

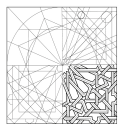
The intelligibility of Western thought is unravelling, and the same is true of its attendant societal structures; indeed, they are in the final stages of unravelment. We are now entering a historical singularity, within a civilizational phenomenon, modernity, that was already, in any case, sui generis. This series of books, 'Elements of Modernity' which contribute to a whole entitled *The Unravelling of Intelligibility*, will demonstrate how and why this is taking place. As the volumes in this series unfold, we will see how this stubborn self-erosion has been carried out throughout the history of modernity, as also in key areas of contemporary life: in urban environment and interpersonal relationships, progress and the self-creating individual, immanentism and the intelligibility of nature, faith and reason, 'science', gender and family, power politics, and postcolonialism.

The five 'bifurcations' or 'severances' of Christian and post-Christian civilization constitute the central explanatory framework through which this unravelling is examined and explicated. These bifurcations are: the severance of law and spirit, which emerges in Pauline Christianity; the severance of spiritual power and temporal power in the early Middle Ages; the severance of faith and reason in the later Middle Ages; and in early modernity, the twin severances of natural world and knowing subject, and that of morality and ontology.

### IN THIS FIRST ELEMENT

In volume 1, Spiker explores the purported 'universality' and 'neutrality' of the post-Enlightenment system, which has been exported around the world so successfully that today, it is direct descendants of the nations that suffered under colonialism who are most often found to be its most uncompromising devotees, insisting that the neutral, universal Civilisation is no longer 'Western' but has become simply 'modern.' The five severances are then introduced, and their explanatory power is demonstrated through an analysis of the contemporary unravelling of urban environment, craft, and interpersonal relationships.

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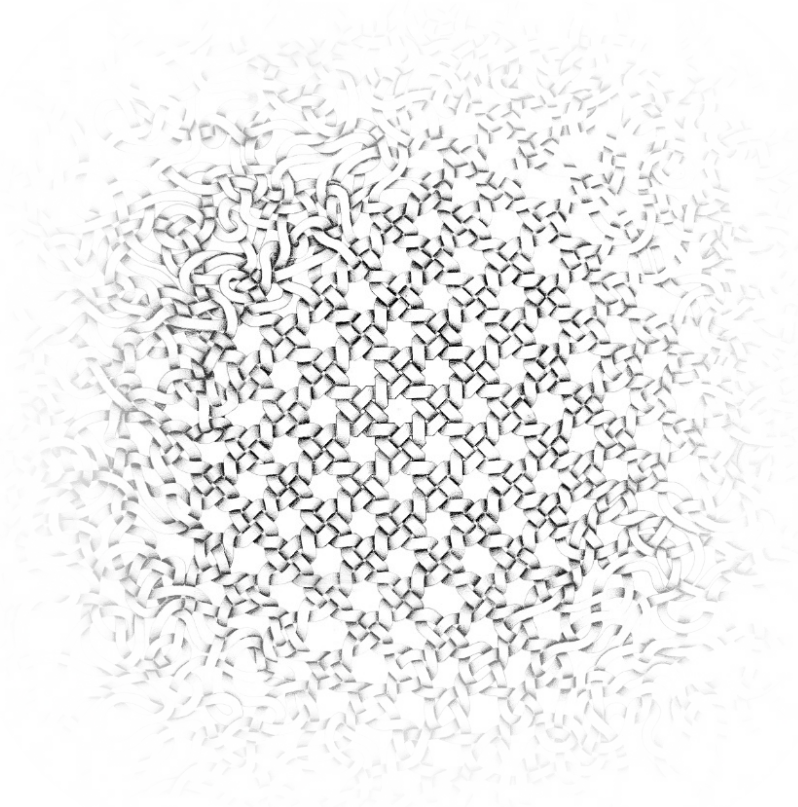
NEW ANDALUS PRESS

THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY I HASAN SPIKER



# THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY

## Elements of Modernity



### VOLUME 1

"THE CIVILISATION OF LIBERAL, UNIVERSAL  
MODERNITY, NEUTRAL & SCIENTIFIC "

HASAN SPIKER

THE UNRAVELLING  
OF INTELLIGIBILITY

ELEMENTS OF MODERNITY  
VOLUME I

THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY  
ELEMENTS OF MODERNITY SERIES

Volume I

*“The Civilisation of Liberal, Universal Modernity,  
Neutral and Scientific”*

Volume II

*Progress and the Self-Creating Individual: Technical and  
Hedonistic Dynamism, Spiritual and Philosophical Desolation*

Volume III

*Gender and the Family After Human Nature*

Volume IV

*Immanentism, ‘Science’,  
and the Severance of Faith and Reason*

Volume V

*Islam in the Aftermath of Postcolonialism  
and the Gazan Holocaust*

# THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY

Elements of Modernity

VOLUME I

“ THE CIVILISATION OF LIBERAL, UNIVERSAL  
MODERNITY, NEUTRAL & SCIENTIFIC ”

HASAN SPIKER

First published 2024 by New Andalus Press

# THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY

## VOLUME I

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*Dedicated to the martyrs of Gaza*



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## PREFACE

Criticism of tendencies in modern society is automatically countered, before it is fully uttered, by the argument that things have always been like this. Excitement – so promptly resisted – merely shows want of insight into the invariability of history, an unreasonableness proudly diagnosed by all as hysteria.

Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*<sup>1</sup>

The intelligibility of Western thought is unravelling, and the same is true of its attendant societal structures; indeed, they are in their final stages of unravelment. And it is not the case that this has *always* been so, despite how comforting a thought that might be. In reality, we are now approaching something of a historical *singularity*, within a civilisational phenomenon, modernity, that was already, in any case, *sui generis*.

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<sup>1</sup> I hasten to add (in a world in which it is necessary to specify ‘RT ≠ Total and Unconditional Endorsement of Author’) that I am no great admirer of Adorno’s, when all is said and done. Yet this is certainly one of his true insights.

This series of little books, ‘Elements of Modernity’ which contribute to a whole entitled *The Unravelling of Intelligibility*, will demonstrate how and why this is taking place.

Now, I intend something specific by the ‘unravelling of intelligibility’: it is a technical term. It serves to denote the many processes by which the subordination of questions of ultimate human concern *to criterionless individual choice* has in the first few decades of the twenty-first century become so totalising in its scope that it now proceeds to steadily undermine the coherence and consistency of the fundamental notions and definitions *upon which ‘the Civilisation’ is founded*.

This is to say that under the dogmatic subjectivism and voluntarism which reign supreme in our ‘Civilisation of Liberal, Universal Modernity, Neutral and Scientific,’<sup>2</sup> the active subordination alluded to above, in metaphysics, theology, aesthetics, ethics, politics, and society, is taking place so systematically and persistently that it is becoming impossible even

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<sup>2</sup> Or ‘COLUMNS’, should you crave a handy acronym.

for those who identify as committed partisans of COLUMNS, to any longer provide coherent or even plausibly self-consistent justification for its fundamental contentions.

I should settle a likely misunderstanding as early as possible: COLUMNS is not just an acronym for *modernity*; and this is because it fully embraces postmodernism as well. Because for all its magniloquent grandiloquence (and granted, occasional insights) postmodernism most often amounts to little more than *making sure to sport an ironic look and make air quotes* while you affirm the validity of the claims of a universal, neutral, liberal, scientific civilisation with the *underlying assumptions* of your discourse, while being *seen* to repudiate it with the *explicit form of words* of your discourse.

As a result of the project of radical voluntarist and subjectivist reduction and thoroughgoing relativism that post-postmodernity is seeking to carry off in its present stage of advanced self-devoration, COLUMNS fails, in its current state, to be anything like thoroughlygoing scientific *or* liberal, *or* neutral, *or* universal.

And so on the personal level, crises of identity and self-definition trigger epidemics of mental illness, on the one hand, and destroy the family, on the other; on the political level, we are beset by crises of democratic and liberal legitimacy; and on the level of liberal pluralism, a much-vaunted ‘tolerance’ of the incurably Other in our midst, no longer seems even prudentially desirable.

And there are far worse dangers; COLUMNS’s vacant ratification of the mass murder of women and children in the Gaza Genocide has shown the non-Western world the real-world human consequences — for the first time with such unmistakable transparency — of the post-morality that is part and parcel of the West’s unravelling.

Instead of persevering in paying lip-service to human rights and international law, it now seems easier, and more in line with one’s real convictions, for the powers that be to simply approve any action — even genocide and ethnic cleansing — which they believe serves their Machiavellian power interests.

And so COLUMNS’s flagship project of radical voluntarist and subjectivist reduction ultimately has

the function of ensuring that the human advancement and fulfilment that COLUMNS promises is in reality little more than whimsy and fantasy; there is nothing *there* to advance towards, and nothing *there* to fulfil. Terrible human misery results. It is hard to deny that we are seeing it everywhere.

As the volumes in the series unfold, we will observe this stubborn self-erosion being carried out all throughout the history of modernity, as also in key areas of contemporary life: in the urban environment and interpersonal relationships, progress and the self-creating individual, immanentism and the intelligibility of nature, faith and reason, 'science', gender and family, power politics, and postcolonialism.

Five 'bifurcations' or 'severances' constitute the central explanatory framework through which the unravelling is examined and explicated (see Chapter 2 in this volume, where each is introduced in brief).

These are the severance of law and spirit, which emerges in early Pauline Christianity; the severance of spiritual power and temporal power, in the early Middle Ages; the severance of faith and reason, in the

later Middle Ages; and in early modernity, the twin severances of natural world and knowing subject, and of morality and ontology.

We will see, as puzzling as it may seem *prima facie*, that it is only in virtue of its intrinsically disjunctive, bifurcated structure, that the internal coherence and operability of post-Enlightenment modernity ever held to any degree at all; what has now changed is that though the bifurcations had hitherto been maintained in an uneasy balance, even an uneasy balance is no longer tenable. This also constitutes a salutary warning to Muslims: Now is not the time to jump on the bandwagon.

For the 'neutral', 'universal' civilisation is indeed unravelling. This fragile order and balancing act that modernity attempted to bring off in response to the first three of these bifurcations, is swiftly losing its *raison d'être*, and indeed, its intelligibility; both are in states of exponential decay.

COLUMNS is no longer the (at least understandable) response to the intrinsically fragmented character of Latin Christian civilisation. This is because *commitment* (to spirit, Divine law, reason, faith, and

sacred authority) is no longer to be encountered in the West in any adequately prevalent, devout, or resolute form sufficient to justify the continued structural grounding of our presently atrophying iteration of COLUMNS *upon their separation*. Blame for the self-immolation of Western civilisation must thus be laid precisely at the door of *the very internal logic of its unfolding in terms of the five severances*, in which their own eventual loss of rationale was in fact starkly inevitable.



Theoretical philosophy, which to superficial people appears so remote from the business of life and the outward interests of men, is in reality the thing on earth that most influences them, and in the long run outweighs every other influence, except the ones it must itself obey.

John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Bentham and Coleridge*

The majority of my life hitherto has been consumed by an attempt — in the modest and flawed form

determined by one's considerable deficiencies and limitations — to uncover, dissect, and finally reassess the foundations of theoretical metaphysics, in light of the transformed patterns of rational explication and *de facto* shifts in epistemological starting point that we now find ourselves born into. Indeed, they are patterns of rational explication and shifts in epistemological starting point that we almost universally now find ourselves *assuming* (even if not always consciously *adopting*) from the very onset of our rational awareness and onwards, simply in so far as we are Muslims who happen to have come into this world during the Age of Modernity. The most stubborn obstacle to intellectual renewal we face as an *umma* thus amounts precisely to our estrangement from this elemental level of discourse, which in the intrinsic order of things, underlies all else; and this state of affairs is moreover one of the chief causes of general Muslim disempowerment.

This foray into *applied* metaphysics of a somewhat popularising intent, represents a short interlude on the journey to the consummation of that larger project, designed precisely to show the immediate import and

urgency of metaphysics. And as such, it is not so much a condescending descent from the Ivory Tower, as it is a demonstration that those lofty heights are no more the real dwelling place of metaphysics than are the ordinary homes, and social formations, whose shapes it has indeed also fundamentally determined.



# CHAPTER I

*We can no longer see it,  
because it has been victorious'*

## THE GLOBALISED 'TRIUMPH' OF POST- ENLIGHTENMENT MODERNITY

As the first few decades of the twenty-first century draw to a close, the triumph of post-Enlightenment modernity is most tellingly revealed by its universal *invisibility*.

This postmodern descendant of the Victorian civilisation of 'necessary progress' has become *the* civilisation; for there is nothing left to contrast it with that is remotely intact, and so '*we no longer see it because it has been victorious*.'<sup>3</sup>

And yet alongside the plot line of Western triumph

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<sup>3</sup> This apt phrase is from Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Random House, 1967), 34.

which today approaches its denouement, a simultaneous, dramatic inversion of the expected course of events has transpired, indeed, a twist, in which the *radical failure* of the universalisation of that same post-Enlightenment modernity becomes every day more starkly disclosed, as entirely unexpected backstories come to fruition and begin to yield the most blindsiding of dramatic peripeteia.

And as we will see as our story unfolds, the most significant of these is the metaphysical challenge of Islam, which after two centuries of relative obscurity now re-emerges wholly unscathed, to the great consternation and perplexity of those who had aspired to bury it, and who were indeed able to convince themselves that they had been able successfully to do so.

The imperial ‘civilising’ proselytisers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wished to remake the world in their own *image*, and in the 21<sup>st</sup>, it is scarcely possible to elude the conclusion that this superficial goal has been achieved with a more terminal sense of finality than even those most presumptuous of peoples, the Victorian missionaries for modernity, could have

presumed to expect.

A quite total rooting out of opposition to post-Enlightenment universalism — on the level required for the perpetuation of that *image* — has ensured that the adoption or imposition of the ensuing brand of intellectual and cultural ‘universality’ across the world has been total.

Yet some will immediately find themselves protesting that this is all quite wrong, and yesterday’s news.

For has not a new age that has finally transcended Eurocentricism, once and for all, already been ushered in by the postcolonial independence and ‘liberation’ which have also been accompanied by a fatal critique of the pretensions of Western ‘Enlightenment’ universality — a critique that has arisen from a larger ‘postmodern’ philosophy — a new age in which the West has *itself* finally denounced its own colonial crimes, and disavowed the universal claims that seemed, at least *at the time, to their great-grandparents*, to justify that colonialism?

To the contrary: As we will soon discover, ‘postcolonial liberation’ is itself no more than one of

the more pernicious forms that this ‘invisibility’ has taken and continues to take — in which ‘we no longer see it, because it has been victorious’ — alongside ‘neutral science’, the criterionless ‘sovereignty’ of the individual over body and mind, and a plethora of other poison vacuities, ever sweet and beguiling, which erstwhile overlords of lands far distant from their own, have implanted therein steadily, over the course of two hundred years.

This process continued until these implants came to be so successfully and independently disseminated by convinced victims from the ranks of the colonised — and now their descendants — that active implantation on the part of the coloniser — or their descendants — became largely superfluous.

That is, it is precisely the subtler, but no less emphatic form that post-Enlightenment hegemony has taken in the aftermath of overt colonialism that creates the treacherous illusion of the *destruction* of that hegemony, an illusion that of course only reinforces its ascendancy to practically the most unyielding degree conceivable.

Indeed, this hegemony has become highly adept at

carrying off a truly redoubtable feat: That of artificially situating the *affirmation* of local particularity and the *disavowal* of post-Enlightenment universality, *within a covert affirmation of its universality*, that is, by affirming this universality with the underlying assumptions of its discourse, in the very same sentences in which it denies it with the explicit form of words of its discourse.

Observe two models of said discourse:

One endlessly hears, for example,

‘We need to implement modern education in our developing country, so that we are no longer in thrall to our former colonisers, and so that we are able to finally take our rightful place as an independent nation state, and as equal partners in the international community.’

In what way, precisely, is subordinating oneself wholesale to the knowledge structures and political systems of one’s former overlords, *not* to be ‘in thrall’ to them? Or, say,

‘Bringing a majority of women into the full-time work force compels society to recognize the hitherto untapped physical and mental capacities of women, thereby creating a strong, independent nation and liberating our country from languishing in subjugation to the West.’

A classic case of *petitio principii*, in this case, of *assuming* the superiority of ‘modern’ (i.e., Western post-Enlightenment) social institutions, political structures, and conceptions of freedom, without ever troubling to critically examine the content of this assumption, let alone prove it. *Their* historical exigencies, and thus *their* theories of human freedom, and of gender, presupposing *their* ‘post-metaphysical’ metaphysics, all for the sake of *their* vision of economic activity — and these intellectual, ethical, and social chains of *blind following* are supposed to yield a national entity that is in any consequential sense *independent*?

