

## NOTE ON THE COHERENCE

### OF THE AMERICAN PHENOMENON <sup>1</sup>

#### 1. THE ARTICULATION OF THE DESTINY OF AMERICA TO THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

The creation of any empire is comprehensible only in terms of the passion that carries it along, exceeds its historical dimension and returns to a cosmic dimension that is common to the whole of time. Great historical phases are only established in and as history by a passion that is the foundation and the cancellation of their historicity. The peoples who were called Barbarians were only called this for the way in which their upheaval of history was felt to be a cosmic and natural happening, beyond history in as much as it did not issue from history and expected nothing from it either. They were "all or nothing" in the pure state; they demonstrated at one and the same time the fact of having nothing to lose and everything to gain; they were the mixture of the origin

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and the end of the times; they were the irruption of the cosmic as such within the very core of history.

Every civilization can, in this sense, be understood as an attempt to master the cosmic dimension in history itself, or to raise history to a cosmic dimension. All people thus remain more or less Barbarian in the eyes of its neighbour in as far as its differences of civilization—beliefs, customs, political regime, technics—remain united in a basic form of relation with the world and the life whose meaning their beliefs, institutions, sciences and technics are quite incapable of embracing. Every attempt made by civilization is just as much a wager with existence which is given its meaning with reference to this cosmic dimension.

Civilization and Barbarism form a functional couple. The definition of culture has on the whole been vaguer than that of civilization, but culture can, in some respects, be that part of the consciousness that it takes from itself. Perhaps one would have fewer qualms about defining its meaning if one really wanted to understand its essential function of considering the relation of civilization to what it wishes to deny and to what only seems to be barbarism in proportion to the degree of the success of this negation. It is vital that civilization does not forget that barbarism is no more than the repetition or the return of a previous upheaval from which it originates itself. This return or irruption is always possible as long as civilization is not truly carried to completion, as far as is possible. To refer the civilized man to the savage or primitive, or to make this contrast, is not false, but is certainly a convenient classification; to contrast the civilized of the barbarian is certainly less lucid but closer to the essential. An understanding of culture as a binding function of a civilization—no matter what civilization—in the bio-cosmic context common to all civilizations which is, only in our time, beginning to assume its constrictive dimension, enables one to avoid the false alternative of a culture that assumes the spiritual dimension of existence and is also ignorant of its material conditions, and of a culture that assumes the material functions of mankind and refuses to recognize its spiritual dimension. Seen in this light the reference to the Barbarians is, identically, a reference to the essence of the problems of advancing civilization.

America is peculiarly characteristic—it is unique in history—in

that it is a total contrast to the irruption of the cosmic into history: the deliberate will to abandon history in order to refashion it in accordance with the world. For the first time in history, on this scale at least, a people is made up of elements that are, literally, transplanted, beyond history—hitherto European—with the ambition of learning the lessons in the process and remaking it starting from scratch, the only (voluntary) presupposition being this possibility of refashioning history. America has wanted and still wants to be the very antithesis of Barbarism, the civilization *par excellence*—its difference being the claim of assuming *to the limits* the relation of every previous civilization with Barbarism. Its political will refuses to be specifically political because it is affirmed neither in its origin nor even in its departure, faced with some particular political undertaking but faced with all the political undertakings embarked upon to date and as a belief in the possibility of constructing an earthly citadel simply by mastering nature.

When the first emigrants arrived in America in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Europe they left had itself reached a very significant moment in its history: people were beginning to believe in man's capacity to direct his destiny unaided; unaided, that is, except by reason. That reason was thought to be natural and general, capable of creating harmony among men because it introduced nothing in its representations and precepts that was not included in common experience. This is the message and the form of hope that the first emigrants received. That they did it in a transfer movement beyond history gives rise to a mirror-like illusion in which the effect is taken to be the cause, the image for the real thing. They wanted to admit reason and yet escape from the conflicts that create it and from which it perhaps cannot be separated. It is admitted as a non-temporal phenomenon previously projected on to every ideological conflict, and man is accused of absurdity without questioning whether this reason would have been expressed without these conflicts. The Americans have not only forgotten the history of Europe, they have wanted to forget it: they wanted to build a history without history, a sort of non-temporal citadel, and reduce European history to a series of scandalous accidents of reason, accidents bearing on the reality that at least had considerably more depth in those days: nature.

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The vital rôle played by religion in the beginnings of America—a mixture of Puritanism centered on the individual dialogue between the soul and God and a sort of natural religion that replaced time and divine authority by the cosmos—, with its function of justifying the self-willed mission of the Americans, adds further to the understanding of the belief they have had in their capacity to build an ideal citadel.

This is how the three elements of this anti-history—which is also a revival of history—are organized: build an entirely new citadel; base everything on reason alone, which will at last bring about in practice all that ideologies have maintained in the form of images for which men killed one another; master nature, which will replace national conflict.

The second of these three factors is the central one; a kind of romanticism of practical reason, a faith in technics, in “social engineering,” takes the place of real prophecy. Political action, in the best sense of the word, replaces religion and metaphysics; it is identified with the construction of the new society; and the construction of the citadel will replace historical conflicts. The conjunction of two circumstances offers the ground where this optimism can develop: geographical isolation, and a rich and virgin continent.

