

RECURRENCE OF CULTURAL ENTHUSIASM

BY MICHAEL HOROWITZ

'The enthusiasm of the heart expresses itself involuntarily in a burst of song, in dance and rhythmic movement of the body. From immemorial times, the inspiring effect of the invisible sound that moves all hearts and draws them together, has mystified mankind.'
 ~I CHING: HEXAGRAM 16

"We need to live first of all; to believe in what makes us live and that something makes us live."
 ~ANTONIN ARTAUD

Astrologers tell us that every two millennia, due to the wandering of vernal equinox, we move from the influence of one constellation to another. The Greco-Roman empires, we learn, were the fated projects of the Age of Aries, the Christian epoch the inevitable child of the charitable Age of Pisces, and our future synthesis of religion and science will herald the Age of Aquarius.

The notion of an era is not limited to astrologers, however. Historians of the West will readily speak of the Classical Age, the Middle Ages, the Modern period, and just now, the post-Modern possibility.

The Classical Age is imagined to be a period of secular initiation, when institutions such as the Academy, the Sciences, the Theater, the Law and the Empire were begun.

The Medieval alternative is described as being more integrated, with society organized in hierarchy and Catholic rationale reigning the huddle.

Commerce marks the Modern period, we're told, when individualized action shapes Protestantism and capitalism.

As for the post-Modern period, we have only guesses: but it has been suggested that it had something to do with Eastern philosophy in the West.

All this raises a question that should be answered briefly before proceeding: what leads human beings to act for hundreds of years in a way that can consistently be called an 'Age'?

The answer, I think, is twofold. First, there is a desire in complex societies to attach behavior to a set of ideas that is traditional; second, there is a desire in complex societies to attach behavior to a set of ideas that is vital. This, of course, is what creates social tension, for what is traditional is not necessarily vital.

An 'Age' is simply the arena in which the battle is fought: more precisely, a particular attempt to balance particular traditions with particular vitalities.

For example, the Middle Ages can be seen as the trial of Catholic rationale. Can it provide a viable transition from classical hedonism? Augustine proves it can. Can it accommodate nascent nationalism? Aquinas asserts that it can. Eventually, however, the vitalities of Science, Reformation and Capital overwhelm the Catholic tradition.

But is this *all* that happens as we move from one Age to another?

Cultural Effervescence

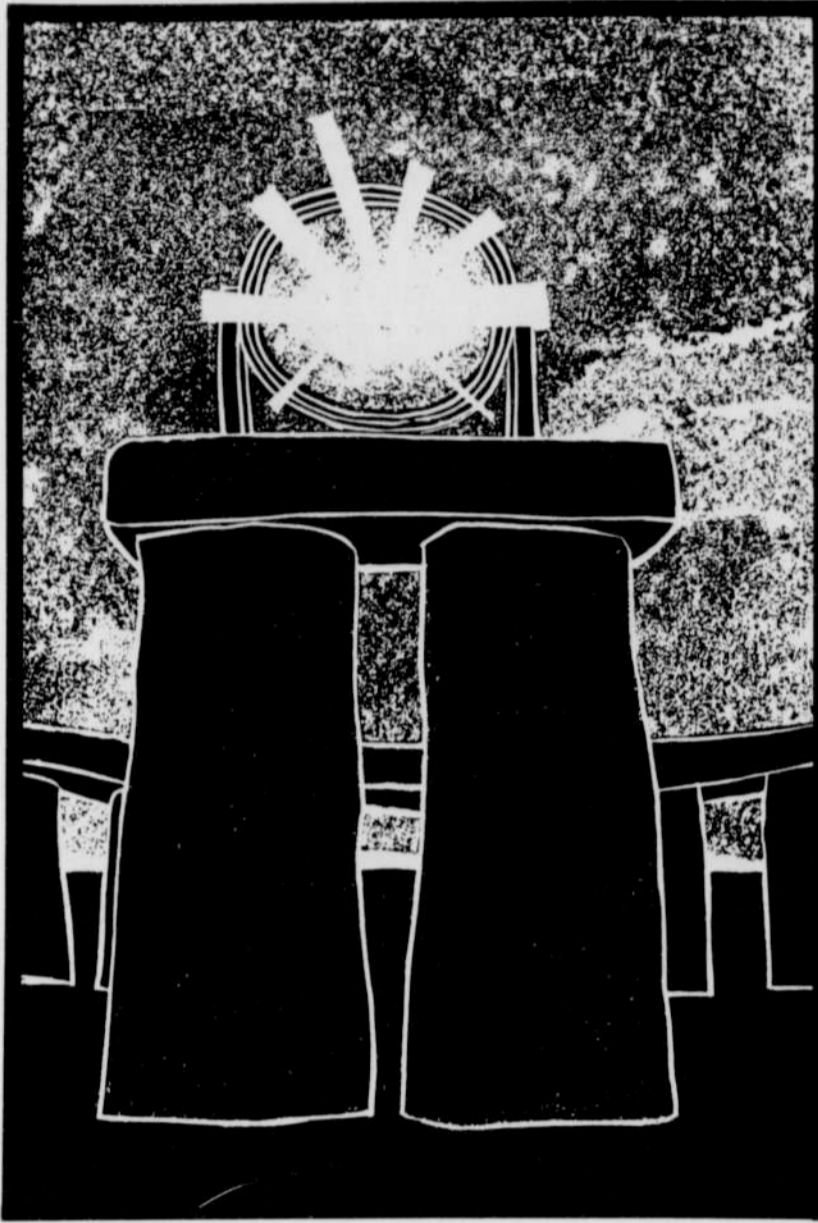
The underlying assumption in standard historical analysis is that changes of Age are ideological — that the alterations appear because of a chance press of new ideas. Furthermore, there is usually a value assumption of progress: pastoral society yields to Christian diligence yields to industrial mastery.

