

THE MELIORABILITY OF MAN'S WORLD

BY HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND

THE biological naturalism of man's place in Nature has served its purpose well enough to lead now to considerations of a more philosophical question, viz: What capacity and method has man for *bettering* his place in Nature, building up his cultural estate, deepening and expanding his more or less altruistic world-conception so as to include *all* those aspects and functions of his civilizing process which seem at present to be so incompatible and discrete? Man has found that his world is not by any means the best possible of worlds, so it therefore concerns him greatly to know whether it is meliorable and what the most efficient method for realizing such betterment is.

We do not have to assume that he *needs* a subtle and persistent capacity as well as a just and adequate method, because this necessity is one of the most easily demonstrable conditions of his historical career as an intelligent social being. But we will be required to assume that his capacity and method for bettering his world are not altogether futile, illusory or incompetent to the purpose in hand. Man undoubtedly has in his cultural possession some few very real and positive elements of genius and affection, will and aspiration, knowledge and skill, which are no longer in embryo but are rather very much adolescent and ambitious to become mature in function and expression. He is even a little too precocious now and then for his own durable good, but the general program and practice is admirably progressive and aspirant, sufficiently devout and wise to offer tokens of an early arrival at a stable and worthwhile Civilization compared with which the present one is infantile and feeble.

Let us look into the situation a little closer and try to see just what is meant by the *ideal* that man's world is meliorable, to see whether it is a statement of fact or fancy, whether man really can work transfiguration on himself and his fellows, whether he is more

social and spiritual than selfish and biologically brutal in his primary instincts and ambitions, and whether his destiny is permanent and his efforts truly commendable or merely the vain gestures and anxieties which his finite nature experiences in a cruelly chaotic and transitory world.

In a brief workout of this theme I will try to review only a few of the main features marking the situation, and while presenting them as they are, to also make a few suggestions as to how I believe they can be expanded and refined in such a way as to offer further hope and action-patterns in the general melioristic of every really vital process which concerns man's civilizing power and function. Among other things having very determinable and indispensable value to *future modes* of cultural achievement I will show that whatever ideals, aims, practices or criteria we cherish and respect are thereby given prominent place and effectual influence on the trend of our own *contemporary* civilization. The present subject accordingly will be treated in the light of two different periods of action as well as under two different aspects of the melioristic ideal. Not only present and future conditions concern us, but the programs and purposes (objective-external and subjective-internal) which now exist or may yet be developed to meet the conditions of life. These also are further divided into three different avenues of approach which for the one side may be listed as Culture-Epochs and Historical Sources, Empiricism and Social Science, Modern Civilization and the Incompetence of Legislation; while on the other may be listed considerations of heuristic contribution from the Creative Functions of Art and Philosophy, and from the Teleology and Eschatology in the Mystic's Overworld, leading on to Man's True Apocalypse and Ultimate Transfiguration. Let us see whether we are able possibly to draw some few synthetic conclusions not altogether devoid of scientific validity and suggestive sociological significance to that promissory millennium when man shall have become both philosopher and saint, when his life shall have become both wise and good, when his world shall have become both civilized and redeemed.

The primary analysis of what constitutes Civilization approaches it historically and selects out of the general evolutionary chronicle of human life those factors, dreams, discoveries, accidents and aspirations which served and still serve to make the world a spiritual cosmos instead of a bestial chaos. It is an effort fully

conscious that only a small part of the real civilizing process ever finds narrative attention or descriptive record in historical documents, whose sources may be as manifold and innumerable as the hopes and ideals of all humanity, but whose feeble power of catching these living factors on the wing renders the record called history all too significantly finite and inconclusive. However, it does fortunately exercise a reliable function in selecting representative types of knowledge, skill, action-patterns and genius-ideals which *act as* and often *are* direct elements in the very emergent process we are trying to study and understand. It is the redeeming credential of history that it records and reveals to later research just these factors of man's spiritual progress and renders just that much service in helping to prove that man's world has a future of no mean promise, that it is meliorable and aspirant as well as evolutionary and emergent.

