

2. Angst And Impending Catastrophe

A Rollercoaster off its bearings

Historians view the short interlude between two world wars through different sets of lenses. For Martin Pugh in *We Danced All Night* the interwar years “boast a coherent identity enjoyed by few periods in history.” He refers to rising incomes, improvement in family diet, holidays, motoring, aviation and the comforts of suburban life. In some respects the book is a revision of *The Long Week-end* written in 1940 by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge. This too came in for criticism, glossing over several much broader dimensions affecting life, society, economics and international politics.

We may contrast the hunger marches, mass unemployment and class conflict with the life of a family in their Morris 8, meandering down leafy lanes, or setting out on a seaside holiday. Overlaying this was a sense of anxiety, gloom and fear, not just about an uncertain future but despair, characterised by economic and cultural decline, social and moral degeneration, if not disintegration, and impending catastrophe. Intellectual soothsayers and Cassandras foresaw demise and uncertainty. The flapper generation, aesthetes, hedonistic jazz age and “liberal uncensored society” appeared shallow but their concerns transcended all this. Europe, with Britain inexorably entangled, was lurching into a dark and sinister age. Like a rollercoaster off its bearings, civilization felt increasingly out of control. It’s foundations were under threat.

George Orwell described these years as “restless, cultureless and centring around tinned food.” This was underscored by a state of angst, introspection and gloom, epitomised in *The Road To Wigan Pier*. For W. H. Auden the Thirties was a “low, dishonest decade.” Arnold Toynbee, in his multi-volumed, *A Study of History*, compared the crisis in the West to the last days of the Roman Empire, a view shared by Leonard Woolf.

The merchants of doom were gathering. Fabians, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, were disgusted by a “moral miasma” of failed capitalism. For economist J. A. Hobson the reason was simple; a misalignment of production and consumption, arising from a flawed system. Whilst Marie Stopes exhorted birth control, for some analysts the real issue was higher breeding rates of lower classes that would create a dysgenic effect for health, well-being and intelligence.

Concerning others was the effect of the unconscious mind and predisposition of humans for neuroses, complexes, repression and uncontrollable desires, with a propensity for violence and aggression, releasing the forces of barbarism. The intellectual and emotional landscape of Britain was changing and unpredictable. Maybe the greatest fear was uncertainty. Many sought education opportunities afforded by the WEA, Trade Unions and Labour Party classes and a web of other organisations committed to learning. It was an escape valve to a better quality of life and sense of purpose in a degenerate if not dystopian world.

The pioneering struggle for independent careers, especially for women, was not in vain even though a grudging acceptance still existed. They now had a greater role in professional life and in shaping the fabric of society, as well as in the home, helped by publications such as the *Testament of Youth* (1933) by Vera Brittain and magazines aimed specifically at women. *Good Housekeeping*, *Women and Home* and *My Home* filled the magazine stands.

Faced by uncertainty, turbulence and increasingly fear, it is perhaps only in the aftermath of a second World War in just two decades are we able to make sense of seismic shifts in thinking, attitudes, economic collapse and, crucially, the consequences of democratic inertia.

Harbingers of doom

Pessimism was contagious. Apart from a plethora of books such as *The End of Order, Dark Age Ahead and Death of the West*, intellectuals and others weighed in. Financial expert Sir Basil Blackett wrote about the "world collapse of civilization in 1932," adding that "chaos will overtake us." Science was not necessarily an antidote. A piece written by Bertrand Russell in 1925 was regarded as pessimism personified with concerns about genetic inheritance, the limitations of science and potential for destructive weapons of increasing magnitude. Utopian remedies would remain elusive to alleviate impending disaster.

Debate was now in the public arena of mass publications, translations, meetings, radio, letters of protest, lectures and reading circles, accessible by a better educated and more articulate populous. Whether Britain was the hub of the Western world was debateable, but not for the elite who travelled widely. Democracy prevailed. Britain had not been invaded and sinister forces did not restrict or eliminate open debate.

