

The Coming Revolution

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Contents

1.	3
2.	4
3.	7
4.	9
Note	10

Our entire much-praised technological progress, and civilization generally, could be compared to an ax in the hand of a pathological criminal.

— *Albert Einstein*¹

1.

A great revolution is brewing; a world revolution. Consider the origin of the two most important revolutions of modern times: the French and the Russian. During the 18th century France was ruled by a monarchical government and a hereditary aristocracy. This regime had originated in the Middle Ages and had been founded on feudal concepts and values — concepts and values suitable for a warlike agrarian society in which power was based principally on heavy cavalry that fought with lance and sword. The regime had been modified over the centuries as political power became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the king. But it retained certain traits that did not vary: It was a conservative regime in which a traditional and hereditary class enjoyed a monopoly on power and prestige.

Meanwhile, the rate of social evolution was accelerating, and by the 18th century it had become unusually rapid. New techniques, new economic structures, and new ideas were appearing with which the old regime in France did not know how to deal. The growing importance of commerce, industry, and technology demanded a regime that would be flexible and capable of adapting itself to rapid changes; therefore, a social and political structure in which power and prestige would belong not to those who had inherited them but to those who deserved them because of their talents and achievements. At the same time new knowledge, together with new ideas that reached Europe as a result of contact with other cultures, was undermining the old values and beliefs. The philosophers of the so-called Enlightenment were expressing and giving definite form to the new yearnings and anxieties, so that a new system of values incompatible with the old values was being developed. By 1789, France found itself in the grip of an obsolete regime that could not have yielded to the new values without destroying itself; for it was impossible to put these values into practice without throwing off the domination of a hereditary class. Human nature being what it is, it is not surprising that those who constituted the old regime refused to give up their privileges to make way for what was called “progress.” Thus the tension between the old values and the new continued to rise until the breaking-point was reached and a revolution followed.

The prerevolutionary situation of Russia was similar to that of France, except that the Russian regime was even more out-of-date, backward, and rigid than that of France; and in Russia, moreover, there was a revolutionary movement that worked persistently to undermine the regime and the old values. As in France, the old regime in Russia could not have yielded to the new values without ceasing to exist. Because the Tsars and others who constituted the regime naturally refused to give up their privileges, the conflict between the two systems of values was irreconcilable, and the resulting tension rose until a revolution broke out.

The world today is approaching a situation analogous to that of France and Russia prior to their respective revolutions.

¹ Quoted by Gordon A. Craig, *The New York Review of Books*, November 4, 1999, page 14.

The values linked with so-called “progress” — that is, with immoderate economic and technological growth — were those that in challenging the values of the old regimes created the tensions that led to the French and Russian Revolutions. The values linked with “progress” have now become the values of another dominating regime: the technoindustrial system that rules the world today. And other new values are emerging that are beginning to challenge in their turn the values of the technoindustrial system. The new values are totally incompatible with technoindustrial values, so that the tension between the two systems of values cannot be relieved through compromise. It is certain that the partisans of technology will not voluntarily give in to the new values. Doing so would entail the sacrifice of everything they live for; they would rather die than yield. If the new values spread and grow strong enough, the tension will rise to a point at which revolution will be the only possible outcome. And there is reason to believe that the new values will indeed spread and grow stronger.

2.

The naive optimism of the 18th century led some people to believe that technological progress would lead to a kind of utopia in which human beings, freed from the need to work in order to support themselves, would devote themselves to philosophy, to science, and to music, literature, and the other fine arts. Needless to say, that is not the way things have turned out.

In discussing the way things *have* turned out, I will refer especially to the United States, which is the country I know best. The United States is technologically the most advanced country in the world. As the other industrialized countries progress, they tend to follow trajectories parallel to that of the United States. So, speaking broadly and with some reservations, we can say that where the United States is today the other industrialized countries will be in the future.²

Instead of using their technological means of production to provide themselves with free time in which to undertake intellectual and artistic work, people today devote themselves to the struggle for status, prestige, and power, and to the accumulation of material goods that serve only as toys. The kind of art and literature in which the average modern American immerses himself is the kind provided by television, movies, and popular novels and magazines; and it is not exactly what the 18th-century optimists had in mind. In effect, American popular culture has been reduced to mere hedonism, and hedonism of a particularly contemptible kind. “Serious” art does exist, but it tends to neurosis, pessimism, and defeatism.

