

## *The Century: A Bird's Eye View*

### TWELVE PEOPLE LOOK AT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Isaiah Berlin* (philosopher, Britain): 'I have lived through most of the twentieth century without, I must add, suffering personal hardship. I remember it only as the most terrible century in Western history.'

*Julio Caro Baroja* (anthropologist, Spain): 'There's a patent contradiction between one's own life experience – childhood, youth and old age passed quietly and without major adventures – and the facts of the twentieth century . . . the terrible events which humanity has lived through.'

*Primo Levi* (writer, Italy): 'We who survived the Camps are not true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion which I have gradually come to accept by reading what other survivors have written, including myself, when I re-read my writings after a lapse of years. We, the survivors, are not only a tiny but also an anomalous minority. We are those who, through prevarication, skill or luck, never touched bottom. Those who have, and who have seen the face of the Gorgon, did not return, or returned wordless.'

*René Dumont* (agronomist, ecologist, France): 'I see it only as a century of massacres and wars.'

*Rita Levi Montalcini* (Nobel Laureate, science, Italy): 'In spite of everything there have been revolutions for the better in this century . . . the rise of the fourth estate, and the emergence of women after centuries of repression.'

*William Golding* (Nobel Laureate, writer, Britain): 'I can't help thinking that this has been the most violent century in human history.'

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*Ernst Gombrich* (art historian, Britain): 'The chief characteristic of the twentieth century is the terrible multiplication of the world's population. It is a catastrophe, a disaster. We don't know what to do about it.'

*Yehudi Menuhin* (musician, Britain): 'If I had to sum up the twentieth century, I would say that it raised the greatest hopes ever conceived by humanity, and destroyed all illusions and ideals.'

*Severo Ochoa* (Nobel Laureate, science, Spain): 'The most fundamental thing is the progress of science, which has been truly extraordinary . . . This is what characterizes our century.'

*Raymond Firth* (anthropologist, Britain): 'Technologically, I single out the development of electronics among the most significant developments of the twentieth century; in terms of ideas, the change from a relatively rational and scientific view of things to a non-rational and less scientific one.'

*Leo Valiani* (historian, Italy): 'Our century demonstrates that the victory of the ideals of justice and equality is always ephemeral, but also that, if we manage to preserve liberty, we can always start all over again . . . There is no need to despair, even in the most desperate situations.'

*Franco Venturi* (historian, Italy): 'Historians can't answer this question. For me the twentieth century is only the ever-renewed effort to understand it.'

(Agosti and Borgese, 1992, pp. 42, 210, 154, 76, 4, 8, 204, 2, 62, 80, 140, 160.)

## I

On the 28 June 1992 President Mitterrand of France made a sudden, unannounced and unexpected appearance in Sarajevo, already the centre of a Balkan war that was to cost perhaps 150,000 lives during the remainder of the year. His object was to remind world opinion of the seriousness of the Bosnian crisis. Indeed, the presence of a distinguished, elderly and visibly frail statesman under small-arms and artillery fire was

much remarked on and admired. However, one aspect of M. Mitterrand's visit passed virtually without comment, even though it was plainly central to it: the date. Why had the President of France chosen to go to Sarajevo on that particular day? Because the 28 June was the anniversary of the assassination, in Sarajevo, in 1914, of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, which led, within a matter of weeks, to the outbreak of the First World War. For any educated European of Mitterrand's age, the connection between date, place and the reminder of a historic catastrophe precipitated by political error and miscalculation leaped to the eye. How better to dramatize the potential implications of the Bosnian crisis than by choosing so symbolic a date? But hardly anyone caught the allusion except a few professional historians and very senior citizens. The historical memory was no longer alive.

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in. This makes historians, whose business it is to remember what others forget, more essential at the end of the second millennium than ever before. But for that very reason they must be more than simply chroniclers, remembrancers and compilers, though this is also the historians' necessary function. In 1989 all governments, and especially all Foreign Ministries, in the world would have benefited from a seminar on the peace settlements after the two world wars, which most of them had apparently forgotten.

