

Editor's Introduction

The Individual as an Ideological Construct

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THE ORIENTATION of public policies, and the priorities of scientific research, are heavily determined by perceptions of what is going to happen in the future. When expectations are seriously distorted, we face a heightened risk of avoidable mistakes occurring.

Serious political miscalculations during the next 15 years are probable because of a flawed analysis of the driving influences that will shape the world. This conclusion is based on a reading of *Global Trends 2015*, which was prepared under the direction of the US National Intelligence Council (NIC), and the Central Intelligence Agency.¹

The report attempts its forecasts on the basis of seven key drivers. These include demographics, natural resources and environment, governance and globalisation. Missing from the list is one of the most important driving forces in the world today, which arguably will exercise greater influence than some of those identified by the NIC. That driving force is ideology: specifically, the doctrines that have shaped Western society over the past century, and advocated now by the USA. Rightly or wrongly, that ideology will continue to cause conflict on a global scale, and therefore it ought to be factored in as one of the drivers of trends. Its absence from high-level discourse is an omission with potentially lethal consequences.

That ideology was vigorously propagated over the last decade in a variety of geo-political theatres that spanned most of the world:

- The transformation of Eastern Europe was strenuously promoted by the champions of Western ideology, with emphatic prescriptions as to the nature of the values and institutions that ought to be embedded in formerly Soviet soil.
- The US vigorously canvassed the need for the government in Tokyo to reconstitute Japanese society on the basis of social relationships favoured by that ideology.

- The international financial institutions coerced developing countries to adopt the economic processes known as "the Washington Consensus", which is at the cutting edge of the proselytising ideology.

It may be that the aggressive propagation of that ideology is legitimate and in the interests of all 6.1 billion people who populate the globe. But we know from the way in which many communities and countries actively resist some of its key tenets that the ideology itself ought to be acknowledged as a key driver of events. For example, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, told Japan in a speech in Tokyo in January that the country's economic problems were "due almost entirely to your attempt to adopt western practices and western norms". He proposed that east Asian countries should create an independent regional financial and trading system that would take them out of the sphere of western influence. If that happened, it would be as a result of the vigour with which western values were sold to Asian nations in recent years; there would be serious negative consequences for the global economy, which need to be anticipated. Better still, a re-evaluation of that philosophy may assist policy-makers to develop strategies capable of fulfilling everyone's aspirations.

Supremacy of the individual THE CELEBRATION of the individual is one of the defining features of Modernity. If the monarchs, statesmen and aristocrats who shaped the outcome of the Enlightenment project had continued to locate the individual within the social framework within which he and she derived personal identity, the development would have been a progressive one in the history of social evolution. Instead, people's desire to deepen knowledge of nature, and their wish to extend personal development as a result of a new awareness of the latent possibilities within each of us, were hijacked and transformed into a cult-like reverence for the individual.

The narrow focus on the individual, which has been turned into an art form by social scientists, corresponded to the abject abandonment of community. As a consequence, along the road to the 20th century, many people were made to suffer as they were uprooted from their communities and transformed into modern individuals. How and why was an enlightened project to refine knowledge and empower people – through a rational extension of the possibilities defined by our biological heritage and cultural endowment – appropriated and transformed into the worship of an idealised entity that was abstracted out of social reality?

The historical changes that were to culminate in a generalised alienation of working people were the outcome of a variety of convergent influences. One was the articulation of a new philosophy that was insufficiently attentive to the role of society in fulfilling people's needs. John Locke's seminal writings played an important role in this process of eroding the obligations of the individual to the community. Ronald Banks, in his essay in this issue, highlights the consequence of this: the erosion of our recognition of the vitality of the community.

A crucial contribution to the emergence of the cult of the individual was the struggle for power within the elite. Monarchs needed to consolidate their control over the feudal aristocracy. Thomas Hobbes contributed the psychological component to the re-engineering of society with his version of the social contract.

René Descartes, in portraying the new epistemology in terms of the individual – *cogito, ergo sum* represented the empirical method with the individual located at the heart of both the problem and the solution – treated the accumulation of knowledge as if it was independent of the social dimension.

