

## RE-EVALUATION OF MODERN SOCIETIES<sup>1</sup>

A complex of transformations, carried into effect with varying tempos since the beginning of the era of industrial revolutions, has disrupted a certain number of human societies: societies which the ethnologists often call "modern" in opposing them to those labeled "traditional."

The unprejudiced observer of these transformations in their historical perspective, and of the realities to which they have led today in a sociological perspective, recognizes that, whatever may be the value of the interpretations and the systems proposed by the great social thinkers of the nineteenth and of the beginning of the twentieth centuries (a value that is far from being outmoded), there is, nevertheless, none whose doctrines allow it to dominate the aggregate of technical, economic, social, psychological, and cultural facts which characterize the modern industrial societies, European and North American, of the

Translated by William J. Harrison.

1. This text represents the introductory report which the author was asked to present to the colloquium on "Progress in Liberty" held in Berlin from June 16 to 22, 1960.

second half of the twentieth century. For the person who does not have a dogmatic faith in the universal and enduring value of these thoughts, the mystic belief in prophetic and superhuman spirits, these limits are foreseeable and rational. They stamp, to cite only a few names, the work of Saint-Simon as well as that of Comte and of Durkheim, of Simmel, Tönnies, Pareto, or even that of Marx and the theoretical writings of Lenin. Each of us can find, in one or another of them, and according to his personal interests, inspirations and suggestive—sometimes even brilliant—explanations. But, for example, neither the “law of three classes” nor the categories of “*élite*” determining “economic factor,” “superstructure,” “proletariat,” “class struggle,” or “imperialism, last stage of capitalism” allow one to account for the fundamental phenomena which the contemporary social sciences, and particularly sociology, economics, demography, social psychology, and cultural anthropology, bring into focus in the world of today.

Hence the usefulness of a re-evaluation of modern industrialized society in the light of the results (albeit still very incomplete) of these sciences and of the problems which they lay bare. I do not make the absurd claim of setting forth in this short paper a complete accounting of this re-evaluation, but only of casting light, in a necessarily simplified, indeed (as it has been recommended to me to introduce a discussion) deliberately “provoking” manner, upon some points which seem to me important. The discussion will bring others into view.

#### I. TECHNICAL MILIEU AND TECHNICAL CIVILIZATION

In order to re-evaluate industrial societies and to be able to understand them in their fundamentals, I believe it indispensable to introduce from the very first the concepts of “technical milieu” and of “technician civilization.” In the pre-machine-age civilizations of western Europe, that is to say, until the end of the eighteenth century, a natural, omnipresent milieu predominates, governing the town as much as the country. The title “natural milieu” is additionally justified when it is applied to the societies of the past and those of the present which utilize only motor forces of natural energy, such as animal power, wind, or water.

Since the end of the eighteenth century the pace of technical progress has continued to rush forth and its rate of acceleration to increase. For motor forces of natural energy, the industrial revolutions substitute motors of thermal, electric, and atomic energy. The large number of

transformations gives rise to institutions, structures, new forms of organization, production, a new quality of civilization. Mankind's technical acquisitions up to the end of the eighteenth century were numerous and of great richness. Nevertheless, the prodigious career of the mechanical exploitation of new forms of energy and the soaring flight of the applied sciences define a new stage in the psychosociological conditioning of many by his medium, leading to the new technical civilization, in one period of which we are living.

An enormously widespread and closely interwoven tissue of techniques characterizes man's new milieu in industrialized societies. Industrial mechanism, that is to say, the sum of machines and production apparatus crowding the workshops and offices of business concerns, is only a part of this. The technical milieu is made up of the aggregate of techniques (production, transport, communication, intercourse, leisure) which transform more each day the conditions of man's existence, penetrate every instant of his life, and ceaselessly permeate additional areas. The individual is thus submitted to a host of stresses, excitations, and stimulants—pressures scarcely known a short time ago. The sum of these techniques creates, inducts, and intensifies about him that which, in the aggregate, we call a technical milieu.