West-serving conclusions smuggled into ‘developing world’ premises; but of course even to use the term ‘developing’ world is to have been lured into civilisational subjugation by pseudo-neutrality, and by

the hideously patronising promise of ‘catching up.’

And so it is by this type of trick, that the continuing hegemony of the (‘*not*-Western!’) ‘neutral and universal world civilisation’ is obscured, substantially successfully.

But we must not be fooled by the present rise of superficial self-assertion, say in India, or perhaps worst and most deluded of all, Turkey,<sup>4</sup> when this self-assertion is taking place within secular Western rubrics of nationalism and ‘independence’.

Indeed, our present state lurches towards one worse than that of the typical Muslim in the first half of the twentieth century, who had embraced the most naïve forms of liberalism and positivism within a straightforward overarching worldview<sup>5</sup> of

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<sup>4</sup> Modern-day Turkey is also home, it goes without saying, to a fairly well-preserved Islamic high culture that has completely disappeared almost everywhere else in the Muslim world, as well as to many of the most genuinely righteous and saintly Muslims to be found anywhere therein. And so please be assured that I am not anti-Turkey: I am simply pro-Ottoman — and I am so opposed to Turkish nationalism in particular, only because it embodies the *kāfir* ideology of Arch-*Munāfiq* Atatürk, masquerading, all the more perilously, as an Islamic identity.

<sup>5</sup> Regardless of its origins — in a quite different and idiosyncratic

modernism, beguiled by ‘neutral’ science and talk of democracy and ‘individual freedom and rights’, which were all apparently originally ‘Islamic.’

This, after all, had merely amounted to becoming *trapped* in idiosyncratic-Westernism masquerading as universal human neutrality; the Muslim heart was still to be widely encountered, alive, and the prospect of escape for this entrapped person was as such not yet excessively implausible.

The embrace of postmodernism and critical theory, on the other hand, amounts to effectual *entombment* in idiosyncratic-Westernism as a universal human neutrality: it is so very universal and so very neutral, indeed, that it purports to have altogether escaped the very intellectual tensions and history that gave rise to it, while simultaneously wiping away the claims to objective truth made by *any* particularity under the sun (with the notable exception of itself).

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context — in the third critique of a certain arch-modernist called Immanuel Kant, in the meantime ‘worldview’ has demonstrably taken on such an independent life of its own, that I consider the term perfectly adequate for use as an organising rubric for comparative purposes.

Now how does he escape from this adamant illusion, the one who firmly believes he is critiquing Western hegemony, when he is in fact amongst the very most effective agents of its nihilistic critique of knowledge, and thus implicitly, of the destruction of the integrity of his own particularity (let us say, Islam)—or whatever little that is left of it for such a person—and indeed, of *any* particularity, even in principle?

The only means of escape from such a labyrinth, perhaps, is to recognise that this state of affairs does not represent the inevitable shape of inexorable ‘progress’, but rather, the product of very particular patterns of philosophical representation, the ascendancy of which, history reveals, was and is drastically contingent, indeed *ever on a knife edge* : that is to say, a dominant ‘Civilisation’ whose ascendancy could very well have never transpired at all.<sup>6</sup>

Viz., that to be trapped in the modernist illusion is

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<sup>6</sup> We mean with respect to an analysis of the patterns of historical causality here in question, *qua* isolated, and not, of course, with respect to the Divine pre-destining.

to be entangled in a post-Kantian iteration of science and morality as regular, binding appearance, and yet *mere* appearance nonetheless — whereas to be caught in the postmodernist illusion is to have been buried in the anarchic aftermath of the *absolutisation of phenomena* post-Hegel, which itself arose as a means of flight from the dismal results exposed by the metacritique of Kant — as eventually combined with the ultimately sub-philosophical and indeed fundamentally misosophical Nietzschean despair that followed.

Now, original *modernity*, comparatively plain, earnest, and straightforward, took the form of *liberalism* on the one hand, and *scientism* on the other, including *philosophy's* disgraceful acquiescence, via various positivisms, to scientism, a move that ascribed itself to one core strand of Kant's philosophy.

But as we will see, the most important direct antecedents of slippery, ever-elusive, paradox-embracing *postmodernism* would split fundamentally into those that remained committed, via Marx, to the dialectic as immanent motive force of the world's unfolding—like Sartre, on the one hand, and the

Frankfurt School on the other — and those who confined themselves to erudite convolution about phenomena qua phenomena, namely, the phenomenological, such as Husserl (of course, Sartre purported to bridge the two commitments). But without Hegel's absolutisation of appearances, it would not have been possible for an (albeit duskier, angsty, ironicising) fusion of social theory and psychology to masquerade as philosophy, as it does in so much of the broad 'Continental' tradition, which attempts to stave off this objection by railing against 'psychologism.'<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, these broad approaches — the dialectic as motive force, on the one hand, and the meticulous disentangling of phenomena qua phenomena, on the other — would both in the end come to be abandoned as excessively concrete; at which point the ascendancy of 'postmodern' constructionism was at hand. How sad, then, for the postcolonialist, who situates his 'neutral liberation from the West' in this most

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<sup>7</sup> It is precisely the staunch immanentism of the phenomenological tradition that makes it endlessly susceptible to this charge, regardless of its protestations to the contrary.

irreducibly and idiosyncratically Western, and thus least neutral, of excesses.



But let us return now to basics and examine, briefly, the original instantiations of the illusion of neutrality.

For when the 19<sup>th</sup> century civilisation of progress, that is, ‘*The Civilisation*’, sublated its last substantive ‘value’ of ‘Christian’ progress in its master value of post-Christian arbitrarism, a self-negation which marked the transition to postmodernism, it was only further cementing an impression of neutrality that had already long deceived the world, dressed in a ‘universality’ which had ‘transcended Westernness’, and was now ‘simply modern.’

Take the Indian ‘classical liberal’ Gurcharan Das, who is only exemplifying a ubiquitous sentiment to be encountered from Danzhou to Delhi to Delaware, and everywhere in between, when he tells us:

Our continuing inability to distinguish between the “modern” and the “Western” is surely the

cause of some of our grief. If we could only accept that a great deal of modern Western culture is *no longer* the property of the West but a universal, critical way of thinking which belongs to all *rational, civilised* human beings, we would not suffer quite as much.<sup>8</sup>

For Das and uncounted millions of his ilk, the technological, secular modernity which, he acknowledges, the West has created, is no longer the property of its creators. In its creation of the modern world and its vanquishing of traditional civilisations, the West has begotten something that has transcended Westernness, and that all human beings must adopt because it is *universal to human nature*.

Eager to alleviate the suffering caused by our sentimental disadjustment to this firm new reality, Das assures us that though this civilisation may have *formerly* been ‘Western’ in some sense, *now* it is simply ‘modern’, in a universal manner applicable everywhere.

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<sup>8</sup> Gurcharan Das, *India Unbound: The Social and Economic Revolution from Independence to the Global Information Age* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2002), 291. Emphases mine.

Modern Western culture is a way of looking at the world and of living in the world that belongs to all 'rational, civilised human beings'. That is, the changes must not be viewed as 'Western', but simply as part of the project of universal modernity, conceived somewhat vaguely (but for that, all the more reverently) as a *mélange* of technological progress, secularisation, scientific 'maturity' and social mechanisation.

The warrant for belief in this universal modernity's indubitable and unique fittingness for all humanity is to be founded in the manner in which its social manifestations continue, in their constitution and formation, to mirror and correspond to an *objectively bifurcated* reality. Just as the honesty of that true mirroring of reality constitutes an evident foundation of goodness and morality, so are the ensuing manifestations of *that fundamental split in reality* to be construed as evidently good and moral, like electronic queue managements systems, or 'tolerance' of the religious Other founded upon epistemological scepticism, or accepting the quantitative and 'physical' as objective and binding, but the qualitative and

evaluative as subjective, and as constitutive of a sacred arena of arbitrary freedom that must be unquestioningly protected.

These, then, are our convertible modern transcendentals: qualitative arbitrariness, quantitative utility, and ‘goodness’ (and since the goodness can never be more than emotive and pragmatic, and hence, constructed, quotation marks are evidently crucial).

And yet again, it is the sheer fact of the *contentiousness* of this characterisation of the ‘Westernness’ of modern globalised culture, which most precisely demonstrates that the Western attempt to neutralise its cultural products has been maximally successful. For with the claims of neutrality and universality widely accepted as *quasi self-evident*, protestations pointing out the historical, geographical, and even philosophical origins of these phenomena can more easily be dismissed as obsolescent, and divisive, or at the very least irrelevant.

After all, these are neutral *values*, neutral *science*, neutral *liberalism*, and neutral *human rights*, as well as *rationalisation* (that is, as broadly diagnosed by Weber) that is likewise neutral, all neutrally applicable

worldwide, in every (neutrally) ‘modernised’ society.

That is, these are not *really* Western cultural products *at all*, except from the obscure and superfluous vantage points of mere historical genealogy and philosophical descent, which are of course only interesting or relevant to academics of a somewhat pedantic (if not perverse) bent.



What is it that such relentless branding has so successfully obscured? It has obscured an unimpeachable fact:

The constituents of this ‘neutral’ human domain are products of transformations which obtained entirely *uniquely* as consequences, often profoundly traumatic, of distinctively and exclusively *native European Christian* cultural and religious *tensions*, in their reception of Pauline antinomianism and of ‘render unto Caesar’ — to cite two of the most consequential examples — engendering, in the fullness of time, the Protestant Revolution, the separation of faith and reason, the bifurcation of nature and knowing subject,

the severance of morality and ontology, the rending asunder of hierarchy and freedom, each split solely offered, indeed solely *intelligible*, in so far as it constituted a putative solution to those idiosyncratic tensions.

That is to say, the *rhetorical appeal* of the speciously ‘universal’ aspects of Western modernism and postmodernism, ‘neutral’ science, and arbitrarist individual freedom, obscures the underlying intellectual lineage that can alone make authentic sense of their real nature.

And so it is only as history’s most incongruous and also most widespread anachronism and anatopism, that across the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, societies across the world would find themselves being structurally, foundationally remoulded *in accordance with the internal exigencies of a European Christian social environment* devastated by the religious rupture of the Reformation, by the subsequent divide between faith and reason, the enduring bifurcation of worldly power and the sacred, and the Cartesian split between matter and mentality, and which *responded* to and sought to move beyond these hopeless tensions by

creating a civilisation both bizarrely aberrant and anomalous, and grotesquely dehumanising, and yet — as the direct and indeed most primary consequence of these characteristics — also uniquely materially powerful.

It is thus that the most fragmented has become the universal; and that which most misses wholeness, has arrogated to itself all of reality.

In the aftermath of this structural remoulding, actualised, in the main, via colonialism, there are still many who retain a sense of deep loss and bitterness at the erasure of a past civilisation — even if the clearest memories of its full and independent distinctness may have been lost generations ago. But the new, more common resentment for this faithful world citizen of COLUMNS, arises from the sheer fact that distinctions of nationality and ancestral culture have been *noticed*.

For there is a certain type of successful ‘modern’ doctor, engineer, lecturer, banker, or even secretary, or perhaps even flight attendant, or ‘barista’, in Nairobi, Amman, or Mumbai, who more often wishes to fulfil a neutral role in the global, universal, modern civilisation, the sole civilisation that he recognises,

hoping that his local identity can simply be ignored.

With a poignant irony that is totally lost on him, he derives self-worth from the subjugated rhetoric of being 'just as good' as his European or American equivalent, or perhaps 'even better', despite the supposed impediment of his nation, of which he is so painfully aware. When he was informed that his country was 'backward' he took it to heart, though he also takes heart from the idea that it is bravely 'catching up.'

Now, of course, the criteria which have condemned his country to 'developing' status are dogmatic assumptions about the desirability and success of modern Western industrial civilisation that have little claim to objective truth; but this unassailable reality has been successfully obscured precisely by these odious narratives of backwardness and 'catching up', which have only had the effect of drastically narrowing the inward and outward horizons of such individuals, non-Western and Western, as wittingly or unwittingly believe them to be 'facts.'

And this sad state of affairs is hardly accidental; its ubiquity has obtained in virtue of an underlying belief

that, in varying relations of backwardness or advancement, all human beings now inescapably live and move and have their being within the Universal Civilisation, or more specifically, the Universal Neutral Scientific Liberal Not-Western Civilisation of Modernity, namely, the Civilisation of Liberal, Universal Modernity, Neutral and Scientific.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ‘UNIVERSAL, NEUTRAL’ CIVILISATION

And so it is the direct descendants of the colonised who almost invariably now constitute the most intransigent hailers of the glories of our not-Western universal and neutral civilisation. Moreover, it is precisely a Europe and a USA languishing in terminal intellectual impasse, and in crises of democratic and liberal legitimacy —a Europe and a USA that now appear, with very few individual exceptions, to be incapable of any serious moral or philosophical conviction— that have ensured this must be so.

The dominant, apparently richly evidenced theory current among this economic elite of the self-proclaimedly ‘developing’ countries of the world, is almost identical to that of 19th and early 20th century colonialists; given adequate education, human beings in every traditional society will naturally come to recognise the superiority and universal character of (not- Western) civilisation.

Indeed, to criticise ‘modern’ civilisation for being

‘Western’ shows a simple want of maturity, and involves committing a genetic fallacy; it is the ‘universal civilisation’, again, the inheritance of all humanity — and it *happened* to grow up in the West. This is merely akin to the manner in which the splendour of Greek and Roman civilisation happened to grow up in Greece and Rome, but soon became the standard of civilisation across the whole Mediterranean, as well as in much of the rest of the world. It is just— as this economic, technocratic, and ideological ‘elite’ are wont to point out—that the human universality and neutrality of post-Enlightenment modernity represents an *even more powerful and universal* incarnation.

Led by these brightest of souls, then, each traditional society will naturally recede, faced with the overwhelming evidence embodied by science, liberty, and the ‘rule of law.’

One such enlightened native was the late Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. In 1990, he delivered the fourth annual Walter B. Wriston lecture in Public Policy, sponsored by the Manhattan Institute, a famous lecture in which he anointed Western

civilisation the ‘universal civilisation.’

His words have proved a reference point and spiritual rallying call ever since, for many others who have desired the reassurance of a ‘moral’ justification for their wholehearted adoption of this (as it turns out, *not*) foreign, Western civilisation.

The universal civilization has been a long time in the making. It wasn’t always universal; it wasn’t always as attractive as it is today. The expansion of Europe gave it for at least three centuries a racial taint, which still causes pain.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, it is as V.S. Naipaul that the author of these words is more ordinarily known, in taking his place alongside other illustrious anti-Islamites, the likes of Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and Martin Amis, in that late 20th-century pantheon of self-consciously secular English literature, the perplexing mediocrity of which only speaks volumes of Western cultural decline. With its sullen, secular nihilism, which it

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<sup>9</sup> V.S. Naipaul, ‘Our Universal Civilization’, published in *NY: The City Journal* 1:4 (1991). The piece is available online at: <https://www.city-journal.org/article/our-universal-civilization> .

portrays as mature resignation, this literature of post-Christian Western chauvinism discharges a seemingly endless stream of hackneyed, trite observations about everyday psychological responses, the secular mind-set's feeble attempt at profundity. This suffocated, strangled spirit is congratulating itself for remembering the most superficial facets of what it is like to be human — all the while relishing its confinement in the hole within which it has imprisoned itself in its benighted ignorance of the numinous, of metaphysics, and thus of all the richest heights of human experience.<sup>10</sup>

For all his indiscretions, however, it must be granted that in recounting his journey 'from the periphery' (in his case, Trinidad), 'to the centre' of Civilisation (which from the outset he has helpfully identified as London)<sup>11</sup> Naipaul at the very least possesses the straightforwardness to voice what many others in the mainstream are thinking, but are more reluctant to say, or perhaps more frequently, unable to articulate.

His words are thus of no small interest in so far as

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<sup>10</sup> I am arguably not a fan.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

they give vent to a widespread, usually subconscious, unspoken sense that (not-)Western civilisation is ‘universal’, and that Islam is the arch-nemesis, indeed, the veritable ‘Wario’, of that humanistic universality.

It was this universal civilisation that rescued Naipaul from the misfortune of his previous, primitive state, namely as belonging to ‘an Asian people, living instinctive, ritualised lives.’<sup>12</sup> And yet, ‘it *wasn’t always* universal; it wasn’t always as attractive as it is today. The expansion of Europe gave it for at least three centuries a racial taint, which still causes pain.’<sup>13</sup>

And so Naipaul grants that the present universality was *not always universal*, because yes, we must confess that it was European in origin, as well as in ‘racial taint.’ During this colonial period, then, it was ‘not as attractive’ as it is now (though still quite attractive?).

