

The Uncertain Century

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STOCKHOLM — Life nowadays is too tricky and too fragile to allow for long-term planning. Even the traditional markers of the ordinary human lifespan are rapidly being upset, moved, changed, uprooted. Childhood, adolescence, motherhood, fatherhood, sex, family, work, career, reward, retirement, yes, even death, are all changing their meaning and position and significance. A person born in 1980, like my youngest daughter, does not expect the same stability and predictability in life as a person born in 1880. She is facing more choices, more risks, more opportunities, more mobility, but also less coherence, less trust, less safety, less certainty about the society in which she lives — and about the kind of life that awaits her.

I am not saying that my daughter is worse or better off than a person who was born 100 years before her. That kind of comparison I find meaningless. We cannot evaluate or judge other people's lives in other times — by our own standards of good and bad. We can only try to understand in what way actual lives differ from each other, in what way one end of a century is distinguished from another.

And perhaps we can do that more clearly if we try to remember what was not there 100 years ago. Or perhaps, more telling, who was not there. Picasso wasn't really there yet, nor Proust, nor Joyce, nor Stravinsky, nor Kandinsky, nor Schönberg, nor the founders of Bauhaus, nor Einstein, nor Kafka, nor Orwell, nor Chaplin, nor the moguls of Hollywood. Nor Mussolini, nor Stalin, nor Hitler.

People who lived in the year of 1900 lived in a world without these people and without their contributions to the human imagination. I don't think these people even could be imagined. The people of 1900, of course, also lived in a world without two world wars, without totalitarian mass movements, without xenophobic nationalism, without Gulag and Auschwitz, without the gaze of Dr. Pannwitz, the head of the chemistry department in Auschwitz, who across

his table inspected one of his offered slave laborers, a young Italian Jew and chemist by the name of Primo Levi, and gazed at him as if he were looking at a fish in fishbowl, as if this were a meeting not between two human beings but between two different biological species (Primo Levi: "If this is a man" *Se questo è un uomo*).

It goes without saying that the people of 1900 also lived in a world without the theory of relativity, without quantum mechanics, without cars, airplanes, atomic bombs, genetics, DNA, cloning, personal computers, Internet, the information society, homosexual partnership, legal abortion, working women, democracy, family breakdown, welfare states.

So what of all this will be considered the heritage of this century? And can one speak of such a thing? A century, 100 years, is after all a rather random way of measuring time — although a relatively harmless one. Millennia are considerably worse. Millennium is a strong and seductive and plain dangerous word. Millennium wishes to imbue history with finality, with ultimate meaning, with redemption, with messianic promises. It was no coincidence that Hitler's Reich was to last a thousand years. And anyone who speaks about the coming millennium is either ignorant, cynical or dangerous.

But even if a mere century, however mechanically and randomly delimited, seems more within our grasp and less imbued with hidden messages, it is not always the most natural period of time to define a historical heritage.

In 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet empire was on the verge of collapse, I wrote an article where I argued that this was the end — not of the 20th century, but of a very long 19th century, a double-century that began in 1789, with the French Revolution and the dream of a new, secular, rational, enlightened, evermore perfect world order. With the idea that history had a meaning, a given course of progress — and a final goal. 1789 was the year when man

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himself, not God, became the great Creator. Man himself would make perfect the world and the human element in it. A distinctly Western, or rather Judeo-Christian, religious Messianic idea of fulfillment and redemption was succeeded by a secular creed, promising basically the same, albeit this time through the purely rational and scientific management of Man and Nature.

Kant was, of course, here, promising us *Rational Man*. Rousseau was here, promising us *la volonté generale*, the general will. Hegel was here, promising us the *Meaning of History*. And soon came Karl Marx, who promised us the scientific key to the course of history.

Only human ignorance now separated earth from heaven. The future became clear, bright and—inevitable. The European stage was set for revolution and redemption. These men of 1800 were all there in 1900 as well. Physically dead, of course, but spiritually well alive. The turn of our century was a time ripe with expectation and self-confidence, *A Proud*

Tower, the historian Barbara Tuchman named it, or perhaps rather a bomb about to explode. It was not a golden age, as some people in retrospect remembered it, not really a belle époque, it was full of tensions and conflicts and social misery, but it was also a period where all curves of human development and activity pointed sharply upward, where radical change had become the order of the day, where machines and industries rapidly multiplied human production and productivity, where enormous social energies were accumulated, where a relentless movement ahead, progress if you so wish, the will to power, seemed to be the objective nature of things.