But the cult of the individual would not have achieved supremacy if it did not facilitate the interests of people who were obliged to privatise culture if they were to succeed in appropriating the resources of nature. The primary target of this class of people was the socially created value – the rent of land and natural resources – which they wanted for their exclusive benefit. To achieve their goal, they had to reshape culture. They had to anaesthetise people, so that they would either be unaware that their traditional rights were being eliminated, or that they would be collectively weakened and therefore incapable of asserting their traditional rights over land and the resources of nature. This culture of containment claimed many distinguished victims, who compromised their intellects in response to the pressures generated by the land-owning elite. Knowledge also suffered, as I describe in my account of Herbert Spencer's influence on the emerging science of society.

FEW PEOPLE now dare to question the rhetoric associated with the individual, for fear of being accused of something approximating treason. **Sanctity of the doctrine**

The dissatisfaction that most people feel about their lives and the condition of their societies suggest that something went seriously wrong during the formative years of the modern era. But the analysis of these problems barely scratches the surface. We remain transfixed by the symptoms and hardly aware of the roots of

the crisis in Western society. The crisis is acknowledged, but there is insufficient understanding of the origins of the driving forces that have resulted in a pathological state of affairs.

Today, the individual is the unit that provides the methodology for thought and action. We can see one of the consequences in Russia. The NIC fails to recognise that Western ideology was a prime agent in the tragedy that has been inflicted on that country. In noting that the population of Russia would fall from 146 million people at present, to 130-135 million by 2015 – continuing a trend triggered in 1992 – the NIC attributes the demographic toll to “such societal costs of transition as alcoholism, cardiac diseases, drugs, and a worsening health delivery system”. There is no recognition that responsibility may, in part, be due to the imposition on this society – which traditionally gives equal weight to the commonality of interests of the population – of a matrix of values and institutions designed by those who favour the individualistic ethic. The first and most dramatic Western economic impact on the majority of the people of Russia was the decision to remove the control over prices without a corresponding increase in people's purchasing power. This reduced millions to destitution.

According to the official government statements, the rise in average income during the first half of 1992 has not compensated for even half of the price increases on basic necessities. As a result, many population strata have found themselves at the minimal consumption budget or below. In June 1992, this index was 2150 rubles a month on average and 1715 rubles a month for pensioners according to the State Statistical Committee of the Russian Federation. More than half of the population had incomes lower than that and seven million people (4.5% of the total population) had per capita incomes lower than 900 rubles.²

As sociologist V.P. Kultygin observed at the time, following an exhaustive survey of income distribution, “The concentration of such immense income in a small group and pauperisation of the bulk of the population does not favour normal consumption processes, the growth of production output or the efficient functioning of the economy”.³ This outcome was driven by Western economic doctrines on the liberalisation of the economy and the privatisation of property. Consciously undertaken on the basis of “shock therapy”, was this not likely to have contributed to the great disruption in the psyche of the nation? The demographic response to the Yeltsin years, which is traced in the essay by Irina Veselkova, identifies a social trauma that is complex in its origins, but which cannot be conveniently dismissed as “societal costs of transition”.

One way out of the tragedy – the only way, in the view of Dr. Dmitry Lvov, the Academician Secretary of the Department of Economics, Russian Academy of Sciences – is to build an economy that reflects the common interests of the people and their natural endowments, the organising mechanism for which would be a restructured public finance.

The transformation of Russian society was driven by what social scientists call methodological individualism. The outcome, as suggested by Tatiana Roskoshnaya, was a predictable national tragedy.

THE UNPICKING of society was illuminatingly traced through the rise of the modern novel in a seminal study by Ian Watt. The story of Robinson Crusoe is a metaphor for the emerging ethic of individualism. **The heroics of Robinson Crusoe**

The great English empiricists of the 17th century were as vigorously individualist in their political and ethical thought as in their epistemology. Bacon hoped to make a really new start in social theory by applying his inductive method to an accumulation of factual data about a great number of particular individuals; Hobbes ... based his political and ethical theory on the fundamentally egocentric psychological constitution of the individual; while in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) Locke constructed the class system of political thought based on the indefeasibility of individual rights, as against the more traditional ones of Church, Family or King. That these thinkers should have been the political and psychological vanguard of nascent individualism, as well as the pioneers of its theory of knowledge, suggests how closely linked their reorientations were both in themselves and in relation to the innovations of the novel.⁴