The full career and development of civil society is prehistorical in sources and impulsion. Its real beginnings were much in vogue and studied concern even before anyone thought of recording the actual achievements of men on the pictorial panels of hewn logs, carved ivory and stone, or in the laborious mural sculptures of the cave-dwellers. History is a documentary product of a far later era when states had become organized, when the political affairs of men had been sufficiently coordinated and harmonized to warrant a few of the more conservative minds to mark down certain events as commendable and worthy of record to posterity. But, while the first beginnings of social development were essentially prehistorical, the functions, duties, ideals and heroic decisions which were really intelligent and effectual as conscious political purposes did not arise until civil states had become established as authoritative governmental and protective institutions. Ever the priestly function of ritual assembly and its later eventuation into ecclesiastical communion and authority had first to gain the favor of the political and military leaders so as to share with them the hegemony already earned or seized. Likewise with many other civil and cultural interests, tho perhaps in a less insistent and dominating way, the field had first to be cleared politically and economically before any of the arts and sciences, literature, history, religion or philosophy could find either the leisure or the security, much less the inclination and will, which were the primary factors in their flourishing. But they did somehow manage to grow up and flourish, healthily and fruit-

fully as modern history and archeology so plentifully prove, just as soon as the troubled times settled down and men found security and a demand for their labors.

Organized society today of course reveals many developments of more recent ages than the primitive and prehistorical, many more-subtle refinements of barbarism than cavemen ever dreamed were possible perhaps, but still listed generally as new economic situations, newer and more complex industrial, vocational, moral, social and political combinations which demand equally newer and more complex mental equipment, more skillful and more accurate, deeper, wider, subtler preparations, adaptations and arrangements. Our exteriors have changed remarkably, but not the inner frame of steady vital purpose; the continuous and irresistible substratum of cultural and philosophical principles involved has hardly altered in one single item. These are characteristics of eternal verity, they are not so ephemeral or dependent upon finite situation or personal needs but are durable and regulative of all human labor and experience, interest and ambition. It has only been during the last quarter century that men have begun to develop a philosophical sociology which would cover the whole field of social evolution and control, giving accurate and adequate attention not only to the customs, rites and notions of primitive society, barbaric and pagan tho it most generally was, but also to lead on thru the whole cycle of human life and give equally accurate and valid attention to the later and more recent developments, the modern especially for it concerns us most in being most immediate to our own cultural makeup and welfare.

One of the first principles of sociology is that the growth of social groups could not have taken place at all were there no common bonds of union and communion among the members making up the group; they had first to be in the mood to dispense with their primitive and barbaric ideas and dispositions in order to get together and work out programs of social contact and control. So then we must first begin our analysis of the sources (whether historical or prehistorical makes no difference here) of social development and ambition by examining the bonds which first brought together and held the men concerned in a common field of interest and activity. Among these we find custom, religion, law and personal influence as the chief external bonds of communion, and private need of support, security and general morale as the chief internal bonds

holding together groups of any size from the tribal family to the whole modern world. Roughly speaking, practically every phase of organized society, whether primitive, classical or modern, can be analyzed, classified and interpreted under one or another of these several fields of interest, only the terminology used might vary according to the particular culture-epoch or locale under inquiry.

The primitive family, clan and tribal groups had their respective order and security according to very definite and established social customs, ritual exercises and beliefs, governmental procedure and military protection as objective obligations and guaranties while they also had very definite and insistent personal fears, notions, desires and dreams which made up the private subjective forces which helped to keep them bonded in social communion with their fellows. The same situation essentially prevailed in the classical eras of civilization in Egypt, Babylon, China, India, Greece and Rome except that the tribal groups had become enlarged into principalities, states and empires with their consequent involution and complexity of life and its requirement of more adaptable objective apparatus and personal submission. The same elements even may be seen following clear thru to our own more cosmopolitan and yet more differentiated modern age with all its worldwide ambitions and collaborations, its precocious but fairly promising gestures toward religion and culture, philosophy and art, science, government and romance. But the more subtly complex and involved social situations of today are just as amenable to precise analysis, understanding, direction and control, just as meliorable and progressive under proper treatment and decision, as either the primitive or classical examples can be found to have been. One difference perhaps being that *then* was the heyday of superstition and magic, small world-conceptions and ephemeral ambitions, while today men are (supposedly, alas!) blessed with good sense, broadmindedness and all those pristine virtues which balk and shy at everything expedient.

We should be cautious enough to ask whether the modern age really deserves all the dignity and discretion which contemporary thinkers have expended in their contemplation and espousal of its supremacy.

