

*Irving Kristol*

## The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals

**N**O SOONER did the late Lionel Trilling coin the phrase “adversary culture” than it became part of the common vocabulary. This is because it so neatly summed up a phenomenon that all of us, vaguely or acutely, had observed. It is hardly to be denied that the culture that educates us—the patterns of perception and thought our children absorb in their schools, at every level—is unfriendly (at the least) to the commercial civilisation, the bourgeois civilisation, within which most of us live and work. When we send our sons and daughters to college, we may expect that by the time they are graduated they are likely to have a lower opinion of our social and economic order than when they entered. We know this from opinion poll data; we know from our own experience.

We are so used to this fact of our lives, we take it so for granted, that we fail to realise how extraordinary it is. Has there ever been, in all of recorded history, a civilisation whose culture was at odds with the values and ideals of that civilisation itself? It is not uncommon that a culture will be critical of the civilisation that sustains it—and always critical of the failure of this civilisation to realise perfectly the ideals that it claims as inspiration. Such criticism is implicit or explicit in Aristophanes and Euripides, Dante and Shakespeare. But to take an adversary posture toward the ideals themselves? That is unprecedented. A few writers and thinkers of a heretical bent, dispersed at the margins of the culture, might do so. But culture as a whole has always been assigned the task of, and invariably accepted responsibility for, sustaining and celebrating those values. Indeed, it is a premise of modern sociological and anthropological theory that it is the essence of culture to be “functional” in this way.

Yet ours is not. The more “cultivated” a person is in our society, the more disaffected and malcontent he is likely to be—a disaffection,

moreover, directed not only at the actuality of our society but at the ideality as well. Indeed, the ideality may be more strenuously opposed than the actuality. It was, I think, Oscar Wilde who observed that, while he rather liked the average American, he found the ideal American contemptible. Our contemporary culture is considerably less tolerant of actuality than was Oscar Wilde. But there is little doubt that if it had to choose between the two, it would prefer the actual to the ideal.

THE AVERAGE “less cultivated” American, of course, feels no great uneasiness with either the actual or the ideal. This explains why the Marxist vision of a radicalised working class erupting into rebellion against capitalist society has turned out to be so erroneous. Radicalism, in our day, finds more fertile ground among the college-educated than among the high-school graduates, the former having experienced more exposure to some kind of “adversary culture”, the latter—until recently, at least—having its own kind of “popular” culture that is more accommodating to the bourgeois world that working people inhabit. But this very disjunction of those two cultures is itself a unique phenomenon of the bourgeois era, and represents, as we shall see, a response to the emergence, in the 19th century, of an “avant-garde”, which laid the basis for our “adversary culture.”

**B**OURGEOIS SOCIETY is without a doubt the most prosaic of all possible societies. It is prosaic in the literal sense. The novel written in prose, dealing with the (only somewhat) extraordinary adventures of ordinary people, is its original and characteristic art form, replacing the epic poem, the lyric poem,

the poetic drama, the religious hymn. These latter were appropriate to societies formally and officially committed to transcendent ideals of excellence—ideals that could be realised only by those few of exceptional nobility of character—or to transcendent visions of the universe wherein human existence on earth is accorded only a provisional significance. But bourgeois society is uninterested in such transcendence, which at best it tolerates as a private affair, a matter for individual taste and individual consumption as it were. It is prosaic, not only in form, but in essence. It is a society organised for the convenience and comfort of common men and common women, not for the production of heroic, memorable figures. It is a society interested in making the best of this world, not in any kind of transfiguration, whether through tragedy or piety.

Because this society proposes to make the best of this world, for the benefit of ordinary men and women, it roots itself in the most worldly and common of human motivations: self-interest. It assumes that, though only a few are capable of pursuing excellence, everyone is capable of recognising and pursuing his own self-interest. This “democratic” assumption about the equal potential of human nature, in this limited respect, in turn justifies a market economy in which each individual defines his own well-being, and illegitimizes all the paternalistic economic theories of previous eras. One should emphasise, however, that the pursuit of excellence by the few—whether defined in religious, moral, or intellectual terms—is neither prohibited nor inhibited. Such an activity is merely interpreted as a special form of self-interest, which may be freely pursued but can claim no official status. Bourgeois society also assumes that the average individual’s conception of his own self-interest will be sufficiently “enlightened”—i.e., sufficiently far-sighted and prudent—to permit other human passions (the desire for community, the sense of human sympathy, the moral conscience, etc.) to find expression, albeit always in a voluntarist form.