I do not intend here to question the value of progress. I am impressed enough with the fragility of our planet's orbit to know that we must eventually command the technology to move ourselves from it.

But humanity cannot live on progress alone and it is ridiculous to construct our history on that sole pillar. Were progress to be our only concern, we would all be busy like bees and ants building computers and reactors. (Granted, some lack the intelligence to do this even if they wanted to, but others deliberately choose not to be engineers.)

There is another historical dimension beside progress, namely the effervescence of culture. It is absolutely necessary that we have fresh ways to dress, play music, make love, play sports, dance, worship and govern.

Seen from this angle, the process of changing epochs takes on an additional meaning.



To use the example of the Church again, it begins as an ethical aggregate of people living amidst what is considered a rich, corrupt, secular empires. Paul's enthusiasm is obvious: "in splendor without spot or wrinkle...holy and without blemish." The ensuing centuries are attempts at refinement: Augustine and the dialectic of conversion; Aquinas and the accommodation with reason. Eventually, however, the Church is discredited because it is thought to be dogmatic and corrupt.

Historians view these facts with varying bias. The "progressive" views the Middle Ages as a reactionary calamity. The West is said to have fled freedom of thought for the shibboleths of medieval Catholicism. Others currently in vogue display the Middle Ages as a magic delight, haplessly exposed to the harsh lineations of Protestant capitalism.

History as a Brothel

But let us desert the preoccupation with ideas and concern ourselves with enthusiasm: that is, to exchange the concept of rationale for morale.

I see the facts like this: that Paul and the disciples trembled with the excitement of renewal while Roman Senators stumbled nauseously into vomitoriums. Yet, by the 16th century the excitement is not in the Church — it is in the rejection of clerical art and music.

(They cheered as Michelangelo's statue was pulled through the streets of Florence.)

What is clear is that cultural enthusiasm is history's genuine prostitute, sashaying from bed to bed without regard for ideology. Historians loathe to recognize her for fear of converting history into a brothel. But history is the study of human social nature in process — on then to consider it with or without the historians.

PROCESS

I believe that the universe is *Process-Processing-itself*.
 I believe that *Space/Time* and *Matter/Energy* are manifestations of *Process-Processing-Itself*.
 I believe there is a threshold where *Space/Time* and *Matter/Energy* become *Process*.

I believe that *Process* is beyond *Time*, beyond *Space*, beyond *Matter* and beyond *Energy*. It is eternal, boundless, formless, and forceless. *Process* processes.