As was to be expected, hedonism has not brought happiness. The spiritual emptiness of the culture of hedonism has left many people deeply dissatisfied. Depression, nervous tension, and anxiety disorders are widespread,³ and for that reason many Americans resort to drugs (legal or

² My correspondent who writes under the pseudonym “Último Reducto” disagrees. He says that the United States, with its “hard capitalism,” is in a certain sense backward: The path of the future is that of Western Europe, which, with its more advanced social-welfare programs, seduces and weakens the average citizen by making his life too soft and easy. This is a plausible opinion, and Último Reducto may well be right. But it is also possible that he is wrong. As technology increasingly frees the system from the need for human work, growing numbers of people will become superfluous and will then constitute no more than a useless burden. The system will have no reason to waste its resources in taking care of the superfluous people, and therefore may find it more efficient to treat them ruthlessly. Thus, possibly, it is the “hard” capitalism of the United States rather than the softer capitalism of Western Europe that points to the future. Only time will tell.

³ In regard to the sickly psychological state of modern man, see, e.g.: “The Science of Anxiety,” *Time*, June 10, 2002, pages 46–54 (anxiety is spreading and afflicts 19 million Americans, page 48; drugs have proven very useful in

illegal) to alleviate these symptoms, or to modify their mental state in some other way. Other indications of American social sickness are, for example, child abuse and the frequent inability to sleep or to eat normally. And, even among those Americans who seem to have adapted best to modern life, a cynical attitude toward the institutions of their own society is prevalent.

This chronic dissatisfaction and the sickly psychological condition of modern man are not normal and inevitable parts of human existence. We need not idealize the life of primitive peoples or conceal facts that are unpleasant from a modern point of view, such as the high rate of infant mortality or, in some cultures, a violent and warlike spirit. There is nevertheless reason to believe that primitive man was better satisfied with his way of life than modern man is and suffered much less from psychological problems than modern man does. For example, among hunting-and-gathering cultures, *before they were disrupted by the intrusion of industrial society*, child abuse was almost nonexistent.⁴ And there is evidence that in most of these cultures there was very little anxiety or nervous tension.⁵

But what is at stake is not only the harm that modern society, does to human beings. The harm done to nature must also be taken into account. Even today, and even though modern man only occasionally comes into contact with her, Nature, our mother, attracts and entrances him and offers him a picture of the greatest and most fascinating beauty. The destruction of the wild natural world is a sin that worries, disturbs, and even horrifies many people. But we don't need to dwell here on the devastation of nature, for the facts are well known: more and more ground covered with pavement instead of herbage, the abnormally accelerated rate of extinction of species, the poisoning of the water and of the atmosphere, and as a result of the latter the

the treatment of anxiety, page 54); "The Perils of Pills," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 6, 2000, pages 45–50 (almost 21 percent of children 9 years old or older have a mental disorder, page 45); "On the Edge on Campus," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 18, 2002, pages 56–57 (the mental health of college students continues to worsen); *Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia*, 1996, Volume 24, page 423 (in the United States the suicide rate of persons between 15 and 24 years old tripled between 1950 and 1990; some psychologists think that growing feelings of isolation and rootlessness, and that life is meaningless, have contributed to the rising suicide rate); "Americanization a Health Risk, Study Says," *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1998, pages A1, A19 (a new study reports that Mexican immigrants in the United States have only half as many psychiatric disorders as persons of Mexican descent born in the United States, page A1).

⁴ E.g.: Gontran de Poncins, *Kabloona*, Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Virginia, 1980, pages 32–33, 36, 157 ("no Eskimo has ever punished a child," page 157); Allan R. Holmberg, *Nomads of the Long Bow: The Siriono of Eastern Bolivia*, The Natural History Press, New York, 1969, pages 204–05 (an unruly child is never beaten; children generally are allowed great latitude for physical expression of aggressive impulses against their parents, who are patient and long-suffering with them); John E. Pfeiffer, *The Emergence of Man*, Harper & Row, New York, 1969, page 317 (The Australian Aborigines practiced infanticide, but: "Nothing is denied to the children who are reared. Whenever they want food...they get it. Aborigine mothers rarely spank or otherwise punish their offspring, even under the most provoking circumstances.")

On the other hand, the Mbuti of Africa did not hesitate to give their children hard slaps. Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People*, Simon And Schuster, 1962, pages 65, 129, 157. But this is the only example that I know of among hunting-and-gathering cultures of what by present standards could be considered child abuse. And I don't think that it was abuse in the context of Mbuti culture, because the Mbuti had little hesitation about hitting one another and they often did hit one another, so that among them a blow did not have the same psychological significance that it has among us: a blow did not humiliate. Or so it seems to me on the basis of what I've read about the Mbuti.