Through some process (presumably evolutionary?), it has nevertheless been able to *acquire universality*—really quite remarkable if you think about it, given that it used to be *particular*—as well as a quite irresistible attractiveness, and one that must indeed strictly *not* be

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

resisted, indeed, that it is ‘morally’ *right* to surrender to.

In the past, the not-quite-yet-universal civilisation suffered from a notion of its racially-bound exclusivity, because (entirely incidentally and accidentally) it had happened to have come out of Europe. Yet when, quite all of a sudden, both the Europeans and the colonised noticed that this was after all *not* a European but a *universal* civilisation, it was acknowledged that the universal civilisation had luckily turned out to be the property of all races. Memories of exclusivism still cause pain; although if truth be told, that is all safely buried in the past, as long as we are all allowed to enjoy being modern *now*, without let or hindrance.

Now, Naipaul is careful to remain extremely vague about the characteristics of this universal civilisation. He does not, in his highly civilised modern epistemological humility, know much about it.

He *does* know, however, that he is a proud anti-realist nominalist. ‘I have no unifying theory of things,’ he tells us. ‘To me, situations and people are always specific.’

Naturally, one cannot help but wonder why Naipaul believes a unifying theory must be antithetical to the acknowledgement of specificity, or, indeed, how he can identify a civilisation as the sole 'universal' one, if he is committed to having 'no unifying theory of things'.

Sir Vidiadhar is indeed very specific about what caused him to perceive the reality of the Western universal civilisation; it was his sheer horror at coming into contact with non-Arab Islam and Muslims, who, like his own nation, he tells us, had also been colonised by a foreign civilisation, but unlike his own, seemed to have acquired none of the benefits of 'the universal civilisation'.

I never formulated the idea of the universal civilization until 11 years ago, when I travelled for many months in a number of non-Arab Muslim countries — Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan — to try to understand what had driven them to their rage. That Muslim rage was just beginning to be apparent ... travelling among non-Arab Muslims, I found myself among a colonized people who had been stripped by their faith of all that expanding cultural and historical knowledge

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of the world that I had been growing into on the other side of the world ...

‘Why’ [a friend of Naipaul’s asks] ‘are certain societies or groups content to enjoy the fruits of progress, while affecting to despise the conditions that promote that progress?’

Why do Muslims and Islam hate the universal, neutral progress of the Universal Civilisation so? Of course, highly conscientious, concerned Muslim modernists, jealous for the march of progress, often ask the very same question.

And yet both they and Naipaul are evidently incapable of recognising that in doing so, they are merely begging the question in the very crudest manner possible, and solely in virtue of the narrowness of their own intellectual horizons. In both cases, they are unaware that their self-congratulatory intuition of the ‘self-evidence’ of this universality and neutrality amounts in reality to no more nor less than an official seal on their ensnarement within a fantasy world of rhetorical propaganda that has completely disabled any latent ability they may have previously had for

independent thought.

The journey that begot Sir Vidiadhar's universal civilisation is documented in his 1981 book, *Among the Believers*. Islam had, for Naipaul, imposed itself upon the original civilisations that it had come into contact with, in India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Iran, and demanded of converts that they deny their past and their own cultural heritage, in a manner that he later tells us was 'even worse' than Western colonialism. Somewhat more recently in 2001, indeed, Sir Vidiadhar courted controversy at a public reading of one of his books in London, blurting out that

Islam has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples(!) To be converted you have to destroy your past, destroy your history. You have to stamp on it, you have to say 'my ancestral culture does not exist, it doesn't matter' ... this abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact... You cannot just say you came out of nothing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Fiachra Gibbons' article, 'VS Naipaul launches attack on Islam', in *The Guardian*, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001, accessible online:



I cannot help but pause here, in order to note the puzzling manner in which the enemies of Islam in our time often *cope*, that is, by telling the precise opposite of the truth: knowingly dabbling in calumny, in many such cases, solely in order to tighten the grip of a propaganda campaign directed towards the non-Muslim masses, which tells of a fearful world, perpetually and *very* gravely threatened by Islam.

Indeed, Naipaul and his ilk tolerate no scruples of veracity and reality whatsoever, in portraying the civilisation historically established as far and away and indeed unquestionably the *best* in the affirmation, preservation, and protection of the customs and cultures of previous religious dispensations, as the *worst* in that regard.

The Qur'an continually reminds us that it has come

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/04/afghanistanterrorism9#:~:text=Islam%2C%20he%20claimed%2C%20had%20both,doesn't%20matter'.%22>

as a confirmation and a protection for the truths that were revealed in past scriptures. And it tells us *for all of you We have made a law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one nation* (Qur'an 5:48). The Qur'an affirms that *for every nation there has been a Messenger* (10:47). It assures us that diversity has been created to be treasured, not to be dissolved or ignored:

*O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you* (49:13).

On the historical plane, there has never been a civilisation that having taken the reins of political power, has so faithfully preserved the integrity, institutions, learning, and indeed history of the extant cultures into which it has come into contact; never with anything like the attitude of respect and indeed rigorously formulated and implemented protective legislation of Islam, and never with a belief in the commensurability and mutual intelligibility of human cultural practices

and intellectual orientations *so explicitly grounded* in its most fundamental epistemological and metaphysical convictions.

Just as the Christian Orthodox in Istanbul and Mount Athos flourished under Islam, just as Jewish culture in al-Andalus and the Ottoman world flowered, so did the Hindus, their schools of learning, their spirituality and their philosophy thrive, their native music, for example, preserved, refined, and vastly improved by Islam.

Of course, it is difficult to sustain a belief that Sir Vidiadhar's words are entirely sincere, or devoid of political motivation, when one recalls that these are the words of a hardened Indian nationalist.

Where the Qur'an and hadith provide no explicit proof texts for a ruling, the science of the maxims of law (*qawā'id al-fiqh*) provides 'a criterion by which the judgements pertaining to events that have no explicit proof text in the Book, the Holy Sunna or the consensus of the scholar-sages are known.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> أبو الفيض محمد الفاداني المكي، الفوائد الجنية حاشية المواهب السنية على شرح  
الفوائد البهية في نظم القواعد الفقهية (بيروت: دا البشائر الإسلامية ١٤١٧)

This criterion nonetheless remains directly rooted in Revelation; scripture contains within itself the regulative principles enabling the learned reader to extend its moral tenor to legal questions for which it does not explicitly legislate, but that would inexorably emerge, in the vicissitudes of history's unfolding, within later Islamic societies.

'Custom,' that is, in the foundational *sharī'a* maxim, 'custom has the power of law', was standardly defined in works of the maxims of law as that which is 'deeply rooted in the soul, and favourably received by people possessed of sound natures.' And because it is at this level of principle that Islam acknowledges and preserves earlier civilisations to which it stands in the relation of final revelation, Islam is not given by its nature to cultural predatoriness.

Nothing in the history of Islam is even vaguely analogous to the disgraceful and bestially cruel Catholic destruction of Mayan and Aztec civilisation, the erasure of Muslim Spain, or the savageries of post-Enlightenment European colonialism. Ancient

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المجلد الأول، ٦٩. (١٩٩٦)

civilisations could become integrated under newly Islamicising Muslim rule substantially preserved, serving, through the albeit partial truth, beauty and goodness that they conserve, as primordial, *fiṭrī* witnesses to the perfect truth, beauty, and goodness now revealed in their fullness in Islam.

‘Custom has the power of law’ entails, as Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) tells us, that

everything that the Sacred Law has come with, for which [the Sacred Law] does not have a precise rule, nor is there [such a rule] in language, is referred back to custom.<sup>16</sup>

Sacred Law, for example, has not specifically stated whether the religious holidays of minorities in Muslim lands should affect their work obligations, whereas the Muslim holiday is Friday; yet in accordance with this maxim, in the absence of a particular *sharʿī* ruling, custom (even those of non-Muslims) is authoritative.

Al-Ghazālī was asked about the case of a Jew taking on work for a stated period. What was the

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<sup>16</sup> السيوطي، جلال الدين. الاشباه و النظائر في قواعد ١٩٨٣ و فروع فقه الشافعية. ١٤٠٣  
بيروت: دار الكتب العلمية، ١٤٠٣

status of the Sabbath, which he would profane if he did not explicitly except it [from the contract]? [He answered] that if their custom (i.e. keeping the Sabbath) is consistent and unchanging, simply initiating the contract is like an explicit stipulation of the exception.<sup>17</sup>

While such examples illustrate the spontaneous operation of custom in the realm of the mundane and the everyday, Islam's most essential anthropological teaching, namely, the intrinsic goodness of human nature — an orientation that directly underpins 'custom has the power of law' — has deeper implications in the realms of cultural integration and change.

Faced with the splendour of Roman Christian civilisation in the Levant, the first Muslim liberators might have been presumed (at least by the mindset of a Naipaul) to emphatically reject its architecture and mosaic ornamentation in virtue of its living association with the decadence of a seemingly polytheistic iconography, as well as a religion that Islam had come to supersede.

Yet in the first Islamic century, under the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 99.

supervision of the Followers and with the last of the Companions ﷺ still alive, two of the most important mosques in the Islamic world were decorated with mosaics by Byzantine master artists. Naturally, graven images were filtered out of the art form, and yet the fundamental wholesomeness and beauty of Byzantine mosaic was affirmed and celebrated. The magnificent mosaics surviving in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, and especially the Barada Panel, are a living testimony to that extraordinary early period of the symbiosis of Roman art permeated, as it was, by the religious spirit of Islam.

And it is less widely known that in decorating the mosque of the Holy Prophet ﷺ himself in Medina the Illuminated, in the year 88/707, the Caliph al-Walīd sought the help of the Roman emperor Justinian II, who sent him 'one hundred workers and forty loads of mosaic.'<sup>18</sup>

Another example is to be found in the embracement

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<sup>18</sup> أبو جعفر محمد ابن جرير الطبري، تاريخ الرسل و الملوك (القاهرة: دار المعارف ١٤١٠/١٩٩٠)، المجلد السادس،

and cultivation of traditional Indian music by the Chisti Order, the single most important portal into Islam for the original Hindu inhabitants of India. And yet Naipaul would have us believe that ‘Islam has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples. To be converted you have to destroy your past, destroy your history. You have to stamp on it, you have to say “my ancestral culture does not exist, it doesn’t matter” ... this abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity.’

The deranged hostility of Naipaul’s castle in the sky, it is surely evident, far exceeds mere ignorance or prejudice.

Islam’s incomparable civilisational openness finds its wellspring in the acknowledgement of the universality of beauty implied by the hadith ‘that which (true) Muslims deem beautiful is indeed beautiful.’<sup>19</sup> And given that the Qur’anic ‘Muslim’ encompasses believers born thousands of years before the final revelation of Islam (see, for example, Qur’an 3:67), the hadith also holds deeper implications: That

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<sup>19</sup> This is the very scriptural proof text cited for the maxim we have been discussing.

regardless of time and place, pure original human nature (الفطرة) naturally inclines towards the true, good, and beautiful, and that only explicit opposition to the *shari'a* need be filtered out; and moreover, that it is the intrinsic nature of cultural exclusivism to be wholly groundless and lacking in warrant, precisely in light of the universality of that original human essence.

But we digress.



What *is* Sir Vidiadhar's 'universal civilisation?' He is entirely sure that it is not Islam. And there is of course a reason Naipaul relates the universal civilisation to Islam; it is because in it he sees the only other clear challenger for the mantle. Yet he seems far less comfortable, perhaps hampered by his distaste for 'unifying theories of things', in depicting exactly what it is about Western civilisation which, he wishes us to agree, is so overwhelmingly morally and culturally superior. The closest he comes to attempting this

depiction opens with a citation from the American Declaration of Independence:

... the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the Civilization<sup>20</sup> to so many outside it or on its periphery. I find it marvellous to contemplate to what an extent, after two centuries, and after the terrible history of the earlier part of this century, the idea has come to a kind of fruition. It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don't imagine my father's Hindu parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "The Civilisation"!

<sup>21</sup> Perchance in 1990 it was possible for an inveterate tunnel-vision modernist like Naipaul to imagine that 'the terrible history of the earlier part' of the 20th century had been left behind. This level of naivety is no longer even vaguely excusable. At the time of writing we are well into the 21st century, and have witnessed a series of horrific wars in the aftermath of 9/11, culminating in genocide committed by the state of Israel in Gaza, a war unprecedented in all of history for the brazenness of its slaughter of children. But perhaps, like many of our contemporaries, Naipaul would feel that

And yet most regrettably, talk of post-Enlightenment modernity as the ‘universal civilisation’ cannot simply be dismissed as an embarrassing enthusiasm, heaved forth, as in this case, amidst other barely coherent ramblings of indoctrination, by an unprincipled and deeply prejudiced victim of ideological modernity, with a whole armoury of axes to grind.

Some of the most prominent names in contemporary Western thought have also given credence to the narrative of Western modernity as a civilisation of true neutrality and universality, even when they also give the appearance of lamenting the consequent erosion of local cultures, as Paul Ricoeur is ever keen to ensure in his ‘Universal Civilisation and National Cultures’:

Mankind as a whole is on the brink of a *single world civilisation* representing at once a gigantic progress for everyone and an overwhelming task of survival and adapting our cultural heritage to

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since these crimes are predominately directed against Muslims, they do not really count (although one feels certain he would have waxed lyrical in exhibiting his sorrow for the Ukrainians).

this new setting. To some extent, and in varying ways, everyone experiences the tension between the necessity for the free access to progress and, on the other hand, the exigency of safeguarding our heritage.<sup>22</sup>

For Ricoeur, Western science has *not* been universalised by mass indoctrination and the elimination of the institutional bases of traditional alternatives. Likewise, its dogmatic materialism has nothing to do with its specifically European origins. Neither does its repudiation of metaphysics, its reliance on probabilistic and inductive arguments, nor its very uneasy mixture of, on the one hand, mathematical models that have precious little to do with empirical reality, and on the other, positivist empiricism. Rather, for Ricoeur, Western science has become universalised because its practice is *an entailment of rational human nature*.

If science is Greek in its origins and European through Galileo, Descartes, Newton, etc., science does not foster this power of unifying mankind

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 1965, 271.

because it is Greek or European *but because it is a human dimension*. It manifests a sort of *de jure* unity which controls all the other features of civilisation ... it is a purely abstract and rational unity of mankind which leads to all the other manifestations of modern civilisation.<sup>23</sup>

As if, in the case of 'science' post-Scientific Revolution, removing final and formal causality, and secondary qualities from nature was a neutral move; as if the doggedly systematic extirpation of any lingering vestiges of theophanic reality therein, was simply the epitome of disinterested impartiality and detached objectivity.

And yet Ricoeur is nonetheless surely right when he proceeds to opine that it is precisely this abstracted 'scientific' phantom of the human, which 'leads to all the other manifestations of modern civilisation.'

Ricoeur speaks with the wide-eyed ingenuousness of a true believer in COLUMNS, when he concludes that modernity is the universal and neutral civilisation because it has finally uncovered the 'human'

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 272.

dimension in all things — politics, economics, urban environment and ‘clothing’, technology, and science — as the ‘purely abstract and rational unity of mankind’:

The fact that universal civilization has for a long time *originated from the European center* has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture. Its *superiority over other civilizations* seemed to provide the experimental verification of this postulate. Moreover, *the encounter with other cultural traditions was itself the fruit of that advance* and more generally the fruit of *Occidental science* itself. Did not Europe invent history, geography, ethnography, and sociology in their explicit scientific forms? <sup>24</sup>

While the bizarre notion that ‘universal civilisation’ is *European in sole genesis, but not European in nature* is being expounded, the expectation appears to be (as is also the case in Naipaul) that we will simply nod along and approvingly murmur that *this is of course entirely self-evident and eminently reasonable* — after

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 277.

all, no further justification whatsoever has been given for the core assumption.

We are called to believe that while in the distinctness of its historical causality and philosophical motivation COLUMNS is demonstrably and in every way particular — irreducibly, idiosyncratically particular — through some magical process, it has since, nevertheless, managed to ‘*become*’ universal.

*Unlike* Naipaul, whose chauvinism is wholly unashamed, Ricoeur *does* feel the need to create a smokescreen to distract readers from noticing the fervent Eurocentric flag-waving which underpins his entire discourse, namely by referring to the ‘illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture’, *in the very same sentence* in which he acknowledges that ‘universal civilisation originated from the European center.’

