The Development of Western Civilization

Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present

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THE AGE OF REASON

BY FRANK E. MANUEL
THE proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is imperative that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it
must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series is to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each is to be written by a recognized scholar and is designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.
The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on the analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field
of his life's work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial coordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

This essay, The Age of Reason, by Mr. Frank E. Manuel, is the second of the series to be published. It presents for the beginning student a carefully balanced introduction to both the social background and the intellectual achievements of the eighteenth century. Though this period has long been studied as a source of many of our basic political assumptions, it has tended to remain one of the least understood chapters of our past. The very familiarity of its intellectual climate has tended to divert attention from the fact that its material way of life was almost as different from ours today as was that of Thomas Aquinas or even Julius Caesar. Nor is the difficulty of comprehending the differences between Voltaire's day and ours a problem only for the classroom. To an important extent it is failure to reconcile the dictates of the political convictions inherited from the eighteenth century with the necessities of the industrial society bequeathed by the nineteenth that has made the twentieth century such a bewildering epoch in which to live. It is hardly necessary to urge, therefore, that the subject of this essay illustrates to
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an unusual degree the proposition—on which the entire series is based—that an accurate appreciation of the past is necessary to an effective understanding of the present.

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THE AGE OF REASON
Prolegomena

The Age of Reason is not merely a convenient catch phrase coined by modern historians to characterize the period from the Peace of Utrecht (1713) to the French Revolution of 1789. During the course of the eighteenth century itself, the kings and ministers who ruled the European states, as well as the intellectuals and writers who dominated public opinion, were keenly aware of the unique quality of their epoch. They themselves earnestly believed that they were living in an age of reason, a century of enlightenment, the dawn of a new era of civilization and progress.

For it was a period when reason virtually replaced religion as the guiding principle in art, thought, and the governance of men. Among intellectuals, ideas and institutions ceased to be respected simply because they were based on tradition, precedent, religious dogma, and authority. Unquestioned acceptance of the old order of society and the old ways of statecraft yielded to a new spirit of critical inquiry which demanded some rational justification for the existing social system. Men asked forthrightly whether their laws and customs enhanced or diminished the wealth of nations and the happiness of peoples.

The general application of reason, it was thought, would
emancipate Europe from the artificialities, restrictions, injustices, and superstitions which had been inherited from the “Dark Ages” and which served only to impede progress. Reason would create a society of law and order, a smooth-running mechanism whose consistency and harmony would mirror the workings of the natural universe.

The status occupied by the feudal aristocracy and the higher clergy of the official churches of Europe constituted the chief obstacle to the transformation of society. The traditions, customs, and autonomous rights of the nobility and the church were essentially alien to the spirit of rationalism and operated to block the establishment of centralized, well-ordered states. At this stage in the historical development of Europe few men wanted the complete eradication of these privileged estates; the ideals of the age could be realized by curbing rather than eliminating the favored social orders.

In central and eastern Europe and many minor states of the continent, the principal contenders against the powers of the nobility and the clergy were the dynastic sovereigns. Competition among the great states was ruthless and the monarchy which failed to overhaul its internal administration faced dismemberment. Seeking to consolidate their own authority the crowned heads wrestled with the separatism of provinces which their royal houses had inherited through mediaeval and seventeenth-century wars and marriages. They tried to introduce uniformity in law and administration throughout their realms and to smash the opposition of nobles and clerics fighting to retain their prerogatives to tax, govern, and dispense justice. The very direction of foreign policy was at stake, because there were aristocracies who attempted to reassert their independence to the point of deciding for themselves upon issues of war and peace. The administrative
reforms of the century were promulgated by royal edict without the consent of and often despite such representative diets and assemblies as had survived from the Middle Ages to become fortresses of aristocratic reaction.

Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria, and Catherine II of Russia were for the intellectuals of the second half of the century embodiments of an ideal of monarchical government which has been called enlightened despotism. What they had in common essentially was a passion and a need for centralization, unification, and rationalization in government. Because it was in harmony with their own drive toward centralism, the despots accepted the belief of the intellectuals of the age that feudal practices were not compatible with reason, justice, and natural law.

The enlightened despots used different tactics, but their purpose was always the same: to integrate the aristocracy with the machinery of the state and to establish the absolute sovereignty of the dynastic monarch over them. The force of the nobility was far from spent in eighteenth-century Europe and their support of the central government often had to be bought with material rewards and blandishments. In Prussia and Russia the compliance of the nobility was paid for by the extension rather than the weakening of their hold over peasants and serfs. Despite the accumulated wealth and power of the church, it was ordinarily the easier of the privileged orders to deal with, and even where aristocratic resistance was most obstinate, the subservience of the clergy to the monarchy was finally established.

In the three continental powers of central and eastern Europe, new and detailed systems of governmental administration were drafted. There was a tendency to soften the cruel punishments of the past. In theory, if not always in
practice, legal codes and a great judicial structure built on uniform procedures granted the people a measure of protection both from harsh customary rules and from the rough justice of local lords. The mere issuance by a royal commission of new codes of written law did not automatically bring more equitable administration of justice to those of low estate, since in many instances the same nobles who had once been responsible for the enforcement of the customary law were called upon to interpret the new codes. But at least the royal decrees set up a standard and acted as a checkrein upon magistrates who had formerly heeded only the confusing dictates of custom and the promptings of caprice.