Despondency melded with gloom for E.M. Forster. Grateful for much kindness and common-sense in being nursed through a dangerous illness, he was propelled back into a world with "neither kindness nor sense." William Inge, the Dean of St Paul's, felt that "civilization was overloaded, too complicated and too artificial." A morbid connection was made with a lack of meaning in life and own mortality. A lecture series of the Hampstead Ethical Institute picked up on these anxieties with titles such as *Can Civilization Be Saved, The Tragedy of Human Existence* and *The Decay of Modern Culture*. H.G. Wells concurred, with *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*, in despair of a species sailing along "the stream of fate to degradation, suffering and death." In *The Shape Of Things to Come*, he talks of deepening distress and apprehension. His friend, George Bernard Shaw echoed these concerns, saying the post-war social landscape was far more complex and much less confident.

On 3 February 1922 distinguished missionary, Albert Schweitzer, began a series of lectures at Mansfield College, Oxford. He reproduced these in book form the next year with the title, *"The Decay and Restoration of Civilization."* His opening page warned readers, "We are living today under the sign of the collapse of civilization," concluding that "the next landslide would carry it away." The crisis had begun before the war, Schweitzer insisted, with "its roots in a failure of spirit." The relentless march of progress had been fractured by this with the threat of a greater apocalypse. Historian Arnold Toynbee later reflected, whilst other civilizations had fallen and come and gone, "their own civilization was invulnerable," but only just as signs of decay were evident. For Leonard Woolf, hatred, fear and self-preservation was now the dominant social psychology. Oxford scholar Gilbert Murray, writing in 1929, referred to chaos.

Both shared similar values. Essential tenets in the fabric of civilization for Woolf were "liberty, equality, education, justice, knowledge, truth and humanity" and for Murray stability, justice and morality. For Nietzsche, history was cyclical and, with it, civilization as human attempts to arrest decay "with weapons of illusory order" were illusory. The more order was imposed, and progress proclaimed, the more civilizations were at the point of collapse. This heralded major wars, punctuated by lapses into barbarism, before an emergent and supposedly new order evolved. The next cycle would then repeat itself.

Such ideas were echoed in Oswald Spengler's *Decline Of The West*, two monumental volumes published with phenomenal success in Germany and by Oxford Historian, Arnold Toynbee who thought it probable the bubble would burst. The three volumes on genesis and growth were

published in 1934. The next three detailed the breakdown and disintegration of civilization. As historian A.J.P. Taylor aptly put it, they came at an 'unbearably appropriate' time in late July 1939. A cornerstone for Toynbee was when creativity is weak, and stagnation sets in with "mechanical responses," this provokes barbarians to exert themselves in violent ways. It is hardly surprising that entropy was a popular subject in the 1920s. Gradual decline would lead to disorder and eventually chaos.

Decay of capitalist civilization

This was the title of a 1922 book by doyens of the intellectual left, Beatrice and Sidney Webb in response to worsening economic conditions, mass unemployment and emerging violence in the wake of world war. Much influenced by Karl Marx, Beatrice saw crisis and decay, defects and perversions, and everywhere agents of destruction, not construction. As well as profit-seeking, pushing workers into penury or unemployment, the capitalist system was diseased and morally bankrupt. Instead, the Webbs sought municipal ownership, co-operatives, trades unions and "systematic prevention of destitution."

Two economists, G.D.H. Cole and J.A. Hobson echoed their views. The seeds of decay were evident; so was a selfish system and notion of self-regulating markets. For John Maynard Keynes post war economics led to unstable change or "disequilibrium," rather than continuing progress and dream of gradual paradise. New ideas and methods were called for in a highly complex rather than dismal science of economics, and not a "festering mass of assumptions" as H.G. Wells put it.

Keynes was to admit the economy was in a "frightful muddle," not well understood, even by professional economists; "Hobson saw a major defect in an imbalance between the capacity to produce goods and capacity of people to consume them. At issue was the misdistribution of income. The rich saved too much, and used their wealth to invest in capital assets such as machinery or on luxuries, or "unproductive speculation." The rest of the population had too little money to consume all the system could produce. This led to periods of recession and unemployment and created the paradox of "poverty in the midst of plenty." Keen to adopt a more mixed economy, Keynes was in despair by the 1930s at the sheer incompetence of "economic and political potentates."