However, it is not the purpose of this book to tell the story of the period which is its subject, the Short Twentieth Century from 1914 to 1991, although no one who has been asked by an intelligent American student whether the phrase 'Second World War' meant that there had been a 'First World War' is unaware that knowledge of even the basic facts of the century cannot be taken for granted. My object is to understand and explain *why* things turned out the way they did, and how they hang together. For anyone of my age-group who has lived through all or most of the Short Twentieth Century this is inevitably also an autobiographical endeavour. We are talking about, amplifying (and correcting) our own memories. And we are talking as men and women of a particular time and place, involved, in various ways, in its history as actors in its dramas – however insignificant our parts – as observers of our times and, not least, as people whose views of the century have been formed by what we have come to see as its crucial events. We

are part of this century. It is part of us. Readers who belong to another era, for instance the student entering university at the time this is written, for whom even the Vietnam War is prehistory, should not forget this.

For historians of my generation and background, the past is indestructible, not only because we belong to the generation when streets and public places were still called after public men and events (the Wilson station in pre-war Prague, the Metro Stalingrad in Paris), when peace treaties were still signed and therefore had to be identified (Treaty of Versailles) and war memorials recalled yesterdays, but because public events are part of the texture of our lives. They are not merely markers in our private lives, but what has formed our lives, private and public. For this author the 30 January 1933 is not simply an otherwise arbitrary date when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, but a winter afternoon in Berlin when a fifteen-year-old and his younger sister were on the way home from their neighbouring schools in Wilmersdorf to Halensee and, somewhere on the way, saw the headline. I can see it still, as in a dream.

But not only one old historian has the past as part of his permanent present. Over huge stretches of the globe everybody over a certain age, irrespective of their personal background and life-story, has passed through the same central experiences. These have marked us all, to some extent in the same ways. The world that went to pieces at the end of the 1980s was the world shaped by the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917. We have all been marked by it, for instance, inasmuch as we got used to thinking of the modern industrial economy in terms of binary opposites, 'capitalism' and 'socialism' as alternatives mutually excluding one another, the one being identified with economies organized on the model of the USSR, the other with all the rest. It should now be becoming clear that this was an arbitrary and to some extent artificial construction, which can only be understood as part of a particular historical context. And yet, even as I write, it is not easy to envisage, even in retrospect, other principles of classification which might have been more realistic than that which placed the USA, Japan, Sweden, Brazil, the German Federal Republic and South Korea in a single pigeon-hole, and the state economies and systems of the Soviet region which collapsed after the 1980s in the same compartment as those in East and Southeast Asia which demonstrably did not collapse.

Again, even the world which has survived the end of the October Revolution is one whose institutions and assumptions were shaped by those who were on the winning side of the Second World War. Those

who were on the losing side or associated with it were not only silent and silenced, but virtually written out of history and intellectual life except in the role of 'the enemy' in the moral world drama of Good versus Evil. (This may now also be happening to the losers in the Cold War of the second half of the century, though probably not to quite the same extent or for so long.) This is one of the penalties of living through a century of religious wars. Intolerance is their chief characteristic. Even those who advertised the pluralism of their own non-ideologies did not think the world was big enough for permanent coexistence with rival secular religions. Religious or ideological confrontations, such as those which have filled this century, build barricades in the way of the historian, whose major task is not to judge but to understand even what we can least comprehend. Yet what stands in the way of understanding is not only our passionate convictions, but the historical experience that has formed them. The first is easier to overcome, for there is no truth in the familiar but mistaken French phrase *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner* (to understand all is to forgive all). To understand the Nazi era in German history and to fit it into its historical context is not to forgive the genocide. In any case, no one who has lived through this extraordinary century is likely to abstain from judgement. It is understanding that comes hard.

