# Egalitarian Anti-Modernism

W.D. James

*"Anti-modernists are those who feel the modern turn was a fundamental mistake. Any critique that does not go that deep, in my opinion, does not go deep enough"*

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# FOREWORD

Outright opposition to modernity is often dismissed as backward-looking or "reactionary" and associated with a rigidly hierarchical or aristocratic outlook.

But there is another tradition of resistance to the modern world that has very different ideals and can serve as the basis of an old-new radical philosophy of natural and cosmic belonging, inspiring humanity to step away from the nightmare transhumanist slave-world into which we are today being herded.

In this important series of ten essays, originally published on the Winter Oak website between October and December 2023, contributor W.D. James, who teaches philosophy in Kentucky, USA, explores the roots and thinking of what he terms "egalitarian anti-modernism".

Paul Cudenec, January 2024

# PART 1: WAS JERUSALEM BUILDED HERE?

*And did those feet in ancient time*
*Walk upon Englands*[i] *mountains green:*
*And was the holy Lamb of God,*
*On Englands pleasant pastures seen!*
*And did the Countenance Divine,*
*Shine forth upon our clouded hills?*
*And was Jerusalem builded here,*
*Among these dark Satanic Mills?*
– William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1808

To us living in the postmodern world, perhaps the greatest question is: was modernity, with its promises of enlightenment, liberation, and progress, the fundamental great leap forward of human history or its greatest blunder? Those who give the latter response we can term 'anti-modernists'. Anti-modernism is, politically, often associated with reaction, oppression, and fascism[ii]. While this can sometimes be the case, I would suggest that there is a whole other anti-modernist tradition characterized by a respect for traditional and indigenous ways of knowing, a nostalgia for organic community, and an ethical commitment to egalitarianism and freedom. William Blake would stand tall in this tradition.

In this and the several essays which are to follow, I would like to point to and explore this

'egalitarian anti-modernist' tradition. What is it? Which thinkers belong to it? And what vision and values does it propagate? To get to answers to those and other questions though, a good bit of preparatory groundwork needs to be done. The rest of this essay will be devoted to that.

**What is 'modernity'?**

This is something of a vexed or at least contested question. On the one hand, I'll assume the liberty to highlight what I think are the fundamental characteristics of modernity and on the other depend on my choices being defensible from our historical vantage point of looking backward from our perspective within postmodernity, or late-stage capitalism, as Frederic Jameson termed it.[iii] I will present modernity as resting fundamentally on a basis of philosophical nominalism which then informs certain fundamental social structures and practices. Next, I will elucidate several subordinate traits stemming from those structures to flesh out the picture and, finally, note several alternative modernities which have not survived.

By 'philosophical nominalism' I mean the radical shift in metaphysics (the aspect of philosophy having to do with the fundamental and ultimate nature of what exists) associated with the medieval philosophers Peter Abelard and William of Ockham. Essentially, what they argued was that 'universals' don't exist. By 'universals' they meant that common nouns like 'human' or 'table' don't actually refer to anything that exists, but that these nouns are just 'names'

(hence, nominalism, from the Latin 'nomen'-'name') we give to things for convenience or utilitarian purposes. To get at why this matters, we'll focus on the first example.

Most prior philosophers (and, indeed, most pre-modern peoples) were what are called 'realists' in this regard. That is, they felt that 'human' referred to something that actually exists (though not concrete): such things are real. Mary, Bob, and Alejandra are individuals, but they genuinely share in something we could term 'humanness' or 'human nature'. They are really, fundamentally, united in this shared reality. Nominalists, by contrast, asserted that Mary, Bob, and Alejandra were really all that exist, and referring to them as all being 'human' is just a linguistic custom. This may seem to be merely an academic issue in the most abstruse sense, but it has profound real-world consequences.

While the turn toward philosophic nominalism might have offered lots of new opportunities, it also presented some fundamental challenges. *We can see modernity as the attempt to build social and existential order on a nominalist basis*. The realist, starting from the belief that there is a shared human nature, began from an assumption that we have fundamental things in common, that there is a natural law (a way of being and behaving according to our shared nature), and that community is part of what 'fits' us. The nominalists, on the other hand, recognizing only the reality of a multitude of individuals with nothing real uniting them, faced serious challenges about how to organize their understanding of the world and human societies.

Looking back, we can discern a set of human practices and structures that proved serviceable in organizing people without reference to any transcendent or shared nature or purpose. Historically, these have become hegemonic in the modern world.

In the realm of knowledge, modern, technologically oriented, science became the primary producer of respectable knowledge. Modern science starts from nominalist assumptions. There are no abstract realities that organize nature and entail any sort of natural purposes. There are only the myriad of individual concrete entities which we may classify as we wish and as suits our self-chosen ends. In fact, the postulating of human ends guides all scientific endeavors. How does this thing look to us (vs. how is it in itself)? How can we come to intervene in natural processes, and thus 'conquer nature'? When Francis Bacon asserted that "knowledge is power", he specifically and very literally meant this sort of scientific knowledge aimed at technological control. In *The New Atlantis* (1626), he outlined the future project of modern science to be gaining "the knowledge of Causes; and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible." "All things possible", indeed. Never mind whether all things possible are good. In short, we get the disenchanted world of "standing reserve" where nature is laid bare (think of that in terms of the old understanding of 'Mother Nature') and subjected to our purposes. William Blake termed this the "single vision" of "Newton's sleep", from which he prayed

we might be spared. We can more neutrally term this 'instrumental rationality.' You get a lot of control and technological progress. But at what cost?

In the realm of politics you get liberalism, in the strict sense of a politics founded upon individualism (remember, only individuals actually exist; as Margaret Thatcher notoriously proclaimed, "there is no such thing as society"). This might take the form of a Lockean liberalism where individuals join themselves together, via a 'social contract', to form a limited government to protect their individual rights or of a Hobbesian version where individuals contract to establish a mighty Leviathan to protect them from one another in the "war of all against all". Either way, 'society' is equally a construct, a political technology, people use to organize what was not naturally organized. Here we get our modern notions of individual freedom, but also our experience of the 'atomized individual', 'alienation', and 'nihilistic' fantasies like consumerism and insane fixations on individually constructed 'identities'. Ultimately, with nothing to genuinely unite them beyond the technological states they create to govern themselves, one way or another, the state becomes the master and the people the administered mass. We get Blake's:

*The hand of Vengeance found the Bed*
*To which the Purple Tyrant fled*
*The iron hand crush'd the tyrant's head*
*And became Tyrant in his stead.*

The “Purple Tyrant” is the tyranny of royal monarchy. The “iron hand” is the Leviathan, the machine, we set up to replace the monarch. It overcomes monarchy (perhaps referencing specifically the regicide of Charles I in the English Civil War), but “becomes Tyrant in his stead.”

In the realm of economics, we get capitalism. Through Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” markets will assign value and organize production and consumption through virtually an infinite number of individual transactions. There are no overarching moral norms to govern our economic lives, only the economic ‘survival of the fittest’. As Marx recognized, this inhuman structure does lead to unheard of productive capacity. As we also recognize, it does not recognize any moral or natural limits to the exploitation of the natural world or of human beings (which really have no qualitatively distinct status given ‘human’ doesn’t refer to anything *real*). Here we have Blake’s “Dark Satanic Mills” where there should be “Mountains green” and “pleasant pastures”. Humans are just ‘standing reserve’, or ‘human resources’, as is everything else. Human beings as gods (masters of nature) end up reducing human beings below the level of human beings. There is a dialectic for you.

Finally, in the realm of ethics, or about the only kind of pseudo-ethics you can construct on this foundation, we have utilitarianism. ‘Happiness’ is reduced to ‘pleasure’ (which is supposedly empirical and quantifiable), and we somehow are supposed to derive an ‘ought’ that would lead us to whatever would produce,

according to Jeremy Bentham, "the greatest happiness for the greatest number". While you can formulate prescriptions on that basis, what in the world would compel you, as an individual among other individuals, to sacrifice your own interest to this interest of the greatest number? To paraphrase the friend of Adam Smith, David Hume, there is nothing irrational in preferring the desolation of millions to the pricking of your own thumb. As Blake lamented, "God forbid that Truth should be confined to Mathematical Demonstration."

To fill out our picture of what constitutes modernity or the modern world we can note several other phenomena which seem characteristic of these hegemonic formations. For instance:

- The centrality of the metaphor of the 'contract' in the organization of the political and economic spheres. What else would be the basis of two distinct individuals cooperating?
- The development of 'bureaucratic' structures to technologically coordinate human activity. There is nothing about human beings as distinct material objects to yield them immune to technological control.
- The development of 'propaganda' to "bring order out of chaos". Propaganda forms the "executive arm of the invisible government", to quote Edward Bernays, one of the first theorists of this 'science'.
- Technological development *and* dominance.
- The application of technological knowledge to production, yielding 'industrializa-

tion.'

- The ideal of 'rational autonomy', derived from Immanuel Kant, but which given the realities of bureaucracy, propaganda, technology, and industrialism, ends up amounting to a consumerist and scripted fashioning of individual identities.

We can see all of these as more or less necessitated developments to impose an order upon the metaphysical disorder introduced by nominalism.

Did modernity have to end up with this particular hegemonic regime? Maybe, maybe not. There were attempts to construct other modernities. Marxian communism was one. Marx sought to build on the accomplishments of bourgeois modernity a social reality that would exploit the productive capacity unleashed by liberal, bourgeois, capitalism to social and human ends. Historically, that option has failed to be realized and is largely seen as discredited. Another was fascism. Fascism attempted to replace, functionally and psychologically, the vanished organic community with the totalitarian state and a nationalist identity. Typically, fascist regimes sought to restrain and channel the energy of industrial capitalism in a more socially harmonious direction via 'national socialist' or 'corporatist' means.[iv] Yet, again, history has not been kind to the survival of fascistically organized regimes.

For all intents and purposes, I will assume when defending a version of anti-modernism, that modernity consists of the hegemonic dominance of a framework characterized by

liberalism, capitalism, instrumental rationality, and utilitarianism along with the subordinate ordering structures noted.

## Anti-modernisms

So, what will constitute a type of thought as being 'anti-modern' as opposed to 'postmodern' or 'critically modern' (where I would situate Marx; affirming much of the modern while trying to critique it so as to produce a more humane or more rational outcome)? Central to this is a rejection or critique of having made the modern move in the first place.

Such thinkers will then, firstly, appeal to the preferability of either (a) a pre-modern form of social organization (such as medieval or tribal structures) or (b) a primordial reality held to be superior to modern conceptions (as reflected in a notion of Nature or of Mythology). The positive attributes of this pre-modern situation will be used, secondly, to critique modernity and to prescribe a solution that draws upon and re-establishes these pre-modern values. This does not necessarily necessitate a *return* to a pre-modern condition, which we could legitimately describe as 'reactionary', but which at least draws upon those pre-modern or primordial realities to formulate an improved alternative to modernity. I'm sure this sounds rather abstract, but we'll seek to fill in details as to how this looks, more concretely, as we examine specific anti-modern writers in future essays.

Among those who adopt an anti-modernist stance, we can then make a fundamental

distinction. Such writers will tend to fall into either 'egalitarian' or 'aristocratic' camps. Perhaps this reflects an allegiance to one or the other of the primary social classes of the feudal order: the peasants or the nobility.

Aristocratic anti-modernists will typically uphold the values of nobility, strength, will, hierarchy, and power. Joseph de Maistre and Thomas Carlyle might be seen as the founders of this strand of anti-modernism. Though it is a sticky question whether Friedrich Nietzsche was anti-modern, later aristocratic anti-modernists will tend to draw upon him. In this camp we can situate such thinkers as Julius Evola, Ernst Junger, and Alexandr Dugin. Often 'anti-modernism', *per se*, is equated with this strand of thought. Though even here, simply labelling it 'fascist' (as part of the contemporary regime's smearing campaign) is at least simplistic, if not misguided. For instance, Evola claimed to be to the *right* (!) of fascism, Junger was a Conservative Revolutionary, but explicitly anti-Nazi, possibly to the point of participating in the failed attempt by German higherups to assassinate Hitler in 1944 (though the circumstances surrounding this are still historically murky), and Dugin (regularly labeled a fascist in the media) explicitly rejects the label and actually has a highly developed and interesting *anti-racist* anthropology. Be all that as it may, this is one fundamental anti-modernist option.

Egalitarian anti-modernists, on the other hand, tend to emphasize organicism, communalism (what Paul Cudenec terms 'withness'), the intrinsic inestimable value of each unique

person, a preference for what is common (in the double sense of what is shared and of what is lowly), cooperation, freedom, the dignity of actual producers, and a wholistic approach to nature and our embeddedness within her. The fathers of this strand of thought are Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Blake. Other seminal thinkers would include folks like Henry David Thoreau, John Ruskin, William Morris, Leo Tolstoy, GK Chesterton, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mahatma Gandhi, Simone Weil, Jacques Ellul, JRR Tolkien, Ivan Illich, EF Schumacher, and Wendell Berry. This is the *alternative* anti-modernism it will be my task to outline, explore, and defend in what is to follow.

In future essays, I will explore several of these thinkers in-depth. At this point in history, it should be pretty clear to us that we have collectively taken a very wrong turn somewhere along the line. My belief is that this set of thinkers (and others like them) can help us gain a better understanding of how deep our problems lie and to recover a vision of a humane and free future we might work towards. First resistance, then creation.

i This is Blake's spelling, not the more common 'England's.'

ii The association of fascism with anti-modernism is often wrong, or at the very least, the question is complicated. See Zeev Sternhell's *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (1994) for a discussion of fascism's embrace of modernity, especially of aesthetic Futurism.

iii I follow Jameson in seeing 'post-modernity' as more an end-stage, final, or ultimate development of the modern, and hence not really after it.

iv See *The Doctrine of Fascism* by Benito Mussolini (and ghost co-authored by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile) where he explicitly argues that the State creates the People, and is, hence, ontologically superior to the People and is to be overtly "totalitarian": The doctrine of fascism : Mussolini, Benito, 1883-

1945 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

# PART 2: JEAN-JACQUES AGAINST THE PATHOLOGIES OF CIVILIZATION

*…two contrary tendencies are to be traced in everything, the one descending and the other ascending, or, in other words, one centrifugal and the other centripetal.*
– René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) can be thought of as the first egalitarian anti-modernist. What distinguishes Rousseau from many anti-modernists is that he was writing so early that modernity was not yet fully formed. So, he cannot formulate an overall picture of modernity to compare to a pre-modern or primordial alternative. He is writing from within the emergence of the modern world and critiquing many of the developments and trends he sees going on. For this same reason, unlike most later anti-modernists, he is not careful to adopt philosophical principles that are not themselves entangled with modernity. Hence, he mostly operates within the same philosophical framework of nominalism and individualism that characterized the 17th century social theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, that we looked at in the preceding essay.

