

I

GREGORY CLAEYS

Introduction

There is one great fact, characteristic of this our nineteenth century, a fact that no party dares deny. On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. This antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand; this antagonism between the productive powers and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted.¹

No judgement on an epoch stands forever. Karl Marx's prophecy that 'the emancipation of the Proletarian' was 'the secret of the nineteenth century' has come and gone without being realised, a mighty effort notwithstanding. His sense of the extraordinariness of the times, however, and of the juxtaposition of exultant promise and alarming decay, remain with us. Every epoch is unique, and few resist flattery in proclaiming the superiority of their collective selves. The nineteenth century was the most optimistic period in humanity's voyage, and it rarely failed to proclaim its triumphs, and to exult in its marvels. Its shortfalls were less often acknowledged.

Yet we must concede some of this immodesty. Three features of the period are outstanding among many. First, humanity moved in immense numbers into cities, leaving behind the rural existence and the dust of 10,000 harvests

GREGORY CLAEYS

that had defined the lives of most since time immemorial. For most the pace of life increased dramatically, and a sense of secular historical time displaced an attitude towards nature and cosmos in a space now defined by bewildering novelty and an ever-multiplying volume and increasing intensity of stimulæ. Humanity's outlook and identity now became increasingly and fundamentally urban. By the century's end, many embraced the Babel-like glass and concrete skyscraper, modernity reaching up to conquer the heavens, as the embodiment of the era's aspirations. Second, unparalleled innovations and marvellous achievements in science and technology transformed work and life alike. Third, the desire for liberty, for collective control, for independence from oppression and exploitation, extended itself from individuals to class, gender, nation and race, in an increasingly conscious and universal effort to encompass all humanity (see Chapter 2 by Georgios Varouxakis, which treats this in the context of the growth of a variety of liberalisms). The slave trade and then slavery were virtually abolished by the time Lincoln emancipated American blacks in 1861 and the Tsar Russian serfs in 1863. From 1848 onwards, in particular, European nations began to demand their independence from the servitude of great empires, and to proclaim the desirability of unity based on the identifying group bonds of nation, language and ethnicity. But nations, too, had many excluded 'others' – gypsies, criminals, minorities of all types – as Saree Makdisi's contribution in Chapter 11 shows us. Gradually non-whites began to claim rights formerly jealously guarded by propertied white males, rebelling in colonies and empires and gaining increasing recognition as legitimate claimants. Slowly, across this period, too, the female half of humanity forced its claims to recognition and dignity. By the century's end the 'subjection of women', as John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill termed it, was widely assailed. Women attained the vote for the first time in several nations, and began to emerge from confinement in 'separate spheres', as Wendy Hayden shows in Chapter 10. These challenges to the arrogance of established order in the name of 'emancipation' and 'liberation' constituted the 'spirit of the age' for many.

These were monumental achievements for a species habituated to and seemingly dependent on servitude. In each of these features, and most of all in their combination, the epoch offered or at least suggested the alluring promise of emancipation and of a world defined by universal rights and the universal recognition of human dignity. The long nineteenth century (1789–1914/17/18) was thus an era in which, at least in Europe and the Americas, Christian ideas of Providence were succeeded by a concept of 'progress' that seemingly promised opulence, greater personal autonomy, the extension of life, the conquest of disease and the prospect of happiness for the many. This

Introduction

induced and was driven by a feeling of secular utopianism in which the old heaven now seemed nearly transplanted to the new earth, and the future sacred timeless space became an imminent secular euchronia, or good time.

Science and technology took pride of place in underpinning this ideal: for most, the good time meant good things in abundance. After the steam engine and railway came, by the century's end, the telegraph and telephone, radio and the cinema, refrigeration, radiation, the internal combustion engine, the aeroplane, automatic weapons and countless other inventions. The Baconian promise of mastering nature was now seemingly fulfilled. To attain legitimacy, an approach to any subject now had to be 'scientific'. Optimism suffused the age as the old, the traditional, the irrational and obscure, cherished and time-worn custom, seemed everywhere challenged by the new and the radical. Youth itself seemed to exemplify progress. From now on every generation began to define itself by its distance from, rather than its proximity to, its parents and ancestors. Cults and movements of reform sprang up to brand these claims, with names like Young Germany, Young Italy and the Young Hegelians. Novelty itself became commendable, as 'old' as such came to seem primitive and suited only to humanity's infancy and immaturity. In politics new opinions were increasingly democratic opinions, as the majority began to claim its sovereignty. As the eighteenth century receded, the principles of the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions now seemed destined to conquer the monsters of kingly despotism and priestly superstition. The power of public opinion, and of the emerging press, seemed to prove the primacy of profane over sacred knowledge. Everywhere reason seemed to be on the march, defining humanity's final coming of age.