Between 1775 and (1914) 1939 the United States seem to be outside the reach of Europe. They have their own history, of course (wars with the indigenous Indians, with England—1776-1783, 1812-1814—, with Mexico—1846—, the Civil War—1861-1864); but all this happened in a world that is so cut off from the rest of the world that the broad outlines of the initial and central political proposal seem confirmed rather than weakened by the continuous success in the formation and expansion of the American nation. They were so conscious of the dangers and difficulties lying in wait for their undertaking that they certainly hid any cause of discord in the submission to this one imperative: the realization of America—“America first,” “right or wrong, my country.” They made a connexion not only with the past but also with their contemporaries. This initial dream of building an America for themselves is, nonetheless, identified with the plan for a political responsibility towards the world when the USA entered history in spite of itself in 1945.

The fact is that before the two centuries were up, the centuries during which America was confirming its dream by constructing a world that was no better nor worse than any other, Europe was bringing into evidence, in its Eastern advances, a parallel desire, as if inscribing itself in the very current of history, by which "starting from nothing," far from passing through the illusion of doing without history, meant the overthrow of history from within, its revolution. The Soviet Revolution was aimed at religion and metaphysics as well; it was also the desire to create a just citadel which would realise socially what had hitherto been only hopes and thoughts. And it was immediately conceived in the context of a project for world revolution. The result is that, after its detour outside history and then its reintroduction back into history in spite of itself, what America comes up against is an identical project by all appearances, symmetrical in a sense and yet diametrically opposed. It is the Russian Revolution that gives the American national dream its world dimension.

It is as well to ask oneself about the conditions and meaning of this time-lag of almost two centuries between the moment when the American will decides to build for itself a citadel based on (practical) reason—a citadel that should only be American to begin with—and the moment when it has to face up to another will to build a citadel based on (political) reason—which was to be worldwide from the word go—, this second moment being also when it begins to have the real means of answering its dream. Without knowing it, or wanting, or even being able, to know it, the ambition that America took from Europe in the 18th century was a worldwide one. This worldwide concept of its project, which contained in its very roots the positivism and in its aloofness from history its dream dimension, was only revealed to it when it had to confront its similar and deliberate ambition, moulded in only two decades, of realising on a worldwide scale what it had tried to realise for itself in two centuries.

The political modality of this re-entry into history, however,—the confrontation of the American and Soviet (or latterly Chinese) powerblocks—must not miss or make one forget the more radical meaning of the difference that has made America—as compared with Europe—see itself as the standard-bearer of the

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world-concept or the concept of mankind taken as a whole. The body of Europe, so often ravaged and tilled by the movements and powers of history, has never been large enough to contain them. The destiny of its countries, their mental frontiers and ideological horizons can only be understood with reference to a history that surpasses them. The wager of the establishment of the USA outside history is directed towards a return to the cosmic, a cosmic that has, itself, been purged as it were of its own history, its creation, its genesis and, in short, of the genesis of man. Space is the natural calling of the American, as it is also his calling to bring into being the first type of real man, superior to all other types. The history of Europe for the American is the prehistory of the organization of the planet. The Old World is at the corner of the infinite—cf. Husserl's *Crisis*—towards which it directs its meaning once it has disassociated itself from the cosmos; the New World understands its task as a taking-charge or recapture of the cosmos that is detached from its meaning.

America's reply to a smarting Europe, breaking away from itself and finding its meaning and roots in this very breakaway, is a rootless and troubled country finding its roots, its meaning and its certainties in the dissatisfied space of its implantation and recurrence. America replies to Europe—daughter of the Logos sure of finding its meaning before experiencing it—by repudiating the *a priori*—apart from the *a priori* of its own existence—, and by being concerned with experiencing its certainties before being sure of their meaning. Both Europe and America have staked their existence on a different moment of reason; both, rational in their own eyes but not in the other's, carry within themselves the other's irrationality as a contestation of themselves. It is in terms of the destiny of reason that their dialogue should be taken. With all the difficulties and risks that face the individuals who take part in the two opposed movements, blinded by their very opposition to the turn in reverse that they have taken.

This function of reflecting the return of the end of Europe in its origin, which is induced by the American entry into history in the mid-20th century, is expressed in the transposition, on an almost planetary scale, —in its two occidental and oriental derivations—of the intimate conflict of Europe with herself. The USA and the USSR, conjointly confronted by the realization of

a world order by ways that are becoming increasingly similar in appearance, cannot escape from the nature of the constraints and demands by which they have respectively reached this meeting-point.