The technical milieu that can be observed in diversely constructed societies presents some common traits, both in the functioning of institutions and in the behavior of individuals. The complex aggregate of the "facts of civilization" (concept borrowed from Marcel Mauss) forms a civilization. Today the sum of the facts of civilization (for example, scientific organization of labor, mass production, mass media, advertising, consumer attitudes, mass tourism, leisure-time behavior, etc.) common to diverse industrialized societies constitutes that which we denote by the term "technician civilizations." There have been in the history of mankind civilizations which have lived and died apart from contact with techniques discovered by other human groups. Henceforth, over the whole area of the planet this isolation will be less and less possible. Technical civilization, fortified with prodigious means of circulation, is essentially universalist. The appearance of the technical milieu, with different extents, densities, and rhythms, is a universal phenomenon which is not bound uniquely to urbanization, for it can also be seen to insinuate itself into rural regions. Its emergence is particularly brutal in certain underdeveloped sections. Masses of humans

stagnate there, even in our day, in a natural milieu with agriculture handicapped by unfavorable soil and climatic conditions, by the absence of irrigation, of fertilization and, in general, of technical equipment, and the persistence, in the cultural context, of traditional attitudes foreign (or hostile) to the productivity of labor, as well as a galloping demographic expansion, does not protect them from famine. The wretchedness of the countryside, the mirages of industrialization, have impelled crowds towards the towns; São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Casablanca, Calcutta, among many other agglomerations not prepared to absorb this influx, surround themselves with the sordid *bidonvilles* and *gourbivilles* of North Africa, *Callampas* of Chili, *faveles* of Brazil, *bustees* of India, shanty towns of Johannesburg, etc. to which the "models" of mass communication and of technical civilization penetrate too quickly. Masses, uprooted from their natural milieu and not integrated into the new milieu of modern societies, often know, and at their lowest level, cinema, radio, television, illustrated magazines (sex and crime) before they know the elements of physical well-being (housing, food, clothing) and basic education.

The re-evaluation of modern societies should be elaborated through two fundamental questions: *What does technical progress bring today to the average citizen belonging to these societies—the man or woman in the street—considered: (1) as consumer, and (2) as producer?*

## II. MODERN SOCIETY AND THE CONSUMER

Let us distinguish here the consumption of material commodities and that of cultural commodities.

a) Industrialization—having as principal means the rational organization of labor, the increase of fast and accurate equipment, mechanization both in industry proper and in agriculture, and mass production—has caused the volume of consumer goods to rise sharply. The various strata have all, though unequally, benefited from this evolution. For his housing, food, and clothing the citizen of modern societies enjoys as consumer the quantity and quality of products distributed by technical progress. He tends today—and this is true even among the working and peasant populations—to acquire the modern instruments of comfort: automobiles, refrigerators, washing machines, household equipment. Certainly, there are still today in these societies underdeveloped groups, including the underprivileged, the *lumpenproletariat*,

slum-dwellers, persecuted ethnic minorities. But in the aggregate the balance is clearly positive. If the *functional* quality of the objects put at the disposal of the consumer is on the increase, their *aesthetic* quality is often questionable. There is, however, a growing awareness of this problem (industrial design, institutes of industrial aesthetics, campaigns in favor of "functional design," etc.), and here, too, there has been perceptible recent progress.

b) The picture is more complex and, in short, darker if one considers the citizen as a consumer of cultural commodities.

General education, furnished by the state, has spread: elementary education in particular, but also secondary and advanced, although in the Western societies there is room for great progress in the democratization of the later stages, to which many have little access (for lack of places or scholarships) or from which (through submission to the sociocultural context) the children of workers and small rural landowners hold aloof. At this point one must underline the ambivalence of the action of mass media, which are capable of assuring the diffusion of information, of arousing curiosity and new interests, of increasing education, of widening the horizon, of integrating the individual with his region, his country, and his planet, of developing his taste, his intellectual and artistic (musical, for example) culture. A good televised broadcast of ballet can awaken or strengthen in the viewer an interest in choreography or the history of the dance. In agricultural regions of France surveys have shown small landowners who had never left their villages to be truly intrigued and enriched by a film of exploration of the Upper Niger. These media are, however, also capable of degrading.

