THE DEMOCRATIC CYCLE

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A STUDENT of western history who passes at a stride from the eighteenth to the twentieth century finds himself faced with a strange and startling contrast. The eighteenth century was called the Age of Reason, or the Age of Enlightenment. We do not yet know what title posterity will bestow on our age, but, if appropriate, it can hardly be flattering. We seem to have passed from the age of reason to the age of madness, barbarism, and anarchy.

A closer examination, if it softens the contrast, does not destroy it. The eighteenth century was marked by three great movements which promised to revolutionize every phase of intellectual activity and social life. Through the scientific revolution man had discovered not only a new heaven and a new earth, but a new moral and intellectual approach to himself and society. Creeds gave way to scepticism, sin became only ignorance. Making all due allowance for religious movements and individual piety, we can say that the Age of Faith had yielded to the Age of Reason. Idealists looked to rational progress to produce the kingdom of heaven on this earth, with a foundation of solid material blessings.

Those blessings were being rapidly produced by the economic counterpart of the scientific advances. By the eighteenth century man knew the secrets of the world he lived in as never before, and he was rapidly turning his knowledge to power and wealth. He was making more and better things than ever before, seeking his materials and selling his goods over the entire globe. From the sixteenth to the twentieth century this economic advance continued, with that rapid acceleration of pace in the eighteenth century that is commonly called the industrial revolution. The net result was to make people more comfortable, and to make them value comfort more highly. Asceticism gave way to materialism. Luxury, especially on this continent, has sometimes been confused with civilization.

Simultaneously with these great intellectual and economic developments, the democratic movement was coming to the surface. The true essence of modern democracy is the high value placed on the individual as a member of society, regardless of any accidental attributes. A slogan of the French Revolution

—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—expressed the idea well enough. All men are free, all are equal, all should live as brothers. The philosophy has many roots in European civilization, of which perhaps the most important is the Christian philosophy. However, the revolutionary explosion in France was more immediately attributable to scientific rationalism and the power of industrial wealth. Both put a premium on individualism. The democratic movement became an assertion of individualism against arbitrary authority.

Thus the eighteenth century offered mankind for faith, reason; for asceticism, materialism; for authority, individualism. The bad old world of the divine right monarch, sometimes tyrannical, always absolute; of the state church, sometimes persecuting, always dogmatic; and of the aristocracy sometimes oppressive, always privileged, received its first great shock with the French Revolution, and the work of demolition proceeded cheerfully thereafter. There were few to point out that, in spite of its vices, it had the virtues of stability, harmony, and at least a lip service to Christian morality. Men were obsessed with the idea that the destructive tendencies of eighteenth century thought and action were merely the first signs of a new and great creation in human society.

The well-informed radical of the eighteenth century who tried to peer over into the twentieth might well have contemplated a utopian world. Intellect would be highly and universally cultivated, thanks to freedom of thought, the scientific technique and the disappearance of bigotry. Miracles of science and industrialism would enable the masses to live in health and comfort and security. Wars and oppression would have ceased in a human society based on freedom, equality and brotherhood.

Given the eighteenth century radical premises of the power of reason and the essential goodness of man—and these premises have been accepted into our own time—the picture is a perfectly reasonable one. That twentieth century reality provides a very disconcerting contrast, cannot be denied. The day of universal intellectual enlightenment is not yet here. At best, ours is an age of superficial academicians and highly trained technicians; at worst, one in which any assertion of intellectual power and integrity consigns to the unspeakable horrors of the concentration camp. The day of plenty is not yet here. Science and industry have worked their marvels, but the best minds of the age are now uniting them in the production of instruments of

death and destruction. These instruments do their work so well that in spite of vast increases of wealth and a steady rise in the standard of living during the nineteenth century, famine and disease are now widespread, and increasing restrictions universal.

Finally, what of the crowning hope of the eighteenth century, the overthrow of absolutism and the birth of peace and freedom? For divine right monarchs we have substituted the dictator. The state church is abolished, and we worship the race and the class. The aristocracy is gone forever, but the Party is with us. Arbitrary morality and the sin that goes with it are things of the past; for the present the *Führer* is always right. This is the "New Order" which replaces the abominable "Old Régime". It may be said that the democratic world does not accept these things, and is fighting an all-out war to eliminate them. It is none the less true that the democratic world has tolerated these things, has allowed them to develop until they are typical of our age, and in resisting them can boast so far only of maintaining anarchy and desolation as at least a lesser evil than the new order.

This, then, is the riddle of modern history. We recognize the beginnings of modern society in the scientific, economic and political movements of the eighteenth century. At that time the signs all seemed to be pointing in the direction of a free, prosperous and peaceful society. In the twentieth century, after a hundred years of steady and apparently prosperous development, we find ourselves in a ghastly *impasse*—a horrible distortion of the worst vices of the old régime which, supposedly, were gone forever. Assuming the historian's axiom of cause and effect, we must conclude either that the revolutions of the eighteenth century were bad in themselves, or that society took a wrong turning somewhere in the nineteenth century.

It is safe to assume that intellectual activity and material progress are not bad in themselves. For the purpose of this discussion it is also assumed that the democratic philosophy is not fundamentally erroneous, but constitutes a notable advance over old-fashioned absolutism. Following these developments through the nineteenth century, we can also assert that scientific and industrial advance have more than fulfilled the most optimistic expectations of the preceding period. The failure, then, must be a political, and consequently a moral one.

