

# It's the End of the Modern Age

By John Lukacs

**F**OR A LONG TIME, I have been convinced that we in the West are living near the end of an entire age, the age that began about 500 years ago. I knew, at a very early age, that "the West" was better than "the East"—especially better than Russia and Communism. I had read Spengler: But I believed that the Anglo-American victory over the Third Reich (and over Japan) was, at least in some ways, a refutation of the categorical German proposition of the inevitable and imminent Decline of the West. However—Churchill's and Roosevelt's victory had to be shared with Stalin. The result, after 1945, was my early decision to flee from a not yet wholly Sovietized Hungary to the United States, at the age of 22. And 20-odd years later, at the age of 45, I was convinced that the entire Modern Age was crumbling fast.

But there is a duality in every human life, in every human character. I am neither a cynic nor a categorical pessimist. Twelve years ago, I wrote: "Because of the goodness of God I have had a happy unhappy life, which is preferable to an unhappy happy one." I wrote, too: "So living during the decline of the West—and being much aware of it—is not at all that hopeless and terrible." But during these past 10 years (not *fin de siècle*: *fin d'une ère*), my conviction hardened further, into an unquestioning belief not only that the entire age, and the civilization to which I have belonged, are passing but that we are living through—if not already beyond—its very end. I am writing about the so-called Modern Age.

What were its main features? First of all, it was the European Age. Until

about 500 years ago, the main theater of history was the Mediterranean, and the principal actors were the people along or near its shores, with few important exceptions. With the discovery of the Americas, of the East Indies, of the shape of the globe itself, all that changed. The European age of world history began.

Yet the very adjective, and designation, of "European" was something entirely new at that time, 500 years ago. The noun "Europe" had existed for a long time, although infrequently used. But "European," designating the inhabitant of a certain continent, was new. Until about 500 years ago, "Christian" and "European" and "white" were almost synonymous, nearly coterminous. After 1492, "Europe" expanded in several ways. Entire newly discovered continents became settled by white people, and Christianized. The lands conquered or colonized by the settlers soon became parts of the empires of their mother countries. Finally, European institutions, customs, industries, laws, inventions, buildings spread over most of the world, involving also peoples who were not conquered by Europeans.

But after the two world wars of the 20th century, during which the peoples of Europe grievously wounded each other and themselves, almost all of that came to an end. There were no more new settlements of Europeans (and of white people) on other continents. (One exception was the state of Israel.) To the contrary: The Europeans gave up their colonial empires, and their colonists left their Asian or African homelands. Yet the Christian churches in Africa, Asia, Oceania seem to have survived the

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reflux of white people, at least in many places. What also survived—indeed, it spread athwart the globe—was the emulation and the adaptation of institutions, industries, customs, forms of art and of expression, laws that were originally European. But the European Age was over.

It was over, at latest by 1945 (if not already by 1917), when the two superpowers of the world (meeting in the middle of conquered Europe) were the United States and Soviet Union. There remained no European power comparable to them, not even Britain. That brings up a terminological question. Was (is) the United States European? Yes and no. Yes: in the sense that its origins and laws and institutions—and for about a century the majority of its inhabitants—were of Anglo-Saxon-Celtic origin. No: since its population is now becoming less and less European. And the United States, too, is affected by the crumbling of the institutions and the ideas of the Modern Age that had produced it at its beginning.

To list the evidences of the ending of the Modern Age would fill an enormous book. Here I must try to sum up—or, better, to suggest—some of them.

**T**HE PROGRESSIVE SPREADING of democracy has marked the history of mankind, certainly during the past 200 years but in many ways throughout the entire Modern Age. That progress was usually gradual, at times revolutionary, and not always clearly visible on the surface of world events. How long the democratic age will last no one can tell. What “democracy” really means is another difficult question. But there is a larger consideration. We are living through one of the greatest changes in the entire history of mankind, because, until relatively recently, history was largely (though never exclusively) “made” by minorities, while increasingly it is “made” by majorities. (In reality it is not so much made by majorities as it is made *in the name of* majorities.) At any rate, this has become the age of popular sovereignty (at least for a while).