Whilst in broad agreement, G.D.H. Cole, an advocate of worker representation in industry, sought clearer explanations for periodic slumps that we may know better as boom and bust. He thought the origins of this economic malaise lay in the early 1900s when living standards plateaued though Britain suffered a long and largely self-imposed, depression from circa 1873 to 1896.

An early communist economist was Cambridge academic Maurice Dodd. He saw defects in under-productivity, monopoly practices, imperial rivalry and collapse of the monetary system. His recipe was to replace capitalism with worker control. The general hope in the 1920s was that post-war transition would rectify decline and decay. Richard Overy cites John Maynard Keynes a few weeks after the Wall Street Crash of 29 October 1929. Writing in the *British View*, Keynes said, "there will be serious direct consequences in London resulting from the Wall Street Slump."

In 1930 Keynes gave a more sobering assessment in an article termed *The Great Slump*. If this worsened and became protracted, "gold-standard capitalism will be shaken to its

foundations." In the four years to 1933 trade fell by 50%, and output of heavy industry by a third, leaving 3.5 million unemployed and much short-time working.

Early in 1932 Keynes sought an end to laissez-faire. "There will be no means of escape from prolonged and perhaps interminable depression, except by direct State intervention." The moral dimension was amply conveyed not by an economist but a clerk in a struggling Salford textile firm, Arthur Greenwood. Now unemployed, he spent nine months writing *Love On The Dole*. Published in 1933 it relayed the misery of failed capitalism.

The book was an immediate best seller. Praise came from all quarters including Edith Sitwell, Graham Greene and political scientist Harold Laski. It is a touching story of abandoned hope and impotence in trying to offset the dire consequences of a faceless economy, tugging at one's very existence. The book was turned into a provincial stage play with total audiences exceeding one million before moving to the Garrick Theatre on 30 January 1935. Receiving an ecstatic reception, the play ran for 400 nights, netting Greenwood £5,000.

Economists were criticized for pure theory, rather than solutions. Keynes, using the metaphor of mending a machine, said whilst expert economists ought to know how, "the machine is not well understood by anyone. In a sense there are no experts." Corrective action presupposed causation was clear. In Keynes' view it was anything but clear, as multiple factors combined into a force of their own. The fear of many economists and politicians was that any radical departure from economic orthodoxy might have unpredictable and dire consequences.

A rising star of the Labour Party, Oswald Mosley, helped form the New Party with industrialists to the fore. Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman* from 1930 to 1960, described him as clever, arrogant, handsome, impatient, rich, endlessly ambitious and wilful." In January 1931 Mosley circulated a new direction in economic policy, drafted by John Strachey and Aneurin Bevan. It included public works and the corporate organisation of industry. By July the alliance had broken up when it became clear that Mosley was flirting with fascism.

On 24 August Ramsay MacDonald formed a National Government of Conservatives, Labour and Liberals, with radical groups largely omitted. Unorthodox economics was rejected in favour of traditional retrenchment, citing the depression in Stalin's Soviet Union or Mussolini's Italy. A particular advocate of fresh thinking was John Strachey. His *What Are We To Do* differed only slightly to Lenin's work. Maurice Dodd was an enthusiast for this and five year plans, insisting the political economy was dead in favour of a planned economy. Although carrying risks it was infinitely preferable to "slow stagnation and spiritual and material decay."

In 1934 the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals was formed in Hampstead. A monthly journal, entitled *Plan*, encompassing education, law, land and population, emphasised the bankruptcy of capitalism. An impressive list of vice-presidents included: Vera Brittain, Leonard Woolf, Aldous and Julian Huxley, Kingsley Martin, Bertrand Russell, Rebecca West and H.G. Wells. Meanwhile, traditional liberalists were seeking a combination of a planned economy, coupled with more individual values of personal liberty.