It is characteristic of a bourgeois culture, when it exists in concord with bourgeois principles, that we are permitted to take “happy endings” seriously (“... and they lived happily ever after”). From classical antiquity through the Renaissance, happy endings—worldly happy endings—were consigned to the genre of Comedy. “Serious” art focused on a

meaningful death, in the context of heroism in battle, passion in love, ambition in politics, or piety in religion. Such high seriousness ran counter to the bourgeois grain, which perceived human fulfilment—human authenticity, if you will—in terms of becoming a good citizen, a good husband, a good provider. It is, in contrast to both pre-bourgeois and post-bourgeois *Weltanschauungen*, a *domestic* conception of the universe and of man’s place therein.

THIS BOURGEOIS IDEAL is much closer to the Old Testament than to the New—which is, perhaps, why Jews have felt more at home in the bourgeois world than in any other. That God created this world and affirmed its goodness; that men ought confidently to be fruitful and multiply; that work (including that kind of work we call commerce) is elevating rather than demeaning; that the impulse to “better one’s condition” (to use a favourite phrase of Adam Smith’s) is good because natural—these beliefs were almost perfectly congruent with the world view of post-exilic Judaism. In this world view, there was no trace of aristocratic bias: Everyman was no allegorical figure but, literally, every common person.

SO IT IS NOT SURPRISING that the bourgeois world view—placing the needs and desires of ordinary men and women at its centre—was (and still is) also popular among the common people.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it surprising that, almost from the beginning, it was an unstable world view, evoking active contempt in a minority, and a pervasive disquiet among those who, more successful than others in having bettered their condition, had the leisure to wonder if life did not, perhaps, have more interesting and remote possibilities to offer.

The emergence of romanticism in the middle of the 18th century provided an early warning signal that, within the middle class itself, a kind of non-bourgeois spiritual impulse was at work. Not anti-bourgeois; not yet. For romanticism—with its celebration of noble savages, *Weltschmerz*, passionate love, aristocratic heroes and heroines, savage terrors confronted with haughty boldness and courage—was mainly an escapist aesthetic mode as distinct from a rebellious one. It provided a kind of counter-culture that was, on the whole, safely insulated from bourgeois reality, and could even be tolerated (though always uneasily) as a temporary therapeutic distraction from the serious

<sup>1</sup> This generalisation, skimming over differences in national traditions and religious cultures (especially Protestant vs. Catholic cultures), is obviously an oversimplification. But it is only an over-simplification, not a distortion.

business of living. A clear sign of this self-limitation of the romantic impulse was the degree to which it was generated, and consumed, by a particular section of the middle class: women.

ONE OF THE LESS HAPPY consequences of the women's liberation movement of the past couple of decades is the distorted view it has encouraged of the history of women under capitalism. This history is interpreted in terms of repression—sexual repression above all. That repression was real enough, of course; but it is absurd to regard it as nothing but an expression of masculine possessiveness, even vindictiveness. Sexual repression—and that whole code of feminine conduct we have come to call Victorian—was imposed and enforced by women, not men (who stand to gain very little if *all* women are chaste). And women insisted on this code because, while sexually repressive, it was also liberating in all sorts of other ways. Specifically, it liberated women, ideally if not always actually, from their previous condition as sex objects or work objects. To put it another way: all women were now elevated to the aristocratic status of *ladies*, entitled to a formal deference, respect, consideration. (Even today, some of those habits survive, if weakly—taking off one's hat when greeting a female acquaintance, standing up when a woman enters the room, etc.) The "wench", as had been portrayed in Shakespeare's plays, was not dead. She was still very much to be found in the working and lower classes. But her condition was not immutable; she, too, could become a lady—through marriage, education, or sheer force of will.

The price for this remarkable elevation of women's status was sexual self-restraint and self-denial, which made them, in a sense, owners of valuable (if intangible) property. It is reasonable to think that this change in actual sexual mores had something to do with the rise of romanticism, with its strong erotic component, in literature—the return of the repressed, as Freud was later to call it. For most of those who purchased romantic novels, or borrowed them (for a fee) from the newly established circulating libraries, were women. Indeed they still are, even today, two centuries later, though the romantic novel is now an exclusively popular art form, which flourishes outside the world of "serious" writing.