“Aristocracy” ought not to be categorically defined as the rule of kings and/or noblemen. “Democracy” also means something more than the rule of “the people.” more, indeed, than mere popular sovereignty. But, especially in Europe, between the highest and the lowest classes (or between the rulers and the ruled) there was another, rather particular, class in the middle: the so-called bourgeois class or classes, whose origins and first influences go back well beyond the beginning of the Modern Age and whose rise marked much of it, together with its achievements.

By the end of the 20th century, the very term “middle class” had lost much (if not all) of its meaning because of its tremendous inflationary growth, perhaps especially in the United States but also in other nations where a governing upper class, whether in politics or in society, has practically ceased to exist. At

the same time, “bourgeois” remains, in retrospect, a historical reality. The existence of a bourgeoisie was marked by recognizable forms of behavior and of ideas. We ought to honor its achievements—not only constitutional government and its attempts to balance equality with liberty, but the fact that most of the great minds and the greatest artistic creations of the past 500 years were the products of people of bourgeois origins and of bourgeois status. Which is why it is at least possible and, in my opinion, reasonable to give the Modern Age (or at least its two centuries before 1914) a telling qualifier or adjective: the Bourgeois Age.

The Bourgeois Age was the Age of the State; the Age of Money; the Age of Industry; the Age of the Cities; the Age of Privacy; the Age of the Family; the Age of Schooling; the Age of the Book; the Age of Representation; the Age of Science; and the age of an evolving historical consciousness. Except for the last two, all of those primacies are now fading and declining fast.

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universal principle of government was that of popular sovereignty rather than that of the state; indeed, the power and authority of the state, and respect for it, began to decline. The most evident example of that is Russia, where, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the problem is no longer the overwhelming power of the state but, to the contrary, its weakness. Elsewhere, too, the breakup of entire states has begun, of which the “privatization” of some of the state’s former functions and services, or the formation of such supranational institutions as the European Union, are but superficial—and perhaps even transitory—appearances, together with the evident lessening of the authority of the state. Popular resentment against “government” merely masks the essence of this phenomenon from which the United States is not at all exempt.

The Modern Age has been the age of money—increasingly so, perhaps reaching its peak around 1900. During the Middle Ages, there were some material assets, often land, that money could not buy; but by 1900, there was hardly any material thing that money could not buy. But during the 20th century, the value of money diminished fast. One symptom (and cause) of that was inflation. By the end of the 20th century, the inflation of stocks and of other financial instru-

ments became even more rapid than the inflation of money, at the bottom of which phenomenon another development exists, which is the increasingly abstract character of money—due, in part, to the increasing reliance on entirely electronic transactions and on their records. Income is more important than capital, quick profits more than accumulation of assets, and potentiality more than actuality—that is, creditability more than actual ownership. What has been happening with money is, of course, but part and parcel of a much more profound development: the increasing intrusion of mind into matter. That this happens at a time when philosophies of materialism are still predominant only reflects the mental confusion of our times.

The Modern Age was, by and large, marked by an increase in the numbers of people; and by an increase in the production of goods and in their availability. But we must recognize that the Age of Industry was remarkably short-lived. It was less than 130 years ago (in 1874) that the majority of people in England were employed in industrial work, not in agricultural production. The people of the United States followed that pattern. But, by 1956, the majority of the American population were no longer engaged in any kind of material production, either agricultural or industrial. They were employed in administration and in services. That proportion has grown fast ever since, and in all "advanced" states of the world. It may be said that the production of consumption has become more important than the production of goods.

The Modern Age was the age of the town. The word "bourgeois" is connected to the word for "city" in about every European language. Bourgeois civilization was largely, though not exclusively, urban. The adjectives "urban" and "urbane" acquired added meanings during the Modern Age. After 1950, the decline of the cities set in. The once urbane populations had begun to move out of the cities, into the suburbs. By the end of the 20th century, the association of urbanity with civilizing disappeared: the presence of an urbane middle class within the cities lost its influence and importance.