Perhaps he hopes that by this ruse, eurocentric chauvinism will have been sufficiently successfully masked for it to be interpreted by readers as simple ‘common sense’. In a similarly underhanded manner, the science which he has just referred to as a universal

and neutral ‘human dimension’, is also to be described, in his own words, as ‘*occidental science*.’



The sentiment of a Gurcharan Das, a Sir Vidiadhar, or a Ricoeur, is also widely shared across *the self-consciously modern* Muslim world. Granted, canonical Islamic modernists such as Taha Husayn and his ‘spiritual father’ Salamah Moussa in the generation after the founders, the likes of Abduh and Farah Antun, did not so much claim modernity as ‘human and neutral’, as they did instead simply resort to claiming Egypt (or Turkey, in the case of Ziya Gökalp) as part of the West.

The more common contemporary manifestation of ahistorical myopia, and the more up-to-date philosophical La-la land inhabited by *today’s* ‘mature’ Arab sentiment on the question, is well epitomised by the words of contemporary Arab thinker Adil Latifi, when he assures us that,

Modernity appears to be “Western,” but is in fact just the result of the accumulation of human experience.<sup>25</sup>

The stark ingenuousness of the philosophical and historical indigence underlying such pronouncements and such discourse, is almost unanimously to be found combined with a refusal *even to entertain the bare possibility* that the nature of modernity may have been dramatically misconceived and misconstrued by its alacritous Muslim adopters.

Granted, modernity is on the one hand indeed *not* a wholly alien accretion devoid of any universal intelligibility whatever — for it has merely manifested one particular amalgam of orientations and potencies which are intrinsic to human nature.

Yet if this recognition is to be accompanied — as it almost invariably is in the contemporary Muslim world — by a stubborn refusal to recognise modernity’s *irreducible* character as idiosyncratic

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<sup>25</sup> See e.g. his article “In aid of a historical understanding of modernity”, accessible online:  
<https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2008/7/8/من-أجل-فهم-تاريخي-للحداثة-2>

philosophical reaction and repudiation, emerging out of the unique and *irreducibly* specific historical travails and vicissitudes of European society, this putative ‘openness’ to mutual intelligibility of course only serves to further cement our cultural subjugation to the pseudo-neutrality of Naipaul’s ‘universal civilisation.’

The blight and travesty of neutrality — apparently assumed *a priori* — also informs widely adopted conceptual frameworks employed in the appraisal of modernity within postcolonial reformist Muslim scholarly and دعوة circles. Here, for example, is Abu’l Hasan Nadwi’s assessment of the Muslims’ historical failure to acquire the benefits of neutral universal Civilisation:

The Ottomans were established in Europe, which was to acquire great importance in the near future and was already beginning to *throb with a new life*. They had a glorious opportunity of stealing a march on Christian Europe in heralding *the New Age* and guiding the world along the *path of enlightened progress* ... But, to their misfortune, and to the misfortune of the entire Islamic world,

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the Turks surrendered to the temptations of ease and luxury ... The greatest error the Ottomans made was that *they allowed their minds to become static* ... While the European nations were *making rapid progress*, the Turks remained at a *standstill* ... *Intellectual sterility* and the inefficiency of the educational system were not peculiar to Turkish life, but were common to the entire Muslim world. *Muslims, universally, had grown inert both mentally and spiritually*. If we do not, for the sake of caution, trace *this stupor* back to the 14th century CE, the 15th century was *definitely* the last to reveal *any real intellectual life* among the followers of Islam ... Europe, meanwhile, was *making* colossal scientific and industrial *progress*. Europeans were conquering *hidden forces of matter*, unveiling *new secrets of nature* and discovering 'unknown' lands ... *The destiny of mankind was being re-cast* in the West and the world was changing at a breathtaking pace. He who lost a moment in idleness lost a great deal. The Muslims, alas, neglected not minutes but centuries, whereas the European

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nations realized the value of time and covered *the distance of centuries* in years.<sup>26</sup>

In order to assist the reader, I have italicised explicit expressions of ideological modernism in the above, as well as the numerous blithe avowals regarding the status of techno-industrial dominance, namely that it is one of the intrinsic teloi of human existence, and integral to the real meaning of human flourishing.

The reality is that while the learned who mislead in this regard should have done better (and this does not of course vitiate the value of their services to *إعلاء كلمة الله* in numerous other areas), those entrapped by 'fallen behind' mantras are generally deserving of our compassion and sympathy: such refrains merely represent the inevitable response, issuing from a certain kind of somewhat unimaginative and dependent mindset, to the twin traumas of military defeat and outside political domination.

Also writing in the 1950s, Şeyhülislam Mustafa

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<sup>26</sup> Sayyed Abu'l Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, *Islam and the World: The Rise and Decline of Muslims and its Effect on Mankind*, (Leicester: Islamic Academy, 2005), 95.

Sabri enjoyed an upbringing within the pristinely whole and unimpaired Ottoman *ilmiye* of the late 1800s, despite the steady encroachment of influences antithetical to the traditional order, in Istanbul since the *Tanzimat* (although explicit ‘reforms’ were not imposed upon the علماء until 1911).

And yet Sabri exemplifies a very different take on the putative inertness and “intellectual sterility” of Islam since the advent of modernity, that is, over the course of the half a millennium of Islamic history that Nadwi has just lambasted:

... alongside the degeneration of the Ottoman polity continued the degeneration, in the face of modern empirical science, of the old science, that had for long centuries taken charge of the argument defending the creed of Islam. Now, this degeneration stemmed not from [any deficiency in] the old science itself ... but as the result of the perspectives of a group of individuals who fawned upon modern science in order to curry favor with the nations that had won victory by means of the weapons that they had derived from that science.

It was thus that they mistook martial victory for intellectual victory.<sup>27</sup>



And so what *idiosyncracies* of Western civilisation gave rise to the shift to the modern order as a domestic exigency, such that it came to be viewed internally as the ‘neutral’ and neutralising final resolution to otherwise fatally irresolvable civilisational aporia?

When we see them in clear relief, we will come to understand that the broad civilisational impulses and tensions from which modernity in its broad outlines emerges do indeed possess a certain cogent historical logic as demanding requisitely ‘neutral’ and ‘universal’ intellectual and societal modes of intellectual and social systematisation for their resolution, that is, as internally required by the violent tensions intrinsic to those *idiosyncrasies* (although as we will see later, even in this *internal* civilisational context, the ‘neutrality,’ in the final analysis, remains illusory).

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<sup>27</sup> مصطفى صبري، موقف العقل و العلم و العالم من رب العالمين و عباده المرسلين (بيروت: المكتبة العصرية، ٢٠١٢/١٤٣٣)، ص. ١٠٩ – ١١٠.

On the other hand, the absurdity that philosophical, political, and social resolutions and compromises solely motivated by Christian and post-Christian idiosyncrasies and tensions are now standardly deemed 'neutral' by the rest of the world, can only be temporarily and superficially veiled where simultaneous to their implantation, corresponding home-grown frameworks were also systematically dismantled.

These idiosyncrasies, then, are the five bifurcations, five severances, which we now encapsulate in brief form here, but which we will continue to unfurl and detail as the argument of this series unfolds.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE FIVE SEVERANCES

### FIVE BIFURCATIONS THAT VITIATE THE 'UNIVERSALITY AND NEUTRALITY' OF MODERNITY

#### EARLY PAULINE CHRISTIANITY

##### I THE SEVERANCE OF LAW AND SPIRIT

(and situating the apex of spiritual realisation *in opposition to embodiment* was also a consequence of this first severance).

#### EARLY MIDDLE AGES

##### II THE SEVERANCE OF SPIRITUAL POWER AND TEMPORAL POWER.

#### LATE MIDDLE AGES

##### III THE SEVERANCE OF FAITH AND REASON.

#### EARLY MODERNITY

##### IV THE SEVERANCE OF NATURAL WORLD AND KNOWING SUBJECT.

##### V THE SEVERANCE OF MORALITY AND ONTOLOGY.

EARLY PAULINE CHRISTIANITY

I THE SEVERANCE OF LAW AND SPIRIT

It is perhaps no great irony that the form of antinomi-  
anism which wracked Christianity for the next two  
millennia should have originated as a Pharisee's  
passionate reaction against the fixation, of his own  
sect, on every jot and tittle of the Law.

Paul of Tarsus encountered ardent opposition from  
the direct disciples of the Messiah or Christ, that is,  
our master 'Īsā, peace be upon him. And yet despite  
the fact that Paul possessed no authority for this clear  
rupture with Prophet 'Īsā's own disciples—those he  
lovingly guided and shaped—other than his own  
claims to personal spiritual inspiration from Christ,  
for many centuries countless Christians have persisted  
apparently unperturbed, as followers of Paul's  
religion.

The true disciples of Christ had confronted Paul  
upon his visit to Jerusalem:

... Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of  
Jews there are which believe; and they are all zeal-  
ous of the law: And they are informed of thee, that

thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles *to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.* (Acts 21:17).

And yet this charismatic interloper, who had never met Prophet ‘Īsā, peace be upon him, nonetheless possessed sufficient chutzpah to purport to initiate the Messiah’s own direct companions — those he has cared for and shaped, both in the spirit, and in praxis — into the true, hidden nature of the message: It was to be an antinomian mission to the gentiles, underpinned by an elaborate theology that justified this abhorrence of the Revealed Law.<sup>28</sup>

And so it is not untrue, even if now something of a commonplace, that it is Paul, not our master the Prophet, Messenger, and Messiah, ‘Īsā the son of Mary, who founded the religion we know today as Christianity. Here he rebukes Peter (פִּיפֶא), no less :

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<sup>28</sup> We do not of course intend the term ‘antinomian’ in the sense of the repudiation of any form of moral code whatever, but rather as representing Paul’s decisive turning away from *sanctification by submission to a detailed Revealed Law*.

We ourselves are Jews by birth ... yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, *because no one will be justified by the works of the law* ... through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, *then Christ died for nothing.*<sup>29</sup>

This first and most foundational of our bifurcations prophesied, self-fulfillingly, every other facet of disintegration that European Christendom would go on to suffer.

For to abjure the sanctification of the everyday — that is both the *submission* to God's detailed will for His creation and a *craving* for His inexhaustible wisdom, and for the glimmers of the all-encompassing Divine decree concerning His creation and concerning human relatedness to that multifarious creation— is

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<sup>29</sup> *Galatians* 2:15-21.

precisely to shut off the secular as a self-enclosed domain.

The religion that has formally divorced the spirit from the revealed law, in which revealed law has been abrogated, has nothing to tell the devout household regarding the vast bulk of human experience and endeavour, even be it that the Christian home is bathed and caked in prayer and rosaries and incense.

Of course, for the properly schooled Christian, this silence is cause for celebration, as embodying all that is most distinctive about the law-transcending dispensation of ‘faith in Christ crucified.’

Indeed, in his *Gnomen*, Bengel calls Galatians 2:19 ‘the very sum and marrow of Christianity—διὰ νόμου νόμῳ—by the law of faith I am dead to the law of works,’ also referencing Romans 3:27 (‘Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.’)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Albert Barnes’ famous commentary glosses *the law of faith* ‘The rule, or arrangement which proclaims that we have no merit; that we are lost sinners; and that we are to be justified only by faith’. With slight variations, this fundamentally represents the standard interpretation across the main Christian denominations.

‘Have you received the Spirit by the works of the law (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου)’, Paul asks, ‘or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?’<sup>31</sup>

A methodical *suspicion of embodiment* would go on to prove an enduring result of this rigorous and anxious bifurcation; an awkwardness about the exigencies of human subsistence and survival that for most of Christian history could only locate the apex of holiness in *the-not-world*, chiefly in diverse varieties of cloistered and celibate monasticism.

And yet the worst result of all, to be inevitably entailed by this severance of Revealed Law and spirit, must surely be located in the sad insinuation that it makes to its victims, namely that it is simply a fact of life that one must for all intents and purposes *make it on one’s own without God*, because one must with one’s own contrivances *oneself fill the gap* left by the absence of detailed guidance on how to live, and on the status of the everyday.

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<sup>31</sup> *Galatians*: 2-3.

If there is no Divine law, there will be an arbitrary law; for where there are humans, inexorably there is law. On Pauline Christianity, man is condemned to be cut off from God; the Divine intent is simply alien to the self-enclosed world of everyday human experience. The leap of faith which you *do*, and the affective chill that you *feel* at Church are interior commitments and experiences, which you must maturely leave behind once you have left the service, since they have precious little *to do with*, or *to say about*, Real Everyday Life: The notion that God has legislated for every aspect of REL is after all an oppressive, obsessive-compulsive superstition.

Yet the real consequence of the severance of spirit and Revealed Law will in varying degrees always involve man's imposition of his own detailed, yet ultimately arbitrary legislation for life upon himself and others, in which matters that need no regulation will be pedantically regulated, and those that *do* need regulation, left to languish in chaos.

And so it is all the more ironic a great twist of history, that a figure of such great moment as Paul should have mistaken a clear prophecy foretelling the

advent of Islam for an imperative, directed towards himself, to do away with the Revealed Law in order to make it possible to bring the gospel to the gentiles. 'And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, *saying*, In thee shall all nations be blessed.' (Gal. 3.8).

## EARLY MIDDLE AGES

### II THE SEVERANCE OF SPIRITUAL POWER AND TEMPORAL POWER

'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's' (Ἀπόδοτε οὖν τὰ Καίσαρος Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ τῷ Θεῷ),<sup>32</sup> Christ is purported to have said in response to the question of whether taxes should be paid to the Emperor. But Ellicott's commentary elucidates the wider implications:

With them (the Jews) politics and religion were intimately blended. They carried into the former

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<sup>32</sup> *Matthew 22:2.*

sphere the fanaticism natural to the latter. Their religious hopes took a political form. The dominion of the Messiah was to be not a spiritual, but a literal dominion, in which they, as a people, were to share. *Clearly, the relations which our Lord assumed towards politics had especial reference to this attitude of the Jews. He wished to disabuse His disciples once and for all of this fatal confusion of two spheres* in themselves so distinct. He wished to purify and to spiritualise their conception of the "Kingdom of Heaven," which He came to found. And, lastly, He finally submitted to the civil power, as the instrument divinely employed to inflict upon Him those sufferings which were to be the cause of our redemption.<sup>33</sup>

Over the course of the history of Christian Europe, the severance of sacred and temporal power in the realm of politics and society has constituted the chief manifestation of the severance, within the individual, of the spirit and the law, *writ large* on the horizons of society, as macrocosm to microcosm.

And this eventual secular principle presupposes the prior split in many different ways, the most basic of

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<sup>33</sup> Ellicott's commentary on *Romans* 13:1.

which is that in the absence of a *shari‘a*—a detailed Revealed Law that would equally bind *both* Pope and King—nothing in the principal structure of Christendom proved capable of restraining the incongruent power interests that would endlessly persuade each party of the necessity of imposing his arbitrary decree upon the other.

Witness — as just one example amongst the many, frequently bizarre, examples of this form of conflict that history preserves — all that transpired between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip the Fair of France, an early 14<sup>th</sup> century dispute which would eventually lead to the establishment of an Avignon Papacy under the overt domination of the French Crown.

Not unlike Big Tech today, Pope Boniface did not wish for his Church clergy to be obliged to pay taxes levied by the King, eventually issuing his famous bull, *Unam Sanctam*, in an attempt to definitively seal the deal by asserting the general subordinacy of temporal powers to papal authority. When it became clear that even this bold new bull had left King Philip distinctly unmoved, the Pope made plans to have him

excommunicated; Philip's court soon got wind of the plan, however, and arranged for the Pope to be kidnapped instead; he was beaten by his captors, and although he was rescued days later, he died soon after, purportedly of shock.



Romans 13:1-2 ('Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation') could be interpreted as compatible with the so-called 'Caesaropapism' that is sometimes held to have characterised Byzantine governance; but more ordinarily, its exhortation to obedience was *not* held to challenge the stark severance of the two powers.

Indeed, as Jacques Berlinblau notes,

The necessary ... condition for political secularism is the real or perceived existence of a twofold

division within the structure of a social body. This binary has been designated by various formulae, such as “papacy and emperor,” “cross and crown,” “*Sacerdotium* and *Regnum*,” “spiritual rule and temporal rule,” “ecclesiastical and civil authority,” “church and state,” “religion and government,” amongst others (...) political secularism is difficult to conceptualize outside of this framework (...) These pairs, with their various Latin and sacerdotal inflections, draw attention to a well-known fact: secularism’s history is inextricably bound with that of Western Christendom.”<sup>34</sup>

The foisting of secularism upon the rest of the world makes little sense anywhere, and especially in so far as the imposition is justified by the fantasy of its ‘neutrality.’