ON THE DOORSTEP | Nietzsche was there, too, literally on the doorstep to our century. He died in 1900 sharp—and with him the 19th century could indeed have ended, because unlike so many others he perceived that the end was there, that the collective Messianic project of human and social perfectibility could lead nowhere but to moral and human disaster. He not only proclaimed that God was dead, but also observed that what he called “the Christian-ecclesiastical pressure of millennia” had created in Europe “a magnificent tension of the spirit, the like of which has never yet existed on earth.” “With so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals,” Nietzsche wrote in 1886 in his preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886). He did not live long enough to see how far, really. He himself had hoped that this tension would catapult the

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spiritual liberation of the individual, create that free spirit in which he placed his hopes. “We good Europeans,” he wrote (long before the European Union), “. . . we still feel the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of the bow. And perhaps also the arrow, the task, and—who knows?—the goal . . .” Yes, with Nietzsche properly read and understood, we “good Europeans” could perhaps have perceived the dangers ahead, the destructive power of the millennial bow and arrow, perhaps also the darkness of its goals.

Instead, the accumulated tensions and energies catapulted the war of 1914. Some argue that this war was the true beginning of our century, because it was bigger and more destructive and more irrational than all previous wars, because it ravaged so much and killed so many, because it did away with the last remnants of chivalry, because it made a mockery of so many values and beliefs.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt writes about the days before and after the outbreak of this war as “separated, not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and the day after an explosion.” It was a war, she writes, that unleashed human hatred on a new scale, making the deceptive quiet years of the '20s assume “the sordid and weird atmosphere of a Strindbergian family quarrel. Nothing perhaps illustrates the general disintegration of political life better than this vague, pervasive hatred of everybody and everything, without a focus for its passionate attention, with nobody to make responsible for the state of affairs—neither the government nor the bourgeoisie nor an outside power . . . Now everybody was against everybody else, and most of all against his closest neighbors—the Slovaks against the Czechs, the Croats against the Serbs, the Ukrainians against the Poles . . .”

Now, if this sounds a bit familiar today, it is because we too seem to experience what Arendt calls “a general disintegration of political life,” an ongoing delegitimization of political institutions and systems, a vague feeling of resentment, not hatred perhaps, not yet, without a proper focus, prone to sudden changes and shifting moods. I wouldn't stretch the comparison too far. Things have changed, important collective experiences have been made, history does not repeat itself, but when we wish to assess the heritage of this century, we cannot but note that tensions that we thought were history are still with us or can too easily be recreated.

THE PERFECT MONSTER | So if we, as I do, believe that

the First World War did not end the millennial project of 19th-century Europe, only radicalized it, dehumanized it, armed it with ever more destructive weapons, pushed it toward a few logical and terrible conclusions, that the fascist and Communist mass movements of this century were as much the children of Rousseau and Marx as of Lenin and Hitler, that both World War II and the Cold War were struggles against radical and still vital millennial forces in Western society, then we must come to the conclusion that the European century which is about to end has been a long one indeed.

On the other hand we can also argue that the ending itself has been a long process, with many apparent endings along the road. Intellectually and spiritually it perhaps ended already with Nietzsche, with Joyce, with Kandinsky, with Kafka, with Stravinsky and Schönberg, with Musil and Broch. With, what the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset called, the “dehumanization of the arts,” with the realization that the coherence and unambiguity of the 19th century were gone and that a new world of incoherence and ambiguity, a world without a given meaning and purpose, a world with no given moral authority, had come into being — a world that called for completely new artistic and literary expressions.

It was a world that clearly manifested itself in that first horrible European war and its aftermath, a world chillingly evoked by Hermann Broch in his trilogy of novels *The Sleepwalkers*, *Die Schlafwandler*, about a Europe which one day is on the verge of human perfection, and the next day is revealed as a monster. He asks, in the concluding third part: “Is this distorted life of ours still real? Is this cancerous reality still alive?”

“The melodramatic gestures of our mass movements toward death ends in a shrug of the shoulder — men die and do not know why; without a hold on reality they fall into nothingness; yet they are surrounded and slain by a reality that is their own, since they comprehend its casualty.” 19th century rationalism had attempted to create an external logic, an ‘objectivity’ (what Broch calls *Sachlichkeit*) beyond human values and value systems. The inner rationality of mankind, its moral drive, had been systematically reduced to the effects of materialist, value-free logic.