Modern empiricism finds its subtlest sanction and staunchest support in the pragmatic values established as current criteria in social science and the ethical theory of Civilization. It takes patterns of action and purpose from man's historically emergent ex-

perience, but on practical requisition that these ideal examples should have some independent valuistic connection and moral significance, empiricism takes refuge in the more finite and ephemeral categories of sociology, in such opportunist types of ethical theory as batten heavily on man's innate rhyomistic nature as it has found exercise throughout his political, economic and industrial development, and is therefore gunshy under the more general philosophical attack of rational analysis and impersonal research into the *whole* civilizing process as it has been variously pursued since preadamite days. The pragmatic phases of Civilization are too materialistic and ephemeral compared with its eventuations into cultural development, progressive education and spiritual refinement, and are thence not to be so easily incorporated into our true philosophy, not even so readily adopted as the *best* sanction and support open to what will later on be introduced as a more valid empirical method and viewpoint. We must remember that human life supplied these elements of spirituality and cultural discipline along with the less important elements of material welfare and economic opportunity, and it is only fair that we consider *both* fields of value and see that it is only by virtue of our own deliberate choice of one or the other field of interest and action that life is noble or mediocre, heroic or pusillanimous, as also that our sociology will interpret all Civilization as either aspirant or utilitarian, cultural or pragmatic. We know of course that a full and true philosophy of the subject would include all manners of approach, all modes of analysis and interpretation, but we know also that it would have validity only so long as it held them all in their proper valuistic order replical to the series of their importance as items or functions in the general cultural development, the melioristic purpose and spiritual advancement of human life.

There may be somewhere in the dusty tomes of political apology some theoretical justification for taking refuge in empirical theories of Civilization and human progress, but none whatsoever so far as I have been able to discover in the annals of symmetrical unbiased philosophy for making man's cultural career on this planet appear so artificial and forced as to be no more than empirical, merely worldly and rhyomistic, that is. If these were its only features, its only ambitions and credentials, I am much afraid we would have little hope of actually departing the bestial and barbaric codes of our primitive ancestors. On the other hand we may be pretty sure that

empiricism's truer value as a representative type of ethical theory could not have arisen in the first place if it had not taken advantage of the outstanding historical fact that man is an intelligent social being and that the persistent struggles, gains, losses and heartaches of his whole evolutionary career make up that richly abundant background of his modern nature which demands that all his affairs, hopes, beliefs and decisions shall be educative, progressive, melioristic else they stagnate and become recrudescient, sterile and decadent. Whence if it would flourish and find theoretical favor as either a metaphysic or an ethic of Human Civilization it must keep faith with the subtle spiritual sources which give origin, vitality and even some share of dignity and destiny to all that man has thus far been able to accomplish in his two worlds of physical and mental labor.

Sociology has long been imbecile with the wrong assumptions and categories, looking more to economic, industrial and political control for its reward than to educational, cultural and moral rehabilitation for its rubric and recommendation. It is about time that we ceased this all-too-fashionable paternalism and officious snupperry, this everlasting debauch of crime-news and scandal, this interminable harangue about how our captains of industry and economic war-lords have inherited the divine right formerly exercised so fatally by kings and aristocratic chameleons. There is absolutely nothing about these factors or actors sufficiently real and sincere that an intelligent courageous man should for a minute consider them necessarily critical or socially omnipotent. At best they are merely transient items of obstruction to progress, ephemeral figures on the dial of an inexorable and melioristic Civilization. The nobler and more adequate social science of the future will not harp on the highly lucrative pragmatic values now so universally in the ascendent; it will exercise better judgment and wider sympathies for the real life and ambition of men heroic enough to repudiate selfishness and trifling rewards, that reliably genuine sort of human life which is at once devout and wise, generous and just, social and intelligent.

In one of its most interesting and at the same time most problematic phases man's world *has to be somehow made better* day by day, but the rub comes when we find that a good world has to be fool-proof as well as virtuous and heroic. It is far more difficult to enlighten a fool than to reform a rogue because if a man is stupid enough to be a fool he will not be clever enough to be a scoundrel.

The knave is very often the more congenial and amenable because his mischiefs require a certain amount of suavity and intelligence to start with, while the fool is just as likely to cause disaster as he is some trifling disaffection.

