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4. The Impact on Society (1919-1939)

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4. The Impact on Society (1919-1939)

Abstract

Anything as revolutionary as World War I could not help but convulse the social order. Within each state the sense of community induced by the common war effort did not survive into the postwar world, with its tensions old and new. Demobilized soldiers, trained to fight, found it difficult to adjust themselves to civilian life. The uncertainties of war, revolution, and economic instability undermined confidence among individuals, classes, and states. Only in a very narrow sense did the armistice of 1918 bring peace. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, World War I, WWI, Social Order, Postwar, Social Hierarchy, Urbanization, Mass Production, Suburbia

Disciplines

European History | History | Politics and Social Change | Social History | Sociology | United States History | Women's History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XVIII: The Western World in the Twentieth Century: The Historical Setting](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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Anything as revolutionary as World War I could not help but convulse the social order. Within each state the sense of community induced by the common war effort did not survive into the postwar world, with its tensions old and new. Demobilized soldiers, trained to fight, found it difficult to adjust themselves to civilian life. The uncertainties of war, revolution, and economic instability undermined confidence among individuals, classes, and states. Only in a very narrow sense did the armistice of 1918 bring peace.

Many traditional social anchors did not survive the war, or survived only in greatly altered form. Provincial and religious loyalties retreated further before the demands of the nation-state. Age-old regimes and dynasties disappeared. Traditional class lines had been blurred when women of gentle birth worked beside their workingclass sisters in munitions factories, while their menfolk shared the common dangers of the trenches. War profiteers formed a class of new rich, alongside a new poor comprising those who saw their inheritances and savings wiped out by war, taxation, and inflation. The latter group represented a grievous loss to Western Civilization because it was they who had once provided much of its managerial, professional, and intellectual talent. Their thrift had accumulated much of its capital and their allegiance had given liberalism its vitality. Now, bitter and uncomprehending, the shabbily genteel were a potentially dangerous element in society.

The steady expansion of urban centers continued. Thanks to cheap transportation, especially the street railway, the bus, and the automobile, the growth of Suburbia created a way of life which was neither urban nor rural. Soon many workers had to spend more time going from their homes to offices and factories than their ancestors on the medieval manor had spent trudging to their strips in the three field system.

Urbanization intensified that standardization of life which was a concomitant of mass production. Ready-made clothes

of a uniform style gave a monotonous appearance to urban crowds. The movies, the radio, and the comic strip threatened to standardize entertainment as well as more serious ideas at a level acceptable to the maximum number of people of all ages. In the century of the common man, heresy was difficult to sustain.

One result of two world wars, when jobs for women were well-paid, socially respectable, and numerous, was the emancipation of women from a number of traditional restrictions. It is said that wartime tensions first made smoking for women acceptable in polite society. The question of votes for women now became steadily less controversial. They received the franchise in Britain in 1918 and 1928 and (for federal elections) in the United States in 1920. They were given the right to own and control their own property. Their social relations with men were placed on a free and more nearly equal basis, as illustrated by that symbol of the "roaring twenties," the flapper. Divorce laws became more lenient and divorce rates rose. Scores of new gadgets and techniques freed women from much of the drudgery of housework. But emancipation led many to express alarm at the fact that with the restrictions also disappeared many of the protections which had been woman's traditional right. *What do you want?*

In this world which was so truly revolutionary there were still many who hoped for and expected in 1918 a return to what President Warren G. Harding called normalcy. By this was meant a world in which the most desirable pre-1914 values and institutions persisted. Optimists, ignoring postwar reality, were encouraged by the apparent success with which a war fought by the Allies avowedly "to make the world safe for democracy" had indeed established numerous and supposedly democratic, republican, and independent nation-states, and a League of Nations. Especially in the United States, which tended to withdraw from European affairs, technological advances and the boom years of the 1920's seemed to confirm their optimism.

The crash of 1929, the great depression, the collapse of democracies before the new totalitarianism, and the deterioration of international relations in the 1930's confounded the optimists and seemed to confirm those who had been pessimists ever since the war. Faith in the inevitability of progress received a body blow which hurt all the more because the belief that some sort of progress was possible was still widely held. In politics, liberty received less attention than equality, and in international affairs faith in national self-determination gave way to a search for national security.

Along with disillusion came in many cases a lack of will. Particularly in regards to social questions, many men seemed to have lost the capacity to think things out afresh and then re-dedicate themselves to the attainment of agreed goals. Rather, they seemed to await some cataclysm which they felt themselves helpless to avert or control.

Much criticism was leveled at those groups which normally provided leadership. Politicians and parties were accused of still fighting over issues of the last centuries, and with outmoded weapons at that. Biographies and histories debunking men and movements enjoyed a large sale. A widely read book by a Frenchman, Julien Benda (1867-1956), entitled The Betrayal of the Intellectuals (1927), accused intellectuals of having deserted their traditional mission by joining the masses in exalting "racial passions, class passions, and national passions." Others thought it significant that the title of one of the most talked-about poems of the period was The Waste Land (1922), by an American expatriate, T. S. Eliot (1888).

A provocative expression of this malaise of the spirit was Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West, first published in Germany in 1918. Within the framework of a cyclical theory of history, Spengler interpreted the events of his day as indicating the inevitable and imminent destruction of Western Civilization. Many readers had the uneasy feeling that he was right when he predicted a collapse similar to that of Greco-Roman Civilization, this time with the barbarians within the frontiers.