⁵ E.g., Gontran de Poncins, *op. cit.*, pages 212,273,292 ("their minds were at rest, and they slept the sleep of the unworried," page 273; "Of course he would not worry. He was an Eskimo," page 292). Still, there have existed hunting-and-gathering cultures in which anxiety was indeed a serious problem; for example, the Ainu of Japan. Carleton S. Coon, *The Hunting Peoples*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1971, pages 372–73.

alteration even of the Earth's climate, the ultimate consequences of which cannot be foreseen and may turn out to be disastrous.⁶

Which reminds us that the unrestrained growth of technology threatens the very survival of the human race. Human society, together with its worldwide environment, constitutes a system of the greatest complexity, and in a system as complex as this the consequences of a given change cannot in general be predicted.⁷ And modern technology is in the process of bringing about the most profound changes in human society as well as in its physical and biological environment. That the consequences of such changes are unpredictable has been demonstrated not only theoretically, but also through experience. For example, no one could have predicted in advance that modern changes, through mechanisms that still have not been definitely determined, would lead to an epidemic of allergies.⁸

When a complex and more-or-less stable system is disturbed through some important change, the results commonly are destabilizing and therefore harmful. For example, it is known that genetic mutations of living organisms (unless merely insignificant) are almost always harmful; only rarely are they beneficial to the organism. Thus, as technology introduces greater and greater "mutations" into the "organism" that is biosphere (the totality of all living things on Earth), the harm done by these "mutations" becomes correspondingly greater and greater. No one but a fool can deny that the continual introduction, through technological progress, of ever-greater changes in the system of Man-plus-Earth is in the highest degree dangerous, foolhardy, and rash.

Still, I am not one of those who predict a worldwide physical and biological disaster that will bring down the entire technoindustrial system within the next few decades. The risk of such a disaster is real and serious, but at present we do not know whether it will actually occur. Nevertheless, if a disaster of this kind does not come upon us, it is practically certain that there will be a disaster of another kind: the loss of our humanity.

Technological progress not only is changing man's environment, his culture, and his way of life; it is changing man himself. For a human being is in large part a product of the conditions in which he lives. In the future, assuming that the technological system continues its development, the conditions in which man lives will be so profoundly different from the conditions in which he has lived previously that they will have to transform man himself.

The yearning for freedom, attachment to nature, courage, honor, honesty, morality, friendship, love and all of the other social instincts...even free will itself: all of these human qualities, valued in the highest degree from the dawn of the human race, evolved through the millennia because they were appropriate and useful in the primitive circumstances in which people lived. But today, so-called "progress" is changing the circumstances of human life to such an extent that these formerly advantageous qualities are becoming obsolete and useless. Consequently, they will disappear or will be transformed into something totally different and to us alien. This phenomenon can already be observed: Among the American middle class, the concept of honor has practically

⁶ See, e.g., Elizabeth Kolbert, "Ice Memory," *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2002, pages 30–37.

⁷ Roberto Vacca, *The Coming Dark Age*, translated by J. S. Whale, Doubleday, 1973, page 13 ("Jay W. Forrester of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has shown that in the field of complex systems, cause-to-effect relationships are very difficult to analyse: hardly ever does one given parameter depend on just one other factor. What happens is that all factors and parameters are interrelated by multiple feedback loops, the structure of which is far from obvious...")

⁸ "Allergy Epidemic," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 8, 2000, pages 47–53. "Allergies: A Modern Epidemic," *National Geographic*, May 2006, pages 116–135.

vanished, courage is little valued, friendship almost always lacks depth, honesty is decaying,⁹ and freedom seems to be identified, in the opinion of some people, with obedience to the rules. And bear in mind that this is only the beginning of the beginning.

It can be assumed that the human being will continue to change at an accelerating rate, because the evolution of an organism is very swift when its environment is suddenly transformed. Beyond that, man is transforming himself, as well as other living organisms, through the agency of biotechnology. Today, so-called “designer babies” are in fashion in the United States. A woman who wants a baby having certain characteristics, for example, intelligence, athletic ability, blond hair, or tall stature, comes to an agreement with another woman who has the desired characteristics. The latter donates an egg (usually in exchange for a sum of money — there are women who make a business of this) which is implanted in the uterus of the first woman so that nine months later she will give birth to a child having — it is hoped — the desired traits.¹⁰ There is no room for doubt that, as biotechnology advances, babies will be designed more and more effectively through genetic modification of eggs and sperm cells,¹¹ so that human beings will come more and more to resemble planned and manufactured products instead of free creations of Nature. Apart from the fact that this is extremely offensive to our sense of what a person should be, its social and biological consequences will be profound and unforeseeable; therefore in all probability disastrous.