Daniel Defoe was the writer who most completely shared the philosophical outlook of the empiricists. He was to express that outlook through the tale of the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe who was important in the development of the mythology of the individual. His deeds are treated as heroic, as symbolic of what the individual can achieve when pitted against the odds. But as a metaphor for the challenges that confronted people over the past 400 years it seriously misrepresented the realities. Watt noted that Defoe "disregarded two important facts: the social nature of all human economies, and the actual psychological effects of solitude".⁵

The irony about Defoe's treatment of the context within which Crusoe sought to survive identifies the fundamental mediating mechanism in the adjustment of social relationships: land tenure. In Crusoe's case, Watt noted that "in the island he owns the freehold

of a rich though unimproved estate".⁶ The English empiricists worked for the right of freehold access to land, but their project of narrowing traditional property rights was to be at the expense of the millions who were expropriated through enclosures and clearances.

Crusoe was lucky: he had no-one to contest his right to the fruits of nature. Back in England, peasants were being physically mutilated if they dared to take a rabbit from the land of His Lordship. Watt, referring to the access to land on the island, noted: "Its possession, combined with the stock from the ship, are the miracles which fortify the faith of the supporters of the new economic creed".⁷ That faith was a minority creed which might have remained the doctrine of a marginal cult on the fringes of European civilisation. It was translated into the secular religion because it helped to fulfil the mission of those who sought to enrich themselves as a result of the privatisation of land.

Hollywood has artistically expressed the outcome of the evolution of the Robinson Crusoe personality through *Cast Away*, starring Tom Hanks, which was the number one movie in the US in January. The review by Diane Ravitch in *Wall Street Journal Europe* (Jan. 10), noting the differences between the Crusoe character and Hanks's Chuck Noland – whom she describes as "a thoroughly modern man" – offered this portrait of the late 20th century's version of the individual on the desert island:

Chuck Noland is truly a man of our times, lacking any inner life, having little to think about other than a lost love. He has no sense of religion and is utterly incapable of seeking meaning in his experiences or his life.

Celluloid myths and land tenure ROBINSON CRUSOE was at risk of suffering from his isolation, but "his inordinate egocentricity"⁸ would not allow him to acknowledge the risk. Instead, he claims that his isolation affords him the fullest opportunity to achieve absolute economic, social and intellectual freedom. The infiltration of this a-historical perspective into Western philosophy served to legitimise the fragmentation of people from their communities.

To sustain the self-deception, it was necessary to cultivate adoration of the isolated individual. The frontier of civilisation provided the colourful theatre for a drama of heroism that would justify the veneration. This, in turn, made it necessary to demonise nature, the better to elevate the achievements of the individual. Thus was spawned the many stories of frontiersmen who became the role models for the colonial settlers and the schoolboys of today. The mythology continues at the cutting edge of the social philosophy of the United States, where it assumes an art form that

is continuously refreshed through the money-spinning accomplishments of Hollywood. Rarely are the personal and social losses that flowed from this colonisation of other people's land allowed to surface: the myths of the individual hero are the analgesic that camouflages the pain.

Excavating the origins of modernity, then, becomes an exercise in discovering the way in which people's minds were shaped to accommodate the self-serving interests of a few people. It was epistemologically necessary for the architects of the new doctrine to create the portrait of the dynamic person. This individual had to be endowed with the qualities of growth (and certainly not the dissolution of the mind that is actually associated with isolation). Defoe contributed to the process of creating the myth of the hardy, self-sufficient individual. His fiction celebrated the isolated individual as hero within the context of the emergent historical process. That Defoe was committed to that history-in-the-making is illustrated by the fact that, for a period, he worked as a spy for the English crown. He sent secret dispatches to London from Edinburgh, where he participated in the unification of Scotland and England despite the wishes of the majority of the Scots.

