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PESSIMISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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A series of great wars implies a long, even longer, period of civilized restoration. It is not alone the duration of the war, nor its combat space, its dead and its economic loss, that presents us with an issue, for the depth of moral, political, and psychological upset challenges the capacity of all men to rebuild a humane life. The courage and moral restraint necessary to start history on its ordinary and progressive course again may lie beyond the capacity of democratic citizenry. One proposition needs to be affirmed: Civilization has been constructed by men going beyond themselves or their customary impulses. Civilization has not been an inevitable product of the laws of life; it is not a creature of automatic forces, for it is a fruit of reason and the spirit. It arises from painful decisions and hesitant steps, and its defense is based on the conviction that we are burdened or blessed with the command to achieve our best.

The sanguine spirit that has characterized American thought is faced with the fact that for a generation societies in Europe have been negating civilized achievement. A traditional coherence in society has been broken down in the dislocations of war. To analyze the crisis, the revolution of today, suggests the final principles of any one's metaphysics. From the multitude of surface plans for the restoration of order and security, we must turn to the examination of what we deem man capable of and the means he may choose to achieve his ends. To state the issue, we must go beyond the mere formulation of economic

devices to keep the economy functioning, for finally we must inquire whether the public temper is such that a system of constructive policies may be carried into effect. It is only a public spirit conscious of social values and the erratic consequences of policy that is able to face in a sustained manner the prolonged issues of restoration in Western society. The danger for us, as it is already exemplified in the European surrender of liberty, is the growth of pessimistic thinking latent in any body of ideas. Mass pessimism is clearly one of the most inflammable of demagogic materials. The intellectuals recognize pessimism as a contingency present in most schemes of thought; it is often merely a prophecy of doom unless a particular panacea is accepted. But for the masses, who may not indulge in such refinements of thought, an enduring failure to reach a measure of order and security can bring about all but complete indifference to the long-run aspects of public action.

While our tradition has been excessively optimistic, there are elements in it from the start which might become the foundation of a revolutionary reorientation of thought. Nor can we say that any one point of view is less likely than others to make its contribution to a pessimistic attitude toward life. It is often the circumstances under which we live and the reaction to conditions that bring about the emergence of a latent repudiation of the dream of progress, or an actual refusal to accept any longer the validity of tradition. Broadly, we may say that pessimism is a type of thinking peculiar to a matured and intellectually sophisticated society. It is characteristic of men who have lost their imagination, and their conception of the creation they are capable of through social time. Materialism is, for example, a suitable point of view when the political and economic horizon has begun to contract, and when struggle to maintain paltry advantages becomes the chief effort of daily existence. In spite of the millenarianism associated with Marxism, we would argue that materialism and pessimism are likely to go together in declining societies.

Pessimism, and particularly American political pessimism, is a statement of the conditions under which progress is either not inevitable or is impossible. It is an intuition, a sense of fear of a changing relation between values, *i. e.*, traditions, and institutions. Or it is a characteristically conservative attitude, though surely it is not by any means even the half of conservatism. Pessimism may, therefore, be a sense of the emergence of new institutions and values; it may be in particular moments a perception of arrangements of power which no longer coincide with old loyalties. Yet though we may say that a pessimistic attitude is often conservative, it may also be revolutionary in that it can be a prophecy of disaster unless a new structure of society is accepted. In politics, it may thus imply the most extreme action or tactic in the social struggle; it may produce a dictatorship of fanatics, or an oligarchy of wealth. When the left threatens, the right may arm.¹

A study of the interpretations of the crisis of our age will show that deterministic systems of thought tend to be pessimistic.² We are facing profound changes in the near future, these theories show, and the new system may not be very pleasant for the ordinary person. Spykman's geopolitical theories indicate that whatever our will may be, we face the permanent implications of geography in international politics; Burnham argues that the managerial revolution is just around the bend; the Marxians show with finality the inevitable terror of a disintegrating capitalism; and Spengler has shown that our civilization has passed its peak. Those who see men simply as a part of nature may, like some psychologists, insist that we are navigating the uncharted wastes of the subconscious, or that we are buffeted by the storms of the irrational. It is not a matter of choice; it is part of the vast system of necessity through which we must live if we would stay alive. Even in Christ-

¹ See William J. Ghent, *The Reds Bring Reaction* (Princeton, 1928), pp. vii-viii.

