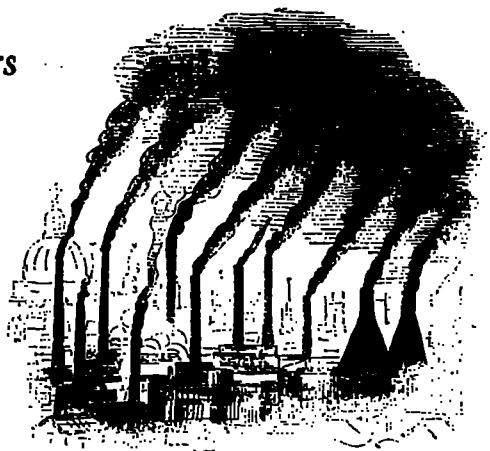


Secular Discontents

BY JAMES FINN



The West is today what it has been for a number of decades, the center and source of powerful ideas incarnated in institutions and practices from whose effects no corner of the globe is wholly immune. It is the great disturber of other cultures. Thus, mutatis mutandis, the West takes its place with the ancient Orient, with classical Greece, with Islam, with the great civilizations that extended and imposed themselves through differing proportions of military power, commerce, and high cultural confidence.

In its development the West has been informed by the profound contributions of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions, and it cannot be understood without reference to them. But the factors that allowed the West first to become a great economic force and second to extend that force into the ecumene have their immediate causes in the eighteenth century. This period in Europe, variously termed the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, elevated to prominence and gave particular meaning to such abstract social concepts as "liberty," "equality," "rights," and "authority." It also emphasized the right to the pursuit of happiness, the attainment of which was said to rest upon the satisfaction of practical needs that are common to all individuals. In fact, these common needs are said to form the basis of their equality. In these terms, the faith that such happiness might be attained rested not on Christianity but on confidence in the application of reasonable principles to man and society. Secular ends were to be attained by secular means.

At roughly the same time, the application of reason to science and technology gave rise to industrialism and what has come to be known as the Industrial Revolution. Developing in different ways and at different rates in the countries of Europe, England, and America, industrialism in each area placed a premium on efficiency, hard work, risk, and, of course, profits. Industrialism entailed a shift from agriculture to manufacturing, from rural to urban, from the use of human energy to that unleashed by inanimate matter. In this sense, what was launched in the eighteenth century is an ongoing and geographically expanding process.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the influence of these two revolutions, one political and the

other industrial, was everywhere evident in the West. In different ways strong intellects and sensitive temperaments attempted to take a clear reading of what that influence was, to assess its impact on the individual and on society, to sort out the clear benefits from the no less clear harsh concomitants. The best did it in ways that are pertinent to our own present concerns. The nineteenth-century novel is the preeminent bourgeois art form, and in Charles Dickens it found its greatest exponent in the English language. His novels can be read as a continual, probing critique of Victorian society—at once exuberant in the realization of new possibilities and distressed by the cost at which they are secured. As one critic has written of *Dombey and Son* (1848): "...we can see how deeply divided Dickens has become. On the one hand he is affirming the changing world symbolized by the railroad, and on the other condemning the society that produced it. That society has in every way grown more uncongenial to the life of feeling and moral decency."

In 1848 there was published, too, the first edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, by Marx and Engels. Its description of what had been accomplished over the preceding century still reads like a paean to those who were responsible.

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, raising whole populations out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?

But it is not yet the garden of Eden. For the bourgeoisie, according to the *Manifesto*,

draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap price of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production....In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

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To paraphrase closely other sections of the document, the bourgeois civilization is one in which physician, lawyer, priest, scientist, and poet are stripped of their halos, in which the family is reduced to a nexus of money, in which Free Trade is substituted for chartered freedom, in which the veils of political and religious illusions are stripped from direct and brutal exploitation, in which man is compelled to face the true conditions of his life.

At the time the *Manifesto* appeared, industrialism was still the possession primarily of Western Europe and the United States. But the effects had rippled out with sufficient strength to justify the assertion that it had introduced a cosmopolitan character to a clearly discernible world economy. The effects, moreover, were more than simply economic, however important these were.

