of what are we to condemn it?

Did the peasants that Balzac described represent a human type superior to our farmers who know how to draw up the budget of their enterprises and how to respond to the market? Are white-collar workers victims of progress? Can we call progress "reaction" when this progress reduces the number of blue-collar employees; when it multiplies middle-class wage-earners, those who deal with figures and symbols, and reduces the number of paid laborers, those who grapple with matter? What right do we have to scorn these ordinary men? Who has the right to scorn them? Faced with these kinds of questions, I feel paralyzed. One man says the great majority will, of course, be mediocre. Another says the few will save humanity. He goes on to say, I prefer the wisdom of the illiterate peasant to the semi-cultivated, who catch, in passing, at bits of ideas, at the favorite phrases of journalists, and discuss the world's future.

Civilizations have always had an aristocracy of thought, if not of position. Today, it is the scholars, the authentic scholars, who constitute, along with the great artists, the aristocracy of the aristocracy. But these aristocrats do not offer a model of how to be a man that other men would try to imitate. As for those surrounded by the clamour of popularity and considered the privileged *par excellence* (from

singers, movie actors, or writers, to corporation executives or government ministers), they permit millions of fans vicariously to live prestigious lives, but they themselves have almost nothing in common, and do not teach the same lesson.

I wonder whether Tocqueville's two affirmations are self-evident. In what way do men of our societies resemble one another more today than yesterday? Do they know less about their fellow men, their neighbors, and their country than our ancestors? Universal education has suppressed dialects. The customs of cities are spreading to the countryside, and city-dwellers are buying the old furniture that villagers replace with Grand Rapids. This sort of homogeneity of language maintained by the diffusion of the same words, of a few fashionable ideas, hides entirely different existences. Did villagers once differ from one another more than office workers do today? Were the habitués of the court of Louis XIV, as we know them from Saint-Simon, better than the courtiers of the President of the Republic or the president of a corporation?

Close-knit families, near their peasant origins and still far from the fashionable neighborhoods, differ from their parents or grandparents less in the narrowness of their life styles than in their ambition. The curse (or merit) of modern civilization is to shake the rules of tradition and the inheritance of trade and status, to make parents aware of social competition, of the opportunity for some to rise and of the risk that others will fall. Even if social mobility is less than our ideals suggest, it dominates the thought and conduct of families. It creates the obsession for education and, at the same time, it makes disappointments inevitable. Not all the young can win in either the genetic or the social lottery.

Endowed with consciousness, and therefore aware of their interests, have these atoms lost their country, and are they, as Tocqueville foresaw, concerned exclusively with their well-being? Certainly, our civilization tends toward a utilitarian or hedonistic morality. Who still evokes the categorical imperative? To the superficial observer, everything in our Western societies happens as if the distribution of the national income constituted the only stake in political quarrels, as if citizens no longer conceived any goal other than the improvement of their standard of living.

This impression rests on well-founded illusion and, to some extent, on reality. But the "materialism" of democratic politics is the result of the separation of religion from the State, and of ideology from the State. Lay or neutral, the State does not give citizens reasons for living. It leaves to individuals the freedom or the burden of

finding them of themselves. The partisan State, whether Soviet or Nazi, broadcasts a message, sometimes arouses enthusiasm and devotion, presents itself as "idealistic," and indulges in murder. Is there less authentic "idealism" in the commercial societies of the West than in the tyrannical societies of the East? Solzhenitsyn detests slovenliness, sexual license, the noise and vulgarity of public life or of the press in the West. But he does not confuse these evils with Evil *par excellence*, namely, the absence of law and the institutional lie of totalitarianism. He does not announce, as predestined, the triumph of Evil, and the fall of the West.

I belong to the school of thought that Solzhenitsyn calls rational humanism, and says has failed. This rationalism does not imply certain of the intellectual or moral errors that Solzhenitsyn attributes to it. Montesquieu maintains a balance between the Eurocentrism of the Enlightenment and historicism. Science's universal vocation is not incompatible with a diversity of cultures. It is the leaders of the Third World who desire the spread of Western technology throughout the entire planet. Who refuses the instruments of power and wealth? Now become the Far West, Japan will perhaps better safeguard her identity than other countries whose masters would like to separate machines from the thought which makes them possible.

In what sense can we decree the failure of rational humanism? The rationalist is not unaware of the animal impulses in man, and of the passions of man in society. The rationalist has long since abandoned the illusion that men, alone or in groups, are reasonable. He bets on the education of humanity, even if he is not sure he will win his wager.

The West has ventured further than any other civilization in pursuit of the moral and intellectual freedom of the individual—a freedom in apparent contradiction with the structure of organizations, *das Gehäuse der Gehörigkeit*. There is a growing discordance between the culture of the West and its economic institutions.

Pitilessly, Solzhenitsyn notes the symptoms of weakness of the West, and finds their profound cause to be the eradication of faith. "In itself, the turning point of the Renaissance was ineluctable, the Middle Ages had exhausted its possibilities, the despotic crushing of the physical nature of man to the benefit of his spiritual nature had become unbearable. But, this time, we leapt from the *Spirit* to matter, in a disproportionate and exaggerated manner."

The history of Europe, since the Renaissance, is full of adventures and battles that only a simplistic Marxist would reduce to the passion for profit or the love of gold. Religious wars and wars of the French Revolution witness more to men's attachment to truth as they see it

than to an exclusive concern for money and comfort. In the final analysis, Solzhenitsyn reproaches the West for its loss of Christian faith, where Tocqueville, after the fall of the *Ancien Régime* saw and foresaw societies stirred more and more by the envious and universal pursuit of well-being.