Broch’s *Sachlichkeit* is the liberation of logic from all value systems. When this *Sachlichkeit* loses itself in the evident irrationality of a world war, when the abstractions are transformed into horrifying monsters, men are left more naked

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than ever. This new deformed machine-man is portrayed in the person of an amoral deserter, Huguenau, capable of adapting to whatever logic appears to hold sway for the moment, a human being for whom a murder, a rape or a stolen meal are actions just as arbitrary or as necessary as any other actions in life. The cheated and finally destroyed newspaper proprietor, Herr Esch, throws himself into religious fanaticism in a desperate search for some values to hold on to. His adopted value system, however, becomes just one of innumerable, mutually incompatible value systems, each one hastening the decay of all values: there is the economic value system of “business is business,” there is art with its *l’art pour l’art*, architecture with its functionalism, there are military, technological and athletic value systems — each of them [writes Broch] “unfettered” in its autonomy, each resolved to push home with radical thoroughness the final conclusions of its logic and to break its own record. And woe to the others, if in this conflict of systems that precariously maintain an equilibrium one should gain the preponderance and overtop all the rest, as the military system does in war, or as the economic system now is doing, a system to which even war is subordinate — “woe to the others!”

But, as we know, it didn’t end there. Recreated, reenergized and radicalized certainties were soon to replace the shattered world of 1914. New visions of meaning and coherence, new dreams of perfect societies, biologically or socially purified and cleansed, were both dreamed and realized — with known consequences.

Some artists and writers became the heralds, sometimes even the creators, of this brave new world. Others became its resistance fighters, defenders of what they believed to be a world of lasting human values, perhaps not a perfect world, but still one worth to defend. “Defending a half-truth against a blatant lie,” as Arthur Koestler later would write.

MODERN FACE | For some time still yet, there was the conviction that totalitarianism was an aberration, something deeply alien to the Western tradition, an exceptional break in the course of progress, a shocking remnant of barbaric ignorance in the midst of human enlightenment and scientific rationality. Many continued to believe so even in the midst of total darkness. In 1942 the composer Victor Ullmann was deported from Prague to the Nazi concentration camp of Theresienstadt. He was 44 years old at the time and absolutely convinced that Schiller would beat Hitler, that artistic form would overcome the matter of day-to-day

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life, that the creation of true aesthetic value would prevail over the creation of violence and death.

With Plato he feared (in an essay from 1937) that an increasing lawlessness in music foreboded an increasing lawlessness in society as a whole and that subsequently the task of the composer was to search for a new order in music. With the right kind of music, barbarism could be kept at the gates. He continued to believe when he should have known not to, when the frequent transports to Auschwitz in the fall of 1944 tore orchestras, choirs and chamber groups apart, canceled rehearsed operas, terminated half-finished lectures, silenced jazz bands and cabarets.

On October 16, 1944, after having dedicated his seventh piano sonata to his children and reserving to himself the right of performance to the work during his lifetime, Ullmann was put on a train and transported to Auschwitz — together with other prominent musicians, artists and composers — where he was killed in the gas chamber on October 18.

So was Auschwitz really an aberration? The killers and victims listened to and enjoyed the same music, saw the same plays, read the same books, subscribed to largely the same cultural symbols. And as we now know, the Holocaust was to a large extent perpetrated by what Christopher Browning in his book about Police Battalion 101 has called ordinary men. And was, of course, organized by the most modern of means and the most advanced achievements of Western science and bureaucracy. And its goals, not to forget, was that ultimate society, that ultimate solution, that final solution, however grotesque, that is the Messianic core of the Western tradition. Or as Zygmunt Bauman cautiously has argued in his study *Modernity and the Holocaust*: "The Holocaust was not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything it stands for. We suspect (even if we refuse to admit it) that the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar face we so admire."

Instead of seeing Auschwitz as an aberration, albeit a unique event in human history, Bauman wants us to discover its distinctively modern roots and features, and thereby understand it as something that could have happened — that way it happened — only in a modern society. Not that Auschwitz will repeat itself, but we now know, and continue to experience, that "ordinary men," however enlightened and educated, under the specific circumstances of modern society and under the influence of specific Western ideals, can be induced to commit horrible crimes.

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BEING AND CIRCUMSTANCE | So what are these circumstances of our society? And are they still with us?

