

## CHAPTER 18

# THE MOST PRECIOUS HEIRLOOM

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Is WESTERN civilization on the way out? Some of our more lugubrious prognosticators say so, declaring moreover that the passing has already begun; the *coup de grâce*, they insist, will be World War III. If that is so, then we of this era occupy a grandstand seat at an historical tragedy that will cause much puzzlement for the scholars to come. What data will they have to go by in trying to put together the plot of the long lost—our—civilization? Will they be able to reconstruct its main *motif*? This is a speculation that ought to interest us, not so much because of any interest in future scholarship, but because it might help us to explain ourselves to ourselves.

What is “western civilization”? To which question there is an antecedent: what is “civilization”? Much of the gloomy

forebodings rests on the anticipated destruction by the atom bomb and other instruments of death, so that "the decline of western civilization" suggests a wiping out of all population. That is obviously an exaggeration born of fear. If the world is to be destroyed, if all life is to disappear, our age and all that preceded it will hardly be a matter of thought; it will never have been, and whatever succeeds us will have to be a new genesis. But, it is more than likely that nature will defeat science, that despite the most thorough job of killing we might devise, at least one boy and one girl will escape, so that a new generation will arise to worry about what went on before they arrived.

When a civilization disappears all that is lost is an accumulation of knowledge; or, more exactly, the memory of that knowledge. A "lost" civilization is a body of ideas of which there is no record, or a frame of thought that once influenced the way people lived but has since been forgotten and has therefore lost significance. As with the impaired memory of senility, the past has no bearing on the present. Thus, as far as the Communists have been able to obliterate the knowledge and the values that obtained before their advent, the pre-1918 Russian civilization has been lost to Russia, even though records of it remain elsewhere.

No civilization is ever completely lost. Some trace of the accumulated knowledge of an age does seep through to its successors, if only through the artifacts it bequeaths, and no part of the world has ever been hermetically sealed off from the rest. Knowledge has a way of seeping through all barriers, of overcoming all exigencies. Though the debris of Rome buried the ancient civilization so deep as to bring on an apparently complete ignorance of it, known as the Dark Ages, some record of it found its way into the archives of the East, to facilitate the eventual reconstruction. And, above all, even on the dark continent of Europe some flickering

torches were kept alive by intrepid monks, with a devotion that bespeaks an unquenchable faith in a renaissance. Now that a new "dark age" is being predicted, the story of these monks and their monasteries ought to be considered. Who will perform a similar office for the resurrection that must succeed the predicted decline?

Why do civilizations decline? Or, starting from the other end, how do they rise? The process of disintegration must be the reverse of the process of growth; hence, an understanding of the one is dependent on an understanding of the other.

If civilization is a body of ideas, it follows that it is the product of human thought, which in turn is stimulated by curiosity. A civilization comes because the reasoning animal puts his mind to the discovery of means for the improvement of his circumstances or the widening of his horizon. Since he is also endowed with the more significant characteristic of insatiability, he is never satisfied with one discovery but must go on seeking new gratifications for the ever-increasing number of desires his imagination conjures up. Out of the wheel came the cart; out of the cart came the railroad; out of the railroad came the automobile; out of the automobile came the airplane. On the spiritual side, which is another facet of desires, he invents an object of fear to worship, but soon finds that unsatisfying and comes up with the more solace-giving concept of a universal God of Love. When his primary desires are satisfied, his insatiable curiosity reaches out into what we call cultural fields, and he enriches his existence with music, art, literature, as well as with ideas that flatter his desire for self-identification, such as adornment and ostentation.

That's how civilizations arise. It is necessarily a graduated process. The will to exist precedes the will to live. Only after

the problem of existence is pretty well solved does the human being discover in himself any interest in improvement; only then do the marginal satisfactions—baseball and Bach—lay claim to his thought. They are called marginal satisfactions because, if necessary, man can get along without them. Any old shelter will do for a castle in the beginning, but when his larder is full he starts hunting for such things as a rug, pictures, a clavicord—to say nothing of hot-and-cold running water—just to make the old place livable. A civilization flowers in proportion to the amount of thought and effort man can invest in the satisfaction of his marginal desires. It is an accumulatively productive enterprise. Obviously, any diversionary or destructive effort, like war, must interfere with the nurturing of a civilization; also, if the human being is insecure in the possession and enjoyment of his output, he loses interest in reaching out for new satisfactions and civilization is retarded. Peace and what we call property rights, which are in fact human rights, must obtain for a civilization to prosper.