What distinguishes Rousseau's thinking is not that he was adopting a completely anti-modern theoretical framework from within which

to operate (though we will see that he intuitively reverts to pre-modern exemplars and is not consistent in his nominalism), but that instead of employing the 'new modes' of thinking to defend emerging modernity, he uses them to critique those same developments and values. Rousseau's thought is especially pertinent to our time of transhumanism and the coordinated attack on 'nature' and all things natural or given. To recognize nature is to recognize stubborn facts and potentially natural purposes and limits to our activities. This seems to be what many in our current cultural moment find it most important to undermine. He teaches us a healthy distrust of human artificiality. He is especially good at identifying basic social pathologies that may be universal, but seem particularly characteristic of our modern civilization.

Rousseau was born in Geneva. While he left that city in adolescence, it remained with him and served as a model of a virtuous society. Jean-Jacques was nothing if not a 'complicated' personality. Though he never subscribed to the Calvinism undergirding Genevan society and politics, and though he was denounced and banished later in life by the Genevan authorities for his subversive and unorthodox ideas, he continued to identify himself as a 'Citizen of Geneva' in the preface to some of his works. What interested him about Geneva was that there was a measure of genuine popular rule, republican independence, and a moral, if rigid, citizenry.

He was at once both a participant in the development of new 'Enlightenment' ideas and

provided a radical critique of many of those same ideas. He was friends with many of the *philosophes* of the day (as the radical French thinkers were called), but also their intellectual enemy. He got into trouble wherever he went, usually being pushed into exile, and then quickly wearing out his welcome with whoever took him in, as was the case with the Scottish philosopher David Hume.

On the personal front, Rousseau had numerous affairs and engaged in other scandalous episodes. At about age 16 he was made the lover of the almost 30 year old Madame de Warens, a noblewomen who also hosted fashionable salons which provided his initiation into the intellectual currents of the day, in addition to whatever other initiations he was provided. He later took as his mistress, and common-law wife, a servant woman with whom he had up to 6 children; all of whom Rousseau had committed to the orphanage. From his uniquely unvarnished *Confessions*, we know this morally tortured him for the rest of his life. He did provide financially for her, her mother, and otherwise large family. Perhaps much of his diagnosis of the ways that 'society' can undermine individual authenticity and morality stem from first-person experience.

**Rousseau's basic stance**

As noted above, Rousseau operates largely within the parameters of a modern philosophical framework. He is a not altogether consistent nominalist and the individual is the basis of his political thought. He even carries on the 'state of

nature' and 'social contract' traditions established by Hobbes and Locke. However, his constant aim is to serve as an iconoclast of modern society, morality, and cultural norms. He is always animated by the attempt to recover some sort of simpler, more authentic, more moral and happier way of life.

We can get a sense of how he differs from these other early modern theorists by comparing their views of 'nature'. Hobbes put forth that our natural state was one of conflict and misery and the whole point of civilization and political power was to allow us to get out of our natural condition. Locke had a more sanguine view, but still thought that nature was filled with 'inconveniences' (essentially lack of security and settled legal structures), so that the move to the civil condition did not completely separate us from nature (we had 'natural rights' that we wanted to protect by setting up distinctly limited governments), but it was certainly not the ideal. Rousseau on the other hand holds out nature as a positive good. His natural human living in the 'state of nature' is strong, good (or at least not at all evil), at one with themselves, and most importantly, *happy*.

As Rousseau sees it, it is society, not something in human nature itself, that is the root of evil and our problems. He paints a picture of the human move to form societies, first very simple and more less beneficial, but containing the seeds that will grow flowers of evil as society becomes more sophisticated. Rousseau will argue that we lose much of human nature in society, especially a corrupt society, and structures of

domination develop as a result. He provides a merciless critique of the pathologies of domination and hypocrisy. He does not think we can return to our natural simplicity. He does think though that we could radically reform our social practices and institutions so as to regain a measure of simplicity, authenticity, virtue, and much more happiness than our current society allows.

Over this and the next couple of essays we will explore Rousseau's thinking in a good bit of detail, typically focusing on one major work in each. Here we will look at *The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, or simply *The First Discourse*,as it is sometimes called.

## "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences"

The story goes that Rousseau was walking to the outskirts of Paris to visit his friend Jean D'Alembert, co-editor with Denis Diderot of the *Encyclopédie*, a compendium of all useful knowledge and the centerpiece of the French Enlightenment project, who had been imprisoned by the authorities for his ideas and publications. Rousseau and D'Alembert were friends and intellectual sparring partners. Along the way he came across an announcement that the Academy of Dijon was sponsoring an essay contest. The proposed question was: "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts contributed to the purification of morals?" Rousseau later reported that "Within an instant of reading this, I saw another universe and became another man."

Essentially, the essay competition was an

invitation to provide a moral foundation for the Enlightenment expansion of human power. The very framing of the question, assuming that the arts and sciences were non-existent in the medieval world, begs the question. Rousseau chose to take up the contrary view that the Enlightenment was a catastrophe for human goodness, tranquility, liberty, and happiness. To their credit, the professors of the academy awarded him the prize for his essay and Rousseau commenced his career as an *enfant terrible*. Here he first lays out many of the themes that he will spend the rest of his developing and expanding upon.

## Domination

Rousseau starts with the observation that the arts and sciences, the fruits of the mind, can make life more pleasant. However, his skeptical suspicions immediately come to the fore. While the despotism of "the government and the laws" is more overt, an effect of the "sciences, letters, and arts" is that they "spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which they [people] are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, [and] makes them love their slavery…".[i] High civilization, while making life more pleasant in some regards, introduces customs of "politeness" and "propriety" which "give orders; without ceasing".[ii] So, while the arts and sciences of the Enlightenment might be adding something to human life, he asks us to question what are the negative effects? What are they covering up? Are

they really increasing our liberty or only making domination more bearable?

Perhaps Rousseau is wrong here, but he always sees a contrast between what people *naturally* are and what they become within society. That line of thinking can go wrong if we assume that people are not social by nature. However, if we interpret this as a distinction between what people are innately, regardless of social context, and then see this as the basis upon which we can evaluate whether a particular social structure has a more or less beneficial effect, it might be more useful. As we will see in more detail in the next essay, Rousseau sees society, especially modern European society, as a great danger. His ability to launch a profound critique of particular social formations is a great contribution Rousseau makes to our thinking.

## Authenticity and duplicity

Another important observation Rousseau makes is that our 'social selves' and 'our real selves' are often quite different. In other writings he will try to work out how to reconcile those. Here he is mainly interested in pointing out this fact. In the polite, enlightened, cultivated society of eighteenth-century France (for example) "One no longer dares to seem what one really is; and in this perpetual constraint, the men who make up this herd we call society will, if placed in the same circumstances, do all the same things unless, stronger motives deter them. Thus no one will ever really know those with whom he is dealing".[iii]

There is a lot going on here. For one, social domination and social inauthenticity are somehow bound up with one another. Secondly, Rousseau believes that it is through social pathologies that we seek to *appear* to be what we are not. We care about our 'image' in situations where the judgments of others will affect how well we prosper materially and even psychologically.

This doubles back to create incentives and structures to conform. It doubles back yet again to heighten our alienation: from others and even ourselves. The Rousseau of the *First Discourse* is still young and just getting his feet under him, but already his seductively suspicious intuitions are working their magic on us.

## Civilization and morality

Having made these initial observations, he is ready to take head on the question of the essay competition about the purification of morals. Rousseau roots the origins of the arts and sciences in a Promethean pride: "Astronomy was born of superstition, eloquence of ambition, hatred, flattery, and lying, geometry of avarice,; physics of vain curiosity; all of them, even moral philosophy owe their birth to our vices; we would be less in doubt about their advantages, if they owed it to your virtues."[iv]

Their effects include "undermining the foundations of faith and annihilating virtue."[v] Finally, they grow from the same ground as "Luxury" and contribute to its development: "Luxury seldom thrives without the sciences and

the arts, and they never thrive without it."[vi]

## Thoreau at Walden Pond

As these essays progress, I will throw side glances at other significant thinkers in the egalitarian anti-modernist tradition I am mapping to further flesh out the terrain. With Rousseau's emphasis on Nature, simplicity, and authenticity, I think of Henry David Thoreau's (1817-1862) experiment at Walden Pond. Thoreau adjourned to the pond, just about a mile outside the town of Concord, Massachusetts, where the American war of independence had commenced, to see how authentically one could still live in the face of rising industrialism. Thoreau wrote: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived…to live so sturdy and Spartan-like was to put to route all that was not life…"[vii]

He too wanted to question civilization: "If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man, and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages, it must be shown that it produces better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I shall call life which it is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run."[viii]

And on luxury: "It is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow… if he [the average man]

resigned himself to their tender mercies he would soon be completely emasculated".[ix]

Thoreau states that he hoped to escape the hustle and bustle of overly active social life and rediscover the sort of Principles that were worth living by. He seems to have found some. When his thoughts turn back outward to society again, as they do in *On Civil Disobedience*, he is ready to take his stand. He asserts: "I heartily accept that motto, 'That government is best which governs least;' and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, 'That government is best which governs not all;' and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient…. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it."[x]

**On reading Rousseau today**

Rousseau's logic in the *First Discourse* can be summed up as follows: as civilization increases in sophistication, the more it increases in disparity and oppression; the more it does this, the less virtue there is; as virtue decreases so does human happiness. It is the logic of exposing how things go wrong and end up subverting their aims. He is good at bringing into focus the pathologies that can develop in society. He is also

good at showing how deep the political reaches: into the psyche and into our identify formation. Hence, social pathologies become individual pathologies; sources of inauthenticity.

He also breaks the hold on us of the modern superstition of unending progress and the notion that increases in sophistication and technology will necessarily serve the cause of human freedom and happiness. In the process, he reopens Nature as a possible source of value and inspiration. Who can better aid us in unmasking the pathologies of the transhumanism which would completely replace the natural with the artificial, the real with the make believe, the authentic with the inauthentic, the natural with the prescribed and enforced?

As Guénon observed in the opening quote, here in our ordinary world, all movements toward decay and disorder generate movements in the opposite direction, towards recovered order. We can see Rousseau as a contrary force called forth by the Enlightenment project itself. Perhaps we are starting to see similar healthful signs in our own time of cultural insanity and societal suicide.

i Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, translated and edited by Donald A. Cress, Hackett Publishing, 1987, p. 3.
ii *Ibid*, p. 4.
iii *Ibid*, p. 4.
iv *Ibid*, p. 11.
v *Ibid*, p. 12.
vi *Ibid*, p. 12.
vii Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, Edited by Joseph Wood Crutch, Bantam Books, 1962, p. 172.
viii *Ibid*, p. 128.
ix *Ibid*, p. 132.
x *Ibid*, p. 85.

# PART 3: ROUSSEAU AND THE EVILS OF INEQUALITY

*The cosmos is desacralised*
*Now the world must be rebarbarised*
*The cosmos is desacralised*
*And the world must be rebarbarised*
*Now the world must be rebarbarised*
– Alisdair Roberts, *Ned Ludd's Rant*

*Can we still remember ourselves…?*
– Paul Cudenec, *The Withway*

In *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men* (1755), or simply *The Second Discourse*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau gives us, as the title states, an examination of how social inequality came about. Really, though, he gives us much more. He lays out a social psychology of *oppression*. He gives us a critical theory which unmasks inequality as an institutional and structural artifact. Rousseau's anti-modernism comes out, in this essay, in the fundamental antitheses he sets up. First and foremost is his distinction between the *natural* and the *social*. Building on this, he further distinguishes *Being*, what is, or what we are, from *appearing*. As Alessandro Ferrara observed, "Rousseau

formulates his critique of modernity as a critique of the effects of a social production based on competition." [i]

His fundamental mistake is failing to recognize the essentially social nature of human beings. Here he falls into the same error as Thomas Hobbes (though John Locke at least seams to sidestep this), of whom he is otherwise a staunch critic. Here we see, as mentioned in the previous essay, how Rousseau still operates largely within the intellectual horizon of modernity, but turns his critical acumen against that very development. This work was also, like the *First Discourse*, written in response to an essay competition. This time Jean-Jacques did not win. Perhaps the judges had prudently lost their spines. Here Rousseau set out to, as he puts it, "defend the cause of humanity".[ii]

**Rousseau's 'state of nature'**

Rousseau starts by distinguishing what he terms "natural or physical" inequality from "moral or political" inequality. The former refers to differences of age, health, physical ability, and mind. The latter refers to inequalities of wealth, honor, and power and require the "consent of men", that is, they depend on social and political institutions.[iii] All modern defenders of the legitimacy of the inegalitarian *status quo* will

need to show that the latter somehow stem from the former. Rousseau's task is to refute that. So, in developing his theory of the 'state of nature', what Rousseau is wanting to do is bring into focus what inequalities are just *given* or baked into the situation (they are 'natural') and which are subject to critique. That people are unequal with regard to age is not a matter of moral or political critique, that they are unequal with regard to wealth is.

He asserts that people like Hobbes, in attributing characteristics such as competition and aggressiveness to human nature (situating it within the 'state of nature') actually make the mistake of taking traits that only emerge in society (and are therefore, not innate) as natural. He intends to be more careful. Rousseau describes what he sees as the natural human being: "…*I see an animal that is less strong than some, less agile than others, but, in sum, formed in the most advantageous way of all. I see him satisfying his hunger beneath an oak, quenching his thirst at the first stream, making his bed beneath the same tree that furnished him his meal—thus his needs are satisfied!*"[iv]

He lives "a way of life that is simple, constant, and retiring, as nature has prescribed."[v] Rousseau is often criticized for his naïve view of the natural goodness (or at least simplicity) of human nature and of romanticizing the 'noble

savage'. However, this sort of critique misses what Rousseau is actually doing here. He is only trying to distinguish what is innate in human nature from what varies from society to society. That which varies we can rightfully hope to improve upon.

