

AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract. The article is an attempt to interpret the twentieth century. The interpretation is anchored between José Ortega y Gasset's characterization of the modern art of the early twentieth century and postmodernists' characterization of the late twentieth century. Developments in arts, religion, politics, economy, sports and science are treated from this perspective.

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1. José Ortega y Gasset

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset published in 1925 an essay "*La deshumanización del arte*". He chose the title of the essay to protest the art of the nineteenth century. The Realism and the Romanticism of the nineteenth century had appealed to emotions, while the modern art of the time declared to be *l'art pour l'art*, or artistic art, as Helen Weyl translated it in English ("*The Dehumanization of Art*", 1948).

A few quotes from the essay illustrate Ortega y Gasset's message: "- - - the characterization of the new art, is, in my judgment, that it divides the public in two classes of those who understand it and those who do not. This implies that one group possesses an organ of comprehension denied to the other – that they are two different varieties of the human species. The new art obviously addresses itself not to everybody, as did Romanticism, but to a specially gifted minority. Hence the indignation it arouses among the masses" (p. 6). "That is why modern art divides the public into two classes, those who understand it and those who do not understand it. – That is to say, those who are artists and those who are not. The new art is an artistic art" (p. 12).

Ortega y Gasset joined this debate with his “*La rebelión de las masas*” in 1930, in English “*The Revolt of the Masses*” (1950). In it he was blatant enough to argue for the division between the select minorities and the gifted few from the masses. He asserts that masses are “mere buoys that float on the waves” and that they “comprise individuals of minus quality” (p. 10). He, however, admits: “The rule of the masses, then, presents a favorable aspect, in as much as it signifies an all-around rise in the historical level, and reveals that the average existence to-day moves on a higher altitude than that of yesterday” (p. 19). But, still, the rebel of the masses may lead to a catastrophe in the history of the human kind. So said José Ortega y Gasset in 1930.

It is upsetting to read Ortega y Gasset now. His view of history and arts is radically aristocratic. His visions have not proved right. Realism was not rejected during the twentieth century. On the contrary, there were influential social and political manifests in the art of the last century. The historical catastrophes prophesized by Ortega y Gasset have not come true either. What he saw as signs of decadence, have been absorbed by the new times and generations as an essential part of their culture.

We are told about catastrophes every time we open our television or newspaper in the morning. But they are not what Ortega y Gasset envisioned. He detested communism and National Socialism, but World War II was not the kind of catastrophe he warned the mankind about. Someone might say that Hitler was raised into power by brutal masses. Even more liberal interpretation would see the Soviet communism the same way. True enough, Ortega y Gasset himself was good at stretching his interpretations.

On reading Ortega y Gasset one cannot help being fascinated by his language, exciting metaphors and sweeping generalizations. His text is sharp, full of paradoxes and intellectual twists. His style reminds the reader of Egon Friedell’s “*Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*” 1927–1931 (“*A cultural history of the Modern Times*”, 1930–1933). The grand style reflected the contemporary culture and intellectualism. Serious academic historians requesting source criticism find the radical views, paradoxes and irony of Friedell and Ortegay Gasset much too much for their hard-earned scholarship.

2. Postmodernism

Postmodernism heralds a changing epoch. It was originally a movement in arts and later it developed into a general philosophy of everything and a method of analyzing anything. It is an enigmatic concept, and it evades all definitions (see, Lyotard 1984). But it can also be taken literally in that it talks about the end of the Modern Times as a period of Western history.

According to postmodernism the Enlightenment did not produce the happiness for the mankind it was seeking. Science and technology made possible the unforeseen cruelty, wars, exploitation of people and environmental damage that the last

century witnessed. The Faustian *angst* for knowledge has bred anomie, a vacuum of values and ignorance of what is good and what is bad. As religion and other institutional carriers of morality have eroded, what is left is the moral responsibility of the self-reflective individual (Bauman 1996). Postmodernists see deconstruction and difference as liberating forces and foresee discontinuity, indeterminacy, fragmentation, distrust of totalizing discourses, instability, even chaos as characteristics of the era we are entering.

One way to look at postmodernism is that it tries to grasp our time and the twentieth century the way Ortega y Gasset tried to interpret his time and how it grew out of the earlier period. This view is adopted in this article.

3. Artistic Art

The opera was originally the Italian popular entertainment. Later on it came to be regarded as elitist. The story of theatre is not much different. Shakespeare's Globe theatre was in the middle of pubs, brothels and other places of entertainment. People paid visits to these places to eat, drink, shout, love and went on a rampage with the actors and the audience or whom ever, friend or stranger, happened to be present. The theatre has never since been so interactive.

What we now call classical music was until the twentieth century mostly Church or Court music. The music was to a large extent based on the folklore and folk music. Composers like Sibelius and Bartok collected and deliberately used themes from their national song tradition. But then the 'finer' music, now called classical music, began to detach itself from the popular music. The composers after World War II preferred pure music. It has been enjoyed by the select few, but Sibelius, Bartok and their predecessors still sell better at the box-office.

