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Civilization

Roger Osborne

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About the Author

Roger Osborne's previous books include *The Floating Egg: Episodes in the Making of Geology*, *The Deprat Affair: Ambition, Revenge and Deceit in French Indo-China* and *The Dreamer of the Calle San Salvador: Visions of Sediton and Sacrilege in Sixteenth Century Spain*. He lives in Scarborough.

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John Carey

'It is a bold adventurer who proposes to survey the history of the Western civilization in a mere 500 pages, and not only to say something fresh about many aspects of it, but to do so in a spirit of perceptive scepticism that refuses to go along with standard views and reflex valuations. Roger Osborne offers himself this challenge and meets it brilliantly.'

A.C. Grayling, *Independent on Sunday*

'*Civilization* is an immensely important book and an exhilarating read. It deserves the widest audience.'

Literary Review

'Roger Osborne's absorbing blockbuster ... is an admirable achievement: a coherent narrative that gallops from the painting of the Lascaux buffalo to the cloning of Dolly the Sheep, from the Beaker people to the McDonald's people, in fewer than 500 crisply written pages.'

Boyd Tonkin, *Independent*

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ROGER OSBOURNE

Civilization

A New History of the Western World

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PROLOGUE

ON 21 september 2001, President George W. Bush said of America's response to the attack on the World Trade Center, 'This is civilization's fight.' On 5 December 2001, he declared, 'I'm not moving on because we're in a fight for civilization itself.' And nearly two years later, speaking about continuing attacks on US troops in Iraq, the President said, 'the choice is between civilization and chaos'. Other western leaders had already adopted the same theme: on 12 September 2001 Gerhard Schroeder, Chancellor of Germany, described the previous day's attacks as 'a declaration of war against the entire civilized world'; and on 8 October the leader of the British Conservative Party described al-Qa'eda as 'dedicated to the destruction of civilization'.

The events of 11 September 2001 shocked the world. They also focused our attention on what was being attacked - not only the lives of innocent office workers, not only some glass and metal buildings, but something less tangible and more difficult to define. In such a grave situation our political leaders needed to invoke something grand and noble, something strong and enduring to stand in opposition to the enormity of the offence that had been committed. Whatever we put up against the forces of terror needed to embody both the values of our society and its traditions; its current state of being and its history. The

word that carries these meanings is 'civilization', so civilization became and has remained the entity that we wish to protect, and the concept for which we believe we must fight.

For most of the last 50 years we have allowed the concept of civilization to lie comfortably undisturbed, tucked away somewhere at the back of our minds. But the events of 11 September 2001 and its aftermath have brought this vague notion suddenly into the foreground. Catastrophic events tend to focus minds. By invoking civilization at such a tragic and dangerous time, our political leaders have tapped into a latent but powerful belief and shown how central it is to our sense of ourselves. Our civilization is a reflection of who we are and what we value, but we are not used to thinking about what civilization really means to us. Now that the idea of civilization has been hauled out into the light, it must inevitably be subjected to closer examination: if the war *against* terror is a war *for* civilization then we need a strong sense of what civilization is.

The following chapters comprise an investigation of western civilization by re-examining the events and legacy of our history. Before we embark on that history, this brief Prologue will set out our past and current understanding of the concept of civilization, the reasons why we need a re-appraisal, and the arguments in favour of a historical approach. If we are to investigate the real meaning of civilization, then we need to understand from the outset that civilization and western civilization are quite different things. Though political leaders may like to pretend that one stands for the other, it is clear that the values that westerners hold are quite different from those of others – indeed the whole idea of 'values' can be seen as a western invention. The civilization that was invoked in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 was not Aztec or Chinese

or Polynesian, but specifically western. The civilization that we must seek to understand is our own and no one else's.