The redefinition of people's personalities was a necessary part of the process of privatising one of the primary codes of society – land tenure – which could not be significantly refashioned while leaving other aspects of life untouched. Time, for example, had to be ascribed with new meanings. Psychologically, Coleridge was to point out, our idea of time is "always blended with the idea of space".⁹ A change in the spatial context, as amended by land privatisation, had, as its reciprocal, a corresponding change in the concept of time. Thus was stimulated the race to develop new means for defining and measuring time.

Mechanical time keepers had existed for 400 years, but by the mid 17th century, under the influence of the first Industrial Revolution that Francis Bacon had detected, something changed. Formerly, time keepers were intended to provide a "semi-religious, astrological/astronomical" function. Now, clocks "were secular and educational. However, it must be admitted that these very expensive pieces were educational in a somewhat élitest way. They were created to enlighten the gentleman dilettante". By the time of the second Industrial Revolution, in the late 18th century, as people were dispossessed of their land and driven into urban factories, "clocks and watches began to be designed specifically for industrial and workaday functions". They were used to carve time into units that could be fitted into the cycle of production. "Predictably, the

daily routines of the workforce of that 'brave new industrial world' were soon to be time-controlled too."¹⁰

The quest for truth ONE OF THE distorting postulates of modernity is the siting of the pursuit of truth in the individual. Locke emphasised the significance of the individual's use of his senses to establish the reality of the universe. This, in so far as it goes, is correct and unexceptional. If social reality had been enriched with this new understanding, the evolution of humanity would have been genuinely advanced for the benefit of everyone. The senses require the tuition of social experience, without which their information would lack meaning and would not be communicable. The tactile knowledge of a lion is bereft of the meaning of the tactile knowledge acquired by the human baby that is being instructed by its mother. Sensations are expressed through the words of a language that unites us in a community.

That social framework is the template within which the individual relies for his existence and opportunities. Why did that reality not suit the empiricists? They depended for their patronage on the aristocracy which had command over the net incomes of their societies, access to which were necessary if the philosophers, scientists and artists were to pursue their occupations relieved of the need to toil in the fields. And the private appropriators of that net income had to diminish the social context if they were to re-write the rules of property rights and therefore control the distribution of income.

Out of the ensuing *mélange* of myth and misunderstanding we see important aspects of the human experience discredited for unworthy reasons. One critically important example is the secularisation of society. Who gained from the despiritualisation of life? The dissociation of religion from people's lives was held to be necessary if the spirit of the individual was to be liberated. But there is an alternative, more devious explanation. First, at the core of the Christian ethic was a teaching about the rights of access to nature which the land accumulators needed to neutralise. Therefore, religion had to be excluded from political debate; had to be relegated to an Other World domain, from which it could pose no threat to the power brokers on earth. Second, the intrinsic importance of the sacred value which people vested in their landscapes had to be debased if they were to be displaced from their natural habitats with the least possible resistance. Consequently, secularisation had at its roots the material concerns of people who were not primarily interested in liberating the

individual from the grip of religious teachings; rather, they were primarily concerned to liberate people from their land. The impact on culture of this spirit of land hoarding is a seriously neglected aspect of the social sciences (one starting point for a new stream of research projects originates with the essay offered by Dr. Herbert Barry III).

THE ENGLISH empiricists may not have intended to rupture people from society. But by failing to accord equal attention to the rights and obligations of the community, they set the scene for the decomposition rather than the renewal of society.

The crisis of liberal society

Today, the idea that the West is in crisis is not openly canvassed by politicians. Such an admission would be viewed as a personal failure (which would therefore cost votes) rather than the logical outcome of a historical process.

One distinguished scholar who is willing to acknowledge the current challenge to Western civilisation is Richard Rorty, who was professor of philosophy at Princeton and the University of Virginia before taking up his present post as Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford University. He is recognised by some as America's leading post-modern philosopher.¹¹ While he is not impressed with what passes for post-modern philosophy and culture, he is frank enough to acknowledge that Modernity is unsustainable.

Rorty, who describes himself as a philosophical pluralist, fears that it is not possible to continue on the basis of the rules that have delivered us to the present position. Rorty believes there are three reasons for proclaiming the end of Western society.

