

The Great Illusion

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The modern age emerged around 1900. Not suddenly, it had obviously been in preparation for centuries, a prolonged process that was accelerated through the industrialization of the 19th, and was brought to a climax in the decades around the turn of that century. One may see it as the bringing to fruition of a number of trends. There are a number of trends which may be identified.

Population increase. This is due to improved health, which can almost entirely be attributed to better nutrition, medical advance only playing a marginal role¹. The improved feeding of the population was made possible by a more efficient farming technology, which also freed people from toiling on the land, making possible industrialization. However, this development seems basically to have been limited to Europe (and by extension the US). It brought about a revolution of the countryside and a redistribution of land, and a concomitant migration to the cities, a trend that has continued throughout the 20th century, and may have been the most important thing, if unsung, that happened during it.

Technological improvement and economic growth. Technology is the application of science, or more precisely applications of science with economical consequences. The scientific advances of the 17th and 18th century did only in the 19th have direct consequences for ordinary lives, The relation between technological improvement and economic growth goes both ways. A growing economy allows resources to be assigned to research and development the fruits of which further enhances economic growth thus releasing even more resources for technological development, and thus, supposedly speeding up the same, setting in motion a feedback mechanism with unlimited benefits. A vision which has been thoroughly embraced by modern politicians.

The economy which had been steadily growing during the 19th century, although with local variations of slumps and busts, part of the usual feature of capitalism, had at the end of the century settled into an expanding growth part much conducive to optimism and faith in progress. Maybe the most drastic change in the everyday life of people was the introduction of electricity. It did not provide a change overnight, it would take decades before it was firmly introduced in Europe, and in fact in the world at large it is still not established, while more recent inventions afford opportunities to shortcut a lengthy and resource demanding project. Electricity provides a convenient means of distributing energy in the process creating a demand, thus the need to create it in the first place. Thus the invention led to the building of power plants fueled by coal or driven by descent of water.

¹ Against this claim one may present the case of inoculation already brought about Jennings in the late 18th century. On the other hand the original invention only worked against smallpox to which there was a fairly large natural immunity in the population anyway. Also, it probably was not implemented on a large enough scale to make a difference. Vaccination only started to make a difference in the 1950's.

But electricity is not just a matter of energy distribution, the telegraph is a consequence, and already in the early 1880's the eruption of Krakatoa was cabled around the world more or less instantaneously. The railway is the quintessential invention and creation of 19th century economy, and as such it has hardly changed during the 20th century. It did revolutionize transportation, making it faster and more efficient in all kinds of ways. It also marginalized rivers as lines of communication, although when it comes to bulk that can be afforded slow passage, waterborne transportation still holds, even inland. While rivers before connected, now they became obstacles to be crossed by bridges. The railway demanded resources. Coal to steam the locomotives, iron to lay tracks, and of course building material to fashion bridges, stations, and anything else connected to the necessary infra-structure. While at the turn of the 19th century improved roads and tracks were in competition, and the latter won out, at the turn of the 20th century roads would come to the forefront again, through the invention of the automobile, which would dominate the 20th century. While the railways demanded strict schedules, as the trains had to share rigid tracks, and thus had to be run either by very big companies or governments, through the car, transportation became a private initiative, which was very seductive and spanned an entirely new lifestyle. It would also create an increased demand for raw materials, such as iron-ore, rubber and most of all oil, the latter becoming thus one of the key commodities of the 20th century. Finally the age old dream of flying was being fulfilled. True, the air balloon was introduced already at the end of the 18th century and was a feature throughout the 19th century, although a very marginal one. It was developed during the first part of the 20th century into the dirigible, but it lost out in competition with 'heavier than air' which would turn out to be far more flexible. In short environmentally friendly means of transportation were replaced by those having a much more extensive impact. Unlike the automobile, air travel never became a private matter, in spite of all the naive predictions made for the future. Extrapolation besides being fragile also tends to ignore the unpredictable. Concomitant with those developments, and in fact antedating them, was the first trappings of a mass consumer society as the middle class expanded.

Imperialism is seen as the ultimate phase of capitalism (as proposed by Lenin). A case of economic exploitation of disadvantaged populations. As such it is identified with racism and abuse, and to be abolished once and for all as a primitive stage out of which enlightened mankind (read westerners) ought to have put behind them. The author takes exception, not that he denies the excesses, the most egregious kind being that of the Belgian colonial administration in Congo, but that the mother countries would reap any economical benefits. Bismarck was notoriously uninterested in them, while his successors were caught up in the prestige that was accorded to a master country having its client territories. Possibly the Indian colony rewarded the British briefly, he is willing to concede.