² Thomas R. Hanley, "Some Interpretations of the Present World Crisis," *The National Benedictine Education Association Bulletin*, Vol. 25, pp. 115-183 (1943).

ian theory, the denial of man's moral nature by the acceptance of a deterministic analysis can have only the most disastrous effects.

In a taxonomic sense, pessimism may be regarded as either absolute or conditional. There are few examples of absolute contemporary pessimism, and usually there is a loophole by which an ultimate regeneration is admitted. Spengler denies absolutely the dream of progress of the days since the Enlightenment; some Christian sects see an early end to all earthly hope in the Lord's coming. Others like Pareto and Brooks and Henry Adams perceive a supervening law that the most courageous optimism cannot repeal. Perhaps Nietzsche's analysis of the crisis of European civilization is, in relation to traditional ideas of Western society, an example of such pessimism.³ Still, most pessimistic thought, especially American thought, is conditional in nature. It is an assertion that evil days are ahead if certain things are done or left undone. The reformer, like Henry George, couples his panacea with a prophecy of doom and a denial of progress, if his ideas are not accepted and put into policy. The conservative may well argue that the most laudable reformist impulses will merely result in failure and a more troubled social situation than before. The pacifist insists that the use of force in war will only make the evil of the world greater.⁴ The legal internationalist will assure us that unless sovereignty gives way to a world legal order, there is no hope of evading the devastations of war. Socialists contend that unless capitalism and its imperialistic children are put to death the dream of progress is futile. In a less revolutionary em-

³ Cf. Eric Voegelin, "Nietzsche, the Crisis and the War," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 6, pp. 177 ff. (1944). "Nietzsche's transvaluation of values," says Professor Voegelin, "... is a conscious attempt to transcend the crisis and to find the firm ground for the erection of a new and stable order of values. This ground cannot be found by developing one more utopia of a new society, but only by creating in one's own personality — with the means at hand, and with precarious chances of success — a new order beyond the crisis" (p. 185).

⁴ Mulford Q. Sibley, *The Political Theories of Modern Pacifism* (Philadelphia, 1944).

phasis, those who see the great evil as monopoly will explain that here is the fulcrum on which retrogression rests. But all of these views suggest that with a proper rearrangement of the conditions of life, man is capable of progress, or of attaining the rational and the good.

In measure, all of the ideas we have just mentioned deny contingently the effectiveness of the principle of universal sympathy and benevolence. They constitute a denial of the protean idea of progress with criticisms based on single but emphasized factors. Indeed, almost any single factor in social thinking can be made either a basis for pessimism or for the realization of progress in our traditional sense of that word.

In spite of the forebodings of the moralists, in spite of industrial conditions which should have given pause, the great tide of nineteenth-century thought carried forward the principles of science and social utility as the foundations of the future. Optimism in that period was based on a kind of scientific determinism, which in more sanguine moments led to the belief, for instance, that evolution might be the foundation for a new morality under the existing laws of the universe. At that time, at any rate, there was no uncertainty about the laws of science; they were generalizations from the unimpeachable facts of the universe.⁵ One did not need to be guided by tradition, by the Burkean principles of historical human nature, for old things, likely as not, were merely ignorance and reaction masquerading under the titles of prescription and honor. But the prophecy of the utilitarians, of men like Bentham, Lecky, Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer, submitted itself to the pragmatic test of consequences, and the consequences we have faced in this century have been in effect the very opposite of that which they predicted. It is still possible to say that the present revolutionary age is the result of men refusing to follow science, but the argument does not have the persuasiveness it had at the end of the nineteenth century. Now the pessimistic, deterministic conceptions of the

⁵ See in general W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (London, 2 vols., 1866).

future we have mentioned are also scientific. There was a time, difficult to point out, at which science became the servant of pessimism as well as of optimism. Science has been juggling its ideological masters. We may see a beginning of this movement in the late eighteenth century when Malthus, for instance, showed the fragility of optimism and the reality of social imperfection, but it was not until the twentieth century that the optimism of the Enlightenment gave place to the more gloomy interpretations of society. Science, in certain quarters at least, and perhaps by way of abuse, has become an influence for social pessimism. Scientific law is thus turned against the very aspirations it was once thought to foster. To say the least, the scientific imagination does not spend much time butressing the humanistic view of life, for it does not look for justice in an evaluation, a moral principle, that is supposed to govern men in spite of the impersonal dynamism of the vital impulse. The search for justice in morality rather than in science is a reassertion of the dualism of men, a reassertion of the freedom of the spirit. Thus we seek to escape from the gloom of futility, and our pessimism is, as Nietzsche said, a symbol or symptom of the deeper crisis in Western life. As Paul Elmer More has argued, at the end romantic or scientific egotism turns into horror at its own vacuity and romantic naturalism becomes despair.⁶