We have the picture of a creature very little raised above other animals. He or she just wanders about the natural environment satisfying their felt needs as they go. They experience thirst, but nature provides many opportunities for slaking that thirst. They experience the sexual urge, but nature is likewise generous here. His point is that what is innate in the species is not hard to satisfy, so there is not much need to compete to satisfy our innate needs and, hence, there is not much of an ineradicable basis for conflict. There is nothing in humans, as long as they stay near these basic, simple, needs and pleasures, to disrupt the situation and, hence, their happiness is secure (their needs being satisfied).

What fundamentally sets this creature apart from others is their freedom (note; not their rationality, *pace* most Enlightenment thinkers). While with other creatures "nature alone directs everything in the life of the beast [via instinct], while man in his role as free agent partakes in the process."[vi] Freedom is natural and essential to human beings. It enables us to cooperate with

nature. As he will famously note in *On the Social Contract* (1762), "Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains."[vii] That is essentially Rousseau's summary of the *Second Discourse* to launch the argument of the later work.

There is one other thing though which marks out this species; its tragic flaw, if you will. That is his "*faculty of self-improvement*" which is "the source of all man's miseries".[viii] Here is where the ironic, insightful, and iconoclastic Jean-Jacques enters in. Here, in the human capacity underlying the Enlightenment, indeed, the whole modern project, even the civilizing project itself, lies the source of our miseries, not our beatitudes. It is from the human capacity to imagine something better, to see something as a problem to be solved or an inconvenience to be removed, the shadow side of our very freedom, humans will not just remain 'natural' but will develop social and cultural 'progress'.

But wouldn't our desire for self-preservation (the basis of the right to life in both Hobbes and Locke) itself be sufficient to introduce conflict and war into the natural state? For Rousseau, no. Because, though he fully recognizes that we will by nature seek to defend ourselves, this is balanced by the no less natural (innate) sense of "pity".[ix] Rousseau observes this is not completely unique to humanity but can be seen in many other animals. This manifests itself in the

reluctance to harm one's own kind when there is no compelling reason to. This is so deep in our bones that it exists prior to reflection—it just is a part of us. "Constrained by both instinct and reason to protect himself against the harm that threatens him, he is restrained by natural pity from doing harm to others unless he is compelled to do so, even if he has been harmed…."[x]

In this situation, how human beings would be by nature alone, there is also no basis for the oppression of some by others: "A man might seize the fruit another has gathered, or the prey he has killed, the den he has used for refuge—but how will he ever succeed in making the other obey him, and what would be the fetters of dependence among men who possess nothing?"[xi]

So, there is no basis for the relatively minor 'natural' inequalities to rigidify into structures of domination. However, in social life, magnified inequalities supported by institutions is what we see everywhere.

Rousseau's anti-modernism is implicit here. Whereas Hobbes and Locke had presented Nature as that which we must leave behind to fulfill our human nature and seek our happiness, Rousseau takes the exact opposite approach. It is in nature that we are most ourselves and most happy. The simpler we can make things, the better.

## The fall of natural man and the birth of oppression

"The first man who fenced in a plot of land and dared to say, 'This is mine,' and found people who were sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society."[xii]

Proudhon essentially echoes Rousseau when he declares "Property is theft." But it is also more than that. What could have led to a human being, as Rousseau has described him, to conceive of "mine" and to stake out exclusive rights to the detriment of his "simple" neighbors?

Here we'll track, in outline, Rousseau's account of the Fall of Man. With the capacity for reflection, humans first come to awareness of their species and its unique abilities. This ignites the first inklings of pride (which proverbially is the root of all evil and comes before a fall- Rousseau seems to agree). This initial sense of self (as an object of esteem), combined with the 'faculty of self-improvement', leads people to give more care to their lodgings (first, simple huts) and tools (a simple stone axe). This births a sense of ownership and also encourages 'settling down'. On Rousseau's reckoning, this "first revolution"[xiii] encourages more prolonged cohabitation, eventually resulting in the formation of families which bring with them "the sweetest feelings known to man: conjugal love

and paternal love."[xiv]

This largely salutary change tragically brings in its train untold misfortunes. The increased stability of life creates the first opportunities for *leisure*. This is our "first yoke" according to Rousseau.[xv] We are able to create conveniences which soon turn into necessities we can't live without. We will willingly take upon ourselves unceasing labor which our 'natural' nature abhors. We'll soon start creating cultural artifacts to entertain ourselves and our friends in our leisure time: songs and dances. Here for the first time genuine social competition will emerge. Some will be better singers and dancers. They and their friends will perceive themselves as such. They will wish to excel, to increase their esteem in their own eyes and in the eyes of their associates. "Shame and envy" make their appearance on the human scene.[xvi] Now, in this social state, we have a basis for competition and conflict: "everyone claimed a right to it [esteem], and it was no longer possible to deprive anyone of it with impunity."[xvii]

Soon people start to see the advantages of a division of labor and of laying up additional provisions. Per Rousseau: "But from the moment one man needed the help of another, as soon as men realized that it was useful for an individual to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property was introduced, work became

necessary…[and] one soon saw slavery and poverty sprouting and growing along with the harvest."[xviii]

Then arise skills and technologies. More and more specialization, 'progress', and inequality and misery. The debacle continues to unfold: "All the natural qualities have been put to work, and the rank and fate of every man is established, not only in relation to the number of his possessions and his capacity to help or harm, but also in relation to mind, beauty, power or skill, and merit or talent. Since these qualities were the only ones that could attract esteem, it soon became necessary either to have them or to pretend to have them. It was indispensable for one's own interest to present oneself as being different from what one in fact was. *Being and appearing became two entirely different things*, and from that difference arose ostentation, deceitful cunning, and all the vices in their train" (my emphasis).[xix]

Then, from our striving to excel our associates, by hook or by crook, arise the perpetual seeds of civil war which necessitate the creation of 'justice': law, the judge, and the executioner.

This is all to lock in the advantages accruing to the strong over the week, the rich over the poor.

## The spirit of freedom and the modern world

For Rousseau, the simpler the society and the closer to nature people live, the more freedom they retain. It is here on the margins that he sees some residual of natural liberty: "the barbarous man does not bow his head to the yoke that civilized man bears without a murmur, and will prefer the most turbulent freedom to tranquil subjection."[xx] So he does look to 'savages' as, in this sense, more noble. He also clearly prefers rural people to urban and small virtuous polities to large cosmopolitan ones.

This allows him to come to the conclusion that "By giving up freedom, man denatures his being…".[xxi] In later works he will attempt to outline a politics and theory of education to rehabilitate as much liberty as possible in the civilized state. Ultimately attempting to repair the gap between appearing and being.

Here, he contents himself with making sure we know just how locked in we are. Our leaders, who officially should be working toward social harmony and the common good, instead cynically pit groups of citizens against one another to maintain their positions at the top. They will seek policies that: "might give society an air of apparent harmony while [actually] sowing the seeds of real division; anything that can inspire the different social orders to mutual distrust and

hatred by pitching their rights and interests against those of the others, and consequently strengthening the power that restrains them all."[xxii]

What better insight into our contemporary socio-political cauldron? 'Virtue' that is no virtue. 'Inclusion' that aims at exclusion and division. 'Freedom' that secures the shackles. 'Safety' that harms. 'Equality' that solidifies inequality. 'Democracy' that censors, persecutes, and cancels anything and anyone that challenges the elite, and which can't abide the outcomes of elections.

**The Withway vs. the COVID regime**

I sense that same Rousseauian love of freedom and hatred of cynical political manipulation in the following passage from Paul Cudenec's *The Withway: calling us home*: "We could compare *their* power with *our* empowerment; *their* desire for control with *our* need for freedom; *their* lust for quantity with *our* quest for quality; *their* emphasis on price and profit with *our* commitment to value and fair exchange; *their* life-hating fetish for artificiality with *our* love for nature within and without; *their* twisted addiction to lies with *our* gut feeling for truth; *their* shallow, fragmented and subjective outlook with *our* profound and all-embracing organic vision; the ugliness of *their* world with the beauty of the

archetype *we* hold in *our* hearts."[xxiii]

While that work certainly has profound value beyond the context of the COVID-19 epidemic and the near global COVID regime put in place, it is, to me, marked by its particular relevance to that (and still this) moment.

Cudenec laments the "epidemic of fear and despair [that] has been sweeping the world since 2020, with liberties abolished, livelihoods lost, childhoods ruined, families divided, communities splintered, hearts broken, dreams shattered and lives left in ruins."[xxiv] Lord, hear our prayer.

His anti-modernism is explicit in his conclusion: "the nightmare imposed upon us under the New Normal is the logical conclusion of our departure from the natural order of the Withway and the domination of power, greed, money and industrial Technik."[xxv]

COVID, less as a disease and more as the set of policies and structures put in place to putatively combat the disease, has proven a watershed moment in our awareness of our political and existential situation. All the pathologies Jean-Jacques carefully delineated for us have been on full display.

Rousseau similarly concludes his discourse: "…we are left only with a deceitful and frivolous façade, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness. I think it sufficient to have proven that this is not the

original state of man, and that it is only society's growing sophistication and the inequality that society engenders that have changed and debased our natural inclination."[xxvi]

i Alessandro Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, State University of New York, 1993, p. 29.
ii Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Essential Writings of Rousseau*, translated by Peter Constantine and edited by Leo Damrosch, The Modern Library, 2013, p. 12.
iii *Ibid*, p. 12.
iv *Ibid*, p. 17.
v *Ibid*, p. 21.
vi *Ibid*, p. 25.
vii *Ibid*, p. 93.
viii *Ibid*, p. 25.
ix *Ibid*, p. 39.
x *Ibid*, p. 58.
xi *Ibid*, p. 47.
xii *Ibid*, p. 50.
xiii *Ibid*, p. 54.
xiv *Ibid*, p. 55.
xv *Ibid*, p. 55.
xvi *Ibid*, p.57.
xvii *Ibid*, p. 57.
xviii *Ibid*, p. 59.
xix *Ibid*, p. 63.
xx *Ibid*, p. 72.
xxi *Ibid*, p.75.
xxii *Ibid*, p.83.
xxiii Paul Cudenec, *The Withway: calling us home*, Winter Oak, 2022, p. iii.
xxiv *Ibid*, p. 144.
xxv *Ibid*, p. 147.
xxvi Rousseau, p. 86.

# PART 4: ROUSSEAU'S REVIVAL

*Ya'll got to have religion, yeah, I tell ya that's all*
*Now he can go to college*
*Go to the schools*
*Haven't got religion he is an educated fool.*
– Sister Rosetta Tharpe, *That's All*

How does religion fit into egalitarian anti-modernism? Really, there is great diversity here. Some, like GK Chesterton, will want to bring forward pre-modern religious traditions. Others will reject institutional religion in total, but seek spiritual values elsewhere. For instance, William Morris is enamored of the Middle Ages, but not so much with its Roman Catholicism. He sees value in the craft guilds, gothic architecture with its forms taken from the natural world, and the examples of plebeian resistance to oppression manifest in peasant rebellions. None accept the thinned down, mercantilist, and basely materialist worldview of modernity though. Rousseau represents an option somewhere between these poles.

By traditional standards, Rousseau is a religious radical. By Enlightenment radical standards, he might be a bit conservative. Jean-Jacques' religion (or the religion he advocates) is

along the lines of Enlightenment Deism. However, one senses he means it a bit more. He was born and raised in the Calvinist atmosphere of Geneva, but converted to Roman Catholicism when, as an adolescent, he moved to France and came under the influence of Madame de Warens, who served as his lover, while also fulfilling many of the functions of a mother. *C'est la vie*.

He outlines a basic philosophy of religion, consistent with reason, but drawing more on emotion and intuition than typical of the *philosophes*. Though he was persecuted as an innovator in the religious sphere, in the intellectual context within which he is operating, I rather think of Rousseau as shoring up a basis for the continuing relevance of religion in the modern world. He is convinced that a simple, but substantive, religion is necessary for both social and individual order and flourishing. Not to mention, to liberty. He is far from being a fundamentalist, but he isn't a secularist either.

**Civil religion**

In the last chapter, save the one paragraph "Conclusion," of *On the Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau takes on the issue of civil religion. His thought here has been influential on the likes of Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*) and other recent communitarian thinkers. Here he lays out

a basic typology of the ways in which religion can be related to civic life. He goes to pains to discountenance Christianity as a viable civil religion based on both its exclusiveness and its 'other worldliness'. However, he also is sure to distinguish what he takes the be the true religion of the Gospels from institutional, historical, Christianity (more on this later).

For Rousseau, the basic function of a civil religion is to "make him [the citizen] love his duty…".[i] The requirements of civil religion, though, should not go beyond what is necessary to reaffirm humanity's "sociability". To this end, he outlines the basic "positive dogmas" of a good civil religion: "The existence of a mighty, intelligent, and beneficent Deity who is prescient and providing, the existence of the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, and the sanctity of the social contract and the laws [representing the 'General Will' through radically democratic mechanisms].[ii]

The sole "negative dogma", the only prohibition, is against "intolerance."[iii]

The purpose of Rousseau's civil religion is essentially to provide the metaphysical framework within which it makes sense to perform one's social duties when temptations exist to do otherwise. He gets that the just do not always prosper here below and the oppressor is not always checked. He feels the need, for the

workability of civil society, that citizens believe some fundamental truths of the moral life. *Ultimately*, justice pays. *Ultimately*, the evil do not prosper. Even modern societies need these 'old fashioned' notions to form a suprarational social glue. Reason alone is not a sufficient basis for sociability and just order. While Rousseau sees society arising out of a 'social contract', he sees that as not sufficient to maintain good social order and liberty. People need a vision of the goodness and coherence of existence itself to guide their social practice. Here Rousseau is clearly passing beyond the nominalist framework of his contemporaries.

**Personal faith**

In that part of the *Emile; or On Education* (published in 1762 and publicly burned in Paris and Geneva that same year) known as 'The Savoyard Vicar's Profession of Faith', Rousseau outlines what he claims is the statement of faith of a Roman Catholic priest whom he knew; possibly the priest that accepted him into the church. However, it is widely held to be Rousseau's own statement of his personal faith.