## II

How are we to make sense of the Short Twentieth Century, that is to say of the years from the outbreak of the First World War to the collapse of the USSR which, as we can now see in retrospect, forms a coherent historical period that has now ended? We do not know what will come next, and what the third millennium will be like, even though we can be certain that the Short Twentieth Century will have shaped it. However, there can be no serious doubt that in the late 1980s and early 1990s an era in world history ended and a new one began. That is the essential information for historians of the century, for though they can speculate about the future in the light of their understanding of the past, their business is not that of the racing tipster. The only horse-races they can claim to report and analyse are those already won or lost. In any case, the record of forecasters in the past thirty or forty years, whatever their professional qualification as prophets, has been so spectacularly bad that only governments and economic research institutes still have, or pretend

to have, much confidence in it. It is even possible that it has got worse since the Second World War.

In this book the structure of the Short Twentieth Century appears like a sort of triptych or historical sandwich. An Age of Catastrophe from 1914 to the aftermath of the Second World War was followed by some twenty-five or thirty years of extraordinary economic growth and social transformation, which probably changed human society more profoundly than any other period of comparable brevity. In retrospect it can be seen as a sort of Golden Age, and was so seen almost immediately it had come to an end in the early 1970s. The last part of the century was a new era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis – and indeed, for large parts of the world such as Africa, the former USSR and the formerly socialist parts of Europe, of catastrophe. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the mood of those who reflected on the century's past and future was a growing *fin-de-siècle* gloom. From the vantage-point of the 1990s, the Short Twentieth Century passed through a brief Golden Age, on the way from one era of crisis to another, into an unknown and problematic but not necessarily apocalyptic future. However, as historians may wish to remind metaphysical speculators about 'The End of History', there will be a future. The only completely certain generalization about history is that, so long as there is a human race, it will go on.

The argument of this book is organized accordingly. It begins with the First World War, which marked the breakdown of the (western) civilization of the nineteenth century. This civilization was capitalist in its economy; liberal in its legal and constitutional structure; bourgeois in the image of its characteristic hegemonic class; glorying in the advance of science, knowledge and education, material and moral progress; and profoundly convinced of the centrality of Europe, birthplace of the revolutions of the sciences, arts, politics and industry, whose economy had penetrated, and whose soldiers had conquered and subjugated most of the world; whose populations had grown until (including the vast and growing outflow of European emigrants and their descendants) they had risen to form a third of the human race; and whose major states constituted the system of world politics.\*

The decades from the outbreak of the First World War to the

\* I have tried to describe and explain the rise of this civilization in a three-volume history of the 'long nineteenth century' (from the 1780s to 1914) and tried to analyse the reasons for its breakdown. The present text will refer back to these volumes, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848*, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* and *The Age of Empire 1875–1914*, from time to time, where this seems useful.

aftermath of the Second, was an Age of Catastrophe for this society. For forty years it stumbled from one calamity to another. There were times when even intelligent conservatives would not take bets on its survival. It was shaken by two world wars, followed by two waves of global rebellion and revolution, which brought to power a system that claimed to be the historically predestined alternative to bourgeois and capitalist society, first over one sixth of the world's land surface, and after the Second World War over one third of the globe's population. The huge colonial empires, built up before and during the Age of Empire, were shaken and crumbled into dust. The entire history of modern imperialism, so firm and self-confident when Queen Victoria of Great Britain died, had lasted no longer than a single lifetime – say, that of Winston Churchill (1874–1965).

More than this: a world economic crisis of unprecedented depth brought even the strongest capitalist economies to their knees and seemed to reverse the creation of a single universal world economy, which had been so remarkable an achievement of nineteenth-century liberal capitalism. Even the USA, safe from war and revolution, seemed close to collapse. While the economy tottered, the institutions of liberal democracy virtually disappeared between 1917 and 1942 from all but a fringe of Europe and parts of North America and Australasia, as fascism and its satellite authoritarian movements and regimes advanced.