**T**HE MODERN AGE discovered the virtues—and pleasures—of privacy. Life in the Middle Ages—both in and outside the dwellings of people—was public, in more than one way. Soon after the beginning of the Modern Age, there came a change. The most evident material sign of that was the new ideal of the bourgeois house or "apartment." (The latter word is telling: It meant the separation of working and public places apart from private chambers, whether in the palaces of kings or in the houses of the bourgeois.) The recognition of interiority affected our very language (and our very thinking): the increasing recognition of imagination (arising from the inside) rather than of inspiration (occurring from the outside). Thereafter, the increasing emphasis on political and

legal rights of the "individual" seemed to affirm the rights to privacy, at least implicitly. But the idea of the private—and thereby autonomous—"individual" was a fiction. In a mass democratic society (perhaps especially in the United States), the desire for privacy was much weaker than the desire for respectability, usually within a particular community. Compared with the wish for public recognition, the cultivation of private behavior, of private appearances, of private opinions remained confused, occasional, and feeble.

**T**HE MODERN CULT OF PRIVACY had, at first sight, a common ground with the cult of what is still called "individualism" (a questionable term); but, at closer sight, that connection is deceiving. Privacy had more to do with the developing bourgeois cult of the family. During the Middle Ages, children were sent out to work, often for others. During the early Modern Age, children returned to the family (or, more accurately, they were kept within the family for a longer time). The tendency to protect and educate children (note the original meaning of "educate": bring up, guide forth) was another new bourgeois habit, eventually spreading up and down, to the nobility as well as to the working classes.

As the 19th century progressed, bourgeois ideals concerning the protection and the education of children were adopted by various governments. More important: So far as family life went, toward the end of that century, for the first time, large numbers of married women, including mothers, no longer had to work in the fields or in factories—because of the wages and the industrial employment of their husbands. Like the entire Industrial Age, that development was short-lived.

During the 20th century came many changes, including the availability of divorce, and of abortion. Yet on many levels, those were consequences rather than causes. As happens before or near the end of a great age, the mutations of institutions, societies, mores, and manners involved the very relations of the sexes. The ideal of the family woman, wife and mother and homemaker, began to fade. Many women, restrained for a long time by certain social customs and habits, became eager to prove their abilities in various kinds of employment: a justifiable aspiration. Yet—especially in the United States—the desire of a woman to be employed somewhere in the so-called "marketplace" was often not the result of financial necessity but, rather, of a new kind of impulse: The life of a housewife—especially in the suburbs—proved to be lonely and boring. Women thought (or, rather, convinced themselves) that they were reacting against the age-old and often senseless categories and assertions of male authority; yet their dissatisfaction often arose not because of the oppressive strength but because of the weakness of males.

The age of institutional schooling was another feature of the Modern Age. There were universities in the Middle Ages but few (or no) schools of general

learning. By the 17th century, schooling became extended to younger and younger ages, eventually including children of the poor. By the 19th century, the ideal of general and public education, increasingly involving the responsibility of governments, became sacrosanct. Still, much of the training and the proper education of children remained the responsibility of parents in the home. During the 20th century, that changed. Like so many other things, the role of the schools became inflated and extended, diminishing the earlier responsibilities of parents. As on so many other levels and ways of mass democracy, inflation had set in, diminishing drastically the content and the quality of learning: More and more young people, after 20 years in schools, could not read or write without difficulty. Schools were overcrowded, including colleges and universities.

In that increasingly bureaucratized world, little more than the possession of various diplomas mattered. Since admission to certain schools—rather than the consequently almost automatic acquisition of degrees—depended on increasingly competitive exami-

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nations, the word "meritocracy" was coined. In reality the term "meritocracy" was misleading. As in so many other spheres of life, the rules that governed the practices and functions of schools and universities were bureaucratic rather than meritocratic. It is bureaucracy, not meritocracy, that categorizes the employment of people by their academic degrees. The number and the variation of degrees awarded by higher institutions grew to a fantastic, and nonsensical, extent. Besides being custodial, the purpose of institutional education was now the granting of degrees to provide instant employment.

