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PART I

The Renaissance and the twentieth century

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I

What historians must explain

On the historian's map, a civilization that Marxists call "capitalist" and others call "Western" lies in the space between the fifteenth and the early twentieth centuries. For perhaps five centuries before the fifteenth century, Christian thought and belief–pessimistic and otherworldly–dominated philosophy and infused art and popular attitudes in Roman and Germanic Europe. A fragmented political structure was supported by force on a local scale and stabilized by habits of deference and acceptance of status within agrarian communities. A stagnant technology and high risks and costs of overland transport kept economic movements in check or focused them on a few notable commodities and lines of trade. Only a very thin ecclesiastical, military, or commercial elite operated the loose hierarchies of church, kingdom, or empire, or dealt in markets more than a few miles from town or manor. From these Europeans the globe's Western Hemisphere with civilizations similar to those of the Near East or Europe three thousand years earlier lay hidden, separated by an ocean, by timid navigation, and erroneous concepts of geography.

In the medieval world, there were economic elements we recognize as "capitalist," and elements in thought and even art that one recognizes as "modern." The "capitalist spirit," as Weber and Sombart described it, is an endemic phenomenon in human history, as are the other elements that went into the synthesis of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism: individualism, in the sense of the exercise of a powerful individual will; and science, in the sense both of experiment and useful improvement and of rational speculation based on sense data about the physical world. Society, one may fancy, in some Hegelian fashion, contains all its elements, at all points and times simultaneously, *in posse* if not *in ease*. But in any society over centuries of stability, the social (and some claim, the physical) climate slowly changes, and new strains of thought and behavior are born, as if by

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genetic transmutation, and survive. In a mechanical rather than a biological analogy, a certain slippage occurs between the civilization's interlocking parts. And the internal structure of these changes (which are simply manifestations of the immanent but suppressed tendencies of the human animal living with his fellows) is such as to allow not simply a few new forms and personalities, but a whole generation and after it, another generation (in which old patterns of behavior and values no longer predominate, and sets of forms to contain social life and of attitudes to motivate it, previously deviant, eccentric, and rare, appear and appear together, cohesive and mutually supportive), furnishing the behavioral substratum, the functional interrelationships, and the very dynamic of a new civilization.

At such a point in the historical record, one becomes aware of transformation. Within half a century, business, government, religion, many social relationships, art, literature, even music – are rapidly altered in form, style, and content. No exact science of society tells us the reason, the prime cause, or the transmission mechanism for the widespread emergence of novelties, with marked structural and psychological similarities, in so many different spheres of life. But the extent of the changes and the many analogies between their different manifestations suggest powerful connecting undercurrents, deriving, it may be, from some single spiritual source. Some historians, indeed, have been quick to evoke such a single and transforming spirit, an altered *Geist,* a new *Mentalité.* The words *medieval, Renaissance, modern,* and *bourgeois* seem unavoidable when one takes one's eye even a short way above the surface of history. They serve to reveal an underlying unity of form among phenomena widely scattered in social space but concentrated in historical time. They emphasize, too, that change is not simply evolutionary but also cataclysmic, that there are periods in which it accelerates up to the point that some new balance is attained, or some momentum is acquired.

I would go too far afield to write here of the new sixteenth-century "humanist" sensitivity among scholars. Then, as now, universities were conservative, monkish institutions that sheltered a few radicals who had rediscovered the art, literature, philosophy, and science of antiquity and were in their hearts no longer medieval Christians. A counterpart to humanism (or that to which it was a counterpart) appeared in the church, where Luther returned to the spirit of the Christianity of the early church, where Calvin reverted to St. Augustine, and where numerous sectarians staged fundamentalist revivals until, with John Wesley in the eighteenth century, the last of the major evangelical Protestant denominations was born. The Renaissance in religion, and the born-again Christians, depended, like the new scholars and scientists, heavily on

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ancient authority, claiming to displace the visible, tangible, political authority of Catholicism with a higher source and a truer interpretation – of Aristotle, Plato, Vergil, Jesus, or the early Fathers. The expression in both spheres had in common the rejection of an external, contemporary structure of authority. Gradually but irresistibly in all spheres of belief, authority came to mean a reliance on the piety, the learning, the reasoning of individual contemporaries whose particular expression of piety, or of knowledge or of humanity, appealed to the individual man, in his soul, his reason, or his humane and esthetic sensitivity.

The Renaissance is so called because it saw the rebirth of the ancient world's learning, its texts, its knowledge. But the spirit in those texts was not that which allowed submission to external authority, even the authority of the texts themselves, even, that is, Aristotle or the Bible. The spirit, which, molded to the circumstances, social forms, and human material of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, was called classical or Greek was a radical individualism resting all salvation, all expression, all attainment on the God or gods men found in themselves, or in their perceptions of and reasoning on nature, or ultimately on no God at all, except man, and among men, upon one's self.