Contrariwise, when living is difficult, when mere existence is the sum-total of satisfactions one can hope for, civilization hasn't a chance. And, whatever civilization has been built up will shrink as men have to give more and more thought to the primary problem of life. Men learn to get along without—without baseball and Bach—and in due time they forget that such things engaged the minds of their forebears. Long before the political entity of Rome collapsed, the number of Romans who took the slightest interest in the culture of the Greeks, or who had any acquaintance with the learning of their own illustrious forefathers, had dwindled to a mere handful; the principal business of the mass was to keep alive, and that was so demanding that nothing else mattered. When the essential word of a language is "gimme," little

value is put on the cadences of poetry. And, when that happens, civilization is on the toboggan.

That is the theory of the rise and fall of civilizations by which those who predict the fall of western civilization measure the current of events. For evidence, they point to Europe, where concentration on mere survival has crowded out the intense interest in cultural values that characterized its population during the nineteenth century. In America, they find a general deterioration of educational standards, even though there has been an increase in student attendance; the curricula of schools and colleges are loaded with functional, rather than self-improvement, courses, so that these institutions have become training centers for soldiers, farmers, clerks; they clinch their argument by pointing to the infantile literature which is popular in this country.

Those who have hope, have their rebuttals ready. But, there is one argument advanced by the pessimists that carries more weight than all the facts and figures they can corral. It is the fact that western man has given up on the underlying concept of his civilization: the primacy of the individual. Of that there can be no doubt. All that we call western civilization seminates in the idea that all things begin and end with the individual, that he is the be-all and end-all of life. "Nothing but the individual exists," wrote a nineteenth century philosopher, "and in the individual, nothing but the individual." This idea that the human soul is the only reality not only released the human being from fetishes but also placed on him the responsibility for his environment. Since in the eyes of God every man is king, it was up to him to prove himself.

Out of that tenet of faith came the philosophy of liberalism that is the mark of western civilization. In its political

expression it lodged sovereignty in the individual and reduced government to the status of a maid-servant. In economics it gave rise to the doctrine of *laissez faire*. In social life it did away with the fictional castes. It stimulated man's spirit of adventure and he reached out into all fields, in the sciences and the arts, in industry and commerce, and the sum-total of his findings is western civilization. The whole came out of a philosophy, which in turn rested on a tenet of faith.

The evidence is all too strong that the philosophy is losing its hold on men. Among the erudite—always prone to clothe popular thought-trends with philosophic phraseology—the inclination is to sneer at the concept of “natural rights,” traceable only to God; and the popular thought-trend, induced by the exigencies of life, is toward the idea that before the individual comes the group. Although it has not yet been phrased that way, the conviction is growing that God made Society, not man. For the habit of thinking, out of which comes the habit of living, is shaping itself around the axiom that Society (acting through the State) is an entity in itself, independent of and superior to its component parts; the individual is only a means, not an end. It is this all too obvious liquidation of the dignity of the individual that supports the contention that western civilization is on the way out.

A civilization dies hard. It is not a body of ideas acquired by a few inquisitive minds, but a way of thinking and living that has become habitual among men. Hence, a civilization does not pass out all at once on a given day; the process of deterioration is as tenuous as the process of gestation. The historian needs a date and a specific event to mark the passing of a civilization. The prognosticator suffers from the same conceit, and he picks on World War III as the finish-

line of western civilization. The exigencies of that struggle, he argues, will require the abandonment of the individualistic premise on which western civilization is based; with that keystone gone, the entire superstructure must collapse.

It is generally agreed that the anticipated war will be fought along totalitarian lines. The battles will be between nations, not armies; all will be warriors. The individual as individual will lose all value, for all thought and energy will be channelled into the one purpose of preserving the State. The first person singular will become a linguistic atavism; every sentence will begin with "we" and end with "us." To be sure, the doctrine of "natural rights" will be abandoned in fact, as it has already been abandoned in theory, and the constitutional immunities of life, property and conscience will no longer be claimed. Within six months after hostilities begin, it is predicted, all the machinery of a military dictatorship will have been put into operation, including, above all, the means of suppressing dissident opinion.