Jazz, pop and hits are the music of the twentieth century. But even these genres, and particularly jazz, have been divided into two. The new jazz is cool. To the connoisseurs it is much more exquisite than the original jazz that traveled from New Orleans to Chicago. Something similar has happened to rock. Its revolt is tamed and commercialized. But its worshippers still encourage sophisticated debates and academic treatises on the subject.

Parallel developments can be discerned in other forms of art like fiction, poetry and fine arts. Indeed, this has taken place in many spheres of life. New hierarchies, schools of thought and a division between the elite and the masses have appeared in religion, politics, economy, sports and science. What follows in this article is an elaboration of this argument.

4. Longing for God

It is not that long ago that the Church stood in the middle of the village and in the middle of life itself. Religion was part and parcel of every man and woman.

The church was the spiritual, intellectual and worldly authority. People went to church more often than they went shopping. “Give us our daily bread” and other prayers were more important than our daily internet connection today. It is a bit longer since the priests got paid by the subsistence of the farms trusted to them. Their sermons were instructive in the true spirit of the Enlightenment, and the priests in their pulpit taught the attentive congregation why and how to grow potatoes and other useful things.

Now the Church has nothing to do with the everyday life of its members. Some churches have been turned into shrines of more up-to-date entertainment such as discos and night clubs. The Heaven, Hell and the God of Christianity no longer concern people. There is a chance that the God of Christians has got bored of all this and left his people to take care of themselves. Yet, Islam is potent in the everyday life of believers and, on top of everything, a powerful actor in the world politics.

Despite secularization people long for something greater than their mundane existence. Revivalist religious movements attract tens of thousands of participants in their summer congregations every year. There is at the vicinity of Helsinki an annual fair of spirituality. It fills the big exhibition halls with stands on shamanism, karma in your former life, bioenergy, teachings of a Brazilian prophet, connections to a higher ego, astrological cycles and more in the same vein. And all this sells better than a nearby shopping center. Yet, the Church of the 2010s does not meet the longing for God that so many people feel.

5. Do people trust democracy?

In a representative democracy the people elect their representatives to decide on public matters. Or to quote Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people”. In a democracy the people have the chance, right and duty to check at the polls how their representatives have succeeded in their mandate.

There has not been a perfect democracy. Yet, democracy has been admired, so much so that political movements for one-party system have disguised themselves as democratic. *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* was a bad case in point. Democratic form of government, even though inadequate and inefficient, has the significant advantage that for the man and woman in the street it is easier to live in a democracy than in a dictatorship, not to mention the fear that dictators evoke in maintaining their rule.

But the trust on representative democracy seems to be declining. This is indicated by the decrease of the voting percentage in many countries. The non-voters’ party is bigger than any other party in the election to the Parliament of the European Union. The young people in particular do not vote – they feel that their vote does not count. The respect for politicians is low. Indeed, it is lower than that of the people who have not been elected to their posts by the voters. Paradoxically, people do not trust the people they have elected.

People in powerful positions tend to belittle their power. But there is some truth to it. A single parliamentarian has limits to his power. The power in democracy is shared, and the backbencher in the Parliament rightly feels that he is powerless. To increase his power he needs to learn the skills of politicking. This subject is not included in the curriculum of Sunday Schools. The markets and the European Union have taken much of the power that once belonged to the national parliaments. Global competitiveness is the Moloch to which politicians need to bring sacrifices. For a minister the trust of the media bears more weight than the trust of the electorate. The media can make or break politicians.

Elections have an enormous entertainment value. Harassing the candidates on television is enjoyed by the moderators and watchers alike. Only the toughest candidates manage to get through this mill. The more sensitive people do not have the courage to stand as candidates.

There lies a dilemma. The elected representatives cannot be a representative sample of the electorate, as the electorate consists of courageous and shy people, beautiful and ugly people, virtuous and not so virtuous people and anything else between these extremes. In the name of democracy all these more or less perfect people should have representatives in the Diet. Accordingly, representative democracy does not represent the people.

6. Who is steering the economy?

In the subsistence economy everybody saw or even ate what they worked for. In the barter economy what one produced was exchanged good for good, service for service or with the help of a currency such as squirrel skins, gold or other precious things. Later on a signed paper with a backing became the currency. The value of the work was visible and concrete without complicated social exchanges. The entrepreneurs of the early manufacturing industry had a face and they were seen in flesh and blood. Their influence on their workers and the whole village grown around the factory was visible, audible, in the chemical industry even smelling.

Nokia still employs Finnish people in Finland, but this is a small and decreasing portion of their whole personnel around the globe. The success of Nokia depends more on the global markets and the cheap labor in countries with lower costs of work than required by the Finnish workers. A good bad example is the Finnish forest industry. Lately, it has increased all over the world but not in Finland.

A European entrepreneur is dependent on China, India and Brazil, on the value of Euro, on the European competition directives, on the German Green Party and on American finance business. The entrepreneur and his truck driver alike can just clench their teeth and fists and tighten the belt once the world economy catches a cold. Even the best speculators make enormous mistakes. The most arrogant of them are good at hiding their risks in obscure portfolios. Once the risks are realized, the pandemic spreads quickly all around the world.