One way to answer these questions is perhaps to go back to the writers of the interwar period, to see if the world they tried to understand and describe sounds familiar to us. Do we, for instance, recognize ourselves in Hermann Broch's shattered world of *Sachlichkeit*, where the value system of "business is business" is overpowering all other values? Or where genuine human moral problems and choices have been transformed into issues of technical-scientific competence? Where human judgment has been replaced by *Sachlichkeit*? Where everybody can blame the system, but few can take responsibility?

Or how do we today perceive what the American essayist Walter Lippman wrote in 1929: "[T]he modern man who has ceased to believe without ceasing to be credulous, hangs, as it were, between heaven and earth, and is at rest nowhere. . . . He does not feel himself to be an actor in a great and dramatic destiny, but he is subject to the massive powers of our civilization, forced to adopt their pace, bound to their routine, entangled in their conflicts. . . . Events are there, and they overpower him. But they do not convince him that they have that dignity which inheres in that which is necessary and in the nature of things."

There was a time that now appears to have been a short interlude in a long century, where this perhaps was not an accurate description of the Western mood. When purpose and energy were again restored to the Western project, when the Barbarians again were at the gate, when the distinction between good and evil again was obvious, when the half truth of Koestler stood out in heroic contrast to the blatant lie of Nazism and Stalinism, when the West again seemed to have a fight to win and a cause to fulfill. Where the moral certainties and the confidence of the late-Victorian era before 1914 were miraculously resurrected — and personified by political leaders like Churchill, de Gaulle, Schumann, Adenauer, Kennedy, Helmut Schmidt, and — I would argue — lately Helmut Kohl. A period and time, which arguably came to an end in 1989, when the Barbarians were suddenly vanquished, the European walls torn down and the final victory of the West proclaimed — and even *The End of History* proposed by Francis Fukuyama. And in a way something important indeed ended there. Perhaps a very long

century—or at least the last remnants of that Western self-confidence which for so long had papered over the shadows and the tensions and those self-destructive tendencies that once had seemed so obvious to an earlier generation of writers and artists. After a short period of relief, and of triumphalist hubris, still perpetuated by neo-liberal ideologues and economists, the wounds in the messianic project of Enlightenment became again visible. Again we could read Broch and shiver. Again we could notice the painful separation of human values from perceived technocratic and economic necessities, of individual experience from the course of events, of actions from consequences, of rights from responsibilities.

I believe that what has come to an end, or rather should come to an end, although we cannot be too sure that it will, is the March of History; the end of the idea that history, or rather Western history, has a beginning, a meaning and eventually an end. That humanity is embarked on some kind of journey toward perfection. The ambiguities and uncertainties and paradoxes that seemed so obvious to Broch or to Kafka or even to an American intellectual like Lippman are back again—and with a vengeance.

And there seem to be no more escape routes. No new big coherence in sight. No new master story. No new 1789 or 1917. What Zygmunt Bauman has explored in a number of books is a modern Western world finally aware of its own shaky foundations, of the darker echoes of its own rhetoric, a world where every collective moral certainty has collapsed and given way to self-doubt, social fragmentation and moral ambiguity of post-modernity. A world where we ultimately must be responsible for our own responsibility.

We now better understand Nietzsche's mockery of his good Europeans—for their good conscience, "that venerable long pigtail of a concept that our grandfathers fastened to the backs of their heads and often enough to the back of their understanding. We the last Europeans with a good conscience: we, too, still wear their pigtail. Alas, if you knew how soon, very soon—all will be different!"

NIETZSCHE'S PIGTAIL | We can, of course, ask ourselves why the 19th century didn't end with Nietzsche, why we managed to put the pigtail back on the back of our heads—and on the back of our understanding. But in asking so, we will have underestimated the seductive power of the Western idea, the idea that man is here on earth with a great purpose and a great mission, that there is a great end to our material

and spiritual suffering. So whenever our material and spiritual sufferings were large enough, and our existential loneliness seemed unbearable, there was a demand for ever new magicians who at each juncture of history would tell us what we so desperately wanted to hear. Provide us with a new illusion, invoking a new great narrative.