I think these are three plausible reasons for believing that neither democratic freedom nor philosophical pluralism will survive the next century. If I were a wagering Olympian, I might well bet my fellow divinities that pragmatism, utilitarianism and liberalism would, among mortals, be only faint memories in a hundred years' time.¹²

Rorty is not alone among scholars in perceiving a crisis in our civilisation. Political scientist Robert Putnam shocked America with his analysis of breakdown in civil society.¹³

This draws our attention to another omission from the National Intelligence Council analysis. Absent is a review of trends in the United States itself. While the analysts worry themselves about the problem of "belonging" to a particular state in the rest of the world, for example, they offer no insights into the way in which US society

is evolving and affecting its own citizens, and how these internal developments will affect the rest of the world. The NIC has no doubt that the US "will continue to be a major force in the world community ... unparalleled among nations as well as regional and international organisations in 2015", but it offers no account of how the interests of the US will be translated into foreign policies that will shape the destiny of the 7.2 billion people who will be alive 15 years from now.

Philosopher Rorty explains the grim prospects of countries tied into the liberal democratic model in terms that post-Lockean philosophy as taught in Western universities cannot handle. The first two of the three reasons for pessimism have their origins in the privatisation of nature, the solution to which would also provide a model for dealing with his third problem.

Reason One. European democracy is predicated on living standards which produce an electorate that is literate and leisured and therefore able to engage in the democratic process. The rest of the world could not achieve this condition for Malthusian reasons – "there are too many people in the world, and too few resources, to make such a standard of living available to all human beings".¹⁴

The Malthusian doctrine relies on a truncated view of the relevant facts.¹⁵

Material prosperity is a problem only if we misunderstand the nature of the individual and what he can achieve if liberated within a community whose rights are protected and obligations are discharged. People may live in areas richly endowed with natural resources and yet remain impoverished if the rules have been so distorted as to exclude them from their legitimate share of the benefits of their activities (Russia today is a case in point).¹⁶

Reason Two. The "greedy and selfish kleptocrats have become, in recent decades considerably more sophisticated. The Chinese and Nigerian generals, and their counterparts around the world, have learned from the failures of 20th century totalitarianism to avoid ideology and to be pragmatic. They lie, cheat and steal in much more suave and sophisticated ways than those used by, for example, the old Communist nomenclaturas. So the end of the Cold War gives no reason for optimism about the progress of democracy ..."

The reason why the thieves get away with it is that they have, for all intents and purposes, been tutored by the IMF and Western governments. The latter have implanted the rules in those societies which facilitate the privatisation of the natural resources which, in countries like Russia and Nigeria, have traditionally been viewed as

social assets. The kleptocratic activity in Russia is no more than the privatisation of the rent of that nation's natural resources coupled with a capacity to avoid taxation even more efficiently than the corporate tax-dodgers of the West. But it is possible to embed democratic freedom and philosophical pluralism deeper into the future by amending the rules that divide the individual from his natural habitat. To achieve this, however, it would be necessary to strengthen civic society against the power of the state, and override the prescriptions favoured by the cult of the individual.

Reason Three. Achieving "a liberal utopia on a global scale would require the establishment of a world federation, exercising a global monopoly of force".

This representation reflects the values that spawned the nation-state that delivered two world wars. The need for fresh thinking on how to co-exist in an integrated One World society is imperative. The rules governing territorial sovereignty, which are now obsolete, are at the heart of geo-politics. That new rules have not yet emerged is tragically confirmed by the failure of peoples like the Basques in Spain to assert their identities in a spatial context. We need to formulate new spatial rules that accommodate the multi-ethnic state of many societies.

Rorty's pessimism is ultimately nourished by a poverty of philosophy. A new paradigm is evidently needed, to open the floodgates of the imagination; one that might prolong the life of the liberal society.

MODERNISM IS "the term usually given to the project of obtaining a secular, scientific understanding of natural and human reality".¹⁷ We have begun to see that this project was responsible for depriving us of an understanding of much of our existence in the realms of nature and society. The editors of the dictionary cited recognise that "modernism became infused with evangelical zeal". The proselytising of the High Priests of that cult were to inflict damage on the values that found clear expression in the Enlightenment, including the notion of liberty and of the rights of people to property.