He presents the priest as a person with "common sense and a profound love of truth."[iv] He deduces just a small number of theological presuppositions. His method is pragmatic; what

is helpful and not contrary to reason will be adopted. These dogmas are the immortality of the soul and the existence of a Supreme Being. The immortality of the soul ensures, as does his civil religion, the opportunity for the good to find consolation (at least in the eternal memory of having done well, whatever the temporal consequences) and the evil to regret their evil actions. Existence needs to make moral sense if we are going to live meaningful lives.

The Supreme Being undergirds a trust in the fundamental order of Nature and existence. Things make sense, morally and intellectually. Of primary importance for Rousseau is the reality of Conscience. We can assume God intended mankind to be free (since we experience free will and love liberty). Reason is not a sufficient guide to life; it "deceives us too often".[v] "Conscience is the voice of the soul, passions are the voice of the body".[vi] Thus Jean-Jacques, betrayer of his own progeny. Yet, we should note, Conscience, not Reason, plays the ultimate role of providing guidance in our moral lives. It is in following the dictates of Conscience, which includes that natural "Pity" Rousseau saw deeply imbedded in our nature, that our liberty and our sociality can be reconciled. Rousseau would have agreed with the sentiment of the American Blues icon quoted at the opening of this essay. Religion does not fit well with Enlightenment modernity,

but it is far from clear that we can navigate satisfying and coherent lives or build cohesive and just societies without some sense of the ultimate to undergird our moral sentiments.

**Rousseau's Russian disciple**

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) recognized his debt to Jean-Jacques. I see in his account of his faith, a development along the same lines, though into deeper territory, of the path started by Rousseau. In his *A Confession* (1880), Tolstoy recounts the loss of his childhood faith. An aristocrat, he added fame and notoriety (with the likes of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* to his credit) to noble birth and enjoyed all the sensuous pleasures of life. Yet, he felt life was nihilistic and was driven to the verge of suicide. He noticed that the poor simple peasants working his estate had no such malady, and though economically and materially challenged, possessed a strong conviction that life was good and lived lives of meaningful purpose.

This set Tolstoy to inquire into the faith of his serfs and to study the religious faiths of the world's many civilizations. He comes to the conclusion that "rational knowledge" only undermines meaning. He identifies an "irrational knowledge," that he terms "faith," which can sustain his need for meaning.[vii] For Tolstoy,

'faith' is largely the ability to affirm 'life' despite reason's condemnation: "where there is life there is faith."[viii] Faith is the affirmation of life, which goes deeper than our discursive reason. A 'Yes' to existence from which we may then reason fruitfully, but a commitment that does not itself result from reasoning.

Tolstoy's method was to look to the people he could not avoid seeing were 'good', then try to believe and as they lived. He equally discerned goodness in the Russian peasantry and in the great religious teachers like the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Mohamed. He eventually came to outline a universal faith he felt was characteristic of all good people. In "What is Religion" he recounts how, under the light of eternity and infinity, he came to understand the brotherhood of all people and, hence, the supreme value of love. This is the core of his Christian anarchism. He understands 'religion' as whatever binds a person to the infinite and eternal, and, hence, to the affirmation of life which is really an affirmation of existence. It is only in the light of this ultimate existence that fundamental human equality and value can come to the light (for the simple reason that by any finite standard of measure we are in fact *not* equal, not equivalent, but quite different).[ix]

Like Rousseau, he comes to believe that luxury can be enjoyed by some only at the

expense of oppressing others. In works such as "Religion and Morality" and "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," he articulates how he sees 'morality' as the deduction of necessary consequences of behavior from the perspective of 'religion' (and religion, so understood, as the necessary basis of morality). We are related to ultimate existence (which is good). Acceptance of this affirmation is faith. The way of life that stems from that is morality. It is this basic religion which centers the ethic of love that both Tolstoy and Rousseau understood as the simple 'Gospel' faith, as distinct from institutional Christianity.

**Rousseau and egalitarian anti-modernism**

According to Tracy B. Strong, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary* (1994), the key to understanding Rousseau is to see he is attempting to rescue 'ordinariness'. He is exploring the space between our isolated selves (Nature) and the transcendent. This is the space where we live out our lives with others and try work out what it is to be human.

Rousseau thinks this can best be done by keeping in touch with what is common, in the double sense of shared and ordinary. It's not in the fancy logic of the professional experts or the fancy theology of the theologians. It's not in the

'high culture' of the educated. It's in the simple longings of the heart and the innate goodness of ordinary people. This is how he set about to "defend the cause of humanity." The fully human entails liberty, for ourselves and others. It entails achieving authenticity and overcoming hypocrisy and oppression. It entails recovering the simple virtue of 'natural man', 'barbarians', and 'peasants.'

To do any of that will require a fundamental rejection of many of the sacred cows of modernity, and of all of its lies, and nothing short of a revolution. Rousseau has kickstarted a tradition of radical critique that still helps us see to the heart of modernity and see through its pretentions to glimpse a more wholistic alternative. In the essays which follow, we will now begin to look beyond Rousseau to later egalitarian anti-modernists.

i Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Essential Writings of Rousseau*, translated by Peter Constantine and edited by Leo Damrosch, The Modern Library, 2013, p. 226.
ii *Ibid*, p. 226.
iii *Ibid*, p. 226.
iv *Ibid*, p. 270.
v *Ibid*, p. 276.
vi *Ibid*, p. 276.
vii Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, translated and edited by Jane Kentish, Penguin, 1987, p. 50.
viii *Ibid*, p. 53.
ix *Ibid*, p. 91.

# PART 5: WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BEAUTY

*Beauty will save the world.*
– Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

## Morris, Carlyle, and Ruskin

William Morris (1834-1896) was an artist (a founder of the Pre-Raphaelite movement), craftsman, epic poet, utopian, fantasy writer, entrepreneur, and practical communist propagandist, perhaps best known for his wallpaper designs. His close friends and associates included the likes of artists such as Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rosetti, literary figures of the rank of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, as well as the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, Karl Marx's daughter Elinor Marx, and social revolutionizer and sandal promoter Edward Carpenter.[i] He looked to the past to gain inspiration for an innovative future. The house he and architect friend Philip Webb designed and decorated, Red House, exemplified this in its mixture of mediaeval and renaissance features and sparsely modern and functionalist features such as its open and flowing first floor interior. As a founder of the Arts and Crafts

movement, all his designs incorporate a simple and hardy roughness, along with an appreciation of nature, with the boldly innovative.

According to his biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, "Morris's true originality as a thinker and practitioner springs from this radical idea of the absolute centrality of art."[ii] She claims his vision "involved the complete dismantling of the stultifying structures of society and their replacement by a freer, more equable and fluid way of life."[iii] Morris saw art as growing naturally from the attempt of free practical producers to make their artifacts beautiful, whether those artifacts were cathedrals, wardrobes, bowls, books, or wallpaper. He set about to discover what were the necessary preconditions of this creative, satisfying, and human mode of production and then to theorize the economic and social revolution necessary to establish it. His guiding model was always the free medieval guild craftsperson.

His intellectual predecessors were Thomas Carlyle (1795-1891) and John Ruskin (1819-1900). As noted in the first essay, I would class Carlyle amongst the aristocratic anti-modernists. This is because he works on the assumption that elites will govern masses, but is highly critical of modern, capitalistic elites. He calls for the restoration of a genuinely virtuous aristocracy. He introduced contemporary German romanti-

cism to the English-speaking world; a version of what has been called 'natural supernaturalism'. In works like *Past and Present* (1843) he contributed to the revival of interest in medievalism, along with others such as Sir Walter Scott. In that work he contrasts the leadership of a monastic abbot (via an exploration of a recently discovered manuscript from the medieval abbey of Bury St. Edmunds) to the lack of moral leadership in the contemporary world of *laissez faire* and abdication of moral responsibility by elites. That he was then a primary inspiration for the likes of Ruskin and Morris shows us that the lines between various forms of anti-modernism are somewhat porous: the Spirit moves where it will.

Morris saw figures like Carlyle and Ruskin as great harbingers of light in the otherwise dreary landscape of Victorian mercantilism and philistinism. Ruskin's influence came through two main sets of ideas. Of secondary importance was Ruskin's forays into political economy in works like *Unto This Last* (1860) and *Fors Clavigera* (written as a series of letter to the British workers in the 1870s; apparently the British working class was well versed in Latin). In that work he identified himself as "a Communist of the old school."[iv] He was being hyperbolic in that appellation, but his student would be rather more literal. In these works,

Ruskin critiques contemporary capitalism from a deeply moral and humanitarian perspective. Here Morris could find the roots of many of his ideas about what was required to make laboring a worthwhile and humane endeavor.

What in Ruskin's ideas really excited Morris though was his aesthetic ideas. Morris later pointed, especially, to a single chapter in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), a work on the medieval architecture of that city, entitled "The Nature of Gothic." In that chapter, Ruskin identifies what he calls the "moral elements of Gothic" as being:

1. Savageness
2. Changefulness
3. Naturalism
4. Grotesqueness (think of gargoyles)
5. Rigidity
6. Redundance [or generosity][v]

What he saw manifesting itself in the Gothic style, which he called "Christian ornament" and "Christian architecture," was the creativity and personality of the laborer. There were no strict forms to be obeyed. There was room for experimentation and even failure. Ruskin himself had an unorthodox, to say the least, relationship to religion. He was probably not a believer in any ordinary sense. Yet, he saw that Christian civilization had freed up and given expression to the creativity of the ordinary artisan (contrast this with the geometrical

perfection of classical Greek and Roman architecture which permitting of no deviation; work fit only for slaves, which in fact the workers mostly were). What was wrong, from this perspective, with self-righteous Victorian civilization, was that it was actually no longer Christian. It had degraded "the operative into a machine"[vi] which carried any number of social evils in its wake. He demanded a revolution in manufacture that would enable workers to realize their humanity. Morris picks up all of Ruskin's themes and runs with them. In this essay we will focus on a couple of his essays and in the next we'll turn to his literary works.

**The political economy of beauty**

In the 1894 essay, "How I Became a Socialist," Morris states his guiding animus: "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization".[vii] There he points at the role of art in a socialist revolution when he observes that modern "civilization has reduced the workman to such a skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for any life much better than that which he now endures perforce. It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him…".[viii]

As something of a sidenote, it is interesting to think of Morris in relation to Marx as that has historically been a debated and contested topic. "Orthodox" Marxists have tended to be critical of Morris, seeing him as rather 'utopian' in the Marx/Engels sense and not having anything worthwhile to contribute to revolutionary theory while also falling into a number of heresies. While Morris was not really a philosopher and certainly not an economist (in any technical sense), he did attempt a real engagement with the ideas of Marx, including a study of *Capital* (1867). What is important to keep in mind is that in the 1880s and 1890s there was not yet, for better or worse (I tend to think better), an orthodox Marxism; there were just exciting ideas that people were engaging with and making use of as they do with any really vital set of ideas. A Marxist can probably sense hints of problems of 'ideology' and 'class consciousness' and the 'immiseration of the proletariat' in this passage, but certainly 'alienation' is what is being described. In fact, alienation is perhaps Morris's greatest social theme. Yet, in the works of Marx that were available to him, alienation is not a central theme (though it is there). The early works where we get our ideas of what Marx thought about alienation were still unpublished manuscripts. Perhaps he had gotten some insight into other concerns of Marx from Elinor, but it

seems more likely to me that he was thinking along a lot of the same lines and developing ideas afresh which Marx had also thought, but not published.

In "Useful work versus useless toil" (1893), Morris outlines what he takes to be the minimum prerequisites for good work (work that is good for the worker and work that produces good things). He observes, "it has become an article of the creed of modern morality that all labor is good in itself—a convenient belief to those who live on the labor of other."[ix] He disagrees and insists there is both good work and bad work. Good work has within itself "hope": "hope of rest [not ceaseless overtoil], hope of product [that is owning and using it], hope of pleasure in the work itself [because it allows for the exercise of mind and soul as well as body]."[x]

At the center of Morris's political economy is a reformulation of 'wealth'. He writes: "Wealth is what Nature give us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, food, raiment and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and the power of disseminating it; means of free communication between man and man; works of art, the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful—all things which serve the pleasure of people, free, manly, and

uncorrupted."[xi]

To some extent, he is shifting the focus of wealth from, in Marx's terms, 'exchange value' (the price a commodity will bring on the market) to 'use value' (the actual utility of an item). But he's doing quite a bit more than that. Here what is aimed at, what is of real value, is the fulfillment of the human capacity to create beautiful things and live beautiful lives.

## Beauty and freedom versus catastrophe and control

Morris is a visionary. That is not a bad thing. It does not discountenance his ideas. His vision of the future is appealing. It is built on the fundamental realization that we desire to live in a beautiful world, surrounded by beautiful things, and that beauty is only produced out of freedom. While he is relatively sober about the need for a genuine political revolution to bring about the future he envisions, the vision itself is life affirming in every way.

This establishes a nice contrast with many of our contemporary, so-called, visionaries. I have in mind the likes of Klaus Schwab and Bill Gates. When is the last time you heard one of their ilk say they wanted to make the world and human existence more *beautiful* or more *free*? They do not. Their vision for the future is rooted

in another pairing: catastrophe and control. Their vision grows not from the soil of human aspiration but from the belief that humanity is not worthy of aspiration. Humanity only inaugurates catastrophes. I certainly don't deny the existence of human caused catastrophes. I'm only interested in what are the wholesome inspirations for a human future that will require massive change? There is nothing very life affirming in the futures marked out by the Great Resetters. In fact, you can tell they actually hate life. What they love is control. When you start from catastrophe you have to aim towards control. You must *fix* things and more fundamentally you must *fix* the flawed human material that inaugurated the catastrophes. You get visions of surveillance cities. You get visions of carefully managed scarcity and austerity (well, except for the Schwabs and Gateses I suppose). And what is it about our needing to eat bugs that so enthralls them (or maybe they've moved on to lab-meat; tasty)? Perhaps it's just that there won't be anything else to eat once they finish killing all the cattle to lower carbon emissions.

