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Between progress and apocalypse: social theory and the dream of reason in the twentieth century

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Social theory is a mental reconstruction of its time, not a reflection but a self-reflection. Art is self-reflection in an iconic and expressive form. Theoretical self-reflection is intellectual and abstract. It leads not to experience and epiphany but to analysis and thought. Social theory cannot induce catharsis, but it can transform understanding. We need social theory if we are going to understand our world. As this great and terrible century draws to a close, this need has never been more important.

The thesis of this essay is that the twentieth century is a unique construction, an historically demarcated world, and that twentieth-century theory is differentiated from earlier theorizing in much the same way. This may be an illusion for future historians to correct. Certainly, neither theory nor history can hope to break out of the self-conceptions of its own time. At this point, however, the historical uniqueness of our century seems to be an empirical fact. It is certainly a social one, for in this uniqueness most of the participants in this century have fervently believed.

To comprehend the underlying motifs of our century, and eventually its social theory, we must clarify what initially marked the west off from other civilizations, the modern west from earlier periods in its history, and the twentieth century from earlier western modern societies. This distinguishing notion is "progress" and the possibility of perfection it implies.

All complex societies, of course, have had myths about the Golden Age. Only in the west, however, did people seriously begin to think that such a new age might occur in this rather than some extraterrestrial or fantastical world. This-worldly conceptions were formulated in Judaism three or four thousand years ago. If the Jews kept their covenant with God, the Bible promised, God would establish his reign of perfection on earth – what

came to be called the millennium. Because Jews were the chosen people, God promised to eventually redeem them. Christianity believed that Christ had been sent to renew this redemptive promise. We have lived in what might be called a millennial civilization ever since.

Yet Christianity still placed the millennium far off in the distant future. It would certainly not happen in our lifetimes. The lot of human beings on earth, at any given point in time, could hardly be changed. This dualism began to shift with the Reformation, which was much more emphatically this-worldly. Protestants, and especially Calvinists and Puritans, worked hard in this world, with the hope of bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. This initial belief in the possibility of worldly perfection was reinforced and greatly extended by Renaissance humanism, with its earthiness and optimism about improving nature and society. The Enlightenment translated this growing perfectionism into the vocabulary of secular progress. As Becker (1932) suggested in *The Heavenly City of the eighteenth-century Philosophers*, the philosophers believed in the imminent possibility of a secular golden age.

Perfectionism is the belief that the human world can become the mirror of the divine. This possibility has defined the essence of modernity. To be modern is to believe that the masterful transformation of the world is possible, indeed that it is likely.¹ In the course of modernity, this pledge to worldly transformation has been renewed time and time again. No matter what the disaster, the hope and belief in imminent perfection never disappears. The faith in perfection has informed all the great experiments of the modern world, big and small, good and bad, the incessant reformism and the revolutions launched from the left and from the right.²

With the Enlightenment and the growth of secular, scientific thought, the ethos of perfectionism became inseparable from the claims of reason.³ Reason is the self-conscious application of the mind to social and natural phenomena. Through reason, people came to believe, we can master the world. Through this mastery, we can become free and happy. The world can be made a reasonable place. It can be reconstructed. Marx and Hegel produced their own versions of such perfectionism; neither believed in it less fervently than the other.⁴

In the twentieth century this fundamental tenet of modernity has been challenged and ultimately changed. The faith in progress has often been severely disappointed and the sense that there is the real possibility for perfection has diminished. This domination has not occurred in every place and at every moment, of course; in the end, however, it has so permeated modern life that it has deeply affected its core. Modern became postmodern long before the contemporary period. The experience of this century has been a tragic one. The originality of its social theory lies in coming to grips with this experience. This, at least, is the thesis I will seek to advance here.

The rational line: progress

I do not want to advance this thesis in a polemical or one-sided way. If one does so, the argument becomes myth and caricature, and loses its force. Our understanding of the twentieth century must be more subtle and more complex. To recognize its tragic proportions does not mean to ignore the hopes that it has inspired and the real progress it has achieved.

From the point of view of the present day, it is possible to look back on this century as a time of wondrous achievement. It is especially possible, and likely, for Americans to do so, but it is by no means impossible for Europeans.⁵ Doing so reflects the particular historical vantage point of the present day; it also reflects the continuing intensity of the progressivist faith. History can, after all, certainly be reconstructed in different ways.

If we look back at the beginning of this century, we can see great hopes. In Germany and in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, large social-democratic parties existed, and their progress appeared to many as inexorable. By pledging themselves to control the market and by demanding full voting rights, these parties promised to incorporate the working classes into industrial economies and to democratize the state.⁶

Similar progressive forces seemed to be expanding in other industrialized nations. In England,⁷ radical Utilitarians and Fabian socialists had increasing access to power, and Marxian socialism itself was becoming a stronger and more militant force. In environments less hospitable to socialism, liberalism was developing a social program of its own. French "solidarism" and American "progressivism" were seen as prime examples of the successful mitigation of capitalism's harshest face.

The progressive view of our century can be sustained by drawing a straight line from these promising developments to the condition of industrial societies today.⁸ One can argue that Marxism, liberalism, social democracy, and even democratic conservatism have succeeded in transforming and, indeed, in perfecting modern life.

This rational line can be justified by pointing, for example, to the extraordinary increase in material wealth. Through the rationality of capitalism and industrial production, this affluence has ameliorated the conditions of everyday life throughout the class structure of advanced societies. These conditions are not limited, moreover, to consumption in a narrow sense. It is primarily as a result of this material transformation (Hart 1984, 1985: 29-49) that deaths in childbirth (for both infants and mothers) have been virtually eliminated and that such deadly diseases as tuberculosis have passed from the scene. One may point to the achievements of modern science, both pure and applied, which have contributed to such life-giving disciplines as modern medicine. The series of technological revolutions that has increased material productivity hundreds of times over make Marx's predictions about the exhaustion of capitalism

seem not just antique but almost reactionary. We are in the midst of what has been called the fourth industrial revolution, the transformation of information capacity that began with the transistor and miniaturization and, with the computer chip and super-computerization, has continued on an unprecedented scale.

