

# This Moribund Humanism

*Julien Tondriau*

*Je suis né tué.*—Voltaire

EVERY century has been confronted with formidable dangers. Ours is menaced by a peril possibly greater than that of atomic disintegration: spiritual decadence brought about by the decline of general culture. We are living in an exceptionally critical period, and we can no longer be content to watch passively the convulsions of a world that is searching its way. We ourselves must search our way, and our success will depend upon the choice we adopt. Before choosing we cannot but meditate on the words of Toynbee assuring us that the character of our answer will determine our chances for survival.

We want to survive. We must survive! And we are faced with an urgent need to analyse and brand the evils that undermine us. The two most dangerous, from which perhaps all others stem, are the intensive pursuit of physical comfort, and what the philosopher Julien Benda recently called "hatred of the disinterested spirit."

## II

The untiring search after physical comfort is probably the after-effect of the epoch of fear in which we have lived. Directly menaced by a complete negation of all liberty, we have been forced to resort to pure power and the irresistible force of arms which has become our credo. We had no other choice. We could not, like the Byzantines, enjoy the supreme luxury of discussing the sex of the angels

while another Mohammed II was beating at our walls. That would have been both absurd and fatal. But we will follow the same path to catastrophe if we continue to consider material power as the only solution to our present anxiety, or to gape with admiration at machines and money, as if they were our ultimate resource. Every man and every country that has adopted the physical element as the only acceptable remedy for overcoming distress has left to its dismayed successors only vanity and dust. R. B. Fosdick, President of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1947, said:

"Our response today cannot be confined to this lower level. Unless we can rise to greatness and lift our answers to an intellectual and ethical plane, our fate will be the fate, not only of the nations that preceded us in history, but of all species, whether birds or brontosaurus, which specialized in methods of violence or defensive armor".

TO assure our comfort is a praiseworthy aim in itself. It would be excellent if each home had a modern kitchen, a radio, television, a telephone, and an automobile of the latest model. Desirable, too, if the dream of Henri IV were to be realized and "chicken in the pot" would be more than just the privilege of a select few. But raising the standard of living favours quantity, it does not necessarily favour quality. It is a grave error to believe that material comfort engenders *ipso facto* the atmosphere indispensable to the intelligent man. Too often it only breeds a generation of feverish and agitated

people, believing in nothing but mechanism and obsessed by nothing but making money. This senseless automatism will soon make us adopt robots to serve us and, as new idle kings, we shall plunge, unconsciously, into a cataclysm which will lead us directly to primitive grottos and to forests inhabited by apes which will have had the advantage of not being affected by congeneric Phoenecians who invented the eighth plague: money. Let us sometimes think of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* . . .

Undoubtedly, perfect comfort and a high financial level can favour the development of a brilliant civilization. But they remain desirable elements which can become mere accessories if the spiritual aspect is not satisfying, for the revenge of the spirit is unmerciful. A European delegate said at a conference at Lake Success: "God knows that we need food and coal if we are to survive, but unless America undertakes to give us a vital faith, a hymn that all humanity can sing, all her exports will serve only to retard the day of reckoning, and the world will die in any case."

Retard the day of reckoning, avoid the unavoidable hour is too often what the modern world is trying to do. Harpagon's economic concept. Gain time . . . and lose the essential.

### III

THIS attraction for comfort has as a corollary the fact that many people, too many people, reserve their unconditional admiration for the sciences which work towards intensifying this comfort. They consider them with a fear-tainted hope, in the manner that the Redskins looked at their Shaman, the great sorcerer who was, par excellence, the dispenser of well-being and the master of great fortune. Physical Sciences are the modern magician. Far be it from us the idea of disparaging them. Our respect is profound, provided they are not deluded and that their too frequent proselytes do not try to make of them the "suprema lex." For then the Great Magician can, in a cruel atomic experiment, prove himself only an apprentice

sorcerer, even more incapable than Pau Dukas of controlling the hideous mechanism which he will have set in motion. Why consider as absolute a science that has to revise its dogmas every twenty years? (This is not said depreciatingly. It is only the sad fate of all human sciences which are still practically in their lisping stage, and only a few of them have the clairvoyance and the courage to realize it. Pontifical dogmatism is so much easier!)