With a sympathy divested of any superiority complex, and accepting the possible validity of a new "culture of the people" entirely different from the humanism that has been inherited from the Greco-Roman culture and is a frame of reference for the majority of intellectuals, let us consider the cultural consumer commodities diffused by the mass media in industrialized societies. Consider the actual manner in which a very great number of men and women occupy their free time daily, watching films, television broadcasts, listening to radio variety programs, reading magazines with wide circulations which are (say their publishers) "adapted" to the masses and which, reciprocally, "attract" them. Let us acknowledge that anarchy in the commercial production of these goods is a great danger—a subject we shall treat of later. Let

us also acknowledge from the experiences of dictatorial regimes (Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy), or those with an official ideology and single party (U.S.S.R., China), the evils of totalitarian shaping of minds by the State, the evils of centralization of mass media which the State abuses in order to impose doctrines, beliefs, information, and ideologies on the individual and to “cast” him in a series of prefabricated molds, according to the requirements of the moment.

We must note as well something which concerns the consumption of both material and cultural commodities—the terrible weapon which the mass media constitute in modern societies as an instrument of manipulation. The individual can be psychologically (intellectually and affectively) manipulated to accept a war or follow a dictatorship, as well as to buy a new product or obey a new need; indeed, the mass media have the power to inject new needs with a calculated efficiency. Immediately after the war, Detroit marketing-research technicians, working for General Motors and Ford, reported to me their certainty of reaccustoming (or accustoming) a growing number of Americans to change automobiles at least every two years. The facts have not proved them wrong. I have seen also in the United States, in the schools of both white and colored children, the rapid development of the need for a family television set.

So much for the manipulation of the consumer in his free time. Later we shall meet the manipulation of the producer, during working hours, in the factory or office.

Another aspect of the consumption of material goods should be mentioned here: the young workman, having left his factory in Pittsburgh, Billancourt, Frankfurt, or Milan, tends to see the same cinema or television programs, to listen on the radio to the same variety programs, the same songs, the same jazz records, to glance through the same magazines as the son (or daughter) of his foreman, his engineer, his department head, and, more generally, as the “bourgeois” children of the middle classes. One encounters him more and more frequently, during his paid vacations, in the same “organized” vacation clubs, on a sunlit beach. Certainly the social relations and even the conflicting tensions created by the work situation persist in the factory or office. But outside the place of work the consumption of mass media exercises a tempering action upon the “proletarian culture,” the “class-conscious” categories of Marxism. The workman, once the factory gates are left

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behind, becomes a consumer, similar to millions of other members of industrialized society. This fact is becoming more and more clear, and its range of influence on the future of our societies can be immense. I would add that, during some recent journeys in Yugoslavia and behind the Iron Curtain, in the U.S.S.R. and in Poland, I noted how much the young people there were influenced and often even mesmerized by mass-media consumer goods of Western origin—a universalist trait of technical civilization beyond the differences of economic structure of societies.

### III. MODERN SOCIETY AND THE PRODUCER

How can one re-evaluate modern societies, subject to the incessant application of technical progress, from the producer's point of view? Here, too, the effects are multivalent.

a) It is commonplace to insist on the benefits brought to the productive man by technical progress. However, they are still forgotten today by too many intellectuals who have little familiarity with the realities of modern labor or who are nostalgic for the idealized ages of craftsmanship, a sort of Golden Age of humanity (some astonishing statements by Jean Giono appeared recently in an important Parisian weekly.<sup>2</sup> Technical progress has, in industrialized societies, widely cut into man's toil; it has abolished child-labor and exploitation by employers, rendered many workshops more salubrious, diminished the dangers of accident and of occupational diseases. Certainly, there is still an enormous amount to be done; but it is enough for him who knows something of present-day working conditions in, for example, the metal industry, textiles, or even in the mines, to compare them with those described by factory inspectors in the last century. It is enough to cite the considerable shortening of the working day (which, in the cotton industry in France in 1834; was still about fifteen hours, for workmen, women, and more often than not, for children) and the growth of national income per person, particularly the increase in buying power of various categories of workmen.