The rational line can be further sustained by pointing to the expansion of human rights. T. H. Marshall (1964) drew an evolutionary model of the progress from civil to political to social rights. Over the last forty years, civil and political rights have been extended to religious and racial groups that had been excluded from western societies for hundreds and sometimes even thousands of years. Social rights have been expanded to groups who were considered to be deserving of their unfortunate fates only a century ago—like the physically and mentally handicapped. For the first time since the neolithic revolution ten thousand years ago, women are beginning to have substantial access to the institutional and cultural centers of society.

These advances may rightly be considered to be evidence of the advance of reason, and they are being applied to civilizations which did not initially share in the benefits of this-worldly millennial religion. Decolonization has extended "European" progress while allowing national aspirations to be freely expressed. Revolution, which has often been the vehicle for this decolonization, has been the primary trigger that has allowed modernization in the backward, unrationalized areas of the world. It, too, can be considered a successful example of the extension of world mastery which has helped to perfect life in the modern world.

On these grounds it may be argued that the twentieth century has been a time of progress, that this is not only a plausible view but also a valid one. Not only Americans and Europeans argue this view today, but articulate leaders in India, China, Brazil, and Japan as well. The twentieth century is a good and sensible world. Yes, evil and irrationality still exist, but their origins are outside of us. They stem from traditionalism and antimodernity, with religious fanatics in Iran, with tribal hostilities in Africa, with nationalist antagonism in Israel. Closer to home, they arise in impoverished groups who have not had the access to modernity that education and material comfort can provide. When we walk through our modern lives, organizing our lifeworlds with good sense and a modicum of comfort, it seems only reasonable to think that reason has prevailed.

The dream of reason

The reality of this vision of the twentieth century is underscored by the fact that it has produced a line of intellectual reasoning, a line of social theory, that goes along with it. I will call this the dream of reason. It is the image

of this rationally perfected life in thought, but not of course a reflection of "real," material life alone. Because life is itself filled with ideas, the perfected life is filled with ideas about perfection. The reasonable life of today can be traced back to the dream of a this-worldly millennium that began thousands of years ago. Of course, while the millennial dream is religious, the dream of reason is postreligious. Still, the dream of reason operates with the metaphysical props of faith that were exemplified in Hegel's work a century ago.

We can see the dream of reason most distinctly by pointing to four spheres of modern thought: philosophy, psychology, art, and social engineering.

The most characteristic school of twentieth-century philosophy must surely be logical positivism, which believed that any thought worth thinking could be reduced to rational and eventually mathematical propositions. Philosophy from this perspective would be little more than a truth language, a code that would state the conditions for knowing. In this form, philosophy would allow language and thought to transparently reflect the external world. Words are induced from things that actually exist (Wittgenstein 1922). Thought is a rational induction from this reality. Philosophy must hone the relationship between words and things. Metaphysics will be abolished forthwith.

We should not be so blinded by the surreal dimension of modern art that we fail to see that much of aesthetic modernism is consistent with this rationalizing view. There is a clear movement in modernity which argues that art should be sparse, minimal, flat, rational, and "true." It should not be fictive but direct, not personal but objective. The great exemplifications of this are architecture and prose. The origins of modern architecture are the aesthetic dictum that form is to follow function. Those who created this style (Pevsner 1977) actually believed that their buildings represented no fictive design but only followed inevitably from the shape of engineering and efficient rational design. While this self-understanding may be false—engineering and efficiency do not have an implicit design—the International Style that resulted was of a decidedly rationalist bent—straight lines, angles, and flat surfaces.

A similar demand for directness, simplicity, objectivity, and efficiency characterizes twentieth-century prose. In the model of science, modern prose language aims to be translucent vis-à-vis its subject matter and denuded of "style" as such, as that notion was exemplified, for example, in Renaissance speech and writing (Lanham 1976). Connotation and ambiguity are pruned from articles and books. In the English language it was Hemingway who blazed this trail, with his short, flat, journalistic sentences. It was *Time* magazine that made this style the mass language of the day.

In psychology two contradictory movements reflect this sense of the ultimate reasonableness of the world. In Piaget's (1972) developmental

psychology, adult persons have developed the capacity for universalistic cognition and rule-oriented morality. These capacities develop from processes that are inherent in the life process. Individuals become rational because of realistic experiences. Faced with the growing complexity of reality, they act pragmatically and develop new modes of reasoning through trial and error. Behaviorism also sees individuals as acting in straightforward rational ways. Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner argued that people are formed not by subjective fantasy but by their environments, that they are molded into whatever they are pushed into being. Like pigeons and well-trained dogs, human beings are rational in a narrow and efficient sense. If we know their past conditioning, we can make predictions about how they will act in the future.

Theories about the possibility of rational planning have been reinforced by developmental and behavioristic psychology, but they also constitute an intellectual movement in their own right. This thought originates in the nineteenth century as a species of secular perfectionism, with people like Saint-Simon, Bentham, and Marx. It has become dominant in the twentieth century, elaborated by democratic socialist theorists of the welfare state like Marshall and Mannheim (1940) and by technocratic communist thought as well. The belief is that the world can be subjected to rational control, that the whole ball of wax can be shaped by reason into a desirable shape. Rawls (1971) is the greatest English-speaking proponent of this faith in perfection through reason. Habermas (1984) elaborates rationalism in a Continental, anti-Utilitarian romantic idiom.

The alternative vision of decline: the prophecy of Georges Sorel

With a very few exceptions, these rationalist streams of thought, no matter how brilliant and enlightening, have not represented the greatest and most original achievements of twentieth-century social theory. One reason is that they do not represent something that is really new; they are extensions of the perfectionist thinking of earlier days. But there is another, much more important reason as well. In its rationalist form, twentieth-century social theory cannot fulfill its self-reflective task. It does not tell us the absolutely essential things we must know about the new kind of society in which we have lived.

A straight line between the hopes of the turn-of-the-century period and the achievements of the present day cannot be drawn. There is, rather, a tortuous path.⁷ If the newly dawning century embodied fulsome hopes for social reform, it was also known as the *fin de siècle* and the "age of anxiety." The dream of reason has continued to inspire the thought of our time, but it is the nightmare of reason that has captured the most profound theoretical imaginations of the age.