As science progressed during the 18th and 19th century there was also a development of philosophy. While the great meta physicists such as Hegel held sway in the first half there was a reaction against him and what he stood for as the century approached its close. The impact of Darwinism was momentous, especially as it was given a wider interpretation by the nowadays mostly forgotten Spencer. A more pragmatic philosophy emerged and the author brings forth especially William James and Henri Bergson as heralding a new age. James is mostly known as a psychologist, but he was basically a philosopher with a

strong psychological bias, as manifested by his later philosophical writings on the up-beat issue of pragmatism. Truth is what is good for you. James was also a great supporter of Henri Bergson, the most fashionable philosopher at the turn of the century, whose talk of *elán* and creativity and its tenuous connections to evolution, made many people feel good about themselves and the future of progress. Nietzsche, whom the author discusses at length, was relatively obscure during his life time, or at least during its active phase, (he is supposed to have been exhibited in his asylum in Naumburg by his sister), but did later rise to posthumous fame. He made a thorough assault on the prevailing values, especially those of Christianity, and as such was thought of heralding a new age. His style was to pontificate, not reasoned argument, so although in his daily life he was the academic professor, albeit retired early, in his writings he was a passionate prophet. All in all the turning away from metaphysics into a more psychological and social approach prepared the way for post-modernism which would dominate much of 20th century intellectual culture.

The emergence of the working masses and its concomitant severance from traditional social contexts, meant that the quotidian power of the church started to wane. Socialism started to fill the void with the opportunities for meetings and demonstrations it provided. With the growth of socialism there was an increased demand for education, not so much formally, that would come later, but as personal self-improvement. The public lecture, which had played an important part throughout the 19th century, now started to attract not only a middle-class audience but a working-class as well. The improvement in the rates of literacy created an increased market for reading material, only a marginal proportion of which was channeled into sophisticated literature, most of it found its expression in the mass circulation press with its propensity for sensationalism.

When it came to the arts the break with the past was even more pronounced. There was an established and rather academic art which was being challenged. One of the first signs was the alternative exhibition set up by the impressionists in 1874, similar ventures to be repeated all over Europe, one thinks in particular of the Secession in Vienna. Art became more personal less a question of objectivity, although such tendencies could be discerned throughout art history, but then it never went beyond the individual initiative and thus did not create a movement. It was different at the break of the modern dawn, in effect modernism had its most palpable manifestation in the arts, especially the visual, and could almost be viewed as epitomizing modernism itself. Impressionism gave way for the more individual expressionism, taking the injunction of art being at its heart a question of self-expression to its logical conclusion. Eventually it lead to abstraction, the more notable fads of which was cubism, with its roots in the art of Cezanne. Abstract art which does not represent anything material could be seen as cultural nihilism and took a long time to be accepted, removing all the classical virtues of traditional art such as skill and handi-craft as it gained in influence, and in doing so tied up with the emerging post-modernism. On the balance though, I am inclined personally to think of this as an improvement. Art in the 20th century is more interesting than art in the previous. More individual and also more encompassing.

Architecture is abstract to start out with, and modernism consisted in emphasizing this natural aspect and to simplify and make design more functional, doing away with ornamentation and other idiosyncrasies of past traditions. In this context 'Art Noveaux'

or 'Jugend' became a fashion, a kind of total art combining architecture with painting and design. It had its roots in previous movements such as the Arts and Crafts in Britain, and certainly owed some to Ruskin and the pre-raphaelites. Although like so many of the other tendencies of the breaking of the modern age it was international in character, at least as far as diffusing across European borders, it was particularly influential in Vienna and other Hapsburg cultural centra.

Music too underwent a thorough transformation. Wagner being one of the last classical composers as well as belonging to the vanguard of the more avante garde variety. It meant, as abstract art had meant in the visual arts, the death of a classical tradition², although it did not stop the veneration of it, on the contrary it became more uncritical as to be expected of the appreciation of a dead tradition (Latin did not evolve after becoming a dead language but became a fossil). The theater could not stay immune to the modernist tendencies but experienced a revival and a period of experimentation, through which Ibsen and Strindberg contributed significantly, the only Scandinavian writers to do so before or after. However, the experimentalism of the stage would eventually be subsumed by the film, and merely stay on, along with the opera, as something of a fossilized tradition.

The revolution of the arts may have been the most spectacular, so much more readily accessible to a wide audience, but the revolution of physical science, had far more momentous consequences. The discovery of radioactivity by Becquerel in 1896 ushered us into a new age. Until then the science of physics after Maxwell and his successors had been seen as finished. Everything essential had already been found, what remained was to work out the details. In the latter words of a Kuhn, the paradigm had been established once and for all. Planck and Einstein, became the pioneers of 20th century physics. Planck being associated with quantum theory is not as publicly well-known as Einstein, whose rethinking of the basics of time and space resulting in his theories of relativity, would become the supreme scientific icons of the new age. There was nothing relative about relativity theory, based as it was on the absolute character of the velocity of light, but the name caught on and the supposed ideas resonated well with the emerging post-modernist *Zeitgeist*. The most famous formula of them all $E = mc^2$ indicated the energy inherent in the transformation of matter resulting in the thermo-nuclear bomb, something that has transformed the human predicament irrevocably by the middle of the ensuing century. Physics experienced its most exciting period ever in the 1920's as modern quantum physics evolved. In some sense an even greater revolution occurred in biology. Darwin was a naturalist obsessed by the variety and inter-relatedness of the organic world, and who proposed a mechanism for its coming about. To be a full-fledged science, it had to be complemented, and this turn out to be the emergent science of genetics which probed deeper into the mysteries. A synthesis between Darwinism and Mendelian genetics would be effected in the 1920's and would via the discovery of the double helix in the early 1950's wed biology more intimately to chemistry and physics and make it depart from its naturalistic origin.