The inflation of "education" had much to do with the decline of reading (and of its declining requirement in the curriculums of the schools). That was another sign of the end of the Modern Age, which was also the Age of the Book. The invention of the printing of books coincided with the beginning of the Modern Age. At first, it was the availability of books, rather than of schools, that led to an increase of readers—until, by the 19th century, men and women who could not read became a small minority among the populations of the Western world. Around the same time, the flood of reading matter, including newspapers, rose even higher than the ever-rising flood of books: With the rise of universal literacy (due to the extension of schooling) there was now a new reservoir of

potential readers to be tapped. But the inflation of printed matter unavoidably reduced its quality; and there were other influences at hand. The reproduction of more and more pictures in newspapers, magazines, and books; the advent of moving pictures and, finally, of television led to a condition in which—again, not unlike the Middle Ages—the routine imagination of large masses of people became pictorial rather than verbal.

I now come to the most difficult of these necessarily generalized and inaccurate summaries of de-volution: that of art, which in the Modern Age was inseparable from the ideals not only of beauty but of representation. Much of the art of the Middle Ages was symbolic, and idealized. The Renaissance, of course, discovered humanism, the beauty of the human body, and the complexity of human nature; and it began with an emulation of Greek and Roman art that was marked by "mimesis" or in another word: "re-presentation." A deep shift in consciousness at the end of the 18th century then affected art, first of all poetry and painting. That was the conscious recognition of imagination, beyond the older idea of inspiration (an early recognition of the inseparability of the observer from what he observes). During the 19th century, literature and architecture were increasingly influenced, if not altogether inspired and formed, by historicity. Meanwhile, Realism and Naturalism in poetry and painting were more and more affected by the artist's comprehension of the limitations of "objectivity"—that is, of the entire separation of the observer (and, of course, of the artist) from his subject.

After the early 19th century, the artist was no longer seen as an artisan, meaning a craftsman, but rather as a person of unusual, indeed, superior sensitivity. By the early 20th century—even before the catastrophe of World War I—what was oddly, and belatedly, called "modern art" meant a drastic and brutal departure from the traditions and the achievements of the Modern Age. The ending of the ideals of re-presentation was also marked by an increasing tendency in letters, buildings, music, painting, poetry, to ugliness.

**T**HIS JEREMIAD has its conditions, and limitations. One of them involves the distinction between the passing of the Modern Age and the Decline of the West. Of course, almost all of the symptoms of the ending of the Modern Age have been most evident within the so-called Western world. But because of the continued influence of Western habits and institutions and practices all over the globe, not a few differences between the customs of the Western and the non-Western world are now sometimes hardly more than differences in timing.

Another limitation is even more evident. That is a chronological limitation of my Jeremiad. The rapid

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dissolution and the malfunctioning of the institutions and ideals of the Modern Age gathered speed during the 20th century, and especially during its second half. Is that not too shortsighted a view? No, history is not a mechanical clock: The pendulum never swings back. But human events and minds change, though slowly; something different, something new is beginning.

A third limitation consists in the condition that the mutation of characteristics and institutions and habits is especially (though not at all exclusively) evident in the United States and in the industrially or technically most "advanced" countries of the Western world. That should not be surprising: After all, the American historical handicap (as well as the once-American advantage) was due to the condition that the institutions of the United States were born in the very middle of the Modern Age, in the century of the so-called Enlightenment, whereby the people of the United States have been less immune to the shortcomings of modernity than other peoples whose mental and physical make-up carries some living memories of older epochs, of an older and different past. After 1989, an unprecedented situation arose: The United States was the only superpower in the world. Does that connote the *apogee* of the Modern Age (the age that had given birth to the United States of America)? Not at all.