As an entree into this darker side of modernity, we might look briefly at the thought of Georges Sorel, the French revolutionary syndicalist who published his original and disturbing *Reflections on Violence* in 1908. Earlier I referred to the large socialist workers parties that were carriers for the ideas, forces, and often the reality of progress in that turn-of-the-century period. Sorel conceived of himself as speaking for a very different segment of the community of dispossessed. He insists (1950 [1908]: 66) that there remained large groups of workers, small employers of labor, and farmers—as well, one might add, as working-class leaders and intellectuals like himself—who bitterly opposed modernity and saw little hope for social progress within its rationalizing frame. These groups provided a constituency for a much more extreme left, one cut-off from the progressive and ameliorating groups of the socialist center. As Sorel explains, "Parliamentary Socialism does not mingle with the main body of the parties of the extreme left" (ibid: 67).

These parties are the revolutionaries. In one sense, of course, their ideal is not all that dissimilar from the reformers'. They, too, want a perfect society ordered by reason. They are certain, however, that such a society cannot be institutionalized in the "present phase" of social life. Reason has become an other-worldly ideal that can be realized only through violent world transformation. What has happened until now has not been progressive. Sorel denigrates "the trash of Parliamentary literature." He despises progressives and has no patience for democratic politics. Such appeals to reason, he writes, are "confused"; they serve only "to hide the terrible fear" that marks the inevitable tension between social classes. If socialism is to succeed it must become revolutionary. Rather than appealing to the rationality of the middle and upper classes, socialists must try to make them afraid: "The workers have no money but they have at their disposal a much more efficacious means of action: they can inspire fear." If the bourgeoisie are afraid, Sorel argues, they will engage in selfish behavior and eventually, repression. In his view this is all to the good. It unmasks the real, anti-progressive face of society, and it will inspire the proletariat to be revolutionary in turn.

Sorel believes that socialism must turn away from social and political reform toward the program of the general strike. As a collective act of deliberate violence, the general strike will inspire fear and usher in a cataclysmic revolution. This violence is associated by Sorel with the very group that according to the rational line embodies reason, the proletariat. Sorel has posed the fateful dichotomy of twentieth-century life. He has opposed violence and reason, rational progress with violence and force. Fifty years later Sartre (1976 [1968]) takes up violence in much the same way, promulgating it as a means of liberating debourgeoisification; from Sartre, Fanon (1965) took violence as the model for anticolonial revolt.⁸ In important respects, however, Sorel's opposition of violence

to reason was more sophisticated; it was certainly more disturbing and more revealing.

Sorel's opposition is unusually revealing because he relativized this threat of revolutionary violence by calling it a myth. Whether there could or, in strategic terms, should be a violent strike was not Sorel's concern. Violent revolutionary was a myth in which workers had to believe in order to maintain their esprit de corps and to inspire repressive reactions in the ruling classes. Myth is necessary because people are irrational. They are moved by impulses, not by "observation of contemporary facts [or by] a rational interpretation of the present" (*ibid.*, p. 99). "Infinitely simpler mental processes" are involved. Only by promoting the myth of violence can the socialists reawaken the spirit of alienation and hatred that creates the desire to destroy bourgeois society.

Sorel's theory is an apologia for left-wing terrorism.⁹ It is also a prophecy of the irrationality to come.¹⁰ Finally, it is a brilliant and representative invention of social theory in the twentieth century. Faced with the disappointment of his socialist hopes for progress, Sorel theorizes that individuals are not as rational as progressive theory had thought. Moving against the rational line, he establishes a commonality between modern actors and the myth worshippers of traditional societies. It is not surprising that Sorel himself wavers between revolutionary left and right. For, he has abandoned rationality not just as an explanation of human action but as a normative stance. He advocates irrationality in its most violent form. This, in fact, is where Sorel's thought differs from the more important twentieth-century social theory we will examine below. For while Sorel understood the pathologies of modernity, he could think of no way to overcome them.

The degenerate line: irrationality

Before we can get to this theory, we need to examine the life upon which they reflect. It can be argued that in twentieth-century life there has been a real declension, a decline that for many has made progress seem like a dream, or even a myth.

Since we have been thinking about Sorel, let us begin with socialism. Marxists and utopians alike have considered socialism (via revolution or reform) to be the very embodiment of reason. For Marx, communalization would overcome the alienation of reason and subjectivity upon which capitalism is based. As the twentieth century has unfolded, however, it has become increasingly clear that revolutionary movements of the left often intensify the "alienation of reason" in drastic ways.¹¹ This counterintuitive fact should not be understood in essentialist terms. It has nothing to do with some inherent perversity of revolutionary action but with the sociological conditions under which revolutions typically emerge.

Revolutionaries represent groups who have been subject to quite terrible oppression and strains. Typically, they have been excluded from the legitimate centers of their societies and often from their very societies themselves; they have been denied access to universities, subjected to despicable prejudices, often jailed, sometimes tortured and murdered.

None of this mitigates what Marx would surely have regarded as the savage degradation of the revolutionary tradition in the twentieth century. In their alienation, revolutionaries, in and out of power, have not only advocated distorted and caricatured thought and speech but often acted barbarously, engaging in systematic force and fraud. For several decades after the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, not only socialists but also a wide range of thoughtful people regarded communism as a legitimate carrier of reason. The true nature of Russian communism was masked by its claims to reason and scientific "last resorts" (Emerson 1981). Wealth, technology, literacy, high culture, hygiene, and class inclusion have been the perfectionist references for official communist rhetoric.

It eventually became clear to many, however, that almost right from the beginning this revolutionary society has made of the hopes for perfection a bitter joke. Lenin initiated, and Stalin established (Johnson 1983: 49–103) a system that suppressed the very exercise of reason. Mao, Castro, and Eastern European puppet rulers followed in their wake. Twentieth-century communism has been more like the medieval church than a model for rationality and progress (Aron 1957). Ruled by an ideological pope and directed by a clergy of party faithful, official communism spreads the dogma of the proletarian messiah, whose message and needs remain to be interpreted in appropriate ways. Reason is monopolized by this communist church; it is impossible for private individuals to possess it. For the masses, coercion and violence are the only recourse. Russian communism subjected first counter-revolutionaries, then conservatives, kulaks, Jews, Christians, and "other" nationalities to unprecedented repression. Once in power, communist parties – these purported vanguards of reason and progress – have institutionalized vocabularies of double-think and systems of thought control that have come to symbolize the nightmares of reason in our time.¹²

Murder and massive political repression in China. Genocidal barbarity in revolutionary Cambodia and dreary failure in its occupiers, Vietnam. The overwhelming inadequacies of centrally planned state economies. Intellectuals who hope for human progress might well ask, what is left of the revolutionary dream of reason today? It may be that the communist version of this dream has become exhausted only two centuries after it began. Certainly intellectual disillusionment with the progressive promises of socialism and communism is one of the most distinctive developments of the late twentieth century (Alexander 1988).¹³

I have not begun with communism because it is the unique embodiment

of bad faith and irrationality. This is the line of the conservative right in America and elsewhere, and it is a cop out intellectually and morally. One must acknowledge that anti-progress and anti-reason occurred throughout western societies, in capitalist and democratic countries as well.