Thus, in his overview of world history, William H. McNeill states that in the mid-nineteenth century,

in each of the great Asian civilizations, revolt either from above or from below rather suddenly discredited or subverted old ways and values; and, in each instance, disruptive influences were enormously stimulated by contacts and collisions with the industrializing West. Indeed, it seems scarcely an exaggeration to say that within the decade of the 1850's the fundamental fourfold cultural balance of the ecumene [Europe, Middle East, China, India] which had endured the buffets of more than two thousand years, finally gave way. Instead of four (or with Japan, five) autonomous though interconnected civilizations, a yeasty, half-formless, but genuinely global cosmopolitanism began to emerge....

It is worth dwelling for a moment on these events to contemplate the large forces at work here. The Taiping rebellion erupted in China in 1850 and, over the course of some years, made self-isolation impractical. A revolution from the top allowed Japan to escape from the most severe rigidities of the Tokugawa shogunate when it opened itself to foreign commerce in 1854. And although the 1857-58 mutiny in India was suppressed, the older order of society was too unsettled to make a full recovery and long-inherited traditions were discarded. Further, the Crimean War of 1853-56 proved a pyrrhic victory for the Turks, since the subsequent public debt, the European-installed railroads, and the forced guaranty of equal liberties to all Ottoman subjects did more to disrupt the Ottoman empire than had previous military defeats.

That these deeply disruptive events in different areas of the world took place within a single decade was not a freakish coincidence. The Japanese who opened their country to foreign trade were aware when they did of China's ongoing turbulence; the Indian soldiers who mutinied were aware that England was then tied down in the Crimean War. Modern methods of communication and transportation—exactly those listed in *The Communist Manifesto*—brought every civilized portion of the globe only a few weeks distant from any other. The technology that was a precondition for industrialism had more than simply economic consequences.

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

For the next hundred years, until World War II, the non-Western world continued to be the recipient of the assertive attentions of the West. Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and Muslim cultures were forced to contest the technology and ideas of the West with their own long-standing and rich religious and cultural inheritances. The flow tended to be in one direction. Although the political and economic penetration of the West was extensive, the inner development of the West until 1917 was dominated by the need to assimilate the twin revolutions, industrialism and democracy, based upon a new understanding of human rights, needs, duties.

Essentially the same task in each country of the West, it took on significantly different forms according to the historical situation of each country and its religious traditions. For example, Catholicism's initial impulse was to criticize and reject modernism in all its various forms. It rejected, that is, the confidence in reason, unfettered intellectual inquiry, and the optimistic view of human nature and the world that characterized the French Enlightenment. The *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) promulgated by Pius IX condemned "progress, liberalism and modern civilization." Although Leo XIII issued a series of letters on social justice that remain relevant, in 1909 his successor, Pius X, imposed upon all priests an "Oath Against Modernism." After some decades of struggling with these issues the Catholic Church came to terms with many of them officially as late as Vatican Council II (1962-65). In the meantime the struggle strongly influenced the mindsets of Catholics and those cultures they affected.

In this, as in so many things, the American experience was different. In contrast to Catholicism, the Protestant impulse has been to embrace modernism. High among the factors that contributed to the swift pace and relatively smooth development of the American economy—so that the term "industrial revolution" has only a strained application to what took place in America—was the easy acceptance of much that modernism offered to an essentially Protestant culture and American ethos. Work was good in itself; self-indulgence and laziness were stigmatized; what contributed to growth was valued, what inhibited it was not. Further, the individualistic ethos assumed that the sum of individual successes would lead to the success of society.

When Andrew Carnegie enunciated a "gospel of wealth" based on competition, accumulation, minimal public interference, and Christian stewardship, he was widely applauded. In America this ethos was accepted and shared by other Christian and Jewish leaders. For example, the prominent Catholic leader Archbishop John Ireland echoed the sentiments of Carnegie and was a friend of the business community. Even though the Catholic Church is a highly organized multinational enterprise that has developed a substantial body of authoritative teaching on social and economic issues to which all Catholics are intended to refer, significant cultural differences still exist between Catholicism in Europe and in the United States and elsewhere.