In political life, wherein ultimately all was controlled, where men could be killed though they could not be made alive, individualistic self-confidence, this delight in reason, and this appreciation of the variety of human life and aspiration was to develop first in petty despotisms by princes ambitious to throw off church and empire. Dukedoms and principalities grew active in Germany and Italy and imposing kingdoms established themselves in Spain, England, and France. In those areas where the religious and intellectual development failed to consolidate its gains politically – either in the Reformation cities of Geneva, Edinburgh, Boston, or the Dutch Republic, or in the national churches of England and France – in, that is, the Empires of Spain and Austria and in the church-dominated lands of Italy, humanistic scholarship, the intellectual enterprise of modern science, the blooming capitalism in business life, and the classicism in art were crushed, or slid into decline after 1600; cultural, economic, and political vitality in Europe moved north of that line which Braudel has demarcated as the "zone of the grape and the olive." But the state that ruled through the local monopoly of force and divine right in a national or regional monarch proved a transitional form. In breaking with the authority of medieval church and empire, in effectively nationalizing the feudal structures, the masters of mercenary armies and household guards had destroyed the supernatural basis of their own legitimacy in the eyes of a citizenry of growing wealth, to whom individual freedom was the new superstition. In the series of revolutions – Dutch, Puritan, French, Central European of 1848, and

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finally in the revolutions of Russia and of Germany in 1917–18, state power slipped from Europe's hereditary rulers, the agrarian nobilities and royal houses, into the forms of a propertied liberalism, with constitutions, laws, and parliaments. Then in Russia immediately and in Germany with a decade's delay, the spirit of rebellion, transmuted through notions of popular democracy, was used by a fanatical oligarchy in lawless politics to destroy the forms of personal liberty that in the West had protected the individualistic spirit and property holdings of the Renaissance.

In the essays that follow, I wish to detail more clearly the evolution of the industrial capitalism that developed with this evolution of Western materialistic and rationalistic civilization and thought. Economic forms have, it will appear, also a course of progress within the appointed five-century span of capitalist growth. But within that span, development of those forms, as with development of Western scientific method, Western art and literature, and Western political forms, was in a sense, all of a piece, the working out of principles and interactions implicit in the original Renaissance conceptions. So it may be said that people of affairs of the nineteenth or early twentieth century could have understood their fifteenth- or sixteenth-century counterparts. Clemenceau or Bismarck could have understood Machiavelli; Rutherford or even Einstein lay in the scientific tradition of Galileo; the listener who can enjoy even Wagner or Ravel is not likely to shut his ears totally to the court and church music of the Renaissance, different though they are in style and emotional content. The portraits of Titian, Reynolds, and Sargent form a single though degenerating line. So too, as Alfred Chandler perceptively noted, "The American businessman of 1840 would find the environment of 15th Century Italy more familiar than that of his own nation seventy years later."[1]

A consistent though evolving style, and pervasive underlying values, through the working out of whose logic the evolution proceeded, establish Western civilization then as a single history in its development and reproduction from the great divide of the Renaissance. The striking, indeed, the unique and ultimately deceptive, feature of that civilization and its associated characteriological, ideological, and social phenomena – science, capitalism, national and martial spirit, its optimistic assertions of human power – was its apparently endless dynamism. The empires of the ancient world – Egypt, Babylon, China, Greece, Rome, Moghul India, and the Ottoman Middle East – all spread over a few centuries in a period of fluorescence by reproducing over a wide geographical area a body of fixed, centrally controlled, military and bu-

[1] A. D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 455.

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reaucratic institutions. Their expansions were geographic, but within their boundaries the forms and patterns of control and deference were fixed and stable. Their art rapidly lost spontaneity and creativity and became a craftsman's stale repetition of a fixed style. Even where this was not true – in China of A.D. 900–1200, as Needham has described it, or in the spiritual life of the Near East and the Indian subcontinent – the economy and technology, reproducing itself over a wide but ultimately limited area, showed few dynamic features. Production techniques remained unchanged, and wealth accumulated more through taxation and conquest than through expansion in productive capacity or variety.

But for five hundred years the West appeared to expand in a kind of dynamic equilibrium – externally overseas, internally through cycles of population growth, while experiencing continuing accretions of wealth and productive power and enjoying (if that is the word) continuing transformation of techniques. The earlier empires had expanded geographically up to certain notable limits while remaining internally stagnant in spirit, political structure, and economic life. The system of beliefs and behavior that burst forth in the Renaissance in Western Europe had an empire not of this world. Its ambitions, its materialism, its science, its view of man and of nature, its optimism and violence, its individualistic ethic expanded over half the globe and thoroughly infiltrated the rest while remaining, within itself, fragmented and in turmoil. The secret of this external chaos and this internal strength and penetrative power lay in the strength and fecundity of the Renaissance ideals and in the simplicity and flexibility of the economic forms that translated them into material life.