They drive me to think of C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* (1943), a cautionary tale about the rule of technocrats not well grounded in a solid humanistic ethos. At the opening of the final chapter, he quotes Bunyan: "It came burning hot into my mind, whatever he said and

however he flattered, when he got me home to his house, he would sell me for a slave."[xii] There is no eating of insects in Morris and one does not suspect the intention of enslavement.

i Sandals were an exotic import from India, associated with health and naturalness, and wearing them was akin to being a promoter of free love.
ii Fiona MacCarthy, *Anarchy and Beauty: William Morris and His Legacy 1860-1960*, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 9.
iii *Ibid*, p. 39.
iv John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings*, edited by Clive Wilmer, Penguin, 1985, p. 294.
v *Ibid*, p. 79.
vi *Ibid*, p.86.
vii Included in William Morris, *News from Nowhere: or An Epoch of Rest: Being Some Chapter From 'A Utopian Romance'*, Dover, 2004, p. vii.
viii *Ibid*, p. ix.
ix William Morris, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, LM Publishers, no publication date given, p. 7.
x *Ibid*, p. 9.
xi *Ibid*, p. 18.
xii C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1974, p. 53.

# PART 6: WILLIAM MORRIS – DREAMING OF JUSTICE AND OF HOME

*Hidden somewhere ahead of us is the fair valley of Rivendell in the Last Homely House.*
– J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

In this essay, we'll look at two imaginative works by William Morris, both of which are presented as narrating 'dreams'. The first is *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), which recounts the rebel priest who played a role in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the second is his utopian romance, *News From Nowhere* (1890). In both, Morris plays on the double meaning of 'dream': as both what may happen while we sleep and as an aspiration. I'll suggest that the first can be read as representing the aspiration for Justice and the second for Home.

**The dream of justice**

Little is known of the historical John Ball beyond the facts that he was an important leader of the Peasants' Revolt and was imprisoned for heresy, possibly along the lines of the Lollards, and eventually hanged and drawn and quartered in

the presence of the king. Probably the most famous line in Morris's version is taken from an account of a sermon the historical Ball preached in Kent: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"[i] He went on to argue for a radical egalitarianism.

Morris's novella is fast paced and masterful, after a fashion. It includes many observations on the architecture of medieval Kent as well as loving descriptions of the local *flora* and *fauna*. Morris in fact had a keen appreciation and understanding of nature and loved to move about England observing the regional variations and admiring the ancient churches. In the opening of the story, he takes a swipe at "the sordid utilitarianism that cares not and knows not of beauty and history."

If the historical Ball was something like a Lollard, he was probably less mystical than he is presented as in Morris's portrayal. The Lollards did have some egalitarian tendencies, at least in regard to the church. The main thing which seems to have gotten them in trouble though was their understanding of the eucharist. They put forward a version of the real presence (the doctrine that Christ is really present in the elements of the eucharist, bread and wine) known as *con*substantiation. This teaching basically holds that the elements materially remain bread and wine, but *spiritually* become

the body and blood of Jesus. In creating a division between the material world and spiritual world this represents a modernizing development. It is usually interpreted as a step toward Protestantism. This is in contrast to the orthodox doctrine of *tran*substantiation which holds that the essence of the elements changes to the blood and body of Jesus while the accidental properties remain those of the bread and wine (it has all the characteristics of bread and wine but is *really* the body and blood of Jesus). The Lollard doctrine is a step towards rationalizing faith while the Catholic doctrine is officially a *musterion*, a mystery.

However that may be, Morris places an interesting theology of solidarity into the mouth of Ball. To me, it has the ring of an authentic medieval heresy. In Chapter 4 he has Ball give this peroration: "*Forsooth, ye have heard it said that ye shall do well in this world that in the world to come ye may live happily for ever; do ye well then, and have your reward both on earth and in heaven; for I say to you that earth and heaven are not two but one; and this one is that which ye know, and are each one of you a part of, to wit, the Holy Church, unless ye slay it. Forsooth, brethren, will ye murder the Church any one of you and go forth a wandering man and lonely, even as Cain did who slew his brother? Ah, my brothers, what an evil doom this*

*is, to be an outcast from the Church, to have none to love you and to speak with you, to be without fellowship! Forsooth brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one you a part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane.*"

Morris has Ball reproduce the rhetorical pattern of Jesus in the New Testament with the structure: you have heard it said, but I say to you. Jesus does this when he is about to turn the world upside down. Contrary to the Lollard tendency, he is bringing heaven and earth closer together (probably too close to remain orthodox, hence the ring of authentic heresy). The "you have heard it said" portion is the view being attacked, basically, be obedient here on earth so that in heaven you may be rewarded.[ii] Ball argues that heaven and earth are one in the Church. Now, what is the Church? This turns on the meaning of 'fellowship'. This is a prominent word used in the New Testament to describe the life of the Church. In the Greek in which the New Testament is written, it is *koinonia*. Interestingly, this word is also central to Aristotle but always translated differently. The opening line of

Aristotle's *Politics* is often translated as "As we see that every city is a society, and every society is established for some good purpose…" or 'society' is translated as 'sharing'.[iii] However translated, the word there is *koinonia*. So, when the New Testament writers, and Morris's Ball, invoke 'fellowship', they are making two claims: the church is a polity and the essence of polity is sharing.

On this reckoning, 'the Church' = fellowship/sharing. Fellowship= heaven=life. Separation = hell = death. So, the true path (Morris's Ball is echoing the Hebrew/Christin 'two paths' tradition: life vs. death) is the path of fellowship/society/sharing. This is frankly impressive theological stuff Morris is dishing out here.

To drive the message home, Morris has Ball go on: "*Yea, forsooth, once again I saw as of old, the great treading down the little, and the strong beating down the weak, and cruel men fearing not, and kind men daring not and wise men caring not; and the saints in heaven forbearing and yet bidding me not to forbear; forsooth, I knew once more that he who doeth well in fellowship, and because of fellowship, shall not fail though he seem to fail to-day, but in days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be holpen by them to strive again and yet again; and yet indeed even that was little, since,*

*forsooth to strive was my pleasure and my life.*"

This entails the understanding that the 'strong' and 'cruel' are sinning against fellowship/sharing. For Morris's Ball, it is in fellowship that the earthly and heavenly draw together.

Morris is presenting a 'dream' of justice. What does fellowship entail? Not oppression and the triumph of the strong over the weak. The work of justice is to seek fellowship. The strong and the great seek not fellowship but dominion. They sunder the world apart.

## The dream of home

Now we turn to what is surely Morris's most famous work, *News From Nowhere*. I have to confess that I do not really like this book. It doesn't have a very sophisticated understanding of human psychology and, hence, I can't really see any society, even a utopian one, working as Morris presents it. It just doesn't 'work' or 'hang together' for me. Nevertheless, it does have its merits.

*News* is also presented as a dream had by a member returning from a Socialist League meeting. It is presented as showing what would happen on "the Morrow of the Revolution," that is it presents a picture of a fully mature socialist society.[iv] It is solidly in the classical utopian

tradition of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), though it is nowhere near so well crafted, funny, and interesting a book as that one. 'Utopia' can variously be translated as 'good place' or 'no place'; Morris's title reflects the latter. Like other literary utopias Morris presents the story from the perspective of a visitor being shown around an ideal society.

To me, there are primarily three things that stand out as noteworthy in the book. First, is its relationship to history. Usually, utopias present a hyper-modern view of life in the utopia: advanced technology, odd 'futuristic' clothing and architecture, etc.… Morris does just the opposite. His good society is not based on the 'progress' of technology, but on people seeking the good. That is a fundamental point. And, if the good is the objective, might it not be found as much in the past as in the future? Morris describes everything in his imagined society as beautiful. For him that basically meant pre-modern. So, the bridges and homes show very traditional influences, and a complete lack of modern utilitarianism, in their design. Morris describes the fashion of the first person he meets after having 'woken up' in the new world: "His dress was not like any modern work-a-day clothes I had seen, but would have served very well as a costume for a picture of fourteenth century life…".[v] Further, there is a *decrease* in the

amount of technology used. Only when there is some particularly hard or odious work that needs done is much technology employed. Most manufacture facilitates enjoyment of the work. It seems liberating to think we could borrow heavily from the good of the past as we build our future.

Second, Morris pays a lot of attention to nature and its beauty. As in *A Dream of John Ball*, he loves describing the plants and animals of the New England. It is part of his point that wildlife has bounced back and is abundant. He also enjoys describing the farming that occurs there and all the crops. Also unlike most literary utopias (but like most actual experiments in utopian community building), Morris's society is mainly rural and agricultural. Large cities are pretty much gone, replaced by human scaled communities with human scaled buildings. Further, while utopias are by definition human engineered and constructed things, a large part of what makes Morris's society appealing is the ever presence of nature. Morris is saying a good society would be as much about letting nature do what nature does as it is about humans actively doing things.

Third, while he uses some of the same devices as other writers of utopias to show the shift in values (for instance, gold is valued only as a good and beautiful metal to use in crafts, not

as a commodity, whereas More had actually had it used for bathroom fixtures, which is just funnier), he does make some sharp observations on the importance of this. In a discussion of love and sex, the person explaining these matters to the visitor explains: "You must understand once for all that we have changed these matters; or rather, that our way of looking at them has changed, as we have changed within the last two hundred years."[vi] He recounts how love and sex were entangled with property in the former times. Hence, there were divorce courts which were "lunatic affairs."[vii] In the comment above, he first suggested that love and sex had changed, but then corrected himself to say how they are thought of has changed. With the removal of private property, they are freed to be what they actually are and this can more clearly be seen from the new, socialist, perspective. So, be removing encumbrances and distortions caused by forms of domination, people can see and know the world more clearly.

Ultimately, the world of Nowhere is 'home' manifesting itself. Things are natural, not contrived. Beauty is attended to instead of calculation. Love, sex, and fellowship are allowed to develop naturally and form the focus of life together. Work is done as part of the natural rhythm of things in a way that is humanly pleasing.

## The politics of home

J.R.R. Tolkien was a big admirer of Morris, especially his fantasy novels which we have not looked at, such as *The Well at the World's End* and *The House of the Wolfings*. He paid homage by borrowing the names of some of Morris's characters for use in his own fiction, including the name Gandolf from the former book.

Tolkien too focuses on the theme of 'home'. The entire Shire of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* is an exploration of a people who value home. They have tidy, and, most importantly, comfortable Hobbit holes in which to dwell. They focus on the homely arts of cuisine and socializing. The whole drama of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy can be seen as a meditation on home and home under threat (by evil, by technology, by tyranny).

Tolkien's politics are sometimes referred to as 'anarcho-monarchism.' He basically thought some form of government was needed, but the medieval monarchs provided the best example by not governing very much. Below a symbolic unifying figure, there was not much government at all. He observed: "*…the proper study of Man is anything but Man; and the most improper job of any man, even saints (who at any rate were at least unwilling to take it on), is bossing other men... Not one in a million is fit for it, and least*

*of all those who seek the opportunity. At least it is done only to a small group of men who know who their master is. The mediaevals were only too right in taking* nolo episcopari *[literally, I do not wish to be bishoped] as the best reason a man could give to others for making him a bishop. Grant me a king whose chief interest in life is stamps, railways, or race-horses; and who has the power to sack his Vizier (or whatever you dare call him) if he does not like the cut of his trousers. And so on down the line. But, of course, the fatal weakness of all that—after all only the fatal weakness of all good natural things in a bad corrupt unnatural world—is that it works and has only worked when all the world is messing along in the same good old inefficient human way… There is only one bright spot and that is the growing habit of disgruntled men of dynamiting factories and power-stations; I hope that, encouraged now as 'patriotism', may remain a habit! But it won't do any good, if it is not universal.*"[viii]

Figuring how to get along "in the good old inefficient human way" may be the pursuit most relevant to our times.

**Liberty and the young**

I was struck last year when having a discussion with a group of my students on personal liberty.

It seemed to be their consensus, minus one libertarian law student and one traditionalist Catholic, that personal liberty was not a big issue. They accepted that they were heavily surveilled by tech companies and the government. This was the cost of the government keeping them 'safe.' As long as government upheld its end of the bargain, they were fine with it. Safety *über alles*.

At least since the rise of the modern administrative state we have probably been less free than we imagined. However, as an American, I was more used to people being jealous of their liberties. 'Don't tread on me!' My students are what we could properly think of as the COVID generation: they were in their high school and early college years during the period of lockdowns, mask mandates, and all of that. I tend to think that they are actually not so much enamored of totalitarian safety regimes as they would just like the world to be a bit more normal and they are trying to plug along (a very large percentage also seem to suffer from anxiety).

I'm not sure that people naturally value liberty. Or, at the least, any natural inclination in that direction can be diminished with proper education, propaganda, and conditioning. Of course, most regimes usually go to the trouble to try to disguise their tyranny; to disguise the chains or at least cover them with velvet. I think

that if we want young people to value liberty it would be best to educate them to value it. People like Morris and Tolkien could be very useful in that regard. Morris is trying to carry out the tasks of classical education dating back to Plato and Aristotle: to awaken and cultivate a love of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. It is in the pursuit of these that liberty is essential and gains its positive value. An education in liberty would have at least three components: love of goods worthy of pursuit, a critical understanding of the structure put in place to hinder that pursuit, an understanding of the practices of liberty. First resistance, then creation.

[i] William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*. My edition lacks publishing information and page numbers, so I will just note quotes using quotation marks or offsets.

[ii] I have no idea if this is the basis of the song, *The Preacher and the Slave*, by the Catholic anarchist and Wobby Joe Hill, but the idea is exactly the same. A nice version of the song can be listened to here: The Preacher and the Slave by Joe Hill – YouTube

[iii] Aristotle, *Politics*, Translated by William Ellis, Graphyco, 2022, p. 10.

[iv] William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, Dover, 2004, p. 1.

[v] *Ibid*, p. 5.

[vi] *Ibid*, p. 50.

[vii] *Ibid*, p. 49.