To reproach a person or a society for having lost faith seems as ridiculous to me as calling a believer "still a prisoner of superstitions." The rationalist of today is not unaware of the limits of scientific knowledge. He neither scorns nor condemns those who populate the world beyond knowledge with the images of their faith or the ideas of their intelligence. He does, however, condemn ideologies with totalistic pretensions, ideologies which are but poor replicas of religions that once gave a civilization a deep unity. The clericalism that had to be fought yesterday now assumes the form of the partisan State or of State ideology. At least initially, the totalizing ideology calls for devotion, sacrifices, and self-abnegation on the part of the faithful or militants. Are the young people who followed Hitler—young people whom I knew in 1931—and even a number of today's communists to be called idealists?

Neither the historian nor the philosopher, and even less the futurologist, possesses the answer to the questions that the West—and, in particular, Western Europe—is asking itself. Can a civilization prosper without a faith shared by the great majority? Will individuals tolerate the moral desert from which they are suffering and for which they reproach "society," that elusive entity that is blamed for everything including the crimes individuals commit? Many intellectuals are enraged by capital punishment, though murderers, thugs or political commissars once did, and sometimes still do, leave them indifferent or indulgent. In the name of ideas, terrorists usurp the right to execute—a right the state is no longer supposed to exercise. The liberal applauds the desacralization of the State; he is uneasy at the contempt displayed for laws, for he knows that without laws men cannot live together peaceably. He is disturbed too at the contradictions of the loudest, roughest and most widely-listened-to speakers of the market place—speakers who expose power and attack it wherever it still exists and who, at the same time, advocate the immunity of the individual who is to be sole master of himself. At what point of the disintegration of the State will men be held accountable for their acts?

Certainly, individuals are molded by their families, their social milieu, by chance encounters, and by the schools they happen to attend. Regardless of the strength or weakness of the State, individuals interiorize the norms of the city and draw a winning or losing num-

ber at the social lottery. In Western societies, they still, nevertheless, have the opportunity to fashion their characters in the benignity of liberty, and not at the risk of liberty or life in defiance of official truth.

The European nations have populated the New World; they have spread their science and their weapons of production and destruction across five continents, but have not, for all that, converted the other civilizations to their true gods. (Europe has had greater success with its idols.) In one sense, Europeans have exhausted the historical mission which Auguste Comte or Karl Marx, in a different sense, entrusted to them at the beginning of the last century. Because the passions that set them against one another almost destroyed them, they even doubt the words for which their grandfathers endured four years of martyrdom in 1914–18. Today, Gulag, the emblem of total tyranny in the name of total liberation, weighs, a remorse and a threat, on Communist parties (at least in Western Europe) and paralyzes mass ideological movements of the left or the right. The memory of Hitler and the persistence of Soviet totalitarianism do not protect the European West from its own demons: workers revolt against the rationalization of production, against the uprooting of communities that are the victims of economic growth, and against the disintegration of society under an invading State. Better than any other, the Italian people can survive without a State and in a kind of anarchy. But for the Italian people also, there are limits to patience—limits that France or Germany would rapidly reach.

With their mission accomplished (on the assumption that this teleological or quasi-theological language is acceptable), have the European nations no longer anything to say or do? Are they condemned to vegetate in the mediocrity of comfort and of the middle class, slaves of progress-reaction? Drawn into themselves, half-united for the purpose of prosperity but incapable of acting together on the world-stage, will they submit willingly or be forced to submit to an Empire which utilizes science but disowns its inspiration? An Empire at once despotic and ideocratic that will at all costs combine scientific method in arms production with a pseudo-scientific superstition in order to perpetuate an omnipotent oligarchy?

In spite of everything, "progress" leaves us with one hope. Despotism requires an educated work force: scientists, engineers. It cannot close its borders to radio and television, to the images coming from the world outside. To be sure, data processing will permit control of the entire population, individual by individual—it makes possible the nightmare of 1984. But Europe's progress has not been solely

or essentially that of machines; it has also been the progress of science and individuals. Thanks to Prometheism, a growing portion of the population is gaining access to the opportunities of liberty.

The pressure of technical rationalization and the religious desert incite and renew revolts. Are Europeans perhaps better immunized against the totalitarian temptation than others? More and more isolated within a league of States that scorn the rights of man as we conceive them, in action and often in thought, Europeans appear weak in the face of the totalitarian empire. But they retain a strength that Solzhenitsyn underestimates, the strength of liberalism, tried and vigorous, which rests on no foundation other than the conscience of the individual.

Perhaps Spengler is right, and pitiless decadence is striking at formless and godless urban and commercial civilizations. Perhaps Toynbee is right to hope for a Christian and even a Catholic revival to rescue the West from the final fall toward which it is moving. The forecasts of historians are no more certain than the prophecies of sooth-sayers. Science and economic prosperity have given societies the means to enlarge their circle of citizens. The ideas of the Enlightenment that stem from the Greco-Christian tradition are still alive in the theory of the rights of man. They recover their lustre and youth in the experience of revolutions.

Reason "will not put an end to the tyrants of heaven and earth," but her struggle with them will endure as long as a strange animal species keeps aspiring to humanity.

Translated by Violet M. Horvath

Notes

1. B. H. Lévy, *Barbarism with a Human Face* (New York: 1979), p. 130.
2. These are the words of Marcel Mauss.