We like to believe that western civilization is something we have inherited from the ancient Greeks, the Romans and the Christian Church via the Renaissance, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Its spirit is embodied in beautiful buildings - Ionian temples, Gothic cathedrals, Art Deco skyscrapers - and in wonderful paintings, in the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare, the novels of Cervantes and Tolstoy and the work of Galileo and Einstein. We sense that civilization is not *Hamlet* or Mont St Victoire or the Chrysler Building, it is not even Shakespeare or Cézanne or William van Alen; it is something to do with the spirit that inspired them and the society that allowed this spirit to manifest itself. This spirit is hard to pin down, but we believe there is some relationship between the cultural icons of the west and the values of western society, so that together they embody western civilization.

We nod in agreement when the leader of the western world tells us that our civilization has always stood for 'openness, tolerance, freedom and justice', but at the same time we recognize a potential difficulty. The inclusiveness that makes civilization useful to political leaders is, of course, selective; they want us to think of civilization as tolerance, freedom of expression and democracy; not poverty, family breakdown, inequality, crime and drug dependency. If civilization stands simply for everything good, then we can happily fight wars on its behalf, but we can only accept this if we are prepared to divorce the theoretical values that we hold from the practical effects of western society over its history.

Here we have a choice to make. If we look at civilization purely in conceptual terms, then we can happily accord it every virtue, while giving its opposite every vice. But when we talk of defending our civilization, we do not just mean our present way of life, we mean the values that we have

gratefully inherited. Civilization is not simply a collection of virtuous concepts, it is the historical effects that those concepts have generated. But we are only too aware that the history of the western world contains an almost unbearable amount of suffering and misery, of injustice and cruelty to ourselves and to others. Do we include war and torture, slavery and genocide in our concept of civilization? And if we simply place them outside our definition of civilization, are we not in danger of misunderstanding the real meaning of our past? If we seek a real understanding of civilization, we need to ask whether the glories and disasters of our past that accompany each other through the pages of history form a necessary conjunction. Does freedom always mean the freedom to exploit others, is tolerance always matched by exclusion, is opportunity always partnered by selfishness and greed? The quest for the meaning of civilization must begin with the untangling of the threads of our history.

The word civilization was first used in eighteenth-century France, but the western idea of a civilized society dates back to ancient Greece and Rome. During the classical period, Greeks began to see themselves as not just different from, but better than, other peoples. When Herodotus, writing in the mid-fifth century BC, referred to 'the barbarians', this was really a shorthand term for non-Greeks; but by the time of Aristotle, a hundred years later, barbarians and barbarous nations could be defined by certain types of behaviour - their treatment of slaves, a barter rather than money economy - that were frowned on by the civilized Greeks. Barbarians had, through their cultural habits, become lesser people than the Greeks, who were seen by themselves, and later Europeans, as the epitome of civilization.

Civilization derives from *civis*, the Latin word for citizen. Although the Romans used the word *cultura* or 'culture',

rather than civilization, to describe their spiritual, intellectual, social and artistic life, to be a citizen was to be part of this culture. The Romans, like the Greeks on whom they modelled much of their behaviour, believed themselves to be uniquely cultured. The two concepts of culture and civilization became, in retrospect, synonymous. Romans, surrounded by barbarians, also felt impelled to bring civilization to others; as Virgil wrote: 'Romans, be it your duty to rule the nations with imperial sway ... to impose the rule of peace, to spare the humbled and crush the proud.'

The definition of civilization in the west was revived by the Christian scholars of the seventh and eighth centuries, such as Gregory of Tours and Bede, whose histories of the previous centuries showed Christianity under severe threat, before triumphing over the pagans. The organization of the church, its literacy and its alliance with the likes of Charlemagne allowed Latin Christendom to become self-consciously synonymous with western civilization.