[viii] Quoted by David Bently Hart in "Anarcho-Monarchism,' *First Things*, 2010, Anarcho-Monarchism | David Bentley Hart | First Things

# PART 7: WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE WORLD?

*Strange things have happened, like never before*
*My baby told me I would have to go*
*I can't be good no more, once like I did before*
*I can't be good, baby*
*Honey, because the world's gone wrong*
– Bob Dylan, *World Gone Wrong*

Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton (1874-1936) fortunately failed out of the Slade art school. I say 'fortunately' because he gave no indication of becoming a great artists but he became a hugely entertaining and provocative journalist as a fallback choice. In his day, Chesterton was a staple of the famed Fleet Street where many of the London daily and weekly papers were housed, not mention of several of the neighborhood pubs. Chesterton developed a very unique style by focusing his writings on paradoxes and was known as quite a character about town. At well over 300 pounds, he struck a dramatic appearance in the antiquated cape he habitually wore. It is said that his walking stick contained a hidden sword and that he traveled with a loaded pistol. I don't know of any reports of him ever using either weapon, but he was ready. Ready for

what? For whatever a modern-day knight along the lines of Don Quixote might be called upon to do (he wasn't actually knighted until near the end of his life, by the Pope).

He wrote hundreds of pages per week for most of his long life, leaving a body of work that includes, in addition to journalism, numerous fabulist novels, epic poems, short verse, the hugely popular Father Brown classic detective stories, biographies of literary and religious figures, philosophy, apologetics, and probably several other genres I'm not thinking of right now. He publicly sparred with the likes of George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, both whom he apparently liked quite a bit while disagreeing with their 'progressive' and 'modern' views, and the affection was returned. His most famous intellectual ally was the writer and parliamentarian Hilaire Belloc. They worked so closely in tandem developing their criticisms of both capitalism and socialism that Shaw referred to them in the singular as The Chesterbelloc. Whatever he was writing and whomever he was sparring with, Chesterton always presented himself as the champion of the 'common man' and on the side of 'common sense.' In this essay we'll look at his criticism of 'the experts' and their new-fangled ideas in his 1910 book, *What's Wrong With The World*.

## Long hair

At the conclusion of this work, an all-out assault on the modern world, Chesterton brings the whole thing very down to earth. He writes: "*I begin with a little girl's hair. That I know is a good thing at any rate…. If other things are against it, other things must go down. If landlords and laws and sciences are against it, landlords and laws and sciences must go down. With the red hair of one she-urchin in the gutter I will set fire to all modern civilization. Because a girl should have long hair* [vs hygienically clipping it short because in her poverty she is susceptible to lice] *she should have clean hair; because she should have clean hair, she should not have an unclean home; because she should not have an unclean home, she should have a free and leisured mother; because she should have a free mother, she should not have a usurious landlord; because there should not be an usurious landlord, there should be a redistribution of property; because there should be a redistribution of property, there shall be a revolution. That little urchin with the gold-red hair (whom I have just watched toddling past my house), she shall not be lopped and lamed and altered; her hair shall not be cut short like a convict's. No, all the kingdoms of the earth shall be hacked about and mutilated to suit her.*"[1]

QED.

The argument, such as it is, of the book centers around a family, whom Chesterton calls the Joneses, who just want a decent life in a decent home, only to find the forces of the modern world are arrayed against them. Those forces are many, but G.K. introduces fictional characters to personify some of them, with names representing a homage to Charles Dickens, whom he loved. Chesterton imagines a scene of modern urban poverty. Then "there are, let us say, two noble and courageous young men, of pure intentions and (if you prefer) of noble birth; let us call them Hudge and Gudge."[ii] Hudge is a wealthy Tory and Gudge an idealistic socialist, but both are believers in modern technocratic governance.

Grudge set about creating a housing project for the impoverished denizens. Hudge donates generously, but the funds are still short, so the project has to be done "on the cheap". Soon all the poor are bustled into their "Brick cells". Both make reports to the government, Gudge reporting that the people are much better off now and Hudge arguing that they were happier where they were before. As the differently motivated technocrats argue it out, Grudge comes to believe "slums and stinks are really very nice things."[iii] As if to say, look at the very nice programs our humanitarian government

provides. Hudge, having footed the bill, likewise comes to think of what was originally meant to provide the most basic shelter is in fact more and more lovely and palatial. What was originally a good faith attempt to meet a real need under the demands of constraints, becomes in the eyes of those overseeing the project (all the powerful of the world), the epitome of what should be aspired to.

But Chesterton asserts that both have made a fundamental mistake: "neither Hudge nor Gudge had ever thought for an instance what sort of house a man might probably like for himself. In short, they did not begin with the ideal; and, therefore, were not practical politicians".[iv] What Chesterton is getting at here is that if you approach things like a modern technocrat, whether 'conservative' or 'socialist', and not from the perspective of ordinary people and families, you'll build a hell and be absolutely convinced it is heaven; for *other* people.

## The Jacobin reactionary

So, why do we need more idealists, and fewer technocrats, if we want to achieve practical improvement? G.K. asserts that social ideals have been replaced with a cult of "efficiency". He holds that as a result of this: "*There has arisen in our time a most singular fancy—the fancy that*

*when things go very wrong we need a practical man. It would be far truer to say, that when things go very wrong we need an impractical man. Certainly, at least, we need a theorist. A practical man means a man accustomed to mere daily practice, to the way things commonly work. When things will not work, you must have the thinker, the man who has some doctrine about why they work at all.*"[v]

In our modern world, no one bothers to think about what they really want but only about what they think they can get. Hence, nothing fundamentally changes or really gets done.

If we want to really get something done, we can look mainly to the past or mainly to the future. The future is a blank slate on which we write ourselves large. Chesterton argues that our vision for the future, if divorced from the past, is actually very narrow. If I have to reject everything that is past because it is past, what is really left for me to affirm in the future? Chesterton demands "complete freedom for restoration as well as revolution."[vi] He will not abide "the unnatural sense of obeying cold and harsh strangers, mere bureaucrats and policemen."[vii] Besides, past ideals have a certain epistemological advantage. If I want to reach some purely future ideal of X, not having experience X, how do I really know if I'm moving toward it or away from it? If I adopt a previous

ideal, one attempted, I and the rest of my neighbors have some good sense of what it was, where we approached it and where we failed, and hence might make some reasonable attempts to get closer to it yet. Chesterton does not hesitate to affirm his being a reactionary, in that he affirms the mad faith that what we have once done, we might choose to do again.

What might these past ideals be that we should consider picking up again and continue to work on? Chestrton calls them "The Unfinished Temple." They are Christendom and the French Revolution!! Or, we might say, 'holiness' and 'democracy'. Of course, every other modern 'reactionary', from Joseph De Maistre (1753-1821) forward, would hold these are utterly incompatible: it was the latter which was the enemy of the former. Not so for Chesterton, ever the aspirant Christian knight and ever the radical democrat (perhaps he understood more than most the core of the ideal of chivalry, that the powerful should serve God by using their power to shield the weak). He observes that we really haven't 'outlived' these old ideas, as the inveterate progressive would hold: "*Of course I mean that Catholicism* [Chesterton was currently an Anglican; his conversion to Catholicism would come a decade and a half later] *was not tried; plenty of Catholics were tried, and found guilty. My point is that the world did not tire of the*

*church's ideal, but of its reality. Monasteries were impugned not for the chastity of monks, but for the unchastity of monks. Christianity was unpopular not because of the humility, but of the arrogance of Christians. Certainly, if the church failed it was largely through churchmen…the great ideals of the past failed not by being outlived (which must mean over-lived) but by not being lived enough… the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.*"[viii]

As regards the other ideal, he observes that representative government is only a shadow of the "full republican ideal."[ix] For Chesterton: "*The theory of the French Revolution presupposed two things in government, things which it achieved at the time…. The first of these was the idea of honourable poverty: that a stateman must be something of a stoic; the second was the idea of extreme publicity….The old democratic doctrine was that the more light that was let in to all departments of State, the easier it was for a righteous indignation to move promptly against wrong. In other words, monarchs were to live in glass houses, that mobs might throw stones.*"[x]

Chesterton demands the right to be old fashioned. To be anti-modern. So as to realize worthy human ideals.

**Let's just undo it!**

Sixty years later, Ivan Illich (1926-2002), in his seminal work *Deschooling Society* (1970), made many of the same criticisms of technocracy as his predecessor. Illich was a priest, often associated with 'liberation theology', who traveled through much of North and South America, gravitating toward the poor and their communities.

He understood that, in the modern state, the 'poor' exist as a group to be 'administered' by technocrats. On his view, the 'institutionalization' of values always leads to their betrayal. Regarding institutionalized education, he observes: "*They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the ore treatment there is, the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is 'schooled' to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. Health, learning, dignity, independence and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the*

*institutions which claim to serve these ends…*"[xi]

He called for a "deinstitutionalization of values" in response. Technique operates in the mode of "expectation" (one can expect, predict, the outcome of a process) while the alternative operates in a mode of "hope". Illich clarifies: "Hope, in its strong sense, means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation, as I will use it here, means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man."[xii] We need to move from treating people like "products" to treating them like humans. Expanding the spheres in which we operate on human, versus bureaucratic or institutional, bases should be a fundamental egalitarian anti-modernist tactical objective.

## 'The Science'

Originally, the technocrats actually had to prove themselves. Frederick Winslow Taylor could actually increase efficiency in production. A relatively small cadre of bureaucrats actually could administer a large multi-ethnic state. Over time, the technocracy became institutionalized and proven competence was replaced with credentialling. One gained their spot in the technocracy not by actually proving competence but by obtaining a credential of competence. However, people still expected that the

technocracy would work technocratically: that it would operate according to data and results. At least there was some sort of tradeoff you got.

We've now moved to a new stage. Technocracy has become separable from the actual results it produces. We are to accept the assertion 'technocracy is good and technocrats are legitimate' *without any evidence*. Technocracy has become fetishized. Technocracy is holy and the technocrats are its high priests; neither must be questioned. The technocracy completed this development during the COVID pandemic. Whereas before, we would have said 'science says' and then would be able to point to empirical scientific research to support that assertion, now it was 'the science says' and that meant the issue was beyond the need to provide actual evidence or test actual hypotheses. The priesthood, the WHO, the NHS, the various national health agencies, were simply to be believed. Any scientist who wanted to operate according to actual scientific methodologies and maintain a scientific skepticism was immediately declared a heretic, a class traitor.

While Chesterton could grant that the budding technocrats were at least well intentioned, I'm not sure we can maintain that level of credulity any longer. All ruling classes seek to evade transparency and accountability. Makes it hard for the mob to become righteously

indignant. Yet, a class that can no longer give reasons for its predominance is nearing the end of its tenure.

i G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong With The World*, Sherwood Sugdon, 1910 (originally), pp. 215-216.
ii *Ibid*, p. 47.
iii *Ibid*, p. 48.
iv *Ibid*, p. 49.
v *Ibid*, p. 9.
vi *Ibid*, p. 25.
vii *Ibid*, p. 26.
viii *Ibid*, p. 29.
ix *Ibid*, p. 29.
x *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.
xi Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Marion Boyers, 1970, p. 1.
xii *Ibid*, p. 104.

# PART 8: CHESTERTON AGAINST SERVILITY

*And Daddy, won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County?*
*Down by the Green River where Paradise lay*
*Well, I'm sorry, my son, but you're too late in asking*
*Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away*
– John Prine, *Paradise*

In this essay we'll take up G.K. Chesterton's writing on 'distributism.' Distributism is an economic theory that has enjoyed minimal real-world application, but is quite interesting. By way of background, we need to keep in mind Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ('The New Things'; 1891). Leo was the Pope who first named 'Modernism' as a heresy and an evil. In *Rerum* he declared war on socialism and capitalism. On his view, neither sought the 'common good' and both were dehumanizing. He defends private property along the lines of a natural right to enjoy the fruits of one's labor. However, private property should be used to promote the common good and state regulation is expressly sanctioned. He also promotes the formation of labor unions and the right to a

living wage. Further, it also contains the seeds of the ethical idea of the 'preferential option for the poor.'

While he pointed to what some concrete measures might be to mitigate contemporary social evils, he is frustratingly vague on outlining an overall vision of a just society (of providing an 'ism' to contrast to socialism and capitalism). Distributism is way of fleshing out what a humane contemporary economic theory might look like once we reject the modern alternatives.[i]

**Property, for me and for you**

In *The Outline of Sanity* (1926), Chesterton sketches his mature economic theory. His intention is to discern what economics is compatible with genuine human freedom. In a short prefatory poem, the directors of the publisher set up this intriguing contrast: "The Servile State in Culture means imposed artificiality, transient fashions, Hollywood and pop icons. *The Distributist State in Culture means meritocracy, real art, folk music, serious literature and good beer".*[ii]

Can I have an 'Amen' for folk music and good beer? The modern project, whether in traditional 'right' or 'left' modes, culminates in servility on his view. Both are characterized by the same modern evils of bigness, complexity, lack of

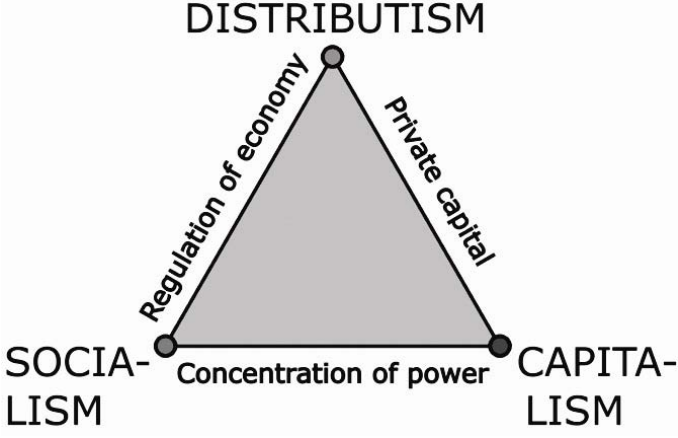
respect for the individual person, and disenfranchise the vast majority of the population.

Chesterton opens this work with an attack on capitalism. He observes, "Capitalism is a very unpleasant word. It is also a very unpleasant thing."[iii] The problem with capitalism is that "The practical tendency of all trade and business today is towards big commercial combinations, often more imperial, more impersonal, more international than many a communist commonwealth…."[iv] He goes on to define 'capitalism' thus: "*That economic condition in which there is a class of capitalists, roughly recognizable and relatively small, in whose possession so much of the capital is concentrated as to necessitate a very large majority of the citizens serving those capitalists for a wage.*"[v]

The irony of capitalism is that while it is built on respect for private property, its own mechanisms end up reducing the majority of people to proletarians—those without private property.