The rational line describes the twentieth century as involving gradual democratization, the extension of rights and privileges to the lower classes, the opening up of ghettos, and the persistent spreading of secular rationality throughout society. In point of fact, even before the twentieth century truly began, much darker forces were beginning to brew. By the 1880s one could observe on the Continent, in France and Southern and Central Europe, a growing reaction against these very progressive forces. In the middle and upper classes powerful advocates of dictatorship and violence emerged. In Germany, a mystical and backward looking *Volk* ideology fermented (Mosse 1964), spreading even to intellectual classes (Ringer 1969). In France there was a sickening turn towards nationalist antisemitism. In the United States, the rigidly segregationist policies of "Jim Crow" began to spread through the Southern states, and "nativism" – cultural prejudice and social mobilization against foreign-born Americans – became an imperious collective psychology in the North.

These irrationalist forces fed directly into the First World War, the cataclysm that separated what afterward looked like an age of innocence from the wasteland that followed (Fussell 1975).¹⁴ Sometime between 1919 and 1921, when he was the British Secretary of State, Winston Churchill jotted down on a piece of War Office stationery a retrospective whose embittered and apocalyptic tones capture the profound disturbance this war gave to the vision of progress.

All the horrors of all the ages were brought together, and not only armies but whole populations were thrust in the midst of them . . . Every outrage against humanity or international law was repaid by reprisals . . . No truce or parley mitigated the strife of the armies. The wounded died between the lines: the dead mouldered into the soil. Merchant ships and neutral ships and hospital ships were sunk on the seas and all on board left to their fate, or killed as they swam. Every effort was made to starve whole nations into submission without regard to age or sex. Cities and monuments were smashed by artillery. Bombs from the air were cast down indiscriminately. Poison gas in many forms stifled or seared the soldiers. Liquid fire was projected upon their bodies . . . When all was over, Torture and Cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilized, scientific, Christian States had been able to deny themselves: and they were of doubtful utility. (Quoted in Johnson 1983: 14–15)

Seventy years after the war's end, such activities could not possibly arouse such astonished indignation. They have become everyday occurrences in the political relations of the twentieth century.

In the chaos and devastation that followed in the wake of the First World War, there emerged at the end of the first third of the century what to earlier progressives would have been a totally unexpected event. This was the outbreak in Europe not of revolutions of the left but counter-revolutions of the right. In Germany, Austria, Italy, and Spain, radical right-wing movements came to power and began to dismantle what remained of the rational and progressive apparatuses of their respective societies. This reactionary movement reached its zenith in Germany, and the results are well known. Rather than the promotion of civility and inclusion, there was the genocidal murder of large segments of the carriers of progress, not only Jews but also intellectuals, communists, socialists, scientists, free-thinkers, and Christian idealists alike.

Alongside the spread of rational understanding, then, there has emerged in the course of this century an outbreak of brutality and violence on an unprecedented scale. This century invented total war, war to the death, war against not only professional armies but the masses of civilian populations. Americans are usually less sensitive to these developments than others, since none of this century's wars has been fought on its continental soil. It is a critically significant fact, however, that liberal democratic countries have become full participants in the ideology and practice of total war (see Gibson 1986 and Johnson 1983). Faced with Hitler's attack on Britain in the summer of 1940, Churchill wrote that "when I look around to see how we can win the war I see that there is only one sure path . . . and that is an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland" (quoted in Rhodes 1988: 469). The leader who once had been repelled by total war had now come to embrace it. Even before the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, allied bombing killed 260,000 Japanese and injured more than 400,000 more (Johnson 1983: 423). In their battle against the ruthless FLN in the first Indo-Chinese war, the French engaged in terror and systematic torture. In their own Indo-Chinese war, the Americans engaged in blanket bombing, with the intention, in President Johnson's words, of "bombing Vietnam back to the stone age." In contemporary America, one of the most democratic nations in the history of the world, the massively funded Central Intelligence Agency organizes secret classes on torture techniques for the military cadres of dictatorial nations; then it gives them the facilities to carry out this torture.

In part because of the strain of continuous warfare, this century has seen the spread of charismatic executive authority on an unprecedented scale. In Germany, China, and Russia, leaders have become living icons for their sometimes adoring, sometimes terrified, but almost always mesmerized

and surprisingly compliant populations. In democratic countries charismatic executive authority has never disappeared. On the contrary, the cult of the personality seems increasingly essential for national integration and effective rational government (Harden 1974).

Finally, even when the darkest shadows of antimodernity have been avoided, the twentieth century has been haunted by a sense of disappointment with modern life. In the most successful countries, boredom and ennui often overshadow a sense of individual and collective purpose (see for example, Keniston 1964). This has resulted in one of the most revealing phenomena of our time – the continuing attempts by those who have been spared the most awful modern brutality to escape from the progressive forces, ideas, and institutions that have achieved this. People flee from the demands of this-worldly perfection to the romantic alternatives of various addictions – to drugs and alcohol, to escapist religion, to visions of nirvana of a mystical and other-worldly kind.

The nightmare of reason

This historical declension of real life in the twentieth century – albeit a “real world” permeated by ideas – has had a pronounced effect on the world of intellectual thought. Reason has been experienced as a hollow shell, progress as inconceivable, and often actually undesirable. The very possibility that there is a higher point, an “end” towards which society should strive, has come to be thrown into doubt.

When social theory is caught up in the dream of reason it is post-religious but relies on a metaphysical prop. When it articulates the nightmare of reason, it is post-religious without a metaphysic. Paul Tillich, a great twentieth-century theologian who lived without the dream, described modern individuals as adrift and alone, without the traditional support from God. Yet Tillich maintained that this condition could spur them on to great strength and, indeed, even to greater faith, and he (1952) drew from Sartre the notion that what we need in the present, postmodern situation is “the courage to be.” Nietzsche drew the opposite conclusion, one more characteristic of the dark line itself. God is dead. Reason is a lie and abstract reasoning is lifeless and corrupt. From this Nietzsche drew a kind of pre-fascist conclusion: we must escape from our present condition by transcending it. One of the ways we can do so is by identifying with an irrational superman.