If we think of the use of reason as the freedom in men to choose ends and means and the effectiveness of such choice, the central proposition of an optimistic and progressive attitude toward life, the pessimistic impact of science becomes clear. For under the influence of science, the area of choice is limited, and forces which are parts of nature and are not subject to human choice tend to govern us. Particularly we may observe that irrational or non-rational interpretations of society flourish in such an atmosphere. And human behavior, as it may be observed in all of its imperfections, ceases to be the responsibility of the

⁶ Paul Elmer More, "The Drift of Romanticism," *Shelburne Essays*, Eighth Series (Boston, 1913), p. 189.

individual; it becomes rather the inevitable expression of men as automatic parts of nature. True, in this view, we may alter behavior by altering the conditions of life, but the alteration is itself part of the order of scientific calculation. The prevalence of anti-intellectualism in modern thought must be attributed to this phase of the impact of science on thinking. Its fruits lie plainly in the moral irresponsibility of leadership, as well as in the moral relativism of mass activity.

In the anti-democratic movements of this century, the application of these considerations is obvious. Whether we look at the anti-intellectualism of fascism and revolutionism, or whether we point to the moderate criticism of democracy in American thought, the basic factors are much the same. With the rejection of the tradition of individual responsibility, propaganda becomes the balance-wheel of power. In the extreme, it is contemporary race theory, pretending to be the product of science, which gives rise to the most clear-cut political pessimism. Gobineau, it is said, was one of the first systematic thinkers to try to find a deterministic element governing the matter of history. It is a denial of Bergson's theory in *Creative Evolution* that life tends to be indeterminate.⁷ Or, if we take the Freudian analysis, there is no chance in the operation of the mind, but the subconscious mind is not governed by rational choices; we are governed by a law which we cannot control or understand. But the results are much the same for the principle of civilization and progress. To assume the superiority of certain races implies at least for those who are inferior a genuine pessimistic attitude toward life; or

⁷ See Hannah Arendt, "Race-Thinking Before Racism," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 6, pp. 36 ff. (1944). We should remember, however, that race doctrine can produce optimistic political attitudes. Race mixture, for example, may be a factor in an evolutionary process which overcomes historic economic and social evils. The American defense of the "melting-pot" interpretation of immigration is a case in point, for here races as well as cultures were, it is said, making a contribution to the America of tomorrow. See Lyman Abbott, *America in the Making* (New Haven, 1911). On page 39, Abbott observes: "We have no common traditions, but we have a common expectation." The future holds us together.

to argue that there has been no advance in the moral faculties in the historic period suggests the fragility of what we call progress. Ralph Adams Cram argued that "the myth of progressive evolution is without validity."⁸ Shaw is not better than Socrates. Democracy can seriously validate itself only with quantitative standards, while majority rule means that the Hearstian mind, the neolithic mind, or the tabloid mind of the many will control.⁹ Unless the few set high qualitative standards for the many, this argument contends that the psychological forces at work today will destroy our scientific and business civilization. In any case, pessimism as to human nature will, in the extreme, reduce law and government to force. A naturalistic romanticism about progress finally turns in upon its own vitality.¹⁰

Carl Schmitt once observed that all the great political thinkers have had in common the principle of the corruption of human nature; man is evil, and in politics we must act accordingly. In certain respects, then, the naturalistic pessimism of Machiavelli joins the theological pessimism of John Calvin; there is a kind of positive reprobation in either case. Clearly, such ideas are difficult to carry to a final conclusion, and we might say likewise that all great political thinkers have included some mitigation of pessimism. Burke, for example, recognized that man's complex nature was given by God, and what saves man generally is our subjection, our capacity to be subject, to duty. It must be recognized, of course, that modern thought is far more Machiavellian than it is Calvinistic, and today when "science" in society leads to pessimism, it is often through Fiesole rather than through Geneva. Calvin's denial of free will, argues Cram, is "the progenitor of all the destructive forms of modern thought; determinism, behaviorism, *Freudismus*." The Nemesis of human freedom inheres more solidly in these corrupting heresies than