And although this also rings true with respect to the world of Islam, there is something considerably more jarring and indeed perverse about the imposition of secularism there, even when compared to its imposition elsewhere outside the post-Christian West.

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, ‘Political Secularism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, edited by Philip Zuckerman and John R. Shook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 86.

The words of Allah ﷻ at *Baqara*, 61 come to mind:

﴿أَتَسْتَبْدِلُونَ الَّذِي هُوَ أَدْنَىٰ بِالَّذِي هُوَ خَيْرٌ﴾

*Would ye exchange that which is higher for that which is lower?*

#### LATER MIDDLE AGES

### III THE SEVERANCE OF FAITH AND REASON

The perplexing doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the ‘Holy Mysteries’, though productive of ever-present intellectual and spiritual tension, nonetheless offered the benefit of continually suggesting the justifiability of exceptionalist self-definitions of Europe as Christendom, the sole bastion of truth and light in a dark and dangerous outside world of Saracens, Christ-killers and pagans.

After all, the faithful believers in a creed about God so radically different from that of the Jews and the Muslims must either be severely misled — a possibility which clearly could not be countenanced — or, alternatively, God’s new chosen people, alone

privity to a staggering new revelation of admittedly unintuitive truths, not known or even imagined by the other monotheistic peoples of the world.

The tensions and aporia presented by these ‘Holy Mysteries’ would in the fullness of time prove to be primary begetters of the distinctive attitudes to faith and reason ushered in by the rise of the Protestant and Scientific revolutions in Europe. Indeed, the insurmountability of such difficulties eventually cemented a conviction regarding the radical otherness of faith and reason that is unrecognisable outside of Christendom. The consequences for the entire world have been momentous.

The Early, ‘High’ and Late Middle Ages each possessed a distinct and characteristic way of treating the relationship between revelation and reason (as we will explore in extensive detail in the fourth volume of this work) — the three approaches are broadly:

I The Trinity, Incarnation possess full continuity of intelligibility with reason and are demonstrable thereby (‘belief is contiguous with and illuminates understanding’) — key thinkers including Anselm,

and Richard of St. Victor; a strong emphasis on spiritual and intellectual holism.

2 Trinity, Incarnation do not possess full continuity of intelligibility with human reason, nor are they demonstrable thereby; nonetheless, the Mysteries do not formally *contradict* reason (Thomas Aquinas is the originator of this fateful approach, which represents the first stirrings of a formalised severance of faith and reason).

3 Trinity, Incarnation do not possess continuity of intelligibility with human reason, nor are they demonstrable thereby; indeed, they entail logical absurdities which formally contradict reason. The crucial intellectual impetus in this third stage comes from the empiricising, and metaphysically parsimonious William of Ockham from Surrey, with his prefiguring of 'intellectual humility' (many long years before it officially reared its pompous and indolent head).

Ockham followed Scotus in diminishing the number of religious truths that can be proved by reason, so throwing more burden upon faith. The danger to religion in this process is that, carried to

extremity, it would argue that faith points one way and reason another.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the deeply disorienting influence of Ockham had nothing short of this cataclysmic impact upon the intellectual stability of Medieval civilisation. Here is Etienne Gilson in this connection — despite his personal preference for a zealously immanentist, anti-Platonic Thomist cultism, he of course remains one of the greatest 20th century intellectual historians of Medieval thought:

The influence of Ockham is everywhere present in the fourteenth century; it progressively invaded Oxford, Paris, and practically all the European universities. Some would profess it, others would refute it, but nobody was allowed to ignore it. The late Middle Ages was then called upon to witness the total wreck of both scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology as the necessary upshot of the final divorce of reason and Revelation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Rickaby, S.J., *Scholasticism* (London: Constable and Company, 1911), 54.

<sup>36</sup> Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 87-88.

For Ockham, the Trinity was not merely indemonstrable — the way of the cathedral schools thus being ruled out — but moreover not even logically coherent, and so the way of Aquinas and the ‘high’ Medieval synthesis was also dismissed. Indeed, when logic is applied to the doctrine of the Trinity, it is revealed to be an absurdity. However, the good Christian must go on believing it undeterred — the other option was the stake. In Ockham’s own words:

Just as it is a singularity in God that a trinity are a thing one in number, in such a way that the thing one in number is each of those three things, so it is a singularity and beyond all understanding that [the inference]. ‘The essence that is one in number is the Son, the Father is not the Son, therefore the Father is not the essence’ doesn’t follow. And so this singularity should not be posited except where the authority of Holy Scripture compels. And so such a consequence never should be denied in creatures, since in creatures no one thing are many things and each of them.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Thom, *The Logic of the Trinity: Augustine to Ockham* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012), 170.

The disruption of the Scholastic synthesis of Aquinas by Duns Scotus, and Scotus's wide-ranging repudiation by Ockham, denoted for the popular mind, in its claim to be a stable, faithful 'handmaiden' of theology, a discrediting of philosophy altogether, as not truly able to assist in the uncovering of truths about metaphysical reality and revelation. After all, how could it do so, when logic and philosophy post-Ockham seemed to suggest that the Holy Mysteries — revealed doctrine teaching the true nature of God — are contradictory and absurd?

This species of sentiment would soon become enshrined in the *devotio moderna* movement of the 15th century, which emphasised a return to simple piety and practice, away from the excesses of philosophy and mysticism.

A growing contempt for philosophy is evident in the explicit anti-intellectualism of works of that movement, like Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. The main religious order associated with this movement, the Brethren of the Common Life, would in the late 15th century, count a certain Desiderius Erasmus as one of its members. One of the most

important figures of Renaissance Humanism, Erasmus consistently ridiculed scholastic theology and philosophy in his works, and advocated instead a return to the pristine and unadulterated message of the Gospel, alongside the personal cultivation of ‘humane letters.’

The great Medieval synthesis had unravelled. In Gilson’s words, ‘when the best minds began to despair of harmonising the teachings of Christian Revelation with those of philosophy, the end of the Middle Ages was at hand.’<sup>38</sup> Yet while Renaissance Humanism was a serious challenge and affront to the old order, a much more radical revolution was brewing that would turn that affront into a catastrophic severance, a rupture at the heart of Christendom: the Protestant Revolution. For as Maritain tells us, ‘the Reformation unbridled the human self in the spiritual and religious order, as the Renaissance ... had unbridled the human self in the order of natural and sensible activities.’<sup>39</sup>

An Augustinian monk before he embarked upon his

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<sup>38</sup> Gilson, *Op. Cit.*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), 14.

reformist vocation, Martin Luther had received a rigorous training in scholastic theology at the University of Erfurt in the Ockhamist tradition; and although he echoed Ockham's fideism when it came to the Holy Mysteries, and Ockham's problematisation of the possibility of a comprehensive natural theology, he did not share Ockham's love of Aristotle. Of the Stagirite, Luther wrote:

Aristotle is the godless bulwark of the papists. He is to theology what darkness is to light. His ethics is the worst enemy of grace. An urchin who must be put in the pig-sty or donkey's stable. Reason is directly opposed to faith, and one ought to let it be; in believers it should be killed and buried.<sup>40</sup>

Nor was he any lover of the Medieval synthesis of Thomas Aquinas; he tells us that Aquinas 'never understood a chapter of the Gospel or Aristotle.'<sup>41</sup>

Luther strenuously denies that the human mind stained by original sin can know anything beyond the similarly tainted natural world in which it finds itself. God has created the human intellect to be able to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 31.

apply reason to created entities, not to see beyond them to Divine reality. This is why human logic appears to contradict the Trinity; in his *Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther asserts that ‘no syllogistic form must ever be applied to Divine terms.’ As Maritain tells us:

Luther's contempt for reason is [...] in harmony with his general doctrine about human nature and original sin. According to Luther, sin has vitiated the very essence of our nature, and this evil is final; grace and baptism cover over, but do not efface, original sin. So that the most that reason could be granted would be a wholly practical part in life and human business. But it is incapable of knowing first truths; and all speculative knowledge, all metaphysics is a snare [...] and the use of reason in matters of faith, the claim to establish a coherent science of dogma and of the revealed deposit by reasoning and the use of philosophy, in short, theology, as the scholastics understood it, is an abominable scandal.<sup>42</sup>

It was Martin Luther, then, who would extend the general implications of Ockham's thought to their utmost extent, teaching of a human intellect wholly

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

incapable of knowing metaphysical reality, and indeed of a reason that is the dogged enemy of faith.

And the vastness of his influence sufficed to ensure that this extreme pessimism about the metaphysical and theological prospects of rationality would soon become conventional epistemological wisdom in Europe, a state of affairs which, despite undergoing numerous transformations and encountering much powerful opposition, has persisted to this day.

#### EARLY MODERNITY

#### IV THE SEVERANCE OF NATURAL WORLD AND KNOWING SUBJECT

This unbridgeable gulf—which so many of us now take for granted, and that is supposed to obtain between subjective, perspectival, relative ‘humanities’ on the one hand and objective, quantitative, empirical ‘sciences’ on the other—is a self-refuting absurdity even on the level of its raw assertion. For the very division itself fails to be either quantitative or empirical, such that the very classificatory distinction responsible for revealing the objective ordering of

human knowledge, must itself be ascribed to the subjective 'humanities.'

Despite how totally this bifurcation dominates in the contemporary world, it remains a subsidiary severance, the roots of which are to be found in a much more fundamental one: that of natural world and knowing subject.

In the wake of the Reformation, the ascendancy of the conception of nature as the arena of signs sharply diminished: Nature as the outward tip of continuous degrees of manifestation culminating in the unmanifest Divine. In these degrees of manifestation, both physical nature and knowing subject are conceived as different loci of that manifestation, standing in microcosmic and macrocosmic relations to one another, each, indeed almost isomorphically mirroring the other.

Now, the liability for this fragmenting shift must in part be laid at the door of Luther himself; and amidst the great plenitude of pertinent diatribes which he offers us throughout his writings, we need not darken our day by citing more than one or two that are representative:

## THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY

Through sin and that awful fall not only our flesh is disfigured by the leprosy of sin, but *everything we use in this life* has become corrupt ... through sin this image (the *imago Dei*) was so obscured and corrupted that we cannot grasp it even with our intellect.<sup>43</sup>

The new Protestant insistence that each individual believer must in some sense serve as the ultimate arbiter of religious truth, seemed to favour the individual and his subjectivity in a manner that marked a radical departure from previous religious attitudes, in that it is within the direct relationship of the believer to God's revealed word—which acts upon the believing heart via the Holy Spirit—that religious truth alone becomes manifest. Thus enthroned, individual subjectivity is independent from, and prior to reason, and finding itself compelled to live in an ill-omened material world stained by Original Sin, may access such truths as transcends the senses only via an inward leap of faith.

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 64 .

An important door had been opened to a form of engagement in knowledge-acquisition that could take place completely without reference to Divine origins, or theology, or indeed to metaphysics; without reference, moreover, to any acknowledgement of the relationality, hierarchy, and interdependence of the sciences.

Amidst the endless wrangling of the various Protestant factions, not to mention the larger dispute with the Catholic Church, the pressing need for a new knowledge standard would often be keenly felt, and this exigency would soon come to be realised in the form of a new empirical science. A life spent immersed in the study of this new reductive quantification of the natural world—and moreover, in the exploitation of that natural world for material gain— was to be deemed fully compatible with the broad new Protestant conception of the pious individual Christian life without which such pursuits are unlikely ever to have come into existence.

No one could be censured for treating the natural world in this way; for it was no longer the sublime theophany of Medieval Christianity; nor even, for

much longer, the Lutheran ‘hostel of Satan’, where the Devil is master and host, irredeemably cut off from God and from truth. In Gregory’s interpretation,

The intellectual impasse created by theological controversy provided an opening for ideas about nature based on novel beliefs. A subjective conception of nature as “objectively” devoid of God’s presence would neatly serve a highly interested view of nature as “disinterested”, even for thinkers who were Christians. Desacramentalized and denuded of God’s presence [...] the natural world would cease to be either the Catholic theatre of God’s grace or the playground of Satan as Luther’s *principes mundi*. *Instead, it would become so much raw material awaiting the imprint of human desires.*<sup>44</sup>

And,

If the postlapsarian natural world was as deeply mired in sin and as subject to Satan as most Protestants thought it was, then the Jesuits’ Ignatian directive to see God in all things was a delusion ... An unintended result of literally interminable, pervasive doctrinal controversy was

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<sup>44</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 57.

a strong tendency towards the de facto elimination of substantive religious claims from any bearing on the investigation of the natural world. New institutions, too, such as the Royal Society of London, were dedicated to the Baconian investigation of “matters of fact” about the natural world in ways that could transcend the interminable fruitlessness of theological controversy.<sup>45</sup>



Baconian Knowledge-is-Powerism merely represented the natural political upshot of a radical methodological reorientation carried out by all the principal thinkers of the Scientific Revolution, which in favour of a purely quantitative mechanicalism explicitly excluded all of:

i. *Final causes* (This excerpt is Descartes):

It is not the final but the efficient causes of created things that we must inquire into. When dealing with natural things we will, then, never derive any

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 46-48.

explanations from the purposes which God or nature may have had in view when creating them *and we shall entirely banish from our philosophy the search for final causes*. For we should not be so arrogant as to suppose that we can share in God's plans. We should, instead, consider him as the efficient cause of all things; and starting from the divine attributes which by God's will we have some knowledge of, we shall see, with the aid of our God-given natural light, what conclusions should be drawn concerning those effects which are apparent to our senses.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. I, 202, Part I, Article 28. As also Bacon himself in *The New Organon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 'The corruption of philosophy from superstition and a dash of theology is much more widely evident, and causes a very great deal of harm either to entire philosophies or to their parts ... A conspicuous example of this occurs among the Greeks in Pythagoras, where it is combined with a rather crass and cumbrous superstition, and in a more perilous and subtle form in Plato and his school. This kind of evil also occurs in parts of other philosophies by the introduction of abstract forms and final causes and first causes, and by frequent omission of intermediate causes and so on. We must give the strongest warning here. For the worst thing is the apotheosis of error; respect for foolish notions has to be regarded as a disease of the intellect' (53), as also, 'final causes, which are plainly derived from the nature of man rather than of the universe, and from this origin have wonderfully corrupted philosophy' (44).

ii. *Formal causes* (Descartes),

Now we understand very well how the different size, shape and motion of the particles of one body can produce various local motions in another body. But there is no way of understanding how these same attributes (size, shape and motion) can produce something else whose nature is quite different from their own - like the substantial forms and real qualities which many philosophers suppose to inhere in things; and we cannot understand how these qualities or forms could have the power subsequently to produce local motions in other bodies. Not only is all this unintelligible, but we know that the nature of our soul is such that different local motions are quite sufficient to produce all the sensations in the soul. What is more, we actually experience the various sensations as they are produced in the soul, and we do not find that anything reaches the brain from the external sense organs except for motions of this kind.<sup>47</sup>

and,

iii. *Secondary qualities from nature* (Galileo)

When I think of a physical material or substance, I immediately have to conceive of it as bounded,

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 285, Part 4, Article 198.

and as having this or that shape, as being large or small in relation to other things, and in some specific place and at any given time, as moving or at rest, as touching or not another physical body, and as being one in number, or few or many. I cannot separate it from these conditions by any stretch of the imagination. But whether it is white or red, bitter or sweet, noisy or silent, and of a pleasing or unpleasant odour, my mind does not feel compelled to bring this in order to apprehend it; in fact, without our senses as a guide reason or imagination unaided would probably never arrive at qualities such as these. So it seems to me that taste, odour, colour, and so on are nothing more than pure names, as far as the objects in which we think they reside are concerned. Rather, they exist only in the mind that perceives them, so that if living creatures were removed, all these qualities would be wiped away and no longer exist. But since we have given them specific names, distinct from those of the other and real primary qualities, we treat them as if they too were real with a distinct existence of their own.<sup>48</sup>

... thereby leaving nature to be conceived, for the purposes of that proto-technological exploitation, as a bare, mathematicised barrenscape of efficient and

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<sup>48</sup> Galileo Galilei, *The Assayer*, in *Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119.

material causality and quantity, artificially isolated from any possible spiritual and metaphysical significance, and yet now uniquely amenable to mechanistic manipulation, via experimentation, in pursuit of material domination:

But as soon as I had acquired some general notions in physics and had noticed, as I began to test them in various particular problems, where they could lead and how much they differ from the principles used up to now, I believed that I could not keep them secret without sinning gravely against the law which obliges us to do all in our power to secure the general welfare of mankind. For they opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which *might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools*. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans; and we could use this knowledge - as the artisans use theirs - for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus *make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature*.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Descartes, *Op. Cit.*, 142-143 (*Discourse on Method*, Book VI).