He next sets about attacking socialism. Socialism, on Chesterton's understanding, is "a system which makes the corporate unity of society responsible for all its economic processes…."[vi] Since it combines both economic and political power in the hands of the same people (the state), it does not tolerate any opposition to its dictates. This mean, in terms of

justice, "putting all ones eggs in the same basket." Chesterton wants to see lots of competing organizations in society, not centralization. And, he wants to see them being built from the bottom up as much as possible, not imposed top down.




The problem with both capitalism and socialism is the same problem: both abolish *small* private property. For Chesterton, ever the proponent of liberty for the little guy, "Opposition and rebellion depend on property and liberty."[vii] In the modern world anyway, "The critic of the State can only exist where a religious sense of right protects his claims to his own bow and spear; or at least, to his own pen and printing press."[viii] He holds that the true contrary to "property" is "prostitution"; either one has

property and a large degree of self-sufficiency or else one must sell oneself.

Chesterton goes on to defend the *radically* egalitarian distribution of *private* property. This is the essence of distributism. Human beings, to be human, to be 'sane', must be able to determine their own fate. This can only, realistically, be accomplished if they possess the economic means of remaining independent. That means private property (contra socialism) widely distributed (contra capitalism). How might we achieve this?

We can summarize some of the basic tenants of distributist economics along these lines:

- Property: Breaking up of large corporations and cartels. Encouragement of the development of small holdings (small scale agriculture; cottage industries). Both in the name of removing on the one hand, and supporting on the other, the material basis of freedom. To the extent that larger scale organizations are necessary, organizing them along cooperative lines.[ix]
- Industrialization: Drastically limiting the use of industrial technologies because they inevitably lead to large-scale manufacture.
- Finance: Advocacy of moral restraints on the market. Just wages, just prices, rent controls; things along those lines.

- Guilds: Reinstituting guilds to self-regulate the various industries and crafts. Labor unions where there are still elements of capitalist production.
- The State: Acceptance that the state will have certain necessary functions to perform for the foreseeable future. However, following the principle of 'subsidiarity,'[x] the state should govern much less in a top-down fashion and much more in a bottom-up fashion by encouraging voluntary associations to carry out community tasks as much as possible.

We get a vision of a society of largely self-sufficient producers in a highly regulated economy (just wages, just prices). Chesterton had rightly deduced that the average person only felt free while at home. Where can the average working person exercise any creativity and freedom? Not in their rented flat. Not in the public housing project. Certainly not on the job. Only in a house they can call their own, paint pink if they wish and on whose little plot of land they can grow some flowers and vegetables, to suit their taste and proclivity. The distributists sought to provide a material basis for maximizing the realm of liberty. This manifested itself in George W. Bush's idea of the 'ownership society', though, sadly, not so much in his policies.

## The worst of all possible worlds

Our current overlords propose that 'you will own nothing and you will be happy.' When they say 'you will own nothing,' they mean neither privately *nor* publicly. The proposal is that the global oligarchs will own everything and they will just 'take care of us'. This might be via automated deliveries in their 'smart cities' or via a 'guaranteed basic income.' I used to be interested in this latter idea. However, it is becoming clear that this is meant as a means of merely sustaining the lot of us once we are rendered useless by the full implementation of artificial intelligence and automation. Lab grown meat, Hollywood, video games, pornography, and sexbots for everyone!

I might be interested in owning some of my own property. I might even be interested in having proportionate ownership in some collective property, democratically managed. What about all ownership in a very few hands? How long do we suppose the 'useful' will provide, *gratis*, our sexbots, not to mention food and shelter, for those rendered useless? I wouldn't bet on it being for long. The useless, are, unfortunately, useless. But what to do about that? It seems like we have three basic options before us: (1) let the technological capital remain privately held in a few hands and pray for the

largess and charity of that class (the direction we are currently heading in); (2) expropriate the technological capital from private hands and administer it publicly (the promise of endless leisure while all the technology does the work; the threat of an ever more effective Leviathan); or, (3) very intentionally place limits on the displacement of humans by technology (but that will still require some overarching authority to impose that scheme). Not a lot of good options. Distributism is a theory of how you might choose option 3.

Home ownership is decreasing throughout the Western world. There are outright housing crises in many countries. Who could claim to be economically self-sufficient on their own means? Participation in some collective ownership of the means of production is off the table. Even contemporary 'socialists' don't venture such a bold proposal as seizing the means of production. No more 'expropriating the expropriators.' Socialism is apparently reduced to virtue signaling, bogus 'green' proposals to enlarge governmental bureaucracies, and making Starbucks baristas feel included and valued (not valued in the sense of paying them a decent wage, just 'affirmed').

Some sort of collective decision making seems essential. 'Let alone' governance means, as Chesterton and others deduced, monopoly and

oligarchy and increasingly extensive automation. Complete collectivization means totalitarian communism. There must be some middle ground of public decision making and private enjoyment. Distributism provides one way of thinking about this. Give me liberty or give me sexbots!

**You can't get there from here**

My dad, long before the time of Google Maps, used to like telling a humorous tale of a stranger who stopped by asking 'how do you get to such and such a place,' and the wizened local responding, 'you can't get there from here.'

Unfortunately, we have come to a place civilizationally where none of the places it is *easy* to get to are very appealing. And maybe you really can't get to a good place from here. Chesterton wants to insist that no matter how hard or unlikely it might be for us to reestablish a decent human society, it is possible, if very difficult, to get there from here. That hope might be the hope we most need to cultivate. Thinking about politics has gotten interesting again and the consequences seem momentous. The times are calling again, as they did in Chesterton's day, for "impractical" thinkers.

i 'Corporatism' would be the main other concrete theory developed out of this strand of thought. This formed the basis of the various Christian Democratic parties in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. 'Liberation theology' might be a third, but was criticized by

Popes John Paul II and Bendict XVI.

ii G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*, IHS Press, 2001, p. 21.

iii *Ibid*, p. 26.

iv *ibid*, p. 26.

v *Ibid*, p. 27.

vi *Ibid*, p. 28.

vii *Ibid*, p. 29.

viii *Ibid*, p. 29.

ix An example of a business organized along distributist lines is the Mondragon Corporation in Spain (it is in the top ten Spanish corporations): Introduction, MONDRAGON Corporation | MONDRAGON Corporation (mondragon-corporation.com)

x The idea that human societies naturally have a variety of levels of association, from the family up through community and neighborhood associations to the state. Further, the idea that the social institutions further up that scale will tend to try to replace or usurp the function of the associations below them and that this is illegitimate.

# PART 9: CATASTROPHE

*Year of nineteen hundred and twelve*
*April the fourteenth day*
*Great Titanic struck an iceberg*
*People had to run and pray*
– Blind Willie Johnson, *God Moves on the Water*

How do we get to the genuinely other side of modernity, and hopefully to some good version of that? Thus far we have looked at what we might term 'constructive' approaches. A radical critique of modernity coupled with a vision of a better alternative to work toward. Blind Willie Johnson's song points to another possible path. To many at the time, the sinking of the Titanic was a warning against the human hubris embodied in the industrial age. She was to be one of the greatest accomplishments of that age, was named after Greek divinities, and was vaunted to be 'unsinkable'. She was a symbol of humanity pushing too far. She was also an indication that, despite its great power and confidence, perhaps the modern world was more fragile than it looked. Perhaps modernity is strong enough to close off constructive efforts to transcend it, but perhaps not strong enough to preserve itself indefinitely. It is possessed of an incurable inner

dynamic to transcend all limits and to always produce and consume more. Neither limited and fallible human beings nor a finite planet can sustain that forever (could not 'transhumanism' be seen as the attempt to transcend the limits of the human in fulfillment of the modern idol?). There is the sense that it must collapse under its own weight.

That may be the other way we end up getting to the other side. We could call this the 'catastrophic' approach. Modernity, industrialism, capitalism, globalism, the whole shebang collapses before it can be constructively transformed. That would not be a fun time. It could be a time of opportunities for humanity though. We might be like addicts who can't quit their habit till they have some sort of breakdown. Though that is hard, and might kill them, they then get a chance to build a better life on the other side (assuming they survive the catastrophe).

**"The Long Emergency"**

One author I would place in the egalitarian anti-modernist camp who takes an approach something like this is James Howard Kunstler. I first came across his ideas back in the 1990's via his critique of American urban planning, *Home From Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World*

*in the Twenty-First Century* (1998). He critiqued the development of the American 'suburb' and the urban sprawl it creates. He is a 'new urbanist' and would much prefer livable urban neighborhoods, or small towns, to that which is not neighborhood, not town, and nothing, really.

More to the current point would be his 2005 book *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century*. It looks like there are plans to turn this into an updated feature length documentary film as well. His basic thesis is that the modern world cannot sustain itself. He takes seriously the threat of climate catastrophe manifesting itself first in crises of food production and distribution (though in later works he sees food crises more likely to arise from other causes). There are also various societal dynamics that threaten, from global financial Ponzi schemes to cultural exhaustion. Probably most famously is his idea of 'peak oil'. The idea here is that given that oil (and other fossil fuels) are finite, and that the more of them you consume, the costlier it becomes to access the remaining reserves, there will be a tipping point where there is not sufficient cheap energy to keep our world running as it currently does. Further, cheap energy is the foundation on which the modern world is built and it was a bad wager from the beginning given that it becomes ever more

reliant on a finite resource.

Kunstler recognizes that modernity is creative in many ways, hence, the *long* aspect of our current and ongoing emergency. But the catastrophic scenarios mount and the modern world can't get itself out of the issues it creates without ceasing to be modern. Kunstler assumes that somewhere in the convergence of these scenarios, the ship will go down.

## "World Made By Hand"

To supplement the more analytic approach he takes in *The Long Emergency*, Kunstler provides a dramatic portrayal of what a post-catastrophe world might look like in the form of a four novel series. Both the first novel and the series as a whole are called *World Made By Hand* (the first novel appeared in 2008 and the fourth came out in 2016).

The novels are set, mostly, in and around the town of Union Grove, Washington County, in New York's Hudson valley. The time is "sometime in the not-distant future…".[i] However, between now and then, much has transpired. There has been a prolonged war in "The Holy Land," possibly over diminishing oil reserves, but that is not explicitly stated. The war had taken a huge toll in lives amongst the contending powers and had nearly exhausted their industrial

capacities. Then terrorists ignited 'dirty' nuclear bombs in L.A. and Washington, D.C. This precipitates the rapid collapse of American society with a military coup headed by a rogue general who is then overthrown by "more constitutionally minded" generals, but all that is anticlimactic as society ceases to function along modern lines. In the wake of all of that, the "Mexican Flu" and other maladies drastically diminish the population (by about 75%).

We hear rumors about how other parts of the planet are faring. In later novels we learn that there is an attempt to reconstitute something of a national government in the Great Lakes region and that the American south has been ravaged by racial conflict. A fascist regime headed by a female ex-television evangelist is centered in Tennessee and an African-American republic centered in the deep south, lead by Milton Steptoe, who had run a check-cashing empire, is proving more than a match for them. We'll focus our attention on the central happenings around Union Grove, which serves as a sort of lab for social experimentation in the new world.

On the first page, Kunstler signals that there is a natural basis for human society, which is reemerging in the post-apocalyptic setting when he has a character observe: "Now and then, the fireflies pulsed in unison, mysteriously, as if they all agreed on something we humans didn't

know about."[ii] A general characteristic of the new world is the reappearance of much that is mysterious, along with a bounce back by nature (the streams are clean again and fish populations are rising; trees and other growth are reclaiming the vast pads of concrete). We are eventually introduced to a (good) witch who seems to practice effective earth and sexual magic. We have a mysterious cult leader with supernatural powers. Kunstler often uses female characters to illustrate this reemergence. The above mentioned fascist tele-evangelist may represent the dark aspect of this.

In my reading, the story centers around a handful of micro-societies, each attended by their key and representative characters, which spring up in the wake of the collapse.

**Civic community**

This is represented by the town proper of Union Grove. The main characters here are Robert Earle, a carpenter and eventual mayor of the town, Loren Holder, the First Congregationalist Pastor (who is eventually 'healed' by the above mentioned witch), and Ben Deaver, a relatively wealthy farmer on the outskirts of town who utilizes hired labor to work his farm.

Characteristics of life in the civic community include doing things through discussion and

mutual consent. Also, civic community is 'impersonal' enough to allow people who might be outsiders in other forms of society to find their niche, represented by a homosexual librarian and portrait painter and a store clerk who has Down's Syndrome. The civic community lacks decisive leadership (something all the other models possess), but seems best at reaching overall decisions.

**Feudal community**

This possibility is represented by Stephen Bullock, formerly a Duke educated attorney "with the look of Roman authority."[iii] Bullock is an authoritarian (somewhat harsh, but ultimately benevolent) leader of something like a feudal fiefdom. He already possessed a large estate when the world went wrong, and in the lead up was wise enough to acquire the sorts of items that would be essential in the new world. His estate still has limited electricity, which has all but disappeared from the rest of the world.

His "servants" are there voluntarily. His version of society provides the most material goods and greatest security, though the least freedom. Like a feudal Lord, Bullock provides safety and succor, demanding obedience and service in return. It is definitely one-man rule. As the novels progress, we get the sense that this

form of society is relatively stable, as long as its charismatic leader remains, but suffers certain inherent limitations that mean it will not work as a generalizable model.

**Religious community**

This possibility is represented by Brother Jobe who is presented as something of a red-neck huckster, but who is eventually revealed to have also been a Duke educated attorney and is a genuine spiritual leader. However, the real leader the "Church of the New Faith" community is, arguably, a shadowy female character who can see the future and somehow seems to birth new "New Faithers" in litters, an essential function given that the males are largely sterile due to having been located near Washington, D.C. when that nuclear bomb went off.

Life in this community is centered on unity and intensity of faith, along with charismatic leadership. Though there is conformity in faith, Kunstler presents this community as one that is creative (though the New Faith brethren and sisters have sexual relations, they are sterile; Kunstler may be playing off traditional monasticism with its combination of sexual chastity and outward creativity). Brother Jobe is overseeing the breeding of various useful animals, especially Mules. The "New Faithers"

form a symbiotic relationship with Union Grove and often possess the skills the town needs and, with the establishment of a bar, sparks a renewal of the town.

