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The Modern Anti-World

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There now exists only one civilization, a single global domestication machine. Modernity's continuing efforts to disenchant and instrumentalize the non-cultural, natural world have produced a reality in which there is virtually nothing left outside the system. This trajectory was already visible by the time of the first urbanites. Since those Neolithic times we have moved ever closer to the complete de-realization of nature, culminating in a state of world emergency today. Approaching ruin is the commonplace vista, our obvious non-future.

It's hardly necessary to point out that none of the claims of modernity/Enlightenment (regarding freedom, reason, the individual) are valid. Modernity is inherently globalizing, massifying, standardizing. The self-evident conclusion that an indefinite expansion of productive forces will be fatal deals the final blow to belief in progress. As China's industrialization efforts go into hyper-drive, we have another graphic case in point.

Since the Neolithic, there has been a steadily increasing dependence on technology, civilization's material culture. As Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out, the history of civilization is the history of renunciation. One gets less than one puts in. This is the fraud of technoculture, and the hidden core of domestication: the growing impoverishment of self, society, and Earth. Meanwhile, modern subjects hope that somehow the promise of yet more modernity will heal the wounds that afflict them.

A defining feature of the present world is built-in disaster, now announcing itself on a daily basis. But the crisis facing the biosphere is arguably less noticeable and compelling, in the First World at least, than everyday alienation, despair, and entrapment in a routinized, meaningless control grid.

Influence over even the smallest event or circumstance drains steadily away, as global systems of production and exchange destroy local particularity, distinctiveness, and custom. Gone is an earlier pre-eminence of place, increasingly replaced by what Pico Ayer calls "airport culture" — rootless, urban, homogenized.

Modernity finds its original basis in colonialism, just as civilization itself is founded on domination — at an ever more basic level. Some would like to forget this pivotal element of conquest, or else "transcend" it, as in Enrique Dussel's facile "new trans-modernity" pseudo-resolution (The Invention of the Americas, 1995). Scott Lash employs somewhat similar sleight-of-hand in Another Modernity: A Different Rationality (1999), a feeble nonsense title given his affirmation of the world of technoculture. One more tortuous failure is Alternative Modernity (1995), in which Andrew Feenberg sagely observes that "technology is not a particular value one must choose for or against, but a challenge to evolve and multiply worlds without end." The triumphant world of technicized civilization — known to us as modernization, globalization, or capitalism — has nothing to fear from such empty evasiveness.

Paradoxically, most contemporary works of social analysis provide grounds for an indictment of the modern world, yet fail to confront the consequences of the context they develop. David Abrams' The Spell of the Sensuous (1995), for example, provides a very critical overview of the roots of the anti-life totality, only to conclude on an absurd note. Ducking the logical conclusion of his entire book (which should be a call to oppose the horrific contours of techno-civilization), Abrams decides that this movement toward the abyss is, after all, earth-based and "organic." Thus "sooner or later [it] must accept the invitation of gravity and settle back into the land." An astoundingly irresponsible way to conclude his analysis.

Richard Stivers has studied the dominant contemporary ethos of loneliness, boredom, mental illness, etc., especially in his Shades of Loneliness: Pathologies of Technological Society (1998). But this work fizzles out into quietism, just as his critique in Technology as Magic ends with a similar avoidance: "the struggle is not against technology, which is a simplistic understanding of the problem, but against a technological system that is now our life-milieu."

The Enigma of Health (1996) by Hans Georg Gadamer advises us to bring "the achievements of modern society, with all of its automated, bureaucratic and technological apparatus, back into the service of that fundamental rhythm which sustains the proper order of bodily life". Nine pages earlier, Gadamer observes that it is precisely this apparatus of objectification that produces our "violent estrangement from ourselves."

The list of examples could fill a small library — and the horror show goes on. One datum among thousands is this society's staggering level of dependence on drug technology. Work, sleep, recreation, non-anxiety/depression, sexual function, sports performance — what is exempt? Anti-depressant use among preschoolers — preschoolers — is surging, for example (New York Times, April 2, 2004).

Aside from the double-talk of countless semi-critical "theorists", however, is the simple weight of unapologetic inertia: the countless voices who counsel that modernity is simply inescapable and we should desist from questioning it. It's clear that there is no escaping modernization anywhere in the world, they say, and that is unalterable. Such fatalism is well captured by the title of Michel Dertourzos' What Will Be: How the New World of Information Will Change Our Lives (1997).