Much of this optimism now appears illusory. As Marx indicated at mid-century, such a powerful sense of promise and hope could not but prove delusional and did not last. The early warning signs were clear and ominous: progress had winners and losers. The former few indeed, it seemed, only prospered at the expense of the latter many. In 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus' *Essay on Population* already warned of an inevitable 'surplus population' of the poor. In the first great work of economic analysis of the epoch, *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), David Ricardo took this to mean subsistence wages for the working classes were permanent: the poor were doomed to remain poor. But the rich seemed equally destined to become richer. Examining the concentration of wealth that the capitalist mode of production promoted, and that was accelerated by every economic crisis, Karl Marx assumed class struggle to result inevitably, and deduced from this the inevitability of a proletarian revolution that would usher in an ideal communist society of peace and plenty. Meanwhile

GREGORY CLAEYS

conditions of work in the new ‘manufactories’ were much more arduous and hazardous than traditional agricultural labour. Already by 1820 doctors in the factory districts pointed to crippling disabilities and reduced life expectancy among those tending the new machines. The narrower division of labour, increasingly reducing work to single repetitive tasks, did indeed produce the ‘mental mutilation’ of which Adam Smith had warned. Outside work the situation was not much better. Observers of the degradation of the new urban slums echoed the gloom and despair that hung over them. Even to the newly triumphant bourgeoisie, the commercial and industrial middle classes, modern urban life, which loosened the traditional bonds of authority, implied some disorientation, loss, alienation and anxiety. The limits of consumerism and maximised stimulation for amusement were already evident, though they were still far from reached. Their comforts were also threatened by the growing claims of the dispossessed. The revolution of 1789 seemingly revealed a rising tide of expectations of greater social equality and more universal prosperity. To landowners and the well-to-do the subsequent revolutions of 1830, 1848 and 1871 threatened still more disruption to come. By 1918 most of the great European monarchies had been replaced by republics. To some intellectuals, like Friedrich Nietzsche, however, democracy meant little more than mob rule, and reversion to an atavistic, primitive type of humanity. Resistance to the claims of equality had been present from early on in the nineteenth century, however. The defence of genius, or the culture of the few, sometimes identified with classical Greece, more often with the aristocracy, attempted to counterbalance the onslaught of mediocrity, with ultimately very mixed results.

Everywhere, thus, modernity seemed to herald strife and conflict between old and new, and rich and poor. My introductory chapter here suggests that by the time the century’s most influential text – Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) – appeared, it seemed obvious that the price of progress, a process in the coming decades that would be increasingly conceived as the ‘survival of the fittest’, might well be very high indeed for those – whole classes and races – who were now deemed ‘unfit’ for this brave new modern world. Here humanity was defined by biological science. It was indeed ‘evolving’, but whether the gain outweighed the pain was a moot point, and the destination remained unclear. Darwin expressed, however, one crucial limit to what remains for us the dominant liberal paradigm, defined by ideals of toleration and the extension of rights. What good were wistful ‘rights’ proclamations when nature’s course was far more certain? How indeed could any morality but the right of the strong prevail? And the strong now were the wealthy, especially the commercial classes. Their god was money. ‘Our people have no ideals now that are worthy of consideration’,

Introduction

lamented Mark Twain in 1906, the ‘Christianity we have always been so proud of’ now being replaced by ‘a shell, a sham, a hypocrisy’.²

To those who saw the losses entailed by these processes as outweighing the gains, the dark clouds of cultural pessimism began gathering well before the celebratory decadence of the *fin de siècle* epoch arrived. The worst forebodings were fulfilled with the colossal slaughter of the First World War. Yet then the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 proclaimed another starting point for humanity, promising a universally inclusive vision of industrial prosperity, peace and brotherhood in which empires would be renounced and Enlightenment extended even further beyond its hitherto established boundaries. To its critics in turn, however, Bolshevism represented an age of proletarian masses in which the gentlemanly values that defined civility would erode in the face of the incessantly vulgar egalitarianism of the many, as a manifestly public desire physically to exterminate the old aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie alike became increasingly apparent. Bolshevism’s cosmopolitanism had an uphill struggle, too. Against the scenario that the many would inherit the earth, embracing one another as brothers and sisters, was pitted nationalist fantasies in which particular peoples became the chosen few. Many countries, notably the young United States, regarded themselves as providentially inheriting the earth for their benefit. Britons often assumed their mighty empire proved the same point. So did France. In continental Europe, Houston Stewart Chamberlain announced the ‘Germanic peoples’ had entered on the stage of history in *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1910), in fulfilment of their Teutonic destiny, an ideal to which Hegel and even to some degree Marx subscribed (Norbert Waszek details the former’s enduring influence on the period in Chapter 4). But this was to be achieved, like everything else, only through ‘struggle’.