But maybe this won't matter in the long run, because it is quite possible that human beings will some day become obsolete. There are distinguished scientists who believe that within a few decades computer experts will have succeeded in producing machines more intelligent than human beings. If this actually happens, then human beings will be superfluous and obsolete, and it is likely that the system will dispense with them.¹²

Although it is not certain that this will happen, it is certain that immoderate economic growth and the mad, headlong advance of technology are overturning everything, and it is hardly possible to conceive how the final result can be anything other than disastrous.

3.

In the countries that have been industrialized longest, such as England, Germany, and above all the United States, there is a growing understanding that the technological system is taking us down the road to disaster.

When I was a boy in the 1950s, practically everyone gladly or even enthusiastically welcomed progress, economic growth, and above all technology, and believed without reservation that they were purely beneficial. A German I know has told me that the same attitude toward technology

⁹ In regard to the decay of honesty in the United States, see an interesting article by Mary McNamara, *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1998, pages E1, E4.

¹⁰ Rebecca Mead, “Eggs for Sale,” *The New Yorker*, August 9, 1999, pages 56–65.

¹¹ “Redesigning Dad,” *U.S. News & World Report*, November 5, 2001, pages 62–63 (sperm cells may be the best place in which to repair defective genes; the technology is nearly ready).

¹² See Bill Joy, “Why the Future Doesn't Need Us,” *Wired*, April 2000, pages 238–262. One should not have too much confidence in predictions of miraculous advances such as the development of intelligent machines. For example, in 1970 scientists predicted that within 15 years there would be machines more intelligent than human beings. *Chicago Daily News*, November 16, 1970 (page citation not available). Obviously this prediction did not come true. Nonetheless, it would be foolish to discount the possibility of machines more intelligent than human beings. In fact, there is reason to believe that such machines will indeed exist some day if the technological system continues to develop.

was prevalent in Germany at that time, and we may assume that the same was true throughout the industrialized world.

But with the passage of time this attitude has been changing. Needless to say, most people don't even have an attitude toward technology because they don't take the trouble to apply their minds to it; they just accept it unthinkingly. But in the United States and among thoughtful people — those who do take the trouble to reflect seriously on the problems of the society in which they live — attitudes toward technology have changed profoundly and continue to change. Those who are enthusiastic about technology are in general those who expect to profit from it personally in some way, such as scientists, engineers, military men, and corporation executives. The attitude of many other people is apathetic or cynical: they know of the dangers and the social decay that so-called progress brings with it, but they think that progress is inevitable and that any attempt to resist it is useless.

All the same, there are growing numbers of people, especially young people, who are not so pessimistic or so passive. They refuse to accept the destruction of their world, and they are looking for new values that will free them from the yoke of the present technoindustrial system.¹³ This movement is still formless and has hardly begun to jell; the new values are still vague and poorly defined. But as technology advances along its mad and destructive path, and as the damage it does becomes ever more obvious and disturbing, it is to be expected that the movement will grow and acquire firmness, and will reinforce its values, making them more precise. These values, to judge by present appearances and also by what such values logically ought to be, will probably take a form somewhat like the following:

- i. Rejection of all modern technology. This is logically necessary, because modern technology is a whole in which all parts are interconnected; you can't get rid of the bad parts without also giving up those parts that seem good. Like a complex living organism, the technological system either lives or dies; it can't remain half alive and half dead for any length of time.
- ii. Rejection of civilization itself. This too is logical, because the present technological civilization is only the most recent stage of the ongoing process of civilization, and earlier civilizations already contained the seed of the evils that today are becoming so great and so dangerous.
- iii. Rejection of materialism,¹⁴ and its replacement with a conception of life that values moderation and self-sufficiency while deprecating the acquisition of property or of status. The rejection of materialism is a necessary part of the rejection of technological civilization,

¹³ See Bruce Barcott, "From Tree-hugger to Terrorist," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, April 7, 2002, pages 56–59, 81. This article describes the development of what may become within a few years a real and effective revolutionary movement committed to the overthrow of the technoindustrial system. (Since writing the foregoing several years ago, I've had to conclude that no effective movement of this kind is emerging in the United States. Capable leadership is lacking, and the real revolutionaries have failed to separate themselves from the pseudo-revolutionaries. But Bruce Barcott's article, along with information from other sources, shows that the raw material for a real revolutionary movement does exist: There are people with sufficient passion and commitment who are willing to take risks and make great sacrifices. Only a few able leaders would be needed to form this raw material into an effective movement.)