If, as is the case, the USA has put itself in a position in which it has to burden itself with a world responsibility, it has, nonetheless, never expressly desired this, while the USSR has been keen to set up, first and foremost, a world order, and has in fact only managed to build its own empire. The idea of a perfect order has served as a cover-up to, but not a mediation of, the American realization. The Americans have never felt that their country was built once and for all: when Turner proclaimed at Chicago in 1873 that the frontier was closed (or reached), the waves of opinion produced at that time came less from the immediate social meaning of this proclamation than from the fact that it went against the people's deepest and most solid feelings. America is not and does not think of itself as finished; on the contrary, it deliberately wants to be an "unfinished business," and there is thus a certain confusion between the construction of America and the realization of the ideal citadel. From its own viewpoint then, to infringe a certain conception of the world is to directly infringe the very existence of America. The whole history and drama of the USA in terms of this history is totally contained in the initial contradiction whereby it resolved to build itself from universal principles but with an empirical spirit. The Founding Fathers wanted to do things well—they wanted the best for their country, but they wanted it empirically and accepted the conception of the final realization as something far ahead; the very principles on which they rested being reversed during this visionary period in which the America-to-be and the world order were identified—and this order was not exempt from a certain mythical allure, loaded, for want of religious conviction, with a voluntarist self-justification: what's good for America is good for the world and vice versa.

Russia, on the other hand, started from a position and a defence: from its existence as a State, taken as the first necessary moment in the realization of a task with worldwide horizons. It is certainly this ideal aimed at the horizon that motivated and determined the present action, but this action was particularly

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subject to outside pressures; it took place in the very heart of history and, for this reason, did not have the whole of time in front of it; there was no risk that there would be any confusion between the success of the Revolution and the creation of the Bolshevik State on the one hand and, on the other, the realization of the Marxist-Leninist ideology on a worldwide scale, this latter having the whole of time at its disposal. From the word go, the ideology was the means to an actual realization. It was at once a faith and a means, and the representation of the object of this faith was, *a priori*, adaptable to the conditions of time and space relevant to the revolution in the different countries. The function of the Marxist ideal was not so much to be taken literally as to be the regulating agent of a logical—and out-of-step—development of the action in time. There could be no theory of action in the USA, on the other hand, where the very continuity of the empirical was erected as a non-temporal doctrine reached by a refusal of any transcendency. The USA has won this involuntary wager of developing, in two centuries, the greatest technological power, and has retained, essentially unchanged, the inherited mentality and the socio-cultural frame of the “Enlightenment.” It soon managed to mechanize its agriculture and accordingly carried out its so-called industrial revolution without the solution of apparent continuity and without any social revolution or rash policy. It was as if it was vaccinated against any such revolution but retained in return the mentality of the century that gave birth to it, and, with time, the letter rather than the spirit of its principles. The Russians, on the contrary, had their revolution much later, at the end of a mental and political maturation, of which the technological revolution was not so much the means as the expression; if technics today have become more expressly the means of political regimes, this only puts the USSR on an apparently level footing with the USA—who see, increasingly, in their technological realizations the justification and end of their political optic, the end and the means to their economic development—and nonetheless in a certain difficulty, which is made evident by the opposition between the defenders of the ideology and the defenders of the economy throughout the post-Stalin period.

America has met its world responsibility in the very moment



of its technical supremacy, and it is thanks to this supremacy that, having started with the attitude of “balancing out history” and learning the lessons from this, it finds itself in a position to “teach the world the lessons.” What it comes up against is a symmetrical desire to put the world in order—a desire that relies on an almost equal technical strength, but both this desire and this strength are issues of a man-to-man relation and not primarily of a man-world relation. If it is true that the equality of military strength is a present-day reality, this in no way guarantees any future equality as long as the asymmetry in the principles which employ this strength and the real ends to which these principles are directed remains so clearly defined.

The difference between the American and Soviet economies is the vital evidence—at once cause and effect—and the test, in certain respects, of this asymmetry. Every comment on the complementarity of the USA and the USSR or on their convergence is only significant if it starts from this observation. Both powers have the possibility of provoking the other to considerable wrongs which would, simultaneously, bring about similarly evil consequences to themselves, but because this is nevertheless not equivalent to the real possibility of destroying the world, as was initially believed and repeated, the equality as regards military capacity is far from being able to fix, by itself, political stability for any length of time. It is thus on another plane, that of cultures, ideologies and attitudes, that one should look for the respective advantages and weaknesses.

Now, a complementarity of principles, on this plane, is certainly imposed on the observation, a complementarity that in itself is more fundamental than either of the ideologies that it secretly controls. To fix the essence of the basis of our experience in the man-nature relation—and conceive, from this, relations between men—or the relations themselves—and establish from them the man-nature relation—entails two naturally and almost necessary, perfectly complementary movements. One can only affirm the intrinsic superiority of one attitude over the other dogmatically and arbitrarily; they correspond, in short, to alternative viewpoints that are organically linked. The fact that man is a historical being and, to a certain extent, author of his own history, will never blot out his condition of being a cosmic crea-

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ture; and, inversely, the cosmos in which his history seems to unfold is itself subject to a history to which man is not entirely alien. In a way it is this nature history complementarity that is reflected or expressed in the political problematic of the relation between the two nations. To start from nothing—in terms of history—was possible in the USA because it had nature—in geographical terms—at its disposal to make up for this, and was so rich that it was able to escape that tricky experience of questioning itself as an identity. By waking up after two dormant centuries into the ideology of the 18th century, they thought they were naturally the masters and owners of the world. This awakening at the same time collapsed the non-temporal conception of man. Far from rejecting the viewpoint of man's ownership of the world, this collapse aggravates what is, in the last analysis, revealed as the true philosophy of the Americans.