THIS EXTRAORDINARY and ironical transformation of the novel from a prosaic art form—a tradition that reached its apogee in Jane Austen—

to something radically different was itself a bourgeois accomplishment. It was made possible by the growing affluence of the middle classes that provided not only the purchasing power but also the leisure and the solitude ("a room of one's own"). This last point is worth especial notice.

It is a peculiarity of the novel that, unlike all previous art forms, it gains rather than loses from becoming a private experience. Though novels were still occasionally read aloud all during the romantic era, they need not be and gradually ceased to be. Whereas Shakespeare or Racine are most "enchanted" as part of a public experience—on a stage, in daylight—the novel gains its greatest power over us when we "consume" it (or it "consumes" us) in silence and privacy. Reading a novel then becomes something like surrendering oneself to an especially powerful daydream. The bourgeois ethos, oriented toward prosaic actualities, strongly disapproves of such daydreaming (which is why, even today, a businessman will prefer not to be known as an avid reader of novels, and few in fact are). But bourgeois women very soon discovered that living simultaneously in the two worlds of non-bourgeois "romance" and bourgeois "reality" was superior to living in either one.

The men and women who wrote such novels (or poems—one thinks of Byron) were not, however, simply responding to a market incentive. Writers and artists may have originally been receptive to a bourgeois society because of the far greater individual freedoms that it offered them; and because, too, they could not help but be exhilarated by the heightened vitality and quickened vivacity of a capitalist order with its emphasis on progress, economic growth, and liberation from age-old constraints. But, very quickly, disillusionment and dissent set in, and the urge to escape became compelling.

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF artists and of those whom we have come to call "intellectuals"—a category itself created by bourgeois society, which converted philosophers into *philosophes* engaged in the task of critical enlightenment—there were three great flaws in the new order of things.

First of all, it threatened to be very boring. Though the idea of *ennui* did not become a prominent theme in literature until the 19th century, there can be little doubt that the experience is considerably older than its literary expression. One can say this with some confidence because,

throughout history, artists and writers have been so candidly contemptuous of commercial activity between consenting adults, regarding it as an activity that tends to coarsen and trivialise the human spirit. And since bourgeois society was above all else a commercial society—the first in all of recorded history in which the commercial ethos was sovereign over all others—their exasperation was bound to be all the more acute. Later on, the term “philistinism” would emerge to encapsulate this sentiment.

Second, though a commercial society may offer artists and writers all sorts of desirable things—freedom of expression especially, popularity and affluence occasionally—it did (and does) deprive them of the status that they naturally feel themselves entitled to. Artists and writers and thinkers always have taken themselves to be Very Important People, and they are outraged by a society that merely tolerates them, no matter how generously. Bertolt Brecht was once asked how he could justify his Communist loyalties when his plays could neither be published nor performed in the USSR, while his royalties in the West made him a wealthy man. His quick rejoinder was: “Well, there at least they take me seriously!” Artists and intellectuals are always more respectful of a régime that takes their work and ideas “seriously.” To be placed at a far distance from social and political power is, for such people, a deprivation.

Third, a commercial society, a society whose civilisation is shaped by market transactions, is always likely to reflect the appetites and preferences of common men and women. Each may not have much money, but there are so many of them that their tastes are decisive. Artists and intellectuals see this as an inversion of the natural order of things, since it gives “vulgarity” the power to dominate where and when it can. By their very nature “élitists” (as one now says), they believe that a civilisation should be shaped by an *aristoi* to which they will be organically attached, no matter how perilously. The consumerist and environmentalist movements of our own day reflect this aristocratic impulse, albeit in a distorted way: because the democratic idea is the only legitimating political idea of our era, it is claimed that the market does not truly reflect people’s preferences, which are deformed by the power of advertising. A minority, however, is presumed to have the education and the will to avoid such deformation. And this minority then claims the paternalist authority to represent “the people” in some more authentic sense. It is this minority which is so appalled by America’s “automobile civilisation”, in which

everyone owns a car, while it is not appalled at all by the fact that in the Soviet Union only a privileged few are able to do so.

IN SUM, intellectuals and artists will be (as they have been) restive in a bourgeois-capitalist society. The popularity of romanticism in the century after 1750 testifies to this fact, as the artists led an “inner emigration” of the spirit—which, however, left the actual world unchanged. But not all such restiveness found refuge in escapism. Rebellion was an alternative route, as the emergence of various socialist philosophies and movements early in the 19th century demonstrated.