But let us turn from this prophecy of alternative societies to efforts at creating alternative worlds of thought. Earlier I identified four intellectual currents of embodied reason. Here I will outline the antirationalist postures that have developed as alternatives. These alternative orientations

crystallize the sharp departures from rationality and progress that have characterized our time.

Twentieth-century philosophy began with logical positivism and the confidence that analytic thought could know the truth. It is ending with hermeneutics, a philosophy which maintains that knowing reality in a manner that separates it from us is epistemologically impossible. Logical positivism was bold, ambitious, predictive. Hermeneutics is modest, exploratory, tentative, regarding the mere description of the object as a herculean task. In the earlier (1922) Wittgensteinian philosophy, words can reflect things; they are based on reality. In the later Wittgensteinian philosophy – *Philosophical Investigations* being the most representative single work of postpositivist thought – words refer not to reality but to themselves. We do not touch reality; we think within a self-referential cocoon of other thoughts and words. Saussure (1959 [1911]), the founder of structural linguistics and semiotics, made much the same point. There is no way to go from objects, from reality, to the word thoughts that characterize them. Between words and objects there is only an arbitrary relation. Influenced by logical positivism, earlier philosophy of science was concerned with the conditions for truth, verification, and the evolutionary progress of knowledge. Much of postpositivist philosophy of science glories in irrationality, asserts incommensurability, and theorizes apocalyptic revolutions.

Earlier I suggested that there does exist in contemporary aesthetics an emphasis on minimalism, realism, directness, and linearity. Much more widely recognized, of course, is the aesthetic movement in the opposite direction, toward surrealism. Particularly in the visual arts and in avant-garde literature there has been the destruction of the notion of a transparent reality. Artists neither refer to nor rely upon the rationality of human beings. Over the long durée, the discontinuities are striking: from Ingres to Abstract Impression by way of Cubism; from Beethoven to Webern by way of Strindberg; from George Eliot and Tolstoy to Beckett and Pynchon by way of James and Woolf. Interpretation theory reflects a similar trajectory. Earlier critics examined authors’ intentions, historical contexts, and thematic development within actual texts. Beginning with New Criticism, these standards and practices became less applicable. The complexity and irrationality of motive, it is now believed, makes authorial intention impossible to discover. Similar difficulties accrue to the study of historical context. With Derrida, our lack of confidence in our own rationality has increased to the point that we are not certain there is a text.

Freud created the psychological alternative to the rationalistic images of developmental and behavioral approaches.¹ Since assumptions about motives are the bedrock of social theory, this depth psychology has had a particularly powerful impact, whether orthodox, Jungian, or “humanistic.”

Instead of rational motive, psychoanalysis begins with the passionate, moralistic, and irrational actor. In contrast to the self-confident and reactive individual, it suggests that the self is fragmented, contradictory, and difficult to find. Against the notion that reality is either obviously visible or increasingly becoming so, depth psychology emphasizes the difficulty of reality-testing and the omnipresence of distortion. Rather than an innate quality, rationality is something that may take years of treatment for an actor to achieve.

The intellectual alternatives to social engineering are at first sight less obvious. Theorists do not argue that society is impossible to change. They do, however, suggest that the standards for promoting and evaluating change are neither rational nor capable of providing accurate evaluations. Oakeshott (1962) has developed this approach in its conservative form, arguing that social change is encrusted by custom and inherently incremental and that efforts to plan change rationally only blind actors to these facts. Walzer (1983) and other "internalist" critics of Rawls and Habermas have developed this alternative more critically. They argue that justice cannot be understood in terms of abstract criteria and transcendental principles. It must be theorized from within the cultural practices of particular spheres of life. Social movements that ignore these structures encourage the domination and violence that has characterized the degenerate line of twentieth-century life.

Social theory as a bridge between two worlds

Many of the great thinkers who initiated twentieth-century social thought participated in two worlds. They experienced both the dream of reason and the nightmare that followed in its wake. They came to early maturity as believers in science, evolution, and progress. One thinks here of Freud's first career in psychophysiology, Weber's pre-breakdown Darwinian writings in political economy and comparative history, Durkheim's early scientism, and Wittgenstein's logical positivism. At a certain point in their development, however, these thinkers came face to face with the darkness and irrationality of their times. When Weber wrote, just after the turn of the new century, that "the rosy blush of . . . the Enlightenment [is] irretrievably fading" (1958 [1904-05]: 182), he gave expression to the darker perception that characterized an entire generation.

For many of these thinkers the First World War symbolized their disillusionment. In his lecture to German students immediately in the wake of war, for example, Weber rejected out of hand the evolutionary hope for reason.

I may leave aside altogether the naive optimism in which science – that is, the technique of mastering life which rests upon science – has been celebrated as the way to happiness. Who believes in this? – aside from a few big children in university chairs or editorial offices. (1946 [1917]: 143)

Three years before that war began, Durkheim wrote that "we are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity."

The great things of the past which filled our father with enthusiasm do not excite the same ardor in us . . . The old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born. (1965 [1911]: 475)

Just after the war began, Freud conceived of it as representing the disillusionment that all thinking people felt with the rationalist promises of the past.

We are constrained to believe that never has any event been destructive of so much that is valuable in the common wealth of humanity, nor so misleading to many of the clearest intelligences, nor so debasing to the highest that we know. Science herself has lost her passionless impartiality; in their deep embitterment her servants seek for weapons from her . . .

When I speak of disillusionment, everyone at once knows what I mean . . . We were prepared to find that wars between the primitive and the civilized peoples [and] wars with and among the undeveloped nationalities of Europe or those whose culture has perished – that for a considerable period such wars would occupy mankind. But we permitted ourselves to have other hopes.

We had expected the great ruling powers . . . who were known to have cultivated world-wide interests, to whose creative powers were due our technical advances in the direction of dominating nature, as well as the artistic and scientific acquisitions of the mind – peoples such as these we had expected to succeed in discovering another way of settling misunderstandings and conflicts of interests. (1963 [1915]: 107-8)

Just as Wittgenstein had been "a happy sunny child" in Vienna, so "his English acquaintances from before 1914 knew him as capable of great gaiety" (Janik and Toulmin 1973: 177). During the war Wittgenstein fought for Austria on the front lines.