### 2. THE AMERICA OF OPPOSITES

By virtue of its willingness to be opposed to any form of Barbarism—at the moment when European history prolonged the Barbarian age—and by wanting to be the most or the only civilised country—civilised *par excellence*—America seems to have defined itself by contradictions and sworn allegiance to them. Provided that one involves no dogmatism, we can see here a practical rule for reading into the American phenomenon. The undefined diversity—even chaos—in which it appears to us on a level of everyday experience or when seen in the details, ceases to appear contradictory to the extraordinary unity of the country no matter how little we are prepared to see the point of balance of equally real opposites in every concrete aspect of their society. Let us choose, at random, some of the concrete aspects which will automatically show us the possible sources of these contradictions. Much has been made of America “in pink” and America “in black”; and it is virtually inevitable, in the name of her European origins, that Europe should see it as both. Seen from within, however, it is both.

In fact, this most cosmopolitan country, gathering point of emigrating European war victims, victims of ideological struggles

or any other form of existential difficulty, constructed as a rejection of all forms of nationalism, the USA, is, knows it is and wants to be the first world power. It has assumed all the disillusionment and hope of Europe and brought them to their paroxysm with all the bridges down: a dynamism alternately tinged with idealism and fatalism, depending on circumstance and temperament. Having wanted to be outside history, its present history is doomed to be without a middle. It exists literally on all *or* nothing, on the level of options, possibilities, horizons to refer to, and, as a whole, in everyday terms on a mixture of all *and* nothing.

The fabulous growth of the economic, industrial, technical and military strength is the only issue of this all-and-nothing, and at the same time the means of reinvesting the contradiction in a circular process. All or nothing is the unconscious postulate of its practical philosophy, the practice of refusing metaphysics, religion, ideology, anything "beyond," anything *a priori*.

Having once and for all judged or decided that any *a priori* is a source of dualism, and any dualism a source of human conflict, which is the consequence of religion or metaphysics—and not the aspiration to unity, the expression of real conflicts—it has erected its experience as an *a priori*, and by refusing any duality between the ideal and the real has become practically Manichaeian in its dealings with others. The point at which one ceases to be a foreigner to the USA comes when one recognizes the universality and exclusivity of the American viewpoint. There is no specific motivation for this—what rich country is free from Chauvinism and xenophobia?—but it is nonetheless a unique and different phenomenon, which, by wanting the exemplary refutation of this motivation, it carries consciously or unconsciously to its culmination generously and cynically. The country can be exceptionally welcoming, it can assimilate startlingly quickly, and yet how many Americans feel they are, deep down, strangers in their own country or at least do not connect the energy of their activity and the blindness of their certainties too specifically to this feeling, which might risk its showing its head? All those people who travel periodically to the USA are struck by the swiftness of its material transformation, the acceleration of industrial, economic and technical progress. But each stage of this progress

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beliefs as much as it confirms the idealism, romanticism and generosity which could certainly have been developed to a purer state up to the First and even the Second World War. Each stage in the material progress corresponds involuntarily to yet another step in America's inevitable encounter with itself, the dream being at the level of its wish to build itself. Neither the moral idealism nor the pseudo-religiosity will suffice for long to stand bail for the ignorance of the why of its strength. The dimensions of the country, its geographical and social diversity and complexity make up a reality that cannot be grasped by the individual, an unknown reality, troubling and threatening for the individual's sensitivity by the mere fact that it is unknown, all the more so because on the whole any belief is challenged beyond belief in free personal judgment. The result is that the anti-intellectualism, hatred of abstract ideas and theories, go hand in glove with an intensive and necessary use of intellectual figurations, abstract models, all forms of calculated representations, all of which address the imagination, nourish belief and the sense of the "fantastic," and are eminently practical: a knowledge that would have the virtue of making history non-temporally, as it were. The serious business of work and the futility of the image are the two parallel links, disassociated and contradictory, in the present-day American man. The underestimated paradox of present-day (and future) America would be that its strength in labour, organization (management) and research (technology) tends by itself to fill the gap between its ideal of the perfect city and the reality of the world; replacing, in this gap, all the theories that have been rejected *a priori*. In this a reasonable possibility or a demoniacal temptation?

It could well be that the destiny of the USA (and of the world) is being played out in the 20th century in this alternative. In any event, the more powerful the USA becomes the more practical certainty it acquires to reply to its uncertainty, its inner anxiety and solitude. Europe and the world have moved from the religious, political and scientific path to industry and science; the Americans seem to be following an inverted route in as far as they meet man invested with economic and technical power—the question of man's nature and meaning. Individually they are not owners of possessions in the sense in which Europeans are:

their possession is reduced to their being, their being to their action. They are insatiable where realizations are concerned and their sole comfort is in their action, their only relaxation in their movement. For the least privileged mass this, in human terms, means anxiety, frustration, recreation, yielding to acquired needs in order to escape from basic needs; but whatever one says on this subject is increasingly overplayed; for an ever greater number of them this means, individually, an increasingly technical activity, increasingly intelligent and concerted, and all the emptier because it coincides with a practical intellectual elaboration. The country takes root within itself by this subterfuge. In a world which it feels opposes it. One has to put oneself on this single—collective—level to comprehend the USA. It is no longer having reduced to being, here—a having that can be reduced all the more easily for not having preceded the being and because people have never had time to accustom themselves to the fact that it is a consequence of action—but on the contrary the action or being of each individual is mixed up with the general having. The collective having takes the place of the individual being. On this scale the contradictions reappear. The technical and economic mutation of the 20th century has affirmed the American nation in the face of the world: it remains for it to conquer itself inwardly, spiritually and politically; to make its inner, social, mental and human integration. Is it, as a nation, capable of freeing itself enough from its fear of being contested in its existence by other nations? The sudden rise of its power to a worldwide scale may possibly warp *a priori* the practice of constructing an ideal society in the name of its immediate coincidence with the dream of the Founding Fathers, which has become the draft of a reality in the 20th century. With the conjunction of the historical modalities of the construction of American society between 1775 and 1916 (or 1945) and the historical context in which it finds itself in the mid-20th century, it is probably impossible for the USA not to uphold the resolution of its inner problems in such close subordination to the resolution of world problems that these latter do not absorb or take the place of the former. This apparent prevalence of the totality over its elements means in reality two completely different things. On the one hand, the American refusal of any ideology is based on a deep mistrust of man which seems

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to issue from Puritanism; it has justified and confirmed itself in its economic and technical success; and this success proves, in the eyes of the American, the truth of his empiricism and his negation of any transcendency, even that of the impersonal idea of man, beyond the diversity of peoples and continents; the consequence of this is the explicitness, driven by American power, of the affirmation—implicit from the beginning—of the general value of American society. This is a fact: the USA know that they are, and believe that they will be for a long time, still the greatest power in the world. This fact puts them in the position of being able to order the world or organise it for themselves. They exercise this consequence in a contradictory way however, and not unilaterally or rationally. It can only be contradictory because they are caught in an inversion of the relations between totality and single element. They alone, being this single element, are in a position to replace the totality. The success of their empiricism engenders for them the temptation to believe that they have effectively reached the aims of their idealism.

What is more, this powerful position obliges them to think about the totality with which they are dealing and which they feel only too keenly is not themselves. We meet here with a relative consideration of time and, above all, history. To understand the quality of this consideration, we must not disassociate it from the powerful position with which it is linked today, that is, to the alternative of being or not-being to which every American move on the international chessboard is referred. This consideration is a crossroads of pure intellectual confrontations, which are abstract but closely linked to the technical, economic, military and political facts of the possibilities to come in the light of those that are past.

Europe and Asia are the actual respective poles of reference of past and future. Athens and Rome offer them two models of the destiny of a people. They make ready, even ambiguous, reference to this. For Asia the horizon is filled with risks and threats. So past and future are as if geographically localized east and west of the country; historical time, in short, is something alien. The only real time is that of technical, economic and military developments. Being the first there, they feel in a position to master time and decide the orientation of history. An important point must

be made here: loathe to see contradictions in experience, they do not, in the first place, think of their relation with the world as a competitive relation, but as a relation of right and duty identically, in order to solve the material problems posed in their limited form: the number that the population of the world must not exceed, if the problems of survival are to be open to a technical solution, symbolically establishes a prescribed axis for history, in terms of which we have really got to organize, as from now, its abscissa. This task of straightening up history corresponds to a priority given to the problems of totality over single problems—national, for example. It also corresponds to the deep calling of the USA which, by exercising it, embodies the dream into which it was born two centuries ago. But the military and civil ambivalence—of the space projects for example—indicates the facility or necessity with which these real problems of the totality of technical order are mixed up with the false totality of the political order, resulting from the reversal of accord with only one country in the world. The USA today, as against world history, has an attitude similar to Descartes' to nature: one must make oneself master and owner; it is the same attitude, i.e., the problem is there whether we like it or not, and has nothing to do with America's own intention. The plan to master history is, moreover, only the culminating and fundamental point of the plan to master nature. The fact that the USA have the material power to prime a movement towards this mastery is not a contingent fact and cannot be treated as such, if only because of the consequences that would ensue. It is up to ponder this dispassionately if we are to try to see in it the part of necessity and inevitability that Europe should see itself in under pain of going against itself, and the part of chance and risk, the part that unconsciously admits to the formula of "American imperialism," the meaning of which is hard to grasp if one does not know what the positive wishes of everyone are.

### 3. THE GLORY OF INCOMPLETION

American society is incomplete and it claims that this incompleteness is the principle of its development. Many surprising or



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scandalous aspects of this society lose this aspect once one tries to understand it in the context of a country in the middle of forming itself, its horizon being a muddled confusion between its own development and the development of the world.

