

## - LECTURE -

**After the Crash and Before the War: Culture and Society in Europe in the 1930s**

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This essay is an exploration of the interwar era, not from an economic point of view but from a cultural one. It is an investigation of how the enormous event of the First World War affected Europe; what repercussions and echoes it had in the cultures and societies of the time. Since this is a very brief analysis, let us revisit the time before the First World War. We often read about it, see it in movies, and hear about it as a Golden Age; an age of tranquillity and security, a sort of Merchant Ivory version of history. Well, the people who lived through that time, from 1900 to 1914, would have been tremendously surprised to hear that it was “the good old days”. When you read their diaries and letters, they describe a world that is exploding. They describe a world in which technology is changing by the day, in which cities are doubling in size, in which for the first time in human history more people live in cities than in the countryside. If you consider that the indices showing a country’s economic growth are generally considered good when they stand at around 2 or 3 percent, and then compare that to Western Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, when 10 percent was not all that extraordinary, we can see that these were very different times. There was an explosion of mass culture and modernity. Industrial modernity in particular really bit deep into societies and affected not thousands or hundreds of thousands of people, but tens of millions.

Industrial modernity had many fascinating consequences that I will not elaborate on here, but it did something very strange and changed one relationship above all others: the relationship between men and women. Why so? Because in a modern society there is no longer any structural need to treat women differently to men. Women at the time were aware of this, and the first two decades of the twentieth century give us the most exciting feminist writers, whose arguments did not surface again until the 1970s. Many men also felt the pressure: the pressure of living in a modern society in which everything is up for grabs, in which everything is up for negotiation, and in which there is no longer any traditional set authority. This provoked not only a feminist revolution, but also a huge intensification and increase in

what historians call “rituals of masculinity”. There were more duels fought in civil society than ever before, men sported better waxed moustaches, people went around in uniforms, and it was the time of the first body-building craze.

Why is this important here? For millions of men, of young men in particular, when war came in 1914, it was an opportunity—expressed in their diaries, in their poems, in their letters home—to reassert and re-find their masculinity; they could be real men again with sabre in hand, facing an opponent and looking him straight in the eye, fighting man to man. This at least was the fantasy. The reality looked very different and the discrepancy is really important.

### **MECHANISED WARFARE**

In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1, nine out of ten soldiers—90 percent—died from wounds received in direct hand-to-hand combat, from sabre, bayonet, or pistol. In the First World War, 3 percent of soldiers on the Western Front died in this way. Many died from illnesses, but an enormous number were simply blown to pieces while sitting in a trench and waiting for something else to happen. Now imagine what that meant psychologically and culturally. These men had gone in their millions to fight for something—for king and country, for the fatherland, for *la république*—and they found that they had been integrated into a machine of entirely random killing. The Western Front was by no means the only front of the First World War, it wasn’t even the deadliest, but it is the one that left the deepest marks on European cultural history. On the Western Front, particularly from 1916, something changed. We all know the stories of idiotic generals sending cavalry to fight against machine guns, but this only happened for a very brief period: the generals were not as stupid as all that, they saw that the war had changed. Very, very quickly fighting became fully mechanised, especially from the time of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. It was now war like never before: soldiers were not fighting other soldiers, they were fighting against poison gas, against tanks, against artillery cannon—against machines that were far bigger than them, machines that could fire projectiles over 30 miles and kill them. It was no longer an equal fight.

During the interwar period there was a reaction to fully mechanised warfare and all that came with it. Central to society and culture was a re-evaluation of the story of man and machine. This reaction to warfare was something new. Everybody knew of soldiers who could not forget the faces of those they had killed, but here were soldiers shattered by the constant noise, the constant danger, the constant misery of their lives at the front during a faceless, impersonal war. There is some very moving original footage of

shell-shock victims in England available online. They literally broke down, shaking convulsively and unable to stop. At first, during the war, they were shot as cowards, but when there were tens of thousands of such cases, the medical profession finally began to see it as a real problem and to treat them as patients.

## MAN AND MACHINE

One might say that the entirety of Europe was in shell shock after the First World War; not only because so many young people had died, or because the war had been particularly cruel, but because in the end nobody could really explain what people had been fighting for. All the great ideals that people had supposedly been fighting for appeared to be merely political rhetoric that left a very empty feeling. It also left a lot of veterans on the streets: men who had lost limbs or half their faces—often quite literally part man and part machine because of the prosthetic limbs they were wearing. This emerges as a recurrent theme in art, for instance in the work of Georges Grosz and Otto Dix, or, in England, in Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* sculpture.

Where does the machine end and the person start? Artists in this period began to pose this question in their work. The investigation intensified during the interwar period and continues today: how much are we changed by the use of smart phones? How much are we changed by the use of retinal implants or artificial organs? When will computers finally become more intelligent than we are? We ask ourselves these questions today; the interwar years mark the point when these questions were first raised.