The revival of interest in the classical world before and during the Renaissance re-ignited the idea of a distinctly European civilization reaching back beyond, and existing parallel to, Christianity. Western Europeans gave themselves a noble tradition by adopting Sophocles, Plato, Virgil and Seneca, as well as Christ and St Paul, as their cultural ancestors. The discovery of a New World across the Atlantic, and of multitudes of seemingly primitive peoples in all parts of the world, encouraged sixteenth-century Europeans to identify even more strongly with the ancient Greeks and Romans - civilized people surrounded by barbarians.

By the eighteenth century, when the word civilization was coined, European intellectuals were in a state of optimism about the essential goodness of the world, the grace of God, and the ability of the rational mind to categorize all knowledge and solve humanity's problems.

The notion of civilized behaviour took hold as French-inspired *politesse* converted landowners, merchants and traders (previously possessed of bad habits such as living and eating with their workers) into refined gentlefolk with correct, if not exquisite, manners. Eighteenth-century gentlemanly culture seemed a welcome revival of the spirit of Athens and Rome and, while the optimism of the French Enlightenment wilted beneath the blade of the guillotine and the carnage of the Napoleonic wars, it blossomed again in the gentlemen's clubs of nineteenth-century Britain. During the Age of Progress and the growth of the British empire, Macaulay, Carlyle and Buckle showed how the wonders of ancient Greece and Rome, of Venice and Florence, were of a piece with each other and with the marvels of industrial Britain. The Victorian historian Henry Thomas Buckle showed, in 1857, how civilization could be understood as a great chain of history whose first link, the civilization of ancient Egypt, 'forms a striking contrast to the barbarism of the other nations of Africa'. From Egypt the chain links led to Greece and on through Rome, the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, up to the present glories of British society. Those who lay outside this sacred line were discounted as barbarian - and those within as civilized. The civilized world of Buckle's time was not only self-defining, it had a mission 'to suppress, to convert and to civilise' the rest of humanity, justifying the European colonization of the world as a beneficial mixture of evangelism and moral superiority. The boundary between civilization and the uncivilized was easily drawn, even if it involved some sleight of hand when dealing with Moghul maharajas, and Chinese and Japanese emperors: civilization was white and Christian and everything else was barbarian.

The concept of western civilization as a continuous (if occasionally interrupted) chain of history was strengthened by renewed interest in both the classical and Renaissance

worlds. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British, French, Dutch and German gentleman-scholars toured the Continent and went south to unearth for themselves the wonders of the past. Pieces of pottery, statues, carved stones, paintings and mosaics were transported north in huge quantities, and in hundreds of north European towns museums were built to accommodate finds brought from Egypt, Greece, Rome and Florence. Eminent Europeans took to having their portraits painted or sculpted wearing Roman togas and laurels, their houses imitated Greek temples, and their clubs and regiments all bore Latin mottoes. Political thinkers revived Greek words like democracy, and J. S. Mill even declared that 'The battle of Marathon was more important to English history than the Battle of Hastings.' The forging of the chain of history continued, as the fifteenth-century innovations in Italian art were named as the Renaissance, or rebirth, of European culture; a description confirmed by Jacob Burckhardt's magisterial 1869 book, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. In the 1890s European colonization expanded dramatically and it seemed likely that the whole world would soon feel the benefits of western civilization.

This comfortable way of thinking about civilization came to a rude end in the Great War of 1914-18, when the deaths of 10 million soldiers, and the maiming and blinding of uncounted others, exposed it as a grand illusion. The 1914-18 war was either a conflict between groups of civilized nations, or a fight between the civilized nations (France, Britain, America) and those who had, quite suddenly, become uncivilized (Germany and Austria). Either way it was unarguably as much the product of western civilization as steam trains and Michelangelo's *David*.

How could civilization have come to this? How could so many millions have died so unnecessarily? The most persuasive answer came not from historians or philosophers, but from an entirely unexpected quarter.

Sigmund Freud, whose views of human psychology were beginning to spread across Europe, had a startling and pessimistic message for humanity. Freud said of the First World War, 'It is not that we sank so low, but that we never came so high as we thought.'