EARLY MODERNITY

V THE SEVERANCE OF MORALITY AND ONTOLOGY

The lack of isomorphism between 'is' and 'ought' is a pillar of common wisdom in contemporary thought, one of those consensus examples of a putative modern 'breakthrough' which has neatly exposed all that went before it as merely so much naïve and devout philosophical hocus pocus.

And yet as with so many of its similar pronouncements, in this case it is modern Whiggishness that must really be found guilty of naivety.

For the 'ought' arises from 'is' precisely because in the pre-modern cosmos, being is still pregnant and full; it was created for the sake of the human being who gazes upon it, it represents the arena of potencies for his action: that is its innermost nature. It is in virtue of man's *τέλος*, made in the image of God and seeking to be reunited with Him, that when standing in relation to the 'is' intrinsically directed towards himself, it is man and man *alone* who derives an inherent 'ought.'

The unboundedness of trans-Christian possibilities offered by Renaissance humanism had already led to the pragmatism of a Machiavelli long before Hobbes would ground his similar pessimism about human nature in a reductive account thereof as a mere bundle of incorrigible natural drives and instincts for self-interest and self-preservation, an account only given a veneer of credibility via its grounding in Hobbes's explicit empiricism and materialism. And indeed, Hume's smug little phenomenalist turn, and the Lobster passage of Locke that preceded him, are both founded on begging the question, namely with their blithe empiricist assumptions. The severance of ontology and morality is thereby revealed to be a direct auxiliary to that of nature and knowing subject.

Let us give Locke the final word for now. He indicts himself very nicely for our present purposes:<sup>50</sup>

The mind has a different relish, as well as the Palate; and you will as fruitlessly endeavour to delight all men with Riches or Glory, (which yet some Men place their Happiness in,) as you would to satisfy all Men's Hunger with Cheese or Lobsters; which, though very agreeable and delicious fare to some, are to others extremely nauseous and offensive ... Hence it was, I think, that the Philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether *Summum bonum* consisted in Riches, or bodily Delights, or Virtue, or Contemplation: And they might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best Relish was to be found in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts ... If ... there be no Prospect beyond the Grave, the inference is certainly right, Let us eat and drink, let us enjoy what we delight in, for tomorrow we shall die.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The rich background to this severance has been very consciously truncated here, because I have provided much of it elsewhere. In this connection, the reader is cordially invited to consult my *Hierarchy and Freedom: An examination of some classical metaphysical and post-Enlightenment accounts of human autonomy* (Cambridge: New Andalus Press, 2023), as well as the forthcoming *Principle and Arbitrariness*, co-authored with Dr. Mohamed Hammour.

<sup>51</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

### Chapter 3

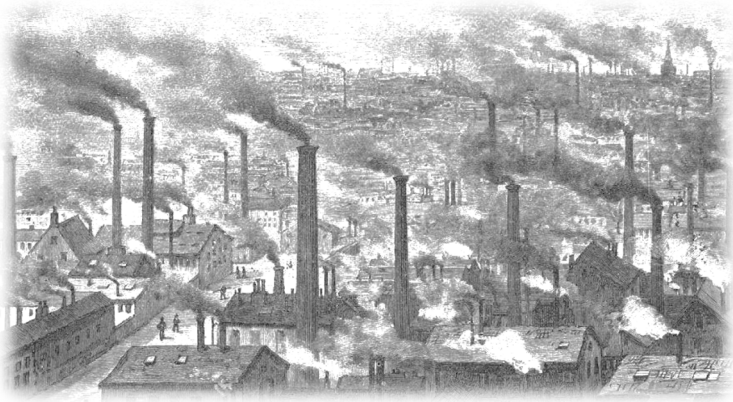
The five severances are the sources not only of the instability of post-Christian thought and society, but also of its extraordinary dominating, controlling power. Now equipped with introductory conceptions of their historical crucibles and natures, let us turn to an examination of the multifarious human intellectual, social, and political phenomena that they have engendered.



## CHAPTER 4

# THE GREAT MODERN UNIFORMITY: RATIONALISATION IN URBAN ENVIRONMENT, SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND THE INTERNET AGE

And did the Countenance Divine,  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here,  
Among these dark Satanic Mills?  
*William Blake*



It is an exigency of certain fundamental potencies of human nature, for human life to be encircled and contained by a built environment, and defined by personal and institutional relationships with other human beings that primarily unfold, transactionally, in those environs.

Now, all of these mutually interdefined elements have been radically reshaped by modernity in ways that embody the principles of the Western project for a uniform, global order in which the ‘neutral’ rationalised, scientific *form* of the One Modern Civilisation is abstracted from its purportedly illimitably diverse ‘subjective’ *content*.<sup>52</sup> And so it is a world at constant logical war with itself, between an outward of *scientistic* ‘objectivity’, and an inward of *postmodern* ‘subjectivity’.

For the progression of the machine culture, burrowing in its uniform, quantitatively-defined fashion ever deeper into the imaginative angst of its rejection of Nature —namely, nature as φύσις, in its original

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<sup>52</sup> That is, by as many unique subjective determinations of its content as there are individuals. That is the theory at least; the reality involves utter uniformity on the inward level.

sense as ‘bringing forth the essence’ — necessarily produces a uniform outward world.

This is just as the hopelessly limited possibilities offered by ungrounded subjectivity, drowned in the senses and recognising no reality but the ‘physical’, also yield strikingly uniform inward worlds — this by the eloquent testimony provided by both the discourse and the dialogical capabilities of the mass-produced victims of ‘manipulated individualism’, who in these regards, and beyond the pseudo-diversity of plural preferences and inclinations, are virtually identical.<sup>53</sup>

On dominant contemporary accounts, ‘human’ ‘nature’ is indeed *one*; it is that constructed epiphenomenon which supervenes on the brute physicality of the specific physical configuration that we call the ‘human’ body — a physicality that cares not at all for this alleged ‘humanity’.

With the material world constituting the *tabula rasa*, the blank slate upon which man creates himself, the individual human subject in his quest for self-

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<sup>53</sup> The painfully narrow range of acceptable opinion in Western public discourse is one important piece of evidence for the existence of these *mass-produced ‘individuals.’*

definition projects, syntheses, and concretises all of the multifarious elements of his unique imagination.

This is his *right* and indeed his *raison d'être* to explore, without restriction, on the condition that he acknowledges none of the structures of self-identification, which he *imagines*, are *really there* — including 'human nature' itself.

They are to be enjoyed only as subjective constructions, constitutive of the 'creative evolution' of each individual; they are your 'finding' yourself, constructing your own world; that is, the world uniquely projected by the proclivities, inclinations, and preferences of your own individual perspective.

And yet you are also held responsible to respect the right of every other individual to likewise recreate the world from his own perspective; and this presupposes your duty to recognise the relativity of your *own* perspective. For each projection of 'the world' is as valid as any other; only the conclusions of the 'hard' sciences are in any sense bindingly real; for every qualitative, aesthetic, moral, 'metaphysical' perception is at base mere arbitrary *interpretation*.

4.1

THE SPLIT BETWEEN NATURE & KNOWING  
SUBJECT, AND OTHER BIFURCATIONS:  
IN ARCHITECTURE  
& THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The architecture, the built environment, and the social landscaping of this brave new (neutral and universal) world, must needs reflect this same *radical subjectivism* in its awkward marriage to *physicalist objectivism*.

In the primitive and naïve world of pre-modernity, namely those many dire centuries groaning under the burden of appalling ignorance and oppression, local differences had sprung from the *objectivist* concretisation of religion, deities, rituals — really mere constructions of the collective imagination, falsely reified and projected into an all-unifying and endlessly self-validating concept of the ‘transcendently real’ — out of which came ‘sacramental’ art, buildings, clothing, and social norms.

In order to show that he has decisively moved on

from this rank ignorance and backwardness, the new universal human being, resigned to the (resplendently ironic) 'fact' that there are no absolutes, no objective morality and no 'essences' of things, must not, according to this internal ethical standard, externally universalise the *idiosyncrasies* of his self-creation. For this would be to limit *others*, by imposing his *own* self-creative proclivities upon the rightful domain of *other* self-determining individuals.

His environment, thus, must instead aspire to mirror the colourless potentiality of the physical world.

Its creators, purified from illusion, fabricate thereby a built environment that is the same everywhere; and they employ an *essentially quantifying* technology in order to do so: to mirror the 'fact', revealed by the Scientific Revolution, exposed by the Cartesian Split, that the objective, extramental world is purely quantitative and material, and that what *meaning* it 'has', we have *given to it*, we are in fact creating *for it*.

Now, in order for this abstracted 'physical and quantitative neutrality' to have become extramentally instantiated, the outward world needed to be stripped of all the elements of what Ahmed Paul Keeler would

call its 'holistic environment', cultural, spiritual, and historical.

And as it happens, this new uniformity indeed *did not* sprout out of the earth fully formed, 'birthed by science and rationality', as an inevitable and universally assented-to manifestation of modernity's 'coming to maturity.' The realisation of modern uniformity instead required, as the British architectural historian David Watkin notes, the (conscious, active) 'destruction of the past, in order to make a scientific rational setting for modern man.'<sup>54</sup>

One of the most famous of all such intended rampages was that of Le Corbusier, a man counted amongst the most notorious of all pioneers and urban planners of modern architecture, namely his 1925 'Plan Voison', which proposed the destruction of large swathes of old Paris in order to make way for eighteen identical tower blocks in a grid.

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<sup>54</sup> David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture Revisited* (London: John Murray, 2001), viii.

## THE UNRAVELLING OF INTELLIGIBILITY



An urban planner for dogmatic modernism

Le Corbusier

Paris was in the end spared this fate — although the city had of course already been subjected to an earlier phase of rationalisation, when its medieval centre had been ripped from its roots in Haussmann's renovation of 1853-1870, in order to make way for an Enlightened rational order.



### **Gratuitous violence**

Le Corbusier's plan

Nonetheless, the brute and quite deliberate inattentiveness to historical, cultural, or indeed *any* qualitatively human factors at all, in this extension of quantitative rationalisation to the built environment, 'this alarming model,' would after the Second World War be 'put into practice in towns and cities throughout the world in new buildings which, taking

the place of the old terraced houses in Britain, were designed with total lack of attention to the environment, to traditional forms, materials, or patterns of living.’<sup>55</sup>

Naturally, the post-Islamic secular authorities dutifully followed suit in their rush to ‘keep up’, to genuflect to ‘modernisation’, to assure their former colonial overlords<sup>56</sup> (and more than anything else, to assure *themselves*) that they were not backward natives, even if they were regrettably still surrounded by such great swarms of them; witness the Ba’ath party demolition of vast swathes of the old city of Damascus at the behest of French urban planner Michel Ecochard, the malicious splitting of old Cairo in two, and so on.

Indeed, in the early Republican period in Istanbul, yet another French modernist urban planner, Henri Prost, was specially shipped in to put the harmonious cohesion of old Istanbul firmly in its place, namely,

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<sup>55</sup> David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture Revisited* (London: John Murray, 2001), vii.

<sup>56</sup> The sentimental idea that Atatürk and İnönü did not have any colonial overlords, is of course deeply absurd and ingenuous.

oblivion, and a totalised subjugation to the modern spirit.<sup>57</sup> To this end, he drove Atatürk Boulevard right through it, and demolished large areas of Ottoman Karaköy, Üsküdar, Eminönü, and Beşiktaş, in order to make way for civilised modern ‘squares’ — much to the ire of Le Corbusier, who had wanted the job for himself.

While the insipid blandness of the architecture of ‘neutral and universal’ modernity is widely lamented today in the West, even, indeed, by the very same mainstream culture that nonetheless remains fully committed to the ideas that inexorably produced it, the continuity of the architecture of ‘neutral, quantified uniformity’ with the bifurcatory philosophy of modernity was once fully intended, and what is more, celebrated.

Nikolaus Pevsner was an acolyte of Le Corbusier, and one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential evangelists of modern architecture. Watkins recounts

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<sup>57</sup> This is not to imply that they *achieved* this aim; faced with the staggering spiritual and aesthetic sublimity of old Istanbul, modernism of course stood no chance. But its cancer has comprehensively disfigured the newer parts of the city.

how upon consulting another giant of art history, Ernst Gombrich (himself critical of modernism) concerning Pevsner, and specifically Watkin's own plans to publish criticism of him, Gombrich counselled Watkins to '... look at people like Pevsner more charitably' by considering that 'functionalism can be interpreted as a religious architecture, *celebrating the religion of progress*,' and pointing out that Pevsner 'at least ... has a faith, and is no cynic or time-server.'<sup>58</sup>

For Watkin, Pevsner should be regarded as a dogmatic 'secular priest' in the realm of architecture and the built environment, and merely one important example, in that specific realm, of Maurice Cowling's insight that in every human domain, the preferences of the modern world more often than not represent 'a rigid moralising orthodoxy, frequently narrower in its prescriptions than the religious certainties which it had replaced.'<sup>59</sup>

The underlying, instrumentalist rationale for the systematic and effectively irreversible blighting of the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., xix.

built environment by the dismal blandness of these ubiquitous and identical temples to the religion of progress, is well captured by the philosopher of architecture Kenneth Frampton, in his celebrated essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance.'

It is self-evident that the *tabula rasa* tendency of modernization favors the optimum use of earth-moving equipment inasmuch as a totally flat datum is regarded as the most economic matrix upon which to predicate the rationalization of construction ... the bulldozing of an irregular topography into a flat site is clearly *a technocratic gesture which aspires to a condition of absolute placelessness*.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, lurking in the philosophical background to this functionalist blight of the landscape is the idea that the natural world, as mechanism, simply *is* function.

And so the impact of such ideological exteriorism

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<sup>60</sup> Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Washington, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 26. The emphasis is mine.

pertaining to the ‘rationalisation of nature’ —which dictates that it must be made manifest within our very built environment, as if to provide the final evidence that modernity is no longer a theoretical construct but truly our deepest practical conviction — is most devastating when its ugly blights appear in parts of the world that are entirely innocent of the ideological lineage of their underlying ideas. This phenomenon is surely one of the most destructive of all the aftershocks to have followed modernity’s bifurcatory aspirations having been set loose upon the world.

Indeed, by the early decades of the 21st century, the irresistible grip that the modern worldview, constituted by our five bifurcations, has continued to exercise upon the inward and outward landscapes of peoples outside its Western world of origin, can be readily discerned by any visitor to any capital city across the world, and indeed to most other cities.

Anyone sufficiently aware of what is of Western origin, and of what had come before, but which has now dwindled and passed from sight, perceives that these are without exception worlds utterly transformed. It is not the mere surface forms of life

that have mutated. It is not simply the ubiquity of the multinational corporation, billboard advertising, designer brands in identical shopping malls, fast food, and Starbucks-template coffee shops.

It is not merely the uniform five-star hotels and the general automatised 'Mcdonaldisation' of life, the family living rooms with television sets at their centres, or indeed the endless interjection of English *technical* and *psychological* adjectives and exclamations heard in everyday discourse in Arabic and Urdu and many other local languages. It is not just the bland jazz and formulaic classical music, removed from any local setting, historical context, societal embeddedness or productive local milieu, which fester like bad smells in nauseatingly uniform, spick-and-span hotel foyers, clinics, hospitals, and cafes across the world.

Nor has the universalisation of Western 'contemporary' decor been the only change, the 'ikeasation' of apartments set in uniform high-rise buildings, replacing the traditional ornamentation of homes, that formerly reflected religion, culture, and local urban environment. Nor even the fact that if you were to wake up in a Starbucks and find yourself

unable to remember how you got there, your surroundings would in no way help you to determine which country you were in; indeed, the same is true of most five star hotel rooms.

And beyond the dictates of architectural ideology, this state of affairs moreover represents the terminus of a prudentialist quantification and monetisation of the lived environment, that cannot help but result from its desacralisation.



One of the most emblematic moments in the birth of modernity was Henry VIII's seizure of the vast monastic possessions of his nation, and their subsequent placement into the hands of an emergent early-modern merchant class increasingly emboldened by the vast elevation in social status that they now enjoyed, when compared to the general contempt in which they had been held as a class throughout most of the Medieval period in Europe, dominated by its particular accounts of the metaphysical determination

of social hierarchy. The period directly after this cataclysm saw

widespread unemployment, appalling destitution and burning resentment that the Dissolution of the Monasteries had accelerated an inclination by landowners to consider their estates as commercial assets to be fully exploited for quick profits, rather than as valued possessions enabling whole communities to supply their own needs.<sup>61</sup>

Contrary to the modernist mindset's automatic presumption of spontaneous and grateful, en masse acceptance of some putatively self-evident 'advancement', destruction of the past has very rarely been greeted by its victims in real life as 'deliverance.'