Only the temporary and bizarre alliance of liberal capitalism and communism in self-defence against this challenger saved democracy, for the victory over Hitler's Germany was essentially won, and could only have been won, by the Red Army. In many ways this period of capitalist–communist alliance against fascism – essentially the 1930s and 1940s – forms the hinge of twentieth-century history and its decisive moment. In many ways it is a moment of historical paradox in the relations of capitalism and communism, placed, for most of the century – except for the brief period of antifascism – in a posture of irreconcilable antagonism. The victory of the Soviet Union over Hitler was the achievement of the regime installed there by the October Revolution, as a comparison of the performance of the Russian Tsarist economy in the First World War and the Soviet economy in the Second World War demonstrates (Gatrell/Harrison, 1993). Without it the Western world today would probably consist (outside the USA) of a set of variations on authoritarian and fascist themes rather than a set of variations on liberal parliamentary ones. It is one of the ironies of this strange century that the most lasting results of the October revolution, whose object was the global overthrow of capitalism, was to save its antagonist, both in war and in peace – that



is to say, by providing it with the incentive, fear, to reform itself after the Second World War, and, by establishing the popularity of economic planning, furnishing it with some of the procedures for its reform.

Still, even when liberal capitalism had – and only just – survived the triple challenge of slump, fascism and war, it still seemed to face the global advance of revolution, which could now rally round the USSR, which had emerged from the Second World War as a superpower.

And yet, as we can now see in retrospect, the strength of the global socialist challenge to capitalism was that of the weakness of its opponent. Without the breakdown of nineteenth-century bourgeois society in the Age of Catastrophe, there would have been no October revolution and no USSR. The economic system improvised in the ruined rural Eurasian hulk of the former Tsarist Empire under the name of socialism would not have considered itself, nor been considered elsewhere, as a realistic global alternative to the capitalist economy. It was the Great Slump of the 1930s that made it look as though it was so, as it was the challenge of fascism which made the USSR into the indispensable instrument of Hitler's defeat, and therefore into one of the two superpowers whose confrontations dominated and terrified the second half of the Short Twentieth Century, while – as we can also now see – in many respects stabilizing its political structure. The USSR would not have found itself, for a decade-and-a-half in the middle of the century, at the head of a 'socialist camp' comprising a third of the human race, and an economy that briefly looked as though it might out-race capitalist economic growth.

Just how and why capitalism after the Second World War found itself, to everyone's surprise including its own, surging forward into the unprecedented and possibly anomalous Golden Age of 1947–73, is perhaps the major question which faces historians of the twentieth century. There is as yet no agreement on an answer, nor can I claim to provide a persuasive one. Probably a more convincing analysis will have to wait until the entire 'long wave' of the second half of the twentieth century can be seen in perspective, but, although we can now look back on the Golden Age as a whole, the Crisis Decades through which the world has lived since then are not yet complete at the time this is written. However, what can already be assessed with great confidence is the extraordinary scale and impact of the consequent economic, social and cultural transformation, the greatest, most rapid and most fundamental in recorded history. Various aspects of it are discussed in the second part of this book. Historians of the twentieth century in the third millennium will probably see the century's major impact on history as the one made by and in this astonishing period. For the changes in human life it brought about all

over the globe were as profound as they were irreversible. Moreover, they are still continuing. The journalists and philosophical essayists who detected 'the end of history' in the fall of the Soviet Empire were wrong. A better case can be made for saying that the third quarter of the century marked the end of the seven or eight millennia of human history that began with the invention of agriculture in the stone age, if only because it ended the long era when the overwhelming majority of the human race lived by growing food and herding animals.