Human beings, Freud argued, are prey to the base and brutal instincts that we inherit from our animal and primitive human ancestors. Civilization tames the brutal savagery that lies within all of us, but it cannot rid us of our instincts. Occasionally these break through the fragile veneer and we commit extraordinary acts of violence. Freud's explanation of the carnage of the Great War forged a relationship between individual psychology and the nature of civilization, and made psychoanalysis the dominant method for exploring that relationship. The boundaries of civilization were no longer drawn on a map around western Europe and North America, or in a historical space around ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, but in ourselves. We became both the barbarians and the civilized.

Freud's theories overturned the nineteenth-century idea of civilization as a benign force and demolished the idea of human progress. His ideas were controversial and apparently novel, but they were actually a throwback to the radical pessimism of St Augustine, the fifth-century father of Christian theology. Catholic doctrine asserts that we are born bearing the sins we inherit from Adam and Eve. While baptism washes these away, humans are ready to sin at any opportunity. St Augustine's words: 'Take away the barriers created by laws, men's brazen capacity to do harm, their urge to self-indulgence, would rage to the full' could have been written by Freud, whose Augustinian ideas about civilization focused attention away from society and on to the individual. Ever since then, the first place we have looked to find answers to the great questions of war,

cruelty, progress, hatred, creativity and destruction has been the individual human mind.

More conventional historians tried to explain the upheavals in Europe by mapping the rise and decline of the world's civilizations. Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, published in 1918, was followed in 1934 by the first part of Arnold Toynbee's multi-volume *A Study of History*. Both were inspired by the nineteenth-century belief that history was guided by universal laws. The historian's task was to show how those laws applied to all civilizations.

By the early twentieth century a new barbarian force had arrived to confront western civilization - mass culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, European intellectuals spoke and wrote despairingly of the end of civilization being brought about by the sheer numbers of the urban masses, and their execrable cultural tastes and habits. Civilization could only be preserved by a small elite producing and appreciating works of art that were beyond the reach of the majority. Civilization became, in some eyes, the preserve of the few.

We might have expected that the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Stalinist Terror would have finished, once and for all, any idea of human progress and of the benign effects of civilization. In fact the opposite happened. The horrors of the Nazi era, while they made us ask what it meant to be human, gave a new impetus to the belief that humans could and must find their way to a better world. For a decade or two, desperate to believe in a world of good things and buoyed by the defeat of Nazism, westerners fell back on the old prescriptions. While careful to avoid banal declarations of progress, cultural historians were able to share their pleasure in the 'greatness' of artists and philosophers and the beauty of paintings, ornaments and great houses, without feeling the need to ask whether these had been bought at a price that was too heavy to bear. In choosing *Civilisation* as the title for his 1969 television series about European art, Kenneth Clark

deliberately pointed attention away from war and genocide, and towards great artists and beautiful objects, as the true products of civilization.

The meaning of civilization for the now-dominant culture of the western world has, through all these changes, remained ambiguous. The writers of the United States Constitution were men of the Enlightenment, utterly embedded in the classical tradition, while European settlers used the idea of a 'civilizing mission' to justify their takeover of the American continent and the destruction of its indigenous population. But America was founded in opposition to established European values and, particularly after the mass migrations of the late nineteenth century, became a different kind of society. The civilization of which Europeans spoke was in many ways an affront to American ideals - elitist and nostalgic where Americans were populist and forward-looking. And the mass culture and popular art forms that European intellectuals so derided in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were, after all, mainly American creations. Only after the Second World War, when America assumed political leadership of the western world, did the potential arise for these contradictions to be resolved. Civilization became a more democratic, less elitist concept (a shift reinforced by the Nazi leaders' love of 'high culture'), and its meaning became both vague and inclusive - the whole of society, rather than a few elite art forms, was the basis of western civilization. This vague inclusiveness brings us back to where we started, with the revival of a concept that, while seeming to have lost some of its clarity, has clearly retained an extraordinary political and emotional power.