Concerning Keynes was the reliance on economic orthodoxy and failure to utilise effectively the great asset of human resources. The result was publication of *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* published in 1936. Whilst addressed to economists, his aim was for a wider readership. The central thrust was the state stimulating economic activity and employment by positive intervention in interest rates, tax levels and investment. It received a mixed reaction. For Keynes there was a subtle distinction between planning per se and need for economic management. Little progress had been made by 1939. Keynes was

one of many economists seeking to avert the continuing economic crisis. For the employed in the new suburbia with a car, a radio and annual holiday the discourse had little meaning, but did for those in traditional industries, more susceptible to the vagaries of the market place. Unemployment did reduce by about a million as the years went by, primarily as a result of the decision to rearm as events were spiralling out of control in Europe.

The economic value of humanity

The Dorchester Hotel was the setting for the Malthusian Ball, held in 1933, organised under the auspices of the Birth Control Movement. The honorary organiser was Edith Summerskill and patron, Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone. One of the sponsors was Julian Huxley. At issue was birth control being practised mostly by those of wealthier means, rather than those deemed to be in most need. Population increase was "greatest amongst the social classes and communities unable to supply their offspring with the necessities of civilized life."

The secretary was an American Nurse, Margaret Sanger, a strong supporter of the Malthusian League. Founded in London in 1877, it lobbied for a restriction of births amongst the least advantaged. The imperative was clear. "Those afflicted with hereditary diseases, or who are otherwise plainly incapable of producing or rearing physically, intellectually and morally satisfactory children, should not become parents."

In June 1915 Sanger met Marie Stopes, an academic botanist and a convert to birth control. The two became rivals. The first clinic to dispense advice and birth control products was set up by Marie Stopes in Holloway on 17 March 1921. In May she convened a public meeting, held at Queen's Hall in Central London. The aim was to publicise the new clinic and dissuade those of lower classes from the expense and futility of producing "wastrels."

There was an economic imperative too. Lloyd George warned it was not possible to run an A1 empire with a C3 population, in reference to the physical attributes of recruits. A 1920 report from the National Service Medical Board stated that, of almost 2.5 million men assessed in the final year of war, only one third were fit, another third were incapable of light work only, over 20% infirm and the remainder chronic invalids. A similar picture emerged in 1921, this time of children as almost 50% of 2.4 million suffered from "defects."

The gospel of contraception was targeted at this large segment. For the Malthusian League, misguided welfare schemes only encouraged reckless breeding that would compound poverty, disease and unemployment. Author Bertram Talbot was emphatic. "A few well-born, well-bred children are worth to the nation more than hordes of rickety, under-fed, ill-cared for little ones." For Mary Stopes, the standard of humanity was attainable only when the population was no longer bred by mere chance viz: "indiscreet enjoyable evenings, by lust, by ignorance and by accident. To let nature take its course was not the way to raise an imperial race."

In Europe and America, eugenics societies were set up, believing that biological nature was the pivotal factor in breeding, rather than nurture and associated social connotations. The British movement, founded in 1907, expanded into regions with prominent contributors such as Frances Galton and Leonard Darwin with much interest shown by economists, sociologists and politicians. It grew in prominence from "the mire of ridicule." As well as Marie Stopes, other organisations accepted most of their assertions including the Malthusian League, the British Social Hygiene Council and National Women's Council as a means of reducing disability and enfeeblement as well as trying to eliminate disease, psychological disorders and reduced inheritance of limited mental faculties.

The implication of dysgenic effects alarmed the eugenic movement, necessitating some form of biological intervention. For some, this bordered on German 'race-hygiene,' developed by Alfred Ploetz in the 1890s. Most members rejected state euthanasia in favour of compulsory sterilization of parents, a view strongly supported by Marie Stopes. Physical imperfections were an abhorrence she insisted, as her son discovered. His mother refused to attend his own wedding, and disinherited him, for marrying a girl who wore glasses, the daughter of Barnes Wallace.

Julian Huxley shared similar views. The brother of Aldous, and grandson of Darwin's bulldog Thomas, he believed the sterile should not seem themselves as stigmatised failures but as a privilege and a badge of good conduct in the wider interests and well-being of society. His associate, psychiatrist Charles Blacker, stated humanity was going through an unprecedented biological crisis.