It is to cover and combat situations like this that we saw that Civilization and social welfare are practically synonymous terms, at least insofar as they signify conditions which are meant to guarantee vital security and general morale to the whole population regardless of personal faculty or fortune. Both are results of social organization, efficient social control of industrial production and distribution, moral and vocational guidance, educational and economic equality of opportunity, full stability and encouragement for all interests and activities which are good and exemplary to the general cultural upreach and spiritual refinement of the whole human commonwealth. It means in short that both the material and spiritual welfare of mankind is looked after in the really just and melioristically operative civilizing process; the effort and ambition of which are not considered sufficient or sincere when only conveying a few words of commendation or patronizing genuflexions in favor of some superficial sophists selfish exploit or spoliation of his fellows, but when direct thought and rigorous labor is expended to make social welfare true and Civilization actual. It means that a really just and genuine social security, concord and efficiency will be the chief features of a truly civilized world which will in turn maintain itself by the organization and administration of a just and stable system of social control, good and impartial laws, direct and strict vocational guidance, educational encouragement and proper economic placement of all genius and special types of skill or learning, sure rewards for the righteous and deserving as well as certain retribution (or rehabilitation if possible) for all wrongdoers.

But so far our efforts have been all but totally futile in trying to establish such a social utopia by means of legislation only. External law will never make men virtuous or intelligent, these being qualities of private character. The mood and makeup of a man, on the other hand, are what often decide whether the external authority of law shall be respected or its statutes considered adequate restraints upon his conduct. Law in the first place is only a plan of action, as Gladstone said, and cannot therefore strike into a man's character with sufficient force to be imperative. His own mind and conscience are supposed to be given him for that highly

responsible function. Authority and government by law (whether civil or ecclesiastical, neither is actually successful or imperial) can at best seek only preventive measures rather than clumsily punitive and weakly restitutive regulations in dealing with the criminal and defective. We can trust and hope however that this in time will help to sterilize the debauchee and imbecile at the same time that it elevates and increases the ranks of the wise and good. The incompetence of legislation alone to meet the cultural situation is a serious defect in man's present status as an intelligent social being, but it is not inclusive of nor even representative of that really pejorative incompetence ascribed to man's whole cultural career by Bertrand Russell and Oswald Spengler in their anxiety that modern Western Civilization is moribund. Their antidote was prescribed more than thirty years ago by Mazzini who held that any *real* Civilization cannot die because it has genuine faith and its faith prefigures what it shall become in the future. If modern civilization, at least so far as its Western Phase is concerned, is in any degree actually moribund it must be because it is not a real civilization in the first place.

In order to forestall any such cultural disaster, whether or not caused by an over-industrialized economic hegemony, we must take immediate and devout action to rechristianize our faith, ennoble and catharize our characters, purify and spiritualize our social conceptions so as to prefigure the future which we would like to realize. We know, or should know unless all our historical examples and the discipline of Nature have served in vain, that jerry-built civilizations cannot endure the ravages of Time, that smear-cultures are precarious, puerile and too precocious for rewards to ever be long ascendent or capable of survival. We know also, however, that the main difficulty is not so much in establishing but in getting people to support and respect some sort of genuine and durable social communion having its first and perennial maxim devoted to those *better values* of human life, those ideals of self-respect, law-obedience and general amiability which are ever ascendent credentials to man's spiritual estate. The establishment *and concerted pursuit* of this ideal program is what we will have to fight for first, because all other features of our purpose to enlighten and democratize the world depend upon thus first winning over the general assembly of mature responsible minds to the only really effectual measure that is in favor of cultural rehabilitation and reform.

Very probably we shall have to start with individuals first, trying to get them aroused out of vulgarian inertia to make themselves lifelong examples of heroic effort at deliberate self-improvement and ennoblement, while latterly we might be able to look forward to that last great age when all men would be rechristianized and inspired anew with social responsibility, moral accountability, intellectual honesty and spiritual rebirth. We know clearly enough already that it is comparatively no problem to gauge and remedy our own individual faults, but a herculean task to even get the public conscience aroused to its obligations, much less to get any really accurate and effectual program introduced and adopted as a part of their honest daily practice. The ideal pursuit of culture and civilized ambition is readily sanctioned and taken in as favorable and desirable as a general proposition for others to liev for, but the actual discipline and pursuit of this ideal by individuals themselves in a genuine life of refinement and spiritual character is still persistently evaded and left largely to vicarious effort and performance.

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