Compared to this, the history of the confrontation between 'capitalism' and 'socialism', with or without the intervention of states and governments such as the USA and the USSR claiming to represent one or the other, will probably seem of more limited historical interest – comparable, in the long run, to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century wars of religion or the Crusades. For those who lived through any part of the Short Twentieth Century they naturally bulked large, and so they do in this book, since it is written by a twentieth-century writer for late-twentieth-century readers. Social revolutions, the Cold War, the nature, limits and fatal flaws of 'really existing socialism' and its breakdown, are discussed at length. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the major and lasting impact of the regimes inspired by the October revolution was as a powerful accelerator of the modernization of backward agrarian countries. As it happened, its major achievements in this respect coincided with the capitalist Golden Age. How effective, or even how consciously held, the rival strategies for burying the world of our forefathers were, need not be considered here. As we shall see, until the early 1960s, they seemed at least evenly matched, a view which seems preposterous in the light of the collapse of Soviet socialism, though a British prime minister, conversing with an American president, could then still see the USSR as a state whose 'buoyant economy . . . will soon outmatch capitalist society in the race for material wealth' (Horne, 1989, p. 303). However, the point to note is simply that, in the 1980s, socialist Bulgaria and non-socialist Ecuador had more in common than either had with the Bulgaria or Ecuador of 1939.

Although the collapse of Soviet socialism and its enormous and still not fully calculable, but mainly negative, consequences were the most dramatic incident in the Crisis Decades which followed the Golden Age, these were to be decades of *universal* or global crisis. The crisis affected the various parts of the world in different ways and degrees, but it affected all, irrespective of their political, social and economic configurations, because the Golden Age had, for the first time in history, created a single, increasingly integrated and universal world economy largely operating across state

frontiers ('transnationally'), and therefore also increasingly across the frontiers of state ideology. Consequently the accepted ideas of institutions of all regimes and systems were undermined. Initially the troubles of the 1970s were seen only as a hopefully, temporary pause in the Great Leap Forward of the world economy, and countries of all economic and political types and patterns looked for temporary solutions. Increasingly it became clear that this was an era of long-term difficulties, for which capitalist countries sought radical solutions, often by following secular theologians of the unrestricted free market who rejected the policies that had served the world economy so well in the Golden Age, but now seemed to be failing. The ultras of *laissez-faire* were no more successful than anyone else. In the 1980s and early 1990s the capitalist world found itself once again staggering under the burdens of the inter-war years, which the Golden Age appeared to have removed: mass unemployment, severe cyclical slumps, the ever-more spectacular confrontation of homeless beggars and luxurious plenty, between limited state revenues and limitless state expenditures. Socialist countries, with their now flagging and vulnerable economies, were driven towards equally or even more radical breaks with their past, and, as we know, towards breakdown. That breakdown can stand as the marker for the end of the Short Twentieth Century, as the First World War can stand as the marker for its beginning. At this point my history concludes.

It concludes – as any book completed in the early 1990s must – with a view into obscurity. The collapse of one part of the world revealed the malaise of the rest. As the 1980s passed into the 1990s it became evident that the world crisis was not only general in an economic sense, but equally general in politics. The collapse of the communist regimes between Istria and Vladivostok not only produced an enormous zone of political uncertainty, instability, chaos and civil war, but also destroyed the international system that had stabilized international relations for some forty years. It also revealed the precariousness of the domestic political systems that had essentially rested on that stability. The tensions of troubled economies undermined the political systems of liberal democracy, parliamentary or presidential, which had functioned so well in the developed capitalist countries since the Second World War. They also undermined whatever political systems operated in the Third World. The basic units of politics themselves, the territorial, sovereign and independent 'nation-states', including the oldest and stablest, found themselves pulled apart by the forces of a supranational or transnational economy, and by the infranational forces of secessionist regions and ethnic groups. Some of these – such is the irony of history – demanded

the outdated and unreal status of miniature sovereign 'nation-states' for themselves. The future of politics was obscure, but its crisis at the end of the Short Twentieth Century was patent.