The world order was irrevocably altered by World War I, with some of the changes being confirmed and others altered once again by World War II. Among the

momentous changes were the emergence of the USSR as a world power under Communist control and proclaimed Marxist principles; the emergence of the U.S. as a world power and, for a time, the undisputed political leader and economic engine of the West; the sophisticated development of multinational corporations; and the entrance of what is still called the Third World on the political scene.

In almost any statistical terms, the advances in human welfare that must be attributed to the modern world are impressive. In developed countries, for example, life expectancy went from thirty years in 1750 to seventy years in 1965. Infant mortality rates declined rapidly. In the twenty-five years after World War II all industrial countries prospered, and, in an extraordinary burst, world industrial production increased by 350 per cent. But as many have also noted, we are now witnessing a largely unexpected revolt against modernity, against development. The revolt comes from different quarters and is couched in different terms. It is not only because the revolt is sometimes couched in religious terms and by religious communities that it demands our attention. As Irving Louis Horowitz says: "An assault on modernity within American life should be taken with absolute seriousness. It affects the character of individual life, community values and ultimately the nature of state power." To which must be added that we should take with seriousness a revolt against modernity in any country; the more powerful the country, the more serious our concern.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

What, then, are the signs of this revolt against modernity and therefore against some forms of development? In a brief treatise on business civilization, Robert Heilbroner offers a familiar list of factors that tend to limit capitalism: the skepticism and lack of commitment of young people, the drug culture, the demand for participatory democracy, the expectation of immediate gratification, and the "progressively intractable obstacles of nature" that must put a halt to the expansive drive of capitalism. Beyond that, however, he posits what he calls an element of recently gained knowledge, "that economic success does not guarantee social harmony."

Conceding the productive genius of capitalism, he asks if as a result the contemporary American is a "better as well as richer citizen than his antecedents? Is he more at peace with his children, his parents, himself? Is he wiser as well as more informed; happier as well as more pampered; sturdier and more reliant as well as better fed, housed, clothed, transported?" To ask these rhetorical questions, Heilbroner asserts, is to expose a "hollowness at the center of business civilization." This extraordinary judgment could be read as the residue of the Enlightenment optimism that the Catholic Church resisted: the belief that goodness and happiness would flow from material goods accumulated through the application of reason to nature's resources. But even as one asks whether this writer has not reversed the proper order of things in expecting social morale to derive from an economic order, we should acknowledge that he has raised questions that have been central to the great religions and philosophies.

The sociologist Daniel Bell also believes that Western society is approaching a watershed. In his provocative study *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, he writes:

...we are witnessing the end of the bourgeois idea—that view of human action and of social relations, particularly of economic exchange—which has molded the modern era of the last 200 years. And I believe that we have reached the end of the creative impulse and ideological sway of modernism, which, as a cultural movement, has dominated all the arts, and shaped our symbolic expressions, for the last 125 years.

For roughly the period Bell mentions, modernism in Western art has been a complicated, strong, subtle, often deliberately nauseating attack upon the broader culture in which it has existed, a culture it stigmatized as bourgeois, barren, mechanical, philistine. When Lionel Trilling called it the "adversary culture," the term was quickly adopted; the recognition of its validity was immediate. The significance of this may be more nearly grasped when one realizes that it is historically unprecedented for a high artistic culture to launch a sustained attack against the society of which it is a part.



And if the recognition of cultural modernism as a substitute for religion is granted, one can accept Bell's judgment that "the real problem of *modernity* is the problem of belief."

"But what holds one to reality," he asks, "if one's secular system of meanings proves to be an illusion? I will risk an unfashionable answer—the return in Western society of some conception of religion."

Since Bell's thesis is that the Protestant ethic, which had placed curbs on unrestrained economics, was sundered from bourgeois society by the capitalist system that depended upon that ethic, the problem he poses to us—and himself—is profound. He recognizes, as must we all, that the gods, once departed, are not readily

summoned back. We can ask, however, if they have, in fact, departed, or if it is modern secular man that has so limited his vision he fails to perceive them. Do they not still dwell in various parts of the world?