Blacker was appointed president of the Eugenics Society in 1931. A Bill was presented to the Scientific Committee of the House of Commons but was rejected as it referred to those with hereditary diseases as well as mental defectives. A private members' bill was presented to the House in July 1931, the Trojan horse for legislation "for the compulsory sterilization of the unfit." The bill was rejected by 167 votes to 89, a roughly 2:1 majority.

This was not the end of the matter. The B.M.A. were in favour of sterilising mental defectives and in 1932 the Ministry of Health set up the Brock Committee to study mental deficiency. The report in 1934 recommended voluntary sterilization for inherited mental disease and "a grave disability, physical or mental." Nothing resulted, unlike the United States and Germany as the scientific community in particular felt insufficient evidence had been provided. Blacker then explored other ideas including a genetic profile, health checks before marriage and a certificate of health, views broadly shared by the Advisory Council of Marriage.

Taxing minds was the prospect of war, with the fittest and most able serving, and a declining birth rate with greater birth control, resulting in silent factories and mills and empty schools. Sir William Beveridge stated that low fertility and excessive birth control could mean that "the people of these islands were heading for disappearance." The distinguished economist, Roy Harrod, spoke of an apocalyptic future with possible human extinction."

The solution for the Bishop of Birmingham was simple. Breed more from "better stocks," an imperative aimed at the more wealthy who preferred a "Baby Austin to babies." Low fertility was also attributed to the greater emancipation of women who were no longer dependent on a husband's income, and on the "neurasthenic age" with its neuroses and anxieties.

Psychoanalysing British malaise

Psychoanalysis was seen as an instrument for dealing with the dysfunctional nature of modern society and fear of primitive instincts that lay concealed in the unconscious. Roots lay pre-war, mainly in Germany and Austria. In 1899 Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, stressing the dynamic role of the unconscious in generating symptoms of neuroses, hysteria, phobias and symbolic imagery. Freudian theory emerged only slowly and the role of infant sexuality. Freud contended these erotic images drove the libido and Oedipus complex where each infant emotionally attaches to the parent of the opposite sex.

Freud stated that the human psyche has three components, the Id, Ego and Superego that all develop at different stages. The Id or primitive instincts contain sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, linked to the pleasure principle. The ego is that part of the Id modified

by direct influence of the external world. It is the decision-making component of personality and is the moderator that works by reason, though not necessarily with a concept of right or wrong. Freud used the analogy of the Id being the horse and Ego the rider, holding in check the horse's superior strength. The Super-ego incorporates the values and morals of society, learned from parents and others. It controls the Id's urges in attempting to persuade the ego to adopt moralistic aims.

There is a constant conflict between the libido and ego that may express itself in benign forms or in neuroses, fixations or physical symptoms of pain or paralysis. Freud insisted the origins lay in impulses or urges constructed in infancy, rather by pre-disposition. This led to splitting with Alfred Adler who insisted neuroses were caused by "organ inferiority" and compensatory "striving for power" provoked by feelings of inadequacy. Carl Jung too abandoned his mentor over his excessive emphasis on the sex-drive. Jung was a highly original thinker who devised the terms introvert and extrovert and what we may think of as personality trait theory.

The most important disciple of Sigmund Freud was controversial British doctor Ernest Jones who set up the London Psycho-Analytical Society in 1913 that was replaced in 1919 with 12 members. In 1926 a London clinic opened in Gloucester Place. Over the next decade 738 patients were examined with treatment up to four years and up to five or six sessions a week. Four patients had more than 900 treatments.

In 1925 the BBC journal *The Listener* reminded readers that Freud's theories had been met with opposition, adding drily, "It was only in the 1920s that complexes and repressions, transference and sublimation, invaded the drawing rooms of English-speaking world." Yet, interest in psycho-analysis was sustained. Curiosity alone would ensure this and a realisation victims of war, especially those who had experienced shell-shock, or who had witnessed the carnage of war, have what we term today post traumatic stress disorder.

The B.M.A. carried out a non-conclusive study of psychoanalysis as some psychologists were unconvinced of the science. All psychological phenomena was traceable to the cortex was one assertion and the unconscious was a "refuge for ignorance." More especially, symptoms were placed there by the analyst, a view shared by the consultant at Bethlem Hospital who claimed that patients under analysis become "very suggestible" as the state of mind is marked by "passivity, receptivity and lack of criticism." Brown illustrated this with a description of a half-darkened room, stillness, a recumbent patient reclining on a comfortable couch and the modulated voice of the analyst.