Granted this eventuality, does it portend a continuing organization of life? Will it not be "for the duration" only? To which observation the prophets of gloom retort, how long will the "duration" endure? Even if military operations are terminated within a reasonably short time, even if one side is able quickly to impose its will on the other, the destruction of the world's economy, to say nothing of the explosive hatreds aroused, will necessitate a long period of world management by the victorious side; at least, the dictatorship will deem such management necessary. Or, as seems probable, if sheer exhaustion induces a stalemate and a truce, it is a certainty that both sides will start preparing themselves for another test of arms, which means a continuation of the dictatorships. In either event, the duration will be long enough—two or three generations at the least—for people to have acquired a new set of values and to have forgotten

about the past. The habit of individualistic thought will have given way to a thorough adjustment to herd-living. Thus, the seed of a collectivized civilization implanted in our *mores* in the early part of the twentieth century will have been fertilized by the conditions of war—and that will be the successor to what we have known as western civilization.

The prophets adduce an historical argument to support their thesis. They point to the fact that the State never abdicates; it is constitutionally unable to do so. Its character demands that it accumulate power, always at the expense of society, and there is nothing else it can do. It is a beast of prey, without any means of sustenance other than what it can grab. When its confiscatory power reaches the point where it can and does absorb all the individual produces, above a bare living, the individual ceases to have any interest in production and then the State has little to live on; in that enervated condition the State is pushed out of the way by revolution and for a while the people enjoy freedom. But, that is a long-term process. In the meantime, the power acquired by the State during war—when fear of a foreign enemy reduces resistance to its encroachments—is never relinquished; each war strengthens the State and weakens Society. Following this historic pattern, the prospect is that World War III will completely obliterate the individualistic premise of western civilization and will introduce a long period of Statism.

The heart of a civilization consists of a body of values; its collapse means the loss of these values. Other casualties, like its accumulated knowledge and its physical appurtenances, can be counted by historians and archaeologists; but, buried in these observable ruins are the values of which they are but the expression, and the humanist of another generation,



immersed in his own set of values, has difficulty in capturing them. What, for instance, did the Greeks of 500 B.C. really think and feel? What were their aspirations, their ideals? What pattern of thought motivated their manner of life? These are the difficult questions that a lost civilization presents to its successor.

To repeat, the key value of western civilization is the primacy of the individual; all the rest is but a manifestation of it. If World War III does in fact destroy this civilization, it will do nothing more than depersonalize the individual and reduce him to an automaton. The social organization will, as near as possible with human beings, follow the pattern of the ant society. The concept of inalienable rights, stemming from God, will be superseded by the doctrine of permissive rights, authored by the Great Leviathan. Since the first responsibility of the human being will be to the collectivity, operating through the State, the Judeo-Christian idea of a direct relationship between the individual soul and the Supreme Being will be untenable. The soul idea, in the new western civilization, will be a lost value.

Now, whether or not this is an exact picture of things to come, or is only the idle speculation of lugubrious poets, the outlines of it are all too visible to permit offhand dismissal. And the history of past civilizations keeps dinning its lessons into our ears. The thing can happen. The only question is, is this consequence of World War III inevitable, something ordained in God's plan, or is it, like the war itself, an evidence of human frailties? There are arguments for both theses.

For those of us who, while observing the panorama of our times, are concerned about the fate of the *one* value on which our civilization rests, perhaps because of a natural attachment to our offspring, the argument of inevitability has no weight. If the collapse of western civilization is deter-

mined by the ineluctable historical cycle, the living man cannot resign himself to it, but must work out his career in the light of his reason, his hopes and his ideals. The stars in the heavens tend to their eternal business, and we mortals must travel within our own specific orbits. After all, it was not an historical imperative that directed the pens of those who signed the Declaration of Independence; it was a force within each of them. And for those of us who still hold high the value of human dignity, our job, whether we like it or not, whether out of a sense of duty or an irrepressible inner compunction, is to keep polishing up this value so as to prevent its utter tarnishment. We must be the monks of western civilization.

The supreme task of the present is spiritual. We are not concerned with saving buildings or gadgets from the impending holocaust, nor even its precious literature. All the physical accomplishments of western civilization must take their chances along with human life. Some things and some people will escape. But, what will happen to the Judeo-Christian tenet of the primacy of the person? Will anybody remember that "only the individual exists"? In the darkness and the stillness of universal Statism, will it be whispered that once there was a world built on the faith of the human being in himself and his God? All we can do now is to mobilize our forces in a struggle against the total obliteration of that value—and hope.