Small wonder that nostalgia is so prevalent, that passionate yearning for all that has been stripped from our lives. Ubiquitous loss mounts, along with protest against our uprootedness, and calls for a return home. As ever, partisans of deepening domestication tell us to abandon our desires and grow up. Norman Jacobson ("Escape from Alienation: Challenges to the Nation-State," Representations 84: 2004) warns that nostalgia becomes dangerous, a hazard to the State, if it leaves the world of art or legend. This craven leftist counsels "realism" not fantasies:

"Learning to live with alienation is the equivalent in the political sphere of the relinquishment of the security blanket of our infancy."

Civilization, as Freud knew, must be defended against the individual; all of its institutions are part of that defense.

But how do we get out of here — off this death ship? Nostalgia alone is hardly adequate to the project of emancipation. The biggest obstacle to taking the first step is as obvious as it is profound. If understanding comes first, it should be clear that one cannot accept the totality and also formulate an authentic critique and a qualitatively different vision of that totality. This fundamental inconsistency results in the glaring incoherence of some of the works cited above.

I return to Walter Benjamin's striking allegory of the meaning of modernity:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (1940).

There was a time when this storm was not raging, when nature was not an adversary to be conquered and tamed into everything that is barren and ersatz. But we've been traveling at increasing speed, with rising gusts of progress at our backs, to even further disenchantment, whose impoverished totality now severely imperils both life and health.

Systematic complexity fragments, colonizes, debases daily life. Division of labor, its motor, diminishes humanness in its very depths, dis-abling and pacifying us. This de-skilling specialization, which gives us the illusion of competence, is a key, enabling predicate of domestication.

Before domestication, Ernest Gellner (Sword, Plow and Book, 1989) noted, "there simply was no possibility of a growth in scale and in complexity of the division of labour and social differentiation." Of course, there is still an enforced consensus that a "regression" from civilization would entail too high a cost — bolstered by fictitious scary scenarios, most of them resembling nothing so much as the current products of modernity.

People have begun to interrogate modernity. Already a specter is haunting its now crumbling façade. In the 1980s, Jurgen Habermas feared that the "ideas of antimodernity, together with an additional touch of premodernity," had already

attained some popularity. A great tide of such thinking seems all but inevitable, and is beginning to resonate in popular films, novels, music, zines, TV shows, etc.

And it is also a sad fact that accumulated damage has caused a widespread loss of optimism and hope. Refusal to break with the totality crowns and solidifies this suicide-inducing pessimism. Only visions completely undefined by the current reality constitute our first steps to liberation. We cannot allow ourselves to continue to operate on the enemy's terms. (This position may appear extreme; 19th century abolitionism also appeared extreme when its adherents declared that only an end to slavery was acceptable, and that reforms were pro-slavery.)

Marx understood modern society as a state of "permanent revolution," in perpetual, innovating movement. Postmodernity brings more of the same, as accelerating change renders everything human (such as our closest relationships) frail and undone. The reality of this motion and fluidity has been raised to a virtue by postmodern thinkers, who celebrate undecidability as a universal condition. All is in flux, and context-free; every image or viewpoint is as ephemeral and as valid as any other.

This outlook is the postmodern totality, the position from which postmodernists condemn all other viewpoints. Postmodernism's historic ground is unknown to itself, because of a founding aversion to overviews and totalities. Unaware of Kaczynski's central idea (Industrial Society and Its Future, 1996) that meaning and freedom are progressively banished by modern technological society, postmodernists would be equally uninterested in the fact that Max Weber wrote the same thing almost a century before. Or that the movement of society, so described, is the historical truth of what postmodernists analyze so abstractly, as if it were a novelty they alone (partially) understand.

Shrinking from any grasp of the logic of the system as a whole, via a host of forbidden areas of thought, the anti-totality stance of these embarrassing frauds is ridiculed by a reality that is more totalized and global than ever. The surrender of the postmodernists is an exact reflection of feelings of helplessness that pervade the culture. Ethical indifference and aesthetic self-absorption join hands with moral paralysis, in the postmodern rejection of resistance. It is no surprise that a non-Westerner such as Ziauddin Sardan (Postmodernism and the Other, 1998) judges that postmodernism "preserves — indeed enhances — all the classical and modern structures of oppression and domination."

This prevailing fashion of culture may not enjoy much more of a shelf life. It is, after all, only the latest retail offering in the marketplace of representation. By its very nature, symbolic culture generates distance and mediation, supposedly inescapable burdens of the human condition. The self has always only been a trick of language, says Althusser. We are sentenced to be no more than the modes through which language autonomously passes, Derrida informs us.