⁸ *The End of Democracy* (Boston, 1937), p. 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁰ Cf. Moorhouse F. X. Millar, "The American Concept of Man," *Thought*, Vol. 17, pp. 679-680 (1942).

in the restrictive laws of a Hitler or a Mussolini or of a democratic parliament.¹¹ On the other hand, if Jonathan Edwards assured us that men are hateful in the sight of God, the "Great Awakening" of the eighteenth century was, at least, an optimistic and democratic force, since the poor were organizing thereby their own religious society. But the Awakening passed, and the Calvinist vilification of human nature remained to be joined with the pragmatic assumption of the irrationality of men, which tends to reduce democracy to a technique of propaganda or a mere matter of the *laissez faire* of popular clamor.

In contrast with the rationalistic assumption that human nature is essentially good, and that all we need is institutions which will release our benevolent energy, the view that men are sinful implies certainly an imperfect achievement of human goals in history. It does not suggest the failure of moral responsibility which results from a purely naturalistic or scientific estimate of duty. While there is frustration in history, and the ultimate victory of man may be beyond history as we commonly think of it, there is also good in man, and his life is a dualism that is, at best, an equilibrium of effort.¹² From a religious point of view that stops short of the Calvinistic attitude, we must still recognize that there is no perfection in history, though it does not arise from ignorance so much as from the self-centered character of the ego. Thus there is still possible high achievement, and courses may be chosen which lead to orderly social life or to disintegration. Choice in such cases must, of course, be based on the moral character of man in the context of a moral order of the world.¹³

Religious pessimism is thus a kind of qualified optimism; or it is an optimism that is qualified by the contingency of a historical debacle. Its basic proposition would be that a

¹¹ Cram, *op. cit.*, p. 221. Cf. Philotheus Boehner, "Ockham's Political Ideas," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 5, p. 484 (1943).

¹² Paul Elmer More, "Studies of Religious Dualism," *Shelburne Essays*, Sixth Series (Boston, 1909).

¹³ Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York, 1941), Vol. 1, pp. 68-69; *Beyond Tragedy* (New York, 1937), *passim*.

purely secular, factitious, or technical interpretation of progress finds itself defeated in the end. No clearer illustration need be found than the falsification of the ethical prophecies of secular minds in the nineteenth century. What is in retrospect merely the high quantitative achievement of certain countries in a short historical period was taken as the evolutionary direction of life. The ebullient sentiments of W. E. H. Lecky, for example,¹⁴ should be balanced against the sober warnings of the nineteenth-century encyclicals as regards the nature of the period. Both secular and theological interpretations of history and politics take the fruits of history as suggestive at least of social dynamics. Thus the twentieth century becomes the graveyard of secular optimism and the proof of theistic admonition. Still, no social theory can rest content for its validity on an interpretation of historical events over a limited period of time. The pragmatic consequence is only a suggestion of the direction of events; it is hardly conclusive. What shall we say, for example, of the race pessimism implicit in the approaching stability and decline of population in the West?¹⁵

In turning to a more specific discussion of pessimism in American thought, it is clear that the growing optimism of the nineteenth century was never without its critics. We agree, however, that for an extended period beginning in the early nineteenth century and extending to at least the beginning of the "Great Depression," the tone and temper of our thinking was largely optimistic. Any person with a tendency to deflate the future was simply a disagree-

¹⁴ See Lecky, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁵ See Jacques Leclercq, *Marriage and the Family*, tr. by T. R. Hanley (Cincinnati, 1941). Leclercq argues (p. 95) that as civilization has sprung from Christianity, the abandonment of the faith will bring the downfall of that civilization. "At all events [p. 285], Neomalthusianism can boast of having launched a movement that is a menace in itself. It has rendered almost certain the fall of a civilization which, even without it, could have been saved only with difficulty." In practice, a most optimistic or casual outlook on life, *e. g.* faith in the inevitable technological utopia, can go hand in hand with a practical disbelief in the necessity of having people around if there is to be a civilization in the future. Is this unconscious pessimism?

able and disappointed detractor from the promise of American life. While enthusiasm for the future was tempered often with an argument for the correction of evils, there was never any doubt about the ultimate outcome. The upsurge of humanitarianism in the early part of the last century was clearly one of the basic justifications to Americans of the democratic creed. We have yet to try our fidelity to democracy in the more sobering world of reconstruction after the wars of this century. And there are signs that love and hate, humanitarianism and cruelty, freedom and suppression, education and unscrupulous propaganda are perilously close together. Might we not even say that optimism is, indeed, close to pessimism, just as realization and frustration balance each other along an exceedingly narrow path?