But what is to be gained from the idea of post-modernity? If the fears of Richard Rorty are justified, it seems that we need to re-constitute society. But what kinds of ideas or techniques would revive hope? The post-modern narrative helps us to re-visualise (and therefore begin to reconstitute) vibrant communities, if we revive our basic principles.

Post-modern philosophers constantly stress cultural differences

**Solutions
in the
post-modern
paradigm?**

and fragmentation. Their philosophy "compels us" to re-think the relationships between the core and the periphery and the real and the imaginary".¹⁸

Observing the seemingly chaotic nature of the modern world, the concealed exercise of power, the pathological impositions on people's lives, and so much more that does not fit the neat distinctions and clean images of the empiricist's discourse, the post-modernists offer analyses that appear to characterise life in the late 20th century. Shallowness, not solidity, is a dominant metaphor of the new analysis, which rejects the faith in structured social hierarchies. Deconstruction is a key word, as philosophers seek to peel away the modern myths in the search for elusive meanings, which are constantly shifting in line with changes in relationships between people and things.

Modernists dislike this approach because they remain comfortable with the certainties of science and the durability of institutions. But it has been their values and categories that have delivered a style of life that renders people constantly anxious, inflicting stresses that challenge the viability of family life and physical health. Intuitively, most people would empathise with the analytical approach of the post-modernist, which is neatly summarised in the *Dictionary of Cultural Theorists*:

Post-modernists argue that there is no longer an embracing belief in "scientific" rationality or unitary theories of truth or progress. Instead, they emphasise the ambivalence and indeterminacy or "undecidability" of things. The theory and method of *deconstruction* takes the apparent solids of human life and exposes their insubstantiality. It peels layer upon layer of "purity" from the modernist illusion of conceptual unity and institutional integrity, to reveal eclecticism and hybridity. Everything exists only in its relationship to everything else; in isolation they have no meaning, no sense, no *actualité*. As analysts, our attention is directed to the relations rather than the things: the rules, codes, customs, conventions and agreements – i.e. discourses – that allow us to recognise that something exists at all.¹⁹

If there *is* something fundamentally wrong with the foundations of Western civilisation we need a technique like the one developed by post-modernists to identify the flaw or flaws, which have to be sought in the rules that establish the authority of the institutions and the relationships between people. Only by the process of deconstruction can we work our way back to the roots of intractable problems, to discover the full nature of the remedial challenge before us.

The post-modern focus on culture corrects the empiricist's priorities of research. Culture is the social space within which

humans engage in both personal activities (developing latent talents, fulfilling particular aspirations), and in communal preoccupations. When tensions arise in society, these surface not just through the acts of individuals (on which preventative action tends to be focused – such as the proposal by American sociologist James Q. Wilson, expressed at a recent seminar convened by Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, that moral revival may involve locking up single mothers in institutions to ensure their off-spring are taught virtue). Those social tensions reverberate through a complex range of interlocking phenomena, just one of which is language.

That language is a site of conflict should not be surprising, since it both unites and divides people; suppresses thought as well as enriching the mind. That is why (as in the Basque country) it becomes a subject of contention when people decide that their freedoms are not as extensive as they think they ought to be. And that is why, when progressive societies wish to extend people's freedoms, they work to nourish dialects as well as the tongues that unite groups into larger demographic units.

Language requires education, which in turn requires resources. If those resources – the "surplus" income that is not required for production and reproduction – are not equally available to everyone, language (along with culture in general), is impoverished. That impoverishment is not a socially neutral distortion, however, for when the net income of society is even partially privatised, it becomes necessary for the appropriators to appropriate language itself. Language is turned from a medium of communication between all members of the linguistic group, into a hostile tool that must be contorted into a weapon for the preservation of privilege and the perpetuation of social exclusion.