The outcome of the imperialism of the symbolic is the sad commonplace that human embodiment plays no essential role in the functions of mind or reason. Conversely, it's vital to rule out the possibility that things have ever been different. Postmodernism resolutely bans the subject of origins, the notion that we were not always defined and reified by symbolic culture. Computer simulation is the latest advance in representation, its disembodied power fantasies exactly paralleling modernity's central essence.

The postmodernist stance refuses to admit stark reality, with discernible roots and essential dynamics. Benjamin's "storm" of progress is pressing forward on all fronts. Endless aesthetic-textual evasions amount to rank cowardice. Thomas Lamarre serves up a typical postmodern apologetic on the subject: "Modernity appears as a process or rupture and reinscription; alternative modernities entail an opening of otherness within Western modernity, in the very process of repeating or reinscribing it. It is as if modernity itself is deconstruction." (Impacts of Modernities, 2004).

Except that it isn't, as if anyone needed to point that out. Alas, deconstruction and detotalization have nothing in common. Deconstruction plays its role in keeping the whole system going, which is a real catastrophe, the actual, ongoing one.

The era of virtual communication coincides with the postmodern abdication, an age of enfeebled symbolic culture. Weakened and cheapened connectivity finds its analogue in the fetishization of ever-shifting, debased textual "meaning." Swallowed in an environment that is more and more one immense aggregate of symbols, deconstruction embraces this prison and declares it to be the only possible world. But the depreciation of the symbolic, including illiteracy and a cynicism about narrative in general, may lead in the direction of bringing the whole civilizational project into question. Civilization's failure at this most fundamental level is becoming as clear as its deadly and multiplying personal, social, and environmental effects.

"Sentences will be confined to museums if the emptiness of writing persists," predicted Georges Bataille. Language and the symbolic are the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, according to Derrida and the rest. Yet we see at the same time an ever-diminishing vista of understanding. The seeming paradox of an engulfing dimension of representation and a shrinking amount of meaning finally causes the former to become susceptible — first to doubt, then to subversion.

Husserl tried to establish an approach to meaning based on respecting experience/ phenomena just as it is delivered to us, before it is re-presented by the logic of symbolism. Small surprise that this effort has been a central target of postmodernists, who have understood the need to extirpate such a vision. Jean-Luc Nancy expresses this opposition succinctly, decreeing that "We have no idea, no

memory, no presentiment of a world that holds man [sic] in its bosom" (The Birth to Presence, 1993). How desperately do those who collaborate with the reigning nightmare resist the fact that during the two million years before civilization, this earth was precisely a place that did not abandon us and did hold us to its bosom.

Beset with information sickness and time fever, our challenge is to explode the continuum of history, as Benjamin realized in his final and best thinking. Empty, homogenous, uniform time must give way to the singularity of the non-exchangeable present. Historical progress is made of time, which has steadily become a monstrous materiality, ruling and measuring life. The "time" of non-domestication, of non-time, will allow each moment to be full of awareness, feeling, wisdom, and re-enchantment. The true duration of things can be restored when time and the other mediations of the symbolic are put to flight. Derrida, sworn enemy of such a possibility, grounds his refusal of a rupture on the nature and allegedly eternal existence of symbolic culture: history cannot end, because the constant play of symbolic movement cannot end. This auto-da-fé is a pledge against presence, authenticity, and all that is direct, embodied, particular, unique, and free. To be trapped in the symbolic is only our current condition, not an eternal sentence.

It is language that speaks, in Heidegger's phrase. But was it always so? This world is over-full of images, simulations — a result of choices that may seem irreversible. A species has, in a few thousand years, destroyed community and created a ruin. A ruin called culture. The bonds of closeness to the earth and to each other — outside of domestication, cities, war, etc. — have been sundered, but can they not heal?

Under the sign of a unitary civilization, the possibly fatal onslaught against anything alive and distinctive has been fully unleashed for all to see. Globalization has in fact only intensified what was underway well before modernity. The tirelessly systematized colonization and uniformity, first set in motion by the decision to control and tame, now has enemies who see it for what it is and for the ending it will surely bring, unless it is defeated. The choice at the beginning of history was, as now, that of presence versus representation.

Gadamer describes medicine as, at base, the restoration of what belongs to nature. Healing as removing whatever works against life's wonderful capacity to renew itself. The spirit of anarchy, I believe, is similar. Remove what blocks our way and it's all there, waiting for us.

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