Another thinker who believes that we have arrived at a crucial period in world history is the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. A former Marxist now resident in England and the author of a three-volume critique of *The Socialist Idea*, he writes:

We were happy a hundred years ago. We knew there were exploiters and exploited, wealthy and poor, and we had a perfect idea of how to get rid of injustice; we would expropriate the owners and turn the wealth over to the common good. We expropriated the owners and we created one of the most monstrous and oppressive social systems in world history. And we keep repeating that "in principle" everything was all right, only some unfortunate accidents slipped in and slightly spoiled the good idea.

This, of course, is not a rejection of development but of the cost of development demanded by one of the great contending economic systems. As empirical evidence mounts to support his contention, as the socialist vision continues to recede into the future, others join in his judgment. (Indeed, the strike of the Polish workers could be read in this fashion—and not, as some have interpreted it, as a revolt against development itself.) It should probably be noted here that as people like Kolakowski desert socialism, its ranks are not necessarily thinned. It continues today to exert its moral appeal, and in the Catholic Church, which once roundly condemned socialism, there are areas—for example, the Latin American-inspired liberation theology—where it is hospitably welcomed.

The major ecumenical Christian body that is largely Protestant in its organization and membership is at least, or at most, equivocal on the matter of development. When the Commission of the World Council of Churches issued its reports for 1974-78, they contained a formal statement of its executive committee on the economic threat to peace. Voicing its general approval of a New International Economic Order, it demurred from approving "steadily accelerating economic growth." The basis for its caution was that present rates already produced pollution and wasted resources. A year later it pinpointed another reason: "...studies made on the power of the transnational corporation in Latin America show that, in the last five years, their unrestrained activities have led to the most serious economic menace to social peace and cultural identity in that continent." Still later, in October, 1980, the director of the Council's Commission on the Church's Participation in Development spoke about "the necessary struggle of Christians against idols in the form of human power like racism or transnational corporations." These are strong signals of resistance to economic growth, to development, to modernity.

Indonesian philosopher Soedjatmoko believes that even within the last ten years the global distribution of power has changed so much that previously unvisited possibilities and alternative civilizations are now worth considering. They will, of course, emerge only if certain kinds of development take place. His concern is

with forms of development that promote not only equity and freedom but human growth. For this purpose, development models based solely on social, economic, and political factors are inadequate.

We will also need to deal with the basic perceptions which a society has about itself, the conception of what constitutes a meaningful life and how it should be lived. In turn, these questions have to do with the most profound notions of collective as well as personal identity which involve man's perception of himself and his place in the universe.

Recognizing that traditional norms and values are not always favorable to modernization, he states, nevertheless, that

the religio-cultural substratum in which prevailing value configurations are rooted constitutes the inescapable baseline from which modernization will have to start if it is to have any permanent effect at all and if it is not to become a superficial and temporary aberration....

That there are intimate relations between religion and development, religion and modernity, religion and national economic growth, religion and global economic development, and that these relations have deep historical roots—all this remains true. There are still historical questions open to further investigation and debate. Max Weber's thesis that the Protestant culture and ethos provided the preconditions for and gave rise to capitalism has been questioned, but only on the basis that it was Catholicism—not Protestantism—that should be so credited. Religion early on provided the legitimation of modernity, of market forces, of modern capitalism. Historically, modernity in many of its manifestations came into conflict with religion; and religion, in some of its manifestations, is in conflict with modernity today. Following a secular pattern, religion is making a choice between capitalism and socialism as the better path to development—or to envisioning some alternative. And a number of religious groups want to make this choice a test for legitimating religion. But if some manifestations of Western religion are antidevelopment, antigrowth, anticapitalism, other manifestations are not. In the West religion continues to provide legitimation for modernity in its economic aspects. At least one question now becomes: Can the bourgeois society, the capitalist enterprise, sustain itself without religious legitimation? Do commercial transactions between freely consenting adults need restraints that modern secularism cannot provide?

These questions seem particularly pertinent within the Western context, where they first arose. But as the terms Westernization and Americanization denote—terms complementary to modernization—the flow of energies primarily still runs outward from the Western center. We transmit our technology, our skills, our values, our uncertainties. As U.S. economic interests now shift from Europe to Asia, we need to understand what moral codes, what conceptions of life and the universe we are encountering, and, again, just what it is we are transmitting. But the flow is not only in one direction, and we must also understand what it is that we are receiving. 