

# Civilization and the Common Man

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ALTHOUGH the mass media never mention the subject and are never likely to do so, there must be few persons of a reflective disposition in such countries as America and Britain who have no foreboding that Western civilisation is falling. Most "ordinary" people if they ever think of it would regard it as academic, having no relation to themselves and their interests. Yet, as history shows, if our civilisation collapses they would be the first to suffer.

Civilisation began in rich river valleys where the comparative relief from drudgery enabled the people to have more leisure to think and develop higher powers. But if a few could contrive to rob the producers of their natural reward then they were reduced to drudgery, intelligence waned and civilisation began to decline. While the Egyptians were being reduced to a nation of slaves there arose on the stubborn soil of Attica a city whose ships traded with all the known world and whose philosophers and poets, artists and lawgivers have remained an inspiration to mankind ever since. This would not have been possible if the ordinary Athenian citizen had not loved freedom, resisted tyranny and on the whole retained his own property.

War is always a negation of reason and civil war, especially, is a symptom of a decline in civilisation. As this article is being written British ports are being blockaded not by an enemy fleet but by British fishermen. The object, however, is the same: to bend the people to their will, in this case by denying them the right to buy cheap fish. The fisherman might say that as other powerful groups, by means of protective tariffs, subsidies, quotas, tax concessions and other ways too numerous to mention, but all legal, are making war against the British public, the fishermen are entitled to do likewise.

However, these various groups while fighting amongst themselves have one common opponent: the people in general. Yet every person in these groups is a member of the people in general. They are thus fighting themselves. This is the typical pattern of Western civilisation as it is today; and it is accepted by almost all the leaders

in Church and State, the new priesthood of economics experts, the directors of education and TV networks, and all other organisations that influence the public mind. Yet it is based on a fallacy that any intelligent child would laugh at: that everybody can become more prosperous by robbing each other than by honest work; and that everybody can get more out of the State than he puts into it, as if  $2 \text{ minus } 2 \text{ equals } 1$ . If a civilisation based on such things as this could endure it would be a monstrosity.

Another symptom of decline is the crushing taxation that is imposed against all principles of justice. In a natural and just order every genuine producer would receive the value of all that he produced. Now he must surrender half his wages to the State. As it would not be expedient to make this too obvious most taxes have to be obscured or concealed. One method is to debase the currency. As this inevitably raises prices, scapegoats must be found to divert attention from the real culprits.

Currency debasement, or inflation as it is generally called, is as old as the hills and has again and again been used by corrupt rulers as an expedient to conceal their waste of public money. It promotes a hectic gambling atmosphere and thus helps to corrupt the general character of the people, on which the character of a civilisation must depend.

A paradox of our time is the ever-increasing progress of science and the decay of character and social institutions.

Some might say that as poverty has been eliminated civilisation is still advancing. In fact, if that compulsory and unnatural redistribution of wealth called welfar-

ism were suddenly abolished there would be widespread starvation. Welfarism acts like bandaging a suppurating sore with a filthy rag. The sore is concealed but the poison spreads throughout the whole body. Much could be written about the demoralising effects: how it paralyses public spirit, conceals the basic evils of society, leaves everything to government initiative, encourages selfishness and dries up natural sympathy for the suffering. It is perhaps the greatest single factor at present leading to the downfall of civilisation. The remark of that shrewd satirist Juvenal on "bread and circuses" is well known - though not so well known as it used to be - but to examine it more closely would reveal how, in all particulars, our society to-day resembles that of decadent Rome.

If we look realistically at what is called the State we see that it is composed of a group of persons drawn together by a mutual desire to exercise authority over their fellows; but the deluded people regard it as a mystical body endowed with super-human wisdom, capable of guiding them for their own good not only in economic matters but in the education of their children. Schooling alone is not true education which is to draw forth all the higher powers of mind and spirit; but State schooling can have a terrible effect on children's growing minds. The old Ottomans could take the children of Christian parents and after State schooling transform them into fanatical Moslems. The State to-day will never use such power except to strengthen its own power. State schooling inevitably produces subordination of mind and any system of regular schooling can be dangerous. Bismarck said that the battle of Königgrätz was won by



the Prussian schoolmaster, and Victor Hugo, who began life as a schoolmaster, said that common sense exists not because of but despite education.

Any subject except genuine science, which must be based on natural law, can be taught in such a way as to serve the purpose of the directors. The purpose of history is to teach by examples but to-day history is taught so as to teach nothing that might shake confidence in the present rulers. To compare our own times with previous times that might have been better, would be dangerous. This tendency also is as old as the hills. The Chinese emperor Che Hwang-le, who died 210 B.C., issued a decree that anyone talking about the past so as to blame the present must be put to death.

If it is admitted that Western civilisation, previously improving, has now declined there must have been some period when the turning point came. The present writer, who was born two days after Gladstone died, believes this came during his own lifetime and the most critical moment was during the few years just after World War I.