Nineteenth century politics can be understood only in their relation to economic and scientific developments. A few

superficial observations are suggestive. During this period material comfort and enjoyment increased, but they rested on a highly complicated system of world trade, subject to dangerous friction; and they were accompanied by increasingly obvious contrasts of poverty and wealth. Science made great progress in all fields, and scientific techniques and discoveries influenced intellectual and moral attitudes. Of all the sciences biology was the most widely popularized, and evolutionary theories were on every tongue. It is perhaps permissible to connect this fact with the revolutionary movements based on the worship of strength and of race which constitute the politics of the twentieth century. The art of politics in our age seems to have succumbed to the science of biology.

Bearing in mind these general developments, we may discern some logic in the political progress of the century. Early in the period three typical movements are discernible—liberalism, socialism and nationalism. At the outset each one is closely connected and entirely consistent with the democratic philosophy. By the end of the period, and through a seemingly natural process, each one is totally at variance with the democratic spirit.

Liberalism or political individualism emphasized civil and political liberties within the state, and international equality without. At its best, it was a noble assertion of human dignity and freedom; at its worst a selfish atomization of society, and a negation of democracy, because it ignored the principle of fraternity. It was seen at its best in many heroic struggles for freedom in the last century. It was seen at its worst in the isolationism of almost all so-called democratic countries which wrecked the League of Nations.

Socialism, in theory the economic counterpart of liberalism, in practice tended to work in opposition to it, because in a highly developed industrial society it involved the regimentation which liberals disliked. As the growing economic cleavage increased the appearance of a class struggle, the evolutionary philosophy of the age took a hand and helped to produce the revolutionary communism which, in its initial stages at least, is diametrically opposed both to liberalism and to democracy.

Nationalism at first went hand in hand with liberalism as an assertion of the self-determination of peoples against the old absolute empires of Austria, Turkey and Russia. As the century advanced, however, new nations and old empires became dominated by economic ambition, and national pride became

not an assertion of freedom, but an assertion of race superiority. Nationalism over the whole world, west and east, degenerated into an imperialism which, differing in fashion and degree, had nevertheless an essential sameness—greed for wealth, pride of race, and the instinct for domination.

Thus, by the close of the nineteenth century, the ideal of reason was rapidly giving way to the ideal of force. Economic advance, instead of setting man free from material obstacles to intellectual and moral progress, led to a worship of material things involving service and subjection. Everywhere the biological attitude of life was winning.

The war of 1914-18 hastened the process. It was not the final overthrow of the old absolutism by democracy. It was the first round between the new doctrine of force and race and the old one of reason and humanity, and it was brought on by the weakness of the so-called democracies as well as by the errors of their opponents. The democracies, having won, had a last chance to try to organize society on the principles in which they professed to believe. They failed because they were too comfortable and too lazy. Having failed, they watched with an air of patronizing complacency the growing strength of states openly dedicated to an overthrow of the whole democratic way of life. The totalitarian state is based on the absolute domination of one group, whether it be race or class, over all others, and on brute force. Each of these two principles constitutes a denial of the great moral and social discovery of the eighteenth century —the value of the individual. The democratic cycle had passed from absolutism through individualism to a tyrannical domination nominally by the masses, actually by a gang of fanatical autocrats. Through these depressingly logical stages we are compelled to trace the degeneration of eighteenth century idealism.

If the democratic philosophy is sound in theory, when and how was the mistake made? The answer seems obvious. The change from the old régime to the modern world was made in a revolutionary fashion, and the worst of revolutions is that they tend to destroy the good with the bad. Eighteenth century revolutionaries destroyed tyranny—and discipline; aristocracy —and *noblesse oblige*; persecuting churches—and religion. Having discarded God, man proceeded to worship Reason, his own distinguishing characteristic, as he thought. Self-worship is always dangerous; it may even become ridiculous.

The last century and a half of western civilization seems to be epitomized in G. B. Shaw's *Fanny's First Play*. A young lady of irreproachable background attended a revival meeting, and they told her she was "free". She felt free; for the first time in her life, she knew she was free, and the sense of her freedom so overcame her that she set out to enjoy the night life of London and ended by knocking down a policeman. For this exhibition of freedom she was given thirty days. She did not complain; nor should we. The moral in both examples is obvious: freedom in an individual or a society is dangerous and harmful unless it is dedicated to an object above and beyond itself.

The remedy, it is assumed, lies not in an acceptance of totalitarianism, but in correction of the initial error. "The deepest sickness of the modern world lies in its lack of any genuine conviction of truth," according to a recent commentator on international affairs (*Causes of the Peace Failure*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). In any system whether mathematical or political, there must be movement from an axiom to an object. The democratic axiom has been called "a facile optimism in human nature that has proved false". Its object was freedom and social betterment. All moral dogma being "soft-pedalled", that was easily translated into egotism and material progress. The result promises to be slavery along with material and moral disaster. It is a truism to say that self-government may be as bad as absolutism or worse. There is no moral safety in numbers.

The old régime stood, at its best, for absolutism along with common moral standards accepted and enforced; the nineteenth century antithesis was liberty, with the assertion of the dignity of the free individual. The danger of the one is tyranny, and of the other, anarchy. If twentieth century democracy cannot produce a synthesis in the form of freedom and individual worth translated in terms of common moral standards accepted and enforced, it will suffer annihilation, and justly.