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Europe at the Close of the 19th Century: The Generation of Materialism

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EUROPE AT THE CLOSE OF THE 19TH CENTURY

THE GENERATION OF MATERIALISM, 1870-1900. Illus. By Carlton J. H. Hayes. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963. xii, 390 pp.

It is with keen regret that we note the passing away of Professor Carlton J. H. Hayes on 3 September 1964, the distinguished Columbia historian and one of the luminaries in the American historical world. Serious students of nationalism will be grateful to him for having enriched their knowledge of that modern phenomenon by his valuable pioneering studies, among which may be mentioned *Essays on nationalism* (1926); *France, a nation of patriots* (1930); *The historical evolution of modern nationalism* (1913), and his more recent summing up of a lifetime's study, *Nationalism: a religion* (1960). We take this opportunity to review in this journal the reissue* of one of his earlier books, already familiar to Western students of modern history, in order to make his works better known to Philippine readers and to draw attention to the book's continuing relevance to our present situation. The reader who is awed and frightened by the terrible ambiguity of the mid-twentieth century—when the current peak of modern technological and scientific progress has also brought mankind within easy reach of global destruction—may arrive at a perceptive insight into our present dilemma by seriously pondering the ideas presented in this book, a classic in its field and a masterly synthesis of European history in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Before discussing details, it might be well to describe the general organization of this book. "Power Politics in the Wake of the National Wars" (ch.i) surveys the positions of the powers from the end of the wars of Italian and German unification to that high point of Bismarck's alliance system, the signing of the Reinsurance Treaty and of the Mediterranean Agreements of 1887. From a study of foreign policies the author examines, next, the development of domestic politics, "The Fruition of Liberalism" (ch. ii). In the 1870's Liberal (with a capital "L") parties held the predominant place all over Europe, all subscribing to a body of principles which the author calls, "sectarian" Liberalism.

The third chapter studies a development central to the period: the unprecedented expansion of machine industry and its manifold effects on European society such as the agricultural crisis, the fantastic multiplication of goods and wealth, the steep demographic rise, etc. Of even greater import is its effect on the thinking of the age:

* This Harper Torchbook reissue enjoys one advantage, besides reduced price, over the original published in 1941 in that it has revised and brought up to date the valuable bibliographical essay of the first edition.

not only the natural, but also the social and humane sciences, are seen in mechanistic and deterministic terms. Thought itself has become mechanized.

The effects of mechanized thought are indeed far reaching: its deleterious effect on religion and its unmistakable imprint on art are described in chapter iv. The tremendous expansion of machine industry also partially accounts for the "Emergence of the Masses" (ch. v), a phenomenon peculiar, if we except the medieval world, to the late-nineteenth-century history of Europe. This means that the masses, hitherto weighed down by the inertia of the ages, now regain a kind of class consciousness and an awareness of their social importance. The masses will no longer be passive spectators; henceforth they will also make history.

Against sectarian Liberalism a reaction takes place in the 1880's, the most striking effect of which were the resurgence of economic nationalism and national imperialism (ch. vi). In line with this general reaction, and clearly embodying the spirit of the Generation of Materialism, was the intensification of nationalism. For this is the "Seed-time of Totalitarian Nationalism" (ch. vii), when the climate was favorable for sowing the seeds of illiberal nationalism in the mind of the masses. The liberal doctrine of national self-determination now meant the determination of "inferior" nationalities by "superior" nations. Nationalism now became the burning desire that nothing restrict the strengthening of one's nation-state.

In resuming the diplomatic history (ch. viii), the author notes a reshuffling in the alliance system in the wake of Bismarck's fall. The rise of global imperialism, the making of the Franco-Russian Alliance, the emergence of extra-European great powers, Japan and the United States, the ambiguous position of England, all these further complicated an already complicated story. Nevertheless peace was preserved and the century ended under seemingly auspicious signs, the Hague Peace Conference of 1899.

"The Climax of the Enlightenment" (ch. ix) embodies Professor Hayes's reflections on the spirit behind the achievements of the Generation of Materialism. The European story was at this stage a peculiarly ambiguous one: thinking men were struck by the tremendous progress achieved in many fields and all too naturally they hoped for even greater achievements. Yet, the author reminds us, if they had only looked more closely beneath the great strides in material progress, they might have seen the unmistakable signs of a lurking nemesis.