The link between sex and psychoanalysis was a major issue in the popular perception of the theories of Freud. Attitudes were changing with more open discussion. In September 1929 the Third Congress of the League for Sexual Reform was held. In his opening address, its chairman, Norman Haire, observed, "We English are backward in some respect at the free discussion of sexual problems, so notorious for sexual prudery and hypocrisy." Aldous Huxley called for an end to censorship in the arts, Marie Stopes for more birth control and Bertrand Russell for more honesty, whilst For Julian Huxley debasing moral standards was of concern. Important too was homosexuality. According to Freud it was an abnormality of the final stage of development, resulting from a combination of hormone imbalance and infantile trauma.

Propaganda against venereal disease was nationwide. In 1930 it was estimated that 2.6 million patients were seeking treatment for syphilis and gonorrhoea. Films such as *The Shadow* and *Third Party Risks* warned of casual pre-marital relationships. Delinquency and not neuroses was the issue said the Social Hygiene Council whose remedy was explaining the

facts of life, whilst Marie Stopes urged parents to teach children, "cleanliness, disinfection and chastity." By the late 1930s sex education was discussed in schools and even kindergarten. A publication in 1917, reprinted twelve times over the next twenty years, emphasised "happy comradeship," team games, and hard physical exercise to calm down the sexually aware. A hard bed by an open window and cold water would not go amiss either, and alcohol was to be avoided as this might otherwise adversely stimulate the senses.

The unconscious mind intrigued psychologists and a jaundiced medical profession. In 1935 a series of BBC talks attempted to unpick psychology with Cyril Burt, and psychoanalysis with Ernest Jones. He explained the unconscious was "the prime motor of the source of most of our mental energy." Alarming, it had accounted for "the innumerable imperfections" in the human condition. Jung referred to the collective unconscious, hidden from view, the basis of which was formed in infancy, challenging the notions of rationality and free will.

Jones insisted that "every human being is guided in his actions by forces of which he is more or less unconscious." In 1930 Freud published a book exploring modernity and the human condition and the state of conflict, afflicted by a crippling malaise and permanent sources of suffering, "doomed to decay and dissolution." This dystopian view was of "an external world capable of overwhelming man, abetted by merciless forces of destruction" - and demands of living with others, the greatest source of perennial human suffering.

It was a prescient observation, leading Freud to contend. "What we call civilization is largely responsible for our misery" and is threatened by man's destructive capabilities. We are mere bystanders in a world with imposed norms and standards, especially if force or other forms of coercion are used.

Over the next decade social order, political behaviour, international crises, a menacing world and war were subject to psychoanalytical scrutiny. Jung, like Freud, understood the paradox that modernity promised both apparent progress and a prospect of imminent disaster. Every step forward "steadily increases the threat of a still more stupendous catastrophe." In the deep recesses of our own mind, and therefore society as a whole, lies chaos and dark forces.

The hope for Jung was a spiritual side would emerge. In the autumn of 1935 the BBC ran a series of six talks with the title '*The Dangers of Being Human.*' The series was introduced by Dean Inge, Dean of St Paul's, who deplored Freud's notion of 'morbid states' rather than a healthy mind, insisting the spirit of God was required.

During the 1930s the Institute of Psychoanalysis devoted much time to the triggers of conflict, violence and aggression in the struggle between good and evil, and association of fear, with Austrian born Melanie Klein at the forefront of research. The idea of neuroses became more accepted with advertisements for remedies for conditions from stammering to melancholia.

Psychology weighed in with a book entitled *I Can and I Will*, promising to reveal '*The Mind Behind the Mind*' to cure self-consciousness, nervous apprehension, depression, insomnia and fear, especially given international events and threats posed. This heralded the study of metapsychology in examining the effects on communities, nations, structures, systems and the individual. Might there be a correlation and, if so, how did this manifest itself given particular circumstances? This went to the heart of the nature & nurture debate. The wheel had turned full circle.