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Civilization as Dis-ease

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> "The friendly and flowing savage, who is he? Is he waiting for civilization, or is he past it and mastering it?"
>
> — Walt Whitman

Early in 1905, Leo Tolstoy wrote to a close friend in England: "Yesterday and today I have been reading Edward Carpenter's book, *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*, and am enraptured by it.... Please inform me of what you know about Carpenter himself. I consider him a worthy successor to Carlyle and Ruskin." The query as to Carpenter's identity may well be repeated a hundred years later; his striking originality, which at one time inspired poets and anarchists alike, has since been virtually forgotten.

As a young man, Carpenter (1844-1929) abruptly abandoned a planned vocation in the clergy after reading Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* a volume which, in its celebration of pastoral pantheism and robust sensuality, enthralled generations (until the twentieth century military-industrial nightmare rendered it a seeming anachronism). In Whitman, Carpenter had found a champion of the body, a liberator of sensation and feeling. They became friends when Carpenter made a visit to the U.S. in 1877 (during which he also became

acquainted with Ralph Waldo Emerson–who had once facetiously remarked to Thoreau that *Leaves of Grass* was "a mixture of the Bhagavad-Gita and the *New York Herald*.")

Returning to England, Carpenter soon settled on a few acres in Millthorpe, a Derbyshire hamlet near Chesterfield, where he lived modestly for the next forty years–a pioneer in the practice of the "voluntary simplicity" he so admired in Thoreau's *Walden*. Over the years, he would travel intermittently into London to lecture and to offer his pastoral-aesthetic (or "green"?) brand of anarchism to the lively discussions spearheaded by such figures as William Morris and the expatriate Prince Pyotr Kropotkin. Like the poet Oscar Wilde–who once characterized philistines as knowing "the price of everything and the value of nothing"–Carpenter deplored commercial regimentation and the stunting of aesthetic-spiritual qualities.

Like Thoreau–and unlike Marx–Carpenter emphasized a transformation of sensibility which would prefigure the restructuring of society. In particular, the intimate contact with the aesthetic delights of the natural world would overcome alienation and lead to renewed spiritual evolution–a pantheistic "cosmic consciousness" which is the true religiosity.

Today, "living" as we do in the entirely dehumanized megamachine, it is almost impossible to recapture the lyrical, pastoral-humanism and pantheistic sensibility of such pre-1914 poets as Carpenter, whose *Towards Democracy* (1883) embraced the Whitmanesque celebration of human self-realization in harmony with nature. Carpenter's sensibility also greatly influenced the young D.H. Lawrence, a not-too-distant neighbor in rural England. Carpenter, perhaps more boldly than Lawrence, also praised the varieties of bodily-spiritual Eros in such books as *Love's Coming of Age* (1896) and *The Intermediate Sex* (1908).

Unlike the German "anti-Civilization" (really anti-cosmopolitan) movement of a century ago–which linked a crude Social Darwinism with the racial mystique of the Volk–Carpenter combined the

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F. Engels. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: Penguin, 1986)

E. Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918)

A. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (second edition; Van Nostrand, 1962).

T. Roszak, *Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (New York: Touchstone, 1993).

H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969)

communitarian ideals of Kropotkin with the romantic humanism of Whitman. Modern civilization, distorting human nature and generating enmity and strife, could be overcome by rediscovering communal reciprocity (and what we might now call a "spiritual ecology").

Carpenter's *Civilisation*, which had so fascinated Tolstoy, was initially outlined in a lecture to the Fabian Society in 1888. Carpenter had often puzzled over the "strange sense of mental unrest which marks our populations, and which amply justifies Ruskin's cutting epigram: that our two objects in life are, 'Whatever we have–get more; and wherever we are–go somewhere else.'" This pervasive sense of agitation, of dis-ease, seemed symptomatic of artificial, strife-ridden modernity, of "Civilization."