**Marginal community**

This group is represented by Wayne Karp and his "general supply". Karp's followers are former "motorheads;" even in the "old-timey, old times," as Brother Jobe calls them, they were people on the margins of society. In the new world they run a semi-criminal, though ultimately needed, operation of scavenging the rest of the world for needed items that can no longer be manufactured.

Life in this group is volatile and often violent. Yet, it 'fits' for many who do not find they can accept any of the other models on offer. 'The general supply' is outside the 'law' of the other communities. It is organized more on the lines of a gang.

**Social ecology**

Kunstler centers the civic option, both in terms of focusing the story on it and in the sense that he seems to think that it is the option that most 'has a future.' However, all the options are presented as having strengths and weaknesses. All

represent modes of sociality that have proven durable at various points in history (more durable than our own highly industrialized society) and Kunstler presents them all as possible options in a no longer modern world. Further, they are all shown to be able to cooperate productively with one another. There is a diverse social ecology operating here. That is probably a healthy vision to have of a non-modern world; no 'one size fits all' solutions.

A character observes "everything is local now."[iv] It could also be said that everything is human scaled. The potential big problems lurking are associated more with the attempts to recreate larger societies like the fascists in Tennessee. Kunstler likes to imagine a variety of genuinely human options for his world and all might feel more authentic than our current situation. The characters have to come to grips with continuing to live in a world that is diminished in many ways from their pervious experience. They seem to have a consensus though that the new times are actually better times in many ways. The basis for this is summed up in a conversation between Robert Earle and his girlfriend (both of whom have been widowed by the harsh new realities): "*(Robert) There's goodness here too. (Britney) Where is it? (Robert) In all the abiding virtues. Love, bravery, patience, honesty, justice, generosity, kindness.*

*Beauty too. Mostly love.*"[v]

Perhaps that is the power that manifests itself in human relationships that is akin to whatever it is that empowers the fireflies to operate in harmony. To the extent that Kunstler might seem to long for a post-catastrophic world, it is probably because so much that is not real and enduring gets stripped away so that the light shines more clearly on what is of genuine value.

## Catastrophe and the imagination

Kunstler's *World Made By Hand* quartet would fit in the 'post-apocalyptic' genre. As that appellation suggests, there is a reflection here of the apocalyptic literature of many ancient religious traditions that assumes that that which had a beginning will have an end. However, the idea of humanity continuing to live in a time after the catastrophe seems to be roughly coterminous with modernity itself, with the first examples of this genre appearing the 1810s and 1820s. Byron and Mary Shelley both wrote works that could fit in this genre.

Certainly, the pace of the production of post-apocalyptic fiction (in literature and film) has picked up in recent decades. The 1970s had all those natural disaster movies (and they haven't stopped coming). The 1980s had aliens and technological tyranny. From the 2000s forward it

seems the genre focuses more on human caused catastrophes and human-against-human post-apocalypse scenarios. This is especially true in the world of 'young adult fiction': *The Hunger Games* series and *The Purge* series stick out. Of course, our whole fixation on zombies fits here as well. It is as if the culture was, mostly subconsciously, registering our predicament (and fate?).

What's more, one can sense, at least in some cases, the 'end' is not looked toward with unmitigated dread, but with something of a longing. This, I think, is the case with Kunstler. In his occasional writing he constantly sees a new crisis looming which surely must bring consequences which we will not be able to ignore, but the 'long emergency' is awfully long.

However, as a literary genre, it is also one means by which we can project our vision of the good society. Kunstler also does this. It can provide a mental fresh-start situation within which to dream. As a possible reality, it is more sobering, but perhaps no less filled with hope.

i James Howard Kunstler, *World Made By Hand*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008, title page.
ii *Ibid*, p. 1.
iii *Ibid*, p. 77.
iv *Ibid*, p. 15.
v *Ibid*, p. 226

# PART 10: EGALITARIAN ANTI-MODERNISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

*It's the end of the world as we know it*
*And I feel fine*
– REM, *It's the End of the World as We Know It*

In the first essay of this series, I outlined some generic features of a style of thought I termed 'egalitarian anti-modernism'. Over the next eight essays we explored several key thinkers in this tradition, from the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries (one major figure for each century). Here, at the conclusion to the series, I would like to talk about where it fits into the contemporary political and intellectual landscape.

**Aristocratic anti-modernism**

My sense is that as our political, social, ecological, etc…, etc… crises deepen, more people are willing to look to the sort of radical critique of our current situation represented by anti-modernism. It is also my sense that the form of anti-modernism generating the most interest is

of the variety I called 'aristocratic anti-modernism.' While I try to avoid falling back into the modernist division of 'left' vs. 'right,' most of the people I am thinking of would describe themselves as being on the political right. This would include relatively popular digital media people like 'Mencius Goldbug' and 'Bronze Age Pervert.' I will confess that I don't really know anything about either of these folks beyond that they exist. Thinkers of more substance who seem to be having something of a revival would include Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) and even Julius Evola (1898-1974). I would also place the contemporary Russian philosopher, Alexandr Dugin (1962-) in this group. While somewhat wary of them, I find value the thought of both Jünger and Dugin.

Jünger was a highly decorated soldier in the German army during World War I. He wrote on topics ranging from the experience of war to the 'total mobilization of labor' in modernity. He wrote a number of novels and was one of the first people to experiment with LSD, more or less seeking spiritual experiences. As mentioned in a previous essay, Jünger associated with the Conservative Revolutionaries between the wars, was courted by the Nazis after their rise power, but sternly rejected membership in the party or speaking in support of the party.

The part of Jünger I find most interesting is his exploration of how the individual might

remain free in a totalitarian regime (and he felt that all modern regimes were essentially totalitarian) in works such as *The Forest Passage* (1951) and *Eumeswil* (1977). The basic argument of the former work is that the modern state seeks to control its citizens through an array of technological and psychological means. The path to becoming a "forest rebel", his term for seeking to slide out of view and adopt a stance of resistance, requires courage (the regime can bring carceral, economic, moral, and ideological pressure to bear). The key to courage (which he apparently had, being wounded over 20 times, depending on exactly how one counts) is to tap into a source of freedom that transcends death, since courage is ultimately the willingness to face death. This he finds only in the primordial origins of religion and spirituality. These "primal centers of power" are "concealed in every individual…so that he might understand himself, in his deepest, supra-individual power."[i] You might paraphrase this by saying that people who have no ultimate purpose will be unlikely to make the ultimate sacrifice; they will remain quiescent in the womb of the security regime. He reaches the conclusion: "freedom is existence—it is above all a conscious consent to existence, and the desire, perceived as a personal destiny, to manifest it."[ii] Anyway, clearly Jünger is not just some ivory tower academic distanced from the

'real world' and, yet, he finds the key to practical resistance to lie in spiritual awareness. That is interesting stuff.

For most of the past decade, Dugin has basically been censored by the American media. The major online book vendors do not carry his works. YouTube will only post videos about him, not featuring him. Social media—forget about it. Also, he is under individual sanction by the U.S. government for his position on Ukraine (as he likes to point out, for his *ideas* on Ukraine, no action he has taken). He revels in being labeled "the world's most dangerous philosopher." I suppose there are two things I find interesting in Dugin. First, his deep critique of technology, liberalism, capitalism, transhumanism, and globalism. He writes: "There are only two parties in the world: the globalist party of the Great Reset and the anti-globalist party of the Great Awakening."[iii] That last phrase is his name for the international upsurge in both left-wing and right-wing populism, which he sees as essentially one.

Secondly, is his geopolitical theory of "multi-polarity". He seeks to foster a world with many centers of political and military power, not one characterized by only one or two superpowers. He grounds his commitment to the sovereign legitimacy of multiple cultures (each of which should enjoy autonomy) to an innovative and

controversial interpretation of the thought of Martin Heidegger. He also appeals to heterodox Brazilian and French anthropologists to argue for the inability to use the norms of one culture to criticize another. He argues this is the genuine basis for an anti-racist politics.

**Where are the egalitarian anti-modernists?**

In this series, I have tried to show that there is a whole other anti-modernist tradition. I do not, however, see any such revival of interest going on there, not to the same extent anyway. This series could be seen as an extremely minor attempt to start changing that. I don't see much of a revival of interest, especially in philosophical circles, of the past luminaries of this tradition. I don't see people holding prestigious academic chairs talking about this stuff. Personally, there have been two main contemporary people I would class as egalitarian anti-modernists that are worth following.

The first is Paul Kingsnorth. He is an English novelist and former environmental activist now living and farming in rural Ireland. He states the fundamental awareness that has shaped his thinking in recent years along these lines: "*I realized that a crisis of limits is a crisis of culture, and a crisis of culture is a crisis of spirit. Every living culture in history, from the*

*smallest tribe to the largest civilization, has been built around a spiritual core: a central claim about the relationship between human culture, nonhuman nature, and divinity. Every culture that lasts, I suspect, understands that living within limits—limits set by natural law, by cultural tradition, by ecological boundaries—is a cultural necessity and a spiritual imperative. There seems to be only one culture in history that has held none of this to be true, and it happens to be the one we're living in.*"[iv]

He terms our current global system "the Machine" and seeks to analyze it historically and metaphysically. He works to envision ways we might avoid the social and individual catastrophes (or, more likely, survive through them) that "the Machine" is bringing upon us.

The second is Paul Cudenec. What first drew me to Cudenec was a friend tried to persuade me to read *The Withway* (2022). The friend said he was an anarchist. I knew that my friend, though I respect him in almost every other way, was susceptible to liking some anarchist thinkers. I thought "'nough said, what else do you want to talk about?" "Who is also into the Traditionalists," my friend went on. That got my attention. OK, *maybe* something interesting there. "He's a sort of a natural law thinker," my friend said, he knew the hook was in good and strong now. Sneaky.

In *The Stifled Soul of Humankind* (2014), he seeks to show how the human longing and quest for freedom is a story of the Spirit (or "collective community if you prefer"[v] he notes). Cudenec seeks to undergird his anarchist politics with a substantive metaphysics of cohesion. The representatives of this spiritual tradition include "shamans, Greek philosophers, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, neoplatonists, medieval magicians, Brethren of the Free Spirit, Ranters, alchemists, *Naturphilosophen,* perennialists or contemporary neopagans"[vi] and, I think we could safely add, Sufis and some Christian heretics along the lines of the Cathars. It is the 'soul of humankind' that manifests itself in these religious movements and in political movements of liberation. Interesting stuff. The main culprits in this story are (1) modernity, (2) political Authority, and (3) the Christian Church.

**A 'common front' of anti-modernists?**

In the 1930s and 1940s, those on the political left formed a 'common front' to oppose fascism. The idea was to set aside in-fighting and unite the left behind a common cause. Surely the differences which separated Communists, Social Democrats, and even Anarchists, were less significant than what separated them from the Fascists! Can there be, and should there be, a

similar alliance among Anti-Modernists (Aristocratic and Egalitarian) in the face of the globalist post-humanist regime, the Machine, or whatever you choose to call it?

Probably, not really. The 'enemy' is surely imposing enough. And there is something to be said for 'the enemy of my enemy, is my friend.' Common fronts don't really work though (witness the Communists, literally, stabbing the Anarchists in the back in Spain during the civil war of the 1930s). On the intellectual plane, I refuse the proposition that there are people too evil to read. There are evil people and evil ideas; all the more reason to study them. And I will not just put serious thinkers into simplistic ideological categories of 'the approved' and 'the forbidden'. For instance, I fundamentally disagree with Nietzsche, but also think there is no more profound analyst of 'the death of God'. Carl Schmitt was a flat out Nazi and disreputable human being, but if you want to understand our current political situation, you should read him (see my previous essay). But that does not mean you ignore the differences or call black, white. Though, in a complicated world, there might be grounds for tactical alliances.

I have heard right-wing podcasters advocate that the right adopt the supposedly leftist maxim of 'no enemies to the right' to the point of including outright racists in their alliance. When

I read people like Evola, I can appreciate and even learn from some of his ideas, like his development of Guénon's discussion of the Kali Yuga.[vii] Nevertheless, it is usually only a few short pages before I sense real spiritual darkness. There may be a time when an Evolaian and I have a common enemy and make some sort of common cause, but there will not be a time when I say there is no real difference between our positions. That is, I think there can be cross pollination (as Morris drew inspiration from Carlisle), but not unity.

**The sameness and the difference**

As I indicated in the first essay, anti-modernists are those who feel the modern turn was a fundamental mistake. Any critique that does not go that deep, in my opinion, does not go deep enough. What is the unique contribution made by *egalitarian* anti-modernists that makes it matter? In my assessment, while the aristocratic anti-modernists might make a point of defending 'the human,' they do not necessarily remain *humane*. Dugin would be a case in point.

I would like to defend 'the human' from its myriad enemies, while also remaining *humane*. At a very practical level, that means valuing each person as a unique manifestation of 'the human.' No trodding over the *herd* or the *mass*

for me. I'm a folk music and good beer kind of guy (see essay 8). This is what the *egalitarian* in 'egalitarian anti-modernism' stands for.

We need a revival of egalitarian anti-modernism. That voice needs to be heard above the din.

*Post scriptum:* In my considered judgment, the egalitarian strand of our thinking in the 'West' comes to us primarily (though not exclusively) from the Christian tradition. If it weren't clear already, I'll put my cards on the table, I'm "on the side of the rebel Jesus."[viii] Long live Rousseau! Resistance, then creation.

i Ernst Jünger, *The Forest Passage*, translated by Thomas Friese and edited by Russell A. Berman, Telos, 2013, pp. 46-47.
ii *Ibid*, p. 86.
iii Alexandr Dugin, *The Great Awakening vs The Great Reset*, Arktos, 2021, p. 63.
iv Paul Kingsnorth, "The Cross and the Machine," *First Things*, June 2021, The Cross and the Machine by Paul Kingsnorth | Articles | First Things
v Paul Cudenec, *The Stifled Soul of Humankind*, Winter Oak, 2014, p. 2.
vi *Ibid*, p. 117.
vii Apparently, the idea that in the Hindu view of the cycles of time, the last and lowest stage, in which humanity is fully divorced from the divine. Eventually the gods reappear.
viii The Rebel Jesus – Jackson Browne – YouTube

*Editor's note: see here for a critical view of Aleksandr Dugin.*