**S**Ocialism (of whatever kind) is a romantic passion that operates within a rationalist framework. It aims to construct a human community in which *everyone* places the common good—as defined, necessarily, by an intellectual and moral élite—before his own individual interests and appetites. The intention was not new—there isn’t a religion in the world that has failed to preach and expound it. What was new was the belief that such self-denial could be realised, not through a voluntary circumscription of individual appetites (as Rousseau had, for example, argued in his *Social Contract*) but even while the aggregate of human appetites was being increasingly satisfied by ever-growing material prosperity. What Marx called “utopian” socialism was frequently defined by the notion that human appetites were insatiable, and that a self-limitation on such appetites was a precondition for a socialist community. The trouble with this notion, from a political point of view, was that it was not likely to appeal to more than a small minority of men and women at any one time. Marxian “scientific” socialism, in contrast, promised to remove this conflict between actual and potentially ideal human nature by creating an economy of such abundance that appetite as a social force would, as it were, wither away.

Behind this promise, of course, was the profound belief that modern science—including the social sciences, and especially including scientific economics—would gradually but ineluctably provide humanity with modes of control over nature (and human nature, too) that would permit the modern world radically to transcend all those limitations of the human condition previously taken to be “natural.” The trouble with implementing this belief, however, was that the majority of men and

women were no more capable of comprehending a "science of society", and of developing a "consciousness" appropriate to it, than they were of practising austere self-denial. A socialist élite, therefore, was indispensable to mobilise the masses for their own ultimate self-transformation. And the techniques of such mobilisation would themselves of necessity be "scientific"—what moralists would call "Machiavellian"—in that they had to treat the masses as objects of manipulation so that eventually they would achieve a condition where they could properly be subjects of their own history-making.

Michael Polanyi has described this "dynamic coupling" of a romantic moral passion with a ruthlessly "scientific" conception of man, his world, and his history, as a case of "moral inversion." That is to say, it is the moral passion that legitimates the claims of "scientific" socialism to absolute truth, while it is the "scientific" necessities that legitimate every possible form of political immorality. Such a "dynamic coupling" characterised, in the past, only certain religious movements. In the 19th and 20th centuries, it became the property of secular political movements that sought the universal regeneration of mankind in the here and now.

THE APPEAL OF ANY SUCH MOVEMENT to intellectuals is clear enough. As intellectuals, they are qualified candidates for membership in the élite that leads such movements, and they can thus give free expression to their natural impulse for authority and power. They can do so, moreover, within an ideological context, which reassures them that, any superficial evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, they are disinterestedly serving the "true" interests of the people.

**B**UT THE REALITY PRINCIPLE—*la force des choses*—will, in the end, always prevail over utopian passions. The fate of intellectuals under socialism is disillusionment, dissent, exile, silence. In politics, means determine ends, and socialism everywhere finds its incarnation in coercive bureaucracies that are contemptuously dismissive of the ideals that presumably legitimise them, even while establishing these ideals as a petrified orthodoxy. The most interesting fact of contemporary intellectual life is the utter incapacity of so-called "socialist" countries to produce socialist intellectuals—or even, for that matter, to tolerate socialist intellectuals. If you want to meet active

socialist intellectuals, you can go to Oxford or Berkeley or Paris or Rome. There is no point in going to Moscow or Peking or Belgrade or Bucharest or Havana. Socialism today is a dead end for the very intellectuals who have played so significant a role in moving the modern world down that street.

In addition to that romantic-rationalist rebellion we call socialism, there is another mode of "alienation" and rebellion that may be, in the longer run, more important. This is romantic anti-rationalism, which takes a cultural rather than political form. It is this movement specifically that Trilling had in mind when he referred to "the adversary culture."

TAKING ITS INSPIRATION from literary romanticism, this rebellion first created a new kind of "inner emigration"—physical as well as spiritual—in the form of "bohemia." In Paris, in the 1820s and 1830s, there formed enclaves of (mostly) young people who displayed *in nuce* all the symptoms of the counter-culture of the 1960s. Drugs, sexual promiscuity, long hair for men and short hair for women, working-class dress (the "jeans" of the day), a high suicide rate—anything and everything that would separate them from the bourgeois order. The one striking difference between this bohemia and its heirs of a century and a quarter later is that to claim membership in bohemia one had to be (or pretend to be) a producer of "art", while in the 1960s to be a consumer was sufficient. For this transition to occur, the attitudes and values of bohemia had to permeate a vast area of bourgeois society itself. The engine and vehicle of this transition was the "modernist" movement in the arts, which in the century after 1850 gradually displaced the traditional, the established, the "academic."

