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Introduction

“THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’,” sang Bob Dylan in 1964. And changed they have, but not in the way expected. Strange shifts have occurred, taking us from one world to another, totally alien from the one that brought it into existence. Hope for a bright future has given way to nostalgia for an idealized past. Populism has replaced leftism as the voice of protest. The enormous difficulty young people experience in imagining the future, their confinement to a kind of perpetual present, are the symptoms of traumas accumulated over the last half century.

The long, aimless wandering of the advanced societies has been the expression of a profound but undefinable discontent. Like an orphan who has inherited a fortune and who spends it in the futile hope of getting her parents back, postindustrial society has sought with all its might—but in vain—to reconnect with the old world’s promises of progress. As if by the effect of a genetic mutation, a new, online species—all surface, without interiority—closer to hunter-gatherers than to farmers, has emerged: *Homo digitalis*, whose algorithmic life will decide the future of civilization. To understand the rage

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and frustrations that brought this *Homo digitalis* into being, to grasp also the carefree attitude and joie de vivre that have mingled with them, such are the goals to pursue if one wants to protect the humanistic values that are part of our heritage, before they are once again betrayed.

Fifty years ago, when this story began, the events that took place in Paris in May '68 ignited the imagination of its time in a way reminiscent of the French Revolution and its abolition of the ancien régime. For the young people who marched in the Latin Quarter, at issue was nothing less than to bring down bourgeois society. But, as Marx said, when history repeats itself, it often does so as farce.¹ May '68 was a joyous celebration; no one was guillotined. It was no longer a question of demanding bread but of "taking boundless pleasure" in an overabundance of riches. In Paris as in San Francisco and Berlin, a new generation thought it could create a new world, rid of the monotony of assembly-line work and material concerns, and composed of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

Unfortunately, economic growth stalled in the mid-seventies. A long period of stagnation began, shattering the aspirations of the sixties. The enthusiasm of a generation that had believed it possible to break free from the biblical curse of toil was shattered. This would be the first trauma of the past half-century.

The economic crisis soon offered the adversaries of sixties radicalism the opportunity for revenge. The Irishman Edmund Burke had blamed the French Revolution for triggering "discord" and "vice" and making the younger generations lose their "reason" and "virtue."² The neoconservatives, having returned in force in the early eighties, took up the same refrain. So the protesters of May '68 wanted to "forbid forbidding"? They were wrong: The existence of every society relies on rules and prohibitions. They wanted to "demand the impossible"? They

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had forgotten that the human condition is tragic. According to the critics of May '68, the "slide toward apathy, hedonism, and moral chaos" had to be arrested as soon as possible.³

In the eyes of those who voted for Ronald Reagan, his election exemplified the revenge of the reality principle over the pleasure principle. He was the standard-bearer of a moral as well as an economic revolution. Yet he would lend his support to an illusion just as naïve as that of the protesters, that of thinking that capitalism can regulate itself through a restored moral imperative. On the contrary, the world would witness the triumph of greed, his election being followed by an utterly indecent explosion of wealth inequality. The conservative revolution's betrayal would be the second great disillusionment of our time.

The transition from the sixties to the eighties might have been only an ordinary swing of the pendulum of human desire, from the wish for personal emancipation to the equally persistent need to return home to the warmth and coziness of one's own tradition.⁴ A profoundly warped form of that opposition emerged over the last half a century. The joyous protest against the established order slid into competitive individualism, while the praise of tradition also underwent a transformation, veering toward the rejection of the traditions of others, toward xenophobia. In place of a (noble) confrontation between emancipation and tradition, we have witnessed a great schism between the winners—autonomous, emancipated from conventions—and the losers, seeking in tradition a protection it was unable to offer.

The rise of populism is the expression of that crisis. After an interminable odyssey in which the lower classes lost the frames of reference that industrial society had offered them, they are revolting against the Left, which is accused of moral laxity, and against the Right, guilty of thinking only of enriching

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themselves. The migration of the working classes to the populist parties sounds the death knell of the hopes of a generation that had written on the walls of its university buildings: “The working class will take the banner of revolt from the students’ fragile hands.” This is the third great lost illusion.

How are we to understand this series of crises and ruptures? What is the hidden pain of which this period was the expression? The answer lies in a decisive factor: the collapse of a civilization, that of the industrial world, and the enormous difficulty advanced societies have had in finding a successor to it. The idea of a postindustrial society, proposed to characterize our era, has catalyzed every sort of misunderstanding. The Left interpreted it as the harbinger of the end of capitalism, the Right as a return to its founding value, hard work. Both were wrong. It is only in recent years that the veil has been lifted to reveal its true meaning.

To understand the nature of the disillusionments that the end of the industrial world has brought about, we must reread Jean Fourastié’s *Great Hope of the Twentieth Century*, a fundamental work published in 1948.⁵ The hope of the new era, according to that major economist, was that human beings, having worked the soil in agrarian societies, then materials in industrial society, would now concern themselves with other human beings, in a society where work time would be dedicated to people rather than objects, in the fields of health, education, or leisure activities. It is that hope for a more human economy that has been betrayed.

Fourastié underestimated the importance of one essential point: the irresistible need for growth in modern societies. He clearly acknowledged that a service society in which Mr. X takes care of Ms. Y cannot grow. If the value of the service that you sell is the time that you spend with your customer (student or patient), growth must stall. Fourastié did not think

it would be a problem, but it did. The desire for growth has remained insatiable, however rich the advanced economies have become. It is possible, of course, “to work more to earn more,” as a former president of France urged, but it would never be possible thereby to double one’s earnings every fifteen years, the situation in the industrial world of the fifties and sixties. To enable an increase in purchasing power, economies of scale must be found that allow a service provider to take on a growing number of clients, like an actor who increases the size of his audience by moving from theater to television.

After a great deal of trial and error, it seems that postindustrial society has found a way to define and name itself: digital society. To achieve efficiency, everyone must enter the cybernetic world like a pill into a body, becoming a bit of data that can be processed by another bit of data. Software, artificial intelligence, will be able to take care of an unlimited number of clients, treat them, advise them, entertain them, provided they have been digitized beforehand. The prophetic film *Her* presents software with the capacity for emotion—whose bewitching voice is that of the actress Scarlett Johansson—in love with several million people at once. Such is the promise announced by *Homo digitalis*, that of a world emancipated from the limits of the human body.

The entire question is obviously whether the cure will be worse than the disease. Are robots going to replace humans and increase poverty? Will assembly-line work give way to efficiency protocols for the mind, via Facebook and Netflix? Through an extraordinary curvature of historical time, the old questions of the industrial world are arising in the heart of the world that replaced it. Do we have to pass through every stage of it once again, its moral bankruptcy and its financial crises? Can we do better? History is now being written, provided we do not err about its meaning.

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