The two dominant ideas of civilization, the nineteenth-century 'great tradition', and the Freudian calming of the beast within, with its echoes of Christian theology, have remained with us at the beginning of a new century. The

image of a golden thread of civilization, carrying the shining light through the barbarian darkness that surrounds it, has proved a powerful and enduring symbol for historians. In 1999 Christian Meier wrote that the narrow channel in which the Athenians defeated the Persian fleet at Salamis was 'the eye of the needle through which world history had to pass', while Kenneth Clark referred to the period when Christianity 'survived by clinging on to places like Skellig Michael, a pinnacle of rock eighteen miles from the Irish coast' as civilization getting through by 'the skin of our teeth'. At times like these the golden thread stretched alarmingly but it did not break. Our link with the great tradition was thereby both preserved and exemplified.

Historians also call on Freud's theories to explain brutal behaviour as a beast lying within us, occasionally breaking through the fragile restraint that civilization offers. Discussing the 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war, Orlando Figes recently wrote: 'It was as if all the violence of the previous few years had stripped away the thin veneer of civilization covering human relations and exposed the primitive zoological instincts of man. People began to like the smell of blood.'

It is not only historians who make use of the notion of the beast within. Artists, film-makers and, in particular, crime writers are enamoured of Freud's vision of brutal humanity held in check by civilizing forces. As P. D. James has commented, crime writers are 'demonstrating how fragile are the bridges which we construct over the abyss of social and psychological chaos'.

In the last few decades these concepts, and the beliefs that sustain them, have looked increasingly shaky. Our ways of studying the past have radically altered, and traditional ways of learning history, so brilliantly lampooned as long ago as 1930 by Sellar and Yeatman in *1066 and All That*, have given way to a much more varied

and richer approach to the past. We consume history with ever-increasing enthusiasm in books and films and on television and radio. But we do not want to be summarily told that Napoleon was good for France but bad for Europe, or that Stalin was a monster, or that Elizabeth I was a 'great' queen. We want to be given information, stories, documents, eye-witness accounts from the past and then make up our own minds. We know that events are never seen with an innocent eye, and that the historian's preconceptions are the dominant influence on the way that history is told. Historians have responded by abandoning their pretence at objective dispassion; instead of just giving us the results, they are showing us how they work and are sharing their methods, their difficulties, their uncertainties and their enthusiasms. In this atmosphere, Kenneth Clark's renewal of the tradition of 'great men' has lost credibility. What seemed a bold innovation in 1969 now looks like the last gasp of a patrician elite.

If new and more transparent treatments of traditional subjects are popular, then so are explorations of the previously obscure and the downright peculiar. Histories of cod, the spice trade, the Dutch tulip obsession, the search for a way of measuring longitude, eating fish in ancient Athens, and a thousand other stories have all found enthusiastic audiences. We now eagerly consume histories of cultures outside the great tradition: of India, of China, of Native American societies, of Polynesia and of Aboriginal Australia.

We have also developed a taste for the archaeology of the historic and prehistoric past, putting us in touch with the rich, and previously disregarded, culture of our ancestors. Studies of such things as mitochondrial DNA, ancient climate and vegetation patterns, isotopes preserved in human teeth and geophysical anomalies have opened up new and fascinating aspects of our history.

When we demand that historians show us the evidence of their work, and when our desire for knowledge of the past takes us into such byways of history, then the golden thread begins to look more like a river of time with a multitude of tributaries and backwaters and slow pools and sudden rapids. Or perhaps it is like a vast rope net rolled up into a ball, with connections made in every direction. The notion that European civilization, or indeed the very existence of civilization itself, has depended on the continuation of a particular, narrowly defined tradition begins, in the face of the multiplicity of the past, to look a little absurd.