Even more obvious than the uncertainties of world economics and world politics was the social and moral crisis, reflecting the post-1950 upheavals in human life, which also found widespread if confused expression in these Crisis Decades. It was a crisis of the beliefs and assumptions on which modern society had been founded since the Moderns won their famous battle against the Ancients in the early eighteenth century – of the rationalist and humanist assumptions, shared by liberal capitalism and communism, and which made possible their brief but decisive alliance against fascism, which rejected them. A conservative German observer, Michael Stürmer, rightly observed in 1993 that the beliefs of both East and West were at issue:

There is a strange parallelism between East and West. In the East state doctrine insisted that humanity was the master of its destiny. However, even we believed in a less official and less extreme version of the same slogan: mankind was on the way to becoming master of its destinies. The claim to omnipotence has disappeared absolutely in the East, only relatively *chez nous* – but both sides have suffered shipwreck. (From Bergedorf, 98, p. 95)

Paradoxically, an era whose only claim to have benefited humanity rested on the enormous triumphs of a material progress based on science and technology ended in a rejection of these by substantial bodies of public opinion and people claiming to be thinkers in the West.

However, the moral crisis was not only one of the assumptions of modern civilization, but also one of the historic structures of human relations which modern society inherited from a pre-industrial and pre-capitalist past, and which, as we can now see, had enabled it to function. It was not a crisis of one form of organizing societies, but of all forms. The strange calls for an otherwise unidentified 'civil society', for 'community' were the voice of lost and drifting generations. They were heard in an age when such words, having lost their traditional meanings, became vapid phrases. There was no other way left to define group identity, except by defining the outsiders who were not in it.

For the poet T.S. Eliot 'this is the way the world ends – not with a bang but a whimper.' The Short Twentieth century ended with both.

## III

How did the world of the 1990s compare with the world of 1914? It contained five or six billion human beings, perhaps three times as many people as at the outbreak of the First World War, and this in spite of the fact that during the Short Century more human beings had been killed or allowed to die by human decision than ever before in history. A recent estimate of the century's 'megadeaths' is 187 millions (Brzezinski, 1993), which is the equivalent of more than one in ten of the total world population in 1900. Most people in the 1990s were taller and heavier than their parents, better fed, and far longer-lived, though the catastrophes of the 1980s and 1990s in Africa, Latin America and the ex-USSR may make this difficult to believe. The world was incomparably richer than ever before in its capacity to produce goods and services and in their endless variety. It could not have managed otherwise to maintain a global population several times larger than ever before in the world's history. Most people until the 1980s lived better than their parents, and, in the advanced economies, better than they had ever expected to live or even imagined it possible to live. For some decades in the middle of the century it even looked as though ways had been found of distributing at least some of this enormous wealth with a degree of fairness to the working people of the richer countries, but at the end of the century inequality had once again the upper hand. It had also made a massive entry into the former 'socialist' countries where a certain equality of poverty had previously reigned. Humanity was far better educated than in 1914. Indeed, probably for the first time in history most human beings could be described as literate, at least in official statistics, though the significance of this achievement was far less clear at the end of the century than it would have been in 1914, given the enormous and probably growing gap between the minimum of competence officially accepted as literacy, often shading into 'functional illiteracy', and the command of reading and writing still expected at elite levels.

The world was filled with a revolutionary and constantly advancing technology, based on triumphs of natural science which could be anticipated in 1914, but had then barely begun to be pioneered. Perhaps the most dramatic practical consequence of these was a revolution in transport and communications which virtually annihilated time and distance. It was a world which could bring more information and entertainment than had been available to emperors in 1914, daily, hourly, into every household. It let people speak to one another across oceans and continents at the touch of a few buttons, and, for most practical

purposes, abolished the cultural advantages of city over countryside.

Why, then, did the century end, not with a celebration of this unparalleled and marvellous progress, but in a mood of uneasiness? Why, as the epigraphs to this chapter show, did so many reflective minds look back upon it without satisfaction, and certainly without confidence in the future? Not only because it was without doubt the most murderous century of which we have record, both by the scale, frequency and length of the warfare which filled it, barely ceasing for a moment in the 1920s, but also by the unparalleled scale of the human catastrophes it produced, from the greatest famines in history to systematic genocide. Unlike the 'long nineteenth century', which seemed, and actually was, a period of almost unbroken material, intellectual *and moral* progress, that is to say of improvement in the conditions of civilized life, there has, since 1914, been a marked regression from the standards then regarded as normal in the developed countries and in the milieus of the middle classes and which were confidently believed to be spreading to the more backward regions and the less enlightened strata of the population.