This not only applies in the case of the 'neutralisation' of the urban environment to which we have just alluded, but moreover in that of the explicit and all-encompassing desacralisation and indeed desecration that represents its usual backdrop.

Both have been bitterly opposed by those thereby

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<sup>61</sup>. Christopher Hibbert, *The English: A Social History 1066-1954* (London: Guild Publishing, London, 1987), 177.

robbed of their traditional religion and culture, for whom such brutal upheavals have only ever represented the cruel and diabolical, wanton incineration of their charts of spiritual advancement, and the desecration of symbolic frames of reference experienced both macrocosmically and microcosmically, in Nature, and within the human self: both were placed there by God.

In short, the myth of happy liberation aided by a willing and relieved populace is one created long after the event, and after amnesia has been effectively induced. And this was as true at the end of the European Middle Ages as it was to prove to be much later in the Islamic world.

The problem, of course, concerns precisely what it is we are to do once amnesia *has* set in.



### **The Dissolution of the Monasteries**

The Cistercian Abbey of Rievaulx in North Yorkshire

Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* is an extended meditation on this bitter opposition, a deep-delving study into the social impact of the Reformation, with its hated destruction of a much-loved and enormously rich Medieval, popular religious devotion and culture, and the resultant people's uprisings and rebellions decrying the imposition of the new civilisational regime.

For ordinary English people of the Elizabethan period, in which the destruction of Medieval Catholicism was carried off, reformation meant

A stripping away of familiar and beloved observances, the destruction of a vast and resonant world of symbols which, despite the denials of the proponents of the new Gospel, they both understood and controlled.<sup>62</sup>

In October 1536, Yorkshire rebels revolted against the dissolution of the monasteries, and occupied York, reinstating, as they did so, Catholic observances and rites in the city, and returning the monks and nuns to their religious houses. Their uprising would become known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, and as was perhaps inevitable, the rebellion would at length be quashed by the Henrician forces.

But a defense statement delivered by the leader of the 'Pilgrimage' rebellion while he was on trial for his crimes, a certain Robert Aske, provides enduring testimony to the evident moral and spiritual sincerity

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<sup>62</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 591

of the movement, and indeed to the fact that their rebellion was not primarily political in motivation:

First, to the statute of suppressions, [I, Aske] did grudge against the same and so did the whole country, because the abbeys in the north parts *gave great alms to poor men and laudably served God...* And by occasion of the said suppression *the divine service of almighty God is much diminished, great number of masses unsaid and the blessed consecration of the sacrament now not used* and showed in these places, *to the distress of the faith and spiritual comfort to man's soul*, the temple of God ruffed and pulled down, the ornaments and relics of the church of God *unreverent* used, the towns and sepulchres of honourable and noble men pulled down and *sold, no hospitality now in those places kept...* when the abbeys stood, the said people *not only had worldly refreshing in their bodies but also spiritual refuge* both by ghostly living of them and also by spiritual information and preaching; and many tenants were their fee'd servants to them and serving men, well succoured by the abbeys.<sup>63</sup>

Lyon goes on to observe that the Pilgrimage of Grace rebels 'perceived the dissolution as an assault on

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<sup>63</sup> Cited in Harriet Lyon, *Memory and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 50.

Catholic piety and a threat to salvation, as well as a shock to the rhythms of English local life.’<sup>64</sup>

And while it would be easy to dismiss Henry VIII’s revolution as a mere selfish rampage brought on by an irascible and egoistic inability to fully subordinate himself to Authority, this would only in fact be one part of the story.

For Henry’s was a Christian Europe already overripe for a change to the mercantile-dominated, Machiavellian-tinged absolutism that was soon to come to dominate in Europe far and wide. It was ripe, that is to say, for the political bodying forth of another *split*, in which the authority of governance is most essentially the post-moral *imposition of will*, and the *ruled* amount only to so much prime matter, waiting to be moulded into the form more or less arbitrarily imposed upon it by the ruler: namely by his power interests, and by those of his governing class.

This change only became possible under the bifurcatory conditions of a split between faith and reason, married to ‘render unto Caesar’, amidst a

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

landscape of nature severed from knowing subject; a direct consequence was the uprooting of political morality from metaphysics. And the overall mutation naturally represented a multifarious abomination, and multifaceted anathema to the Medieval order.

The first diagnoses of Henry VIII as ‘Machivellian’ are contemporary; and they are not so much intended to be derogatory, as straightforwardly factual.

In 1539, Reginald Pole had been the first to offer this characterisation in writing. Thomas Cromwell himself, no less, had confided to Pole that the direct inspiration for Henry’s radical revolution — in which he split from Rome, dissolved the monasteries, stole their property, and subordinated all spiritual authority to his absolute political authority — had been Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. There had been no absence of professed eyewitness testimony, then, to endorse Tudor historian A.F. Pollard’s famous verdict on Henry VIII, namely that he was ‘Machiavelli’s *Prince* in action.’<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and Mystery of State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), I.

4.2

THE SPLIT BETWEEN NATURE & KNOWING  
SUBJECT, AND OTHER BIFURCATIONS:  
IN INDUSTRIALISATION & CRAFT

The abrupt and ruthless desacralising amputation that was the Dissolution of the Monasteries, would in the longer run contribute, amongst the burgeoning mercantile class and newly-landed gentry, to a sense of their unboundedness by any form of sacred order outside of arbitrary power and accumulation, *arbitrary* and thereby *profane*.

Henry's decision to open up this mother of all property auctions to the ignoble classes had in any event partly been motivated by his desire to further weaken the still considerable though already diminished power of the old feudal aristocratic families. And yet Henry's personal consolidation of power through this elevation of diverse specimens of the nouveau riche, set forces in motion which would quite soon serve to undermine the very possibility of absolute royal power.

For the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in its assertion of parliamentary supremacy, was in large part motivated by the vested mercantile and financial interests that members of parliament held in curbing the arbitrary power of the monarchy. As such, one scarcely needs to assent to the dogmas of Marx's historical materialism in order to appreciate the power of his claim (in a July 11th 1853 article for the New-York Daily Tribune) that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 represents 'the first decisive victory of the bourgeoisie over the feudal aristocracy,' who would thereafter be compelled to navigate the parliamentary system in order to achieve their interests, their landed power further diminished by the sudden influence of an upstart class, purveyors of capital and commerce.

The centuries-long and quite unbridled series of capitalistic bacchanalias that would ensue in the wake of *another* revolution, one that accompanied and was inextricably bound up with the putatively 'glorious' one — namely, the 'Financial' Revolution — could never have transpired had Henry VIII not permitted, in his ominous statute of 1545, the charging of usury in England for the first time.

What did this fateful associated revolution entail? The creation of the English stock market in the 1690s, and the accompanying, unprecedented proliferation of the joint stock company (itself a key innovation of the age), the founding of the Bank of England in 1694—primarily in order to create a limitless tap of credit for government borrowing—by private investors who were promised 8% interest on the government's debt; and the employment of the same model of government borrowing, this time in exchange for political influence, to fund the East India Company's rapacious economic exploitation of India.

—I suppose it is in some sense reassuring that the subordination of political power to monied interests is by no means a recent novelty, but is fully 'traditional' to the modern order !—

This, in turn, and in conjunction with the vastness of the exponential wealth creation of burgeoning joint stock enterprise, had the effect of pouring unprecedented quantities of monopolised wealth into England, capital that would lie in wait in order to soon facilitate the attainment of the holy grail of the bifurcated ideal: the union of fiat and usury finance

and the mechanised exploitation of nature, what Keeler has described as *the marriage of the merchant and the modern scientist*.

The Industrial Revolution indeed represents the ultimate convergence of the bifurcations of modernity. That its advent was unique to England is no accident. In the person and rule of Henry VIII, the severance of faith and reason, and that of temporal and sacred power, would be concretised within a new kind of political order, that of arbitrary absolutism; and the bifurcation of knowing subject and nature, actively brewing in the background, in the contortedly fecund minds of the Bacons, Descartes, and Galileos of a post-Reformation Europe straining to navigate the turmoil caused by a wide-ranging breakdown of old certainties, would seek to divert all of the unbound potency of human knowing away from the quest after the infinite, towards Bacon's 'knowledge is power', and the exploitation and 'mastery' of nature solely for the sake of material gain.

In England, thence to a parliamentary order fixated upon the safeguarding of the property rights of a merchant class newly emboldened: For the most far-

reaching significance of the ‘Glorious’ Revolution surely lies in the Financial Revolution, and the beginnings of a preoccupation with self-interest, accumulation, and capital, which as Albert Hirschmann argues in his *The Passions and the Interests*, could serve as the perfect corrective to the excesses of religious enthusiasm, and to the otherwise uncontrollable furies of the masses in their divers passions.

And so it was that colonial rapine and stock market speculation should prove to be the perfect patrons for investment in the new machines and factories that would soon drive the Industrial Revolution.



Were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly,

or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. For the simplest operation, some helps and accompaniments, some cunning abbreviating process is in readiness. Our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster. The sailor furls his sail, and lays down his oar; and bids a strong, unwearied servant, on vaporous wings, bear him through the waters.

Thomas Carlyle, *Signs of the Times*

Two hundred and fifty years after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, similar resentment at a new stage of the politically and economically motivated brutalisation of nature and tradition again erupted, in the form of the hugely disruptive Luddite movement.<sup>66</sup>

With the introduction of early machines into the textile industry, the economic lure of automation (at this stage still partial) using machines which could be operated by the relatively unskilled, soon came to trump the art of the vastly superior, skilled work of the many expert craftsmen thereby made redundant.

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<sup>66</sup> See also E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 552-575.

The rebels rallied under the leadership of a certain Ned ('General') Ludd who was purported, aptly, to live in Sherwood Forest (and although this was perhaps just a pseudonym under which the rebels sent out threatening letters to mill owners, it is also eminently possible that General Ludd was an actual weaver's apprentice who represented the driving force behind the movement, and served as its leader).

In their initial attempts to negotiate their position, attempts founded upon the invocation of the old moral certainties of the guilds, the Luddites found themselves confronted by the first stirrings of a new force which they could not understand: *laissez-faire* economics. Their petitions to parliament and legal appeals were vigorously combatted by factory owners.

After it had become evident that all appeals had fallen on unhearing ears, the reaction was visceral and violent: After a pitiless night in Nottingham in which British troops forcefully dispersed a throng of protestors demanding fair wages, ('a more liberal price'), the protestors set off to smash the looms of a nearby textile mill. This act sparked off a new movement of machine destruction in different parts of

England, highly organised and sophisticated operations, carried out by secretive bands of workers.

The sudden explosion in scale of the systematic destruction so alarmed the authorities that they mobilised several brigades of soldiers to quell the unrest. This came to a head in April 1812, when one hundred and fifty followers of General Ludd exchanged fire with guards at a Yorkshire mill. After two of their number were killed, the unfortunate mill owner was lynched by the rebels.

Just a few weeks later, an army of two thousand Luddites took over a factory in Huddersfield. Three were killed when guards opened fire. The Luddites returned again the next day, and this time government troops were sent in, killing five. Before the eventual, brutal military suppression of the Luddites, their operations had succeeded in 'encouraging' many workshop owners to withdraw such mechanised devices from use. But Luddism would soon become an offence punishable by hanging; and by 1813, indeed, so many Luddites had been hanged or sent to Australia that the movement's dynamism began to dwindle.

And so in the wake of the Protestantising

desacralisation of nature and built environment, the demeaning of the skill of the craftsman by the crass machine would constitute the next main ingredient necessary to facilitate Frampton's 'absolute placelessness': the abolition of craft in the first stirrings of industrialisation, and with it the expurgation of the imprint of individual mastery, imagination, idiosyncrasy and spirit from commercial article and lived habitat.

Luddism erupted at a time when old paternalist legislation that had to some extent protected the worker was being swept away; when the 'shadowy image of a benevolent corporate state' — in which artisans occupied a lowly but nevertheless respected position in society — was being rapidly dispersed. Artisans and journeymen felt themselves 'thrust beyond the pale of the constitution' and robbed of those few rights they had previously enjoyed.<sup>67</sup>

The example of England is especially poignant and portentous, because the extermination of craft took place there against the backdrop of an already

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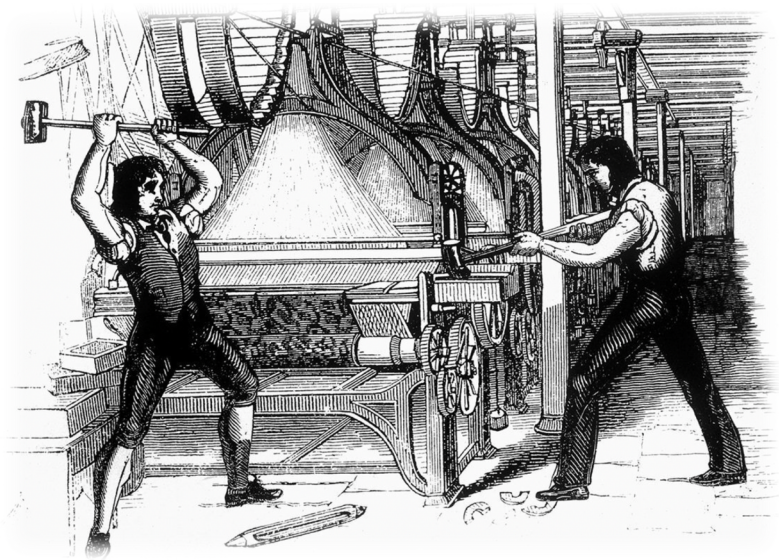
<sup>67</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *Op. Cit.*, 487.

obliterated religious culture. Elsewhere, the creation of 'neutral' secular placelessness would have to brew for considerably longer; but by the end of the twentieth century the result was everywhere more or less the same. The abolishment of craft and human creativity in favour of the machine would spread to the rest of Europe, and eventually (even if only in aspiration) to the rest of the world.

'As a body of ingenious artisans employed on materials of great value,' the experienced silk-workers of Derby protested to the master hosiers, 'we conceive ourselves entitled to a higher station in society.' Instead of that, they —and tens of thousands of skilled workers in other trades—were to be given over to what they considered little better than slavery in vast, depressing factories where their identities would be lost, where they and their children would be exploited and oppressed, confined for all their working lives in demeaning and incessant labour.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 487



### Rage against the machines



The seismic repercussions of industrialisation were not confined to its impact on the personal and family lives of those forced to leave their skilled trades in order to operate its machines.

The Revolution also radically imperilled the extraordinary cultural richness of pre-industrial modes of human community life, self-sufficient communities with their vibrant cottage industries and their integral agricultural traditions, in which generations of families lived and knew one another, inter-married and worked and worshipped together — relationships of an intimacy, familiarity, depth, coherence, stability, and spontaneous nature scarcely possible for us to so much as conceive of today.

Industrialisation deprived rural settlements — historically associated with their own unique crafts — of the ability to thrive, and eventually, even to survive, without entering a state of vassalage to the emerging industrial towns that had dispossessed them of their markets, by offering more inexpensive but (in almost every way) far inferior products. At the same time, it destroyed the cultural and religious practices that those communities had begotten as the most naturally befitting expressions of their modes of life.

New industrial techniques were developing, soon to transform the entire economy and turn Britain (England in particular) from an agricultural and handi-

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craft nation into an industrial one: multiplying many times the towns and their inhabitants. Just as enclosure destroyed the peasantry in the open-field districts, so machinery and steam power eliminated one cottage craft after another ... In some [rural trades] — wool, for example— collapse was complete within a generation. Everywhere craftsmen found it daily harder to hold up against the tide of mass production. The very essence of craftsmanship—its individuality, its emphasis on quality and on the performance of the *whole* process of manufacture—placed it at a disadvantage commercially, and rendered it ever less competitive. And as the nineteenth century advanced, the village community became more accessible and more vulnerable to change. The old monopolies had not been difficult to maintain in the absence of good communications; indeed their very isolation had been a source of strength. But all this began to evaporate before the turnpikes, the canals, the great trunk roads ... and finally the railways. It seemed only a question of time before the impetus of urban industry forced all the remaining mills, kilns and village workshops to close.<sup>69</sup>

*Every rural community had previously been isolated,*

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<sup>69</sup> Victor Bonham-Carter, *The Survival of the English Countryside* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), 62.

and each was, as such, truly a world unto itself. Each possessed its unique and vivid colour, its warmth of a wholly organic distinctness —what we would today wistfully brand ‘authenticity’, whose absence we feel.