One response has been to write and talk about civilizations in the plural. Authors such as Fernand Braudel (*A History of Civilizations*) and Felipe Fernández-Armesto (*Civilizations*) have written histories of different civilizations that avoid the traditional obsession with underlying patterns; while books like Robert Tignor et al.'s 2002 *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* are aimed at the growing number of American college courses on world history that deliberately avoid the prejudices of Eurocentrism. Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996) depicted a world of several distinct and potentially powerful civilizations. In *Europe: A History*, also published in 1996, Norman Davies has given a new perspective on the history of Europe itself by showing, just a decade after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, how the stories of eastern and western Europe can and should be unified.

The fading of the old belief in the moral and intellectual superiority of Europeans has been given intellectual force by the emergence of what we might call environmental history. The American scientist and historian Jared Diamond has persuasively argued that geography, topography, climate, ocean currents and coastlines affect the development of different societies - not in some vague

sense, but in ways that are open to investigation and measurement. In this analysis Europeans simply happened to live in a place that made them likely to develop technologies with which they could conquer the world.

* * *

If the idea of the great tradition has been pushed aside, what about Freud's revival of Augustine's belief that civilization tames the beast that lies within the human psyche? Freud's use of the behaviour of primitive man in support of his theories has proved a two-edged sword – impressive in the short term but vulnerable to hard-headed investigation thereafter. That investigation has shown that most of Freud's pick'n'mix anthropology was misdirected. Freud's promotion of the unconscious suffered not because the concept was wrong, but because he used his own idea of the content of the unconscious to explain every aspect of human life. And while psychoanalysis proved popular among mildly neurotic, or even apparently quite normal, if well-heeled, people, its failure to cure serious mental disorders has inevitably dented the credibility of Freud's theories of the mind.

But if we distrust Freudian ideas about civilization, then how do we account for the brutality of the twentieth-century wars that Freud explained with such apparent success? The theory of the 'beast within' gained great credence from the carnage of the First World War, but recent historians have developed a different approach to the psychology of warfare. John Keegan has argued that between the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 and the outbreak of war in 1914, Europe came increasingly to resemble a vast military camp. There was no geopolitical reason for this, since in 1815 Europe looked forward to a long period of relative peace. However, nearly a century later: '... on the eve of the First World War, almost every fit European

male of military age carried a soldier's identity card among his personal papers telling him when and where to report for duty in the event of general mobilisation ... At the beginning of July 1914 there were some four million Europeans actually in uniform; at the end of August there were twenty million, and many tens of thousands had already been killed.'

The military culture, which existed in parallel to civil society, had become ever more powerful and warfare had become an automatic response to political difficulties. Once the Great Powers went to war in 1914, the availability of millions of men, and the development of new forms of artillery and small arms based on high-quality steel, meant that massive loss of life was certain to follow. Keegan also shows that the ethos of glorious combat, of a noble death in war and the desire to destroy your enemy are elements of a peculiarly western idea of warfare - such murderous conflict would simply not have arisen in other cultures. From the historian's viewpoint, the world wars were not the reversion of European humanity to a primitive state of barbarism, but were born of a culture that had been deliberately promoted and fostered over the previous century.

These new ways of looking at history reflect our changed understanding of the world. But not only do they bypass the question 'What is civilization?', they make it increasingly difficult to answer. Our changed outlook on the world presents us with some stark difficulties. We have come to believe, for example, that so-called primitive societies have the right to continue their existence undisturbed. How then do we view a civilization that has routinely destroyed such societies and has justified such destruction on moral, religious and historical grounds? If our civilization includes our history and is an expression of our enduring values,

then when these two are in such obvious conflict, what remains?

We can begin to answer these questions by looking at how we, the present generation, differ from our predecessors, and why our view of the world is so different from theirs. I have described how civilization has been viewed in the past, and given some of the reasons why those views have fallen away, but what are the particular characteristics of the present that influence our view of our civilization?