Friedrich Engels, remaining prominent in English socialist circles after Marx's death in 1883, in fact had published his treatise on cultural evolution the following year. Drawing upon the American proto-anthropologist L. H. Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), Engels managed to sketch the lineaments of "primitive communism" and to trace the historical origins of inequality, class stratification, and the State. Carpenter–undoubtedly influenced by Engels–was nonetheless closer to the Romantic poets' meditations on modern alienation and their imaginative reconstruction of idealized, egalitarian communities.

Social reciprocity and "mutual aid," as Kropotkin argued and anthropologists later documented, largely characterized tribal cultures prior to conquest by predatory, imperialistic Civilizations. When Community was forcibly superseded by Mammon, fragmentation ensued, characterized by "warfare of classes and individuals, abnormal development of some to the detriment of others, and consumption of the [social] organism by masses of social parasites." This organic analogy, in which the structural-normative integrity of "primitive society" is likened to a self-regulating organism, was also taken up by early twentieth century British anthropologists like A. R. Radcliffe-Brown.

In *The Decline of the West* (1922), Oswald Spengler carried the analogy further, characterizing modern Civilization as the decadent, terminal stage in the life-cycle of European *Kultur*. More generally, Carpenter had already noted that no culture has "come through and passed beyond this stage" of Civilization–and most have succumbed "soon after the main symptoms had been developed."

In vivid prose, Carpenter exhumed the pathogenic roots of modern discord: the change from communal to private property; the replacement of matricentricity with a male domination which "turned the woman into the property of the man"; the polarization of class antagonisms founded upon expropriation of wealth; and the institutionalization of slavery, serfdom, and wage-labor. Like Engels (as well as Nietzsche), Carpenter saw expanding State power as symptomatic of the breakdown of traditional community:

"If each man remained in organic adhesion to the general body of his fellows, no serious dis-harmony could occur; but it is when the vital unity of the body politic becomes weak that it has to be preserved by artificial means, and thus it is that with the decay of the primitive and instinctual social life there springs up a form of government which is no longer the democratic expression of the life of the whole people; but a kind of outside authority and compulsion thrust upon them by a ruling class or caste."

Laws and penal sanctions, not only tools of ruling-class coercion, were more broadly symptomatic of the social fragmentation resulting from the destruction of tribal communities. (This theme was imaginatively treated in Dostoevsky's fantastic tale "Dream of the Ridiculous Man.") One can't help wondering whether Carpenter, like William Morris, was thinking of the centuries-old English peasant "commons" destroyed by Parliament's Enclosure Acts (1760 through 1830).

The isolated individual, alienated from communal solidarity, was further estranged from the natural world. The loss of direct, intuitive perception was compensated for by abstract thought: "man builds himself an intellectual world apart from the great actual universe around him; the 'ghosts of things' are studied in books; the student lives indoors, he cannot face the open air…". Yet this denial of the immediacy of bodily-sensuous experience quite literally results in physical dis-ease: "he falls prey to his own organs."

The Cartesian subject-object dichotomy, Bacon's dominion over nature, Newton's "single vision": all manifested the pervasive alienation from ecological relatedness of urban-industrial Civilization. But scientific knowledge would be superseded by "a higher order of perception or consciousness": "self-consciousness" would evolve toward "cosmical consciousness." Carpenter therefore urged that "Civilization" be defined as a transitory stage in the psycho-spiritual evolution of humanity–as a phase of social dis-ease antecedent to the restoration of wholeness and to further harmonious development.

Rather than calling for a return to some hypothetical "Paleolithic consciousness," Carpenter's vision is closer to that of the pathbreaking psychologist Abraham Maslow: after attaining self-actualization, human cognition may evolve further toward a "transpersonal consciousness" (pure "Being-Cognition"?). Carpenter foreshadowed by a century the rediscovery of "ecopsychology"–i.e., modes of experiential connectedness with nature and the cosmos almost entirely stifled in modern Civilization, but lying dormant, ready to transform the pervasive false consciousness into the fundamentally "aesthetic ethos" heralded by poets as disparate as Schiller, Whitman, Wilde–and Carpenter .

References for further reading

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