Pessimism in America means that the tradition of the unlimited and progressive realization of civilization has failed.¹⁶ Civilization has meant to the optimistic view the reception of the movements in thought which have tried to lift the ceiling on secular achievement, while the pessimistic strain has insisted that the new is not always the better, or even that the new is destructive of civilization itself. One of the early and important issues of this nature was the discussion of the French Revolution in the United States. It is customary to place Thomas Jefferson and John Adams at opposite poles of thought on this question. The eager receptivity for new French ideas of the Enlightenment, science, positivism, and secularism shown by Jefferson is balanced against adherence to the Anglo-American tradition of law, political restraint, and historical continuity. Many of the ideas accepted by Jefferson were, in their earlier years, rejected by Adams as destructive of social balance and morality.

If we assume that the Federalist and Democratic-Republican traditions in the nineteenth century set the fundamental pattern of political discussion and conflict, we must recognize that in each there was and is an emphasis on

¹⁶ See Charles A. Beard, *The American Spirit* (New York, 1942).

contingent pessimism. It may be argued that while the Jeffersonians saw the decline of democracy in the evolution of European urban-industrial conditions, the Federalists were inclined to see the negation of civilized order in the excesses of either urban or agrarian democracy. To the Federalists, the new democracy and the excesses of the revolution in Europe bespoke the destruction of Anglo-American continuity; to the Republicans, the more orderly course of history was a denial of the new glow from the Enlightenment. Since Jefferson and Adams found much in common in their old age, one is tempted to minimize the sharpness of the difference of which we have been speaking; but certainly with all the overlapping there is a difference or a conflict in tradition. The fulminations of John Taylor against the Hamiltonian principles were real enough to the Jeffersonian democrat in his own day.

In general, both Federalist and Republican pessimism gave way as the nineteenth century moved on, and popular belief turned toward the inevitability of American destiny. People forgot Jefferson's distrust of the non-landowning city proletariat, and John Taylor's tirades were soon outmoded as the products of a bygone day. For America, the idea that there might be periods and conditions of moral decay faded out. Federalist pessimism gave way before the collapse of extremism in Europe, the mellowing of rivalries, the security of property, and the economic expansion of the United States.¹⁷ Even the Eastern seaboard belief in the degeneracy of the frontier was being absorbed by the romantic conception of America. Some economists, like Daniel Raymond and Mathew Carey, saw the need of rejecting the implicit and explicit economic pessimism of Ricardo and Malthus; America was not to be governed by such somber conceptions.¹⁸ "Cooper with his whining thrusts at men in shirtsleeves and Melville with his dislike of mankind in the mass spoke largely for themselves. In a sense they also voiced the misgivings of the older Calvinist

¹⁷ Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943), pp. 174, 240.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 253 ff.

and Episcopalian mercantile and landed classes toward democracy."¹⁹ The romantic impulse toward the unlimited was naturally criticized as well by the leaders of southern thought after the slave controversy became acute. "The flowering of New England," as Van Wyck Brooks had described it, indicated the end, for the time being, of the respectability of pessimistic evaluations of the future.

In spite of the earlier experience of Europe and the warnings of agrarian-minded thinkers, the rising industrialism of the United States was welcomed as a further chapter in the assurance God had given us. Until the great disintegration of the industrial system in this century, it was chiefly the socialists who, after the middle of the last century, insisted that capitalism was inconsistent with American democratic ideas. We can see in retrospect that industrial and urban conditions have been the most pervasive denial of the ethical and humanitarian dreams which filled our discourses on progress. Our very loftiness of vision introduced a relatively permanent contradiction into the American psyche; if we resolve this condition as it has been in the rest of Western civilization, it will be at the expense of romantic humanitarianism; it will be a return to the ethics of the Federalists. Socialism, however, was a victim also of utopian myopia; for, as Karl Kautsky argued for the whole movement at the turn of the century, the social revolution will do away with the physiological and social roots of pessimism. Mankind will become joyful and appreciative of beauty and the realized goodness of the new society.²⁰ Lacking socialism, W. J. Ghent saw increasing state power, regular soldiers keeping the masses tied in bondage to their industrial jobs, and a tendency toward a stratified society.²¹ To the socialist, the conservatives are inherently pessimistic, since they do not assume an easy changeability of human nature, and because they tend