From 1919 on, he became a lonely and introverted figure. He admitted to having been impressed by Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and he retreated more and more into ethical attitudes of extreme individualism and austerity. (ibid.)

After the war's end, even as the *Tractatus* made Wittgenstein famous, the author disappeared from the intellectual world. He taught school in a small peasant village and later became a gardener. When he returned to Cambridge and academic life in 1929, he did so with an entirely different outlook on life from that of his early, logical positivist phase. He had given up on progress in the conventional sense. "When we think of the world's future," he wrote in 1929 (1980: 3e), "we always mean the destination it will reach if it keeps going in the direction we can see it going in now; it does not occur to us that its path is not a straight line but a curve, constantly changing direction." These changes, Wittgenstein was certain, would bring ruin. He had a premonition of disaster: "The earlier culture will become a heap of rubble and finally a heap of ashes" (ibid.).

Cleansed of their earlier innocence, these thinkers devoted themselves to explaining how this darkness could have come about. Yet if they abandoned the dream of reason, they did not reject rationality as a normative goal. To explain irrationality constituted the principal intellectual challenge of their lives. They would do so in order to preserve the values of modernity in a less naive, more mature form.

Freud spent his later life outlining the pathways of unconscious irrationality. He allowed that the result of psychoanalysis would not be utopia but simply common unhappiness. He insisted, however, that this was far preferable to the fantasies of psychosis. Psychoanalysis could not eliminate the influence of the unconscious, but it could reduce its ability to distort reality. "Where it was," Freud suggested hopefully, "there ego shall be."¹

Weber demonstrated how modern rationality had historically arisen from religious commitments, and he believed that "world flight" would be the most common reaction of modern people once these commitments were withdrawn. He condemned these flights and any attempt to restore the metaphysical world. The secular rationality that was the heir to religious rationalization, he insisted, represented the only possible hope for humankind (Alexander 1989).

In his later work, Durkheim described how the mythical and symbolic underpinnings of modern thought made any conception of narrowly rational behaviour obsolete. At the same time, he hoped that his exposure of the social foundation of religion would allow this symbolic dimension of human life to be expressed in a non-deistic form, freeing the cognitive dimension of thought to be disciplined by the scientific method.

The case for a continuing commitment to reason is more complex with Wittgenstein. Alone among this first generation of great theorists, he experienced another world war. Is it surprising that in 1947, after this second shattering experience, he would ask whether it is so "absurd . . . to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity," or that he would entertain what he called a "truly

apocalyptic view of the world" in which "the idea of great progress is a delusion" (1980: 56e)? When he announces his hopes for *Philosophical Investigations*, that great rational reconstruction of ordinary language, he does so in a subdued and pessimistic way.

I make them public with doubtful feelings. It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another – but, of course, it is not likely. (1968 [1945]: vi)

Still, this later theory of the conventionalized nature of ordinary language explained the impossibility of denatured objectivity in an extraordinarily lucid and rational way. Even while he expressed skepticism about "the idea that truth will ultimately be known" (1980 [1947]: 56e), it is clear that Wittgenstein continued to see "clarity [and] perspicuity as valuable in themselves" (1980 [1930]: 7e).

The great social theorists of the middle and latter twentieth century matured within the framework created not by progressive rationalism but by Freud, Durkheim, Weber, Wittgenstein, and other thinkers of a similarly postmodern cast. Keynes was weaned on the anti-Utilitarian platonism of Moore, and he developed a radically new theory of the irrationality of capitalist investment that could only have been drawn from Freud. Lévi-Strauss grew up on Durkheimian anthropology and structural linguistics. Sartre cut his intellectual eye teeth on Husserl. Marcuse grew up on Heidegger, Freud, and Lukács. Parsons' intellectual fathers were Weber, Pareto, and Durkheim.

Yet, while these more contemporary thinkers differed from their illustrious predecessors in the fact that they never experienced an epistemological break, their commitment to postmodern thought was nourished by a similar confrontation with the darkness of modern life. Keynes rejected his earlier aestheticism after he was horrified by the barbarism of the Great War and politicized by the stupidity of the peace treaty that followed. In the middle of the 1930s, Lévi-Strauss fled to the Brazilian jungle and immersed himself in savage thought because of the repulsion he felt for the mechanization of modern society and the cold, abstract reasoning it employed.¹⁵ Sartre lived at such a distance from French society that he experienced the Second World War almost as a relief (Hayman 1987: 149–78). He wrote *Being and Nothingness* in a German prisoner-of-war camp, and he took man's confinement in "non-being" as characterizing modern society as such. The true condition of being, Sartre wrote, is anguish; to talk about ideal values is only bad faith. Parsons conceived of his first great book as a response to the double shadow of fascism and Stalinism – "various kinds of individualism have been under increasingly heavy fire [and] the role of reason, and the status of scientific

knowledge . . . have been attacked again and again" (1937: 5). Marcuse regarded even democratic industrial societies as totalitarian. "The fact that the vast majority of the population accepts, and is made to accept, this society," he wrote (1964: xiii), "does not render it less irrational and less reprehensible."

Neither did these later thinkers accept the nightmare of reason as humankind's necessary fate. Keynes intended to revive the hope for a humane economy in a post-perfectionist form. Lévi-Strauss, despite his fatalistic ruminations, regarded his life's work as a scientific contribution and urged other rational thinkers to resist the temptations of historicist thought. Sartre insisted that human beings do have the capacity for freedom, and he strenuously argued in his literature as well as his philosophy that this responsibility be taken up. Parsons tried to develop a voluntaristic theory that, through the internalization of values, would provide the basis for a more mediated and secure freedom. Marcuse insisted that transcendence was possible, if only his contemporaries would draw upon their innately human capacity for critical thought.

Conclusion

H. Stuart Hughes (1966) entitled his influential historical study of French social thought in the interwar years, *The Obstructed Path*. His thesis was that French society, and French social theory, had strayed off the normal and expected path of rationality and democracy into mysticism, radicalism, alienation, and antimodernity. My argument in this essay has been directed against this kind of "exceptionalist" view of antimodernity. Rather than as an accurate description of twentieth-century thought, it should actually be viewed as an expression of the dream of reason itself. The line of twentieth-century development has been a tortuous one, and the path of the theory that has reflected on this development has been obstructed. It is not just French theory between the wars that reflected alienation, radicalism, and irrationalism, therefore, but the major thrust of twentieth-century theory itself.