In the 1930s and 1940s it was quite clear what western society and western civilization stood for. Whether you were a socialist or conservative, civilization was everything that Hitler, Mussolini and imperial Japan were trying to destroy, and the task of civilization was to preserve itself. Belief in a Christian God had given way to belief in progress before being replaced by the urgent need to defeat fascism. Those who fought on 'the wrong side' saw this clearly too, once the war was over. The immediate task of the post-war years was not to rebuild the society that existed before - it was to make a fresh beginning. Nevertheless, the war took an enormous toll of the emotional and cultural energies of those who went through it, and after a brief flirtation with radicalism, the west subsided in the 1950s into a politically and culturally conservative society, eager to cling to what it had, static and frightened of change.

The 1960s were, in part, a reaction against the atrophying of society that followed the Second World War. The wartime generation was simply relieved to have survived and be given the chance to build a peaceful and prosperous world; their sons and daughters, then approaching adulthood, wanted something else. The previous sense of fighting to preserve civilization was transformed into a new belief that it was precisely the existing society with its hierarchies, its rigidity, its

deference to authority, its 'doctor-knows-best' mentality that had been to blame for Europe's slide into conflict. At Nuremberg, when the world asked how citizens of a civilized country like Germany could have committed such horrors, the continual refrain was 'I was only obeying orders.' This harrowing phrase became the reverse shibboleth of the new generation - from now on, no one was to give and no one obey orders. Europe was ridding itself of the militarism that had haunted the continent for more than 150 years.

It is difficult in retrospect to appreciate the utter faith that most people had in the pillars of society in the immediate post-war period, and the palpable sense of personal and collective shock as one institution after another was exposed as hypocritical, self-serving and corrupt. In Britain the Suez crisis, Profumo, Poulson, Thalidomide, the demand for Catholic civil rights in Ulster and a series of miscarriages of justice ended our illusions and dealt immense blows to our previously rose-coloured view of the established order.

In America the disillusionment was just as profound and potentially more disturbing. The Vietnam war projected the futile brutality of the government into every living room, while the civil rights movement exposed America's dirty secret - legalized segregation and dehumanization of its black population - to the world. My Lai, the murder of Martin Luther King, the shooting dead of peaceful demonstrators at Kent State University, the sight of white cops beating black protestors in Alabama; all this and more repelled the generation that came to adulthood as it was all unfolding. In France, Germany and Italy the effects were the same, while the Russian suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 destroyed any vestiges of admiration for the Soviet alternative to western society.

While members of the post-war generation were disgusted by the sight of the old order trying to hold the

world still, the previous generation must have been dismayed at the antics of its children – their disregard for its struggles, their easy assumption of the wealth that came their way, and their joyous desecration of its icons. One of the central props in Joe Orton's play *What the Butler Saw*, which packed in London audiences in 1969, was a jar containing the preserved penis of Winston Churchill. This iconoclasm extended to anything and everything old and venerable – art, buildings, politicians, generals, education, culture. It was as if the sins of the past had been so great that only a total cleansing and fumigation of society would suffice. Everything must be thrown out so that everything could be built anew.

This social revolution happened at the same time as a sudden increase in affluence, particularly in western Europe (the United States had felt the effects in the 1950s). The disdain for authority and the desire for instant gratification were spurred on by the sheer amount of new, cheap stuff that was suddenly available to almost everyone – records, cars, clothes, transistor radios, cameras, telephones, colour magazines, tabloid newspapers and, above all, television.

In the 1960s, technology not only offered a better, more colourful, more interesting set of experiences, it also offered an escape from a communal, conforming, collaborative society. There was no longer any need for the family to sit round the fire in the evening 'making their own entertainment' or listening to little Annie murdering a succession of songs on the piano. Central heating and portable record-players and radios meant that every room in the house became a potential private entertainment centre. Teenagers' bedrooms were transformed from freezing dormitories entered only in the hours of darkness to warm dens full of gadgets beaming in music, photographs and sheer excitement from across the world. The communality of family life was abandoned in the