The free trade revolution in Britain marked a notable advance in European civilisation; the benefits were at least as moral as they were material. Other economic philosophers had shown the absurdity of monopoly and restrictions in trade and production but Adam Smith by examining the true nature of wealth was the most influential. He thought, however, that the ignorance and selfishness of ordinary people would prevent the operation of common sense being put to practical effect. Yet ordinary people by vast petitions to Parliament demanded, as well as the abolition of the Corn Laws,

the abolition of protective duties supposed to benefit themselves. This had a profound effect on character which remained right up to 1914. The revolution had been won by an appeal to reason in widespread debate among ordinary people. They realised that freedom paid better than selfishness, and that it was better to rely upon oneself and one's own intelligence than to delegate one's thinking to authority. Richard Cobden in his last speech pointed out that although trade had been liberated it remained for the next generations to apply the principle of freedom to land. This must have helped in an historic election, to bring into power in 1906 a Free Trade, land-reform government. All monopolists, like members of a gang of robbers, collaborate amongst themselves but in the end they are all subordinate to the land monopolist. Churchill in 1909 said, "It is true that land monopoly is not the only monopoly which exists, but it is by far the greatest of monopolies, and it is the mother of all other forms of monopoly." Then came the war.

War, especially a large-scale war, is not so much a cause of decline but a consequence of false thinking, and as during the war rational discussion is suspended, the germs of false thinking have more chance to develop. As far as Britain was concerned that war began on a high note of genuine patriotism. Men were called to arms in order to defend freedom and make this a war to end all wars. At that call five million young men volunteered - though many were rejected for physical defects. Tens of thousands of those soldiers carried in their packs a copy of *The Spirit of Man*, an anthology of verse and prose collected by the poet laureate,

Robert Bridges. That expressed the spirit of European civilisation. In a short preface the laureate makes no appeal to hatred, or vengeance or pseudo-patriotic rant. He says, "That fairest earthly fame, the fame of Freedom, is inseparable from the names of Albion, Britain, England: and this heritage is our glory and happiness." This is not mere verbiage, for freedom is happiness.

In the preface the laureate also says, "The progress of mankind on the path of liberty and humanity has been suddenly arrested by the apostasy of a great people who now openly avow that the ultimate faith of their hearts is in material force." All the actions of the State rest on material force and now the British and similar peoples call upon the State, in order to solve their problems, to exert increasing material force upon themselves, and thus reverse the progress of mankind. Although their significance is now ignored the words of Sir Edward Grey, who had striven so hard for peace, are still remembered. On the evening of the day the ultimatum expired he said, "As we sit here the lights are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time." Now, sixty years afterwards, the lights of civilisation are still unlit.

For the subsequent decay the soldiers were not to blame. War is so absurd and contrary to human nature that measures have to be enforced to prevent fraternising with the enemy, such as occurred between British and German troops during Christmas 1914. The present writer, who served in East Africa, well remembers on the morrow of a severe action with many casualties on both sides, being sent to interrogate a German prisoner. Our conversation might have been that of two men swapping experiences over a pint. This affront to human nature can be seen in the present industrial civil war. The ordinary trade unionist has no desire to inflict suffering upon his countrymen but under the discipline imposed by the leaders he must do so.

After the victory in arms, not in ideas, the survivors returned quite understandably intent only to have a "good time." The civi-

lians had become passive and such things as independent debating societies started to fade away. The practice among ordinary people of reasoning together diminished as the complacency of delegating one's thinking to others increased. When the Economic Blizzard came in the thirties people fell into a panic and without putting the question to genuine discussion and examining basic causes, free trade was abandoned together with proposed land reform. The way was opened for the spirit of monopoly: a spirit at once selfish, stupid and cowardly - for it dare not face competition. That panic, extending from America throughout Europe, brought Hitler to power and now the British and American people have been brought to the brink of totalitarian government themselves. We are on the road to serfdom. Professor F. A. Hayek, in his book under that title (1944) says: "We are rapidly abandoning not the views merely of Cobden and Bright, of Adam Smith and Hume, or even of Locke and Milton, but one of the salient characteristics of Western civilisation as it has grown from the foundations laid by Christianity and the Greeks. The basic individualism inherited by us from Erasmus and Montaigne, from Cicero and Tacitus, Pericles and Thucydides is progressively abandoned." Professor Hayek's socialist colleagues at the London School of Economics begged him not to publish that book.

Nearly a hundred years ago Henry George pointed out that if Western societies continued to ignore land monopoly and its affects, Western civilisation must eventually fall. Now we see, as was said before, that "he wrote history in advance."

To-day the outlook for Western civilisation is dark and we would delude ourselves to imagine there is any positive evidence to show that it is the darkness before the dawn. We know, however, that human nature cannot be changed in its essential. Some words of the Old Testament still touch our minds and hearts as they must have touched the minds and hearts of ordinary people thousands of years ago, before Rome, before Greece, before Egypt. Perhaps the

news we learn daily of violence and disorder, however stupid and selfish, is an indication that people are beginning to feel, unconsciously, they can never find happiness in servitude.

To think for oneself, to discuss honestly with one's fellows, to seek truth for its own sake: that is to be true to one's soul. Only by that path has humanity risen from the primeval slime. As long as men and women can still aspire to this there is some hope for civilisation.

The urge to be free is so irresistible that one sees it in all animate nature. A wild bird caught and thrust into a cage, offered food and protection against all dangers of the wild, will yet batter itself to death against the bars rather than submit.

It is for those who see that a corrupt civilisation falls worst upon ordinary people to show that if they will only think and act for themselves a happiness that now seems impossible is within their grasp. To call this task impossible because it looks formidable is culpable timidity. In the words of Henry George, "Let no one imagine he has no influence. Whoever he may be and wherever he may be placed the man who thinks becomes a light and a power."

We may be sure that within a generation or so the words of the most publicised experts and politicians of to-day will be as if they had been written in drifting sand. But words that were spoken two and a half thousand years ago still live on. Said Pericles, "Happiness is Freedom; Freedom is Courage."