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

²⁰ Karl Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*, tr. by A. M. and M. W. Simons (Chicago, 1902), p. 188.

²¹ William J. Ghent, *Our Benevolent Feudalism* (New York, 1902), *passim*.

to adhere to formal laws of politics, for example, the inevitability of inequality or oligarchy in social organization. In a somewhat similar vein, Henry George predicted in *Progress and Poverty* the decline of our civilization unless the fundamental land reform he advocated was adopted. Broadly, the socialists contended that the catastrophic results of capitalism will not be carried to their ultimate conclusion, since the social revolution will intervene and a new social system will be generated. Socialistic pessimism is thus merely a limited, and not to be feared, contingency.

It is our own age, the warlike period of the twentieth century, which raises most clearly the issue of pessimism. Specifically, the issue is whether the historical and traditional optimism of the American people can survive the buffeting of reality. The conflict between our ethical and democratic assumptions and the actual conditions of history is far more acute than it was in the years after Appomattox; it has, we think, grown rather steadily more sharp. The Progressive movement, for example, leads to the New Freedom and to the New Deal, and to what may come afterwards. But in all of these movements there is the assertion of the failure of the American dream unless a particular system of social reform is adopted. History will throw us down unless with H. D. Lloyd the commonwealth is vindicated against wealth; or with Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., government must be given back to the people, else dire consequences will follow; monopolies or Wall Street become symbols of decline for those, at least, who accepted the resurgent pessimism of American politics.

Still, it is the period between the two world wars which has shaken us most rudely. The long depression was viewed by some as showing the necessity of social revolution, but for the ordinary American, it was necessary for the first time to put security above all else. While the socialists urged the fragility of our prosperity after 1918, the pessimistic strain was clear among intellectuals who berated American democracy as a hollow and Philistine performance. Disillusionment was greater, let us argue, than after

the Civil War.²² The majority was the raw material out of which only occasionally a real human being was manufactured. In New Deal thought we find the argument that we have now a developed economy, that frontiers are closed; and that the problem of our age is merely to keep the industrial system functioning within reasonable limits. If this is not pessimism, then at least it is the slowing down of optimism. Naturally, those opposed to the new departure were pessimistic over the destruction of the old values of political life.

There is "doubt" at the center of our thought. It may be questioned now that the older symbols of political discussion can evoke belief or enthusiasm. The social conflict is, perhaps, more naked and elemental. And those who talk of issues in the framework of constitutional provisions are considered to be hiding false and ignoble motives. This is the nature of warring times; and perhaps we should regard the years after the Civil War as a prelude to what will likely be in our era, when the guns have been stilled for an indefinite period. Lewis Mumford has drawn a contrast between the revival of "the tragic sense of life" in Herman Melville and the fact that "except in the roughest political lampooning satire did not penetrate the leathery optimism and the cast-iron self-righteousness of antebellum America. . . ." ²³ The Civil War, argued Mumford, destroyed the culture of two hundred and fifty years which produced Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and Melville; in its place there developed a material civilization inimical to human culture.²⁴ "Melville's younger contemporaries, who fought in the Civil War, knew Life and Death; but those who prospered in the years that followed knew something more dreadful than simple death; they knew chaos and purposelessness and disintegration, such chaos and purposelessness, mixed with a wan reminiscent hope, as Henry Adams pictured in his *Education*."²⁵

²² Cf. Curti, *op. cit.*, pp. 692 ff.; Oscar Cargill, *Intellectual America* (New York, 1941), *passim*.