The markets are faceless and have neither a home nor a native country. Nonetheless, the global markets influence each and every one of us. Yet, we have no choice or voice in this matter. The markets have detached themselves from the masses.

7. Citius, altius, fortius

The sports have a long history, but it was Baron Pierre de Coubertin who gave it a new impetus by establishing the modern Olympic Movement. The movement was an example of the idealism of Europe at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The games of amateurs were expected to promote understanding across cultures and peace. This was modeled by the sacred truce that was said to prevail during the Antique Games (see Young, 1984). The mission of the Games sounds: "The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle, the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well". The International Olympic Committee declared to promote ethics in sports, educate young people through sports, promote fair play, ban violence and discrimination, promote equality of men and women, oppose political and commercial abuse of sports, and encourage sustainable development (see the selected writings by de Coubertin, 2000). These principles remain valid, but there remains much to do to achieve them.

It was amazing how small countries succeeded in the early Olympic Games. In Paris in 1924, Finland was the second best country in the medal count after the United States of America. Paavo Nurmi still ranks among the best athletes of the twentieth century.

Now the sports have been divided into competitive sports and fitness sports. The competitive sports have been professionalized. It is a big business, and very few who strive to the top can reach it and even then with enormous human costs. There are numerous losers per one successor. Small nations have fallen from the top-ranking countries of the Olympic Games and other sports events of global interest. The Finns have succeeded in car racing. It has required organizing, marketing and financing skills at least as much as sports skills. To reach the top in competitive sports needs superhuman performance.

When people do not have daily exercise in work, fitness clubs have found a market niche. A fitness club advertises with an evangelical zeal: "Training for the real man and the real woman". It is not only the fitness clubs, but also sports gear, heart rate monitors and other accessories on the shelves of fitness business that keep people fit and proper for the vanity fair. The sports are certainly far away from the everyday walks of life.

8. What about the academia?

It is a fact of the history of science that many of the most eminent scientists were amateurs. The father of genetics, Gregor Mendel, was a monk. Charles Darwin was educated in theology. Albert Einstein created the first version of the

theory of relativity as an assistant examiner in the Bern patent office. The human and social studies emerged from the intellectual debates of idle gentlemen.

Contemporary universities are sanctuaries of academic merit. The merit is achieved by the acceptance of the brothers and sisters in academic faith who cite each other in their holy journals. It is a long way of merits to a chair in the academic community, quite like the road to priesthood is a long way of self-sacrifices in the churches. On this road through the hierarchy it is always a risk to show independent ideas. Doing so one reaches the point of bifurcation of being rejected or becoming a saint. Instead, if one follows the safe road of paying credit to the hierarchy, one can earn his bread in mediocre positions. The professors can settle down as academic gate-keepers, to watch, promote or stop young aspirants climbing the academic ladder and sign as an author of joint articles based on the inventions of their students (Lawrence, 2002). Publish or perish and climbing on the ranking list are the articles of faith in academic life (see Adler&Harzing, 2009, for a critical point of view).

The natural sciences are abstracted from the everyday experience to the extent that understanding their achievements is impossible by the layman (Nurmi, 2002). Interpreters abound, and they make a profession of their own.

From the 1950s onwards, the social sciences adopted quantitative methods of analyzing data. Students were drilled to apply them as rigorously as the army recruits are drilled in their closed ranks. Formalism in methods was often more highly credited than the substance. The structure of research papers became schematized in the linear form: Introduction – the research objective – methods – results– conclusions. The formal beauty of this span earned the grade. But around the change of the last millennium research papers with richer and mingled material got published. Researchers' interpretative imagination began to be appreciated again. The structure of the research papers changed from the "*quod erat demonstrandum*" – type to collages of mixed material (Lehmann 2006). This signified the breaking of postmodernist social sciences (compare Harju 1981 and Übius 2009 with Heil 2009 and Rokka 2010).

Science was once considered an investment in the future of mankind, but now its findings must be used, consumed and capitalized at once. Science has got authority and anything can be justified by an uncritical quote from the cornucopia of science. The newspapers publish science news in their science pages and in their trivia columns. It is difficult for the readers to discern what is reliable from what is published for the sake of the sensation that the headline causes. Some researchers have learned the rules of the publicity game. There are historians who earn quick media publicity by revealing human vices of celebrities, while those who dive in the deep undercurrents of history go unnoticed by the media and the public.

9. To conclude

If the arts, religion, politics, economy, sports and science are detached from ordinary people and have become bigger than life for their select aficionados, Ortega y Gasset's theses sound strangely familiar. Few would now have the cheek to speak in public about "two different varieties of human species", about "those who understand and those who do not" and the division between the gifted few from the masses, who "are mere buoys that float on the waves" and "comprise of minus quality". After all, now we have undemocratic elites and democratic vanguards of progressive people. Don't we?

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