In order to adapt their administrative systems to a growing centralism, the enlightened despots made a bureaucratic revolution. They altered the basic character of government by creating special departments and agencies whose jurisdiction was kingdom-wide. Their officials made tours, wrote reports, and saw to it that orders were transmitted to all parts of the realm. Governmental decrees were interpreted logically and consistently, and any departure from rules required a special justification. Bureaucracy became a guardian against the arbitrary use of power not only on the part of local lords but even by the crown itself. A monarch could hardly exercise his whim often enough to modify seriously the effect of daily decisions by his army of civil servants. As David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and historian, reflected, among the galaxy of absolute princes in Europe there were no tyrants cast in the mold of Caligula or Nero. "It may now be affirm'd of civiliz'd Monarchies, what was formerly said in Praise of Republics alone, that they are a Government of Laws, not of men. They are found sus-
ceptible of Order, Method, and Constancy, to a surprising Degree.”

The innovations of the enlightened despots should not be confused with democratic reforms. In revamping the administrative machinery of their states, the autocrats were not moved by consideration for the human rights of their subjects so much as they were by their own exigencies. Whatever benefits accrued to individual peasant or bourgeois in the process of state reorganization were usually incidental to the final purposes of despotism in war against the aristocracy and in war against a rival dynasty. Indeed, the attempt to replace “irrational” customary law and its tribunals with a system of orders handed down by the monarch and based on the paramount interest or “reason” of the centralized dynastic state could and often did create a tyranny of its own. A multiplicity of regulations, many of them absurd with minutiae, were poured forth to order every kind of human relationship.

In central and eastern Europe the underlying conflict remained the tug of war between the monarchy and the aristocracy, since there was no middle class of merchants, manufacturers, and professional men substantial enough to challenge the position of the nobles. The bourgeois was under royal patronage, not an aggressive force in his own right.

In Britain and France it was the middle classes, directors of new productive enterprise and commerce, who were the active enemies of “irrational” feudal residues which impeded free movement and progress. The bourgeoisie of the West

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identified the growth of their own prosperity and power
with reason. By 1750 the realignment of the old and the
new forces in British and French society was already far
advanced. Britain had undergone a “Great Rebellion” and
a “Glorious Revolution” in the seventeenth century, the
first in Christian Europe, and had emerged with a new con-
stitution protecting commercial interests and providing for
their representation in the government of the nation. In the
course of the eighteenth century the integration and working
compromise of the English aristocracy and merchant class
proceeded apace, accompanied by no more dramatic clash
than the election contests of Tories and Whigs. In France,
the Bourbon monarchy had already produced in the seven-
teenth century its great autocrat, Louis XIV, who had
curbed the power of the nobility and imposed upon the
state a centralized, bureaucratic mechanism, one which was
subsequently imitated by the enlightened despots of the
rest of the continent. But the absolute monarchy under
Louis XIV’s successors failed to amalgamate the nobility
and the bourgeoisie, and toward the end of the century the
rivalry of these two classes was sharply accentuated until it
flared forth in civil war—the great French Revolution.

Wherever men—kings or commoners—set themselves in
opposition to the old order, they were applauded by the
intellectuals of Europe. The philosophes, or popular phi-
losophers, who were overwhelmingly commoners in origin,
smarted under the humiliating restraints and disabilities
imposed by the aristocrats. Even more bitterly than they
assaulted the position of the nobility, the philosophes at-
tacked the Christian churches which had thrown the pro-
tective mantle of religion about the iniquities of society.
The intellectuals used the discoveries and the methods of
science to refute and to mock the teachings of mediaeval Christianity. They turned the attention of their contemporaries to the pursuit of happiness in this world, and tried to emancipate them both from fear of the church and respect for the aristocracy.

In reorganizing their states the monarchs were impelled not only by a desire to dominate the nobility, but by the need to build formidable military machines based on effective government. Even when the enlightened despots befriended the men of learning and talked the language of the most advanced thinkers of their day, their major preoccupations remained war and territorial aggrandizement. The whole history of the eighteenth century could be written in terms of a struggle for power among dynastic states on the European continent and in the colonies. Battles were fought intermittently throughout the century, and by the eve of the French Revolution the European states system as formulated at the Peace of Utrecht had undergone rather important alterations. The traditional diplomatic alignment of Bourbon versus Hapsburg had been upset by the rise of Russia and Prussia. These two states of eastern Europe had emerged as nations of great potential power; the impact of their dynamic expansionism was first felt in this period. In the colonial world the outcome of a century of sporadic warfare was decisive. France was virtually ousted from the continents of Asia and America, and England—ruled by the men of industry and trade—became the preponderant maritime and colonial power.
CHAPTER I

The European World

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY world maps furnished Europeans with a reasonably accurate impression of the coastal outlines of the great continents and islands, except for a strangely shaped New Holland (Australia) and a totally unexplored American Northwest. Of the several continents, Europe proper was the only one whose settlements had been extensively charted. Detailed maps for all its political subdivisions had been prepared by learned societies and army staffs in order to guide generals in their military operations and to facilitate the policing of the state. In other parts of the world, little beyond the coastal fringe where the major colonial factories, seaports, and fortified places were located had been accurately surveyed.

Although to most Europeans the interior of these continents remained dark and mysterious, the frontiers of geographic knowledge continued to recede. Explorers, traders, and colonists pushed their way up the river valleys of North America, charted islands in the South Pacific, established new posts on the West African coast and on the rivers of India. A profusion of exotic voyage literature was avidly devoured by those who stayed at home.

Europe itself consisted of some two hundred separate po-