²³ Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1929), pp. 5, 281.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

Henry Adams, however, is not typical of the artistic and intellectual protest against Philistinism in America, though to him like many others who were to follow, the Continent, and particularly France, provided an atmosphere in which genius might flourish. *The Education of Henry Adams*, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, as well as the *Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres* represent a broader, more profound questioning of our optimism and complacency than is found in the creative labors of the pre-1929 American expatriate on the Paris Left-Bank. The expatriate may have seen little of value in American commercial and industrial society, but he was content as an alternative with the creative standards of his own group in his own time. The fragmentary character of our civilization, the dilemma of unity and diversity, the problem of modern energy and its dissipation in contrast with the faith and unity of other times, led Henry Adams to seek behind the architectural marvels of the Gothic the civilization that succeeded in producing it. He was seeking, as the *Prayer* shows, what our forebears had left behind them when America was settled. What peace he found was not in the uncoordinated energy of our society, but in its opposite, the affirmation of a faith and a unity that alone lived in the Christian past. The pessimism of Henry Adams is not common in America, for it states a problem perhaps more ultimate than is perceived by many social critics, reformers, party leaders, or even the mine-run of left-wing intellectualism. Yet a time may come when an attempt at a religious restoration of culture in the West generally will present the issue specifically to us.²⁶

To many Americans the great depression beginning in 1929 was the first truly pessimistic period in our history.²⁷

²⁶ The theories of Brooks Adams fall into a much more conventional interpretation of the forces that govern civilization. He represents the contingent pessimism of many of the deterministic interpretations. See *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (New York, 1903); *The Theory of Social Revolutions* (New York, 1913).

²⁷ See Harold J. Laski, *Faith, Reason and Civilization* (New York, 1944), p. 172. He remarks that until October, 1929, "there were few Americans, and perhaps even fewer Europeans, who did not

Here was what seemed to be a genuine query addressed to the symbols of progress, for we faced a negation of all the assurances of science, industrialism, and urbanism on which both young and old had been fed. Behind the whole question of the depression and the measures taken to combat it, stands the issue of the viability of industrial and urban society. Few conservatives show much confidence that the recent ante-bellum system can survive without serious modification, while more radical voices, such as socialism, deny that it can function at all. Beyond these the agrarian and the guildsman have insisted that even socialism will result simply in the servile and bureaucratic state. Christian social theory, likewise, is becoming more and more uncertain of the embodiment of justice in the current forms of capitalism. The fear of the machine, or the necessity of dealing with the machine if civilization is to advance, is one of the essential aspects of contemporary intellectual conservatism. But it is a contingent pessimism which suggests the alternatives that might be successful.²⁸

In the main current of thought, however, the issue is stated as the proper policy for a mature society. At least, in the United States, in contrast with Europe, we can speak of our troubles as those of maturity. Our political doctors must attempt to keep the complexities of urban civilization in equilibrium, though it is good politics no doubt to talk as if the frontier began in the next county. Technological advance, we are assured, is unlimited in its potentiality, and the future will bring it all to us. Moreover, the secular conception of man stemming from the eighteenth century

think that the United States had a special destiny reserved for it, different from the destiny of the Old World. . . . The years of the New Deal made it evident that the mental climate of America was not in essence different from that of any other acquisitive society." On page 29 he says: "America ceased, after the first World War, to be the land of promise."

²⁸ The works of A. J. Penty might be cited here, especially *A Guildsman's Interpretation of History* (London, 1920). The slowly growing but important bibliography of American agrarian and anti-industrial thought deserves attention in connection with the study of pessimism in politics.

has all but reached the conclusion that we really have no nature, that we are the product of ideological and technical environment; all we have to do to be successful is to drift with the tides of the power age. Still, the belief that we can defend a just cause in war belies a natureless man; if there is justice, it must be a component of men who compose society. The effectiveness of optimistic exhortation has yet to be demonstrated; even its use as a vote-getting device may be questioned. But the alternative becomes an outright acceptance of contingent pessimism, that is, an analysis of our times which denies the promise of the last century. The revolutionary era has, however, been a race course of destruction and not of civilized or orderly achievement.²⁹

Thus, in the struggling material civilization of the present, one central issue is the place of our traditional humanitarian ideology. Clearly, it has been placed against the course of history, and ideal and actuality do not even remotely coincide. Our optimistic view of life has been fed on the promise of the humanitarian impulse. Progress has been taken as the normal consequence of the application of benevolent sentiment. But benevolence and harshness are sometimes the obverse and reverse; while we have thought

²⁹ One of the most persistent issues which gives rise to pessimistic attitudes is fiscal policy. On the one hand, those who fear the increasing debt and taxation of the modern state insist that the political and social consequences may come close to fascism; on the other hand, the defenders of the unbalanced budget may argue that the downward economic spiral can only be stopped by government investment. Both sets of ideas are implicitly pessimistic as to the kind of economic order in which all of us must live.