And then there is Christianity. Its churches have been emptying. Yet something like that has happened before, and often. (One example: Perhaps never in the 2,000 years of the Holy See was a Pope as bereft of prestige and power as Pius VI was 200 years ago, in 1799.) Is Christianity disappearing? I do not think so.

**A**ND NOW the Contra-Jeremiad. A list of the enduring achievements of the Modern Age. Enduring; and lasting; and matters still in progress. We are healthier than ever before. (To be more precise: less affected by pain and by contagious illness.) Our life span has become longer and longer.

Large masses of people are now able to live in conditions of comfort available only to the richest or most powerful of our great-grandparents. Large masses of people drive their own automobiles. Institutional slavery has largely ceased to exist. Almost every state now proclaims itself a democracy, attempting to provide a minimum of welfare to all of its inhabitants. Men have been propelled to the moon and back.

We cannot crank our lives backward. We must also know that there were (and are) no Golden Ages of history. The evidences of decay all around us do not mean that there was any ideal period at any time during the Modern Age. In certain fields of life and art and thought: perhaps. In others: certainly not. Yes, it would be pleasant to meet

especially in the United States—have changed from "antiquated" or "outdated" to suggest some things that are reliable, solid, enduring, desirable.

In any event, there is every reason to believe that the respect for (and even the occasional emulation and adaptation of) some of the creations of the Modern Age (surely its achievements in art) will continue and grow. The time will come (if it is not already at hand) when people will look back and respect and admire (perhaps with a sigh, but no matter)—indeed, when they will recognize—the past 500 years as one of the two greatest eras in the history of mankind, the other having been the "classical" one, Greece and Rome. But here is a difference—and a significant one. The last time something like that happened was 500 or 600

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Rembrandt or Bach or Montesquieu or Washington—or perhaps even to live in the age of Edward VII: but only with plenty of money at our disposal, and in at least near-perfect health.

Moreover, history and life consist of the coexistence of continuity and change. Nothing vanishes entirely. The institutions, the standards, the customs, the habits, the mental inclinations of the Modern Age still exist around us. So does the respect for many of its creative achievements—political, social, but, even more, artistic. (One of them is polyphonic music, which was a unique European creation sometime during the beginning of the era.) The respect for older things has now acquired a tinge of nostalgia—almost certainly part and parcel of the uneasiness with "progress." During the past 40 years, the meanings of the adjectives "old" and "old-fashioned"—

years ago, involving but a small minority of people, which is not what is happening now. At that time, men began to look back at the achievements and the letters and the art of Greece and Rome, idealizing them, and emulating them. (All art begins with emulation.) That was the Renaissance, a re-birth: The word is telling. It marked the beginning of modern historical consciousness—although that was imperfect and incomplete, because of its almost unrestricted idealization of the Classical Age, of the ancients. Its admirers dismissed the entire Middle Ages. They took their inspiration from two ages away, farther back.

That is not happening now. Something else is: our respect and admiration for the age that is now past but which existed immediately before our times and that, in many ways, is still close to us and extant within us. And

that is a symptom of the evolution of our historical consciousness, which may be acquiring novel forms and which is not weakening.

But now we arrive at the greatest and gravest duality—indeed, the greatest and gravest problem looming before us at the end of the Modern Age. Now, for the first time in the history of mankind, dangers and catastrophes of nature are potentially (indeed, here and there actually) threatening nature and humanity together. Those dangers are man-made. They include not only horribly destructive atomic and biological weapons but many effects on the nature and on the atmosphere of the globe by the increasing presence and intrusion of the results of applied science. So, at the end of the Modern Age, the control and the limitation and even the prohibition of some of the applications of science—including genetic engineering—becomes a, sometimes global, necessity. At the same time, there exists no international or supranational (and in most cases not even a national) authority that would enforce such measures.