I believe that the next moment is random but the last moment could not have happened any other way.

I believe that *Life* is an imperfect relation with *Process*. The effects of *Process* are that *Life* is balanced by *Death*, *Love* is balanced by *Hate*, *Good* is balanced by *Evil*, and *Light* is balanced by *Darkness*.

I believe that *Love* is living encouragement to live, grow, love and reproduce.

I believe it is the nature of *Life* to live, grow, love, reproduce, and draw closer to *Process*. There is no meaning to *Life*, only a process of living.

I believe that the process of living is living according to one's nature while being conscious that one's nature is in imperfect relation with *Process*. Yet one's nature is changing and human nature is changing.

I struggle against *Process*, I cooperate with *Process*.
 I trust *Process* to process.

~V/O BLUM

'Process' is from V/O Blum's novel *Equator*.

The proposal is to turn the notion of cultural enthusiasm into an historical artifact. Cultural enthusiasm may be defined as an escalation of social energy catalyzing an historical revitalization of culture.

I submit that it is a social aspect of complex culture to periodically explode its overriding rationale and that this serves a natural purpose akin to the crucial social acts of reproduction, manufacture and worship. This has the ring of biology to it: I can't help that. History inevitably meets biology if it concerns itself with life.

The fear of enthusiasm among historians is not without foundation. How is one to distinguish between constructive and destructive enthusiasm? Wasn't Nazism an enthusiastic event? Didn't Ezra Pound enthusiastically announce Mussolini's 'New Order'?

I assert two responses to their concerns. First: the change of Age that Fascism boasted never took place. In historical retrospect, Fascism was only a challenge to Liberal Capitalism, and was defeated. The only bona fide changes of Age in recent Western history have been the rise of Greece, the fall of Rome and the Protestant Reformation.

Secondly: an Age is a large room — it cannot constrain people too tightly. Part of the inefficacy of Nazism was its tin-can quality — it wasn't big enough to accommodate an Age.

I'm not saying an Age has to be noble but there was a grandeur to the Roman Empire, to the Catholic Church, to International Capitalism that could at least entertain the aspirations of many peoples.

I give away my motive when I say there was a grandeur to International Capitalism. For certainly the reason to write this essay is the premonition that the Modern period is coming to a close, that the bourgeois edifice of Liberal Capitalism is beginning to depress more significant people than it impresses.

Traditional notions of individualism, incessant work and material progress are beginning to wear thin and the resulting fatigue has caused some to speak of the "omnipresence of the grotesque."

An Age Beckons

What are we coming to?

No one has more than inklings of where we're going.

We hear electronic music with primitive rhythms. We experience tribal ecstasy with artificial chemicals. We trim our hair long with electric shavers. It appears that, as our astrologers say, we aim to have our technology and our mystery, too.

The Age of Aquanus beckons.

From a certain point of view — a coldly rational one — it seems hardly worth it to desert progressive Protestantism. After all, Protestantism has given us a lot: it has cured many diseases, it has freed the individual mind and given us awesome technological power and comfort.

What does the new Age offer us?

At worst, slavery in the name of tribalism, poverty in the name of ecology. But *ca ne fait rien*.

For what is operative now is not ideological but cultural restlessness.

It seems to permeate societies whose rationales are unable to energize. It particularly affects the young, supporting my suspicion that cultural rejuvenation is linked to generative concerns.

This is not to suggest we are ending the Modern period and commencing the post-Modern — it is to say the opportunity is there.

My only purpose is to speculate on what we are flirting with — the change of an Age. Such changes ultimately occur impulsively. Complex societies simply seem to desire them. It is as irrational as panic — for what purpose? And yet, as Artaud knew, panic has a purpose.

If we must dance the St. Vitus, we should understand why. Don't let ex-post facto judges fool you. The changing of an Age is not entirely due to the inevitability of a righteous challenge.

It additionally involves a shrouded social recurrence whose origins I'm sure will become clearer once we more earnestly study them. Until that time, we must at least recognize that the birth of a new rationale enables an ever-changing definition of progress to inspire the vigorous continuation of history.

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