The history and meaning of this movement are amply described and brilliantly analysed by Daniel Bell in his *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). Suffice it to say here that modernism in the arts can best be understood as a quasi-religious rebellion against bourgeois sobriety, rather than simply as a series of aesthetic innovations. The very structure of this movement bears a striking resemblance to that of the various gnostic-heretical sects within Judaism and Christianity. There is an "elect"—the artists themselves—who possess the esoteric and redeeming knowledge (*gnosis*); then there are the "critics", whose task it is to convey this gnosis, as a vehicle of conversion, to potential adherents to the movement. And then there is the outer layer of "sympathisers" and

“fellow travellers”—mainly bourgeois “consumers” of the modernist arts—who help popularise and legitimate the movement within the wider realms of public opinion.

One can even press the analogy further. It is striking, for instance, that modernist movements in the arts no longer claim to create “beauty” but to reveal the “truth” about humanity in its present condition. Beauty is defined by an aesthetic tradition that finds expression in the public’s “taste.” But the modern artist rejects the sovereignty of public taste, since truth can never be a matter of taste. This truth always involves an indictment of the existing order of things, while holding out the promise, for those whose sensibilities have been suitably reformed, of a redemption of the spirit (now called “the self”). Moreover, the artist himself now becomes the central figure in the artistic enterprise—he is the hero of his own work, the sacrificial redeemer of us all, the only person capable of that transcendence that gives a liberating meaning to our lives. The artist—painter, poet, novelist, composer—who lives to a ripe old age of contentment with fame and fortune strikes us as having abandoned, if not betrayed, his “mission.” We think it more appropriate that artists should die young and tormented. The extraordinarily high suicide rate among modern artists would have baffled our ancestors, who assumed that the artist—like any other *secular* person—aimed to achieve recognition and prosperity in this world.

OUR ANCESTORS WOULD have been baffled, too, by the enormous importance of critics and of criticism in modern culture. It is fascinating to pick up a standard anthology in the history of literary criticism and to observe that, prior to 1800, there is very little that we would designate as literary criticism, as distinct from philosophical tracts on aesthetics. Shakespeare had no contemporary critics to explain his plays to the audience; nor did the Greek tragedians, nor Dante, Racine, etc. Yet we desperately feel the need of critics to understand, not only the modern artist, but, by retrospective re-evaluation, all artists. The reason for this odd state of affairs is that we are looking for something in these artists—a redeeming knowledge of ourselves and our human condition—which in previous eras was felt to lie elsewhere, in religious traditions especially.

THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT in the arts gathered momentum slowly, and the first visible sign of

its success was the gradual acceptance of the fact that bourgeois society had within it two cultures: the “avant-garde” culture of modernism, and the “popular culture” of the majority. The self-designation of modernism as “avant-garde” is itself illuminating. The term is of military origin, and means not, as we are now inclined to think, merely the latest in cultural or intellectual fashion, but the foremost assault troops in a military attack. It was a term popularised by Saint-Simon to describe the role of his utopian-socialist sect *vis-à-vis* the bourgeois order, and was then taken over by modernist innovators in the arts. The avant-garde is, and always has been, fully self-conscious of its hostile intentions toward the bourgeois world. Until 1914, such hostility was as likely to move intellectuals and artists towards the romantic Right as towards the romantic Left. But Right or Left, the hostility was intransigent. This is, as has been noted, a cultural phenomenon without historical precedent.

AND SO IS the “popular culture” of the bourgeois era, though here again we are so familiar with the phenomenon that we fail to perceive its originality. It is hard to think of a single historical instance where a society presents us with two cultures, a “high” and a “low”, whose values are in opposition to one another. We are certainly familiar with the fact that any culture has its more sophisticated and its more popular aspects, differentiated by the level of education needed to move from the one to the other. But the values embodied in these two aspects were basically homogeneous: the sophisticated expression did not *shock* the popular, nor did the popular incite feelings of revulsion among the sophisticated. Indeed, it was taken as a mark of true artistic greatness for a writer or artist to encompass both aspects of his culture. The Greek tragedies were performed before all the citizens of Athens; Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was read aloud in the squares of Florence to a large and motley assemblage; and Shakespeare’s plays were enacted before a similarly mixed audience.