¹⁴ Último Reducto has pointed out a possible ambiguity in this phrase. To eliminate it, I need to explain that the word "materialism" here refers not to philosophical materialism but to values that exalt the acquisition of material possessions.

because only technological civilization can provide the material goods to which modern man is addicted.

- iv. Love and reverence toward nature, or even worship of nature. Nature is the opposite of technological civilization, which threatens death to nature. It is therefore logical to set up nature as a positive value in opposition to the negative value of technology. Moreover, reverence toward or adoration of nature may fill the spiritual vacuum of modern society.
- v. Exaltation of freedom. Of all the things of which modern civilization deprives us, freedom and intimacy with nature are the most precious. In fact, ever since the human race submitted to the servitude of civilization, freedom has been the most frequent and most insistent demand of rebels and revolutionaries throughout the ages.
- vi. Punishment of those responsible for the present situation. The scientists, engineers, corporation executives, politicians, and so forth who consciously and intentionally promote technological progress and economic growth are criminals of the worst kind. They are worse than Stalin or Hitler, who never even dreamed of anything approaching what today's technophiles are doing. Therefore justice and punishment will be demanded.

The movement in opposition to the technoindustrial system should develop something more or less similar to the foregoing set of values; and in fact there is much evidence of the emergence of such values. Clearly these values are totally incompatible with the survival of technological civilization, just as the values that emerged prior to the French and Russian Revolutions were totally incompatible with the survival of the old regimes of those countries. As the damage done by the technoindustrial system grows worse, it is to be expected that the new values that oppose it will spread and become stronger. If the tension between technological values and the new values rises high enough, and if a suitable occasion presents itself, what happened in France and Russia will happen again: A revolution will break out.

4.

But I don't predict a revolution; it remains to be seen whether one will occur. There are several factors that may stand in the way of revolution, among them the following:

- a. Lack of belief in the possibility of revolution. Most people take it for granted that the existing system is invulnerable and that nothing can divert it from its appointed path. It never occurs to them that revolution might be a real possibility. History shows that human beings commonly will submit to any injustice, however outrageous, if the people around them submit and everyone believes there is no way out. On the other hand, once the hope of a way out has arisen, in many cases a revolution follows.

Thus, paradoxically, the greatest obstacle to a revolution against the technoindustrial system is the very belief that such a revolution cannot happen. If enough people come to believe that a revolution is possible, then it will be possible in reality.

- b. Propaganda. The technological society possesses a system of propaganda, made possible by modern media of communications, that is more powerful and effective than that of any

earlier society.¹⁵ This system of propaganda makes more difficult the revolutionary task of undermining technoindustrial values.

- c. The pseudorevolutionaries. At present there are too many people who pride themselves on being rebels without really being committed to the overthrow of the existing system. They only play at rebellion or revolution in order to satisfy their own psychological needs. These pseudorevolutionaries may form an obstacle to the emergence of an effective revolutionary movement.
- d. Cowardice. Modern society has taught us to be passive and obedient, and to be horrified at physical violence. Moreover, the conditions of modern life are conducive to laziness, softness, and cowardice. Those who want to be revolutionaries will have to overcome these weaknesses.

Note

I wrote “The Coming Revolution” several years ago at the suggestion of a young Spanish man, and I wrote it in Spanish. Here, obviously, I’ve translated it into English.

As I originally wrote the notes to “The Coming Revolution” many of them contained direct quotations, translated into Spanish, from English language sources. If I translated these quotations back into English, the results certainly would not be identical with the original English-language versions. Therefore, where possible, I have returned to the original English-language sources in order to quote them accurately. However, in several cases I no longer have access to the English-language materials in question, and in such cases I’ve had to use paraphrases in these notes rather than direct quotations. But material enclosed in quotation marks always is quoted verbatim.

¹⁵ See the interesting article “Propaganda”; *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, Volume 26, 15th edition, 1997, pages 171–79. This article reveals the impressive sophistication of modern propaganda.

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