Another issue with notable pessimistic implications is foreign policy. Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (New Haven, 1942), makes it pretty clear that individuals and states are like automata; we must obey the logic of matter and situations rather than select the policies we want to follow. The argument that in a democracy the people have a right and duty to select their foreign policy has no place in such a deterministic international order. M. J. Adler, *How to Think About War and Peace* (New York, 1944), avows a long-run optimism and short-run pessimism, in that there is no immediate chance of preventing wars. The idea that our only hope is militarism or a strong international police is also pessimistic in implication.

we were generous, others have believed us either stupid or grasping. We have not resolved the cleavage in our psyche which arises from the belief in our own progressive kindness and the assertion of what might with understatement be called our ego. Paul Elmer More, probably the most distinguished of our modern intellectual conservatives, has argued that humanitarianism surrenders to naturalism and materialism because of its emphasis on material aid to the objects of benevolence. Humanitarians fall into two classes, those who have no imagination or the sentimentalists, and those who have a perverted imagination that can be cruel and intolerant to an astounding degree. Such are the leaders who institute a terror in the name of liberty, or who in the quest of ideals are willing to slaughter all who are incapable of sharing the new humanitarian vision. Thus even if we are humanitarians, we may be literal and precise pessimists in our behavior, or we may become so by rejecting the unrealizable for a hard immoral political realism.³⁰

We may assert our own ego with the most romantic individualism while, at the same time, we are willing to punish the world for not accepting us as the true manifestation of what is right and just. Pessimism is, therefore, primarily a product of tension in the social system and insecurity in the individual. But pessimism is often particular in nature; it is the denial of the other fellow's dream of a happy world. Our own experience since the beginning of the current revolutionary period in 1914 would suggest that the American faith in the future has suffered severe jars and jolts. The confusion and war of the modern world makes either a religious or secular optimism difficult, and the problem is clearly presented for the masses as well as for the intellectuals. Pessimism is certainly one of the issues we will have to face in the post-war period, for, in the extreme, the native fascist movements show the presence of despair and hate; and in the less violent positions, the problem is primarily one of holding our former status

³⁰ See Robert Shafer, *Paul Elmer More and American Criticism* (New Haven, 1935), pp. 107-108.

against the tendency of the times. The nineteenth century was, in contrast, a period of great conservative élan, though it was spotted by revolutions and misery; in our own time, the élan is gone, and the revolutionary tide is more prominent than ever.³¹

Security as a symbol in politics is profoundly evocative today because of the latent pessimism of the popular mind, as demonstrated at least by movements of violence and anti-intellectualism in European politics, and to some extent in America. The adventure of insecurity no longer appeals because of the fear of the consequences of freedom. For most individuals, optimism and assurance is the normal view; it is essential to peaceful living, and in witness we might cite that the present revolutionary time has not prevented the blossoming of schemes by which we may guarantee the inevitability of progress, even if tradition has fallen by the wayside. Whether we can recover the confidence in the future held by former thinkers such as Kant, Comte, Mill, and Hegel depends in part on whether we can be enthusiastic about the exact situation in which we find ourselves. But enough has happened in the world of ideology to suggest that the twentieth century will turn out to be far more modest in its expectations than the nineteenth. A denial of confidence in human nature can easily be carried too far, and what was once conservative historical imagination can readily develop into political nightmare.³² Those who cannot see assurance in bureaucracy, the class struggle, war, or empire are forced in the end to a religious defense of the reasonableness of social ends, and the possibility of a limited, but worthwhile, realization of these ends in the history we will make in the coming generation.

³¹ Lecky, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 187, observed: "All the great intellectual problems that convulse Europe are connected with the rights of nationalities, the progress of democracy, or the dignity of labor." He might have added war and the international order as issues, and we might add that the solutions of the last century have been quite impermanent.

³² Cf. Paul Elmer More, "Aristocracy and Justice," *Shelburne Essays*, Ninth Series (Boston, 1915), *passim*.