However, if physical fatigue has been reduced by technical progress, nervous fatigue (caused by the sounds of machines and particularly of chains, the constant or intermittent concentration, the responsibility

2. *L'Express*, April 21, 1960.

for costly equipment, etc.) has greatly increased. While *length* of the work period has diminished, its *intensity* has often increased, although even today many semiskilled tasks where man is a stopgap of mechanization tend to be done away with by the automatization of production. On the whole, seen from this angle, the balance of modern societies is positive.

b) From other aspects it is much less so. In a widely distributed report Otto Lipmann, the great German psychologist later banished by the Third Reich, stressed more than thirty years ago the decline "of man's role in production," the *Entseelung* of labor in industrialized societies.<sup>8</sup> While multiplying the number of workers in the industrial field,<sup>4</sup> the "scientific" organization of labor imposes upon them repetitive and compartmentalized tasks which demand only a brief period of execution devoid of initiative, of technical intelligence, and of direct contact with the raw material (metal, wood, leather, textile fiber, etc.); standardized, interchangeable, depersonalized tasks, often with no possibility of professional promotion; fragmentary tasks devoid of a personal sense of achievement, of accomplishment, of intellectual and effective participation in a community; tasks which do not permit the participation, still less the fulfilment of the profound inclinations of the personality.

We should point out that strict specialization in very divided tasks, rigorously limited and repeated, is a phenomenon encountered at the most varied levels of professional life and which everywhere carries harmful psychic effects. In Paris I have met a specialist in bone surgery who, having made a success of the operation for club foot, had just celebrated (with tedium) his three hundredth operation for that deformity.

We must note, too, that to the manipulation of the consumer by mass media corresponds the manipulation of the producer by the unscrupulous practitioners of psychological techniques in the service of the contractor or of the employer-state. Finally, and without entering into statistical analyses, the trend in modern societies which leans towards the multiplication of repetitive and compartmentalized tasks is

3. "Das Anteil des Menschen am Produktions-Effekt" (French trans. in *Journal de psychologie*, January 15, 1928).

4. In the United States today their number clearly is declining, compared to those in the tertiary field. It will soon be the same in other developed countries.



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accompanied by a trend in the opposite direction which creates new skilled occupations: for instance, the controllers of machines and, above all, the various skilled specialists in repair and maintenance whom the introduction of automation techniques and particularly of electronic apparatus tends to increase today.

### IV. THE NEW SISYPHUS

Seen in its entirety, this process does not permit the hope that, during the coming decades and despite the progress of automation, modern societies will be able to offer to all their citizens tasks which will permit them to engage their personalities and to derive real satisfaction from their work.

Indeed, even admitting that the automation of production should one day manage to abolish all these fabricative tasks, comparable to those that characterized the work of men during past millenia, a grave problem already begins to be posed. For work, as Freud has stressed,<sup>5</sup> is not merely a restricted activity carried out for practical purposes. When it corresponds with a certain engagement of the personality (which is far from always being the case) it constitutes an important factor of fulfilment for the individual whose integration it assures into reality and, particularly, into communities ranging from the work team to society as a whole. Technical progress is likely to have, even now, an unbalancing action on the psyches of many individuals by depriving them of an essential activity for which it provides no substitute, unless it be the possibility of fulfilment outside work, in leisure time.

But the picture is still more complex. The prophets of automation, seeing the work week of thirty, indeed, of twenty, hours, already on our horizon, are convinced that the worker will, during the "four Sundays" of the week, devote himself to the joys of genuine culture—music, painting, great authors of the present and of the past, and artistic pilgrimages. Now, observation of what is happening (for very different reasons, moreover) at the same time in prosperous societies, such as the United States, Great Britain, France, and in austerity economies (Poland, Yugoslavia) or in countries with underdeveloped sections, like Argentina, shows that many workers devote their increased leisure to working: this is the curious contemporary phenomenon of "double (or

5. *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Vienna, 1929); French trans.: *Malaise dans la civilisation* (Paris: Denoël & Steele, 1934).

even triple) employment.” In modern societies, which are of particular interest to us here, the worker, taken in the context of social “models” and of emulation and subject, moreover, to the constant introduction of new (or strengthened) needs, seeks to earn more money in order to increase his comfort, improve his household equipment, his housing, etc. A survey made in Akron, center of the rubber industry in 1958, showed that approximately 17 per cent of the workers hold, apart from their factory work, a second full-time job and that, moreover, about 40 per cent of them ply a second part-time trade, very often a tertiary “service,” for instance, at a beauty shop or a real-estate agency.<sup>6</sup> In France “black market” work has spread so widely that, during the winter of 1958–59, it provoked a protest movement of the craftsmen’s unions.