Indeed, it is American thought in the twentieth century that has been exceptional, precisely because it has been so untortured and perfectionist, so confident in the unobstructed access to rationality in modern life. In the postwar period, Parsons and Rawls provide perhaps the two best illustrations of this rationalist optimism. Hughes' first important book, *Consciousness and Society* (1958), provides an historical formulation of this American bias in a still influential form. In this classical work, which brought the whiggish thesis of *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1937) into the domain of intellectual history, Hughes described the growing recognition of the irrational and surrealism in European thought

and art merely as a deepening of progressive self-reflection. The bitter often tragic, and enormously destabilizing social and intellectual origins of this turn away from rationality are simply unrecognized.

A taught dialogue between pessimism and optimism, reason and unreason, defines social theory in the twentieth century. Suspended between perfection and apocalypse, what marks off the greatest of this century's theorists is their attempt to mediate these dichotomies. While they have abandoned positivism and no longer see their times as embodying the dream of reason, most have not given up on science as a hope and none have given up on reason as a possibility. They recognize the omnipresence of irrationality with regret. Their theories are devoted to showing how the irrational works, in different spheres, in different modes, with different results. They show this by exercising their reason and they hope to use their hard won understandings to find a way to a better life. This life will recognize the ineradicable need for irrational experience and for the concrete, expressive articulation of meaning. By augmenting our rational understanding, however, it may be possible for a form of social life to emerge that meets these needs in a less restrictive way.

This form of life has not yet emerged. As the second millennium of western history draws to a close, it remains a possibility devoutly to be wished. By reflecting on the unique character of this century, social theory may perhaps contribute to this task.

Notes

1. For the notion of "transformative capacity" as the rationalizing contribution of the Protestant Reformation, see Eisenstadt (1968). By emphasizing perfectionism and reason, I am adding to this evolutionary approach a more culturally-specific element of intellectual history.
2. For the centrality of millennialist ideas in modern revolutions and reform movements, see Walzer (1965) on the English Revolution; Tuveson (1968) and Bloch (1985) on the American Revolution; Miller (1965) on early national reform in America, "Christianity in Chartist Struggle 1838-1842" on Chartism and primitive Christianity; and Hyams, *The Millennium Postponed*, on the communist revolutions more generally.
3. At several points in his work, Weber suggested that, via the Enlightenment the "charisma of reason" inherited Puritanism's this-worldly asceticism and became the embodiment of the world-mastering heritage of religious rationalization. For the connection of Puritanism to the first great manifestation of "reason," the scientific revolution, see Merton (1970 [1939]) and Tenbruk (1974). The connection between religious rationalization and the contemporary ethos of modernity has been almost totally obscured by Weber's instrumental and materialistic theorizing about the industrial society. The Parsonian tradition provides the antidote to this, but its generally optimistic, even Pollyanna-ish thinking about modernity has made its contributions to theoretical reflection much less important.

4. For the religious and eschatological underpinnings of Marx's work, see Lowith (1949), of Hegel's, see Taylor (1975).
5. I doubt, however, that it is possible for Poles to take this progressive line. For Germans who describe history in this progressive way, see the evolutionary change theories of Habermas and Munch. I will address the extremely interesting issue of national variation in the latter part of this essay.
6. Indeed, participation in these mass socialist parties seemed to have provided tens of thousands of low and middle status people not only with a firm conviction of the imminence of the new society but with an experience of actual salvation in this world. See, for example, the autobiography of Julius Braunthal, the Austro-Hungarian socialist leader, which presents Braunthal's participation and expectations in unmistakably millennial terms.

It was a great day in my life when I went . . . to the Working-Class Youth Club to register . . . It meant for me the firm resolve to help bring about nothing less than the New Jerusalem on earth in my own lifetime . . . For me the fact that the world was constantly changing was beyond any question. My problem was whether or not the time for the "final change" in human society had come . . . From Marx's *Manifesto* and Friederich Engels' *Anti-Duhring*, which were among the first Socialist classics I had read, I believed that humanity had now entered the final stage of its history. (Braunthal 1945: 39-40).
7. Hughes (1958) used the phrase, "the obstructed path," in his influential intellectual history of French thought and ideology in the interwar years. His focus was the manner in which French social theory strayed off the path of normal and expected Enlightenment thinking, into irrationality, alienation, and antimodernity. My argument here is against this kind of "exceptionalist" point of view on antimodernity. Rather than describing twentieth-century thought, it should actually be viewed as an expression of the dream of reason itself. It was the twentieth century that ran into an "obstructed path" and a major thrust of European social theory (not just French thought between the wars) reflected upon it. It is American thought in the twentieth century that has been exceptional, precisely because it has been so untortured and perfectionist and has continued to express such confidence in rationality and modernity. Parsons and Rawls provide two of the best illustrations. Hughes' *Consciousness and Society* (1958) provides a formulation of this American bias in a still influential form. In this classic work, which was strongly affected by Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Hughes traces the growing emphasis on the irrational and the growing surrealism of European thought and art. This discussion, like Parsons' earlier one, is presented, however, as a story of intellectual progress. The bitter, often tragic, and enormously destabilizing social and intellectual origins of this turn away from rationality are simply unrecognized.
8. At first glance, it seems quite extraordinary that, in a century that has been humbled by the most horrid violence, this turn toward violence in radical philosophy has been so little remarked upon and so infrequently criticized. Thus, Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* has typically been taken by left thinkers (e.g., Poster 1979) as an argument for community – for the movement from serial to fused groups – rather than as an apologia for violence, which it also is. Aron's *History and the Dialectic of Violence* (1975) is the only serious critique of this theme in Sartre's work of which I am aware, and it has been virtually ignored. Aron argues that Sartre's work became so politicized that theoretical and ideological confusions are fused – "the taste for Revolution and a lack of it for reform have become a philosophical truth" (Aron 1975:

- 185). He attacks the degeneration of reason and the ultimate dehumanization that this position involves
- The strange alliance between Reason and violence, whereby the other – the conservative, the reformist, anyone who says 'no' to the revolutionary apocalypse – takes on the grim traits of the anti-man" (ibid.) . . . It is by means of the class struggle, by the antagonism of groups where everyone wishes the death of the other, that the dialectical movement, whose completion is marked by the advent of totalizing Truth, progresses (187-88)
- In regard to the link between Fanon and Sartre, Aron is critical not of anti-colonial violence as a strategic necessity but of its theoretical justification in anti-rational terms. "What I hate," he writes (p. 192), "is not the choice, *hic et nunc*, at a particular conjunction of circumstances, in favour of violence and against negotiation, but a philosophy of violence in and for itself, not as means that is sometimes necessary for a rational politics, but a philosophy that lays claim to an ontological foundation and psychological function or effectiveness."
- The intellectual promotion of violence, of course, is hardly limited to the left. Highly respected geopolitical thinkers, like Kissinger, advocate the strategic use of massive deadly force (see Gibson 1986).
- That most commentators have been uninterested in the philosophical promotion of violence may, on further reflection, not be so surprising. It may in fact be the very result of the omnipresence of violence in this century's life. This is not an anachronistic usage, as Lenin's famous pamphlet, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, demonstrates.
- "The notion that social change can be best achieved through revolutionary violence is very much an offshoot of the French Revolution and of its socialist heirs. Sorel's *Reflections sur la violence* took up an uncomfortable and hushed-up subject and made it the centre of a strategy destined to overthrow the bourgeois order. At a time when the Marxists of the Second International were pussy-footing about the desirability of a revolution, Sorel took the uncompromising step of affirming its necessity" (Llobera 1988).
- For a discussion of the historical dialectic between absent and present reason, see Alexander (forthcoming).
- Until recently, it was only "anticommunists" who made such critical claims. Ironically, the most recent documentation of the communist distortion of reason has come from newspapers within Soviet Russia itself. In spring 1988, in the wake of Perestroika, the final history examinations of more than 50 million Soviet schoolchildren were cancelled. In an extraordinary commentary on its front page, laced with expressions of bitterness, tortured guilt, and hopes for purification, *Izvestia* attacked the entire historiography of Soviet Communism as the inversion of the Revolution's rational hopes.
- The guilt of those who deluded one generation after another, poisoning their minds and souls with lies, is immeasurable . . . today we are reaping the bitter fruits of our own moral laxity. We are paying for succumbing to conformity and thus to giving silent approval of everything that now brings the blush of shame to our faces and about which we do not know how to answer our children honestly. [This process is] a purifying torture of revelation, or, to be precise, a second birth. (*Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1988)

13. "It is now the world of psychologically and morally exhausted societies (largely on a Marxist and post-Marxist pattern) that have lost their energy and appeal. They are seen, along with their philosophy, as antique fortresses jutting out of a wasteland of the past. In fact, their own chances of breaking out of this closure now depend largely on their success in following the new model set by America and its rivals and competitors in the Western imperium. . . . At the time of Nikita Khrushchev's reform regime in the early 1960s, and again under Mikhail Gorbachev's drive in the mid-1980s to modernize the Soviet economy and partially open the society, there was discussion of a possible 'convergence' of the two adversary systems. But the pull of convergence was mostly one-sided, not toward the blocked societies of the East but toward the openness of the West."

This polemical statement is remarkable not so much for what it says as for who has said it – not a conservative cold warrior but the venerable New Deal liberal, Max Lerner (1987: 11–12), in the left-of-center American magazine, *The New Republic*.

14. "In the weeks before the Armageddon, Bethmann Hollweg's secretary and confidant Kurt Riezler made notes of the gloomy relish with which his master steered Germany and Europe into the abyss. July 7, 1914: 'The Chancellor expects that a war, whatever its outcome, will result in the uprooting of everything that exists. The existing world very antiquated, without ideas.' July 27: 'Doom greater than human power hanging over Europe and our people.' " (Johnson 1983: 12).

15. "Levi-Strauss begins *Tristes Tropiques* with an account of his encounter with "one of those outbreaks of stupidity, hatred, and credulousness which social groups secrete like pus when they begin to be short of space" (1973: 18). He argues that "experiences such as these [are] starting to ooze out like some insidious leakage from contemporary mankind, which [has] become saturated with its own numbers and with the ever-increasing complexity of its problems" (ibid.). He concludes the book with this melancholic prophecy, not much different from the spirit of Wittgenstein's:

The world began without man and will end without him. The institutions, morals and customs that I shall have spent my life noting down and trying to understand are the transient efflorescence of a creation in relation to which they have no meaning. . . . From the time when he first began to breathe and eat, up to the invention of atomic and thermonuclear devices, by way of the discovery of fire. . . . what else has man done except blithely break down billions of structures and reduce them to a state in which they are no longer capable of integration? (ibid.: 472)

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2

Problems of crisis and normalcy in the contemporary world

ROBERT HOLTON

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Contemporary social thought has become dominated, if not obsessed by the idea of crisis (Holton 1987). Crisis-talk is expanding on an epidemic scale. No-one needs convincing of the pervasiveness of crisis-perception. The problem is to determine what this situation signifies. Is the ubiquitous sense of crisis indicative of a deterioration in human welfare? Or is it more a symptom of exaggerated expectations about human capacities to improve the human condition? Should we expect current crises to be resolved, and crisis-talk to recede, or is crisis rapidly becoming a permanent fixture, part of the normal order of things?

One way of responding to these questions is to argue that the epidemic of crisis-talk does indeed reflect a deterioration in the human condition. It is not difficult to list many relevant indicators of this, such as the African famine, intractable warfare in the Middle East and Central America, mass unemployment, the AIDS epidemic, and increasing crime rates. The existence of such massive problems does not however explain how it has come about that crisis-talk has become normalized. Nor does it explain what Piotr Sztompka has called the crisis of crisis-awareness. By this he means the apparent moral indifference and insensitivity of contemporary society to the gravity of social problems. Sztompka asks do we really care about ecological crisis, famine, alienated labour, broken families, and alcoholism, if we are not ourselves unemployed, starving, and so forth (Sztompka 1984). Evidently crisis-awareness depends on issues of interpretation and judgement as to the presence of pathology according to particular evaluative criteria, and cannot be reduced to some simple calculus of human suffering.

The rationalist discourse of crisis has been designed as a means of identifying decisive phases in the development of social pathologies, and as a stimulus to crisis-intervention and resolution through social action. The model underlying this discourse derives, as is well known, from drama and medicine.

Rethinking Progress

MOVEMENTS, FORCES, AND IDEAS
AT THE END OF THE
20th CENTURY

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