



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE 20TH CENTURY

FROM FRONT PAGE

The story of the 20th Century is a stark account of the decline of the material natural world, its descendancy the direct result of human ascendancy and ensuing population bloat. Wildlands and forests disappeared, coral dying in every ocean, swelling ozone holes in the upper sky, frogs declining. Closer up the foodchain the great wild mammals were vanishing or being exterminated, displaced by endless incursions into their habitat to accommodate sprawling civilization or hunted as predators of great docile herds of food animals or fowl; or like the Asian snow tiger (all tigers actually), the great apes, wolves, whales poached out of existence for profitable potions or beauty aids, or their furry skins draped over other flesh.

For most of history humanity has lived on its home planet without much concern for its natural state, and the 20th Century in particular wreaked immense havoc by avaricious ravagers who have done as they pleased with little concern for consequences only immediate profit and comfort — polluting sky, oceans and land with chemicals by indirect or direct applications through waste, warfare or with pesticides and biocides; despoiling and leaving the mess to be dealt with by future generations whose probable antipathy toward their 20th Century predecessors will be obviously justified.

Ironically, the very civilization agriculture created is eradicating it, ever more farmland plowed under by implacable urban sprawl as humans overcrowd the soil that was once so bountiful to them. The century ended in mortal combat between 'Rape & Pillage Developers' and 'Kamikaze Environmentalists' — between those who would bulldoze wildlife and regulate the planet as a battered docile plantation, with genetic mutation and agronomics; and those who savor wilderness and natural diversity, aware human hubris is too tragically shortsighted to improve on natural selection.

Aquaculture was being explored as a food surrogate at the end of the century. Experiments were started to turn accessible parts of lakes and oceans into undersea farms, also the rapid development of fish ranches that will eventually decimate wild stocks; domesticated fish and sea veggies will be genetically altered, and probably cloned.

The tragic fate of Pacific Northwest salmon serves as an archetype for the recurrent ravages of human civilization and technology on Earth's natural environment. Dams that were built for hydroelectric power, irrigation and flood control had the not entirely unexpected effect of eliminating the great salmon spawning migrations back up the Columbia River. Civilization destroyed salmon habitat. Nuclear, industrial and urban pollution poisoned the riverwater. Overfishing of already weakened stocks reduced them more. By *fin de siècle* it was almost also *fin de salmon*.

Any memoir of the 20th Century would essentially be devoted to the phenomenal rise of science and associated technologies. The natural balance of power changed irrevocably with the release of nuclear energy; 'Atomic Man' was suddenly a superhuman who cracked the core of *Gaia* — yet a few years, later humanity's nonhuman brainchildren rewired its own brain.

Technology is *ultra* Darwinian — it spreads, it evolves, it adapts. It replicates ever more swiftly and diversely, recombines and recreates like mutant cells adjusting to ever more immediate and altering environments. In the end it seems to matter less who should control technology than who is able to.

William Jennings Bryan, infamous to the modern mind for his objection to Darwinian evolution and what he said were its implications that "no spiritual force has touched the life of man and shaped the destiny of nations," was particularly disturbed that "Darwinian theory represents man as reaching his present perfection by the operation of hate — the merciless law by which the strong crowd out and kill off the weak."

The core question, asked incessantly and in proportion to human adaptation to the mechanical dependence it created, is whether humans have proxied their biology to machines they invented but which now robotically replicate? Or has humanity always done so since chipping rocks and throwing sticks at large animals and each other? *Homo sapiens (sapiens)* is a singularly adaptive creature with no fixed skills, with large evolved brains, dependent for its survival individually and as a species in manipulating rather than adjusting to its environment. Perhaps we are so far along, so adapted to our machines that it seems grossly naïve to ask.

The 20th Century started with the new industrial marvels of mass produced automobiles, machine powered aircraft, huge all metal steam powered and electronically operated battleships (which started the century's first military arms race) as well as submarines, telephones, phonographs, radio and movies. The century ended with rockets carrying humans beyond Earth's atmosphere and onto its moon, and jet airliners spread layers of multi-ethnic/races all over the world's surface, making every place emigratable and immediately accessible. Various designer satellites orbited the planet. The half-century threat of worldwide

nuclear obliteration diminished temporarily although local nuclear war remained probable; and nuclear power plants were being dismantled and abandoned as the major alternative to declining oil. A worldwide electronic neural system was formed by computers which redesigned themselves and civilization at incomprehensible speeds and data capacity. The bewildering rapidity of cybernizing civilization raised apprehensions that it might transform the planet beyond human cognizance or incinerate the wireless world like meteors streaking into the planet's atmosphere.

Though hardly noticed at the time and barely remembered afterward, one of the most significant milestones in history and certainly the 20th Century occurred in July 1969, known as 'Watershed Week'. The same month that humanity first walked on the moon, the information handling capacity of all the world's computers exceeded the processing capacity of all the human brains in the world. Computers were able to receive and store more data than the 3.5 billion humans then occupying the planet. And although human brains have multiplied enormously, almost doubling in number since then, computers race far ahead in data volume and complexity — perhaps as much as a million to one or greater; which only a computer can compute.

(By the end of the 20th Century it was prophesied that a computer would be developed to unravel the billions of cells and hundreds of billions of interconnectors in the human brain — ironically, 'Artificial Intelligence' will be the mapmaker.)