Ironically, however (and post-modernists would enjoy such irony), the post-modern exercise may be no more than a technique for enabling us to identify what more needs to be done to complete the Enlightenment project. Taking our cue from analysis offered by Richard Rorty, it would seem that the liberal democracies need to review, as a matter of urgency, the nature of property rights. And it would seem that the aspect of property that is most controversial relates to land as broadly defined by the classical economists to include all of the resources of nature. Could it be that the simple model of private ownership in land is inadequate to fulfil needs at all three levels – the biological requirements of the individual (all individuals), the social needs of the community, and those of nature itself? Are we able to formulate a structure of property rights that is

flexible, but resilient, and comprehensively inclusive, which integrates all the needs of the complex triadic system of individual-community-ecology? If we discount the opposite to the individualistic ethic – that is, the communist alternative of absolute ownership vested in the state – it would appear that there is one alternative only. That is the traditional one in which every individual retains the right to the private use of land, the superior rights of ownership remain vested in the community (which acts as the steward to safeguard intergenerational claims), and society enforces the rules of land reallocation appropriate to the level of cultural development.

Culture at a dead end THE INDIVIDUALISTIC ethic now fosters behaviour in the United States, in particular, which cannot be addressed within the terms of contemporary social policies. A-social behaviour, driven by the desire for instant gratification, defies comprehension and will defeat containment because it is perpetrated by citizens who are not suffering from any known pathology. This appears to be what the Pope had in mind when he attacked the "culture of death" in his last New Year's Day message.

A culture that no longer has a point of reference in God loses its soul and loses its way, becoming a culture of death. Detached from their Christian origins, these models are often inspired by an approach to life marked by secularism and practical atheism and by patterns of radical individualism.²⁰

John Paul's words can be taken literally. A few examples from the USA in 2000 make his point.

- **In July**, after a 10-year-old boy was elbowed in the face by an opponent in a children's ice hockey game, the father beat and killed the referee.
- **In August**, a disruptive passenger on a Southwest Airlines flight was beaten and choked to death by eight passengers.
- **In October**, a woman obtained the child she wanted by murdering a pregnant woman and cutting the live baby from her womb.

The intensity of these examples of rage in the self-centred society are not matched in Europe, yet, although the number of murders now being perpetrated by children in England suggests that Britain is not far behind the USA. The American incidents were chronicled in the *Financial Times* by Richard Tomkins in his essay on the individualistic ethic.

And so we come to the big question. What is the alternative when you've

tried having it your way and find you don't like the result? Disappointingly ... it is a question that has no answer. The reason is that the Utopia of triumphant individualism is not a staging post on the way to something better. There is no better Utopia beyond it. The only way forward is to go back. But to what? The Dark Ages, or a renaissance? And if a renaissance, of what? The golden age of poverty? And who will volunteer to help turn back the clock?²¹

The doubts and the hopeless questions are nourished by repeated examples of individual rage that only make sense in a rapacious society. The American century ended the day after Christmas with Michael McDermott killing seven of his office colleagues because he was upset with the taxman, who wanted money deducted from his wages at source.

Cases such as these are the stuff of the social sciences, since they appear to affirm the singularity of action by the individual. Personal aggression rather than acts of social solidarity are the subjects of research and theorising.

Even scientists may regard aggression as more stimulating, as a more common behaviour, or as a socially more important problem than pro-social behaviour; until recently, the scientific literature on violence and aggression by far exceeded that on pro-social behaviour, co-operation and altruism.²²

This neglect of the social milieu – its opportunities and excesses – explains why Richard Tomkins is as baffled as the generality of Western philosophers. Their imaginations have been narrowed by default: the failure to explore all the possibilities originally articulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Consequently, we are driven into a state of inaction – deterred from undertaking social experiments – by the fear of the unknown or of a retreat to a Dark Age.

As a result, the supermarket society continues unimpeded by the wisdom that might expand people's lifestyle choices. Political philosophers portray personal empowerment as a positive means for undermining traditional structures. They are unable to visualise a practical strategy that empowers the individual while simultaneously strengthening society. They remain locked into the paradigm of individualism, in which rights reign supreme, and social obligations are attenuated.

The dead-end character of contemporary philosophy is highlighted by the irony that has been noted for the triumph of the individualistic ethic. As Tomkins notes:

Paradoxically, the triumph of individualism has also brought an accidental

victory for Marxism, in the sense that the balance of power in society has shifted away from the boss classes and now rests decisively in the hands of the people. Whichever way you look at it, we have quietly reached Utopia. And that would be excellent news indeed, were it not for one small flaw: a feeling that it sucks.