By 1914 this struggle was symbolised, perhaps more than anything else, by the Maxim or automatic ‘machine’ gun, which made imperial conquest so much easier, but that boomeranged with devastating effect upon its European inventors when the Great War commenced. Now the fantasy of remaking the world was transformed into the reality of destroying it. The cataclysm of 1914–18 came all the more as a surprise given the sense of authoritative rational discovery and conquest that extended equally across the globe and across all fields of human knowledge in the preceding century. Collectively the chapters in this volume demonstrate how rapid and persuasive was the transfer of authority from traditional sources to the new. Theology gave ground steadily to the onward march of the natural and social sciences, which made strong claims respecting objectivity and predictability and thus their own epistemological supremacy (see John E. Wilson’s account in Chapter 3

GREGORY CLAEYS

of the trajectories of theological criticism). History offered itself as a master science increasingly focused on evidence and the interpretation of empirical fact, as Adam Budd shows us in Chapter 6. Political economy even more successfully proclaimed itself in command of the interpretation of the laws of social nature, though its proclamation of the inevitability and superiority of ‘capitalism’, as Keith Tribe indicates in Chapter 7, was hardly uncontested. And, as Mike Gane demonstrates in Chapter 5, the social sciences were not long in following suit in assuming some of the authority of the natural sciences. Theology lingered longer on the fringes of this debate, and sometimes at the centre, than sceptics imagined it would. Its defeat in several key areas, most notably in the debates over Darwinian evolutionism, offered new justifications for oppression, conquest and even the extermination of less ‘efficient’ or ‘fit’ peoples, as the moral demands of Christian mercy gave way to scientific imperatives (but in the early modern era Christianity had marched hand in hand with imperial conquest everywhere). Where the conquest of knowledge promised slow, gradual improvement, here its results heralded, once again, intolerance, struggle and bloodshed in the name of ‘progress’.

The chapters in this volume attest to the fact, then, that ambiguity haunted the nineteenth century virtually from the outset. A growing pride in modernity was mixed with the sense of loss of much of the past, and the multiple threats that novelty posed. The erosion of older forms of identity – rural, local, religious – was made up for in part by new ones, both larger (nationalism, imperialism) and smaller (the individual self). Pride of place is often given to the later modern ‘invention’ (which was really only a redefinition) of the self. Writers like Samuel Butler (in *Erewhon*, 1872) made clear that humanity had begun to act consciously like the machines that were its notional slaves, commencing a servitude that threatened a very uncertain future. Humanity’s growing sense of individual identity swelled with and yet was also alarmed by the ‘discoveries’ of the unconscious and, with eyes somewhat averted, sexuality, with Freud, as Roger Smith indicates in Chapter 8. Its sense of group identity expanded with the proclamation of ‘rights’ of individuals and groups alike; and with new feelings of the collective, whether the madding crowd of Le Bon or the proletariat of Marx, of the nation and of the empire. After political economy and history, psychology too now put forward its claim to be considered a master science. In biography, autobiography and literature (as Norman Vance indicates in Chapter 12), the celebration of self embraced the feeling of uniqueness, the new sense of the public space, the confessional mode of personal unfolding and the cult of celebrity. The claim of superior, civilised individuality made it easier for nations to encompass vast territories of empires and colonies

Introduction

as conquests extended the European idea globally under the common racist pretence that non-whites would welcome it. New nations, especially the United States, could affect an innocence and virtue that the older palpably lacked. Millions embraced the new America as a beacon of hope and equality when Europe itself seemed to flag. All the leading nations imagined themselves superior to the rest, and smiled upon by God, even as slaughter in the trenches commenced. But America in particular came to embody the promise of well-being for the many. Here individuals sought happiness with a fervency their ancestors would have marvelled at. Here, and increasingly everywhere else, they found it (when they found it), by and large, through trafficking in commodities, through acquiring and using things. The utopia of modernity would ultimately come to be defined as much by this process of acquisition, possession and consumption as the desire for equality. The consequences were exhilarating but upsetting. Though the spell of modernity is now largely broken, it is a combination we have learned to live with.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2005), vol. 14, pp. 655–6.
- 2 Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010–15), vol. 1, p. 462.