Science was most obviously the Pied Piper of the 20th Century, the modern religion that inexorably swept away old beliefs and upset tradition, confounding also the so-called common sense principles of causality, observation and the long cherished concept of a mechanistic universe. Science advanced past popular grasp simultaneous to becoming the most powerful influence and shaper of the century.

Yet the great breakthroughs in scientific thought aside — the everyday tinkering by anonymous drones working singly in garages or basements but most often in large corporate facilities continually produced, improved and evolved a bewildering array of consumer products, astronomical calculations and discoveries, superb medical advances, bizarre and frightening new chemical, biological and nuclear weapons; and more recently organic cloning and genetic manipulation which created the new field of biotechnology and intense controversy at the end of the century.

Science and its handmaiden Technology modernized civilization by continually ripping away its fabric without taking time to replace it in a kaleidoscopic surge into an incomprehensible future. This is the point at which history is declared dead, without significant meaning except as memory and nostalgia because it is claimed to no longer have any bearing or effect on present or future: the race is to the swift; the present is patently obsolete as it careens into the past.

BASCOVE



(During the 20th Century a new planet was added to Sol's society, Pluto in 1930, though its planetary status is in dispute, and it was established by century's end that other stars also have planets. An ancient mythological origin of the universe was revived in the resurrected, extravagantly enlarged 'Big Bang' theory which theoretically explained the concept of an expanding universe, which itself created dilemmas as to whether the expansion is forever or will contract onto itself into an eventual impossibly dense 'black hole'.)

The final analysis was human rights, that no matter what else occurred in the 20th Century everything reverted back to the most ancient struggles of rich against poor; whatever masks or complexities surrounded ideologies, their design was to either protect privilege and power or establish and extend rights and liberties of the powerless. "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much," Franklin Delano Roosevelt said to perk up the Great Depression. "It is whether we provide enough to those who have too little."

Calling the 20th Century the "American Century" is an exaggeration, yet at century's end the USA was the world's only superpower, the same as old Rome which was the world's first superpower after it won a long contest with Carthage. The USA helped Communist Russia crush the Nazis and finished the century victor of its 74 year long rivalry with the Reds. Economically the USA was undergoing the longest boom of its history at the beginning of 2000, but for a nation devoted to classless equality its sharing of wealth was grossly unequal; a small percentage had almost all of it and the rest were in various credit card debt. Welfare to the poor was practically abolished simultaneous to huge job losses to offshore labor while boundless corporate welfare was wrapped in Old Glory. If this *fin de siècle* era were to have a shibboleth it might well have been 'Socialism for the Rich, Capitalism for the Poor'.

Slicing the 20th Century into decade-sized snacks might be roughly labeled like this: 1900-09, *Last Hurrah For The Royals*; 1910-19, *Modern World Begins With Modern Horror*; 1920-29, *Getting Over The War*; 1930-39, *Snapshot of a Tripartite World: Nazis, Reds & The New Deal*; 1940-49, *The Mushroom Cloud Advents A New Millennium*; 1950-59, *Father Knows Best: Iron Curtain & Cold War*; 1960-69, *War & Peace-niks*; 1970-79, *Ozzie & Harriet Redux*; 1980-89, *Showtime for Bonzo*; 1990-99, *Shaking Out the Dustbin of History*.

The book on the 20th Century won't be closed until its influence becomes indirect and ultimately indistinct. That means as well the demise of everyone who breathed the century's dirty air. It might also be that if 20th Century human beings not only trod upon ground underneath which earlier bodies were buried, but their visceral selves also warped into invisible beings occupying the same geography at an earlier time, perhaps survivors of the just dead century might ghost around the infernal world and harass their descendants as ancestors always do.

The 20th Century ended in paranoid hyperbole that a fluke contrived within the worldwide cybematic network would paralyze civilization because the year 2000 had too many zeros for computers to comprehend. If collapse did not occur it was at least speculated that the internal calendars of most computers would revert back to 1900, which might not have been a bad idea if indeed time could be so twisted: an opportunity to redo the 20th Century and leave out the bad parts like the influenza epidemic, the Great Depression, the two World Wars — the Holocaust! — and development of nuclear power as a weapon of mass destruction.

For all of the rapid advances in technology, medicine and science, with considerably slower and uneven progress in human rights, humanity yet seemed at the end of the 20th Century to peer as apprehensively through the portal between centuries as they did at its beginning. "There was a sense...of the familiar world passing away, of old landmarks disappearing, or change proceeding too fast to be controlled or fully comprehended," Asa Briggs wrote of "the men of 1900."

Carrie A. Nation started the 20th Century in the year 1900 swinging an ax in her famous antisaloon crusade that left many chopped up bars and indignant as well as frightened saloon owners and patrons. Her battle against booze (two husbands died of alcoholism) helped lead to Prohibition in the 1920s, the century's first failed drug war, and precipitated the later more inept and savage half-century campaign of 'Just Say No To Drugs'.

In the year 1900 Chinese 'Boxers' presaged the 20th Century movement to throw off colonialism in the 3rd world.

U.S. President McKinley was shot a year later and the first Roosevelt carried his 'Big Stick' of dynamic imperialism into the new 'American Century'.

And a few years afterward, in 1905, Albert Einstein, who later alerted the second Roosevelt to the "possibilities" of an atomic bomb (1939), changed everything about time and space with two simple questions: "Where am I? How am I moving?"

The rest is $E=mc^2$.