Caught in the infernal cycle of production-consumption, the man-in-the-street, even assisted by automation, risks becoming a new Sisyphus, condemned to roll without respite a burden which always falls back, crushing in him the values of thought and of culture, and which delivers him during his free time (*peau de chagrin* gnawed by proliferating “needs”) to the anarchic action of mass media let loose.

#### V. FINAL REMARKS

In concluding this outline it is important to emphasize that a re-evaluation of modern societies, and thus an assessment of the technical milieu and of its effects on the individual, demands on our part a rigorous attempt at clairvoyance, going beyond the visual so dear to the humanist intelligentsia; casting aside any hint of superiority, every prejudice disdainful toward a new culture that is trying to find itself. Technical civilization (is it, in fact, really a civilization?) is a stage of the immense Promethean adventure for which the ground was laid thousands of years ago but into which our species has thrown itself in the last century and a half with increasing fervor and something akin to frenzy: I mean the adventure of mankind at grips with the products of its genius.

In the course of this adventure, the incessant technical changes fall, as it were, on societies more or less fortified by tradition. Many North Americans who have stayed for long in Western Europe say frankly

6. Harvey Swados, “Less Work—Less Leisure,” pp. 353–63 in E. Larrabee and R. Meyer-sohn (eds.), *Mass Leisure* (Glencoe, Ill.; Free Press, 1958).

that even today their fellow citizens lack an “art of living” and of enjoying themselves. This observation, in which there is some truth, cannot be a source of pride to the European confronted with analogous problems which he himself has not resolved. The art of living in the new technical milieu is lacking in Europeans just as it is in Americans: if the former cope with it better, on the whole, than the latter do, it is because of the older traditions of their pre-Machine Age societies.

Since there are other reports especially devoted to the “culture of the masses” in modern societies, we will not dwell on these problems. At the conclusion of this global re-evaluation we can, however, recommend a strictly objective attitude, free from both pathetic maledictions and naïve apologies, with regard to the applications, as much cultural as material, of technical progress. The mastery of these abundant techniques, a fundamental condition of their humanization, demands from man today not an “increase of soul” in the sense of Bergsonian spiritualism but a supplement of conscience and of moral forces in order to re-establish the balance broken by the too-savage emergence of its power. Intellectuals, whether imbued with the humanist ideal or with the experimental spirit of the physical sciences, must themselves be the prime movers and actual examples of these struggles with conscience. The social sciences can thus play a fundamental role today by initiating the psychosociological study of the technical milieu, by enlisting the interest of young researchers and a growing public, and by sharpening the awareness of our contemporaries of hidden and daily dangers. Modern societies where the number of men engaged in the tertiary field (administration, offices, business, “services” of every kind) increases to the detriment of occupation in agriculture and even in industry<sup>7</sup> already present us with a diptych. On one side, we have production, mechanized and automatized with the help of increasingly perfected machines demanding continually shorter periods of weekly work; on the other, we have leisure time in which, overcoming the pathology of “double employment,” many men should find the center of gravity of their existence, the location of their dignity and of their happiness.

Can modern societies realize freely this harmonious union, this magnificent possibility—free from totalitarian shaping but also beyond the commercial anarchy of the mass media? Or will it be necessary for the

7. Cf. “Le Repartition de la population active aux U.S.A. en pourcentage du total de 1820 à 1960,” in Jean Fourastié, *La Civilisation de 1975* (Paris: P.V.F, 1953), p. 26.

state to practice a sort of enlightened despotism, a despotism advised and guided by a deeper knowledge of the technical milieu and its effects? If this is the case, the wondrous development of the physical sciences must be, I am convinced, accompanied and controlled by equivalent progress in the social sciences and by the judicious application of the social sciences to the problems of the individual and of communities.