In this way, the evolution of Western civilization threw in the path of its capitalism an unending succession of opportunities for creating capital, wealth, and social output. These opportunities are examined in later essays in this volume. What is of interest here is not their detail but their recurrence. The overseas expansions; the discoveries of gold, spices, and furs, then of forests, slaves, and fresh soils, of vast native populations, strange flora, and at length, of the world's subsoil resources of minerals and fuels; and the mercantile trades that responded to these attractions are for Europe itself perhaps the smaller part of the story, though the one more convulsive in its effects on the planet as a whole. In Western Europe, as populations grew, as new ideas spread, as wars altered the map and revolutions rearranged internal social structures, richer markets and a more abundant labor supply began to draw out of the ancient arts of agriculture and industrial crafts a more productive body of practices, techniques, and equipment. And by the mid-eighteenth century, the modern Industrial Revolution – the continuous transformation of productive technology, supported by engineering and

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scientific traditions both deep and rich – created modern industry, modern transportation, modern urban structures and ultimately, after long delays, modern agriculture. And since the productivity of capitalist economies was in good part a matter not of productive ideas pure and simple but of the scale on which they were carried out, the worldwide expansion of this civilization, the doubling and trebling of its effective market size and resource base, continued to feed the furnace of its expanding economic opportunity.

Was this huge parade of opportunity created by capitalism itself – taking capitalism as the organization and body of motivation by which economic life was carried on? Or is the history better conceived as the introduction of opportunities from other human activities – war, speculation, family life – to which economic men could make a response? The answer may not seem very important except to historians, who are concerned with framing a philosophy of history and a model of social change that permits them to write a narrative that does no violence to the facts and the relationships that their intuitions suggest. In such an effort, one reaches the chicken-and-egg problem. One searches for the first cause of social change, the "primitive accumulation" of commodities, the primitive transformation of ideas and behavior traits from which the rest of the change takes its impetus. Yet it is no mere historian's issue, and it is one which historical evidence can hardly settle. The compartments of Western development were closely, if bafflingly, linked. Not one could have gone far along the path it took without a characteristic body of action, of response, within itself and in interaction with the civilization's other components. If, for example, the early trading ventures had not been actively pursued, if the Incas' gold had not been put into circulation, the expansion of Northern Europe might have been slower; and the mass of commerce and finance that had accumulated by 1750 could not have thrust itself so powerfully into the new lands and new techniques of the nineteenth century.

We come then to the question that has powerfully agitated social thought and historical research since the beginning of the twentieth century. Since scholars share the troubled environment they examine, it is the fundamental question for our view of the contemporary world. The question is simply this: Are we observing and experiencing in the twentieth century a closing in of Western civilization's horizons of opportunity, a breaking up of its forms of organization and expression, a transmutation of its individualism, its optimism, its faith in reason and in self – are we in effect living through the Renaissance in reverse? No doubt some actual reversions to the medieval are observable in the world today. In music, dance, painting, even literature – those most sen-

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sitive of indicators – bourgeois humanism has splintered between abstract styles, elitist and aristocratic in appeal, and works of frenzied or vulgar popularity. The forms of religious expression, too, appear as the saintly mysticism of the few and the mass emotion of a mob. Hierarchy, authority, and status have returned with a vengeance to the political and economic structure. One may trace back in the historical development of the West since 1870 the rewinding of many of the threads of the medieval synthesis that had been loosened and unraveled in the Renaissance and its succeeding centuries. But since history never repeats itself, though it gives the observer of its dreamlike stream of events the frequent experience of déjà vu, there are many new strands as well. Perhaps the phenomenon is not really a reversion to medieval forms but the crossing of another great cultural divide into the next age.

Society in the last hundred years, as in the late Middle Ages, has been living on a geologic fault, experiencing earthquakes as the strata settle into a new position. The tremors were felt first a hundred years ago, in the midst of the great half-century of capitalist expansion in European philosophy, art, and science, then in the political structures, in the social class structure within which capitalist economy worked, within which families are formed and tastes, motivation, and personalities generated. The world had been explored, its empty spaces settled; European population growth leveled off; only technological change continued moving relentlessly with the growth of science down its twentieth-century path, creating shortages and relieving them, scattering destruction and marvelous creations alike across the path of social development.