We have discussed socialism above, but merely as a social phenomenon, yet the essence of socialism is political, although I suspect that Marx only thought of that as the initial phase. The turn of the century saw the widening of the electorate, of which the right to

² It is interesting to note that the continuation of the classical musical tradition went on in Russia, even during its Soviet phase

vote by women was just one aspect, although a very contentious one, the history of the suffragettes being an amusing one. With the widening of the electoral base, the political impact of the working classes increased which meant an advance of socialism thus enabled it to effect many new reforms conducive to its power forming yet another feed-back mechanism. However, no trees grow to heaven, and the feed back was more tenuous than in the case of economy and technology as discussed above, and after a period of reform there was a back-lash. One very natural explanation is the disaster of the First World War, which admittedly spawned the Bolshevik revolution in Russia but as such it was probably more detrimental to the socialist cause than aiding it. Socialism as Communism acquired a bad name and became something to avoid even among those who ostensibly would have benefited from it. Although the growing peace movement had taken hold in the socialist circles, whose internationalism was part of its definition and which also resonated with the globalization of the economy, it turned out that when push came to shove, the nationalistic identifications of the working masses were much stronger than their internationalistic solidarities. Idealistic schemes of general strikes to counteract war never materialized.

In this modern integrated world with a level of globalization not to be reached until the very end of the century a suicidal war was unleashed. How could it come about in an enlightened and progressive society? Was not war outmoded? Or was it after all a passionate reaction to a world too ordered, too civilized, and as thus too enfeebled. War is the ultimate adventure where you can prove your mettle. The public enthusiasm seems to have been great.

The author devotes the final three chapters to the pre-history of the great conflagration. The account was written almost fifty years ago, and about fifty years after the event, but does not seem to differ very much from the modern accounts written a hundred years later. In particular he makes a succinct review of all the diplomatic crises and limited wars that preceded the explosion. He refers to the various alliances that had been formed and which hampered flexibility. The British tried to stay aloof as long as possible not to compromise their freedom of action. We find a description of the volatile situation at the Balkans together with the perceived clashes of interest between the Russians and the Austrians. But no party is receiving the main blame, in particular are the Germans not depicted as overly aggressive bent upon unleashing roaming armies bent on a conquest. After the Second World War and the emergence of the Cold War, the motivation to blame the Germans had become somewhat irrelevant and thus the on-going discussion ended up in what I believe is a post-bellum consensus. Instead what you can agree on is that the war was a consequence of a failure of diplomacy. No Bismarck was involved to steer matters coolly and judiciously. The actors had limited views and tended to react rather than plan ahead. People of power and ordinary intelligence were to react appropriately and swiftly on events being thrown at them with unforeseeable consequences. When the events unfolded in the summer of 1914 it might already have been too late to stem the tide, although in retrospect there were plenty of opportunities to slam the brake (especially if they had been endowed with the hindsight we benefit from). What had been needed would have been a clearer analysis of what was really at stake and to what extent conceived obligations really mattered. While the Russians and the Austrian had divergent interests on the Balkans, to say nothing about the conflicts between the British and the Russians in

the East, there were no real conflict between the Russians and the Germans, except that the latter felt threatened by the alliance of Russia with France (one of the facts that has often been proposed as a source for the war). France may have thought of Germany as the arch enemy, but that was only because of the Franco-Prussian war and the humiliations that had brought about. At the time it seemed that a generation later the French had reconciled themselves to the loss of Alsace and did not really harbor any political reasons for avenging the slights. In effect the long term tensions between France and Russia on one hand and the British on the other seemed more entrenched than either of the countries had with Germany. What about an alliance between the Germans and the British? It would have been logical and also natural, culturally and historically. But then of course there was this stupid naval competition, for which the German Kaiser has to take some responsibility. Of course on his own he would never have been able to bring it about, his political power was, as had been that of his predecessors, limited; but he tipped the scales.

Yet for the incompetence of the actors it does not strike you as very much more than that displayed by contemporary politicians. In what sense are they more inured to short term goals and questions of prestige than their predecessors? And the problem this time is that the stakes are so much higher.

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