THE POPULAR CULTURE of the bourgeois era, after 1870 or so, tended to be a culture that educated people despised, or tolerated contemptuously. The age of Richardson, Jane Austen, Walter Scott, and Dickens—an age in which excellence and popularity needed not to contradict

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one another, in which the distinction between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” made no sense—was over. The spiritual energy that made for artistic excellence was absorbed by the modernist, highbrow movement, while popular culture degenerated into a banal reiteration—almost purely commercial in intent—of “wholesome” bourgeois themes.

In this popular literature of romance and adventure, the “happy ending” not only survived but became a standard cliché. The occasional unhappy ending, involving a sinful action (e.g., adultery) as its effectual cause, always concluded on a note of repentance, and was the occasion for a cathartic “good cry.” In “serious” works of literature in the 20th century, of course, the happy ending is under an almost total prohibition. It is also worth making mention of the fact that popular literature remained very much a commodity consumed by women, whose commitments to the bourgeois order (a “domestic” order, remember) has always been stronger than men’s. This is why the women’s liberation movement of the past two decades, which is so powerfully moving the female sensibility in an anti-bourgeois direction, is such a significant cultural event.

In the last century, the modernist movement in the arts made constant progress at the expense of the popular. It was, after all, the only serious art available to young men and women who were inclined to address themselves to solemn questions about the meaning of life (or “the meaning of it all”). The contemporaneous evolution of liberal capitalism itself encouraged modernism in its quest for moral and spiritual hegemony. It did this in three ways.

First, the increasing affluence that capitalism provided to so many individuals made it possible for them (or, more often, for their children) to relax their energetic pursuit of money, and of the goods that money can buy, in favour of an attention to those non-material goods that used to be called “the higher things in life.” The anti-bourgeois arts in the 20th century soon came to be quite generously financed by restless, uneasy, and vaguely discontented bourgeois money.

Second, that spirit of worldly rationalism so characteristic of a commercial society and its business civilisation (and so well described by Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter) had the effect of de-legitimising all merely traditional beliefs, tasks, and attitudes. The “new”, constructed by design or out of the passion of a moment, came to seem inherently superior to the old and established, this

latter having emerged “blindly” out of the interaction of generations. This mode of thinking vindicated the socialist ideal of a planned society. But it also vindicated an anarchic, antinomian, “expressionist” impulse in matters cultural and spiritual.

Third, the tremendous expansion—especially after World War II—of post-secondary education provided a powerful institutional milieu for modernist tastes and attitudes among the mass of both teachers and students. Lionel Trilling, in *Beyond Culture*, poignantly describes the spiritual vitality with which this process began in the humanities—the professors were “liberated” to teach the books that most profoundly moved and interested them—and the vulgarised version of modernism that soon became the mass counter-culture among their students who, as consumers, converted it into a pseudo-bohemian life-style.

Simultaneously, and more obviously, in the social sciences, the anti-bourgeois socialist traditions were absorbed as a matter of course, with “the study of society” coming quickly and surely to mean the management of social change by an élite who understood the verities of social structure and social trends. Economics, as the science of making the best choices in a hard world of inevitable scarcity, resisted for a long while; but the Keynesian revolution—with its promise of permanent prosperity through government management of fiscal and monetary policy—eventually brought much of the economics profession in line with the other social sciences.

SO UTOPIAN RATIONALISM and utopian romanticism have, between them, established their hegemony as “adversary cultures” over the modern consciousness and the modern sensibility.

But, inevitably, such victories are accompanied by failure and disillusionment. As socialist reality disappoints, socialist thought fragments into heterogeneous conflicting sects, all of them trying to keep the utopian spark alive while devising explanations for the squalid nature of socialist reality. One is reminded of the experience of Christianity in the first and second centuries, but with this crucial difference: Christianity, as a religion of transcendence, of *other-worldly* hope, of faith not belief, was not really utopian, and the Church Fathers were able to transform the Christian rebellion against the ancient world into a new, vital Christian orthodoxy, teaching its adherents how to live virtuously, i.e., how to seek

human fulfilment in this world even while waiting for their eventual migration into a better one. Socialism, lacking this transcendent dimension, is purely and simply trapped in this world, whose realities are for it nothing more than an endless series of frustrations. It is no accident, as the Marxists would say, that there is no credible doctrine of "socialist virtue"—a doctrine informing individuals how actually to live "in authenticity" as distinct from empty rhetoric about "autonomous self-fulfilment"—in any nation (and there are so many!) now calling itself "socialist." It is paradoxically true that other-worldly religions are more capable of providing authoritative guidance for life in this world than are secular religions.