This incompleteness is felt as such to be a quality by the American; it is part of his life style; he wants to be and readily believes he is the best, someone who "excels," and at the same time he seems to scorn perfection (apart from technical perfection) as if it was no more than a decoy, something unreal. Incompleteness and excellence are not contradictory if one's view of life is a view that is in motion, not in the superficial sense of tumult or excitement as is thought in Europe, but the very movement of things that are in the process of being formed. One does not think of incompleteness as compared with the ideal completion of the country, but in terms of a victory over life, nature and others. This victory is accepted in advance as something that can be reconsidered indefinitely. Way before it is an athletic ethic, the sense of competition is an economic (commercial, industrial), political and technological ethic. The American realises rather than creates. He realises things on a prodigious scale because of his genius for organising production and its expansion. The incompleteness refers to production, because there is always room for greater and more varied production. Producing takes the place of roots. The existence of the USA is at one with the production of production. One's only fear is that this faith in incompleteness is covering up a process of escape.

The American seems to have a certain blindness, or lack of sensitivity or natural concern, where many human—and above all social—problems are concerned. It is not a lack of sensitivity as much as an effect of judgement, a decision of reason; this blindness in fact conceals strong passions (connected with the differences of nationality, religion and race, and with money...); it is wedded to romanticism and uses this to cover up its passions. People are more sensitive to prowess than to simple but solid realizations. People need prowess more than justice, they need the cult of the hero more than a sense of dignity; there is a whole metaphysical background to this sensitivity to prowess—and metaphysical is not too strong a word: it is a form of defence against—and refutation of—the mediocrity of life, absurdity,



disillusionment and fear; this blindness to human problems is in reality a fear to face up to the dark side of life, to recognize it in all its natural forms: absurdity, suffering, death. This, in fact, is an inevitable question in this country where the sense of justice is so advertised, but so much injustice is allowed to run loose, and they are so unconscious, not to say cynical about it; and this injustice is so easily shrugged off on destiny, fatality or the incompleteness of America. The theme of incompleteness serves here as the surety or justification of this coexistence of the idealism that is given utterance and laid claim to and of the scandalous and deliberate non-realizations. This contradiction can be grasped if one is prepared to recognize in it the force of those elementary passions, fear of death and the enjoyment of power. This is a sense of vanity rather than cynicism or indifference. As it presses forward, life creates victims and wreaks havoc; this is as natural as "natural" selection. The true name of the ethic of competition, in social or political terms, is "natural selection." As an ethic it is, essentially, biologically inspired. The reference to rationality serves as a cover for interest or fear, it is a means of forewarning oneself; it is not the deep motivation, nor, directly, the expression of generosity; this is real, but serves to cover up anxiety, or, if not this, does not have the depth to enable it or encourage it to take hold of this and overcome it; there is a solution of continuity between fear and faith in action, which automatically defines the importance of the first as compared with the second; a solution of continuity that passes through the consciousness of each citizen as it does through the whole nation as such; and this, in analytical terms, is the true incompleteness.

#### 4. TECHNICS AND IDEOLOGY

The Americans have interiorised their rejection of Europe. "Starting from nothing" has become, variously, availability, constant generosity, universal curiosity, perpetual movement, the feeling that they can do anything and everything, a refusal to take roots and a refusal of individual possession, an innocence resulting from feeling that there is a universality of duties corresponding to a universality of rights—this is their only presupposition. But this

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presupposition is not that simple: "starting from nothing," together with the yankee avatar of puritanism, has come to mean with time "bracketing or putting aside any consideration of human nature," and saddling itself with a power that is inflammable with anguish, anxiety and impatience, which has been able to use all the resources of compromise to advance without ever looking back. In human terms this is hardly the definition of real movement, but rather of an immobility. A dynamic immobility maybe, if one is prepared to accept this contradiction that so fully illustrates, now in the mid-20th century, the coexistence of a rural political mentality and the most advanced spirit of technological invention. Technics in all its forms—all the types of invention, detection, manipulation and organization—has given the USA its movement, the movement of a world where the American man himself is never re-considered, not because he sees himself as a god—only in his relation to life is he fatalistic and *blasé*—but because the more his technical inventions permit him to affirm himself in the world and before other people as the leader, the more they allow him to make merry in his boredom and to turn his back on an anxiety which only increases the more the back is turned.

Faced with a problem, the American's attitude is that of a technician. He will only meet the problem in concrete situations; he will only solve them "on his own merits," that is, by starting from experience and never outstripping this nor referring to any *a priori* or any value that is extrinsic to the given situation; doing without *a prioris* is his only *a priori*. This submission to the facts of experience which, naturally and for everyone, operates the continuity of meaning through the diversity of experience is not a theoretical attitude for him, however—not a method of approaching experience, but rather a way of existence as much as a way of thought, because of the lack of definition of the theory and the practice. The American is quite convinced that all problems are soluble, but will only attack a problem if he is sure of being able to solve it. He will not risk attempting to solve a problem before being sure of its solution. This is the cause of the extraordinary inhibition that goes with an extraordinary availability. It is also the cause of the ever greater gap between the acceleration of the development of all physical technics—