The film *Metropolis*, made in 1926, is a remarkably bad film—although it is still celebrated as a masterpiece—because its maker, Fritz Lang, was not remotely interested in the plot. He was interested in the special effects, and he created some of the greatest and most exciting special effects of his day. The story is one that reads as if it is desperately overdue for a Hollywood remake: the story of the happy one percent living on top of the benighted and exploited 99 percent, who have to work in huge factories underground in order to finance the luxurious lifestyle of the few.

*Metropolis* lays on its metaphors rather heavily to illustrate the malevolence of technology. Once again there is a crossover between the organic and the mechanical. The workers have to work at a heart machine, which of course devours workers. A sort of messiah figure, a woman, is set in front of them, and

when they finally want to rebel, this figure is exchanged for a robot. The robot is there to lead them to their perdition.

This is also the time of a cinematic remake of a story written at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Mary Shelley, author of a little novella called *Frankenstein*. The rights were bought and an English actor—Henry Pratt, otherwise known as Boris Karloff—was cast in the role of the monster. Nobody who had seen veterans of the First World War could fail to notice the analogy of the doctor working at an operating table, patching together a human body out of body parts and resuscitating it to ghastly mechanical life.

However, the key sentence comes from *Metropolis*—ironic because it is a silent film. The Faust-like inventor who builds the robot has a prosthetic hand—a clear echo of all the veterans with prosthetic limbs. Asked how he got his prosthesis, he lifts up his hand (it is an expressionist film, so there is of course a huge shadow of it on the wall behind him), and the intertitle reads, “What is it to lose a hand against the chance to create a new man?”

## THE NEW MAN

Surprisingly, this idea became Western culture’s answer to the trauma of the war. (Much the same can be said of the United States, though here I am concentrating on Europe.) The reign of the machine, the power of the machine, could not be broken by men as they existed, because they were effectively already redundant. Instead, only a new kind of human being, engineered to perfection and superior to modern humanity, could master the machine. This ideal came in two different, shall we say, “flavours”.

There is fascist new man, who is basically a very old man. Humanity was apparently in such a muddle because it was so diluted and polluted by different influences that only by returning to the essential quality of one great race could man regain his dominance over history. Hitler’s racial programme was to bring humanity—or at least Germanic humanity—back to a state in which it had never been, but which was imagined and represented to the public as real. This new man was the product of a lot of badly construed Nietzsche. He was stronger, prouder, more intelligent, fiercer, and more remorseless than anything before. He would sweep aside all cultures, and indeed all culture, in front of him and create a new world.

Despite the antagonism of competing ideology and rhetoric, if you had gone to Berlin in the dead of night and taken down a statue of their great muscly new man, flown it to a square in Moscow, and erected it secretly, people waking up in the morning would scarcely have known the difference. Socialist new man looked exactly like fascist new man—he was just as muscly and strutting and strong. There was a difference, however. Whereas fascist new man sprang from some romantic imagination of Nietzsche and essentialism, socialist and communist new man was a machine. He was very explicitly meant to be so. In the Soviet Union there was an institution, run by a visionary labour theoretician named Alexei Gastev, in which workers were literally strapped to contrivances that taught them to make the right mechanical movement again and again in the most efficient possible way in order that they should be as similar to machines as possible. They were put into houses that were—using Le Corbusier’s phrase—“machines for living”. Visionaries devised plans for their daily lives that were planned to the last minute, right down to when they could digest their food and when they could have an hour of free time. Society was a machine and the ideal individual was a machine within it.

This is only the merest indication of a very great theme. It may look as if there are lots of parallels between then and now. The relationship between man and machine (although now we say “humanity” in place of “man”, for good reasons)—our relationship to the mechanical, the electronical—is one of the greatest themes facing us in the next decades. We have no idea how it is going to develop. This is not so much a parallel as a continuation of the same story; it is a continuous intensification.

## **EUROPE’S SECOND THIRTY YEARS’ WAR**

Finally: a footnote that addresses the economic pivot on which the culture and society of this period rests. In 1938 a young artist asked the French politician Paul Deschanel, who had been involved in the negotiation of the Versailles Treaty, what he thought of it. Deschanel answered, “Nous venons de signer la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale” —“We have just signed the Second World War.” He was not the only one to realise that the treaty bought time but was not a resolution of anything. This produced a very unsettling dynamic. Indeed, economically (if not morally) speaking, to weaken the central economy in Europe to such an extent that no institutions, democratic or otherwise, and thence no stable economy, could take root, was a recipe for disaster. It gives credence to what some historians say: that the interwar years were in fact Europe’s second Thirty Years’ War. The peace time was in no way a time of peace. There were coups d’état, there were violent revolutions. In Germany alone, between 1918 and 1923, 5,000 people

were killed through political violence; today we would call this a civil war. It led to the Spanish Civil War. There was never peace as such.

Hope of peace and stability started to blossom in the late 1920s as political unrest began to subside; economies were stabilising and societies were showing signs of optimism again. However, all this crumbled in the Wall Street Crash of 1929. After that there was no longer any hope. It was perfectly clear to most people—at least to those who were at all farsighted—that the degree of destabilisation, the level of mitigated functioning statehood resulting in so many countries, would mean that the ideological differences in this world would take over. It was abundantly clear from that point that the result could only be catastrophe.