Since this century has taught us, and continues to teach us, that human beings can learn to live under the most brutalized and theoretically intolerable conditions, it is not easy to grasp the extent of the, unfortunately accelerating, return to what our nineteenth-century ancestors would have called the standards of barbarism. We forget that the old revolutionary Frederick Engels was horrified at the explosion of an Irish Republican bomb in Westminster Hall, because, as an old soldier, he held that war was waged against combatants and not non-combatants. We forget that the pogroms in Tsarist Russia which (justifiably) outraged world opinion and drove Russian Jews across the Atlantic in their millions between 1881 and 1914, were small, almost negligible, by the standards of modern massacre: the dead were counted in dozens, not hundreds, let alone millions. We forget that an international Convention once provided that hostilities in war 'must not commence without previous and explicit warning in the form of a reasoned declaration of war or of an ultimatum with conditional declaration of war', for when was the last war that began with such an explicit or implicit declaration? Or one that ended with a formal treaty of peace negotiated between the belligerent states? In the course of the twentieth century, wars have been increasingly waged against the economy and infrastructure of states and against their civilian populations. Since the First World War the number of civilian casualties in war has been far greater than that of military casualties in all belligerent countries except the USA. How many of us recall that it was taken for granted in 1914 that:



Civilized warfare, the textbooks tell us, is confined, as far as possible, to disablement of the armed forces of the enemy; otherwise war would continue till one of the parties was exterminated. 'It is with good reason . . . that this practice has grown into a custom with the nations of Europe'. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, XI ed., 1911, art: War.)

We do not quite overlook the revival of torture or even murder as a normal part of the operations of public security in modern states, but we probably fail to appreciate quite how dramatic a reversal this constitutes of the long era of legal development, from the first formal abolition of torture in a Western country in the 1780s to 1914.

And yet, the world at the end of the Short Twentieth Century cannot be compared with the world at its beginning in the terms of the historical accountancy of 'more' and 'less'. It was a qualitatively different world in at least three respects.

First, it was no longer Eurocentric. It had brought the decline and fall of Europe, still the unquestioned centre of power, wealth, intellect and 'Western civilization' when the century began. Europeans and their descendants were now reduced from perhaps a third of humanity to at most one sixth, a diminishing minority living in countries which barely, if at all, reproduced their populations, surrounded by, and in most cases – with some shining exceptions such as the USA (until the 1990s) – barricading themselves against the pressure of immigration from the regions of the poor. The industries Europe had pioneered were migrating elsewhere. The countries which had once looked across the oceans to Europe looked elsewhere. Australia, New Zealand, even the bi-oceanic USA, saw the future in the Pacific, whatever exactly this meant.

The 'great powers' of 1914, all of them European, had disappeared, like the USSR, inheritor of Tsarist Russia, or were reduced to regional or provincial status, with the possible exception of Germany. The very effort to create a single supranational 'European Community' and to invent a sense of European identity to correspond to it, replacing the old loyalties to historic nations and states, demonstrated the depth of this decline.

Was this a change of major significance, except for political historians? Perhaps not, since it reflected only minor changes in the economic, intellectual and cultural configuration of the world. Even in 1914 the USA had been the major industrial economy, and the major pioneer, model and propulsive force of the mass production and mass culture which conquered the globe during the Short Twentieth Century, and the USA, in spite of its many peculiarities, was the overseas extension of

Europe, and bracketed itself with the old continent under the heading 'western civilization'. Whatever its future prospects, the USA looked back from the 1990s on 'The American Century', an age of its rise and triumph. The ensemble of the countries of nineteenth-century industrialization remained, collectively, by far the greatest concentration of wealth, economic and scientific-technological power on the globe, as well as the one whose peoples enjoyed by far the highest standard of living. At the end of the century this still more than compensated for de-industrialization and the shift of production to other continents. To this extent the impression of an old Eurocentric or 'Western' world in full decline was superficial.