aimed at space, matter and energy—and the immobilism or repetition in all those fields in which action has a bearing on man, particularly in politics. By saying that the American only conceives of action as something separate from creation, one risks being caricatural, but in fact this is a fundamental point. This gives excellent results in all those fields in which it is in one's interest to start from zero, in which one can look at experience with completely new and free eyes, in which technical achievement can really take the place of creation; but it plunges one into insoluble difficulties once the problems to be solved are given situations that have to be grasped and understood literally if there is to be any advance. If the 18th century in Europe represents the emergence of a technical, scientific and political thought that is resolved and determined by the crisis of religious thought, the latter still transmits something of its style to whatever refutes it. One only has to consider, for example, the origins and posterity of Kantian thought, and, even more clearly, Hegelian thought. The sensibility that nourishes American thought as from the 18th century, i.e., from the moment when the USA really begins to exist, is completely severed from the religious past as such. It belongs to a soul that has as it were been suddenly struck down with amnesia, not only with regard to the history of man in which it takes part but also to its contradictory condition of having been created finite and also capable of the infinite. A soul which, as if in a waking dream, sees one of the two phases of its tragedy: the phase in which everything is possible; and it can only preserve this dream by being deliberately ignorant of the other phase: death, failure; and this is more contradictory than any other because of the sleep-walking ignorance of its opposites. American thought was born in this form of sensibility. This waking dream and this sleep-walking are its hallmark. What stands bail for this thought and gives it the illusion of being awakened is the world: nature, matter, energy, space, life, and man seen in the light of all these things; but it is not man as such. There is no conception of man transcending American man.

The fault in the latter—the thing that he is possibly beginning to realise is lacking in him—is precisely the sense of creation which includes us and in which we take part, the consciousness of the dimensions of the genesis in which human action plays its part.

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It is not their technological power that makes the Americans appear satanic sometimes; it is their unawareness of the implications of what they are taking on, their blindness to the conditions and ends of their undertaking. They have not really broached the problem of the relation of technics to man yet; they have simply presupposed man, that is, they have put him in brackets, seen only his relation to nature, and directed the relation with other people to their own relation to nature. This puts them in an exceptionally strong position to organise the human empire as this becomes increasingly tributary to its natural "environment," as the very life of men depends more and more on the use made of matter, energy and space. It is not money or economy or technics or beliefs that are the real strength of the USA, but the fact that we are entering an era of civilization in which the survival of mankind depends effectively on man's capacity to adapt mankind to the world, to bind mankind organically to it. The USA is aware that in theory or in terms of ideals the real problem is to direct the world at man, but they believe that we have no choice, that the only real problem hanging over us as from now is to adapt man to the world; and that if one day it will be possible to direct that world at man, this process will have to pass through the necessity of directing man at the world; this is why they feel all human conflicts, national conflicts and ideological conflicts as so many absurd obstacles which only add to the one basic drama: man's mastery of nature. This mastery is muddled up today with a mastery of history because all serious human problems are naturally limited problems (demography, alimentation, energy).

In this, they are following an exactly inverse course to that of Marxism, which started from the problem of feeding man and ended up at a possible solution by the previous solution of the problem of man's alienation of man. The USA thinks that the only problem is nature's alienation of man, but according to the USA this is a technical, not a religious or philosophical problem, the solution of which is responsible for the life or death of mankind; it thinks that any human conflict merely delays this solution, that is, increases the chances of the death of mankind.

We use the term "USA" and not "the Americans" here to underline that it is because they are this power (the USA) that

the Americans think they are in a position to involve the rest of mankind in solving the problem of man and nature. On their part there is a deliberate choice or commitment: the racial problem in America, the war in Vietnam, ideological conflicts, the risk of a thermo-nuclear war, all these they feel to be difficulties that are all the more terrible because they are quite absurd; absurd because they are completely removed from the real problematic which is that of mastering nature—and the conquest of space is one of the major steps towards this. We are free to ask ourselves how far the space programme, in its genesis and development, is linked with the ideological conflict with the USSR and its military potential. This commitment we have mentioned is felt by the USA itself to be the only rational answer, and it reckons it shows a great deal of forbearance and wisdom in its patient endurance of the misunderstandings and absurdities of others.

This formulation of the problems of man into problems of man's relation to the world can be taken by us (as Europeans) to be an escape from the "real problems." But nonetheless let us not disregard the fact that if, for the Americans, this is a valid substitute for any religious, ideological or philosophical perspective, it also encounters a very real dimension of human history, and that it is basically this encounter that makes the USA so effectively strong on the world of today, whatever the various and actual guises may be, in which this strength is expressed. In other words, the USA is strong in its weakness, in so far as it is capable of shrugging off its disregard for human nature to the point of identifying this with its acknowledgement of nature and nothing more. Before he put the stress on man's alienation of man, Marx talked of naturalising man in order to humanize nature.<sup>1</sup> One wonders if, in the end, it is not this pre-Marxism coming straight from the 18th century that the Americans have undertaken to take to its conclusion.

The American submits to natural, spacial and visualizable experience—to factual data—with the same tenacity, vigilance, self-confidence and confidence in his country as the communist submits

<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Political and Philosophical Economy*, 1844.

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to history and time. In the dialectic of domination, which embraces every sort of submission, the American refusal of ideology does not indicate a better condition for a dialogue, but rather for a soliloquy. Putting the human presupposition between brackets does not correspond to a tactic; it translates an anguish that is cloaked in a naïve self-confidence, in a feeling of natural right to collective possession. The dialogue with others can only take one form: collaboration or understanding. The USA is deeply engaged in making man “master and owner of nature,” and men are not too numerous to direct this task.