TOO many universities, to paraphrase the Rockefeller Foundation Report, have succumbed to the twentieth century adoration for the methods that bestow the leadership of the physical world. In contrast to the credits available for Humanities and Social Studies, the sums allocated today to the Physical Sciences by our academic institutions are higher than they have ever been. It would be better, however, to fill up this ditch rather than enlarge it. We cannot, in this scientific age, escape our obligation to assimilate science; but to the supreme question which confronts our generation, neither physics nor chemistry nor engineering have an answer. They are morally neutral. They are absorbed with physical matter. They can give us more horsepower; but only the naive would believe that horsepower can develop in itself the means by which our technicians, carried off like wrapped-up horses, will be brought under our control. Science can aid men to live longer and in better health; it is not directly concerned with the discovery of new aims for humanity, with the art of human relations and with the pursuit of social and moral wisdom on which depend peace and good government of men. It is not we who affirm this; it is openly proclaimed by the president of the most important scientific foundation in the United States.

OUR intention is not to belittle the physical and chemical sciences nor to lower their techniques to the level of merely utilitarian manipulations. We only wish that they might cease to produce certain hyper-specialized scholars who, confusing the admirable ideal of Terence, have



become automatons to whom "all that is human is foreign". (May we add that the same reproach might be applied, under another form, to more than a few pseudo-humanists). Our generation forgets too often the "Meden agan" which gleamed on the pediment of a temple at Delphi; it has lost its equilibrium. This equilibrium might be restored if one considered all sciences as worthy of equal veneration and pledged with an equally respectable mission: the search after Truth for the peace of the human spirit.

The first condition for mutual esteem is a better understanding: in comparing their aims, their methods, their results, the sciences perceive that fundamentally they differ little. They thus avoid a harmful partitioning; they reject scientific isolationism, prejudiced like all isolationism. Uniting their thresholds of light, they will show the way to peaceful progress. the only path by which man can find safety.

**A**N insatiable hunger after comfort on one hand, "hatred of the disinterested spirit", on the other. And perhaps the latter is only a second aspect of the avidity to enjoy this comfort, for pure and impartial research is not concerned with material ease. Its primordial ambition is partly identified with the platonic ideal of the constant improvement of the individual, of the extension of his knowledge without, however, forgetting the old socratic wisdom that consists above all in knowing that one knows nothing. How many still care about general culture? How many above all have the courage to admit their ignorance? It is with general culture as with the horse's tail evoked by a celebrated sophism: pull out a hair or several, it's still a tail; but if one continues to pull them out, what remains? It is certainly not a question today of aspiring to the laurels of a Pic de la Mirandole for our *De Omni Re Scibili* is too vast. But between that and permitting oneself to ignore almost everything and to dispense with constant learning, there is too great a margin. A few remaining hairs cannot be called a tail, a few scraps of knowledge do not constitute a culture.

This hatred of the disinterested spirit is directed especially towards classical studies and explains, in part, their decline. For the "totalizers of utilitarianism", as one might call them, a disinterested activity is useless, superfluous, and even detrimental and anti-social.

Literature. If it is not "engagée", it becomes subversive. What matter the *Iliad*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Divine Comedy*? Why admire Pindar, Virgil, Villon or Musset? What is divine in Shakespeare, Racine or Goethe? What is there important in the fact that duBellay wrote his *Regrets*, that Cervantes won fame by his *Don Quixote* and not by his *Autos*, that Boileau was inspired by the poetic art of Horace? This literary culture has hardships with which one can easily dispense. As Professor Hubeau of the University of Liège said in a caustic and lucid article, this culture could content itself with knowing the tirade "Rodrigue, as-tu du coeur?", the first ten lines of *Andromaque*, several passages chosen from Hugo, and a few proverbs borrowed from the *Wisdom of the Nations*. A charming bundle, in fact, this armful of worn-out clichés. A solid varnish apt to disguise the encyclopaedic ignorance of more than a few intellectual braggarts.

#### IV

**N**OR does historical discipline escape. The admirable *Cité antique* of Fustel de Coulange cannot perish, but the disinterested teaching of the master is being attacked, and whom does one discover among his assailants? Paul Valéry! One did not expect this of the man who flogged pseudo-intellectuals with "they are bored and they believe that they are thinking." One did not expect to see him rail History which, with a barely disguised disdain, he called "our old enemy, History". Would he have preferred History à la Rosenberg or like the war communiques? One might object that we arrange History as we wish; but it does not alter the fact that a rigid historical criticism exists. A name, a date, a battle are not essential, but what is

important are the spiritual rules required to discover them and to comment impartially upon them. It is recognized that modern historical criticism is undoubtedly one of our most exact sciences. It has nothing to do with dictatorship; that is why tyrants try to destroy it, and they thus give to historical criticism its most splendid title to glory. It is one of the pillars of liberty. Its asceticism is severe, it requires a serious integrity, long and tenacious research, but it is an incomparable creator. And we are discrediting it.