There needs to be a third option out of this impasse, but it does not appear to be on offer in the university syllabus or the corridors of power. One explanation, as I suggest in my essay on Herbert Spencer, is the moral infirmity of those who are supposed to be the guardians of the intellect. This is a serious charge that warrants extensive research of the biographical kind.

Philosophy and the intellectual coup d'état SOME INFLUENTIAL philosophers of the Enlightenment, by failing to develop a theory of community that matched their theory of the individual, assisted (to put it at its weakest) those who were dedicated to privatising the material resources that funded people's public lives.

That privatisation of public life, however, could be achieved only as a result of a complex set of preparatory changes to the fabric of society, in particular to political power. A handful of people could achieve their objectives only by first acquiring control over the law-making process. This was the first step in the direction of redefining public revenue. For it to acquire a durable existence, this *coup d'état* would require a benign intellectual climate. An ideology was needed that legitimised what they were working towards – the private appropriation of the public revenue.

Until the onset of the Enlightenment, the public purse was replenished out of the flow of rental income derived from the land and natural resources of the kingdoms of Europe. To alter that economic reality, and to avoid opposition from a popular uprising in defence of people's common interests, it would be necessary to convince the majority that the cult-like trappings that had been encrusted around the feudal aristocracy ought to be accepted by the people at large. The outcome was the elevation of the cult into a popular belief system. What transformed that belief system into a religion was the failure to apply, with consistency, the rule of reason. One realm of life in particular – property rights – was treated as off limits. Artificial property rights in land were treated as the natural appendages of the "free" individual. To secure the latter automatically ensured the unquestioning preservation of the former. Locke's invocation – "life, liberty and estate" – was censored to remove everyone's right to estate (land). Thus, what originated as a minority belief system on the margins of mediaeval society was

steadily extended, through the wilful abandonment of ancient religious tenets (the primary one is that earth is to be shared by everyone), into an all-pervasive doctrine. To defend itself against the empirical evidence and the teachings of world religions, this doctrine had to adopt the institutional trappings of a world faith.

The philosophers contributed to this project, at the very least by default. There were exceptions, as Malcolm Hill stresses in his essay on the principled stand taken by Anne-Robert Turgot in France. In general, however, the philosophers who were to acquire influence emphasised the rights of the individual, and failed to articulate the parallel rights of the community. They failed to fully elaborate the obligations of the individual, with matching obligations for the community. As a result, they smoothed the way for a repeat performance of the greatest heist in history – the privatisation of the income from the natural world and (therefore, necessarily) the culture that defined humanity. They aided and abetted the privatisation project, by providing the rationalisations that distracted people from their social interests.

IS THE LEGACY of the Enlightenment a hopeless one? It seems not. Gail Warden's report on how the people of Ethiopia have begun to reconstruct their society is important. **The need to reconstruct society**

Theirs was a society torn to shreds by an ideological war that was driven by communist aspirations. That alternative creed to Western individualism was finally defeated. From the ashes emerges a story of hope which reveals that people can work together to identify and protect their vital collective interests. They are developing a model of cultural renewal that both empowers the individual to fulfil his and her aspirations, while respecting the rights of every other person-in-community.

The Ethiopian model locates the renewal process in the structure of property rights. The people have affirmed through the democratic process that the land belongs to them all. Their formulation does remain an incomplete one, however. It fails to incorporate the complementary fiscal policy that would guarantee the political and economic fulfilment of the philosophical aspiration. To prevent divisions arising in society that stem from damaging forms of taxation – the gap in income distribution, and the class structure, to name two examples – it is necessary to ensure that socially-created rents generated by land and natural resources are reserved for public expenditures. In this way, everyone would share in the benefits of the nation's land, including those who either do not possess land, or whose holdings are economically inferior to those

held by other people. Through public finance, property rights are equalised, while safeguarding the freedoms of individual land users.

To their eternal credit, this fiscal policy was prescribed by some Enlightenment philosophers such as Turgot and Adam Smith. It can be retrieved to assist in the reconstitution of societies that have fallen victim to what has passed for Modernity. Ironically, developing nations such as Ethiopia may yet demonstrate to the West that it is still possible to complete the project on which the philosophers of the Enlightenment originally embarked. In doing so, they would be fulfilling the promises of Modernity.

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