The second transformation was more significant. Between 1914 and the early 1990s the globe has become far more of a single operational unit, as it was not, and could not have been in 1914. In fact, for many purposes, notably in economic affairs, the globe is now the primary operational unit and older units such as the 'national economies', defined by the politics of territorial states, are reduced to complications of transnational activities. The stage reached by the 1990s in the construction of the 'global village' – the phrase was coined in the 1960s (MacLuhan, 1962) – will not seem very advanced to observers in the mid-twenty-first century, but it had already transformed not only certain economic and technical activities, and the operations of science, but important aspects of private life, mainly by the unimaginable acceleration of communication and transport. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the end of the twentieth century is the tension between this accelerating process of globalization and the inability of both public institutions and the collective behaviour of human beings to come to terms with it. Curiously enough, private human behaviour has had less trouble in adjusting to the world of satellite television, E-mail, holidays in the Seychelles and trans-oceanic commuting.

The third transformation, and in some ways the most disturbing, is the disintegration of the old patterns of human social relationships, and with it, incidentally, the snapping of the links between generations, that is to say, between past and present. This has been particularly evident in the most developed countries of the western version of capitalism, in which the values of an absolute a-social individualism have been dominant, both in official and unofficial ideologies, though those who hold them often deplore their social consequences. Nevertheless, the tendencies were to be found elsewhere, reinforced by the erosion of traditional societies and religions, as well as by the destruction, or autodestruction, of the societies of 'real socialism'.



Such a society consisting of an otherwise unconnected assemblage of self-centred individuals pursuing only their own gratification (whether this is called profit, pleasure or by some other name) was always implicit in the theory of the capitalist economy. Ever since the Age of Revolution, observers of all ideological colours predicted the consequent disintegration of the old social bonds in practice and monitored its progress. The Communist Manifesto's eloquent tribute to the revolutionary role of capitalism is familiar ('The bourgeoisie . . . has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest'). But that is not quite how the new and revolutionary capitalist society had worked in practice.

In practice, the new society operated not by the wholesale destruction of all that it had inherited from the old society, but by selectively adapting the heritage of the past for its own use. There is no 'sociological puzzle' about the readiness of bourgeois society to introduce 'a radical individualism in economics and . . . to tear up all traditional social relations in the process' (i.e. where they got in its way), while fearing 'radical experimental individualism' in culture (or in the field of behaviour and morality) (Daniel Bell, 1976, p. 18). The most effective way to build an industrial economy based on private enterprise was to combine it with motivations which had nothing to do with the logic of the free market – for instance with the Protestant ethic; with the abstention from immediate gratification; with the ethic of hard work; with family duty and trust; but certainly not with the antinomian rebellion of individuals.

Yet Marx and the other prophets of the disintegration of old values and social relationships were right. Capitalism was a permanent and continuous revolutionizing force. Logically, it would end by disintegrating even those parts of the pre-capitalist past which it had found convenient, nay perhaps essential, for its own development. It would end by sawing off at least one of the branches on which it sat. Since the middle of the century this has been happening. Under the impact of the extraordinary economic explosion of the Golden Age and after, with its consequent social and cultural changes, the most profound revolution in society since the stone age, the branch began to crack and break. At the end of this century it has for the first time become possible to see what a world may be like in which the past, including the past in the present, has lost its role, in which the old maps and charts which guided human beings, singly and collectively, through life no longer represent the landscape through which we move, the sea on which we sail. In which we do not know where our journey is taking us, or even ought to take us.

This is the situation with which a part of humanity must already come to terms at the end of the century, and more will have to in the new millennium. However, by then it may have become clearer where humanity is going than it is today. We can look backward over the road that brought us here, and this is what I have tried to do in this book. We do not know what will shape the future, although I have not resisted the temptation to reflect on some of its problems, insofar as they arise from the debris of the period that has just come to an end. Let us hope it will be a better, juster and more viable world. The old century has not ended well.