A historian can only look cross-eyed at the history of the last hundred years. It is too close for comfort. If Communist revolutions had been successful outside of Russia in 1917, or if the German and Japanese empires had been the winners in 1945, the job would be much simpler. Then a historian, writing like a monkish chronicler in the Dark Ages, would trace a clear dénouement to the drama of the West. The *Abendland* would have experienced *Untergang* and the organizational problem would be settled once and for all. The "role of the state" would not be a matter of discussion, and all the false starts, the brave ventures, the experiments of "mixed systems," the schemes of worker participation, all the patter and vaporings about capitalism and freedom and creeping socialism would be buried in an oriental despotism in the name of the proletariat or the Aryan (and Japanese) manifest destiny. Or, suppose the American army had done in 1945 what a few of its officers urged it to do – simply kept going, and ridden and flown on to Moscow – thus fulfilling the fantasies of Stalinist paranoia. What an ending then for Western history! For a military coup of such magnitude – had it succeeded – would have overturned American institutions as well as Euro-

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pean, and an American fascism would very likely have substituted for the German and Japanese.[2]

In short, we see the world today terribly divided: in international politics, between East and West; in domestic economy, between bureaucratic socialism and market freedom, between huge organizations and little men; in spirit, between liberty and order, between rash venture and savings bank timidity, between family and self, between materialism and mysticism, between science and superstition. All these divisions are taken by many as cracks in the temple, indications of an imminent collapse. But it may be that the struggle, even the external enemies, are the conditions of the West's own transformation, the internal chaos a mask not of decay but of vitality. It has all come about in any case because in its two twentieth-century cataclysms, "the West" did not go under. Had it done so, the historian could have built a brilliant explanation, if "the historian" had been around to tell the tale.

But what, one may ask, has happened within Western capitalism, while this struggle against its enemies has been going on – against the childish militarism of the Central Powers, against the antiquated arrogant ideology of Stalinism, and internally against those symptoms of change, taken to be symptoms of decline but now perhaps to be seen as the experiences of a transformation? Between 1945 and 1970 the capitalisms of Continental Europe; North America; the western rim of the Pacific in Asia, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East; Australia; South Africa; and even to a degree the massive and creaky economy of India[3] all expanded faster, transformed more ardently, traded more vigorously, and invested more radically and more variously than ever before. Compared to the twenty-five years after World War I, the contrast

[2]No doubt this scenario portrays the Soviet state and German fascism in excessively monolithic terms. Each country, had it dominated the West, would have had its own history. The strictly economic problem of centralization and decentralization is not radically different in a planned communism than it is in the West under a mixed system. The element of private property is of course absent, but it is absent, too, in a world of corporate capitalism. The history of a Nazi world would probably have resembled that of an oriental empire, a chronicle of rapine and oppression, punctuated by fierce and petty struggles for succession.

[3]Because capitalism, as structured in these countries, flourished does not mean that socialism failed. Growth in the Soviet Union and some parts of Eastern Europe was also high. Moreover the word "capitalism" in every decade has meant something slightly different in a world economy of large organizations and government programs, incentives, and controls. To explain a growth record, one must penetrate below surface correlations and superficial nomenclature to see whether economies grew because of their institutions or in spite of them, and the institutional mix itself must be pulled apart into its dynamic and retardative elements.

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could hardly be sharper. Yet those difficulties of the 1920s and 1930s, the ways they were overcome, the new forms of organization and state policy, the new science and art, the shattering changes in social characteristics, especially those specific to sex and to social class, the inflations of the early twenties and the long bellyache of unemployment of the thirties – all the excitements and miseries, the gaudiness and bleakness of these two decades, made a difference. Capitalist growth after 1945 is not simply the continuation of the British world economy of 1914. One cannot remove the interwar decades, like a piece of leaky pipe from the plumbing of history, and splice together the ends in a single conduit. Looking before 1914, one can even now see some of the shifts under the nineteenth-century surface, like shifting tectonic plates under the earth, which produced the volcanoes and the earthquakes of the twentieth century. And the history since 1970 shows, too, that we no longer live in the simple, free, expanding capitalism and the stable, structured culture of the "British century" between Napoleon and the Kaiser. Historians and sociologists have perceived this since the 1890s, but economists, businessmen, and political leaders are lighter-hearted creatures, readily misled by a decade or two of optimism and success.

The study of history is reputed to assist in the understanding of contemporary events. That no doubt is true in the same way that any deep and thorough study gives one a more sensitive, a more profound, more subtle appreciation of one's own environment. But history seems to assume a pattern and a form in our minds partly because, since it happened long ago, much of its detail is lost, and because we are not immediately involved in its past outcomes. No one – a historian least of all – can trace definitively the chaotic historical transition in which we are caught. This is true because we are all caught in it, and what we write as well as what we do reflects the underlying disorder. Historians, or socio-scientific pundits, Marxist or bourgeois, who think otherwise, compose vain rhetoric and empty, pompous, imprecise theory. It is commonplace to regret the narrow specialization, the loss of scope in scholarship; our inability to see what is happening and to assert with conviction that we do itself is a symptom of what we feel – the breakup of Renaissance ideals of learning and scholarship, and the groping in the dark toward a new synthesis and understanding in scholarship and a new stability and spirit in social life.

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