**T**HE UTOPIAN ROMANTICISM that is the impulse behind modernism in the arts is in a not dissimilar situation. It differs in that it seeks transcendence—all of 20th-century art is such a request—but it seeks such transcendence within the secular self. This endeavour can generate that peculiar spiritual intensity that characterises the anti-bourgeois culture of our bourgeois era, but in the end it is mired in self-contradiction.

The deeper one explores into the self, without any transcendental frame of reference, the clearer it becomes that nothing is there. One can then, of course, try to construct a metaphysics of nothingness as an absolute truth of the human condition. But this, too, is self-contradictory: if nothingness is the ultimate reality, those somethings called books, or poems, or paintings, or music are mere evasions of truth rather than expressions of it. Suicide is the only appropriate response to this vision of reality (as Dostoevsky saw long ago) and in the 20th century it has in fact become the fate of many of our artists: self-sacrificial martyrs to a hopeless metaphysical enterprise. Those who stop short of this ultimate gesture experience that *tedium vitae*, already mentioned, which has made the "boringness" of human life a recurrent theme, since Baudelaire at least, among our artists.

This modern association of culture and culture heroes with self-annihilation and *ennui* has no parallel in human history. We are so familiar with it that most of us think of it as natural. It is, in truth, unnatural and cannot endure. Philosophy may, with some justice, be regarded as a preparation for dying, as Plato said—but he assumed that there would never be more than a handful of philosophers at any time. The arts, in contrast, have

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always been life-affirming, even when dealing with the theme of death. It is only when the arts usurp the role of religion, but without the transcendence that assures us of the meaning of apparent meaninglessness, that we reach our present absurd (and *absurdiste*) condition.

MOREOVER, though utopian rationalism and utopian romanticism are both hostile to bourgeois society, they turn out to be, in the longer run, equally hostile to one another.

In all socialist nations, of whatever kind, modernism in the arts is repressed—for, as we have seen, this modernism breeds a spirit of nihilism and antinomianism that is subversive of *any* established order. But this repression is never entirely effective, because the pseudo-orthodoxies of socialism can offer no satisfying spiritual alternatives. It turns out that a reading of Franz Kafka can alienate from socialist reality just as easily as from bourgeois reality, and there is no socialist Richardson or Fielding or Jane Austen or Dickens to provide an original equipoise. Who are the “classic” socialist authors or artists worthy of the name? There are none. And so young people in socialist lands naturally turn either to the high modernist culture of the 20th century or to its debased, popularised version in the counter-culture. Picasso and Kafka, blue jeans and rock-and-roll may yet turn out to be the major internal enemies of socialist bureaucracies, uniting intellectuals and the young in an incorrigible hostility to the *status quo*. Not only do socialism and modernism end up in blind alleys—their blind alleys are pointed in radically different directions.

MEANWHILE, LIBERAL CAPITALISM survives and staggers on. It survives because the market economics of capitalism does work—does promote economic growth and permits the individual to better his condition while enjoying an unprecedented degree of individual freedom. But there is something joyless, even somnambulistic, about this survival.

For it was the Judaeo-Christian tradition which, as it were, acted as the Old Testament to the new evangel of liberal, individualistic capitalism—which supplied it with a moral code for the individual to live by, and which also enabled the free individual to find a transcendental meaning in life, to cope joyfully or sadly with all the *rites de passage* that define the human condition. Just as a victorious Christianity needed the Old Testament in its canon

because the Ten Commandments were there—along with the assurance that God created the world “*and it was good*”, and along, too, with its corollary that it made sense to be fruitful and multiply on this earth—so liberal capitalism needed the Judaeo-Christian tradition to inform it authoritatively about the use and abuse of the individual’s newly-won freedom. But the “adversary culture”, in both its utopian-rationalist and utopian-romantic aspects, turns this Judaeo-Christian tradition into a mere anachronism. And the churches, now themselves a species of voluntary private enterprise, bereft of all public support and sanction, are increasingly ineffectual in coping with its antagonists.