They are not anti-communist on principle. Their anti-communism contains all the resentment and exasperation they feel against the party that denies their evidence; as such, it has all the allure of contingency and is always close to turning into self-hatred. Here we see the division and completion of the political attitude which happens, as if by accident, to be jealous of the communists for having an ideology, and the technician’s attitude which puts the cards on the table—technics replacing ideology. In relation to all important world problems or the problems of its own society, the USA enacts ambiguously the ambivalence between the legitimate neutralisation of ideology by the technology of world problems in terms of given situations which, as such, are manageable, and the substitution of technological ideology for politics in order to solve world problems, as human problems, about the conception of man and the means of satisfying man’s deep aspirations. At this point technics bring us to the most delicate and sensitive issue of the dialectic of submission and domination. They cannot really replace politics, but they think they can, and this belief alone influences politics sufficiently to introduce into them a super-rationality which absorbs the irrationality of ideology (the ideology which others lay claim to and its own unconscious ideology) into the rationality of technics. What happens archetypically, because it is limited, in the space adventure or in the whole Soviet-American strategy as seen by the American, caps and comprehends in this respect every particular problem, be it world-wide or American, but seen since the USA, the two dimensions of which—relation to nature, relation to man—are entangled a subtle play of relations of rivalry, mutual ignorance, substitution, utilisation, in which one sees clearly where the American convic-

tion lies, but still unclearly which will outweigh the other, after all.

This ambiguity is reinforced and consolidated by the fact that the USA did not approach technics by a rupture or a revolution within its own history but directly from its history and on a level with it, once its break with history had been made. It is also reinforced by the fact that American technological power is developed within history—no longer outside it—, in other words by the fact that the USA is wrong just when it begins to be right, and because it is right; its very success puts it face to face with what it had originally decided not to see any more. The question posed by Nietzsche on the subject of the sciences can be more keenly posed on the subject of the technics from which the sciences cannot be disassociated: having proved that they were capable of destroying man's life aims, can they give him new ones?<sup>2</sup> Or the question can be formulated thus: are the ideals that affect or inspire man anything more than the aims which are imposed on him by the very structure of the experience in which his existence is contained? This is a general question—and not specifically American—but it underlines the necessary ambiguity of the US position in world problems, and throws light both on the American exasperation with the attitude of the attitude of the rest of the world, and on the exasperation, or at the very least the contradictory emotions, of the world with "Americanism." The breadth and stake of the tasks offered to man today by the world can only promote the confusion between ideals and aims. The breadth and the shifting of the problems that have arisen within American society during its history have also promoted the confusion between the ideal of America and the concrete aims of American society; America—"still-to-be" is the only transcendence which the Americans listen to, and the ambiguity of the US position in world problems is on a level with the confusion that exists between America-to-be and the tasks of the world.

The ambiguity is again underlined by the very nature of the relations between technics, ideology and politics. Technics and

<sup>2</sup> *The Gay Science*, fr. 7, 1886.



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politics can both be defined as practical *a priori* functions—*a priori* of the means and the ends respectively. The confusion of aims and ideals is made easier by the reversal of the priorities of means over ends, which, more and more, characterises the ventures of our civilization. Political action is increasingly attended by technological considerations, although it is still unthinkable that we might reach the stage of a real technocracy, no matter the State. But for the Americans politics is still synonymous with irrationality—be it the irrationality of others or the irrationality for which the others condemn them. Ideology is, *per se*, evil in their eyes, the cause of every sort of disorder: a last resource because it is part irrationality. This is not to say, however, that technics should take the place of politics, but that only technics can counterbalance ideologies (those of the USSR and China), and that politics and technology will outweigh ideological politics. In this dialectic economy will eventually assume the same function as technics. In spite of oneself and because it is a necessary evil, one will acknowledge the priority of politics over technics, while still exercising—and believing in—the priority of technics over politics. One recognizes in the existence of one's opponent precisely those things that one does not want to recognize as one's own presupposition.

The time of the US entry into history decides the time of innocent desire and temptation, the time of man's unawareness of the implications of power and the time of confronting these implications, just as, for the Marxist, the Revolution decides the time of man's alienation and liberation.

At the point when the scope of technological development is upsetting the conception and practice of political power in different ways in every country—and considerably strengthening it in the USA—and when one readily uses this circumstance to talk of Soviet society and American society converging, the call of this common problematic—the problematic of the relations between nature and history which recurs in the relations between technics and politics—which involves every country of the world today, can make us wary of the easy temptation of thinking that its origin lies exclusively in the USA or the USSR; and by going further than this alternative—on which the USA deliberately insists—might enable us to escape as far as possible—on an



international scale—from the consequences with which the ambiguity included in this accepted alternative is bristling.

The USA is a country of contradictions and a contradictory phenomenon; it is without doubt—and contradictorily—the nucleus of irrationality to which the world must refer in considering its hoped-for coherence; and inversely the USA will only find its own coherence in proportion to its capacity to submit to the vital problems of the world, the formulation of which is outlined by its own existence.