So has it really ended? Yes, I believe so. Even if these final years of the century have an eerie ring of *dejà-vù* to them, with many people craving for a new certainty, a new mission for our civilization, a new enemy to mobilize against, small or big, another clash of civilizations, it has become all too clear that whatever new certainties we will find they will all be on a lower level. We will have claustrophobic ethnic or national certainties, regional and local certainties, the certainties of sects and subcultures, the short-lived certainties of the media. But we will

probably discover that every certainty that aspires for more will disintegrate. The Western nation and nation state, which for almost two centuries was able to organize and articulate collective meaning and purpose, to provide direction and goal, to carry great narratives and sustain great certainties, will not be able to do that anymore—except in a few remaining cases of national claustrophobia. Its moral and political authority is quickly vanishing.

The Europeans of the next century will thus be a lonely lot, looking in vain for that moral certainty, that human self-confidence, which for almost two centuries was provided by the Western project. Our questions will surely remain the same as in 1789, or in 1848, or in 1945, but a whole category of answers will have lost their authority and validity.

We cannot anymore conceive of a single project as the solution to human conflict and suffering. We will increasingly have to accept and cope with the fact that humans strive in different directions, cherish different ideals, value different values, obey different authorities, enjoy different music, different books and different movies.

We will also have to realize that all human values eventually clash, that human life is a matter of continuous choice, not necessarily between good and bad, but more often between good and good, and that is because not all good values are commensurable with each other. Many are not. Freedom clashes with equality. Stability clashes with change. True moral choice is not a piece of cake—or following a pre-ordained recipe for baking one—but more often involves true conflict and genuine agony. The old Western idea of one

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true path of all good values, and one false path of all evil is finally losing its persuasive power.

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFUSION | So the heritage of this very long century is the challenge to live without such an idea. The value pluralism of Isaiah Berlin; the inescapable fact that no coherence of values is possible, that human goals are many, diverse and conflicting, will be a defining feature of the coming society. If the eternal conflict of human values is a deeper truth than the promise of an evermore perfect and harmonized society, then this will demand a radical change in the way we try to organize our contemporary European societies, most of them originally based on the concept of a homogeneous nation — en route toward increasing unity of purpose and harmony of values. In his characteristically low voice, Berlin himself remarked that the most we in reality can hope to achieve “is a precarious balance” in the endless effort “to avoid desperate and intolerable choices.”

So what is the heritage of the century?
Let me say it in one word: confusion.

Schumpeter might perhaps have called it constructive confusion. Nietzsche, perhaps, too. But I know a good many people who see confusion as something destructive. In any case, confusion is always uncomfortable, it itches and moves and presses on. It is like non-equilibrium in nature. It seeks stability, *modus vivendi*, balance, rest. Confusion seeks certainty.

The difference between this century, however you define it, and the coming is that no certainties are at hand. Confusion has no quick fix anymore. In the passing century we had the enlightened and the still confused, the elite and its not-yet-educated masses. Now the enlightened are the confused. Or if you wish, we are all confused, the difference being that some are aware of it, and some not. Certainty, a short-lived and aggressive certainty is now possible only among those so confused that they don't know that they are confused.

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There is, of course, a perfectly normal state of mind between confusion and certainty, between despair and bliss, and that is uncertainty, ambivalence, ambiguity. Which, I think, happens to be the true human condition, at least more true than the long-lived Western fiction of a human march toward fulfillment and certainty. “Wishing to abolish this constitutive ambiguity,” writes the German philosopher Hans Jonas, “is wishing to abolish man in his unfathomable freedom.” The question then remains: Will we be able to create decent societies without the fiction of a great human mission, a clear path of certainty and a shining end of fulfillment? Will we be able to build them on the much more difficult ideals of human diversity, conflict and change? Well, this is ultimately for our heirs to answer. But I do believe that if they shall succeed, they will need to preserve one tool from

this old, tired, long century. The only tool that permits us to think deeply, to reflect thoroughly, to listen carefully, to discuss with dignity, to discover with sensibility, to understand with both mind and heart is the written word. It is true

that the written word has seduced us to do foolish things and to dream vain dreams, but it is also true that the same written word has enabled us to discover the follies of our deeds and the vanity of our dreams.

I do not believe that a society which increasingly understands and interprets itself through short-lived and skillfully manipulated images and pictures can provide for the kind of reflective human communication which I think will be needed in this new situation. To write honestly and to read seriously and to consciously guard the sharpness and richness the written language must then not only be an act of human creation — but also an act of defense. Not to defend old certainties, but the very possibility to live with uncertainty — without losing our human dignity. This, too, then is the heritage of a century.