Its sister, Philosophy, who might boast of being at the base and summit of all science, has hardly more future. Why should one think clearly in a world where error abounds? Some would like to make of Philosophy a universal panacea. Like the Athenians "delivered" by Demetrios Poliorcetes, they celebrate a hymn burning the ancient gods and praising their saviour of the moment. Where are the pre-Socratics of yesteryear who studied the microcosm? At present the human microcosm is interested in nothing but its immediate well-being. Is there any need to add that the disinterested philosophers (some do remain) enjoy only a mediocre attention, if any? The disseminators of ill-omened ideas have sown their wild oats and the evil is done. They have conferred upon their system a chartered nobility that they cannot renounce, even if they wish.

## V

**A**nd Art! Art, the supreme bloom of the free human spirit, sublime elevation beyond the contingencies of time and space. Does one not want also to enslave it by ethnic considerations, to channel it in miserable political profits? At times does not one dare to call it insolent luxury or a perverted pastime? Chefs-d'oeuvre cannot be disputed unless one attempts to make them serve political ends. Why should Art serve to transform the world, to elaborate a new order? Art is transcendental, it ignores petty restrictions. Its seal of beauty will never accommodate political posters. But does one still care about beauty? Or does one prefer to de-

clare that the Mona Lisa is not pretty because it requires an effort to find her beautiful?

**T**HE ordinary man might be unable to distinguish a Tintoretto from a Velasquez, a Teniers from a Jordaens. Let us admit it. A man may be called learned and not be capable of recognizing Bach or Couperin. He might confuse the works of Phidias and of Praxiteles. Let us concede that. He might never have heard of Gauguin or think Dufy kept a tavern. That does not prevent him from living comfortably. "Happy are the poor in spirit", said the Lord. The Patagonians and the Zulus ignore all this and they are satisfied. But is our ideal that of being a Patagonian or a Zulu? Then what can one say of science? Do we not hear from every corner that only he who pursues utilitarian aims deserves the title of scholar? In such case, one would have to conclude that Clerk Maxwell and Faraday, for example, that even Newton who cared little about divulging his astonishing discovery, were only vain theoreticians and not true scholars, no more useful to humanity than the celestial Mozart or the ingenious El Greco. It is the moment to remember "A good poet (they said later a good chessplayer) is no more useful to the state than a good dart-thrower." Many more sacrileges will be perpetrated in the name of utilitarianism. Why do we not make two arms for the Venus of Milo and have her brandish a partisan sword so that she might "serve" for something? And why, instead of illuminating the Parthenon, do we not cover it with vivid neon signs advertising some famous brand of soap or spaghetti?

## VI

**E**UROPEANS say without hesitation that the Americas are the cause of this propagation of utilitarian ideas which sap general culture and, consequently, the standing of the human spirit. Perhaps. But perhaps they, too, would do well to examine their consciences. As far as the United States is concerned, it is comforting to see that they have realized



the danger: let us hope that the cries of alarm of the illustrious Maynard Hutchins and the warnings of the Rockefeller Foundation will not remain echoless. Canada, too, is developing a powerful humanistic movement.

"It is not too late but it is time," concluded Paul-Henri Spaak in a memorable speech at the United Nations. It is also time to react against confined utilitarianism, to crush the new infidel. It is time to prefer Faulkner or Dos Passos to dime-store novelists; to be ecstatic before Rubinstein and not before a delirious jazz band; to appreciate the ballets of Covent Garden, the Carib dances of Katharine

Dunham, the gypsy dances of Carmen Amaya instead of the local chorus girls; to remember that Dr. Fleming is worth as much as a long distance runner and that Einstein is at least as important as a blues singer. "Man is what he does," wrote André Malraux, and we might add that "man is also what he knows."

Henry L. Stimson called any effort to raise culture as "the capacity for America to survive." The hour has come to consolidate this capacity everywhere in the world. Otherwise, to paraphrase the words of John Donne, tomorrow we shall not have to ask for whom the bell tolls. It will toll for us.

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## *The New Despotism*

"Unless, during the first five years, so great a degree of change has been accomplished as to deprive the capitalists of power, it is unlikely that the Socialist Party will be able to maintain its position of control without adopting some means of prolonging Parliament without an election."

—SIR STAFFORD CRIPPS