**I**N VIEW OF THAT PROSPECT, the confusion and the split-mindedness characteristic near or at the end of an age appears. Most “conservatives,” votaries of what is still wrongly called “capitalism” and of technical progress, deny the need to preserve or conserve. Most “liberals” still cling to outdated dogmas of the so-called Enlightenment, unwilling to question the validity of science. That kind of schizophrenia is evident, too, among the Greens or environmentalists—otherwise an interesting and promising appearance of a movement that, for the first time in modern history, prefers the conservation of nature to the inroads of finance and science—since the same Greens who militate in favor of laws and authority to halt the ravages against nature militate against laws and authorities that still claim to protect families and forbid abortions. The very word “environmentalism” is inaccurate and even misleading, as if mankind were one thing and its “environment” another.

Still, after all, the existence of Greens and of environmentalists is a promis-

ing symptom—despite their still present split-mindedness of being anticonservative and conservative at the same time. At the end of the Modern Age, for the first time in 200 years, more and more people, in more and more fields of life, have begun to question the still present and now outdated idea of progress.

Some time during the past quarter of the 20th century, the word “postmodern” appeared: another symptom of the uneasy sense (rather than a clear recognition) that we are living through (or, rather, facing) the end of an age. The prefix “post,” in itself, is telling. There is some sense of historical consciousness in it (as for example in “post-Communist” or “post-Impressionist” or “post-liberal”). Yet the meaning (as different from the sense) of “postmodern” has been and remains inadequate, and worse than imprecise: It is vague, to the extent of being unhistorical. Besides, most academics and “postmodernist” intellectuals still shy away from abandoning their faith in the Enlightenment, in the Age of Reason.

There is a difference between “postmodern” intellectualism and “postmodern” art. We have seen that the Modern Age—as we still use that approximate term—began about 500 years ago. Yet the widespread usage and application of the adjective to life and art, such as “modern woman,” “modern design,” “modern architecture,” “modern art,” and so on, appeared mostly in the 1895-1925 period. So: What is “postmodern”? A reaction to the 20th century? Or to the 19th? Or to the 18th, 17th, 16th? A reaction to, or a step ahead from, Picasso? Or Meissonier? Or Poussin? One form of art to which “postmodern” may be applicable is music: but, again, only in a narrow chronological sense. By “modern music,” we customarily designate the period beginning from Wagner (or, even better, from Debussy), ending with Poulenc, Ibert, Honegger, Webern, Duruflé—the period recognizably 1880-1950. Is “postmodern” music therefore a reaction to, or a step ahead from, not only, say, Strauss but also Gershwin? If so, then only orchestral compositions after about 1950 are “postmodern.” In popular music, “modern” was the high period of jazz, approximately 1914-1950, after which “postmodern” is rock, an electronic application of primitivism and barbarism. In architecture, “modern,” after about 1895, amounted to anti or

nonhistorical, or to anti or nontraditional. And “postmodern” architecture either does not exist or it is hardly more than a reaction against Bauhaus and Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier—but often only in bits of ornamentation and a few other smallish details. If “postmodern” architecture and art are nothing more than reactions to post-1895 modernism, the term is inadequate and imprecise.

**Y**ES, we are at—we are living through—the end of an age. But how few people know that! The sense of it has begun to appear in the hearts of many; but has not yet swum up to the surface of their consciousness.

That will happen, even though there exist many obstacles to it—among them, enormous but corroding institutions. As these lines are being written, something is happening in the United States that has had no precedent.

A great division among the American people has begun—gradually, slowly—to take shape: not between Republicans and Democrats, and not between “conservatives” and “liberals,” but between people who are still unthinking believers in technology and in economic determinism and people who are not. Compared with that division, the

present “debates” about taxes and rates and political campaigns are nothing but ephemeral froth blowing here and there on little waves, atop the great oceanic tides of history.

However—this is not a political or social pamphlet. Its theme is simple. It has to do with conscious thinking. We have arrived at a stage of history when we must begin thinking about thinking itself. That is something as different from philosophy as it is from psychoanalysis. At the end of an age, we must engage in a radical rethinking of “progress,”

of history,  
of “science,”  
of the limitations  
of our knowledge,  
of our place in the  
universe.

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