Excellent in many respects, the present work's most important contribution lies perhaps in laying bare the ambiguity or the ambivalent nature of that past age. Professor Hayes has aptly called it the Generation of Materialism, an age characterized by a "marked in-

terest in, and devotion to, and proud of, material things and achievements." In so far as it had a philosophy, it was imbued with a "simply material and frankly this-worldly pragmatism." A period of unprecedented progress, it represented in every respect the climax of the Enlightenment: an era of unsurpassed technological advance and scientific control of nature; tremendous expansion of wealth; growing tolerance and social betterment; ever widening acceptance of liberalism and democracy and nationalism; an incredibly long peace which seemed to preclude the possibility of major war. Not too long ago the popularizers saw only this side of that era, and they marvelled and waxed enthusiastic over the magnificence of such a golden age. The words of that twentieth century psychotherapist, Emil Coué, could be applied most appropriately, it seemed, to that age: "Day by day in every way I am getting better and better." Everyday, in every day, indeed, the world then seemed to grow better and better.

And yet there was another side to that age, and this book is important in providing an analysis of *both* sides of that era; in other words, of the supreme ambiguity of that Generation of Materialism. For it was at once the climax of the Enlightenment and the source of future disillusionment. The great technological, scientific, commercial progress had its *other* side: the capability to produce mechanized weapons of mass destruction. The emergence of the masses and the spread of mass democracy and nationalism had its *other* side: the explosive effect of mass opinion on foreign policy and the inevitability of total war. One may pardonably wax grandiloquent over the modern world's progress in religious toleration if one remembers that toleration is a notoriously relative thing. Modern man can, for instance, become generously tolerant toward religious heretics because he no longer cares about religious orthodoxy, and yet remain extremely intolerant toward other things (like national minorities, or heretics to nationalist orthodoxy, or "alien" subverters of the national interest). The other side to that era of peace was that it was an armed peace: a major war failed to erupt, not because there was a universal will to peace, but because the powers were much too absorbed in preparation for some future war. The other side to the climax of the Enlightenment was its smug self-confidence which transformed that age into a fertile seed-bed for "the present and quite different harvest of personal dictatorship," and "the prelude to an era of disaster and disillusionment."

There lies the heart of the nemesis lurking beneath the more striking material progress. For that age was truly one of those ages of tremendous capability, but men forgot that this capability was ambiguous, indeed two-edged. It could be used for the betterment of the world or for its destruction. But the smug self-confidence of that generation led men to presume that all this capability would be used

for the world's betterment. That it might be used otherwise was ruled out of the question. It was not the thinkers of the age, those "scientific" and "self-effacing" philosophers, who ruled out this possibility but the inexorable law of progress itself, with whose workings mortal man ought not to tamper. Progress became irresistible because it was rendered mechanical.

One example will suffice to show how the thinkers of the age transformed progress into a mechanical law. In 1859 was published the Darwinian hypothesis on biological evolution. Put in popular terms the doctrine of "natural selection" ran thus: The physically more fit tend to survive the physically less fit. Almost immediately Darwin's popularizers seized upon this principle and applied it to the social sciences, the history of mankind, the whole cosmic process itself. Thus "natural selection" was discovered to be operating in the fields of economics, politics, psychology, ethics, etc. A further step was taken with the identification of evolution with "moral progress" so that the physically fittest also became the "morally best." Thus, according to Darwin's popularizers, "natural selection" determined the course of economic development in the 1860's when the industrially more fit corporations began eliminating the industrially less fit. And in 1866 and 1871, even international politics seemed subject to this all-pervasive law of nature: The industrially-militarily more fit nation (Prussia) triumphed over the industrially-militarily less fit states (Austria and France). And from the 1870's onward "natural selection" was extended to the whole world, for the revival of imperialism on a global scale saw the "superior" races lording it over the "inferior" races.

So far, so good, at least apparently. What the Darwinian popularizers failed to recognize was that by making the law of progress mechanical, they had ruled man himself out of his own creation. Because progress became automatic, rational man was relieved of his responsibility to labor unceasingly towards true progress. Naive optimism undermined those dikes which man's reason and his traditional religion had always set against the currents of retrogression constantly beating and pounding against the work of mortal man. The naive optimists forgot that the road to true progress demands unremitting vigilance, that a thin line separates progress from retrogression, that when men become smugly self-confident and let down the safeguards against the dangers which threaten human civilization, then the time for disillusionment is not too far at hand. And the greater the achievement, the higher the capability and progress that had been attained, the greater and harder the fall.