And in the absence of the parasitic, and always awkwardly deficient simulation of the big city, or indeed, of the half-life of the comprehensive loss of dynamism that has since afflicted these lost worlds, there reigned a now vanished fullness of unselfconscious devotion and emotion, an unvarnished human sincerity, a devotion and emotion that have indeed always been the sole preserve of such human cultures as have been engendered by the precise linguistic, religious, commercial, and geographical realities into which they were born.

This is a phenomenon that by its nature can never be reproduced in the ‘global village’. Little marred by *simulation*: real societies, populated by real people.

And yet with enormous rapidity, the equilibrium of this established order of millennia would be worn away by the many consequences of new, easy exposure to the cities

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A live society is powered by work. Once the jobs have gone, then the community they created in bound to disappear. An early symptom in England was the disintegration of folk life. With the passing of the peasant, it was inevitable that the native culture of the countryside should drift towards its demise. Folk dances, folk songs, local customs, dialect, the very values and attitudes characteristic of countrymen—in all their vigour and variety, deriving ultimately from man's intimacy with Nature—weakened and waned ... In sum, as man lost his awe for the mystery of Nature, so he lost interest in the art of honouring it in ritual and entertainment. Science and sophistication killed tradition, just as they weakened faith in the dogmas of religion. And—as with the economy of the countryside—once the heart had missed its beat and the blood ceased to flow freely, then the whole body of rural society suffered in every part ... quicker communications made the town as easy to reach for entertainment as for work; and what was discovered there—by reason of its novelty, of being ready-made, of its aura of superiority—came to be preferred to the customary attractions of the village, which depended wholly upon the inventiveness and the participation of those who attended them. Thus further damage was done to that sense of self-sufficiency, which had hitherto permeated all of rural life.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 64.

Assimilation into the city necessitated assimilation into a monoculture that had cut the potencies of true diversity off at their source. The multifarious human richness of rural and village cultures would soon be severed from its roots in the living earth, to instead wither in vases of unfamiliar water, in the self-congratulatory museums of 'cultural heritage' that only celebrate the exceptionalist and totalising hegemony of modern industrial society.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The words of Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi in his *Kufr: An Islamic Critique* spring to mind: 'The previous great ages of man are now encapsulated in displays in museums. Primitive cultures are captured in an instant of 'living history' in anthropological museums. There is their tent, real handwoven goat's hair. There is their handbeaten brass coffee roasting and cooking service. There is a wax bedouin in a replica robe. There is his stuffed camel. We observe them. We examine them. We learn from them. Thus we are the superior culture. Ah, but we do empathise. Our humanity is vast. We recognise their art, their music, their simple faith. We realise that the nomadic desert life has poetic, indeed, dangerous appeal — still that irritating irrational streak of waywardness not yet fully eliminated. But our warm humanist ethic absorbs the nomad into our poetic imagination. After all, the free desert life is all very well but—what if you needed an appendectomy? How would your wife like to deliver her baby without the reassuring doctor and his surgical knife and his anaesthetics in case of any sign of pain or

And yet the loss is not the luxurious nostalgia, as is often alleged, of those who have only been made comfortable enough to purport to care about ‘folk’ culture by the very modern industrialism that has made such (article of faith) ‘comfort and abundance’ so widely available.

In any event, these pre-industrial social phenomena far surpass anything that can be blithely dismissed as a mere miscellany of ‘folk traditions.’ They rather represent complete nexuses of culturally distinctive, holistic, virtuous, collective responses to natural human exigencies of every kind, the loss of which precipitated a more general loss — which would follow in the wake of industrialisation amongst other agencies — of any truly binding sense of personal and communal responsibility to fellow man.<sup>72</sup>

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trouble? What if you wanted to read a paperback? And you shudder at the raw isolation of it all and the naked fear of existence, life and death that for a moment have been thrillingly exposed to you in the cool air-conditioned splendour of the life-arena of the Museum of Man. The haunting flute of the bedouin will not long disturb your dreams.’ (Norwich: Diwan Press, 1982), 14.

<sup>72</sup> ‘As Whitehall and County Hall took the place of the manor and the parsonage as the main sources of social aid in the countryside,

4.3

THE SPLIT BETWEEN NATURE & KNOWING  
SUBJECT, AND OTHER BIFURCATIONS:  
IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS  
& THE INTERNET AGE

In an interesting essay in the volume of *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*, the psychologist W. H. R. Rivers adduced evidence which has led him to believe that the natives of that unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the 'Civilization' forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom. When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheap motor-cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories from a loudspeaker ... it will not be surprising

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substituting—as democracy demanded—public right for private discretion, they did so at the expense of the old pattern of patronage and self-help. Personal benefactions, curious charities attached to church and chapel, especially village friendly societies—with their distinctive emblems, bands, banners, feasts and rituals—all declined or died out altogether' (*Ibid.*, 64).

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if the population of the entire world rapidly follows  
the fate of the Melanesians.<sup>73</sup>

T.S. Eliot, 'Marie Lloyd' (1923)

The defrocking of religion in public space, the waning of craft and rise of machine-made architectural and artefactual uniformity, and the destruction of rural cultures by city monoculture; these are three of the main strippers of meaning from lived environment and public social relations in the contemporary world. They are ultimately symptoms of all five of our bifurcations; but most foundationally that of the metaphysical autism of the split between nature and knowing subject, in which nature and human social configurations in their rationalised incarnations become irrevocably 'othered' from the (now merely 'subjective') isomorphism of theophanic signs upon the horizons and in the soul, the shared experience and celebration of which had previously constituted the spiritual well-spring of local community and culture.

Now, instead, the blandness of the modern city lived-environment possesses a reciprocal relationship

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<sup>73</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), 421.

to the blandness of modern city public life; both cannot help but to tend to reinforce the monotony and cold indifference of the other.

Richard Sennett has identified an important sense in which this extends beyond the uniformity of the modern built environment (‘on the most physical level, the environment *prompts people to think of the public domain as meaningless*’)<sup>74</sup> to the uniformity entailed even by something as ostensibly innocuous as machine-made clothes:

The mass production of clothes, and the use of mass-production patterns by individual tailors or seamstresses, means that many diverse segments of the cosmopolitan public began in gross to take on a similar appearance, that public markings were losing distinctive forms ... *the machine meant that social differences*—important differences, necessary to know if one were to survive in a rapidly expanding milieu of strangers—*were becoming hidden, and the stranger more intractably a mystery.*<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, NY: Albert A. Knopf, 1977), 12

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

Because the insipid uniformity of machine-made built environment, goods, and clothing is not innocuous at all; it has always represented one of the chief channels by which the implantation and passive inculcation of dogmatic metaphysical arbitrarism has been achieved; and thereby rendered all the more dangerous, precisely in its self-labelling as 'neutral.'

The erasure of meaning from the horizons, and the outward forms of public life, and the investiture of all meaning in the self-defining, self-creating individual, has inserted numerous paradoxes into the very idea that human society possesses an intrinsic nature and overall teloi, such as, for example, a supreme moral purpose.

The sole genuine communal ends become those capable of neutrally facilitating arbitrary individual ends, viz., those directed towards protecting the arbitrariness of the self-defined and therefore in some sense fundamentally *solipsistic* individual.

Yet the individual almost invariably desires the affirmation of seeing himself in the mirror of others recognisably similar to himself in nature. That is, he desires company, and he moreover needs the

cooperation of others in order to fulfil his most basic needs. The notion of the collective *forces* itself upon us; but we have no way of defining it on broad bifurcationism, except as a fundamentally arbitrary aggregate of individuals, each of whom have conflicting and ultimately mutually unintelligible definitions of themselves and of 'the world'. It is hard to see how even the sheer existence of a group of individuals could help interfering with an 'autonomy of the individual' so defined. And this is indeed one of the causes of the anonymous, purposeless feeling of contemporary public life; people are afraid that a common cause will impair self-autonomy.

The public problem of contemporary society is two-fold: behavior and issues which are impersonal do not arouse much passion; the behavior and the issues begin to arouse passion when people treat them, falsely, as though they were matters of personality.<sup>76</sup>

Rather than cultivating or indeed even so much as *conceding the existence* of matters of principle and universal import vital for any even vaguely holistic

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 6

account of human flourishing, contemporary civil life and social intercourse instead tend towards an ever increasingly myopic fixation on the navigation and negotiation of individual subjectivities, which operate on an at least tacit assumption of self-enclosedness; each individual is fundamentally unintelligible, ‘a mystery’, and this is crucial exactly in order to safeguard arbitrary ‘autonomy’.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> From our perspective, it seems that in the valuable passage that follows Arnold Gehlen depicts a kind intermediary state — one that can be said to have obtained for many centuries from early modernity to the beginnings of unravelment in the first decades of the twentieth century: ‘Interpersonal relations are ... losing the fullness of structure and meaning they possessed ... Over the centuries the forms of public life had seen a fusion between a sense of purposefulness on the one hand, and a keen sense of taste on the other; as this fusion has gained extension into the private realm, these forms had served, there, to protect the individual from himself ... Any individual transplanted into our own times from the vigorously concrete culture of antiquity, of the Middle Ages, or even of the baroque era, would find most astonishing the conditions of physical proximity, and the lack of structure and form, in which the people of our time are forced to vegetate; and would wonder at the elusiveness and abstractness of our institutions, which are mostly “immaterial states of affairs.”’ Arnold Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology* (1954), trans. Patricia Lipscomb (New York, NY: Colombia University Press, 1980), 73-74).

Human friendship begins to lose its former basis, in the principle of mutual participation in a human nature limitlessly rich, and instead inclines towards a fortress solidarity founded on the sharedness of assumptions which are acknowledged to be subjective and fundamentally voluntaristic, in which the friends hold out together, not without a certain degree of hostility, against those who do not share their assumptions. This hostility is necessary, in lieu of the possibility of any resolution, proof, or encounter with normativity.

Public, anonymous interaction thereby takes on an increasing awkwardness, a silence which is the expression of the right not to be interfered with, with substantive topics carefully closed off, and especially anything which purports to transcend the purely perspectival, in order to attempt to grasp a 'nature of things'.

In the mid-19th Century there grew up in Paris and London, and thence in other Western capitals, a pattern of behavior unlike what was known in London or Paris a century before, or is known in most of the non-Western world today. There grew up the notion that

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strangers had no right to speak to each other, that each man possessed as a public right an invisible shield, a right to be left alone. Public behavior was a matter of observation, of passive participation, of a certain kind of voyeurism.<sup>78</sup>



The perplexing public phenomenon in which people feel at perfect liberty to share subjective trivialities, but withdraw at the first hint of any exploration of non-physical fact, let alone spiritual discourse — in which strangers who will likely always remain strangers, go through the motions of a public life ‘together’ — has only been intensified in its alienated quality by the advent of the internet.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 27. Albert Borgmann tells of ‘the expatriate quality of public life. We live in self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action ... Individualism has become cancerous. We live in an age of narcissism and pursue loneliness. These expressions are alarming not because they predict the ruin of the state; prediction and control, for all their liabilities, will continue to provide comfort and stability. Rather, these expressions of distress should disquiet us because they indicate that we have no common life, that what holds us all together is cold and impersonal design (...).’ *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 106.

‘Social media’ has involved the creation of abstracted identities, anonymous alter egos who ‘befriend’ one another by consummating their will-to-be-seen for who they are (even if it is only their alter egos, and world-pictures, that are seen), who only feel truly alive when enshrouded by this shadow of an infirm society, in which this type of intimate visibility has become increasingly rare and difficult.

We share words and images of ourselves and our world which reflect our self-placement within the particular universe of inter-subjectivity that we have chosen for ourselves. But unlike the bodily world, the internet allows one to carefully arrange one’s stand socially, before opening shop. The psychologised world of the internet becomes the sole substantive locus of social expression, with young adults, and indeed adults of all ages, finding it difficult to enact life in a real extramental world, in which, increasingly, we merely go through the motions of work and small talk, so that we can be allowed to return to our real internet world.

The internet is the ultimate rejection of essences; so much of it is the concretisation, in a new, ‘external’

world, of the perspectival relativisation of all things. It is the concretisation of self-determination, in a constructed level of being. Things can be created there; 'essences' can be 'designed', they can be made actual by simply combining into a whole whichever aspects of the imagination we wish to reify or even personify.

But the internet is not a concretisation of the imagination in the way that a work of great art is a concretisation of the imagination, by which one might rest from weary life in the world and find solace and refreshment in the contemplation and company of a realm of symbolism capable of revealing, at least in part, the real signification of both everyday life and our ultimate human purpose.

Rather, the internet is the concretisation of the imagination that has come to be used as a *replacement* for a real world, and for a real human subject living therein, now both so fragmented by the extreme aftermath of our bifurcations, that they struggle grievously to relate to one another.

The internet is a world brought into being to serve as the willing manifestation of postmodernity's dream, replacing an extramental world which, stubbornly

insisting that it indeed *has* a real nature, so obstinately and tenaciously resisted that dream.

And it has had further, beneficial effects, which represent, as it were, forms of *compensation* for the dire straitening of personal and social life under the sway of modernity.

It can allow people to make a living who would otherwise be prevented from doing so due to the imbalances in their social circumstances brought on by social atomisation. It has brought like-minded people together, from isolated single parents in societies wracked by divorce, to young suitors whose abnormal conditions of social disintegration and isolation dictate that they would otherwise be forced to resign themselves to lives of perpetual bachelorhood, to intellectual collaborators, able to join forces with one another despite often profoundly uncomprehending or hostile immediate environments.

Yet in its degenerate aspect, the internet allows us to absolutise one abstracted aspect of what is in reality inconveniently whole. It is a way to concretise fantasy and the imagination; not in reality, but so as to remain within the fantasy; it delivers the promises of radical

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arbitrarist autonomy made by modernity, promises which it proved unable to deliver in the external world.



Enchained, the simulation of autonomy

And so rather than traversing the heavens of outer space, or extracting great works of art out of our purported emancipation from falsely reified human constructions like family, morality, or gender, the advanced technology that has taken radical individual self-determination as gospel turns out to have confined itself to the automation of convenience, and

simulation. For the arbitrarist, constructionist metaphysical voluntarism underlying this 'self-determination,' inexorably and ineluctably drags us to an ever-worsening social atomisation, in which we are directed to submit ourselves to a voluntary locked-in syndrome wherein we will be safely shut in upon ourselves and our pleasures; in which the most fundamental of human needs have been systematically abstracted from the holistic interrelationships and metaphysical teloi that had in all previous human generations charted our paths of spiritual ascent, but that now merely depict the dismal descent promised not by 'transhumanism', but by simple subhumanism, in the utterly flattened placelessness of the perpetual Blank Slate of 'radical freedom' and 'unconditioned will,' in which we will now be forced to build our pods.

Yes, the picture of human society painted by doctrines of the impossibility of metaphysics, of necessary progress, of individualism, and of the repudiation of human nature, is indeed desolate and forlorn; and yet it faithfully represents the precise contours of the enchained 'emancipation' which

constitutes the central promise of universal and neutral not-Western Civilisation.

Already, such patterns are beginning to be emulated in every world locale to have successfully acknowledged the universality and neutrality of that secular modernity. Observe the loss of traditional Sufism almost across the board in the Arab world, followed by the demise of the Islamic urban environment, in harmony and continuity with nature and imbued with beauty and the sacred; the disappearance of craft, of local cultures, the dismantling of traditional hierarchies and their replacement by the ascendancy of the totemised Westernised doctor and the engineer, both priests of a fetishised 'The Science', and thereby the ultimate authorities in all matters; the fact that those inhabiting Westernising, atomising neighbourhoods in the Arab world today do not know their close neighbours; in dress as well: the bifurcation of creed and conviction, on the one hand, and the arbitrarist liberal 'choice', on the other, which an Arab woman there makes when she goes out in public with her hair uncovered, or perhaps even her midriff displayed. And what next?

The meaninglessness of work and cultural life within an outward shell of bifurcation, stripped in the Muslim world of its historical rationale and (partially) emancipatory intent, was at least consoled, until very recently, by the relative intactness of family ties and structures of sacred authority; and yet every evidence now suggests that the family in the Muslim world is presently undergoing rapid erosion at the ever-grasping hands of arbitrary individual freedom, being replaced, in too many cases, by rampant mental instability and crises of authority. Whither now?

These patterns of disintegration will continue to be emulated, knowingly and unknowingly, as long as the Arab world and the wider 'post'-colonised world continue to be gripped by the delusion of neutrality, and thus persist in failing to understand the singularly Western, voluntaristic, individualist, anti-essentialist, anti-theological philosophical structures that have given rise to them.

Outward uniformity is premised on inward uniformity; and in light of our bifurcations, both uniformities are to be viewed as indicative of 'progress.'

*The next book in our Elements of Modernity series  
explores progress and individualism.*



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