**I**S IT POSSIBLE to restore the spiritual base of a bourgeois society to something approaching a healthy condition?

One is tempted to answer: no, it is not possible to turn back the clock of history. But this answer itself derives from the romantic-rationalist conception of history, as elaborated by Saint-Simon and Hegel and Marx. In fact, human history, read in a certain way, can be seen as full of critical moments when human beings deliberately turned the clock back. The Reformation, properly understood, was just such a moment, and so was the codification of the Talmud in post-exile Judaism. What we call the “new” in intellectual and spiritual history is often nothing more than a novel way of turning the clock back. The history of science and technology is a cumulative history, in which new ways of seeing and doing effectively displace old ones. But the histories of religion and culture are not at all cumulative in this way, which is why one cannot study religion and culture without studying their histories, while scientists need not study the history of science to understand what they are up to.

So the possibility is open to us—but, for better or worse, it is not the only possibility. All we can say with some certainty, at this time, is that the future of liberal capitalism may be more significantly shaped by the ideas now germinating in the mind of some young, unknown philosopher or theologian than by any vagaries in annual GNP statistics. Those statistics are not unimportant, but to think they are all-important is to indulge in the silly kind of capitalist idolatry that is subversive of capitalism itself. It is the ethos of capitalism that is in gross disrepair, not the economics of capitalism—which is, indeed, its saving grace. But salvation through this grace alone will not suffice.

*Paul Johnson*

## Is There a Moral Basis for Capitalism?

### *Dissenting Thoughts in a Collectivist Age*

IT TAKES NERVE these days to suggest there can be a moral basis for capitalism, let alone to argue that capitalism provides, on the whole, the best economic structure for man's moral fulfilment. No day passes without a prominent clergyman denouncing the gross immorality of some large capitalist concern; and in most schools children are encouraged to hold their noses when such notions as "profit" and "private enterprise" are discussed.

Such attitudes, it seems to me, are confused. They are based on a lack of understanding of the relationship between man's moral development, and the way in which he organises his society. We can and do achieve moral maturity under any kind of economic and social system, including those we find morally repugnant. Indeed, history suggests that societies specifically contrived to promote morality rarely succeed. Such earthly Utopias tend to become theocracies, and theocracies—whether the temple-states of antiquity, Calvin's Geneva, or the Ayatollah's Iran—traffic in a spiritual intolerance which does violence to mind and body. The core of man's moral condition is the free will he is bidden to exercise. Hence the question we should begin by asking is: What social system is most conducive to developing the informed conscience which enables man's free will to make the right choices?

THE FIRST THING to note is that the articulated concept of the individual conscience, though always buried in our nature, took a very long time to emerge. The earliest recorded societies did not recognise that every human being has a unique personality, endowed with self-consciousness and a free will. In the Ancient Egypt of the Old Kingdom, in the first half of the 3rd millennium BC, religious

and political doctrine revolved round the assumption that only the Pharaoh was a complete personality. His life and fate embraced that of all his subjects. They engaged in the infinite labour of building his tomb-pyramid not from compulsion but almost certainly with enthusiasm, because they believed that their salvation was subsumed in his: if his funeral and tomb arrangements were satisfactory, they would be carried into eternal life along with him.

Only very gradually did the ancient Egyptians "democratise" their idea of a Last Judgment, in which each human being was separately weighed in the scales of eternal justice. The great American Egyptologist, Professor James Breasted, has called this discovery "the dawn of conscience." And it was an important human discovery as well as a religious one, for it implied that every individual was responsible for his or her actions and therefore, in a moral sense, free. The implication was first properly understood by the Jews, who probably derived the idea from the Egyptians. The Jews (as the earliest parts of the Bible indicate) had, like other primitive societies, a strong belief in collective virtue and crime, and in collective rewards and punishments. These beliefs were very persistent, and the Jews were still trying to shake them off long after they became rigorous monotheists. Only in the two or three centuries before the birth of Christ were they really beginning to work out their theory of the immortal soul and the Last Judgment. At roughly the same time, the Stoic philosophers in the Greek world were developing the idea of the individual conscience, a necessary adjunct to the concept of free will.

The two sets of ideas were made for each other, and Christ and his great interpreter St Paul were the inheritors of this new collection of thoughts